

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A cat-and-Maus game: the politics of truth and reconciliation in post-conflict comics

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(Received 20 July 2018; revised 27 January 2019; accepted 15 February 2019; first published online 14 May 2019)

Abstract

Several scholars have raised concerns that the institutional mechanisms through which transitional justice is commonly promoted in post-conflict societies can alienate affected populations. Practitioners have looked to bridge this gap by developing 'outreach' programmes, in some instances commissioning comic books in order to communicate their findings to the people they seek to serve. In this article, we interrogate the ways in which post-conflict comics produce meaning about truth, reconciliation, and the possibilities of peace, focusing in particular on a comic strip published in 2005 as part of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report into the causes and crimes of the 1991–2002 Civil War. Aimed at Sierra Leonean teenagers, the Report tells the story of 'Sierrarat', a peaceful nation of rats whose idyllic lifestyle is disrupted by an invasion of cats. Although the Report displays striking formal similarities with Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (a text also intimately concerned with reconciliation, in its own way), it does so to very different ends. The article brings these two texts into dialogue in order to explore the aesthetic politics of truth and reconciliation, and to ask what role popular visual media like comics can play in their practice and (re)conceptualisation.

Keywords: Visual Global Politics; Popular Culture; Transitional Justice; Outreach; Sierra Leone; *Maus*

Introduction: Aesthetics, politics, and 'outreach'

Since the early 1990s, transitional justice (TJ) initiatives have been a prominent feature of post-conflict political landscapes around the world.¹ As a discourse, TJ has shaped how international and transnational organisations have responded to crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other atrocities, while as a field of practice its prescribed methods for post-conflict peacebuilding have come to predominate on the global stage.² More recently, however, several scholars have argued that the institutional mechanisms through which TJ is commonly promoted can often operate at a distance from affected populations, in the process alienating rather than engaging the people they seek to represent.³ TJ practitioners have responded to these concerns by developing 'outreach' programmes in order to communicate their findings to local populations, as at the

¹Pierre Hazan, *Judging War, Judging History: Behind Truth and Reconciliation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 8.

²For a list of current and historical TJ initiatives, see the Transitional Justice Database, available at: {<http://www.tjdbproject.com>} accessed 16 July 2018.

³Phil Clark, *Distant Justice: The Impact of the International Criminal Court on African Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Alison Des Forges and Timothy Longman, 'Legal responses to genocide in Rwanda', in Eric Stover and Harvey M. Weinstein (eds), *My Neighbour, My Enemy: Justice and Community in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 56; Rachel Kerr and Jessica Lincoln, 'The Special Court for Sierra Leone: Outreach, Legacy and Impact' (2008), pp. 3–6, available at: {<http://www.rscl.org/Resources.html>} accessed 16 July 2018; Peter Uvin and C. Mironko, 'Western and local approaches to justice in Rwanda', *Global Governance*, 9:2

International Criminal Tribunals for both Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.⁴ Although reactions to these initial efforts have been mixed, the principles underpinning them have informed almost all subsequent TJ initiatives: outreach is now very much part of the TJ playbook.⁵

What little scholarly attention outreach programmes have thus far received within IR has tended to focus on questions of ‘effectiveness’, understood quantitatively in terms of how widely key messages have been disseminated to relevant publics.⁶ While these studies can offer some insight into the reach and scope of particular outreach efforts, however, they are unable to provide any analytical or critical purchase on the sensitivities and complexities associated with the communication of institutional practices to a wider community. These methodological limitations matter because the messages transmitted as part of TJ outreach efforts are not politically neutral, and therefore require interpretation and evaluation. As Martha Nussbaum argues, ‘life is never simply *presented* by a text; it is always *represented as something*’.⁷ Outreach should not be understood as a simple broadcasting exercise, then, but rather as a dynamic and productive discursive intervention into specific, often fragile social milieus.⁸

One notable feature of recent outreach programmes that has received little attention within the literature is their frequent use of comic strips, especially as a means of communicating with children and teenagers.⁹ This is a development that deserves critical attention for two further reasons. The first of these concerns the popular-cultural space that comics occupy. As Lene Hansen observes, comics are ‘sociologically significant for the mediation and experience of foreign policy’,¹⁰ and as such they form part of the ‘popular culture-world politics continuum’ that delimits how global politics (including TJ) is seen, experienced, understood, and ascribed meaning.¹¹ Secondly, however, comics also by necessity engage with certain formal conventions and expectations that shape the messages they project. As Hillary Chute has argued, comics offer a ‘unique spatial grammar of gutters, grids, and panels’ that together comprise ‘a form that is deeply rooted in the specificity of its medium as a source of cultural, aesthetic, and political significance’.¹² To

(2003), pp. 219–31; Paul Gready, ‘Analysis: Reconceptualising transitional justice: Embedded and distanced justice’, *Conflict, Security and Development*, 5:1 (2005), pp. 3–21.

⁴Victor Peskin, ‘Courting Rwanda: the promises and pitfalls of the ICTR outreach programme’, *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 3:4 (2005), pp. 950–1.

⁵Kerr and Lincoln, ‘The Special Court for Sierra Leone’, p. 6; Clara Ramírez-Barat, ‘Making an Impact: Guidelines on Designing and Implementing Outreach Programs for Transitional Justice’, Working Paper, International Center for Transitional Justice (2011), p. 6, available at: {<https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Global-Making-Impact-2011-English.pdf>} accessed 16 July 2018).

⁶Peskin, ‘Courting Rwanda’, pp. 950–61; Ramírez-Barat, ‘Making an Impact’; Tim Kelsall and Edward Sawyer, ‘Truth vs. justice? Popular views on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Special Court for Sierra Leone’, *The Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution*, 7:1 (2007), pp. 36–68. One exception is Kerr and Lincoln, ‘The Special Court for Sierra Leone’, esp. pp. 9–14.

⁷Martha C. Nussbaum, ‘Form and content, philosophy and literature’, in *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 5, emphasis in original.

⁸Cf. Michael Shapiro, ‘Textualising global politics’, in Michael Shapiro and James Der Derian (eds), *International/Intertextual Relations* (Lexington: Lexington Press, 1989), pp. 11–22; Cerwyn Moore and Laura J. Shepherd, ‘Aesthetics and international relations: Towards a global politics’, *Global Society*, 24:3 (2010), pp. 299–309.

⁹Mohamed Sheriff and Elvira Bobson-Kamara, *TRC Report: A Senior Secondary School Version* (hereafter SSSV), illustrated by Simeon Sesay (2005), available at: {http://www.sierraleonetr.org/index.php/view-the-final-report/popular-reports/item/trc-report-a-secondary-school-version?category_id=16} accessed 16 July 2018. See also the ICTR’s *100 Days in the Land of a Thousand Hills*, available at: {<http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/education/education.shtml>} accessed 16 July 2018.

¹⁰Lene Hansen, ‘Reading comics for the field of International Relations: Theory, method and the Bosnian War’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:3 (2017), p. 582.

¹¹Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott, ‘Pop goes IR? Researching the popular culture-world politics continuum’, *Politics*, 29:3 (2009), pp. 155–63; cf. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 5.

¹²Hillary L. Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 4.

reach out towards a target audience with a *comic*, in other words, is to draw on a particular formal tradition that must be accounted for in any interpretive or analytical search for meaning.

Taking these observations together, one can see that there is a politics of aesthetics at play in TJ outreach programmes that remains under- or even unstudied within IR. This oversight constitutes one focus of this article, which explores a series of questions concerned with the visual politics of truth and reconciliation: how do images produce knowledge about war, conflict, and the possibility of peace? And how does the comics medium enrich, dilute, or otherwise shape the messages it projects?

