

**Rhizomatic Graphic Novel. Research, paper and unpredictable fieldworks**

**Abstract**

This text focusses on a fieldwork experience in which we aimed to use illustrations and images to disseminate research outcomes. Inspired by the concept of *rhizome* in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, we will discuss the method and contradictions of research when it seeks to produce cultural and visual texts/objects which aspire to reach beyond academic circles and engage in co-narration practices. We deal with the ambiguity of our own ethnographic experience presenting a diary of what happens in fieldwork: the Foggia area between the so-called "runway" in Borgo Mezzanone and the "ghetto" in Rignano – two migrant day laborers' settlements, two islands surrounded by endless agricultural fields. We will try to explain the method we used to build what we have called "rhizomatic graphic novel", that is, a piece of work created by researchers from a heterogeneous range of disciplines starting from a shared field experience, which has radically challenged our initial intentions unsettling the relations between "informants" and "researchers".

**Keywords**

Ethnography – fieldwork – graphic novel – agriculture – migrants' camps

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“Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come”. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 4-5)

### **The graphic novel and the rhizomatic map<sup>1</sup>**

In the following pages we will discuss a situation we came across during a fieldwork experience in which we aimed to use illustrations and images to disseminate research outcomes. Inspired by the concept of *rhizome* in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, we will discuss the method and contradictions of research when it seeks to produce texts/objects which aspire to reach beyond academic circles and engage in co-narration practices.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome is a bulb, it is “a map and not a tracing”; the rhizome is “oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real”. Thus, if we think of ethnographic research as a rhizome which professionals from different disciplinary areas as well as actors in the field contribute to producing, the outcome of that research will not be a tracing of what we will observe. It will be a generative map with “multiple entryways”, an experience open to encounters and connections.

The rhizomatic map “fosters connections between fields, the removal of blockages on bodies without organs, the maximum opening of bodies without organs onto a plane of consistency” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:12). What does that mean? Based on our interpretation, the product of research can only be rhizomatic, that is, generative along unexpected trajectories, unsaturated, ungrammatical, escaping any structural or discursive hegemony. From this point of view, images offer many cues since they can express and condense multiple representative planes and act as a generative amplifier along multiple lines of thinking. Thus, they “foster connections between fields”.

Let us consider two more aspects. The “removal of blockages on bodies without organs onto a plane of consistency” can be achieved by taking intentionality out of research work. This is a difficult and somewhat paradoxical passage. How can research work be unintentional? It cannot be at its origin but, following the logic of the rhizome, it will have to be unintentional immediately after entering the field. Thus, intentionality will have to look only at the field in its initial moment and, immediately after, forgo the flattery of the “field - organism”, that is, of the field seen as a system, to dissolve into “a field - body without organs”, falling into what Deleuze and Guattari define as a “plane of consistency” - a plane which is not designed but inspired by desire.

The work discussed in the following pages is organized as a diary of what happens in fieldwork, specifically in the Foggia area between the so-called “runway” in Borgo Mezzanone and the ghetto in Rignano - two migrant day laborers' settlements, two

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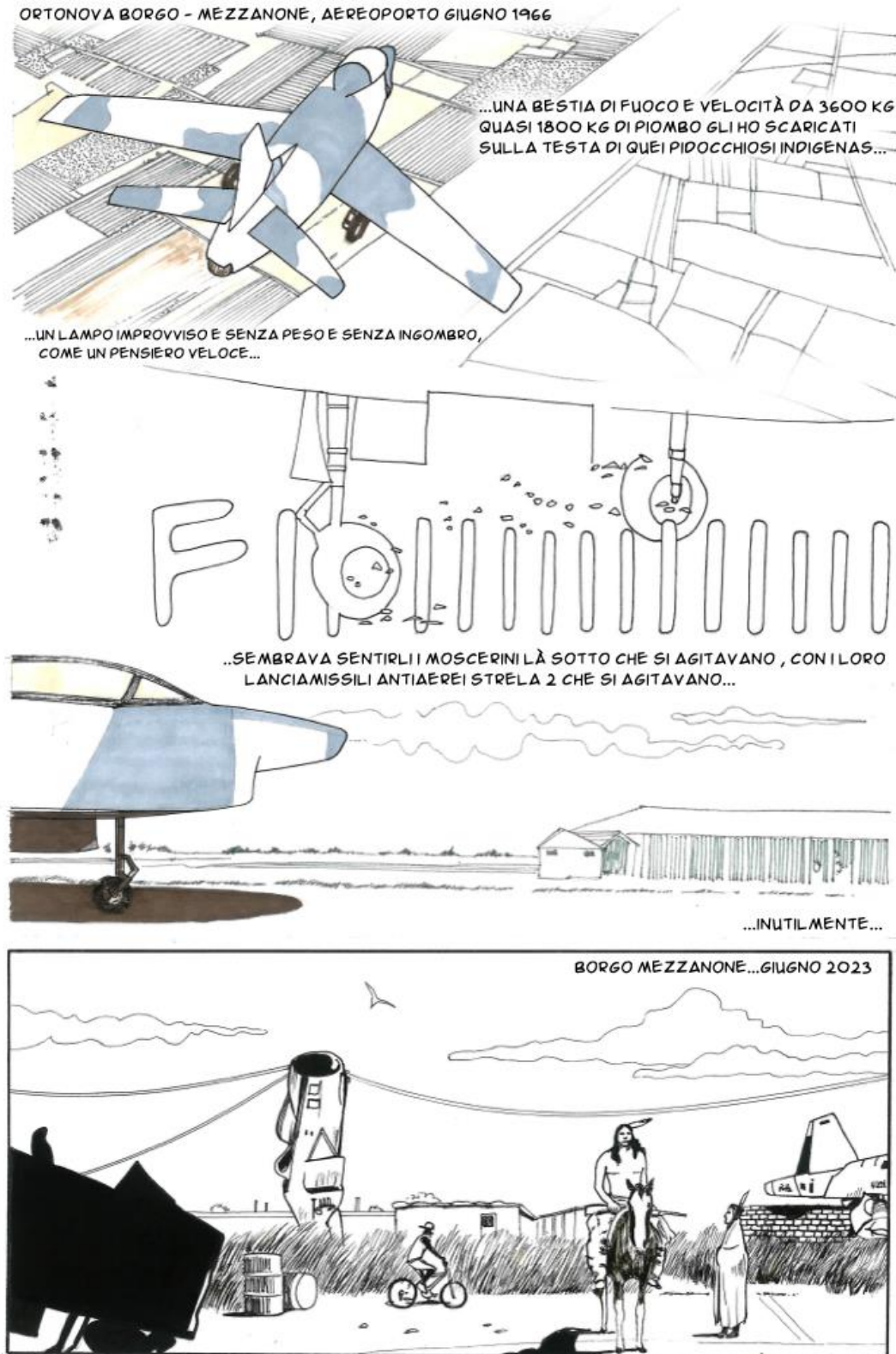
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islands surrounded by endless agricultural fields.

