

The comic book as a ‘place of mediation’: encounters between codes and perspectives in *Etenesh. L’odissea di una migrante* by Paolo Castaldi

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the graphic novel *Etenesh. L’odissea di una migrante* [Etenesh. The odyssey of a migrant] by Paolo Castaldi (2011), the present contribution proposes to interpret the comic book as a ‘space of encounter’ between disparate subjectivities and as a ‘place of mediation’ between different cultural and geographical perspectives. The first part of the article aims to situate the analysis of *Etenesh* within the recent field of ‘comic book geographies’, paying particular attention to the encounter between comics, postcolonial, and geographical studies in the emerging debate around ‘postcolonial comics’. Furthermore, the graphic novel by Paolo Castaldi is proposed as an example of how comics could profitably enter contemporary ‘Italian postcolonial studies’.

The second part will present the reasons why it is appropriate to embrace ‘interviews’ as methodological tools in postcolonial geographical research: on the one hand, I respond to the question about who is the interviewer, presenting my own positionality through a short auto-ethnographic account. On the other hand, I see the interview as a privileged means by which to explore the composition process of the story and to analyse the intimate hesitations and feelings through which the author mediates between his and Etenesh’s perspective. The dialogue with the interviewee becomes a means by which the comic book, as a storytelling practice and a finished product, emerges as a ‘place of mediation’ between the perspective of Etenesh, a young woman coming ‘from the European South’; the perspective of the author of the graphic novel, Paolo, who is a white male born and living in Italy; and us, the readers.

Introduction: encountering *Etenesh*, the graphic novel

As soon as we left Sudan, and reached the desert,
I understood it would be an awful journey.
A living hell.
Etenesh

Paolo Castaldi, *Etenesh. L’odissea di una migrante* (2011)

This article aims to contribute to the international debate involving cultural studies, geography, literary criticism and comics studies in the interdisciplinary field of comic book geographies. On a national level, starting from the idea of an ‘Italian postcolonialism’ in literary criticism (Fracassa 2012; Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2014; Oboe and D’Agostini 2016) and geography,¹ my aim is to involve other codes, such as comics, in the study of migration because of their strong influence on popular culture and collective imagination (Dell’Agnese

and Amato 2016). On the international level, my study aims to contribute to the emerging field of comic book geographies (Dittmer 2014, 2010a, 2010b; Fall 2014, 2006), but from an Italian postcolonial perspective. My further proposal is to explore comics starting from a 'processual' point of view (DeLyser and Hawkins 2014), going beyond the mere interpretation of their content and narration to focus on their process of production.

From a methodological perspective, my analysis further draws on an increasing body of work that explores autoethnography – as a prolific, because subjective, perspective – to engage with research in the social sciences. While cultural geographers have recently explored ethnographic storytelling and autoethnography as a way to obtain a greater understanding of spatial processes (Butz and Besio 2009; Ellis et al. 2011), I suggest embracing these methodologies also in the reading of comic books.

Therefore, endeavouring to suggest a viewpoint and to ask questions, rather than to find definitive theoretical and methodological answers, the present article is structured into three main parts. First, I briefly outline the emergence of a postcolonial perspective in comics studies, including an Italian point of view; I introduce *Etenesh. L'odissea di una migrante* [Etenesh. The Odyssey of a Migrant] by Paolo Castaldi (2011) as my case study and suggest the idea of the comic book as a 'space of encounter' and a 'place of mediation' among authors, editors, subjects/protagonists of the story and readers. Second, I share my own experience as a comic book reader and cultural geographer, seeking to make explicit the critical tools I later use to formulate the questions of the interview: this part is also meant to reflect on how every reading practice and the 'event' of encountering a text and a case study is necessarily influenced by our own positionality and subjective route. Finally, I present a short interview with the author and the editor of the graphic novel *Etenesh*, Paolo Castaldi and Guido Ostanel.

1.1. Emerging (Italian) postcolonial comic book geographies

Within the interdisciplinary field of comic book geographies, there have already been proposals to explore comics from a postcolonial perspective. In the volume *Comic book Geographies* by Jason Dittmer (2014) – which has consolidated the birth of a new interdisciplinary field of studies between geography and comics studies – besides chapters on autobiography, geopolitics, cartographies and the representation of landscape in comics, there is a chapter devoted to the study of postcolonial spaces in graphic novels (MacLeod 2014). Going beyond the borders of geographical research, I also consider the volume *Postcolonial Comics: Texts, Events, Identities*, edited by Binita Mehta and Pia Mukherji (2015), representative of the prolific encounter between comics and postcolonial studies and of the still unexplored possibilities offered by this interdisciplinary field. I found it particularly stimulating that the volume does not include an Italian postcolonial perspective, even though it underlines the power of comics to produce and circulate new postcolonial vocabularies and

narratives in different geographical, especially European, contexts. Thus, this fundamental work became a stimulus to trace some prolific routes for future research, from which I could start my own exploration of Italian postcolonial comic book geographies.

