Sketching Affects: Enacting Human Rights as Relationships

Abstract

This essay draws on the work of art historian and activist John Berger to explore how sketching and the sketchbook afford an opportunity to rethink human rights as a set of affective relations that are enacted between people regardless of national borders. In its first part, it offers a reading of Berger's *Bento's Sketchbook* (2011), where in dialogue with Spinoza he argues that sketches capture a shared affect between artists and the subjects of their work, whether human subjects or non-human objects. In its second part, the essay brings this idea into conversation with the artist Joss López's crowd-funded and independently published book of narrative art, *Serres: Reportage of a Journey Through Sketching* (2022). Presented as a sketchbook and containing images that deliberately perform the aesthetics of the sketch, *Serres* documents the artist's experience working together with refugees, volunteers, and support workers in the eponymous Greek city. By combining the Spinozan philosophy of Berger's *Bento's Sketchbook* with an analysis of López's *Serres*, the essay argues that sketching points to a radical re-conceptualisation of human rights as enacted relationships between subjects, rather than as a set of individual entitlements that must be granted and recognised by national or supra-national states.

Keywords: sketching, human rights, borders, graphic narrative, John Berger, Joss López

Introduction: Sketching Affects

This essay explores how the act of sketching and the form of the sketchbook might allow us to re-conceptualise human rights as a set of affective relations that are enacted between people regardless of national borders. Sketching is able to do this because it is at once an artistic form and a method of conceptualisation: as the design educator Alma R. Hoffman describes, sketching is 'the means through which we give an idea a passage into the physical world to live' (2020, 2). Sketching has a processual quality that not only allows it to capture ideas in formation, but which historically has been taken to index traces of the lived, physical relationship between the working body of the artist and the object of their study (Grennan 2022), a process sometimes referred to by comics scholars as 'graphiation' (for instance, see Baetens 2001; El Refaie 2012). In this essay, I argue that the historical capacity of sketching to index the enacted physical relationship between artist and the world also affords an opportunity to think beyond narrow understandings of 'human rights' as a set of individual entitlements that must be granted and recognised by national or supra-national states. While associations of the unfinished sketch with embodied relationships are no doubt historical and culturally constructed (Szép 2020), they are nonetheless deliberately and productively mobilised by refugee comics artists to re-conceptualise human rights as a more capacious set of relations and circulating affects between humans, objects, and places. These relations, I contend, actively disregard national borders and their differentiation of populations into citizenries with unequal rights (see Jones 2016).

I make these arguments through readings of two texts: the artist and activist John Berger's multi-modal collection of words and drawings, *Bento's Sketchbook* (2011), and the Spanish illustrator Joss López's crowd-funded and independently published book of narrative art, *Serres: Reportage of a Journey Through Sketching* (2022). Through a discussion of these books, I suggest that the sketch encourages us to re-conceptualise human rights as a relationship between subjects, *regardless* of whether those subjects are *regarded* by nation-states as having rights through citizenship or refugee

status, or indeed whether they are *disregarded* as non-citizens or so-called 'illegitimate' migrants. This runs counter to hegemonic conceptions of human rights, which are bound to a liberal politics of recognition that understands rights as possessions that belong only to recognised groups and individuals (Markell 2003). Such an understanding reduces human rights to narrow legal attributes that exist only insofar as a 'deserving' human being is acknowledged as such by state power. Clearly, such a limited conception of 'rights' does little to challenge the national borders that made human rights necessary in the first place – on the contrary, it relies entirely on the reaffirmation of their power (Oliver 2001).

In recent years, scholars such as Samuel Moyn (2018) and Jessica Whyte (2019) have shown how half a century of neoliberal political economy has stripped human rights of their once egalitarian aspirations and reduced them to a surface-level humanisation of the rule of the free market. This has been further worsened by an increasingly entrenched and militarised nation-state system, along with the transformation of humanitarian organisations through bureaucratic and carceral mechanisms into little more than population management systems (Barnett 2011; Oliver 2017). Elsewhere, scholars in the field of critical refugee studies have shown how, from their inception, human rights failed to account for 'refugee *livability*,' a phrase that names 'the capacious and bountiful ways of refugee living' that exceed the narrowly legal definition of 'refugee status' (Espiritu et al. 2022, 59, emphasis in the original). With these different critiques of historical and contemporary conceptualisations of human rights in mind, I make two arguments: first, that the sketchbook can help us draw out revitalised ways of thinking about human rights as a set of relations that are enacted between human subjects, and which are created through affects that connect those subjects to non-human objects, such as food and work, in ways that constitute more-than-human environments and even entire places. Second, I propose that this re-conceptualisation of human rights is worked through in refugee comics that consciously adopt and perform the aesthetics of the sketchbook.