In answering these questions, we build on the burgeoning IR literature concerned with visual and popular culture.¹³ Common within this scholarship is the hope that art and visual culture might contribute to a reimagining of the world: that it might ‘make us feel, or feel differently ... make us think, and think again’.¹⁴ Yet this hope must also be tempered by the acknowledgement that a society’s cultural and artistic output can just as easily be incorporated into programmes that reinforce existing norms and hierarchies: what David Campbell and Michael Shapiro call ‘cultural governance’.¹⁵ In addition to a hermeneutic question about the ways in which post-conflict comics represent truth and reconciliation, then, this article also asks a political sociological question about the ways in which these messages interact with the wider discourses from which they derive and into which they intervene. To what extent do the discursive demands of TJ frame the conceptualisation and presentation of ‘truth’ and ‘reconciliation’ in outreach texts? And what might this reveal about the politics of outreach more widely – about the relations of power immanent within a transnational TJ programme’s interaction with a community potentially engaging in other, more informal reconciliatory practices? With Frank Möller, we therefore ask not only ‘what forms of knowledge ... [about war, conflict and peace these] images produce’, but also whether they ‘widen ... the discursive frames within which human activities unfold’, or close off alternative possibilities?¹⁶ These questions would appear to be of particular importance in a post-conflict setting, where the foreclosure of possibilities for thought and action would appear commensurately to discipline any and all movement towards peace (however defined).

In pursuing these two axes of enquiry, we turn to the 2005 comic book commissioned by the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SLTRC) in an attempt to communicate its core findings to Sierra Leonean secondary school students.¹⁷ The comic in question – which has no official title but which we here call *Sierrarat*¹⁸ – was an important means through which the SLTRC and its partners hoped to engage with young Sierra Leoneans in the wake of the 1991–2002 civil war.¹⁹ Our analysis has three main foci intended to mirror the institutional priorities of the SLTRC itself. Firstly, we examine the ontological assumptions underpinning *Sierrarat*’s presentation and conceptualisation of reconciliation. Secondly, we explore the epistemological framework informing its approach to truth. Finally we consider the temporal matrix that enables each of these concepts to function as part of a broader narrative – as part of a

¹³The literature on the so-called ‘visual’ and ‘pop cultural’ turns is large and varied. A range of approaches and examples can be found, however, in Roland Bleiker (ed.), *Visual Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018); and in the ongoing *Popular Culture and World Politics* book series from Routledge.

¹⁴Alex Danchev and Debbie Lisle, ‘Introduction: Art, politics, purpose’, *Review of International Studies*, 35:4 (2009), p. 775.

¹⁵Cultural governance involves support for diverse genres of expression to constitute and legitimise practices of sovereignty, while restricting or preventing those representations that challenge sovereignty.’ David Campbell, ‘Cultural governance and pictorial resistance: Reflections on the imaging of war’, *Review of International Studies*, 29:1 (2003), p. 57; cf. Michael J. Shapiro, *Methods and Nations: Cultural Governance and the Indigenous Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁶Frank Möller, *Visual Peace: Images, Spectatorship and the Politics of Violence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 19–20.

¹⁷SSSV.

¹⁸The comic has no official title because it is incorporated within the SSSV. We call it *Sierrarat* here for the sake of convenience.

¹⁹SSSV, pp. 5–11.

transition, in other words.²⁰ Taken together, these three foci enable us to evaluate *Sierrarat*'s relation to the institutional context from which it derives. In addition, however, we also bring *Sierrarat* into comparative dialogue with Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a comic with which it shares significant formal and aesthetic similarities, but which nevertheless displays a strikingly different approach to the emotional and social fallout of conflict and atrocity. While acknowledging that the two comics were created for different purposes and with different audiences in mind, bringing the two texts to bear on one another nevertheless enables us to open up space from which to explore the political limits and possibilities of the comics medium in a post-conflict and/or TJ context.²¹

The article proceeds in two parts. The first outlines the historical background surrounding the Sierra Leone Civil War and the establishment of the SLTRC, while the second undertakes a comparative analysis of *Sierrarat* and *Maus*, as outlined above. It will be noted that although *Sierrarat* appropriates *Maus*'s representational vocabulary, it does so to very different ends, in the process reinforcing messages that are reflective more of the fraught institutional context in which the SLTRC was operating than the political dynamics 'on the ground' in Sierra Leone itself. The conclusion brings this broad finding to bear on discussions about the role that might be played by comics in outreach initiatives. In particular, we suggest that the openness of the comics medium presents a formal challenge to any attempts on the part of TJ initiatives to prescribe a fixed passage towards 'truth' and 'reconciliation' on behalf of the communities they serve.²² In this respect they are ideally placed to contribute to the reconceptualisation of outreach's place within TJ initiatives. Future attempts to incorporate comics into outreach programmes must therefore do so with sensitivity to the political messages informing (and informed by) representational choices, and to the ways in which meaning emerges through a complex interaction between context, content, and form.

Sierra Leone: the conflict and post-conflict years

The conflict in Sierra Leone began in 1991 when the Sierra Leonean Revolutionary United Front (RUF) invaded the eastern regions of the country, led by Foday Sankoh and supported by Liberian President Charles Taylor. A complex civil war ensued, involving a multiplicity of protagonists who can be separated loosely into three groups: government, rebel, and international forces.²³ These designations are 'loose' because of their mutability: what constituted 'the government' shifted continuously, for example. While President Joseph Momoh of the All People's Congress controlled the state's military forces at the start of the war, a 1992 coup by disaffected soldiers saw his deposition and the establishment of the military-led National Provisional Ruling Council. In 1996, an advisor to the Council named Ahmed Tejan Kabbah was elected president, in the process integrating an anti-RUF paramilitary group called the Civil Defence Force into the

²⁰On the relationship between narrative and temporality, see Paul Ricoeur, 'Narrative time', *Critical Inquiry*, 7:1 (1980), pp. 169–90. For an analysis focused specifically on the ways in which narrative and time manifest themselves in comics, see Thierry Groensteen, *Comics and Narration* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013).

²¹In seeking to interpret the visual production of meaning, we draw on discourse-analytical techniques. These are applicable beyond the study of language because, as Linda Åhäll points out, 'the way we interpret the world is not limited to spoken or written words'. Linda Åhäll, 'Affect as methodology: Feminism and the politics of emotion', *International Political Sociology*, 12:1 (2018), p. 43; cf. Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (London: SAGE, 2001), pp. 135–86.

²²Cf. Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), p. 10.

²³This section largely draws on the history of the conflict provided in Kirsten Ainley, Rebekka Friedman, and Chris Mahony, 'Transitional justice in Sierra Leone: Theory, history and evaluation', in Kirsten Ainley, Rebekka Friedman, and Chris Mahony (eds), *Evaluating Transitional Justice: Accountability and Peacebuilding in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 2015), pp. 1–18.

government's official military apparatus.²⁴ Although Kabbah was unseated by a 1997 coup, he returned to power in 1998.

Among the rebels, allegiances also fluctuated. For example, while the RUF were the most prominent of the numerous insurgent and paramilitary groups involved in the fighting, they were also briefly aligned with the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, a splinter group from the Sierra Leonean military who were responsible for the 1997 coup against Kabbah. International forces, meanwhile, included private mercenaries such as Executive Outcomes as well as international peacekeeping forces, first from the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group and then from the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, a UN force with strong British involvement.²⁵ These largely intervened on the side of the government, often to ensure continued access to Sierra Leone's natural resources, including, but not limited to, diamonds.