We will try to explain the method we used to build what we have called "rhizomatic graphic novel", that is, a piece of work created by researchers from a heterogeneous range of disciplines starting from a shared field experience, which has challenged our initial intention to create an ethnographic graphic novel. We will not be using images to write a text tracing the field experience, but rather as a technique we will use to delve into and reveal the complexity of the ethnographic encounter. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 12) have put it: "The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation." Our work will be about disorientation and deterritorialization, removal of the researcher's intentionality, and negotiation in other territories. As Agier (2020) highlighted, knowledge arises from a montage of sequences of life which represent only a tiny part of what happens in the world and "paints a sort of second city which is the result of data collection and arrangement procedures" carried out by researchers and ethnographers.

### **Preparing the drawings**

"A Fiat G.91 reconnaissance fighter-bomber, used in counter-guerrilla operations in Portuguese Guinea and Mozambique between 1966 and 1973, flies over the runway. There's smoke coming out of the engines, it's losing altitude. The racket that could be heard before turns into a deafening hiss; pieces of metal sheet break off from the wings and from the main body. A glow in the night. The pieces of metal sheet fall on the runway onto a mound of tiles, rusty pipes, and wooden boards with beaten nails sticking out of them, torn rope; shacks are forming along the runway. After the crash, when we wake up, the landscape has changed. That was the runway where FG.91s were tested; then those same planes became a weapon of the colony. Now a black man is coming out of that rubble."



**Figure 1** Rhizomatic Graphic Novel 1 - Drawing of Stefano Greco

This should be the opening of the graphic novel we have in mind, which is also a way to disseminate our previous ethnographic research experiences (Fravega and Queirolo Palmas 2022; Giliberti and Queirolo Palmas 2024) in the Borgo Mezzanone ghetto, known

by its inhabitants as "the runway". It is a large camp, a city of black people and day laborers in one of the main agro-industrial districts in Italy, and perhaps in the Mediterranean. Starting from the field diaries produced during our work, we would like to tell a story through images which can convey the complexity of the relationships that are generated in such an evocative context in a colonial situation (Balandier 2022). We are here to show our interlocutors some sketches, drafts of a story that has yet to be developed, and to conceive the project together. In recent months we have fantasized about hypothetical plots and our plan on how to document the lives of contemporary day laborers has expanded to stories of the past – the colonial era and its armaments – through images that refer to Western-movie aesthetics. We have also hypothesized invisible principles in the regulation of relationships and current events, evoking the genre which Gabriel Garcia Marquez had called magical realism.

As with the recent graphic novel "La Giacca" (Beneduce *et al.* 2025), we often start from a diary or from a collective ethnographic experience. Since we are not illustrators, we reassemble our field notes by separating the descriptive parts from the reflective and interpretative ones to build a storyboard for the illustrator, to whom we give these concise notes – a synopsis – to be reworked into drawings and a story. Here are some examples of this production process. The first one refers to ethnographic access, to a tourist context not far from the day laborers' camps, in which the researcher's subjectivity takes center stage. In the second one, we talk about a "return to the field" and, from within "the runway", we wonder about the transformations in relation to the previous phases of the research project.

Tap, Tap... Tap, Tap. In this seaside town, which I imagine is alive with tourism in the middle of the summer season, this sound and these gestures refer to something else.

A repeated, constant, dry noise that can be heard from a distance as if it reverberated on the white limestone walls; two men standing next to each other slam octopuses on the rocks following a precise rhythm. Tap, Tap... Tap, Tap. They are wearing an apron, stained with splashes of blood and flesh; little by little the same rocks get covered with a stain, a shroud. They each follow their own rhythm, but the sounds slowly converge, creating a harmony, some kind of mutual quotation. This procedure is mechanical and handcrafted at the same time.

Being beaten, so that the meat becomes more tender and therefore edible, looks like an anthropophagic metaphor of the production and reproduction of a social order in which force and violence are needed to impose oneself on people and things, but there is also that final, desperate, and persistent resistance, however doomed to fail, of what seems inanimate. Tap, Tap... Tap, Tap. As though resonating in space also opened up the possibility of resonating in time.



