

Chapter 20

Mediterranean Calling: Hunger, Revolt, and Migration in French-Language Graphic Novels

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Abstract

A wide range of materials contribute to a historiography of the ideas and imaginaries that developed around the Mediterranean in the modern era: maps, technical reports, paintings, magazines, films, documentaries, posters and advertising brochures. What is the contribution of the new millennium? The “Ninth Art” is becoming increasingly important in many countries, including those around the Mediterranean. Several works from the French-speaking world published in the last two decades have the “Middle Sea” and the riparian countries as their setting (or protagonist). Hunger, revolt, and migration seem to unite most of these graphic novels, which take place on the shores of the Mediterranean. Hunger, revolt, and migration will therefore be the common threads running through our discourse, as *topoi* of a systemic crisis and an imbalance between a “North” and “South” in which the Mediterranean remains the fundamental barycenter.

Keywords

Mediterranean sea; comics; French literature; French-speaking literature; imaginary.

Introduction

Analyzing the photographic Sicilian imaginary that tourist industry and individual consumers produce, Douglas Mark Ponton borrows Van Leeuwen's terms of exclusion, suppression, and backgrounding (Ponton 2023: 5; Van Leeuwen 1996). Ponton emphasizes how,

[i]n analyzing photography, which has pretensions to show simply “what is there”, this perspective cannot be ignored. It will be seen that there are significant absences in the corpus; there are very few human figures, and none from the non-human world, where this term refers to animals, insects, birds, etc. In Stibbe's terms, these absences appear as “erasure” (Stibbe 2012, 2015), a significant semiotic feature contributing to discriminatory representation. (Ponton 2023: 5)

While we do not ask graphic novels to depict reality as it is, it is true that we have long asked them to embellish it for our entertainment. This is especially true since their setting turns out to be an exotic and generic “South”. Are these mechanisms of exclusion and backgrounding also present in the representation of the South that graphic novels offer? Or do these prove, on the contrary, capable of deconstructing stereotypes (even their own)?

This chapter will firstly focus on why it may be interesting to interrogate the Mediterranean imaginary that graphic narrative (Chute 2008) has constructed in recent history, as well as how this imaginary has changed over time. Afterwards, the article analyses a sampling of recent Mediterranean graphic novels, following the thread of hunger, revolt, and migration. These topics demonstrate that today's graphic novels are anything but a disengaged art, especially on the Mediterranean shores. The Mediterranean in graphic novels does not necessarily contrast with current representations on the same theme in newspapers, social networks, videos, and films, but certainly completes them.

Child's Play?

In its origin, graphic narrative (Chute 2008) was a disengaged genre and aimed at a young audience. Even more so when its setting was non-European. Limiting myself to my field of specialization, the French-speaking context, episodes of Tintin or Spirou could make twentieth-century readers dream with exotic settings and daring adventures: they would then reassure them with a happy ending. Today graphic narrative is aimed at adults and is often used to express harsh stories. Upon examining literature from the French-speaking world, one observation spontaneously arises: the time when the Ninth Art was light-hearted and disengaged is definitely over. This seems even more true on the shores of the Mediterranean: looking at the southern “border” of Europe,

French-speaking graphic narrative seem to express difficult, conflicting, and, sometimes, mournful realities.

The enormous success of the sagas *L'arabe du futur* by Riad Sattouf (2014-2022) or *L'odyssée d'Hakim* by Fabien Toulmé (2018-2020) demonstrate how it is possible to entertain and make readers reflect on painful stories, both individual and collective¹.

