

CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

ISSN: 3085-5411
Journal Homepage: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

Graphic Occupation: Joe Sacco and the Artwork of Bearing Witness

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol1iss1.5013

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Received: 20-03-2025 Accepted: 02-06-2025 Published: 10-07-2025

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Joe Sacco's graphic works *Palestine* (2001), *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), and *War on Gaza* (2024) as a counter-narrative to dominant media and historical discourse on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Through a peace studies framework, particularly the concepts of positive peace and moral imagination, the study situates Sacco's work as an intervention that exposes structural, cultural, and direct forms of violence. His blending of comics and investigative journalism creates layered narratives that challenge the illusion of journalistic neutrality and reclaim forgotten and overlooked past traumas. Sacco's formal techniques, like multilinear storytelling, self-reflexivity, and graphic testimony, reconstruct marginalized histories while fostering empathetic engagement. By integrating personal testimony with historical reconstruction, he not only documents episodes of mass violence and displacement but also interrogates the ideologies that sustain them. Sacco's visual medium resists the desensitization of the conflict by prompting ethical witnessing and complicating the binaries of victim and perpetrator. The article argues that Sacco's comics function as peacebuilding narratives that dismantle hegemonic discourses and promote critical literacy in an era of media saturation. His works reframe the question of objectivity, insisting on accountability and relational truth. Ultimately, Sacco's oeuvre provides a powerful model for ethically mediated storytelling, one that fosters historical awareness, transnational solidarity, and a more inclusive vision of justice.

KEYWORDS

Joe Sacco

Comics Journalism

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Testimony

Peace Studies

Introduction

Awareness of the origins and evolution of the Palestinian plight under Israeli occupation has frequently been obscured by dominant discourses that, across media, historiography, academia, and the arts, have framed the situation as an equal conflict. This framing perpetuates a misleading notion of "balance," suggesting that both sides inflict comparable levels of violence. The nearly eight decades of illegal occupation, siege, mass killing and detention, house demolitions, land confiscation, and grotesque conditions of displacement and dispossession are routinely erased behind the "war on terror" rhetoric disseminated by corporate Western media, which often promotes Israeli self-righteousness while demonizing Palestinians.

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In response to this selective historical narrative and detached reportage, numerous literary works have sought to reassert the human dimensions of the conflict by raising urgent questions concerning truth, memory, trauma, human rights, and the relationship between narrative and lived experience.[1] Among these, Joe Sacco's groundbreaking contributions to comics journalism stand out for their unique capacity to reconstruct both past and present realities in Palestine through a deeply personal and immersive artistic style.

Sacco's three major graphic works, *Palestine* (2001), *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), and *War on Gaza* (2024), combine comic art with investigative journalism and deploy the techniques of eyewitness reportage alongside graphic storytelling to document the occupation in the Palestinian Territories. *Palestine*, first published in two volumes in 1996 and later released as a single edition in 2001 with an introduction by Edward Said, draws on interviews with hundreds of Israelis and Palestinians. The main aim was to capture the lived experiences and daily struggles of Palestinians under Israeli occupation during the first intifada (1987–1993). The pages depict protests, shootings, arrests, torture, and prison conditions, all reconstructed through comic conventions grounded in testimony. *Footnotes in Gaza* excavates two largely forgotten massacres from November 1956, when Israeli forces invaded the at the time Egyptian-ruled Gaza Strip as part of the British-French intervention in the Suez Canal Crisis. Hundreds of Palestinian men were executed in the cities of Khan Younis and Rafah after being pulled from their homes, lined up, and shot. The title reflects their erasure from official history; the events are mentioned only in passing in a U.N. report. Through firsthand interviews, archival research, and visual reconstruction, Sacco retrieves these tragedies, embedding them in a wider narrative of daily resistance, struggle, and political complexity. In contrast to these two works, *War on Gaza*, which Sacco created in the aftermath of the October 7, 2023 events, does not involve on-the-ground reporting, due to the barring of foreign journalists from the region. Instead, this work is Sacco's artistic commentary on what he portrays as an unfolding genocide, the complicity of Western powers—particularly the United States—and the devastating impact of sustained bombardment on Gaza. First serialized on *The Comics Journal*'s website and later published by Fantagraphics, the series consists of single-panel vignettes that reframe historical context and communicate Sacco's shock and grief as Gaza is reduced to rubble through relentless Israeli airstrikes using Western-supplied weaponry, while humanitarian aid remains obstructed.

By integrating text and image, Sacco creates layered narratives that connect formative events such as the 1948 Nakba, the 1967 war, and the 2018–2019 Great March of Return with current struggles in Gaza and the West Bank. His continuous juxtaposition of past and present serves to illuminate the complexity of Palestinian collective memory and to foster a sense of ethical responsibility grounded in a shared human condition. In his introduction to *Palestine*, Edward Said notes that, "Except one or two novelists and poets, no one has ever rendered this terrible state of affairs better than Joe Sacco" (iii). In the decades since *Palestine* won the American Book Award, Sacco has continued to expand the possibilities of historical and political graphic narrative, engaging critically with questions of trauma, memory, and representation. His works function as an intervention into Western media discourse, directly challenging superficial or misleading coverage. Although Sacco cares deeply about how the communities he documents receive his work, he writes explicitly for American and "Western European" audiences, whom he believes lack the contextual knowledge necessary to fully understand the subjects he depicts (Sacco, "Presentation").

This paper explores how Sacco's works on Palestine offer an alternative lens for interpreting the conflict by harnessing the distinctive affordances of the comics medium to convey historical memory, lived experience, and political struggle. Taken together, I argue that *Palestine*, *Footnotes in Gaza*, and *War on Gaza* constitute a powerful field for peacebuilding through

storytelling, offering a humanizing and empathetic mode of engagement that promotes a deeper understanding of the conditions necessary for positive peace.

Concepts like positive peace, as developed within peace studies, have expanded the parameters of peace theory beyond the political realist notion of peace as merely the absence of war. Johan Galtung, widely recognized as the founder of peace studies, distinguishes between negative peace, the cessation of direct violence, and positive peace, which addresses the structural and cultural underpinnings of conflict. The concept of negative peace is insufficient for understanding situations in which a stable social order is maintained through systemic oppression. In such cases, peace becomes equated with the mere suppression of open violence, while deeper forms of harm persist unaddressed (Galtung).

