Dreamlands, Border Zones and Spaces of Exception: Comics and Graphic Narratives on the US-Mexico Border

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Abstract

This article explores the formal correlation between the spaces of exception that amass at national borders and the bordered, infrastructural components of the graphic narrative form, through a study of two graphic narratives about the US-Mexico border towns of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. Beginning with a brief discussion of Sacco's *Palestine* (2001), arguably the refugee comics' archetype, to establish this affiliation, the article then offers close readings of Charles Bowden and Alice Leora Briggs' co-authored illuminated non-fictional narrative, *Dreamland: The Way out of Juárez* (2010), and Jon Sack's collaboratively produced piece of comics journalism, *La Lucha, The Story of Lucha Castro and Human Rights in Mexico* (2015). Through these readings, it argues that both are able to recover human testimonies through exceptional visual-narrative experiments that correlate formally with the exceptional space of the border zone. Documenting the lives and deaths of those who fall through the gaps of an entangled and unevenly applied rights-based legal system, these graphic narratives position themselves as a spatial antidote to the violent logics of the world's current dispensation of bordered nation-states. In conclusion, the article suggests that these comics thus initiate a kind of 'border thinking', one that is able to frame and critique the material effects of a border violence that regulates those migratory bodies that are fit for labour, on the one hand, and discards those that are not, on the other.

Keywords: US-Mexico Border, Juárez, graphic narrative, refugee comics

Introduction: Bordered Spaces of Exception

In June 2018, the human consequences of US President Donald Trump's policy of 'zero-tolerance' toward immigrants, which called for the prosecution of *all* individuals who had illegally entered the United States, were made momentarily visible.[1] Leaked images and sound recordings revealed that efforts to enforce such aggressive anti-immigrant policies had led to the separation of nearly 2,000 immigrant (mostly Mexican) children from their parents or carers, as 'minors' as young as five months were detained in cages at the US-Mexico border. The reports quite rightly sparked both domestic and international outrage. Numerous protests – some under the label 'Occupy ICE' (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement) – mobilised along the country's borders and around immigration offices across the country.[2] Trump faced a severe backlash from US and international publics, politicians, celebrities and perhaps the First Lady herself. Even members of his own Republican party who had previously supported his tough line on immigration condemned this particular instance of such glaringly ruthless border violence.

How could they not? Those with the most hardline views on immigration must surely concede rights violations when confronted with the images and sounds of children locked up in cages – shouldn't they? Unfortunately not. Several far right voices were heard in the media and online, faulting not the US or ICE, but the Mexican parents who had brought their children with them. And Trump himself, who had kicked off his presidential campaign in June 2015 by claiming that arriving Mexicans were criminals, drug-dealers and rapists, and who in April 2018 had unashamedly doubled down on these sentiments, refused to admit that the incarceration of toddlers was ethically unsound.[3] However, the self-contradictory language of his refutation is revealing. As he commented in a press conference a few days after the story of child detention had gone global: the US 'will not be a migrant camp and it will not be a refugee holding facility [...] we have the worst immigration laws in the entire world. Nobody has such sad, such bad, and in actually many cases, such horrible and tough, you see about child separation, what's going on there. But just remember a country without borders is not a country at all. We need borders, we need security'.[4]

It is wise to be cautious of beginning any political story with the often sensationalist words of the US president, which tend to dictate the flows and priorities of mainstream media outlets.[5] Yet in this instance, Trump's words are remarkably profound. His admission that border security is crucial to America's philosophical existence as 'a nation' – or rather, 'a *white* nation' – reveals the extent to which the contemporary global dispensation of nation-states is fundamentally predicated on the production and infrastructural maintenance of bordered spaces of incarceration, spaces in which human beings are routinely denied their basic human rights.[6] More specifically, the geography underpinning Trump's statement, which justifies the construction of immigrant holding facilities at the *border* of the nation as an effective strategy for preventing that nation from *itself* becoming a holding facility, throws into relief the uneven *spatial* consequences of the nation-state system. Trump's confused statement arises from the fact that the very existence of a system that prioritises the rights of a national citizenry over the rights of a universal humanity rests upon the production of

spaces of exception where humans must necessarily be deprived of their rights.[7] As Trump points out, rights can only exist *inside* the nation if they are actively disavowed at its borders.

For Giorgio Agamben, the refugee camp epitomises such spaces of exception. As he writes, the camp, that 'pure space of exception', demands that the 'concept of the refugee [...] be resolutely separated from the concept of the rights of man'.[8] In this dislocation, the exceptional figure that should have been the most essential recipient of human rights – the refugee – comes instead to embody their failure.[9] The camp is the spatial correlation of this exception, a 'zone of indistinction' that is both 'outside and inside' the basic infrastructural and legal fabric that regulates human life.[10] It is a kind of liminal space, or 'dreamland', a 'dormant' area of 'borders and margins' that are in fact 'physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other', as Gloria Anzaldúa wrote of her own experience of the US-Mexico border some time ago now.[11] While the horrendous images and sounds of incarcerated Mexican children have rightly been received with outrage across the world, this particular instance of inhumane brutality is not an exception to decades of US and Western domestic policy, but in fact its logical consequence.[12] Visually echoing the infrastructures of the Nazi concentration camps that inform Agamben's work on spaces and states of exception, the images of incarcerated Mexican children capture the sourest symptom of a global border regime that differentiates humanity into different citizenries with unequal rights and unequal life chances. If reading such instances of blatant disregard for human rights as anomalies risks obscuring these wider global logics, it also occludes the long histories of activism, resistance and resilience that have sought to challenge and circumvent them. By way of a modest and necessary – though admittedly insufficient – response, this article shows how recent comics and graphic narratives have worked to try and throw the structural contours of these violent logics into relief, and to bring the multiple and strategic everyday resistance movements to them back into the frame.

