**+“‘We are such stuff…’: Imagi(ni)ng Ethnicity through Thing Theory**

**in Two Balkan-themed Graphic Novels”**

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In an increasingly, even tyrannically image-oriented culture, one need not wonder at the popularity of the comics medium or, as Scott McCloud defined it, “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response to the viewer” (9). Helping to shape the identity of young readers, comics have in the last few decades escaped the adolescent pool, especially by virtue of the graphic novel subgenre, to become legitimate (and legitimized) textual markers of many a modern culture, and drawing vigorous scholarly interest in the process. There is a strong academic controversy on whether comics are “a form of literature,” as, among others, Charles Hatfield would hail it (ix); a “hybrid” form of art whose “multimodality,” according to Klaus Kaindl (and the many other supporters of this view), endows them with the ability to operate on both a “linguistic” and a “pictographic” register, as well as via “intertextual reference” (173-74); or a descendant, according to Aaron Meskin, with an “ancestral relationship” to both the verbal and pictorial art forms (237-38). Whatever view one chooses to espouse, however, the point is that, first, the comics genre draws immense popular affective power from its double and interwoven legacy: as Alan Moore notes, “Pentagon studies in the 1980s demonstrated that comic strip narrative is still the best way of conveying understandable and retainable information.” Second, this mixed essence significantly draws textuality into the realm of the autographic, i.e., that kind of art which cannot be reprinted in any form or shape other than its original one, lest it lose its artistic and conceptual import (Meskin 230-33).

Those two above qualities would suffice to draw attention, in my view, to the dimension not only of the art, but of the thinginess of comics, both in terms of their commercial dissemination as wildly fetishized objects that shape passions and consciousnesses, but also to the signature immanence of their very content and ingredients of each issue (preferably ever in “mint/near mint” condition). In that sense, an examination of comics through as thing theory would be long overdue, though curiously yet untested, to my knowledge. A recent branch of the very popular field of material culture studies—whose critics, according to Daniel Miller, “are concerned at least as much with how things make people as the other way around—thing theory is the brainchild of University of Chicago professor Bill Brown, inspired by the Heideggerian object/thing distinction: in his words, “We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A thing, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us” (4). This observation leads Brown to conclude that:

Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects). But this temporality obscures the all-at-onceness, the simultaneity, of the object/thing dialectic and the fact that, all at once, *the thing seems to name the object just as it is even as it names something else*. (Brown 5)

Even though this observation might seem simple, the repercussions for what has been, since the 1960s, an increasingly text-oriented way of thinking (either via Saussure’s sign and Derrida’s deconstruction of it, or via Lacan’s psycholinguistics), are significant. Chris Tilley sums it up best in quoting material culture theorist Webb Keane[[1]](#endnote-1):

Keane (2003, n.d.) has cogently argued that what this amounts to is a materialistic rather than a linguistically grounded notion of semiotics or the process of signification which shakes off Saussure’s radical separation of sign from the material world with the *assumption* that the relationship is always arbitrary. (qtd. in Tilley 69)

The above might explain the fascinating yet perplexing saturation of text with thinginess on the comics page, and provides our theoretical footing to examine the thing as an agent-par-excellence of constructed reality in two contemporary graphic endeavors dealing with the modern Balkans, in: Joe Sacco’s 2000 graphic journalism memoir, *Safe Area Goražde*, and the 2011 novella *To Ptoma* (*The Corpse*), scripted by Tassos Zafeiriadis and Yiannis Palavos, with Thanassis Petrou doing the pencils. What brings these two texts together is their common preoccupation with the dreams and nightmares of ethnic identity in an area of southeast Europe with a rich history of culture and conflict that has resulted in a perennial hotbed of national(ist) trouble. Their focus marks them as ideal for a thing theory investigation, since, in John Plotz’s words:

its job should consist of noting the places where any mode of acquiring or producing knowledge about the world runs into hard nuts, troubling exceptions, or blurry borders—of anatomizing places where the strict rules for classifying and comprehending phenomena seem suddenly no longer to apply. Lacunae like these cry out for thing theory. (118)

