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JOE SACCO'S *SAFE AREA GORAŽDE*
AS AN ALTERNATIVE COMIC

Abstract: In this paper, Joe Sacco's journalistic comic *Safe Area Goražde: War in Eastern Bosnia 1992–95* (2000) is framed as an alternative comic and explored through the lenses of postmodernist self-referentiality of the author's avatar in the comic and by employing the notions from trauma studies which relate to the controversial and complex representation of trauma. The alternative comics' rejection of commonplace formulae, experimentation with genres (especially in terms of exploring the limits of autobiography), and insistence on (geo)political and international themes, all come into play in the analysis of *Safe Area Goražde*. Whereas notions relevant to trauma studies – the unclaimed truth of traumatic memory (Caruth), the textualization of its context (Felman), and the reframing of recognizable narrative conventions (Luckhurst) – contribute to a diversified exploration of Sacco's comic as a graphic trauma narrative.

Keywords: alternative comics, comics journalism, trauma studies, Bosnian War

1. Introduction

In his study *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, Charles Hatfield (2005, pp. ix–xi) notes that the relatively recent – at least in terms of Western literary tradition – identification of the graphic novel genre has opened doors for critical revaluation and literary recognition of comics in general. Hatfield (2005, pp. 6–20) traces the plasticity of this genre[1] to the underground comix[2] movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which, at its best, infused countercultural themes into an increasingly self-aware and satirical medium. Following the movement's peak successes, however, the exaggerated amplification of controversial, taboo-breaking material for its own sake produced an environment in need of a shift. The "poetic ethos of individual expression" (Hatfield, 2005, p. 16), which the underground comix fostered in their promotion of individual cartoonists over collaborative work, in the

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[1] According to him, "a graphic novel can be almost anything: a novel, a collection of interrelated or thematically similar stories, a memoir, a travelogue or journal, a history, a series of vignettes or lyrical observations, an episode from a longer work – you name it. Perhaps this very plasticity helps explain the currency of the term" (Hatfield, 2005, p. 4).

[2] The alternative spelling with an *x* signaled the comics' X-rated quality and was used to distinguish them from those which were approved by bodies such as the Comics Code Authority in the US and the Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act 1955 in the UK (see Walker, 2010, p. 71).

1980s formed the basis for the alternative comics movement and its exploration of autobiographical limits in graphic narratives, alongside a more sustained focus on complex social and political issues, without disregarding the self-ironizing model of its predecessors.

> Crucial to this new movement were the rejection of mainstream formulas; the exploration of (to comics) new genres, as well as the revival, at times ironic recasting, of genres long neglected; a diversification of graphic style; a budding internationalism, as cartoonists learned from other cultures and other traditions; and, especially, the exploration of searchingly personal and at times boldly political themes. What's more, alternative comics invited a new formalism, that is, an intensive reexamining of the formal tensions inherent in comics. (Hatfield, 2005, p. x)

Joe Sacco (b. 1960), a Maltese-born American cartoonist and journalist, is an idiosyncratic figure in the world of alternative comics in that he pioneered a unique blend of field journalism and its subsequent, often painstakingly long, graphic envisioning, altogether commonly referred to as comics journalism or graphic journalism (see Chute, 2016, pp. 197–210).

> His graphic journalism possesses clear elements of investigative journalism, as he digs for data, especially for forgotten, overlooked, unpublicized information, but he never claims to be able to give an ultimate or a definitive picture of a situation he describes. Rather, in the manner of literary journalism, his work joins together subjectivized accounts of individuals. He incorporates dialogue into the texture of his story and interweaves it with visual descriptions of an atmosphere, of a place, and of a person's mood. (Flis, 2010, p. 192)

When referencing "literary journalism", Flis points to a heavy reliance of Sacco's comics journalism on the principles of New Journalism, which has since the 1960s stressed the subjective biases of reporting, the literariness of journalistic writing, and a self-awareness of the medium, given that journalists would conspicuously be involved in the stories they reported on.