Underpinning this instability were the forces driving the conflict, which were largely those of economic and political opportunism rather than entrenched division along ethnic, racial, or ideological lines (for example). As such, the most prominently visible fault lines were those of age and gender rather than party affiliation or ethnic background.²⁶ For example, many of the rebel fighters were disenfranchised young men, angry at their continued exclusion from the existing governance structure,²⁷ while all sides systematically perpetrated atrocities against women.²⁸

In 1999, the conflict was provisionally brought to a close with the Lome Peace Accord. This agreement set out a TJ programme, promising a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in addition to amnesty for all that had participated in the conflict. The SLTRC would

address impunity, break the cycle of violence, provide a forum for both victims and the perpetrators of human rights violations to tell their story, and to get a clear picture of the past in order to facilitate healing and reconciliation.²⁹

Significantly, it was agreed that the SLTRC would include a mix of local and international staff, in an attempt to embed the commission firmly within Sierra Leonean civil society.³⁰ However, the Accord fell apart in 2000 as fighting restarted, and the SLTRC's formal establishment was therefore postponed.³¹ In May 2000, after the RUF had captured five hundred UN troops, President Kabbah requested UN support in order to establish a tribunal to hold perpetrators to account for crimes committed in the war.³² Kabbah's request resulted in the abandonment of the initial amnesty agreement, allowing both for the prosecution of any person responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other serious violations of international law,³³ as well as for the creation of an international court, the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL).³⁴

²⁴Ainley, Friedman, and Mahony, 'Transitional justice in Sierra Leone', pp. 9–10.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 9–13; Tim Kelsall, *Culture Under Cross-Examination: International Justice and the Special Court for Sierra Leone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 25–30.

²⁶Gearoid Millar, "'Our brothers who went to the bush': Post-identity conflict and the experience of reconciliation in Sierra Leone', *Journal of Peace Research*, 49:5 (2012), pp. 722–4.

²⁷Ibid.; Kelsall, *Culture Under Cross-Examination*, p. 30.

²⁸Millar, "'Our brothers who went to the bush'", p. 725. See also Myriam Denov, 'Wartime sexual violence: Assessing a human security response to war-affected girls in Sierra Leone', *Security Dialogue*, 37:3 (2006), pp. 319–42.

²⁹Beth Dougherty, 'Searching for answers: Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *African Studies Quarterly*, 8:1 (2004), p. 41.

³⁰Ibid., p. 42.

³¹Kelsall, *Culture Under Cross-Examination*, p. 31.

³²Ibid.

³³Ainley, Friedman, and Mahony, 'Transitional justice in Sierra Leone', p. 11.

³⁴Ibid.; Chris Mahony and Yasmin Sooka, 'The truth about the truth: Insider reflections on the Sierra Leonean Truth and Reconciliation Commission', in Ainley, Friedman, and Mahony (eds), *Evaluating Transitional Justice*, p. 39.

These post-1999 developments had significant consequences for the SLTRC. First, the creation of the SCSL resulted in a shift in focus away from the SLTRC as the primary instrument of post-conflict peacebuilding and justice.³⁵ This precipitated a dramatic reduction in the Commission's funding, from \$10 million to \$4.5 million, leading in turn to severe staff shortages.³⁶ In the process, President Kabbah was emboldened to exert significant control over the Commission, appointing allies to a number of key positions.³⁷ In addition to the Commission's precarious existential position within the post-conflict Sierra Leonean landscape, however, its outreach programmes faced a number of more practical difficulties. These included the exceedingly low literacy levels of Sierra Leone's population, many of whom were largely unfamiliar with the SLTRC's methods and goals.³⁸ This problem was even more pronounced among younger Sierra Leoneans, who had participated in the conflict in large numbers and were therefore a key target audience.³⁹ In order to respond to these challenges a German NGO called Ifa Zivik offered additional funds, and in the wake of this cash injection it was decided that a 'Senior Secondary School Version' of the SLTRC's final report should be created, comprising a report summary and accompanying comic strip.⁴⁰ With this, *Sierrarat* became part of the SLTRC's outreach efforts, in which capacity it was distributed around Sierra Leonean secondary schools. The following section will bring the comic into dialogue with another, from which it took significant formal and representational cues: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*.

The politics of truth and reconciliation in post-conflict comics: *Sierrarat* and *Maus*

In this section, we offer a comparative analysis of two post-conflict comics that adopt almost identical representational strategies, but in very different contexts and to very different political ends. In bringing them into dialogue with each other, we seek to examine the ways in which each comic produces and projects a particular, meaningful understanding of truth, reconciliation, and the processes through which they might be achieved. This facilitates our evaluation of the visual politics of truth and reconciliation, the possibilities and limits of the comics medium as a means of exploring these concepts, and the interaction between these aesthetic possibilities and the outreach efforts of TJ programmes.

The Senior Secondary School Version (SSSV) of which *Sierrarat* was an important part was intended both to condense the SLTRC Report's eight thousand pages into a more manageable size as well as to simplify its message and style whenever it was considered to be 'above the level of its target audience'.⁴¹ Although split into separate segments accompanying each of the SSSV's eight chapters, *Sierrarat* was nevertheless intended to function as an initial access point to the text as a whole: 'It is hoped that the cartoon stories will not only make exciting reading for the student, but also arouse their curiosity about the SSSV text and motivate them to read it.'⁴² The comic tells of a civil war in 'Sierrarat', and explores the aftermath of the conflict, in which figures such as 'Ratoldman', 'Ratpapa', 'Ratabu', and 'Ratchild' come to terms with the effects of the violence (and their own participation in it) with the help of the newly created Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

³⁵Mahony and Sooka, 'The truth about the truth', p. 39.

³⁶Dougherty, 'Searching for answers', pp. 39–44.

³⁷Mahony and Sooka, 'The truth about the truth', pp. 38–9.

³⁸Rosalind Shaw, 'Rethinking Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: Lessons from Sierra Leone', *United States Institute of Peace Special Report* (2005), pp. 7–8, available at: {<https://www.usip.org/publications/2005/02/rethinking-truth-and-reconciliation-commissions-lessons-sierra-leone>} accessed 16 July 2018; Dougherty, 'Searching for answers', p. 46.

³⁹See also Clara Ramirez-Barat, 'Engaging children and youth in transitional justice processes: Guidance for outreach programmes', *International Centre for Transitional Justice* (2012), available at: {<https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Report-Children-Youth-Outreach-2012.pdf>} accessed 16 July 2018); SSSV, p. 4.

⁴⁰SSSV, p. 4.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

Maus is a graphic ‘novel’⁴³ conceived and created by Art Spiegelman over a twenty-year period beginning in the early 1970s, and commercially published in two instalments in 1986 and 1991.⁴⁴ It is focused around Spiegelman’s Polish-Jewish parents’ experiences in the Second World War, during which both were transported to and detained in Auschwitz.⁴⁵ Yet in addition to telling their story, *Maus* also seeks to tell Spiegelman’s own, as he tries to access and understand a constellation of events that he did not experience directly, but that have nevertheless profoundly shaped him. *Maus* is not just a survivors’ tale, then, but also a *child-of-survivors*’ tale. It is for this reason that it has become a key text for scholars interested in the social construction of memory across generations; what Marianne Hirsch has called ‘post-memory’.⁴⁶ As James Young has observed, *Maus*’s narrative ‘interweaves both events of the Holocaust and the ways they are passed down to us’, encouraging reflection not only on the events being remembered, but also on the memorialising process itself.⁴⁷ Crucially, for Young as for many other commentators, the ambiguity of *Maus*’s narrative style is inextricable from the fragmented (or fragmentable) sequentiality of its medium.⁴⁸ It is for this reason that it is an ideal site – despite its dislocation from any formal TJ mechanism – from which to assess the possibilities afforded by comics in relation to peace and conflict.

