

Aura Nikkilä
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University of Turku – University of Granada

Can a graphic novel make the readers see the world through the eyes of an underprivileged migrant, to empathize with somebody whose life is thoroughly different from their own? This question was at the core of my master's thesis, in which I analyzed the graphic novel *Näkymättömät kädet* (*Invisible Hands* in English), by the Finnish comics artist Ville Tietäväinen. The graphic novel tells the story of a fictional Moroccan man called Rashid, who, in order to provide for his family, leaves his home and crosses the Mediterranean to Spain as an illegal migrant in search for a better life. First Rashid's journey takes him to drudge in the greenhouses of Andalusia under terrible conditions, and in the course of the story Rashid ends up homeless and insane on the streets of Barcelona. *Näkymättömät kädet* is a fictional work, but it is based on the lives of real people, since as part of the research for the graphic novel Tietäväinen travelled to Morocco and Spain following the route taken by many migrants and interviewed people along the way.

My own journey started when I travelled to Andalusia in the spring of 2012. I spent five and a half months in Spain as an Erasmus student, and that spring marked the beginning of a process that eventually led to my master's thesis, which I completed in May 2016. The time spent in the beautiful Andalusian city of Granada had an immense impact on my studies, as well as on my life in general. First of all, it led me to the field of comics studies, which I still continue to roam, and secondly it broadened my view of life by opening my eyes to the multicultural history of Europe. In this essay I will try my best to describe the twofold effect the semester spend as an exchange student had on me, as well as to give a summary of the contents of my master's thesis.

Spain and Andalusia were familiar to me beforehand through family vacations, but I hadn't visited Granada before. I read somewhere that the city was named after the pomegranate fruit during the Moorish period, and Granada does resemble this exotic fruit in a certain way: under its hard skin it reveals a cluster of different neighbourhoods with distinct atmospheres. Everyday life is characterized by the Andalusian way of living, with such conventions as siesta in the afternoon, not to mention the special events, such as the stunning processions during the Eastertide. I had studied Spanish for some years before going to Granada, and a significant reason to choose Granada as the destination of my exchange period was my desire to improve my knowledge of the language as well as the Spanish culture. However, the specific style of Andalusian dialect made the learning process somewhat challenging. My roommate was from Madrid, so at home I got a sense of another kind of dialect, one a tad more comprehensible to my relief. I unyieldingly stuck to Spanish in everyday situations and gradually learned to ignore the feeling of embarrassment caused by little misunderstandings and my own imperfection. All the courses I chose at the university were taught in Spanish, so by the time summer had arrived, my language skills had improved tremendously – and to the amusement of some Spanish speaking friends I even had adapted certain aspects of the Andalusian dialect to my style of speaking.

Along with the language, also my knowledge of the culture grew better. History is present not only in the architecture of the city but also in culture in general. Flamenco is a vital part of Andalusian culture and I had an opportunity to see some impressive performances. I also got to hear a little about the roots of the art form, and

came to realize that even though flamenco is widely considered as something very Spanish, it originates from a mixture of Andalusian, Islamic, Sephardic and Gypsy cultures. The most visible evidence of the city's Moorish history is of course the magnificent palace of Alhambra. On a hill on the other side of the river Darro lays Albaicín, the district that has preserved many monuments from the era of Muslim dynasties as well as the medieval city planning with its narrow streets. I was privileged to be living in this neighbourhood with layers of history around me, and to crown it all, our apartment had a breathtaking view of the Alhambra from the kitchen window.

Granada is among the most popular destinations for exchange students in Europe, and this fact is apparent on the city streets. It's inevitable for an Erasmus student to get to know people from many different countries. Daily encounters with other exchange students gave me an opportunity not only to become acquainted with people from around the world but also to get a glimpse of different cultures. The multiculturalism of the city isn't just due to the high number of foreign students, for Granada has an active community of migrants especially from North-Africa, which gives the city a distinct feeling. For example the streets of Albaicín are lined with *teterías*, that is tearooms with exotic pastries and sweet mint tea poured from a metal pot to fine glasses.

In addition to my wish to become more fluent in the language and to get to know the culture better, there was a very specific reason for me to choose the University of Granada as the destination of my exchange period. I've always been something of a comics nerd: when I was a kid I used to draw comics of my own, and as a teenager I wrote a diary in comics form. Later on I gave up drawing and focused solely on reading comics, mostly graphic novels. Browsing through the courses offered at the art history departments of some Spanish universities, I came across a course called *Historia del cómic*, which was held annually during spring semester in the UGR. The thought of studying comics from an academic perspective had never crossed my mind, even though in my home university art history is not strictly a history subject but more broadly the study of visual culture. Now a horizon of possibilities seemed to open before me, as the realization hit me: I could concentrate on comics in my studies!

