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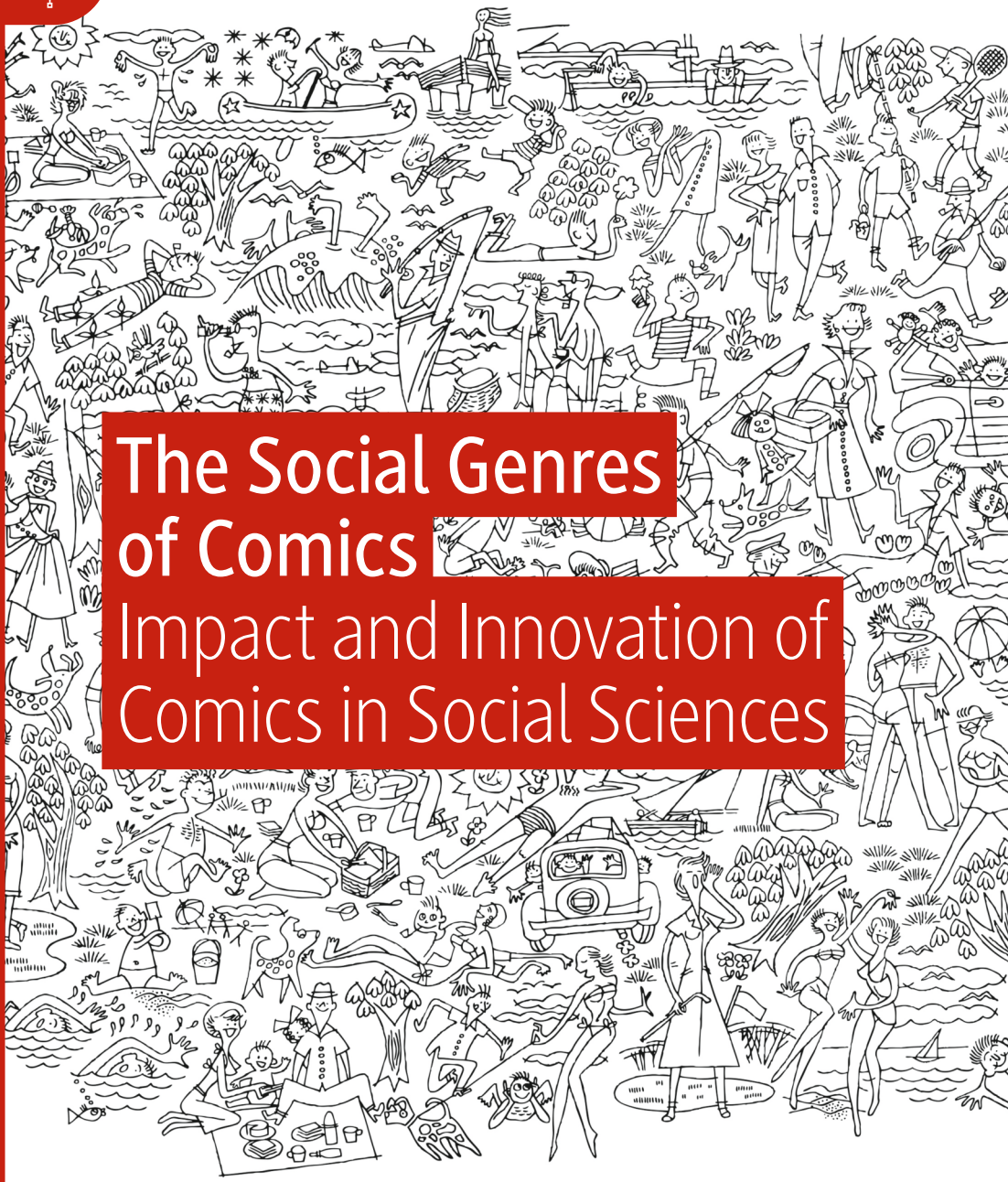

The Social Genres of Comics

Impact and Innovation of Comics in Social Sciences

Edited by Veronica Moretti
Francesco Della Puppa

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This series brings together academic work which considers the production and consumption of the arts, the social value of the arts, and analyses and critiques the impact and role of cultural policy and arts management.By exploring the ways in which the arts are produced and consumed, the series offers further understandings of social inequalities, power relationships and opportunities for social resistance and agency. It highlights the important relationship between individual, social and political attitudes, and offers significant insights into the ways in which the arts are developing and changing. Moreover, in a globalised society, the nature of arts production, consumption and policy making is increasingly cosmopolitan, and arts are an important means for building social networks, challenging political regimes, and reaffirming and subverting social values across the globe.

Veronica Moretti • Francesco Della Puppa
Editors

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CHAPTER 6

Comics in Migration, Migration in Comics: Methodological Reflections and Theoretical Perspectives Emerging from the Analysis of Two Case Studies

Francesco Della Puppa and Sarah Walker

Introduction

Comics about migrations have been shaped across languages, cultures, and time by the diverse socio-political stances and today migration comic research and migration studies by comics are developing research and methodological fields. The language of comics is characterised by its ability to convey movements, mobilities, and transformations across time and space (McCloud, 1993; Kauranen et al., 2023). As such, it represents a medium particularly well-suited to narrating migration. Through the

F. Della Puppa (✉)
Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Venice, Italy
e-mail: francesco.dellapuppa@unive.it

S. Walker
University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy
e-mail: sarah.walker2@unibo.it

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skilful use of images, colours, and a combination of text and visuals, comics can express emotions and atmospheres while connecting phenomena distant in time and space—something that text alone often struggles to achieve with equivalent immediacy and effectiveness. Drawing, in this sense, transcends boundaries (Busi Rizzi et al., 2022), enabling the construction of realities and memories that span nations (Kauranen et al., 2023; Spadaro, 2023a). Furthermore, it is important to note that many comic book authors are themselves migrants or come from migratory family backgrounds (Sanfilippo, 2024). This explains why this medium frequently centres on narratives of human mobility and its social implications. In what follows, we will reflect on how comics narrate migration. After an initial bibliographic overview of comic works that 'depict international migration through panels and speech bubble' (Della Puppa, 2023), we will focus on two examples of socio-anthropological storytelling in comics (Della Puppa et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2024). Finally, we propose a section of reflection on the strengths and limitations of the visual and graphic dimension of comics in social research on migration phenomena, particularly when compared to more 'traditional' narrative approaches.

