Lublin Studies in Modern Languages and Literature

VOL. 50
No 2 (2026)

FACULTY OF LANGUAGES, LITERATURES AND CULTURES
MARIA CURIE-SKŁODOWSKA UNIVERSITY

Lublin Studies in Modern Languages and Literature

Borders and Migrations in a Global Context

Guest Editor: Ewa Antoszek

UMCS
50(2) 2026
http://journals.umcs.pl/lsmll

e-ISSN: 2450-4580

Publisher:

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press
MCSU Library building, 3rd floor
ul. Idziego Radziszewskiego 11, 20-031 Lublin, Poland
phone: (081) 537 53 04
e-mail: sekretariat@wydawnictwo.umcs.lublin.pl
https://wydawnictwo.umcs.eu/

Editorial Board

- **Indexing**

Peer Review Process

1. Each article is reviewed by two independent reviewers not affiliated to the place of work of the author of the article or the publisher.
2. For all publications, at least one reviewer's affiliation should be in a different country than the country of the author of the article.
3. Author/s of articles and reviewers do not know each other's identity (double-blind review process).
4. Review is in the written form and contains a clear judgment on whether the article is to be published or rejected.
5. Criteria for qualifying or rejecting publications and the reviewing form are published on the journal's website.
6. Identity of reviewers of particular articles or issues are not revealed, the list of collaborating reviewers is published once a year on the journal's website.
7. To make sure that journal publications meet highest editorial standards and to maintain quality of published research, the journal implements procedures preventing ghostwriting and guest authorship. For articles with multiple authorship, each author's contribution needs to be clearly defined, indicating the contributor of the idea, assumptions, methodology, data, etc , used while preparing the publication. The author submitting the manuscript is solely responsible for that. Any cases of academic dishonesty will be documented and transferred to the institution of the submitting author.

Online Submissions - https://journals umcs pl/lsmll

Registration and login are required to submit items online and to check the status of current submissions.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press
Vol 50, No 2 (2026)
E-ISSN 2450-4580

Borders and Migrations in a Global Context

Table of Contents

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE Vol 50, No 2 (2026)
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press

E-ISSN 2450-4580

Ewa Antoszek, Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, Poland

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.2.1-11

On Migrations and Borders

The questions of borders and migration have acquired special urgency in the twenty-first century, when unprecedented global mobility has coincided with intensified practices of surveillance, securitization, and territorial control of nation-states. Trends in contemporary migration and bordering mechanisms continue the tendencies that emerged at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first century: contemporary societies are increasingly shaped by tensions between the unrestricted global circulation of goods, capital, and information on the one hand, and the growing restriction of human movement on the other. Recent events, including the so-called 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Poland-Belarus border crisis that began in 2021, and the displacement caused by the war in Ukraine, have demonstrated that borders remain central instruments through which states negotiate security, sovereignty, humanitarian obligations, and national identity.

At the same time, migration has become one of the most politically polarizing and socially transformative phenomena of the contemporary world. Economic inequalities, armed conflicts, climate change, and labor demands continue to generate large-scale movements of people across and within states, challenging traditional understandings of citizenship, belonging, and territoriality. As Hein de Haas argues, migration should not be regarded as an exceptional crisis but rather as an intrinsic component of broader processes of social and economic transformations (de Haas, 2024). The persistence of migration alongside increasingly restrictive bordering practices reveals a fundamental contradiction of globalization: while the modern world depends on interconnectedness and mobility, states simultaneously attempt to regulate and contain those very flows.

As borders and migrations play such a crucial role in shaping of the contemporary global order, they must be examined not only as geopolitical realities but also as cultural, social, ethical, and symbolic processes. Contemporary border regimes influence everyday experiences of inclusion and exclusion, determine access to rights and mobility, and shape public discourses surrounding identity, security,

Ewa Antoszek, Katedra Anglistyki i Amerykanistyki, Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, Pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4A, 20-031 Lublin, antoszek@umcs.edu.pl, http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2714-3031

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

and otherness. The study of borders and migration is therefore essential to understanding some of the defining tensions of today's world systems.

1. An overview of the history of migrations

In *How Migration Really Works:22 Things You Need to Know about the Most Divisive Issue in Politics*, Hein de Haas, a well-known Dutch sociologist and geographer who has focused his research of over thirty years on migration, proposes an epistemic framework to explain and interpret the contradictions involved in the public discourse on migration. He does so by debunking various myths that have arisen around migrations. He also identifies turning points in the history of this phenomenon, arguing for the constant presence of migratory movements in human history.

One of the first commonly recognized significant peaks in global migrations is the nineteenth century, which witnessed an intensified expansion of Europeans into the New World, "in countries such as the United States, Canada, Argentina and Brazil, as well as Australia and New Zealand" (de Haas, 2024, p. 17). As de Haas observes, "This massive out-migration coincided with the peak of European imperialism, when many European soldiers, colonists, missionaries, administrators, entrepreneurs, and workers settled in colonies in Africa and Asia" (p. 17). The consequences of colonization processes on the flows of people became conspicuous later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though the pattern of the movement became reversed, as de Haas suggests, as Europe transformed "from the world's main source of colonists and immigrants to an important destination of migrants" (p.19). It can be argued that many official governmental programs aimed at addressing the problem of labor shortages with immigrant labor, including the program inviting guest workers in Germany, or the Bracero Program in the U.S., were, in a way, a delayed effect of postcolonial transformations that reversed the migration mechanism.

Another important trend identified by de Haas also took place at the end of the nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, when colonially-driven migrations simultaneously occurred with migratory flows prompted by conflicts, wars, and political transformations. The scope of this article does not permit the analysis of all the political determinants mentioned in that context, and there is extensive scholarship devoted to that period of history. However, it should be emphasized that despite the distinct character of each type of migration at that time, determined by their specific context, they share a common denominator, regardless of their scale. Migrations generated by both the well-known historical events of that period, such as the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the October Revolution of 1917, World War I, or the ones that took place locally, such as the Bieżeństwo of 1915 from the western borderlands of the Russian Empire, pertain to displacement rather than mobility. Combined with the aforementioned colonially-driven as well

as economically-driven movements, all these flows contributed to this exceptional increase in human mobility, which concurrently resulted in the rise of anti-immigrant sentiments. Issues related to migration became more pronounced after the end of World War II, with that era's redrawing of national borders, which in turn contributed to the major displacement of people, followed by the emigration of people escaping newly established communist regimes. Analyzed from today's perspective, numerous analogies to the contemporary character of migrations can be identified, which debunks the argument that the scale of modern migratory movements is exceptional.

Examining the subsequent cases of migration increases at the end of the twentieth century, de Haas highlights two new trends. The first tendency is "the rise of non-Western migration destinations . . . in the Arab Gulf" (de Haas, 2024, 2) in the 1980s. This shift was followed by other migratory processes in Europe in the 1990s that coincided with increased mobility of citizens from Eastern and East-Central Europe. These transformations were accompanied by further labor shortages in "Old Europe" as well as the development of the European Union with its noble founding principles that assumed cooperation and exchange among member-states, and, later on, allowed unrestricted movement within the Schengen zone, first established in 1985 and subsequently expanded by the addition of new countries. These pivotal changes created an apparently propitious atmosphere for the unrestricted flows of people. However, as the favorable atmosphere towards both internal and external migrants depends on the profitable economic situation and the sense of security of ordinary citizens within any nation-state, the 1990s already showed signs of anti-immigrant attitudes in various Western European countries, supported by the common (and often distorted) rhetoric representing immigrants as stealing jobs from legitimate citizens, not assimilating with their host countries' cultures, and violating the law.

It has to be noted that what just commenced in Europe had already happened in the U.S., as after a period or relatively moderate attitudes towards migration that resulted in The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, which was an amnesty/legalization program for immigrants already living and working in the U.S., the 1990s brought an increased number of legal acts and actions whose aim was to restrict immigration and the immigrant rights including the Immigration Act of 1990, California Proposition 187 of 1994, Operation Hold the Line from 1993, Operation Gatekeeper from1994, and Operation Safeguard from 1995. These 1990s actions constructed the framework for modern U.S. immigration enforcement, increasing reliance on detention and a militarized border.

Parallel to these developments were analogous changes in European border regimes, leading to the creation of the concept of "Fortress Europe", which dominated discourse on the security of European borders, particularly after the 2015 refugee crisis, followed by the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border that began in

2021, and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022. Matthew Carr, in *Fortress Europe: Dispatches from a Gated Continent* (2012), explores the consequences of such recent events, maintaining that, contrary to the original tenets founding the European Union, today's governments have developed a highly intricate system of border control and exclusion (Carr, 2012, p. 245). He further notes that this phenomenon extends beyond Europe, explaining that "Fortress Europe" forms part of a broader network of barriers established throughout the industrialized West over the past two decades to prevent some from entering wealthier countries, while also restricting their mobility more generally (p. 231), which points to ethical contradictions displayed by liberal democracies.

The equivocality of migration mechanisms has led to an oversimplified categorization of human flows. As Hein de Haas argues, there are generally two approaches to migration. On the one hand, it is perceived as a problem, since according to this discourse, migrants "inundate" other countries, take away the jobs from the citizens, oftentimes break the law, and, finally, fail to accomplish integration processes. As de Haas concludes, "All of this has amalgamated in the notion of a 'migration crisis' that requires drastic countermeasures – such as stronger border enforcement, refugee resettlement schemes, and development aid for poor countries" (de Haas, 2024, p.1). On the other hand, some voices argue that migration should be treated as a solution to the growing problems facing advanced economies and high-income countries. In that context, as de Haas indicates, immigrants can help solve labor shortages, support aging populations, offer cultural contributions, and generally "boost growth and innovation and to rejuvenate our societies" (p. 1). Such conflicting ideas are reflected in the polarization of attitudes towards migrations, resulting in two migration *doxas* that propound "pro- *and* anti-migration narratives" (p. 2), thus disregarding the complex character of this phenomenon. As the fear of unlimited human mobility is more prevalent in the public discourse, and migration narratives are dominated by the image of immigrants who threaten the security and stability of receiving countries, this leads to the implementation of further restricting mechanisms aimed at controlling human movements. Migration, then, is one defining feature of globalization, and borders are the mechanisms through which states attempt to regulate, channel, and control transnational mobility.

2. Borders and their vicissitudes

To understand the current status quo of contemporary border regimes and bordering mechanisms, it is necessary to recognize critical moments in the history of borders. Alexander Diener and Joshua Hagen, in *Borderlines and Borderlands: Political Oddities at the Edge of the Nation-State* (2010), emphasize that, despite recurrent claims about the emergence of a "borderless world", borders remain fundamental to contemporary political, economic, and cultural organization (Diener & Hagen,

2010, p.4). The authors identify significant transformations in the history of nations and trace the historical evolution of borders from the fluid frontier zones of ancient empires to the territorially precise borders associated with the modern nation-state. They argue that, unlike contemporary borders, premodern frontiers were often unstable, permeable, and only loosely defined. The gradual consolidation of centralized states in early modern Europe, which started in the sixteenth century and "evolved over several centuries" (p. 5), transformed borders into increasingly fixed territorial markers linked to sovereignty, administration, and national identity. Consequently, transformations in the concept of the border from "vaguely defined" (p. 6) and permeable into a more precisely delineated space paralleled sociopolitical changes – a shift from the feudal system to the modern state system (p. 6). As a result, as Diener and Hagen aver, "[t]he idea of the nation-state, where the political borders of the state would coincide with the cultural boundaries of the nation, had become the ideal, although not the norm, by the beginning of the twentieth century" (p.6). Significantly, the craving for more precisely defined borders included both European states and their colonies (p. 6), thereby propagating this concept of territorial divisions across a wider global context.

What also seems important in the history of borders is how the processes of their establishment have occurred, as it is to a large extent relevant to understanding the contemporary location of the borders. As Diener and Hagen note, "[v]arious proposals for border delineation emerged beginning around 1500" (p. 7) and the first precise ideas how to divide territories appeared at the end of the eighteenth century, when the view "that borders should coincide with 'natural' features had become widely accepted" (p. 7), as those natural borders were considered "more stable and less likely to generate conflict" (p. 7). However, borders have never been neutral geographical facts. Rather, they have been shaped by political interests, imperial ambitions, and competing interpretations of territory and identity. The notion of "natural borders" frequently served to legitimize territorial expansion, as the term could be interpreted in manifold ways that would address the interests of individual states that were stakeholders in the discussion on borders. Therefore, the criteria applied to define the borders were far from objective – for example, a natural border could be defined as the one that "should follow physiographical features, such as rivers or mountain ranges" (p. 7), which, as Diener and Hagen argue, was "a view that provided a convenient justification for annexing new territories" (p. 7). On the other hand, a natural border could also be understood as the one that demarcated a territory which would "encompass all the members of one nationality" (p. 7), which could again explain the territorial advances of some states. Consequently, these unclear criteria reinforced states' own "particular geopolitical agendas" and "particular territorial aspirations" (p.7). Consequently, borders emerged not as objective divisions but as historically contingent and politically negotiated constructs.

The process leading to the establishment of more objective border paradigms was interrupted and at the same time accelerated by World War I. This, according to Diener and Hagen, led to both "dramatic territorial realignment" (p. 7) and "triggered a surge of interest in border studies" (p. 7), which resulted in attempts at providing new criteria defining the borders that would prevent conflicts of that scale in the future. However, since the interests of individual states were still at stake, "the dichotomy between natural and artificial borders" (p. 7) remained prevalent and border "studies tended to be highly subjective, often reflecting their authors' national origins" (p. 7), as it used to be in the past. As a consequence, new research undertaken throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s deemed borders "arbitrary, subjective, and the result of human decisions, not forces of nature" (p. 8). The analyses of the borders of that time included "empirical descriptions of border locations, before-and-after case studies of border realignments, and new systems of border classification" (p. 8), leading to the conclusion that the popular "natural-artificial distinction was pointless" (p. 8), even though this division remained valid in mainstream discourse.

This line of thinking persisted from the 1950s through the 1970s, when scholars initially concentrated on individual case studies before border research was largely neglected by the end of the 1970s (Diener & Hagen, 2010, p.8). Instead, political geographers shifted their attention toward states and the internal processes associated with modernization (Diener and Hagen, 2010, p. 8). In this perspective, borders were considered relatively unimportant because they were viewed simply as divisions between separate modernization processes rather than as factors shaping those processes themselves (p. 8). The Cold War further reinforced this approach by diminishing the perceived significance of international borders and redirecting scholarly attention toward questions of power, while borders came to be understood mainly as "passive territorial markers" (p. 9).

The trends that signaled the emergence of the "borderless world" (Diener & Hagen, 2010, p. 9) reversed when the role of borders had been lessening since the 1980s, due to new transformations related to globalization that involved "transnational integration and interdependence" (p. 9). Even though in some parts of the world borders did indeed cease to play the role they used to have a few decades before, elsewhere they retained their power, or sometimes even strengthened their influence. Observing these phenomena, Diener and Hagen note that "[w]hile the apparent "disappearance" of borders across much of Western Europe is often presented as irrefutable evidence supporting the borderless world thesis, these developments do not appear to be the global norm" (p. 9); moreover, "[i]t is difficult to argue that a similar "de-bordering" is imminent in, for example, Africa, the Middle East or Central Asia" (p. 9). Considering contemporary sentiments regarding migration mechanisms and border regimes that prevail in Europe nowadays, it may be assumed that even the de-bordered Schengen zone

will reinstate – at least temporarily – some of its borders as well, which has already happened on several occasions. Consequently, the question of borders has become even more urgent and difficult to address unequivocally.

Diener and Hagen propose two arguments concerning borders in the 21st century as studied from a global perspective. First, the authors argue that globalization has not diminished the importance of borders as decisively as many theorists predicted in the late twentieth century, and therefore, borders are unlikely to lose their perceived importance in the near future. Although processes of economic integration and technological connectivity have facilitated transnational flows of goods, capital, and information, the mobility of people remains unevenly regulated. In this sense, contemporary borders function selectively: they may become increasingly permeable for trade and communication while simultaneously becoming more restrictive toward migrants and refugees (Diener and Hagen, 2010, p. 10). Secondly, they observe that borders in the twenty-first century should be understood not as static lines but as dynamic social constructions possessing both material and symbolic dimensions and "the rich interdisciplinary body of research that has emerged since the 1990s conceives of borders as social constructions possessing both material and symbolic aspects, rather than preordained, rigid lines marking the absolute limits of the state" (p. 9). Their meanings and functions continue to evolve in response to globalization, security concerns, migration pressures, and changing conceptions of national identity and sovereignty. This in turn can result in two scenarios: the "creation of transition zone borderlands" (Newman, 1996, as cit. in Diener & Hagen, 2010, p. 10) or the borderland remaining a frontier "in which mutual suspicion, mistrust of the other and a desire to maintain group or national exclusivity remain in place" (Newman, 1996, as cit. in Diener and Hagen, 2010, p. 10). Consequently, as Diener and Hagen maintain, researchers will continue their efforts to explain the construction of borders, taking into account various processes influencing their establishment, yet, as they finally conclude, "it may be impossible to develop a single border theory applicable and explanatory of all borders at all times" (Diener and Hagen, 2010, p. 9).

These conclusions are endorsed by Astrid Fellner, who argues for "a reconceptualization of boundaries that treats them critically as processes, discourses, practices, even symbols through which power functions" (Fellner, 2021, p. 7). The 2000s "'cultural turn' in border studies and 'border turn' in cultural studies" (Nyman & Schimanski, 2021, as cit. in Fellner, 2021, p. 8) highlights the multifaceted character of borders, including not only a variety of territory/geography-related terms (such as boundaries, frontiers, borderlands, or borderscapes), but also recognizing the concept of borders as social constructs. Fellner (2021), in her analysis, proposes the concept of borders as "shifting sites of transition and movement", or "heterotopic spaces" (p. 10). Such shifts in approach to border studies emphasize the complex character of borders, which escapes the

reductive approach frequently applied to analyze these spaces – they are often represented as solely dividing the two nation-states with border markers such as fences or walls enforcing bordering mechanisms and securing border regimes. Moreover, as Fellner (2021) claims, by recognizing other dimensions of borders, the approach to bordering processes and border crossings is also transformed and "Borders are thereby unmasked as contingent social and cultural productions and as instruments of power, which determine and often also substantiate our perception of the world" (p. 8). Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate why borders and migration remain central to the contemporary world: as globalization, displacement, and transnational mobility continue to reshape societies, borders function not merely as territorial divisions but as dynamic sites where power, identity, belonging, and human movement are constantly negotiated.

3. Why are migrations and borders still pertinent in the twenty-first century?

Why, then, do borders and migration remain so pertinent in the twenty-first century? One of the main reasons is that contemporary societies are increasingly shaped by global mobility, while simultaneously attempting to limit and regulate it. As Hein de Haas argues, "liberal democracies are caught in a 'migration trilemma' between (1) the political wish to control immigration, (2) economic interests in more migration, and (3) fundamental human-rights obligations towards migrants and refugees" (de Haas, 2024, p. 360). This "trilemma" reveals the inherent tensions within modern migration policies, as the "conflicting policy goals seem impossible to resolve satisfactorily, and that largely explains why immigration policies can be incoherent and therefore often ineffective or even counterproductive" (p. 360). Therefore, in other words, even though "ethnoscapes" (Appadurai, 1990, p. 296) are an intrinsic part of today's world order, it is still unresolved how to address them, and the existing mechanisms of dealing with them remain contentious.

These tensions are further intensified through media and political representations of migration. As de Haas notes, migration often receives extensive media coverage, and it is frequently presented through sensationalist narratives that amplify fear, exploiting the rhetoric of crisis and instability resulting from migrations (de Haas, 2024, pp. 15, 21). We all remember the news with a sensationalist bent after the 2015 migration crisis, the infamous "caravan" that was marching from Central America to "invade" the U.S., and finally the "surges" of Ukrainian refugees that were going to destabilize neighboring states, Poland in particular, after the outbreak of the war, to name just a few examples. The linguistic aspect of such relations cannot be ignored, either, as the language used in these accounts serves to support a particular political standpoint. Moreover, the same migration-related event may be represented in radically different ways, depending on the political or ideological agenda behind its interpretation. Combined with the spread of disinformation, including fake news, or

the activity of trolls on social media, such rendering of migrations further aggravates the tensions. One of the biggest paradoxes of the twenty-first century, in my view, is that while we have unprecedentedly extensive and almost immediate access to information through various media, biased (both ways) and tendentious coverage often results in confusion and leads to misinformation. In the case of migrations, it also generates further polarization.

The instability of the contemporary world order, with many ongoing conflicts and some potential ones in the making, renders the issue of borders and migration relevant, as history has shown that such conditions significantly influence the movement of people. Such instability also contributes to the vulnerability of geopolitical borders, which in turn leads to an increase in their surveillance and security procedures. In that context, it should be noted that the emergence of a new form of conflict, hybrid warfare, has changed the dynamics of conflicts, and its consequences are yet to be learned. Its effects are frequently delayed, but it can influence a society in a much more extensive way than is readily apparent. As NATO experts explain, "Hybrid methods are used to blur the lines between war and peace, and attempt to sow doubt in the minds of target populations" (*Countering hybrid threats*). They aim to destabilize the target country/ies and disorient inhabitants without resorting to a full-scale invasion. Even though it may seem less radical than conventional war, hybrid warfare is dangerous, and it often preys on the fear of the other – an immigrant, a stranger, to accomplish its goals. In such contexts, migrants and refugees often become instrumentalized as political tools or symbols within broader struggles for power and influence, while simultaneously remaining among the primary victims of violence, exclusion, and border securitization.

Lastly, it is critical to understand that neither migration nor migratory movements can be completely stopped. In fact, we probably do not even want to do that, given the potential consequences of such a shift. Therefore, we need to recognize migrations as a natural phenomenon, acknowledge their complexity, and approach them from a critical perspective but without prejudice. Hein de Haas concludes his analysis of migrations, maintaining that they should be treated "as an intrinsic part of broader processes of social, cultural, and economic change that affect our societies" (de Haas, 2024, p. 358). He closes his discussion in the following way:

> The evidence presented shows the need to go beyond the usual framing of migration debates in simplistic and polarizing pro- and anti-terms, and to not focus on what migration ought to be, but rather on what migration *is*, in terms of its actual trends, patterns, causes and impacts. Understanding the inevitability of migration, and its central role in economic development and social transformation, will lead us to a totally new way of understanding human mobility – a new paradigm on the very nature and causes of migration that belies almost everything that we are usually told on the subject. As Ronald Skeldon observed, 'Migration *is* development'; it is a process that benefits some people more than others, that can have downsides for some, but that cannot be thought or wished away. The power of a scientific, and above all nuanced

> view of migration as development helps us to understand and – to a certain extent – predict how migration will evolve as our societies and economies change. (de Haas, 2024, p. 358)

For this reason, interdisciplinary approaches to migration and border-related studies remain essential. Because migration intersects with politics, economics, sociology, culture, media, law, geography, and human rights, no single theoretical framework can fully capture its complexity. Interdisciplinary perspectives allow for a more nuanced understanding of migration processes and bordering practices, while also resisting the overgeneralizations and polarized narratives that often dominate public discourse. The contributions in this volume are intended to examine selected aspects of representations of migrations and borders, and to advance a discussion concerning these issues. Interdisciplinary approaches adopted in the analyses included in this collection of essays provide a more comprehensive study of borders and migrations, thereby the aforementioned polarized approaches that lead to overgeneralizations and simplifications. Moving across literary studies, film studies, and cultural studies, the contributions explore borders as lived experiences that structure identities, relationships, and forms of exclusion and resistance.

The volume opens with essays that reconceptualize borders through visual and affective frameworks. Svitlana Kot examines graphic novels about refugees and migrants through the lenses of affect theory and bordertexture methodology, exploring how narratives of legal and illegal migration (de)construct binaries such as welcome/unwelcome and expose the emotional and ideological dimensions of contemporary border regimes. Similarly focused on visual culture, Betül Ateşci Koçak analyzes Mira Jacob's graphic memoir *Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations* as a post-9/11 migrant narrative in which racial belonging, exclusion, and identity are negotiated through fragmented dialogue and intergenerational exchange. Kenan Koçak's contribution extends this discussion of representation to Turkish satirical magazines, demonstrating how caricatures of Syrian refugees reveal nationalist anxieties surrounding migration, integration, and belonging while exposing the affective dimensions of anti-migrant discourse.

A second cluster of essays turns to cinematic and literary representations of migration, trauma, and precarious belonging. Carla Abella Rodríguez examines the representation of African female refugees in *Aisha* (2022) and *Drift* (2023), arguing that both films foreground bodily vulnerability, touch, and "carnal hospitality" as ways of articulating trauma and fragile encounters between self and Other within inhospitable European reception systems. Ewa Antoszek's analysis of Agnieszka Zwiefka's film, *Silent Trees* (2024) similarly investigates the violence of contemporary European migration regimes through the 2021 Polish-Belarusian border crisis. Focusing on the experiences of a Kurdish teenage girl, the article explores denied childhood, captivity, trauma, and "hostipitality", while also highlighting animation as a medium capable of expressing the psychological

dimensions of displacement and the ethical contradictions of "Fortress Europe". Małgorzata Martynuska's reading of Gabriela Garcia's *Of Women and Salt* expands these concerns through an exploration of intergenerational and collective trauma among Cuban refugees and Salvadoran migrants. The article examines how border crossings, detention, deportation, and family separation shape both individual and inherited forms of suffering, while also emphasizing resilience and survival across generations of women.

Questions of diaspora, identity, and alternative forms of belonging are further developed in the volume's final essays. Macarena Martín-Martínez analyzes Melania Luisa Marte's *Plantains and Our Becoming* as a reconfiguration of Afro-Dominican diasporic identity grounded in Black joy and transnational rootedness. Challenging dominant narratives of displacement and victimhood, the article foregrounds community, multiplicity, and thriving as forms of resistance to racialized exclusion and dehumanization. Richard Reitsma's contribution similarly explores migration, identity, and alternate forms of belonging through the lens of queer desire and Mexican culinary culture in Heidi Ewing's film *I Carry You with Me* (2020). The article demonstrates how food and foodways function as languages of longing, intimacy, and memory, revealing how migrants continue to "carry" borders within themselves even after crossing them physically.

The volume concludes with Lucía Bausela Buccianti's analysis of Sole Otero's graphic novel *Walicho*, which situates migration within broader colonial and decolonial histories. Examining the intersections of migration, feminist solidarity, indigenous cosmologies, and capitalist extraction, the article reveals how colonial migrations continue to shape contemporary spaces and identities in Latin America while also exposing the possibilities and limitations of decolonial resistance.

Announcement

The research for this paper was supported by the Erasmus+ project 2023-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000154375, Migration Narratives in European Media: Teaching, Learning, and Reflecting (MigraMedia).

References

Appadurai, A. (1990). Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. *Theory, Culture, and Society*, *7*, 295–310.

de Haas, H. (2024). *How Migration Really Works:22 Things You Need to Know about the Most Divisive Issue in Politics*. Penguin Books.

Countering hybrid threats. NATO website. https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/countering-hybrid-threats

Diener, A. C., & Hagen, J. (2010). *Borderlines and Borderlands: Political Oddities at the Edge of the Nation-State*. Rowman and Littlefield.

Fellner, A. (2021). *Narratives of Border Crossings: Literary Approaches and Negotiations*. Rombach Wissenschaft Nomos.

Nyman, J., & Schimanski, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Border Images, Border Narratives: the Political Aesthetics of Boundaries and Crossings*. Manchester University Press.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press
Vol 50, No 2 (2026)
E-ISSN 2450-4580

Svitlana Kot, Saarland University, Germany

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.2.12-30

Constructing (Un)Welcome and (Il)Legal: Affective Mechanisms of B/ordering and Othering in Graphic Novels about Migration

ABSTRACT
This research studies the representation of migrants in graphic novels through the interdisciplinary lens of affect theory and bordertexture methodology. Considering the controversy surrounding border policies and the current anti-migrant populist sentiment, it is crucial to explore the emotional affects induced by visual and textual representations of welcome and unwelcome border-crossers. This paper questions binary opposition legal/illegal and welcome/unwelcome and examines how the graphic novels *Illegal*, *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees*, *Home*, *The Power of Welcome* deconstruct or reinforce these binaries and, in doing so, highlight the selectivity and multivalence of borders. The paper argues that this framing, rooted in a colonial legacy of 'othering,' reinforces a hierarchical worldview where borders function as both physical barriers and cultural constructs within complex bordertextures.

KEYWORDS
affect; borders; graphic novels; migration; refugees

1. Introduction: the cultural and affective landscapes of migration

In a recent decade marked by a cascade of wars, intense mobility, and various migration challenges, borders have emerged not only as political and legal institutions but also as powerful cultural imaginaries. Global shifts, including deglobalization and new security regimes, reflect a trend toward closed and/or militarized borders, which differentiate between privileged and non-privileged forms of mobility. These developments evoke strong cultural responses, influencing perceptions of migrants as either *welcome or unwelcome*. The terminology such as "migrants", "expats", "illegal aliens," or "refugees" carries powerful symbolic weight and cultural connotations, reflecting social hierarchies, moral judgments, and contested notions of belonging. The terminology highlights opposite ends of a symbolic spectrum where "expats" connote privilege, mobility, and social acceptance, while "refugees" or "illegal aliens" signal marginalization, criminalization, and exclusion. Public perceptions of migrants are stratified, some

Svitlana Kot, Amerikanistik, Universität des Saarlandes, Campus Gebäude A 5.3 66123 Saarbrücken, kot.svetlana.yurievna@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1462-1276

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

are seen as more "deserving" than others (De Coninck, 2023, p. 582), which reinforces emotional hierarchies and symbolic borders.

Representations of migrants are woven into the textures of borders, revealing their affective dimensions. Given controversies over border policies and rising anti-migrant sentiment, it is essential to examine cultural representations of migrants and their impact on border discourse. A critical question arises: What role do cultural narratives about migration play in sociopolitical landscapes? Are they merely symbolic gestures with limited impact, do they have positive impact, or do they, paradoxically, reinforce the anxieties and divisions they seek to challenge?

Taking into account the various controversies within border policies and sociocultural discourses constructing migration, this paper aims to explore the affects created by visual and textual representations of welcome and unwelcome migrants. Rather than treating these categories as inherent qualities, the analysis understands them as socially and politically constructed through the interplay of state institutions, legal frameworks, media narratives, and public perceptions within a global migration regime. The four graphic novels *Illegal* by Eoin Colfer, *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees* by Don Brown, *Home* by Julio Anta, and *The Power of Welcome: Real-life Refugee and Migrant Journeys* by Jusic et al., (2023) were selected as case studies because they articulate prevalent cultural narratives of displacement. The cultural narratives in these graphic novels seek to illuminate both the diversity of migrants' experiences across European and American borders and the ways these experiences are perceived, shedding light on borders in all their complexities. Moreover, as suggested by their very titles, they reflect on the selective nature of borders and the unequal attitude toward migrants. The analysis focuses on recurring tendencies across the graphic novels, exploring how visual and textual elements construct borders, displacement, and migrants, how they reflect the selectivity of borders, how affective mechanisms shape these representations, and what implications they carry. The analysis of the novels provides an opportunity to question binary oppositions such as legal/illegal and welcome/unwelcome and to examine whether these texts reinforce or challenge these categories through their affective implications. This might shed light on how borders function both as physical barriers and as cultural constructs within the hegemonic nation-state paradigm.