I did enjoy all the courses I took during my studies at the UGR, but the comic course was without a doubt my absolute favourite. Every Tuesday and Thursday evening from February to the beginning of June I got to sit in a lecture room surrounded by other enthusiastic students absorbing as much as I could about the history of comics. The teacher, art history professor Ricardo Anguita Cantero, lectured very passionately about the subject, and during the spring we covered the birth of modern comics in the American press of 1800s, the golden era of super heroes, the consequences of the infamous comics code system and the rise of the graphic novel and autobiographical comics, amongst other things. And so a basis for my academic comics knowledge was build. As an additional course work I wrote a short essay on a graphic novel that I had partly by chance brought with me from Finland, *Näkymättömät kädet* by Ville Tietäväinen. Even though it was more of an introduction to the work, this short essay already had some elements that I would expand in my master's thesis.

So now I will proceed to explaining the contents of my thesis, starting with the theoretical frame and concluding with the outcomes of my analysis. The point of view of my thesis derives from the thematics of my research subject, Tietäväinen's graphic novel, which deals with global inequality, irregular migration, questions of ethnicity

and racism, religion, honour and insanity, along with the crossing of borders. The main theoretical frame that I built my analysis on, is transnationalism. Transnationalism is a broad theoretical research frame that is applied commonly in migration studies. Simply put transnationalism refers to certain currents that cross national borders: economic, social, cultural and political connections between people, places and institutions. In my thesis I analyze how Tietäväinen's work incorporates transnational elements both in the themes as well as in the expression of the comic.

Comics tell stories by merging different forms of expression, and therefore comics research has various starting points. The multidisciplinary of the research field runs through my thesis as well, since I use theories derived from art history and study of literature as well as social sciences. I approached the graphic novel first through the theory of narration, then from the angle of intertextuality and lastly with the means of comics semiotics and theories of representation. In my study I demonstrate that the transnational themes of *Näkymättömät kädet* are constructed, in a manner common to the medium of comics, both visually and verbally. I propose that Tietäväinen builds a contact surface between Rashid's story and the reader in multiple ways and thus creates a place for a transnational encounter.

The concept of focalization opens a way to the viewpoint of the comic. Focalization presents itself as one possibility of transnationalism in comics: through it a more personal relationship between the reader and the character of the story can be formed and so the reader is given a chance to identify, and to experience events through the vantage point of the character. By means of intertextuality, *Näkymättömät kädet* is bound to a broader historical context, and my interpretation is that the myriad of intertextual references scattered throughout the work cross national and cultural borders. Some of the references highlight the entangled history of Europe and Africa, for example by referring to the historical Muslim domain of al-Andaluz, while others draw from Spanish culture and history – such as the characters of Columbus, Don Quijote and the Catholic Monarchs, all present in a form or another on the pages of Tietäväinen's work. Some of the references allude to Finnish culture and advance the possibility of a Finnish reader's identification with the migrant characters of the comic. These allusions also draw parallels between the current migration from African and Middle Eastern countries to Europe and the streams of Finnish migrants to America and Sweden throughout the 20th century.

As already the title of Tietäväinen's graphic novel reveals, hands are a focal element and a key metaphor in Rashid's story. With the tools provided by comics semiotics I analyze the meanings that hands are given in Tietäväinen's work. I present the idea that the recurrent representation of hands creates on the pages of the graphic novel haptic visuality, that affects the reader in a corporeal level, and makes her empathize with the graphic novel's characters more profoundly. Haptic visuality thus indicates touching both as a physical and an emotional gesture. I complete my study by reflecting the connection between stereotypical representation and the comics tradition. By paying attention to the stereotypes, I analyze the construction of otherness in *Näkymättömät kädet*. I furthermore tackle the problematic sides of transnational representation by comparing Tietäväinen's graphic novel to the tradition of comics journalism.

To conclude with my thesis, the transnationalism of *Näkymättömät kädet* appears not only in its subject and thematics, and their verbal and visual manifestations, but also in the way that the graphic novel speaks to the reader, even reaches out to her. The thread that runs through my master's thesis is the idea of comic's possibilities of appealing to the reader, which I describe as transnational

encounter. The plight of many migrants might be difficult to picture if one has no personal connection to the phenomenon, but through the immediacy of comics form the reader has a chance to empathize with the suffering of others. The encounter made possible by Tietäväinen's graphic novel appears transnational especially when the readers own life has little in common with the story told. In this kind of situation the result of a transnational encounter may at best be that something previously experienced as intimidating otherness may turn into mere difference, that one needs not to fear.

As can be seen from the summary above, the time spent in the multicultural environment of Granada had an indisputable impact on my way of seeing the world and my academic viewpoint. My time as an Erasmus student gave me a better understanding of the entangled history of Europe and a vision of a multicultural world. These insights on their part made my attitudes towards the current migration situation more tolerant, which is not an insignificant effect in a time when the world seems to be getting more xenophobic every day.

I started this text by drawing a line between the semester spent as an exchange student and the completion of my master's thesis, but actually the process didn't end there. From January 2017 onwards I will carry on with comics research as a PhD student in my home university. My doctoral thesis continues with many of the issues I dealt already in my analysis on *Näkymättömät kädet*. Now the scale is just broader, as I'll be doing research as part of a research group that analyses how the ongoing global migration is visible in the comics field and how migration is represented in comics. So my time as an Erasmus student in Granada didn't only advance the completion of my master's degree, but also gave a direction to my life in a more comprehensive way.