

DRAWING THE LINE.
AN INQUIRY OVER THE POLITICAL ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS AT BORDER CROSSINGS

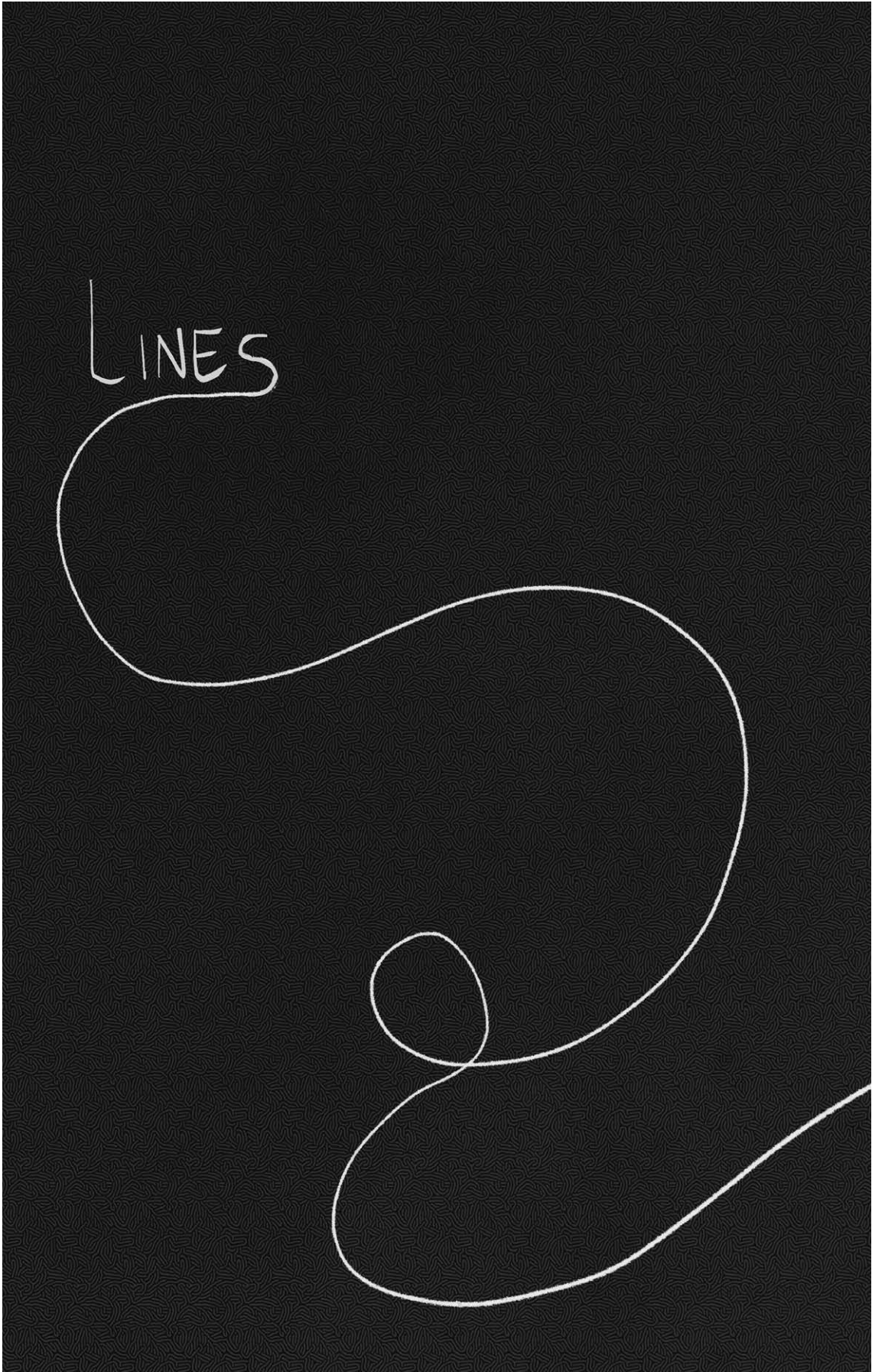
Maddalena Landi, Marco d'Alessandro

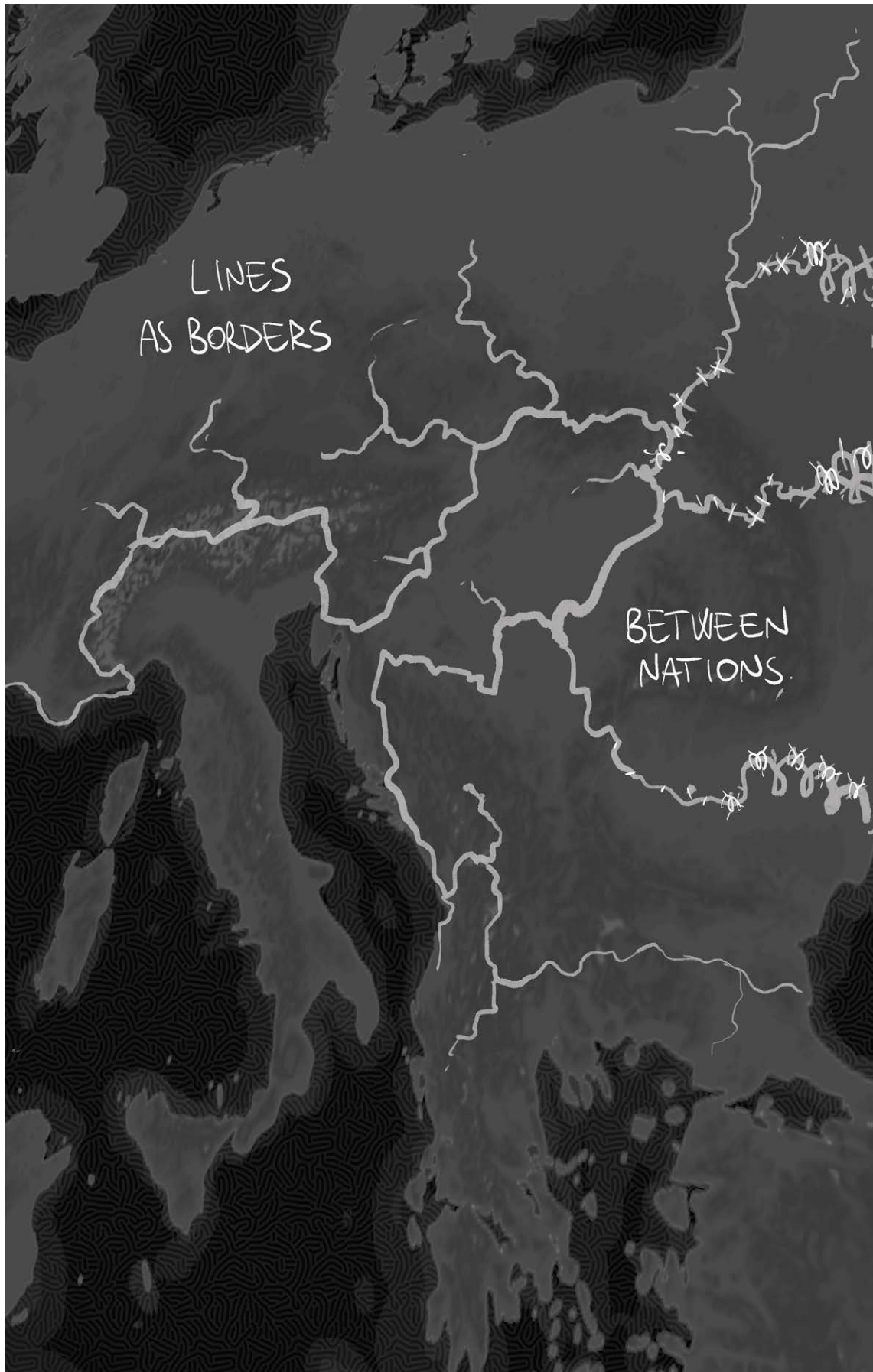
Despite the impact that volunteering can have, the role of the volunteer at border crossings has received little academic attention, with most of the focus being placed on the spotlight from right-wing, populist parties. For instance, cases of attacks and smear campaigns against civil organizations providing aid to migrants have been reported in Spain and Italy. The charges range from trafficking to white-collar crimes and aiding illegal immigration, leading to what has been labeled as the criminalization of solidarity. However, the impact of this criminalization on the volunteer, as well as the political meaning of the volunteer's role, has been understudied. With this in mind, this paper draws from feminist theory, which recognizes the personal as a critical and under-explored site of inquiry for the political. Our research seeks to understand the political meaning of volunteering at border crossings by exploring the emotions of the volunteers themselves. This study will focus on volunteers from the European Union who have had experiences at EU borders, and through their narratives, the paper aims to uncover the meanings constructed during the process of helping others. The paper will examine the experiences of being at the border and returning from, and it will ask which meanings people attach to these experiences and whether they can have political power in a feminist sense.