Sacco studied journalism at the University of Oregon, but following graduation quickly became disillusioned with the capitalist-driven nature of the job market in the US and, urged by his "war junkie"[3] drive, began travelling to war-torn areas of the world, such as the Gaza strip and Bosnia, where the marginalized, dispossessed, and silenced inhabit places that Sacco laboriously recaptures in his graphic works. Sacco would commonly spend weeks or months in these areas, collecting testimonies from people who stood at the heart of specific conflicts. Those experiences would then be followed by years of referring to his collected interviews and research, performing additional investigative work, and ultimately, meticulously drawing his book-length comics. Sacco refrains from labelling these works as graphic novels (see Miller,

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[3] *War Junkie* was one of Sacco's early comics, but he has since stated in a 2015 interview: "I still enjoy reporting, I still consider it a privilege to be invited into people's homes, but the 'junkie' part of it has faded. The world doesn't seem so much a wild and interesting place as a cruel and difficult one, and it is increasingly difficult to leave home. After doing this for 20 years or more, one sobers up" (Babar & Sacco, 2015).

2018, p. 389), given that they are not fictional in a strict sense, even though they do integrate a dimension of self-awareness regarding their necessary literariness.

The alternative comics Sacco produces have also been termed "slow journalism" (see Chute, 2016, p. 37), not solely because of the sheer amount of time it takes to complete the publications, but more significantly because of the kind of reading experience they provide. Due to its trauma-laden subject matter, Sacco's work resists superficial consumption and adamantly contradicts the news media's hyperproductivity and crazed pace. Chute notes that "especially in the context of war reporting – and the circulation of what Mirzoeff calls 'weaponized images' that accompany and play a role in justifying war – the slowness of Sacco's comics is both a mode of ethical awareness and an implicit critique of superficial news coverage" (2016, p. 201). He would spend months drawing just a few panels, detailing images from his notes, memory, and additional research. All his panels are dated, both for the readers' and for his own sake, so as not to lose a sense of duration, of the effort and time spent portraying sometimes excruciatingly disturbing material. In the following section, insights from trauma studies will be applied to the alternative comics genre, to shed light on its potential in terms of trauma representation and to set up a theoretical background for the subsequent analysis of Sacco's *Safe Area Goražde*.

2. Alternative comics and trauma studies

During the final decades of the 20th century, the ethical turn in philosophy and literary criticism, alongside a concurrent emergence of trauma studies in these domains, partially enabled the academic prominence of the graphic novel, since this genre was largely grounded in representing trauma and collective suffering (see Romero-Jódar, 2017, p. 3). Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer-winning graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (serialized between 1980 and 1991), which employs animal imagery to thematize the Jewish Holocaust through the eyes of his father, a Holocaust survivor, was the first to elevate the comics genre in academic circles. As Hatfield explains, "the reception of *Maus* suddenly made serious comics culturally *legible* […]. This revolution in reception and practice, solidified by *Maus*, is what is meant by *alternative comics* – and it has publicly redefined the potential of the art form" (2005, p. xi).

The comforting formulae of stereotypical comics are flouted in alternative comics (Hatfield, 2005, p. x), as is also the case for trauma fiction. In his study *The Trauma Question*, Luckhurst writes that the aesthetics of trauma narratives are essentially "avant-garde: experimental, fragmented, refusing the consolation of beautiful form, and suspicious of familiar representational and narrative conventions" (2008, p. 81). Psychological trauma – which is in a poststructuralist sense indicative of the absence of signifying, meaning-making structures – demands representation through a breakdown of said representation, which is a contradiction inherently formative for trauma studies. This positions trauma narratives within the

postmodernist and poststructuralist notion of the *crisis of representation*, which recognizes the inability of any symbolic system to directly represent "objective reality". That is why the narrativization of trauma demands a complex grappling with how we construct realities, how collapsible they are, but also, conversely, how dependent on social, cultural, and psychological contexts they are. Once the traumatized subject is reintegrated into a signifying matrix, trauma – as an *impossible* memory of the formative absence in that matrix – functions like a glitch, a retroactive, repetitive re-inscription of one's narrative identities. Modes of representation, therefore, become overtly tangible in trauma narratives and formal choices become comparably relevant to the subject matter that is undertaken, although the subject matter is always already caught up in signification.