Slavoj Zizek concurs with such an assessment, remarking on Lacan’s prophecy about the rise of racism in the late 20th century: “From what does this sudden impact of the ethnic Cause, the ethnic Thing (this term is to be conceived here in its precise Lacanian sense as a traumatic, real object fixing our desire), draw its strength? Lacan locates its strength as the reverse of the striving after universality that constitutes the very basis of our capitalist civilization” (Zizek 125). What I aim to show is how things are used in the two graphic works to both indicate and deconstruct ethnic identity, and also how people are signified not only via their relation to things, but in being thingified themselves as Others—in the negative sense of the term that Aimé Cesaire first used to indicate the debasing of human identity under colonialism, a situation similar to the new Balkan reality in the context of global and glocal politics. In turn, an examination of things in these graphic works would help ground better our understanding of material culture studies, especially its visual culture component which, as James Elkins notes, must be made “more difficult” by being made “multicultural” enough to abandon the facile application of “Western methodology to non-Western material” (qtd. in Tilley 139). Of particular interest will be the graphic depiction of the dead human body as a thing of arcane and universal terror—as Plotz aptly puts it, a thing where “’thing’ is the term of choice for the extreme cases when nouns otherwise fail us,” in “summing up imponderable, slightly creepy what-is-it-ness” (110). The human corpse as a transgressor of subject-object categories, a dearly departed, is the most abject and thingiest of things, to recall Julia Kristeva’s famous anathema in *Powers of Horror*: “the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything” (3); “that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, […] The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection…death infecting life” (Kristeva 4). Looking at the corpse through thing theory, however, will be an effort to redeem that abjection, as Bill Brown, in citing Adorno, notes: “accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such” (Brown 12).

Sacco’s journalistic graphic account of his days among Bosnian Muslims in the enclave known as “Safe Area Goražde” is full of such dead Others. An ingenious cross between artwork reminiscent of Ronald Crumb or Rory Hayes that McCloud would categorize as “expressionistic” and “neurotic” (125-26) and grim photojournalism, Sacco seemingly distances his readers from the horrors of war by cartooning reality, merely to trip them up again when they allow this cartoonish engagingness to penetrate their jaded defenses as a kind of Trojan alienation device. McCloud explains this cartoon-specific effect as “amplification through simplification”: “By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning,’ an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (30); as a result, when one sees a cartoon face, readers see themselves (McCloud 36). As Sacco has also done in his other graphic accounts of ethnic/nationalistic violence in Palestine and Chechnya, *SAG*, winner of the Eisner award (among other distinctions and praises), does not shy away from making us identify with the raw violence and the grotesqueness of human existence in this particularly atrocious war. As fellow graphic artist and native Yugoslavian Enki Bilal noted about the Serbo-Bosnian conflict, “when Yugoslavia began collapsing after Tito’s death, I began to worry too. […] You could feel the end of a system, of an era. A slow end. It was as if the country was thawing, so what did that mean? That the monsters had awakened” (Bilal 15).

Nevertheless, it is not so much monsters that Sacco is concerned with, but people, suffering individuals. In contrast to “most journalists” whom he chides in his work as blowing off real people in favor of “English-language quotes” and “a quickie stand-up” (SAG 130), many critics (Bartley 55; Vanderbeke 78) have praised Sacco’s opening full-page frame of Goražde for the individualizing of each person in the crowd: as Sacco himself explained, “I didn’t want to show a mass of people in the sense that they all look like a bunch of ants or something. To me, they are individuals who have suffered enormously” (“Presentation”). Showing each face as the thing itself and not reducing it to imperialistic Western vision of identical ethnic caricatures violently shifts our visual presumptions to this new and confusing local ground: as Bartley observes, it “heighters the real outcome that is hidden under the abstract language of the trade” (55). While Sacco admits in his notes that “[i]t looked like some scene out of a World War II documentary” (“Some Reflections” xii), filtering a living scene through pre-conceived footage of a past event’s recording, his later graphic depiction of a multiplicity of individuals as things you cannot look through defeats the staging of the frame from a “Western privileged” perspective, slightly elevated and panoramic, while the emphasis on the gouged, vacuously white main street in the middle, with “the unforgettable ‘bear’s paw’ scar that a mortar shell makes on a pavement” (Hitchens vi), eloquently paints with dumb and alien things a mise-en-abyme of the book’s theme: a people sharply divided and ravaged body, property and soul by the beast of war, unthinkable as only its traces of evil exist, yet real in the damage it has done to their immediately surrounding possessions, the chewed-up houses and fruit-trees.