In order to demonstrate this, the article turns first to a brief discussion of Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (2001) to establish a formal correlation between the spaces of exception that amass at national borders and the bordered, infrastructural components of the graphic narrative form. It then turns to two

graphic narratives about the US-Mexico border towns of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso – Charles Bowden and Alice Leora Briggs' co-authored illuminated non-fictional narrative, *Dreamland: The Way out of Juárez* (2010), and Jon Sack's collaboratively produced piece of comics journalism, *La Lucha, The Story of Lucha Castro and Human Rights in Mexico* (2015) – to show how their spatial form allows them to initiate a kind of 'border thinking', one that is able to frame and critique the material effects of a border violence that regulates those migratory bodies that are fit for labour, on the one hand, and discards those that are not, on the other. Documenting the lives and deaths of those who fall through the gaps of an entangled and unevenly applied rights-based legal system, these graphic narratives positions themselves as a spatial antidote to the violent logics of the current dispensation of bordered nation-states.

Images of Exception

In recent years, comics and graphic narratives have proven themselves to be especially concerned with making the world's spaces of exception visible, while also documenting the histories of their contestation. These proliferating visual-narrative experiments, circulating both online and offline, have been variously defined as 'migrant comics', 'refugee comics', 'detention comics', 'documentary comics' and 'crisis comics', and much has been written of their formal and political attributes.[13] Just as there is a correlation between the exceptional, 'rightless' figure of the refugee and the spaces of exception in which they are incarcerated, there seems also to be a formal affiliation between these bordered spaces and the bordered, infrastructural components of graphic narrative. As critics have noted, comics are drawn repeatedly to immigration detention centres and camps, whether on the islands offshore of Australia, in the rural hinterlands of Canada, or at the port of Calais – those sites where conventional systems of rights-based governance fall away and break down.[14] This tendency begins with what has arguably become the refugee comics' archetype: Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, originally serialised during the final years of the first Palestinian Intifada (1993-1995) and collected

and a published as a book by Fantagraphics in 2001. Sacco's comic establishes an evocative formal template that is taken up by those comics artists that have been drawn to the exceptional spaces at the US-Mexico border, and it is therefore worth briefly unpacking here.

At the centre of *Palestine* in Chapter Six is a multi-page sequence that, entitled 'RefugeeLand', details Sacco's tour of the Gazan refugee camp, Jabalia.[15] This chapter begins with one of Sacco's most striking single-panel sketches: a large, double-page splash that bleeds off the margins of the page to reveal the Jabalia refugee camp as a space of infrastructural deterioration – roads have been reduced to muddy slush, concrete blocks hold down corrugated iron roofs, skips overspill with uncollected trash (see Fig.1).[16] Economically and geographically isolated by the Israeli Occupation, the camp's built environment is constructed from scavenged materials, precarious in its informality and visibly on the brink of infrastructural failure. But the image is exceptional in another sense: while there are of course multiple narratives taking place here (the children walking to school, the man loading sacks onto a cart), the formal narrative 'infrastructures' specific to comics – grids, gutters, panel borders – are absent.[17] The image breaks away from Sacco's usual comics pages, which tend to be criss-crossed with multiple text boxes, speech bubbles and competing lines of sight. As I have observed elsewhere, the evacuation of Palestinians of their basic human rights – to shelter, to sanitation, to food – are signified by the camp's material lack of infrastructure, just as Sacco's portrait of the camp is cut away from the comic's organising infrastructural system of grids and panels.[18] *Palestine*'s central splash page, like the refugee camp it depicts, is a 'space of exception', to use Agamben's formulation.

Insert Figure 1. The central splash from Chapter Six of Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, which depicts Gaza's Jabalia refugee camp as a space of exception. Reproduced here with the kind permission of the publisher.

