

Silvia Aru

# Diary from the border. Ventimiglia



*Illustrated by*  
Emiliano Serreli



Their story begins on ground level, with footsteps. They are myriad, but do not compose a series. They cannot be counted because each unit has a qualitative character: a style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation. Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together.

- Michel De Certeau, 1988, p. 97 -

*Lilgoulou Keita, research support intermediary,  
Ventimiglia - November 2018.*

**Marie Skłodowska-Curie project**

*"A Place for Asylum Seekers. European migration policies and their socio-spatial impacts (PASS)"  
(No 752021).*

<https://passresearchingtheeuasylumsystem.com>

Host Institution: University of Amsterdam, AISRR  
- Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research,  
IMES - Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies.

**ISBN of the italian edition: 9791220061032**  
*Published in March 2020.*

## Preface

The *Diary from the border. Ventimiglia* is an integral part of the wider Marie Skłodowska-Curie project *A Place for Asylum Seekers. European migration policies and their socio-spatial impacts* (PASS). Within the PASS Project, during the last four months of 2018, I conducted an ethnographic research in Ventimiglia, an Italian town of around 23.000 inhabitants, located on the border between Italy and the rich French area of the Cote d'Azur.

Like Calais and Melilla, Ventimiglia is one of the checkpoints (Garelli, Tazzioli, 2018) of internal EU control and management system on migration flows. Since 2015, the city has become one of the symbolic places of the EU 'migration crisis', due to the suspension of the Schengen Treaty by France and the resulting rise in informal migrant settlements. Like other similar contexts (Cassidy et al, 2018) inside the EU, Ventimiglia first experienced a 'de-bordering' process - thanks to the Schengen acquis - followed by a new 're-bordering' process related to the migration crisis. The 'return of the border' has resulted in a greater presence of security forces on both sides of the border, an increase in the number of people blocked in Ventimiglia due to rejections at the French border side, in the creation of the Roja Camp (2016) run by the Red Cross, and, last but not least, in the development of informal camps built by transiting migrants and their

constant evictions by Italian authorities.

Different people pass through here: those who want to go to France, those who want to go to Switzerland or Germany but had had problems in crossing other borders (e.g. the Brenner); but also migrants who have lost their place in the Italian asylum system after receiving an application rejection or people with a residence permit expired. Actually, the Roja Camp is currently the only one, in Italy, to be open not only to asylum seekers but also to migrants who do not (or may not) apply for asylum or those who, for the most diverse reasons, no longer have access to any public support. During the time, Ventimiglia has become a 'clearing house' for all those who have been stranded during the border crossing between Italy and France and for the various people expelled from the Italian asylum system.

In Ventimiglia, I carried out my research in a number of different locations: from the city's public spaces to the border 'line', but also inside the Eufemia Infopoint run by the 20K Collective and the city's Caritas centre, both of which provide services to migrants.



*City of Ventimiglia, minimum map.*

The research tools were calibrated according to the context and the communicative situation, which was not always easy given the delicate and vulnerable conditions the migrants, encountered during these four months of empirical investigations, found themselves.

I walked several times with migrants along the route from the centre of the city to Camp Roja; I took the train that goes to the first French station, Menton-Garavan, in order to monitor the checks carried out by the French gendarmerie; and I travelled from Ventimiglia to the Prefecture in Imperia, where asylum requests presented in the border cities are dealt with. I also carried out semi-structured interviews with migrants residing at the CAS (Reception centre for asylum seekers) in the nearby town of Bordighera and inside the so-called “Transit Camp” run by the Red Cross, which opened in 2016 in response to the increase in migrant numbers as a result of the border closure.

The decision to investigate both formal and informal spaces was guided by the notion that both are the result

of the constant redefinition of the border regime in Ventimiglia. Eventually, I interviewed employees of NGOs in Ventimiglia, as well as officials involved in forced transfers between the Member States, and in voluntary and forced returns, in the offices in Rome (Italian Dublin Unit, EASO, IOM, National Guarantor of the Rights of Detainees).

The fieldwork has brought with it a necessary reflection on Ethical issues and, therefore, on research outputs. Given the increasing vulnerability of migrants and asylum seekers in the EU, I have decided not to proceed with the direct publication of the ‘audio’ of the interviews I have conducted, as previously planned. In many cases, the use of the recorder was problematic both because of the irregular situation of some of the participants encountered during the fieldwork, and because of a rapport based on openness and mutual trust that is paramount in such scenarios. To protect participants involved in my research, I finally decided to structure my ‘Research Diary’ not in audio but in visual form, by using comics as a vehicle for the dissemination and sharing of my research experience in Ventimiglia. For this reason, I asked the illustrator Emiliano Serreli to give form to my Diary from the border. Ventimiglia which covers an extensive period: from 2016, when motivations behind the project arose, to the end of 2018, when I



carried out the actual fieldwork research in Ventimiglia.

The use of comics as a research tool and object of inquiry is increasingly present at the international level, as many interdisciplinary studies show (Dittmer, 2014, Peterle, 2018; dell’Agnese & Amato, 2018). In the academic field, comics have drawn scholars’ attention in different ways, either as objects of investigation in and of themselves or, less commonly, as a research output used to construct the spatial narrative. My choice fits in this second line of interest. I did not analyse the space in comics nor of the comics (Peterle, 2018, p. 2); rather, I translated part of my project results into comics.