Narrating International Migrations through Panels and Balloons

There is a substantial body of reflections on the narration of migrations and migration studies through the medium of comics, produced both by authors (Cancellieri, 2023; Della Puppa, 2023; Tonfoni et al., 2022) and by scholars (Arioli, 2022; Bandirali & Cristante, 2020; Bedin, 2022; Busi Rizzi et al., 2022; Davies, 2019, 2022; Favaro, 2022; Kauranen et al., 2023; Landi & D'Alessandro, 2022; Pezzarossa, 2022; Rifkind, 2017; Righini, 2022; Sébastien, 2022; Smith, 2011; Spadaro, 2023a, 2023b; Tanca, 2022; Vari, 2023). In particular, some studies have focused on comic narratives as a new way to represent mobility and, above all, the creation of 'transnational' spaces (Della Puppa, 2023; Ẹgẹdẹ, 2020; Mangiavillano, 2023; Spadaro, 2023b; Spadaro & Stamboulis, 2023) or to capture the human experience of migration. Regarding this second theme, Shaun Tan's (2006) *The Arrival* serves as an exemplary work. The graphic novel depicts a 'universal' migration experience through the story of a labourer, father, and husband navigating emigration, immigration, and eventual family reunification. Significantly, the volume contains no written text, making it accessible across diverse linguistic, national, and

cultural contexts. It narrates the protagonist's inner struggles—marked by suffering and loneliness—alongside external challenges such as housing difficulties, bureaucratic and regulatory hurdles, and labour exploitation. At the same time, it conveys hope for the future and solidarity with other workers and migrants—immigrants and refugees fleeing slavery and armed conflict—who share parts of his life journey (Tonfoni et al., 2022). Olivier Kugler's *Escaping Wars and Waves* (2018) documents the experiences of Syrian refugees across the globe. Drawing on many interviews, and hundreds of reference photos, through his drawings of the everyday life of his interviewees while working for Médecins Sans Frontières, Kugler brings to life their location, and renders the extraordinary ordinary (Davies, 2022).

Given the significant focus in the literature on Anglophone comics (Kauranen et al., 2023), we here focus in upon Italian language comics, a growing field, particularly as Silvia Vari (2023) also observes since the 2000s, following a shift in Italy as a country of emigration to one of immigration, with a concurrent increase in migration discourses. An author who has extensively explored the narration of migrations through the language of comics is Barbara Spadaro (2022). Her work focuses particularly on migrations to and from Italy, emphasising *the mobility and the multilingualism of Italian comics culture* and contributing to the theorisation of *the emerging field of Transnational Italian Comics Studies* (Comberiati & Spadaro, 2023):

> [t]wo elements have been key in such an endeavour: a transnational perspective that embraces the mobility of Italian (comics) culture across geographical and linguistic borders (Burdett et al., 2020; Spadaro, 2022) and the engagement of contributors from different academic backgrounds related to Comics and Italian Studies. In this framework, memory and migration have emerged as powerful narrative themes in production and simultaneously as avenues of research in Comics Studies. (Comberiati & Spadaro, 2023, p. 489)

In her exploration of the intersection between Italian comics, transnationalism, and memory, Spadaro (2023b) identifies four main research strands: (1) **'Italian cartoonists in emigration'**—focusing on works such as Fior (2010) and Tota (2010), which explore the "new" emigration of young Italian cartoonists to France; (2) **'History and (post)memory of Italian emigration'**—examining, among others, Baru's trilogy (2021, 2022, 2023), as well as works by Campi and Zabus (2018), Carrara (2005), Colaone (2010), Marchese and Patané (2009), Otero (2020), Salma

(2013), Santospirito (2015), and Valentinis (2014). These narratives address various social, labour, identity, familial, and generational aspects of historical Italian emigration to Europe, the Americas, and Australia; (3) **'Toward Europe: Reality comics and refugee comics'**—including works such as Bernardi and Sio (2019), on the complex relationships within refugee and asylum seeker reception centres; Castaldi (2017), capturing the testimonies of Eritrean refugees; Cripsta and Bonaiuti's exploration of hosting asylum seekers in private homes; Girardi (2009), on Kurdish emigrants fleeing political violence; and Niccolini and Bonaffino (2014), on the shipwreck of an Albanian migrant vessel caused by an Italian patrol boat's ramming; (4) **'Migrant stories, transnational lives: Children of migration'**—including volumes by Takoua (2016, 2018, 2021), which explore emigration after the Tunisian uprising, as well as racism and resistance experienced by Tunisian immigrants in Italy. Also included are Cajelli and Genovesi's *noir* series (2013–2020), inspired by 1970s Kung-Fu movies, to depict Chinese immigration to Italy and reflect on related stereotypes and discrimination; *Ti sto cercando* by Marchese and Patané (2008), which interrogates colonial histories, exploitation, and racism through the memories of immigrant fathers and their children in Italy; and the trilogy by Rocchi and Demonte (2015, 2017, 2021), which also examines Chinese immigration to Italy.

In line with the evolution of migratory patterns and the intensification of asylum channels—paralleled by the proliferation and worsening of armed conflicts, climate catastrophes, and environmental crises—there has been a growing focus in comics on the themes of asylum seekers and refugees (Davies & Rifkind, 2025). Notable works in this area include *In fuga* by Bissattini et al. (2023), which examines the refugee experience and the Italian asylum system; Marco Rizzo and Lelio Bonaccorso's *Salvezza* (2018), which depicts the work of ship crews rescuing migrants off the Libyan coast on the Mediterranean route. The authors drew from their direct experience aboard the *Aquarius*, a vessel used by SOS Méditerranée and Médecins Sans Frontières to rescue men, women, and children risking death for a better life in Europe. Rizzo and Bonaccorso also authored *A casa nostra: Cronache da Riace* (2019), focusing on the reception phase, specifically the grassroots and successful solidarity efforts in Riace, later dismantled by systemic racism in the Italian state. Meanwhile, Francesca Mannocchi and Gianluca Costantini's *Libia* (2019) uses a journalistic style to depict Libya as a transit hub for migrants travelling from Africa to Europe, highlighting the atrocities in Libyan detention camps, where

armed militias funded by the European Union and Italian governments torture and exploit migrants.