Violence, according to Galtung, encompasses any condition that impedes human potential or causes suffering. This includes poverty, malnutrition, repression, denial of educational opportunities, suppression of free expression, and ecological degradation. These phenomena are expressions of structural violence, as they are embedded in the social, economic, and political institutions of a society. At a deeper level, cultural violence legitimizes both direct and structural violence by producing ideological systems that generate fear, degradation, hatred, and suspicion. Cultural frameworks enable societies to normalize or justify repression, rendering structural inequality and discrimination as natural or inevitable. In contrast, positive peace is oriented toward the removal not only of direct violence, but also of the structural and cultural forces that perpetuate injustice. Its goals encompass a broad range of human concerns, including quality of life, personal development, freedom of expression, social equity, economic justice, and solidarity (Galtung).

Several peace scholars in this regard do criticize the exclusive reliability ascribed to the theoretical and the professional within the realm of peace and conflict research because it overshadows in the process alternative initiatives and practices that are conducive to the values of peace. In *Passion for Peace: Exercising Power Creatively* (2003), Stuart Rees argues that, in the presence of destructive uses of power as in wars and massive killings and other violent practices like oppression and bullying, the creative exercise of power lies in peacebuilding initiatives aimed at raising awareness about systemic injustice and imagining a world interconnected by shared ethical obligations and universal human rights. For Rees, the arts and creative writing are a source of inspiration that is strongly needed by peace researchers and conflict negotiators because they resist the rigidity of theoretical principals and enable an empathic and sensitive take on issues that might originally seem inevitable or intractable.

The criticism of the over-professionalization and departmentalization of fields of knowledge has equally been voiced by John Paul Lederach in his book *Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (2005). Reflecting on his twenty-five years of experience in mediation and peacebuilding, Lederach states: “The art has brought me closer to the discipline of touching intuition as a resource rather than considering it a distracting disturbance” (69). For Lederach, the arts are very much needed in conflict transformation because creativity helps restore the personal dimension that is most often relegated to the sphere of the subjective and improbable. Defined as “the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist” (29), moral imagination is what can enable optimism inherent in creative personal processes that emanate from and address the hard realities of the human dilemmas (x).

Accordingly, the imaginative, creative and constructivist processes that emanate from personalized approaches to destructive patterns ought to be explored insofar as they are capable of breaking cycles of violence through a discourse that enables optimism in the possibility of

change. The search for peace with justice, according to these scholars, requires to be explored in any art source that inspires the creative exercise of power.

These frameworks provide a broad conceptual structure that accommodate diverse definitions of peace and offer a robust theoretical platform for analyzing Sacco's work. This paper applies a peace studies lens to Sacco's graphic works, exploring how they raise awareness of the factors that inhibit and promote peace and justice. Sacco's narratives exemplify a persistent inquiry into the causes and consequences of physical, psychological, structural, and cultural violence. This investigative process pushes readers to look beyond ideological clichés thinly veiled as objective journalism and encourages them to become more ethically attuned to the suffering of others. Within the medium of graphic narrative, Sacco's works serve as peacebuilding interventions that function as artistic tools for re-humanization, empathy, and reflection. The three works interrogate dominant conceptions of human nature and social order, offering alternative imaginaries that may help dismantle the roots of violence and foster a deeper, more inclusive understanding of the conditions required for peace.

Of particular relevance is the fact that, amidst the ongoing genocide in Gaza,[2] *Palestine* has resurged as an essential resource for readers seeking context. Following the Hamas-led October 7th incursion and the subsequent Israeli military attack on Gaza, demand for *Palestine* soared, causing initial print runs to sell out and prompting Fantagraphics to rush a new edition into publication. Critics and audiences alike suggest that this revival gives new meanings to the medium and Sacco's artwork that continue to inform contemporary discourse. In interviews, Sacco expresses sadness that his work remains, nearly thirty years later, painfully resonant today, a testament to both the durability of structural violence and the power of graphic narrative as a witness to ongoing suffering (Barnett). The renewed circulation of Sacco's works underscores their significance as critical, analytical tools that help new generations confront the moral and political complexities of genocide and reaffirm the vital role of graphic journalism in conflict awareness.

Countering the Cultural Violence of Journalism

Sacco is widely credited with establishing comics journalism as a legitimate genre of nonfiction narrative. His dual expertise as a cartoonist and a journalist enables him to navigate the formal and ethical demands of both disciplines, balancing narrative immersion with investigative rigor. When he began his first journey to the Occupied Territories in 1992 for his project *Palestine*, Sacco was disillusioned by Western media's distorted and biased portrayal of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Reflecting on his motivations, he recounts:

> I grew up thinking all Palestinians were terrorists. That was not from studying the issue closely but from absorbing what I read in newspapers. Newspapers were reporting many facts. You can report objective facts—the hijacking of an airplane, attacks on a bus, killing hostages—but often, what objective facts do not provide is a context of other crimes… You can report objective facts selectively and without context and give someone an impression, as I was given by so-called objective journalism, that Palestinians are pure and straightforward terrorists. It took self-education. I would never have come up with another viewpoint after reading the American press. (Burrows)

The fallacy of journalistic "objectivity" has been widely critiqued in media studies which expose the hegemonic influence of corporate conglomerates on global news production and discourse (Bagdikian 1983; Chomsky and Herman 1988; Schudson, Downie, and Anderson

2016; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). Media, in this framework, often becomes a vehicle for cultural violence when it justifies military aggression by delegitimizing Palestinian resistance and erasing the broader context of the occupation. Sacco's comics journalism explicitly resists these narrative erasures, urging readers to question the authority of photographic images and the ostensibly neutral language of mainstream reportage.

As Rocco Versaci notes, comics journalism—emerging in part from the ethos of New Journalism—foregrounds "anti-'official' and anticorporate" perspectives that raise a central, if frequently unasked, question: "Who creates truth, and why?" (131). While Sacco may not have been the first to use comics for nonfiction storytelling, his distinctive blend of first-person reportage from conflict zones has firmly established the form as a viable and compelling medium of journalism. Hilary Chute emphasizes this convergence, describing Sacco's work as combining "the energy and immediacy of inexpensive, accessible, serial comic books with the gravity and rigor demanded by a journalistic investigation into world-historical conflict and its effects on the ground" (*Why Comics* 448).