«The Mediterranean is lively, too lively!»², exclaimed the French poet Gabriel Audisio in 1958, and he went on to say: «Which of its shores has not erupted? The fever of nationalism, convulsions and fanaticism, frenzies, insurrections, repressions, revolutions... The liquid continent rises, boils, and its boiling makes the lids blow off»³ (Audisio 1958: 16). The recent geopolitical record seems to confirm these old assertions: economic, strategic, and cultural reasons put the Mediterranean back at the center of media and academic attention. It may therefore be interesting to ask what image or images of the Middle Sea the Ninth Art conveys to us. Moreover, the Mediterranean is inextricably linked with its image: paintings, photographs, films, advertisements and even “clubs” have, over time, crystallized a Mediterranean “imaginary”, and even in the twentieth century, a certain “brand”⁴. From a historical point of view, before being an area or an idea, the Mediterranean is an image: the one that maps show us, with borders that vary in size from one era to the next. As Anne Ruel points out, it was geographers who established the Mediterranean as an autonomous object of study⁵. In the age of the internet and social networks, Mitchell's «pic-

1 Historian Henry Laurens explains the presence of the Arab world in French-language comics: «In the twentieth century, the images of the contemporary Arab world conveyed by French-language comics were aimed at a young audience and created a whole imaginary world. Today, the comics are aimed more at adults, expressing the conflicts, exile and dual cultures of today's Arab world. Over the course of two centuries, the messages of this committed art form, imbued with a pleasant and stereotyped vision, have been transformed and replaced by much harsher political realities» (Laurens 2022; «Au XX^e siècle, les images du monde arabe contemporain véhiculées par la bande dessinée francophone étaient destinées à un public jeune et créaient tout un imaginaire. Aujourd'hui, cette dernière s'adresse plutôt à des adultes pour exprimer les conflits, l'exil et la double culture dans le monde arabe actuel. Sur deux siècles d'histoire, les messages de cet art engagé, empreints d'une vision plaisante et stéréotypée, se sont transformés et ont été remplacés par des réalités politiques bien plus dures»). All the translations of French texts are my own; the original versions are provided in footnote.

2 «Vivante, trop vivante Méditerranée!».

3 «Lequel de ses rivages n'est pas entré en éruption? Fièvre quarte des nationalismes, convulsions et fanatismes, frénésies, insurrections, répressions, révolutions... Le continent liquide se soulève, bouillonne, et son ébullition fait sauter les couvercles».

4 On these alliances between culture and marketing, see Guellec and Hache-Bissette (2012); Thérenty and Wrona (2020).

5 «To speak of the Mediterranean, you had to be able to think of it. The birth of the word therefore takes us back to the work of geographers: they were at the origin of the concept of a Mediterranean whole. [...] Élisée Reclus was the first geographer to establish the

torial turn» (Mitchell [1992] 2017: 79) is complete: massive access to precise and cheap technological equipment, such as smartphones and drones, generates an infinite number of landscape views, selfies and videos every day (Rouillé 2020). Today, the omnipresence of images is a fact, and also plays a role in the context of cultural production⁶. It is therefore no coincidence that comics and graphic novels⁷, hybrid forms of writing and drawing, are very popular with the public. At the intersection of words and images, they adapt to the rhythms of an increasingly fast-paced, fluid, viral and largely iconocentric society.

Contemporary Mediterranean graphic novels are obviously characterized by a range of subjects, styles and orientations. The Ninth Art is gaining increasing prominence in many countries, including Arabic-speaking countries around the Mediterranean⁸. Here, graphic narrative proves above all capable of telling difficult stories and conflicting realities⁹. Perhaps these patterns simply draw our still Eurocentric attention. Researcher Alexandra Gueydan-Turek rightly observes: «All too often confined by critics to works from its diaspora, and only reaching a select audience of mainly French readers, Maghrebi comics have long been regarded as a minor genre living outside its region»¹⁰ (Gueydan-Turek 2019: 45).

Mediterranean as an independent object of study. His view of the sea shifted from a restricted geophysical definition to an awareness of a historical, economic and cultural space. [...] The construction of a geographical object was replaced by the birth of a cultural entity» (Ruel 1992: 8-9; «Pour parler de Méditerranée, encore fallait-il pouvoir la penser. La naissance du mot nous renvoie donc à l'œuvre des géographes : ils furent à l'origine de la conception d'un ensemble méditerranéen. [...] Élisée Reclus est ainsi le premier géographe à consacrer la Méditerranée comme un objet d'étude autonome. Le regard qu'il porte sur la mer se déplace d'une définition géophysique restreinte à la prise de conscience d'un espace historique, économique et culturel. [...] À la construction de l'objet géographique s'est substituée la naissance d'une entité culturelle»).