In *I disconosciuti* (2024), Della Puppa et al. present an ethnographic and sociological analysis of refugees and asylum seekers living outside the formal reception system. The protagonists include a young researcher and three migrants with diverse trajectories, navigating the "Mediterranean route" through the Sahara and the Mediterranean Sea, and the "Balkan route" via former Yugoslav countries. Similarly, the protagonists of *Threads from the Refugee Crisis* (2017) by Kate Evans and *Les nouvelles de la jungle de Calais* (2017) by Lisa Mandel and Yasmine Bouagga endured dangerous journeys across nations and continents. Both volumes adopt an ethnographic and self-reflective perspective to depict 'the Calais Jungle'—the informal migrant camps in the French city established since the late 1990s by non-European migrants attempting to reach the UK via the Channel Tunnel or improvised crossings. They also analyse the relationships among migrants within the camp and between migrants and locals outside the camp (Sébastien, 2022).

Finally, both works examine the violence resulting from segregation into specific sites, a theme echoed by other authors (Nabizadeh, 2016; Humphrey, 2016; Rifkind, 2017; Davies, 2022), who have studied the architecture of detention and reception centres as examples of spaces for confinement and dehumanisation. Much of this graphic literature draws from Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, which, as Dominic Davies observes 'has arguably become the refugee comics' archetype' (2022, p. 5). In capturing the everyday rhythms of Palestinian life, Sacco reclaims the humanity of these refugees whilst visibilising the carceral violence they are exposed to (2022). Hence, just as other scholars (Nabizadeh, 2016) also argue, comics can allow for new spaces of visibility to be carved out.

The theme of the difficult emigration of unaccompanied foreign minors along the dangerous 'Mediterranean route' is at the heart of *4 vite che sono la mia* (4 Lives that are Mine), which, through a 'choose-your-own-adventure' narrative, illustrates the trajectories and the winding paths of a young Gambian heading to Europe. The title *4 vite* refers to the multiple choices the reader must make through a coin toss—heads or tails? Each result leads to a different turn in the life of Abdel, the young Gambian protagonist, inviting the reader to jump forward or backward in the comic, exploring the endless possibilities that fate might reserve.

This phenomenon is also addressed in *Il Gioco dell'Oca: storie di crescita e migrazione in un tiro di dadi* (Snakes and Ladders: a tale about growing

up and migration by the throw of a dice) (Walker et al., 2024), which, however, primarily focuses on the labyrinthine legal and social journey that unaccompanied foreign minors must face upon their arrival in Italy. *Ismael e gli altri* (Ismael and the Others), on the other hand, masterfully provides a socio-legal investigation into the reality of the exploitative labour system, or 'caporalato' (gangmaster), used by many Italian businesses, which ties the 'legal' economy to the 'criminal' economy in the exploitation of immigrant workers in Italy. The volume also clearly exposes the mechanisms of indebtedness that chain immigrant workers to their exploiters in Italy, as well as the reality of the 'Balkan route', experienced by many emigrants from the so-called 'Middle East' and 'Indian Subcontinen' (Zambon & De Marchi, 2023). Similarly, in placing focus upon the fictional voyage across the Mediterranean Sea of a migrant girl, Amalia, Silvia Vari argues that the wordless graphic novel *Mediterraneo* (2018), visualises what is usually invisible, and at the same time problematises the positionality of the gaze of the viewer-reader when addressing the border violence migrants are exposed to.

As previously mentioned, many comic book authors are themselves migrants or come from migrant family and share a migrant background (Sanfilippo, 2024; Spadaro, 2020), or alternatively, they observe international migration from the countries of origin (Jẹgẹdẹ, 2020). Consider, for example, the previously mentioned works by Rocchi and Demonte on Chinese immigration to Italy and Milan (2015; Rocchi & Demonte, 2017), or *Marmellata con Laban (come mia madre è diventata libanese)* [Jam with Laban (how my mother became Lebanese)] by Lena Merhej, which tells, in the style of a memoir, the personal and family migration experience of her mother from Germany to Lebanon (2021). The graphic *memoir* form is also adopted to narrate painful experiences in the border zone between Mexico and the United States in *La cicatrice* by Ferraris and Chiocca (2017), which critiques the socio-political construction of borders and the violence they entail (Favaro, 2022). Furthermore, among authors of immigrant origin or immigrants themselves, we can also point to Italian authors in France and, especially, Belgium, who are still active in the production of these countries (Comberiati, 2018; Salma, 2013; Cossu & Druart, 2019), as well as Argentine or Latin American authors in the last third of the twentieth century (D'Andrea et al., 2024).

Looking at our most recent work and the evolution of Italian emigration, it is important to emphasise the growing significance of female migration, which, similar to foreign immigration to Italy, is numerically