In their introduction to the volume *L'Italia postcoloniale* [Postcolonial Italy] (2014), Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo bring to light the reason why an Italian postcolonial perspective has been developed since the late 1990s to take into account and map (Romeo 2015) the particular condition of contemporary Italy's postcolonial heritage with both its political and its social and cultural implications, as well as its literary and artistic outcomes. Even if the Italian postcolonial critical perspective is often focused on the cultural and literary production of postcolonial subjects in Italy, my attempt is to focus also on the reception, narration and representation of migrant bodies, trajectories and stories in Italian comic books. Referring to the comic book by Paolo Castaldi, my interest is not (only) in how Etenesh tells her own story of migration to Italy but especially in how her story has been embraced and told by a non-migrant author listening to it 'from the European north'. Starting from these perspectives, I found Cristina Greco's contribution to the volume by Martine Bovo Romœuf and Franco Manai – entitled *Memoria storica e postcolonialismo. Il caso italiano* [Historical Memory and Postcolonialism. The Italian Case] (2015) – especially stimulating where she proposes the graphic novel as a prolific genre to explore Italian postcolonialism from a cultural, historical and literary critical perspective. Not simply does Greco affirm that comics have a particular capacity to be “open’ to transcultural interpretation, becoming a space for otherness to pass through” (2015, 203) but to support her claims she also chooses two case studies, both published by the Italian publishing house BeccoGiallo:² *Ilaria Alpi, il prezzo della verità* [Ilaria Alpi, the Price of Truth] (2008), about the dramatic story of an Italian journalist, reporter and photographer who was killed in Mogadiscio in 1994, and *Etenesh. L'odissea di una migrante* [Etenesh. The Odyssey of a Migrant].

In my analysis, I decided to start precisely from this second graphic novel, *Etenesh* by Paolo Castaldi, for several reasons. First, the protagonist of the comic book is not a fictional character but a living person the author had the opportunity to meet and listen to before attempting to narrate the story. Etenesh was able to cross the Mediterranean Sea only after a terrifying journey: she started from Ethiopia, passed across the desert towards Libya and finally landed on the Italian island of Lampedusa. Second, not simply does Etenesh come from one of the former Italian colonies, being part of the thousands of micro-histories whose contemporary routes still tell the colonial past of our country and compose the macro-history of Italian postcolonialism, she is also now living in Rome, contributing to the narration of the postcolonial cultural mosaic of Italy's capital city. Finally, even if Etenesh's travel is told in first person from a female perspective throughout the graphic novel, it was translated into a comic book by an Italian male author: Paolo Castaldi. Thus, I believe that focusing on the process of its composition permits reading the comic book as a 'place of mediation', not

simply between different cultural but even gender perspectives. As I will further explain below, I decided to interview only the author and, briefly, the editor of the graphic novel, not to ignore Etenesh's voice but rather to explore how migrant and postcolonial subjects are represented and how their stories are told in contemporary Italy.

1.2. The comic book as a 'space of encounter' and a 'place of mediation'

Etenesh. L'odissea di una migrante was published by BeccoGiallo in 2011. The first black-and-white edition was reprinted and substituted in 2015 by a colourized version. The graphic novel tells of Etenesh's journey, focusing not so much on the sea crossing but more on her route to pass across the desert to reach the Libyan city of Tripoli and, after that, the Mediterranean coast. While Castaldi decided to tell the lesser-known part of the migratory route leading to the European coasts – the one that precedes the sea crossing – I decided to go beyond the traditional perspective in comic book geographies by not focusing on the representation of spatial phenomena in the contents of comics but rather on the processes that precede the material object of the comic book itself. In fact, starting from the idea of the comic book as a place of mediation and a space of encounter, I explore the space and time of encounter between the author, Paolo, and the protagonist of the story, Etenesh, asking what happens when a European, Italian, male cartoonist meets a female migrant's perspective to tell her story 'from the south'; and what do creative and cultural, and even intimate and 'counter-identitarian', processes bring to the encounter between different geographical, gender, and ethnic perspectives.

After that, thinking about the comic book as a place of encounter, not just between disparate cultural, geographical, and gender perspectives but also between different languages and codes, texts and images, I analyse and explore Castaldi's stylistic and narrative choices, as well as BeccoGiallo's reason for publishing his work. In doing this, I did not want to restrict my study to my own critical tools and perspectives, I aimed to go deeper into the mediation and writing process, exploring the gestures and choices that allow the transference from an oral story to a graphic novel, from a blank page to a finished product. As McDowell stresses, when engaging with interviews as a method of research, "the purpose is to explore and understand actions within specific settings, to examine human relationships and discover as much as possible about why people feel or act in the ways they do" (2010, 158). Thus, I decided to address my questions directly to the author of the comic book and to Guido Ostanel, the editorial director of BeccoGiallo publishing house, to follow their travel and attempt to mediate and narrate Etenesh's story among Italian readers (fig. 1).

From a theoretical perspective, I take into account firstly the proposal by Sheila Honess to interpret the literary text as a 'spatial event' that takes place every time readers encounter the text and thus make it happen (2008, 1301) and, secondly, the suggestion by Angahard Saunders to explore also the process of writing as a 'spatial event' in its own right (2013,

285). Starting from these two perspectives and moving my analysis from the literary text to comics, I asked myself: What if we interpret the comic book as a spatial event in which the reader makes the story happen? What if we explore the process of composing the comic book as a spatial event, interpreting the moment in which the author meets the story to tell it as a 'spatial encounter'?