The essay's first section, 'Incalculable Destinations,' therefore offers a reading of *Bento's Sketchbook* to unpack the political implications of the sketch for remodelling and re-conceptualising

human rights in this way. Though this collection of aphorisms and drawings appears to make only passing reference to refugees, I show how Berger's sketchbook engages with the work of Benedict Spinoza to propose sketching as a route to a renewed and radicalised re-conception of human rights as embodied forces that are realised through political and social affects. In its second section, 'Embodied Encounters,' the essay brings these ideas into conversation with the artist Joss López's crowd-funded and independently published book of narrative art, *Serres: Reportage of a Journey Through Sketching* (2022). Documenting the artist's experience of the eponymous Greek city and his time spent with the refugee support organisation Lifting Hands International, *Serres* is presented as a compilation of sketches and anecdotes, rather than a complete graphic narrative: it takes, in other words, the form of a sketchbook. While López's book is in fact a finished and published work, it nonetheless performs the aesthetic mode of the sketch as a situated practice (see Peterle 2021), and through this performance enacts the same re-conceptualisation of human rights that Berger is gesturing towards. Combining insights from *Bento's Sketchbook* with López's drawings of the relationships between refugees, volunteers, support workers, physical materials, food, temporary camps, and other physical locations in the city of Serres, the essay shows that sketching re-conceptualises human rights as an enacted set of relationships between people and places, rather than as something that individual humans are seen to inherently lack or possess. In conclusion, the essay turns to López's use of photographs in the final pages of *Serres* to read the sketch as a proleptic form that opens out onto this more hopeful enactment of human rights as affective relationships.

Incalculable Destinations: John Berger's *Bento's Sketchbook*

Known as a celebrated art historian, John Berger was also himself an enthusiastic drawer who frequently made sketches of people, places, and things. These ranged from depictions of seemingly banal objects, such as the plums that grew in his garden, to images with more obvious historical gravity, such as drawings of the revolutionary leaders of Mexico's Zapatista movement. In 2011, just

a few years before his death, Berger gathered some of these sketches together and published them in a short book, which he called *Bento's Sketchbook*. Far from a magnum opus or retrospective of his life's work, *Bento's Sketchbook* presents the reader with a series of roughly drawn images that Berger then contextualises with brief narrative anecdotes. Each story is deliberately unfinished, repeating the loose and exploratory form of the sketch it describes. Taken together, image and text do not define, recognise or even straightforwardly represent the world. Rather, they provide the reader with an intimation of an embodied relationship between the artist and the subjects and objects that he encounters on the page. The provisional and contingent nature of the sketch affords these relations a proleptic quality, not closing them down to a past that is complete but turning them towards the future instead. As Berger himself suggests, it is perhaps the case that these 'are not proper drawings' at all, 'but simply maps of an encounter. Maps that may make it less likely to get lost. A question of hope' (2011, 10).

The practice of sketching was not secondary to Berger's worldview, but rather instrumental in his conceptualisation of human rights as relationships that were enacted between subjects regardless of national borders. This was founded in turn on his deep commitment to an international socialism that organised through social justice movements around the world and especially in the global South, and which were often centred on questions of human rights and displaced communities. Through his work as an art historian, journalist, and novelist, Berger responded to the intellectual and philosophical concerns of the Jewish diaspora in the wake of the Holocaust, while he later became a lifelong advocate of the cause of another of the twentieth-century's largest refugee populations: the Palestinians (see Sperling 2020). For Berger, the refugee was not an inherent or essentialised identity to be passively recognised, but rather the point from which any progressive politics should be actively pursued. In this sense, he anticipated concepts recently developed in critical refugee studies, such as 'refugee livability' and 'refugeetude,' which understand the condition of the refugee 'not as an irregularity or disruption of political subjecthood – a crisis to be resolved – but as an experiential

resource for developing significant and durable ways of being in and moving through the world' (Nguyen 2019, 109).