The representation of welcome and unwelcome migrants in the graphic novels is approached through an interdisciplinary framework of affect theory and bordertextures methodology. The lens of bordertexturing enables the understanding of borders beyond their physical manifestation, conceptualizing them as phenomena "formed out of attributions, ideas, or bodily representations in their mutual interweavings and influences" and as "both material and immaterial formations of cultural production" ("Bordertextures/UniGR Center for Border Studies").The mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion established by borders

– manifesting through the categories welcome/unwelcome, wanted/unwanted, and legal/illegal when considered within cultural contexts – are grounded in attitudes and emotions produced by the multivalence and selectivity of borders, revealing deep-seated affective and ideological structures that shape perceptions of belonging and mobility within bordertextures. By integrating affect theory which claims that all life is affective life: all behavior, thought, planning, wishing, doing (Nathanson, 2008, p. xx), the paper highlights the emotional mechanisms that sustain and potentially disrupt the binaries while examining how migrants and borders become interwoven within complex textures of cultural imagery, thereby offering new insights into the social, political, and cultural complexities of displacement narratives.

2. Navigating the divide: the role of borders and the media in shaping perceptions of migration

Welcome and unwelcome are not accidental responses but the very outcomes of selective border regimes, which demonstrate that borders operate not merely as legal or political lines but as affective and classificatory systems that classify migrants, determining who is granted passage and who is obstructed, contained, or rendered invisible. Numerous studies (Costello & Foster, 2022; Korte, 2021; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2012; Schulze Wessel, 2016; van Houtum, 2021; Wille et al., 2023) have demonstrated that borders function as selective systems of classification, "sorting machines" (Costello & Foster, 2022, p. 79) unevenly distributing mobility and producing hierarchies of belonging. They classify mobility into desirable and undesirable (Wille et al., 2023, p. 9), dividing people into "border persons" (subject to controls) and "non-border persons" (largely unaffected) (Schulze Wessel, 2016, p. 52). As Schulze Wessel (2016) claims, "For some the border is not even visible, while for others it is a permanent presence" (p. 52). Borders not only target individuals rather than territories (p. 52), but they are also "polysemic and unequal" (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2012, p. 58) as they can harden and soften depending on context, privileging some groups while discriminating against others (Korte, 2021; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2012). Wille Weber, and Fellner (2023) offer the term "multivalence" to define the contextual selectivity of borders, emphasizing how their "meanings and values" shift depending on context and person, while also stressing their regulatory, cultural, and symbolic functions, which generate order and inequality. Scholars often emphasize the unequal treatment of migrants, pointing to different degrees of welcome and unwelcomeness, and describe this inequality through terms such as transnational segregation (van Houtum & van Naerssen, 2002, p. 134), the global inequality trap of paper borders (van Houtum & van Uden, 2022, p. 22), and a discriminative taxonomy based on national origin (van Houtum, 2021, p. 35), or even "global apartheid" as a dominant global climate of unwelcome, where

migrants are framed as threats and contained through walls, surveillance, and militarization (Benedicto et al., 2020, p. 5). Ultimately, such conceptualizations underline how borders regulate not only mobility but also the degrees of welcome and unwelcome that render certain migrants "legal" or "illegal" in both formal and symbolic senses.

The selectivity and multivalence of borders carry deep cultural and symbolic significance, shaping affective responses and legitimizing differentiated perceptions of migrants. Borders and border fortifications function as projections of collective anxieties and geopolitical imaginations. They materialise collective identities, induce processes of Othering, and legitimise exclusion in the name of security and purity (Almond, 2016; van Houtum, 2021). Several studies (De Coninck, 2023; Korte, 2021) demonstrate that migrant reception reveals a hierarchy of "deservingness," where cultural familiarity and geopolitical narratives often outweigh humanitarian need, which exposes the deeply affective and ideological logic underlying border policies. For example, Kristina Korte, in "Filtering or Blocking Mobility?," notes that the Hungarian fence built in 2015 at the Serbian border primarily targeted Syrian refugees (Korte, 2021, p. 50). Similarly, David De Coninck (2023), in "The Refugee Paradox During Wartime in Europe: How Ukrainian and Afghan Refugees Are (Not) Alike," highlights that Ukrainian refugees displaced by the 2022 Russian invasion received widespread humanitarian support from Western countries, whereas Afghan refugees fleeing after the Taliban takeover in 2021 faced skepticism and negative reactions (p. 580). This contrast is explained by several factors: Ukrainians are viewed as culturally and ethnically closer to Western populations, believed to share similar values and aspirations, and their visibility in European cultural events such as sports championships and Eurovision promotes familiarity and solidarity. Afghans, in contrast, lack this visibility and are often perceived through a lens of ideological and cultural difference, with conservative values and Muslim faith fuelling prejudice and Islamophobic xenophobia (p. 582).

The media and cultural productions amplify the symbolic and selective power of borders, mediating public perceptions and affects within the socio-political discourse. Various studies demonstrate that media coverage of refugees shapes public attitudes, highlighting the active role of the media in promoting either welcoming or unwelcoming perceptions. Yet their influence remains controversial and sometimes paradoxical and heavily relies on affects created. There are studies (Bara & Tsakiris, 2024; Merolla et al., 2013; Savio Vammen & Kohl, 2022) which demonstrate that emotions play one of the major roles in doing borderwork and govern the unwanted migration or "evoke morally charged spatial geographies" (Savio Vammen & Kohl, 2022, p. 919). Merolla et al. (2013) demonstrated that language choices in the media such as the terms *"illegal", "undocumented",* or *"unauthorized"* serve as framing devices that influence

public sentiment on immigration. Some research (Eccarius-Kelly & Schaeffing, 2022; Keskin et al., 2020; McLoughlin, 2023) emphasizes that media, as active agents, can generate a positive impulse by producing more sympathetic coverage inducing empathy and solidarity. However, these studies suggest that the media can foster welcoming attitudes mainly in specific contexts – among children, culturally proximate groups (as in De Coninck's study discussed above), or audiences whose political orientations align with the media's framing. Conversely, numerous studies reveal that negative framing is more prevalent, with threat-based and alarmist reporting reinforcing fear and dehumanization, which in turn radicalize attitudes and fuel anti-immigrant sentiment (Agovino et al., 2022; Wenzel & Żerkowska-Balas, 2018). Overall, media representations of (im)migrants and refugees are ambivalent and context-dependent, their effects shaped by selective framing, audience interpretation, and broader socio-political conditions.

Yet the media is only a part of a broader cultural landscape. Contemporary cultural and artistic responses to refugee crises within Western discourse like literature, film, and visual art are largely framed by the humanitarian logic of liberal rhetoric, characterized by sympathetic portrayals and the absence of alarmist or threat-focused framing. As Hemelryk et al. (2019) note in their editorial to *Refugee Filmmaking*, "writers, artists and intellectuals are today engaged in a relentless effort to contradict xenophobic narratives and to expose and unpick their manipulation by right-wing politicians" (p. 6). Many cultural narratives portraying migration actively challenge dehumanizing policies and seek to affirm the dignity and humanity of migrants. This tendency is exemplified in the epigraph by Elie Wiesel that opens *Illegal* by Eoin Colfer and Andrew Donkin, which encapsulates the ethos of such cultural production:

> You, who are so-called illegal aliens, must know that no human being is illegal. That is a contradiction in terms. Human beings can be beautiful or more beautiful. They can be fat or skinny. They can be right or wrong, but illegal? How can a human being be illegal? (2017, "Epigraph")

This statement epitomizes a broader cultural ambition: to humanize migrants and restore their moral and emotional visibility in opposition to sociopolitical discourses that reduce people to illegality, threat, or otherness. In general, studies (Briciu, 2020; Eccarius-Kelly & Schaeffing, 2022) observe that narratives of displacement often adopt humanizing strategies like first-person testimony, co-created art, and refugee-centered literature, that foster empathy, solidarity, and recognition. However, some scholars (Behrman, 2016; Kot, 2025) highlight that audience reception crucially depends on whether the narratives depicting refugees are fictional or non-fictional. Within fictional narratives, the portrayal of refugees as either active agents or passive victims further shapes responses which range from critical solidarity to paternalistic charity. Whether through empathy,

solidarity, or charity, this cultural generosity creates a paradox: despite sustained efforts to evoke compassion through emotionally charged narratives of struggle and resilience, anti-migrant sentiment continues to intensify across various regions, and restrictive border policies persist.

Aiming to identify the roots of this paradox, and the limits of cultural interventions in transforming political and social realities, the following section examines how specific cultural narratives of migration are constructed and perceived to reveal the representational and affective dynamics underlying them.

3. Affect, emotional engagement, and graphic narratives: looking at the readers' responses

This section uses readers' response analysis to examine graphic narratives of migration as the sights of cultural production which generate affective response. It focuses on affects triggered and demonstrates that such narratives resonate emotionally with audiences predominantly portraying migrants and refugees in a positive and empathetic light. As Nathanson (2008, p. xiv) explains, drawing on Tomkins (2008), the terms *"affect"* or *"innate affect"* refer to a group of nine highly specific, unmodulated physiological reactions present from birth. The term *"feeling"* describes the awareness that an affect has been triggered. Emotion is understood as the intertwining of an activated affect with memories of previous experiences of that affect. Affect, recognized through bodily reactions and expressions, not only brings individual experiences into consciousness but also contributes to script formation – a cognitive process that organizes repeated emotional experiences into lasting interpretive frameworks (p. xxii). Viewed in this way, migration narratives are not isolated depictions of hardship or resilience but are embedded within broader cultural scripts that structure how migrants are perceived. Representations of displaced people in cultural narratives, seek to trigger affect generating empathy and reinforcing particular modes of understanding. In this sense, readers respond to visual and narrative cues such as facial expressions, bodily posture, and scenes/descriptions of vulnerability or endurance, which signal recognizable affects like surprise, interest, fear, distress, anger. These cues invite readers to mirror or internalize these affects, shaping their immediate emotional response and guiding interpretation. Nathanson (2008) notes that people are "wired to react innately to the expressed affect of others as if it were our own." However, he admits that "to live in a complex world with all its intense experiences requires that we practice variable susceptibility to the affect of others," a mechanism he calls an "empathic wall" (p. xvi).

The analysis of Goodreads reactions to four studied graphic novels *Illegal*, *Unwanted*, *Home*, and *The Power of Welcome* shows that the first three, depicting migrants from Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America as unwelcome in the EU and U.S., generated considerably more engagement than *The Power of*

Welcome, which emphasizes individual stories of arrival and inclusion. Readers tend to demonstrate strong emotional reactions in their reviews of the first three books, frequently expressing feelings of *sadness, empathy, and frustration*. The responses describe the novels as heartbreaking, eye-opening, and depressing, while also noting the hope and resilience of the protagonists. The most recurrent keywords include *struggle, desperation, survival, journey, loss, hope, injustice,* and *inhumanity*, which reflects both the emotional intensity of the narratives and their emphasis on the perilous quest for a better life.

This pattern of audience engagement reflects the intentions articulated by some authors. Julio Anta (2022), in his author's note, writes:

> My intention with this story was to expose readers to the real horrors migrants experience at the hands of our government, albeit with a superhuman bent. Anna[1] did an incredible job bringing this bleak environment to life, particularly the icebox. She was also able to translate the helplessness and terror Juan and his mother experienced when they began learning the truth about family separation in a way I couldn't even imagine while writing a script. (n. p.)

Readers' reactions to *The Power of Welcome*, though fewer, emphasized themes of hope, loss, war, welcome, and safety. All together the responses illustrate that reading functions as a distinctive form of social interaction, one that engages audiences in a dialogue with the narrative and mediates between diverse perspectives and values, thereby generating affective resonance. It is affective resonance through which, according to Tomkins and Nathanson, people know about the inner experiences of others (Nathanson, 2008. p. xvi).

These patterns in reader responses point to broader processes through which affect becomes structured and interpreted within public discourse through emotional scripts. As Seigworth and Gregg (2010) note in *The Affect Theory Reader*, affects influence not only feelings but also the relational and physical forces that shape behavior, ideas, and experience (p. 2), sparking and fading in ways that transmit the influence of the surrounding social environment (p. 6). Emotional scripts, therefore, operate as a powerful mechanism for shaping public perception of migration and they reinforce or challenge established social and political boundaries.

Building on this theoretical framework, the following sections turns to the analysis of the four graphic novels. The focus lies on how visual and textual strategies construct representations of displacement, migrants, and borders. Given the scope of this paper, the analysis focuses on shared tendencies across analysed graphic novels, especially those that highlight affect and its implications. The analysis considers how these representations elicit affects, what implications they

[1] Anna Wieszczyk is comic book artist and illustrator from Poland; co-creator of the graphic novel *Home*.

hold for the inclusion/exclusion binaries underlying welcoming or unwelcoming attitudes and how they promote or eliminate the symbolic function and selectivity of the border.

4. Constructing displacement

As evident from the previous section, narratives that frame migrants and refugees as *unwanted*, *unwelcome*, or *illegal* tend to produce the most emotionally charged portrayals. Unlike narratives emphasizing inclusion or welcome, they highlight danger, vulnerability, and suffering and shape audience perception through heightened affect rather than nuanced social realities. This tendency, however, is not uniform across all cultural texts. The degree to which emotional intensity translates into oversimplification often depends on the narrative's relationship to real experience and the positionality of its author (Kot, 2025, p. 57). Thus, the affective charge and ethical framing of migration stories usually vary according to whether the text emerges from direct testimony or from the author's interpretive reconstruction of others' experiences. It is important to note that while *The Power of Welcome: Real-life Refugee and Migrant Journeys*, as indicated by its title, engages with real-life events, the other three works primarily reflect the authors' interpretations of migration stories or compilations of experiences. Julio Anta, for example, explains that, as the son and grandson of Cuban and Colombian migrants, was horrified in 2018 by the Trump administration's family separation policy. Don Brown dedicates *Unwanted* to Syrian refugees whose stories heavily inform the narrative, whereas the authors of *Illegal* acknowledge that their story is fictional, though every element is drawn from reality.

Building on this distinction between first-hand and mediated accounts, we can observe how representation itself becomes an affective mechanism of inclusion or exclusion. The sense of being unwelcome is not only emphasized as a focal point in *Illegal*, *The Unwanted*, and *Home*, but is also conveyed through the intense precarity of journeys migrants must undertake. These journeys are frequently depicted as endless, exhausting, and dangerous treks across different times, spaces, and borders. In contrast, *The Power of Welcome* portrays refugees in more privileged, contemporary circumstances, travelling by flights, trains, and through urban settings, which aligns with a socially acceptable and modern image of migrants. These depictions might frame societal approval or warmth toward those perceived as more similar to "us," and vice versa alienation toward those marked as distant, threatening, or culturally "other." In this way, the contrast between "welcome" and "unwelcome" refugees exposes the affective hierarchies, revealing how narratives of mobility often mirror broader structures of inclusion and exclusion.

Although fictional narratives often draw on real experiences, those portraying "unwelcome" migrants tend to overaccumulate and sensationalize precarious

details that an "outside gaze" can capture, reducing complex realities into digestible, formulaic narratives of crisis. The analysed novels focusing on unwelcome migrants resemble adventure novels, detached from the realities with which readers can identify. This disconnect arises not only because readers often lack direct experience of migration, but also because these narratives, like adventure tales, detach events from historical, biological, or biographical sequences. They rely on what Bakhtin (1981) calls "adventurous time," fragmented into short, intense episodes marked by coincidences and chance events, where normal causality is suspended and the plot advances through sudden turns such as "at just that moment" or "suddenly" (p. 92). In *Illegal*, *The Unwanted*, and *Home*, each stage of the recursive journey is depicted as highly risky, involving threats such as Mediterranean crossings, rooftop travel, desert treks, or movement through conflict zones, villains such as smugglers, human traffickers. Refugees are facing constant loss and mortal danger, e.g. death at sea or in the desert, mothers losing children. As fictional representations of real events, these clustered misadventures transform refugee experiences into dramatic clichés, producing the "spectacle of suffering" (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 1) that may function as "poverty porn" (Lenette & Cleland, 2016, p. 78) for Western audiences, invoking the notion of "rescue." In this way, the lived experiences of displaced people are often reduced to familiar visual clichés and narrative tropes like "massification, vilification, infantilisation, marginalisation or aestheticisation," which function as "symbolic strategies of dehumanisation" (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017, p. 1173). Analysed graphic novels also rely on those tropes depicting migrants as masses, one-dimensional and faceless or overly dramatized, perpetuating what Barthes (1957/1991) described as the myth of the "eternal essences of refugees, which it is in the nature of the East to produce" (pp. 95–96). This, he argues, "denies any identification by History", presenting migrants as timeless, passive figures whose experiences are detached from political and historical contexts

The accumulation of precarious details, especially through visual representations, functions as a form of sensory bombardment designed to elicit affective resonance. In *Illegal*, the depiction of crowds desperately trying to survive as a ship capsizes amplifies the chaos and panic when hundreds of people are flailing in the water. The sense of fear and helplessness is intensified by their lack of agency, creating a scene of overwhelming desperation. At the same time, the tragedy takes on a voyeuristic dimension as a spectacle designed for the reader's emotional engagement. As studies have shown, the "spectacle" of "crisis" often operates between evoking empathetic concern (Bal, 2022; Bara & Tsakiris, 2024; Briciu, 2020; Robinson, 2019) and stimulating voyeuristic responses (Ibrahim & Howarth, 2016; Stepnitz, 2018). In *Illegal*, the catastrophe is depicted with such visual and narrative intensity that it draws readers into the horror while positioning them as distant observers, safe from the suffering they

witness. This dual perspective generates a complex affective response: readers may experience sympathy for those depicted, yet also an awareness of their own detachment, which can create emotional distance and diminish their sense of responsibility. As Schimanski (2024) argues, the temporality of the spectacle of crisis constitutes a media event that unites audiences in a shared moment of national or global attention, yet obscures the slower, structural temporalities of migration (p. 23). In this sense, the migrant journey is not only dramatized as a spectacle of suffering but also folded into a broader logic that privileges immediacy, visibility, and emotional intensity over historical or systemic understanding. Displacement is thus transformed into a universalized spectacle of endurance and loss that seeks pity rather than understanding. By privileging sentiment over analysis, such narratives translate systemic injustice into individualized feelings of compassion or pity which might comfort the reader-spectator but fail to challenge the structures producing displacement in the first place. Thus, they risk reproducing the very logic they aim to expose. They sustain an affective economy in which responsibility is replaced by emotional consumption. Moreover, the constant sensationalisation leads to this formulaic coverage of tragedies which can both escalate demands for trauma while also produce the numbing effect which Susan Moeller (2022) calls "compassion fatigue" (p. 2).

The narratives depicting "unwanted" and "illegal" refugees often rely on the trope of the "promised land," a place where, as shown in *Illegal and Unwanted*, migrants believe they have "the greatest chance to be welcomed and allowed to work (Brown, 2018, p. 35)." Such portrayals reinforce the misconception of migration as a journey toward a guaranteed better life and Europe as an "asylum paradise," a notion that has since been co-opted by populist discourses to criticize this perception. In *Illegal* and *Unwanted*, Western Europe is idealized as embodying migrants' aspirational yet naïve hopes, encouraging readers to see migration as a personal story of tragedy and survival with emotional closure when the destination is reached. It displaces attention from broader struggles migrants deal with both on the way and upon arrival: discrimination, precarity, lack of legal recognition, and the enduring trauma of displacement. In this sense, *The Power of Welcome* offers a more balanced representation of refugee life in host countries by shifting the focus from the journey itself to post-arrival realities, including stereotyping, hostility, depression, and economic hardship as well as moments of support and connection. Rather than framing refugees primarily through trauma or physical struggle, the book explores the affective dimensions of migration: separation, nostalgia, and the pain of leaving one's home. Significantly, even those characters who fall into the category of the "welcomed" and enjoy relative privilege: dual citizenship, safe passage, or pre-existing social ties with the host country are depicted as experiencing deep affective displacement. This nuanced portrayal challenges one-size-fits-all narratives of refugee experience and

highlights the complexity of belonging and emotional adaptation in the context of forced migration.

5. Constructing an un/welcome migrant

If we further examine how un/welcome is framed in the four analysed graphic novels, we notice the same (if not more striking) contrast between representation of welcoming attitudes and experiences of being unwelcome as discussed in the previous section. The struggles of "unwelcome" migrants are conveyed through images of fear and despair depicting them as victims fleeing violence and danger, confined in hostile environments marked by darkness and discomfort which reinforces a sense of victimization. *Unwanted* repeatedly depicts exploitation, with children working for meager wages, denied education, and living in parks or makeshift camps. An image of a desperate mother with her children standing in the middle of the street, isolated and silently judged by bystanders, an evocative trope of alienation and societal indifference (*Brown, 2018, p. 45*). In *Illegal*, migration is portrayed as acute vulnerability, with migrants entirely dependent on ruthless smugglers who control access to basic needs. *Home* follows a similar pattern, juxtaposing hostile border officials with desperate migrants and highlighting the contrast between power and victimization. While this juxtaposition aims to reveal the border's selective and dehumanizing logic, it simultaneously risks reducing migrants to tropes instead of seeing them as individuals with voices, agency, and personal complex histories. Viewed through the prism of affect theory, such narratives of displacement rely on the emotional intensity of victimization to engage the reader. They aim at inviting and amplifying feelings of compassion[2]. This prosocial emotion, as evolutionary theorists argue, is inherently rewarding[3] because it sustains social bonding and cooperative behaviour. According to Goetz et al. (2010), compassion mechanisms depend on three main factors: how relevant the sufferer seems to us, whether they are seen as responsible for what happened to them, and whether they appear able to cope with their situation (p. 7).

[2] Compassion, sympathy, and pity are distinct yet related emotions that arise in response to another's suffering. According to Goetz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas (2010), compassion is "an affective state defined by a specific subjective feeling that arises when witnessing another's suffering and motivates a desire to help" (p. 2). The researchers distinguish compassion from empathy, which entails internally mirroring or resonating with another's emotional experience. Both affective states belong to an interconnected family of emotional responses. They are also related to sympathy, which involves emotional concern and sorrow for another's suffering but does not necessarily entail a prosocial motivation, and to pity, which often carries a sense of superiority or condescension toward the sufferer (pp. 2–3).

[3] From an evolutionary perspective, compassion is rewarding because it increased survival and reproductive success by promoting care for vulnerable offspring, enhancing attractiveness in mate selection, and fostering cooperative bonds with non-kin (Goetz et al., 2010, p. 4). In general humans are motivated to maximize positive affects (Nathanson, 2008, p. xx;)

As an indicator of deservingness is the extent to which the sufferer is seen as responsible for their own suffering. When migrants are represented as entirely blameless, dependent, and powerless, compassion aimed to be maximized; when they are seen as responsible for their choices or capable of resistance, it may diminish. Thus, while compassion is effectively mobilized through portrayals of vulnerability, the full complexity of migrants' strategies, risks, and moral choices is frequently blurred allowing emotional resonance to remain strong at the cost of nuanced understanding.

Another problem, with such sentimentalized depictions, which concentrate excessively on trauma, is that although they may effectively evoke sympathy and moral urgency, their focus on victimhood tends to elicit pity rather than compassion. While precarity is indeed central to the lived realities of many displaced people, these depictions reduce them to mere symbols of suffering, "beggars," victims of circumstances, or objects of rescue as they frequently portrayed in *Unwanted* and *Illegal* and *Home*. This reflects a charitable, paternalistic gaze which positions migrants as passive recipients of aid and enforce a world in which, as Szörényi (2006) notes, those on display in whose name the images are made are voiceless. They are expected only to be looked at, objectified, and ultimately obscured in the name of producing global truths by those in power who define the narrative (p. 29). The inability of "illegal" and "unwanted" migrants to control these narratives leaves them symbolically silenced, stripped of the capacity to narrate and reclaim their own experiences.

Migrants, in the analysed graphic novels which focus on unwelcomed migrants, are often coded as uneducated, poor, and vulnerable. For example, the graphic novels *Illegal* and *Unwanted* depicts primarily "Third World-looking people"[4] in settings that look timeless, backward, and incapable of progress, perpetuating Orientalist tropes. Such portrayals tend to strip migrants of individuality and cultural specificity and turn migrants into a neo-embodiment of Said's Orient, "produced by the nature of the East" (Barthes, 1957/1991, p. 95), which "helped to define Europe (or the West)" (Said, 1978, p. 1). Unwanted and unwelcome migrants are thus constructed as exotic, inferior, powerless, and unchanging, an image contrasted with that of someone from the West. What makes such depictions even more problematic is that these recursive visual clichés and narrative tropes function as frames of recognition. These frames, according to Butler (2009), enable certain images and "operate to produce certain subjects as

[4] Ghassan Hage in his book *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* uses the term *"Third World-looking people"* to describe how Western, or "First World," societies construct racialized others as visual symbols of poverty, backwardness, and cultural inferiority within their own imaginary of superiority (Hage 1998, p. 58 as cited in Szörényi, 2006, p. 28).

'recognizable' persons and to make others decidedly more difficult to recognize" (p. 6). As Anna Szörényi (2006) rightly observes: "there is the assumption that there is indeed a kind of person that can be called a refugee, and that this person thinks and feels in a particular way. Second, that 'these people' are 'all victims'. Third, that the discourse through which this problem should be addressed is that of human rights. And finally, that in spite of the myriad political, historical and personal trajectories involved in displacement from different locations around the globe, the state of being a refugee can be characterised by a standard narrative form: persecution, flight, exile, and finally rescue and resettlement" (p. 6). These representational norms then help determine, for instance, whether asylum seekers are recognized as people whose lives are understood as "grievable" and worthy of compassion (Bleiker et al., 2013, p. 400). The outcome is that, despite their claimed humanitarian intentions, books like the novels analysed often appear more focused on reinforcing, rather than questioning selectivity of borders. It means that refugees and (im)migrants might be considered deserving of help when they align with certain expectations (e.g., impoverished or helpless), but less deserving when they challenge those expectations.

Moreover, affect studies also show that people experience stronger compassion and are more likely to help those who are similar to them in values, preferences, or physical characteristics (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987, as cited in Goetz et al. 2010, p. 8). By lacking depth and failing to reference the true identities and experiences of real people to whom readers can relate, the analysed narratives may contribute to the construction of an empathic wall, the abovementioned variable susceptibility to the affect of others. The focus on extreme tragedy, especially when depicted through stark, emotional visuals of suffering like in the discussed novels, can still maintain distance, where the audience is invited to feel sympathy but not necessarily to relate. According to studies (Batson, 1991; Nussbaum, 1996 as cited in Goetz et al., 2023; Sontag, 2003) compassion maintains a crucial self–other distinction as it involves recognizing that "the bad lot of the sufferer…is, right now, not one's own" (Nussbaum, 1996, p. 35, as cited in Goetz et al. 2010, p. 8). The image of the dislocated and suffering person can be used to bolster the subjectivity of the privileged viewer, "voyeristic lure" (Sontag, 2003, p. 99). A distant, sanitized view of refugee hardships (Lenette & Cleland, 2016, p. 78), as embodied in such narratives, reinforces the border itself by strengthening the "us/them" dichotomy, positioning refugees as the "other", who, in their visibility, are objectified for the consumption of the Western viewer (Mannik, 2012, p. 274) within the hegemonic nation-state paradigm because, as Mannik (2012) claims, visual representations of refugees provide another way nations are imagined through the juxtaposition of images of "others" (p. 272). This leads viewers to separate their own non-refugee experiences from the precarious misadventures occurring far beyond the border, evoking possible emotional responses but little meaningful engagement.

In contrast, *The Power of Welcome* seeks to make migrants more relatable to the audience by shaping the images through emotions of belonging, resilience, and quiet struggle rather than victimhood or desperation. The book employs semiotic strategies that challenge traditional portrayals of refugees as suffering, displaced individuals. Instead, it situates them within contemporary, recognizable spaces. We see in these graphic narratives urban settings, modern transportation such as flights and trains, and everyday activities like taking photos, painting, or cycling both before displacement and in host countries, which emphasises their presence within a shared global present. The visual and narrative cues reject exoticism and orientalism. For example, cities like Damascus are portrayed not as distant, chaotic, or trapped in the past but as modern, vibrant spaces filled with cinemas, restaurants, and ordinary life.

This normalization of refugee spaces and experiences is reinforced through individual stories that emphasize agency and emotional depth. For instance, the Ukrainian family is shown carefully planning their journey, debating whether to leave, which manifests rationality and self-determination rather than passivity. Similarly, Afghani protagonist's decision to flee Kabul during the Taliban's advance is depicted not through sensationalised images of destruction but through the intimate, painful process of departure: packing belongings, saying goodbye, and acknowledging the emotional weight of leaving loved ones behind. Acts of kindness, such as a mechanic fixing a refugee's bike for free, symbolise humanising and reciprocal relationships between refugees and host communities. The emphasis on emotional loss over physical hardship signals a shift in refugee narratives, which frames displacement as complex, nuanced transitions. Unlike narratives that emphasize suffering and hardship reinforcing borders by framing refugees as perpetual "others" in need of rescue, a more nuanced depiction, such as that in *The Power of Welcome*, seeks to dismantle symbolic borders and stress a sense of shared humanity.

6. Constructing the Border

The multivalence of borders is evident in migration narratives, which not only show the selectivity of borders but also extend it into the cultural imaginaries of bordertextures. Comparing narratives of "welcome" and "unwelcome" migrants, it becomes clear that the border is strongly emphasized as the main antagonist in the latter, while being almost invisible in the former, which devotes little attention to border crossing and the journey. In the narratives portraying unwelcome migration, like *Illegal*, *Unwanted*, and *Home*, borders are depicted as strong, limiting forces that block access to safety and frequently lead to painful, life-or-death situations. This dramatization reveals the selectivity of the border itself and affective intensity of representations that borders generate. As Nathanson (2008) observes, "affect always makes good things better and bad things worse"

(p. xviii). Armed guards, barbed wire, and hostile environments reinforce the image of refugees as victims unjustly shut out from sanctuary. The restrictive nature of borders, the harsh behaviour of border guards, structural inequities, and bureaucratic obstacles are strongly emphasized, shaping representations of displaced people through threats and anxieties. These emotions define the borders in these narratives, which further amplifies the symbolic and affective dimensions connected with migrant representations. While these portrayals of border injustice aim to generate empathy through affective resonance and can mobilize short-term support, they also reinforce the selectivity of borders. By presenting borders exclusively as impenetrable, militarized zones, fictional narratives may distance readers from the experiences of unwelcome migrants, separating their own secure lives from the precarious misadventures at the border. Moreover, the binary of "good" refugees versus "bad" border guards leaves little room for nuanced discussions of migration management, humanitarian concerns, and national security. When such complexities are absent from public discourse, suppressed questions become tools for political manipulation.