Beyond protecting informers and their anonymity, I decided to use the communication potential of this medium, which allows us to convey complex contents in a “simplified and accessible” form (Kleeman, 2006) and, in particular, to represent “uncomfortable topics” (De Spuches, 2016). Thanks to comics, a space of visibility and possibilities can be opened for under-represented stories (Giubilaro, 2016). It is not a coincidence that in the XXI century, more and more comics and graphic novels are based on migrants’ stories, collected through interviews, and used to break the silence on important political and disputed issues (De Spuches, 2016).

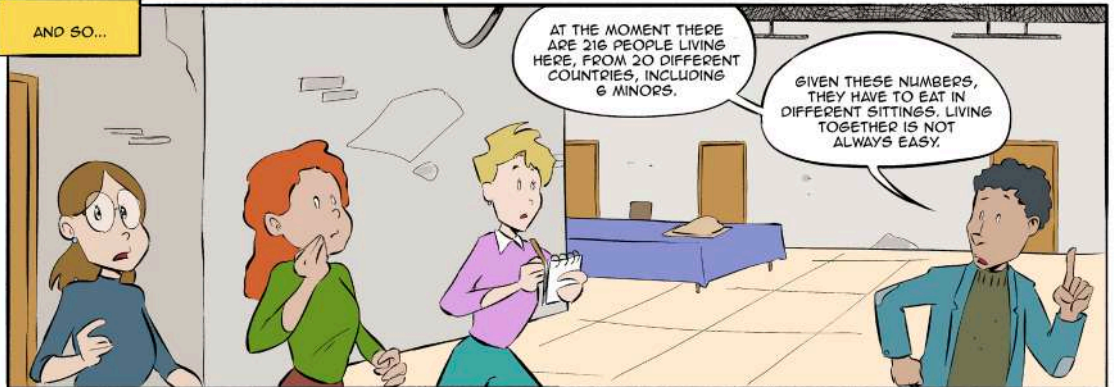
CAGLIARI, SARDINIA, 21 NOVEMBER 2016



\* CENTRO ACCOGLIENZA STRAORDINARIO  
[EMERGENCY RECEPTION CENTRE]



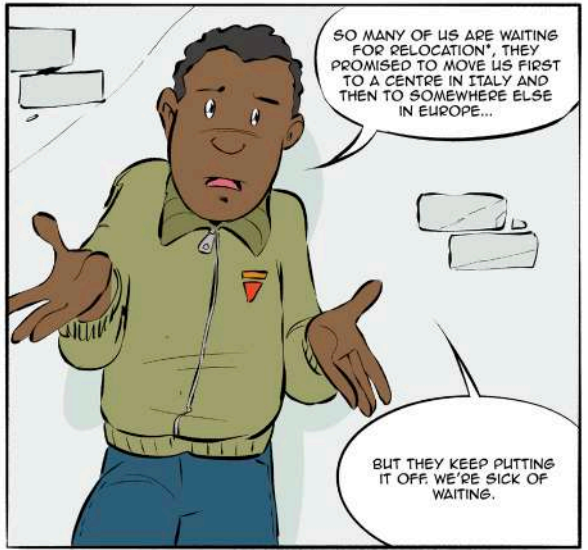
AND SO...





HOW ARE YOU GETTING ON HERE?

BADLY. WE ERITREANS HAVE BEEN HERE FOR MONTHS AND WE'RE WAITING TO BE MOVED, BUT THEY DON'T TELL US EXACTLY WHEN.

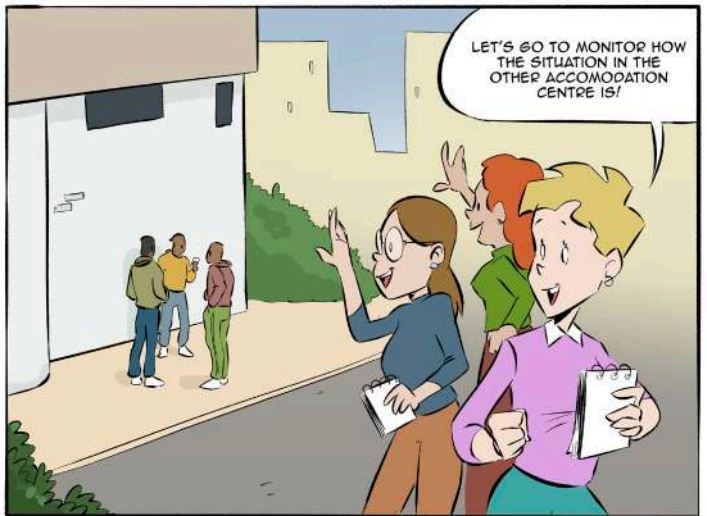


SO MANY OF US ARE WAITING FOR RELOCATION\*, THEY PROMISED TO MOVE US FIRST TO A CENTRE IN ITALY AND THEN TO SOMEWHERE ELSE IN EUROPE...

BUT THEY KEEP PUTTING IT OFF. WE'RE SICK OF WAITING.