Even as he looked forward, Berger remained attuned to the intellectual traditions that made his work possible. His meditations on the politics of sketching were influenced by the writings of the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher, Benedict Spinoza, who 'took for granted what would later become the first principle of Marx's thought – that it was more important to change the world than to interpret it' (Fisher 2004, n.p.). Spinoza married the elements of Enlightenment thought that would eventually feed into the twentieth-century's human rights discourse with a radical insistence that we are always situated within and impacted by the environments we observe. As he famously claimed in *Ethics*, the human body is not an isolated 'empire within an empire,' but shaped through 'affections of the body by which the body's power of action is augmented or diminished, assisted or restrained' (Spinoza 2018, 93-94). This dynamic understanding of the human as constituted through affects circulating between subjects and objects suggests an alternative conceptualisation of human rights as enacted relationships, rather than essentialised individual assets to be recognised by a national or supra-national state power. As Andy Merrifield has written in his reading of Spinoza's influence on Berger, 'what seems just our plight is actually the plight of many people, the plight of a multitude of different of people, and we identify with this, make links, establish relations, tune in' (2012, 201). Universal rights, for both Spinoza and Berger, are made through the encounters and shared affects that circulate between human bodies across borders.

It is therefore significant that Spinoza – who was also known to his acquaintances as Benedict or 'Bento' – is said to have always carried a sketchbook around with him. He valued drawing as an interpretive practice and often made sketches of situations he observed, a practice that also informed his written work: another disciple of Spinoza, the Italian Marxist Antonio Negri, even described *Ethics* itself as 'an open work, a definition of the first sketch of the human task of appropriating and constructing the world' (1991, 213). When Spinoza died suddenly in 1677, much of his work was rescued and preserved, and *Ethics* was published posthumously. Yet, the sketchbook itself was never

found, and it is to this lost sketchbook that Berger returns. As he writes in the introduction to *Bento's Sketchbook*, which is named after Spinoza's lost work:

> For years now, I have imagined a sketchbook with [Spinoza's] drawings in it being found. I didn't know what I hoped to find in it… As a draughtsman Spinoza would have been an amateur. I wasn't expecting great drawings in the sketchbook, were it to be found. I simply wanted to reread some of his words, some of his startling propositions, whilst at the same time being able to look at things he had observed with his own eyes. (Berger 2011, 5)

As Berger implies Spinoza's interest in sketching was not incidental but vital to the situated ethics that he went onto develop, and which in turn would inspire a wave of radical thinkers – Berger included – in the late twentieth century who had seen the universal promise of human rights betrayed (see Gilbert et al. 2023). The sketch is a dialectical and open-ended form: rather than asserting visual ownership or power over the world, it captures instead an embodied relationship between the artist and the subject or object of their drawing. As the designer and artist Nigel Power contends, sketching captures a moment of encounter 'that draws attention to the particular structures and meaning of the encounters themselves… Its central aim is to understand and articulate the experience of embodied and situated subjects' (2018, 203).

This is what Berger is describing in *Bento's Sketchbook* when he speaks of his sketches as 'not proper drawings but simply sketch maps of an encounter' (2011, 10). In an early sequence, Berger recounts the experience of drawing a bunch of irises. Here he emphasises the sketch as a relational medium, the artist asking questions of the irises and the irises responding with questions of their own:

> At first you question the model (the seven irises) in order to discover lines, shapes, tones that you can trace on the paper. The drawing accumulates the answers. Also, of course, it accumulates corrections, after further questioning […] the first answers. Drawing is

> correcting… At a certain moment – if you're lucky – the accumulation becomes an image – that's to say it stops being a heap of signs and becomes a presence. Uncouth, but a presence. This is when your looking changes. You start questioning the presence as much as the model… You stare at the drawing and repeatedly glance at the seven irises to look, not at their structure this time, but at what is radiating from them, at their energy… Drawing now involves subtracting as much as adding. It involves the paper as much as the forms drawn on it. (Berger 2011, 8)

In this account, sketching emerges as an attempt to give form to a forcefield of shifting actions, affects, and relations. There is nothing static or unidirectional about the process, and the sketch does not essentialise or categorise the irises. Their image is not stolen or 'taken' by the artist, to be later translated into economic or political value. Rather, the sketch indexes the embodied relations that have been acted out in the making of the drawing; it traces the physical processes by which the artist and the irises brought one another into being through a moment of encounter. The sketch of this encounter makes a place, the place of the page: 'It involves the paper as much as the forms drawn on it' (Berger 2011, 8).

