



# Learning Together: Exploring Visual and Textual Narration with Students Affected by Forced Migration

*Brittany Murray*

In the summer of 2019, Vassar hosted its New Americans Summer Program. For two weeks, eighteen high school students came together to take academic classes, engage in artistic projects, and explore life on a liberal arts college campus, where they learned about possible courses of study and prepared for higher education. Participants, who had arrived in the United States within the previous two to three years, brought with them knowledge gleaned from Afghanistan, Guatemala, Guinea, Haiti, Honduras, Rwanda, Turkmenistan, and other nations. Participants completed STEM and humanities coursework, experimented with digital storytelling and filmmaking, painted a mural with the help of a guest artist, learned about the college admissions process, and joined social activities on campus as well as weekend field trips.

Launching the program posed productive challenges, requiring us to rethink our pedagogical practice and the space of the campus. The unusual conditions of the summer session, a time when the intricate logistics of the

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academic year are paused, heightened organizers' awareness of campus space; though dining halls, student residences, computer labs, athletic facilities, and outdoor space are always intricately interwoven with the academic mission of the college, the connections were especially salient to the summer program. To coordinate these different elements, new relationships had to be formed across campus. Even before the first participant arrived, a small crew of administrators, faculty, staff, and current Vassar students improvised new working relationships in order to prepare for success. Though college campuses can be spaces that produce and reproduce exclusionary practices, the New Americans Summer Program inspired new ideas about how to orient campus space.

Arriving on campus, students contributed greatly to the momentum of this critical and creative process. Participants arrived with an impressive array of intellectual and artistic strengths, along with sophisticated critiques of policing, racism, sexism, xenophobia, economic inequality, and environmentally unsustainable practices. My contribution to the program began with a daily humanities course, where class discussion flourished, thanks to participants' critical prowess. Once we were in the thick of it, however, our shared commitment meant abandoning assumptions about our usual roles on campus. Everybody pitched in where needed. Classroom instructors may have also mixed paint for a mural, on hot days as well as those with sudden thunderstorms. As a team, the program's organizers—Maria Höhn, John Bradley, Matthew Brill-Carlat, and I—re-examined who we teach, what we teach, and how we teach.

### BEFORE THE PROGRAM

While preparing for the program, my thoughts about migration and the humanities classroom developed through hands-on experience, in community with others. Too often, higher education is divided into compartments, separating scholarly reflection from the work of institution-building and organization, research from teaching, and K-12 from higher education. My preparation for the New Americans Summer Program, however, required me to honor the connections among these activities, rather than to treat them as distinct.

The program benefited from the insights of students and educators at all levels. For instance, New Americans Summer Program organizers worked with high school teachers to identify participants. To this end, Höhn and Bradley visited International High Schools and ENL (English

as a New Language) classrooms in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Albany; at each school, they connected with educators who specialize in working with students new to the United States in a process that yielded invaluable collaborations. The program was fortunate enough to count among its collaborators Alhassan Susso, a distinguished teacher whose pedagogy is informed by his own arrival, at the age of sixteen, in the United States from The Gambia. These outstanding high school educators helped the program to identify academically strong, multitalented students.

Insights gleaned from the classroom during the regular academic year also shed light upon the special summer session. Dialogue with former and current undergraduate students challenged and deepened my understanding of the dynamics of the liberal arts classroom, and of the role of the humanities in responding to forced migration. One venue for such reflection was the Lexicon of Forced Migration, a course developed by the Consortium on Forced Migration, Displacement, and Education, to be coordinated across multiple college campuses.<sup>1</sup> As I taught the course at Vassar College from 2019 to 2020, my thoughts expanded in dialogue with students and guest speakers. (For their part, current and former Vassar students have advanced this conversation through an exciting project, a Selective Bibliography of Forced Migration.<sup>2</sup> The bibliography, comprised of open-access sources about forced migration aimed at a general audience, was constructed by Elijah Appelson, Matthew Brill-Carlat, Samantha Cavagnolo, Violet Cenedella, Angie Diaz, Kaiya John, Naima Nader, and Haru Sugishita.) Propelled by student research and classroom discussion, we collectively uncovered a rich tradition of literature, film, visual art, and performance—one which often unsettled facile assumptions about how best to narrate migration.