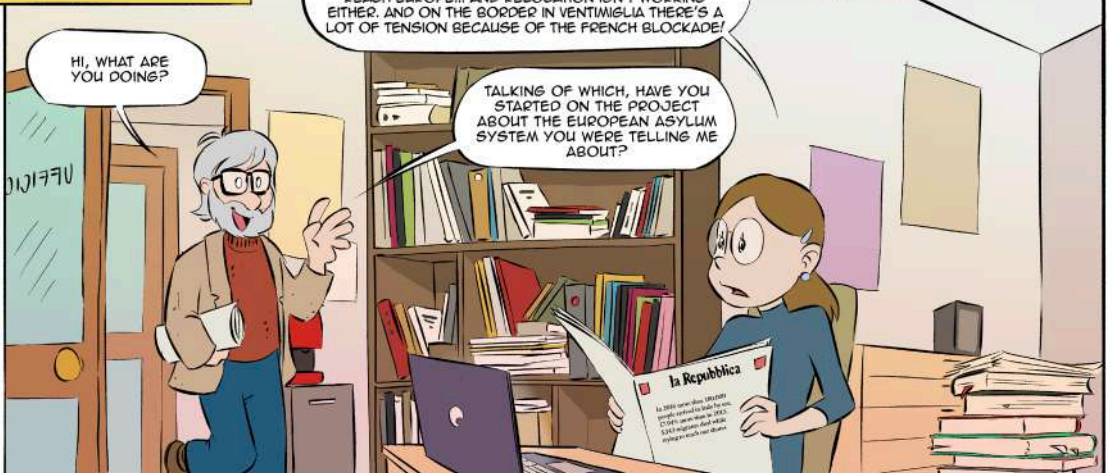


WE ARE RECORDING THE SITUATION IN THIS CENTRE. WE WANT TO UNDERSTAND WHAT PROBLEMS YOU ARE HAVING... IN SOME OTHER PLACES THEY ALSO TOLD US ABOUT LONG WAITING TIMES AND UNCLEAR PROCEDURES!



LET'S GO TO MONITOR HOW THE SITUATION IN THE OTHER ACCOMMODATION CENTRE IS!

CASLIARI 8 DECEMBER 2016, UNIVERSITY

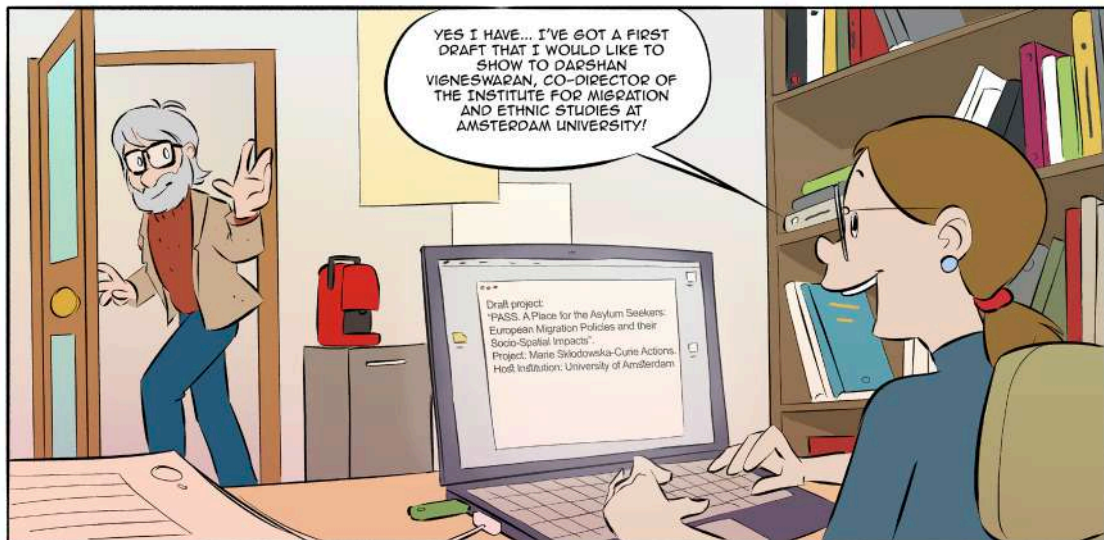


HI, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

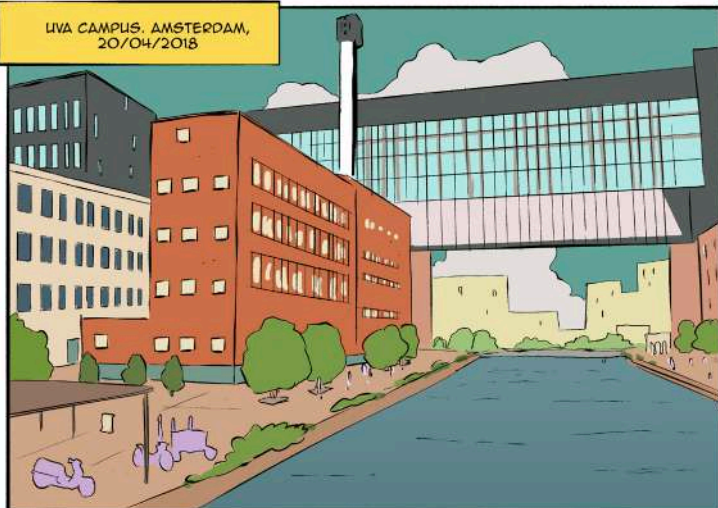
HI MALIRI! I WAS READING THE FIGURES FOR THE MIGRANT EMBARKATIONS AND DEATHS IN 2016. IT'S GETTING HARDER ALL THE TIME FOR THOSE TRYING TO REACH EUROPE... AND RELOCATION ISN'T WORKING EITHER. AND ON THE BORDER IN VENTIMIGLIA THERE'S A LOT OF TENSION BECAUSE OF THE FRENCH BLOCKADE!