In contrast, *The Power of Welcome* visualizes a "First World" cultural imaginary, with flights and urban settings replacing militarized borders and portraying a welcoming reception. It focuses on the lost home, the desire for homecoming, and the everyday struggles of displaced people. These stories convey the emotional complexity of displacement and resist overly sentimental portrayals. They acknowledge, that displacement is a permanent, liminal condition. Borders here are presented not just as physical obstacles but rather as continuous, shaping forces that structure life between lost and found homes.

Although neither of the discussed novels can fully capture the diverse causes and experiences of displacement, the representations of migrants constructed through them reveal how the selectivity of borders is culturally constructed and mediated through both affective and symbolic frameworks. Overall, both the narratives portraying "unwelcome" and "welcome" migrants construct emotional frameworks that shape the affective dimensions of bordertextures. While the former emphasize suffering and precarity, activating moral hierarchies and emotional distance, the latter employ normalization and relatability to bridge the gap. Yet even compassionate depictions remain entangled in hierarchies of perception, where empathy often reinforces rather than dissolves asymmetries of power. The difficult circumstances of "unwelcomed" or "illegal" refugees frequently result in their depiction as victims, reducing their experiences to states of passivity and loss. A more nuanced depiction reveals, however, that moments of agency, resilience, and adaptation coexist with vulnerability, complicating the binary of victimhood and empowerment. Through these layered portrayals, such narratives expose the complex emotional economies that structure belonging, recognition, and exclusion.

7. Conclusion: reflections on migration, borders, cultural representations, and affects

The contemporary geopolitical context has intensified global migration to unprecedented levels, which generates challenges that often fuel anti-migrant sentiment. Migrants experience uneven treatment at borders and within host societies: some are met with recognition, solidarity, and inclusion, while others face exclusion, prosecution, and surveillance. Public responses to migration, which reveal the selectivity of the border, are shaped by cultural proximity, political alignment, and dominant media frames that determine which categories of migrants are welcome and which are marginalized, often employing the power of affect and emotion. Unlike ambivalent socio-political discourses, cultural representations of migration seek to evoke compassion and empathy. Yet, despite such intentions, anti-migrant attitudes persist, provoking critical reflection on the actual impact of these affective portrayals.

This article suggests that borders function as affective and symbolic constructs entangled with emotion, security, and hierarchy, forming complex bordertextures in which cultural narratives play an indispensable role. The gap between the ethical intention of these narratives and their limited transformative effect lies in the representational fallacies embedded within them. Even when motivated by empathy, such representations often rely on simplification and stereotyping, amplifying certain experiences while silencing others. Borders, both material and symbolic, mediate these representations: rather than subverting exclusion, cultural narratives can reinforce it by shaping emotions, perceptions, and notions of "deservingness." Simplified representations frequently portray migrants solely as victims, avoiding the moral and political complexities of displacement. By emphasizing desperation and suffering, depictions of "unwelcomed" or "illegal" migrants tend to evoke pity rather than compassion, strengthening a paternalistic gaze that blurs agency and the structural dynamics of migration.

Affective resonance, the emotional intensity with which audiences internalize migration narratives, is therefore ambivalent, as the very narratives designed to provoke sympathy may inadvertently strengthen perceptions of migrants as alien, illegal, and "othered," thus building an empathic wall. When migrants are depicted through a trope of "passive sufferers", they risk reaffirming exclusionary logics. Drawing on Berlant's understanding of affect, Figlerowicz (2012) argues that affect theory is valuable precisely because it resists a strict separation between intentional and non-intentional forms of experience (p. 13). More nuanced portrayals, attentive to ambivalence, agency, and contradiction, can potentially challenge these emotional and symbolic hierarchies by presenting migrants as fully human, complex, self-determining, and embedded in larger political contexts. Understanding the affective, symbolic, and structural dimensions of these narratives is therefore crucial not only for cultural analysis but also for

reimagining borders themselves and countering the emotional mechanisms that sustain othering and exclusion.

Announcements

This paper draws on research conducted with the support of the *Future Ukraine* programme (DAAD).

References

Agovino, M., Carillo, M., & Spagnolo, N. (2022). Effect of media news on radicalization of attitudes to immigration. *Journal of Economics, Race, and Policy, 5*, 318–340. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41996-021-00091-4

Almond, B. (2016). Border anxiety: Culture, identity and belonging. *Philosophy, 91*(4), 1–19.

Anta, J. (2022). *Home* (A. Wieszczyk, Illus.). Image Comics.

Bakhtin, M. (1981). Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel. In M. Holquist (Ed.), *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (C. Emerson, & M. Holquist, Trans.), pp. 84–258. University of Texas Press.

Bal, M. (2022). Refugees and representation: An impossible necessity. *Humanities, 11*(1), 29. https://doi.org/10.3390/h11010029

Bara, I., & Tsakiris, M. (2024). The effect of seeing paintings or photojournalistic images depicting refugees on their infrahumanisation. *Art & Perception, 13*(2), 144–170. https://doi.org/10.1163/22134913-bja10066

Barthes, R. (1991). *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.). The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (Original work published 1957)

Batson, C. D. (1991). *The altruism question: Towards a social-psychological answer*. Erlbaum.

Benedicto, R. A., Akkerman, M., & Brunet, P. (2020). *A walled world: Towards a global apartheid* (Centre Delàs Report 46). Centre Delàs d'Estudis per la Pau.

Behrman, S. (2016). Between law and the nation-state: Novel representations of the refugee. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees, 32*(1), 38–49. https://refugeeresearch.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Behrman-2016-Novel-representations-of-the-refugee.pdf

Bleiker, R., Campbell, D., Hutchison, E., & Nicholson, X. (2013). The visual dehumanisation of refugees. *Australian Journal of Political Science, 48*(4), 398–416. https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2013.840769

Briciu, B. (2020). 'Anyone Can Become a Refugee': Strategies for Empathic Concern in Activist Documentaries on Migration. *Emotion, Space and Society*, *37,* 100737. Elsevier. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2020.100737

Brown, D. (2018). *The unwanted: Stories of the Syrian refugees*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* Verso.

Center for Border Studies. UniGr. *Bordertextures*. http://cbs.uni-gr.eu/en/border-studies/working-groups/bordertextures

Chouliaraki, L. (2006). *The spectatorship of suffering*. Sage Publications.

Chouliaraki, L., & Stolic, T. (2017). Rethinking media responsibility in the refugee "crisis": A visual typology of European news. *Media, Culture & Society, 39*(8), 1162–1177. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717726163

Colfer, E., & Donkin, A. (2017). *Illegal* (G. Rigano, Illus.). Sourcebooks.

Costello, C., & Foster, M. (2022). (Some) refugees welcome: When is differentiating between refugees unlawful discrimination? *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law, 22*(3), 244–280.

De Coninck, D. (2023). The refugee paradox during wartime in Europe: How Ukrainian and Afghan refugees are (not) alike. *International Migration Review, 57*(2), 578–586. https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183221116874

Eccarius-Kelly, V., & Schaeffing, A. (2022). Digital storytelling and visual representations: Refugees disrupt stereotypical narratives. *Collaborations: A Journal of Community-Based Research and Practice, 5*(1), Article 7, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.33596/coll.88

Figlerowicz, M. (2012). Affect theory dossier: An introduction. *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, *20*(2). 3–18. https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.20.2.0003

Goetz, J. L., Keltner, D., & Simon-Thomas, E. (2010**).** Compassion: An evolutionary analysis and empirical review. *Psychological Bulletin, 136*(3), 351–374. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018807

Hage, G. (1998). *White nation: Fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society*. Pluto Press.

Hemelryk Donald, S., Davies Hayon, K., & Sorbera, L. (2019). Refugee filmmaking. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 18*, 3–11. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.18.01

Ibrahim, Y., & Howarth, A. (2016). Imaging the jungles of Calais: Media visuality and the refugee camp. *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network, 9*(4). https://doi.org/10.31165/nk.2016.94.446

Jusic, A., Bamyani, M., Ramzee, Zhurenko, S., & Kaadan, N. (2023). *The power of welcome: Real-life refugee and migrant journeys*. Scholastic.

Keskin, Y., Keskin, S. C., & Yüceer, D. (2020). The influence of media on students' views regarding refugeehood in Turkey: A phenomenological study of seventh-grade students. *SAGE Open, 10*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020914595

Korte, K. (2021). Filtering or blocking mobility? Inequalities, marginalization, and power relations at fortified borders. *Historical Social Research, 46*(3), 49–77.

Kot, S. (2025). We/they are displaced: Children-refugees in American literature and beyond. *American Literatures, 5*(1). https://www.amlit.eu/index.php/amlit/article/view/157

Lenette, C., & Cleland, S. (2016). Changing faces: Visual representations of asylum seekers in times of crisis. *Creative Approaches to Research, 9*(1), 68–83.

Mannik, L. (2012). Public and private photographs of refugees: The problem of representation. *Visual Studies, 27*(3), 262–276.

McLoughlin, M. G. (2023). Media representations of "the refugee": An exploration of the role of community-based media in challenging dominant narratives of migration and "the refugee" through the work of ReFOCUS Media Labs. *Junctions: Graduate Journal of the Humanities, 7*(1), 49–65.

Merolla, J., Ramakrishnan, S. K., & Haynes, C. (2013). "Illegal," "undocumented," or "unauthorized": Equivalency frames, issue frames and public opinion on immigration. *Perspectives on Politics, 11*(3), 789–807.

Mezzadra, S., & Neilson, B. (2012). Between inclusion and exclusion: On the topology of global space and borders. *Theory, Culture & Society, 29*(4), 58–75.

Moeller, S. D. (2002). *Compassion fatigue: How the media sell disease, famine, war and death*. Routledge.

Nathanson, D. L. (2008). Prologue. In S. S. Tomkins, *Affect imagery consciousness: The complete edition* (Vols. 1–2, pp. xi–xxvi). Springer Publishing Company.

Robinson, P. S. (2019). Refugees on film: Assessing the political strengths and weaknesses of the documentary style. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 18*, 107–122. https://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue18/ArticleRobinson.pdf

Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.

Savio Vammen, I. M., & Kohl, K. S. (2022). Affective borderwork: Governance of unwanted migration to Europe through emotions. *Journal of Borderlands Studies, 38*(6), 919–938. https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2022.2156374

Schimanski, J. (2024). Border temporalities, temporal borders: Migratory border-crossings in literature and other discourses. In J. Nyman, J. Schimanski, & C. Zamorano Llena (Eds.), *Temporalities and subjectivities in migration literature in Europe* (pp. 15–34). Lexington Books.

Schulze Wessel, J. (2016). On border subjects: Rethinking the figure of the refugee and the undocumented migrant. *Constellations, 23*(1), 46–57.

Seigworth, G. J., & Gregg, M. (Eds.). (2010). *The affect theory reader*. Duke University Press.

Sontag, S. (2003). *Regarding the pain of others*. Picador.

Stepnitz, A. (2018, March 13). *Re(art)iculating refugees: Spectacle and the cultural contestation of law*. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*. https://berkeleyjournal.org/2018/03/13/rearticulating-refugees-spectacle-and-the-cultural-contestation-of-law/

Szörényi, A. (2006). The images speak for themselves? Reading refugee coffee-table books. *Visual Studies, 21*(1), 24–41.

Tomkins, S. S. (2008). *Affect imagery consciousness: The complete edition: Vols. 1–2*. Springer.

Van Houtum, H. (2021). Beyond "borderism": Overcoming discriminative b/ordering and othering. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie, 112*(1), 34–43.

Van Houtum, H., & van Naerssen, T. (2002). Bordering, ordering and othering. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie, 93*(2), 125–136.

Van Houtum, H., & van Uden, A. (2022). The birth of the paper prison: The global inequality trap of visa borders. *EPC: Politics and Space, 40*(1), 22–29.

Wenzel, M., & Żerkowska-Balas, M. (2019). Framing effect of media portrayal of migrants to the European Union: A survey experiment in Poland. *East European Politics and Societies, 33*(1), 44–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325418777058

Wille, C., Weber, F., & Fellner, A. M. (2023). Grenzen und ihre Multivalenzen in einem flüchtigen Europa. *Borders in Perspective, 8*, 7–15. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7377468

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press
Vol 50, No 2 (2026)
E-ISSN 2450-4580

Betül Ateşci Koçak, Erciyes University, Turkey

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.2.31-43

Negotiating Belonging: Racial Borders and the Migrant Voice in Mira Jacob's *Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations*

ABSTRACT
This article examines Mira Jacob's *Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations* as a contemporary migrant narrative that negotiates racial belonging in post-9/11 America through visual minimalism, fragmented dialogue, and intergenerational exchange. In this graphic memoir, Jacob shares the daily conversations she has with her son, which form the point of departure for the work. Situating the memoir within the socio-political climate shaped by intensified surveillance, racial profiling, and populist rhetoric, the study explores how everyday family conversations become sites where identity, fear, and belonging are continuously negotiated. The narration mostly follows Jacob's dialogues with her young biracial son, Z, as well as with family, friends, and partners. These moments of dialogue, filled with humour, frustration, and doubt, offer insight into how racialised individuals search for belonging in a society that often excludes or misrepresents them.

KEYWORDS
graphic memoir; racial belonging; identity; post-9/11; migration

1. Introduction

The beginning of the twenty-first century is remembered not only for the historical context of the millennium but also for the pivotal event that occurred on September 11, 2001, in the United States of America. The attacks have had abiding effects both within and outside the US, marking "9/11" as a cultural symbol that revived fear, anxiety, trauma, and societal discomfort related to selective memory, as the aftermath of the attacks caused a renewed impulse within American society to exclude those from different ethnic backgrounds and people of colour. Since that time, earlier instances of domestic terrorism and attempted assaults that took place prior to September 11 have been overshadowed by the heightened focus on the racialised dimensions of the attacks. In a divided world defined as post-9/11, attention increasingly shifted toward perceived threats from abroad, while, as recently mentioned, "domestically, the post-9/11 wars dramatically expanded mass surveillance, eroding constitutional protections,

Betül Ateşci Koçak, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Erciyes Üniversitesi Ahmet El Biruni Caddesi No: 91, 38280 Talas / Kayseri, betull08atesci@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7937-953X

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

and intensified police militarization. Marginalized and racialized groups, from Muslims and Arabs to Black and Indigenous organizers to migrants, have borne the brunt of these consequences" (*Costs of War*, 2025). The mentioned regulations and policies were implemented at the state level. Yet, their impact became most evident in everyday interactions, influencing the way families and communities discuss race, safety, and home (Ateşci Koçak, 2025, p. 73). Through representation, discourse, and personal recollection, they manage their entry and disruption of cultural places. The public's perception and newly defined policies, together with institutional changes following the attacks, have demonstrated that migration, particularly in the context of counterterrorism, has begun to be perceived as a danger to the American identity. The prevalence of suspicion, fear, and exclusion has increased in daily life, particularly for people of colour who have already dealt with these problems during their migratory past and thus still battle with the idea of belonging.

In the context of heightened surveillance, racialisation, and contested belonging, cultural texts are essential for explaining how these dynamics are encountered in daily life. *Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations* (2019) is a particularly strong argument in this regard. The creator of this graphic novel, Mira Jacob, is an Indian American author and illustrator who explores issues of race, identity, and belonging in contemporary American culture. She was born in New Mexico to parents who immigrated from India to the United States in 1968 (Park, 2019). After becoming a mother, she notices the interesting questions, mostly about race, that her six-year-old son asks as he grows up. These questions lead to a series of discussions and narratives that examine race, motherhood, immigration, family dynamics, social life, and more. Throughout the memoir, Jacob attempts to navigate her own doubts as a mother and storyteller while assisting her son in a world characterised by unstable cultural boundaries and unresolved racial tensions, as she states that her son grew up "very quickly from a brown boy who had never known anything but a black president, to a world that was actively targeting people who looked like him" (Baird, 2019). The author's concerns and vulnerabilities, as well as those of her family, intensified during the Trump administration, a period that highlights the memoir's timeliness and central themes. These concerns are reflected in the work's fragmented, non-linear structure, which emphasises both the possibilities and limitations of intergenerational, ethnic, and cultural communication.

This article aims to analyse how *Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations* applies visual storytelling and everyday dialogue to represent the migrant voice and to emphasise the emotional and social complexities of racial belonging in post-9/11 America. In this context, it highlights conflicts between individual experience and group identification by paying close attention to how personal narratives interact with larger cultural and political discourses. This article explores how identities are socially produced and negotiated within the migration framework by examining

Stuart Hall's theory of identity as representation, Yuval-Davis's observations on the politics of belonging, and Homi Bhabha's theories on culture.

2. Negotiating Belonging: Racial Borders and the Migrant Voice in *Good Talk*

As both narrator and mother, Jacob explores belonging through her child's upbringing in American society, characterised by precarious cultural borders and unresolved racial tensions. While she asserts her Americanness confidently, her work illustrates that belonging is not only defined by personal claim but is frequently evaluated through social engagement, political dialogue, and racial viewpoints.

This belonging, however, is not entirely self-determined. Her identity is challenged by how others perceive her body, accent, and family, highlighting the disparity between formal citizenship and actual belonging in America.

It is stated that "during the last decades, graphic narratives have conquered a stable and legitimate position in popular culture, not to mention a high-valued status among other types of literary and visual media" (de Figueiredo, 2024, p. 101). Within these increasingly recognised genres, *Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations* is a valuable contribution, offering a personal account of the post-9/11 era.

The motivation for her graphic narrative came from an American news website in 2017, and prior to its publication as a graphic memoir, Jacob released an early version of the work on an online news site under the title "37 Difficult Questions from My Mixed-Race Son: 'Are White People Afraid of Brown People?'" (2015). There, she recounts her six-year-old son's curiosity about Michael Jackson, his favourite singer, mostly about his changing skin tone. When her memoirs are compiled into a graphic narrative, she presents a more comprehensive perspective on what it means to be an Indian American in the United States. Jacob examines the troubled relationship that exists between her parents after their migration from India, reflects on how she addressed her son Zakir's (mentioned as Z in her work) concerns about racial prejudice, and dreams of therapy sessions with celebrities. Z's questions initiate the author on a selectively chronological self-journey, where she recounts her life, including her parents' migration story from India; her upbringing, together with her school experiences; and friendships, as a child, an adolescent, and an adult, all impacted by her identity as a brown individual in the U.S. She also includes humour and sincerity in her real-life accounts, which also include important highlights about coloured migrants during Trump's first presidency.

Jacob's work is a hybrid medium combining photography, comics, and text. The book features drawings resembling paper cuts or puppets, with speech bubbles placed in front of the photographs on each page's background. Each page

follows a consistent structure, allowing a sequential progression that suggests a cinematic mode of narration. The people she features in her work are depicted as cut-out figures. The backgrounds, mostly presented in photographic form, create a patchwork effect. The characters generally appear static, in the form of a portrait picture. The presence of splash pages throughout the text reminds the reader of the significant turning points of the author's life. There are forty chapters in the work, and each varies in length. She uses either short conversational phrases from dialogue or simply dates to label the chapters, showing the memoir's structure as a compilation of real experiences rather than a linear story. Jacob's work has an unusual perspective by weaving photos into a conversational tone. This enables the work to graphically stage the conflict between private speech and public space, while also framing discussions about race and belonging through the lens of public and social contexts. Graphic memoirs frequently integrate cartooning and photography to portray the lives of real people through the autobiographical lens of the individual who experienced and narrates those events. Photography is increasingly common in this genre, which has been termed "autographics" and considered an unconventional form of autobiography (Pedri, 2021). The use of spaces, including pages filled with words, those that include both pictures and words, or blank pages, enables the reader to see the non-chronological side of the narrator's experiences, implying the blurring aspects of what she has gone through as a person of colour. Chute (2008) clarifies this, saying:

> Highly textured in its narrative scaffolding, comics doesn't blend the visual and the verbal—or use one simply to illustrate the other—but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of reading and looking for meaning. (p. 452)

Along with the non-linear elements, Jacob's use of dialogue rather than straightforward narration aligns with the theme of uncertainty regarding the belonging of people of colour, both in the American public sphere and in the nation. The frequent use of fragmented dialogue in her work engages the reader with her past experiences, as well as those of the present and future. She draws the reader's attention to transitions by using a white background for the present and a darker one for the past (Baird, 2019). This distinguishes the memoir from a strictly historical narrative by gently inviting the reader into a detailed examination of Jacob's life through dialogue, cut-out characters, and photographs, while also conveying reflections on the present and past experiences through the shift in background from white to a darker colour. The reader can easily identify who is speaking at each moment and understand when a speaker pauses, stops, or hesitates by using cut-out figures to visually differentiate the speakers. Additionally, the speakers' facial expressions do not change throughout the graphic novel, even as

the discussions become more difficult. The author does this intentionally because she wants to avoid presenting racial pain as a visible performance "for an America that is largely numb or blind or dismissive of it" (Lindsay, 2020).

The book has a few pauses, and when it does, it highlights the challenge of articulating the complexity of race and belonging. When Mira's son begins asking questions about Michael Jackson, such as "Was Michael Jackson brown or was he white?" (Jacob, 2019, p. 6)[1], "Is it bad to be brown?" (p. 15) and "Are white people afraid of brown people?" (p. 17), Mira tries to answer with both the anxiety of being a mother and the fear of "confusing" him because of his age (p. 44). She is shocked when, after the questions about Michael Jackson, he asks, "Is Daddy afraid of us?" (p. 18). The author describes their neighbourhood as follows: "I'm East Indian and my husband is Jewish. We've lived on the same block in Brooklyn for almost two decades. A lot of mixed-race kids live on our block. A lot of everybody lives on our block" (p. 7). Her neighbourhood becomes a place where her son gradually becomes interested. Residing in a community rich in cultural and national diversity, Jacob illustrates how ordinary interactions can introduce awareness of race into daily family experiences. When Z asks whether his father is afraid of them, it marks a pivotal moment when Jacob's migrant identity is triggered. However, she identifies herself as American, and her son becomes both the observer and reflection of the dynamics through which identity markers are produced and read, drawing attention to social recognition and self-identification.

In Stuart Hall's (1999) theory of identity as a process, one of the primary domains in which identity is created is representation. Hall explains two different views of identity. First, "identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (p. 222). In accordance with this, identity is constantly formed by representational actions rather than being fixed. Identity becomes more than just the definition of the individual and how one feels; it gains meaning through context, who defines it, and how it is represented, because a social recognition phase is involved in its definition. Thus, the concept of belonging is continually reframed in *Good Talk* through everyday questions, public representations, and, particularly, family discussions. In this context, representation emerges as a power field that functions in everyday conversations, as well as in the media and political debates. By showing how these abstract dynamics function in actual experience and revealing how deeply public discourse impacts individual understandings of belonging, Z's questions, which delve into the production and negotiation of identity, highlight the difficulties of representation.

[1] Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

As for the second view, Hall (1999) claims that cultural identities

> undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power. … identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (p. 225)

The case of being "positioned" becomes more obvious to Mira Jacob, especially when she is with her son. In one of her epiphanic moments, she states:

> Sometimes, you don't know how confused you are about something important until you try explaining it to someone else. For years I had been telling myself that America was changing for the better, and that the pain and confusion I'd felt growing up here would soon be a thing of the past. Hadn't we just selected our first black President? Didn't that mean those of us who'd always been treated like we were suspicious, or invisible, or just lucky to be allowed in, were finally going to feel like we were safe and welcome and loved? (p. 20)

Jacob's autobiographical narrative makes the vulnerable aspects of identity and belonging visible while also amplifying the migrant voice that continues to echo despite the passage of time. In the sixth chapter, titled "American Revolution", the author describes an incident from her fifth-grade year, when her essay, titled "Tools of Early America", won first place in an essay contest organised by the Daughters of the American Revolution Society (p. 53). As the winner, her teacher takes her to the society's meeting place in a different part of the town so that she can read it aloud in front of the committee. After the performance, before heading back to school, Ms. Morrell, a Mormon "who loved colonial Americans" (p. 51), addresses her and says: "Mira Jacobs, I am going to tell you something and I want you to listen closely. You are an American. Do you understand me?" (p. 59). Mira Jacob, whose surname is once again mispronounced by her teacher, remains quiet and later explains, "It seemed like a trick question, so I did not answer. She grabbed my arm and squeezed it hard" (p. 59). As she continues to remain silent, Ms. Morrell goes on, "You are American. I don't care when your parents came here. They are Americans, too. Don't you ever let anyone tell you that you're not" (pp. 59–60). After pressing Mira's arm again, apparently in an attempt to receive a response, she starts the car after receiving a nod from her "Americanised" student. As framed by her teacher, Mira and her parents are led toward a limited definition of American identity, which restricts her ability to explore her own sense of belonging. Ms Morrell finds it difficult to balance Mira's Indian heritage with her success. Although she strongly supports Mira's success, her acknowledgement takes place within a system of conditional belonging shaped by social norms and institutional expectations, which is resonated by Yuval-Davis (2010):

> Belonging assumes boundaries of belonging and is thus exclusive as well as inclusive. The politics of belonging are comprised of specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities that are, at the same time, themselves being constructed by these projects in very specific ways. (p. 266)

In addition, her theory clarifies how social positions, evaluative norms, and personal identities interact:

> Identities, as verbal and non-verbal narratives of self, occupy a different analytical dimension than other components of belonging: social locations, on the one hand, and normative values, on the other. Social locations relate to the positioning of people, in particular times and in particular spaces, along intersecting (or, rather, mutually constitutive) grids of social power. Normative values relate to the ways specific belonging/s are evaluated and judged. (p. 267–268)

Ms. Morrell knows that Mira wants to be a writer (p. 61), and she is aware that her father is a cardiovascular surgeon. While Mira's dream is good for the country's future, her father's significant profession as a doctor serves the good of the people in the US. The only element that appears out of place is the family's ancestral background, marked by marginality and minority status, which is constructed as incompatible with dominant definitions of Americanness, a case that Homi Bhabha (1994) explains as:

> The enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the binary division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address. It is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic. (p. 35)

Despite the family's secure social position and prospects, racial difference continues to function as a burden through the persistent marking of "brownness". Mira's experience in the fifth grade resonates with the concepts of "good immigrant" and "conditional citizenship", which is explained as a logic of conditionality that defines citizenship as "good" citizenship, requiring citizens to actively participate in civic life and exhibit virtuous behaviour to improve the quality of public life. This moralising approach puts pressure on migrants and immigrant-origin minorities to assimilate and integrate according to the standards deemed 'good' by the state and dominant majority (Hackl, 2022, pp. 992–993).

The goodness context becomes blurred when Z has questions about racism after noticing the absence of black superheroes or an Indian character in Captain America. Here goes the conversation:

> Z: There are no brown superheroes.
> Mira: Really? Still?

> Z: Not in Captain America: The Winter Soldier. Like Indian Guy. Where is Indian Guy?
> Mira: The eternal question.
> Z: If there was an Indian guy, could he be racist?" (pp. 83–84)

After this challenging question, Mira tries to explain that it can take different forms, including bigotry. She explains that Indian people can also commit bigotry by considering themselves better than other races due to their success in America (p. 84). Hearing this, Z reacts with hesitation and confusion:

> Mira: You Okay?
> Z: I thought we were the good guys.
> Mira: Oh. I guess we are both, right? We're in the middle place where sometimes we get treated badly and sometimes we do it to other people. But I mean, that's not the end of the world, right? Knowing we've got room for improvement.
> Z: I'd rather just be the good guys. (p. 85)

As the child of a second-generation mother, Z's understanding of goodness shifts from a moral certainty to a fragile position shaped by racial awareness. Yet for Mira, goodness no longer signifies inherent innocence. Still, it becomes something that must be claimed, negotiated, and protected, including the cases in which she was called "half-Indian" (p. 193) even after she became a grown-up.

Considering racial and migrant experiences in the US and India, it is difficult to claim that Jacob felt at ease during her visits to her homeland. She recounts that there, the issue with her skin colour "remained a favorite topic" (p. 40). Her relatives, especially her grandmother, who "gave her a bottle of Fair & Lovely", express dissatisfaction with her dark skin tone. One of her cousins explicitly articulates the cultural burden attached to darker skin: "It makes you seem like a servant, see? And the good boys only want to marry wheatish girls, so everyone is just feeling bad for your parents" (p. 41). Acknowledging that both situations persisted over the years, the difficulty and in-betweenness of navigating two cultural contexts increasingly complicated her sense of belonging. She reflects on this period by stating:

> I couldn't stop thinking about it. I had been the wrong color in America my whole life. But it hurt worse somehow, knowing it was the same in a country full of people who I had thought looked like me. (p. 42)

The cultural codes operating in both contexts thus make it difficult for her to find a sense of balance or belonging in either place. The feeling of displacement becomes almost permanent, whereas the notion of belonging remains fluctuating, fragmented, and continually mediated. Mira reflects these repetitive and unresolved aspects of race in her drawings as well. The people in her life and those she has met over time are depicted across a range of everyday settings: at college, in

the business world, during family gatherings or with friends, on planes, and in a café. Through this repetition across shifting contexts, the memoir emphasises how racialised identity persists regardless of place.

The experiences surrounding her identity took on another dimension during her adolescence. Throughout these years, Mira encountered forms of treatment shaped by similar patterns of conditionality. In her relationships, some individuals equated her Indian roots with exoticism. She was either desired because of her skin colour (p. 87), perceived as someone with the ability to read minds due to her race (p. 69), or received comments from her white girlfriends who remarked that she looked "perfect" with her Black boyfriend. Through subtle forms of acceptance that conform to implied social norms, these examples demonstrate how racial difference is perceived and processed. The regulatory normative ideal, borrowed from Michel Foucault's concept of regulatory power and later developed by Judith Butler in relation to gender, is also a term that Hall (1996) refers to when addressing issues of race and belonging, particularly in relation to the formation of racial identities through everyday expectations about how one should appear, behave, and belong. He explains that

> identity is a matter of considerable political significance and is only likely to be advanced when both the necessity and the 'impossibility' of identities, and the suturing of the psychic and the discursive in their **constitution,** are fully and unambiguously acknowledged. (p. 16)

Brownness is conditionally acceptable in Jacob's experience when it satisfies normative standards, when it is presented as appealing, fascinating, or complimentary rather than disruptive. Thus, racial projection, exoticisation, and appreciation serve as regulating processes that dictate how diversity is perceived, appreciated, and contained within prevailing social frameworks.

It has been suggested that "after 11 September 2001, a new dimension of ethnic and racial profiling was added to the concept of US American otherness" (Levi, 2019, p. 7). The attacks triggered a new wave of discrimination, hatred, and violence against migrants, particularly people of colour. Hate crimes and both physical and verbal abuse toward racialised groups increased in the immediate aftermath of the events. In such a setting, identity is constantly negotiated in the face of shifting social conditions, as well as being targeted. According to Bhabha (1994),

> The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. The 'right' to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority. (p. 2)

Islamophobia intensified, manifesting in multiple forms of abuse against people of colour and ethnic minorities. Mira was among those who witnessed the events of September 11. She saw the pain of people who either lost or could not reach their loved ones in the attack zone. Being aware of the gravity of the situation and the collective suffering, she attempted to help in various ways, such as volunteering at soup kitchens and serving firefighters on several occasions (p. 169), as well as offering spontaneous assistance in the affected areas. However, there were also moments when she was subjected to discrimination because her skin colour resembled that of the attackers.

