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From fieldwork to frames: Insights from an auto-ethnographic comic on the French-Italian border of Ventimiglia

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Abstract

This paper examines *The diary from the border: Ventimiglia*, an auto-ethnographic comic based on intensive fieldwork in the Italian border city of Ventimiglia from September to December 2018. The primary objective of my empirical research was to explore the socio-spatial effects of France's reintroduction of border controls in the area since 2015, mainly targeting irregular mobilities within the European Union (EU). This study presents the auto-ethnographic comic by delving into two crucial aspects. Firstly, it illuminates the rationale behind utilising an auto-ethnographic comic as a research output, shedding light on the creative process involved in its conception. Secondly, it explores its composite narrative plot, encompassing three key elements: 'me' (the researcher's personal experiences extending beyond the fieldwork), 'me in Ventimiglia' (the researcher's encounters during the fieldwork), and 'Ventimiglia itself' (the French-Italian border regime). By fostering a trans-disciplinary dialogue encompassing migration issues, comics and life course theory, this paper enriches the geographical debate in three significant ways. It recognises the profound impact of the researcher's life events in shaping both research experiences and outcomes within and beyond the fieldwork. Additionally, it underscores the importance of auto-ethnographic comics in challenging dominant narratives and visually portraying the multifaceted experiences of migration. Lastly, it contributes to the ongoing discussion on visual methods within geography and advocates for using comics as a compelling tool to disseminate research findings, fostering empathy and a comprehensive understanding of migration experiences.

KEYWORDS

auto-ethnographic comics, critical migration studies, life course theory, French-Italian border, Ventimiglia

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2018, I conducted fieldwork in Ventimiglia—an Italian city near the French border—to explore the socio-spatial impacts of European migration policies. The primary objective of my research was to collect empirical data on irregular migration routes by documenting the accounts of migrants regarding their movements into and within the European Union (Collyer et al., 2012).

I had originally planned to employ visual research methods, such as photos and videos, as open-source research output, just as I had done in my previous research. However, during my stay in Ventimiglia, I faced challenges in aligning my initial plans with what was feasible or preferable in the fieldwork context. As a result, there are no available videos or photos showcasing my empirical work. In their place, I have crafted a concise 27-page auto-ethnography entitled *The diary from the border: Ventimiglia*.¹

This paper aims to explore this peculiar diary by examining the reasons for selecting it, the method of its creation, and its narrative structure. Initially, this geographic novel (Bertoncin et al., 2023) was created to compensate for the lack of published photos within my project. However, over time, it has acquired another value, primarily due to my growing awareness of the broader debate on comics and geography (Fall, 2014, 2020; Peterle, 2021; Serrano, 2021a, 2021b) and the fortuitous and inspiring reading of the special issue on life course theory hosted in *Area* (Wimark et al., 2017). The theoretical and methodological insights from these two streams of literature fostered a new process of reflexivity that allowed me to reinterpret my product more comprehensively than before. Following this newfound awareness, my argument emphasises the value of auto-ethnographic comics as a form of research output, particularly for geographers involved in critical migration studies.

This paper is structured as follows: the first section frames my theoretical perspective, demonstrating the relevance of linking debates on comics and geography with long-life course theory to redirect the analysis of my specific research output and recognise the heuristic potential of auto-ethnographic comics in geography. The second and third sections analyse *The diary*, by presenting the motives behind choosing a geographic novel, the process of its creation, and the core elements of *The diary's* narrative structure. Finally, the concluding section synthesises my key findings.

This work highlights the value of auto-ethnography in providing essential insights into the relationship between my life trajectory (Elder Jr. et al., 2003; Fois, 2017) and my field research experience. The immersive nature of Ventimiglia's comic narrative makes it a powerful tool within the realm of critical studies, addressing various means to respond to anonymous, classifying and criminalising official discourses against undocumented migration.