Mary Layoun similarly observes that Sacco's formal innovation offers a powerful means of navigating the entangled layers of political, historical, and personal meaning (315). This function becomes even more vital in a global media landscape increasingly shaped by narrative control and institutional bias. Said reinforces this view by positioning Sacco's work as a radical intervention in the field of visual culture:

> As we also live in a media-saturated world in which a huge preponderance of the world's news images are controlled and diffused by a handful of men sitting in places like London and New York, a stream of comic book images and words, assertively etched, at times grotesquely emphatic and distended to match the extreme situations they depict, provide a remarkable antidote. (iii)

Said's insight highlights how Sacco's visual storytelling contests the pretense of journalistic neutrality and disrupts the ideological circulation of dominant images. Sacco's narrative and visual strategies, such as shifting perspectives, claustrophobic panels, and non-linear layouts, invite active reader engagement. His decision to reject a stance of objectivity allows his work to foreground mediation, complicity, and interpretive uncertainty, key components of what Wendy Kozol and Kyo Maclear define as ethical witnessing (Kozol 168). For Kozol, Sacco's choice not to present violence as either pure spectacle or moral instruction is a means to resist the passivity of spectatorship. In *Palestine*, he pushes readers to reflect on the politics of looking, the limits of representation, and the ethical demands of witnessing from a position of privilege (Kozol). Through this process, Sacco constructs an alternative visual and narrative vocabulary grounded in a commitment to representing those whose stories are typically omitted from the historical and media record.

Sacco's acknowledged—even championed—subjectivity is a defining feature, articulated through his self-insertion as a character with invisible eyes behind blank glasses within the narrative. The blank spectacles suggest that Sacco is a mediator whose main task is to craft the scenes and report the events, but the glasses remain a supplement for the readers to "see" for themselves. Tristam Walker sees them as a "white screen" upon which "trauma can be projected and reconstituted," and that provides the reader with a tool for witnessing (Walker 69). Through this approach, Sacco engages readers in the investigative process itself, prompting them to confront the intersections of historical memory, present-day injustice, and the fallibility of recollection. His self-deprecation and the visible discomfort of his character subvert the power dynamics and exploitative impulses behind journalistic coverage of human rights crises. As

Richard Stafford observes, "If Sacco's image attains credibility, it is precisely because he is open about his shortcomings as a person, as a witness, and as a reporter" (Stafford). Sacco's method does not seek to provide a comprehensive history; instead, it presents fragmented personal accounts that collectively convey a textured narrative of injustice and resistance.

The opening pages of *Footnotes in Gaza* are highly revealing of Sacco's tone with regard to mainstream journalism. When he is brought by his friend Christine of Reuters to meet other foreign reporters in Jerusalem, he is portrayed as disoriented and alienated within a professional environment marked by cynicism and routine. Christine's colleagues are depicted sitting in a restaurant, casually discussing daily events amid drinks and cigarettes. Sacco describes them as "brushing off the day's dust, swirling the night's first drinks, and talking the rarified talk of the old hand and hack" (4). His criticism takes the form of an image where the restaurant's menu card is merged with images of bus bombings in Israel, assassinations and military incursions in Palestine, culminating in his sardonic observation that "they could file last month's story today—or last year's, for that matter—and who would know the difference?" (*Footnotes* 5).

Sacco takes issue with the desensitization produced by routinized media consumption in a visually saturated culture. Detached, formulaic reporting flattens the specificity of violent events, rendering them indistinguishable and stripped of context. In contrast, the images below the menu capture grief-stricken faces of Palestinian and Israeli individuals affected by violence, creating a powerful emotional counterpoint to the banality of journalistic discourse. Sacco's comic panels subvert this erasure by insisting on the affective particularity of victims. The following image of dead bodies of Palestinians fifty years ago (in reference to the 1956 massacres) next to Palestinian children killed "a week ago" and "a month ago," and an Israeli woman in an ambulance "a year ago" locates the subject matter of his book within the current events (*Footnotes* 5). The time period is marked by shadier tones, but history carries forgotten traumas that seem disturbingly similar to the current ones. In a way, this panel—and by extension, the whole book—constitutes Sacco's "answer" to the claim of irrelevance made by *Harper's Magazine* when it edited out paragraphs from an article he co-authored with journalist Chris Hedges. The omitted sections originally provided historical background on the Khan Younis massacre in a 2001 piece that chronicled the lives of Palestinians in a refugee camp (*Footnotes* ix). While history is often relegated to footnotes, Sacco shows how its echoes persist in the present. Ultimately, he does not seem to put the blame on individual journalists. Rather, he critiques the systemic forces that constrain them and positions himself as ethically responsible for reintroducing marginalized stories into public discourse.

The unique interplay of text and image in Sacco's graphic journalism enables a multilayered mode of communication that engages both cognitive and emotional registers. Such multimodality encourages critical reflection on journalistic authenticity and the mediating structures that shape public understanding. Sacco's work carries significant peacebuilding potential; it counters the systemic erasure of Palestinian subjectivity and highlights the structural and symbolic violence embedded in media narratives. Whereas Western audiences often encounter Palestinians only in moments of episodic bursts of intense violence, Sacco reveals the persistent, normalized forms of oppression that shape their everyday lives: direct violence, economic hardship, family disruption, and psychological trauma. His narratives cultivate a culture of truth-seeking, resistance, justice, empathy, and transnational solidarity. In doing so, they invite readers to reimagine global realities beyond the narrow frames imposed by corporate media and hegemonic political discourse.

Comics as Alternative History

Sacco's works occupy a unique space at the intersection of journalism and history, interrogating the assumptions and limitations of both disciplines. At the core of his artistic projects lies the challenge of navigating the tension between remembering and forgetting, between the power of historical knowledge and the apparent futility of confronting the past. His comics engage in a deliberate reconstruction of historical events, seeking to expose their complex contexts and lingering effects. For Chute, Sacco's works "ask readers to confront key epistemological questions, using the word-and image form of comics to provoke consideration of how history becomes legible as history" (*Disaster* 198). By excavating buried memories, Sacco illustrates that the cycle of violence can only be interrupted through a nuanced understanding of the past. The formal affordances of the comics medium allow him to connect present-day Palestinian realities to the buried traumas of the past. For Said, what makes Sacco "so unusual a portrayer of life in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is that his true concern is finally history's victims" (v). His works enact a process of "never forgetting," not merely by preserving memory but by revealing how memory itself is constructed.

The comics form enhances the emotional and analytical impact of these memories by allowing for the juxtaposition of past and present within single frames or across sequential panels. For Chute, along with Sacco's self-consciously interpretive comics, there is a confidence in the medium's "ability to traffic in expressing history," asserting that, "taking for granted that "pure" historical representation is never possible, comics calls into question the status of any "objective" or "realistic" account, including historiographies— especially those that bank on the seeming transparency of words" (*Disaster* 198-199). In *Palestine* and *Footnotes in Gaza*, Sacco frequently overlays contemporary interviews with reconstructed scenes from the past, visually dramatizing the way historical violence persists into the present. In *War on Gaza*, the formal clarity of Sacco's stark black-and-white illustrations intensifies the affective charge of the images, underscoring the rawness of lived pain and historical recurrence. Together, these works function as counter-histories, amplifying voices routinely excluded from dominant discourses in Western media and historiography. As Sacco puts it, "One advantage of comic journalism is that I can depict the past... History can make you realize that the present is just one layer of a story. What seems to be the immediate and vital story now will one day be another layer in this geology of bummers" (Gilson).

