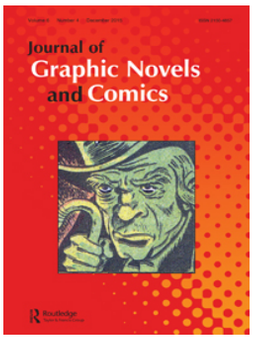

Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics

ISSN: 2150-4857 (Print) 2150-4865 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcom20

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To cite this article: James Hodapp (2015) The postcolonial Joe Sacco, Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, 6:4, 319-330, DOI: 10.1080/21504857.2015.1060620

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2015.1060620

Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, 2015
Vol. 6, No. 4, 319–330, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2015.1060620

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The postcolonial Joe Sacco

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(*Received 27 November 2014; accepted 23 April 2015*)

Joe Sacco's almost universally lauded comics frequently reveal issues and people that are overlooked or misrepresented in western media. Whether these are Palestinians, African immigrants in Malta, or Indian villagers, Sacco takes readers on a visual and narrative journey to locations that are disregarded. Given the similarities between Sacco's consistent modus operandi of illustrating and voicing the global subaltern and the core principles of postcolonial studies, it is odd that a postcolonial approach to Sacco has not been developed. Whereas comic authors such as Marjane Satrapi and Art Spiegelman have received many such readings, a critical blind spot remains in this regard to Sacco as his works have not been brought into conversation with the fundamental principles of postcolonial studies at length. By examining Sacco's comics 'The Unwanted', *Palestine* and 'Kushinagar', the current article redresses this oversight by contextualising Sacco's work in relation to postcolonial literary studies. Joe Sacco's work troubles readers by confronting them with representations of subjects against which they have constructed institutional barriers, and this article similarly troubles the way we view Sacco's texts.

Keywords: Joe Sacco; postcolonial; Africa; India; Palestine

In a recent article, 'Postcolonial remains', prominent scholar Robert Young defines postcolonialism as a 'wide ranging political project' that seeks to 'reconstruct Western knowledge formations, reorientate ethical norms, turn power structures upside down [and] refashion the world from below' (2012, 19). Young's intervention to define postcolonial studies in the context of growing interest in world literature and globalisation is useful because it overcomes narrow understandings of the field as being concerned merely with colonialism and its immediate aftermath. More important for the study of comics, it inadvertently crystallises the project of much of Joe Sacco's popular and influential comic journalism. Sacco's work is a political project that seeks to tell the stories of those often underrepresented or misrepresented, such as refugees and other subaltern groups, and bring western readers into contact with geographies and people often elided in western media. Similarly, much of the scholarship on Sacco has focused on the comic form itself, and almost exclusively on his comics about Palestine, rather than on the subaltern nature of his wide variety of subjects from around the globe. Although one could argue for the postcolonial nature of Sacco's entire oeuvre, I focus on 'The Unwanted', 'Kushinagar' and 'Pilgrimage' to redress this oversight and reflect on the benefits of considering him a postcolonial author who takes the subaltern as his subjects, relies on a postcolonial ethics of representation and values his works' impact on the real world.

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Sacco's consistent choice of subaltern subjects is one central element that marks him as a postcolonial author. Even when taking on the United States, the quintessential hegemonic subject, in the recent collaborative effort *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* (Hedges and Sacco 2012), he chooses subaltern communities such as Native Americans on reservations and migrant workers. People who slip through the cracks are those with whom Sacco's work is most concerned, whether they be Palestinians existing under constant threat of violence in a non-state entity, African refugees who cannot return home but are not granted asylum elsewhere, or Indians entrenched in the bottom rung of a caste system whose only representatives are the very ones oppressing them.[1] His wide range of human subjects can also almost universally be termed 'subaltern' as defined by Antonio Gramsci and further articulated by the Subaltern Studies group as 'history told from below' in the sense that Sacco often focuses on people excluded from structures of representation. In coining the term 'subaltern' as used by the Subaltern Studies Group, Gramsci stressed that subaltern history is episodic and fragmented because the subaltern do not control the means of their own representation because 'Subaltern classes are subject to the initiatives of the dominant classes, even when they rebel; they are in a state of anxious defense' (1971, 21). In response to the Subaltern Studies Group use of Gramsci's term, Gayatri Spivak (1988) problematised the way that dominant discourses (like American journalism) can actually speak or dissent for a subaltern group in her influential 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Largely adhering to these understandings of subaltern, Sacco carefully negotiates the question of representation by choosing subaltern groups but not contending either to speak for them or offer a transparent method for them to speak through him.