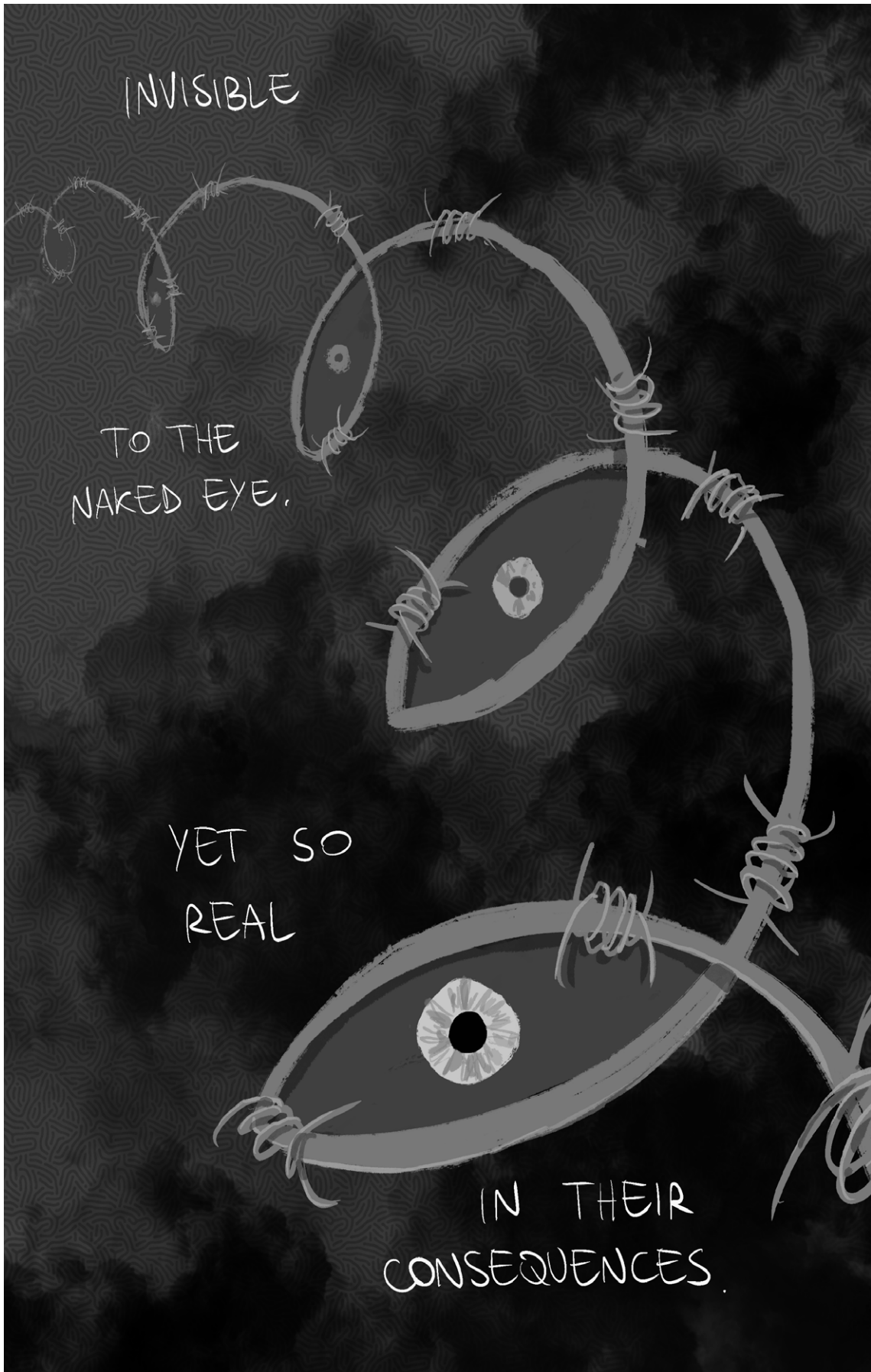
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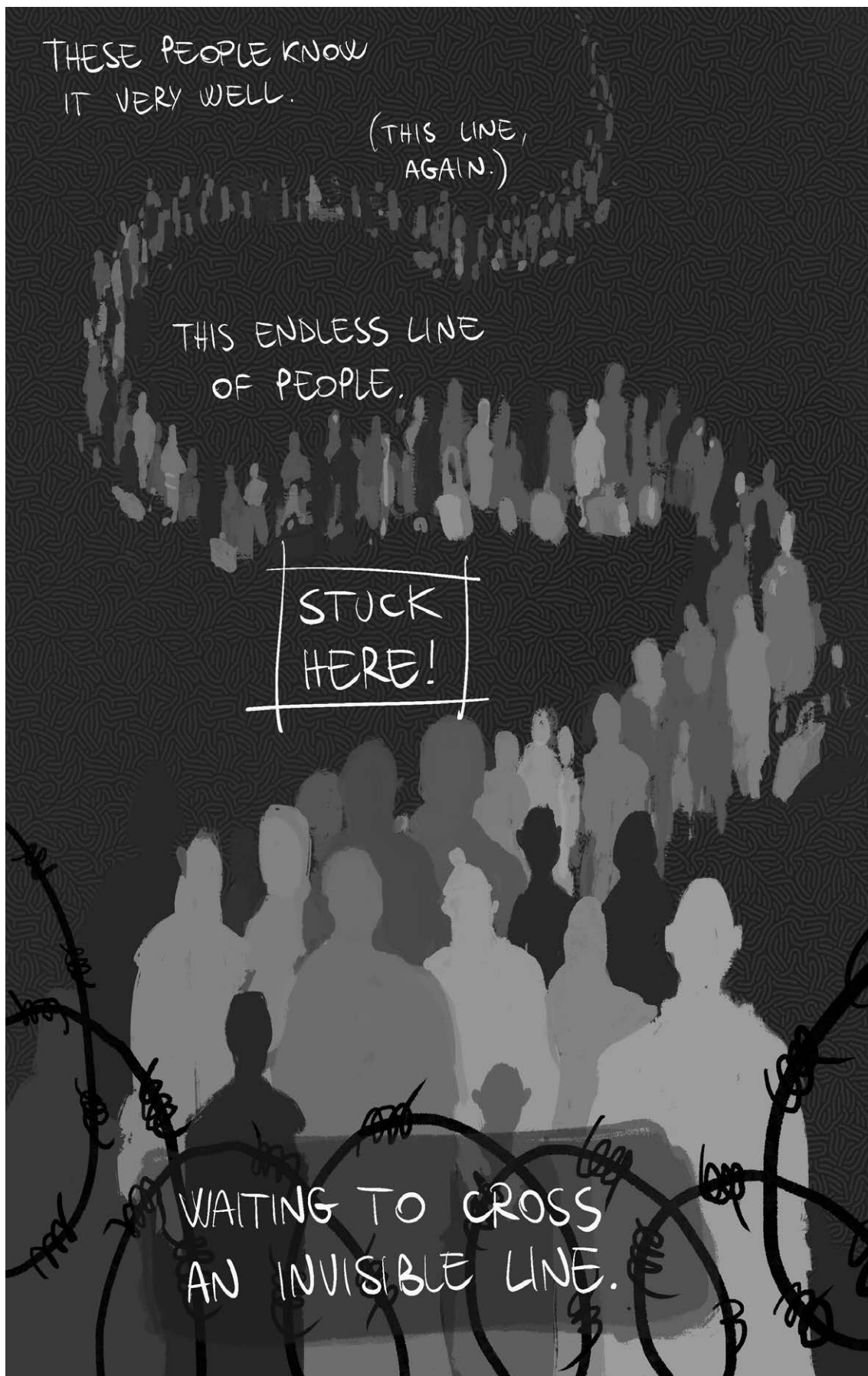
Migration; Volunteerism; Borders; Politicisation; Comics Based Research

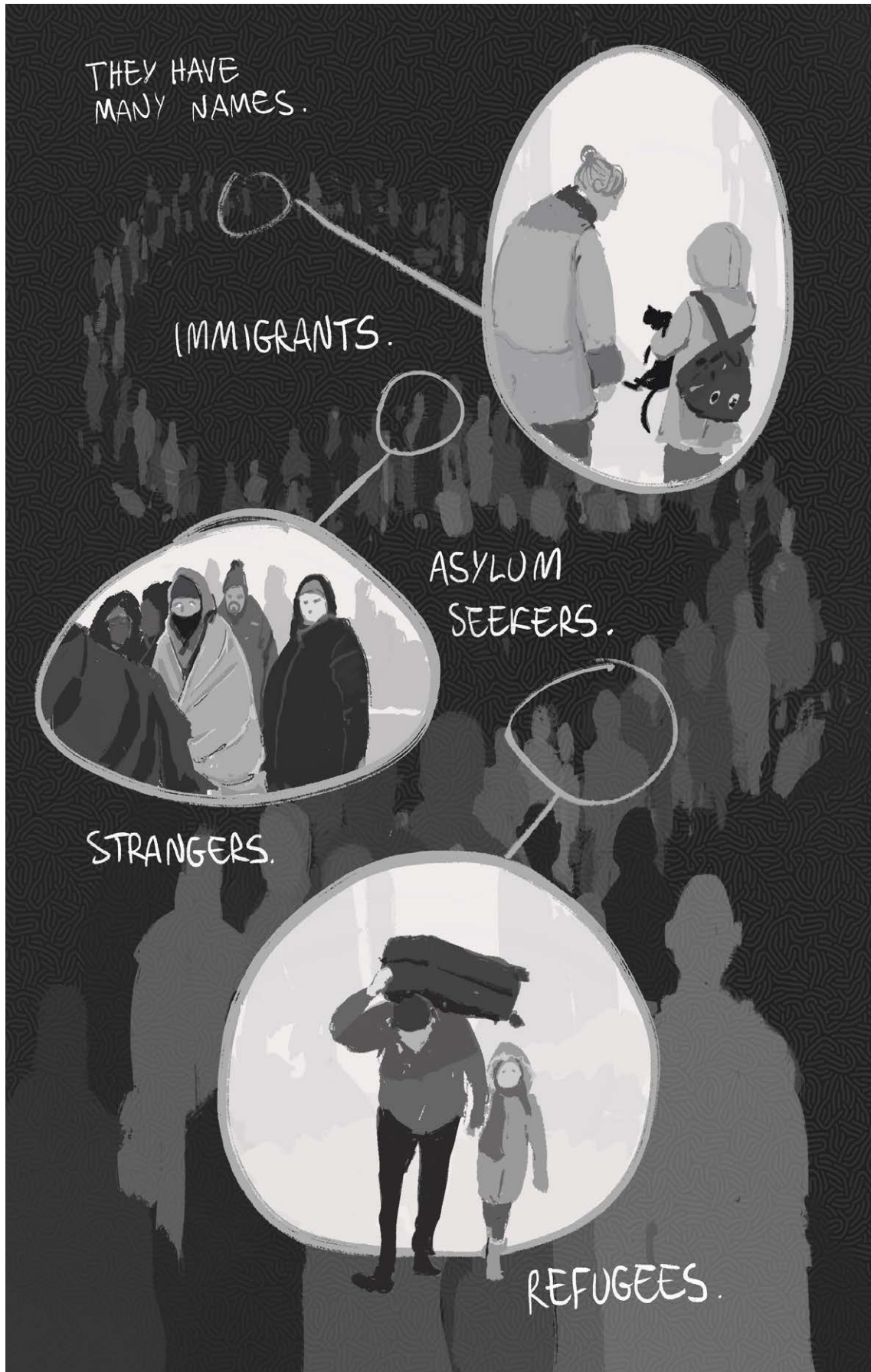
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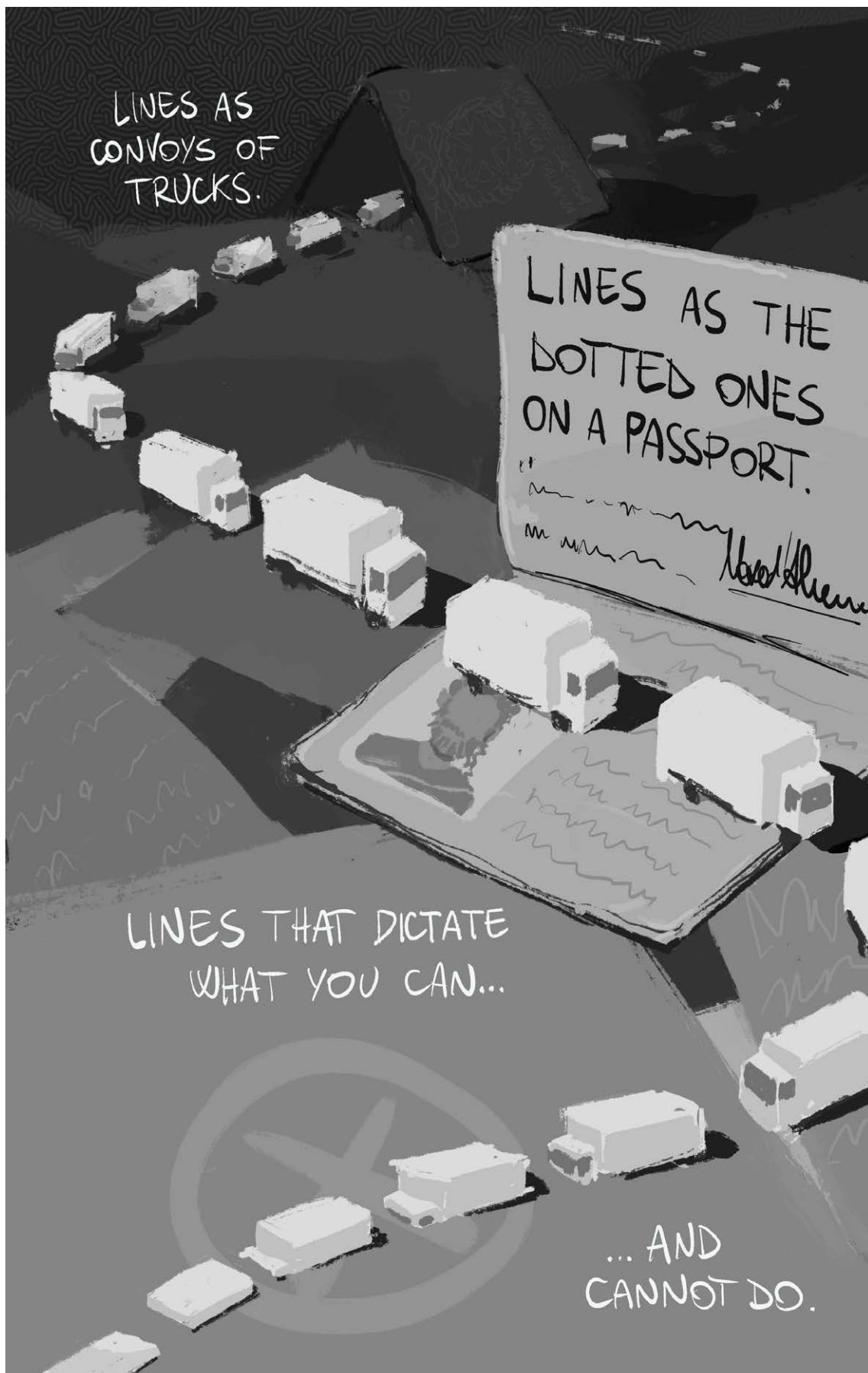