Fig. 1. The word 'odyssey' presents the protagonist as a migrant soul. If departing always means to leave something behind you, Etenesh departs leaving her entire family and previous life, represented here by the photographs in the background. Pages 19-20. All figures in this article, credits: BeccoGiallo 2015.

If “to approach the text as a spatial event is to recognize the sociality that lies at its core” (Saunders 2013, 286), my further aim here is to suggest that the comic book could be profitably explored from an Italian postcolonial perspective for several reasons: as Greco suggests in her chapter, “the idea is to reflect on the forms of expression that facilitate a process of hybridization between cultures through writing about the experience of migrant subjects and of their interpreters” (2016, 204). In this hybridization, both the spatial events of writing the comic book and of the graphic novel itself – as a story that circulates in the hands of hundreds of readers after its publication – represent a ‘place of mediation’ in which the perspectives of the author and of the reader meet those of the migrants. Through the writing and reading processes, authors and readers momentarily ‘experience’ and follow migrants’ trajectories: sometimes, when the framing of the panel proposes a subjective point of view, they even embrace the migrant’s own gaze, looking at his/her dramatic journey as if they were experiencing it at first hand, and, even if just for a short moment – such as the writing and reading time – the comic book makes the encounter with postcolonial subjectivities

happen (fig. 2). As Greco affirms: “The encounter across the border gives birth to a new space, where cultural spheres previously ascribed separately to colonisers and colonised, oppressors and oppressed, become transversal: open to the inclusion of new cultural systems” (2016, 204). Thus, a third space of encounter, a ‘place of mediation’, emerges from the comic book every time someone engages with its visual and textual narration when writing and reading it.



Fig. 2. Here the author and the readers embrace Etenesh's gaze during her crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. Page 16.

2. An auto-ethnographic account of how I came to meet Paolo Castaldi

As mentioned before, the following interview is intended as an opportunity to explore the postcolonial geographies of comic books before and after their publication, giving importance to subjective aspects, such as authorial feelings and actions during the writing process. The aim of this paper is not to let the particular narration of geopolitical aspects or description of landscape emerge from the case study's 'representational' (i.e. visual and textual) features. Rather, I would like to focus on its 'non-representational' and processual aspects (Dittmer 2010). Considering BeccoGiallo's comic-book series as a place of interdisciplinary and intermedial encounter, I attempted to imagine this article as an 'encounter' in itself. Therefore, I decided to insert in my analysis something I could barely control (becoming myself, as a researcher, a bridging figure in the process of discovering *Etenesh's* postcolonial geo-

graphies): an interview. Interviews often disclose unexpected aspects of research, leading it along unexplored paths and to unexpected conclusions. In the same way, when starting this project, I knew where I was coming from – my reading of Paolo Castaldi’s graphic novel and my interest in its writing process as a ‘spatial event’ (Saunders 2013) – but I could not foresee what the perspectives of the author and of the editor were. As Linda McDowell summarizes, when adopting interviews as methodological research strategies “questions about identification, contacts, interactions, interpretation and representation are important at different stages in the process whereas issues of ethics, responsibility, equity, status and power underlie the whole process” (2010, 158). Furthermore, the questions about whose voices should be heard (the interviewee[s]) is followed by questions about who is the listening subject (the researcher[s]) and who s/he is writing for (the reader[s]).

When I prepared this interview, my first aim was to realize a kind of ‘ethnography’ of the production of *Etenesh*, discovering the place and time where the telling of this story began. The comic book actually became a ‘space of encounter’ since it gave me the opportunity to meet Paolo Castaldi and to draw – with his help – the geographies of *Etenesh. L’odissea di una migrante*, going beyond the illustrated and written pages of the comic book as a material object. Therefore, the interview features the different journeys and perspectives, trajectories and languages, and codes and lives that crossed the pages of Castaldi’s graphic novel: yet, this interview is also about a series of ‘encounters’.

Proposing the idea of comics as places of mediation not simply between disparate visual and textual codes but even between different perspectives, among the many questions I could have asked Paolo about his work, I decided to focus on the way he met *Etenesh* and her story, on how he distanced himself from his male, Western perspective to embrace her ‘from-the-south’ female one, on the way in which he encountered his readers after publishing his work and, finally, on the way in which form meets content and comics language meets other codes in his particular narrative style. The researcher’s ‘situatedness’ and subjectivity are also intended as epistemological resources for geographical and ethnographic research. Trying to respond briefly to McDowell’s second question about “who was listening to Paolo’s and Guido’s answers” (2010, 158), I would like to make my own positionality explicit, momentarily collapsing the borders between objects and subjects of research (Butz and Besio 2009, 1662). Therefore, what follows is a brief ‘autoethnographic’ account (Ellis et al. 2011) of how I came to encounter the BeccoGiallo publishing house and one of its most popular authors, Paolo Castaldi. I believe tracing my own journey in relation to my encounter with *Etenesh* will highlight that every creative process, and research practice, is made up of fortuitous events, relationships, shared interests and subjective perspectives.

