

/ANTJE ELLERMANN, FREDERIK BYRN KØHLERT, SARAH LEAVITT, AND MIREILLE PAQUET, eds. 2025, *Crossing Lines: Comics about Human Migration*, ethnoGRAPHIC, University of Toronto Press, 148 pp. ISBN 978-1-4875-3139-3

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Crossing Lines: Comics about Human Migration is one of the latest installments in the University of Toronto's ethnoGRAPHIC series, which publishes ethnographic research in full-length graphic monographs. The book offers a purposeful arrangement of short comics in a wide variety of different art styles, taking the reader from the migrant's arrival in a new country towards the integration process (or lack thereof) and ending on a hopeful message about what it means to "belong" in a new community. With the impetus for the book coming from a workshop bringing together various Canadian universities, it is not surprising that of the eight comics presented, six focus on migration to Canada, and all but one center international South-North migration. The book therefore offers further contribution to an already robustly researched and much-discussed form of migration in both academic and public discourse. Trusting reader to already have a general knowledge of immigration issues and anti-migrant sentiment surrounding South-North migration, the editors see the comic form as one that can "facilitate dialogue, fight disinformation, and generate empathy," without necessarily presenting novel research (4). While targeting an audience in the global North accomplishes the editors' stated goals, the title, *Crossing Lines: Comics about Human Migration*, positions the book as offering a general perspective on migration, rather than what is really a clear focus on South-North migration, which is both in the minority and towards which research already skews heavily. In situating the book as a resource for learning about migration in general, the editors risk reinscribing the idea that countries in the global North host the majority of migrants and refugees, or that the number of migrants coming to the global North is rising to "crisis levels" (Schewel and Debray 2024).

After an introduction by the editors, the comics begin. Each comic is followed by a summary that provides context and lays out an artist's statement that expands on elements of the design as well as suggested discussion questions and an annotated bibliography for further reference. This design offers an ideal format for a class discussion, even if some of the discussion questions can be quite prescriptive, for example, "How does the question, 'Where are you from?' contribute to experiences of non-belonging?" (27). While the artist who designed

each comic is credited first, the lines of authorship are blurred between contributors, with three to four authors being credited at the beginning of each short piece. This method of crediting authors ensures equal footing for all collaborators, whether academic or community members, and works to decenter the idea of the “lone ethnographer” in favor of a collaborative process. However, without an explanation from the editors or authors, it is unclear whether the comics are based in auto-ethnographic or ethnographic research, or if they are ethnographic fiction based on observations and interviews. Whether the comics portray the experiences of “real” people or create characters based in reality, however, the short storylines presented encourage readers towards feeling and empathizing, rather than objectifying the experiences of vulnerable people, a possible move towards abstraction and away from representational realism and the colonial gaze it engenders, as discussed by Welcome and Thomas (2021). This shift is most evident in the final comic, “Belonging,” which represents the process of a person adapting to a new society through the journey of an abstract, cell-like creature which stretches its body in impossible ways, merging with other entities and spontaneously forming and reforming itself both in response to its new environment, and independently (figure 1).

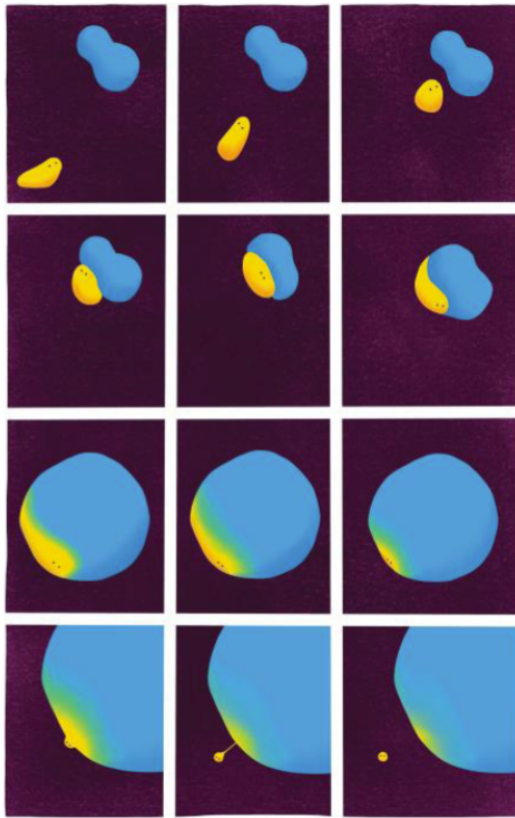


figure 1. Illustration on page 133, Alyssa Hirose, “Belonging.”

The abstract format of the comic demonstrates the lack of a simple binary between narratives of “assimilation” versus “multiculturalism,” and highlights both the flexibility of the migrant and the fluidity between the self and society in a visual format that is simple and clear without losing nuance.