2 | CHALLENGING DOMINANT NARRATIVES THROUGH COMICS

Social sciences are currently experiencing a growing interest in alternative forms of writing (Dittmer & Bos, 2019) as opposed to purely academic ones, including creative non-fiction (Richardson, 2000), autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2003), multimedia presentations, and other innovative approaches. The focus on alternative writing methods in Social Sciences aligns with a primary objective of critical migration scholars: challenging prevailing narratives about migration. Because these narratives often fuel 'xenophobia and anti-immigration' sentiments in Western contexts (Serrano, 2021b, p. 9), scholars aim to provide a more complex and nuanced perspective on migration and migration control to a broader audience (Collyer et al., 2012; Cornelius et al., 2014; Fassin, 2019; Squire et al., 2021).

To this end, as pointed out by Dittmer (2014), one notably effective alternative form of writing includes graphic narratives in both comic book and graphic novel formats. In particular, Serrano (2021a) explains how comics can provide a critical perspective on border control, detention and deportation, while Fall (2014, p. 93) suggests that comics can counter dominant geopolitical narratives, offering 'alternative and polyvocal geopolitical visions'. Critical migration studies can also leverage the ability of comics to render visible and convey the field research that often lies at the core of their methodological approaches (Brambilla, 2015; Fall, 2020; Peterle, 2021). By highlighting the situated nature of the field and the perspectives of various actors, researchers can challenge the 'view from nowhere' (Fall, 2021, p. 22) inherent in a xenophobic understanding of migration and provide a counter-geopolitical perspective (Dittmer, 2014) based on the life stories of migrants and researchers involved in fieldwork (Squire et al., 2021). Autobiographical comics are particularly valuable in this regard. As shown by other geographers (Bertoncin et al., 2023; Fall, 2014), autobiographical comics immerse readers in the research process at each reading, effectively portraying emotions and relationships among actors, crucial data sources during fieldwork (Caretta & Cheptum, 2017), while emphasising the embodied situatedness of research production.

Theoretically, the potential of autobiographical comics can be enhanced through the debate on the theory of the long-life course. In the special issue of *Area*, Wimark et al. (2017) emphasise the role of researchers' life events in changing and being changed by research experiences and outcomes (Fois, 2017). These studies invite us to pay more attention to how places, institutions and historical contexts in which researchers' careers operate shape their fieldwork and how, in turn, fieldwork experiences shape academic identities and career trajectories (Hockey & James, 2003; Knopp, 2000; Moser, 2008). I argue that the long-life course perspective improves the potential of auto-ethnographic comics to foreground the embodied nature of fieldwork and, in this way, to provide a powerful antidote to dominant geopolitical narratives.

I contend that the life-course perspective enhances the potential of auto-ethnographic comics in highlighting the embodied nature of fieldwork, thus becoming an even more powerful antidote to dominant geopolitical narratives.

3 | THE GEOGRAPHIC NOVEL: MORE THAN A 'GRAPHIC REPLACEMENT'

If I had been asked 3 years ago why I chose to publish a graphic novel as one of my project outcomes, my answer would be: 'I found it difficult to use visual research methods'. The highly militarised context of Ventimiglia and the presence of people seeking a way to cross the border into France made me perceive the use of (tele)cameras as entirely inappropriate. As border studies literature eloquently shows, the Italian border city has become a checkpoint for the EU's internal control and management system on irregular migration flows due to France's suspension of the Schengen Treaty (Tazzioli & Garelli, 2020). This has led to the pushback of migrants to the Italian side of the border or to slowing down their movement (Amigoni et al., 2020). In that context, collecting images of people attempting to cross the border put me 'in an ethically challenging position' (Caretta & Cheptum, 2017, p. 415). On a more visceral level, I felt discomfort whenever I initially tried to use a (video)camera. As a scholar accustomed to empirical research, this experience did not surprise me. The research process is always shaped by emotional entanglements experienced in the field (Rose, 1997), and deviations from the original plan (Billo & Hiemstra, 2013) are part of the game.

At that time, however, I had not yet conceptualised that the graphic novel, initially conceived as a 'replacement', could eventually reveal something about myself and my research that I had yet to discover. I had not even realised that, through the graphic novel about Ventimiglia, an area that has recently garnered attention in various academic papers, including my own (Amigoni & Aru, 2023; Aru, 2021, 2022), I was offering a distinctive viewpoint on a crucial area within the European internal mobility control system. This perspective is genuinely unique within the realm of Ventimiglia studies, as it incorporates a visual counter-narrative of the border city, unveiled through the various stages of the research process. This way, comics adopt a bottom-up perspective in which a researcher's experiences before and during fieldwork become significant.