The following interview was conducted between April and May 2017 thanks to a close collaboration I had established since 2011 with one of BeccoGiallo’s editorial directors, Guido Ostanel. This happened especially through the fundamental mediation of the cartoonist

Claudio Calia. While I was working as a journalist and reporter for the Italian website for comics information LoSpazioBianco.it, Calia introduced me to the national comics scene, permitting me to encounter and interview authors like Zerocalcare, Gipi, Manuele Fior, Alessandro Baronciani, Davide Reviati, Alberto Corradi, Sara Pavan, Marino Neri, Rocco Lombardi and many others. Among them, I found some good friends and enthusiastic collaborators, one of which was Guido Ostanel. I rapidly realised this was a great opportunity as a reader, and especially as a researcher, to explore not simply the contents of BeccoGiallo's comic book series but even the process of writing, drawing and publishing them. While my intimate map was rapidly changing and I became a PhD student in geography, I was trying to conciliate my novel perspective as a cultural geographer with that of a literary and passionate comic book reader. In that time, together with BeccoGiallo, I became part of the organising team of *Oblò. Rassegna di docu-film e graphic novel*, a festival where documentary films and graphic novels were the starting point of deepening topical issues like climate change, global conflict, fair trade, migration and social and cultural integration. On 23rd February 2015, we organised a presentation titled "Questa è la mia terra. Cambiamo il sistema non il clima" [This is My Land. Let's Change the System Not the Climate]; Paolo Castaldi, with his graphic novel *Etenesh. L'odissea di una migrante*, was one of the special guests. The following interview, thus, represents our second encounter.

3. A dialogue with Paolo Castaldi and Guido Ostanel

3.1. The encounter between the author and Etenesh's story

GP: Hi Paolo. Thank you for your time. What I would like today in this interview is for you to draw a map of your graphic novel *Etenesh. L'odissea di una migrante*. My wish is not simply to trace with you your protagonist's journey, rather, to cross the borders of the comic book itself to explore 'the history of your story', identifying the trajectories that made it possible. My aim in this interview is to follow your experience as a storyteller, thus developing a kind of ethnography of the process of composing the comic book. In other words, the map I would like to trace is that of *your* journey.

I know this travel began with an encounter in the place where Etenesh's trajectory and yours crossed for the first time and the journey of *Etenesh*, the graphic novel, took shape. Where were you, in the time and space of your life and of your career as a comic author, when you came across Etenesh's story? When did you decide to tell it?

PC: I was at the start of my journey, intended as my route and career as a comic author. Before 2011 – the year when the graphic novel was published by BeccoGiallo – I had just a few, minor publications and I was in search of my own identity, of my own space in an effervescent, growing comic book market. At that time, many publishing houses like Bao and Eris – which can now easily be found in the bookstores – were only at the beginning of their

development. Together with me, many authors were emerging, giving rise to a small ‘resurgence’ of Italian ‘authored’ comics. It was the right moment to debut as an author!

Also, in my private life, I was trying to take significant steps. During the drafting of *Etenesh*, I moved in with my girlfriend, leaving my family home. It was a humble apartment, with everything we needed, in the western suburbs of Milan, a city I am very attached to – I don’t know whether it’s a good thing or not. I placed a small drawing board in our bedroom. There, mostly at night, I drew another, far more dramatic story: Etenesh’s.

The topic of migration has piqued my interest for a long time. At that time, it wasn’t so ‘exploited’ by the media and politics as it is nowadays. Few and imprecise, very imprecise, words were said about migration. For this reason, I wanted to shed some light on it, in my own small way. I was already sick and tired of hearing rumours about migration. On television, they were showing only the tip of the iceberg of this dramatic phenomenon, the part that was most suitable for spectacularization, that is, the landing on the Italian coastline. Consumed faces, moribund infants, men and women broken by sun and thirst, shipwrecks... Images that touch and move souls. However, very few people – including me – knew exactly what was behind that. Where do these people come from? What’s moving them across the desert? What’s the price for a better future?

Another fundamental stage of my personal journey in search of the right answers was Rome. Here, thanks to Ethiopian film maker Dagmawi Yimer, I met Etenesh. She told me her experience in a three-hour interview, sitting at the table of a bar, near Termini Station. Three long hours that felt like months. Heavy, touching, too hard to be forgotten. It was a sunny and fresh spring day, ideal to start a journey that is still ongoing. Every time I present my comic book in a bookstore, in a library or in a school, the journey goes on and, with it, also my own journey as an author and a man (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Sketching Etenesh. Pages 3 and 6.

3.2. The encounter between the author and 'the other'

GP: I believe to tell a story is always a form of mediation. If we are telling an episode we experienced first hand, the account becomes a bridge between ourselves and whoever is listening to or reading us. Nevertheless, when we decide to tell a story that other people experienced, the story itself becomes a meeting place between us and 'the other'. In this way, different trajectories cross each other, and the protagonist of the event meets our trajectory and the trajectory of everyone who is going to read the story.

In your case, your graphic novel became a meeting place between your personal perspective of someone living north of the Mediterranean Sea and the perspective of those 'from the south' and thus forced to risk their lives to cross the sea. How was it for you, not just to meet (listen to) but to embrace (tell) a migrant's perspective when you started the narration of Etenesh's tragic route?