Perhaps the most telling evidence for considering Sacco as a postcolonial writer is that, like the field of postcolonial studies, his subject is in fact not literature (or literary journalism) but the world itself. Postcolonial literature seeks to intervene in the world, not simply describe it or map it for literary conventions, aesthetics or reportage. The field makes critical interventions in the outside world and advocates for change via a literarily constructed world whose messages are meant for use in the world outside the text. It does not take itself or its adopted form as its subject but rather its political concerns and the ability to impact circumstances outside of itself. Similarly, Sacco does not write simply to display the diversity of the world or to complicate journalistic and comic forms but to point to real-world problems that he believes need redressing. Sacco exposes imbalances of power and different forms of injustice to engage in realities beyond the comic. Change has been the call word for postcolonial studies since early pioneers, such as Franz Fanon (1963) in *The Wretched of the Earth* and Aimé Césaire (1955) in *Discourse on Colonialism* articulated the hypocrisy of colonialism. Exposing such hypocrisy is also one of Sacco's goals as he demonstrates the inconsistencies and cruelty of the various power structures he confronts.

The ultimate criteria for postcolonial literature is its appeal to ethics. The ethics of postcolonial literature is focused on a sense of humanity and the challenges to justice presented by inhumanity. Postcolonial studies contends that the European colonial mission, as a kind of patient zero, was fundamentally flawed by its very nature as evidenced by the terror that it released onto much of the non-western world. Postcolonial studies is founded on the notion that this must be corrected, hence the field is not simply *against* colonialism but *for* an equitable ethics of representation.[2] Discourses of the colonial mission misrepresented non-western cultures as savage and uncivilised in order to dehumanise their populations to such a degree that subjugating them and using their resources could be seen as a civilising gesture by both colonised and coloniser. The postcolonial

mission attempts to take those who have been traditionally marginalised and maligned as lacking humanity or interiority and turn them into fully realised subjects who are not bogeymen in a 'heart of darkness' but complex individuals with as much content and significance as white Europeans and Americans. Sacco specialises not only in choosing subaltern subjects (an ethical act in itself) but also in demonstrating their humanity. He refuses easy stereotypes of Palestinians as terrorist, African refugees as dangerous criminals and Indian untouchables as animalistic and lends them the humanity that is so often denied by their oppressors and much of the world media. Just as postcolonial studies takes the lived experiences of individuals caught inside large historical events as its primary subjects, Sacco purposefully chooses disempowered groups and individuals and allows readers to reflect on their situation while imaging another reality in which they possess the agency to assert their humanity.

Unsurprisingly, postcolonial studies antagonises the societies that produced it (the US and Europe) and Sacco embodies this further by bringing into frame subjects that his society have maligned or ignored. Postcolonial studies assumes that, although colonialism proper has ended, its traces, sometimes explicit in neo-colonialism, continue to influence the world and Sacco embraces this view. Sacco investigates assumptions of universal prosperity and mobility in the triumphalist discourse of globalisation. In this sense, Sacco's work is highly troubling, as the western reader who has at various moments benefited from colonialism and globalisation at the expense of unseen others, cannot treat his comics as disposable or unchallenging pleasure reading because the comics touch on contentions that implicate the west and the western reader.

'The Unwanted'

Sacco's only work on Africans to date, 'The Unwanted' (2012b), tells the story of African refugees who arrive in Malta seeking asylum. The refugees do not intend to come to Malta but are in search of Sicily and mainland Europe. The Maltese also do not want the Africans there as the island is too small to accommodate a large influx of people. Race plays a central role in this equation as white supremacists have gained traction in recent decades in Malta on the issue of immigration. Sacco negotiates these complexities with his usual honesty and aplomb, but his own identity as a Maltese-American adds an even more than usual personal note to the comic. 'The Unwanted' is a paragon of Sacco's ambivalence, as a close reading demonstrates his clear sympathies with African immigrants stranded in inhumane conditions in Malta, while also thoughtfully articulating the inability of a small island nation to cope with the demands of mass migration. The comic begins with 'Globalization!' and the story of how Maltese tuna is harvested in the Mediterranean Sea to be sold in Japan. It is a successful tale of globalisation's ability to create what Thomas Friedman (2005, 23) calls a 'flat earth' on which different entities around the globe compete in a meritocracy kept in balance by free trade and technology. Sacco writes triumphantly of this globalisation: 'what begins in the Mediterranean Sea ends with happy burps in Tokyo restaurants' (1). This seamless international movement of tuna bodies, as large as the humans that handle them, is a well-worn tale of success that juxtaposes the difficult movement, and contextualisation, of African refugees fleeing to Malta whom 'The Unwanted' takes as its main subject. This movement of Africans is a different kind of globalisation, void of flat-earth triumphalism and happy burps, populated instead with perilous journeys, hunger and alienation.