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Felman (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. xv) notes that trauma does not only require a contextualization of the text, but likewise and concurrently, a textualization of the context, so that what is traumatic is made structurally, and not only thematically, palpable. Chute associates this claim with alternative comics: "Graphic narratives accomplish this work with their basic hand-drawn grammar – frames, gutters, lines, borders – rendering this textualization graphically, conspicuously manifest" (2016, p. 33). In terms of structurally displaying an awareness of the crisis of representation, a graphic narrative "mobilizes verbal and visual discourses, […] it makes readers aware of the space *between* word and image" (Chute, 2016, p. 34). The gutter – the gap between the panels on a page – in comics like Sacco's, very poignantly points to the constitutive absence which is intricately connected to the narrativization of trauma. The gutter is where the readers are supposed to establish causal relationships and supplant the missing narrative links with their own "forged" memories, as Acheson calls them.

> By recognizing the comics medium's structural multidirectionality in the gutter's indeterminacy space, the first half of the forged memory equation becomes fixed. The medium generates reader engagement by demanding direct interaction with the narrative to make full meaning of the various page elements. This demand for engagement actuates the second element of the forged memory equation: completing the experience in the narrative by infusing personal experience to complete the missing visual and verbal lexicon. (Acheson, 2015, p. 292)

The truth associated with witness narratives is in trauma studies marked as "unclaimed", a term Cathy Caruth (see 1996, pp. 10–24) applies to traumatic experiences and testimonies, in that they resist straightforward referentiality and conventional representation. It is not uncommon for trauma narratives to integrate different genres in order to tackle the "unclaimed" nature of trauma, which is likewise a trend present in alternative comics. They interweave genres that were new to comics, such as documentary reportage, historical fiction, or autobiography (Hatfield, 2005, p. x). "Functioning conspicuously in two different narrative registers, the word-and-image form of comics expands the reach of documentary, recording facts while also questioning the very project of what it means to document, to archive, to inscribe"

(Chute, 2016, p. 7).

In the wider realm of literary history, it appears that postmodernist techniques survive in the graphic novel, which "openly celebrates the revival of postmodernism" (2016, p. 2), as Hescher states. Furthermore, Vickroy (see 2014, p. 4) draws a parallel between postmodernist fiction and trauma narratives since both ironically deconstruct or subvert discourses of power and official ideologies, employ such narrative strategies as fragmentation and an ontologically unreliable narrative voice, and lack closure and disrupt formulaic stories, although trauma narratives more prominently deal with ethical and affective considerations. Sacco's autobiographical, alter-ego character, his avatar in the comics, acts as an example of these techniques since he overtly steers the readers' attention to the perspective-driven nature of representation and the range of narrative devices employed to tell the story. Additionally, the notion of a complete story – or "Real Truth" (Sacco, 2000, pp. i–ii) – becomes ironized when faced with the chaotic complexity of the witnessing voices, often irreconcilable with the official historical narratives. This aspect of Sacco's *Safe Area Goražde* will be analyzed in the following section, before a more comprehensive interpretation of the comic.

3. Self-awareness and ironic distance in *Safe Area Goražde*

Sacco published *Safe Area Goražde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992–95* in 2000, having spent four years drawing the comic upon returning to the US from Bosnia in 1996. The comic primarily portrays the testimonies of people trapped near the end of the war in the Goražde enclave, which was a UN-designated safe area in Eastern Bosnia, occupied by separatist Serbian military forces during the Bosnian War. Goražde contained around 57,000 people in 1995 when Sacco arrived, from its pre-war 15,000, most of them Muslim refugees from other parts of Eastern Bosnia. Despite its official label as a safe area, Goražde was, alongside other safe areas in the region, suffering constant humanitarian crises, which the international community was either incapable of alleviating or chose to ignore (see Sacco, 2000, pp. 148–149, 196–208)[4]. The title, therefore, does not only contextualize the comic. It functions rather as an ironic recasting of the safety Goražde's residents were supposedly guaranteed but barely experienced.