Berger recalls that he made this drawing of the irises for a friend, Marie-Claude, who died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-eight. When the ink had dried, Berger rolled up the paper and tied it with ribbon, before placing it into her coffin – along with the tributes of real flowers – to be buried with her body forever. Because of this, the sketch of the irises Berger has described is not actually presented to the reader in *Bento's Sketchbook*. Though Berger does include many other sketches in the book, the drawing of the irises is reserved to accompany Marie-Claude in death. Rather than taking value away from his encounter with the irises, such as a drawing to be commodified and sold on the art marketplace, it is in the end Berger who gives something of himself away to his recently deceased companion. 'We who draw do so not only to make something visible to others,' Berger writes, 'but also to accompany something invisible to its incalculable destination' (2011, 9).

This meditation on the destination of the sketch as open-ended and unfinished presents an opportunity to re-conceptualise dominant ideas of human rights. Rather than a quantifiable or essentialised 'status,' it points us instead towards a model of rights as enacted relationships that are 'beyond recognition' (Oliver 2001). It is no coincidence that Berger immediately follows the story of the irises with another anecdote about the economic value of art. Two days after Marie-Claude's funeral, he hears that another, much smaller of his drawings has been sold at auction in London for £4,500, 'a sum of money such as Marie-Claude would never have dreamt of having in her hands during her entire lifetime' (Berger 2011, 9). Though Berger never spells it out, the implication is obvious enough: the larger drawing of the irises that has accompanied Marie-Claude in death might well be worth £4,500, if not more. As a consequence of Berger's memorial gift, she is paradoxically much wealthier in death than she ever was in life; and yet, now that the sketch of the irises is buried underground, that economic value will never be recognised. Berger's sketch therefore not only indexes his embodied encounter with the irises, it also affects an act of generosity. Buried in the ground with Marie-Claude, this enacted generosity is situated 'beyond' the market forces that have otherwise narrowed contemporary understandings of human rights.

There is one more turn to this moment in *Bento's Sketchbook*. Although the sketch of the irises has been removed from the marketplace, Berger's other sketch was sold at auction for £4,500. Berger explains:

> The auction was organised by the Helen Bamber Foundation, which gives moral, material, and legal support to people begging for asylum in Great Britain, people whose lives and identities have been shattered by traffickers of immigrants – slave traders in all but name – by armies that terrorise civilian populations, and by racist governments. The Foundation appealed to artists to donate a work which could be sold to raise funds for its activities… Along with many others I sent a small a contribution… The money the drawing fetched at the auction will help to buy medicines, care, counsellors, nurses, lawyers for Sara or Hamid or Gulsen or Zin… We who

> draw do so not only to make something observed visible to others, but also to accompany something invisible to its incalculable destination. (Berger 2011, 9-11)

This other sketch – the smaller sketch valued by the auction at £4,500 – is one of a series of a charcoal drawings made by Berger of Subcomandante Marcos, a member of the democratic socialist and majority Indigenous Zapatista Army of National Liberation in the Chiapas in southern Mexico. In an act of generosity, Berger donated one of his sketches of this militant revolutionary to the cause of a pro-refugee organisation. While the sketch has been reduced to an economic unit at auction, the funds it generated went on to provide material resources that would help care for those who have been displaced across borders.

In this example, the embodied relations indexed by the sketch produce a cascade of affects that enact human rights into the world, rather than merely subsuming them into a liberal politics of recognition. The sketch does not simply help the rights of the refugee to be recognised by state power, inadvertently reaffirming the authority of national borders. Instead, the sketch initiates an action that indirectly affects the production of a different place from which a team of people, including nurses, counsellors, care givers, and lawyers, can come together to produce the human rights of refugees through actions of their own. The sketch has indexed the embodied encounter between Berger and Subcomandante Marcos, and from there it has affected further relationships that can help us re-conceptualise what we think of as human rights. These rights are not objects to be recognised but relations to be enacted; they are what Berger describes as the sketch's incalculable destinations.