My humanities approach allows me to highlight the ethical, legal, and political sensitivity of different forms of representation of migration. For instance, documentary photography, if done incautiously, can

<sup>1</sup> Parthiban Muniandy, “Lexicon of Migration: Nations, Borders, and Mobilities,” accessed December 13, 2020, <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2019/03/04/syllabus-lexicon-of-migration-nations-borders-and-mobilities/>.

<sup>2</sup> Elijah Appelson et al., “A Selective Bibliography of Forced Migration: Resources for A New Generation of Discourse,” accessed December 13, 2020, <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2020/10/11/a-selective-bibliography-of-forced-migration-resources-for-a-new-generation-of-discourse/>.

inadvertently reinforce gendered and racialized tropes.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, there are ethical implications of photographing someone at the most vulnerable moment of travel, particularly when such images decontextualize their subject. Furthermore, one must consider the legal implications of disclosing names or personal details, particularly when people are fleeing danger or awaiting decisions about their status.

These considerations should not preclude the act of witnessing and testimony, but they do underscore the importance of artfulness. Writers, photographers, filmmakers, and other artists have been my teachers in this regard. An example of an artful approach to documentation might be Jim Lommasson, whose exhibition, “What We Carried,” presents photographs of items belonging to Iraqi and Syrian refugees resettled in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Each image includes an object with a handwritten message from its owner, who is often only identified by a first name. These images testify and preserve the memory of lives left behind, but not through direct representation of people. The photographer approaches his task obliquely, providing compelling insights into people who are invoked metonymically, through their objects.

To testify, but to testify obliquely. I also find inspiration in artists who accomplish that task through surprising and inventive uses of genre. Authors like Edwidge Danticat (“Without Inspection”) and filmmakers like Mati Diop (*Atlantique*) tell stories deeply rooted in the real experiences of communities affected by migration, but they do it through fantastical tropes like flying, haunting, or phantoms.<sup>5</sup> Both examples—love stories, ghost stories, migration narratives, and more—disrupt assumptions about what the appropriate genre might be to narrate migration. The fantastic elements signal a fidelity to the mysterious and undisclosed, reminding readers and viewers that difficult stories require attention to

<sup>3</sup>Heidi Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno, “‘A Horrific Photo of a Drowned Syrian Child’: Humanitarian Photography and NGO Media Strategies in Historical Perspective,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 97, no. 900 (2015): 1121–55.

<sup>4</sup>Jim Lommasson, *What We Carried*, May 25, 2019, photography, <https://whatwecarried.com/>.

<sup>5</sup>Edwidge Danticat, “Without Inspection,” *The New Yorker*, May 7, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/05/14/without-inspection>; Mati Diop, *Atlantique* (*Atlantics*) (Ad Vitam Production, Netflix, Cinéart, The Criterion Collection, 2019).

“what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.”<sup>6</sup>

Art does not merely document a separate reality; there are moments when narrative intervenes. This is, I think, the most ambitious interpretation of Robert Tally’s argument that narrative is a “spatially symbolic act.”<sup>7</sup> Stories reshape perceptions of space, assert claims to inclusion and exclusion, and sometimes build bonds of solidarity that change the way that space is apportioned. As Brill-Carlat so eloquently put it, the discourse of higher education “access” implies that “the problem of unequal opportunity in the US is a spatial one.”<sup>8</sup> We speak of “barriers” to education erected by institutions. While this spatial imaginary may produce certain blind spots—access to the campus lawn does not alone ameliorate the effects of systemic violence and economic inequality—it also indicates a potent site of intervention.

Stories alone, of course, do not suffice to build solidarity. As the New Americans Summer Program’s organizers would attest, this latter task requires no small amount of fundraising, nurturing networks, tackling logistics, resolving conflicts, and acknowledging mistakes. Nevertheless, the humanities inspire and orient this work to re-imagine communities, beginning with our college campuses.

## DURING THE PROGRAM

Humanities coursework highlighted the transformation of everyday experience into narrative through literary and visual form. A graphic novel, Jérôme Ruillier’s *The Strange*, served as a starting point for discussions that often took unexpected turns.<sup>9</sup> The story follows an anonymous protagonist, an anthropomorphized animal, who flees political persecution in an unnamed place, headed for a faraway city. At his destination, he encounters difficulties such as police violence, xenophobia, and exploitive

<sup>6</sup> Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p 4.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Tally, Jr., “On Literary Cartography: Narrative as a Spatially Symbolic Act,” *Nano, New American Notes Online*, no. 1 (January 2011), <https://nanocrit.com/issues/issue1/literary-cartography-narrative-spatially-symbolic-act>.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Brill-Carlat, “Displaced Students and Higher Education Access: Reflections from Vassar College.” Accessed July 4, 2021. <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2019/10/28/displaced-students-and-higher-education-access-reflections-from-vassar-college/>.