To take up Africans as subjects, let alone refugees, is in itself unusual and an ethically charged political move for a western comic. Without unfolding the entire history of the

genre here, it is not an exaggeration to state that depictions of Africans in comics from the United States and Europe have been highly desultory until quite recently. Africans have usually been portrayed as savage, uncivilised and poorly spoken figures who lack complexity, intelligence and interiority.[3] Sacco chooses a group that is not only often overlooked as complex subjects but that has been marginalised practically out of existence in comics. The duality of this choice of subject continues throughout 'The Unwanted' as African refugees represent a class of extreme subalterns while the depiction of them in comics represents another. They are subalterns in the real world and they are subalterns in the world of comics. Sacco's determination to give voice to the voiceless in 'The Unwanted' aligns with the core project of postcolonial studies to represent those traditionally underrepresented or misrepresented.[4]

Although 'The Unwanted' takes up the perspective of both the Maltese and African refugees, most of the story is told from the perspectives of African refugees. The story of just one such refugee, who uses the pseudonym 'John' to protect his family, comprises about 15 pages of the total 47-page comic. His story is tinged from the beginning with confrontation as 'John' looks directly at the reader while backgrounded in black. Sacco takes this approach in 'The Unwanted' with other characters, but the initial image of 'John' is the comic's largest close-up. Moreover, this decontextualised image of John in front of a black background appears eight times (along with many others images of him). The structure of the image of 'John' confronting the reader repeatedly is an assertion of subjectivity. 'John' is not going away; he is going to stay literally in the reader's face for much of the narrative. In other words, he will not be denied subjectivity. Of course, this is subjectivity mitigated by a white American-Maltese writer, but it demonstrates that Sacco is heavily invested in the politics of subjectivity for subaltern peoples. John also cannot be dismissed because the content of his story casts him as a sympathetic figure who simply wants to escape an unjust country where his life is in constant danger.

'John' is not the only refugee who receives sympathetic representation in 'The Unwanted'. Many African faces confront the reader and Sacco is clearly interested in humanising a markedly dehumanised population. He strives to divert the discourse from one describing an epidemic, often discussed in terms of numbers of people and resources available, to one that imbues those numbers with the humanity of suffering people. The most explicit example of this comes in a diagram detailing the high rejection rates of asylum applications transposed with the faces of refugees who get rejected. Under this diagram Sacco demonstrates the seemingly arbitrary nature of those decisions by depicting the profiles of six refugees and indicating that those on the left, who happen to be from the Horn of Africa, are more likely than those on the right, from other places in Africa, to receive asylum, apparently regardless of individual circumstance. Sacco's use of faces here to supplement the percentages of refugees granted and rejected asylum, as well as those likely and unlikely to gain the status based on accidents of geography, indicates that the issue of refugees for Sacco is one of humanity, not crowd control. Resources and statistics are important, and Sacco does not believe that Malta should carry the burden of this influx on its own. But, by his use of African faces in 'The Unwanted', Sacco tells us that ultimately the crisis is not national, regional or European but humanitarian, and his strategy for arguing this is to present a human face on the crisis.[5] The humanising of refugees without a clear resolution articulates an irreducible tension between ethics and resource management largely lost in more detached discourses on the topic.