At six years of age and fifteen years after the attacks, in one of his conversations with his mother, Z suddenly comes up with an opinion related to September 11:

> Z: We look like terrorists.
> Mira: No we don't! Who said that to you?
> Z: No one. I saw the pictures on TV. They are brown like us and have eyebrows like us and beards, which are not like us because we don't have beards. (p. 174)

Reflecting on this period, Mira explains to Z that "I guess America got kind of weird for us for a while. People didn't like us. … A lot of people who look like us. Muslims. Sikhs" (p. 176). Regarding the varying forms of exclusion framed through the discourse of the 'axis of evil' in the aftermath of September 11, it is argued that the association of Muslims with evil had been constructed long before the attacks through "20 years of media and popular culture images equating Muslims and Arabs as terrorists" (Levi, 2019, p. 4).

When Z later asks whether anyone hurt her during those years, Mira answers, "Not really", yet she silently recalls the incidents she experienced:

> Once, a group of Black teenagers spat on me. Once, a white couple at a diner said they didn't feel safe near me, and the waitress moved them. Once, a man I was trying to ignore on the subway grabbed me by the hair and between my legs and yelled, 'Speak English, you dirty cunt!' (p. 177)

Mira, a Syrian Christian, reliving the harshness of these memories, does not disclose this lived experience to her son. Instead, within the memoir, these moments appear as inner reflections or silent flashbacks. This conversation between Mira and her son also coincides with Donald Trump's election campaign and the subsequent rise of populist rhetoric. It has been argued that such rhetoric "employs the label of 'American' as an identity term which seems on the surface to be civic and thus not racially or ethnically biased, but upon closer examination reveals itself to be exclusive to white/Anglo-Saxon citizens" (Levi, 2019, p. 8).

Their conversation, which highlights the legacy of September 11, shows how racial perceptions are shaped by public discourse and the media. Z has gradually

developed an understanding of visual similarity through media rather than direct experience in daily life. Similarly, the fear he articulates is not learned through personal hostility or experience but through repeated visual and narrative associations that conflate brownness with threat. During this period, Z, who is learning to read as he grows older, also becomes interested in newspapers, paying closer attention to news headlines and listening to the radio. Mira finds it increasingly difficult to shield him from media exposure, as she states, "I cannot stop all of it from coming" (p. 45), which heightens her anxiety both in response to her son's questions and to the growing uncertainty surrounding identity and belonging. Therefore, the source of his anxiety appears through continuous visual and narrative connections that equate brownness with danger. In alignment with the dominant populist atmosphere, it is also suggested that

> the nativist tone of Trump's rhetoric can be traced back to his past political statements which occurred in the years before his campaign. Trump was a key figure in the Birther Movement, which arose in response to the presidency of Barack Obama in 2009 and sought to question the American citizenship of Obama. (Levi, 2019, p. 9)

These nativist and exclusionary definitions of Americanness extend beyond political discourse; they permeate private spaces, where they are experienced, challenged, and navigated in everyday encounters.

Mira's increasing concerns and anxieties are triggered during Donald Trump's first presidential term, particularly due to his rhetoric surrounding migration and the promotion of zero-tolerance policies that framed migrants and Muslims as security threats. In one of their conversations, after listening to the news on the radio, Z asks:

> Z: Does Donald Trump hate Muslims?
> Mira: I think it's more like… he is angry because he is scared of terrorists. And he thinks all terrorists are Muslim.
> Z: So they should stop scaring him!
> Mira: But they are not scaring him. His imagination is scaring him. Most of them are just people with families like us, but he doesn't want to believe that.
> Z: I have a Muslim name, right?
> Mira: Yup. Z: So will he be angry with me if he becomes president?
> Mira: Look, you are an American citizen, okay?
> Z: What?
> Mira: You are every bit as American as Donald Trump. This country is as much yours as it is his, and you have every right to be here. (pp. 179–180)

These discussions also take place in the private realm, where Mira experiences subtle forms of exclusion within her extended family that reflect the racialised conceptions of belonging that exist in the larger political environment. Her in-laws, who had already expressed discomfort upon learning that she was not Jewish

at the time of the marriage, implicitly maximised feelings of exclusion, especially during this period. In the context of Trump's populist rhetoric, which frequently disregarded legal citizenship in favour of racialized definitions of belonging, Mira finds herself positioned as part of a migrant figure despite being an American citizen since birth.

3. Conclusion

This article has examined *Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations* as a narrative and visual exploration of racial belonging, migration, and identity formation in post-9/11 America. Through everyday dialogues, particularly those shared between Mira Jacob and her son, the memoir reveals how questions of race, citizenship, and belonging are not abstract political concerns but lived, negotiated experiences that unfold within family life, public space, and mediated discourse. By foregrounding conversations rather than linear narration, Jacob captures the uncertainty, fragmentation, and emotional labour involved in explaining race to a child while simultaneously confronting her own unresolved experiences of exclusion or othering.

The memoir demonstrates that belonging is not secured by legal citizenship alone but is continuously tested through social perception, racial visibility, and political rhetoric. Jacob's experiences, from childhood encounters with conditional acceptance to moments of exoticisation in adolescence and racial profiling in the aftermath of September 11, expose how brownness is tolerated only when it aligns with dominant expectations of non-disruption. These experiences are mirrored visually through static figures, cut-out bodies, and shifting photographic backgrounds, reinforcing the sense of suspension and displacement that characterises her position within American society.

The post-9/11 context and the resurgence of exclusionary rhetoric during the Trump era further intensify these dynamics, revealing how national crises and populist discourse permeate private spaces and shape a child's understanding of identity and threat. Z's questions, informed by media imagery and public narratives, illustrate how racialised fear is inherited not biologically but culturally. In this sense, *Good Talk* exposes the intergenerational transmission of racial anxiety while also documenting attempts to resist it through dialogue, reassurance, and self-assertion.

Ultimately, Jacob's memoir positions conversation itself as both method and resistance: a space where uncertainty is acknowledged, belonging is negotiated, and identity remains open rather than fixed, shaped by both social and political dynamics. By centring the migrant voice within ordinary exchanges, *Good Talk* offers a multifaceted account of how race is lived, questioned, and re-imagined in contemporary America, revealing the enduring impact of racialised frameworks on both personal memory and collective life.

Announcements

The research for this paper was supported by the Erasmus+ project 2023-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000154375, Migration Narratives in European Media: Teaching, Learning, and Reflecting (MigraMedia).

References

Ateşci Koçak, B. (2025). Fractured borders and politics of resistance: Post-9/11 through Rabiye Kurnaz vs. George W. Bush (2022). *Res Rhetorica*, *12*(3), 72–88. https://doi.org/10.29107/rr2025.3.4

Baird, S. (2019, March 21). Mira Jacob, The Creation of Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations. *SPINE*. https://spinemagazine.co/articles/mira-jacob2

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.

Chute, H. (2008). Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative. *PMLA*, *123*(2), 452–465. https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.2.452

Costs of War. (2025, April 1). Brown University Watson School of International and Public Affairs. https://costsofwar.watson.brown.edu/costs/social-political

de Figueiredo, C. A. P. (2024). Unveiling Truth and Truthfulness in the Graphic Memoir Heimat. In B. Schirrmacher, & N. Mousavi (Eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media* (pp. 101–125). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_5

Hackl, A. (2022). Good immigrants, permitted outsiders: Conditional inclusion and citizenship in comparison. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *45*(6), 989–1010. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.2011938

Hall, S. (1990). Cultural Identity and Diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.

Hall, S. (1996). Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'? In S. Hall, & P. D. Gay (Eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (pp. 1–17). Sage Publications.

Jacob, M. (2015, June 8). 37 Difficult Questions From My Mixed-Race Son. *BuzzFeed News*. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mirajacob/questions-from-my-mixed-race-son

Jacob, M. (2019). *Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations*. One World.

Levi, S. (2019). *Literature Review on Islamophobia and Nationalism in the USA* (ERC AdG Prime Youth No. 785934). European Research Council. https://bpy.bilgi.edu.tr/media/document/2019/08/27/usa-lit-review-selin-levi.pdf

Lindsay, C. (2020, March 2). Good Talk: A Conversation with Mira Jacob. *12th Street*. https://www.12thstreetonline.com/good-talk-a-conversation-with-mira-jacob/

Park, E. (2019, May 2). A graphic novel that answers a child's question about being biracial. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/02/books/review/graphic-content-mira-jacob.html

Pedri, N. (2021). Photography and the Layering of Perspective in Graphic Memoir. *ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*, *8*(2). https://imagetextjournal.com/photography-and-the-layering-of-perspective-in-graphic-memoir/

Yuval-Davis, N. (2010). Theorizing identity: Beyond the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy. *Patterns of Prejudice*, *44*(3), 261–280. https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2010.489736

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press
Vol 50, No 2 (2026)
E-ISSN 2450-4580

Kenan Koçak, Erciyes University, Turkey

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.2.44-55

Syriana Non Grata: Representation of Syrians in Turkish Humorous Magazines

ABSTRACT
This article examines representations of Syrian refugees in Turkish humorous magazines through close readings of three caricatures published between 2013 and 2024. Drawing on social semiotics and Žižek's (1993) concept of the "national Thing", it argues that caricatures depict Syrians not only as cultural outsiders but also as figures implicated in the perceived loss of enjoyment, mobility, and economic security among Turkish citizens. Through close readings organised around integration, exclusion, and leisure, the study shows how satirical media both register and unsettle everyday nationalist anxieties. It positions caricature as a primary site for interpreting the affective and ideological grammar of migration discourse in Türkiye.

KEYWORDS
Syrian refugees; political caricature; Turkish satire; nationalism; enjoyment; migration discourse

1. Introduction

Türkiye's satirical press culture reaches back to the period of Ottoman modernisation. Aside from *Zvarcakhos* (Joker), published in Armenian and Armeno-Turkish in Armenian script in 1856 (Kiraz, 2024), the first Turkish humorous magazine to feature caricatures is *Diyojen* (Diogenes)[1], founded in 1870 by journalist and novelist Theodor Kasap, who was educated in Istanbul and Paris. The magazine's manifesto was Diogenes' famed retort to Alexander the Great: "Stand a little less between me and the sun". It directly appealed to the Ottoman government for an uncensored press (Koçak, 2016, p. 179). Since then, humorous magazines have remained one of the primary venues for articulating public opinion. These periodicals mirror the political climate and material conditions of their moment, each marked by distinct cultural allusions that illuminate the dynamics of Türkiye's political humour (Ünan Göktan, 2024, p. 98).

In the Turkish context examined here, a humorous magazine is a periodical that combines satire, caricatures, comic strips, and commentary on political, social, and cultural questions. Weekly and biweekly titles typically run to sixteen pages in any

[1] Translations from Turkish into English appear in the text are mine unless otherwise stated.

Kenan Koçak, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Erciyes Üniversitesi Ahmet El Biruni Caddesi No: 91, 38280 Talas / Kayseri, kenankocak@erciyes.edu.tr, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6422-2329

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

printed format, while monthly or irregularly published titles run to forty-eight or sixty-four pages in standard or large formats. The corpus of this article consists of three caricatures published in *Uykusuz* (Sleepless) and *Naber* (What's Up), both of which remain in print and are among the most established humorous magazines in Türkiye. They inherit the legacy of the *Gırgır* (Wisecrack) tradition, which achieved a circulation in the millions in the 1970s. These magazines proliferate through successive splits, with each new magazine emerging from the institutional and aesthetic core of its predecessors. Founded by former contributors to *Penguen* (Penguin), *Uykusuz* debuted on September 5, 2007, and maintained a weekly publication schedule until its 801st issue on January 25, 2023. After a pause, the magazine reappeared in January 2024 with two seasonal issues and has been published monthly since September 2024. In 2015, Umut Sarıkaya left *Uykusuz*, which was still actively published at the time, and founded *Naber* as a largely solo project, supported intermittently by minor contributions from other artists. Despite initially announcing a quarterly schedule, *Naber* has followed an irregular publication pattern, producing only sixteen issues over the course of a decade.

This article critically examines the representation of Syrian migration in caricatures. The UNHCR's Annual Results Report records that in 2024, Türkiye remained host to one of the largest refugee populations in the world, as it had for nearly a decade. As of the end of 2024, 2,901,478 Syrian people were receiving temporary protection (UNHCR Annual Results Reports, 2025, p. 4). Data released by the Directorate General of Migration Management under the Turkish Ministry of the Interior show that the number of Syrians under temporary protection had declined to 2,353,402 as of December 25, 2025. The same data indicate that the number of Syrians under temporary protection was recorded as 0 in 2011; 14,237 in 2012; 224,655 in 2013; 1,519,286 in 2014; 2,503,549 in 2015; 2,834,441 in 2016; 3,426,786 in 2017; 3,623,192 in 2018; 3,576,370 in 2019; 3,641,370 in 2020; 3,737,369 in 2021; 3,535,898 in 2022; 3,214,780 in 2023; and 2,901,478 in 2024 (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2025). These figures help account for why, from 2013 onwards, Syrian displacement became one of the most contested issues in Turkish public debate. Following the Assad regime's violent suppression of protest demonstrations in March 2011, the ensuing unrest escalated into civil war and culminated in the overthrow of Assad in December 2024. Taken together, these figures establish Türkiye as the principal destination of Syrian refuge over the period. Initially received in humanitarian terms by a broadly welcoming public, Syrian refugees were progressively recast in the register of security. Public discourse came to link them with crime, economic strain, perceived cultural threat, and internal security (Koca, 2016, p. 56).

Between 2013 and 2025 Syrians featured prominently and repeatedly in Turkish print media, and this pattern has attracted considerable academic attention. Few studies, however, have examined the depiction of Syrians in caricatures

published in Türkiye. In the early stages of the unrest in Syria, the report titled "Understanding the Syrian Problem through Comics – 8", published in April 2012 by the Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM), argues that "one of the tools that most effectively reflects the so-called media war and how Middle Eastern public opinion perceives the Syrian issue is the cartoons published in the region's print media". On this basis, the report seeks to analyse the situation through caricatures from various Middle Eastern countries (Tanrıverdi, 2012). Yumurtacı and Tosunay's (2018) article, "The Representation of Migration in Humor Magazines", analyses how migration was represented in 2017 issues of *Leman* and *Uykusuz*, two of the most widely circulated humour magazines in Türkiye. Leman ran 25 migration caricatures in 2017 versus Uykusuz's three, suggesting a more explicitly political and oppositional orientation. Dilmaç and Kocadal's (2018) study, "Syrian Refugees in Turkish Cartoons: A Social Semiotic Analysis", analyses a corpus of 23 caricatures that appeared between 2013 and 2017 in *Uykusuz, Penguen, Gırgır*, and *Leman*. The primary conclusion of the study is that Turkish cartoonists portray Syrian refugees through a multifaceted and frequently distressing lens, mirroring and influencing public apprehensions. The caricatures persistently critique the Turkish government's "open-door" policy, depicting it as hypocritical and politically driven. Two contrasting depictions of refugees emerge: they are perceived either as an 'alterity' that jeopardises national stability and secular identity, or as 'our own kind' to be assimilated for the political advantage of the ruling party.

The arrival of Syrians in Türkiye since 2012 has generated a substantial body of caricatures, which has not yet received sustained academic analysis. This study addresses that gap by closely reading three caricatures from different periods to show how Syrians are portrayed as fragmentary or unintegrated members of society, foregrounding the social and cultural tensions through which they are imagined as a threat to Turkish national identity and everyday life.

2. *Syriana Non Grata*: three case studies

Before turning to the case studies, two concepts from Slavoj *Žižek*'s account of nationalism deserve specification, since they organise the readings that follow. The first is the "national Thing". For *Žižek* (1993), the Thing is not any actual feature of a national way of life – not a cuisine, a landscape, a language – but the fantasised substance that gives those features their density. It is what citizens point to when they say their nation has something other nations lack, while remaining unable to specify what that something is. The Thing's mode of existence is reflexive belief: individuals believe in it insofar as they suppose that others do (pp. 201–202). Crucially, the Thing is always experienced as already endangered. It is the 'threatened' form of enjoyment that gives the nation its affective consistency; a national Thing that no one could imagine losing would cease to function as one.

The second concept, the "theft of enjoyment", names the structural complement of this first one. If the Thing is constituted in the mode of threatened loss, it requires a figure to whom the loss can be attributed. The migrant, the foreigner, the visible Other typically occupies this position: not because the migrant has actually appropriated anything, but because the fantasy of the Thing demands a thief in order to remain coherent. The migrant must be imagined as enjoying – illicitly, excessively, in ways the citizen cannot – so that the citizen's own dissatisfaction can be experienced as a wrong rather than as a structural condition (*Žižek*, 1993, pp. 202–206). The accusation is not really about what the migrant does; it is about what the citizen needs the migrant to be doing.

The three caricatures examined below stage precisely this fantasy across three registers, and each, read carefully, exposes its internal contradiction. Figure 1 locates the theft in the marketplace and the social bond, and exposes the citizen-host as the one actually running the hustle. Figure 2 locates it in the domestic interior and the class position, and exposes the metropolitan onlooker as enjoying a comfort she cannot acknowledge, depending on the refugee's invisibility. Figure 3 locates it in leisure and movement, and exposes the citizen as immobilised not by the refugee but by the structural conditions the refugee is asked to symbolise. In each case, the satirical work consists in showing that the figure imagined as having stolen national enjoyment is the one most visibly without it.

Figure 1: Syrian Habibi (Üstün, 2013, p. 8)

Published in *Uykusuz* on 24 October 2013 – the year of the sharpest year-on-year increase in the Syrian population – the caricature below registers an early stage of the debate over Syrian integration into Turkish society.

The caricature depicts two characters engaged in conversation in Turkish near the seaside. The well-dressed, middle-aged man who addresses the other as "El Habibi" [my darling] is shown holding perfume boxes. In urban settings, particularly in Istanbul, it is common to encounter street vendors who claim to sell 'original' perfumes, typically targeting Arab tourists, whose presence increased markedly in 2013. The figure dressed in traditional Arab attire, who is addressed with the Arabic term "El Habibi", reacts sharply to this form of address, responding: "Hey, get lost! Every two steps it's 'El Habibi, El Habibi'! You're trying to push your cheap perfumes on me! I'm Syrian, man – I'm one of you now… Don't lump us together with those trashy Arab tourists". The Turkish vendor replies, "Why are you getting so worked up?" to which the Syrian responds, "Watch yourself".

The cartoon stages a specific conflict, and naming it precisely is the first step in reading it. The conflict is not between Turkish citizen and Syrian refugee in any general sense; it is between two parties who recognise each other as commercial actors in the same informal economy, and who disagree about which of them is in the position of the dupe. The Turkish vendor's hustle – the inflated street perfume, the appellation "El Habibi" deployed as a sales technique – is a small, banal extraction practised on Arab visitors. In Žižek's terms, it is the disavowed jouissance of the host: an everyday enjoyment that the citizen practises without acknowledging, because acknowledging it would compromise his sense of himself as the wronged party. The refugee's intervention ("You're trying to push your cheap perfumes on me") does not contest the hustle as such; it withdraws from it. By refusing the position of the marketable Arab tourist and naming the transaction for what it is, the refugee returns to the host an unwelcome reflection: the host's own minor predation, made visible. The discomfort the cartoon registers – and the source of its uneasy humour – lies precisely here. The xenophobic complaint that frames everyday discussion ("they have come and taken from us") is, in this scene, exactly inverted: the citizen is the one practising the small theft, and what he loses when the refugee speaks is the cover under which the theft was previously running.

The cartoon also depends on, and partly exposes, a stereotype that organises Turkish public discourse about the wider Arab world: the hierarchy between the desirable Gulf visitor and the undesirable Levantine refugee. The affluent Syrian in Western dress rejects the address "El Habibi" not by claiming Turkish identity but by repudiating a class position – "don't lump us together with those trashy Arab tourists". The line works as comedy because it mobilises a stratification that ordinarily operates beneath the threshold of articulation: the implicit "good Arab / bad Arab" distinction by which the figure of the Arab is sorted, on the markers of capital and comportment, into the welcome and the unwelcome. The cartoon's

politics are sharper than they first appear. It does not endorse this hierarchy; it lets the refugee voice it, and in doing so, makes its operation legible to the reader. The Syrian who insists "I am one of you now" is laying claim to the same stratifying logic the host uses, and the host – the cheap-perfume vendor – has no grounds on which to refuse the claim except the one that the comedy will not let him voice. The Žižekian point is that the host's national Thing, in the moment of the encounter, fails to deliver: it cannot supply a stable difference between "us" and "the trashy Arab tourists" that the refugee, who has learnt the local idiom of distinction, cannot also operate. Read in the conjuncture of 2013 – the year of the steepest rise in the Syrian population and of the first sustained public debate over their status – the cartoon already registers what later years would intensify: that the affective shift from "guest" to "problem" turns less on the refugee's arrival than on his demonstrated capacity to refuse the terms of his hosting (Doğanay & Keneş, 2016, p. 154; Koca, 2016, p. 56; Ozduzen et al., 2021, p. 3351).

The caricature to be examined next likewise engages with the issue of Syrian integration, though it shifts focus from the figure of the affluent Syrian to the more commonly encountered image within Turkish society: the Syrian beggar.

Figure 2: Syrian Beggar (Dilek, 2014, p. 8)

An adult male beggar is depicted sitting on a handkerchief spread on the ground, with scattered coins beside a piece of paper bearing the inscription "I am Syrian". In the foreground, two fashionably dressed women comment on the scene; one remarks, "I wish they wouldn't come to our country", while the other responds, "Ugh,

seriously", signalling her agreement. The Syrian beggar, portrayed as sufficiently integrated to comprehend Turkish fluently, voices an internal monologue: "As if I enjoyed leaving my centrally heated, fully furnished home just to sit on a stone here, for fuck's sake. The war broke out, so we came, unbelievable!"

The cartoon's conflict is over recognition, structured by an asymmetry that the reader sees but the diegetic figures do not. The two women see a beggar – a category they already know how to dismiss. The reader sees a man whose interior monologue uses Turkish middle-class vocabulary with native fluency: not just kombi (a natural-gas boiler standard in Turkish urban apartments) but oturma grubu (the matched living-room suite that signifies settled bourgeois domesticity), and a register of complaint ("just to sit on a stone here, for fuck's sake") that mimics, almost exactly, the rhetorical idiom of the women looking down at him. The cartoon's mechanism is the Barthesian one of textual anchorage (Barthes, 1977, p. 40): the women's speech anchors the visible image as a scene of nuisance, while the refugee's interior speech anchors the same image, for the reader, as a scene of class displacement. The conflict, in other words, is not staged between the women and the beggar at all – the women do not hear what he is thinking, and the cartoon does not let them. The conflict is staged for the reader, between the two readings of the same body. What is at stake is who counts as a fellow class subject and on what terms; the comedy and the pathos lie in the cartoon's refusal to resolve this in either direction.

The cartoon's stereotype both mobilises and exposes is gendered and classed in ways that warrant precise naming. The two women are not generic Turks: they are coded as metropolitan, fashionable, secular, consuming – the figure that Turkish media discourse has long mobilised as the bearer of a particular national respectability, the one whose comfort and composure the migrant is imagined to disturb. Recent scholarship on anti-Syrian discourse online has traced exactly this gendered, leisure-coded register, in which Syrian presence is figured as an offence against a feminine-coded middle-class equilibrium (Ozduzen et al., 2021, p. 3363). The cartoon makes the operation of that figuration visible in a single frame: the women's "I wish they wouldn't come to our country" is not the speech of overt nationalism but of casual proprietary entitlement – banal nationalism in the sense Billig (1995, p. 88) describes, in which the part claims to represent the whole without needing to argue for the representation. The cartoon's satirical edge is that it stages this entitlement at the moment of its blindness. The women's confidence in their position depends on the refugee remaining the category they take him to be; the cartoon shows, in his unspoken Turkish, that he is not.

The Žižekian work the cartoon does is to locate the "theft of enjoyment" inside this asymmetry of recognition. What the women possess and feel threatened by in the refugee's presence is not material wealth – they are walking past, not enjoying anything in particular – but the imagined exclusivity of the Turkish middle-class

life-world: the fantasy that the kombi-heated apartment and the matched seating suite are markers of a national way of life to which they belong and the beggar does not. The cartoon's reversal is twofold. First, it shows that the refugee has, before his displacement, lived inside the same imagined interior; he is not the figure outside the national Thing but the figure who has already possessed and lost it, and who can describe it in the host's own metonyms. Second, it shows that the women's enjoyment of their position depends on his not being able to do so. If the refugee can speak the language of kombi and oturma grubu, the national Thing fails to identify its own – the women's casual claim on the country ("our country") cannot survive the recognition that the beggar at their feet is a class peer. The fantasy that the refugee has stolen something has, in this cartoon, the structure Žižek (1993) describes most precisely: it is a fantasy whose function is to protect the citizen from noticing that what she fears the refugee has taken is something she herself cannot define, secure, or articulate without his collusion in the very category that the cartoon refuses to let him stay inside.

The caricature below was published in 2024 in issue 13 of *Naber*, a magazine produced single-handedly by Umut Sarıkaya.

Figure 3: Throwing the Greeks into the Sea, Keeping the Syrians out of It (Sarıkaya, 2024, p. 2)

Set against a stylised yellow map of Türkiye, drawn as if sun-bleached, including the northern half of Cyprus marked as Turkish territory ("our side") alongside the southern coasts and the Aegean Sea and faintly including the Marmara Sea and the Black Sea at the top, the image features six figures. At the centre of the image stands a character who repeatedly turns his head from side to side. While taking a drag from his cigarette and flicking off the ash, he says: "Summer is coming…

The Syrians will go into the sea again… They're going to get on my nerves! I'm already at the end of my tether; once they take off their tops, I'll jump on them. And you, don't hang around under my feet!" As he speaks, he kicks a figure on the left side of the image who is dressed in traditional Greek military attire; as the figure falls into the Aegean Sea, he exclaims "Kifidis", (a Greek surname that either marks the character as Greek or functions as a generic ethnic signifier despite being the first Turkish orthopaedic products company). To the left of the Taurus Mountains stands a figure dressed for the beach – shorts, a shirt, flip-flops, and a side bag, the iconography of the domestic tourist who would go to the coast but cannot afford to – who remarks: "We're throwing the Greeks into the sea, we're not letting the Syrians into the sea, what exactly are we doing, brother?" The centrally positioned figure responds: "We can't go on holiday". In the upper right corner, three Syrian figures converse in their own language. The leftmost asks, "Sho hal eyyam?" [What kind of days are these?][2]. The one in the middle replies, "Eyyam-ı bahur", (an Ottoman Turkish phrase meaning "dog days of summer"), and the rightmost joins in by saying, "Mabrouk, mabrouk" [blessed or congratulations][3].

The phrase "throwing the Greeks into the sea" is a canonical reference to the culmination of the Turkish War of Independence, most notably the liberation of İzmir from the Greeks in September 1922. This trope traditionally signifies the restoration of sovereignty, the expulsion of imperialist forces, and the symbolic consolidation of national borders. In collective memory, the Aegean thus operates as a site of decisive Turkish agency and victory. Sarıkaya's (2024) caricature performs a ruthless inversion of this founding myth. The figure falling into the sea, shouting "Kifidis!!" introduces a deliberate visual ambiguity. When read alongside the dialogue – "Summer is coming… it will annoy me" – the sea is stripped of its 1922 associations of military triumph. The Greek figure is recontextualised: no longer the defeated enemy, he is now the gatekeeper – a reminder that the former adversary has become a privileged EU member. This shift reflects contemporary anxieties regarding the EU-Turkey deal and the restrictive Schengen visa regime, under which Turkish citizens increasingly face rejection (Caglayan & Erkoyun, 2022). The Aegean – once imagined as the canvas of national victory – is refigured as a site of bureaucratic and geopolitical exclusion.

Read in the context of its publication date, the caricature satirises the Turkish citizen's inability to reach the sea under conditions of severe economic precarity. This economic paralysis is crystallised in the speech bubble "Tatile gidemiyoruz" [We can't go on holiday], which anchors xenophobic resentment in material deprivation rather than cultural friction alone. Amid the hyperinflation and

[2] A reference to Lebanese singer Ziad Rahbani's song with the same title.

[3] Another reference to Lebanese singer Ramy Ayach's song with the same title.

eroded purchasing power of 2024, leisure shifted from a routine expectation to an unaffordable luxury for the working and middle classes. On this logic of relative deprivation and zero-sum competition, the presence of Syrian refugees on public beaches is reinterpreted as displacement: the premise that "if I cannot afford a holiday and the Syrian is at the seaside, then the Syrian has displaced me". This affective calculus is further intensified by widespread disinformation that Syrians receive state salaries, subsidised housing, and tax exemptions (Filibeli & Ertuna, 2021, p. 2251).

The right side of the caricature, signifying the influx from east and south, operates through a distinct set of visual and linguistic codes that contrast sharply with the kinetic singularity of the Greek figure. Here, the Syrians are depicted as a collective mass – three figures serving as a metonym for an entire population. This collectivisation is reinforced through a polemical re-semanticisation of the term "mabrouk" [blessed or congratulations]. Stripped of its function as a neutral pleasantry, the word is weaponised to imply either a self-congratulatory breach of the border or a mockery of a Turkish public perceived to be permitting an "invasion". The rhythmic repetition of "mabrouk, mabrouk" produces a festive auditory register that collides with the Turkish figure's declaration of economic immobility. This juxtaposition reinforces a nationalist fantasy: Türkiye is framed as a land of unearned benefit for refugees while functioning as a site of debt and restriction for its own citizens. The phonetic rendering of Arabic in Latin script "audibilises" the scene, activating anxieties of cultural displacement. This effect is intensified by the inclusion of the Levantine phrase "Sho hal eyyam?" [What days are these?]. By invoking Ziad Rahbani's famous lyrics, the caricature situates the figures within a coherent Arab cultural repertoire that remains opaque to the average Turkish viewer. Rendered in Latin script, the phrase generates cognitive dissonance, evoking the perceived "noise" of a transformed urban soundscape in cities like Istanbul or Gaziantep. Within this nationalist framework, the question "What days are these?" reads not as shared bewilderment but as an ironic commentary on a national disorder the refugees are imagined to have authored.

Read together, the three caricatures reveal the internal grammar of the "theft of enjoyment" fantasy with particular precision. Across the marketplace, the domestic interior, and the public beach, the satirical reversal is the same: the figure who is positioned as having stolen Turkish enjoyment is the one most clearly without it – the migrant exposed to the hustle, sleeping on a stone, watched but unmoving on the shoreline – while the figure who imagines himself dispossessed is the one most actively trying to recover something that was never coherent to begin with. What the caricatures stage is not the loss of an object but the disintegration of a fantasy that depended on a believing Other, the reflexive structure Žižek (1993) identifies as constitutive of the national Thing. The Syrian refugee, in this satirical mode, is less a thief than a witness: someone whose presence makes legible the

precariousness, the disinvestment, and the economic immobilisation that Turkish citizens were already living with. The caricatures' humour is therefore double-edged. It registers xenophobic resentment as a real affective fact, but it also exposes the structural irony at the centre of that resentment – that the obsessive monitoring of borders, beaches, and public spaces is itself a symptom of the very immobility it claims to defend against.