Both *Sierrarat* and *Maus* concern themselves with periods of extreme, systemic violence as well as with subsequent efforts to understand and come to terms with the events they narrate and depict. In this regard they are not unique: the use of comics either by post-conflict peacebuilding institutions or as a way of exploring personal trauma is now fairly well established.⁴⁹ Our reasons for bringing them together in this article go beyond their shared subject matter, however: *Sierrarat* and *Maus* both adopt near-identical representational tropes in order to tell their respective stories, to the extent that it appears highly likely that the latter directly influenced the former. Most obviously, both comics’ central conflicts are between cats on the one hand, and rodents on the other. In *Maus*, each national or ethnic identity category is denoted by a different species: Jews

⁴³As Hillary Chute points out, ‘graphic novel is often a misnomer. Many fascinating works grouped under this umbrella – including ... *Maus*, which helped rocket the term into public consciousness – aren’t novels at all: they are rich works of non-fiction’ (emphasis in original). Chute herself suggests the term ‘graphic narrative’. We use the term ‘graphic novel’ here for clarity and familiarity’s sake. Hillary Chute, ‘Comics as literature? Reading graphic narrative’, *PMLA*, 123:2 (2008), pp. 452–65; cf. Ian Gordon, ‘Making comics respectable: How *Maus* defined a medium’, in Paul Williams and James Lyons (eds), *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), pp. 179–93.

⁴⁴Art Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* (London: Viking, 2011), pp. 22–3, 293. Spiegelman began taping his conversations with his father Vladek in 1972, in which year he published a short comic about the Holocaust (also called ‘Maus’) in an Apex Novelties ‘one-shot’ called *Funny Animals* [sic]. Art Spiegelman, ‘Maus’, in Robert Crumb *et al.* (eds), *Funny Animals* (San Francisco: Apex Novelties, 1972), pp. 9–11.

⁴⁵For the sake of clarity, we use ‘Spiegelman’ to refer to Art Spiegelman the author, and ‘Art’ to refer to Art Spiegelman the character within the text.

⁴⁶Marianne Hirsch, ‘Family pictures: *Maus*, mourning, and post-memory’, *Discourse*, 15:2 (1992), pp. 3–29; see also James Young, *At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁴⁷James Young, ‘The Holocaust as vicarious past: Art Spiegelman’s “Maus” and the afterimages of history’, *Critical Inquiry*, 24:3 (1998), pp. 666–99.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 672–5. For a discussion of ‘closure’ – the interpretive work required to extract meaning from a series of static, usually demarcated panels, see Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 60–93. As Hillary Chute similarly argues, ‘*Maus* demonstrates how the vocabulary of comics – the narrative shapes its grammar offers – along with its visual surface, the extragrammatic layer of its drawn lines, conveys information while at the same time accounting for the excess (or absence) of signification and reference.’ Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, p. 178.

⁴⁹Jean-Phillipe Stassen, *Deo gratias: A Tale of Rwanda* (New York: Roaring Brook Press, 2000); Joe Sacco, *Safe Area Gorazade: the War in Eastern Bosnia, 1992–1995* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2001); cf. Chris Boge, ‘Crimes against (super)humanity: Graphic forms of justice and governance’, in Thomas Giddens (ed.), *Graphic Justice: Intersections of Comics and Law* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 219–35; Jérémie Gilbert and David Keane, ‘Graphic reporting: Human rights violations through the lens of graphic novels’, in Giddens (ed.), *Graphic Justice*, pp. 236–54; Marnie K. Jorenby, ‘Comics and war: Transforming perceptions of the other through a constructive learning experience’, *Journal of Peace Education*, 4:2 (2007), pp. 149–62.

are depicted as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs, Americans as dogs, and so on. In *Sierrarat*, meanwhile, Sierra Leoneans are represented as 'rats', while the invading force from 'Liberat' are described as 'disgruntled Sierrarat people who left the country and turned to cats', in which latter guise they are portrayed throughout the comic.⁵⁰ The similarity between each strip's basic representational strategy is additionally underlined by the similarity of their respective drawing styles: black-and-white line drawings with pen-and-ink. Despite the two comics' obvious aesthetic similarities, however, there are significant differences between their respective circumstances of production and dissemination. *Sierrarat* was shaped by its function as a communicative vehicle for the SLTRC's outreach campaign towards Sierra Leonean secondary school students, while *Maus*, in contrast, began life as a personal venture before belatedly being brought to market. Initially published in an underground comics periodical called *RAW*, it eventually achieved critical and commercial acclaim several years later once it had been taken on by a major publishing house.⁵¹ Spiegelman explores his relationship with his work's unexpected commercial success in *Maus*'s second volume.⁵²

These differences should not be underplayed or forgotten in what follows. Nevertheless, in their (dis)similarity, the two comics open up vital terrain from which to consider the visual politics of truth, reconciliation, and outreach. Although both *Sierrarat* and *Maus* can both be read as responses to the emotional and social fallout generated by conflict and atrocity, their respective understandings of 'truth' and 'reconciliation' contrast in several striking and important ways. In exploring these (dis)similarities, we seek to evaluate the potential contribution of the comics medium to debates about the visual politics of truth, reconciliation, and peace.⁵³ This is a discussion which in turn facilitates an examination of *Sierrarat*'s place within the SLTRC's outreach efforts, and enables us to draw conclusions about the ways in which TJ discourse has come to frame and discipline what 'truth' and 'reconciliation' mean and how they function on the global stage. It should be acknowledged that our conclusions in this latter regard are to some extent limited by the lack of available information about how *Sierrarat* was received by its target audience, including how widely and for how long it was read and/or taught in schools. However, we mitigate for this data's absence by drawing on ethnographic research examining the relationship between wider Sierra Leonean society and the SLTRC, a dynamic and often tense association that informs our reading of *Sierrarat* as an 'outreach' text.

The following three subsections will explore the parallels and tensions between the two comics with reference to the ontological, epistemological, and temporal frameworks underpinning each comic's understanding of post-conflict possibilities and limits. We have structured our analysis in this way in order to give us the greatest possible purchase on the politics of reconciliation (the affirmation of which inherently relies upon ontological claims about identity and community) and truth (which by necessity comes bound to particular epistemological assertions and assumptions). Examining the temporal scaffold within which these concepts are represented, meanwhile, enables us to understand them dynamically, as part of a transitional process or narrative rather than as static and unchanging archetypes.

Ontologies of reconciliation

Sierrarat makes a case for reconciliation understood as the restoration of total and complete unity between all Sierra Leoneans. 'Reconciliation', then, signifies ontological wholeness: in the strip's final panel, five rats and two cats stand hand-in-hand in a circle, each making a declaration signifying their individual and collective transcendence of the division, violence, and suffering that marked the Civil War. 'Forgiveness', 'Repentance', 'Unity', 'Reconciliation', 'Peace', 'Never Again',

⁵⁰SSSV, p. 5.

⁵¹The circumstances surrounding *Maus*'s publication can be found in Spiegelman, *MetaMaus*, pp. 76–9.

⁵²Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 201.