TALKING OF WHICH, HAVE YOU STARTED ON THE PROJECT ABOUT THE EUROPEAN ASYLUM SYSTEM YOU WERE TELLING ME ABOUT?

\* RELOCATION: THE 'EU RELOCATION SYSTEM' IMPLEMENTED BETWEEN 2015 AND 2017 AIMED AT TRANSFERRING 120,000 ASYLUM SEEKERS - MOSTLY SYRIAN, ERITREAN AND IRAQI - FROM ITALY AND GREECE TO THE OTHER EU MEMBER STATES.



LIVA CAMPUS, AMSTERDAM,  
20/04/2018

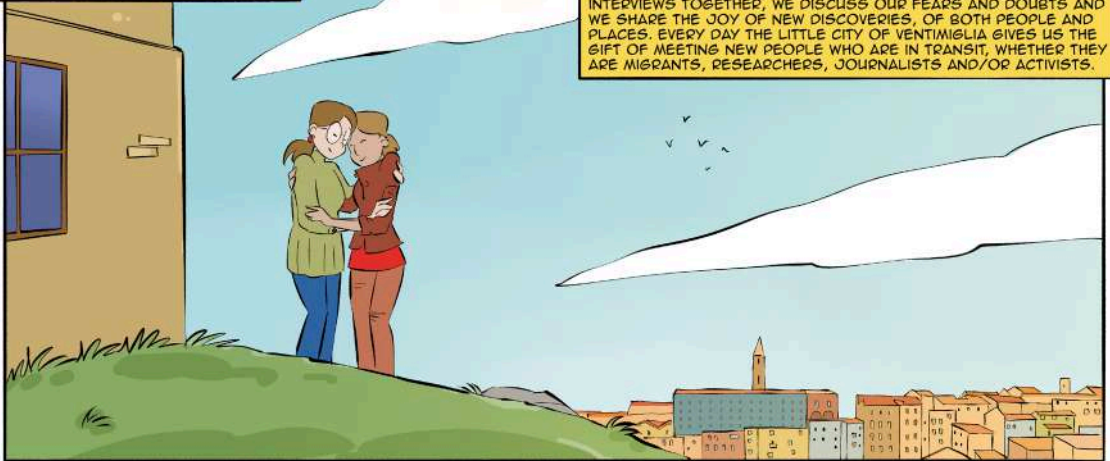




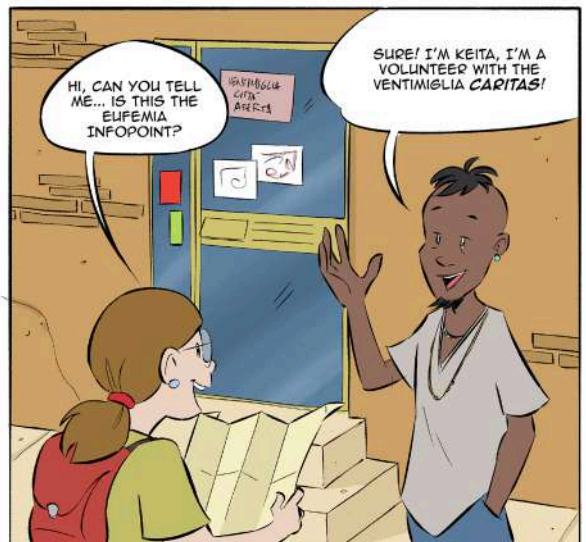
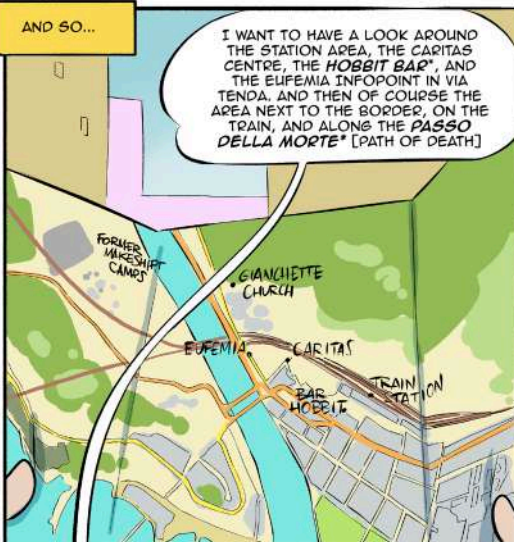