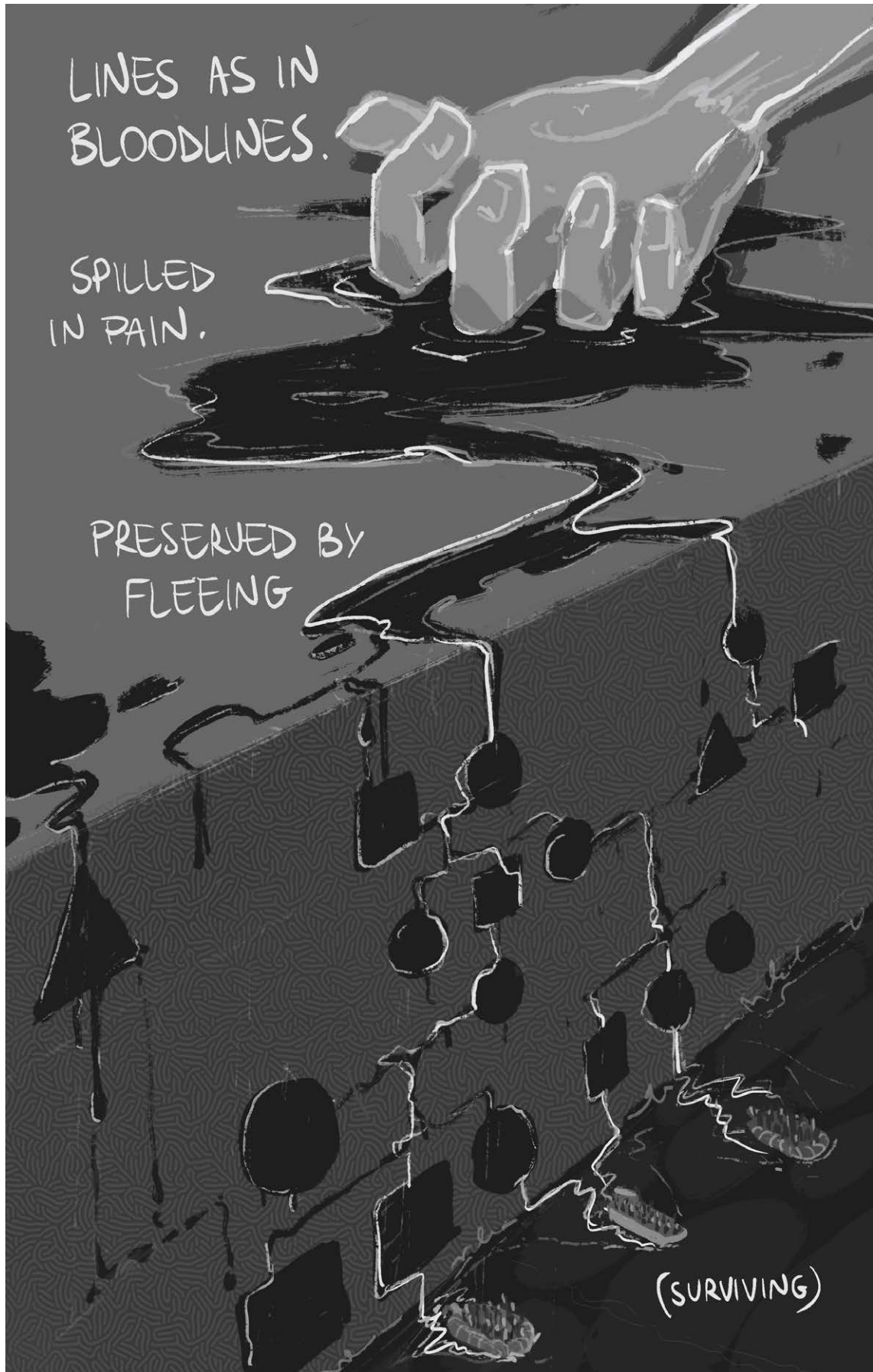




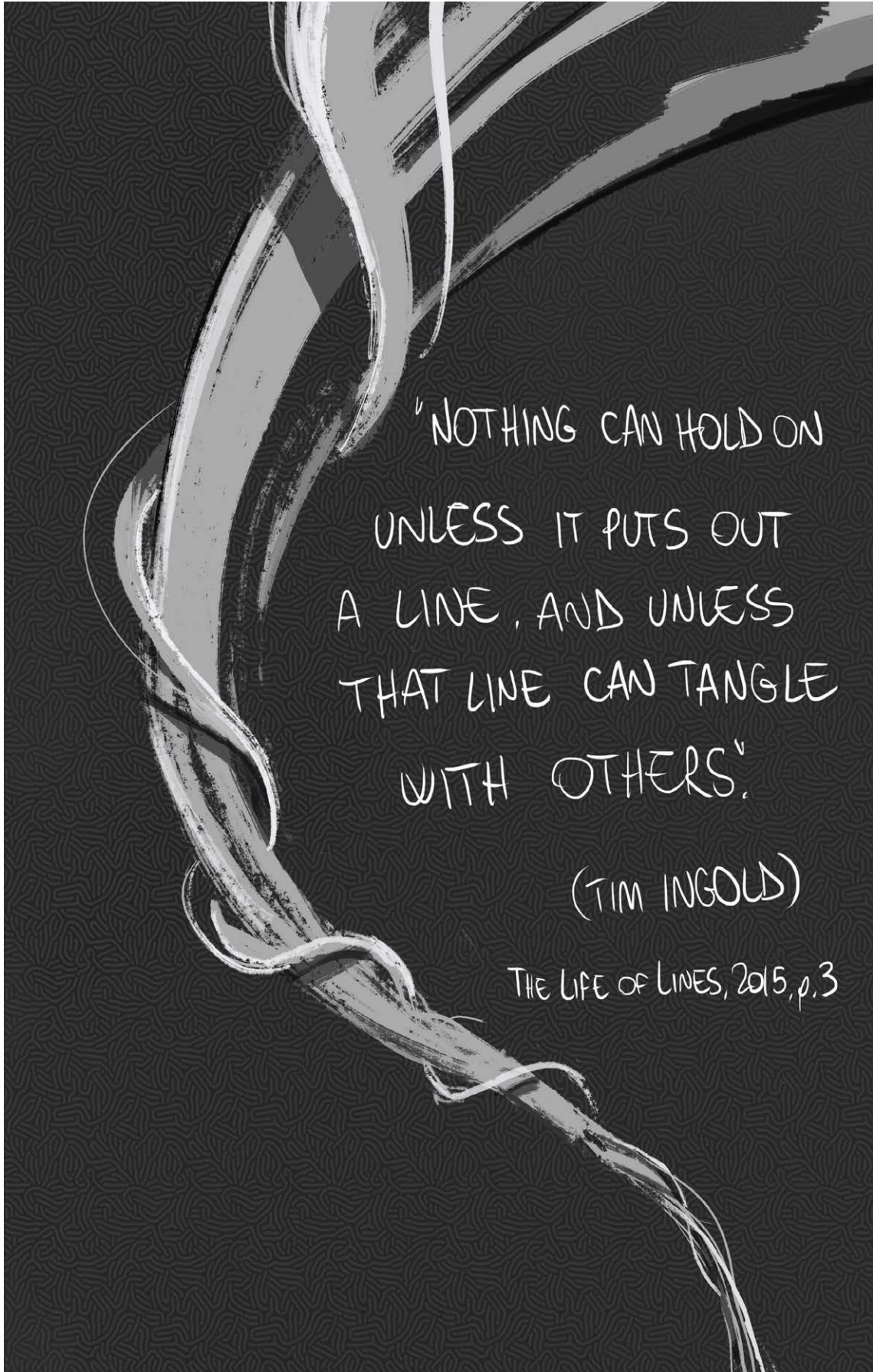












"NOTHING CAN HOLD ON
UNLESS IT PUTS OUT
A LINE, AND UNLESS
THAT LINE CAN TANGLE
WITH OTHERS."