3. Conclusion

This article has examined three caricatures published in Turkish humorous magazines in order to trace how Syrians are visually and discursively negotiated within satirical media. Through close semiotic readings, it has shown that caricatures function as critical sites where everyday nationalism and economic anxiety intersect. Rather than offering a singular or stable representation, the caricatures oscillate between figuring Syrians as integrated social actors, as displaced equals, and as antagonistic figures imagined to threaten national enjoyment. Analysed through Žižek's concepts of the "national Thing" and the "theft of enjoyment", these images reveal that resentment toward Syrians is driven less by cultural difference per se than by the perceived loss of leisure, mobility, and economic security among the Turkish population. Crucially, the humour of these caricatures exposes the incoherence of exclusionary fantasies: the citizen who seeks to police borders, beaches, and public spaces is himself immobilised by structural economic conditions that remain entirely beyond the refugee's control.

These dynamics have not subsided with the political transition in Syria. The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 reopened the question of return, and Turkish authorities have since reported several hundred thousand voluntary returns alongside an expanded "go-and-see" visit policy (ECRE, 2025; Ferris, 2025). Yet anti-refugee sentiment in Türkiye remains the highest recorded in any country surveyed by UNHCR (Ferris, 2025), and the caricatures examined here continue to circulate as part of the affective archive that any post-2024 return debate must reckon with. The xenophobic fantasy these images stage – that the refugee's presence is what blocks the citizen's enjoyment – does not dissolve when border flows reverse. It migrates, attaching itself instead to those who remain, to those who hesitate, and to the new ambiguities of a transition whose outcome is still being negotiated.

Announcements

This article is derived from the author's project titled "SBAÜ-2023-12514: Sultan II. Abdülhamid Han'dan Mustafa Kemal Atatürk'e İngiliz Basılı Görsel Medyasında Türk İmajı (1876-1938)" [The Image of the Turk in British Printed Visual Media from Sultan Abdülhamid II to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1876–1938)].

References

Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-Music-Text*. Fontana Press HarperCollins.

Billig, M. (1995). *Banal Nationalism*. Sage Publications.

Caglayan, C., & Erkoyun, E. (2022, August 26). Turks frustrated by 'deliberate' increase in number of European visa rejections. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/world/turks-frustrated-by-deliberate-increase-number-european-visa-rejections-2022-08-26/

Dilek, İ. (2014, August 28). Syrian Beggar. *Uykusuz*, 365.

Dilmaç, J. A., & Kocadal, Ö. (2018). Syrian refugees in Turkish cartoons: A social semiotic analysis. *Studii de Lingvistică*, *8*, 211–229.

Doğanay, Ü., & Keneş, H. Ç. (2016). Yazılı Basında Suriyeli 'Mülteciler': Ayrımcı Söylemlerin Rasyonel ve Duygusal Gerekçelerinin İnşası. *Mülkiye Dergisi*, *40*(1), 143–184.

ECRE (European Council on Refugees and Exiles). (2025). AIDA country report on Türkiye – Update on 2024. https://ecre.org/aida-country-report-on-turkiye-update-on-2024/

Ferris, E. (2025). Syrian refugees in Türkiye: Prospects for return or integration? Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy. https://doi.org/10.25613/GDD8-6F06

Filibeli, T. E., & Ertuna, C. (2021). Sarcasm Beyond Hate Speech: Facebook Comments on Syrian Refugees in Turkey. *International Journal of Communication*, *15,* 2236–2259.

Kiraz, E. (2024). *Osmanlı Mizah Basınının Başlangıcı: Ermeni Harfli Türkçe Mizah Gazetesi Zvarcakhos "Latifeci" (1856)*. Libra Kitap.

Koca, B. T. (2016). Syrian refugees in Turkey: From "guests" to "enemies"? *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 54, 55–75. https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2016.4

Koçak, K. (2016). Tintin's Journey in Turkey. In J. S. Sanders (Ed.), *Comics of Herge: When the Lines Are Not So Clear* (pp. 177–190). University of Mississippi Pres.

Ozduzen, O., Korkut, U., & Ozduzen, C. (2021). 'Refugees are not welcome': Digital racism, online place-making and the evolving categorization of Syrians in Turkey. *New Media & Society*, *23*(11), 3349–3369. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820956341

Sarıkaya, U. (2024). Throwing the Greeks into the Sea, Keeping the Syrians out of It. *Naber*, *13*.

Tanrıverdi, N. (2012). *Karikatürlerle Suriye Sorununu Anlamak—8* (No. 114). Ortadoğu Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi (ORSAM). https://orsam.org.tr/yayinlar/karikaturlerle-suriye-sorununu-anlamak-8/

UNHCR Annual Results Reports: 2024 Türkiye. (2025). UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/T%C3%BCrkiye%20ARR%202024.pdf

Ünan Göktan, A. D. (2024). How Political Cartoons Reveal Türkiye's Cultural Dynamics: An Analysis of Three Satirical Magazines. In O. Feldman (Ed.), *Communicating Political Humor in the Media: How Culture Influences Satire and Irony* (pp. 93–117). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-0726-3_5

Üstün, C. (2013, October 24). Syrian Habibi. *Uykusuz*, *321*.

Yumurtacı, G., & Tosunay, D. (2018). Mizah Dergilerinde Göç Olgusunun Temsili. *Kurgu*, *26*(3), 227–237.

Žižek, S. (1993). *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Duke University Press.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press
Vol 50, No 2 (2026)
E-ISSN 2450-4580

Carla Abella Rodríguez, University of Salamanca, Spain

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.2.56-67

Female African Refugees in Europe through the Cinematic Lens: Carnal Hospitality and the Longing for Touch in *Aisha* (2022) and *Drift* (2023)

ABSTRACT
This article analyses the representation of the female African refugee experience in Europe in two recent European cinematic productions: Frank Berry's *Aisha* (2022) and Anthony Chen's *Drift* (2023). The investigation suggests that, in the face of the complexity for the displaced self to reach out to the Other because of psychological and physical trauma, a language of touch emerges to cross the self-Other threshold and open the door to the fragmented and vulnerable self. Mobilising a framework that foregrounds the role of the body in hospitable encounters, a longing for touch can be traced through the presence of a physical and symbolic hand.

KEYWORDS
carnal hospitality; risk; gentleness; hand; body; touch; threshold; African women; female refugee

no one leaves home unless / home is the mouth
of a shark / you only run for the border / when
you see the whole city running as well . . . you
only leave home / when home won't let you stay
// no one leaves home unless home chases you /
fire under feet / hot blood in your belly.

"Home", Warsan Shire (2009)

1. Introduction

British Somali poet Warsan Shire's verses resonate across the experience of 122.6 million people who are forcibly displaced in the world today. 37.9 million of them are refugees and 8 million asylum-seekers (UNHCR, 2024). Women and girls make up around 50% of these populations. Domestic violence, rape, female genital mutilation or forced marriage lead many to escape their homelands. Female refugees experience a "dual vulnerability" since their "exposed status

Carla Abella Rodríguez, Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Universidad de Salamanca, C/ Placentinos 18, 37008 Salamanca, carla.abella.rodriguez@usal.es, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2511-5977

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

and precarious situation" puts them at risk of sexual assault or human trafficking (Apthorpe et al., 2019). Sexual and gender-based violence is thus a ubiquitous threat for refugees in the home country, in transit and in the host nation (Bartolomei et al., 2014 in the Forced Migration Research Network, 2017). Despite women making up half of the refugee population (Orav, 2023, p. 2), there is a considerable lack of studies that shed light on the displacement that women experience. This scarcity also reveals the absence of women from mainstream media and public debates on forced migration, which focus heavily on the male refugee (Apthorpe et al., 2019). In a recent study of female refugee depiction in news digital media in European countries, Amores et al. (2020) revealed the underrepresentation of female refugees and when represented, they appear as victims, inoffensive or vulnerable in "passive" and "secondary roles" (pp. 296–300). This type of representation leads to what Gerbner (1972) has called a "symbolic annihilation," which reduces the control these women have over their representations and experiences (Amores et al., 2020, p. 298; Gerbner, 1972, p. 44). The purpose of this paper is to analyse the representation of the African female refugee experience in Europe in recent European cinematic productions. Running away from home, Aisha and Jacqueline empty themselves out in Frank Berry's feature film *Aisha* (2022) and in Anthony Chen's *Drift* (2023). These characterological studies try to counter the symbolic annihilation of this vulnerable group of refugees by shedding light onto their daily experiences and struggles. *Aisha* follows Aisha Osagie, a young Nigerian woman from Benin City seeking asylum in Ireland. In *Drift*, Anthony Chen explores the psychological trauma of refugees by centring the experience of Jacqueline, a refugee from Liberia who finds herself alone and homeless on a Greek island in the late 90s.

The investigation scrutinises how these two protagonists fail to find solace and comfort in the different non-spaces they traverse. A framework that centres the body in hospitable encounters between the self and the Other is mobilised. The theoretical scaffolding incorporates Kearney's carnal hospitality, which is applied for the first time to the study of hospitable encounters in a visual or literary text, along with Dufourmantelle's hospitality of gentleness and risk. The films reveal that the interactions between self and Other might be better understood in terms of bodily boundaries instead of spatial demarcations. Both oeuvres reflect the complexity of the displaced self to reach out and be reached out because of psychological and physical trauma. This emotional wound is difficult to access because the women have been silenced by their own trauma or shunned by a failing reception system. In the face of this inability to process trauma, the films identify a language of touch that tries to open the door to the fragmented and vulnerable self. This language of touch is reflected in the longing or yearning for touch, which provides some access to the self not simply physically but also emotionally and psychologically. The paper contends that a longing for touch can

be traced in both films through the presence of a physical and symbolic hand, which can either strive for violence or strive to bridge the gap between the self and the Other.

2. Risking ourselves, risking the Other: Carnal hospitality and ethics of care

In an increasingly mobile world, the question of hospitality is still of paramount importance. Hospitality is an ancient notion, referring to the practice of receiving strangers into one's home, which has its origins in Graeco-Roman societies, where it was a duty to protect and host any stranger (Dufourmantelle, 2013, p. 14). In recent years, hospitality theory has experienced a "renaissance" (Still, 2010, p. 1) to discuss not only the encounter between self and Other, but also the integration of displaced people in different nation-states. Building on Levinasian philosophy that foregrounds the ethical responsibility towards the Other, French philosopher Jacques Derrida (2000a; 1997/2000b) proposed an ethico-political approach to hospitality which recognised hospitality as inseparable from hostility and identified the paradoxical relationship between conditional and unconditional hospitality (pp. 77, 79; and p. 14). To find an answer to the challenging question of what hospitality is (Derrida, 2000a, p. 6), hospitality theory has been mobilised for the analysis of texts and films dealing with displacement and encounters between self and Other. This growing scholarship on hospitality has primarily focused on the spaces of welcome, the relationships between the host and guest, security protocols, linguistic hospitality and (in)hospitable gestures in a range of films and literary traditions (Clapp & Ridge, 2016; Gerke et al., 2020, Manzanas & Benito, 2017; Manzanas & Hernández, 2021). The body has received limited attention in the analysis of hospitality encounters. Mica Hilson (2016) has examined the hospitality and security of the non-normative body of little people in fiction but does not discuss the body as a site of hospitality, which Manzanas and Benito (2017) do to study the biopolitical control of immigrants in films and literary texts. This article places the focus on the body as a theoretical tool to better understand the aporetic nature of hospitality through touch and the physical and symbolic hand. Specifically, the study addresses the lack of scholarship discussing carnal hospitality, as theorised by Richard Kearney (2019), in the analysis of filmic and literary texts. Only Arias (2020) has explained the relevance of the concept in her introduction to an issue on hospitality in neo-Victorian fiction, though it is never applied to any specific work.

Hospitality as an embodied practice helps foreground the vulnerability of African female refugees in cinema. As Butler (2004) notes, vulnerability is part of the relational relationship that the self has with the Other since bodies "expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well" (pp. 26–27). The question of hospitality, I argue, might benefit from a discussion of this notion as

an embodied practice of vulnerability. In this sense, the films address relationality as an ethical question of caring, in its polysemy, towards the displaced individual: Who cares about refugees and who takes care of them? Caring holds many ambivalences, as it can mean both to help others feel good or to oppress them (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 1). In her meditations on what "ethics of care" means, Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) foregrounds care as "vital in interweaving a web of life" that emphasises "interconnection and interdependency" (p. 4). Focusing on touch allows to "rethink relationality in its corporeal character" and understand caring not only in ethical and affective ways but also as materiality and embodiment (pp. 95–97). Both *Aisha* and *Drift* reclaim this interconnection and interdependency through the act of caring by touching. The body and its relationship to cinema have received significant attention in film studies. In accented cinema, made by filmmakers in diaspora or displacement and usually aimed at those communities, there is a recurrent "tactile optics" (Naficy, 2001, p. 28) that foregrounds "images and memories of the non-visual, the haptic, or the olfactory" (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2015, p. 141). The importance of touch in displacement films is taken up in this article to analyse the relationship between self and Other. In this vein, the study follows Paszkiewicz's work on Isabel Coixet's filmography (2020), which underscores the relevance of touch for the study of ethics of relationality, and furthers her attention to the role of the hand for the extension of ethico-political gestures of carnal (in)hospitality.

Barker highlights the importance of touch for the embodied dimension in our perception of the Other: "Tactility is a mode of perception and expression wherein all parts of the body commit themselves to, or are drawn into, a relationship with the world that is at once a mutual and intimate relation of contact" (Barker, 2009, p. 3). Nevertheless, touch holds an ambivalence which underpins the contact between the self and the Other and which is revealed in its etymology: "'Touch' is a word that comes from the old French *toucher*, which is related to the Italian *tocco*, to knock, stroke, and *toccare*, to strike or hit, both of which emphasize the violence of contact" (Dumm, 2008, p. 156; Dumm, 2008 as cited in Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 100). As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) puts it, "*Touché* is a metaphorical substitute for wounded". To be touched is to open ourselves to hurt (p. 99). In other words, our physical and emotional bodies can be opened and exposed to violence. A hand can open or close. It can comfort and welcome or hurt. In this sense, it can be said that the act of touching is reminiscent of Derridean "hostipitality". In this neologism, Derrida (1999) captured the hostility inherent to hospitality due to "the risk of the other coming and destroying the place, initiating a revolution, stealing everything, or killing everyone" (p. 71). Opening ourselves to a comforting touch also opens our vulnerability to potential violence. We cannot touch without risking ourselves or risking the Other. Richard Kearney (2019) puts forward the notion

of "carnal hospitality" to foreground the embodied experience in hospitable exchanges (p. 79). Indeed, for Kearney, carnal hospitality is the cornerstone of many hospitality encounters: "Civilization begins with the handshake. Instead of reaching for a sword to smite the stranger one offers one's hand. The fist becomes an open palm. The *hostis*-enemy becomes the *hostis*-friend" (p. 78). Touching is thus an act of hospitality, which can be inviting and accepting, but also rejecting and violating. For Kearney (2019), a "two-way" touch allows a "reciprocal feeling, empathy, attention" towards Otherness, a hospitable gift that can be perverted when turned into an imposing "one-way touch" (pp. 79–80). Carnal hospitality, when reciprocal, seems closest to a form of unconditional or pure hospitality in which self and Other disappear in an embrace. Then, the hand represents the genuine encounter between guest and host.

Carnal hos(ti)pitality implies the paradox that we cannot touch without risking ourselves and the Other. *In Praise of Risk*, Dufourmantelle (2011/2019)[1] explains "zero risk" has become the "ethical law," the "obligatory horizon of our collective and individual decisions" in our societies (pp. 34–35). Indeed, European countries try to attain "zero risk" by increasing security and closing off their borders to the Other, who is seen as a peril. Dufourmantelle (2011/2019) contends that risking our lives should not be understood as negative or as dying. Rather, it is as way of "being the world" and building a "horizon" (pp. 1–2):

> To risk one's life at decisive moments of our existence is an act that pushes ahead of us on the basis of a still unknown knowledge, like an intimate prophecy; it is a moment of conversion . . . As an act, risk lets chance take hold. We would wish it to be voluntary but it originates in obscurity, the unverifiable, the uncertain. (p. 2)

In a hospitable reading of "risking our lives," risking would mean welcoming the uninvited and unknown Other. Hospitality emerges as a form of risk taking. It is precisely the protagonists of the films, Aisha and Jacqueline, who, by risking the most, their physical and emotional bodies, are able to connect with the Other. The body is a threshold, which can open or close itself to the relationality with the Other violently or gently. In *Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living*, Anne Dufourmantelle (2013/2018) articulates gentleness or "douceur" as a form of hospitality:

> Gentleness is an enigma. Taken up in a double movement of welcoming and giving, it appears on the threshold of passages signed off by birth and death. Because it has its degrees of intensity, because it is a symbolic force, and because it has a transformative ability over things and beings, it is a power . . . We cannot possess gentleness. We offer it hospitality. (p. 1, p. 55)

[1] I would like to thank Dr Isabelle Keller-Privat for bringing Dufourmantelle's oeuvre to my attention.

Gentleness is an invitation, a hospitality, that is continuously extended and given to the Other: "There is no limit to gentleness, rather a continual invitation to become infected by it—and that invitation can be broken in an instant" (p. 22). It can be intellectual or carnal, and appear in many senses, including tact, to give "opening access" (p. 8, p. 20). Dufourmantelle (2012) insists that Derridean unconditional hospitality can only truly be possible towards an Other who is recognised existing before the self, to whom the self opens themselves to recognise a relationality, and who appears as a figure of gentleness in Levinasian terms: "The Other precisely reveals himself in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness" (Dufourmantelle, 2012, p. 59; Lévinas, 1961/1969, p. 150). Gentleness thus seems to be a form of pure hospitality that can help to the opening of the self, as it will be argued in the analysis of the two films.

3. Touch as threshold crossing in contemporary refugee cinema

Aisha and *Drift* centre the experiences of two young women who find themselves is spaces of welcome where they are unable to process their physical and psychological trauma due to the lack of suitable systems of care and reception. Their inability to talk about their past experiences leaves both women further touched or wounded, as Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, p. 99) puts it, since both protagonists close off and avoid connection with the individuals they encounter in the host country. Aisha has been in Ireland for over a year and resides in a centre for refugees in Dublin after fleeing Nigeria. She escaped after being raped by the men who murdered her father and brother for not paying a debt and who intended to make her work as a prostitute to pay them off. While waiting for a decision on her request to be recognised as a refugee, Aisha works as a beauty assistant in a salon in the city. In a scene at the beginning of the film, Aisha is holding the hands of a client while doing her nails (Berry, 2022, 26:22). They are sitting in the middle of the almost empty beauty salon. The camera is on the same frame during the whole scene: The two women face each other, with Aisha barely looking into the woman's eyes. Aisha avoids commenting on why she is seeking asylum, deflecting the question with "I just had to move" (Berry, 2022, 26:42). There is no close-up in the scene, and the distance between the camera and the women reinforces the distance between Aisha and the woman, as well as the viewers, who at this point of the film remain unaware of Aisha's sexual abuse. The client expected her to be a refugee of war and makes generalised comments about how asylum seekers can now work in Ireland. Aisha corrects her to explain that asylum-seekers can only start to work after nine months in the country and not everyone gets the chance (Berry, 2022, 26:53).

This transactional act of touching hands, which for Dufourmantelle (2013/2018) is the opposite of genuine gentleness (p. 58), is symbolic of the partial integration of asylum seekers like Aisha into the system of the host country, which also

appears in *Drift*. Back in Liberia, Jacqueline was the daughter of a minister in Charles Taylor's government. She fled the country after her family was murdered in a rebellion. She finds herself hiding in an unnamed Greek island. She is homeless and destitute among white tourists who enjoy their displacement on a paradisiacal enclave. Her main shelter is a cave by the beach, where she sleeps on a bed made of plastic bags filled with sand. At the start of the film, we are introduced to a Jacqueline in starvation, unable to pay for food. Shortly after, she steals an oil bottle from a terrace to give massages to tourists in exchange for money. The hands of labour appear in this case to massage her first client, a woman relaxing on a sunchair next to her husband (Chen, 2023, 13:36). The camerawork shows Jacqueline at her feet, in a lower position compared to the white couple. While Jacqueline is massaging her feet, the close-up frames do not show the two women in the same frame. When the husband asks how Jacqueline got to the island, she evades the question, just like Aisha. She responds "Same as everyone else. Plane. Ferry. Boat. Luck" (Chen, 2023, 15:52). The camerawork in both films conveys that a gesture of touch does not translate into connection or openness, but into distance and separation.

In the films, the hand symbolises and reinforces the power of the host nation to withhold care. In *Aisha*, two members of the Garda come unannounced into Aisha's room looking for her roommates, another Black woman and her two children (Berry, 2022, 10:00). The male policeman informs them that they are going to be deported. His hand imposes a bureaucratic and empty language of order, which syntax closes on itself and never opens: "We are here to execute this transfer," he says (Berry, 2022, 10:42). A series of close-ups show a defiant Aisha hugging one of the children and begging for the family to have the chance to call for a lawyer or assistance (Berry, 2022, 10:55). She is threatened to step back by the policeman, a white male. Instead of an open hand of welcome, the man points his finger at her, his hand closed in a fist. The hand creates a bodily threshold not to be crossed. The camera frames show Aisha next to the disembodied hand, since the policeman is left out of the frame (Berry, 2022, 11:10). This way, Frank Berry foregrounds the dehumanised hand that exerts the power of the nation-state. The frame hides the face of the policeman, which is only visible for a few seconds and from the side. Even though the hand never touches Aisha, its closeness produces carnal inhospitality and instils fear.

The family is forced to leave the centre through the back door, but Aisha follows them and defiantly stands outside the building to console the family and say goodbye. Her body and her care towards the family are deviant and disruptive of the law of the hand, of the nation-state. The manager, who controls the space of the refugee centre, warns her: "There is no need for you to be out here" (Berry, 2022, 12:07). Gestures of care such as hugging a family that is soon to be deported are seen as defiant. As a woman and a person of colour, she is

perceived as problematic and "insubordinate" by her white male manager (Berry, 2022, 38:58), which will cause her to be further isolated as she is moved to two remote accommodations in the Direct Provision System, a system for housing people seeking international protection in place in Ireland since 2000 (Amnesty International, 2021). The isolation is further revealed through touch in *Drift*. Jacqueline is introduced to the audience on the beach. We see a shot of her walking down the beach packed with white tourists when, suddenly, a child bumps into her, as if he had not seen her walking (Chen, 2023, 2:23). This uninvited harsh gesture causes Jacqueline pain, as evident in her face and moan. This moment of touch does not open the door to carnal hospitality. She momentarily holds the child, but he does not speak to her or apologise and quickly runs away into the arms of his mother. Jacqueline resumes walking as a spectral presence invisible to the surrounding tourists. The aliveness that can be heard in this scene full of families contrasts with Jacqueline's solitude, exacerbated by the fact that she is the only Black woman on the island, and silence, which predominates throughout the film.

The hand helps convey the struggle of both protagonists to process their psychological trauma. In *Drift*, the hand evokes violence, family loss and struggle to let go of emotional pain. Jacqueline soon befriends Callie, an American tour guide who resides on the island. After a dinner date, Jacqueline gets sick and Callie takes her to her apartment, where the former asks the latter for permission to take a bath (Chen, 2023, 1:14:20). In the bathtub, a vulnerable Jacqueline finally opens up about her family's murder. A series of flashbacks takes the viewer to her family being tortured and killed by an armed youth back home in Liberia (Chen, 2023, 1:16:00). Jacqueline was forced to watch her pregnant sister being raped and murdered by having her belly cut open (Chen, 2023, 1:18:00). The film problematises the abuse of the hand as carnal inhospitality: In the moment of her killing, the camera focuses on a boy holding a knife and we hear a cut, which happens outside the frame (Chen, 2023, 1:19:09). While recounting the past, Jacqueline holds tight to her underwear, which was worn by her sister before being abused (Chen, 2023, 1:17:00). She holds it in a tight fist, refusing to let go of the piece of clothing and her sister, to protect the only lasting memory of her. Despite Callie's effort to reach out to Jacqueline after the confession, the latter rejects her care: "Don't think for a second there is anything to do here," Jacqueline says before running away from her (Chen, 2023, 1:22:52).

In *Aisha*, the hand reveals how the Irish immigration system fails to provide care for psychological trauma. Soon after being moved from Dublin to an isolated camp of caravans in rural Glentill, Aisha will learn that her mother was murdered while hiding in Lagos. After losing her emotional support, Aisha will then be taken to a remote hotel in the mountains. The night before her appealing interview, where she will have to recount her rape, Aisha leaves the hotel to throw herself in front of a passing car (Berry, 2022, 1:12:07). The paramedics

who take her to the hospital Otherise her by assuming she does not speak English, depriving her of speech (Berry, 2022, 1:12:35). Barriers to the (ethics of) care emerge on the health workers's part. Aisha leaves the hospital alone with a carpal tunnel brace (Berry, 2022, 1:13:00). Her physical pain has been taken care of but not her emotional one. Her hand points to a devaluation of the economic value of her labour after her psychological wounds have worsened. Outside the hospital, Conor, the young local security guard working at her residence in Dublin and with whom she has struggled to start a romantic relationship due to her uncertain future, is waiting for her. The shot shows Conor facing the camera while we only see Aisha's back and never her face, which she keeps down (Berry, 2022, 1:13:08). The lack of tact of the medical care contrasts with Conor's precaution after Aisha leaves the hospital: His hug is an act of gentleness, a "threshold crossing" (Kearney, 2019, p. 82) to reach a fragile Aisha. This act of unconditional hospitality opens the door to vulnerability. Kearney (2019) remarks that "the open palm and naked lips are thresholds of vulnerability. Which is why the kiss and the handshake are paramount symbols of peace and hospitality" (pp. 79–80). An embodied approach to hospitality does not only imply that the body is the means of extending carnal hospitality, it also extends the spatiality of (in)hospitality to that of the body.

At the end of both films, touch allows the self to open their emotional and physical vulnerability to the Other. Jacqueline remains silent for most of the film as she is painfully unable to speak about her trauma to those few people around her, including Callie. One day, Callie takes Jacqueline to the hospital after having an accident on the island. Jacqueline runs away from the hospital and Callie to avoid the police, and isolates herself in an abandoned block of apartments under construction, a building which bears the traces of her failure to re-build her life. However, the next day, in a luminous moment in the film, memory appears as her guiding force. Her mother's voice and touch visit Jacqueline in her lowest moment in isolation (Chen, 2023, 57:46). We see her mother's hand appear in the frame when Jacqueline is sleeping in an empty apartment and then gently touch her face prompting her to wake up and go to town to reconnect with Callie by inviting her to have dinner together. After the above-mentioned confession scene in Callie's apartment, the latter will eventually discover Jacqueline's hiding spot and will come to comfort her (Chen, 2023, 1:24:52). Jacqueline stands silent in the empty concrete apartment. She refuses Callie's touch when she tries to give her a side hug. Immediately after, a long shot shows Callie moving behind her: She hugs Jacqueline from behind in a full embrace to comfort her while we hear her cry. A close-up then reveals Jacqueline weeping while holding onto Callie, who kisses her back (Chen, 2023, 1:26:35). The scene shows Callie and Jacqueline in the same frame, totally embraced and opposite to the first tactile encounter in the film on the beach. The longing of Jacqueline for the Other's touch, for intimacy,

which she has been unable to verbalise or demand, is realised at the end of the film. After this touch, this embrace, Jacqueline slowly starts to reconstruct her life and memory with Callie. Here, to risk one's life is to let the Other in, to be dependent on the Other (Dufourmantelle, 2011/2019, p. 9).

Similarly, Aisha struggles to start a romantic relationship with Conor, who himself experienced sexual abuse as a child. Sexual assault appears as the ultimate violation of carnal hospitality with a "one-way touch." After her hospital visit, Conor accompanies Aisha to the hotel to stay the night before her interview (Berry, 2022, 1:13:33). However, Conor cannot visit Aisha in her room as her guest. He can only enter the hotel as a paying guest staying in a room on a different floor. Aisha and Conor spend the night together, simply lying next to each other. Aisha comes into Conor's room (Berry, 2022, 1:16:40). A backshot of Conor shows them sitting far away from each other on the bed. Aisha, the only one facing the camera, starts opening herself by asking for his consent to lie next to him: "I just want to lie down here with you. Is that okay?" (Berry, 2022, 1:17:25). The camera then shows a close-up of the empty bed, where they risk themselves by lying in proximity, but not touching. In a close-up of only their faces without their bodies, Aisha extends her hand, caresses his and holds it. Then, they interlock their fingers. The hand, reaching out to touch and not to harm, offers a new language of gentleness, of openness to vulnerability and painful memories, a language of reciprocity that goes both ways. By sharing their traumas and daring to touch or be touched physically and emotionally, the two women cross the body into the Other for interdependence.

In their films, Frank Berry and Anthony Chen put forward an ethics of care through touch that helps visibilise and nuance the underrepresented experiences of female refugees, largely absent from media and public debates. *Aisha* and *Drift* portray an embodied (in)hospitality that foregrounds the lived experiences of African female refugees and their interpersonal encounters in their migratory process from their homelands to Europe. The investigation reveals that, by shifting the attention from studying spatial demarcations in hospitality encounters to hospitality as an embodied practice, the displaced individual, usually considered a guest in the host country, is centred as the self who opens their bodies, in both physical and emotional dimensions, to a guest or Other. This approach of embodied hospitality can be productive for analysing other films that reflect not only migratory experiences, but also any traumatic process to highlight the lived experiences of those with limited access to care and support.

Announcement

This investigation was made possible thanks to the grant *Ayuda para la Formación del Profesorado Universitario* (Ref. Ayuda FPU21/03856), funded by El Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades of the Spanish Government, to the Erasmus+ project *Migration Narratives in*

European Media: Teaching, Learning, and Reflecting (Ref. 2023-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000154375), funded by the European Union, and to the research project *Historia crítica de la literatura étnica norteamericana VI: Más allá de la hospitalidad: Revisión de la acogida y rechazo en la cultura norteamericana* (Ref. PID2019-108754GB-I00), funded by La Agencia Estatal de Investigación and El Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación of the Spanish Government.

References

Amnesty International. (2021). End Direct Provision. https://www.amnesty.ie/end-direct-provision/

Amores, J. J., Arcila-Calderón, C., & González-de-Garay, B. (2020). The gendered representation of refugees using visual frames in the main Western European media. *Gender Issues*, *37*(4), 291–314. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-020-09248-1

Apthorpe, M., Burtschell, C., Burton, S., Gibson, L., & Lightfoot, F. (2019). Challenges for Female Refugees and Asylum Seekers. *Anthropology of Aid at Manchester University*. https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/anthropology-of-aid/the-issues/refugees-and-asylum-seekers/2019-2020-challenges-for-female-refugees-and-asylum-seekers/

Arias, R. (2020). Neo-Victorian negotiations of hospitality: An introduction. *European Journal of English Studies*, *24*(3), 197–207. https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2020.1875978

Barker, J. (2009). *The Tactile Eye. Touch and the Cinematic Experience*. University of California Press.