Just as the camp is a 'zone of indistinction' that is both 'outside and inside',[19] excluded and included in the Palestinian case by the infrastructural regime of Israeli surveillance and spatial control, Sacco's image of the camp is both inside and outside the gridded infrastructure of the comic's narrative, setting an important panoramic context yet also dislocating readers from the rhythm of its chronological progression. The lack of conventional comics' infrastructure – its grids, gutters and other architectural materials – suggestively resonates with the lack of infrastructure that the image depicts. If the exceptional space of the camp deprives Palestinian refugees of their political rights, this lack of rights shows up both in Sacco's depiction of the camp's failing infrastructure *and* in the deterioration of the infrastructure of the comic's page – a formal correlation also to be found in *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), as Charlotta Salmi has identified (2016).[20] The geographic stranglehold of the blockade of Gaza that has stagnated the camp's economy and stalled its infrastructural development, reducing Palestinian housing and roads to a condition of informality. This infrastructural 'informality' is registered in the formal discrepancy of Sacco's splash page, as the 'planning modalities' of both the Israeli Occupation *and* the comic's grids, panels and gutters disappear from view.[21]

But there is a counteractive, reparative work also contained in Sacco's exceptional image. As Eyal Weizman has written in his book-length analysis of the architecture of the Israeli Occupation, if the 'almost palindromic linguistic structure of law/wall [binds] these two structures in an interdependency that equates built and legal fabric', then the 'un-walling of the wall invariably becomes the undoing of the law'.[22] While the dilapidated infrastructure of the refugee camp here registers the absence of a rights-based legal system, the Palestinians' cautious construction of their own informal infrastructure registers in turn their enduring economic activity and social resilience – sacks are loaded onto horse drawn carts, girls in hijab pick through the mud on their way to school, basic housing is built from the recycled bricks and metal sheets that lie to hand. These seemingly mundane details are invested here with a rights-based politics. For in capturing the everyday rhythms of Palestinian life, Sacco reclaims the humanity of these refugees and consequently their *right to*

human rights – a rights-based assertion of course continued in the many narrative testimonies that are documented throughout *Palestine*.

Fragmented by the kaleidoscopic geographies, splintering infrastructures and unevenly consequential laws/walls of the Occupied Territories, Sacco's documentation of Palestinian life narratives both insists upon the humanity of those otherwise consigned to spaces of exception, while more profoundly revealing that, in fact, 'there is no autonomous space in the political order of the nation-state for something like the pure human in itself'.[23] Sacco's *Palestine* provocatively aligns the uneven geographies that separate spaces of citizenship rights from exceptional, rightless spaces – not to mention the rigid border infrastructures that demarcate and contain them – with the narrative infrastructure of the comics form. In this infrastructural alignment, which as I will show is repeated by graphic narrative depictions of the exceptional spaces along the US-Mexico border, the rights-claiming capacity of life and sometimes death narratives are actively *built* – to extend that infrastructural analogy – into and by the comics form itself. As Sacco's paradigmatic example demonstrates, by so graphically indexing its own underlying narrative infrastructure, the comics form is able to show up the uneven edges of nation-state legalities, undoing their selective processes of inclusion and exclusion and thereby creating a space in which refreshed and more expansive rights-based narratives might be (re)constructed.

Visualising the Necropolis

It must be conceded that despite this suggestive formal aptitude and the growing critical interest in the relationship between human rights, border zones and graphic narratives, there are as-of-yet a relatively limited number of comics about the US-Mexico border. However, this seeming dearth of graphic responses to the exceptional spaces and border towns scattered along the US-Mexico line may be about to change. For though this liminal zone has long been a space where inhabitants are routinely denied their human rights, and where even the most basic laws and essential infrastructures

regularly fall away, it has in recent years – largely thanks to Trump – become one of the most publicly visible sites of exception on the planet. Innovations in life writing and (auto)biographical narratives are emerging in response to this recent shift, as Francisco Cantú's astonishing memoir of his time as a guard with the US border patrol, *The Line Becomes a River* (2018), or Jean Guerrero's biography of her migratory father, *Crux: A Cross-Border Memoir* (2018), would seem to suggest.

There are of course some comics that have been drawn to the longer history of the border's gradual militarisation, as well as the endemic violence slowly hardening around it. In 1994, the Mexican government peaked the outrage of its more powerful Northern neighbour by releasing a short, 32 page comic book, provocatively entitled 'Guide for the Mexican Migrant'.[24] Though the comic clearly stated that it did 'not promote the crossing of Mexicans without the legal documentation required by the United States', its inclusion of strategies for avoiding the detection of the US border guard – along with more basic survival techniques – incited the outrage of those advocating for tougher immigration controls.[25] More recently, Hector Rodriguez's free online comic, *El Peso Hero* (2012-present), imagines its titular 'hero' protecting Mexicans attempting the border crossing from narcos and border patrols alike – in a recent issue, El Peso is even depicted punching Trump, poignantly invoking Captain America's more famous assault on Adolf Hitler (and thus inviting comparison between the two leaders).[26] Referencing these longer comics histories and building on a long tradition of Latinx superheroes, *El Peso Hero* draws both the Latino/a experience *and* the exceptional US-Mexico borderlands subversively into mainstream visual culture.[27]