The pictographic detail Sacco puts in the depiction of the people of Goražde—heightening, according to McCloud, their individualism (36)—is nevertheless contrasted with the exaggeratedly cartoony figure by which he persists in representing himself, “as if he wanted us to forgive him a little” (Hitchens vi). To the extent that all representation is political and ideological, as W.J.T. Mitchell says (15), this reversal of the individualization of the I/subject versus the Them/object, as well as the frequent drawing of Sacco from a 3rd person perspective—when he is not omitted altogether to make room for Bosnian testimonies—posits a mute, yet pictorially inescapable critique of the U.S. as a hegemonic “US” in the Balkan conflicts and the Western-Eastern politics that gave cause for the ethnic violence, which in turn authorized fatally inefficient U.N. peacekeeping and Bill Clinton’s fatally indiscriminate shelling of Serbia. In Vanderbeke’s words, “The displacement is emphasized, but the hierarchy often noticeable in documentaries and reports—that is, the journalist is better dressed, controls the situation by asking the questions, directs the gaze and is thus coded as empowered—is turned on its head” (78). Furthermore, Sacco’s “Sacco” blatantly admits his identification with, and dependence on, material goods as much as the SerboBosnians. He confesses his appeal is solely due to his having a free pass to “The Blue Road” out of Goražde, through which he is constantly asked to convey gifts, letters and supplies (becoming, literally, a things-man), and through which flirting girls hope he would “carry them off to a Gap outlet in the sky” (SAG 57), while he is shown painfully hooked on his camera, his creature comforts (such as warmth, clean clothes and food provided by Bosnian hospitality—SAG 44), and to his Goražde-born addiction to smoking Drina cigarettes (SAG 104-05). His devoting several pages and narratives of manifest frustration (SAG 66-67, 218-21) to his temporary inability to secure a pass or ride on the Blue Road puts him, even momentarily, on the same level as the Goraždeans: it is one of those “occasions of contingency—the chance interruption—that,” in Bill Brown’s words, “disclose a physicality of things” at the core of politics and show the human being dependent for life and identity—synecdochized, literally, on an identity card, a thing—on the daily palpable stuff that life is made of. So even though, as Bartley points out, Sacco eventually uses his privilege to leave Goražde (62), his difference is, even temporarily, made precarious through its dependence on stuff.

Hence Sacco’s seemingly untoward narrative about the “Silly girls,” a group of Goražde women obsessed with Western commercial brands like Levi’s jeans, acquires the quality of an inside joke. On the one hand, the fetishizing of Western commodities characterizes spot-on the mentality of peoples from former Iron Curtain regimes, as jeans, safety razors or cosmetics become precious not only as objects symbolizing political capitalist freedom, but also as themselves, rare things of creature comfort. The thing, therefore, marks the Other as such—even at the expense of human lives, which doesn’t appear to bother the silly girls as much, or of human labor, as they exhaust Sacco to the ground, having him run endless shopping errands for them, and then becoming depressed because the Levi’s he bought turn out to be counterfeit. Tilley explains this attitude as follows: “almost all the things surrounding us in consumer societies are bought ready-made and their conditions of production are concealed from the consumer. The things thus appear to have a price and a value in themselves rather than in their value being socially created” (68). The frivolous western goodies are furthermore never actually drawn by Sacco, suggesting that these things are immaterial chimeras that rule Balkan desires; instead, he devotes double pages to the “mini centrales,” the river-powered homemade generators as things that stand for Bosnian ingenuity and resilience in the face of “precarious” existence (SAG 48-49), as well as to the elemental wood that the simple people chop down tirelessly to cover their basic needs, and which unites neighbors instead of dividing them (SAG 45-46). Nevertheless, Sacco is shown embracing the company of the silly girls, getting drunk on their moonshine brandy and snarfing down their pizza and banana cake—the last too becoming even more delicious for being rare-to-find reminders of Western food. The fact that all these goods, in contrast to the jeans, are personally hand-made from scratch allows them to serve as markers of the Balkan’s relationship with the West: blithe domestic copying of the imported fad/ideology/commodity, yet often no less functional for it. Yet his fetishization of and craving for Western things is as powerful as theirs, all the more ironic for his being aware of it. If the Other is silly for worshiping consumable idols, well, so is he; and in preferring the homemade counterfeit over the original, he comes closer to them.