Embodied Encounters: Joss López's *Serres: Reportage of a Journey through Sketches*

I have so far used *Bento's Sketchbook* to suggest that the sketch might help us think beyond narrow understandings of rights as 'things' to be recognised. Against this neoliberal understanding of rights, the sketch moves us towards a broader notion of rights as enacted relationships. In the second section

of this essay, I apply this approach to a graphic narrative that deliberately performs the aesthetic mode of the sketch to re-conceptualise and enact human rights into the world as embodied and potentially universal affects. 'Bodies *affect* other bodies, and are *affected* by other bodies,' writes Merrifield in his commentary on Spinoza and Berger: 'it is this capacity for affecting and being affected that defines a body in both its individuality and potential commonality' (2012, 196).

As its subtitle suggests, Joss López's *Serres* deliberately presents itself as an open-ended series of observational images, as opposed to a more polished graphic narrative. Its pages are square rather than rectangular, like those of a sketchbook. They are also unpaginated, resisting a linear chronology, and the book contains roughly 100 pages in total. Its images were made while López was volunteering with Lifting Hands International in the Greek city of Serres, which he has been doing since 2014. Serres is just a few miles from the coastline that looks out onto Aegean Sea. Hundreds of thousands of boatsmigrants and asylum seekers have crossed this stretch of ocean on dinghies and boats, fleeing conflicts in Iraq and Syria and making their way from Turkey to southern Europe. López's book takes its name from this place. Importantly, it not only includes sketches of displaced people, but also those engaged in the provision of shelter and support for migrants, scenes of the city and its permanent inhabitants, and other non-human objects such as foodstuffs. *Serres* was crowd-funded via the project platform Verkami and self-published in 2020, with a second edition released in 2022.

López himself is a Spanish artist who has worked across digital and print media. While *Serres* is his only published work about migrants, he places emphasis on sketching throughout his practice. This has included his participation in – and design of the logo for – Urban Sketchers London, a group of professional and amateur artists who draw on location around the UK's capital. He has also organised and delivered practice-based workshops as part of an art-therapy programme for displaced children in Serres, where 'free-playing drawing' is encouraged 'as a resiliency protocol for coping with adverse life events' (López n.d., n.p.). These workshops have centred particularly on 'drawing-movement games' that encourage young people seeking asylum to use their bodies in the process of image-making – for instance, by sketching with their feet or scribbling on large spreads of paper

stretched out across the floor. The result is at once a profoundly situated and deliberately social practice that resonates with the re-conceptualisation of human rights implied by Berger in *Bento's Sketchbook*. Indeed, and as these examples suggest, López's work is mostly disinterested in the production of professionally published books by an individual auteur for sale in a literary marketplace. It is oriented instead towards drawing as a way to build new relationships, communities, and even physical places, insofar as his workshops actively produce spaces of embodied interactions, encounters, and shared affects.

López writes about the specific qualities of sketching both on his website and in the preface to *Serres*. In descriptions of his 'free-playing' workshops, he centres the importance of the 'gesture' as the action that 'communicates and brings us a message. The gesture is the bridge that involves us and forces us to observe, ask, and identify' (López n.d., n.p.). As gestural movements, scribbling and sketching capture the movement of the body on the page, indexing the presence of the observer and their relationship with the person or place they are drawing. López highlights this emphasis on the body's physical presence in the introduction to *Serres*, echoing Berger's description of the sketch as a relational medium cited above: 'it takes a while to make a drawing and you have to really linger over all the details to get it to look right, to get the proportions right, to get the sense of how hands are… in a concrete position' (López 2022, n.p.). The sketch reveals the artist's physical, affective presence in the scene they are trying to draw. As a consequence, 'the thing that you're drawing has that kind of immediacy of the line where there is almost nothing between your own thoughts and the line going down on the piece of paper' (López 2022, n.p.).