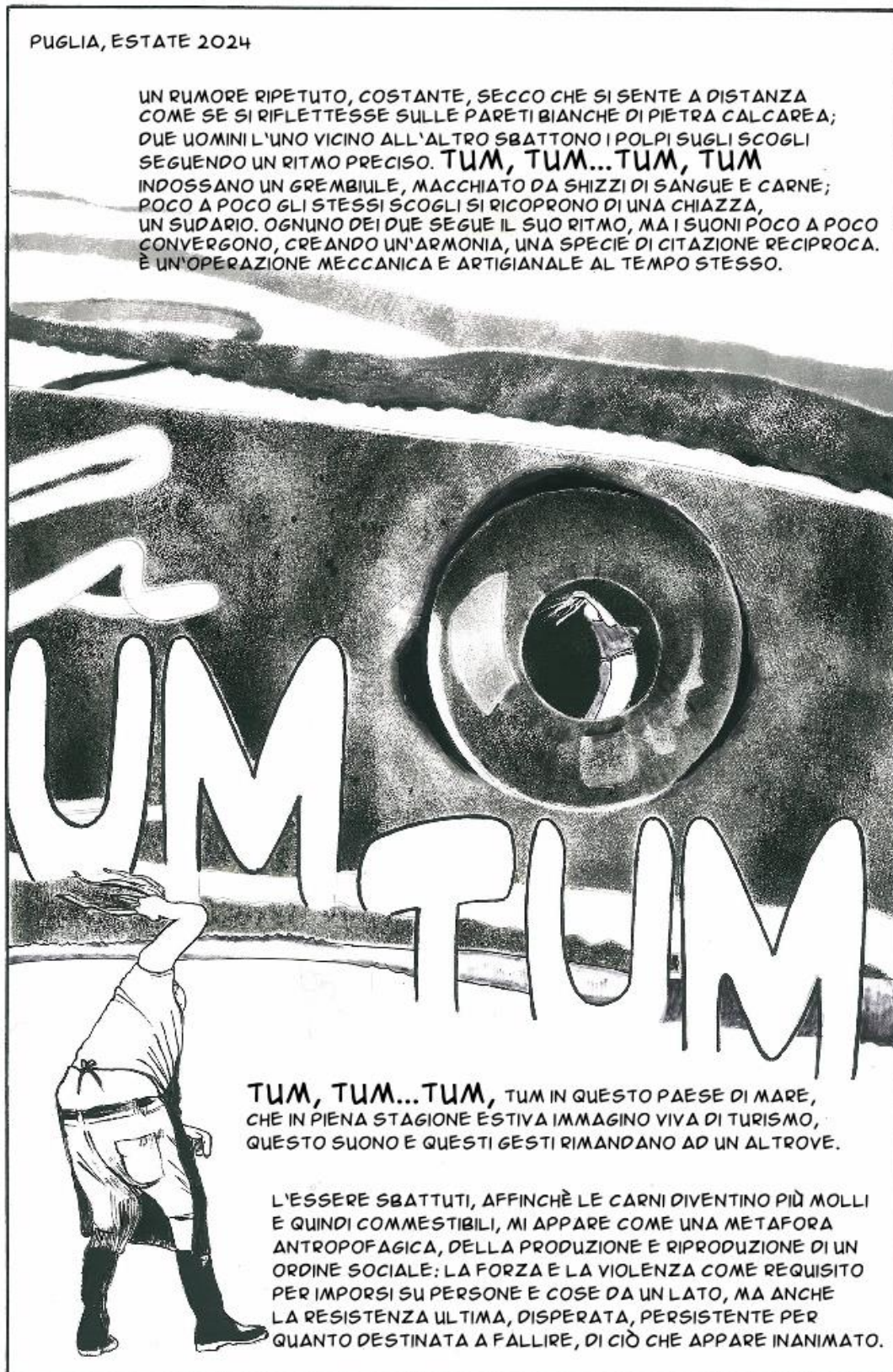


Figure 2 Rhizomatic Graphic Novel 2 - Drawing of Stefano Greco

It's 12 o'clock and the sun is hot on the flat countryside; the horizon is green. We see little low cars with black men wandering around the fields. They could be on a golf course or in a children's playground, but they are sowers. Then there are bars, butchers, stray dogs, people selling all sorts of things, churches, mechanics, electricians, the mayor, writings on the walls, sex workers, carpenters, multi-ethnic neighborhoods, restrooms, and burnt houses. There are little novelties, like water fountains where residents go with their bins, a car wash, a cultivated field surrounded by fences with chickens scratching around, a CGIL (trade union) flag, and a trade union information center. So, agricultural mechanization has not arrived and the runway is still there, a city with its informal services that is alive all year round and grows exponentially during the summer season, hosting workers from far and wide and providing essential services to land owners and to the large retailers that govern the agricultural market.

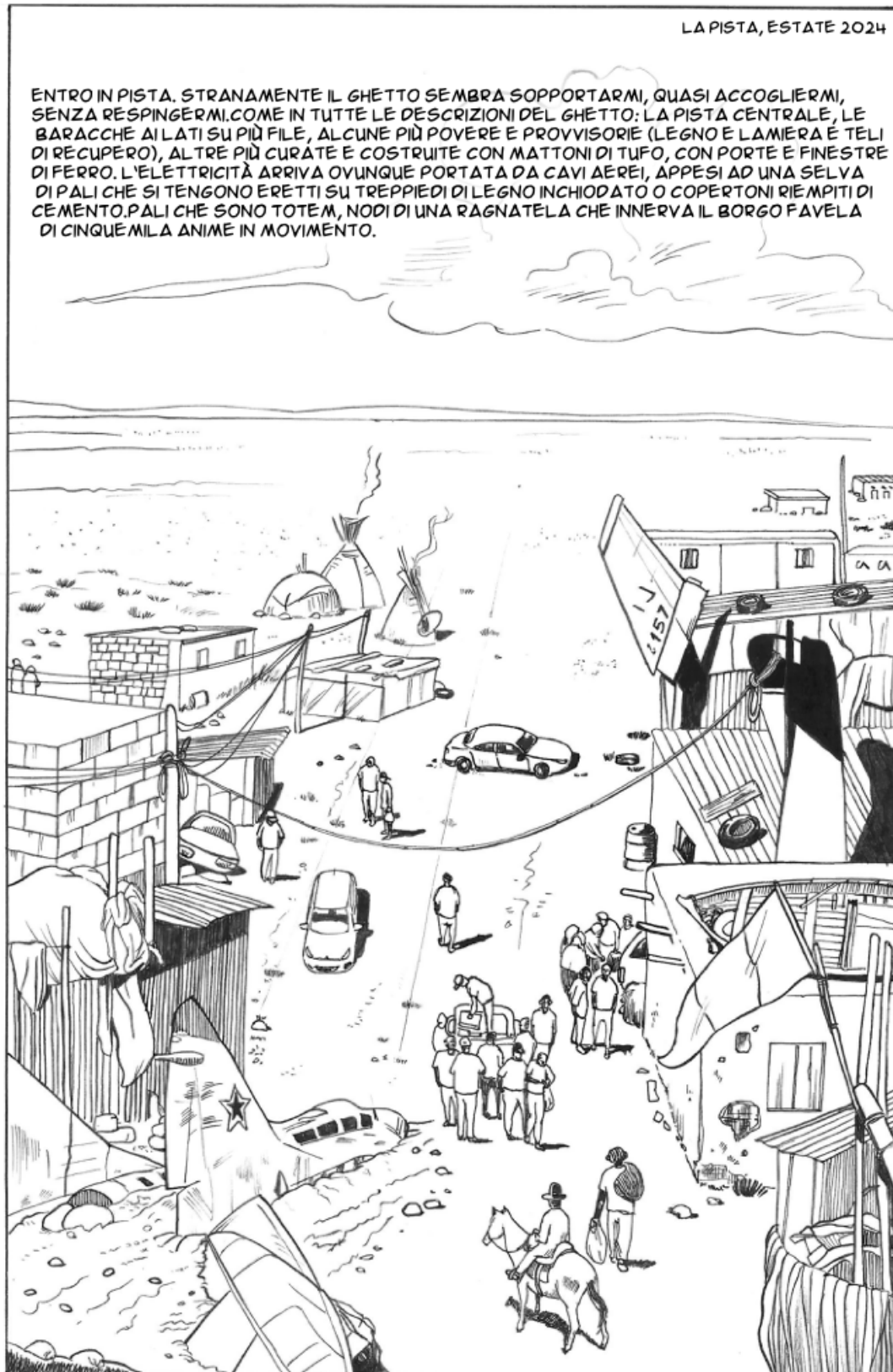
In this field, having a car is a sign of class distinctions between those who can organize a work team and those who can't, those who can move around the area and have relations with land owners and those who can't, those who can sell transport services and those who must buy them or suffer.

