

I Disconosciuti. Vivere e sopravvivere al di fuori del sistema di accoglienza.

An ethno-graphic novel by Francesco Della Puppa, Alessandro Lise, Francesco Matteuzzi, Francesco Saresin e Giulia Storaro. Padova: BeccoGiallo. Review by Caterina Borelli

VOLUME 14 | No 1 | 2025
<http://dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-197>

The author

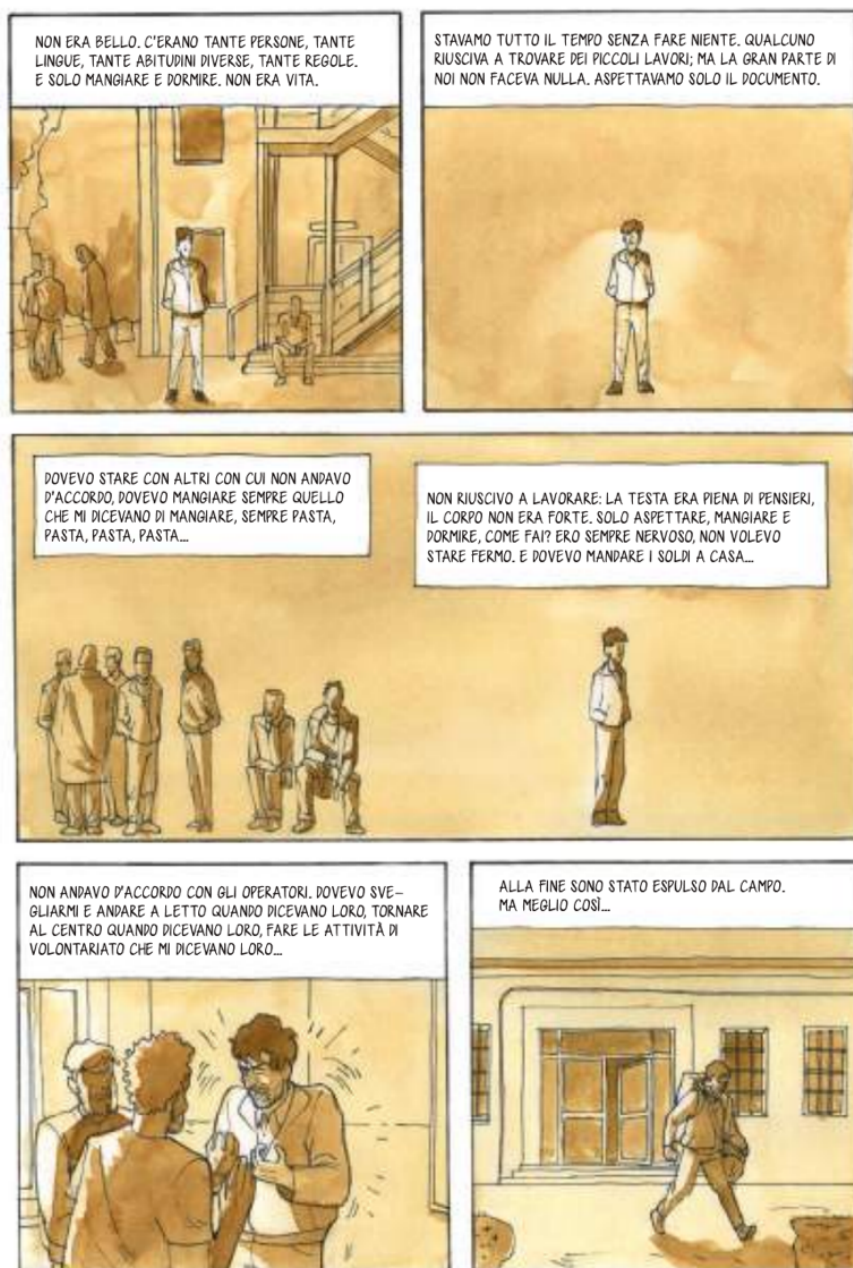
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The ethno-graphic novel *I Disconosciuti* ("The disavowed") is a recount of the life of asylum seekers who were expelled – or never made it into – the Italian reception system. It is the second work of this kind by Francesco Della Puppa, who teaches Sociology at the University of Venice. A few years ago, he decided to translate his research on the onward migration of Italo-Bangladeshis to the United Kingdom into a narrative language more creative than academic writing and more appealing to a non-expert audience: the comic format. The result was *La linea dell'orizzonte* ("The horizon line", 2021), written in collaboration with the screenwriter Francesco Matteuzzi and illustrated by Francesco Saresin. The experiment was quite unique within the social sciences, or at least in the Italian scenario, where the only clear antecedent is, to my knowledge, *The King of Bangkok*, by Claudio Sopranzetti, Sara Fabbri and Chiara Natalucci, to which we might add the reflections on drawing as an ethnographic method recently brought forward by Letizia Bonanno. The book was well-received in a variety of settings, both within academia and beyond. The more informal medium proved to favour the dissemination of research, which was appreciated by comic book lovers who thus were drawn into sociology and migration studies, as well as by those interested in the social phenomenon, whom an abstruse academic text would have otherwise put off. The success of that first test convinced the author to continue along this path of narrative experimentation.