6 See Bonnet (2017); Doueïhi (2008); Pascal, Thérenty, and Tran (2021).

7 On the difficulty of establishing the literary status of graphic novels, considered by specialists to be more in the commercial or publishing category, see Beaty (2007); Baetens and Frey (2014); Benvenuti (2019); Brienza and Johnson (2016); Delorme (2019); Tosti (2016).

8 In 2018, at the Angoulême Festival, an exhibition was devoted to “Nouvelle génération. Arab comics today”. The catalogue of the same name, subtitled *Un tour d'horizon du neuvième art méditerranéen*, presents the work of various artists from the countries of the Maghreb and the Levant. Dalila Nedjem, a comic strip artist, has been organizing the Algiers International Comic Strip Festival since 2001. The younger generation often use the internet to share their work: Noha Habaieb uses Instagram and Behance to share her panels, which alternate between Arabic, English and French; Zainab Fasiki has published parts of *Hsbouma. Corps et sexualité au Maroc* via social networks before being published in volume. Using comic strip language, and often social media, they try to raise awareness of issues concerning the status of women in Maghrebi countries. More and more French and Arabic language blogs and groups work mainly via the web.

9 See Nabizadeh (2019); Serrano (2021); Comberiati and Spadaro (2023); Busi Rizzi et al. (2022).

10 «Trop souvent confinée par le champ critique aux œuvres issues de sa diaspora et ne touchant guère qu'un public d'initiés principalement composé d'un lectorat hexagonal, la bande

Nevertheless, hunger, revolt, and migration are subjects that constantly return in graphic novels in relation to the Mediterranean space and therefore deserve to be read as a whole, starting from some case studies.

Memories of Migration

Various contemporary French authors are using graphic novels to retrace their own family history, and their mixed origins. Individual stories become intertwined with history, which inevitably coincides with France's colonial past in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Jacques Ferrandez has devoted an entire cycle, *Carnets d'Orient* (2019), to reconstructing his family's Mediterranean adventures at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Spain to Algeria. The ten volumes of the cycle span an extended period, from 1986 to 2009. This provides an interesting sample for analyzing the evolution of the language of comics in the space of twenty years. Indeed, the volumes Ferrandez published in the 1980s were graphically very different from today's graphic novels. Autobiographical inspiration dissolves among the very dense plots, text-filled clouds, and numerous characters: it's no coincidence that the first volumes appeared in the comics periodical *Corto Maltese*. Ferrandez's work is both aesthetically pleasing and richly documented. The author's personal memories are interwoven with in-depth historical research. Many iconographic sources support the narrative: maps, plans, architects' sketches and the notebooks of traveller-painters and military-painters, in the words of the author¹¹.

A similar autobiographical and transmedia approach characterizes the work of Joël Alessandra, whose surname evokes Italy. His *Petits-fils d'Algérie* (2015) investigates his origins, starting with the port of Marseille where the *pieds-noirs* (black foot), including the Alessandra family, landed in 1962. But the real center of the story is Constantine, in Algeria. In his introduction to *Petits-fils d'Algérie*, historian Benjamin Stora reconstructs the socio-geographical mosaic of this city, full of European immigrants: «poor people, full of hope, who did not shy away from the toughest tasks»¹² (Stora 2015: 3). Indeed, Alessandra's grandparents emigrated from Sicily to Algeria in the nineteenth century; initially bricklayers, they later became building contractors. While there, Alessandra (re)discovers the contributions his ancestors made to the architecture of Constantine. This historical and biographical reconstruction is based on hybridization: photos,

dessinée maghrébine a longtemps été considérée comme un genre mineur vivant hors de sa région».