It took me a while before I could revisit *The diary* with a fresh perspective. It required approximately 3 years of detachment from a product I found deeply personal and, therefore, intimate. As Gambold (2017, p. 407) reminds us, we collect the data, ask the questions, and when we read our notes, 'we are no longer who we were' at the time of the research. I am no longer the same person I was 3 years ago; *The diary* now engages me 'in new kinds of dialogue and knowledge production' (Antona, 2019, p. 698). By doing so, the graphic novel demonstrates its agentic power over me, triggering new reflexivity on my research experience and fostering a meaningful reappropriation of my fieldwork in Ventimiglia (Lancione, 2017).

4 | TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO A GEOGRAPHIC NOVEL

The diary is a self-produced novel, published in Italian and English in 2020. The research is available as open-access and distributed through multiple platforms, including initially on the dedicated research webpage during its initial years. I have no record of who has read the comics,² but open access—that was the goal—has certainly made it available to a potentially much wider audience beyond the academic community. Additionally, I presented *The diary* in seminars aimed at high school teachers.

The 20 graphic pages are based on a 'graphic translation' (Lancione, 2017) of my memories, field notes and other research outputs such as interviews. In this translation process (Peterle, 2021, p. xvi), the illustrator Emiliano Serreli played a key role in transforming interviewees into characters, walk-along interviews into plotlines, and maps into creative

practices. Even though I was living in Amsterdam at the time, I chose an illustrator from my hometown with whom I had previously worked successfully and with whom I could more easily communicate in my native language. This prior acquaintance also facilitated Emiliano's graphical representation. For instance, my avatar is entirely based on his memory of my face and my tendency to gesticulate constantly (more than the abundant gesticulation often attributed to 'Italians') rather than any explicit request from me to depict myself in a certain way.

The intensive dialogue between Emiliano and me was conducted through Skype calls and numerous emails. I sent plots, photos of locations and character dialogues, and he sent back sketches of faces and settings. I reviewed his drafts, and he suggested improvements for the division of the narrative between panels. In approximately 3 or 4 months, Emiliano and I have collaboratively transformed my fieldwork into a 'geographic narrative' where the connection between my body and the surrounding environment becomes apparent (Peterle, 2021, p. 59), thanks to the distinct elements of comics such as panels, comic pages, frames and speech balloons.

Through my avatar, the reader learns about *me*, *my fieldwork*, and *the border regime of Ventimiglia and its impacts on migrants' lives*. In the upcoming sub-sections, I will explore how *The diary*, which centres around these three main elements, sought to graphically capture and present the complexity of the research process (Fall, 2014, pp. 99–100).

4.1 | My life journey before fieldwork

The first seven strips of the graphic novel represent three different time periods and two distinct spatial contexts. First, Cagliari, the city where I was born and raised, located on the Mediterranean island of Sardinia. Since 2016, I have been part of a volunteer group called *LasciateCIEntrare*, which aims to assess the living conditions of asylum seekers in Italian reception centres. In the meantime, I was working as a post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Cagliari. I was seeking European funding to continue my academic career, which had been significantly impacted by the extensive budget cuts in Italian academia since 2010. This is the reason why the narrative gives space to my contact network, enabling me to secure the project and conduct the related fieldwork. Firstly, Professor Maurizio Memoli, who encouraged me to pursue a European project aligned with my interests beyond academia. Secondly, Professor Darshan Vigneswaran, who supported my application to the University of Amsterdam as the host Institution for my Marie Curie research project. Both individuals appear in the story: the former in person and the latter on my laptop screen (Figure 1).

That specific juncture of my life, when these elements—positioning (my activism), necessity (academic precarity), and encounters (Maurizio and Darshan)—converged, could unquestionably be identified as a pivotal 'turning point' (Wimark et al., 2017) in my life and my career. Fast-forwarding about a year and a half, the comic strip transports readers to the University of Amsterdam, where it emphasises another crucial encounter in the development of my research and associated fieldwork. This encounter involves meeting Cecilia Vergnano, an anthropologist, who would later become both my colleague and friend. I shared a significant portion of the empirical research in Ventimiglia with Cecilia, but also doubts, fears, the spaces of the same home, and the car we used to move around the city and border areas.