(TIM INGOLD)

THE LIFE OF LINES, 2015, p.3

DRAWING THE LINE

AN INQUIRY OVER THE POLITICAL ROLE OF
VOLUNTEERS AT BORDER CROSSINGS

A visual essay

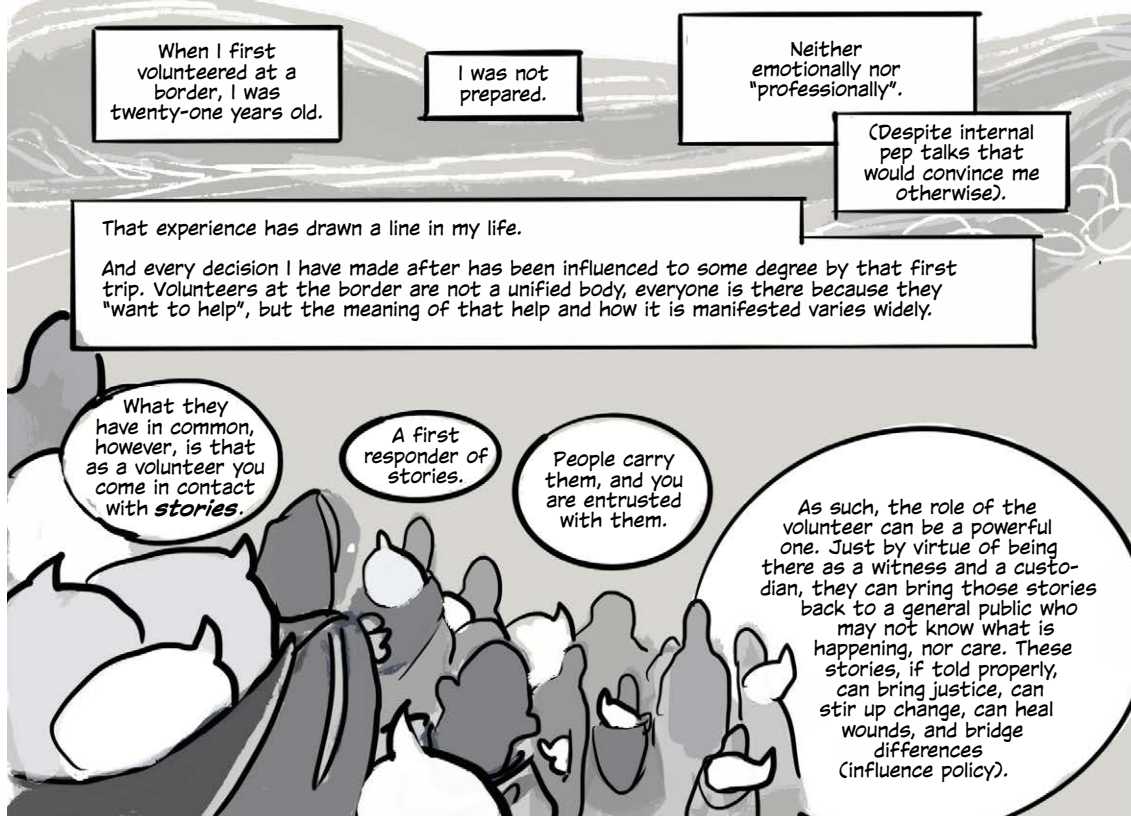
MADDALENA LANDI
MARCO D'ALESSANDRO



INTRODUCTION



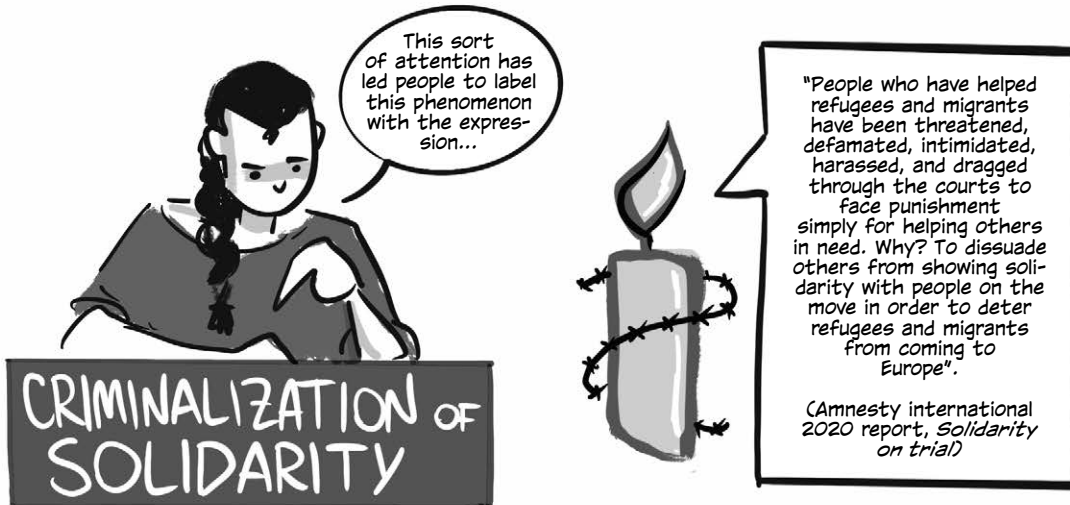
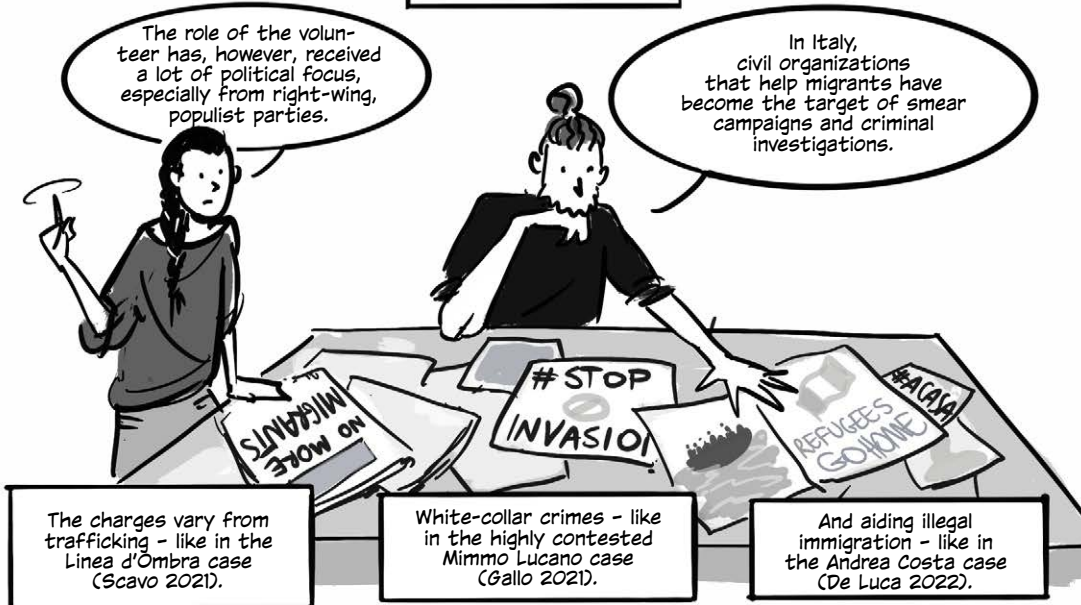
Or you may even be a direct witness, you may have to choose who to save on a boat, or see a camp burn down.



However, the role of the volunteer, especially the experience of the volunteer at border crossings, has received little academic attention (Wilson 2012, 176). This scarcity may be justified by the volunteer's privileged positionality, which needs to be addressed. People who choose to volunteer are mostly people from the western civil society, with little to no training, whose eagerness to help is sometimes misplaced or taken advantage of.



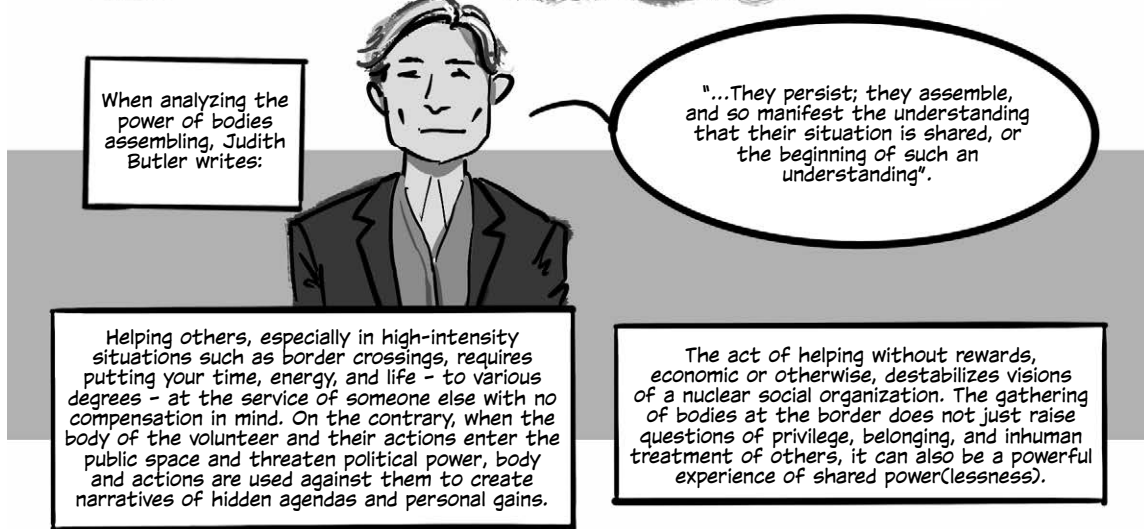
The term coined for this phenomenon is, aptly, VOLUNTOURISM.





Then, the space that the volunteer occupies, becomes political because the act of helping is politicized.

In a neoliberal world that understands moral responsibility as, first and foremost, the economic self-sufficiency of individuals (see Butler 2015), help can be a radical political act.

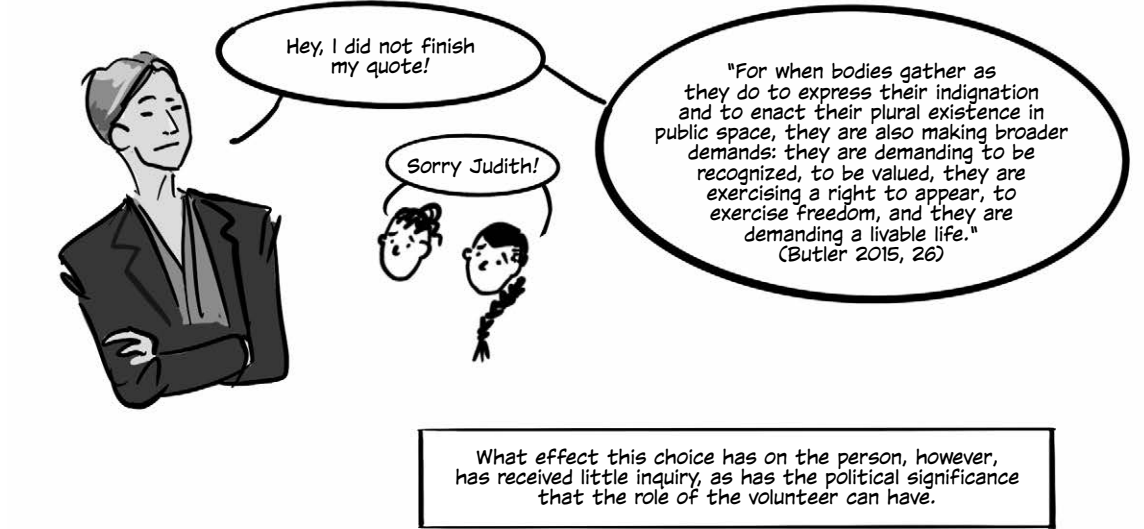


When analyzing the power of bodies assembling, Judith Butler writes:

"...They persist; they assemble, and so manifest the understanding that their situation is shared, or the beginning of such an understanding".