VENTIMIGLIA 15/09/2018

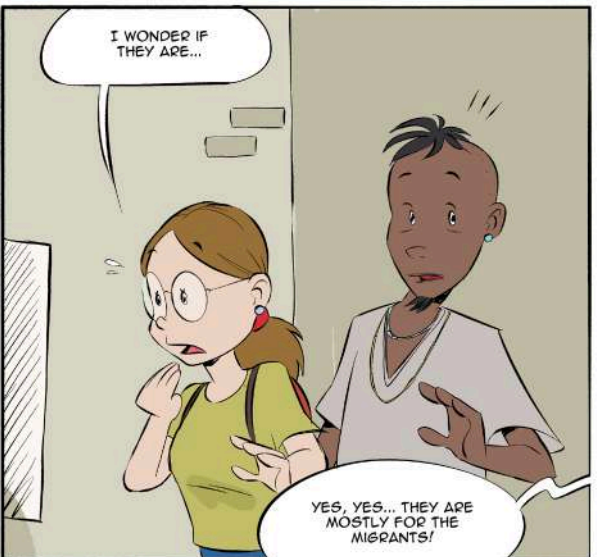
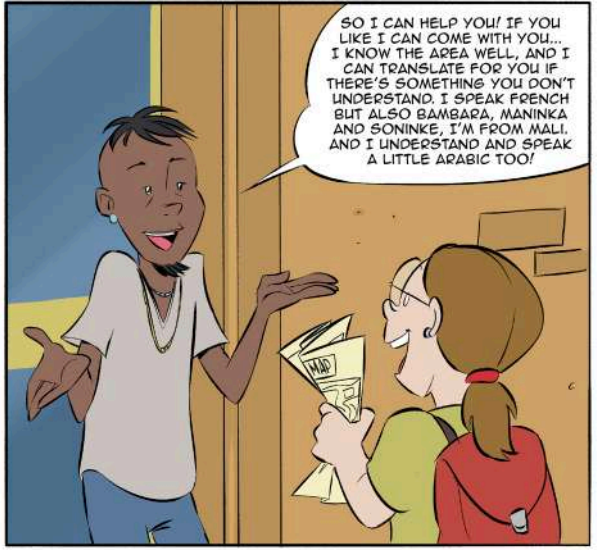
SO WE'VE STARTED! FOR ABOUT 4 MONTHS NOW CECILIA AND I HAVE BEEN SHARING MOST OF THE FIELDWORK IN THE FRENCH-ITALIAN BORDER CITY OF VENTIMIGLIA. WE DO SOME INTERVIEWS TOGETHER, WE DISCUSS OUR FEARS AND DOUBTS AND WE SHARE THE JOY OF NEW DISCOVERIES, OF BOTH PEOPLE AND PLACES. EVERY DAY THE LITTLE CITY OF VENTIMIGLIA GIVES US THE GIFT OF MEETING NEW PEOPLE WHO ARE IN TRANSIT, WHETHER THEY ARE MIGRANTS, RESEARCHERS, JOURNALISTS AND/OR ACTIVISTS.



AND SO...



<sup>\*</sup> **HOBBIT BAR:** THE PLACE, RUN BY DELIA BUONOMO, HAS OVER TIME BECOME A CENTRE OF SOLIDARITY AND ANTI-RACISM WHICH SUPPORTS PEOPLE IN TRANSIT IN VENTIMIGLIA.  
<sup>\*</sup> **PASSO DELLA MORTE:** THIS IS A PATH THAT CROSSES THE MOUNTAINS ON THE ITALIAN-FRENCH BORDER, ALLOWING PEOPLE TO REACH MENTONE, FRANCE WITHIN A FEW HOURS OF LEAVING VENTIMIGLIA.





WE HAVE TO BE SO CAREFUL ALL THE TIME, WE ARE SCARED OF RUNNING THEM DOWN. THEY HIDE EVERYWHERE. IN THE DARK, A LOT OF THEM ARRIVE AT NIGHT...



WHAT YOU SEE HERE ON THE GROUND IS ALL THE ITEMS THAT PEOPLE DISCARDED BEFORE THEY LEFT.



AND WHERE DO THEY HIDE?

THE SMUGGLERS USE THIS KEY TO HIDE THEM ON THE TRAIN, IN THE BATHROOM, OR IN THE ELECTRICAL ROOM...



BUT THE FRENCH POLICE ARE ONTO THIS AND THEY CHECK THE WHOLE TRAIN WHEN IT ARRIVES IN MENTON...



YES... AND IT'S DANGEROUS TO HIDE IN THE ELECTRICAL CABIN!

YES, YES... OF COURSE IT IS! THEY DO IT BECAUSE THEY ARE DESPERATE, I UNDERSTAND...

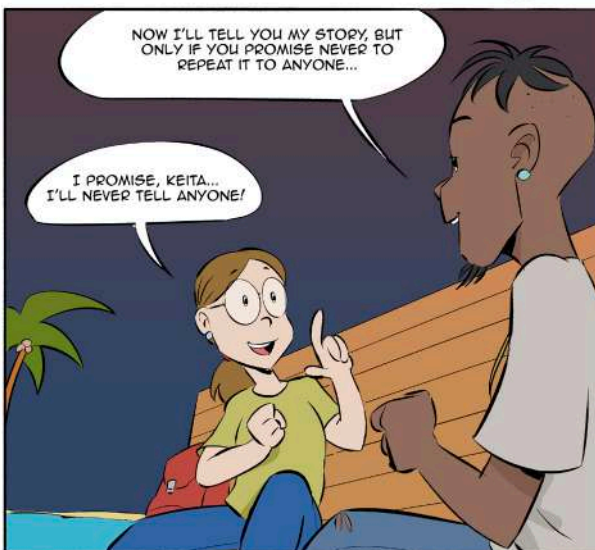
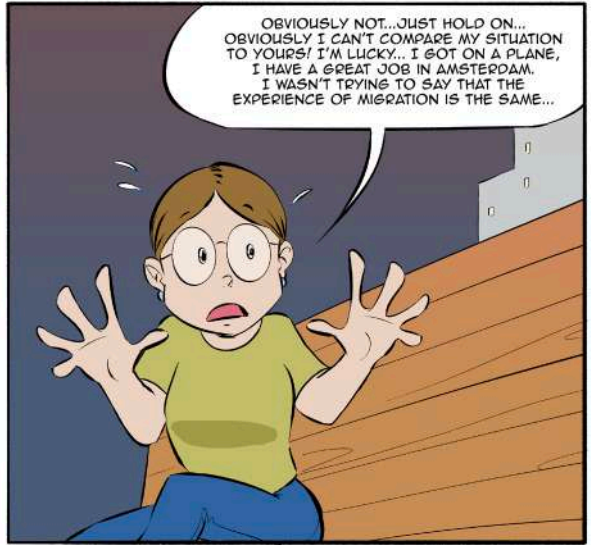


BUT WE CAN'T RISK OUR HEALTH AND OUR JOBS FOR FEAR OF RUNNING THEM DOWN. WE MADE A REPORT TO THE STATE POLICE ABOUT THE CONTINUAL PRESENCE OF PEOPLE ALONG THE TRACKS!