11 Intervention at the conference “Le monde arabe dans la bande dessinée francophone”, February 18, 2022. Accessed July 31, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXCn-JnTzTSQ>.

12 «Des gens pauvres, pleins d'espoirs, et ne reculant pas devant les tâches les plus rudes à accomplir».

magazine covers, and newspaper articles are integrated into the narrative, sometimes as originals, sometimes as drawn reproductions. This “meta-drawing” is an effective strategy: it breaks the rhythm of the narrative and presents historical documents of interest to the reader, integrating them directly into the narrative. As the pages turn, Alessandra seems to come to terms with his own personal history — and nevertheless, this graphic novel is the expression of unresolved stories and memories about the Algerian Independence War, which the author approaches in a neutral tone, confining himself to listing the facts.

Alien Species

The theme of migration links the stories of yesterday and today, but by inverted paths. While Ferrandez and Alessandra recount crossings from the north to the south of the Mediterranean, the contemporary world conjures up images of odysseys from the south to the north. Edmond Baudoin had already published the illustration book *Méditerranée* with Gallimard in 2017, which poetically told a story of migration and shipwreck. In 2018, he signed another Mediterranean-themed work, *Humains. La Roya est un fleuve*, in collaboration with his colleague Troubet (Jean-Marc Troubet). This comic strip reportage, with an introduction by Jean-Marie Le Clézio, recounts the week the two cartoonists spend between Ventimiglia and the Val Roya, following in the footsteps of migrants trying to cross the border between Italy and France. The pages are filled with episodes from an abnormal daily life, as well as portraits of the migrants and the people who help them. While the point of view on the events recounted is undoubtedly that of the two authors, a series of small speech bubbles accompany some of the portraits of the migrants, quoting their words. Despite various mediations — translation from the original languages into French, written versus oral formulations — *Humains* is an attempt to give a voice to those who have none.

The setting here is more explicitly Mediterranean than elsewhere, in its marine and hilly dimension, between Liguria and the Côte d’Azur. The sea is that of tourists on holiday, who barely get a dip in the water because near the border «the rocks are sharp and full of sea urchins»¹³ (Baudoin and Troubet 2018: 6), as well as that of migrants who «certainly can’t swim»¹⁴ and who take the «the passage of death» at the top of the hill (*ibidem*). It’s also the sea that the two cartoonists see through the window of the train going to Nice: «It’s blue, pure and bright»¹⁵ (Baudoin and Troubet 2018: 48), but to their eyes, it appears as a cemetery.

13 «Les rochers sont coupants et sont remplis d’oursins».

14 «Me doivent certainement pas savoir nager».

15 «Elle est bleue et pure. Lumineuse».

The work *Humains* by Baudoin and Troubet presents another interesting image that concerns those who look at the Mediterranean from its northern shore. When asked why he does it, Marco, a volunteer at the Ventimiglia border, replies: «The tomatoes no longer taste good, so I wanted to understand»¹⁶ (Baudoin and Troubet 2018: 92). Tomatoes, along with lemons and oranges — which, we will see, feature on many Syrian pages — are often associated with the Mediterranean imaginary and diet; but tomatoes, lemons and oranges come from elsewhere¹⁷. They are not indigenous species, but rather species alien to the Mediterranean. Thus, these fruits are the tangible sign of a journey and mixing typical of the Mediterranean; at the same time, ironically, they are also the *topoi* of an imaginary never free from the risk of stereotypes, and this on the basis of a supposed “authenticity”.