López's description of his own practice resonates with Berger's understanding of both the sketch and the sketchbook. In *Serres*'s very first drawing, López sketches a piece of Baklava, a layered dessert of pastry, diced nuts, and syrup or honey that is popular across Turkey and the Middle East. Beneath this image, he suggests that his 'personal visual storytelling is like a Baklava. Every experience represented through sketching in this book is agglutinated in layered ways of capturing the essence of a journey' (López 2022, n.p.). Just as for Berger it is 'the accumulation' of lines on the

page that ‘becomes an image,’ for López it is not only the individual sketch that accumulates, but the entirety of the sketchbook itself: lines ‘agglutinate’ into sketches, while individual sketches similarly coalesce to give the sketchbook its open-ended form. The artist’s titular ‘journey’ is not a simple linear route through empty territory, but a steady accumulation of presences and affects that circulate between care workers, residents, and migrants, thickening into the place that is Serres. The city becomes a rich stack of sedimentations: the Baklava stands in as a metaphor for this layered understanding of place, while also foregrounding the many practices that migrants bring with them from their varied cultural backgrounds. Moreover, rather than stories of refugees defined by trauma and dispossession, the image of the Baklava suggests more positive embodied affects such as nourishment, sustenance, and pleasure.

The following pages of *Serres* offer two types of images: sketches of people and sketches of places. Throughout, the sketchbook aims to provide the reader with what Berger would have called ‘sketch maps of an encounter’ (2011, 10). Drawn in the plural, it provides sketch maps of many encounters. Importantly, these encounters do not only take place between artist and refugee. They are not bidirectional but multidirectional encounters, conceptualising human rights as a web of enacted relations that defy national borders and their unequal distribution of rights. As the book proceeds, the sketches of people and places increasingly overlap and intermingle with one another: we see the relations between people transforming Serres into a place of hospitality rather than hostility, while the city presents new spaces in which those same people are then able to meet and to socialise. There are of course references to the traumatic pasts of the refugees that López encounters, as well as to the carceral infrastructures that enforce borders around the Mediterranean. But taken as a whole, the book overwhelmingly offers an alternative view of place-based human rights by indexing embodied affects and encounters through the modality of the sketch.

Fig. 1. Sketches of volunteers from Europe and the US who have come to Serres to support arriving migrants. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

Consider an early page in the book that presents the reader with small, sketched portraits of López's housemates while he is staying in Serres (see Fig. 1). We are given almost no textual information about these people beyond their names and a series of simple facts: they are volunteers, they are warm and welcoming to López, and they come from all over Europe – Italy, Germany, Portugal, France – as well as the US. The lines of the sketches accumulate to give us a tentative sense of these people on the page: Patricia's glasses, Tesni's book, Aurelie's bag slung across her shoulder. But López's images deliberately perform an unfinished and situated aesthetic. Drawn onto lined paper, the smudges of water colour that frame each face bleed out across the page, looking more like dirt or tea stains than complete portraits. They invite us to feel the artist's hand on the page as he sketches his encounters with these individuals and records the embodied affects moving between them. The point of these sketches is not to provide a definitive sense of who these people are and what they look like. Instead, the aim is to show that these people, including the artist himself, are enacting human rights into the world through their support of asylum seekers arriving in Serres.

Fig.2. Accompanying text emphasises the affective qualities of members of Lifting Hands International. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

López uses a similar technique later on in the book when introducing the support workers and members of Lifting Hands International (see Fig. 2). While there is more descriptive text on this page, these words eschew biographical detail and emphasise instead the human affects of these individuals: Hayley is 'caring… selfless and big-hearted'; Hannah embodies 'passion and tenderness'; Tara is known for her 'calm and leadership'; Irene is 'inspiring, active, and energetic' (López 2022, n.p.). Again, López splashes stretches of water colour across the page to communicate to the viewer that these are rough snapshots that index embodied encounters rather than a relationship that is finished or closed. Two lines even run in a circular arc to suggest a stain or watermark, the artist performatively authenticating the sketches as situated in the world they record (see Schmid 2021).