Footnotes in Gaza, in particular, constitutes not only a chronicle of past atrocities but also a meditation on the persistence of trauma and the epistemological challenges of accessing historical truth. The volume's richly documented and contextually layered reconstruction attempts to salvage two massacres, largely forgotten beyond the immediate memory of survivors, and reinscribe them through the graphic medium. Sacco engages in meticulous investigative journalism: identifying and interviewing witnesses, verifying accounts, and correcting inconsistencies caused by memory decay. He juxtaposes quotations with carefully researched illustrations, often based on archival photographs, to preserve visual and factual integrity.

Sacco situates the 1956 massacres within the continuum of dispossession, linking them to ongoing house demolitions and the siege on Gaza, thereby stressing the continuity between past violence and contemporary suffering. During his stay in the region, Sacco witnessed a continuous thread of bitterness as the region goes from one disaster to another. He writes in his foreword: "'events are continuous [as someone in Gaza told me].' Palestinians never seem to have the luxury of digesting one tragedy before the next one is upon them." Moreover, delving into the tragedies of the past is mocked by Gazans for perceived futility as they ask Sacco why

he is digging into the past when much more terrible atrocities are taking place; Israelis bulldoze entire neighborhoods, carry out targeted assassinations and disappear men in nightly raids of homes (*Footnotes* xi). A key rationale of the work is striking this uneasy balance between history and forgetting, between the power of knowing and the futility of the past. At its best, weaving the memories and evidence of the past into the present is an attempt to reveal the relevance and meaningfulness of events in the midst of the cycle of violence because, as he argues, they "often contain the seeds of the grief and anger that shape present-day events" (xi). This point is reinforced by one of Sacco's interviewees, Hamas senior official Abed El-Aziz El-Rantisi (later assassinated by Israel), who recounts witnessing at the age of nine his uncle being killed. The trauma remained with him for years: "This sort of action can never be forgotten," he tells Sacco. "They planted hatred in our hearts" (xi).

In the chapter entitled "Footnotes", Sacco foregrounds the historically peripheral nature of his work through a tripartite visual structure that moves from geopolitical narrative to local conflict, and finally to the human cost of war: "This is the story of footnotes to a sideshow of a forgotten war." The top splash panel depicts a war-ravaged cityscape during the 1956 Suez Crisis, with soldiers advancing through rubble and warplanes flying overhead, contextualizing the scene within the alliance of Britain, France, and Israel against Egypt. However, Sacco immediately reframes this conflict as merely the backdrop to "a sideshow" that invokes the ongoing raids between Palestinian fedayeen and Israeli forces that remained largely absent from dominant historical accounts. The "footnote panel"—strategically positioned at the bottom of the page—foregrounds the human impact of this "sideshow": A group of Palestinian men with raised hands walk toward the viewer, seemingly under arrest or being held at gunpoint, their expressions marked by terror and despair, some already shot, others awaiting execution (8). Sacco's expressionistic figures and use of direct gaze demand the viewer not look away.

The visual configuration powerfully engages the reader on an emotional level. The image of the refugees' arms up in surrender and frozen faces, the elderly man in the front with terrified eyes, and the one behind him with his head up, cringing and eyes tightly closed, unable to look at the next bullet that could end his life as it has just done with the man under his feet evokes a visceral response. As Martha Nussbaum observes, such a narrative "focuses the mind too insistently on particulars, seeing them as important not just as parts of the causal nexus of the universe, but in their own right" (Nussbaum 510). Sacco's visual storytelling thus becomes a medium for fostering empathetic engagement by humanizing victims otherwise silenced by history. In doing so, he subverts the marginalization of these events which have been relegated "to the bottom of history's pages, where they barely hang on" (*Footnotes* 8). The painstakingly detailed recreation of the survivors' accounts represent what Chute describes as "visual and verbal counterarchives to official histories" (*Disaster* 205).

In *Footnotes in Gaza* the past is not clearly differentiated and meshes more seamlessly with the present and, unlike film's forward-marching momentum, the transitions between 2002–2003 and 1956 are seamless. One of the most striking examples comes at the climax of the Khan Younis killings when eyewitness Faris Barbakh who was then fourteen ventured to go out in the curfew to find out a line of dozens of corpses of the men that were pulled from their homes, piled along the wall of a castle. Sacco offers side-by-side illustration. The left page is a panoramic view of bodies "from the beginning of the wall to the end," piled against "the ruins of the 14th century castle, which now forms one side of the town square." The facing page features the same castle half a century later. Its walls are festooned with handbills and graffiti and cars in a crowded row where the bodies once had been. The effect is haunting (*Footnotes* 98-99). These two panels are meant to be mirrors of one another. They bear a compositional symmetry; yet, the details differ markedly. The comics medium allows the reader to stay on the pages, make the visual transition repeatedly in both directions, read Faris's words and Sacco's reflections, and contemplate the shift. One can read these two panels as a simple segue from

past to present, but the pointed parallel and contrast in the details suggest that they cannot be easily reconciled.

A defining characteristic of Sacco's testimonial art is the individualized depiction of people in mass scenes. An excellent example from *Footnotes in Gaza* is the two-page spread of the chapter entitled "The Screening." When Rafah fell under occupation, Israeli forces ordered all men aged fifteen to sixty to gather in the government schoolyard where they were brutally screened for fedayeen and for Palestinian soldiers in the Egyptian army. Herded through gunfire, beaten with clubs and metal rods, the men who survived the passage were forced to kneel in the schoolyard—wounded, bleeding, and humiliated—while soldiers fired automatic weapons overhead, denying them food, water, or access to toilets. In this rendering of the eight-or-ten-hour-long sifting of the detained men in the schoolyard, the effort that drawing such an evocative scene involves is quite remarkable. The engulfing mood is one of dread, pain and desolation. Still, Sacco makes the laborious effort to draw each Palestinian man with a distinctive countenance. There is an apparent visual simplicity coupled with emotional and political complexity. The attention attributed to the individualized portrayal provides intimate detail about the characters, which enables identification with distant others. In addition, this borderless splash emphasizes both the magnitude of the gathering and the extent of the duration, which speaks to the absence of this chapter from the history of the conflict (*Footnotes* 298-299).