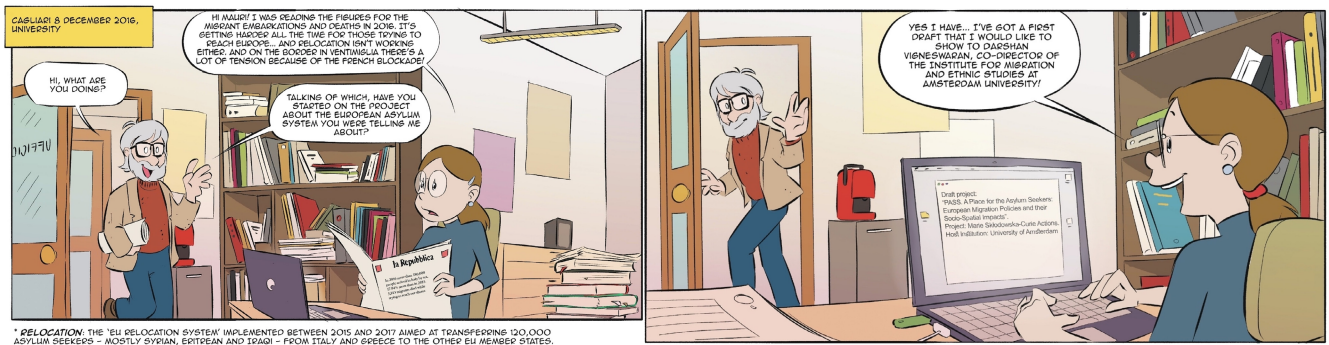


FIGURE 1 A turning point in my (academic) life: applying for a prestigious EU grant.