And, like the last time we were there, here work starts at 5 in the morning, when the teams leave, and ends after 8 hours by 1 or 2 p.m.

These are the extracts from the diary which the illustrator used to imagine the drawings without really knowing the place (he had never been to Borgo Mezzanone). The text from the diary is just an outline, a take-off runway following the beginning of the story, in which the past (the colony) plunges into a disorienting present (exploitation and segregation in the agricultural market), juxtaposing allusions to the lyrics of a pacifist song by Italian singer-songwriter Francesco De Gregori with a Western-movie aesthetic and an Indian reservation. These juxtapositions testify to the openness of images at the time when ethnographic writing, which is true fiction (Clifford and Marcus 1986) in and of itself, loses the hegemony of narrative and language.

Nothing is a given. We are working in unsaturated spaces and on fragmented time. The assemblage process has already begun, authors and subjects are multiplying, the text has already gone "through the outside and on the outside" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 4).

What to do next? The drawings we brought with us evoke pieces of colonial history and land on the table of the bar run by Jo, who is also a day laborer with a car, a bar as his home, and a small work team (according to an anthropology lexicon we want to unsettle, he is also an "informant"). They land there like a plane crashing on the runway.



**Figure 3** Rhizomatic Graphic Novel 3 - Drawing of Stefano Greco



## **Chronicle of a day on fieldwork**

We are here to see the consequences of this crash. Our voices and our drawings become entangled in a swarm of discursive lines, lines of physical presence, musical lines, staggering dogs, fish cut into pieces on the counters of the places where people are cooking Senegalese dishes, machines that have been looted and remodeled, garbage, shacks, metal sheets, rivulets of water coming out of puddles and cisterns that run out of water before their time. Let's try to recount the different parts of our ethnographic encounter.

### **First access - 1 p.m.**

"The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers... the settlers' town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about... the streets of [the settler's] town are clean and even, with no holes or stones... The town belonging to the colonized people... the Negro village... the reservation... is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute... It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other". (Fanon 1963: 38-9)

Today we are going to the runway with a researcher who carries out administrative paperwork support work for those who live in another ghetto. It is clear that she has been there for a long time; the way she greets people is telling and, through her precise gestures and local pronunciation, she introduces us to her specific world on that island surrounded by fields. With two of her Gambian friends, we talk about the relationship between mobility and the difficulty of building lasting emotional relationships when you are far away from home for too long. This conversation highlights a clear sense of existential precarity through the tone of someone who always has to renegotiate their timeframe, place, and way of life while continuing to feel that they are the protagonists of their own lives. In a small space, between a double bed and a sink with burners (but with no running water... only small ever-present trash cans), there is a huge screen broadcasting a Nigerian soap opera. They offer us a cup of tea while we keep discussing documents and residence permits. Yet, we are talking to people who have been in Italy for nearly 10 years.

Hospitality, exchange, and recognition come naturally. The volume of the soap opera is really high compared to the voices of the boys living in the house; their whispered words are difficult to hold back.

### **Production accidents - 4 p.m.**

"The thing which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself". (Fanon 1965: 36-37)

We have known Jo since the first time we went to the runway; his bar is a hangout in that part of the camp. People greet each other affectionately, with handshakes, smiles, and

hugs; the atmosphere is that of a reunion, with people telling anecdotes about the meetings that happened in the previous months. At the table next to ours, three boys are drinking their usual Peronis, listening to Bob Marley and singing the songs' choruses. The conversation flows smoothly and of course we are talking about Mali and West Africa; we have recently returned from Mauritania where we met dozens of Malian miners who were looking for gold in Chami, in the meanders of a land that swallows everything and rejects low-cost illusions (Queirolo Palmas & Cassarini 2024). It is always the *toubab* who get rich. We talk about the beautiful things from Mali (Mopti, Djenne, Niafunké, the great blues guitarist Ali Farka Touré, Timbuktu), but Jo knows little about them because he left right after high school, at the age of 25. It is often the case that the *toubab* know more places than the locals; it is because of tourism, *race*, and class.

It is precisely this unfair distance (a reflection of the persistence of the colony in the form of tourism) between him, a Malian man who does not know places in his country, and us who can mention some, that gives rise to a long conversation on the resources that the French have plundered from Africa. J talks about persisting colonialism, current politics, the need for a strong man – a man who is not involved in the political games that keep Africans subjugated – to break these chains once and for all. It is clear that the colony he is talking about had a starting point and then developed in different forms, which still exist to this day. This has fossilized everything, forcing us to continuously come to terms with it, every time a white man encounters a black man. And we researchers are in it up to our necks. To proudly claim a sense of belonging among other things, Jo shows us a map from which one can tell that in pre-colonial times Mali had access to the sea in what is now Mauritanian territory; the French then squared off these territories, creating a geography of power, throwing these peoples, who were often nomads, into state reservations.

We show Jo the drawings that Stefano Greco, our illustrator, had started to put together, choosing a Western-movie setting for the ghetto and the day laborers – gold rush, saloons, tumbleweed... a pop composition. However, Jo is drawn to a specific drawing, full of words, the only one in which the images are not predominant. He tries to read them... but his poor command of written Italian makes it hard. He starts to get annoyed, saying he sees nothing good in this story and asking us why we had transcribed his words about the lives of runaway workers. Why did we, *toubab*, transcribe his secrets? His reasoning? His knowledge? What for? Had we already published that work? Were we making money from it? Were we once again robbing the Malian, the black man, of his riches to transfer them into our economy, betraying the relationship of trust with him and exposing him to the gaze of others in the ghetto? He emphasizes that his is just one voice, that he cannot speak for others, and he repeats that he does not want to use his voice to get rich from his brothers' sweat. How can we move, how can we proceed in this regime of persisting coloniality, which is clearly embodied in the very segregation of the camp and its inhabitants away from the white people's city? The graphic novel as a project and illusion of co-narration has already crashed on the runway. And that is for the best. Our minds go back to *A Thousand Plateaus* by Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 8): "An assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily

changes in nature as it expands its connections. There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure... There are only lines”.

### **One step back: Respectable cities**

“Out-of-places are first and foremost constituted as outsides, located on the edge or at the limit of the normal order of things... they are characterized from the outset by confinement and a certain extraterritoriality. This is achieved through a double exclusion from locality: exclusion from the places of origin... and exclusion from the local people's space where the camps and transit areas are... Their positions are negotiated and relations are established between refugees or displaced people and local people - work relations in the camps or conflicts regarding the temporary use of the land owned by the villagers” (Agier 2020: 102)

Going into the ghetto is like entering another world. You need a contact, a clear and visible reason.