<sup>9</sup> Jérôme Ruillier, *The Strange* (Montreal, Quebec: Drawn & Quarterly, 2018).

landlords. He also encounters kindness, the solidarity of the diasporic community, the courage of activists, and the love of a partner.

The simplicity of the narrative allowed for complexity of interpretation. Translated from the original French, *L'Étrange*, the title layers connotations of foreignness with valences of strangeness, difference, or outsider status. This openness of interpretation spoke to students, who experienced migration not as a separate, abstract experience, but as one intertwined with the strangeness of growing up. Prompted by the novel, students enhanced discussion with observations about learning a new language, moving houses or apartments, fitting in at school, standing up to bullies, identifying future academic and professional goals, and engaging with larger social issues. For students, the fast transition from the norms of a high school classroom to those of a liberal arts campus could be challenging. The humanities classroom provided an opportunity for students to explore within the framework of a seminar-style discussion.

Nuanced attention to the formal qualities of the graphic novel enhanced discussion of the text's social significance. Ruillier's narrative unfolds through deceptively simple sketches in a limited color palette; visible strokes suggest graphite or colored pencils. Characters are drawn as animals—a crow who watches everything from a distance or goldfish neighbors prone to forgetfulness. The class mused about why the artist eschewed realism in favor of abstracted or iconic images. Can the abstracted images and spare narrative details, we asked as a class, make the narrative more inclusive? Does it allow people with varied experiences to recognize themselves in the graphic novel?

Together, we explored the possibility of building communities of support while honoring the irreducible differences that mark each individual experience. We were inspired by Ruillier, whose unique working method begins by compiling interviews and testimony, which are later distilled into a fictional story. The result is something grounded in social reality and sensitive to the community depicted, yet open and spacious enough to support the diverse stories with which readers come to the material. Linguistic difference, for instance, is preserved in the text; speech bubbles host misunderstood language represented as symbols. The device reminds the reader of the practical challenges of moving someplace new, while at the same time invoking the fundamental strangeness of another person, and the fragility of communication.

Ruillier's strategy recasts a reality taken for granted. The novel invited the class to think critically about everyday space, as the protagonist's

journey reminded us that places like airports, buses, and crowded sidewalks mean different things to different people; they can be so familiar as to be nearly invisible to the initiated, or for newcomers like our novel's protagonist, they can puzzle or threaten.

Skills honed during class discussion prepared students to engage critically and creatively with Ruillier's text. Students drew and presented their own final panel for the graphic novel's ending. These panels reflected both their toolbox of storytelling tricks and their political outlook for the future. In some stories, the migrant repatriates happily, in others, sorrowfully; in some, he remains in his new country under increasingly hostile conditions; in others, the creativity of migrants and activists transforms society for the better. Reflecting on the text long after the program ended, some students shared their unresolved questions with the author, who generously responded in a written interview published in *EuropeNow*.<sup>10</sup>

Experiments with filmmaking deepened knowledge gleaned from the graphic novel while introducing students to the storytelling possibilities unique to cinema. One day during my humanities course, filmmaker Jan Müller taught a segment on filming dialogue. Enthusiastic about a hands-on opportunity to apply their knowledge, some students tried their hand behind the camera, while their peers discovered hidden talents in front of the camera. This knowledge of filmmaking proved useful later, when Müller guided participants in making a film about their experience. Müller's film, [available here](#), includes information about the program, interviews conducted between two participants, and footage of the mural, discussed below.

Fortified with newfound knowledge of filming, participants then explored film editing. In a campus computer lab, guided by Vassar libraries' academic computing experts, students explored the intersection of technology and storytelling. Students edited digital narratives combining still images with music and voice-over narration that they wrote and recorded. The topic, a food with special familial significance, inspired affecting autobiographical stories. During a final screening, participants, faculty, and counselors had the pleasure of celebrating students' technical skills while learning more about the cultural and familial significance of

<sup>10</sup>Brittany Murray and Jérôme Ruillier, "Foreign, Strange, Singular, Exceptional: An Interview with Jérôme Ruillier," *EuropeNow*, no. 30, accessed December 13, 2020, <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2019/10/28/foreign-strange-singular-exceptional-an-interview-with-gerome-ruillier/>.

each participants' favorite dish. Art and technology came together through this digital storytelling project.