PC: At the beginning, it was very hard. After assembling Etenesh's suffering words, I asked myself what right I had, as a privileged boy from the north – not just of Italy but in a global sense – to tell a story that was so far from my reality, so delicate, with the aim of publishing a comic book that was expected to sell and bring profit. For some days after our encounter near Termini Station, I hesitated, struggling with the moral and ethical issues you're referring to in your question.

The answer was already in the recorded audio file. Etenesh's story itself was the answer – her words, unfiltered, without any fixed stance. I let them flow over my body, in my hands, on the paper, without any resistance, being a mere 'amplifier', altering them as little as possible through my own artistic sensibility.

Thus, I decided to tell the story as honestly as possible, with humility, like someone who sits in the back of a classroom when the only thing he can do is listen because he has everything to learn and nothing to say.

3.3. Encountering the *female* other

GP: Your willingness to tell one of those migrant stories, and precisely the story of a female migrant, of Etenesh, further forced you to embrace the perspective of a woman. How was it for you, as an author and as a man, the experience of giving voice to a female perspective, of encountering her fears and struggles, of perceiving her body and pain?

PC: It was easier than I thought – assuming that I was able to. Maybe it's because – as Valentina, my girlfriend says – I have a strong feminine side... I don't know.

I wanted to narrate the south-Saharan migration as seen from a woman's perspective because I believed that, in this way, I could 'engage' readers more thoroughly. While she was telling her difficult story, I kept repeating to myself, *How could this girl, alone, so small*

and slender, face such a hard travel? I would have certainly died. I tried to imagine the 'hell of the small things', of those things you never think about. When speaking about migration and women, the first images that come to a narrator's or a journalist's mind concern brutalities, rapes, abuses. I wanted to think about those aspects of everyday life that constantly remind you of the nightmare you are living in. The impossibility to access any toilet, for example, in the heat, maybe during your period: for a woman, who is used to having always access to a toilet, at home, at her workplace, everywhere she is, it must have been a little, yet big, drama. A real psychological and physical violence (fig. 4).

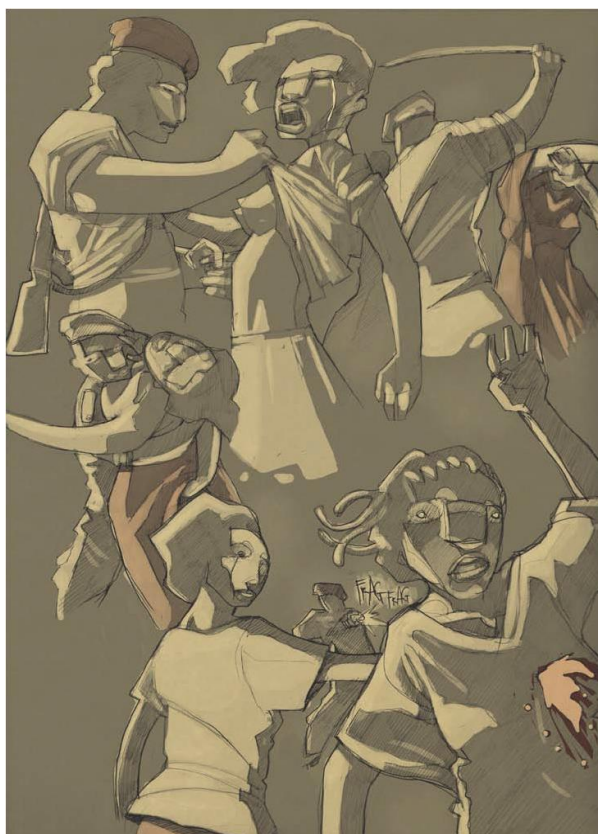


Fig. 4. Drawing the violation of female bodies in the Sabha Prison, Lebanon. Page 112.

3.4. Between form and content

GP: Through the cooperation between images and words, comics build a closer relationship between form and content than textual narration. Building a comic page always means making certain choices, even simply in the structuring of panels, concerning the narrative articulation of space. There are many aspects of the stylistic choices of *Etenesh* that I would like to explore with you, but, in particular, there has been a significant formal change from the first to the second edition of the graphic novel that I would like to focus on: the switch from black and white to the colouring by Giuseppe Morici. In the second edition, colour assumes an expressive, symbolic and even narrative function. On the one hand, the vivid red colour

gives materiality to the suffering of the protagonist through the constant visualisation of blood, the symbolization of violence and abuse; on the other hand, it plays a narrative role. In fact, like a red wire it illuminates Etenesh's dress, enabling readers to follow her story among many other migrants' stories and to identify her on the overcrowded trucks crossing the desert, among the groups of standing women in the Sabha prison or on the bottom of a rubber dinghy off the coast of Lampedusa.

Finally, the contrast between the colour of the desert sand and the blue of the sea enables you to stress the alternation between the different narrative and temporal levels in which the story is organised: first, the sea journey, from Tripoli to Lampedusa, which functions as a 'narrative frame', and then the travel – certainly less widely known through the chronicles – that precedes the crossing and tells the escape from Addis Ababa to Sudan, across the Sahara to Libya.