Helping others, especially in high-intensity situations such as border crossings, requires putting your time, energy, and life - to various degrees - at the service of someone else with no compensation in mind. On the contrary, when the body of the volunteer and their actions enter the public space and threaten political power, body and actions are used against them to create narratives of hidden agendas and personal gains.

The act of helping without rewards, economic or otherwise, destabilizes visions of a nuclear social organization. The gathering of bodies at the border does not just raise questions of privilege, belonging, and inhuman treatment of others, it can also be a powerful experience of shared power(lessness).



Hey, I did not finish my quote!

Sorry Judith!

"For when bodies gather as they do to express their indignation and to enact their plural existence in public space, they are also making broader demands: they are demanding to be recognized, to be valued, they are exercising a right to appear, to exercise freedom, and they are demanding a livable life." (Butler 2015, 26)

What effect this choice has on the person, however, has received little inquiry, as has the political significance that the role of the volunteer can have.



METHODOLOGY

The paper that combines qualitative analysis with in-depth interviews and the medium of comics. The reason we decided to combine established academic tools with comics is that this medium more than others allows *holding complexity without reducing it*.

The emerging field of practice of comics-based research can offer a novel set of cognitive framework for both audiences and researchers: as a device structurally multimodal, encompassing images, words, sequentiality, simultaneity and so on, comics encourages both creators and readers to engage with text and content on a broader level.

"It opens up opportunities to take analysis in divergent directions, to build up multiple layers of meaning, and to explore themes that don't necessarily fall into a traditional model of causality."

Kuttner,
Weaver-Hightower,
Souzanis,
2020, 11



As we moved into a phenomenon as local and yet dependent on larger socio-political aspects as volunteering in border areas is, one of our main concerns was to *keep open* and *think through* the dialectic between those different aspects...

This paper will not focus on structured volunteering offered by large organizations. As mentioned earlier, volunteers are not a homogenous group and we have chosen to focus on individuals who went independently to the borders.

The use of the comics' medium forces us to use a different language, grammar and syntax. It engages and different parts of our body; thus, it gives us a new lens through which to look at this issue.

By creating an actual *space* on the page, we had to confront ourselves with (another) sheer reality of lines and borders: the ones traced by hand, the ones we could not overcome, the ones we could bend and pass through.

Because we are dealing with borders (geographical, emotional, and political) the visual representation, more than words, can *explore the significance* of...

distance

exclusion
inclusion

otherness

The interviews were conducted online and involved five people.

They were volunteers who had between one and multiple experiences at different borders of the European Union. They were involved in different forms of volunteering: collecting and distributing donations, legal support, hosting refugees, and language courses to name a few.

In order to maintain their anonymity, this research uses neutral pronouns throughout. The words in their balloons are direct transcriptions of their interviews.

Because those were conducted between April and May 2022, most of the people interviewed had at least one experience at the border with Ukraine.

The in-depth structure of the interview allowed us to explore themes related to the person's feelings and emotions and it gave the person space and time to reflect on their experience.

A preliminary semiotic analysis was done on the interviews to identify common isotopies in the volunteers' narrations.

This observation uncovered recurring patterns of meaning such as themes of *separation*, *politicization*, and the role that *emotions* play throughout the experience.

We used an inductive analysis to interpret meanings linked to the volunteering experience and to the politicization process.

It was surprising to realise how the idea of "border", which started as a grounded, physical occurrence of the outside world *mirrored itself on an inner, personal level* for the individuals interviewed.

The radical act of helping others to cross a border was always accompanied by another, necessary and radical act of *tracing a border within one's own self*.

And had then the inevitable consequence of realizing that another border was now in place: *one between the self and the others*.

The aim of this research was not to provide a conclusive account of the subject, which would be beyond the space and scope of this contribution, but rather to open a path for future exploration.

BORDERS WITH THE SELF



Ok so... we have a lot here. Where do we start from?

It might be obvious but... I'd say their reasons to go on the border, see where it points?

I was inspired by a documentary, together with my girlfriend.

C

I just... Couldn't focus anymore at work. Like what I was doing was meaningless.

B

I needed to see, for myself.

E



These are quite personal reasons, rather than political.

Right! Plus, they all have something in common: feeling the *need* to do something.

The idea that the feeling is so intense that the body is set in motion, is never explicitly addressed as a political act.

A. summarised it for us when they said:

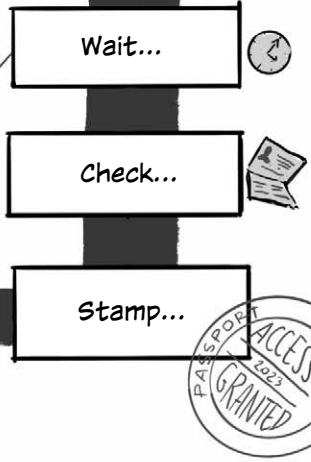
A

I don't know, it's like, I didn't really think it through. I just knew I had to go, it just made... it* wouldn't make sense not to go once I saw it, you know.

*the situation at the border - in this case between Ukraine and Hungary.



Hopefully, the people in line all have passports and the necessary documentation to get to the other side.



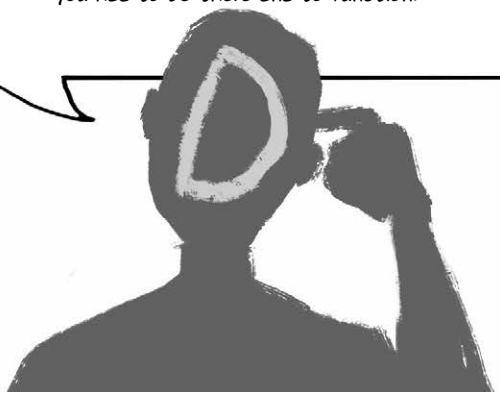
However, borders can also be unpredictable, they shape the relationship with our identity, and our sense of what is legal and illegal, they can be incredibly dangerous places and be hotspots for a crisis.



Borrowing from geographer **John Wyle:**
 "The notion of landscape and self [is] essentially written through experiences of mobility and exile" (Wyle 2007, 211).

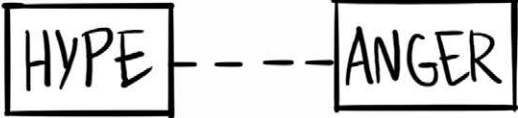
Volunteers arriving at the borders are presented with high-intensity situations both for the pace required and the emotions involved.
 D. remembers:

I also felt very stressed [...] then we decided - because we were only staying for 2 1/2 days - that we won't sleep. So I just worked for like 48 hours or more. And we're kind of also, yeah, hyped, I don't know. Not in a trivial sense but rather in this stressed sense. So, yeah, really just checking for "OK, what's going on" all the time, super kind of also... alarmed, I would say. Everything that would happen, you were just very focused on what's going on and sensitive to what's happening in your environment because you had to be there and to function.

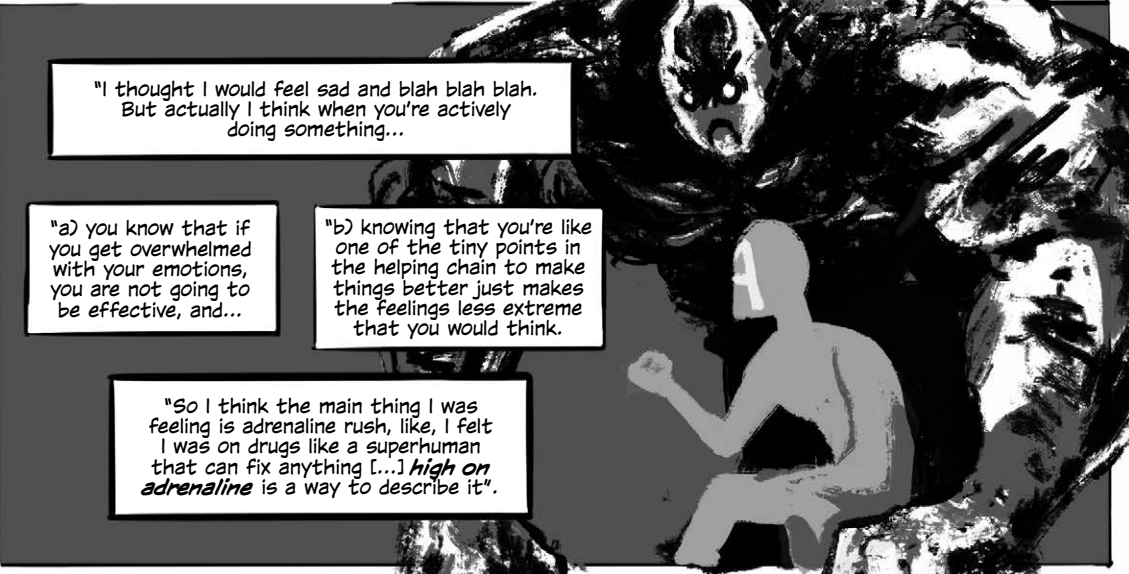




The kind of hype *D.* mentions often returns in other interviews. The emotion that is mentioned the most related to being on the ground is feeling angry.



Sadness also comes up. But, the way volunteers deal with it and talk about it is more nuanced and difficult to express.



"I thought I would feel sad and blah blah blah. But actually I think when you're actively doing something..."

"a) you know that if you get overwhelmed with your emotions, you are not going to be effective, and..."

"b) knowing that you're like one of the tiny points in the helping chain to make things better just makes the feelings less extreme that you would think."

"So I think the main thing I was feeling is adrenaline rush, like, I felt I was on drugs like a superhuman that can fix anything [...] *high on adrenaline* is a way to describe it".



This idea of anger as a productive emotion is interesting, tell me more about it!



Well, as Weber explores, in his experimental article on the political effects of emotions...

You go Weber.

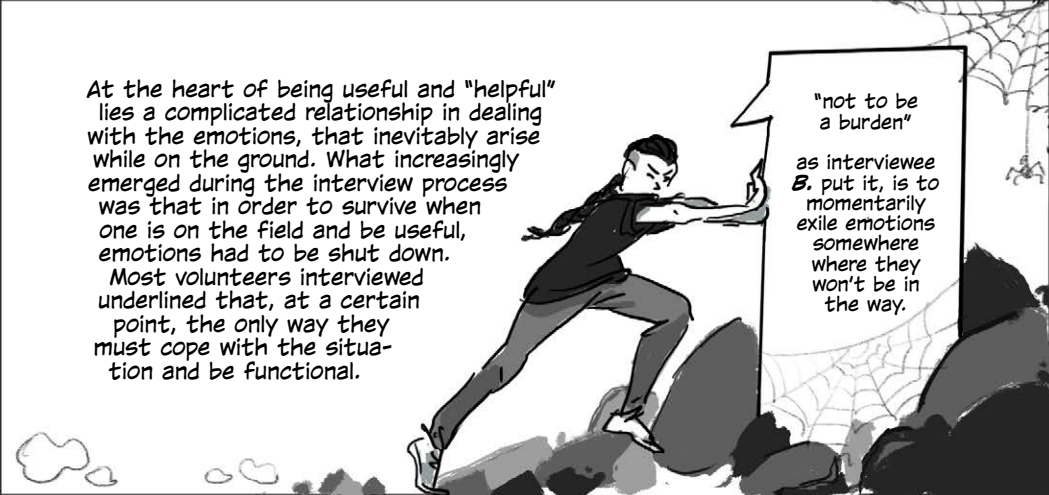
Anger and enthusiasm involve a heightened sense of personal control, these emotions facilitate behavioral *approach* over *withdrawal*. Fear and sadness, however, promote perceptions of reduced personal control and should subsequently lead to behavioural *avoidance*.