In *Palestine*, many of the stories focus on Palestinians recalling past traumas: mothers mourning children, former prisoners recounting torture, or families remembering the destruction of homes. Sacco renders refugee camps, military checkpoints, and demolished neighborhoods with meticulous detail, lending visual credibility and narrative weight to their experiences. The perspectives in his panels, for instance, can be exaggeratedly overcrowded and cramped to reflect confinement and restriction in refugee camps. The visuals make a distant place, both geographically and culturally, feel strikingly close and tangible, offering viewers a seemingly effortless path to identification and connection, or what Scott McCloud terms "amplification through simplification" (30). However, while Sacco's self-representation is usually marked by a tone of sarcasm, awkwardness, or detachment, a reminder of the inherently flawed but persistent investigative process, the laborious illustration of his subjects' testimonies forges a rhetorically intricate connection between subject, author, and reader.

For instance, during a testimony about a settler attack, Sacco juxtaposes the family's account with a close-up image of settlers from a low angle of view that emphasizes their mouths, storming a Palestinian village, firing guns into the air, and smashing houses' windows with rocks and axes. The terrified expressions of the elderly grandmother who nearly suffers a heart attack, and the grief-stricken father who watches his son bleed to death due to curfew restrictions that prevent ambulance access, offer one of Sacco's most powerful unspoken appeals for justice and solidarity (fig.1, fig.2). [3] Gilbert Cruz observes that, "The hopelessness etched across the faces of Sacco's war-weary Palestinians would be near impossible to duplicate solely through the written word" (32).

By placing such scenes alongside those of the settlers' violence, Sacco reclaims the humanity often effaced in mainstream representations, interrupting the sanitized detachment with which such narratives are typically rendered. Such representations deepen Lederach's understanding of the arts as integral to conflict transformation insofar as they cultivate the moral imagination necessary to grapple with the layered textures of human pain and possibility. On the other hand, without the political context that opens this chapter of land confiscation as a systematic policy of consecutive Israeli governments for settlement expansion, these acts can easily be reduced, as they usually are in Western discourse, to two sides fighting each other over a piece of land. Settler violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, documented widely by organizations such as the United Nations, Amnesty International, and B'Tselem, has intensified since the 1980s and escalated further in late 2022 (United Nations, *A/78/553*; Amnesty International,

Settlements and International Law; Amnesty International, *State-Backed Rampage*; B'Tselem), following the election of far-right leaders linked to the settlement movement. Sacco's narrative insistence on showing the victims of this violence brings to light the entrenched structures that sustain injustice. The intimate, emotionally resonant portrayals of these individuals offer insights that statistical, policy-driven reports might overlook.

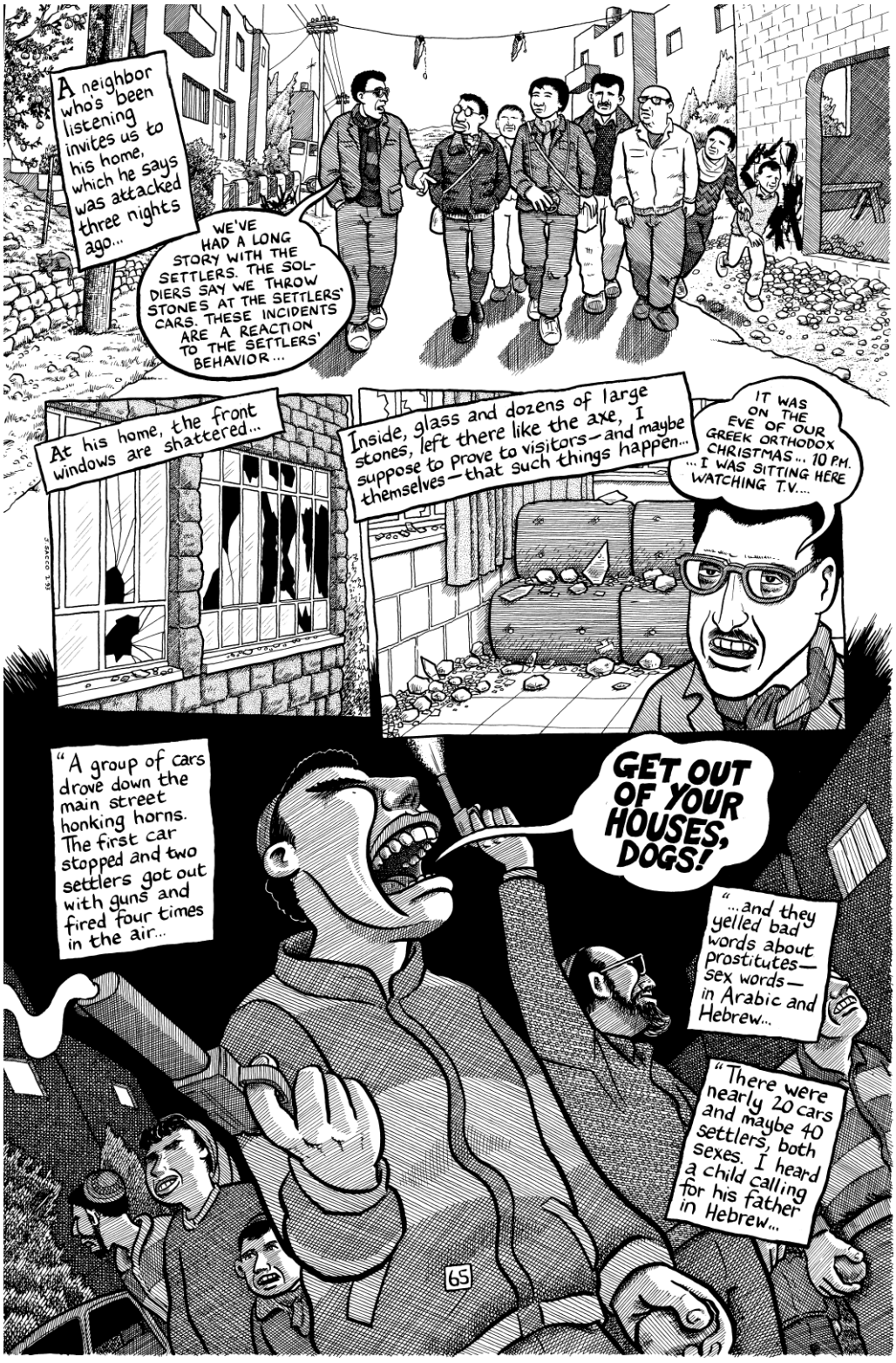


Fig. 1. Joe Sacco, *Palestine*, p. 65.