Fig.3. López sketches people visiting the Serres street market. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

This technique is repeated in another scene that documents López's visit to a local street market in Serres (see Fig. 3). Here, the descriptive text draws our attention to the artist's physical location in the scene that the page then presents to us: 'I was lucky to find a table on a terrace to make some sketches while enjoying a Freddo coffee' (López 2022, n.p.). Presented as a facsimile of the actual sketchpad that the artist had with him in the market, the page creates an embodied sense of the affective atmosphere of the place: we can feel the hustle and bustle of the market; we can hear the shouts and conversations of sellers and buyers; we can see the stain of the coffee cup that the artist was drinking as he drew in his sketchbook. Crucially, this social atmosphere is evoked with very little recourse to direct representation of the place itself, the page shifting focus away from physical features to capture instead the relations between the people – both citizens and migrants – going about their daily business: the word 'people' itself is then etched multiple times across the page, further heightening the market's bustling atmosphere. The artist makes no attempt to delineate citizens from non-citizens; we do not know which of his sketches show longtime residents of Serres and which show more recently arrived refugees. Human rights are instead constituted through the multi-directional encounters that bring this place into existence.

Fig.4. López sketches a fenced off cornice that often doubles as a meeting place in the city of Serres. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

This does not mean that López avoids drawing the buildings and streets that make up the physical place of Serres altogether. Throughout, he travels to different parts of the city to sit and sketch its surrounds, inviting his readers to explore and inhabit the environment with him. In all of these images, we are not looking down from above, or from a great distance, or through carefully enclosed frames. Rather, we see as the artist does: from specific places and situated perspectives within the city itself. In this sense, the sketches resemble geoGraphic narratives, which as Giada Peterle points out, 'always produce situated knowledge, where the perspective and body of the researcher-cartoonist is entangled with the research output' (2021, 14). In one double-page spread,

López draws the ruins of two abandoned buildings, one an ornate cornice and another a mosque, that are enclosed by wire fences (see Fig. 4 & Fig. 5). Although people are conspicuously absent in these pages, these buildings are not divorced from the social life of the city. As places, they still derive their meaning from interlocking social relations and residual affects. The cornice, we are told, 'is well known and many times it is used as a meeting point' by both local residents and newly arrived refugees (López 2022, n.p.). The mosque, meanwhile, 'is hidden between buildings, public access to it is not allowed' (López 2022, n.p.). Yet, the liveliness of the sketch conjures the mosque's historical beauty and its role as a place where people once came together to worship and socialise. At first glance, the etched wire fencing that spans both of these pages foregrounds a physical barrier and layers the image with connotations of prohibited movement. But rather than settling for these immediate impressions, the form of the sketch and the directive of the text instead encourage readers to search for the relations between people that once animated – and still animate – the depicted environment.

Fig.5. A sketch of bordered off mosque that was built by Sultan Kotza Mustafa in 1519 AD. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

In the final third of the book, López's sketches turn to the drawing of workshops that he organised as part of the Education Programme for child refugees. He begins with drawings of the Education Tent where this programme and its activities took place (see Fig. 6). Simple pen lines slowly accumulate into the tent's recognisable shape, before the page is then split in half with strips of masking tape onto which López prints brief lines of descriptive text. With this technique, the layout of the page performs a three dimensional and roughly improvised quality, as though constructed from bits and pieces of material lying around. This layout then anticipates the scene in the bottom half of the page that, though gently washed in water colours, remains composed from only sketched lines. It shows refugee children who have 'made with handmade materials and improvised… an assault course' in the recreational area outside of the Education Tent (López 2022, n.p.). López presents us

with an image of children at play, as they quite literally make a physical place with their hands. With its own sketched and improvisational aesthetic, this production of place is then reproduced on the page of the sketchbook itself. It captures – and, I would argue, itself produces – a space in which refugees, volunteers, educators, and support workers come together to enact their rights through shared relationships and affects.