⁵³For example, as outlined and discussed by Möller, who explores the visual politics of 'entertainment' media – including comics – to debates about spectatorship and the witnessing of war and atrocity. Möller, *Visual Peace*, pp. 163–77.

and ‘Progress’ (Figure 1).⁵⁴ The image’s depiction of harmony between ‘rats’ (including those subjected to the War’s violence, such as Ratabu, whose hands have been cut off by a cat militia) and ‘cats’ (including Catcutan, Ratabu’s dismemberer) seems to suggest that reconciliation is something that occurs primarily between ‘victims’ on one hand and ‘perpetrators’ on the other. The comic’s presentation of these two subject-groups as different species reinforces these two identity categories by visually differentiating them. In other words, the comic’s aesthetic vocabulary encourages the precise and immediate identification of ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’, and in so doing also produces the opposition between these two groups as the central division to be overcome in the transition towards reconciliation.

Sierrarat’s presentation of reconciliation in terms of a seemingly complete (re)unification of previously opposed parties is ontologically suspicious. Poststructuralist and other scholars in IR and in other disciplines have long argued for the impossibility of what Michael Dillon calls a ‘metaphysics of presence’: an undiluted, logocentric wholeness of being, without lack or remainder.⁵⁵ Yet this is not simply a philosophical problem: in its apparent depiction of a sort of millenarian, redemptive bliss, the comic also implicitly delegitimises the very lack or remainder that any practical efforts at post-conflict peacebuilding will inevitably leave behind. In this account, it seems, everything can and should and must be precisely accounted for, put in its right place once and for all. However, critical scholars of peacebuilding have long warned that such strategies can ‘reify and validate the existing global and orthodox project of liberalism built into the liberal state and international system’ by obscuring the violence that underpins the liberal project and delegitimising desires that cannot easily be incorporated into it.⁵⁶

The division between ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ that *Sierrarat*’s use of the cat/mouse *motif* both sets up and resolves is further complicated by the fact that this is a fault line that has not commonly been cited by Sierra Leoneans themselves. As Gearoid Millar has argued, the frequency with which actors switched sides and the commonplace profession of multiple, provisional, and/or variable allegiances frustrates attempts to mark individuals as ‘guilty’ perpetrators or ‘innocent’ victims.⁵⁷ One consequence of *Sierrarat*’s prioritisation of this division is that it masks the economic, gendered and intergenerational patterns of violence that have more frequently characterised the Civil War in the minds of those who experienced it. According to Millar, Sierra Leoneans have tended to make sense of the conflict in terms of structural factors such as poverty and lack of opportunity, for example, not in terms of individuals who can be classified according to a binary distinction between those who perpetrated violence and those who were victims of it.⁵⁸

The shortcomings of the victim/perpetrator binary is particularly evident in the comic’s handling of the delicate and ambiguous status of child soldiers: although one particular narrative thread sees two rat children called Ratlamin and Ratmanu coerced into fighting and committing war crimes, another panel displays a child soldier as a cat (Figure 2).⁵⁹ The comic’s indecision as to the victim-rat/perpetrator-cat status of these individuals betrays the shortcomings of its taxonomy: child soldiers can be *either* victims *or* perpetrators, but there is no grey space in between,

⁵⁴SSSV, p. 119.

⁵⁵Michael Dillon, ‘The sovereign and the stranger’, in Jenny Edkins, Nalini Persram, and Véronique Pin-Fat (eds), *Sovereignty and Subjectivity* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999), p. 117.

⁵⁶Oliver P. Richmond, ‘Introduction’, in Oliver P. Richmond (ed.), *Palgrave Advances in Peacebuilding: Critical Developments and Approaches* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), p. 2.

⁵⁷Millar, ‘“Our brothers who went to the bush”’, p. 724.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 724–5.

⁵⁹SSSV, pp. 42, 110–12.



Figure 1. *Sierrarat*, final panel.



Figure 2. *Sierrarat*, Rat children forced to conscript.

and hence no way to acknowledge the legal and ethical complexity of their status, in which they are simultaneously both and neither.⁶⁰

In this respect the comic is not only at odds with the experiences of Sierra Leoneans but also with the text it accompanies, which presents a far more nuanced account of difference, victimhood, responsibility and guilt within Sierra Leonean society. The text goes to some lengths to emphasise the complexity and messiness of post-conflict Sierra Leonean society, recognising (for example) the ways in which rape victims were commonly ostracised from their societies and families.⁶¹ However, in the comic itself, sexual violence functions as a vector through

⁶⁰Alcinda Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 69; Pieter Brits and Michelle Nel, 'The criminal liability of child soldiers: In search of a standard', *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 22:3 (2012), pp. 467–72.

⁶¹Jennifer Leaning, Susan A. Bartels, and Hani Mowafi, 'Sexual violence during war and forced migration', in Susan Forbes Martin and John Tirman (eds), *Women, Migration, and Conflict: Breaking a Deadly Cycle* (London: Springer, 2009), pp. 173–99; Megan MacKenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), pp. 110–11; Nirit Ben-Ari and Ernest Harsch, 'Sexual violence, an "invisible war crime"', *Africa Renewal*, 18:4 (2005), p. 1.

which the victim-perpetrator distinction can be both reinforced and overcome: a rape victim who is welcomed back into her family after the conflict ends is one of the seven figures holding hands in this final panel.⁶²

The problems that *Sierrarat's* ontology of reconciliation encounters when brought into dialogue with the complex dynamics at play during and after the Sierra Leonean conflict are thrown into still sharper relief when compared with *Maus*. Although *Maus* portrays Jews as mice and Germans as cats, reproducing the reified, racialised identity categories imposed by the Nazis themselves,⁶³ the partiality and contingency of this classification is made apparent in the numerous sections in which Spiegelman refers to his own creative process. In some of these, Art is represented as a human with a mouse mask, while in another, Art discusses with his (French, converted-Jewish) wife Françoise how she should be drawn: as a mouse, a frog, a moose, a rabbit, or a poodle.⁶⁴

The cat/mouse trope is not adopted here in order to draw a binary moral distinction between 'victim' and 'perpetrator', then, but rather as a way of discussing and exploring the complexities and partialities obscured by such simplistic identity claims. In Spiegelman's words, 'I liked working with a metaphor that didn't work all that well ... it would be fatuous to move in the direction of Aesop's Fables. The work would just turn fatuous and fake.'⁶⁵ *Maus* thus 'involved [Spiegelman] producing, however contingently, identity affiliations ... with which [he was] uncomfortable', leading, as Hillary Chute has pointed out, to an unsettling tension between its status 'as testimony and history, despite ... its [apparent] iteration in the funny animal genre [of comics]'.⁶⁶ At the end of the comic, this tension remains unresolved. *Maus* does not end with a statement of panracial unity, but rather with Art's father Vladek asking Art to turn off his tape recorder as he goes to bed. Drifting off, Vladek absentmindedly refers to 'Richieu', Art's older brother, born in 1937 and poisoned by Vladek's friend Tosha in 1943 in order to prevent his transport to Auschwitz.⁶⁷ 'I'm *tired* from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now.'⁶⁸ *Maus*, then, ends not with a vision of reconciliatory wholeness, but with a reminder of one of the many absences that remain lurking at the end of the comic *despite* Vladek's personal reunion with Anja – mother to both Richieu and Art – at the end of the war. In Vladek's sleepy identification of Art with Richieu, in other words, one can read a sense of the impossibility of any sort of transcendent post-conflict unity, and the necessity of working *with* that lack creatively and productively rather than seeking to draw a veil over it.