larger than male migration and often more qualified (Perillo, 2022; Sanfilippo, 2024). In recent years, the comic book landscape has increasingly highlighted migrant women. Consider the acclaimed *Chez toi. Athènes 2016* by Sandrine Martin, which tells the Mediterranean crisis through the encounter of a Syrian refugee and midwife Monika in a Greek refugee centre. The point here is that, beyond some now-predictable figures, we are witnessing new narratives. In the past decade, we have had the Eritrean refugees in *Etenesh: l'odissea di una migrante* (The Odyssey of a Migrant) by the already mentioned Paolo Castaldi (2017), and Nigerian women victims of trafficking and prostitution in *Trattate male: sogni e paure delle più belle del reame* (Mistreated: Dreams and Fears of the Most Beautiful in the Kingdom) by Laura Bastianetto and Valerio Chiola (2014). Moreover, we have additional figures: Takoua Ben Mohamed, also cited by Spadaro (2023b), had already narrated her own biographical experience and transition from school to the world of work in the trilogy *Sotto il velo* (Under the Veil) (2016), *La rivoluzione dei gelsomini* (The Jasmine Revolution) (2018), and *Il mio migliore amico è un fascista* (My Best Friend is a Fascist) (2021). Tiziana Francesca Vaccaro and Elena Mistrello (2021), seeking to adopt the perspective of migrant women, narrate the reality of immigrant care workers in their work *Sindrome Italia. Storia delle nostre badanti* (Syndrome Italy: The Story of Our Caregivers). Cristiano Bedin (2022) analyses this work, focusing on the psychological distress experienced by Eastern European women who come to Italy to care for elderly people with disabilities (Della Puppa, 2012). Mental health disorders related to the so-called Syndrome Italia often manifest only when these women, after a more or less long stay in Italy, return to their home countries and must face children and relatives after a long absence. Vaccaro and Mistrello, through a stream-of-consciousness narrative, convey the experience of the protagonist, including the violence suffered by Vasilica in Italian households, and also the long-term impact of the migration experience on her life. The theme of dequalification and downgrading, which immigrants and, even more so, immigrant women like Vasilica, are subjected to, is also addressed in the recent work edited by Perillo on female emigration and immigration from Italy to Australia and, especially, from Latin America to Italy (2024), with the intertwined biographies of two protagonists. Similarly, in *La linea dell'orizzonte* (The Horizon Line) (Della Puppa et al., 2022), the narrative, moving between autobiographical writing and bildungsroman (Mazzola, 2022), weaves together a "double biographical thread": that of Bangladeshi immigrants in Italy who,

after acquiring Italian citizenship and thus a European passport, use this status and document to embark on a new emigration to the UK, and that of the researcher who travels to the UK to conduct an ethnography on this emerging phenomenon (Gusmeroli, 2022).

Some studies have focused on the representation of migrants and related themes, such as the issue of cultural memory at the individual level (Lanslots, 2021; Serrano, 2021), the aesthetic strategies used for this representation, and the issues it brings to light, from the political sphere (Earle, 2020) to anthropological aspects (Dix et al., 2019) and autoethnographic approaches. Others have focused on "braided geographies" or counter-geographies, mapped by the memory of migrants (Davies, 2019), and experiences of exile and diaspora in graphic life narratives (Naghibi et al., 2020).

Of particular note in relation to attempts to change the narrative around migration is the British organisation *PositiveNegatives*[1] which researches, produces, and disseminates graphic narratives around migration, conflict, and asylum through participatory methodologies. Where possible, PositiveNegatives 'works with people to tell their own stories, placing the participants at the heart of the creative process' (Wong et al., 2020, p. 313). One moving example of this is the short animation *Dear Habib,* which illustrates the true story of a young unaccompanied migrant and his life in Britain. Habib's own testimony underpins the animation, and he was both a participant and a researcher on the project (Wong et al., 2020). We turn now to our own two case studies as sociologists working on migration to open up the discussion.

Snakes and Ladders: Stories of Migration and Growing up by the Throw of the Dice

We here discuss the short Italian language comic, *Il Gioco dell'Oca: storie di crescita e migrazione in un tiro di dadi* (Snakes and Ladders: a tale about growing up and migration by the throw of a dice) (hereafter Snakes and Ladders) that Sarah created with two Italian comic artists, Antonio Mirizzi and Chiara Suanno and in collaboration with one of her research participants, Amadou,[2] a young man from The Gambia who sought asylum in Italy as an 'unaccompanied minor'. The title of the comic draws on

[1] Visit www.positivenegatives.org to see the full portfolio

[2] This is a pseudonym.

the analogy of the Italian board game *Il Gioco Dell'Oca*, similar in concept to the English game of S*nakes and Ladders*; games in which everything is down to chance, to the throw of the dice. Just as in these children's board games, life on the margins is precarious and open to slippage back to where you started from, at any time.

The comic draws upon this analogy to understand young men like Amadou's attempts to create a life for themselves in the northern Italian city of Bologna, examining how the system replicates this board game. It is a visual representation of how, as Melanie Griffiths (2013) has shown, immigration controls function by governing through uncertainty, which impacts upon futures. Its very visuality, captured in the form of the children's board game, brings the arbitrariness of immigration controls to the fore; allowing the reader to feel the uncertain nature of the journey that continues for these young migrants, even after they have reached the shores of Italy. This work is based upon over five years of ethnographic research conducted by Sarah Walker between 2017 and 2023 with young men from Africa who sought asylum in Italy as 'minors'. This included eight months of participant observation in 2018 in a reception centre for (male) unaccompanied minors in Bologna named 'Giallo'. Repeat qualitative interviews were also carried out with twelve young African men housed in Giallo, two of whom had refugee status while the others possessed humanitarian protection.[3] Sarah then conducted follow-up interviews in 2022 with eight young men still living in Bologna to establish how they were faring as 'adults' outside the reception system (for more details on research methods see Walker, 2023).

Snakes and Ladders can then be understood as a 'research-based comic' (Sassatelli, 2021), in which Sarah's research was shared and transformed into comic form by the comic artist Antonio Mirizzi and then discussed and amended through conversations with 'Amadou' one of the research participants from The Gambia. A form of what Charlie Rumsby (2020) calls 'retrospective (re)presentation': using the visual to offer alternative modes of (re)presentation to the written ethnographic text. In Snakes and Ladders, the decision was collectively made to present the young men's stories through three fictionalised characters. This was a means to avoid direct representation and to capture some of those elements that were common to the young men: the tensions and frictions of being an

[3] Humanitarian Protection (a two-year renewable status) was widely granted to protect unaccompanied minors who did not meet the conditions for refugee status.