Bartolomei, L., Eckert, R., & Pittaway, E. (2014). "What happens there … follows us here": Resettled but still at risk: Refugee women and girls in Australia. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, *30*(2), 45–56. https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.39618

Berry, F. (Director, Writer). (2022). *Aisha* [Film]. BBC Film; Screen Ireland; Subotica; Wavelength.

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso.

Chen, A. (Director). (2023). *Drift* [Film]. Aim Media; BFI; Cor Cordium Productions.

Clapp, J., & Ridge, E. (Eds.). (2016). *Security and Hospitality in Literature and Culture*. Routledge.

Derrida, J. (1999). Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida. In R. Kearney, & M. Dooley (Eds.), *Questioning Ethics* (pp. 75–93). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203450833

Derrida, J. (2000a). Hostipitality (B. Stocker, & F. Morlock, Trans.). *Angelaki*, *5*(3), 3–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/09697250020034706

Derrida, J. (2000b). *Of Hospitality* (R. Bowlby, Trans.). Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1997)

Dufourmantelle, A. (2012). L'hospitalité, une valeur universelle? [Hospitality: A Universal Value?]. *Insistance*, *8*(2), 57–62. https://doi.org/10.3917/insi.008.0057

Dufourmantelle, A. (2013). Hospitality – Under Compassion and Violence. In T. Claviez (Ed.), *The Conditions of Hospitality* (pp. 13–23). Fordham University Press.

Dufourmantelle, A. (2018). *Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living* (K. Payne, & V. Sallé, Trans.). Fordham University Press. (Original work published 2013).

Dufourmantelle, A. (2019). *In Praise of Risk* (S. Miller, Trans.). Fordham University Press. (Original work published 2011)

Dumm, T. (2008). *Loneliness as a Way of Life*. Harvard University Press.

Elsaesser, T., & Hagener, M. (2015). *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Gerbner, G. (1972). Violence in Television Drama: Trends and Symbolic Functions. In G. A. Comstock, & E. A. Rubinstein (Eds.), *Television and Social Behavior* (pp. 28–187). Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior.

Gerke, A. E., Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan, S., & San José Rico, P. (Eds.). (2020). *The Poetics and Politics of Hospitality in US Literature and Culture*. Brill.

Hilson, M. (2016). A Dwarf at the Table: Hospitality and the Non-Normate Body in Modern Literature. In J. Clapp, & E. Ridge (Eds.), *Security and Hospitality in Literature and Culture* (pp. 94–107). Routledge.

Kearney, R. (2019). Double hospitality: Between word and touch. *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion*, *1*(1), 71–89. https://doi.org/10.1163/25889613-00101005

Lévinas, E. (1969). *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Duquesne University Press. (Original work published 1961)

Manzanas, A. M., & Benito, J. (2017). *Hospitality in American Literature and Culture*. Routledge.

Manzanas, A. M., & Hernández, D. (Eds.). (2021). *Cine y Hospitalidad.* Ediciones de la Universidad de Salamanca.

Naficy, H. (2001). *An Accented Cinema*. Princeton University Press.

Orav, A. (2023). Migrant Women and the EU Labour Market: Overcoming Double Discrimination. *European Parliamentary Research Service*. www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747905/EPRS_BRI(2023)747905_EN.pdf

Paszkiewicz, K. (2020). Touch as proximate distance: Post-phenomenological ethics in the cinema of Isabel Coixet. *Film-Philosophy*, *24*(1), 22–45. https://doi.org/10.3366/film.2020.0127

Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). *Matters of Care*. University of Minnesota Press.

Shire, W. (2009). Home. *Amnesty International*. https://www.amnesty.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/home-by-warsan-shire.pdf

Still, J. (2010). *Derrida and Hospitality*. Edinburgh University Press.

The Forced Migration Research Network, University of New South Wales. (2017). The World's Biggest Minority? Refugee Women and Girls in the Global Compact on Refugees. https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/59e5f4447.pdf

UNHCR. (2024). *UNHCR's Refugee Population Statistics Database*. https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press
Vol 50, No 2 (2026)
E-ISSN 2450-4580

Ewa Antoszek, Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, Poland

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.2.68-79

Silent Trees (2024): Crossing the Border to "Fortress Europe[1]"

ABSTRACT
This article analyzes contemporary European migration regimes through the 2021 Polish–Belarusian border crisis and its representation in *Silent Trees* (2024). It aims to examine how migrants experience both physical border crossing and subsequent social, legal, and cultural "borders". Focusing on the story of a teenage Kurdish girl, Runa, the article highlights the gendered and traumatic dimensions of displacement, including the phenomenon of "denied childhood", captivity, and hostipitality. It also explores the use of animation to articulate trauma. Finally, it indicates the human cost and ethical contradictions of restrictive migration policies.

KEYWORDS
migrations; borders; Fortress Europe; *Silent Trees*; captivity; hostipitality, border matrix; repeating border

1. Introduction

Even though human mobility, or what Appadurai (1990, p. 296) calls "ethnoscapes", has been an intrinsic and natural part of human history since its beginnings, the twenty-first century has been a witness to an unprecedented number of processes

[1] As Haley Widom explains: "Historically, the term Fortress Europe, originally the German *Festung Europa,* "[was] used for the part of continental Europe occupied by Nazi Germany during World War II and the envisioned defensive fortification of all of Nazi-occupied Europe against British and American invasion". More recently, "Fortress Europe" is used to refer to the way Europe controls its borders and detains immigrants. It is legitimized by negative public attitudes towards immigration and associated with much of the inhumane treatment done to migrants and refugees by European countries. Anti-immigration politicians and leaders have pushed "Fortress Europe" as a political agenda and have reinforced the idea through implementing or at least supporting strict anti-immigration policy" (Widom, 2022). Zygmunt Bauman's *Europe: An Unfinished Adventure* explains this particular characteristic. Quoting Denis de Rougemont, Bauman (2004) avers that "Europe discovered all the lands of the earth, but no one ever discovered Europe. It dominated every continent in succession, but was never dominated by any. And it invented a civilization which the rest of the world tried to imitate or was forcefully compelled to replicate, but a reverse process never (thus far, at any rate) happened. These are all 'hard facts' of a history that has brought us, and the rest of the planet with us, to the place we all now share. One can define Europe, de Rougemont suggests, by its 'globalizing function'" p. 9).

Ewa Antoszek, Katedra Anglistyki i Amerykanistyki, Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, Pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4A, 20-031 Lublin, antoszek@umcs.edu.pl, http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2714-3031

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

comprising "hedging and bracketing, constraining and denying free movement for all but a few" (Brady, 2022, p. 16). These processes appear hand in hand with exclusionary practices and othering of those seeking a new life for multiple and multifaceted reasons, rendering them as a potential threat to the somewhat illusory stability and integrity of nation-states. Matthew Carr, in his *Fortress Europe: Dispatches from a Gated Continent*, examines border crises that happened in Europe in the early 2000s, contributing to the rise of border wars, followed by various attempts to fortify European borders. In his analysis, Carr (2012) argues that

> At no time in history have so many people attempted to cross international borders without authorization, and at no time have so many governments gone to such lengths to try to stop them. All this raises crucial questions about human rights and global inequality, about security, migration, and the obligations of governments to refugees and noncitizens in a century that is likely to be dominated by the new global mobility. To some extent therefore, the confrontation between Europe and its unwanted intruders is specific to Europe, but it is also a reflection of a much wider phenomenon. (p. 7)

Carr's conclusions resonate even more in the second decade of the 21st century that has witnessed multiple migration and border crises all over the world. The beginning of this decade was marked by a significant crisis on the eastern border of Europe, between Poland and Belarus. Before 2021, as Mieczysława Zdanowicz (2023) explains, the previous largest migration crisis in Europe of 2015 resulted in "more than 2 million third-country nationals . . . reported to have entered EU Member States illegally" (p.103). She indicates that "The people who came to Europe were mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, and other Middle Eastern and African countries" and "The reasons for the increased migration were unstable political and economic situations and warfare" (p.104). Zdanowicz (2023) admits that the 2015 crisis "also had its consequences in Poland and contributed to Poland's violation of the principles of the Common European Asylum Policy by not fulfilling the country's relocation obligations", but the 2021 contingency "took a slightly different form" (p.104).

From today's perspective, it can be concluded that the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border was manufactured by Alexander Lukashenko (supported by Vladimir Putin) as part of the hybrid war with the EU and NATO, and its aim was to destabilize both the bordering countries, including Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, as well as NATO's eastern flank. The migrants, "invited" or lured to Belarus under the false promise of an easy passage to the EU, became pawns in the hands of the dictator, experiencing hardships, violence, and pushbacks from both sides. Zdanowicz (2023) explains the mechanism behind this crisis in the following way:

> Lukashenko's regime artificially created migratory pressure on the Polish–Belarusian border, which is also the external border of the EU, in response to the sanctions imposed on Belarus in

> connection with the rigged presidential elections and mass persecution of the opposition. At the same time, this crisis part of a hybrid operation conducted by the Belarusian secret services, was to be a test of the condition and defense readiness of NATO's eastern flank and was intended to weaken the EU's international authority. (pp. 104–105)

Anna Dyner (2022) confirms these conclusions, arguing that "Initially, they wanted to divert attention from the country's internal situation and undermine the international position of their western neighbours while forcing the EU to negotiate the sanctions. During the crisis, these goals evolved into a multi-faceted hybrid operation backed by Russia". She also identifies two phases of the crisis – the first one, a preliminary one, was "a relatively small-scale operation against Lithuania" that began in the spring of 2021. The second phase, began in August 2012 and "was aimed mainly at Poland" (Dyner, 2022). Dyner (2022) notes that "The second stage has been the much longer and more demanding phase because of the intensity of the Belarusian and Russian propaganda, as well as the scale of attacks by migrants on Polish border infrastructure and the number of attempts to cross the border irregularly in 2021", a situation that has continued ever since.

The crisis affected the migrants mentioned above, as they were lured to Belarus under false pretenses and ended up in terrible conditions on the Polish-Belarusian border with literally no possibility to obtain international protection. Some of them remained in the limbo of no-man's land between Poland and Belarus for weeks, many died trying to cross the border; most experienced violence at the hands of either Belarusian soldiers or the Polish Border Guard, including pushbacks. Such an instrumental treatment of people, as well as breaking of the law and international conventions, drew attention of both Polish and international media that reported violations of human rights at the border, which was soon suppressed by the introduction of the state of emergency in the area. Nevertheless, in spite of these restrictions, the events from the Polish-Belarusian border reverberated all over the world first through the social media coverage, followed by films, including Agnieszka Holland's *Green Border* (2023), that reflected the abuse befalling migrants trying to cross the border to "Fortress Europe".

Agnieszka Zwiefka's *Silent Trees* (2024), which combines documentary and fiction, can be described as a symbolic continuation of Agnieszka Holland's *Green Border* (2023). It tells the story of Runa, a 16-year-old Kurdish girl, and her family. They escape persecutions in Iraq and find themselves stranded on the Polish-Belarusian border before they finally arrive in Poland. Zwiefka, similar to Holland, documents the migrant experience of being caught in limbo on the border, where cruelty and death become a common occurrence, but her film focuses on the period after the crossing. In Runa's case, it is the time after her mother's death, which forces her to grow up quickly and take care of the family.

Silent Trees documents the process of border crossing, but goes beyond that and follows the family in Poland, depicting multiple and manifold difficulties they encounter on their path to change their fate. The purpose of my essay is to analyze what crossing the border to "Fortress Europe" means to those who are forced to do that by external circumstances and how they cope with the trauma of border crossing and deal with everyday obstacles and challenges in their new place of living, adjusting to new circumstances and crossing other "repeating border[s]" (Benito & Manzanas, 2002, p. 4).

2. *Silent Trees* (2024) – the plot summary

The story opens with Runa's account of her family's strenuous journey through the winter woods to cross the border to Poland. She recollects difficult conditions and fear accompanying her through this trek, together with some bad premonitions about its outcome. The scene is shot at the refugee center, which informs the viewer that Runa has managed to cross the border. In that way, such an opening is, in a sense, anticlimactic – we know that the family has crossed the border and made it to Poland. Thus, unlike in Agnieszka Holland's *Green Border*, the focus of the narrative is not going to be on the perils of the journey solely, but the film also shows subsequent physical and metaphorical borders migrants have to cross after crossing the physical border.

In Runa's case, the next border to cross is that of reconciliation with her mother's death, since the mother manages to cross to Poland, yet she dies in a hospital in Hajnówka, Poland, as the journey and the conditions in the woods exhausted her completely. Not only does Runa have to deal with the trauma of the crossing and her mother's premature death, but she also becomes the head of the family, taking care of her younger brothers and helping her father, who suffers from a complete breakdown and seems incapable of any action. Runa, with the help of her new Polish friends, manages to overcome formal obstacles and leave the refugee center to move with her family to Gdańsk, where they are supposed to start their new life. They receive an apartment there, and the children become enrolled at school, which constitutes another metaphorical border to be crossed by Runa and her siblings, as they have to settle down in a new place, and this time they are almost completely on their own.

In the meantime, Runa, with the assistance of some activists, attempts to mobilize her father to become the head of the family, find a job, and take care of his children while he oscillates between surrendering and fighting. This mobilization is particularly important in light of the court hearing to determine their status in Poland, awaiting the father. Runa's efforts and endeavors are suddenly interrupted by the problems with her eyesight that require immediate surgery. The film ends with Runa's recovery from the surgery and on a semi-optimistic note, informing the viewer that after a year's wait, Runa's family has been granted temporary

asylum in Poland, but there are still people trying to cross the border in the Białowieża forest who die during this perilous journey.

3. Gendered experience of migration; "denied childhood" (Brady, 2022, p. 10)

It is very significant that the main character in this story is a teenage girl, Runa, and thus the narrative focuses on the female (and adolescent) experience of migration, since, as Mary Pat Brady argues, quoting Caroline Archambault, "[w]omen are more commonly portrayed in migration scholarship . . . as 'left behind'" and "[m]igration scholarship . . . depends for its models on an image of the young, male migrant, searching for wage labor. Women in this model are viewed as beside the point, merely passive bystanders to male decisions" (Brady, 2022, p. 181). Such an approach carries serious consequences, because, " . . . this image of women reinscribes a patriarchal narrative of women as passive agents in a system of movement in which they are prohibited from participating because of the high costs of social reproduction" (p. 181). However, Brady maintains, it does not mean, that women do not migrate, but "migration scholars argue that women face very different hurdles when migrating, and a vastly different set of narratives accompanies those hurdles" (p. 181). Accounts of various kinds, including, for example, Ivannia Villalobos-Vindas's documentary *Casa en tierra ajena* (2017), which depicts forced migration from the Northern Triangle, reveal that female migrants are much more exposed to sexual assault, violence, and abuse during their journeys to their destinations. They are also more likely to die, due to their lesser physical stamina or the caring role they perform for the dependents travelling with them.

In *Silent Trees,* the whole family undertakes the journey; women are not "left behind", but Runa's mother, who is pregnant and thus more vulnerable, dies in the hospital after the border crossing. It is a multiple turning point for Runa, as she not only has to deal with her mother's death, but actually takes over all the responsibilities in the family. From then on, the director depicts a reversal of the parent-child roles, since Runa is the one who becomes the head of the family. The father seems incapable of any action, he is lost in mourning, and as a result, Runa takes over, caring for both her brothers and her father. It has to be noted that the boys are also depicted in a specific manner – their image is not sugarcoated: they are often presented as naughty and misbehaving. The whole situation has certainly put a strain on them, and this is probably how they deal with their mother's death and the new circumstances of their lives. However, it also seems that they are more entitled than Runa is, which may be a cultural aspect. The boys attempt to treat Runa like a servant, and slowly but consistently, she begins to oppose that. Nevertheless, for the major part of the narrative, Runa behaves like a provider for the family; she learns Polish, and she becomes a translator, helping her father

deal with all kinds of documents or her brothers with their student IDs at school. In Gdańsk, she also accompanies her father to help him look for a job. We are not familiar with the family's history back at home, but one of the workers in the refugee center suggests that it was, in fact, the mother who was the head of this family. That question is left unexplained. However, later on in Gdańsk, the father undertakes some effort to get back to the role of a parent.

That dynamics illustrates both Runa's parentification and the mechanism of the appearance of "children without childhoods" (Brady, 2022, p. 9) or the concept of "denied childhood" (p. 10). Mary Pat Brady uses these terms to illustrate the situation of people of color in the U.S., maintaining that "people of color were figured as perpetual children who were nonetheless robbed of their childhood, denied the protection of innocence the label childhood offers as a privilege" (p. 8). Brady's concepts applied in the context provided in *Silent Trees* showcase analogies between Runa's situation and that of children of color who were forced to work beyond their capacities and, at the same time, denied opportunities others got effortlessly by birth. In Runa's case, persecutions in her country of origin, as well as the physical trek across the border, with all that befalls the family on the way, inevitably deprive Runa of her childhood. The subsequent events in Poland, in turn, fast-forward the process of her growing up. Assumed gender roles aggravate these changes, since, as a female, Runa is expected to take care of others. Throughout most of the narrative, Runa embodies the caring figure who prioritizes others' needs over her own. Weronika, her friend from Białystok, notices this immediately and keeps reminding Runa that she needs to take care of herself. The eye surgery seems to be such a moment with the potential for restoring the proper order of things. It is as if Runa's body objected to the abnormality of the whole situation, and relative normalcy must finally return.

Finally, gender plays an important role in the very account of the border crossing, as we hear this tale in Runa's own voice. She is the narrator of this part of the plot, and the viewer listens to Runa telling this story in her own language. In this way, the director does not deprive a teenage female migrant of her agency; conversely, Zwiefka provides space for Runa to voice this story. Owing to that, unlike many other migrants, Runa is neither silent nor silenced, and she can present her own version of this experience and its consequences.

4. Animating trauma: visualizing the unspeakable

Runa's agency is also reflected in the drawings she creates to complete her story. Throughout the film, Runa's voice accompanies the animated sketches that complete the official account of the family's story, depicting various, often difficult moments from Runa's life. In one of the opening scenes, we see Runa drawing in the refugee center, and the images later in the film turn into an animation that recounts the family's journey through the woods. In this

case, Runa resorts to drawing to face her trauma caused by the strenuous and dangerous journey through the forest. While drawing, she admits that she was scared during this trip and had some bad premonitions about it. In the animation, the woods become alive, evoking analogies to a Shakespearean forest, and the branches attack people around Runa to finally encircle and trap her as well. Runa goes back to these events later on in the film when talking to her friend and admits her mixed feelings about the woods. The trees permanently invoke fear; at the same time, when she sees them, she hears her mother's voice, which both reminds her of her loss but also, in a way, gives her consolation. Forest animations reappear throughout the film, completing the account of the journey – at some point, for example, Runa is escaping the Border Guard chasing the migrants. She witnesses the terrible death of another migrant who drowns in the swamp. During this flight, the tree branches become replaced with barbed wire that traps her and cuts off her only route back, leaving Runa stranded on the edge of the rock. This animated story has a fragmentary character – the animations are unfinished at first and become completed later in the film. It may be argued that such a rendition reflects Runa's fragmented life. It echoes her condition of being stranded in all kinds of limbos, with no way out. It also represents Runa's traumatized self – fragmented and scattered after the physical border crossing and other metaphorical border crossings she faces in her life.

Another animated section makes an analogy to Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1895), carrying Runa's scream from place to place, while turning off lights as well as breaking and shattering all the objects made of glass in its path, similar to her life – broken and shattered by the crossing and by her mother's death. There is also an animation from the court proceedings that is very Kafkaesque in its character, where rows of clerks stamp indifferently hundreds of decisions pertaining to the fate of people seeking asylum. In this section, Runa stands in front of the court, even though she is a minor and should not be legally accountable, and attempts to explain the family's situation to the judge. In this scene, there is an eponymous image of a giant stamp sealing unavoidably the fate of a people with an ominous thud, which once again implies the inhumanity of the system and the powerlessness of those who face it. Finally, even in an apparently hopeful scene when an animated version of Runa flies in the skies together with birds, she is pulled down by a rope and trapped again, which indicates her vulnerability.

Lev Manovich, in his analysis of animation, claims that it "foregrounds its artificial character, openly admitting that its images are mere representations. Its visual language is more aligned to the graphic than to the photographic" (Manovich, 2001, p.298). In his description, the word "mere" implies that this form is inferior to cinema, which he states overtly in the further part of his analysis. I argue that animation, particularly the one included in a film, and turning it into a hybrid form, should be treated on a par with the cinematic fragments. In the

case of *Silent Trees* it creates a parallel story of Runa. Even though the animated sections are scattered and intertwined with the main plot, as mentioned above, when interpreted in sequence, they create an alternative testimony. Runa resorts to drawing when she recollects the most difficult events from her life. She uses this medium in case her voice fails her in order not to leave things unspoken. Owing to that, in case her voice fails, her creativity will take over, and the story will be told till the end.

Such an interpretation of Runa's animated story can also be supported by the arguments Nea Ehrlich (2013) provides in her analysis of documentary animations,[2] which "focuses less on the binary opposition between fact and fiction and concentrates instead on assessing the documentary quality of the works to understand their representational viability" (p. 248). In her paper, Ehrlich argues for their "political significance", particularly in the light of "the continually shifting ideas about documentation" (p. 248). She also postulates that "animation techniques increase the animator's agency by easily eliminating or adding visual elements to enhance a message … [which] elucidates animation's informative potential" (pp. 250–251). In the conclusion of her analysis, Ehrlich enumerates "the advantages of using animation as a documentary aesthetic [which] include the ability to reach new and multi-cultural audiences, engage with topics otherwise visually un-representable and, through unique formal characteristics, influence viewer reception of a work" (p. 266). The latter alludes to the changing role of the viewer, since, as Ehrlich maintains, "although animation can be used to create a documentary aesthetic that distances viewers from the events and people portrayed, it essentially acts as an informational 'boomerang'"(p. 266), as through animations "engagement with the difficult political content is thus facilitated alongside a potential to draw viewers' attention in a highly visual information age (pp. 266–267). The animated sections in *Silent Trees* fulfill the functions mentioned above and thus expand the film's documentary capacity beyond the limits of photographic representation. At the same time, they enhance viewer engagement by transforming fragmented memory into a powerful visual testimony that bridges personal narrative and broader systemic critique.

5. Captivity and hostipitality

Analyzing the situation of racialized children against the scales of captivity, Mary Pat Brady claims that in Western thought, "[t]he concept of freedom is materialized through mobility, and power is materialized through the ways in which it can

[2] In *Animating Truth: Documentary and Visual Culture in the 21st Century*, Ehrlich adopts Sheila Sofian's definition and describes it as "any animated film that deals with non-fiction material" (Ehrlich, 2021, p. 36). Thus, this definition can also be deployed to describe animated sections in *Silent Trees*.

regulate and constrain movement" (Brady, 2022, p. 12). Consequently, all over the world, we can observe the cases when free flows of goods are paralleled by restrained movement and mobility of people. Referring to the situation on the U.S.-Mexico border, Mike Davis argues that it functions like a dam – opening its valves when needed and closing them when the economic situation in the receiving country becomes worse (Davis, 2008, p. 27). Enrique Ochoa calls it the "revolving door policy" (Ochoa, 1998, p. 125). As a result, "[t]his double play crystallizes in the practice of enclosure, eviction, forced removal, deportation, imprisonment, surveillance, and siege" (Brady, 2022, p. 13) and "[t]he centrality of movement to liberal subjectivity compels the economies of captivity into the quotidian logics of all subjected to sovereign practices …" (p. 13). Developing her argument, Brady claims that "captivity doesn't need to include iron bars to constrain choices" (p. 17). Contemporary examples of captivity also include forced migration and life "with the looming threat of deportation amounts to a form of containment, a bracketing …" (p. 35). Such a concept of captivity described by Mary Pat Brady correlates with Derrida's concept of hostipitality which he describes in his essay "Hostipitality" (Derrida, 2000) and which, according to Derrida assumes the potential of hostility in any act of hospitality and thus suggests an aporetic and tenuous nature of hospitality (Derrida, 2000).

Silent Trees illustrates the interplay between captivity and hostipitality through the vicissitudes of Runa's family. At the beginning, they are literally captive: in the Białowieża forest first and then in the refugee camp. Then, subsequently, other forms of captivity appear: the family members do not speak Polish, which both limits their interactions with the workers at the center and excludes them from exercising fully their (already limited) rights. Their unclear and undetermined legal status also resembles a form of capture, making them feel as if they were in limbo, uncertain of their current situation and their future. Linguistic exclusion also leads to acts of hostipitality, as they are immediately perceived as "Other". In fact, Runa's skill for languages alleviates this situation to some extent, as she becomes a translator. However, they are still regarded with suspicion by the people they meet.

One of the very profound examples of hostipitality includes the father's visit to the barber's in Gdańsk where he looks for a job and does not get it, be it because of his rusty skills or for a completely different reason that is left unspoken, yet somehow can be sensed in this scene. It is a particularly grave situation for Baravan, as he gets this semi-hostile treatment from a Ukrainian migrant working in Poland. This scene also alludes to the differentiation into "good" and "bad" migrants that was especially visible in Poland after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. In these discussions, both politicians and Polish citizens would delineate clearly the division between Ukrainian war refugees and migrants crossing through the Polish-Belarusian border. That categorization pertains to the situation

of Runa's family as well: they are hosted in Poland, but they are still treated as foreign, strange, "Other", due to their skin color, origins, and religion.

There are several other examples of them experiencing hostipitality: at some point, Runa shushes her siblings during their particularly lively and loud play, telling them that "they are not in Kurdistan", implying that such a behavior may meet with criticism or even scorn here. Runa's father is suggested to cut his beard shorter, as Polish people associate longer beards worn by a person with a slightly darker skin color with terrorism. He follows the advice and takes it even further, as he shaves his beard off completely before the court hearing, to avoid any potential connotations with terrorists. In that case, the intersection of race, class, and gender plays an important role, as brown-skinned men are much more likely to be perceived as a potential threat and experience hostility.

6. The border and border matrix

Images from the Polish-Belarusian border constitute a framework for this narrative. The border first appears at the very beginning of the film, as Runa's story of crossing is interspersed with documentary shots from the border depicting migrants sleeping in tents, cooking snow for water, and their attempts to get help and asylum in Poland against the Border Guard's announcements, followed by barking dogs and shots fired to scare people from approaching the fence. It is complemented by the information about the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border. Then we hear all kinds of desperate pleas for help and asylum in different languages when a drone-like take of the camera moves over snow-covered trees of the Białowieża forest and the title, *Silent Trees*, appears on the screen, symbolically suggesting that the trees have been often the only witnesses to the atrocities befalling migrants, yet since they are silent, mute, they only absorb these stories without the capacity to tell them.

As mentioned above, the film ends with documentary shots from the forest as well. There are several snapshots of abandoned tents with clothes and paraphernalia left by migrants. It evokes images from other borders as well, including well-known images from the U.S.-Mexico border. In that way, the director indicates analogies between borderscapes all over the world. Of course, different borders differ in various aspects, including their geophysical characteristics, but they also share some features, which means the experience of border crossing is different and similar at the same time. In his analysis of the U.S.-Mexico border, Paul Ganster (2016) suggests "[t]here are many ways in which the U.S.-Mexican border provides a paradigmatic case of global border development" (p. xvi), alluding to the aforementioned analogies. In recent years, the U.S.-Mexico border has served as a matrix for other borders. Walls, fences, concertina wire, and aggravated surveillance that have been present for some time along the U.S.-Mexico border have become a common sight in other countries as well, including the Polish-Belarusian border. Moreover, just as

Mexico has served as a buffer zone for migration from Central America, so is Poland beginning to perform this function for those trying to cross to "Fortress Europe". The long, perilous, and strenuous journey either through a desert or through a swamp in the Białowieża forest can turn equally deadly. Border crossers are often unaware of their whereabouts or which side of the border they are on. They have to rely on the GPS in their phones, which makes contemporary borders both treacherously elusive and yet very tangible at the same time, with all the cruelty and violence happening there. The film also refers to this aspect in its final scene with its dedication to the memory of Runa's mother, Avin, and other people who have died crossing, looking for a better life.

7. Conclusion

Matthew Carr analyzes the origins of the European Union and explains its founding principles, maintaining that "The project of European integration was a response to the darkest period of European history, which had spawned the Nazi and Soviet dictatorships, fascism, two world wars, and genocide. The founders of the European Union aspired to build a different kind of Europe" (Carr, 2012, p. 6). The noble precepts have changed with time, as "In their determination to limit or at least slow down the pace of irregular migration, European governments have created an extraordinarily elaborate and complex system of exclusion and control that is simultaneously ruthless, repressive, devious, chaotic, and dysfunctional, with consequences that are often strikingly at odds with its stated rationalizations and objectives" (p. 245). Carr also observes that these transformations are not exclusive to Europe, but, unfortunately, "To some extent, Fortress Europe is only one component in a wider wall or series of walls that have been erected across the industrialized West in the last twenty years, primarily in order to lock out the world's poor, though those barriers have also served to lock them in" (p. 231). The "dry" legal language of restrictive migration policies ignores ignores their human cost and ethical contradictions. All these factors make them cross multiple borders on a daily basis and some of these crossings turn into lethal traps – both literal and metaphorical ones. Many of such stories remain invisible or become silenced. Agnieszka Zwiefka's *Silent Trees* (2024) illustrates these processes and, at the same time, asks questions about their validity and sense. *Silent Trees* is a great contribution to the discussions on migrations and migrants that attempt to challenge their stereotypical representations and replace them with images reflecting the complexity of this phenomenon.

Announcements

The research for this paper was supported by the Erasmus+ project 2023-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000154375, Migration Narratives in European Media: Teaching, Learning, and Reflecting (MigraMedia).

References

Appadurai, A. (1990). Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. *Theory, Culture, and Society*, *7*, 295.

Bauman, Z. (2004). *Europe: An Unfinished Adventure*. Cambridge.

Benito, J., & Manzanas, A. M. (2002). Border(lands) and Border Writing: Introductory Essay. In J. Benito, & A. M. Manzanas (Eds.), *Literature and Ethnicity in the Cultural Borderlands* (pp. 1–21). Brill Rodopi.

Brady, M. P. (2022). *Scales of Captivity: Racial Capitalism and the Latinx Child*. Duke University Press.

Carr, M. (2012). *Fortress Europe: Dispatches from a Gated Continent*. The New Press.

Davis, M. (2008). *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City*. Verso.

Derrida, J. (2000). Hostipitality. *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, *5*(3), 3–18.

Dyner, A. M. (2022). *The Border Crisis as an Example of Hybrid Warfare*. https://www.pism.pl/publications/the-border-crisis-as-an-example-of-hybrid-warfare

Ehrlich, N. (2013). Animated documentaries: aesthetics, politics and viewer engagement. In S. Buchan (Ed.), *Pervasive Animation* (pp. 248–271). Routledge.