Fig. 2. Joe Sacco, *Palestine*, p. 70.

Similarly, in *Footnotes in Gaza*, Sacco uses the figure of his guide, Abed, and his family to convey the historical, journalistic, logistical, and socio-economic context necessary for understanding how the contemporary condition of Palestinian refugees is rooted in overlooked historical episodes. Their testimonies reflect the long-term erosion of opportunities for a dignified life following the establishment of the State of Israel and the subsequent mass displacement. Sacco cites a 1949 Israeli Foreign Ministry report that chillingly stated: "The most adaptable and best survivors would manage by a process of natural selection, and the others will waste away. Some will die, but most will turn into human debris and social outcasts and probably join the poorest classes in the Arab countries" (36). Underlying such tellingly dehumanizing rhetoric is a logic by which the fate of more than half of Palestine's indigenous population who had been uprooted from their homes was envisaged.

In seeking to bear witness to the injustices endured by Palestinians, a notable aspect of Sacco's work is his refusal to idealize victims or demonize perpetrators. In *Palestine*, Palestinian teenagers are frequently portrayed as aggressive, harassing Sacco for money or shooting at birds' nests (*Palestine* 21-24). In *Footnotes in Gaza*, readers learn that many fedayeen were formerly thieves or criminals, recruited by Egyptian intelligence officer Mustafa Hafez. Sacco's depiction of an aged fedayee commander recounting an operation where fedayeen killed Israeli soldiers, only to carry out further killings, and sever ears as proof, reflects his commitment to documenting violence irrespective of who commits it. The inclusion of such graphic imagery serves not to sensationalize but to challenge the moral justification of brutality, even when enacted by the oppressed.

Sacco's refusal to romanticize is further exemplified in his attention to the suffering of innocent civilians. One panel shows a close-up of two Israeli children lying lifeless, bloodied on the ground (72-73). The focus on their youthful, delicate faces invites the reader to imagine the profound tragedy of their deaths, children who could have been anyone's. Despite the devastating consequences inflicted on Palestinian refugees by Israeli forces, Sacco resists the fatalistic logic that legitimizes violence as inevitable. Instead, he emphasizes the shared human cost borne by civilians on all sides.

The Artwork of Bearing Witness

Unlike traditional war reporting, Sacco is not in search of a breaking news moment or a sensational headline; rather, his panels in *Palestine* and in *Footnotes in Gaza* unfold with a deliberate slowness that mirrors his own process of discovery. It allows him to meticulously reflect on the state of daily life under occupation—the streets, the infrastructure, the gestures of endurance. The power of his narrative lies not in spectacle, but in the accumulation of ordinary degradations that lead up to what he conceives of as "attacks on people's dignity" (Mohtasham). The visual documentation of crumbling pavements, sewage-filled streets, and dilapidated housing in Gaza evokes Galtung's concept of structural violence. These conditions are not the result of direct assault but of enduring inequalities embedded in social and political structures. Veena Das emphasizes that violence does not always explode; it often seeps silently into the everyday (Das 7). The self-deprecation and sarcasm usually displayed by Sacco's character, in a way, grant agency to the reader as they navigate stark splashes and frameless panels of muddy, flooded streets in a refugee camp (*Palestine* 147, 150, 163) or streets full of bulldozed houses in Rafah (*Footnotes* 180-81). Beyond dramatizing violence, these scenes reveal and equally subvert how it is normalized through neglect, confinement, and dispossession.

Accordingly, the visual-narrative method positions *Footnotes in Gaza*, *Palestine* and *War on Gaza* as ethical endeavors to creatively reinscribe erased or overlooked histories. In his interviews, Sacco embeds each of his subjects in the foreground of the panel as a head-and-

shoulders mugshot, rendered just cartoony enough to be familiar—someone the reader might know personally—speaking directly to the audience (for example 236). These portraits personalize the testimony and extend the emotional stakes of bearing witness. The raw scenes would risk becoming indistinguishable from amateur atrocity footage were it not for Sacco's humanizing lens. The graphic portrayal of wounded and deceased bodies compels readers to confront the corporeal toll of violence and to recognize the individuals, families, and communities devastated by it.

Sacco constructs a narrative that transcends the verbal testimony of his interviewees, drawing equally on their visual perception to achieve an honest representation of events. His narrative strategy relies on a complex, multilinear organizational logic, employing multiple sign systems, stylistic conventions, and rhetorical techniques. In the chapter entitled "Nov. 3 1956. Pt.1: Khan Younis Center" of *Footnotes in Gaza*, for instance, the panel structure depicting survivor Misbah Abu Sadouni's harrowing account of the Khan Younis massacre is meticulously composed to foreground subjectivity and embodied experience. The top borderless panel, dominated by the width of heavy Bren machine guns, illustrates Misbah's account that they "fired four different times." The Israeli soldiers appear as indistinct extensions of the weaponry, with their covered eyes emphasizing their dehumanization and symbolizing their inability—or refusal—to recognize the humanity of the Palestinians they are firing upon. In contrast, the lower panel centers Misbah's wide, zoomed-in eyes, accentuating the intensity of his perception as he witnesses bullets exploding skulls and faces and experiences a sensation of his spirit ascending. An aerial view of bloodied bodies strewn across the ground visually aligns the reader with Misbah's disembodied perspective. The superimposition of horizontal panels over vertical ones serves a narratological function, transcending the "photographic moment" to guide the viewer's interpretation of the visual field (90).

In fact, if Sacco suggests that drawing is an "act of visualization" that "comes with an unavoidable measure of refraction" (*Footnotes* x), then that refraction can serve to focus the reader's understanding. Such instances of graphic testimony expose the entrenched structures of exclusion and racialized hierarchy shaping Israeli state policy and settler-colonial practices. In *War on Gaza*, Sacco particularly interrogates the contradictions inherent in upholding Western discourses of democracy by Israel through two juxtaposed panels: one shows Israeli citizens protesting Prime Minister Netanyahu's judicial reforms, while the other depicts armed settlers attacking Palestinian villagers harvesting olives under the protection of IDF soldiers (*War* 28-29). Beneath the surface of settler violence lies a system in which democratic ideals and human rights are selectively granted to the Jewish population, rendering violence against Palestinians both normalized and institutionally sanctioned.