'unaccompanied minor' and subject to the constraints this entails in a reception centre, a place that is at once both 'very good and very difficult'; the desire for education and training in order to set themselves up for a better future; the transition to eighteen as a moment of joy, as opposed to a moment of fear as often occurs in other EU states, or elsewhere in Italy (see Walker and Gunaratnam, 2021). In particular, the aim was to highlight the importance of this lack of fear for young migrants' aspirations and sense of belonging, and how this belonging is destabilised by the borders of race and constructs of otherness that pervade the hostile environment racialised migrants are exposed to, yet how spaces of hospitality may also contemporaneously exist.

Discussions of the migrant 'crisis' have been primarily concerned with the act of crossing/ the journey to, and less attention has been paid to the processes of settlement. Yet this is a journey that continues, and in using the frame of Snakes and Ladders, the comic shows how migrants must still employ their wits against ongoing border violence that manifests in a variety of ways and locations as they seek to make space and place to belong.

In addition to providing a visualisation for the temporariness of immigration controls, the comic also aims to challenge the binary logics inherent in such controls. As Sarah's research shows, unaccompanied minors are viewed through a bifurcated lens which embodies fixed categories of age as a border control mechanism (Walker, 2023; Walker & Gunaratnam, 2021). This rigid age binary is reproduced in research and policy on unaccompanied minors, reducing those over eighteen to an invisibilised category. Yet, it is at this moment that the rights they are accorded as children, including the right to stay in the host country, may be lost, thus they are at risk of ending up in limbo, without status. Unaccompanied minors who turn eighteen are then hidden from migration narratives and their particular experiences of the rupture from their moment of belonging whilst children, are invisibilised. Through focusing on an 'invisibilised', heterogeneous group of young people, the research draws attention to the 'sociology of absences' (Santos, 2016), something that the visual element of the comic can draw out well, perhaps more so than text.

The helplessness through which the de-racialised, de-gendered subject of the hapless unaccompanied minor is constructed, implies a need for others to protect them and hence speak for them, silencing their own individual narratives (Malkki, 1996). In drawing out the narratives of the young men, the comic aims to counteract such silencing forces whilst placing attention on race and gender dimensions. The plural narrative of comic

allows for the capturing of these tensions and ambiguities. As Allsopp (2017) has shown, the migration regime enforces a problematic 'binary portrait of masculinity' whereby the 'vulnerable' child must, upon turning eighteen, then internalise and enact traits of the 'strong young male' stereotype, which fails to recognise the multiplicities and intersectionalities of young men's identities. The shift from child to man within the racialised migration regime remains fraught. The comic aims to be mindful of the politics of representation, and act as a means to problematise overly binary portraits of 'unaccompanied minors'. Through the comic, we are given perspectives in which the vulnerable subject position imposed by the 'unaccompanied minor' label is contested; revealed as far more complex, playful, political, and critical than the label suggests. The comic functions to reveal different fragments of the young men, allowing for some of their complexities and politicised identities to be made visible. Thus, the comic form enabled the capturing of the more complex subjectivities of the young men.

Drawings by Amadou are incorporated in the comic. For example, the 'wrestler', a self-portrait he shared as part of the research which represents both strength and entitlement. The 'wrestler' reveals the subject of a young man engaging in mobility to improve his life chances, with the 'right to see the world', just as many of his peers do. Save that those with the right citizenship status can access legal channels. Channels which are not open to Amadou. He is portrayed as a strong political subject with rights, not a victim seeking salvation. The wrestler figure also contrasts sharply with that of the vulnerabilised minor—a label often attached to young migrants who travel alone. It is also a hegemonic portrait of masculinity. This drawing is included in the comic, as well as Amadou's description of it in the text, to connect with Amadou's self-representation and rejection of the derogatory term of 'immigrant', instead framing his movement in terms of justice and rights.

Migrants do not arrive in an empty or neutral space, but rather a space of power relations that is already informed and constituted by coloniality (Grosfoguel et al., 2015, p. 641). Hierarchies of mobility and belonging are then produced by migration regimes, themselves based on racialised colonial histories (Back et al., 2012). Hence, upon entering Italian society, not only do they become 'unaccompanied minors', contemporaneously they must also confront Italian ideas of Blackness—a racial taxonomy infused with colonial tropes (Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013). These mediated intimacies in the research were marked by a Duboisian

double-consciousness in which the participants' spoken and visual narratives were alert to how they were perceived and measured 'by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity'. To reflect this, the choice was made to use colour in the comic in an unrealistic manner. Even the complexions were coloured according to criteria of graphic pleasantness—another choice that could certainly seem ironic for a story conceptually based on the real problem of the inequalities in Italy between 'white' people and people 'of colour' (Walker and Mirizzi, 2024 forthcoming). The racialised experiences of the young men are brought to the fore in the difference in treatment between them and Sarah as a white British migrant in Italy.

Sarah's experience of the rental market is very different to that of the young men. Whilst they are told 'the landlord doesn't rent to foreigners', in response to Sarah's (acceptable) 'migrancy', the landlord is portrayed as 'a man of the world'—able to connect with those from elsewhere. In including this experience in the comic, attention is drawn to these contrasting experiences to highlight how the 'migrant' is a racialised subject, derived from migration regimes based on historical colonial frames of reference and cultural norms (Back et al., 2012).

In visualising the experiences of the young men in the research project, the aim was to bring the reader into the space of the reception centre for the unaccompanied minor, to share experiences of growing up and becoming adults, to render these experiences more 'ordinary' and less exceptional. In line with Nabizadeh, through the comic, 'the reading process illuminates repressed elements' (Ibidem: 349) of the lives of these young men within the reception centre space. It thus draws attention to this invisibilised space and the experiences of the young men within it. In doing so, it responds to Bruno Riccio's (2023) call to take into account the perspectives of migrants themselves on the reception system that hosted them. It then foregrounds the humanity of young migrants often obfuscated by rhetorical labels of 'threats'.

Finally, another key aim of the comic was to reach a diverse audience, as discussed above, something others have identified in academic comics (Della Puppa, 2022; Lancione, 2017). The comic is a short (16-page) graphic pamphlet, also available in PDF format. In this way, working as a more versatile product that may also be used as a teaching resource and, potentially, for local NGO campaigns, thus enabling the dissemination of the research outside academia and to reach alternative audiences; a useful potential (Kuttner, 2021). To date, it has been used as an Italian language

teaching tool for young men currently residing in Giallo, a teaching resource for aspiring social workers, a pedagogic tool for school teachers, as well as presented and shared at a variety of academic and non-academic conferences and seminars and will be published in its entirety in the journal for social workers *Animazione Sociale* (Walker et al., 2024). As such, its potential to reach a more diverse public (particularly when compared to academic articles) is evident.