Participants enacted one more storytelling project, and an ambitious one at that. Students painted a mural with the help of street artist and educator Joel Bergner, who also goes by the name Joel Artista. Bergner and his organization, Artolution, have completed community-based mural projects in Brooklyn, Syria, Brazil, and Uganda.<sup>11</sup> At Vassar College, the artist introduced the process with a brainstorming session. Inspired by the mural's eventual location at Vassar Farms, participants knew that they wanted to touch upon food, agriculture, and ecology. At the brainstorming sessions, this goal intersected with many other passions—students thought about social issues like racism, gender, migration, poverty, and climate change, and they thought about shared passions like music, sports, and family. With Artista's leadership, students then painted the mural on the side of the barn.



The mural is an example of how narrative can reshape our understanding of a place, opening the imagination to new possibilities. Stories became

<sup>11</sup> Joel Artista, "World Refugees Paint Their Journey," Global Projects Blog, accessed December 13, 2020, <https://joelartista.com/blog-2/>.



a vehicle for academic learning, artistic expression, socializing, and rethinking how we relate to campus space. The mural is at the Environmental Cooperative at the Vassar barns, a hub of activity where different communities come together through agriculture. Residents of the city of Poughkeepsie might catch a glimpse of the mural on their way to their garden allotments, or members of the CSA may see it when they come to pick up produce. Quite a few motorists and cyclists wandered over for a peek and a conversation with the young artists simply because the mural caught their eye from a busy city road nearby. Bringing together the campus, the city, and our guests, the mural served as a reminder of how art can change the way one looks at a space, while strengthening bonds of cooperation and solidarity.

### AFTER THE PROGRAM

As the team assessed outcomes after the New Americans Summer Program session, it was clear that the program resulted in many successes, while calling attention to challenges and new directions. One lesson learned was the value of centering participant knowledges. The participants were a multilingual, multitalented group with significant life experience. Singers, dancers, poets, photographers, athletes, and scholars—the group brought a range of talents to campus. I joined a team tasked with preparing the ground for their creativity, yet it was ultimately the strength of the students that drove the program's success.

The collaborative structure of the program represented another great asset. The program succeeded, thanks to the efforts of many people. The organizers, John Bradley and Maria Höhn, initiated the project and brought us together. Matthew Brill-Carlat coordinated multiple aspects of the program, taking charge of many of the program's residential, social, and logistical challenges. A team of counselors led by Brill-Carlat included four current Vassar College students, one recent graduate, and a rising first-year college student eager to share lessons learned from her own recent transition to the United States from Afghanistan. Müller and Bergner shared their artistic talents. Hudson Gould and I taught academic courses. Countless other library and staff members helped to make the program a positive experience during the summer, when normal campus activities are suspended. Members of the community baked treats, provided opportunities for worship to students with religious commitments,

and shared their own stories of migration. The new relationships forged through this collaboration reaped unexpected benefits from the project.

The experience nevertheless indicated many opportunities for growth. One area for consideration is how to best preserve and strengthen relationships after the end of such a program. The program's aim was to introduce participants to liberal arts colleges—and the many academic disciplines represented there—as well as to help them prepare for success at whichever higher education institution they chose. Relationships were vital to achieving this end. Participants remained in touch digitally and even organized in-person meetups before the pandemic. My colleagues and I wrote college and scholarship recommendation letters. The student counselors organized virtual sessions for college-bound participants to answer questions and prepare for their upcoming adventure. Similar initiatives might plan even further opportunities for ongoing mentorship and collaboration.

Another question is how best to use technology and digital communication. This concern became particularly urgent during the pandemic, and it is an ongoing goal in light of impediments to transnational mobility. How, for instance, could digital learning, blended coursework, and even transnational classrooms be used to reach participants who may not have the option to travel to a physical campus? How might we implement web-based assignments in a way that enhances the relationships that were the core of our inaugural program?

Finally, it is vital to continue building networks across college and university campuses. A program like this can be expensive and logistically challenging; it can only succeed where there is genuine institutional commitment. Such an endeavor requires considerable material resources. In the past, universities have served as places of refuge; if they are to preserve that tradition, then they might consider committing to financial support.

Stories represent a first step, an opportunity to imagine the world otherwise, including spaces of higher education. Whether we realize that vision is a question of continued effort and collective priorities.

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