(Weber 2013, 415)



"So, *A.* expected to feel sad, but they did not experienced it right away...?"

"Correct. In fact, doing something, feeling useful and focused is presented as an outcome of the fast-paced environment in which the volunteer must operate."



In one interview, a *split* between the emotional and the professional sphere is explicitly mentioned:

Something breaks inside at some points, maybe when you start normalizing those situations - to be able to survive, emotionally survive...

it's when you split up in having your emotional personal mindset and then your professional mindset.

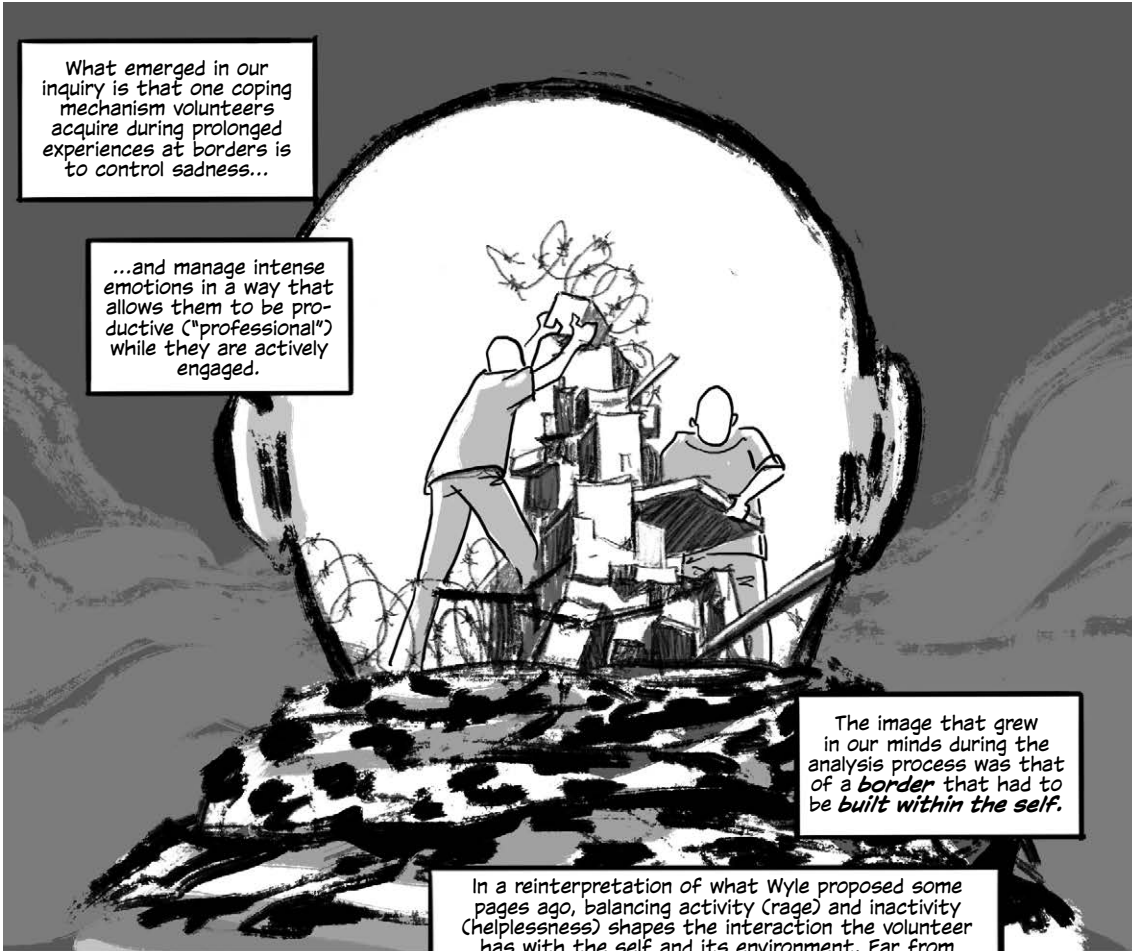


Emotions are not necessarily repressed - as we will see shortly, they still affect the volunteer on the ground - but at some point, it becomes necessary to draw a border between you...

...and what you feel.





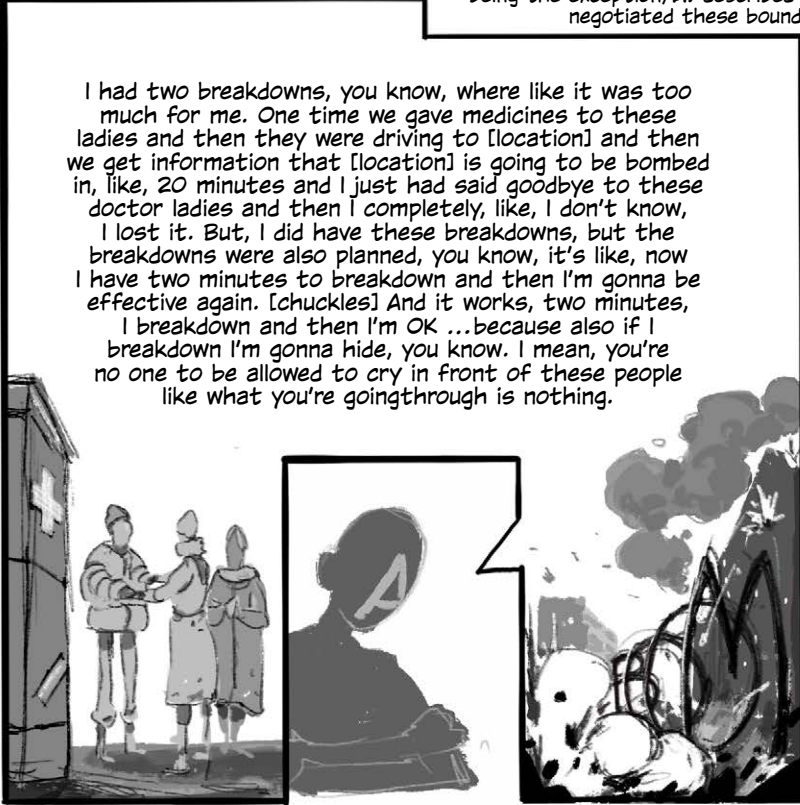


What emerged in our inquiry is that one coping mechanism volunteers acquire during prolonged experiences at borders is to control sadness...

...and manage intense emotions in a way that allows them to be productive ("professional") while they are actively engaged.

The image that grew in our minds during the analysis process was that of a *border* that had to be *built within the self*.

In a reinterpretation of what Wyle proposed some pages ago, balancing activity (rage) and inactivity (helplessness) shapes the interaction the volunteer has with the self and its environment. Far from being the exception, *A.* described to us how they negotiated these boundaries:



I had two breakdowns, you know, where like it was too much for me. One time we gave medicines to these ladies and then they were driving to [location] and then we get information that [location] is going to be bombed in, like, 20 minutes and I just had said goodbye to these doctor ladies and then I completely, like, I don't know, I lost it. But, I did have these breakdowns, but the breakdowns were also planned, you know, it's like, now I have two minutes to breakdown and then I'm gonna be effective again. [chuckles] And it works, two minutes, I breakdown and then I'm OK ...because also if I breakdown I'm gonna hide, you know. I mean, you're no one to be allowed to cry in front of these people like what you're going through is nothing.

This image of the controlled breakdown came up repeatedly in other interviews.

It introduces another element to sadness. It is not just that sadness renders you inactive - hence useless or a burden - but the volunteer does not feel entitled to that sadness.

So this emotion must be controlled but, at the same time, it is a largely private affair.

BORDERS WITH OTHERS: COMING BACK



Exchanges with people were also difficult: the degree of interest always varies, but your level of involvement in what you witnessed does not.

(Which makes relating the stories stressful and disappointing).

Unless you are with people who have either had similar experiences or are genuinely interested and have the time to listen.

You - as the person who went - are confronted with your own dual position (we give here a very simplified account of a European volunteer):

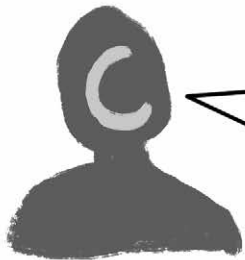
You come from a relatively comfortable life with the attached privileges of being a European citizen - including freedom of movement - and yet you witness and participate, to varying degrees, in the lives of people who do not enjoy the same privileges and whose choices are severely limited.

Coming back means confronting this positionality which rarely leaves the person in a comfortable state.

This is the moment where sadness may come to the fore as the prevailing emotion:

I keep crying once in a while, like, randomly - because things I've seen and I felt were blocked there, and, once I came here, and, you know, they, they're coming out.

Coupled with sadness, all the interviews talked about the sense of being out of place, being detached from what is happening, and the difficulty to connect with people and with - what is perceived as - the "old" life.



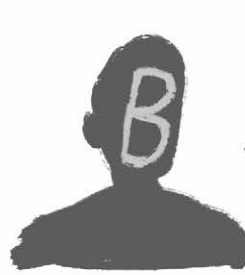
I remember I got back to my place and the day after, it was this parade in the streets with a lot of drunk people: overconsumption of alcohol and thousands of people in the streets. I felt really out of place. And really, uh, I felt horrible for like a week or two and then it took me months to really get back to the rhythms. It was this feeling of coming back from a different world, from a different life.

Driving back with the car and stuff already that was kinda strange [...] you could just stop somewhere at the gas station, buy stuff you want to have... Before that we were buying everything at a grocery store what could help the people for, I don't know, 500 euros, and then you were just: "Oh yeah, I'd like an ice cream because that's nice." Then you could just buy that. [...] I was super exhausted and super down for days, when I came back.