In this new endeavour, the story unfolds in an anonymous, medium-sized northern town. The specific location is less critical than its atmosphere, a point the book emphasises by opening with the line: "Every city has its own temperament, its own character" (p. 13), accompanied by an aerial view of a small urban centre spread out between a river and the green mountains in the background. As we move through the pages, the impression is that the character of the setting plays a significant role in adding a subtle yet sharp contrast to the narrative between the neatness and calm order reigning among the city streets and the shelter under the bridge where migrants have settled. Most of them have been expelled from, or were never admitted into, the reception system addressed at asylum seekers and holders of international protection. Other left it on their own will, in search of a space of autonomy far from the state's technology of care and control.



P. 21: Farad recounts his days at the reception centre: "It wasn't nice. There were many people, many languages, many different customs, many rules. Just eating and sleeping. That wasn't life. We used to spend the whole time doing nothing. Someone would find some tiny job; but most of us wouldn't do anything, just wait for the papers. I had to live with other people with whom I didn't get along, eat what I was told to eat, always pasta, pasta, pasta, pasta... I couldn't work: my head was full of thoughts, my body was weak. Just waiting, eating, and sleeping. How can you live like that? I was always nervous, couldn't stay still. And I had to send money home... I didn't get along with the social workers. I had to wake up and go to bed when they said so, do the volunteering activities they told me to... Eventually, I was expelled from the camp, but it was better that way..."

The story is narrated from the perspective of Anna (Giulia Storaro's alter ego), a young researcher supervised by Stefano (Della Puppa's stand-in). The plot develops along two intertwined narrative lines. On the one hand, it is a detailed recount of Anna's fieldwork

encounters with migrants living at the fringes of society, sleeping under bridges or in homeless shelters, eating at soup kitchens, working odd jobs when possible, otherwise struggling to fill an apparently infinite temporal and existential void. They are forced into these margins because building a new home in a foreign country is an almost impossible goal to achieve for racialised people with a liminal legal status, or no status at all. The book effectively highlights how structural obstacles to entering the housing and labour market severely hinder social inclusion, thereby reproducing vicious circles of marginalisation. Crucially, however, urban margins seem to provide Anna's interlocutors some protection as well, and a time-space where they can escape the receiving society's expectations on how a "deserving migrant" should behave.



P. 36: Anna and Aliou walk through a park: "Nice, isn't it? During the day there is plenty of people, but at night... At night, there is no one, so we don't bother anyone. That's why they leave us alone. At night everything is ours ah ah ah!"



P. 41: Farad shows Anna his spot under the bridge: "My bed" "How long have you been living here?" "I have spent here the whole summer. Here no one sees what we do. It is isolated. In other areas, we are more exposed. If we hang our things out in the air, they say it is neglect. And if something happens, it is always our fault."

On the other hand, the book charts the ups and downs of conducting research, showing moments of self-doubt and impasse, sudden turning points, the overlapping of work and private life, and the inevitable moment when a researcher must acknowledge they have done all they could within the allotted time, and the research must conclude. It speaks to the contradictions and moral dilemmas of dealing with one's relative privilege vis-à-vis situations of profound discomfort, unmasking the triviality of our "first-world

problems”, while establishing at the same time some unexpected correspondences between different precarities and rootednesses.



P: 87: Anna says goodbye to Farad, who is about to leave for Portugal in search of a job: “Well, I hope you will be able to find what you are looking for, and a place to feel at home” “Yes... you too.”

The effectiveness of *I Disconosciuti*, much like Della Puppa's previous work, lies in its ability to translate complex fieldwork dilemmas and the lived experiences of migration into a visual and direct language. This capacity for public engagement and dissemination is precisely why the medium is gaining crucial attention and academic legitimisation. Della Puppa's continued commitment to this innovative format confirms its growing importance: the volume he recently edited with Veronica Moretti, *The Social Genres of Comics: Impact and Innovation of Comics in Social Sciences* (published by Palgrave Macmillan), represents a major effort to academically formalise the discussion around the impact and potential of comics in social sciences. Ultimately, *I Disconosciuti* stands as compelling evidence that the graphic narrative is not merely a creative tool, but a crucial new vehicle for ethnographic critique and public sociology.