Epistemology and truth

Both *Sierrarat* and *Maus* are intimately concerned with the production of knowledge as a means of approaching, understanding, and coming to terms with past conflict and atrocity. *Sierrarat*, for example, constitutes reconciliation as the by-product of a truthful understanding of the Civil War. In so doing, it identifies an inevitable and inexorable path from knowledge towards peace in which the former is a necessary condition for the latter: 'We must know and understand, then it won't happen again' (Figure 3).⁶⁹ Yet the 'truth' that underpins the comic's proposed trajectory towards reconciliation is understood specifically⁷⁰ as that produced by the institutional machinery of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The narratives constructed by the SLTRC about

⁶²SSSV, pp. 93–5.

⁶³Cf. Spiegelman, *MetaMaus*, pp. 113–14.

⁶⁴Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, pp. 171, 201–05.

⁶⁵Spiegelman, *MetaMaus*, pp. 119–20.

⁶⁶Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, pp. 117, 156.

⁶⁷Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, p. 111.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 296.

⁶⁹SSSV, p. 9.

⁷⁰SSSV, pp. 9–11.



Figure 3. Sierrarat's inhabitants demand a TRC.

the Civil War are thus constituted not only as *the* truth, but also as a requirement for reconciliatory peace in post-conflict *Sierrarat*/Sierra Leone.

As such, *Sierrarat* implicitly legitimises the SLTRC as the prescribed organ through which reconciliation must be achieved.⁷¹ This sits uneasily with the institutional and political complexities of Sierra Leone's TJ programme, in which the SLTRC and the SCSL not only coexisted but also competed for the right to determine, define, and establish truth about the Civil War.⁷² In particular, the SLTRC's capacity to gather testimony was compromised by the very establishment of the SCSL, because the existence of a trial court rendered it unable to guarantee amnesty as it had originally intended to do.⁷³ This intricate and often fraught institutional relationship between truth and reconciliation within post-conflict Sierra Leone is obscured by *Sierrarat's* disinterest in the Commission's own complex place within Sierra Leonean politics, which serves to mask the inevitable gaps and silences immanent within the knowledge it produced.

Foremost among these gaps and silences are the informal and culturally specific mechanisms that many Sierra Leoneans had developed to deal with the trauma they had experienced. These included directed forgetting,⁷⁴ 'a practice whereby the discussion of violent events in public [wa]s viewed as objectionable',⁷⁵ which ran in direct contradistinction to the SLTRC's emphasis on public confession and truth telling.⁷⁶ This sets up an alternative understanding of the relationship between truth and reconciliation in which knowledge about atrocity, when publicly established and/or professed, 'makes that violence present and connects it to the person remembering'.⁷⁷ *Sierrarat's* focus on the need for a 'truth' mediated by the SLTRC thus neglects Sierra Leoneans' acute awareness of what had happened within their communities, and the methods

⁷¹SSSV, p. 4

⁷²This was acknowledged by the SLTRC report itself, which commented on 'the ... mutual failure of the [two] institutions to harmonise their objectives'. Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Witness to Truth: Report of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Vol. 3B, p. 430, available at: <http://www.sierraleonestrc.org/index.php/view-the-final-report/download-table-of-contents> accessed 16 July 2018.

⁷³Kelsall and Sawyer, 'Truth vs justice?', p. 38. While the relationship between the SLTRC and the SCSL remained murky in this respect, what is key is that much of the population (and especially perpetrators) feared that testifying at the SLTRC could lead to prosecutions at the SCSL. Tim Kelsall, 'Truth, lies, ritual: Preliminary reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 2:2 (2005), p. 381.

⁷⁴Shaw, 'Rethinking Truth and Reconciliation Commissions', p. 8; and Rosalind Shaw, 'Memory frictions: Localizing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 1:2 (2007), pp. 193–5.

⁷⁵Rachel Anderson, 'Compromise without virtue: Male child soldier reintegration in Sierra Leone', in John D. Brewer (ed.), *The Sociology of Compromise After Conflict* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), p. 181.

⁷⁶Kelsall, *Culture Under Cross-Examination*, p. 383.

⁷⁷Shaw, 'Memory frictions', p. 195.

that they had already developed among and between themselves in order to manage it.⁷⁸ It subordinates these local ways of forgetting by insisting on an essential affiliation between official, institutionally mediated, public knowledge and the healing of social division.⁷⁹

Sierrarat's choice of medium undermines its prescription of the SLTRC as the sole means through which the knowledge and truth necessary for peace could be produced. Comics are inherently reductive: in Scott McCloud's words, they function according to a principle of 'amplification through simplification' in which an image is stripped down to a core (if partial) meaning that can then be emphasised in a manner unavailable to more 'realistic' modes of representation.⁸⁰ This destabilises *Sierrarat's* understanding of truth's causal relationship to reconciliation, for two reasons. Firstly, because *Sierrarat* claims knowledge to be a necessary condition of peace that must therefore be encouraged to bloom in all its fullness rather than stripped back and knowingly distorted in the manner encouraged by the comics medium. And secondly, because *Sierrarat* understands knowledge as something that must be produced through the institutional mechanism that constitutes the SLTRC. For McCloud on the other hand, as for many other comics theorists, the medium's fundamental aesthetic simplicity cultivates an interactive approach to the production of meaning. 'The cartoon is a *vacuum* into which our *identity and awareness are pulled* ... an empty shell that we inhabit ... we don't just *observe* the cartoon, we *become* it.'⁸¹ The collaborative openness of the comics medium, in short, is ill-suited to the prescriptive pursuit of knowledge or truth within a closed institutional context from which one's target audience have largely been excluded.

In *Maus*, Spiegelman mobilises precisely these features of his medium in order to precisely acknowledge the aporias and impasses that define his attempts to distil truth from his father's testimony:

Paradoxically, while the mice allowed for a distancing from the horrors described, they simultaneously allowed me and others to get further inside the material in a way that would have been more difficult with more realistic representation, where one could constantly question my choices: 'Is that what that guy looked like?' and you know, I actually have no idea. It gave me a certain degree of wiggle room, a certain kind of slack, about getting a detail wrong despite all my research.⁸²

This is not at all to say that *Maus* is unconcerned with questions of accuracy or correctness: on the contrary, Spiegelman repeatedly demonstrates an obsessive level of detail regarding the material minutiae of his parents' concentrationary experience, including maps, architectural diagrams, timelines, and even a step-by-step guide delineating how one should repair the sole of a shoe.⁸³ However, these impulses towards precision are presented in constant and irresolvable tension with the misrememberings, forgettings, and silences that frustrate and impede Art's desire for complete, rounded knowledge. Aside from the absence of Richieu, Art is also unable to gather testimony from his mother, who committed suicide in 1968 and whose diaries Vladek has burned.⁸⁴ Spiegelman thus exploits the representational latitude offered by the comics medium in order to open up a productive tension with respect to the idea of 'truth'. On the one hand,

⁷⁸Gearoid Millar, 'Local evaluations of justice through truth telling in Sierra Leone: Postwar needs of transitional justice', *Human Rights Review*, 12:4 (2011), pp. 524–30.

⁷⁹Although the comic portrays Ratabu's reconciliation with his daughter, who has been a 'bush wife' to multiple soldiers during the conflict (a role that has also involved bearing their children), it is notable that the process by which this reconciliation occurs is a confessional public hearing ('I must know the truth ... you have to tell me the truth. I need to know.') that in many ways mirrors the TRC itself. SSSV, pp. 94–5.

⁸⁰McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 30.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, p. 36, emphasis in original.