Sacco's treatment of African refugees is laudable and his viewpoint demonstrates a postcolonial ethic of representation from the perspective of the oppressed. Rather than viewing Africans as others from a stable exterior, Sacco depicts many frames from the

perspective of Africans he meets and interviews, while being careful to avoid pretences of speaking for them. Two frames near the beginning mark his ethical usage of perspective and point of view. One of the main complaints of the Maltese is that Africans who arrive have nothing to do all day and that they drink in groups. In a frame in which Sacco is shown a spot under a bridge where Africans go to drink, he depicts the Africans from inside the group while he and his guide are outsiders looking in. The position of the figures demonstrates that Sacco does not patronise the Africans and delude himself that he can fully empathise with them. While he can portray the scene from amongst the Africans, he does not allow the figure of himself to be included inside their circle. That is, he desires to provide an insider's perspective on the African refugee plight but others himself in his own narrative to highlight that the story of the Africans is ultimately theirs rather than his. We see a stark contrast on the next page when Sacco meets Maltese people on the street.[6] Sacco draws himself in the same aspect ratio as the Maltese and his frame completes a circle of other Maltese bodies. While Sacco maintains difference with the Maltese ('Obviously my sympathies are with the migrants' he tells us in an afterword added to the anthology *Journalism*; Sacco 2012a, 157) he makes it clear through the positioning of his own representation that he cannot eschew his Maltese-American identity so easily. Sacco's representational ethics dictates that he makes transparent his role as a mediator and architect of the stories rather than passing himself off as their source and subject. A tension still registers though as Sacco, the white American visitor, is imbued with a power of representation denied the Africans. Sacco cannot undo this privilege, but via a post-colonial ethic of representation he deftly manoeuvres the issue of subjectivity by bringing the matter of how he represents the other to the forefront of his comics, rather than attempting to elide his positionality. This early ethical moment of recognising himself as other in relation to the African refugees allows him to depict less problematically scenes in the journey of 'John' and others in Africa that he does not witness himself. Sacco has already highlighted the limits and flexibility of his mediator status and thus paradoxically convinces the reader that, although he is ever-present, the stories still largely belong to the Africans.

'Kushinagar'

Perhaps the most subaltern group that Sacco has taken up as a subject, in a career dedicated to their representation, are the Dalits of 'Kushinagar', known colloquially as 'untouchables'. The Dalits are the lowest caste in the traditional Indian caste system. Although officially no longer in use, the caste system is still a powerful determiner of fates in India. 'Kushinagar' (Sacco 2012c) tells the story of the untouchables Sacco meets in the Kushinagar region who, despite a wealth of government programmes designed to improve their living conditions, live in extreme poverty. They tell Sacco that they regularly go days without eating because their government-allotted subsidy of grain, which is not enough in the first place to feed most families, is reduced or simply stolen by local officials and those of higher castes. Sacco imagines ways that the villagers can counteract the prejudices and intimidation tactics deployed against them by speaking to powerbrokers in the region, but ultimately he is run out of the village by those with controlling stakes. In a truly dire ending he ponders: '… how Dalits like these whose labor is all but superfluous, whose only role seems to be attracting the benefits that are easily plundered, can bust out of their circumstances' (189). He answers this quandary by letting Ashok Choudhary, a Dalit activist and journalist, have the last word on the Dalits:

'It appears obvious that all of them [soon] will be dead and they will be part of history' (189).

As if being the underclass of the underclass in a poor region of a poor country were not grim enough, Sacco details the utterly inhumane ways in which the Dalits of Kushinagar manage to survive. In a series of panels that painfully defines the term subaltern, the villagers tell how they raid the holes in which rats live to take the grain the rats have gathered from the fields. One of the men says that raiding rat holes is steadier and more profitable work than any other they can get. Sacco's time in India is limited as he is constantly run out of villages, and his space is limited in the magazine in which this comic initially appeared. But, what he is attempting to do is construct a sense of subaltern history. In keeping with Gramsci's contention that the subaltern cannot represent themselves fully and therefore produce only fragmented histories, Sacco cannot fully unfold the Dalit plight in a few dozen pages, but he does relate episodes such as the gathering of rat-hole grain as a representative gesture to a larger inaccessible history. Sacco further aligns himself with postcolonial studies by taking up the project of the subaltern here in South Asia, the subject of the influential postcolonial Subaltern Studies Group. As if answering the call of the Subaltern Studies Group to redress the tendency in literature and criticism on South Asia to focus on elites, Sacco tells a South Asian story whose protagonists are an underclass.[7] Whether knowingly or not, Sacco also participates in the project of the Subaltern Studies Group by highlighting the disconnect between elected government representatives and the poor. The Subaltern Studies Group has worked to problematise the myth that India was founded by elites leading the masses to freedom, positing instead that Indian elites simply altered the British parliamentary system for their own benefit and ignored underclasses in much the same way the British did. Sacco goes out of his way to point out the continued disconnect between elites and typical Dalits when he digresses briefly about Mayawati, who considers herself the champion of Dalits. Sacco tells us that she erected obscenely luxurious monuments housing scores of giant marble elephant statues, as well as a statue of Mayawati herself, at an expense of over $100 million. The comic only devotes two panels to this particular case, but the point here is that, like the Subaltern Studies Group, Sacco believes that the ruling elite – even Dalit chiefs and Mayawati, the most politically powerful Dalit – only serve themselves in a corrupt system, rather than assisting the poor they supposedly represent.