LATER...









AT THE END OF 2015, AFTER THE TERRORIST ATTACKS IN PARIS, FRANCE DECLARED AN OFFICIAL STATE OF EMERGENCY. IN THE NEW CLIMATE OF HEIGHTENED ALERT, CONTROLS AT THE BORDER WITH ITALY WERE MASSIVELY INCREASED. THE CITY OF VENTIMIGLIA, LESS THAN 10 KM FROM THE FRENCH BORDER, BECAME A BOTTLENECK FOR THE MANY MIGRANTS WHO WERE ATTEMPTING TO LEAVE ITALY IRREGULARLY.

MENTON-GARAVAN STATION  
(THE FIRST STATION INSIDE FRANCE  
WHEN YOU LEAVE VENTIMIGLIA)



IS HE WITH YOU?

JE SUIS FRANCAIS!  
TU VEUX VOIR MON DOCUMENT?

CETTE FOIS PAS!

MHMH... NO!

OPEN UP!



YOU CAN'T GO TO FRANCE...  
WHY CAN'T YOU UNDERSTAND  
THIS? YOU'LL BE SENT BACK  
TO ITALY!

COME WITH US SO WE  
CAN ID YOU!



BUT WHEN WILL  
THEY LET US GO?

I DON'T KNOW... SOON  
I HOPE. I'M THIRSTY AND I  
NEED TO SLEEP...

THE DAY AFTER...

HOW LONG BEFORE WE GET TO THE CITY?



THE LAST TIME THEY SENT ME BACK IT TOOK ABOUT 40 MINUTES. IT'S A LONG WAY.

WHAT SHALL WE DO NOW?



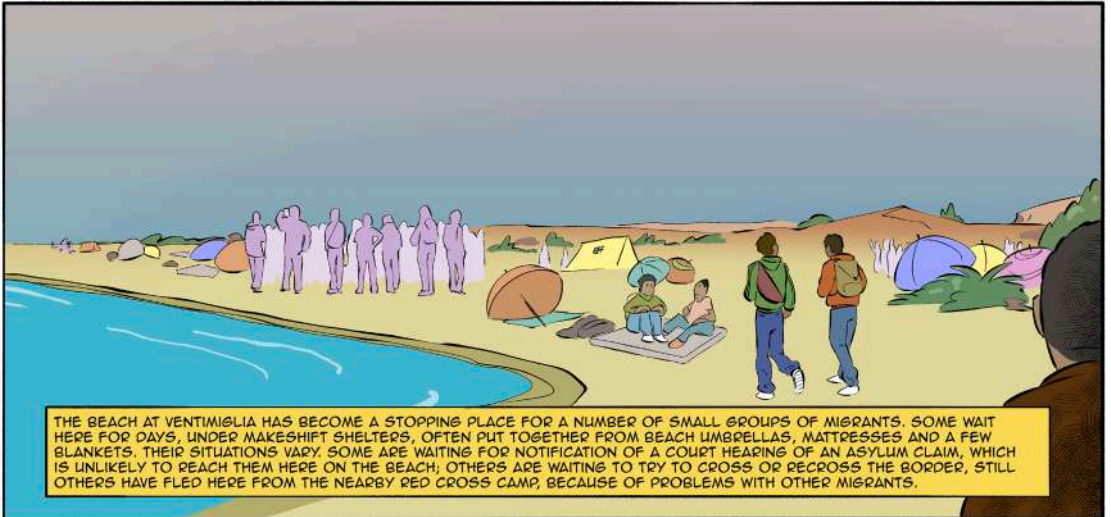
WE CAN GO TO THE STATION, WE MIGHT FIND SOMEONE WHO CAN HELP US, AND IF NOT WE'LL TRY AND GET THE TRAIN AGAIN TONIGHT!



HAVE THEY TURNED YOU AWAY AGAIN? BE CAREFUL AROUND HERE!