The image of (alien) species also returns to describe the Syrian diaspora, whose stories of forced migration are sadly the focus of many graphic novels in recent years. Their pages are full of images of men rebelling in the name of God and freedom, and other men shooting at them. But before depicting human beings, several Syrian works begin with the presence of plants: gardens dotted with citrus fruits, plants and flowers, that seem to suggest a lost paradise. *Haytham, une jeunesse syrienne* (2016) is a first-person account rewritten by journalist Nicolas Hénin and drawn by Korean cartoonist Kyungeun Park. It tells the story of the son of a Syrian activist, a refugee in France against his will. The graphic novel opens with the image of a boy sitting on a branch, and the words: «What I loved as a child was climbing the lemon trees in the garden. Planting onions under the orange trees. And eating clementines under the trees»¹⁸ (Hénin and Park 2016: 3). Even the first two panels in *Freedom Hospital* (2016) by Syrian visual artist Hamid Sulaiman show the black-and-white silhouette of an olive tree, a wall and a jasmine. There are few indications of the context: Turkey, near the Syrian border, March 2012, forty thousand victims since the start of the revolution. The contrast between the idyllic setting of the drawings and the harshness of the facts described in words strikes the reader.

16 «Les tomates n'ont plus de goût, j'ai voulu comprendre».

17 Back in 1940, Lucien Febvre wrote: «I can imagine the good Herodotus making his journey around the Eastern Mediterranean again today. What astonishment! These golden fruits, in these dark green shrubs, which he is told are “characteristic of the Mediterranean landscape”, orange trees, lemon trees, mandarin trees: but he has not the slightest recollection of having seen them in his lifetime... - By Jove! These are Far Easterners, carried by the Arabs» (Febvre 1940: 29; «J'imagine le bon Hérodote refaisant aujourd'hui son périple de la Méditerranée Orientale. Que d'étonnements! Ces fruits d'or, dans ces arbustes vert sombre, qu'on lui dit “caractéristiques entre tous du paysage méditerranéen”, orangers, citronniers, mandariniers : mais il n'a pas le moindre souvenir d'en avoir vu de son vivant... - Parbleu! Ce sont des Extrême-Orientaux, véhiculés par les Arabes»). Later, the discourse includes cacti, agaves, aloes, palms, cypresses, tomatoes, aubergines, chillies, etc.

18 «Ce que j'aimais, quand j'étais petit enfant, c'était grimper dans les citronniers du jardin. Planter des oignons au pied des orangers. Et manger des clémentines sous les arbres».

Among stories and testimonies of diaspora, *L'odyssée d'Hakim*, by Fabien Toulmé, has been a great success in France, to the point of being translated in several foreign countries. In three volumes, *L'odyssée d'Hakim* recounts the trials and tribulations of a young Syrian fleeing the regime of Bashar al-Hassad. Unlike the classic odyssey, however, there is no return. In these diaspora narratives, plant metaphors recur to signify belonging. Hakim, who spent his childhood «between school and his father's nursery»¹⁹ (Toulmé 2019: 21) and who meets coincidentally — or perhaps not — his future wife under a lemon tree, says at the start of his adventures: «In the end, we exiles are perhaps a bit like plants. When you uproot them and put them in a pot, they continue to grow, but with less strength and desire»²⁰ (Toulmé 2019: 260). The image effectively conveys resilience, but also the irreparable loss imposed by exile.

In general, the human and inhuman miseries find more space than anything non-human in this story of daily hardship. The landscape is given little space. Nevertheless, in several pages of the second volume of *L'odyssée*, the sea takes center stage when Hakim, with his baby Hadi, has to cross the waters separating Turkey from Greece. The double register of writing and image is very effective here in building a tormented crescendo to the sea crossing that ends in tragedy. The Mediterranean firstly appears as a sonorous presence: «We couldn't see it, but we could hear the sea»²¹ (Toulmé 2019: 193). Through Hakim's memories, we see a precise representation of the whole ritual that the smugglers impose on their clients, from the night-time wait on the beach to the crossing when one of the migrants, in exchange for a discount on the ticket, takes over driving the dinghy. Toulmé knows how to balance the space of the word, of the drawing and of color in the moment of disaster — the driver of the boat is disoriented by the lights on the opposite coast, the boat's engine breaks down, there is no signal to call for help and the situation degenerates. It is from the contrast between the black immensity of the sea at night and the few words that stand out at the top of the page that anguish arises in the reader: «We found ourselves in the middle of the water in a deadly silence»²² (Toulmé 2019: 195). Despite numerous other vicissitudes, this anguish is partially diluted when, in the end, we learn that Hakim manages to find the rest of his family in France and rebuild his life. However, in the epilogue to volume 3, the narrator-Toulmé declares that Hakim's son, Hadi, is now 6 years old. In Turkey, he often went to the beach with his parents and he loved it, but since his arrival in France, he has been very

19 «Entre l'école et la pépinière de son père».