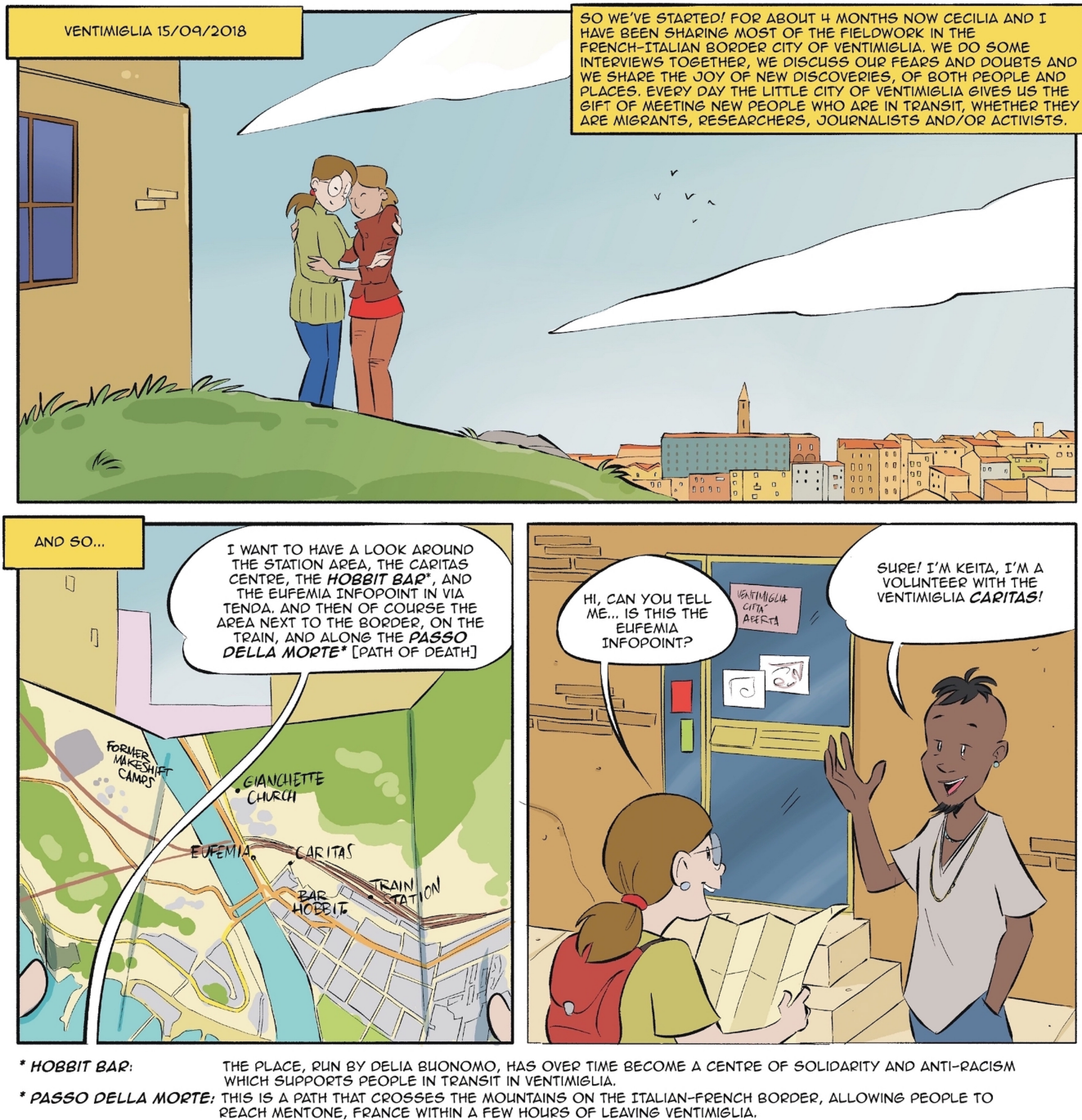


FIGURE 2 Venturing into Ventimiglia: arriving and starting fieldwork.

4.2 | The fieldwork in Ventimiglia

The diary unfolds with a depiction of me entering the fieldwork in Ventimiglia in September 2018 (Figure 2).

The second vignette in Figure 2 employs the graphic technique of a map (Peterle, 2021) to visualise the fieldwork locations in the city, while the third introduces Keita, a Malian asylum seeker in the Red Cross Camp, who became my research assistant. We met at the InfoPoint for migrants called Eufemia (Amigoni & Aru, 2023), where I conducted extensive research.

Guided by Keita and me, readers traverse significant spaces outlined in the initial map. Through comics, the fieldwork comes to life, vividly depicting 'an unceasing flux of gestures, actions, shifts, changes of position, and other bodily movements' (Peterle, 2021, p. 151). Readers can perceive spaces in their materiality and emotions such as the enthusiasm, disappointment, difficulty, sadness and joy experienced by different individuals at different times. Moreover, the medium

of comics compelled me to be genuinely honest about certain challenging aspects of the fieldwork that are more difficult to convey through words alone.

My significant relationship with Keita, who played a crucial role in facilitating access to specific urban areas and translating to Italian different African languages and Arabic, was founded on a profound level of trust. This trust grew from a sort of ‘role reversal’ that took place one of the first days after we met. Keita asked me to share my story, and I delved into the more demanding aspects of my experience migrating from Italy to the Netherlands (Figure 3). This led to a somewhat embarrassing situation for me—or at least that’s how I perceived it—when Keita pointed out (amusingly) that I could not label myself as a ‘migrant’. Despite my haste in clarifying that I was a fortunate migrant, we engaged in a lengthy discussion on this matter. For Keita, being European and facing no difficulties in moving within Europe categorised me as a ‘minus migrant’. How could I blame him? However, as depicted in the comics, my emotional engagement while recounting my experiences of academic precariousness and my (not-so-happy) decision to go abroad, along with my evident embarrassment in justifying the parallelism, created a sense of shared understanding. After that, I have not dared to explicitly compare my migration experience to that of other interviewees. Instead, I have focused on discussing and sharing a common issue: the challenging Italian job market, which does not offer the same work opportunities as in other European contexts. This feeling connected me with many interviewees who had spent years in Italy, including those with legal status, all without the need for me to explicitly label myself as a ‘migrant’.