In the early days of his comics journalism, specifically concerning his serialized comic *Palestine*, Sacco's drawings tended to be more reliant on the autobiographical comics tradition and the cartoony style that he was comfortable with, even though he was actively distancing himself from those modes of expression. In *Safe Area Goražde*, he continued to downplay the autobiographical aspect, foregrounding further the graphic representation of complex historical narratives as they intersect

[4] For the historical contextualization not directly drawn from first-hand witness testimonies, Sacco relied on different sources. In the Bibliography section (see Sacco, 2000, p. 228), he lists and briefly comments on the literature he used for the political background of Yugoslavia since World War II and specifically for the conflict in Bosnia 1992–1995. Aside from academic studies and documentary literature, Sacco likewise relied on day-by-day accounts from the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*.

in the tumultuous present (see Worden, 2015, p. 6). By the time he was drawing *Safe Area Goražde*, Sacco had decidedly settled on a photorealist approach, reserving caricature for intentional distortions significant for character portrayal. The only exception remained his own cartoony avatar, with opaque glasses, exaggerated facial features, and rubbery limbs.

Because Sacco's work initially stemmed from the autobiographical tradition of drawing comics, it was never a significantly conscious decision to implement his own character into the comics (see Gilson & Sacco, 2005). The emphasis was never specifically on the exploration of the autobiographical element but the conspicuous, formal presence of the narrating subject. In an interview, Sacco pointed out:

> I think having myself in it [the comic] is a strong part of the work, not because I want to be a character, but because I want to point out that this material isn't objective, this is my point of view, these are the impressions I got. I'm interested in the facts, but that's not the same as being objective. My figure represents the personal pronoun 'I' and emphasizes that this isn't 'fly on the wall' journalism. (Jenkins & Sacco, 2007)

Sacco's presence in his comics intends to make the reader continually aware of the subjective nature of journalism. The goal is not to explore his own subjectivity, which is signaled by the occlusion of his eyes. Rather, Sacco points to himself as a factor in the creation and production of the story, in the non-neutrality of his worldview, in the reception of Goraždans' testimonies, their visualization, and ultimately representation.

Sacco's tone in the narrative bubbles is colloquial, even chummy with the readers, taking them along for the ride, drawing them in by what he was initially drawn, too – the exhilaration of field journalism, of being in the midst of war. But the benevolence of the tone dissipates as the readers get to know Goražde's characters, their own witnessing to atrocities, to mental anguish and constantly shifting paradigms, to their trauma. What also becomes more prominent throughout the comic is the ironic recasting of foreign presence in Bosnia, which is the perspective Sacco must at least partially assume, regardless of how integrated he becomes in Goražde's community. The readers are primarily led to inhabit Sacco's shoes, their own experience shifting with that of the avatar and becoming emotionally drawn from the sidelines into the thick of chaos.

Sacco's character in the comic is housed by Goražde's resident Edin, whom Sacco describes as "a true discovery" and "a willing, good-natured, sure-footed guide" (Sacco, 2000, p. 12). These compliments accompany Sacco's mocking portrayal of the journalists visiting Goražde as greedy, manipulative, and sanctimonious, without sparing himself the same criticism. Regardless of how genuinely close he becomes to Edin throughout his stay in Goražde, Sacco's narrating voice does not allow the reader to forget that Edin is still trapped in Goražde, while Sacco can leave at any point, and that ultimately Sacco is performing a job, with his Maltese passport as a ticket out, while Edin's position is precarious and devoid of inherent value in the eyes of the privileged outsiders. On the right side of a panel picturing a helicopter flying over the trees in Goražde, Sacco's avatar narrates: "In my world there were