Sacco’s use of things as backdrop also matches his depiction of humans. The photo-realistic and incredibly detailed background appears as another marker of the irreducible thinginess of the Goražde experience, while at the same time the stark black and white lines of its art question the flashy pictoriality of CNN-style embedded journalism, with its impressive shots of Armageddon-style bombing operations. As comics theoretician Thierry Groensteen has noted, following Deleuse, “the image…is not only an utterable, it can also be a *descriptable* and an *interpretable*” as filtered through the human experience of it (107). Likewise, the addition, in Sacco’s comic, of the human figures (and their narratives) in those settings endows those otherwise ugly and hardly-noticeable backgrounds with a forceful background of their own: like Chris Ware’s ingenious endowment of a series of quotidian images with a short backpage corresponding snippet of personal history that literally transforms them in *Jimmy Corrigan, Smartest Kid on Earth*, Sacco’s emphasis on the thinginess of those backgrounds, their inescapable presence and use in history, makes ethnic warfare even more tragic, as neighbor turns on neighbor and fruit orchards become killing fields. The grounding of those witness narratives in the image/thing thus serves two purposes. First, as Hillary Chute notes, studies of trauma “point to a pervasive underlying sensory component, above all one that is imagistic” (“Materializing Memory” 303), with victims having trouble simply narrating what for them are sensory images; Sacco’s medium overcomes this impasse by offering the image as the thing-in-itself, paradoxically grounding its impact at the same time it supposedly removes it from reality via artistic representation. If, as McCloud concludes, the magic of comics to make meaning lies in the gutter, the empty space between panels where “the visible and the invisible” mix (92), so does Sacco extract from the unseen margin a visible story. Secondly, for Vanderbeke, “Sacco tries not only to give a voice to the unheard, but also to provide images of the unseen, based on the narrations of those who have lived through the experience” (77) and, consequently, cedes the narrative strongpoint to a humanized Balkan Other, not himself as a Western observing/judging subject.

Yet the most upsetting moments in the story are reserved for those abject things that transcend the thing/person, gutter/frame dichotomy: the dead and dismembered bodies that burst from the pages of SAG, not only because of their graphic starkness but also because their fragmentation begs for a transcendence of the frame, the comic book’s narrative unit, towards completion of either their fate or their physique. Indeed, one of the most interesting motifs about Sacco’s treatment of those bodies is the blending of flesh and thing, their dismemberment and bleeding with the “bleeding” and edges of the physical comic frames themselves (SAG 21, 23, 114-15, 123, 158). Marianne Hirsch describes the technique in *Maus* as part of the depiction of trauma: “…once in a while, something breaks out of the rows of frames, or out of the frames themselves, upsetting and disturbing the structure of the entire work. The fragments that break out… have the power of the ‘fetish ‘ to signal and to disavow an essential loss” (41). Lacan would call that the traumatic irruption of the Real into the Symbolic; Kristeva calls it the threat of the abject, a defiling “shift” of “the border” (73). Notice how in SAG 181 each body, smeared with abject fluids and turned into a piece of meat, is mutilated both within the frames, and by the frames, while the maintenance of background combined with the continuous narrative banner on top and the use of black for the gutter spaces (which Sacco prefers for the eyewitness narratives of atrocities) creates an effect of inter-gutter bleeding of the comic page—i.e., the picture running off beyond the single frame to the page’s edge (McCloud 103)—as a thing out of control. The sequence of similar frames of horror and pain also creates a staccato time motif, returning us continuously to the moment of utmost pain, with no follow-up sequence signaling any relief, and thus destroying what McCloud calls the fundamental effect of closure in comics (63-66), stripping the art of the comforting sense of a beautiful complete form (as Kant and Burke defined it in their respective treatises on the sublime) and leaving only the raw, broken thing in its place.