However, only after my ‘blunder’, Keita decided to share his own migration story, under the condition that I would never disclose it. His story remains unspoken, left to the reader’s imagination. Now, I realise that it is precisely this ‘untold’ aspect that emblematically marks the transition to the third and final part of the story: the border regime of Ventimiglia since 2015 (Amigoni et al., 2020; Figure 4). Here, my avatar temporarily recedes into the background, and the true protagonists of the narrative become the migrants and their journey stories.

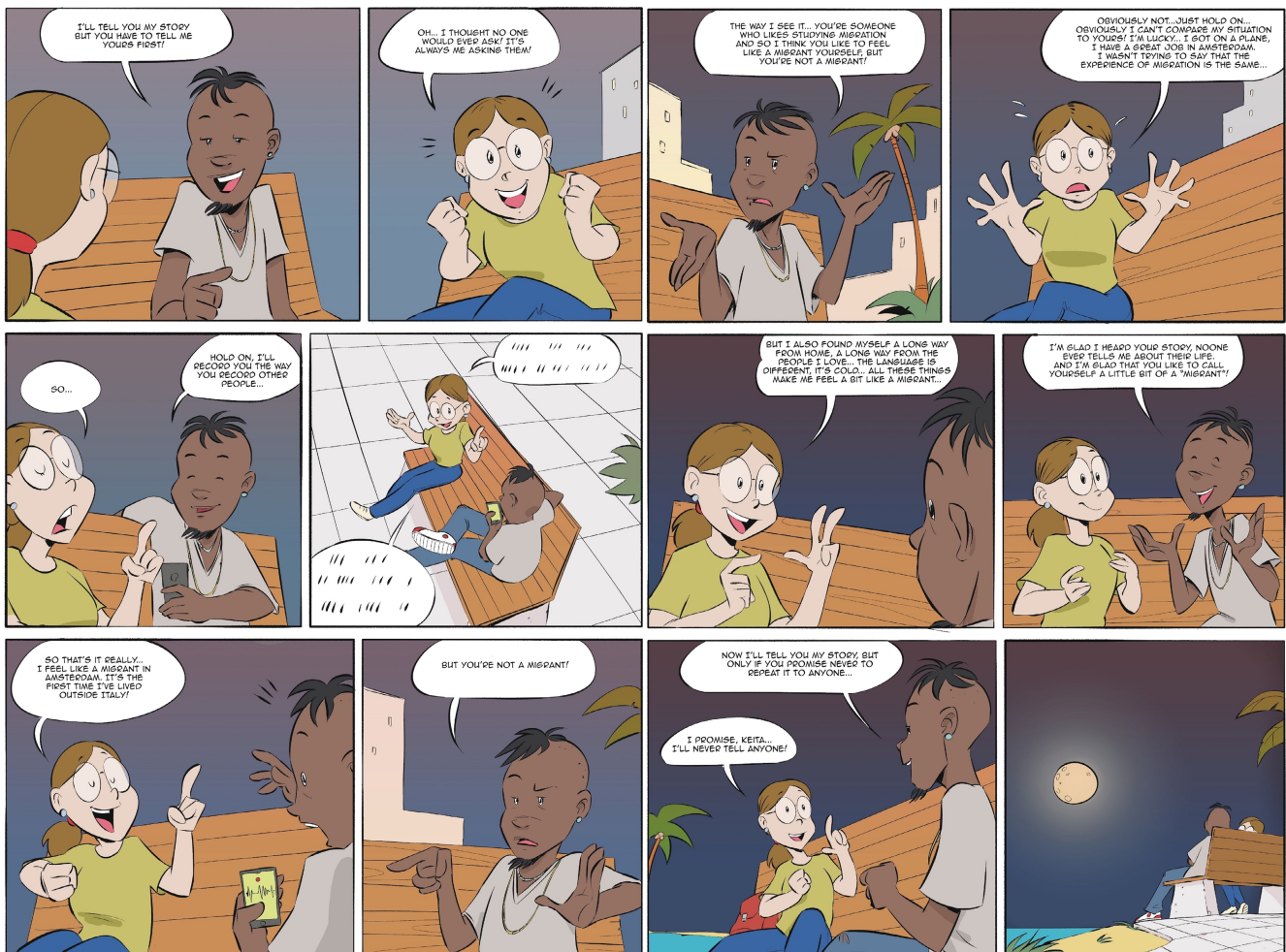


FIGURE 3 Keita and I at a crucial moment in our encounter.