Many longer literary and visual depictions of the US-Mexico border have centred especially on Ciudad Juárez, or the City of Juárez, the most populous urban enclave in the Mexican state of Chihuahua and indicatively known throughout the nineteenth century as Paso del Norte, or 'Pass of the North'. Connected via four border points with its US neighbour El Paso, these two cities combine to form the second largest binational metropolitan area on the US-Mexico border. Juárez industrialised as an export zone in the mid-1960s, experiencing phenomenal economic growth that continued into the twentieth century and transformed the city into a key strategic site for the Mexican

state.[28] However, with George Bush's 2006 drug war and the 2008 global financial crisis, Juárez's economy collapsed and the city was largely abandoned by the state. As cartels competed for monopolies on trafficking corridors into the US, Juárez was transformed into a war zone.[29] The conterminous toughening of US immigration policies prevented Mexican civilians and workers from escaping northwards, resulting in homicide statistics comparable with internationally recognised war zones: there were 7,479 violent homicides in Ciudad Juárez from 2006 to 2010, and 6,254 homicides from 2010 to 2013, peaking in 2010 with a homicide rate of 3,075.[30] As the most avid chronicler of the city, US journalist and non-fiction writer Charles Bowden, described before his death in 2014, Juárez is a 'murder city', the site of 'the global economy's new killing fields'.[31]

Popular representations of Juárez, such as director Denis Villeneuve's much celebrated 2015 film *Sicario,* have focused on the city's exemption from the customary laws of state and civil society that reduces human life to frightening levels of disposability. The film depicts Juárez as a warring playground for the multiple factions of the US police, border guard and military, and the kaleidoscopically affiliated cartels who are similarly armed to the teeth – the films characters use 'private planes, public roads and clandestine tunnels to slip back and forth across borders both moral and geographical'.[32] Though opening to almost unanimous acclaim in the US, then mayor of Juárez, Enrique Serrano, called on the city's residents to boycott the film, taking out adverts in US newspapers and even threatening to sue the film-makers for its negative depiction of the city. Yet while *Sicario* might well be accused of capitalising on the city's murderous reputation for commercial gains, the violence it depicts is all too real. What is ultimately lost in these debates is the extent to which Juárez has been transformed into a space of exception, exempt from customary rights-based politics by the hardening of the border to its North, the impoverishment of its industry and citizens, and the labour demands of its wealthier, 'white' neighbour city, El Paso.

For urban commentators Engin F. Isin and Kim Rygel, Juárez is an 'other global city' – a space of 'extreme militarisation, violence and poverty' produced by 'the migration of cheap labour' that is 'integral to the functioning of cosmopolitan spaces like the global city'.[33] Arising from the dynamics

of the border zone, the city is an extraterritorial zone that denies its inhabitants 'the right to have rights'.[34] This space of exception is a direct consequence of the solidification of the US-Mexico border, one that makes 'the dominant regime of a global regulation of movement of peoples and capital by democratic states [...] visible for what it is'.[35] It is more than coincidence, I want to argue, that Bowden, who spent the final decades of his life deciphering and documenting Juárez in books such as *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* (1999), *Down by the River: Drugs, Money, Murder, and Family* (2002), *A Shadow in the City: Confessions of an Undercover Drug Warrior* (2005) and *Murder City: Ciudad Juarez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields* (2010), chose to combine the written word with sequentially organised images in a graphic narrative that was published in 2010, the city's most murderous year.

Written in an almost elegiac prose, *Dreamland: The Way out of Juárez* (2010) is part biography of the city and autobiography of the author, one that supplements Bowden's journalistic wanderings across and around the border with Alice Leora Briggs' sgraffito etchings. Sgraffito, a centuries-old technique more commonly used to decorate façades and interiors, involves the application of a layer of paint from which decipherable images are then scratched out. This labour intensive practice, in which the artist's hand carves away at the surface of the page, is echoed meta-visually in motif of disembodied hands that recurs throughout the book.[36] These ghostly hands serve in part as a metaphor for Bowden's mostly failed attempts to 'grasp the reality' of Juárez as a space of exception.[37] Consider, for instance, the book's opening image (see Fig.2).[38] The lefthand side of this page confronts readers with a decontextualised, disembodied hand, while another on the righthand side holds a Kodachrome slide up to a lamp that dominates the background of this panel. Kodachrome, a film widely used by journalists and in print media for its high quality colouring, was discontinued by Kodak in 2009, the year before *Dreamland*'s publication. However, if Briggs' dull grey images efface the bright colouring that had ensured Kodachrome's popularity for decades, her artistic technique – etching images into the page rather than painting them upon it – echoes Kodachrome's own

developmental processes as a *reversal* film, which produces an image through *positive* rather than negative light capture.

Insert Figure 2. The opening image from Charles Bowden and Alice Leora Briggs' *Dreamland: The Way out of Juárez* depicts 'a black hand' reaching 'out of the sand dune just beyond the city'. Reproduced here with the kind permission of the artist, Alive Leora Briggs, Kelly Leslie, and the publisher.