“Belonging” is the final comic in the series of eight, and the most abstract, with most comics veering closer to a realistic representation of “human migration.” In the first comic, the reader enters into the mind of a woman asked at an airport, “where are you from?” highlighting the hidden struggle and colonial dynamics at play when navigating what is often seen as an uncomplicated question. The second comic, “Crossing Lines,” offers a largely representative example of the narrative and goals of the comics in the series. The comic is co-created by an artist, an anthropologist, a professor of law, and two specialists in immigration and integration programming and presents six characters of varying citizenship who all arrive at the Canadian border. The overlapping and interconnecting lines that connect each element of their stories

demonstrate that while each character may be at the border, that space is stratified by citizenship and status, with those with Canadian citizenship and passports passing easily through the bureaucracy of the airport, while Indigenous individuals traveling with a status card are delayed and migrant workers depend on unstable work opportunities in order to enter.

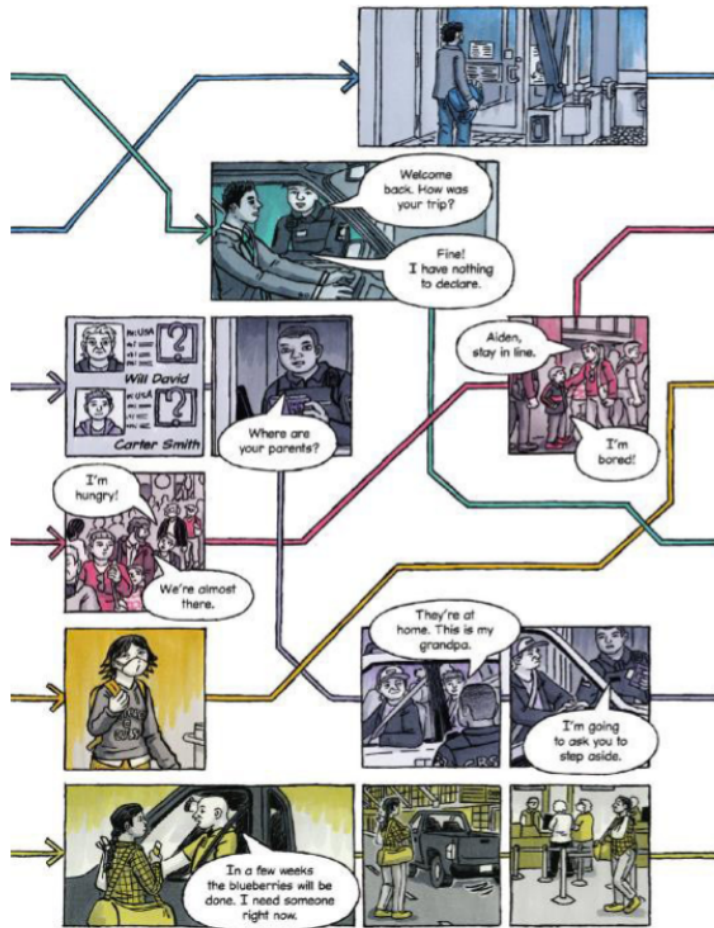


figure 2. Illustration on page 37, Jonathon Dalton, “Crossing Lines.”

The third comic in the series uses anthropomorphized birds to question what is included or excluded from the citizenship process in settler states such as Canada. As the only comic to discuss the naturalization process, this comic focuses on the relationship between governmental ideas of being or becoming a citizen as compared to Indigenous views on citizenship (figure 3). The fourth comic offers a unique “video game” simulator in which the main character plays a game that allows her to roleplay as a “highly skilled” migrant woman and overcome the various struggles in finances and paperwork that come with such a position. The relatively simple nature

of the video game makes this comic one of the most effective in communicating its message without feeling rushed or abrupt, as some of the others do. The final four comics in the collection offer commentary on various aspects of belonging: the comic “In Search of Bruce Lee” offers a positive wordless visual narrative about how connections made through pop-culture can transcend national boundaries; a message that broadly connects with the message of the final comic. “The Waiting Room” and “Butterfly,” placed between these two positive narratives, offer commentary on the isolation, health problems, and loss of social status that can occur for immigrants, particularly people of color.



figure 3. Illustration on page 58, Doug Savage, “Migratory Birds.”

While the comic format offers broad possibilities for new conversations between scholars, the comics in this collection are best suited as an introduction to the study of migration and the basic questions at stake within the field. Its short and accessible format, as well as the included discussion questions, would make it a good fit for an introductory classroom discussion on the varying issues around South-North migration, including citizenship, Indigenous land

rights, migrant healthcare, and borders. The form of the graphic ethnography is not only one that may be “more accessible” to the general public, as the editors note, but also one that offers possibilities of materializing what is immaterial or rendering visible invisible or embodied elements of the very human subject of migration (Gilbert and Kurtović 2022). The book’s greatest contribution is perhaps in bringing together scholars, community members, and artists in a collaborative project on such a fraught and timely subject. As anthropologists and other academics continuously seek better ways to communicate research to the public, comics offer a compelling form in which to do so.

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Faith VanVleet is a PhD student in sociocultural anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research focuses on Ukrainian immigrant and refugee experiences in Poland and how these experiences intersect with state narratives surrounding immigration. She is interested in questions of belonging, religious spaces, space and embodiment, as well as the potentialities of experimenting with form through art and comics.



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