So, why did you make this choice and what is, in your opinion, the added value of the integration of colour in *Etenesh*?

PC: To be honest I had the idea of using colour since the first edition. Almost all of my works are thought and realised in colour, even when monochromatic. Then, mostly for publishing rather than artistic reasons, we opted for greyscale.

When in 2015 *Des Ronds dans l'O* bought the rights for the French version, they asked us if a recolouring would be possible. French readers are less used to black and white, so it was fundamental for them to have coloured pages for the publication of *Etenesh* (fig. 5 and fig. 6).



Fig. 5. The alternation of colours helps the alternation of different narrative levels. Here is an example of the sandy colour of the difficult trip across the desert. Pages 40 and 41.



Fig. 6. The blue of the water as a backdrop for all those sequences telling the sea crossing from Tripoli to Lampedusa. Pages 91 and 92.



Fig. 7. Colours play a symbolic and expressive, beyond narrative, role in the comic book. The use of red stands out to represent the power of Etenesh, but also to symbolize the rivers of blood flowing along contemporary migration routes. Page 49.

In that period, I was working on two other comic books that had to be delivered soon, therefore I entrusted the colouring process to Giuseppe Morici. Yet the chromatic suggestions were in my head from the beginning... the red dress, the colour of the sand, the blue of the scenes set in the sea... I just shared them with Giuseppe, who quickly got the idea and did a great job. The addition of colour not only made the pages more readable and less 'oppressive', it further added another voice to the story – if we can imagine the page like an orchestra playing signs, lines and traits. The reader can easily feel the heat, the night, the cold, the fear the protagonist felt. Colour, when wisely used, is not just as a mere ornament, it has the power to 'speak' exactly like a caption, a panel or a close-up (fig. 7).

3.5. The comic book as a place of encounter between other texts and languages

GP: The language of comics is understood as an intermedial, hybrid language because of its combination of images and text. So, what's the particular relationship between the image and the text you pursued in *Etenesh*? What are the contact points where images mediate what words wouldn't be able to explain and, at the same time, the passages in which words became necessary, going beyond the figurative and evocative power of illustrations?

PC: My narrative style tends to be dry and linear to create silences on which texts can lean – if necessary. I always try to tell as much as I can with the drawing itself. If you need textual parts to make a scene work, this means you didn't conceive and draw it well and you should reformulate it (fig. 8).



Fig. 8. The gutters between the panels become like silences in the narration: we can only imagine, as readers, what Etenesh' mother is saying on the other side of the telephone. Pages 84, 86, and 89.

I believe the sequence in which Etenesh calls her mother, almost at the end of the story, is exemplary. Seven splash-pages, full-page illustrations, where you see only a close-up of the girl's face while she's crying at the telephone. The reader can only imagine the

mother's words on the other end of the line. I think that sequence is the strongest passage of the entire story; I think it's really well done and I'm rather proud of it.

There is this fundamental, basic contradiction according to which everything should always be clear, explained, leaving to the reader the mere role of a non-participating spectator. It's an enormous mistake (fig. 9).



Fig. 9. This page represents the moment in which Etenesh escapes from the Sabha prison. The obsessive repetition of the words 'Shoot me!' accompanies the rapid rhythm of her running steps. Page 115.

GP: Your story also establishes a significant intermedial and intertextual dialogue with other codes, enriching the narration with other languages and texts. From the reports and interviews by Gabriele Del Grande to the documentary film by Dagmawi Yimer, from the preface by Moni Ovadia to the bibliographical suggestions (films, websites, works of literature and journalism), you give readers the opportunity to look more deeply into the topic of migration, if they want to. Yours is a graphic novel that crosses the borders of its own code and makes its dialogue with other languages explicit. So, what's the influence of these other languages on your work, and how could you include them in your narration?

PC: The comics language has basically two souls: the graphic sign and the written text. Both alone permit you to say a lot. Thus, integrations mostly fill a conceptual rather than linguistic

vacuum. The testimonies collected by Gabriele Del Grande – inserted almost in the middle of the story as a couple of simply textual pages – for example, have the immediacy of reporting, of journalism. I needed them to bring the reader back to reality after some very narrative and poetic passages. I didn't want the readers to rest on the captions, on the silent landscapes of the desert. I needed 'a slap in their face' to bring them back to the harsh reality. They should not forget that *Etenesh's* story is a real story of suffering and death, like thousands of other stories.

Referring to Moni's preface and to the interview with Dagmawi, I just followed the typical format of BeccoGiallo's comic book series, where every comic book is enriched by extras that help deepen the subject. I think it's one of their most interesting aspects as a publishing house because a comic book will never be as exhaustive as an essay or a long journalistic report can be; nevertheless, it is able to open a small window on a bigger story, to awaken your curiosity thanks to its special relationship between text and drawing. Then, it's up to the reader to go more in depth if s/he wants to. BeccoGiallo simply helps you to do it immediately, that's it.

GP: Are there any places that were still unexplored from other narrations or codes and that your comic book was able to explore?