At the Rignano ghetto, the day before the incident with Jo, we met a boy who lived there and was walking back, hitchhiking along the road. Fo, an activist and researcher, was waiting for us inside, but performing an act of solidarity on our way in was just as important; even as we were heading to Borgo Mezzanone, we stopped to offer help to a man who was stacking an inappropriate number of more or less reusable tiles on his scooter.

The runway is an element along which urban informal development is organized in two main directions, with most businesses overlooking it; it is a built-up area that develops lengthwise, unlike Rignano which appears more stratified and surrounded by a road that delimits it into a semicircle from the outside. Built structures anywhere in the ghettos are made of metal sheet, wood, planks, tiles, and salvaged materials; scraps become precious. In Borgo some built structures have been consolidated with bricks and have been more or less plastered. There are dogs staggering around or lying down with their legs stretched out and a patchy fur coat. They look like they are dying. The music coming out of the bars is loud; the soundscape is modern African music, with a lot of Nigerian Afrobeat. The runway pushes the horizon away and there is a whole lot of sky.

There is no running water, electricity comes through informal connections, and gas comes in tanks. There are big blue plastic tanks that quickly run out of water. There is garbage everywhere. People wander around the runway. There is an incredible number of cars from which people have taken every piece that can be used to fix those that are needed as taxis to take workers to the fields. There are carcasses of cars, vans, and stacked tires.

## Two Steps Back: Moral Regions

"These areas are formed by dividing people based on their origin, ethnicity or possibly social class, through progressive agglomerations which depend on affinities or, conversely, on people's reaction to prejudices... for Robert Park, these areas progressively turn into moral environments and subsequently into "moral regions". The concept of moral region made it possible to understand the segregated organization of cities as a mosaic made up of distinct urban ethos" (Agier 2020: 53)

In Rignano, the Senegalese woman who runs the bar on the way into the settlement is talking about her children and the process of regularization. One of them is in Russia, he graduated in chemistry; another one is working. The youngest, who is 11 years old, was staying with a friend's family in Naples; his mother hoped to offer him a different perspective in a big city, she hoped he could have a better adolescence. Unfortunately, he ended up in prison at the age of 15 for stabbing one of his peers. He had been lured by the image of local street kids – scooters, running around, wearing designer clothes. Inside the bar it is hot, and the neon lights define its silhouette from the street in front of it, where there is a man leaning against his car. The pot is on low heat. On the shelves there are many packs of few products. Peach, apricot, custard, chocolate croissants, all the same. They probably have a chemical, sticky taste. How could she think of giving her children that fate, her fate? Taussig (2004: 67) speaks of "the existential strength of mind that monotony requires". Fo, the activist, comments on this case: "Had he been here, things might have been better. Nothing works here, but they would have kept an eye on him, he would have understood how to live respecting others. There are values that hold communities together and one learns the dignity of having a job." The thing is that here you cannot see a future; the past hangs over you, the present emerges, and then the night rises.

## Representatives and representations - 5 p.m.

"The multiple must be made, not by always adding a higher dimension, but rather in the simplest of ways, by dint of sobriety, with the number of dimensions one already has available – always  $n - 1$ ... Subtract the unique from the multiplicity to be constituted; write at  $n - 1$  dimensions. A system of this kind could be called a rhizome". (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 6)

Jo gets up, sits down again, and calls one of the members of the Board of Representatives in Borgo. There is a Board made up of representatives from each group, francophone, anglophone, Malian, Senegalese, Nigerian... it is used to make decisions on organizational matters and to deal with conflicts. "We talk and sort things out", says Jo, "this matter must be brought to the Board. Since the Board was established, we have solved many problems, quarrels, even fires. If they're still there, it's because they're accidental." This may be a fire, too, or it could turn into one. He reiterates that he feels robbed – it is clear that we are the specters of the settlers. Transcribing his narration of the secrets he shared with the *toubab* was an act of theft in his eyes; this is what he believes to have happened, although it is not so.



The incriminated text that accompanies the drawings had been entirely written by us as a sort of archaeological history of that space. It was a history of the runway as an air base for the planes which were then used in military operations against some African countries woven together with extracts from our diary on the city of Foggia focusing on how its young white proletarian population could not see the world of black day laborers. We had not made any drawings on how the ghetto functioned, on the secrets that were shared with us. The drawings denounced the same story that Jo was talking about. Yet, they had aroused his suspicion and anger. This is about method and specters. As is always the case in these unbalanced relationships, history comes back in all its harshness. Beneduce (2010: 45) states that:

"When History is interwoven with violence and humiliation, when History is witchcraft or a tragedy, the spiral of resentment and suspicion seems to have no end and anything can bring back the pain or mortification of an unredeemed past. (...) This is the post-colony, a regime ruled by guilt and shame, in which even research is probably one of the dirtiest words in the lexicon of the indigenous world, as it breeds silence and evokes dark memories, eliciting knowing and distrustful smiles".

Jo has all the right to be suspicious of the intentions and purposes of our operation. So, to show our understanding, we tear up the drawings and ask him to start over together. "That's it, this is what we must do, things must be done properly, we'll talk about it during the Board meeting, we'll meet and talk about it together, we must do things together, we live here." In the meantime, a Board member has arrived, taken a quick look at the drawings, and postponed the discussion until later.

We are part of the Institution and, as much as we have friendly intentions, it is fair for us to have to deal with historical and colonial legacy, which means we are at the receiving end of legitimately suspicious behavior. The world of research, the University, and the Health Service are all contiguous with the same institutions that leave the ghetto isolated, floating precariously in the midst of the fields where its inhabitants work the land with their hands; if subordinates are the ones who always remain on the margins of their superiors' discourse, then we must work together to rethink the ways, times, and spaces in which we meet and write. How can we write together with Jo? After all, that is what we came here to do - bring provisional drawings, paper shreds, to see the effects they would have and imagine ways and forms of co-narration.

### **Intermission: young Italians and migrant day laborers**

"Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be... Collective assemblages of enunciation function directly within machinic assemblages; it is not impossible to make a radical break between regimes of signs and their objects". (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 7)

On a bench in the town of Borgo Mezzanone, where the dirt track leading to the runway branches out from the paved road, we meet three pensioners who are talking about corruption, Toti (the former Governor of the Region of Liguria), market logics, and the

absence of the state. A former construction worker says: "We're on our own, sometimes they come to have some demonstration for migrants, which is right, but then they leave us alone, us and them. You can't work for that little, it's barely enough to survive. With my pension I can't buy certain products if prices go up at the supermarket. The Italian guys there, Italians... get paid €1,400 a month and then they have to give 400 back to their employer. With €1,000 per month they have to keep living with their parents. To keep prices low, everyone is exploited. This is not life. The day laborers are at the bottom of the chain, but it's the same chain." Perhaps the chain is not exactly the same, but with regard to their reasoning on class issues we are pleasantly surprised to come across this perspective which places young Italians, pensioners, and migrants in the same regime of precarity. His friend, who used to work in a pasta factory, replies: "Anyway, now they (*black people*) no longer work for less than 8 euros per hour." These are the same things Fo had told us in Rignano, which is a sign that workers are in short supply and there is a strength which was partly rekindled by this relative scarcity.