These multiple layers of (failed) representation are further complicated by another image of a segment of Kodachrome film that floats beneath these panels, yet which frames only an empty black space. This empty blackness then richochets backwards, across the page, through the other filmic frames. The Kodachrome film included *inside* the second panel reveals a disembodied hand, a shape echoed both by the original image in the lefthand panel and the hand that holds the photograph itself. There is no way out of this self-referential page for the reader, just as there is no 'way out of Juárez' – the book's subtitle – for the owner of the original, disembodied hand. As the accompanying text, printed on the opposite page, informs readers:

> A black hand reached out of the sand dune just beyond the city. Of course, I knew about bodies coming out of the sand, often with money in their mouths. Everyone knew about the bodies. [...] The photographer [who sold Bowden the Kodachrome slide] believed it was deliberately left reaching out of the dune, left to beckon the curious and the ignorant and the idle to a new kind of reality.
>
> I bought the slide from him and carried it with me a long time.[39]

Th emergence of these bodies from the shifting sand dunes on the outskirts of Juárez – an image of which Bowden carries around in his pocket throughout the narrative – dramatise the comic's own project to make visible those civilians whose lives are made disposable by the larger dynamics of the border economy. Juárez is an 'other' global city, or rather, the 'necropolis' to El Paso's 'metropolis': 'there is no metropolis without a necropolis. Just as the metropolis is closely linked to monuments,

artefacts, technological novelty, an architecture of light and advertising, the phantasmagoria of selling, and a cornucopia of commodities, so is it produced by what lies below the surface', write Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe.[40] The spaces of rights-based politics *within* the nation-state are predicated on the production of their exception, just as the smooth functioning of the neoliberal economy and the circulation of financial assets and commodities are predicated on the immobilisation and containment of certain human bodies. This oppositional, black-and-white relation between border cities finds aesthetic resonance in the positive-negative composition of Briggs' images.

Telling the story of a murder by a US-employed Mexican informant (the plot is entangled in, and an entanglement of, the multiple threads of this cross-border space), *Dreamland* returns throughout the book to questions of representation and exception. The title itself denotes a liminal space, between waking and sleeping, and as the book progresses Briggs' images become increasingly abstract and chaotic, reading as an illuminated medieval manuscript rather than a contemporary graphic narrative. This aesthetic is used to denote the slippage of Juárez from a space regulated by a system of laws and rights into one of pre-disciplinarily administered justice. The images, which blend drawings of border guards and drug traffickers with writhing bodies, often naked and on torture apparatuses,[41] reverse the historical trajectory famously identified by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* – the shift from spectacular medieval punishments to regimes of disciplinary regulation, epitomised in the 'state of permanent visibility' assured by the architectural layout of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon.[42] Juárez, however, eludes this visibility, as power is organised around pre-modern methods of public execution and corporeal violence. As Dominika Blachnicka-Ciacek observes in her comparison of 'the media spectacle' of 'the so-called "refugee crisis" with 'the performance of medieval executions', the execution is 'there to frighten, make insecure and evoke the feeling that "it could have been me", thus inviting obedience to power and authority'.[43]

Dreamland's overarching ambition is to realise the space of exception as, in fact, no exception at all, instead making visible the *everyday* nature of homicide and other visceral forms of dissuasive violence in the liminal zone of Juárez. For Bowden, this is explicitly bound up with a language of

sight and visibility, as the graphic narrative seeks to capture visually the lives of those civilian casualties who are routinely invisibilised – think again of the *invisible* body attached to the *visible* hand. While Bowden's Mexican informant '*sees* the whole matter as an instance where government failed to function properly', one that can simply 'be exposed and remedied', Bowden himself is 'drifting into a different way of *seeing* things'.[44] As he continues:

> I want to say this: I think the death house is how government works on the line. The death house is remarkable only in that it became known. Few will agree with me, except for the dead. And they are gagged and kept out of sight by various headings: illegal immigration, illegal drugs, national security. The list keeps growing, as does the number of dead.[45]

The 'death house' is the 'necropolis', the space of exception – 'except for the dead' – that is not an accidental consequence of the hardening nation-state system, but rather its most essential component. Though it 'is easier to see the whole house of corpses as a deviation from the natural order of things', writes Bowden, it is in fact integral to the system's well-oiled mechanisation.[46] Searching for a word to describe the exceptional space of the border city, Bowden settles on 'Dreams', a liminal zone that is given a purgatorial quality by Briggs' medieval-style sgraffito drawings. Hell is to the South, heaven to the North; the many disappeared Mexican immigrants buried in the border zone's sand dunes are confined to an eternal purgatory through the impossibility of their postmortem identification and the related denial of their human rights, even in death. They are only 'hands', which is to say a source of migratory *labour*, integral to the functioning of a border economy that refuses to recognise them as fully human.

Exceptional Forms, Exceptional Lives

This exceptionality materialises in the form of *Dreamland*. It is not a conventional graphic narrative or comic, and Briggs' images are not necessarily essential to the plot's progression nor the reader's comprehension of it. They are rather supplementary and illustrative, departing from the text in those

moments when Bowden's written words dissolve into dreamlike abstraction. In this sense, they are routinely images of exception, breaking away from and interrupting the narrative as much as building toward its completion. However, on certain pages throughout the book, the two are blended more explicitly.[47] In these instances, a light grey image bleeds to the edge of the page, overlaid with thick black lines that contain within them white text. This text is invariably the directly quoted testimonies of *Dreamland*'s main protagonists – those personal narratives that are otherwise occluded by the headline rhetorics of 'illegal immigration, illegal drugs, [and] national security'.[48] If the thick black lines resemble redacted documentation, the white words they contain counter such redaction by making visible the testimonies of Juárez's previously invisibilised inhabitants. These crucial sentences, which punctuate the narrative at its most crucial points, take on the pictorial qualities of an image, performing a visually semiotic function that signifies far more than the simple meaning of the words they contain.