certain privileges. / I was a guest of the Bosnian War. / I could get out of Gorazde gratis. / No one ever asked me for money or a limb" (Sacco, 2000, p. 130). Sacco's narrating voice tends not to express direct value judgments. He lets the voices of those participating in the turmoil of war speak. What Sacco's character does is provide observational commentary and, if he does venture to speak from personal experience, it is almost always with an overt sense of self-deprecation and irony. While introducing the story, Sacco writes in narrative bubbles above his character and that of another journalist walking through Goražde, surrounded by rubble, bombed houses, and Bosnian people who cannot but pay attention to them:

> We were cut off. / <u>They</u> were cut off to be more precise. Emira and everyone else we were about to meet. / As for me, don't you worry. I was privy to exclusive exits, all clearly marked. / If the noose got tight again, I could flash my UN-issued Blue Card and get out of here and back to Sarajevo… / …back home to mommy if things really slipped back to unthinkable. (Sacco, 2000, p. 7)

When visiting a family in Goražde during a home celebration following the easing of tensions in 1995, Sacco portrays the complex relationship he enters with the boy Mela, who gets so physically close to Sacco that it seems as if "he wanted to blend in with [him], to take [his] place!" (Sacco, 2000, p. 11). Mela perceives Sacco as a figure symbolic of the promise of freedom, of a world vastly different from the one in which Mela has been imprisoned for years. Later, Sacco again employs irony to speak about this aspect of his privileged position in Goražde: "They <u>had</u> to love me in Goražde. / They <u>had</u> to want me. / I <u>was</u> movement" (Sacco, 2000, p. 65). The Blue Card enables him to travel to Sarajevo and back, delivering messages and packages between family members, making him an invaluable asset to Goraždans. Yet, he acquires such a role not on account of any special skills, but solely because of his privileged nationality – a fact he never misses to ironically underline in the comic. At the end of the night of celebrations, Mela gives the visiting journalists trinkets as presents, over which Sacco comments: "We took his junk, of course, everything he had! / Our due as foreigners who'd dropped by for pizza in Gorazde!" (Sacco, 2000, p. 11), indirectly satirizing the foreign media's exploitation of human beings for the "news content value" they may possess. With such commentary, Sacco illustrates the complex nature even of his own slow type of journalism, which is supposed to counteract the media's compulsive chase for digestible, easily packaged "content", but which still cannot escape the paradoxical position of (if only symbolically) exploiting those whose ally he proposes to be.

The "bon-bons scene", in which Sacco is most derisive toward foreign media presence in Bosnia, functions as a paradigmatic example not only of the journalistic coverage of the Bosnian War but metaphorically of the political context of the war, as well. Sacco depicts how journalists would, when pressed for time, artificially induce certain behavior that was considered "photographable", like throwing bon-bons in front of children to elicit a "mad scramble" (Sacco, 2000, p. 131). In the following panels, bon-bons become a symbol of merciful charity, but one that stems from a power structure that does not prioritize the ones in need of that charity. When

a boy asks a British journalist for a cigarette, he is given a bon-bon instead, because the journalist would rather preserve his liberal conscience and "set a good example" (Sacco, 2000, p. 131) than attempt to connect with the boy's experience in a more meaningful manner. The politics of the bon-bon distribution stand for the ineffectual politics of the international community's involvement in the Bosnian War at large. Sacco describes it in the following way, ending with a panel of a young, smiling, toothless boy holding a bon-bon in the middle of a dirt road in Goražde surrounded by the familiar ravaged scenery:

> Every journalist had his or her own take on the matter of bon-bon distribution. / My colleague Whit said bon-bons ought to go to the parents… / that they should pass out the bon-bons. / We discussed the subject for a good five minutes… / (that's a long time to be talking about dispensing bon-bons.) / Anyway, my bon-bon policy was to give them out to every kid asking so long as they all got one. / As to when and how they ought to eat their bon-bons, I couldn't care less. / I figured the children in Gorazde could make their own bon-bon decisions. (Sacco, 2000, p. 132)