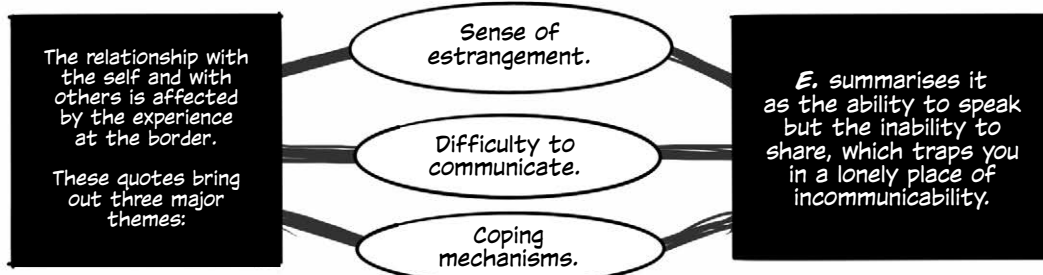


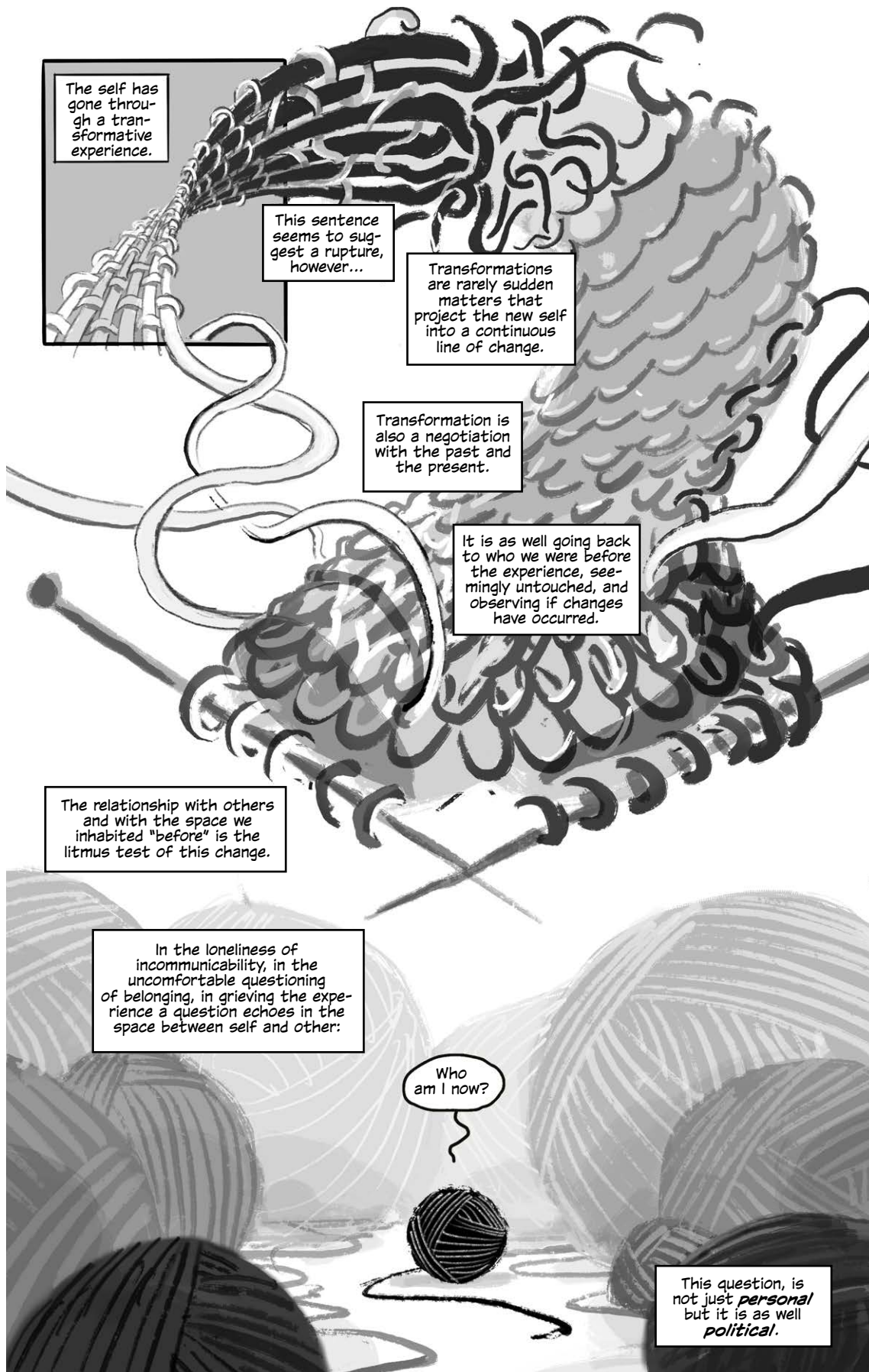

The feeling when you come back is that you can speak, but you cannot share exactly what you are living [...] you are on your own when you are far but you are still alone a bit when you are here.

The first time I went to the supermarket and I saw all the people there I probably looked like if I'm really stoned because I was just standing there, I was like, I don't know, I couldn't grasp how can life be so fucking crazy fucked up for these people 600 kilometres away and how here nothing has changed.

Every time it reopens my wound, emotional wounds, because of course it was tough for me, so... Now I'm trying to, you know, tell a story almost in an automatic way, just because it's too heavy to go back there with my heart sometimes.





The self has gone through a transformative experience.

This sentence seems to suggest a rupture, however...

Transformations are rarely sudden matters that project the new self into a continuous line of change.

Transformation is also a negotiation with the past and the present.

It is as well going back to who we were before the experience, seemingly untouched, and observing if changes have occurred.

The relationship with others and with the space we inhabited "before" is the litmus test of this change.

In the loneliness of incommunicability, in the uncomfortable questioning of belonging, in grieving the experience a question echoes in the space between self and other:

Who am I now?

This question, is not just *personal* but it is as well *political*.



In the relationship with the other, the volunteer is confronted, perhaps for the first time, with undeniable inequality.

The return to life "before", the "normal life", is also perceived as crossing back to a state that suddenly has a different meaning.

However, this meaning does not seem to be shared, or it is so only partially, by others around the volunteer, who continue to do "business as usual"

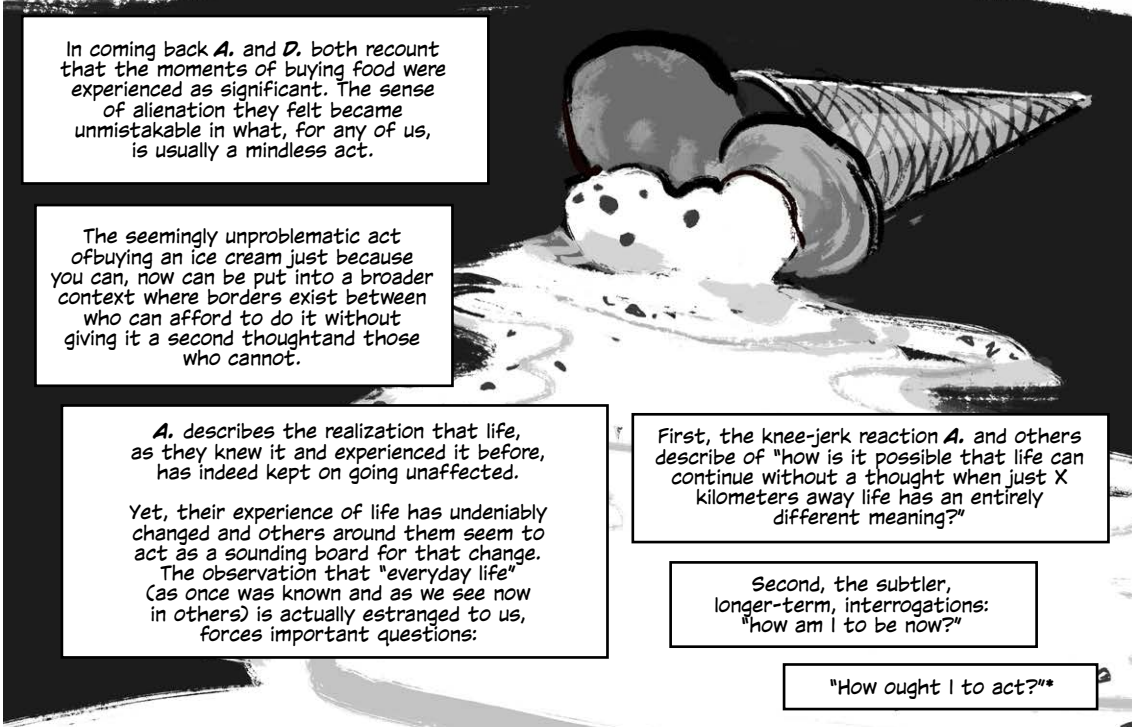
It is perhaps no coincidence that in two interviews the uncomfortableness of coming back plays a role in a shopping context.



Food is a primary necessity; sharing food is also one of the most ancient acts of socializing.

Indeed, whoever has volunteered in a refugee camp, or in any volunteering context for what matters, knows that the most important moments of exchange, levity, and bonding happen around food.

The act of eating together can be a great equalizer.



In coming back *A.* and *D.* both recount that the moments of buying food were experienced as significant. The sense of alienation they felt became unmistakable in what, for any of us, is usually a mindless act.

The seemingly unproblematic act of buying an ice cream just because you can, now can be put into a broader context where borders exist between who can afford to do it without giving it a second thought and those who cannot.

A. describes the realization that life, as they knew it and experienced it before, has indeed kept on going unaffected. Yet, their experience of life has undeniably changed and others around them seem to act as a sounding board for that change. The observation that "everyday life" (as once was known and as we see now in others) is actually estranged to us, forces important questions:

First, the knee-jerk reaction *A.* and others describe of "how is it possible that life can continue without a thought when just X kilometers away life has an entirely different meaning?"

Second, the subtler, longer-term, interrogations: "how am I to be now?"

"How ought I to act?!"

*Butler 2015, 23

POLITICAL BORDERS

As we mentioned in the beginning, the role of the volunteer with people on the move has been politicized, often by right-wing parties who advocate for stringent border policies.

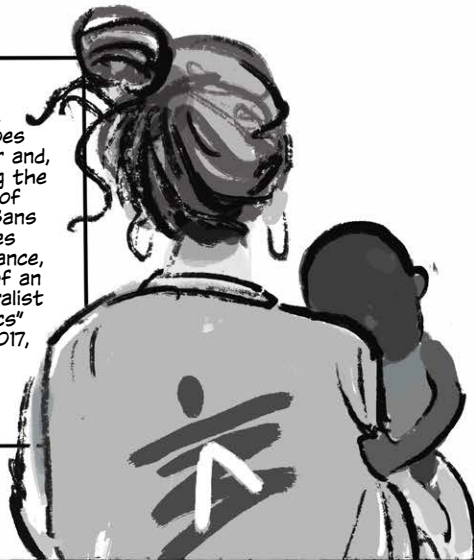


It is important to notice, as Monforte and Maestri explain, that charities and humanitarian groups often tend to stand clear of addressing their work as political:

"In contrast to more visibly political engagements, charities and humanitarian organizations tend to avoid "making things political" as they focus on concrete immediate solutions to individual problems through service provision".

(Monforte and Maestri 2022, 4).