In the book's final pages, the owner of the disembodied hand is identified as Luis Padilla. Alongside this revelation, the image of the Kodachrome slide reappears, though now with the vacant, black space filled in with a gently etched sgraffito portrait. Opposite this image, redacted black lines are similarly filled in with the testimony of Janet Padilla, Luis' wife:

> Two weeks after his disappearance, the Mexican authorities in Juárez, Mexico, Antisecuestro [Anti-kidnapping] department called me to identify a body.
> I found my husband.
> Although his body had partially decomposed, there were obvious signs of abuse.
> His hands and feet had been bound with duct tape.
> His head and mouth were also partially bound with duct tape.
> His pants were soaked in blood, especially in the groin area.
> It appeared to me that Luis, my husband, had been tortured to death.[49]

In identifying the dead and recounting the visceral abuse of Luis' body, *Dreamland* strives to counter the invisibilising conditions of the US-Mexico border's exceptional spaces. If Luis' murderers are not brought to justice, and he falls through this space of exception, Bowden's graphic narrative positions itself as a spatial antidote to this failure. The purgatorial space of the titular 'dreamland' is,

after all, documented in the book itself, which points to the limits of the nation-state system in the same moment as it fills in those geographically organised oversights. Though perhaps more accurately thought of as a 'death narrative' than a life narrative, Bowden and Briggs breath new life into these testimonies through an exceptional visual-narrative experiment that, like Sacco's *Palestine*, correlates formally with the exceptional space of the border zone.

The recovery of testimonies – and especially women's testimonies – that expose the violence at the border is also the subject of Jon Sack's collaboratively produced book-length piece of comics journalism, *La Lucha, The Story of Lucha Castro and Human Rights in Mexico* (2015). Sack's comic is a more conventional graphic narrative, adhering to the comic's basic infrastructure of panels, grids, frames and speech bubbles and refusing the formal liminality of Bowden and Briggs' book. Nevertheless, like *Dreamland*, it is concerned with the surge in homicides that plagued Juárez in the years following Bush's drug wars, attending especially to what Sergio González Rodríguez describes in his book-length study as 'the femicide machine'. Rodríguez couches his account of this phenomenon in the language of spaces of exception:

> In Ciudad Juárez, a territorial power normalised barbarism. This anomalous ecology mutated into a femicide machine: an apparatus that didn't just create the conditions for the murders of dozens of women and little girls, but developed the institutions that guaranteed impunity for those crimes and even legalised them. A lawless city sponsored by a State in crisis.[50]

Deploying the spatial form of graphic narrative to explore these extra-legal territories, Sack departs from Bowden and Briggs by attending not so much to the dead as to the living. In particular, it *makes visible* the work of Lucha Castro, co-founder and coordinator of the Centre for the Human Rights of Women (Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres) that operates in Juárez, and that has sought to fill in the gaps of a nation-state-centric legal system that has as much produced as it has overlooked the city as a space of exception.

La Lucha is in this sense a biography of Lucha Castro, a life narrative that combines the history of the creation of the Centre for the Human Rights of Women with an immediate reportage account

of the centre's everyday activities of political resistance and social repair. Sack suggestively conflates his own documentation of Castro's life narrative with the work that she herself undertakes – the recovery and documentation of those women whose lives have been eradicated by the violence of the femicide machine. The form of the graphic narrative allows Sack to capture the spatial constellations of this work as it operates in a legal fabric both patchy and uneven, as Castro interacts occasionally with the US and Mexican governments, but also moves beyond them via non-state networks and actors to undertake rights-based work in Juárez's spaces of exception. Castro herself offers a metaphorical image for this collaborative human rights activism in her preface to the comic, describing how, when she was a child, she would work with her friends to look 'outside the institutional limits' of the convent in which she grew up: 'one of us would clasp our hands together as a platform so that another of the girls could climb up and tell us what was happening outside the walls'.[51] Extending this metaphor, Castro decided in later life to offer 'my hands, my arms, my lap, my voice, so that other women could learn that another world is possible, another world without violence'.[52] Here, *Dreamland*'s recurrent depiction of the disembodied hand – signifying migrant labour and expendable human life – is transformed into a cross-border '*image* of solidarity and shared dreams of freedom', as Castro describes it.[53] The hand becomes a point of connection and social solidarity rather than a symbol of anonymous isolation and death. It is exactly this 'image' that *La Lucha*, in its graphic form, sets out to make visible.