Thus, curiously, Sacco’s graphic memoir works both as a ritual of commemoration akin to a burial of the unsung, unnoticed dead, since the frames literally house and give shape to those disjointed and impossibly painful accounts of war, returning a face to and place for the loved ones, but also as an abjectification of those images of war as things that cannot go away. By showing the integration of things into human identity and the thingification of human bodies, Sacco’s work presents us with a palpable thing of sorrow that cannot be digested merely as art or news. In a sense, Sacco thingifies the very concept of the Goražde enclave, as when the war ends with the Dayton peace treaty he reproduces the area map (SAG 212) showing Goražde as a kind of bold protrusion into the Serbian geographical body that refuses to be assimilated, annihilated or traded, with all the intransigence of the thing itself. It thus becomes a paradoxically redeemed abject, buried within the graphic narrative and history yet remembered and kept, happily yet also a bit uncomfortably as Sacco admits, alive inside the Balkan body politic.

The vicissitudes of Balkan identity, the abjection of death and life intertwined, and the confusing anxieties of having and being things also feature prominently in the Greek graphic novella *The Corpse* by acclaimed new authors Zafeiriadis and Palavos, with the art of Thanassis Petrou, who’s had prior and successful experience adapting Greek literary works to comics (Baskozos). As Agiati Benardou notes, “*The Corpse* is a different kind of comic. It is a graphic short story, a story that could be a thriller, but it’s not; that could be a satire, but it’s not; that could be a drama, but yet again, it’s not: *The Corpse* is a study on urban loneliness, mid-life crisis, and also on the human ties that continue to bind us” ([www.lifo.gr/mag/books/461](http://www.lifo.gr/mag/books/461)). It is also a work that, like Sacco’s, transgresses the frames of fact and fiction, as it is based on a true story (Benardou). Here, however, instead of the multinarrative and polyglottic approach of Sacco, including himself, we have the distanced invisible observation of a single person as a paradigm of a long-suffering cultural condition encapsulated in 3 days of his life. Even from the cover one can see the abject confusion of categories, since under the bold caption of “Corpse” we see a man very much alive, with a hard-boiled, challenging look to boot, doing away with the 4th wall convention and staring straight at us, as if the thing we are holding in our hands were alive and reading us. He is Lefteris, an old, divorced employee at a funeral parlor somewhere in Salonica, the Northern Greek city known as “the co-capital of Greece” and a top Balkan port and transport hub. Lefteris is old salt at the business, quiet and very lonely yet streetwise. That’s why he is handed the rather delicate assignment of keeping vigil over the corpse of an old man who was discovered in an advanced state of sepsis until his long-estranged daughter comes back from Spain to attend the funeral. Mind you—and sorry about your lunch, by the way—embalming is not the Greek practice, so Lefteris and the funeral director’s young nephew (score one for traditional nepotism here) have to move the body to a secluded area, on the Seikh-Sou hills in the outskirts of Salonica where the stench won’t be a problem, and take turns guarding it until the funeral, two days later. During the second night, when Lefteris is performing the wake alone because the nephew goes off to attend a football match with Salonica’s home team, PAOK, the corpse awakens and tells Lefteris all about his troubles, his desires, his loneliness, and especially his ire over his daughter’s wishing to direct his funereal affairs, despite her 20 year-long neglect of him when alive. In the next morning, as Lefteris is transferring the body to the cemetery for the funeral, he has an inexplicable change of heart, and dumps the body, casket and all, into Thermaikos Bay, Salonica’s harbor.