This scene is also a rare example of Sacco's narrating voice assuming a personal stance or expressing a subjective response. His policy of putting the Goraždans first is a revolutionary one and if it were proposed by a politician and not an independent journalist it would imply a demand for a complete overhaul of the politics surrounding the conflict in Bosnia. However, Sacco remains an independent journalist, one that does suffer several personal adjustments during his stay in Goražde, which the readers, for whom Sacco's avatar acts as a surrogate, are also invited to go through. But ultimately, the emphasis in *Safe Area Goražde* is not on Sacco. The ironic self-awareness of his character is there to frame the story in a postmodernist, performative sense, but Sacco-the-author does not reduce the story to that framework. He lets the people of Goražde speak.

4. Trauma and witnessing in *Safe Area Goražde*

It ought to be clear from the previous section that *Safe Area Goražde* is not another *Bildung* story about the self-exploration and maturation of the American traveler. Sacco does not allow himself to take the front stage in any of his comics that belong to the genre of graphic journalism. In *Safe Area Goražde*, that stage belongs to the enclave's witness narratives.

The comic itself is sectioned into episodic chapters, the first of which acts as an introductory piece, a Prologue, where Sacco sets the overall framework for his depiction of the Bosnian War. He and Edin are having coffee amidst other despondent faces of Goražde's residents in the Alcatraz – a suitably named tavern – when they are approached by a zealous man promising to deliver the "Real Truth" about Goražde, "in fact, he'd written a book called 'The Real Truth About This Town'" (Sacco, 2000, p. i). However, after the man leaves their table, Sacco narrates in a bubble: "I never visited that man. In fact, after that evening I avoided him completely…" (Sacco,

2000, p. ii). What Sacco achieves in this introductory scene is to align his graphic narrative with the postmodernist notion of dethroned metanarratives. Throughout the comic, the readers are never given a revelation in terms of a grand truth or "the real story". They are instead faced with a multitude of witnessing episodes laying claim to their own narrative truth, which the readers are urged to ethically evaluate, empathize with, and critically deconstruct. Caruth pertinently characterizes witness narratives as "a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (1996, p. 7), where the weight of the survival is shared in varying degrees between the witness and the witness-to-the-witness.

In the following chapter entitled "GO AWAY" (Sacco, 2000, p. 1–4), Sacco seems to have attempted to cram the entirety of Goražde. The settings first encountered in this chapter provide a sense of claustrophobic encapsulation because Sacco insists on the repetitive representation of conspicuous sights, such as bearpaw marks from mortar shells, lonely chimneys sticking out from demolished houses and buildings, and passers-by in oversized military jackets, with crutches and worn-down faces, alike yet drawn as distinctly different. But claustrophobia in the comic is likewise temporal because time is arrested in Goražde. It blasts and it stands still, but it does not progress linearly. While Sacco "<u>was</u> movement" (Sacco, 2000, p. 65) for the Goraždans, they themselves are caught up in either disassociating from traumatic memories in a vacuous present or reenacting them to try and reclaim the unclaimed truth (see Caruth, 1996, pp. 1–24) of the impossibly unthinkable nature of those memories. As Luckhurst notes, "the traumatic memory persists in half-life, rather like a ghost, a haunting absent presence of another time in our time" (2008, p. 81).

Unlike the typical sanctity ascribed to the traumatized in narratives that aim to represent them, there is no romanticization of the people Sacco interviews in *Safe Area Goražde*. He provides a platform for the disenfranchised to speak, but they are not martyred as saints. In the series of chapters entitled "SILLY GIRLS", the mundane and the horrific meet. The girls are portrayed as giddy and excited about Sacco getting them original Levi jeans from Sarajevo not long after sharing stories about homes lost and parents found bleeding from shrapnel (Sacco, 2000, p. 50–56). The banality, however, is never employed to ridicule, but to humanize the witnesses and detach the trauma from its problematic representation as sublime, beautiful suffering[5]. Sabina can "[grin] about the time the cannon fired at her while she hung the wash… / and [giggle] about how bad posture saved her and Kimeta from shrapnel" (Sacco, 2000, p. 151), but once Sacco asks about her worst moment, her face becomes similar to that which most people he interviews put on when sharing their stories – a somber, resigned almost expressionless countenance. The face is drawn repeatedly to signal the subject behind the voice, the sufferer behind the story.