The Line of the Horizon

The line of the horizon is an 'ethnographic novel' presenting the results of a multi-sited ethnography carried out in Italy and London. This qualitative research explored the motives and hopes, disappointments, and living conditions of male migrants from Bangladesh who, after spending more than half of their lives in Italy—arriving there between the 1990s and the 2000s to subsequently be joined by their wives, have children there, and, most importantly, become Italian citizens—had decided to emigrate to London with their families.

Until the mid-1970s, Italy was largely a country of emigration: the number of Italians leaving the country to live and work abroad was higher than the number of foreigners moving to Italy. But since around 1976, the number of people immigrating to Italy has increased, exceeding the number of Italians emigrating, although emigration has also continued. However, in the last decade or so a new phenomenon has emerged, not only in Italy, but throughout Mediterranean Europe, that we could define as "onward migration". In the case of Italy, these are immigrants of foreign origin who, after almost twenty years in the country, acquire Italian citizenship and emigrate to other countries. They use their European passports to move around the European (and sometimes global) space without major bureaucratic problems or the need for entry visas.

The line of the horizon: an ethnographic novel on migration between Bangladesh, Italy, and London shows the lighter and darker sides of this migration experience, thus revealing the dynamism of these 'new Italian citizens', as well as giving insight into a migration route that is shaped by continuous global transformations and the social, political, and economic situations of Italy and Southern Europe in general. It would also be useful for highlighting the difficulties and critical moments of ethnographic research. The language of comics may help to reach a wider audience of

non-experts, beyond the usual readership of social scientists and migration scholars.

Collaborating with professional cartoonists push sociologists to reflect on various aspects of language and narrative styles. In order to create an ethnography using the language of comics a social scientist has to learn—at least at a basic level—how to use this language and to construct a narrative that was adapted to it: how to write a coherent and complete script; how to write fluent dialogue that is spontaneous, clear and concise; how to exploit the communicative capacity of drawing to ensure that each panel functions effectively without long sections of written text; and how to divide up, frame, and organise the various panels on the page.

In order to make the sociological and ethnographic contents of the sociological work accessible to a wider audience, the authors (researcher, screenwriter, illustrator) have to make sure it was an enjoyable and engaging read. In other words, the team had to choose specific narrative strategies that allowed to lead the reader organically through the various spheres of the *onward migration* of Bangladeshi-Italians from Italy to London, demonstrating the ambivalence of their experience and the multi-faceted nature of the 'migratory prism'.

Focusing on the individual, family and migratory biographies of a single Italian-Bangladeshi protagonist would have meant gathering different and sometimes contradictory situations, dynamics, points of view, and experiences into one story, creating a narrative that would have seemed unrealistic and forced. The researcher and his co-authors also discarded the idea of devoting each chapter to a different protagonist, as this would have resulted in a fragmented narrative, much like an academic essay, making it a difficult read for those not socialised in the 'traditional' styles of the social sciences. The researcher and his co-authors, thus, opted to pivot the ethnographic narrative around the protagonist generated by this narrative: the researcher. Putting the researcher and his movements at centre stage allowed the researcher himself and his co-authors to bring together the sometimes divergent trajectories of the Italian-Bangladeshi interviewees, thus creating a choral narrative of their onward migration. It also meant the researcher could show the often uncertain developments of ethnographic research "in the making" with its inevitable setbacks and unexpected accelerations, the obstacles encountered and the strategies adopted to get around them. In other words, it depicted the ethnographer "in the field": his body and emotions, his experiences and feelings, his

gaffes and embarrassment, his idiosyncrasies and excitement, and his rigidity and transformation.

Placing the figure of the researcher at the centre of the comic's narrative thus allowed the qualitative researcher to restore the ironies and poetics of ethnographic work, its prosaic nature, its problems, and even, perhaps, its allure. At the same time it enabled the desacralisation and demystification of both ethnographic practice and academic canons.

While, as said above, the language of comics forced the researcher and his co-authors to reduce the amount of words, to cut down the essayistic component of the text and free up the dialogue, it also allowed them to visually represent the fieldwork meeting places, the multiplicity of bodily *hexis,* and their interaction within physical, social, and cultural spaces. It also permitted the researcher to illustrate the betrayal of emotional reactions with an immediacy that is unattainable in a 'traditional' socio-anthropological text, which is forced to recount such moments in redundant glosses and lengthy clarifications.

The visual language of comics allowed the ethnographer to present his interviews with Bangladeshi-Italians in London whilst also representing their migratory, family, and socio-material trajectories on the page. It also helped the sociologist to temporally interweave the historical, structural, collective, and macro spheres with the subjective and micro spheres of individual stories and choices.

Again, in comparison with 'traditional' sociological writing, the illustrated ethnographic form was better able to demonstrate the social connection between different places (Bangladesh, Italy, and London) and between multiple temporalities and life events (their childhoods in Bangladesh, their early years in Italy, being reunited with their families, becoming parents, another emigration, old age, and death).

This interweaving of the spatial and the temporal was translated through the use of different colour tones, showing that every moment of the present contains the past and is already projected into the future. The researcher and his co-authors chose warm and reassuring colours to communicate the nostalgia of the years spent in Italy, cold and unwelcoming colours to convey the difficulty of integrating into the socio-territorial context of London, and sepia-brown tones, borrowed from the language of cinema, for biographical and historical flashbacks to the distant past. In fact, a limited colour palette must be chosen to ensure the work looks harmonious and coherent.