The dead end that Sacco reaches in his journey and comic seems to confirm Spivak's (1988) contention in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' that they in fact cannot. Sacco cannot find a way productively to speak for, or appropriate, the Kushinagar Dalits. In answering Spivak's provocative question on whether the subaltern can indeed speak, Sacco too discovers that they cannot speak for themselves and that he cannot speak for them to any practical end. He can speak though *about* them to a western readership, and this is primarily where the value of his comics resides. What seems a failure for Sacco is a moment of authorial integrity because, rather than condescendingly fabricating a hopeful, yet false, happy ending that would patronise the Dalit and his readers, Sacco accurately portrays the postcolonial point that true subalterns cannot speak or resist as a precondition of their subaltern status. The value of Sacco's contribution, then, is not radically to redefine the term 'subaltern' − this seems neither his intention nor within the field of his expertise − but rather to bring into play what have been fairly cloistered academic ideas (now tentatively stable) about the subaltern into the realm of comics.

Unlike in 'The Unwanted' in which the actors keeping the refugees in limbo are hidden behind paperwork and bureaucracy, the forces of oppression in 'Kushinagar' are present and visible. Sacco's sense of resistance in 'The Unwanted' is problematic as it is

not simply Malta that is oppressing the Africans but an entire European series of prejudices that articulate themselves in restrictive immigration laws and inhumane treatment of asylum seekers. In 'Kushinagar' the hegemony being resisted is manifold and far-reaching, yet clear. In fact, the representatives of oppression in 'Kushinagar' are almost too many to count and so present that even small infractions like wandering into the wrong mango field can result in losing a limb. The Dalits face those that steal their livelihood on a daily basis and are submitted to utter humiliation as a result. Sacco identifies Dalit village chiefs, former *raja* (royalty) of the region, block development officers who control government aid programmes and the region's chief minister as the visible enforcers of an inequitable status quo. Unlike in 'The Unwanted', there is no end to the very real people keeping the Dalit's human rights at bay.

Ironically, while the Dalits have actual people to whom to voice their complaints, they have trouble doing so. Sacco acknowledges his presence in his comics but rarely is he the most ardent resister to abuses of power. In 'Kushinagar', though, he is forced into an explicit position of resistance and advocacy because only he and Choudhary are up for a confrontation. Many of the Dalits complain to Sacco, though only in private, and tell stories of previous attempts to assert their rights and the violence that was brought down on them for their troubles. The Dalits of Kushinagar are entirely beaten and so, by the end of his comic, is Sacco. The defeat of Sacco, unlike the Dalits, seems entirely appropriate because he does not swoop in with a condescending sense that he can fix the situation. Sacco could clearly create a narrative in which he disrupts the powers that be so much that they must reimagine their relationship with the Dalits, but focuses on his shortcomings instead. In fact, the structure of the comic highlights this as Sacco, finally being chased away, is depicted in the opening of the comic to foreground his own failure. Sacco's resistance is reduced to an awareness of Dalit issues. He cannot affect change on the ground and he cannot even find anyone willing to consider doing so. There is no 'John' in 'Kushinagar' fighting the good fight against the odds. Sacco's act of resistance, then, is to not remain silent. As small a success as this might appear in the context of the comic, we see that even speaking is a dangerous and powerful manoeuvre. From the beginning, Sacco's meetings with Dalits are secret and prone to interruptions by members of higher castes and their thugs. The ultimate reason why the Dalit villagers refuse to continue speaking to him is because 'Big people will get annoyed' (Sacco 2012c, 162). Not only must the Dalit villagers suffer from the pangs of hunger and the humiliation of being so low that they are societal untouchables, they also must do so without complaint. Sacco is not under the same strictures and uses his access to media to tell the story of the Kushinagar Dalits that is almost entirely unknown outside of India. This is not to say that this comic, written originally for a French magazine, somehow replaces or fully stands in for the silenced Dalits as an equally valid form of resistance to oppression; but that Sacco is willing to use his resources, however ultimately meagre we may judge them to be, in service to resisting asymmetrical power relations, just as postcolonial studies does.