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[5] In his study *Memory, Trauma, and History: Essays on Living with the Past*, Michael S. Roth (2021, p. 146) warns against the employment of the opaquely conventional association between the traumatic and the sublime, which can deny agency to the witness and risk a regression into transcendentalism and essentialism.

Sacco sometimes draws the narrated memories of people he interviews in continuous panels with the narrating character; sometimes in panels surrounding them, indicting the temporal simultaneity of past and present for (post)traumatic memories; but most frequently he does it in a long, continuous stretch within the black-margined chapters. While the white-margined sections correspond to Sacco's immediate experiences and interactions with the people in Goražde, the narratives stemming from Goražde's witnesses are reserved for the sections in black. The shifting sizes and types of panels and the changing borders between them point to narrative dislocations, which is where Sacco textualizes the context, understood by both Felman and Chute as one of the crucial, context-dependent techniques of trauma narratives. With these techniques that produce disorder and fragmentation, Sacco formally points to the collision of the individual and the communal through the integration of personal testimonies within the larger political, historical, and cultural narratives. They likewise demonstrate the overlap between the past and the present, which spill into one another through unresolved historical conflicts and the instigation of national myths, but also through personal witness narratives whose temporal dimension is warped by trauma.

In one of the black-margined chapters entitled "Around Gorazde" (Sacco, 2000, p. 109–119), Rasim, a refugee from Višegrad, recounts his memories of how the Serbian nationalists put the town on siege following the departure of Užički Corps in May 1992. Sacco pushes realistic graphic representation to its limits in the detailed, visceral drawings of the horrific violence described by Rasim. The blood is drawn in black, like the night sky and the surface of the river into which slaughtered Bosnians are thrown, and it seeps into the blackness of the margins, unifying the narrative of its witness. Rasim's repeatedly drawn face in numerous panels explicitly pronounces that he "was an eyewitness" (Sacco, 2000, p. 109, 110, 111), making a claim to the truthfulness of his memories, holding on to a shred of stability in a devastatingly collapsed reality.

However, regardless of how detailed Sacco's drawings may be, the readers are still required to fill in the gutters with their "forged" memories, to acknowledge the constitutive absence in trauma and connect with the witness through a shared lack which, in psychoanalytic terms, conditions subjectivity. The potential self-serving idiosyncrasy of the subjectively forged memories is contained by the readers' confrontation with the self-ironizing caricature of Sacco's avatar, which challenges the supposedly disinterested and objective Western perspective. The subjectivity of the reader's response is framed by the demand for self-evaluation and perhaps even a temporary stepping back from direct engagement with the comic. This type of self-annulling on the part of the reader, so as not to recast the portrayed traumatic experiences through a self-serving, stereotypical experiential lens, is in line with Levine's claim that we cannot speak of a stable identity within the context of a dialogic witnessing to trauma – the "I" must be "searched for and won" (2006, p. 4). While this is the case for the witness, it likewise becomes true for the witness(es) to the witness. Their perceived sense of self is disturbed by the ongoing, active participation in negotiating the assumed definitions of humanity, morality, culture,

and customs – which to Westerners might at first seem as straightforward, indisputable legacies of their civilization.