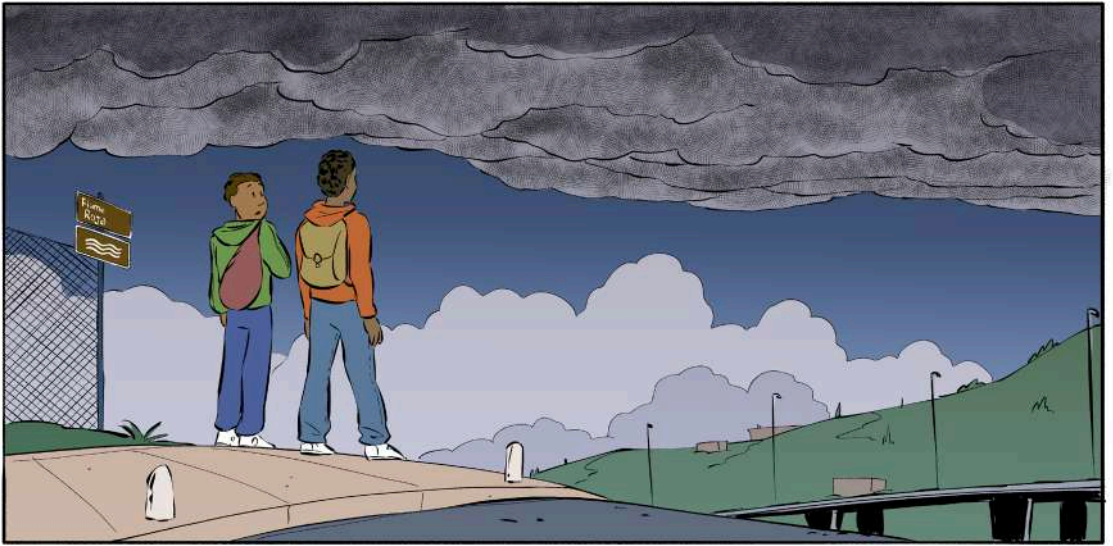




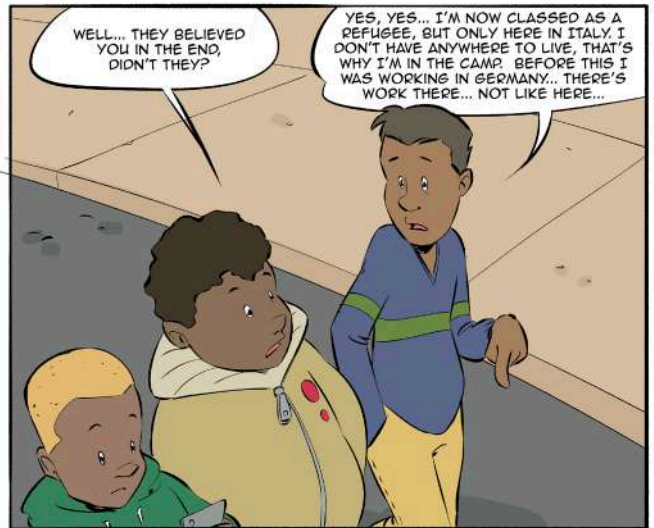
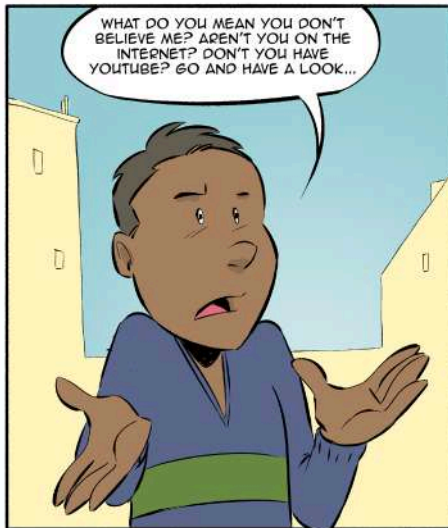






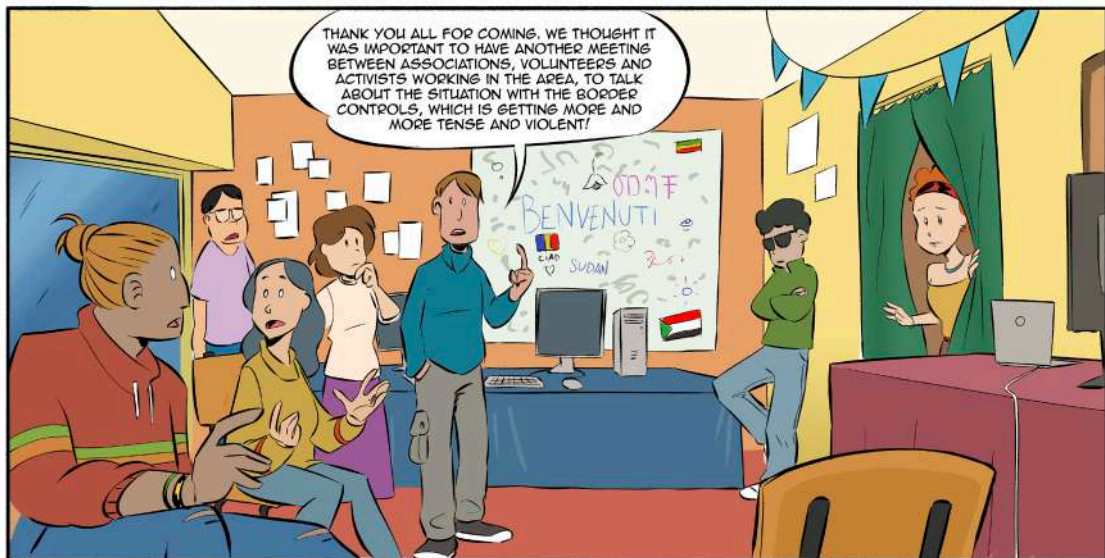




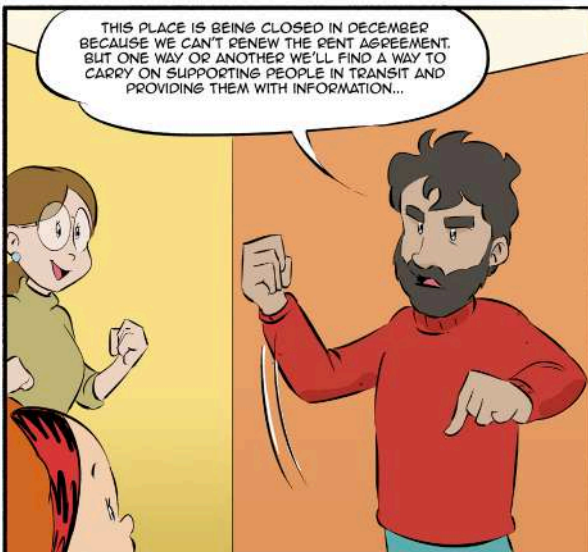


\***SECUREZZA E IMMIGRAZIONE**: THE DECREE ON SECURITY AND IMMIGRATION (840/2018) WAS APPROVED ON 27 NOVEMBER 2018.  
\*\***SPRAR**: SYSTEM OF PROTECTION FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES









# The graphic novel

Given the PASS project goals, the graphic novel was chosen because it is a useful tool for questioning the “pervading uniqueness” (Giubilaro, 2016, p. 61) of some representations on ‘migrants’ and ‘migration crisis’ in the EU. Drawings are thus considered a sort of ‘counter-map’, as opposed to the anonymous, classifying, criminalizing discourses which tend to portray the stories of migrants on EU territory and beyond.

The graphic novel aims to orient the reader within the territorial and narrative context presented, starting from my personal geographies and those of the subjects represented. The story is structured through three macro moments:

1. the period that precedes my decision to write a research project on the EU asylum system (2016)
2. my transfer to the University of Amsterdam (February 2018)
3. the fieldwork in Ventimiglia (September- December 2018).

Initially, I am one of the main characters in the graphic novel. However, as the story unfolds, my role evolves and becomes functional in leading the reader to discover the places and the stories I met in Ventimiglia. In this transition, my character, though never disappearing, deliberately assumes a secondary position in the representation.

The decision to build a narrative that emphasizes some of the moments and central passages of any (empirical) research, meant that my inclusion became meaningful. In particular, I wanted to underline the personal reasons underpinning the choice of the research topic; the importance of proper funding in pursuing a research project; the relational aspect inherent to any knowledge gaining process, which means that no research can ever be called ‘personal’ in its entirety. Thus, the use of comics also allowed me to give the right place to some people who have been central to the development of the PASS project: first of all, Maurizio Memoli (University of Cagliari), who urged me to insist in staying in Academia; Darshan Vigneswaran (University of Amsterdam), who immediately accepted my proposal, and then my ‘mates’; Francesca Mazzuzi and Cornelia Isabelle Toelgyes, from the Campaign LasciateCIEntrare, with whom I started my effort on the ground before the granting of ad hoc funding. Finally, my Diary could not miss Cecilia Vergnano, Lilgoulou Keita - who still worries about me - and Livio Amigoni who does not appear under his own name, but with all his grit and attitude among the crowd of the 20K Collective Assembly in the last scene of the novel. All the protagonists of the stories told, when my character takes a step back, are real - names aside - as are the places and dynamics presented.

## References

- Cassidy, K., Yuval-Davis, N., & Wemyss, G.** (2018). *Debordering and everyday (re) bordering in and of Dover: Post-borderland borderscapes*. *Political Geography*, 66, pp. 171-179.
- De Certeau, M.** (1988). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- De Spuches, G.** (2016). *Abitare la diaspora in Europa. Il graphic novel come forma di geopolitica popolare*. *Geotema*, 50, pp. 76-82.
- Dittmer, J.** (ed.) (2014). *Comic book geographies*. Mainz: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Geotema**, XX (2016). Special issue: *L'esperienza migratoria e la cultura popolare: passaggi, costruzioni identitarie, alterità*. Edited by dell'Agnese, E. & Amato, F.
- Giubilaro, C.** (2016). *Corpi, spazi, movimenti. Per una geografia critica della dislocazione*. Milano: Unicopli.
- Kleeman, G.** (2006). *Not just for fun: Using cartoons to investigate geographical issues*. *New Zealand Geographer*, 62(2), pp. 144-151.
- Mainwaring, Ć.** (2019). *At Europe's Edge: Migration and Crisis in the Mediterranean*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Peterle, G.** (2018). *Orientarsi tra le nuvole: cartografie, atlanti e pratiche mappanti nel racconto a fumetti*. *Between*, VIII (15).
- Tazzioli, M., Garelli, G.** (2018). *Containment beyond detention: The hotspot system and disrupted migration movements across Europe*. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, pp. 1-19.



This comic is based on the author's research experience in the field of EU migration policies, and in particular on her research diary, which was written during the ethnography carried out at the Italian-French border of Ventimiglia between September and December 2018. The comic seeks to document the results of new French border controls in place since 2015, as well as of Italian policies to manage the increased number of migrants in Ventimiglia. This work focuses on the negative impact that a specific way of understanding and managing the border has on the lives of people in transit.

The illustrator Emiliano Serreli translated the Silvia Aru's research diary into comics.

**Silvia Aru** is currently an assistant professor of Economic and Political Geography at the Polytechnic of Turin. Previously, she benefited from a Marie Curie fellowship at the University of Amsterdam (2018-2020) on the right of asylum in the European Union, of which this work is one of the outputs. Her research interests encompass migration policies and their socio-territorial impact, as well as related issues of justice and socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion.

**Emiliano Serreli** was born a cartoonist like all children. He decided to pursue his inclination by studying architecture at the University of Cagliari and, since 2015, by working on illustrations and comics mainly for the Italian and US markets.