Sacco does not shield himself from the critique he levels at liberal democratic hypocrisy. In fact, in *War on Gaza*, Sacco opens on a reflective note as he revisits an earlier conversation with a Gazan friend in which he suggested that Palestinians "ought to march peacefully to the Israeli barrier enclosing Gaza so the world would laud their non-violence and shame the Israelis into ending their oppression." The friend responded, incredulously, that the Israelis would undoubtedly shoot them. The exchange is rendered through exaggerated close-ups of Sacco's face and raised finger, visually ridiculing his own moral posturing as he is lecturing his friend from a position of Western privilege. However, the caption that displays Sacco's solution is strategically placed on images from the 2018–2019 Great March of Return, during which Gazans were, in fact, peacefully demonstrating the occupation and the blockade, only to be met with lethal force. By juxtaposing his earlier idealism with the brutal reality of peaceful protest met by sniper fire, Sacco critiques the inadequacy of liberal prescriptions from Western observers who fail to grasp the structures of impunity at play (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Joe Sacco, *War on Gaza*, p 1.



Fig. 4. Joe Sacco, *War on Gaza*, p 2.

The power of Sacco's empathetic representation lies in the multi-layered meanings his comics generate. A central scene from the Great March of Return depicts Gazans protesting along the fence that separates the besieged Gaza Strip, carrying banners and flags. Drawn from a relative distance, this composition allows the reader to grasp both the scale of the fortified barrier that enforces the blockade and to assess whether such a moment might resemble "a page … from Gandhi's book" (1). The visual framing invites critical reflection on concepts of nonviolence and peace with justice, themes deeply embedded in peace research and here evoked through individualized, affective renderings.

The subsequent page shifts the perspective to ground level, depicting demonstrators "demanding their rights as stipulated by long-ignored U.N. resolutions," only to be met with live fire as Sacco's friend had bleakly predicted (fig. 4). A caption that references Amnesty International's report on Israeli snipers deliberately aiming for limbs during the protests in order to "'inflict life-changing injuries'—i.e., amputations" accompanies a chaotic scene: wounded protesters lie on the ground, one is carried in another's arms, and a journalist has just been shot in the head. The lower section of the panel is a visually arresting sequence composed entirely of fragmented and repeated frames of lower limbs viewed through the crosshairs of a rifle scope. These limbs—mostly legs—are isolated, decontextualized from the rest of the body, and rendered with a brutal clinical focus. This layout resists a conventional linear sequence, instead functioning as a visual accumulation of violence, both repetitive and systematic. The repetition of body parts framed as targets communicates the mechanized nature of the injuries and the depersonalization of the victims. The overall composition suggests a crescendo of trauma, one that overwhelms narrative clarity and instead communicates a haunting calculated rhythm of destruction. What distinguishes *War on Gaza* as a work committed to justice is Sacco's artistic reconstruction of scenes that could—and arguably should—serve as evidence in cases involving war crimes and crimes against humanity. Yet these images, like the real-world events they depict, are largely ignored, as, Sacco remarks sardonically, "the world yawned and moved on" (2).

The sequence on the Great March of Return culminates in one of the most haunting and symbolic panels of the book, also featured on its cover. Black bombs fall from the sky, each entering the form of a white-shrouded corpse laid out on the ground. A fragmented caption asks, "Is it genocide, or is it self-defense?" a question that critiques Western preoccupations with terminology and rhetorical precision in the face of unrelenting violence. Sacco's pointed response is spread across three captions: "Let us make everyone happy and say it is both;" "In that case, we'll need a new terminology;" and finally, "I propose 'genocidal self-defense'" (fig. 5). Through this linguistic provocation, Sacco underscores the absurdity of language debates that obscure the lived realities of Gazans, both living and dead, beneath falling bombs.

Building on his critique of rhetorical deflection, Sacco pivots from international discourse to personal implication, turning his gaze toward the United States and its material support for Israel's war machine. In the sequence spanning pages 15 to 24, Sacco depicts himself as both a narrator and a participant in the violence, conjuring a surreal sequence in which his own body and tax payments are metaphorically processed into the weapons and technologies used by the Israeli military. This is no abstract metaphor: tanks, drones, and bombs are all visually linked to U.S. funding, and Sacco does not exclude himself from the equation. Through his act of visual self-indictment, there is a direct challenge to the illusion of ethical detachment, which resonates with Lederach's moral imagination as the capacity to recognize and engage the complex interdependencies that sustain violence. These panels do not simply accuse the U.S. government of enabling war crimes; they confront the reader with the ethical burden of democratic participation in empire. This is where Sacco's work is most urgent: it reveals the necessity of understanding complicity as structured, material, and actionable. His visual rhetoric turns witnessing into an act of reckoning.

By making visible these interdependencies, *War on Gaza* contributes to the discourse of justice and accountability. Sacco's panels resist the depoliticized humanitarian narrative that often frames Gaza solely in terms of victimhood and suffering. Instead, he interrogates the international structures, political, economic, or ideological, that enable this suffering, particularly the role of Western democracies that claim to uphold peace while underwriting war. His satire, especially the phrase "genocidal self-defense," is not merely provocative, it is a call to strip away euphemism and confront the contradictions of global power. For peace and conflict studies, Sacco's work becomes a visual pedagogy of structural violence and ethical responsibility. It asks: how do wars persist not only through tanks and bombs, but through discourse, denial, and distant spectatorship? In making these mechanisms visible, and implicating himself in them, Sacco transforms the comic medium into a tool for critical inquiry, and into a space where the pursuit of peace must begin with the recognition of one's place in the system of violence.