In the Epilogue, Sacco recounts that he "was lost" (Sacco, 2000, p. 223) upon returning to liberated Goražde at the beginning of 1996. The people he had made close connections to were no longer there, most of them having gone to Sarajevo: "Sarajevo was full of Goražde" (Sacco, 2000, p. 224). Typical for postmodernist narratives, a lack of closure also qualifies *Safe Area Goražde*. But the ethical considerations intrinsically tied to witness narratives and the complex representation of trauma prevent the comic's interpretation in terms of disinterested relativism, which a host of postmodernist techniques might risk producing. On the other hand, Scherr argues that the emancipatory potential commonly attached to narrative methods that emphasize the performative function in connection to storytelling, identity, and subjectivity, is not made available to the characters in Sacco's comics. They remain largely trapped in their suffering, while the readers are the ones who are offered emancipation.

> One of the deep tensions in Sacco's work is that while his style and methods revolve around the performative, the emancipatory potential of the performative in his work is reserved for the *readers*: his work gives readers new vistas, new ways of thinking about and framing suffering, new ways of connecting and seeing a shared vulnerability across differences. (Scherr, 2015, p. 195)

The unease that the readers are forced to experience, both in terms of the lack of closure and Sacco's refusal to frame the witnessing narratives in a savior-type genre, underline the ethical dimension of his comics. The readers are made to inhabit a shared precariousness with the traumatized characters. However, due to the "purposeful failure" (Scherr, 2015, p. 198) built into the witnessing performances, i.e. Sacco's intentional avoidance of fitting them into a grand narrative that would make sense of them, the readers' feeling of shared vulnerability is left gaping, like a wound. While emancipation may lead them to a greater rational and emotional awareness of a context they probably once reduced to simplistic binaries, it also can and ought to bring about unresolved pain which cannot be subsumed under comforting formulae.

5. Sacco's comics as alternative narratives

In his Foreword to Sacco's comic *Palestine*, Edward Said wrote that Sacco "is tugged at by the forgotten places and people of the world, those who don't make it on to our television screens, or if they do, who are regularly portrayed as marginal, unimportant, perhaps even negligible were it not for their nuisance value which, like the Palestinians, seems impossible to get rid of" (2001, p. iv). That "nuisance value" is what Sacco manages to humanize exceptionally in his journalistic comics, and ultimately it is this humanization that has become the driving force of his graphic art.

Sacco has never professed an ethically straightforward cause for his comics in terms of contributing to the resolution of historical conflicts by shedding light

on universal truths. Through depicting stories that can serve as memory narratives for the silenced, he has been granting a voice to those who are, in the West, easily reduced to simplistic portrayals and referred to and imagined either as the Other or generalized victims. In an interview he gave to *The New York Times*, Sacco touched upon this issue: "Bosnia marks a point in my life where I set aside idealism, and what replaced idealism was understanding. […] You can condemn violence all the time – everyone does. But you have to understand the context" (Elder & Sacco, 2000). *Safe Area Goražde* is, therefore, not about condemning evil. It is about understanding the enormity of human sacrifice and about empathizing with the complexity of human suffering when condemning evil proves to be only a coping mechanism of the privileged.

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СИГУРНА ЗОНА ГОРАЖДЕ ЏОА САКОА КАО АЛТЕРНАТИВНИ СТРИП

Резиме

У раду се журналистички стрип *Сигурна зона Горажде: рат у источној Босни 1992–95* (2000), чији је аутор малтешко-амерички графички новинар и стрип цртач Џо Сако, проматра као алтернативни стрип и анализира путем постмодернистичке самореференцијалности ауторског аватара у стрипу, као и путем концепата из студија трауме који су везани за контроверзно и комплексно представљање трауме. Као оквир за анализу стрипа *Сигурна зона Горажде*, у раду је образложено одбацивање стереотипних формула присутно у алтернативним стриповима, њихово експериментисање са жанровима (посебно у контексту испитивања граница аутобиографије), као и акценат који стављају на (гео)политичке и међународне теме. Концепти преузети из студија трауме, попут неприсвојене истине трауматског сећања (Карут), текстуализације контекста (Фелман) и репозиционирања препознатљивих наративних конвенција (Лакхурст), у раду доприносе подробнијем тумачењу *Сигурне зоне Горажде* као графички уобличеног трауматског наратива.

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