To understand the import of the story as well as Lefteris’ decision, one must necessarily understand the cultural and literal background of the story, namely the city of Salonica, whose presence is practically definitive of every panel and action. Critic Titika Dimitroulia interestingly lapses into pictographic language in reminding us that Palavos is noted for his grounding of his stories in both “actual time and space, which he describes with remarkable accuracy and, technically, realistically” and “in the mot juste, not that which is precise, but that which will enthrall the eye, forcing it to rebuilt the image from the start” (10). What is this background juste then? Columbia professor of history and specialist in Modern Greece Mark Mazower, says in his book *Salonica, City of Ghosts*, that the city represents “a different Greece, less in thrall to an ancient past, more intimately linked to neighbouring peoples, languages and cultures” (3). Designated by European and Balkan cultural treaties as the “Cultural Capital of the Balkans,” Salonica features a rich and multiethnic historical past along with an advantageous geographical position that has traditionally been a conduit to the Aegean and the Mediterranean sea for the rest of the Balkan nations, as well as a bridge for Asia Minor to reach Europe. The resulting distinct flavor of Salonica—evident in its monuments, its cuisine, its attachment to Byzantine Orthodoxy and its Macedonian origins, even in its northern brogue and loose attitudes—makes itself at home in the comic in a variety of ways. Throughout the story, Petrou (a Salonican native with a Sociolinguistics graduate degree), employs Sacco-like pictorial renditions of actual Salonica surroundings, down to the traffic signs and banners advertising Greek folk singers. However, significantly, he manages to paint none of the trademark tourist markers of the city like the White Tower, the Roman Arcs, the Hagia Sophia or the International Fair grounds. Releasing Salonica from its monuments, its Heideggerian objects, allows it to function as the everyday locus of universal human drama, while at the same time allowing the small items, the things of quotidian Greek life, to the foreground. The frappé coffee of the nephew, a trademark Greek beverage, the Amstel beer can, the traditional Salonican fylllo pastry of bougatsa, the references to the PAOK soccer team (a second religion to half of Salonica), all allow the unmistakable particular flavor of the city to emerge without grandiloquence, like the narratives of everyday folks instead of the panygerics of politicians. It is interesting that locus, food and beverage are the items of choice, as they, like the Lacanian Real, are the thing that must be experienced spot on, digested in itself to be understood, and not transferred symbolically.

However, as all food runs the risk of abjection, this Salonican culture gives off warning signs of deep decay. In the words of Maria Tzaboura, “The book follows the rhythms of the plaid pensioner’s slipper dragging across the tiles. Youth is absent, or only appears in photographs…. Even the young employee of the funeral parlor soon disappears from the action, to attend a football game! Thus only Lefteris and the corpse of the old gentleman in the coffin remain, one in the present tense, the other in…the absent!” The young are spiritually cut off or physically removed from the historical process of passing on the culture and tradition, as Lefteris’s daughter now lives in Germany with her estranged mother and even speaks to him in German, and the old man’s daughter, only seen in a vague photograph taken at some ski resort, hasn’t seen him in 20 years. The young nephew is brash, arrogant, and, as shown by his pimples, spiky hair, and cartoony nose, “prickly”; he shows no respect for the dead and the wake rituals, boozing and sleeping instead in the hearse, before taking off blithely for the soccer field: he thus engages in performances of the abject, confusing the categories of sleep and eternal sleep, youth and rot, living subject and inanimate object, even on a linguistic register by using the Salonican colloquialism “to rot off” instead of “sleeping.” How is this “Salonican”? As Mazower notes, Salonica’s history of “more than two thousand years of continuous urban life .…was decisively marked by sharp discontinuities and breaks” (7) involving forced ethnic population exchanges, wars, great fires, and, to top it all, the rounding up and deportation of the Jews during the German occupation of Greece in WWII, which Mazower unhesitantly names “genocide” (394-411). He devotes in fact all chapter III of his book, titled “Making the City Greek,” to how this city, that was always particularly multiculturally live and open but grew into a metropolis too fast, too soon, engaged in the past decades in a systematic erasure of its multicultural past in favor of atavistic neo-nationalist narratives bordering on (or often, clearly showing) fascism, incited by illiterate or populist politicians in the wake of the Soviet fall and the re-arrangement of political contingencies in the Balkans—the same ones that wrote the tragedy in the former Yugoslavian republics like Serbia, Bosnia-Herjegovina and Croatia. Hence, while the young Salonicans in *The Corpse* might be seen as avoiding what Chute calls “the continuousness of history as ‘what hurts’ (as Jameson puts it), as our non-divorce from the traumatic events of the past, the impossibility of rejecting horror as ever completely "behind us" (102)” (qtd. in Chute, “The Shadow…” 213), in other words rejecting a threateningly uncertain cultural identity for a less abject homogeneity, in fact they are left with no identity at all other than that prescribed by their mass-dictated things, nondescript clothes, or hairstyles. When identity is gone, thingification ensues.