20 «Finalement, nous, les exilés, on est peut-être un peu comme des plantes. Quand on les déracine et qu'on les met dans un pot, elles continuent de pousser, mais avec moins de force et d'envie».

21 «On ne la voyait pas, mais on entendait la mer».

22 «On s'est retrouvés au milieu de l'eau dans un silence de mort».

afraid of the water, in a sort of indelible mark that the Mediterranean crossing has left on him (Toulmé, “Épilogue”, 2019).

The Frog and the Snake

Still on the theme of revolt, but on other shores, the two Tunisian authors Seif Eddine Nechi and Aymen Mbarek have signed *Une révolte tunisienne. La légende de Chbayah* (2022), first published in Arabic and then translated into French by Marseille-based editions Alifbata. This work falls outside the strictly Francophone production, but it is interesting to consider it briefly.

Although set in the 1980s, this graphic novel is reminiscent of Tunisia in 2023. At the end of December 1983, a government-imposed increase in the price of cereals triggered riots in the streets — with the slogan «bread, freedom and dignity» (Nechi and Mbarek 2022: 120) (fig. 20.1) — and violent police repression.



Fig. 20.1 – *Une révolte tunisienne. La légende de Chbayah* (Nechi and Mbarek 2022); courtesy of Alifbata ©

Nechi and Mbarek decided to approach the events that took place between December 30, 1983 and January 6, 1984 in Tunis from a particular point of view. Against a backdrop of growing tension, a pirate radio station, run by

someone hiding behind the pseudonym Chbayah (ghost), disrupts official communications and spreads misinformation to the police, thereby siding with the demonstrators. This marginal but real episode is interwoven with the stories of a few fictional characters. The authors imagine that the pirate radio is launched by little Bachir, a novice in the political life of his country, and his grandfather Ahmed, a former soldier in the battle of Monte Cassino; in the middle, Salem, Bachir's father, who works in Tunisian institutions but who has a painful past as a militant student in 1970s Tunis.

Nechi and Mbarek have produced a work of great narrative and graphic quality. Several narratives intertwine, several temporal planes alternate and a certain multilingualism, albeit marginal, characterizes the work. In order not to be overheard, Rachid's grandfather and his hairdresser speak in Italian; elsewhere, brief incursions in Arabic make an appearance. Realistic scenes of urban *guerrilla* warfare, with smoke bombs and shouting from both sides, show the confrontation between the police and the demonstrators. Nechi and Mbarek uses the non-human to symbolize the human: in terms of violence, these two worlds seem to coincide. Indeed, several «interludes», of excellent pictorial quality, stage the struggle between the two sides in the much quieter form of a fight between a frog and a snake. Here, there is no place for words, but only for glances, expectations, and attacks. Once again, it seems that when the tension becomes excessive, showing with drawing, instead of showing with telling, is the preferred method of communication chosen by cartoonists and scriptwriters.

The Seas, Their Stories

The Ninth Art, in contact with the Mediterranean sea, gives life to different stories, in different forms. To speak of a singular Mediterranean imaginary is impossible today. While the sea constitutes a liquid continuity, the “Mediterraneans” are multiple, segmented and diversified according to the point of view adopted (French, French-speaking, Arabic), the period considered (colonial period, contemporary) and the country concerned²³. The (de) construction of the Mediterranean imaginary also involves the observation of this fragmentation of narratives. In this regard, it is worth mentioning again the meritorious translation operation that the Marseille-based publishing house Alifbata has been carrying out for the past few years. Alifbata translated and published another work from English into French, which features the theme of refusing to leave, in contrast to the strand of migrant literature discussed above:

23 The opposing intellectual positions on the unity and diversity of the Mediterranean have a long history, between proponents of unity (Braudel, Matvejević, Chambers) and diversity (Pirenne, Aboulafia). In this regard, we note the recent Italian publication of Horden and Purcell (2024).