In Borgo, pensioners take for granted that work is divided along racial lines. "Our youths work in supermarkets or factories; black people work in the fields." Yet, the words of these ex-workers always convey a feeling of abandonment, of not being seen. Žižek calls it *envy*, a term he uses precisely to describe the condition of those who do not feel that they are being seen and want to be seen. This is why they definitely vote for the right, they believe in Salvini and Meloni, and unions are a distant subject: "Landini (the general secretary of CGIL, a major Italian trade union) only cares about black people" they tell us. We went to the CGIL branch in Borgo, where we were welcomed by local children involved in an after-school club who were curious about the summer activities of the black children with whom they sometimes end up playing. "Mohammed left, he went to France." And France almost sounds like a mysterious and fascinating space station. Then the walls bear the traces of an Italian-language school for day laborers – a project funded with the proceeds of a film that was shot on the runway and that has left behind this positive legacy<sup>2</sup>.

### Interconnections - 6 p.m.

"An assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections. There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure... There are only lines". (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 8)

Jo agrees to relaunch the graphic novel operation and work on it collectively, which is approved by the Board. The colonial misunderstanding was a valuable experience. J had become attached to those unknown, dangerous words. Each letter had become part of his body.

Not only does the representation of the Other (that is, of day laborers in the *toubab's* world) display them in the public space, but it is also a line which questions and destabilizes their private space. Researchers, like social workers, must constantly

<sup>2</sup>See: <https://willmedia.it/cosa-facciamo/one-day-one-day/>

negotiate positions, gazes, and the grammar of their encounters; they work ceaselessly.

Besides, needless to say, Jo has relations within the ghetto and Ka, who had been our interlocutor in the previous phases and with whom we had negotiated the operation, is now back in Africa; Ka has significant cultural capital within the ghetto, since he has already published an autobiographical book. Surely his relationship with researchers is completely different from Jo's, who in the fields' jargon is known as a *caponero*, that is a day laborer who organizes work teams. There is a delicate balance in the ghetto, much like elsewhere, involving power dynamics, visibility, accumulation of wealth, and individual growth which, however, must be considered in relation to community alliances. Ka's capital is cultural capital but it cannot be converted into economic capital; his life revolves around the camp. Jo's capital is social capital – he knows where to get work from the Italians – which turns into relative economic capital – he gives work to a few black brothers, he has a car and a bar, but he also toils in the fields. Envy and what is controlled by it come to mind once again. What looks will we be getting when we leave Jo's bar? How will Jo be looked at after a long conversation with the *toubab*? The man who, a few hours ago, had looked at us angrily exclaiming: "It's always like this with you *toubab*! We can't trust you!" It is very difficult to assess the effects which follow an operation involving a representation of the Other. Speaking for them and building a space of subjective expression with them are issues we often discuss...

Life on the runway goes on, with its dust, emaciated dogs, garbage everywhere, modern African music, girls standing in front of the brothels, an Italian girl high on crack, the tire dealer putting air in the tires of a child's bicycle. Some cars have stopped, others have been looted or are ready to go. According to Agier (2020:107) "in the camps, there is no room for any collective memory of the place to emerge, since their residents are just waiting to leave".

### The morning after: openings and suspicions

"Principle of asignifying rupture: against the oversignifying breaks separating structures or cutting across a single structure. A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines". (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 9)

We receive a voice message from Jo: he says he spoke to the Board the previous night and they agree to meet with us when we return in a month. They propose to decide together what to say in the graphic novel. If it is done this way, the operation sounds interesting to them. We still decide to go back to the ghetto before leaving, cross the sea of fields, go up on the island, go to the bar, and say goodbye to J. Greeting him is a sign of respect. It does not take long, just a hug. But it is loaded with meaning. It is a symbolic farewell.

Then we call K, who is abroad and whom we had kept informed about what was happening in his absence. He questions the relevance, even the existence of the Board and its function in this situation and the last thing he says is about Jo: " You can't do the graphic novel with him.", reminding us of the extent to which cultural capital stratifies each and every world, even the most subaltern. However, K makes himself available to come

to the meeting; he wants to be part of the process. The field has broadened and relationships are now more complex. We are more involved in the inner workings of relationships among residents of the ghetto. Galinier states that in relationships with informants it is necessary to recognize the difference between "external exegesis, that is, the statements produced by informants at the outsider's request, and internal exegesis, which includes all the comments which are offered spontaneously during a specific event..." (in Beneduce 2010: 22).

### **1 month later at Jo's bar - a Saturday in July, 5 p.m.**

Getting to the runway by car is more difficult; the rain has turned the dirt road full of potholes into mud. Last time we were told that this land requires so many day laborers that it cannot give in to mechanization.

At Jo's bar we are told that he is not there, he will arrive. We stick around and wait for him. A Nigerian guy starts ranting when he sees us in there: "This place ain't for you, this is Africa, you gotta get out, you don't wanna change Africa, do you?!?" We are two white men in a black men's bar, in a black men's town. A black men's town in the middle of the fields, like an island without a treasure.

Jo arrives, gives us a warm welcome, and sets up a table and chairs in front of the bar, because it is too hot inside; we drink (warm) beer accompanied by corn on the cob. Now there are five of us white men and one black man at the table, surrounded only by black people and dogs, most of them white. Colors matter a lot here.

Jo jokes: "So, how's the Netflix production going?" We say: "See, we stuck to our agreement and came to talk to you and the Great Board". Jo is smiling in his own way, not completely at ease in his role as mediator/representative of the Great Board (henceforth GB), very calm as a guest. It is his place, his bar, he talks to everyone, he gives orders, people come to say hi to him, you can tell he has made something of himself. Then the Gambian representative of the GB, whose grandparents are from Guinea Bissau, calls us and we tell him about the project, specifically about the history of the runway; he is astounded that there can be a past connection between today's runway and yesterday's colonial occupation: "I knew it was a military runway, but I didn't know about its history, it's interesting and I don't think anyone knows about it around here". There is an opening, some interest. Lazzari (2022: 13) states that "history does not speak for itself, it is subjects that make it speak and, at best, challenge the way it is interpreted by historians and politicians..."