Ehrlich, N. (2021). *Animating Truth: Documentary and Visual Culture in the 21st Century*. Edinburgh University Press.

Ganster, P., & D. E. Lorey. (2016). *The U.S.-Mexican Border Today: Conflict and Cooperation in Historical Perspective*. Rowman and Littlefield.

Holland, A. (Director). (2023). *Green Border*. [Film]. Metro Films, Astute Films, Blick Productions, Marlene Film Production, Beluga Tree.

Manovich, L. (2001). *The Language of New Media.* Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Munch, E. (1895). *The Scream*. [Painting]. National Gallery, Oslo, Norway.

Ochoa, E. C. **(**1998). Constructing Fronteras: Teaching the History of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands in the Age of Proposition 187 and Free Trade. *Radical History Review*, *70*, 119–130.

Vilalobos-Vindas, I. (Director). (2016). *Casa en tierra ajena* (*Home in a Foreign Land*). [Film]. Universidad Estatal a Distancia (UNED), Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR), Consejo Nacional de Rectores (CONARE).

Widom, H. (2022). *Fortress Europe: The EU's colonial-era external borders: Spain & Morocco*. https://www.american.edu/sis/centers/transatlantic-policy/20220412-fortress-europe.cfm

Zdanowicz, M. (2023). The Migration Crisis on the Polish–Belarusian Border. *Białostockie Studia Prawnicze/Bialystok Legal Studies*, *28*(1), 103–115.

Zwiefka, A. (Director). (2024). *Silent Trees*. [Film]. Agnieszka Zwiefka, Zofia Kujawska, Chilli Productions, Ma.ja.de Filmproduktions, HBO Max.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press
Vol 50, No 2 (2026)
E-ISSN 2450-4580

Małgorzata Martynuska, University of Rzeszów, Poland

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.2.80-92

"We are force": Border Crossings and Intergenerational Trauma in Gabriela Garcia's *Of Women and Salt* (2021)

ABSTRACT
Gabriela Garcia's debut novel *Of Women and Salt* (2021) offers an extensive view of Latinx immigration, illustrating how leaving one's homeland affects not only migrants themselves but also subsequent generations. The article discusses the complexities of remembering, inheriting, and transmitting trauma by exploring the different experiences of Cuban refugees and Salvadoran migrants who cross the U.S.-Mexico border illegally. Secondly, the analysis focuses on the complex themes combining physical and sexual abuse, fractured mother-daughter relationships, drug addiction, and structural violence, which produce or display intergenerational trauma inherited by matrilineal descendants in the Cuban family. Subsequently, the article discusses the issues of undocumented immigration, border crossings, detention, family separation, and deportation, which trigger intrusive memories and function in the novel to express the Salvadoran characters' individual trauma as well as the collective trauma of other detained migrants. The phrase "We are force" resonates through both intertwining storylines, denoting inherent strength that prevails against traumatic experiences.

KEYWORDS
Cuban refugees; Salvadoran immigrants; intergenerational trauma; collective trauma; border; detention

1. Introduction

Gabriela Garcia's[1] novel *Of Women and Salt* (2021) tells a multigenerational Cuban family saga intertwining with the story of a lone Salvadoran mother and her daughter. The book's broad setting combines four countries: El Salvador, Mexico, Cuba, and the American states of Florida and Texas. In a nonlinear narration, the female voices alternate through personal stories that uncover the family history, focusing on matrilineal descendants. The spatial and time shifts,

[1] Gabriela Garcia, a daughter of immigrants from Mexico and Cuba, is a fiction writer and poet. She is the recipient of a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer's Award and a Steinbeck Fellowship from San Jose State University. Her first novel *Of Women and Salt* (2021) was named the best book of the year by *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. (Gabriela Garcia's Biography. Retrieved January 20, 2025, from https://www.gabrielagarciawriter.com/).

Małgorzata Martynuska, Instytut Anglistyki, Uniwersytet Rzeszowski, Al. mjr. Kopisto 2B, 35-315 Rzeszów, mmartynuska@ur.edu.pl, http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5028-5046

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

spanning from 1866 to 2019, cumulatively combine into a consistent storyline linking the central female characters. Through twelve chapters, we read about María Isabel, the 19th century cigar roller in Camagüey, her great-granddaughter Dolores in contemporary Cuba, and Dolores's daughter Carmen living with her daughter Jeanette in Miami. The immigration subplot focuses on the Salvadoran characters of Gloria and Ana–a mother and her daughter – who are taken from Miami to a detention center in Texas and then deported to Mexico. The central protagonist, Jeanette, is a contemporary character with connections, often familial, to the novel's other protagonists.

The article discusses the complexities of remembering, inheriting, and transmitting trauma by exploring the different experiences of Cuban refugees and Salvadoran migrants who cross the U.S.-Mexico border illegally. Secondly, the analysis focuses on the complex themes combining physical and sexual abuse, fractured mother-daughter relationships, drug addiction, and structural violence, which produce or display intergenerational trauma inherited by matrilineal descendants in the Cuban family. Subsequently, the article discusses the issues of undocumented immigration, border crossings, detention, family separation, and deportation, which trigger intrusive memories and function in the novel to express the Salvadoran characters' individual trauma.

The realm of trauma studies, situated initially within medicine and psychology, gained significant literary criticism with Cathy Caruth's publication *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) and her essay collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995). Trauma is related to an overwhelming event that an individual faced in the past and which has particular implications on his/her mental state at present (Craps, 2014, p. 55). The traumatic event, located within a specific cultural and historical context, is often associated with experiences of extreme poverty, war, violence, or displacement from their home country when individuals have to struggle for security and survival (Schick, 2011, p. 1840). Balaev (2008) affirms that the traumatic experience impacts the person's identity formation because his/her response to dramatic events "disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self" (p. 150). Intrusive memories of traumatic events appear suddenly and involuntarily, making the trauma survivor re-experience the distressing occurrence which leads to endless cycles of suffering (Schönfelder, 2013, p. 32).

Trauma studies closely intertwine with the growing recognition of memory studies, defined by Erll (2011) as a "broad convergence field, with contributions from cultural history, social psychology, media archaeology, political psychology, and comparative literature" (p. 1). Returning memories of trauma are frequently incomprehensible, and victims may struggle to articulate them; as Caruth (1995) notes, "The danger of speech, of integration into the narration of memory, may lie not in what it cannot understand, but that it understands too much" (p. 155).

She argues that traumatic memory works irrationally and may destroy the truth because the original experience of trauma may be "losing the precision and the force" (p. 153). The critics of Caruth's theory place less emphasis on the incomprehensible and unspeakable aspects of trauma (Schönfelder, 2013, p. 31). Pederson (2014) presents an alternative theory claiming that "trauma is memorable and describable", and the victim's reluctance to speak of their trauma does not prove that they do not remember it (p. 334). Moreover, the distressing feeling is experienced on individual or collective levels because trauma can both disrupt a community and hold it together (Schönfelder, 2013, p. 40). As an illustration, the cases of the genocide of Native Americans and the slavery of Africans in North America resulted in trauma remembered collectively by individuals sharing a similar ethnic descent (Balaev, 2008, p. 149).

Psychoanalysts and cultural theorists affirm that the effect of trauma can "transcend individual life-spans and continue on as subterranean anxieties" in subsequent generations (Krondorfer, 2016, p. 92). The phenomenon of the apparent transmission of traumatic patterns and memories from a trauma survivor to their descendants is called intergenerational trauma. People who survived historical disasters or went through adverse childhood experiences, such as physical or sexual abuse, emotional neglect, or parental separation, may pass the effects of those traumas to their children or grandchildren (Psychology Today, 2024). Individuals showing symptoms of intergenerational trauma exhibit emotional and psychological consequences of the distressing events the ancestors experienced (Balaev, 2008, p. 154). Those people did not directly go through the trauma themselves, so they do not have flashbacks of intrusive memories. Their stress response to trauma combines physical and mental health issues, which include "a heightened sense of vulnerability and helplessness, depression, suicidality, substance abuse, difficulty with relationships and attachment to others" (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2023).

Trauma theory and cultural memory studies intersect with literary studies. In the 1990s, trauma theorists developed new approaches to analyzing the impact of difficult histories, with particular attention to how such experiences are remembered and represented in cultural texts (Kennedy, 2020, p. 55). The notion that literature can function as testimony to otherwise inexpressible experiences established a new critical paradigm, one that has been employed, for instance, to convey knowledge about the Holocaust (p. 56). As Erll (2011) notes, literature is capable of vividly representing both individual and collective memory through narrative structures, symbols, and metaphors, thereby producing fictionalized accounts of remembering and forgetting (p. 2). The pattern of memory loss is exemplified in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, particularly in the depiction of Macondo, a town whose inhabitants are afflicted by an insomnia plague that gradually leads to amnesia. Writing within the realm

of magic realism, the author portrays the community's struggle against losing "the name and notion of things" (García Márquez, 1967/1971, p. 28). Rascovsky et al., (2009) argue that García Márquez anticipated, in literary form, a depiction of collective semantic dementia before the condition was formally identified in neurology (p. 2609). Thus, the novel illustrates how literary narratives can both mirror and anticipate scientific understandings of memory, reinforcing the role of fiction as a powerful medium for exploring the complexities of cultural and psychological trauma.

2. Intergenerational trauma and Cuban family

The first chapter establishes the connection between Victor Hugo's words: "We are force" and Cuban characters in the book. The novel begins in 1866 in Camagüey, Cuba, with the story of María Isabel, who works in a cigar factory. Although she endures misogyny from her male supervisors, María feels empowered by the lector's readings of the books: Cirilo Villaverde's iconic novel of Cuban race and class conflict, *Cecilia Valdés*, and Victor Hugo's historical novel, *Les Misérables*. The lector also reads a public letter from Victor Hugo to the workers of Cuba, in which the author asks, "Who are we, weakness?" and answers, "No, we are force" (Garcia, 2021, p. 17). María Isabel receives the copies of *Cecilia Valdés* and *Les Misérables*; the books become her family's inheritance. She marries the lector, but their happiness does not last long, as her husband is killed amid the political and social tensions of the Ten Years' War (1868–1878). María Isabel repeats the sentence "*We are force*" (Garcia, 2021, p. 26) at the moment of giving birth to her baby daughter, which is precisely the time of her husband's execution for alleged crimes against the government. Structural violence, defined by Chuya (2020) as violence "located within the social, political, and economic structure of society" (p. 20), becomes the source of trauma transmitted in subsequent generations of María Isabel's family. She writes a note, "We are force" (Garcia, 2021, p. 150) in her copy of *Les Misérables*, leaving a permanent mark of her struggle against hardships, and this phrase inspires her matrilineal descendants to rebel against the oppressive systems.

The cultural constructs of machismo and marianismo act as both risk and protective factors for oppression in Latinx communities (Zavala & Carabello, 2024, p. 2375). An exaggerated sense of manliness, known as machismo, combined with male dominance, patriarchy, and overdrinking increases the risk of family violence (Chuya, 2020, p. 34; Nolasco, 2022, p. 6). While machismo intrinsically interconnects with domestic abuse, marianismo contributes to the ways Latinx females react to violence. The concept of marianismo reflects the attributes of the Virgin Mary and refers to Latinx women's prime identification as mothers who sacrifice for the sake of their children (García-Leeds & Schneider, 2017, p. 314). The novel illustrates the impact of machismo on Latinx women with the story of María Isabel's great-

granddaughter, Dolores. She faces oppression from a brutal, sexually abusive, and heavy-drinking husband who becomes a threat to her children. Dolores feels empowered by the strong sense of marianismo, but her rebellion against machismo takes an unexpected turn when she commits the act of premeditated murder of the violent man. Her daughter Carmen watches her father's burning body, and this dramatic experience transitions into her silenced trauma. Dolores's choice to kill her husband and the imperative to silence the trauma create a legacy of suffering, which impacts the next generation of women in the family.

Despite immigrating to Miami and living in a wealthy suburb "among the Cuban elite, the First Wave" (Garcia, 2021, p. 37), Carmen is processing the trauma of violence in her family, which shapes how she performs her own motherhood. The ineffability of her traumatic memories impacts Carmen's relationship with her drug-addicted daughter, Jeanette, and further transcends into Jeanette's inherited trauma. Carmen's daughter silences the trauma of being sexually abused by her father because she believes that revealing the truth would destroy her mother. The Latinx female characters demonstrate a strong commitment to the family, defined as *familismo*, which involves prioritizing "family cohesiveness" over individual needs (Nolasco, 2022, p. 7). As observed by Zavala & Caraballo (2024), *familismo* is the main reason for the victims of domestic violence to remain silent about the abuse (p. 2379). Jeanette experiences trauma in her own home, a supposedly safe location that transforms into a threat-generating place. The novel demonstrates a dual perspective of home through the panther metaphor–the wild animal juxtaposing with the idea of domestic safety. When Carmen investigates violent, wild-animal-like noises from her neighbor's house, she discovers a panther in captivity. Despite the potential danger the panther creates, she does not report her neighbor to Miami Animal Control, confirming that the violence occurring within domestic space is kept out of public view. The panther trope metaphorically informs about the Latinx culture of silencing violence, suggesting that even if she acknowledged her daughter's sexual violation, Carmen would never report it. Silencing the truth about sexual abuse aggravates Jeanette's trauma. As affirmed by Phillips (2015, p. 65), "What makes silence dangerous in the aftermath of violence is that it invites and intensifies trauma".

Carmen and Jeanette's lives inextricably interconnect with the legacy of their ancestors. Jeanette believes that her mother's family history is the genesis of her own self-destruction, so she attempts to redefine her identity by visiting Cuba: "And even as a child, Jeanette understood that another narrative she couldn't access had shaped her life. She didn't have the vocabulary to say, *I want to know who I am, so I need to know who you've been*" (Garcia, 2021, p. 36). Cuba and her mother's past have existed as an imaginary mythology for Jeanette, corresponding with Cuban Americans' myth about the life-altering qualities of the pilgrimage to their ancestral island (Whitefield, 2018). In her grandmother's house in Cuba,

Jeanette finds the copies of *Cecilia Valdés* and *Les Misérables*, which inform about the family legacy; however, the books do not provide a "connective tissue" (Garcia, 2021, p. 140) for Jeanette's broken relations with Carmen. The trip to Cuba does not meet Jeanette's expectations because, as she narrates, "There is no Meaning here. Only questions" (Garcia, 2021, p. 140). Wondering whether "loss unspoken becomes an inherited trait" (Garcia, 2021, p. 38), Jeanette refers to the transmission of trauma in her family. María Isabel and her descendants find strength to endure hardship, but they are silencing their individual trauma, which transcends into intergenerational trauma.

The stories of Cuban and Salvadoran families intersect when Jeanette watches the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) authorities taking her Salvadoran neighbor, Gloria, into custody. Jeanette takes care of Gloria's daughter, Ana, while her mother is transported to the detention center in Texas. Initially, Jeanette provides shelter and support to the girl, but soon, persuaded by Carmen, she reports Ana to the police. Jeanette, an American of Cuban descent with no migratory experience, shows more solidarity with a minor separated from her mother than Carmen, the first-generation Cuban American who received refugee status just after she arrived in the USA. Carmen represents a broader perspective of Cuban Americans[2] who do not identify with other Latinx, claiming, "*we're* not like them, we belong here, *we're* political refugees" (Garcia, 2021, pp. 100–101). Jeanette confronts Carmen about her immigration experience and asks: "Do you ever think about how Cubans get all this special treatment, like literally you step on US ground and you have legal status" (Garcia, 2021, p. 36). Jeanette refers to the so-called "wet-foot, dry-foot policy", which, from 1995 to 2017, granted refugee status to Cubans who managed to reach the American shore. They were then qualified as legal U.S. residents who could eventually apply for citizenship (Florido, 2017). Cubans such as Carmen, who arrived in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution in the early 1960s, formed a part of the first wave of exiles admitted to the United States for resettlement. Their designation as refugees aligned with U.S. anti-communist propaganda during the Cold War (Duany, 2017), providing the American government with a clear incentive to emphasize repression in Cuba (Brown, 2022). In addition, these early Cuban exiles were predominantly light-skinned (Duany, 1999, p. 76), and their relative ease of acculturation into mainstream American society further contributed to their preferential treatment (Fulger, 2012). The juxtaposition of Cubans' privileged status with the treatment of Salvadorans underscores the unequal application of U.S. immigration law.

[2] The Cuban American community is unique from other Latinx immigrants due to various socioeconomic indicators, such as generally higher economic success than other Latinx, strong anti-Communist beliefs, and higher voting participation (Moreno, 2013).

3. Border crossings and Salvadoran immigrants

The novel negotiates the complexities of the U.S. immigration system, highlighting the difference between the legal status of a refugee and an illegal immigrant. These terms cannot be used interchangeably since each has different implications in the legal context. Refugees are individuals forcibly uprooted and escaping oppression in their home countries (Chak, 2018, p. 9); consequently, they are usually treated favorably in comparison with immigrants. However, recognizing Salvadorans as asylum seekers has been politically contentious, given that the United States provided military assistance to the Salvadoran government during the civil war from 1980 to 1990, thereby contributing to the conditions of violence that persist today (Musalo, 2021, p. 184). As a result, Salvadorans are frequently classified as "economic migrants" rather than refugees (Menjívar & Gómez Cervantes, 2018). Furthermore, because many Salvadoran migrants are poor, mestizo individuals from rural backgrounds (Migration Policy Institute), they are overrepresented in public discourse as "illegal immigrants" (Ryo et al., 2025, p. 283) associated with a so-called "border crisis" (Young, 2023).

The hierarchical processes of inclusion and exclusion within the national community are established on the basis of the person's legal status. Instead of finding a home and safety, the Salvadoran characters of Gloria and Ana face what Brady (2022) calls the "deportation regime" (p. 202), which transforms their legal status by taking away their human rights. The novel showcases the "deportation regime" when the migrants' individual stories are replaced with Alien Registration Numbers, Gloria is denied the right to a Credible Fear Interview (CFI) and persuaded to sign a Voluntary Departure form, which directly leads to initiation of deportation proceedings. The detention practices developed by the U.S. immigration authorities reflect the concept of "bureaucratic violence", that is, violence combined with state power, which produces harmful outcomes for vulnerable individuals, making them suffer from "heightened stress, uncertainty, and feelings of hopelessness" (Martinez, 2023, p. 3). The exclusionary policies situate the Salvadoran migrants in a precarious position of liminality in terms of their belonging to the national community. According to Baelev (2008), one of the indicators of trauma is a "re-evaluation of one's relation to society" (p. 165); thus, Gloria's distressing situation transcends into trauma.

The case of a Salvadoran mother and her daughter illustrates a significant theme of separating parents and children during the detention procedures. Although this practice had already existed under Barack Obama's administration, the issue gained widespread attention during the presidency of Donald Trump (Seitz, 2019). Gloria is detained during her daughter's absence from home, and the experience of separation violates her understanding of the world, leaving her vulnerable and distrustful. In response, she turns to the symbolic certainties offered by the Latinx

culture, especially the significance attributed to birds[3]. The species of burrowing parrot becomes a metaphor for immigrants' situation in a detention center. Gloria imagines herself as a migrating bird who is "off to do battle at the end of the earth" (Garcia, 2021, p. 49), and who may be killed during the journey, but "Birds fly even if it kills them" (Garcia, 2021, p. 54). This observation means that migrants at detention centers cannot stand their captivity and attempt to achieve freedom despite the danger it involves. Gloria realizes that it is unsafe if migrants are detained for a long time because burrowing parrots "become exasperated and violent if caged for too long. Burrowing parrots need interaction" (Garcia, 2021, p. 48). She hopes she will eventually reunite with Ana because "If you separate two burrowing parrots, in short order the one left behind will die. She will die of loneliness" (Garcia, 2021, p. 48). Ana is ultimately detained as well after Jeannete reports her to the police, and she joins her mother at the facility. Despite this reunion, Gloria remains concerned about the lasting psychological effects of detention on her daughter, fearing that the experience may shape her "into something new and unrecognizable" (Garcia, 2021, p. 84). Ana herself recollects captivity at the detention center as "a jail for mothers, babies" (p. 193), emphasizing that the U.S. authorities imprison even small children.

The migrant's positioning on one or the other side of the border determines their status as a national or a foreigner and if they feel safe or unsafe. As stated by Anzaldúa (1987), "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe, to distinguish *us* from *them*" (p. 7). The mother and her child are repatriated to an unfamiliar place in Mexico where "They'd been dropped off over the border in Mexico instead of flown to El Salvador" (Garcia, 2021, pp. 115–116). The border in the novel functions not only to draw state boundaries but also to exclude, which reaffirms the observations of Cruz and Forman (2024), claiming that the purpose of the border is "more to separate than to demarcate" (p. 138). After the deportation, Gloria is confronted with three options: to travel to El Salvador, to cross the U.S.-Mexico border again, or to remain in Mexico. The novel presents El Salvador as a location of Gloria's traumatic experience, which triggers intrusive memories of "Simmering violence" (Garcia, 2021, p. 62) in the place where "death shadowed" (p. 87). While considering the option of returning to the USA, Gloria experiences the recollections of her previous border crossing, highlighting the magnitude of border deaths: "all those bodies turned skeleton in the desert, all those bodies stacked atop one another in the morgues;" (Garcia, 2021, p. 87). "Border death" is defined by Gombeer et al. (1967/2022) as "the physical death of a person crossing a border, who drowned, suffocated, fell, froze to death, was struck by a vehicle, was shot or got dehydrated,

[3] The national bird of El Salvador is the *torogoz* (a turquoise-browed motmot), which embodies the spirit and resilience of the Salvadoran people and fosters their sense of belonging and collective memory (Vasquez, 2024).

at the border" (p. 133). Border death evokes Mbembe's (2003) concept of "necropolitics" because the increased militarization of the border channels migrants toward perilous alternative routes, which frequently turn into lethal spaces. Gloria's resignation from the subsequent border crossing confirms the research of Smith et al., (2016) who claim that the bodies of migrants left in the borderlands "strengthen the border" (p. 259), acting as a deterrent for repeated border crossers. Eventually, Gloria and Ana remain in Mexico, where they are foreigners and undocumented immigrants again. Their deportation produces what Brady (2022) calls "a new form of subjectivity" because the Salvadoran migrants find themselves "situated but without state attachments" (p. 198).

Interpersonal memory sharing becomes a process of remembering and narrating the multiple border crossings. Ana has no recollection of her first attempt to cross the border, which occurred when she was a baby, but according to her mother's version of the story, they were returned to El Salvador by the "government people" (Garcia, 2021, p. 42). Then, her memory triggers reflections on their second border crossing in a car trunk, which she recalls as: "musty and hot, pinpricks for light and air over a piece of cardboard that covered her" (Garcia, 2021, p. 193). The reminiscences of dramatic events from the past appear when Ana feels vulnerable and in despair after her mother's death. She becomes confused about her real memories and "those instilled by her mother's stories" (p. 193). Although her narration of different crossings delves into traumatic memories, her recollections are "Somebody else's story" (p. 193).

Ana's account of her third border crossing reflects a growing trend for unaccompanied minors to cross the border alone[4]. At the age of thirteen, she exhibits remarkable resilience amid sudden changes in her personal circumstances. While in Mexico, her mother is diagnosed with cancer and dies shortly thereafter. In the aftermath of Gloria's death, Ana is left confronting an uncertain future and ultimately joins a group of strangers being guided across the border by a smuggler. Rather than emphasizing the financial arrangements, Garcia centers the narration on the emotional toll and perilous journey. To evade detection, the smuggler selects less-patrolled routes and leads the group under the cover of night, when visibility is limited. Ana stands out in the group whose members can locate their homeland in countries like "El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras" (Garcia, 2021, p. 189) because she has no memory of her home country, and her migrant identity has transformed into an exiled one. The border-crossing in Ana's narration is not a one-way move between two fixed poles but a dangerous journey requiring confrontation with the deadly attributes of the physical environment, confirming the research of

[4] According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection reports, 15,634 unaccompanied children from Mexico and 16,404 from El Salvador crossed the U.S.-Mexico border in 2014 (Donato & Perez, 2017, p. 116).

Chatterjee et al., (2020) who claim that international border-crossers experience "a high level exposure of death and violence" (p. 324) due to natural obstacles such as mountains and deserts. The life-threatening part of Ana's trip involves crossing the river with the support of tires, which terrifies her because "The mud could swallow them like quicksand if they touched the ground" (Garcia, 2021, p. 190). Extended militarization of the border produces the effect of a "territorialized national space" (Agnew, 2007, p. 401) and transforms the borderlands into a "zone of captivity for asylum seekers" (Martinez, 2023, p. 5). The narration reveals the logistics behind the smuggler's practices and his awareness of the Border Patrol's routines when he keeps the border crossers waiting for a "one-hour window" (Garcia, 2021, p. 191) when the agents change shifts. Finally, Ana manages to reach the country "that made her, expelled her" (p. 193) but experiences confusion due to the unfamiliarity of the Texan borderlands.

The Salvadoran migrant's "journey to statehood" (Agnew, 2007, p. 401) ends in Miami, the place where she spent "the happiest years of her life that she could remember" (Garcia, 2021, p. 193); however, the city fails to provide her with a feeling "of home, a place in the world?" (p. 199). In the novel's last chapter, Ana gets unexpected support from Carmen, whose daughter had died of a drug overdose. This concluding scene offers commentary on motherhood, suggesting that a mother who did not manage to save Jeanette may still save another daughter. Carmen gifts Ana the copy of *Les Misérables* with the 19th-century note "*We are force*" and Jeanette's words "*We are more than we think we are*" (p. 204). Although both *Les Misérables* and *Cecilia Valdés* present narratives of survival that help women transform suffering into a sense of collective endurance, Ana receives Hugo's novel. This choice signals a shift away from confronting the rigid Cuban social structures of race and class embodied by *Cecilia Valdés* toward the broader themes of redemption and overcoming adversity in *Les Misérables*. Carmen's gift is not merely a book, but the suggestion that cycles of trauma can be broken rather than inherited. The book passed across generations in the Cuban family becomes the legacy of the Salvadoran girl. Jeanette's sentence functions as "a cry across time" (Garcia, 2021, p. 204), empowering the matrilineal descendants who endure trauma by providing a framework that enables survival. Just as Villaverde's phrase rallies against oppression, the female characters' actions in *Of Women and Salt* challenge systems that marginalize them. Women's "force" manifests as endurance transmitted across generations, making each one stronger despite displacement and trauma. Ana plans to pass the book to "Someone drawn to stories" (p. 204), another woman with a similar life experience.

4. Conclusion

Of Women and Salt offers an extensive view of the Latinx immigration experience, illustrating how leaving one's homeland affects not only migrants themselves but

also subsequent generations. This aspect of the novel resonates with *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) by Cristina Garcia. Both novels explore themes of family, migration, and the intergenerational impact of displacement. In their narratives, Gabriela Garcia and Cristina Garcia show how personal experiences, family secrets, and political choices intertwine. The Latinx protagonists' stories in *Of Women and Salt* intersect in a reflection of the broader experience of women who struggle for survival within the home and while crossing the borders. The titular "salt" means all the hardships women endure, from abusive men to structural violence, separation, detention, and deportation. Garcia proves that Latinx do not represent a monolithic identity, and their immigration experiences vary depending on their nationality. The Cuban character of Jeanette tries to establish her identity as attained by inheritance; thus, she represents the concept of ascribed identity. Gloria's Salvadoran character defines the collective identity of undocumented immigrants.

The Cuban plot of the novel explores the complexities of transmitting and displaying intergenerational trauma, while the Salvadoran section investigates the multiple border crossings that intertwine with the process of remembering trauma. The book demonstrates that trauma transcends across generations of matrilineal descendants of the Cuban family through the imperative to silence structural violence and sexual abuse. Furthermore, intergenerational trauma does not appear through the flashbacks of intrusive memories but takes the form of substance abuse and complicated mother-daughter relationships. Traumatic reminiscences are triggered by distressing events that make the migrants extraordinarily vulnerable and helpless. Gloria's intrusive memories reappear after her separation from her daughter during the detention procedures, and Ana's traumatic recollections occur after Gloria's death through the process of interpersonal memory sharing. Contrary to Gloria, whose intrusive memories discourage her from repeating the border crossing, Ana's reminiscences of the stories shared by her mother do not serve as a deterrent to crossing the U.S.-Mexico border again. The motifs of detention, family separation, and deportation function in the novel to express the Salvadoran characters' personal trauma and the collective trauma of other detained migrants. Nonetheless, the Latinx female characters try to leave the past behind while drawing strength from their experiences. The phrase "We are force" resonates through their stories, denoting inherent strength that prevails against traumatic experiences.

References

Agnew, J. (2007). No Borders, No Nations: Making Greece in Macedonia. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *97*(2), 398–422.

Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books.

APA Dictionary of Psychology. Retrieved January 17, 2025, from https://dictionary.apa.org/intergenerational-trauma

Balaev, M. (2008). Trends in Literary Trauma Theory. *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, *41*(2), 149–166.

Biography of Gabriela Garcia. https://www.gabrielagarciawriter.com/

Brady, M. P. (2022). *Scales of Captivity: Racial Capitalism and the Latinx Child*. Duke University Press.

Brown, J. (2022, August 1). Why Is the Cuban Immigrant Story in the US so Different from Others: Cold War politics led to special policies and domestic political power. *BO Today*. Boston University. https://www.bu.edu/articles/2022/cuban-immigrant-story-in-us-is-different-from-others/

Caruth, C. (1995). Recapturing the Past: Introduction. In C. Caruth (Ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (pp. 151–157). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Chak, F. M. (2018). Europe's Dystopia: The Exploitation of Unaccompanied and Separated Child Refugees. *Policy Perspectives*, *15*(3), 7–28.

Chatterjee, H. J., Clini, C., Butler, B., Al-Nammari, F., Al-Asir, R., & Katona, C. (2020). Exploring the psychosocial impact of cultural interventions with displaced people. In E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (Ed.), *Refuge in a Moving World: Tracing refugee and migrant journeys across disciplines* (pp. 323–345). UCL Press.

Chuya, J. (2020). *The experience of Latina victims of domestic violence in seeking support services* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Walden University.

Craps, S. (2014). Beyond Eurocentrism. Trauma Theory in the Global Age. In G. Buelens, S. Durrant, & R. Eaglestone (Eds.), *The Future of Trauma Theory. Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism* (pp. 51–65). Routledge.

Cruz, T., & Forman, F. (2024). Cross-Border Citizens. In D. Alvarez, R. Uno, & E. M. Webb (Eds.), *Arts in a Changing America* (pp. 136–145). Duke University Press.

Donato, K. M., & Perez, S. L. (2017). Crossing the Mexico-U.S. Border: Illegality and Children's Migration to the United States. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, *3*(4), 116–135.