'Pilgrimage'

In all the comics that make up *Palestine*, Sacco articulates subjectivity for a subaltern group – the Palestinians – who are othered and demeaned by the hegemonic force of the Israeli occupation. Unlike African refugees or Dalits, though, who are largely unrepresented in global media, Palestinians are a well-worn topic in the global discourses of journalism and international affairs (as well as the only of his subjects that have been

addressed via postcolonialism).[8] In fact, their plight is a constant disincentive to Middle East peace and a counterpoint to the carefully manicured image of Israel as a modern liberal democracy. Although the reality of life in the occupied territories can also be said to be underrepresented, Sacco's application of an ethic of representation here is more keenly focused on issues of misrepresentation, rather than underrepresentation, when taking up Palestinians as subjects. I focus here one of the longest comics in the collection and one that has been largely overlooked by previous postcolonial analyses, 'Pilgrimage' (Sacco 2001), to tease out Sacco's restorative ethic via a focus on Palestine itself as a postcolonial contact zone for readers. For Sacco and many others, the Palestinian subject has been dismembered, fragmented and rendered non-existent by the physical and psychic violence of the Israeli occupation. This non-existence manifests itself in Palestine's non-state status and its people as non-citizens, only compounded by demeaning representations of Palestinians. Sacco counters this with detailed descriptions of daily life in Palestine, bordering on the mundane at times, while chronicling the countless personal tragedies of average Palestinians.

Sacco works towards an ethic infused with humanitarianism brought about by close contact with Palestinians. His *Palestine* comics are intimate and eschew the images of rock-throwing youths targeting Israeli soldiers (though he addresses that phenomenon) and suicide bombers, opting instead for images of wrongly killed children and their grieving mothers. Sacco is able to achieve this intimacy because he shifts the usual contact zones the western reader has with Palestinians. The term 'contact zone' was coined by the postcolonial scholar Mary Louise Pratt to help students understand their own subject-position in relation to transcultural contexts. Pratt defines them as spaces in which 'peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish on-going relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict' (1991, 33). The term has proliferated beyond Pratt's original usage but in general has been used conceptually to mean negotiated spaces in which asymmetrical power relations are explored and confronted, if not partially solved. They are tenuous and uncomfortable interactions meant to destabilise ossified standard positions in unequal relationships. In a readerly sense, contact zones arise when readers are exposed to representations of the other that ethically problematise maintaining the critical distance necessary to contain otherness. Contact zones erode distance via humane representations of the other that cannot be ignored, and Sacco's representations of Palestinians are just such cases.

Palestine is full of uncomfortable contact zones in which western readers, usually kept at a critical distance from the interior of Palestinian lives, become temporary insiders. Perhaps the most dramatic is in 'Pilgrimage' when an old woman tells Sacco, via his translator, Sameh, the story of her sons and husband. In the span of nine pages she watches one of her sons get shot in the head while innocently standing in his doorway, only to have him die after 45 hours of not receiving medical care because of complications in finding transportation to hospitals in Israel. She is forced by Israeli soldiers to bury him in the dead of night in the rain without time to prepare proper burial rites. Soon another of her sons is killed after being injured, and again the lack of medical care is a mitigating factor. She buries this son as well in the middle of the night without proper burial rites while Israeli soldiers laugh at her. Her husband also dies of a heart problem because he cannot get Israeli permission to travel to Egypt. The explicit and horrific natures of the tragedies that befall the woman confront any reader that might defend or feel ambivalent about the occupation and its real life impacts. The contact zone here, then, is a challenge to explain or

defend the actions of Israeli soldiers as representatives of liberal western democracies. The reader cannot keep this woman's story at a critical distance to rationalise inside a larger socio-political framework. Sacco draws her as looking the reader in the eye and she demands to be considered as real and as human as the reader's own mother. The discomfort in the encounter is registered by Sacco's figure in the comic, a surrogate for a readership that is compelled to enter a contact zone it is unused to encountering.