But even in the adult world of the graphic novella, things are also hopelessly decayed, blurring the boundaries between the quick and the dead, thing and subject. All is reduced to monetary exchanges, like Lefteris’ relationship with his money-mooching wife, or is measured in money, as shown by the dialogues between the funeral director and/or his employees over payment worries, and using the cheapest coffin, or the cheapest way of preservation (TC 12-13). Meanwhile, the superannuated superintendent (the man in each Greek apartment building designated as responsible for the collection and payment of common utility fees), although decrepit himself, nevertheless is discovered embezzling the utility funds and then stupidly trying to win the lottery so as to replace the stolen money. The tapping of his walker, his malfunctioning screeching earpiece, and his never-winning lotto tickets serve as synecdoches of an aged culture that annoys by being both quick yet not too quick about it, and “steals” resources from the living to continue its half-life. The superintendent is both the “abject” thingified body that should have departed the living body politic a long time ago, and a metaphor for the politicians that in recent decades devoured Salonica’s public resources in a series of outrageous scandals and embezzlements (two former Conservative mayors are in jail as we speak, one serving a life sentence!).

Even the food, in tandem with the booze of the young, does not nurture but recall the Kristevan dictum that “Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (2), and one related to cadavers at that (Kristeva 3). Lefteris and the rest subsist basically on ready-made bougatsa, coffee and cigarettes, a half-sustenance at best where the culture-specific foodstuff has, ironically, been stripped of its deeper cultural significations (proud reminder of Salonica’s multiethnic culinary influences, uniter of families, sign of plenty) and is simply something to get by. The one home-cooked meal shown in the novella, the lentils—a traditional commonfolk staple for Greeks—that Lefteris leaves half-cooked to attend to the corpse emergency have gone bad when he returns for his rest the next day and finds them, contributing to the theme of putrefaction that permeates the images like an aroma. And yet, everyone refuses to acknowledge the stench, and pretend it’s not them, like Lefteris and the nephew do when they navigate the hearse with the stinking corpse through Salonica’s notorious traffic jams.

What all the things in the novella then let us understand is that these Salonicans are already dead and thingified but don’t know it, like the corpses that cannot be put to rest in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. It explains the old superintendent’s attitude, or why Lefteris is so grave, or why the cityscape with its back-lot facades looks like a vault, in contrast to the eternally vibrant and beautiful natural surroundings of Seikh-Sou, where Lefteris will have his climactic encounter with the thing called Death. The briefly animated corpse, “a body without soul, a non-body, disquieting matter” (Kristeva 109) is first detected as a synecdoche of a thing, the suspiciously open casket, and then as a metonymy of his relieving himself in the bushes, recalling both Kristeva’s link of abjection to unclean bodily fluids such as urine (53), but also a male marking of his territory, suggesting that Salonica is somehow the city of the dead. Yet, for all the horror-film introduction, the old gentleman is quite a revelation: suave, lively, humorous, and knows how to get his own way, now that he’s dead, recalling what Zizek calls the Freudian/Lacanina “Father of Enjoyment,” the primeval cultural father that “has been dead from the beginning” (23). Far from being a soulless thing, the old gentleman is still troubled by human cogitation and desires, filtered through various things—the first thing he asks is for a cigarette, any brand, recalling the aforementioned staple diet of the live Salonicans, and making this abject more sympathetic as prone to homeomorphic identification. He complains about being stuck dead for a month before a telemarketing channel because he didn’t grab the remote fast enough at the moment of his death (when, ironically, it was he who had his channel changed by remote). He protests his thingification at the hand of the funeral director and his daughter, who hasn’t seen him for 20 years—significantly, the amount of time Lefteris says he’s been working for the parlor—yet wants to take control of the funeral, as if the dead man’s wishes were of no matter (pun on matter as much as you like here). Nevertheless, the corpse’s words, unlike those of the live characters, are pictured inside the frames as disembodied, without “bubbles,” exactly like the sounds of machinery throughout the story—the dead man’s wishes cannot matter anymore, for he is indecipherable matter to all but Lefteris. And to Palavos, who has a prior history on thematizing weird, “complementary”-to-life versions of the afterlife in his fiction, including one where humans live their afterlife as office supplies, staplers, sharpeners, etc (Dimitroulia 10). The corpse’s ire regarding the disregard of his “complementarity” recalls Zizek’s question: “why do the dead return? …because they were not properly, buried, i.e., because something went wrong with their obsequies. The return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolization; the dead return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt” (22), or maybe, because the debt was never just symbolic to begin with. It is measured in lost years, actual distance, palpable goods. And actual rites of memory: although the old gentleman, as a subject no more, is not given a name in the story, his antiquated clothes and comportment recall a particular group who were made physically and culturally extinct from the city, though they once were close to a 3rd of its population: the Salonican Jews, for whom Mazower says that “it would be scarcely an exaggeration to say that they had dominated the life of the city for many centuries” (8). The few families that survived the deportation and the Shoah—and their abject thingification into soap bars and lampshades—have since come to be identified with the city’s more patrician and intellectual strata. Nevetheless, the collective memory of the Jewish population of Salonica has all but been wiped clean: Mazower observes that “…it seemed to me that these two histories—the Greek and the Jewish—did not so much complement one another as pass each other by. I had noticed how seldom standard Greek accounts of the city referred to the Jews” (10). Notably, even the Hebrew cemetery at the center of the city was paved over and the modern Aristotle University of Salonica was built on top of it!