Shortly after we are also joined by L, who is from Nigeria and has been living on the runway for a few years while his wife and daughters aged three and five are in Bari; he is here to work and occasionally goes back to Bari for four or five days to be with them. He did four years in jail, he has been out for two years, and in one year he will clean up his criminal record and get a residence permit for his family, since their daughters were born in Italy. We tell him about the graphic novel project, but he is understandably interested in the legal matters related to the residence permits.

It is getting late. It is night and we feel even more out of place. It is as if this place became more hostile to us *toubab*. Jo suggests arranging a meeting with the GB at the



end of the work day.

### **Wandering and bewilderment - a Sunday in July, 4 p.m.**

On Sunday afternoon we go to the Rignano ghetto, where day laborers unionized by USB have occupied state land to produce fair-trade tomatoes. Along the main road, some inquire about who we are; our guide is wearing a vest which reads "lower your weapons, raise our wages". At the edge of the camp, we see a shack wrapped in cellophane; a boy - Zak - walks out of it wearing a woolly hat and the usual US tank top. We stop to talk to him after exchanging ritual greetings. What have you been up to today? He whispers... I worked out and drank water. He shows us a bottle with a teabag inside and says "It comes from Burkina, from Ouagadougou, it's good for your gut." We move close to the shack because the wind makes it difficult for him to smoke and because his voice is lower than that of the wind.

He looks inside, his eyes are very sweet, it is as if they are smiling; we play with our phone and show him his image with the selfie setting. He smiles and stares deep into his own eyes. He wants his photo, then he writes down his name and date of birth for us; we are going to mail it to him since he does not have a cell phone. Everything is very slow. The wind blows on the heat, the fields, the sky, his gaze, and his hands of a different age. "What year is it?" he asks. He has been here since 2015, he has two brothers. Who knows how he sees himself when he looks ahead. "What do you think your future will be like?" He smiles and says "A boat for food, to transport food; I will cross the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific." It is an image that compels us, perhaps because it also appears to describe his present. The time that is to come seems so connected to the space where he is now - a shack isolated from life in the ghetto, next to the fields occupied by others like him and different from him, who see the trade union as a space of possibility. Marx wrote about "class in itself" and "class for itself".

We should be questioning our categories which define the idea of the flow of life in a linear and progressive way, focused on improvement if possible. Thoughts and hopes are two different things. What makes us exist in this world? Existing in this world requires a domestic world in which people can settle and the fundamental notion of existing in this world is having to be there (De Martino 1959). Being with him involves a process of dematerialization, our bodies begin to lose themselves and our gaze is focused on his hands... they seem to belong to a man who is getting old. We had to find our place along different temporal and spatial coordinates, learn different ways of sharing. We all know that these are subjective categories of existence and we will have further proof of this with Jo; the challenge is managing to live within them together with those who have established them.

Experiences of encounters which took place at different times and in different spaces, between Borgo and Rignano, between the "anarchist" ghetto and the "trade union" ghetto, start speaking to each other; they are two sides of the same coin. We think that in Rignano it would have been easier to produce a graphic novel. You can play at home: party, trade union, activists, "raise our wages, lower your weapons"... in short, pieces of a familiar world.

The image of the future painted by Zac's words materializes in what we see: him, his boat, the sea of green and yellow fields, the sky, and the wind. It is future, present, drifting, and a dream. It is a meta-historical plan generated with special tones of the voice, of the gaze, of the rhythm of speech, and of gestures. When we leave, he reminds us about the bottle with the gut concoction he had given us – the gift and all its contents. Then our guide regains his focus: his account is accurate, clear, and all its passages are well articulated in fluent Italian. He gets to Rignano with €10 and at once he immerses himself in the organization, in the development of relationships between day laborers and employers, landowners. All of this, thanks to his language skills which have immediately turned into social capital. We feel that it has become easier to interpret the processes of this ghetto, which now has its own established narrative, perfectly conveyed by our guide who is an official representative of this place – some call him *mayor*, others *president*. We ask him "What is the ghetto for you?" "My America" he replies, while on the walls of the trade union headquarters we see some posters praising new pan-African sovereignisms. AES, the association of Sahel states, is the name of the new political project that brings together Mali, Niger, and Burkina to respond to the need of anti-colonial strongmen evoked by Jo. What kind of text and what kind of writing will characterize the graphic novel if it ever comes to fruition? We go back to Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 11) as we make our way back to the runway to meet with the Great Board: "contrary to a deeply rooted belief, the book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an aparallel evolution of the book and the world; the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterritorialization of the book, which in turn deterritorializes itself in the world (if it is capable, if it can)."

### Our appointment with the Great Board – 8 p.m.

As we get on the runway we make it through the mud on the road; people are in high spirits, the evening is here. Being there at that time of the day is already a privilege. Our white car, surrounded by that landscape in which every ruin is salvaged and salvageable, makes us stand out. Anyway, we are the *toubab*, regardless of what car we have. We are the *toubab* because we are white, we are wealthy because we are white, we have a colonial background because we are white, we have certain powers to access the black people's city because we are white.

Jo is at a Nigerian wedding in Foggia. We wait at the bar; the beer is warm and there is corn on the cob roasting around the fire. We talk to the people who are sitting there. A Nigerian Rastafarian who comes from Ascoli Piceno says: "Here you get work every day; there with the City Council you never got any work." We ask him about the future: "I don't think about the future, I can't know about it. I'm here because I accrue experience and learn this job as a day laborer. Every place has its own way." We talk about music, about politics in the music of Fela Kuti, about the sea: "Is it close? Is it far?" he asks. He tries to measure the distance based on how many hours it takes to get to the water. The Senegalese man next to him shows us his documents: "I had a permit (subsidiary?) that burned up in the hut when it caught fire... can you help me get it back? I trust you, I give you my identity card (*he actually does that*), then you call me, and I do everything you tell

me...". We are the *toubab* to whom the relationship with papers and state documents is delegated.

### Unveiling - 10 p.m.

Meanwhile, Jo arrives; he was at the Nigerian wedding with the other members of the GB which is therefore postponed tonight. We think about the fact that we came from Genoa specifically for this meeting. But we are not really surprised. We would have been surprised at the opposite; we were curious to see, to deal with a power entity in and from the camp. We are glad that Jo came, it was the sign we were looking for; the GB is a boundary that Jo has put between us and his words, between us, white gatherers-predators, and him, a black gatherer... of what? He is an entrepreneur in an informal economy which is linked to large-scale agro-industrial distribution after a thousand intermediate steps; he has a bar with a kitchen, he rents out rooms to sex-workers in the back, he has a car and puts together work teams that go to the fields with him. It is also thanks to Jo that we have tomatoes on our tables.