In stark contrast to this emotionally poignant strategy, Sacco also deploys the mundane aspects of everyday life to humanise Palestinians. Most of the comics in *Palestine* feature Sacco's determined translator, Sameh.[9] Sameh acts as a legitimising presence so that the reader does not doubt that Sacco is meeting real Palestinians, rather than travelling as just a tourist. To achieve this effect, Sacco does not insert him as merely a linguistic go-between but as a character himself with depth and a backstory. In other words, to legitimise the Palestinians who Sameh introduces to Sacco, Sacco legitimises Sameh. He does this by offering the mundane and every day of Palestine. This technique is intriguing because of how it structures the telling of stories in the comics in relation to more spectacular tales, but also because it creates a less dramatic, but equally powerful, contact zone for the reader. Yes, Palestinians are the victims of endless abuse and have horrific stories to prove as much, but they are also just ordinary people with unexciting daily lives. This characterisation strategy humanises them, perhaps most poignantly when we encounter Sameh's apartment with a hole in the roof, his inter-office politics at work, his wardrobe (underwear and all) laid out for the reader, his not wanting to be late for a barbeque with his friends and his showing Sacco the unique routes (via an Israeli compound) that school kids use for short cuts. This is a markedly different contact zone than the grotesque and disturbing stories of Israeli abuse but one none the less in which Sacco deploys the postcolonial ethic of humanising the other, making their humanity uncomfortably conspicuous via an appeal to the ordinary and universal.[10]

Because it is a collection of various comics about Palestine written at different times, *Palestine* has no essential climax or confrontation that defines the book, but a moment from 'Pilgrimage' does help define Sacco's representative ethic. After telling the stories of the deaths of her sons and husband, the woman confronts Sacco by asking how talking to him 'is going to help her … we don't want money … we want our land, our humanity' (Sacco 2001, 242). Understandably, Sacco is nonplussed and begins to explain himself with 'I hope my work' only to be interrupted. Finally he can only say 'I don't know what to say to her', silencing even himself in this moment (243). The frustration Sacco relates here articulates his inability in the moment to answer a grieving mother and wife with idealism pinned on the hopes of comics, but the frustration also demonstrates how badly Sacco as author and character wants his comics to impact the real world. If it were not clear that Sacco wants his comics to impact the views of his readership and by extension the actions governing these events before, this moment crystallises that he considers the implications and stakes of his comics to be at least partially their ability to change the real world. Throughout his work, Sacco oscillates between his own inability to improve the lot of the subalterns he encounters and the power of comics. He often professes powerlessness while deferring to the comics he writes as the only power that he wields. Sacco never fully embraces comics as an effective tool in naively realising change, leaving instead a fitting residual tension concerning the complex topic he takes up that is not resolved via publication.

Conclusion

As noted by Stephen Greenblatt (1991), texts were the 'invisible bullets' in the arsenal of colonialism and empire. Texts defined and confined colonial subjects not only with misrepresentations on the page but in the lived reality of colonial subjects whose colonial masters consumed and deployed the attitudes and policies therein in the real world (21). Understanding the power of colonial texts, anti-colonial movements mobilised their own texts to counter the influence of colonial discourse, perhaps most famously in the work of Fanon. Using this same understanding, Sacco deploys his work not as cultural tourism or politically correct cultural diversity but as counter-narratives that rethink contemporary geopolitics and present various subalterns and the ethical implications that accompany them. This focus on the political has led Sacco, though at times not his critics, to place more emphasis on the subjects of his comics than on the comic form itself − a quality that aligns him with the postcolonial eschewing of form.