⁸²Spiegelman, *MetaMaus*, p. 149.

⁸³Cf. Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, pp. 112, 211, 220, 228, 230.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 102–05, 160–1.

there is ‘amplification through simplification’: the reductive aesthetics of the comics form allows him to ‘get further inside the material in a way that would have been more difficult with more realistic representation’.⁸⁵ And yet on the other, this more abstract, emotionally informed engagement with his parents’ experiences also allows for a certain imaginative ‘wiggle room’ regarding the empirical details. His desire for truth is thus accompanied by a simultaneous acknowledgement that ‘reality is too complex for comics’:⁸⁶ that the processes of remembrance, communication, reception, organisation, and presentation underpinning his narrative must by necessity degrade the source material upon which that narrative is based:

My father could only remember/understand a part of what he lived through. He could only tell a part of that. I, in turn, could only understand a part of what he was able to tell, and could only communicate a part of that. What remains are ghosts of ghosts, standing on the fragile foundations of memory.⁸⁷

Spiegelman’s use of the comics medium to emphasise the complexity, partiality, and fragility of his knowledge of the story he is trying to tell stands in contradistinction to *Sierrarat*’s attempt to distil the complexities of the Sierra Leonean Civil War into a singular and institutionally mediated truth. His self-reflexive understanding of the limits of his medium likewise contrasts with *Sierrarat*’s apparent faith in a chain of communication that flows without degradation or interpretive interruption from an initial witness through their testimony to the SLTRC, and then through the comic itself to the student reading it. And although Art’s obsessiveness with detail is everywhere evident, there is no assumed causal connection between truth and reconciliation: *Maus* is a book about coming to terms with loss and trauma, rather than overcoming it.⁸⁸

Temporalities of peace and trauma

Sierrarat begins with a vision of Sierrarat in its prelapsarian, preconflict state – ‘a poor but peaceful and beautiful country’ – which is then interrupted by an intrusion of cats from the neighbouring state of ‘Liberat’, sparking a civil conflict. It is this initial state of peace, or something very like it, that the SLTRC seeks to bring about once more – a state of ‘lasting peace’ this time, in which ‘the war won’t happen again’ (Figure 4).⁸⁹ The comic thus constructs a circular timeframe in which Sierrarat proceeds from an idyllic past, through the difficulties of the Civil War, before re-establishing a mature and permanent peace that resembles the prewar state in which the country is found at the beginning of the comic. This temporal structure both organises *Sierrarat*’s narrative and delimits its sense of political possibility: bound up as it is with the parallel advancement of truth and reconciliation, it describes a trajectory in which progress from conflict *back* to peace proceeds irrevocably and only from the knowledge generated by the SLTRC itself.

Because the comic’s circular temporality is designed to house a progressive narrative leading from the establishment of the SLTRC towards reconciliation, the story it presents is linear and straightforward. This is a depoliticising move insofar as it obscures the ways in which crises continue to resonate after the events that constitute them. As Jenny Edkins has noted, ‘trauma is not experienced at the time; it is belated. It returns in the form of dreams or flashbacks.’⁹⁰ This disruption of linear time is trauma’s defining feature, according to Emma Hutchison: ‘the past is felt so intensely in the present that trauma becomes distinguished most prominently by its belated

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 149.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 176.

⁸⁷Spiegelman, *MetaMaus*, p. 154.

⁸⁸Cf. Hillary Chute, ‘“The shadow of a past time”: History and graphic representation in *Maus*’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 52:2 (2006), p. 213.

⁸⁹SSSV, p. 10.

⁹⁰Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 40.

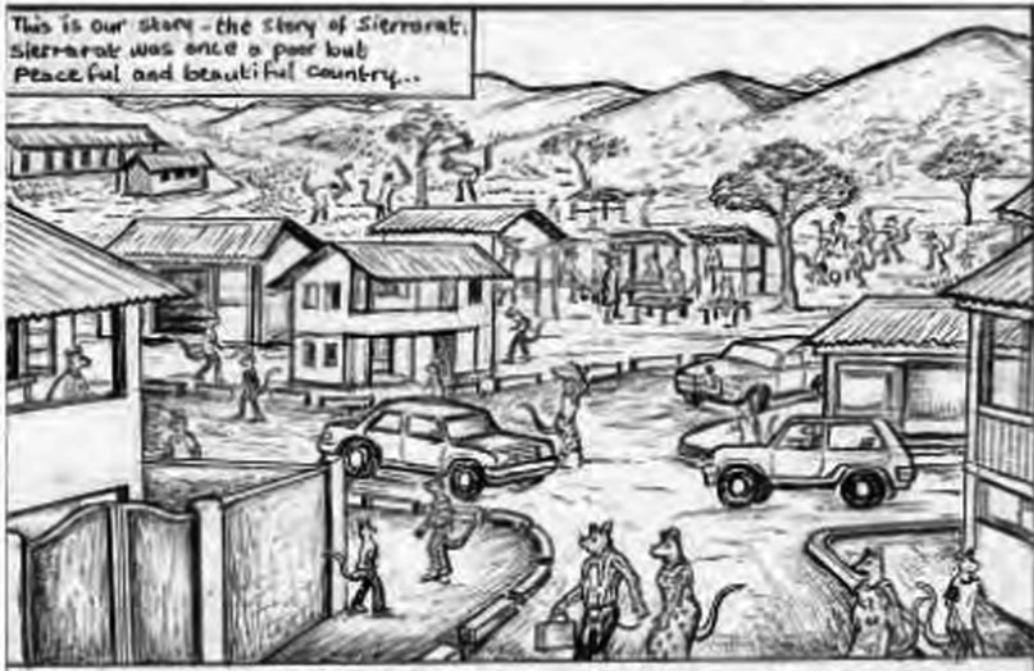


Figure 4. *Sierrarat*, first panel.

return'.⁹¹ Bound up with an ontology that disregards the differences, lacks, and absences that result inevitably from conflict, and an epistemology that prioritises one particular institutional formation of knowledge production over more informal strategies of forgetting, *Sierrarat's* temporality similarly presents a closed system that precludes the possibility of diversion, dissension, or traumatic intrusion.

A key feature of the comics medium that would appear to lend itself more to the critical interrogation of linear time than to its reproduction is the temporal dislocation represented by the 'gutters' that divide the panels. The gutter 'fracture[s] both time and space', in Scott McCloud's words, 'offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments' whose relation, coherent or otherwise, is subject to the interpretive labour of the reader.⁹² As such, the gutter functions much like Foucault's description of the margins in an illustrated book, for 'it is there, on these few millimetres of white, the calm sand of the page, that are established all the relations of designation, nomination, description, classification'.⁹³ For Frank Möller, these seemingly empty spaces are key to understanding comics' political potential with respect to questions of peace, insofar as they function as temporally indeterminate interstices that encourage 'readers [to] get involved in the construction of the story-line by linking otherwise disconnected panels'.⁹⁴ One way in which *Sierrarat* seeks to bypass the gutter is by making use of a narrator, whose descriptive asides in caption-like text boxes seek to bridge the ambiguous space between panels by summarising whatever information is perceived to be in need of clarification. 'This is how it happened ...'.⁹⁵

⁹¹Emma Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics: Collective Emotions After Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 41.

⁹²McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 67.

⁹³Michel Foucault, *This Is Not A Pipe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 28. We would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing this passage to our attention.

⁹⁴Möller, *Visual Peace*, pp. 170–1; cf. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 63.

⁹⁵SSSV, p. 81.