Censorship is about who profits from whom, who says what about and for whom, who has power and where. Unlike in the Rignano camp, the runway does not "turn white"; it keeps its distance from any political, cultural or trade union project. Jo is playing with his cell phone and then suddenly he takes us for a stroll; we walk along the runway together. We arrive at the headquarters of the GB, a stone-made house. On the door there is a poster advertising a planned meeting with the CGIL, which might prove that there is a higher entity of which he is part and that represents a constriction. We might be going past this in a fragmented and informal way, without any solemnity. We talk among ourselves about the impressions we have of that world – is this an expression of a past or are these the premises of a future? It is just a *toubab* game that tries to situate space in time and time in space; the bodies that inhabit it every day block this need we have and collapse the categories with which we play. Our modes and parameters evaporate. The same research project falls apart every time we try to redefine it, as discourses open up which run along multiple planes; the graphic novel is buried. We focus on two questions. What is in it for them? In the name of what are we there? These questions remain unanswered. As Lazali (2022) pointed out, society is the receptacle for the different forms of violence to which it exposes subjects. Their fragility is exacerbated when they come into contact... with us, researchers, institutions, white people; to limit the exposure to danger, they would rather retreat and disengage.

### Walking. Redefining our relationship - 12 a.m.

"Principle of cartography and decalcomania: a rhizome is not amenable to any structural or generative model. It is a stranger to any idea of genetic axis or deep structure... that genetic axis and profound structure are above all infinitely reproducible principles of tracing... The rhizome is altogether different, a map and not a tracing... What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real... It fosters connections between fields, the removal of blockages on bodies without organs, the maximum opening of bodies without organs onto a plane of consistency". (Deleuze and

Guattari 1987: 12)

It is difficult to think of the product of research in this dissolution of form; it is better to breathe in this state of things.

Jo is very kind, polite in some way, and we feel his kindness as we take that walk which recreates another way of continuing that relationship. Jo is accompanying us, he is validating us, he is greeting people, he is greeted by a lot of people, we see that, we are safe and relaxed; the night is less hot than the day and it almost seems brighter. There are music lights and fires from many small parties everywhere. We see and stand on the brink between the street and the interiors, the hustle and bustle of dozens of bars and businesses of all kinds.

We walk without feeling anxious about censorship or bargaining; are we learning how to be there? We remember Fanon's words that we had superimposed on the figure of a migrant who was being hunted down at the gates of Briançon in the graphic novel *La Giacca*: "All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help build it together" (Fanon 1986: 85).

We do not know how to build something together either. What? Build a world that was ours? Jo seems more clear-headed than us in this proposition, more willing to show his helplessness in the face of this tension that we ourselves cannot sustain. So we leave, saying goodbye in a simple way, until next time, without any words. We exit through the end of the paved runway and take off with a handful of research hypotheses and interpretations.

### Back to the Introduction

After all, Jo had only censored us. The proposal to create a graphic novel to tell as many people as possible, elderly people and children, about the long history triggered by the runway's fighter-bombers up to the shreds of Africa that today have reassembled on the same runway did not seem to be Jo's priority. There is something invisible that regulates power and economic relations within the runway; it is probably something invisible that lies in the folds between subjects and their community. That might be where the device of censorship is inserted. When we showed the drawings to Jo we were in a place that is a bar, a brothel, and a labor market all in one, but is removed from its real location; perhaps the relationship between black and white people had moved it from a present spatial dimension to a past temporal dimension, from the current relevance of what is visible and what is knowable to the temporality of the colony. We can try to question the extent to which research can overcome these relational boundaries, placing them on planes of evanescence which are articulated between subjectivity/community/History and what is visible/invisible. As Deleuze and Guattari put it (1987: 23): "There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity... What is lacking is a Nomadology, the opposite of a history... Write to the  $n$ th power, the  $n - 1$  power, write with slogans: Make rhizomes, not roots, never plant! Don't sow, grow offshoots! Don't be one or multiple, be multiplicities! Run lines, never plot a point! Speed turns the point into a line! Be quick, even when



standing still! ... Where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for? These are totally useless questions”.

### Back to the Methodology

This text is primarily intended as a self-reflection on fieldwork. In ethnography, the diary is the primary tool for keeping track of encounters, documenting the developments of a discourse, but also doubts, disorientation, and contradictions. Although central to ethnographic practice and tradition, such materials are not usually published. Furthermore, as Clifford and Marcus (1986) has taught us, ethnographic *truths* are inherently partial: biased and incomplete. Describing the backstage of research helps to bring out this dimension. The diary is an intimate and sometimes uncomfortable text, because it enters the cracks of reality, often providing interpretations that are not peaceful; Furthermore, by allowing frictions and contradictions to emerge, precisely because of its descriptive and at the same time analytical nature, the diary intensifies the critical and *back translation* character of a "set of data", of an object initially intended only as an archive, as a *backstage*, as a repository for intimate and private reflection. Making fieldwork diaries public means, on the one hand, revealing a fundamental moment in the production of theory and research, which then appears in more codified terms in books and articles. On the other hand, this operation implies a bet on the literary value that writing in the social sciences can assume: distilling materials extracted from a composite research archive into narrative form, at times through a work of montage; expanding their evocative capacity thanks to the power of artistic imagination. The diary can be a manageable and transformable device with which to build connections and co-authorship with visual artists, illustrators, and filmmakers. From this perspective, the diary form—which is itself a collage of different materials, such as transcripts of conversations and experiences, theoretical and emotional reflections in the making of the research—constitutes a possible script on which to trigger other projects of translation and cultural expansion. The ethnography we practice, in Borgo Mezzanone as elsewhere, follows in the footsteps of what Back and Puwar [2012] have called the *live method*, seeking ways in which social science can, on the one hand, be embodied in works capable of interesting audiences beyond the academic sphere and, on the other, make use of artistic languages as research tools that are more effective in generating new knowledge. A now vast literature allows us to place graphic ethnography (Della Puppa and Moretti 2024, 2025; Gruning and Scavarda 2025, Rumsby 2020; Taussig 2011; Dennison 2015) within the field of diverse and legitimate research practices. For us, the “naïve” exercise of graphic ethnography was primarily a way to reflect on the contradictions of (our) way of acting when doing research, insofar as it seeks to operate in a participatory manner. We have been doing fieldwork in Borgo Mezzanone since June 2023 and are still building relationships with some of the inhabitants of that space. The graphic novel, as an unpredictable rhizome, is still under discussion with our interlocutors.

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