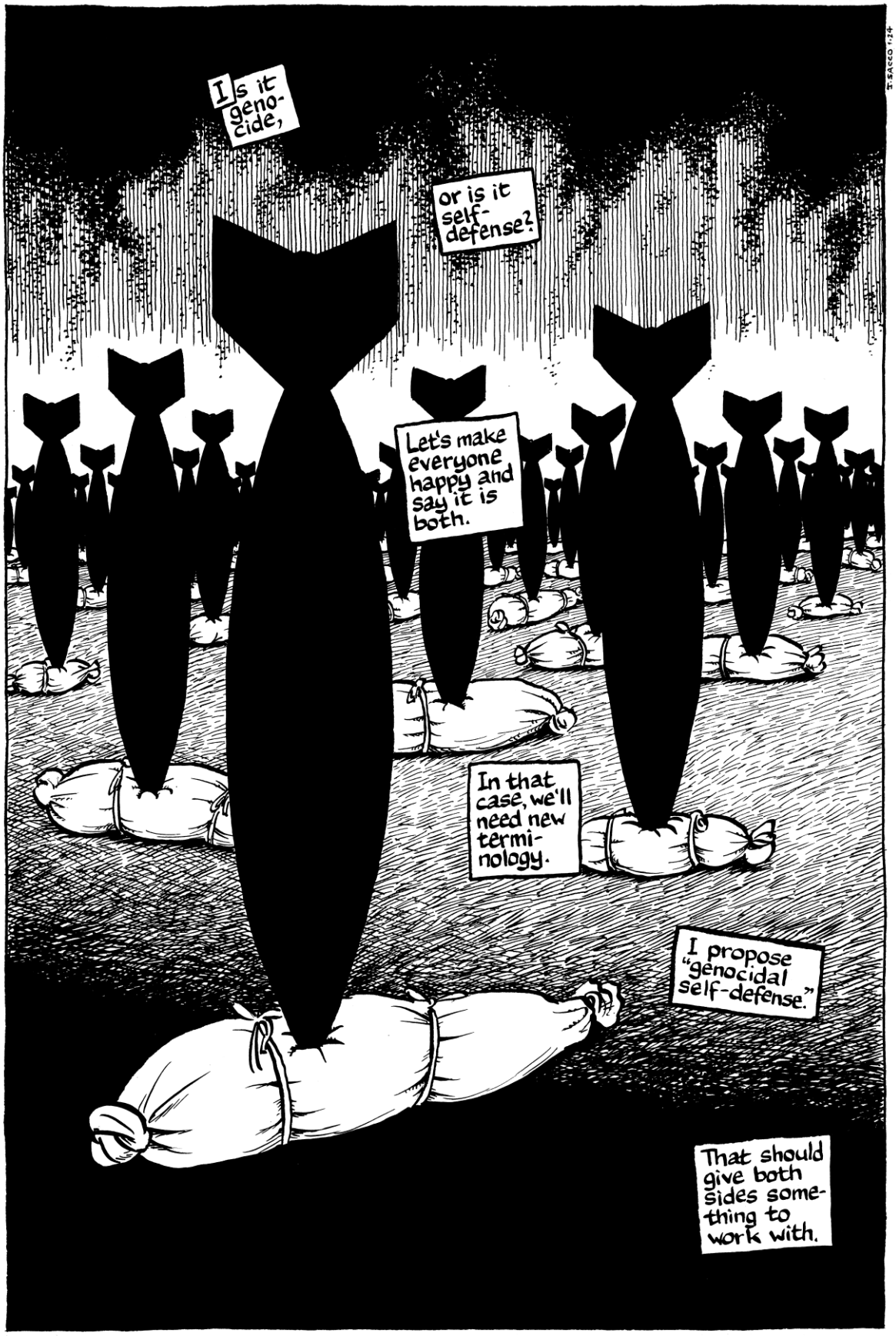


Fig. 5. Joe Sacco, *War on Gaza*, p 3.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Sacco's artistic commitment to documenting the lived experiences of Palestinians through the medium of comics journalism generates powerful effects of identification, empathy, and moral engagement. His integration of eyewitness testimony, historical excavation, and visual narrative resists dominant media narratives that render Palestinian suffering invisible or abstract. In doing so, *Palestine*, *Footnotes in Gaza*, and *War on Gaza* align with peace studies' critical commitment to exposing the structural, cultural, and direct forms of violence that inhibit justice and understanding.

Through an interdisciplinary fusion of journalism, art, and memory work, Sacco crafts a counter-archive, one that values the overlooked, the footnoted, the silenced. He shifts the act of witnessing away from detached objectivity and toward a participatory and accountable position, where truth is relational and grounded in the experience of those whose lives are most impacted by violence. His self-representation challenges the myth of journalistic neutrality and models a form of ethical witnessing that foregrounds humility, self-reflection, and solidarity.

From a peace studies perspective, Sacco's works serve as a vital intervention: they confront the erasure of Palestinian subjectivity and reinscribe the narratives of victims into the historical record. His detailed renderings of individuals refuse simplistic binaries and instead push readers to grapple with the human cost of violence. The concept of positive peace, as theorized by Johan Galtung, finds resonance in Sacco's work: the dismantling of structural and cultural violence becomes possible only through the cultivation of empathy, historical consciousness, and visual truth-telling.

Moreover, in an era of media saturation and disinformation, Sacco's graphic journalism offers an alternative mode of knowledge production, one that is affective, critical, and resistant. The interplay of word and image slows down the consumption of information, inviting the reader into a space of contemplation rather than passive reception. By challenging the visual and discursive control exerted by global media conglomerates, Sacco reclaims a visual narrative that promotes peace, justice, and human dignity.

In the privacy of the creative mind, in the unofficial yet powerful medium of literary and visual expression, Sacco's works are acts of imaginative solidarity. They refuse silence, challenge indifference, and ultimately enrich public understanding of Palestine through a quiet, persistent insistence on the humanity of the unseen. If, as Said reminds us, we must attend to the footnotes of history to grasp its full weight, Sacco's art, thus, serves as a compelling model for ethical, visually mediated storytelling that invites critical reflection on silenced histories.

Notes

1. Some examples of literary works are: Alan Rickman and Katharyn Viner's *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* (2005); Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* (1998); Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* (1963) and *Returning to Haifa* (1969); Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* (1976); Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) and *Against the Loveless World* (2020), William A. Cook's *The Chronicles of Nefaria* (2008).

2. The term genocide here is not used for rhetorical exaggeration; it aligns with international jurisprudence as evidenced by the ICJ's provisional orders and recognizes consensus in

genocide studies from scholars like Amos Goldberg to academic coalitions. (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Statement by UN Experts: Grave Violations Committed by Israel May Amount to War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity, 16 Nov. 2023, www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/11/statement-un-experts-grave-violations-committed-israel-may-amount-war; Genocide Scholars, "Statement by 55 Holocaust and Genocide Studies Scholars on the Situation in Israel and Palestine," Genocide Studies and Prevention, 17 Oct. 2023, www.genocidestudiesandprevention.org/article/id/1293; International Association of Genocide Scholars, Statement on Gaza, 2024, www.genocidescholars.org/statements; Francesca Albanese, Report to the UN Human Rights Council on the Situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Mar. 2024, www.ohchr.org/en/documents/reports; Genocide Watch, Genocide Emergency: Gaza, 2023, www.genocidewatch.com/gaza; Human Rights Watch, Israel: Apparent War Crimes in Gaza, 8 Dec. 2023, www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/08/israel-apparent-war-crimes-gaza)

3. All illustrations by Joe Sacco are reproduced with permission. *Palestine* (Fantagraphics Books, 2001) and *War on Gaza* (Fantagraphics Books, 2024). Copyright © Joe Sacco. Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books (www.fantagraphics.com).

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