Most importantly, the language of comics meant that the methodology of ethnographic practice could be represented in all its reflexivity and emotional bearing. It allowed the sociologist to demonstrate a variety of factors that would be harder to address in a traditional academic article: the various different manners in which the field can be accessed, with their attached and inevitable worries and awkwardnesses; the interweaving of rituals of hospitality and empirical activity; the way in which ethnographic activity is traversed by continuous redefinitions and recombinations of power relations between the researcher and the research protagonists, which results in the ethnographer feeling a sense of inadequacy and anxiety, and the sensation that they have become the subject of criticism by those who are meant to be "their" interviewees; the fear of feeling out of place, of being intrusive, of assuming a colonial and/or objectifying gaze, of not being understood, of not being able to fully grasp what we are being told in the field, of wasting time and not having enough of it, and of not having slavishly followed the rigid models of collecting and organising qualitative data.

The canonical sociological and anthropological literature often seems autopoietic or, at most, developed by a deus ex machina who has been dropped 'into' the field, confident in their bibliographic research, and free of hesitations or uncertainties. It often simply ignores unforeseen events or failures, and disregards the cognitive curiosity and proactivity of interviewees in their attempts to interview the interviewer.

If ethnography is a life posture, ethnographic works must explore what accounts by social scientists usually hide, such as their lack of control over research trajectories, the challenges posed by unforeseen events that impose new strategies, possible failures, or the reading of an apparent failure as a research result. Above all, as a life posture, ethnography can help the researcher to understand the relations between different points of view, feelings, personal issues, and biographical (im)mobilities, creating moments of catharsis and encouraging processes of reflexivity. Through the ethnographic novel, it has been possible to show the interiority of the researcher, allowing the reader to glimpse the processes of reflexivity that ethnographic and interpretative research set in motion, not only in those on whom the research is centred, but also and above all on those who conduct the research. Indeed, at the end of his geographical, ethnographic and biographical journey, the protagonist of *The line of the horizon*, like all those who have carried out a successful ethnography, is "transformed" by his immersion in the social world he has been studying, since

understanding others inevitably leads to understanding—or revealing?—something about yourself. In other words, a dual biographical tension and reciprocal reflexivity runs through the pages of the comic, linking the researcher with the other research protagonists.

This way of doing ethnographic writing—or this literary activity—has unconsciously borrowed elements from the macro-categories of writing on the self. The formula of the *Bildungsroman* is present as much for the Italo-Bangladeshi who pursues a multidimensional and polysemous horizon that becomes increasingly global, as for the researcher who, in a game of mirrors, places their research activity alongside their personal life. This individual and collective growth takes place through a 'journey', a dynamic that recalls the literary genre of *reportage,* although in this case the photographs are replaced by pencils and watercolour.

Qualitative research has a 'spiral' movement—constantly oscillating between empirical activity and theory—but inevitably also involves the "overspill" of analytical reflection into the researcher's daily life. Sometimes the "instrusiveness" of ethnography into the everyday arises in those moments in which the researcher seeks a spatio-temporal dimension "for themselves", for instance in the practice of a sport, a discipline, or a creative activity. In *The line of the horizon* the practice of running has been chosen as a space of reflexivity in which to return to theory and facilitate dialogue between the empirical moment, the analytical moment, and the scientific literature, and, of course, as a time in which the researcher has the opportunity to understand *himselves* on their journey to understanding.

However, visual representation raises difficult questions that the social sciences had learnt to 'manage' in their 'traditional' forms of writing and presentation, but which now forcefully re-emerge: those relating, for example, to how to avoid stereotypes and simplifications in the representations of the class position and racialisation of subjects, of bodily *hexis* and internalised social *habitus*.

At the same time, perhaps the re-emergence of these problems can help to reveal, in an unhypocritical manner, the positions, categories, and censorship that social scientists more or less consciously camouflage between the more canonical lines of their texts. The language of comics and the visual representation of social-anthropological work thus oblige social scientists to put themselves on the line, stepping out of a comfort zone in which academic modes of discourse are rarely challenged. Those who have the courage to do this can contribute to the creation of truly 'public' knowledge.

Discussion

As we have argued in the preceding, potentially, comics and their visual representation can play a key role in providing more complex narratives and contrasting singular 'crisis' narratives. In the overly politicised domain of discourses around migration, there is a clear and evident need to counteract the historical and geographical exceptionalism through which the 'migrant crisis' in Europe is framed. The proliferation of borders around the EU is such that people wishing to seek asylum now have 'no other option than to cross borders irregularly' (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023, p. 142). Indeed, terminology has political consequences. This has been particularly evident in recent media and civil society debates as to whether to use the term 'refugee' or 'migrant' in the European 'crisis'.

The construct of the migrant is inherently racialised, deriving from migration regimes based upon historical colonial frames of reference and cultural norms (Back et al., 2012). As Sinha and Back remind us, it is 'worth re-examining the ways in which the frameworks for understanding migration and in which the *figure of the migrant* is produced in debate have become part of the problem itself' (2014, p. 475, emphasis in original). If we take Italy in particular, a country which has become a site of the 'spectacle' at the border (De Genova, 2013) of the "migrant crisis" currently affecting Europe, where migrants are discussed in a negative manner, and predominantly as invasion, inferior, and/ or threat (Perocco & Della Puppa, 2023). It is then of even more paramount importance to provide counternarratives. As the work of Barbara Spadaro (2022) in particular in relation to Italian migration shows, comics have the potential to play a key role in this.

Comics can portray ambiguity, uncertainty, and multiple perspectives via the tension between images and words in a way that academic prose cannot (Kuttner, 2021). As Dominic Davies (2022) observes, in relation to Oliver Kugler's work, his technique of overlaying panels on top of one another rather than in a linear succession, creates a resulting paradox of temporal simultaneity allowing for a story of both 'displacement and emplacement', which would be difficult to create through text alone. A form of 'retrospective (re)presentation' (Rumsby, 2020).