PC: Honestly, I don't think so. A documentary film like *Un uomo sulla Terra* [A Man on Earth], for example, tells the same drama. In that you can find what you also find in *Etenesh*, but in different forms. Comics are just another medium, intended here as a metaphorical means of transportation, to undergo the same journey. What changes are the times, the panoramas, the sounds, the sensations. If we go from Milan to Paris whether by car, train, motorcycle or by bike, of course we are going in the same direction but our experience will be completely different according to the means we are using.

3.6. The encounter between the author and the reader

GP: We already talked about how the comic book became a place of mediation between your and the protagonist's perspectives, between male and female perspectives, between two points of view that look at the Mediterranean Sea from opposite shores. Now I would like to know what geographies the comic book has drawn after it was published, to understand how your and Etenesh's perspectives met the readers'.

What journey did your comic book undergo after its publication? Have there been any directions you wouldn't expect as an author?

PC: When you publish a book, a comic book at a national level, your journey has no secure direction. You are there, on board, standing on the bow of a ship, trying to see a faraway land on the horizon, with golden beaches and trees rich in tropical fruits. But you never know

for sure whether you're going to arrive or not. The ship could run into a storm just outside the harbour, causing it to be wrecked. *Etenesh* has been travelling for six years and has arrived at many, sometimes unexpected, harbours. It won international awards and was translated.

One day, for example, I received a letter from France: a few lines personally signed by Robert Badinter, the former Minister of Justice, a real reference point in the fight for human rights. He complimented me on my graphic novel and told me he would encourage young people to read it, starting from his grandchildren. I was speechless for a few minutes.

Etenesh brought me into the Italian schools, it allowed me to meet the prisoners of San Vittore, to encounter great people, which has been a very enriching experience for me. When you get published, you need to go with the flow, to let it carry you away and redraw the geography of your soul. It's a wonderful feeling.

GP: To conclude, how did you experience your role as a 'bridge', as a mediator between different perspectives, between yours, Etenesh's and the readers'?

PC: I'm not the bridge. The story I drew on paper, the graphic novel, is the bridge. I don't do anything, I just look forward. There are so many stories to tell. I don't want to have a role in it. My work ends when the book gets printed.

During presentations, I'm always introduced as an expert on migratory phenomena. But I'm not; I'm just an author who wrote a story, the story of Etenesh. Nothing else. It's the only burden I feel I can bear. If someone searches for a bridge to reach the other side of the river, that person shouldn't come to me, rather s/he should go to a library and ask for my comic book.

3.7. The encounter with BeccoGiallo

GP: Guido,³ starting from your experience with *Etenesh* by Paolo Castaldi but widening your perspective to the manifold works of 'civic engagement' that BeccoGiallo published in the past ten years, do you think comics can be intended as a 'place of mediation'? Do you believe they can represent a place of encounter between different perspectives (man and woman, narrator and reader, migrants and locals, 'me' and 'the other') besides between different codes and languages?

GO: Yes. If cinema, written literature and oral storytelling, theatre and music are interpreted as a place of mediation – and today we can say this loudly – then the same applies to comics. It might be even more interesting to understand how this language – which is now coming to the attention of critics and a wider public – is different from other languages in the ways it works, it's used, it's read and re-elaborated. Let me say it differently: comics can be a place of mediation in a very original manner, sometimes being similar to cinema, other times being closer to illustrated narration, but each time telling stories in particular, always different forms.

Consider that, according to Art Spiegelman – the author of *Maus*, which was one of the most famous, read and awarded comic books in the history of modern comics – the comics language is one that is more similar to the way in which our brain works: our memory does not work with formatted texts, nor with perfect film sequences, rather with a constant alternation of images and texts, with explosions of images and words. When the author of a comic book proposes a sequence to his/her readers, s/he always leaves a wide margin of responsibility to them. The reader, to a limited extent, decides how to compose the sequence, how long to linger on a single panel or on a detail, and maybe that detail (a word, an entire sentence, a background, a red brush stroke, a face or a particular composition of all these elements) will let him/her take other directions and force him/her to move towards a personal memory, a recent experience, an apparently lost memory. Finally, readers are always coming back to the same comic book, as if nothing happened. Nevertheless, something happened, maybe under the skin, unconsciously – but something really unique happened, something special and personal for each reader. It seems that comic authors are constantly forced to say: “Here you are, dear reader. This is what I put on the table. It’s now up to you. Take it, watch it, read it, be ready to recompose it as it comes, make what you want out of it, take your own responsibility.”

In this sense, if the language of comics is used by a capable and wise author, it can become a very powerful tool. In my opinion, a really interesting means – today still under-explored – for mediations, dialogues, encounters, possible redefinitions.