Je ne partirai pas. Mon histoire est celle de la Palestine (2023), by Mohammad Sabaaneh. Here too, the prose is simple, concise, devoid of lengthy didactic texts. To convey the message of injustice and oppression, the album relies above all on the beauty of aesthetics and the simplicity of the graphic narrative: locked in his cell, a prisoner finds freedom through art.

If, as we have said, graphic narrative was traditionally considered “light” literature, today’s graphic novels prove capable of telling tough stories with great poetry. In this way, they oppose the exclusion, suppression and backgrounding mentioned at the beginning of this article. In the panorama of contemporary forms of storytelling, graphic novels constitute new forms of witnessing, telling, denouncing (and thus possibly redeeming) disasters involving human and non-human beings. This is possible precisely thanks to a storytelling that combines graphic signs and words, an association that is an empowering tool for these stories, capable of greater communicative capacity. Thus, graphic novels make it possible to reach a wide audience, without renouncing the story, but on the contrary emphasizing it through images. As science teaches us, the latter have a more immediate impact on the human brain, which is why a whole branch of “visual storytelling” studies has developed in recent years. Far from distracting or sublimating, the combination of writing and drawing generates narrative clarity and greater emotional involvement on the part of the reader. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that often the most violent scenes are entrusted precisely to the drawing, with little or any verbal commentary²⁴. Despite its dual resources, not even the graphic novel seems to escape ineffability.

If, as already mentioned, authors around the Mediterranean are increasingly exploiting the graphic novel to tell very different stories — sometimes epic, sometimes of ordinary everyday life — many francophone narratives stage stories of hunger, uprisings, and migrations in relation to the Middle Sea. These *topoi* seem emblematic of an unbalanced relationship, which graphic narrative denounces against all erasure. This system crisis concerns first and foremost the relationship between human beings (dictatorships, authoritarian regimes, the condition of women, migrants and foreign workers); then, in the background, the relationship between human and non-human (humans and animals, but also

24 See Nechi and Mbarek (2022: 134-135); Sulaiman (2016: 123, 152) (fig. 20.2); Sabaaneh (2023: 29). Sabaneh also states in his introduction: «I did not draw the pages of this book. I used the linocut technique. In prison, I kept wondering how the other inmates managed to engrave their names on the rough walls. I myself was unable to write mine on the walls of my cell. That’s why today I’m determined to engrave their stories and share them with the world» (Sabaneh 2023: 3; «Je n’ai pas dessiné les pages de ce livre. J’ai utilisé la technique de la linogravure. En prison, je n’ai cessé de me demander comment les autres détenus se débrouillaient pour graver leurs noms sur les cloisons rugueuses. J’ai été incapable, pour ma part, d’inscrire le mien sur les murs de ma cellule. C’est pourquoi je suis bien décidé aujourd’hui à graver leurs histoires et à les faire connaître au monde»).

humans and the environment); finally, between this «North» and «South», as between this «West» and «East» of the world, of which the Mediterranean, Paul Valéry's «ever-renewed sea»²⁵ (Valéry 1920: 157), Gabriel Audisio's «liquid continent»²⁶, remains a fundamental barycenter.



Fig. 20.2 – *Freedom Hospital* (Sulaiman 2016); courtesy of Éditions ça et là ©

25 «La mer toujours recommencée».

26 «There is no doubt in my mind that the Mediterranean is a continent, not an inland lake, but a kind of liquid continent with solidified contours» (Audisio, 1935: 23; «Il ne fait pas doute pour moi que la Méditerranée soit un continent, non pas un lac intérieur, mais une espèce de continent liquide aux contours solidifiés»).

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