When Sacco contends in interviews that formally his comics are 'pretty standard', because he is more concerned with his subjects than complicating comic form, we do not have to take him at his word (Morton 2012). However, when paired with the postcolonial components of his work, it is clear that Sacco values the real-life African asylum seekers, Indian Dalits and Palestinians more than his contribution to comic form. Certainly the comic form communicates their stories, but Sacco is engaged more in an ethic of resistance and change to real-world problems than wrapped up in questions of complicating comic form. I do not share his easy distinction between form and subject, but I do think that analysis of Sacco as participating in discourses beyond comics is necessary to understand the full weight of the implications of his work. Sacco's work transcends comics (while being of them) and fully participates in postcolonial, transnational and global concerns on the subjects about which he writes. Sacco's statements are an indication that perhaps more attention should be paid to the subjects of his pieces than the formal characteristics of his comics. My argument here is for an opening of such considerations by demonstrating how his work can be seen as part of larger literary movements, including but also beyond comics. Ultimately, I would like to see Sacco's work contextualised with other work whether comic, journalistic, historic, novelistic or poetic by topic and ethic rather than noted primarily for its comic form. Like any journalist who has spent years reporting on a subject, Sacco is not only an expert on his genre of journalism (comics) but also on the subjects he considers. This is not to say that we should not appreciate the unique way that comics contribute or the way Sacco's comic form achieves it thematic goals in ways other forms cannot, but that we should resist voiding Sacco's texts of their political consequences in favour of analyses of form. To overlook the real people and places in Sacco's comics not only contradicts Sacco's own views on what is most at stake in his comics but largely misses the significant ethical and postcolonial implications of his work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Although I am interested here with *Palestine*, 'The Unwanted' and 'Kushinagar', the characterisation of Sacco's subject as subaltern fittingly describes nearly all of his work, outside perhaps of his comics on music.
2. Leela Ghandi (1998) has fielded accusations against postcolonial studies as interested in 'postcolonial revenge' against the west. She argues that postcolonial studies does not seek to turn the tables on the west by now making it a marginalised and demonised entity. In fact, that would be the antithesis of postcolonial ethics as cultural equity is the goal of the field.
3. Thankfully, African comics have challenged this representation recently, most notably in the six-part *Aya* series by Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie (2008). Other works such as the non-fiction *Abina and the Important Men* (Getz and Clarke 2011), numerous versions of the Ashanti epic of Sundiata and graphic-novel versions of African literature such as *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe 1958) have also contributed to more responsible representations of Africans in comics. Nonetheless, these comics stand as exceptions to the rule for comics that circulate outside of Africa.
4. This is not to say that there have been no multicultural comics before Sacco's, but that they are rare (especially those taking up Africa as a subject) and in nearly every case have been published recently. A 2010 collection of essays edited by Fredrick Luis Aldama, *Multicultural Comics*, investigates trends in multicultural comics and Sacco may be said to be participating in a similar project to Aldama's. A few outliers, such as this collection, help to contextualise Sacco's work but should not lessen the impression that in representing Africans responsibly he is distinctly working against the grain of comic history and even most recent trends in the field.
5. This does not immunise Sacco, though, from issues concerning the way Africa is imagined in the popular imagination in the west. Africa is most often seen in western media as war torn, diseased and impoverished. This is seen particularly in the recent literature and viral videos concerning child soldiers. African graphic novels have moved in the direction of stories and characters not on the brink of disaster, but Sacco's modus operandi of highlighting crises means that he is not singling Africans out as crisis-prone but one of many of his subjects that experience existential threats. In other words, because Sacco only writes about people living in dire situations, he would not be writing about Africans at all if not in this manner.
6. 'The Unwanted' does not stick to this point-of-view formula throughout when Sacco interviews individuals. However, both of these initial chance meetings on the street demonstrate his perceived positionality to the groups when not constructed around a face-to-face interview.
7. The Subaltern Studies Group is a collection of South Asian academics and writers who have argued that the history and culture of India is not simply the story of an educated elite class that dragged the country into modernity. Instead of being interested in the ways that influence works from the top down, they are interested in 'history from below', or how the largely overlooked ways that movements, attitudes, culture and history have been moved by India's subaltern groups.
8. 'Framing Refugee Time' by Maureen Shay (2014) investigates how Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009) uses the visual elements of comics to contrast temporalities while 'Sounding the Occupation' by Rose Brister (2014) focuses on the spatial and sonic abilities of comics to register a national narrative for Palestine.
9. 'Kushinagar' and 'The Unwanted' portray moments of translation but not a translator, or at least not a consistent one. Sacco is more at ease linguistically in 'The Unwanted' as he speaks Maltese, but he also speaks to African refugees from parts of Africa with diverse linguistic compositions. In 'Kushinagar' we know that he cannot speak to the Dalits directly and Sacco alludes to an Indian reporter, but the reporter enters and leaves the story to create a measure of immediacy between Sacco and the Dalits, highlighted most directly on page 3 when a Dalit stares down Sacco and tells him he needs to leave.
10. I think it important to note that Sacco does not deploy the universal as a way to collapse difference completely. The landscapes, politics and general foreignness of the people and places Sacco depicts are not made into interchangeable universals but retain specificity of location while imbued with a universal humanism. In Sacco's tales, the foreign never becomes comfortable but rather is made more legible by his proximity.

Notes on contributor

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