The border zone of Ciudad Juárez is posited as the comic's crucial backdrop from the outset, the narrative beginning with a short sequence entitled 'A Conversation at the Border'.[54] Sacks, La Lucha and their two fellow travellers wait in a car to cross the US-Mexico border at the Cordova bridge, one of the most infamous crossing points between Juárez and El Paso. A US border guard, his eyes concealed behind dark sunglasses, approaches and peers into the car. He is shocked to find that it contains both Americans and Mexicans: 'So, you guys are American, and these two up front are Mexican – how do y'all know each other?'[55] When the group inform him that they are working with a cross-national human rights group he exclaims: 'What – are there human rights violations gong

on in Mexico?'[56] His repeated questions – 'What?' – betray a wilful ignorance – 'Is there democracy in Mexico?' – that is enabled by entrenchment of a hard border between the US and its Southern neighbour. Beginning with this literal, geographic movement between the two countries, the comic highlights an American refusal to 'see' the exceptional violence that the militarisation of the border has produced. If it is exactly this refusal that Sack's piece of comics journalism seeks to redress, the guard's conspicuous sunglasses, along with repeated panels that hone in on his confused expression, operate both as a metaphor for this willed 'unseeing' and as a reference to Sacco's *Palestine* – after all, in his many drawings of his wanderings through spaces of exception, Sacco always conceals his own cartoon eyes beneath the accentuated lenses of his glasses.[57]

Insert Figure 3. A double-page splash depicting the Mexican border city of Juárez in the opening pages of Jon Sack's *La Lucha* (2015). Reproduced here with the kind permission of the publisher.

This sequence is followed by a panoramic, double-page image of Juárez, which depicts sparsely populated, wind-swept streets patrolled mostly by military convoys (see Fig.3).[58] The splash is notably evocative of Sacco's comparable depiction of a space of exception – his drawing of the Jabalia refugee camp in *Palestine*, that I have discussed above.[59] As Sack comments in a later half-page splash of one of Juárez's suburban neighbourhoods, 'this place almost reminds me... of a refugee camp'.[60] But unlike Sacco's exceptional image, Sack's splash pages are never entirely devoid of comics' basic formal conventions. In this first opening example, he inserts two floating panels, the first showing the now iconic hillside graffiti ('La Biblia es la Verdad, Leela'/'The Bible is the Truth, Read It') that overlooks Juárez, and the second a mundane street occupied by a school bus and the occasional pedestrian. Above this second floating panel is a third 'frame': an advert for a US corporation (Wendy's), barely visible because the pasted paper has been torn through to reveal the skeletal scaffolding of the billboard beneath. In this composition, Sack gestures to a formal correlation between the exceptional space of these pages *within* the comic's narrative and the space of the city

that they, in turn, depict as one of exception. By overlaying the splash page with these floating panels, the urban space of Juárez is partially included into, and partially excluded from, the comic's narrative – just as the city itself is a site of unevenly realised and fragmentarily enforced political rights. While the torn billboard suggests an imagistic failure, that the advert's remaining strands lap at the identifiable *grid* of this structure points to the book's own formal composition and the rights-based narrative that the remainder of the comic will investigate.

These self-reflexive layers recur throughout the comic. For example, when readers arrive at Lucha Castro's Centre for Human Rights for Women a few pages later, a member of the organisation looks directly out of the page and comments: 'One of the things we do are forensic examinations to visualise the effects of violence'.[61] In this self-reflexive layering, the comic both documents a forensic practice oriented toward the reclamation and recovery of human rights, while also suggesting *itself* as an act of rights-based *forensis* through its framing of activist lives.[62] The spatial composition of the comic's pages allow *La Lucha* to reveal a nested set of collaborative rights-based projects operating at different scales of visibility – local, regional, national and global. Where Lucha Castro and her Centre work to recover the identities and make visible the humanity of those caught in the liminal space of the border zone, Sack makes visible *their* work to protect the activists themselves from the killing of human rights campaigners that has become routine in Juárez in recent years. Following Sacco in the use of repeated, single-panel portraits of these activists and reproducing direct transcripts of their words, Sack not only centres the exceptional lives that arise in response to these exceptional spaces. More than this, these testimonies also normalise a language of exception – 'refugee camps',[63] 'war zones',[64] '*deadliest* place in Mexico'[65] – that forces readers to accept the extent to which national borders undermine the rights-based politics on which those nations *themselves* are founded.

Conclusion: Border Thinking

Drawn to the US-Mexico border, the graphic narratives studied here make visible the routine violence of a nation-state system that devalues human life through the production of spaces of exception. These spaces gather especially in cities suffocated by ever-hardening borders, be it the Gazan refugee camp of Jabalia, subject now to decades-long economic isolation and military occupation, or Ciudad Juárez, a city sucked dry of its labour and abandoned to extra-legal regimes of violence and territorial warfare. Yet Sacco's paradigmatic work in *Palestine*, and the two graphic narratives about Juárez that are both inspired by and depart from it, also begin to make visible – and to participate in – the array of spatial practices that challenge the violence these borders inflict, no matter how small that contribution may be. Turning a forensic gaze upon the necropolitical space of the border zone, they begin to excavate from its subterranean texture a range of resistant and reparative death and life narratives that have hitherto remained out of the frame. By burying into this necropolitical crust and clasping the hands that reach forth from it (to use the comics' own metaphors), they counteract a refusal to 'see' these spaces. They self-reflexively detail the processes by which the identities of border victims are recovered and documented, and suggest the narrative infrastructure of their form as a visual counterpoint to the militarised infrastructures that regulate the border zone.