4. Conclusions. Comic books and voices ‘From the European South’

The interviews with Paolo Castaldi and Guido Ostanel enabled me to explore the postcolonial geographies of the graphic novel *Etenesh. L’odissea di di una migrante* from a processual perspective, focused not on the finished product but rather on the storytelling practices. As I tried to bring out in the opening paragraphs, this article hopes to represent, firstly, a certainly partial and incomplete proposal to explore comic books as prolific case studies that could profitably enter the emerging debate within an Italian postcolonial perspective. Thus, the short encounter with the editorial director of an Italian publishing house specialized in comic books of ‘civic engagement’, aims to suggest BeccoGiallo’s comic book series as a prolific object for further analyses in the field of Italian postcolonial studies. Indeed, BeccoGiallo’s publications comprise works that were personally written and drawn by postcolonial subjects, but also comic books derived from interviews, reports, workshops and different encounters with them. Precisely, this second group of works inspired in me the idea of the graphic novel as a ‘space of encounter’ and a place in which different perspectives, male and female, northern and southern, meet through the mediation of a visual and textual story.

Taking into account the advantages and disadvantages of interviews as methodological

research tools, I tried to stress the importance of ‘encountering’ and interviewing the author of *Etenesh*, the graphic novel: this was an opportunity to deepen the acts, gestures, decisions, feelings and doubts connected to the comic book writing practice. These choices and intimate feelings become especially significant when the comic book tells the personal story of someone other than the author him/herself. Although Paolo Castaldi affirmed that “he is not the bridge but the comic book itself is the bridge,” my aim was to explore with him the events, the practices, the questions and hesitations that finally led to the graphic novel we can now find as a finished product in European bookstores. Therefore, particularly significant is the part in which he describes his encounter with Etenesh and the sense of oppression he felt later when starting his writing process. Even if the information we gain through the interview is not necessary to understand the comic book in itself, as a *story*, it gives us the opportunity to explore *Etenesh* as a practice, as a place through which people and perspectives coming from the European north and south have met and tried to understand each other. As I said, the fact that this graphic novel was not personally written by Etenesh, the woman who actually underwent the dramatic journey across the Mediterranean Sea, but by Paolo, a young white male, who was born and is living and working in Italy, suggests an understanding of the comic book itself as a place of mediation between their disparate experiential, cultural, geographical and gender perspectives.

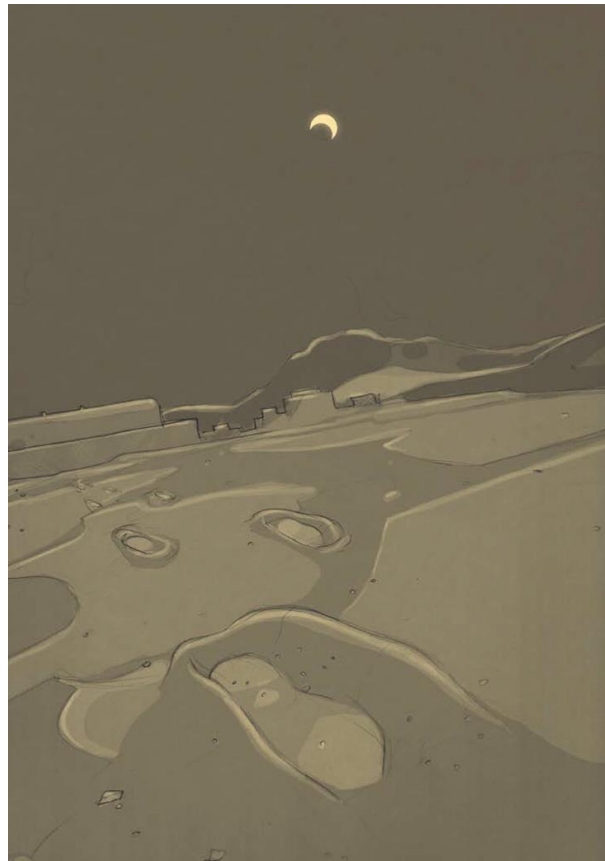


Fig. 10. The traces of Etenesh' steps in the sand. Page 117.

Beyond these methodological and theoretical reasons, I believe *Etenesh* by Paolo Castaldi represents a significant example of how comic books should have a full role in the contemporary debate within Italian postcolonial narratives. Entire migratory routes are still unknown or ignored by northern countries. Like footsteps in the sand, their traces seem to be constantly erased by indifference, censored by (dis)information or removed by our detached perspectives. Through his graphic novel, Paolo Castaldi, together with BeccoGiallo, has been able not simply to embrace the perspective of Etenesh and her female and migrant gaze ‘from the South’, starting from his white, male, European perspective, he has further been able to involve readers in his encounter with Etenesh through the reading of the comic book, which becomes a place of mediation where the authorial and protagonist’s gazes merge with our own. Following this reading journey, we cannot ignore those footprints in the sand any longer; we are, rather, forced, as Guido Ostanel says, “to take our own responsibilities as readers” and tell Etenesh’s story, making this mediation ‘take place’ again and again (fig. 10).

Notes

¹ For an overview of recent research and debate on postcolonial geographies from an Italian perspective, see Tania Rossetto (2014) and Caterina Romeo (2015).

² BeccoGiallo is a small ten-year-old Venetian publishing house based in Padua, specializing in *graphic journalism*: comic-book series are mainly focused on the narration of real, often historical, facts.

³ The final part of the interview is a short dialogue with Guido Ostanel aimed at presenting the perspective of BeccoGiallo publishing house and its perspective on the role of comics in the circulation of ideas and the representation of contemporary migratory, cultural and postcolonial phenomena.

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