In the process, *Sierrarat* seeks to foreclose the possibility of alternative readings and counternarratives that might disrupt its depiction of a smooth procession towards reconciliation under the watchful gaze and parental guidance of the SLTRC. Its implication is that the reconciliatory process through which the horrors of the Civil War are to be left behind is so thorough as to short-circuit any possibility of traumatic surprises to come.

In contrast to *Sierrarat*'s linear framing of the passage from conflict towards reconciliation, *Maus* presents two parallel narratives folding into one another, the first set in wartime Europe and the second set in postwar America. One sees trauma at work repeatedly throughout the text, collapsing the temporal distance between these two narratives, as when Vladek mistakenly appeals to his dead son Richieu,⁹⁶ or when Spiegelman's early 1970s comic about his mother's suicide is reprinted in full.⁹⁷ This climaxes in arguably the book's most famous sequence, entitled 'Time Flies ...'. On this single page, the comic shifts between its own multiple temporalities with such pace that they begin to bleed into each other visually – a coincidence that becomes only gradually apparent as the viewer's perspective is pulled back, frame by frame, to reveal a pile of corpses beneath Art's drawing board.⁹⁸

Acknowledging the lacks, absences, silences, and impassés that accompany and constrain any attempt to deal with, know or move beyond past atrocity, *Maus*'s shifting temporal terrain demonstrates the reasons why 'truth' and 'reconciliation' in the senses advocated by *Sierrarat* are more complex and fraught than the latter comic suggests them to be. Here the past is not folded up and packed away, but instead plays an active and productive role in the present, insofar as it contributes to the ways in which subjects like Art and/or Vladek understand and position themselves in relation to the world around them. Achieving 'closure' through the reconstruction of a pre-traumatic state of affairs makes little sense in a world in which so much has been lost, and in which the shadows of the past continue traumatically to puncture the present, rendering it painfully fractured and incomplete. Possessing no formal commitment to 'realism' and already punctuated by the temporal ambiguity of the 'gutter', the comics medium allows for these multiple, non-linear temporalities to appear in a single frame, layered on top of one another and thereby captured in a single act of looking.

Conclusion

Despite the aesthetic, formal, and representational similarities between *Maus* and *Sierrarat*, the two comics offer starkly different responses to conflict, atrocity, and the possibilities and limits of post-conflict 'reconciliation'. In ontological, epistemological, and temporal terms, *Sierrarat*'s understanding of the conflict it describes (and the medium it uses to describe it) serves to obscure and potentially delegitimise lingering grievance or difference, alternative institutional or non-institutional mechanisms of knowledge-production or forgetting, and the traumatic interruptions of the past. As such, it appears to function as an intervention into the competitive institutional politics of the SLTRC within post-conflict Sierra Leone more than it does an attempt at 'outreach'.

While it is perhaps unsurprising that *Sierrarat* largely reproduces the SLTRC's understanding of its own role within the institutional politics of post-conflict Sierra Leone, it raises important questions about who and what precisely outreach is for, and how aesthetic media like comic books might contribute to its success. If the problem outreach initiatives seek to address is the perception that TJ institutions prosecute what Phil Clark calls 'distant justice', at a remove from the communities they are supposed to represent, then one might reasonably ask what purpose is served by an outreach text like *Sierrarat*.⁹⁹ Communicating institutional practice to

⁹⁶ Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, p. 296.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 102–05.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁹⁹ Clark, *Distant Justice*.

a particular social group is unlikely to be met with much positivity if that group already feels alienated from the institution in question. This problem is only compounded if outreach initiatives prescribe a particular vision of truth and reconciliation that is unable to accommodate the methods and approaches that have already been developed by the people with whom they wish to communicate. This is precisely what is at stake in *Sierrarat*. The comic's presentation of the SLTRC as the necessary and only solution to Sierra Leoneans' problems is at odds both with the SLTRC's place with respect to the SCSL in Sierra Leone's TJ discourse and with the informal transition towards peace that many Sierra Leonean communities had begun to effect among themselves.

We do not believe this to be an indictment of the comics medium more generally. In fact, comics are in many ways ideally suited to contribute to a radical reconceptualisation of outreach within TJ discourse. If post-conflict outreach texts ought to seek to accommodate the experiences of their audience and prospective readership, then one might look, with Hillary Chute to a medium that 'engages presence in active and important ways, while also leaving itself open to the provisional, partial, and disjunct'.¹⁰⁰ Comics are 'reticent', in Thierry Groensteen's words: they require the collaborative participation of their audiences in order to produce meaning. 'Not only do the silent and immobile images lack the illusionist power of the filmic image, but their connections, far from producing a continuity that mimics reality, offer the reader a story that is full of holes, which appear as gaps in the meaning.'¹⁰¹ These 'gaps' should not be considered limitations: on the contrary, they underpin the imaginative expansiveness and flexibility of the medium. It is here – in the involvement of readers in the production of knowledge about the conflict they have experienced and the steps required to move forwards – that we feel comics are of potential use to outreach initiatives.

Sierrarat's limitations in these regards are thrown into acute relief when set side-by-side with the text from which it appears to draw its representational vocabulary. While it may seem unfair to judge *Sierrarat* with reference to one of the most widely acclaimed of all comics texts, our turn to *Maus* is rather intended to provide an example of the sort of openness that the comics medium can afford when mobilised with thought and care. While the use of comics in order to communicate with a population with low literacy levels makes intuitive sense, given the textual and pictorial hybridity of the medium, the representational simplicity of the form does not by any means mandate a closed and/or prescriptive approach to the narration and visualisation of conflict, atrocity, truth, reconciliation, and peace. The comics medium is not necessarily just a way of simplifying a complex mass of information, but can also play an active and important role in the exploration and communication of difficult and sensitive issues concerning conflict and atrocity.¹⁰²

We conclude by suggesting another possible model for outreach initiatives involving comics. The *PositiveNegatives* project 'explores issues of global concern [including conflict, migration, slavery, drug addiction and identity] through personal stories', creating comics in direct collaboration with contributors from a range of backgrounds and places of origin.¹⁰³ Where possible, scripts are drafted in the field, in order to give contributors the chance to suggest alterations or to correct mistakes. This kind of approach would appear to be promising for outreach programmes because it potentially enables meaningful connections between TJ institutions and the population they serve to be built into the very act of producing an outreach text, rather than simply in its dissemination. Whichever strategy is used, it must be remembered that the choices comic book artists make are deeply political, and both reflect and produce wider frames of understanding that legitimise and delegitimise different realms of lived experience. For this reason, more


¹⁰⁰Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, p. 34. The text quoted within her quotation is from Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 5.

¹⁰¹Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, p. 10.

¹⁰²SSSV, p. 4.

¹⁰³*PositiveNegatives*, available at: {<http://positivenegatives.org/about/methodology/>} accessed 24 January 2019.

attention needs to be paid to the aesthetic politics of truth and reconciliation in the design and execution of TJ outreach initiatives. This is in order to ensure that future efforts to communicate institutional processes to a wider public do so with a sense of the complex emotional, social, and historical contexts into which they are intervening.

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Acknowledgements. Previous iterations of this article have been read by Tim Aistrop, Claudia Aradau, Lindsay Clark, Kyle Grayson, Luke Hennessy, Rachel Kerr, Rhiannon Nielsen, Dave Norman, and Ben Zala. We are grateful to all of them for their engagement. Thanks are also owed to the *RIS* editorial team and the three reviewers for their constructive and generous stewardship. This research has been part-supported by AHRC grant AH/P005365/1 and ESRC grant ES/S01117X/1.

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