In fact, Ticktin goes even further and, in describing the parabola of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in France, she talks of an "era of moralist antipolitics" (Ticktin 2017, 581):



"They [MSF] turned away from engagement with what they thought of as politics - engaging with power relations in the struggle for a collective future - and instead embraced the belief that one can ultimately address only individual suffering".

(Ticktin 2017, 581)

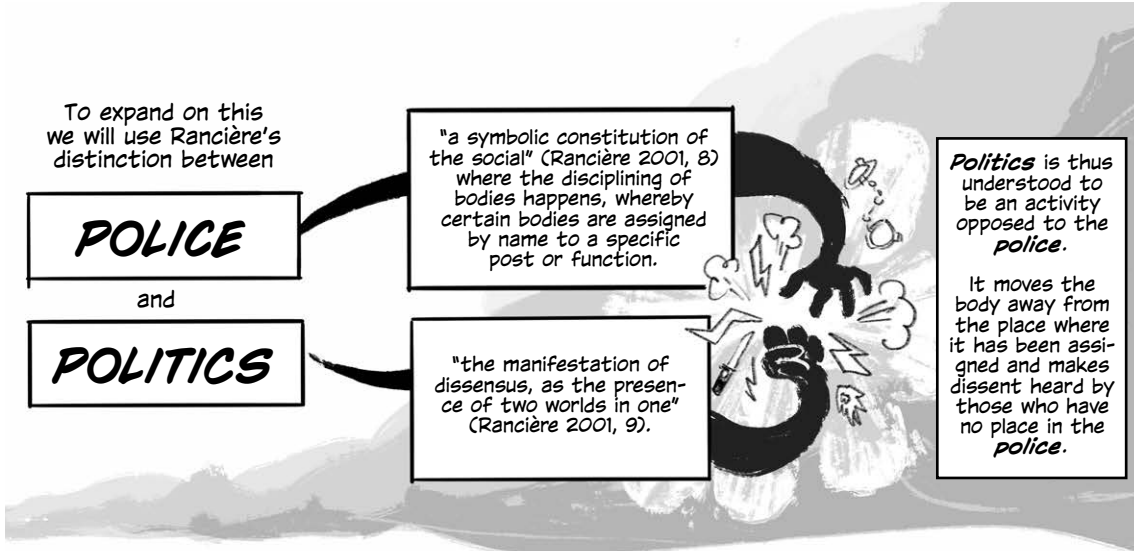
MSF serves here as an example to illustrate a shift in which humanitarian groups are allegedly guilty. Namely, the fact that by focusing on urgent, individual needs, they reproduce inequalities and systems of dependency without addressing the need for broader systemic change*.

While it is true that humanitarian action and charity do not escape problematic power relations, reproduction of unequal structures, and at times even neocolonial patterns.

Voluntourism being an apt example.

We argue that the lines between the dichotomies of humanitarian/apolitical and activism/political are not quite as well defined.

*See Ticktin, 2017; Berlant, 2004; Vitellone, 2011.



In this framework, Monforte and Maestri claim that:

"Politicization does not occur spontaneously [...]: to become political, collective actors need to identify inequalities and the contradiction of the police".

(Monforte and Maestri 2022, 4)

Such a moment is described to us in *D.*'s interview:

I can still remember that I was in this camp in [location].

UNHCR was there and they had a lot of blankets. But they weren't enough.

And I was just standing there with blankets and then seeing people coming and [...]

there were children, and mothers, but also fathers or whoever old people, young people alone and I was handing them out and it was really like ok, there you could also see your *privilege*, for example and you see like ok:

you are deciding who gets a blanket and who doesn't,

and this was just a super important moment for me personally. Also, morally and politically, I think it was then also... The situation of seeing "ok what is the role of the State and also mainstream politics?".

And in the EU, for example, seeing how institutions actually deal with such problems.

Only two interviews openly addressed the theme of politicization, nevertheless the idea of political engagement, that Rancière links to the identification of inequality and to dissense with the police - was perceived in all interviews.

In recounting their moment of politicization, *D.*'s words underline a possible flaw in Ticktin's analysis: the idea that individual acts of help are the antithesis of political implication.

In fact, at that moment *D.* was engaged in what in the world of humanitarian action can be called a "neutral" activity. They were distributing blankets to people on the move, thus providing very concrete and immediate support to alleviate suffering.

That moment of concrete help, the antipolitics of innocence "outside politics, outside history, indeed, outside time and place altogether" as Ticktin (2011) describes, is actually a moment of a profound recognition of the self as implied in larger, powerful, political structures and of questioning of both how the self is positioned and of the structures themselves.

As it is narrated, there are four important passages that define this moment.

FIRST

The recognition of *scarcity*: UNHCR, arguably one of the most important international bodies that deals with migration, do not have enough blankets for the situation;

SECOND

The volunteer has to confront a group of people *in need* and realizes that they are placed in the position of "deciding who gets to have a blanket and who doesn't";

THIRD

The realization of this privilege is a *morally* and *politically* important moment where each realm, far from being distinct, is used almost as a synonym implying that there is an overlap between morality and politics;

Indeed, in each interview, even when political motives are not directly addressed, the role of the State, and the EU in particular, is often questioned.

Furthermore, the role of the volunteer as a citizen, as part of a broader social fabric where collective decisions are taken, is present and informs the experience of the volunteer.

Overall, we found consistencies with what Monforte and Maestri observed:

"Although they still distantiate themselves from more visibly politicised forms of engagement such as social activism, these changes lead participants to present their actions as a form of "quiet" or "unexceptional" politics that often passes unnoticed, yet is meant to challenge the established social order".

(Monforte and Maestri 2022, 14)

FOURTH

We have a moment of politicization à la Rancière where the focus shifts from the individual in the camp to a *broader question* "what is the role of the State in this?".

In their "unexceptional" and "quiet" acts of help, in the messiness of identifying and dealing with emotions, important questions arise:

Who counts as a body?

Who gets to claim help?

Who should help?

Who counts as a grievable life?

In this last story, C. ties personal grief to a larger political responsibility:

At the same time [as the war in Ukraine developed] the European Union unveiled this marvelous temporary protection for everyone and on that same day in Lesbos, seven bodies were found on the beach.



Uh, and that is being quite one of the hardest things that I've dealt with in my life.

Until the point that, uh... My father passed away three years ago and I remember having the same feelings... Uh, for two or three days after those persons were found dead on the beach that I had back when I knew about my father's passing, it was super super hard.

I'm still thinking about that quite a lot.

We leave here geographical coordinates to underline the political dimension that counts on one side but is forgotten on the other.

At the border with Ukraine, bodies are political entities deserving not only of our empathy but also of political protection.

Simultaneously, in the Mediterranean Sea, bodies are washed ashore, excluded by political recognition.

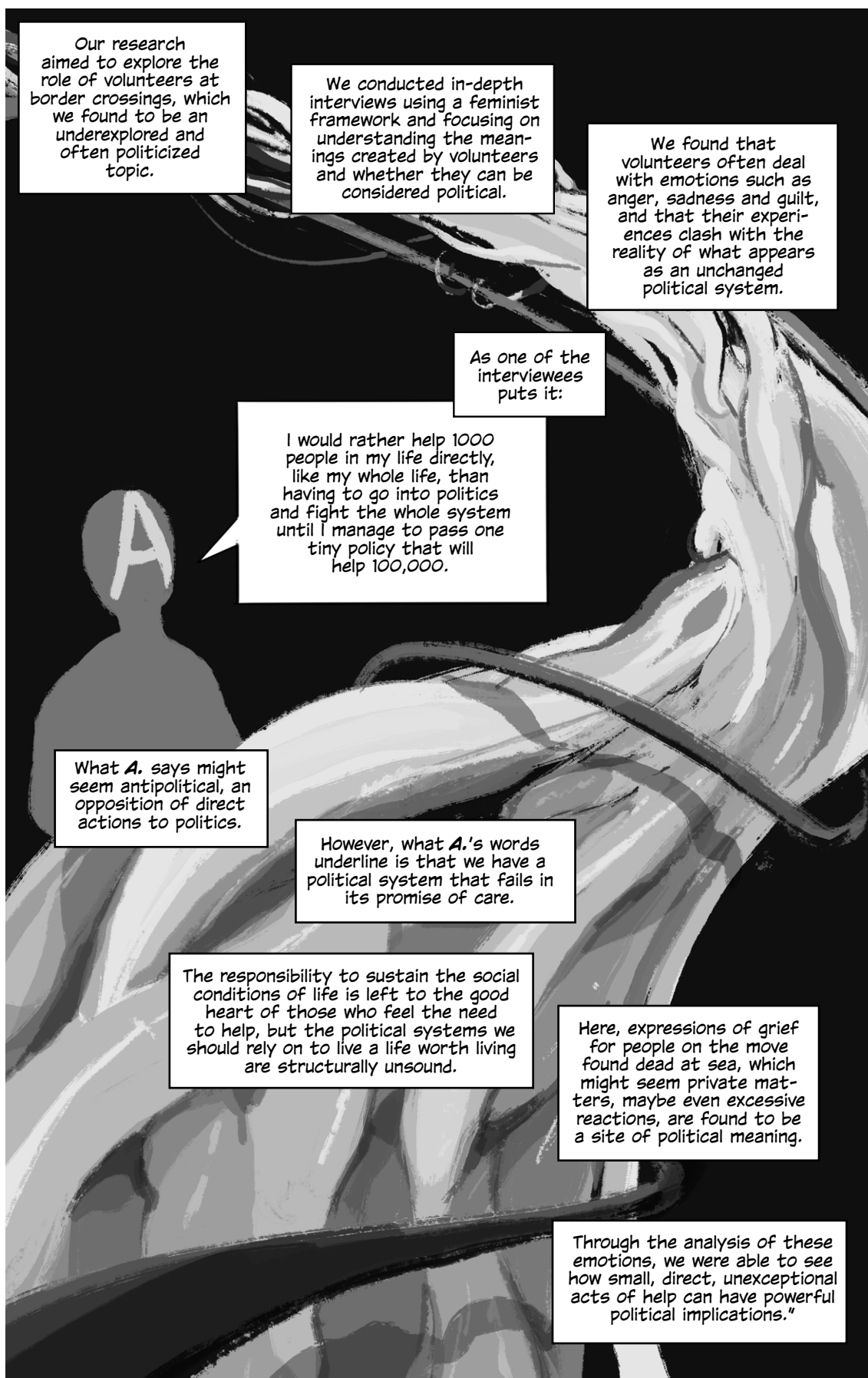
We would like to argue that grieving becomes a political act.

C. does not mean to say that they are saddened or touched by the news of another death, they feel similar grief to that which they felt at the death of their father, to the extent that they are still affected today.

In this grief, one recognises the people who died at sea as *kin*, not just as numbers whose deaths one is sad to hear, but only superficially.

One recognises life, these lives and these corpses as worthy of mourning. Therefore these bodies count.





I saw the reaction of people
for what I'm doing, you had
the people who were like "that's
really great, how can I help?"
and people who were criticizing
because you doing something just
reminds them that they are not.



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