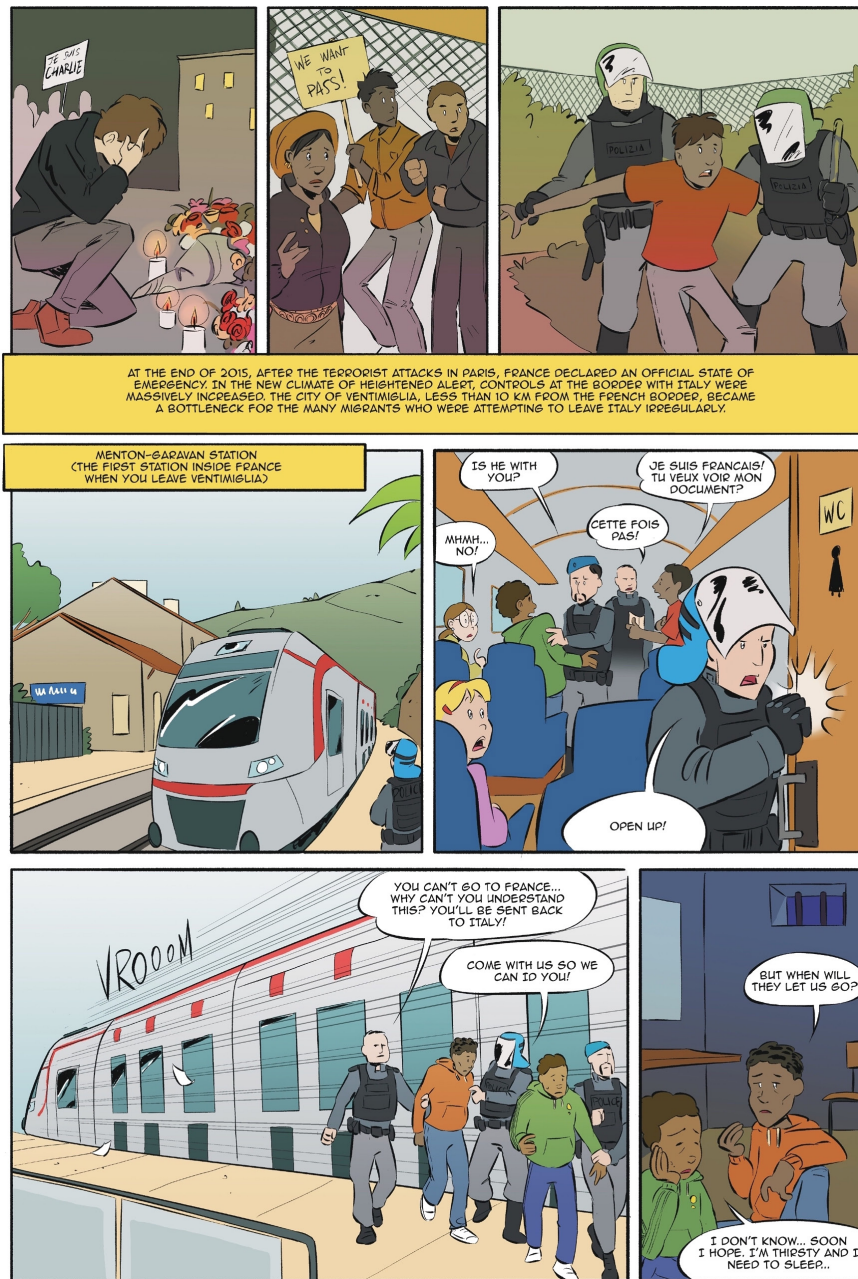


FIGURE 4 The reconfiguration of the border regime since 2015.