Fig.6. A sketch of the Education Tent where activities were organised for refugee children in Serres. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

I want to conclude this reading of *Serres* by returning to the indexing of gesture and embodiment that informs so much of López's practice, and which is, as Berger highlights, what makes the sketch such a powerful form. By making visible the movement of the artist's arm – indeed, by making this movement an integral part of its form – the sketch creates an image that registers the physical relationship between the observer and the observed. In a compelling scene that describes a game played in the Education Tent with volunteers and refugees, López at once documents this process as it takes place through a drawing activity, while his sketch then doubly enacts the same process on the surface of the page. The game is called 'draw on my back' and requires at least two people; it is a relational rather than an individual activity (see Fig. 7). The first person makes a sketch of an object, using the back of the second person as a drawing board. The second person then has to attempt to sketch the same object based only on the way the first person's sketch *feels* on their back – they are not allowed to see the first person's sketch before attempting to reproduce it themselves. In effect, participants are asked to reproduce a sketch that they have 'seen' without using their eyes: they must interpret the sketch through embodied feelings and sensations, interpreting the gestures of the first person's body alone.

Fig.7. López describes the game, 'draw on my back,' sketching in biro two people taking part. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

This game produces the relational element of the sketch in its most essential form: participants must interpret one another through only movements, affects, and points of physical contact between their bodies. This models that alternative conceptualisation of human rights that I have been arguing for in this essay, the meaning of the image only appearing when observer and observed actively *collaborate* with and through one another's bodies. Participants produce their shared humanity through this collaborative relationship, allowing them to feel and affect one another as rights-bearing subjects, regardless of the recognition of national or supra-national state power. By drawing out this process on the page, López's sketches invite us – the reader and viewer of the sketchbook – to equally be affected by the place it has made. *Serres* requires us to feel the sketch as a relationship between artist and subject; being so affected, we too begin to realise that we are implicated in the world we are trying to observe.

Conclusion: Re-Conceptualising Rights

López concludes *Serres* with two double-page spreads of photographic images. These are the only images in the whole book that are not sketched by the artist. The first double-page spread presents the reader with a collage of photographs of places. But when we look more closely, we see that these are not only photographs of places but rather photographs of López's individual sketches of places *in* the place that each sketch represents (see Fig. 8). Drawings that we have already seen in our reading of the book are held up and juxtaposed with the place they depict. Often, the hand of the artist himself is also in view, gripping the edge of the pages; at other times, the camera looks up and over the page of the sketchbook to the landscape beyond. This collage reiterates what the sketches throughout the book have been trying to produce. Rather than objectifying photographs of Serres as a city that is 'out there' on the borders of Europe, viewers are made to feel a situated and physical relationship with the place through the hand and gestural presence of the artist.

Fig.8. A collage of photographs that show López's sketches of places in front of the physical sites they depict. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

In the second double-page spread, we are presented with a collage of photographs that show not places this time, but the people that López met on his journey, including refugees, volunteers, support works, strangers in the market, and even shots and selfies of the artist himself (see Fig. 9). While López's own sketches aren't themselves visible in these photographs, we do see shots of refugee children – carefully edited to protect their identities – sitting on the floor and engaged in the process of sketching themselves. The overriding affect in these images is joy, each one capturing shared encounters and relationships. These relationships run between López and his fellow volunteers, between volunteers and the children, and perhaps most importantly, between the children and the sketches they have made. Again, this collage of photographs reiterates the re-conceptualisation of human rights as enacted relations and circulating affects that I have been arguing for in this essay.

Fig.9. Photographs show refugees and volunteers participating in drawing workshops and other activities in the Education Tent. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

For Peterle, geoGraphic narratives are not mere representations of the world, but practices that are 'able to orient, affect, and move geographic thought in new directions in the very act of its telling' (2021, 15). Through a discussion of John Berger's writing on sketching and a reading of Joss López's sketches of Serres, this essay has approached the sketch as an artistic form that is similarly able to move our conceptualisation of human rights in new directions. By indexing embodied affects that are open-ended and unfinished, the sketch opens up radical understandings of human rights as relations that are enacted into the world, undercutting a liberal politics of recognition, ideas of essentialised individual rights, and a neoliberal humanitarianism centred on the bureaucratic and spatial management of displaced populations. Rather than a gaze that remains complicit with the violent borders of the nation-state system, the sketch enacts human rights as relations that actively disregard their geographic divisions and legal categorisations. From Spinoza's ethics through Berger's

sketchbook to López's graphic narrative, I have argued that the sketch helps us to see that rights circulate through the world as actions and affects, and that it is these relational processes that produce our common and universal humanity.

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