What haunts Lefteris then is not just the very thing that cannot be otherwise comprehended, death as our common fate, but the premature death of his own Salonican cultural identity via ethnic purgation. His own life has been chopped away piecemeal—job enjoyment, wife, kids, home—the same way that Salonica’s life and significant parts of its history, Ottoman, Balkan, Jewish, have been chopped away to make way for globalized capitalist modernity, though that is not life either. The corpse shows, by its literal presence, what is wrong with his own existence: the abject, c’est moi. Appropriately Petrou devotes many a panel on the route to and fro the Seikh-Sou hill, reproducing the traffic signs painstakingly, and thus creating a kind of irony of signs as things that runs contrapuntal to the characters. Lefteris is seeing the signs for what they designate, a signified geography, while he (and we) should be seeing them for what they say literally—e.g., “(Warmth)”—the translation for lake Thermi, “Sleeping Place”—Greek for Cemetery, and “The Resurrection of the Lord”—which in Greek also reads as “The Gentleman’s Resurrection,” the name of the funeral parlor café habitually set by cemeteries so that the relatives can offer memorial coffee and treats at funerals. All the signs point slyly to the confusion of the life and death categories that is occurring, has occurred already as a monumental and immanent event.

Therefore, it is now appropriate for an enlightened Lefteris to be true to his name, “Liberator,” and, in a parody of Christian resurrection, after three days in the casket free the corpse (and himself) from its thingification, but turning it into a thing proper—the mystery of matter one must respect, for its trace of history cannot be recalled, its extra properties unreachable to us. His release of casket and corpse into the Thermaikos Bay, the womb of the sea, marks a tongue-in-cheek comment about Salonica’s bay promenade being intolerably stinky (as generations of corrupt politicans allowed the pollution of the bay to reach record highs), but also the local origin legend of Salonica as taking its name from Thessaloniki, Alexander the Great’s half-sister who turned into an immortal mermaid. It might also bring to mind another sister’s ending, the poet William Wordsworth’s sister, Lucy, who is also given a proper burial in one of his poems, rocked comfortingly like a baby, not among souls waiting resurrection but among inanimate things:

No motion has she now, no force;

She neither hears nor sees;

Roll’d round in earth's diurnal course,

With rocks, and stones, and trees.

To see the abject as a thing proper is to redeem it; to see ethnic or other identity as composed of things helps us understand, and hopefully ward off, the danger of thingification, ever-present in the globalizing shifts of the last 50 years, especially in hot-spots like the Balkans. In allowing us to picture the thing in its physical intransigence but also in its symbolic-implicated dimensions, graphic texts like SAG and The Corpse might make this empathy with the Other a little more possible.

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1. The information is from Keane, Webb, “Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things,” in *Language and Communication* 23 (2003): 409-25. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)