4.3 | The border regime in Ventimiglia

From this point onwards, *The diary* portrays migrants navigating the daily challenges they face in different places and times, and sheds light on critical issues such as: (i) racial profiling practices on trains upon arrival in France; (ii) the border-blocking procedure; (iii) the risk of being captured on the Italian side and transported by bus to identification centres in southern Italy; (iv) the long and perilous road to reach the migrant camp; (v) the frustration experienced when asylum claims are denied and migrants are not believed by asylum commissions in Italy or elsewhere in Europe. This 'bottom-up' perspective, based on migrants' life stories, offers a contrasting viewpoint to prevailing narratives on irregular migration. These narratives often depict migrants as seekers of benefits, criminals or threats to national security, rather than as individuals seeking safety and opportunities. *The diary* presents another representation of the border, where the finger is not pointed against the subjects of mobility, but against the violent effects of restrictive migration policies on their lives.



FIGURE 5 Between research and activism: my presence in the field even when less visible.

This change in viewpoint is also reflected in the emphasis on the InfoPoint Eufemia in the last nine panels. The graphic novel directs the reader to explore one of the places of solidarity towards migrants. The InfoPoint materialises as an alternative space in the city, in stark contrast to the many militarised and heavily secured areas throughout Ventimiglia. My character reappears in the representation because the InfoPoint was a crucial location in my fieldwork. However, in comparison to the initial part of the narrative, my role assumes a secondary position (Figure 5). Although not in the foreground, my presence in Ventimiglia is once again contextualised within a broader network of relationships, which is fundamental to understanding fieldwork.

Explicitly visualising the researcher's standpoint serves as an additional critique of an interpretation of migration that, through a quantitative and security-focused approach, objectifies and justifies a certain restrictive policy towards contemporary migrations. Only upon rereading the graphic novel, I realise that my auto-ethnographic comics begin and end with solidarity groups. Once again, my direct engagement in these networks of solidarity—extending beyond the purely academic sphere—is a vital aspect of my life experience, which becomes crucial to understanding my research.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Integrating literature on comics' geographies and life course theory has offered a fruitful framework for unveiling previously undiscovered insights within my auto-ethnographic comic.

Firstly, in line with the debate on long-life course theory, the analysis has brought to light 'the eventfulness, non-linearity, and personal side' of my work (Fois, 2017, p. 422). In *The diary*, my fieldwork is embedded within a broader context which extends beyond the temporality of the empirical research itself; without considering this broader context, certain essential aspects would have been overlooked (Wimark et al., 2017). The use of comics has enabled the meaningful emphasis on diverse encounters that hold significance at various interconnected phases of the research, as well as the emotional aspects of the research journey. Encounters and emotions are not mere by-products of the research process; on the contrary, they 'can enhance our understanding of the complexity of the research process and knowledge production' (Ng, 2017, p. 413). These elements are difficult to convey adequately through (academic) writing, even though they are of paramount importance.

Furthermore, through my long-life research experience translated into comics, this paper delves into the French-Italian border regime, making a significant contribution to critical migration studies. It demonstrates how auto-ethnographic comics can both expose the bias and violence inherent in contemporary migration and border policies and offer counter-narratives based on the migrants' and the researcher's field experiences. By means of *The diary*,

I address Fall's (2014, p. 93) call for 'developing graphical alternatives to the geopolitical "view from nowhere" by visually connecting bodies and experiences' (Fall, 2021, p. 17). *The diary* creates a vivid and empathetic portrayal of the challenges that migrants face in Europe, including police violence, inadequate living conditions, and the constant threat of deportation. It also highlights the emergence of solidarity networks that support individuals in transit on their arduous journeys.

The 'bottom-up' approach embodied in *The diary*, which allows the reader to navigate the border through the situated perspective of the researcher turned avatar, promotes a deeper understanding of the challenges and motivations behind undocumented migration. This understanding is fundamental for questioning and reevaluating current restrictive migration policies (Squire et al., 2021).

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTES

¹ *The Diary from the Border: Ventimiglia* is available from: https://iris.unito.it/retrieve/2a1d944d-dd84-49c7-a238-b74c4fa00c70/Diary_Ventimiglia_compressed.pdf

² I also had the opportunity to share the work, in its printed version (which, in my opinion, has a completely different charm), with many of the individuals involved in the comics. Unfortunately, of the migrants, only Keita was easily reachable; I lost contact with many of the transit individuals whose stories I collected.

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