With this in mind, I want to conclude by suggest that in this depiction of spaces of border zones through their variously bordered forms, these comics might be said to initiate a kind of 'border thinking', one that begins 'to confront global modernity with global decolonialities'. The graphic narratives discussed in this article begin this decolonial shift through their attendance to these spaces of exception and the recovery and identification of those 'bodies left out of line', as Walter Mignolo terms the dispossessed.[66] This border thinking is present too in their recovery of feminist testimonies of activism and resistance, their visually metaphoric conflation of physical and psychological borders, and their ability to frame and critique the material effects of a border violence that regulates those migratory bodies that are fit for labour while discarding those that are not. Bringing the tangled patchwork of the border zone's extra-legal territories and its consequential violation and uneven application of rights-based narratives into the frame, these comics show up the violent underbelly of

the nation-state system. They position themselves with and against the border in order to work toward, through the spatial narrative infrastructure of their form, a decolonial unravelling of it.

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[5] Gessen, 'Normalise this!'
[6] Bebout, *Whiteness on the Border*.
[7] Jones, *Violent Borders*, 81.
[8] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 134.
[9] Agamben, 'Beyond Human Rights', 91.
[10] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 181.
[11] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands, La Frontera*, iv.
[12] Terrio, *Whose Child Am I?*; Day, 'The Roots of Trump's Family Separation Policy'.
[13] Smith, 'Human Rights and Comics'; Mickwitz, *Documentary Comics*; Mickwitz, 'Comics as Refugee Stories'; Rifkind, 'Refugee Comics and Migrant Topographies'; Serrano ed., *Immigrants and Comics*; Davies, 'Welcome to the New World'; and Davies, 'Crossing Borders, Bridging Boundaries'.
[14] Chak, *Undocumented*; Evans, *Threads*; Nabizadeh, 'Comics Online'; and Rifkind, 'Migrant Detention Comics'.
[15] Sacco, *Palestine*, 144-177.
[16] ibid., 146-147.
[17] While these formal components are more usually referred to as the 'architecture' of comics, I have explained my preference for the term 'infrastructure' elsewhere: 'the term "infrastructure" signifies, where architecture does not, the political imperatives of access to life-sustaining services that enable certain forms of urban life and close down others. [...] it also signifies the extent to which local urban environments are enmeshed within – and their physical form a materialisation of – an assemblage of cross-national infrastructures that facilitate the rhythms of the twenty-first-century's neoliberal economy'. Davies, *Urban Comics*, 29.
[18] Davies, *Urban Comics*, 1, 4-5.
[19] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 181.
[20] Salmi, 'Reading Footnotes', 421-422.
[21] Roy, 'Urban Informality', 147.
[22] Weizman, *Hollow Land*, 210.
[23] Agamben, 'Beyond Human Rights', 91.
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[27] see Aldama, *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics*.
[28] Cuninghame, 'Globalisation, maquiladoras and transnational identities at the US-Mexico border'.
[29] Heiskanen, 'We Were All Involved'.
[30] Morales et al., 'Transnational Entrepreneurs and Drug War Violence Between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso'.
[31] Bowden, *Murder City*.
[32] Kermode, 'Sicario Review'.
[33] Isin and Rygel, 'Of Other Global Cities', 185-186.
[34] ibid., 180.
[35] ibid., 186.
[36] see Bowden and Briggs, *Dreamland*, 18-19, 42, 77-78, 113, 136, 158.
[37] ibid., 1.
[38] ibid., iv.
[39] ibid., 1.
[40] Nuttall and Mbembe, 'Introduction: Afropolis', 21.
[41] see, for example, Bowden and Briggs, *Dreamland*, 34-35, 47-48, 84-85.
[42] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201.
[43] Blachnicka-Ciacek, 'Refugees. Present/Absent'; see also Davies, 'Hard Infrastructures, Diseased Bodies'.
[44] Bowden and Briggs, *Dreamland*, 10, my emphasis.
[45] ibid.
[46] ibid.
[47] see, for example, Bowden and Briggs, *Dreamland*, 95, 99, 117, 137, 150-151, 155.
[48] ibid., 10.

[49] ibid., 155.
[50] Rodríguez, *The Femicide Machine*, 7.
[51] Sack, *La Lucha*, x.
[52] ibid.
[53] ibid.
[54] ibid., 1-6.
[55] ibid., 3.
[56] ibid., 4.
[57] see Davies, 'Joe Sacco: Representing Palestine'.
[58] Sack, *La Lucha*, 9-10.
[59] Sacco, *Palestine*, 146-147.
[60] Sack. *La Lucha*, 23.
[61] ibid., 17.
[62] See Weizman, *Forensic Architecture*.
[63] Sack, *La Lucha*, 23.
[64] ibid., 30.
[65] ibid., 60.
[66] Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 89-92.