Comics also have the important ability to render the extraordinary ordinary (Davies, 2022), which the comic form can enable more easily than text alone. Indeed, for Charlie Rumsby (2020), a potential humanising strength of the comic is to move the viewer beyond a stark assessment

of what is lacking and instead to reveal the details of their daily lives. This enables viewers of the comic to empathise with a variety of experiences that are not directly correlated solely to migrancy status. It is this ability of the comic, as Shannon Sandford argues, to make visible plural and diverse lives which can then 'contests official policies predicated on erasure and silence' (Sandford, 2024, p. 200). Similarly, Golnar Nabizadeh argues that comics can 'carve new spaces of visibility' (Nabizadeh, 2016, p. 355) through graphically depicting those places that are kept out of public view and where entry is difficult for those who do not work or live there.

For Wong and colleagues (2020), the comic allows for 'imagin[ing] or *visualis[ing]* alternative[s]' (315) which can 'challenge the assumptions underpinning both government policies and public opinion' (316). Nonetheless, they flag some of the difficulties with, as they put it, 'ethically mind[ing] the gap between subject and representation' (Ibidem: 320). Anna Vuorinne and Ralf Kauranen et al. (2023) observe how representations of suffering may also victimise migrants, making their helplessness and powerlessness appear as (essential) properties of their subjectivity rather than structural circumstances deriving from unequal legal-political frameworks. This is why Sidonie Smith has defined many comics depicting refugee or migrant stories as 'crisis comics', or comics whose reading 'rehearses a form of rescue of the other' (Smith, 2011, p. 64).

Indeed, Vuorinne and Kauranen caution that whilst comics have been seen as purveyors of alternatives to anonymising, dehumanising, sensationalist, and scaremongering media representations, their history nonetheless also points to the opposite use in which stereotypes are both purposefully manipulated to, or inadvertently, provide anti-migrant representation (Vuorinne & Kauranen, 2023, p. 10). Nina Mickwitz contends that 'graphic narrative does offer a capacity for narrative complexity, temporal simultaneity, shifting focalization, visual metaphors, and rhetorical opportunities, such as the deliberate incongruity between text and image' (Mickwitz, 2020, p. 459). However, she cautions, 'such qualities require consideration on a case-by-case basis, rather than being presumed to be characterising traits of all comics, or even comics addressing social inequalities' (ivi). It needs to be remembered that 'graphic narrative is as capable of crudity' (ivi) as examples show.

Nonetheless, as Smith herself recognises, the comic form does offer possibilities for 'diverse representations to emerge and to unsettle commonplace frames of difference' (Smith, 2011, p. 65). Here we see Dittmer's argument that 'comic book visualities' can 'open opportunities

for more plural, flexible narratives to emerge' (2010, p. 223). In the case of Snakes and Ladders, the comic was shared with participants for feedback, the 'ironic perspective' that Groglopo and Alvarez (2023) argue comics can bring to academic work was recognised and appreciated by the participants when they viewed the comic. They appreciated the humour in the comic and felt it reflected well their experiences. The ability to share and gain feedback on the research is also something the comic form offers that the academic text cannot.

In both case studies we discuss in this chapter, the comic form, particularly in the longer work of *The line of the horizon*, helped the sociologist to temporally interweave the historical, structural, collective, and macro spheres with the subjective and micro spheres of individual stories and choices. Further comics may offer social scientists greater space within which to reflect on their own practices and methodologies. Collaborating with professional cartoonists can push sociologists to reflect on various aspects of language and narrative styles. In order to create an ethnography using the language of comics academics are compelled to learn—at least at a basic level—how to use this language and to construct a narrative that was adapted to it: how to write a coherent and complete script; how to write fluent dialogue that is spontaneous, clear and concise; how to exploit the communicative capacity of drawing to ensure that each panel functions effectively without long sections of written text; and how to divide up, frame, and organise the various panels on the page. In order to make the sociological and ethnographic contents of the sociological work accessible to a wider audience, the authors are compelled to make sure it is an engaging and enjoyable read. Thus, we agree with Wong et al. who argue that comics can allow for complex academic research to be translated into a visual narrative, widening the accessibility of this work by reaching out to audiences beyond academia and enabling these audiences to 'imagine better worlds' through the visualisation of alternatives (2020, p. 313). Their capacity to reach a broader, more diverse audience is recognised (Della Puppa, 2022; Kuttner, 2021; Lancione, 2017).

As deftly detailed in the in *The line of the horizon*, in contrast to 'traditional' sociological writing, the illustrated ethnographic form was better able to demonstrate the social connection between different locations (Bangladesh, Italy, and London) and between multiple temporalities and

life events. The language of comics and the visual representation of social-anthropological work thus obliges social scientists to put themselves on the line, to think more deeply about questions of representation, such as how to avoid reproducing racialised categories in the process.

Simple techniques can be put to complex use: the construction of space in a sequence can be relevant to visually present the traumatic experience of the migration journey; colours or lack thereof might represent feelings (fear, hope, desperation) of migrants once in the new place; thought bubbles can express hurtful memories; speech bubbles can show the frustration of being a foreigner. Furthermore, the strategic use of colours, the positioning and the shape of strips, cartoons and balloons are particularly meaningful for multi-sited ethnographies, for research that delves into global phenomena, and for diachronic and long-term research endeavours, that is, theoretical aspects, methodological perspectives, empirical approaches, and analytical positionings that cross and characterise migration studies.

However, on the other hand, graphing invites us to ask relevant questions that—as sociologist of migration and migration scholars—we have somehow learned to handle with regard to the practice of writing. On the other hand, if every social research reflects an operation of cultural politics, the same can also be said for the choice of language with which it is reported, or disclosed. Therefore, how to represent "ethnic" or "cultural" belonging without eliminating it or reproducing its stereotypes? How to deconstruct, without removing, the 'color line' (Du Bois, 1973), the cultural difference or the naturalisation of gender corporality? It might be wondered in how many different ways ethnographic practice can be translated into images, but above all with what effects on the discourse that is produced (Gusmeroli, 2022).

Graphic experimentation in ethnography is enhancing reflexivity, collaboration, and public dissemination (Theodossopoulos, 2022) and this is an important part of pushing social scientists to reflect further on these elements. The graphic novel has the potential to materialise a powerful space of visibility for what may otherwise be invisible, and in the hostile environment towards migrants, it is increasingly more urgent that the work of sociologists focusing upon migration is made more 'public'.

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