Duany, J. (1999). Cuban communities in the United States: migration waves, settlement patterns and socioeconomic diversity. *Pouvoirs dans la Caraïbe*, *11*, 69–103. https://journals.openedition.org/plc/464

Duany, J. (2017, July 6). Cuban Migration: A Postrevolution Exodus Ebbs and Flows. *Migration Policy Institute*. Retrieved March 26, 2026, from https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/cuban-migration-postrevolution-exodus-ebbs-and-flows

El Salvador. *Migration Policy Institute*. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/country-resource/el-salvador

Erll, A. (2011). Traumatic pasts, literary afterlives, and transcultural memory: new directions of literary and media memory studies. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, *3*(1), 1–5.

Florido, A. (2017, January 15). End Of 'Wet-Foot, Dry-Foot' Means Cubans Can Join Ranks Of 'Undocumented'. *NPR.* Retrieved January 19, 2025, from https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/01/15/509895837/end-of-wet-foot-dry-foot-means-cubans-can-join-ranks-of-the-undocumented

Fulger, D. (2012). The colors of the Cuban diaspora: Portrayal of racial dynamics among Cuban-Americans. *FIAR: Forum for Inter-American Research*. https://interamerica.de/current-issue/fulger/

Garcia, C. (1992). *Dreaming in Cuban*. Ballantine Books.

Garcia, G. (2021). *Of Women and Salt.* Flatiron Books.

García-Leeds, C. B., & Schneider, L. (2017). Systematic Approach in Latino Families Surviving Domestic Violence in the United States of America. *Propósitos y Representaciones*, *5(2)*, 277–319.

García Márquez, G. (1971). *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. (G. Rabassa, Trans.). Avon Books.

Gombeer, K., Ulusoy, O., & Basilien-Gainche, M.-L. (2020). Understanding the Causes of Border Deaths: A Mapping Exercise. In P. Cuttitta, & T. Last (Eds.), *Border Deaths* (pp. 131–147). Amsterdam University Press. (Original work published 1967)

Intergenerational Trauma. (2023, November 15). *APA Dictionary of Psychology.* Retrieved January 17, 2025, from https://dictionary.apa.org/intergenerational-trauma

Intergenerational Trauma. (2024, February 10). *Psychology Today.* Retrieved January 17, 2025, from https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/intergenerational-trauma

Kennedy, R. (2020). Trauma and Cultural Memory Studies. In C. Davis, & H. Meretoja (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* (pp. 54–65). Routledge.

Krondorfer, B. (2016). Unsettling Empathy: Intercultural Dialogue in the Aftermath of Historical and Cultural Trauma. In P. Gobodo-Madikizela (Ed.), *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition: A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory* (pp. 90–112). Barbara Budrich Publishers.

Martinez, C. (2023). Waiting in Captivity: Slow Borders, Predatory Bureaucracies, and the Necrotemporality of Asylum Deterrence. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, *39*(2), 1–17.

Mbembe, A. (2003). Necropolitics. *Public Culture*, *15*(1), 11–40.

Menjívar, C., & Gómez Cervantes, A. (2018, August 29). El Salvador: Civil War, Natural Disasters, and Gang Violence Drive Migration. *Migration Policy Institute*. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/el-salvador-civil-war-natural-disasters-and-gang-violence-drive-migration

Moreno, D. (2013, March 19). Cuban Americans. *Oxford Bibliographies*. https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199913701/obo-9780199913701-0014.xml

Musalo, K. (2021). El Salvador: Root causes and just asylum policy responses. *Hastings Race & Poverty Law Journal, 18*, 178-264.

Nolasco, K. G. (2022). *Intimate partner violence in the Latinx community: Risk factors, barriers to care, Tteatments and prevention* [Unpublished honors thesis]. Texas State University.

Pederson, J. (2014). Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory. *Narrative*, *22*(3), 333–353.

Phillips, S. B. (2015). The Dangerous Role of Silence in the Relationship Between Trauma and Violence: A Group Response. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, *65(1)*, 65–87.

Rascovsky, K., Growdon, M. E., Pardo, I. R., Grossman, S., & Miller, B. L. (2009). 'The quicksand of forgetfulness': semantic dementia in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. *Brain: A Journal of Neurology*, *132*(9), 2609–2616.

Ryo, E., Chacón, J. M., & Menjívar, C. (2025). Criminalization of Immigration. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, *11*(3), 282–343.

Schick, K. (2011). Acting out and working through: trauma and (in)security. *Review of International Studies*, *37(4)*, 1837-1855.

Schönfelder, Ch. (2013). *Wounds and Words: Childhood and Family Trauma in Romantic and Postmodern Fiction*. Transcript.

Seitz, A. (2019, May 30). Trump separated more migrant families at the border than Obama. *AP.* https://apnews.com/article/archive-fact-checking-5409040005

Smith, A., Swanson, N., & Gökariksel, B. (2016) Territory, bodies and borders. *Area*, *48*(3), 258–261.

Vasquez, N. (2024, March 27). El Salvador National Bird Torogoz: A Majestic Avian Emblem. *Elsalvadorspot.com*. https://elsalvadorspot.com/el-salvador-national-bird/

Whitefield, M. (2018, May 25). Faded photos and old tales of their parents' Cuba are not enough for these Cuban Americans. *Miami Herald*. https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article210989304.html

Young, J. (2023, December 12). The Situation at the U.S.-Mexico Border Can't Be 'Solved' Without Acknowledging Its Origins. *Time*. https://time.com/5951532/migration-factors/

Zavala, E., & Caraballo, K. (2024). Social Concern Theory and Family Violence Among Latino Families. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *39*(11-12), 2373–2394.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press
Vol 50, No 2 (2026)
E-ISSN 2450-4580

Macarena Martín-Martínez, University of Seville, Spain

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.2.93-105

"Made of Everything": Black Joy and Diasporic Rootedness in Melania Luisa Marte's *Plantains and Our Becoming*

ABSTRACT
This article examines Melania Luisa Marte's *Plantains and Our Becoming* (2023) as a work that challenges canonical diasporic and migrant narratives. Marte articulates a holistic and holy Afro-Dominican-York identity, dismantling dominant constructions of Blackness, nationalism, and *mestizaje*. Going beyond water as the prevailing diasporic metaphor, she turns to plantains and mangos to affirm a transnational yet rooted sense of self. While acknowledging structural racism, police abuse, and dehumanization, Marte moves beyond narratives of victimhood and displacement to foreground the African diaspora and community as sources of belonging, insisting on unapologetic Black joy and thriving as radical forms of resistance.

KEYWORDS
Afro-Dominican York; Black joy; African diaspora; migration; decolonial studies; identity; belonging; dehumanization

1. Introduction

In 2023, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Scheinert & Kwan, 2022) won the Oscar for Best Picture, along with six additional awards. It was celebrated for its inventive use of multidimensional scenarios. However, what was hailed as an innovative portrayal of the "metaverse" can also be read as a reflection of the everyday realities of migrant families – such as the one portrayed in the film – who live across multiple cultures and geographies at once. That same year, Afro-Dominican-York slam poet and writer Melania Luisa Marte published her debut poetry collection *Plantains and Our Becoming,* also affirming her own holistic and multidimensional identity. She does so by invoking the imagery of plantains and mangos –diasporic fruits carried across oceanic routes yet firmly anchored in place. This imagery signals her first major innovation in relation to canonical migrant and diasporic narratives, as she resists the primacy of water as diaspora's dominant metaphor. Another of her significant challenges lies in her rejection to frame diaspora and migration primarily through victimhood. Instead, Marte

Macarena Martín-Martínez, Filología Inglesa, Facultad de Filología, Universidad de Sevilla, C. Palos de la Frontera, s/n, C.P. 41004-Sevilla, mmartinm@us.es, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4546-3274

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

foregrounds joy and play – internaa reaching for the stars by those never meant to rise.

Marte narrates her own migratory lineage across three generations: her paternal grandmother, who fled the Dominican Republic after Trujillo's dictatorship; her mother, who bartered beauty and virginity for a blue passport; and herself, a Black Spanish speaker and Manhattan islander born into a tradition of spoken-word poetry that has evolved from Nuyorican Poetry to Slam.[1] Her family story mirrors that of many Dominicans who managed to obtain one of the limited visas the United States offered in response to the country's post-Trujillo political instability, irregularly migrated, or were already born in New York. Despite Dominicans now constituting the largest immigrant population in New York, and notwithstanding the efforts of the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute and scholars such as Silvio Torres-Saillant, Lorgia García Peña, Omaris Zamora, and Sharina Maillo-Pozo, the experiences of Dominican New York–based authors – who, like Marte, were born closer to the Hudson than to the Caribbean Sea – still remain largely unaddressed. The life, practices, and negotiations of Afro-Dominicans, in particular, remain insufficiently examined – not only within broader diaspora studies, which remain largely Anglo-centered, but also within Latin American studies, where the ideology of *mestizaje* continues to erase Afro-descendants, and within US scholarship, where Blackness and Latinidad are too often framed as mutually exclusive.

Indeed, in her poem "Afro-Latina" – which opens *Plantains and Our Becoming* and was featured by Instagram on IGTV during National Poetry Month, garnering over nine million views – Marte insists that while Afro-Latin culture, especially in the form of music, has achieved global recognition and commodification, Afro-Latinas themselves "go missing in history books" (p. 4).[2] Since the 2010s, this limited attention has begun to shift, particularly with the publication of *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* (Jiménez-Román & Flores, 2010), which gave visibility to those experiencing a "triple consciousness" – Black, Latinx, and American – and opened the door to subsequent critical contributions. Yet even within Caribbean studies – where racialized perspectives have traditionally been more central–scholarship has largely centered Puerto Rican and Cuban experiences – understandably, given their earlier arrival and distinct political relations with the United States – while leaving Dominican migration comparatively unaddressed.

In *Plantains and Our Becoming*, Marte not only situates the Dominican-York experience within a broader diasporic and migratory narrative, but also redefines

[1] Futher* information on this evolution of performative poetry from the 1960s to current slam poetry, see *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam* (Noel, 2014).

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, page numbers are taken from the publication: Marte, M. L. (2023). *Plantains and Our Becoming*. Penguin Random House.

it. This article dedicates one section to Marte's innovative explorations of identity and belonging, and another to redefining diaspora from a perspective of joy rather than victimhood, drawing on Black Joy frameworks.

2. "Made of everything:" Re-defining identity and belonging

Already in the fifth poem of the collection, "Island Gyal", Marte asserts that not being born in the Dominican Republic does not make her any less of an "island gyal", since Manhattan too is an island (p. 9). This witty statement conceals deeper questions tied to diaspora and migration: Who is allowed to claim the Dominican Republic as home? Do those born in New York City to Dominican families share that right? This initial interrogation opens the space to question and disrupt other notions that have become central in diasporic and migratory narratives.

Without diminishing the pain of displacement, Marte challenges the traditional and binary notion of *ni de aquí ni de allá*–"neither from here nor there"– (Candelario et al., 2004; Rivera-Rideau et al., 2016), rather portraying migrant identity as holistic and sacred. She declares herself "made of everything", claiming both "LES/DR" (pp. 9, 53) – the Lower East Side of Manhattan and the Dominican Republic. She transforms her entanglement with Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States into a "holy trinity" (p. 106), invoking the Christian doctrine in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are distinct persons yet simultaneously one God. In this way, Marte reframes the perceived burden of multiplicity as a source of divine power. The problem, she suggests, does not lie with her or others like her, but with those overwhelmed by such richness–thereby reframing where accountability lies:

> *ni de aquí ni de allá* is a farce
> And i would like to move past fallacy
> Of claiming nothing when you're made of everything
> […]
> This is not to discredit the confusion or pain
> This is just a reminder that all energy has purpose
> And wouldn't you rather spend it whining that waist […]
> Than explaining
> To some uncultured fool how you […]
> Were gifted too much culture […]
> And you foolishly have no idea what do with it. (p. 9)

Marte's rejection of the dualistic label *ni de aquí ni de allá* in pursuit of a holistic identity also grounds her challenge to the misconception that Afro-Latinxs are merely "mixed". This notion, rooted in colonial *mestizaje* and whitening logics, presumes that Blackness in Latin America has been transcended and that US Afro-Latinxs must therefore result from the union of African Americans and Latinxs. Against this erasure, Marte affirms Blackness in the Dominican Republic, the

Caribbean, and Latin America, and repeatedly returns to the question "What Are You Mixed With" (pp. 6, 128) in order to interrogate the query itself.

Rather than offering the expected answer, Marte reclaims the question as a space to foreground the African diaspora. In this vein, she not only acknowledges being a "mix" of Latinx and African American cultural markers, like "Telemundo and BET" – two US-based television networks that cater to Latinx and African American audiences respectively – but also of elements that represent different geographies of Blackness, like "the Caribbean spice and Southern BBQ" (p. 6). The question thus becomes also a means to, while recognizing differences across diasporic geographies, affirm the shared and embodied Blackness of all Afro-descendants: "WHAT YOU MIXED WITH? … Everything. A whole universe and just as Black" [capitals in original] (p. 128). Through such declarations, she underscores that although Afro-Latinxs have traditionally been denied Blackness in the US context due to cultural differences with African Americans, all Afro-descendants are legitimately Black. Indeed, Marte claims that even across languages, customs, and identity labels – *negra, morena, prieta, trigueña, africana,* Black –, both Blackness and anti-Blackness "translates so well" (pp. 128–29). Ultimately, she reverses the interrogation, turning it back on those ignorant about the African diaspora who perceive Black Latixs as inherently "mixed" and inevitably estranged from African Americans:

> you tell me we different kind of black and I say, where? And how? […] we different to you. Yet all hold the same spice… got me feeling like life can't be this simple but y'all can't be this dense. Tell me, how do I divorce all the women in me who taught me about myself? And for what? For your token? Your box? (pp. 128–29)

By being the one who poses the questions now, Marte insists on moving beyond colonial divisions imposed through the nation-state, such as census forms, and instead calls for diasporic unity and sorority among all Afro-descendants. Indeed, she names several African American women from whom she learned Afro-diasporic practices of care and art, as well as Afro-diasporic history and articulations of identity. In her poem "If I Could Buy All My Homies an Island?" she in fact emphasizes that the only way back "home" is through finding the "way back to each other" (p. 74), highlighting relational bonds across the diaspora. This diasporic connection, she argues, should span multiple Black locations, since when roots are cut – as they were through the Atlantic slave trade – 1,000 more were born "in Harlem,/ in the Bronx,/ in Houston,/ in Louisiana,/ in Miami,/ in Hialeah,/ in Oakcliff,/ in Compton,/ in Atlanta,/ in Jersey City" (pp. 74, 90).

By equating home with community rather than a singular place or familiar lineage, Marte rejects the nostalgic ideal of a 'utopian home' and the ancestral return narrative that has long shaped diasporic and first-generation migration literature. Marte instead chooses to be "more healer and less archeologist"

(p. 119), refusing to contribute to corporate genealogical projects like "Ancestry.com" that profit from diasporic and migrant populations' need of belonging: "my unknowing, their triumph. My search, their child's play. My insecurity, their comedy" (p. 76). Unlike her mother and those of her generation who migrated to the US carrying "a mystified mirror of nationalism" and an idyllic memory of the Dominican Republic (p. 5), Marte is openly critical of Dominican society. In poems such as "Questions for Hispaniola" and "Internalized & Anti____", she denounces Dominican conformism, anti-Haitianism, complicity with colonialism, internalized colorism and whitening. Instead, in "What Is Missed", she adopts a pragmatic view of belonging, claiming that a house ceases to be home when basic needs are unmet: "when home / becomes a hole which you can never climb out of […] When you can't afford basic human rights / then you must leave home that very night" (p. 15).

In this sense, Marte reverses the traditional diasporic/migrant narrative in which the "place of origin" (the Dominican Republic in this case) is somewhere to return to or miss, while the "place of arrival" (the United States) is to be abandoned, for example, upon retirement. Instead, she recognizes that the place of origin may sometimes be necessary to leave, and she shifts her focus to staying and building a life in the US. In "Mami & Technology", she describes her mother's attachment to technology as rooted in the desire to stay connected with relatives in the Dominican Republic–an act that, according to Marte, simultaneously signals her mother's active decision to remain in the US: "Mami loves technology for the same reasons/ she loves to call herself a resident not a citizen/ she wants to remember staying more than leaving" (p. 18). Her mother's emphasis on resident status – a permit that grants the right to reside and enjoy certain protections– over citizenship, a more permanent status typically acquired by birth – reflects a politics of actively claiming and constructing space beyond birthright. As Marte provocatively asks: "maybe this is not my land but who is more deserving of it than me?" (p. 14).

Connected to this notion of claiming US land and rights, Marte articulates a deep sense of rootedness in the urban island of Manhattan. She does so, however, through an explicitly transnational and diasporic framework, mobilizing plantains and mangoes as central symbols of her Dominican American belonging, at once rooted and diasporic. These foods evoke the island, its landscape, and its culinary traditions, echoing familiar migrant and diasporic narratives in which landscape and food index identity beyond the United States. As numerous scholars have noted, nature, land, ecology, and familiar foods function as emotionally and politically charged sites of memory, serving as affective and intellectual anchors through which belonging is articulated, particularly in moments of displacement (Boyce Davies, 1994; Copeland & Thompson, 2018; Savory, 1998; Williams-Forson, 2022).

However, rather than reinscribing a nostalgic attachment to a lost homeland in the face of a hostile host nation, Marte strategically deploys these crops to articulate belonging across multiple sites. This becomes particularly clear when she explains that both plantains and mangoes originated in Asia and arrived in the Americas through oceanic trade "along with genocide, slavery, and whitewashed religion" (p. 7). Although these crops seem native to Caribbean soil – so deeply rooted in the land that they have become emblematic of the region –, Marte complicates their presumed non-diasporic origins to draw an implicit comparison with herself.

On the one hand, she repeatedly affirms to be firmly anchored in the New York City projects–subsidized public housing – where she was raised. In doing so, she dislodges diasporic models that privilege ancestral roots over routes, often overlooking the inhabited urban contexts, their socioeconomic implications, and lived experience. Instead, she echoes frameworks that understand cities like New York not as mere backdrops but as sites of embodied belonging. On the other, Marte articulates a transnationalism that, like those of these crops, is forged through Atlantic trade. Indeed, she explicitly aligns plantains with the African diaspora, asserting that they know no borders, split into ten, and carry fruit far from the original tree (p. 7). Thus, like mangoes and plantains, she is as deeply rooted in the soil of the projects as she is in diasporic crossings and networks, or as Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez (2020) would call it, "rooted and relational"[3].

Like scholars who use water to theorize diaspora as nationally fluid, border-crossing, and yet spatially situated rather than placeless (DeLoughrey, 2007; Gilroy, 1993; Hey-Colón, 2023; Moreno, 2022), Marte uses these emblematic crops as signs of her rooted connection across continents. Though this contribution, she expands the vocabulary of belonging beyond nationalism. Furthermore, just as the sea simultaneously evokes the Middle Passage and anti-colonial borderlessness, these crops echo the violence of the Plantationocene (Haraway, 2015) while affirming diasporic communities' capacity to grow "despite the knife" (pp. 62, 90). Like plantains, diasporic subjects claim space in an "ungrateful" and unloving land–one that exploits their labor without granting full recognition or political rights, including the right to vote in federal and some state and local elections (pp. 32, 90). As Marte poignantly observes, they learn to play in "someone else's backyard and somehow feel at home" (p. 71). If these transplanted crops have become cherished symbols of the nation, Marte implicitly asks why the transnational subjects who sustain that nation should not also have the right to belong.

[3] "Rooted + Relational" is a five-year research initiative at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies (City University of New York), funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, that aims to reimagine the Center's research agenda as well as its scholarly and community impact.

For Marte, this insistence on growing, belonging, thriving, and finding pleasure despite a neoliberal system that reinscribes colonial logics and dehumanization resonates with broader scholarly and artistic investments in Black joy as a mode of resistance. It is precisely in this refusal to be reduced to pain or loss that Marte's work is most powerful. The following section turns to this theme in greater depth.

3. "Dem Dog Dayz Are Ova:" Black joy

Afro-diasporic people have endured a long history of hardship. Dehumanization, displacement, violence, and abuse trace back to the Atlantic slave trade, and since then, new – yet historically familiar – forms of oppression have continued to persist and emerge. In the last two decades, some of the most visible examples include police brutality – whether at marches, while driving, or even at home – as well as disproportionate vulnerability to respiratory illness, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected racialized populations at higher rates. Black communities and Black Studies have responded to these ongoing conditions both through Afro-pessimism and Black joy turns.

Afro-pessimism, represented by thinkers such as Saidiya Hartman (1997, 2007), Christina Sharpe (2016), Frank Wilderson (2010, 2021), and Calvin Warren (2018), argues that slavery and colonialism are not aberrations but the very foundation of the modern world. As a result, Black death is integral to the system itself. This perspective introduces concepts such as Hartman's "afterlife of slavery" (2007) and Orlando Patterson's "social death" (1982) – which Wilderson (2021) popularized – to describe systemic racism and its enduring legacies. At the same time, Afro-pessimism has faced substantial criticism. Raphaël Lambert (2025) describes it as "time-collapsing", since in order to sustain the claim that Blackness is coterminous with slaveness and that contemporary migration echoes the Atlantic slave trade, Wilderson in particular is accused of erasing agency and collapsing distinct eras into one undifferentiated narrative (p. 6). Critics have also pointed to the afro-pessimist tendency toward essentialism, reducing Black identity to permanent subjugation. Furthermore, its radicalism has been considered paradoxically conservative, more invested in naming and maintaining the logic of racial hostility than in offering new tools or visions for transformation.

In contrast, scholars such as Fred Moten resist reducing Black life to trauma or social death. While deeply attentive and aware of violence and anti-Blackness, Moten (2003) insists on the excess of Black existence – what cannot be fully captured by domination. His thought often appears in conversations on Black joy, even if he does not use the term. Black joy emerged explicitly with *The Black Joy Project*, founded by Kleaver Cruz, an Afro-Dominican-York like Marte. Confronted with relentless police violence and the disproportionate toll of COVID-19 on racialized communities, Cruz not only became a Black Lives

Matter organizer but also, in 2015, began posting daily images of Black joy on social media for thirty days.

This Black Joy Project was not a gesture of naïve optimism, unawareness, or denial. Rather, it was a deliberate practice of addressing anti-Blackness and reclaiming humanity. Black joy signals resistance through subversion. Although aware of the systematic oppression, it refuses the equation of Blackness with death and trauma, and affirms a right to joy, love, and wellness. This current has since been taken up and expanded by scholars like Catherine Steele (2019), Jennifer Nash (2019), Lindsey Stewart (2021), Hinderliter and Peraza (2021), Tracey Lewis-Giggetts (2022), Barbara Combs (2023). Similarly, Marte's work "examines a lineage of reclamation and resistance in the face of racial injustice with freedom and joy at the helm" (Velasquez, 2023). She deliberately chooses to revisit a personal encounter with the police not in order to reproduce trauma but to re-write the narrative from the perspective of Black joy as resistance.

From *The Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968) to *Get Out* (Peele, 2017), and from historical events like the Alabama police attack on the Selma to Montgomery marches (1965) to the 2010s–2020s cases of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor –whom Marte memorializes in her poetry – the fear of the police and its deadly consequences remains inscribed in the collective memory of racialized communities and their protest movements, including #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName. In her poem "Good evening, officer", Marte captures this terror by recounting the experience of being stopped by the police for driving five miles above the speed limit.

What initially appears to offer her protection in the face of her encounter with the police–the fact that she looks "flawless" that day (p. 30) – suddenly becomes a source of vulnerability. Initially Melania describes her anxious relief in believing that her polished appearance might shield her from violence. Yet the black turtleneck she is wearing complicates her sense of safety, as Marte wonders whether her clothing protects her or, instead, is the very reason she has been stopped. By asking if the officer knows "that the people are reawakening" (p. 30), Marte points to the symbolic connection between her outfit and the Black Panther Party – an organization that in the 1970s defended the rights of African Americans against systemic racism and state violence, and whose members, often dressed in black turtlenecks, leather jackets, and berets. If the Black Panthers were criminalized back then, Marte reflects, then she too could be persecuted now.

Yet she questions whether the officer realizes that contemporary Black activism extends beyond organized groups and mass protests – such as the former Black Panther Party or today's Black Lives Matter movement – to include Black joy and the very act of thriving as forms of political resistance: 'Has he been warned that exuding unfiltered joy is also an act of political warfare? That my resistance is in the subtle way I smile at him? All proper and well-fed' (p. 30). For Marte,

Black joy is far more political than suffering in silence and "sitting in the dark and crying over horrors" (p. 140). It is a form of resistance because it disrupts the capitalist system that builds on the structural oppression and abuse of BIPOC communities. She argues that her wellness, beauty, bilingualism, and transnational identity may themselves provoke the officer's detention, precisely because they embody the most visible signs of disobedience to the system. She describes the officer's surveillant gaze – through which the police come to embody the state's mechanisms of control and discipline – as if it were saying:

> How dare you? Be Black and a woman and pretty and happy? Daughter of immigrants whose native tongue I use at my convenience. How dare I live the joyous life my grandmothers prayed for. Have the audacity to claim America as my own. How dare I claim a country that doesn't love me as my own? (p. 31)

Marte's bold and unapologetic joy recalls the disruptive presence of Cardi B – a Grammy-winning Afro-Dominican hip-hop artist, celebrity, and outspoken cultural figure who began her career as a stripper in the Bronx and rose to international fame. Marte dedicates a poem to her, recognizing that Cardi B embodies dissidence not only through her explicit lyrics or her social media reflections on race and diaspora, but also, and above all, through her very journey: daring to thrive, to be happy, and to "reach for the stars" (p. 35)[4]. Like Cardi B, Marte underscores the radical importance of daring to enjoy, laugh, love, and dream, rejecting the constrained, deathly, and precarious futures that BIPOC are "supposed to have" (p. 88), as well as the pull toward being consumed or immobilized by trauma and fear.

Refusing such futures–rooted in dehumanization – is central to Marte's politics. In her poem "Dem Dog Dayz Are Ova", she proclaims survival and buoyancy as defiance:

> i will not drown. not how they want me to. not today like they insist. not now. not for them. not for their gaze and prize. not for their joy. not for their meal or playtime. i will not drown. nor will i die. not on their watch. not for their pleasure […] i am no victim and nobody's fuckin' martyr. and nobody's doormat or dog. i am no dog. (p. 88)

The title of this poem, "Dem Dog Dayz Are Ova" – a phonetic reworking of Florence and the Machine's "The Dog Days Are Over" (2009) – signals dissidence not only in content but also in form, echoing bell hooks's rejection of capitalization as a refusal of dominant norms. Here, "dog days" shifts meaning: no longer a seasonal metaphor, it names the long history of dehumanization endured by the

[4] For further information on Cardi B's "polemic" views on feminism and African diaspora, see Martín-Martínez's (2024).

communities from the African diaspora and the Global South. By declaring that the "dog days" must end, Marte calls for diasporic communities to move beyond victimhood, trauma, and dehumanization. As she writes:

> we are no longer mourning,/ not searching for grief,/ not praying for freedom. Today, I want to learn play again/ run wild with the wind,/[…] isn't that what we fight for? To live a life worth living./ that our passions be a legacy lasting longer than our pain./ that the warmth of safety allow us to feel at ease. (p. 126)

Choosing laughter as legacy (p. 93) does not mean overlooking depression, bullying, body-shaming, colorism, generational trauma, or even the realities of suicide and death as alternative forms of emancipation and belonging (pp. 22, 91, 104). Yet, Marte insists on preferring to "die sleeping" – that is, having a non-traumatic death–rather than "dream[ing] of dying", because unfortunately dying is the only way for some racialized individuals "to make it home" (pp. 113, 91). In doing so, she envisions and advocates for a mode of resistance that is "hopeful" rather than "hostile" (p. 144). In this vein, Marte aligns with Latinx and Black scholars such as Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez (2020), Lorgia García Peña (2022), and Esteban José Muñoz(2009) who advocate for hope as a call for action, reparation, and dissidence, rather than as a naïve form of "cruel optimism" that sustains the status quo (Berlant, 2011).

In its poetic assertion of rising and cultivating agency even amidst structural oppression, Marte particularly echoes Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" (1978) (p. 135), and portrays children playing at a funeral (p. 44). Although Western binary thought often frames funerals primarily as somber occasions rather than spaces for joy, they remain communal moments where relatives and friends both mourn and honor a life they cherished. Even Christina Sharpe (2016), whose work is well-known for emphasizing how Black lives persist in the ongoing wake of slavery, argues that wakes affirm the existence of Black life. Wakes affirm agency, belonging, and community–for to mourn a Black life means that life was not disposable, but rather worthy, loved, and thus, "livable" (Butler, 2004). That, in itself, is a reason for joy. As Danez Smith (2017, p. 47) suggests in *Don't Call Us Dead*, laughter and mourning could be and are intertwined: "listen to my laugh & if you pay attention, you'll hear a wake".

Another poetic image Martes uses to illustrate her non-dualistic philosophy, where struggle and love coexist is through her reflections on mothering. Although the experience left her with depression, anemia, and chronic back and knee ailments, it also gave her an enduring sense of vitality and care. In particular, she dwells on the physical toll of breastfeeding. Despite the exhaustion it caused, she chooses the Spanish word "*amamantar*" – because it resonates with "*amar*" ("to love" in Spanish, and "immortal" or "long life" in Arabic) (p. 143), thus, confirming the coexistence of joy and hardship. Just as diasporic subjects have

learned to play in someone else's backyard and still feel at home, they have, in Marte's words, "learn[ed] to heal the same way [they] learn to bleed" (p. 126). This ethic of play, flourishing, and healing amidst systemic oppression and struggle ultimately summarizes in her defiant smile at the police, which metaphorically inverts the gaze of interrogation. Now she is the one that through that smile seems to ask the officer "How dare you? Do you not realize? That anything you do, I do it in heels all the while bleeding?" (p. 31).

In *Plantains and Our Becoming*, Melania Luisa Marte reimagines the Afro-Latinx experience not as a state of fragmented loss, but as a site of divine wholeness and unapologetic Blackness. By dismantling both the assumptions embedded in *mestizaje* and the dualistic notions of belonging foregrounded in traditional diasporic and migrant narratives, she asserts a holistic and multidimensional identity that is as grounded in the urban soil of Manhattan as it is in historic and current oceanic crossings and networks. However, her work shifts the diasporic paradigm, where narratives have long relied on the fluidity of water to describe displacement yet fluid transnationality. Instead, Marte anchors her belonging in the symbolic weight of plantains and mangoes. These fruits – transplanted through the violence of the oceanic trade yet flourishing "despite the knife" – serve as the ultimate map for the diasporic rootedness that Marte experiences. Just as these crops have become emblematic of a land they were once forced to inhabit, Marte suggests that the Afro-Dominicanx subject is not a perpetual visitor or a victim of history, but a deeply rooted inhabitant that deserves full rights and recognition. Thus, she transforms the New York projects of her upbringing into a site of embodied belonging, asserting them as a space to claim rather than merely a backdrop for survival

Marte's poetic intervention calls not only for a scholarly shift away from Anglo-centered frameworks of the African diaspora, but also for a move beyond social death paradigms associated with Afro-pessimism, urging scholars in Afro-Latinx and Diaspora Studies to center Black joy as a radical form of political resistance. She calls on future scholars, authors, and diasporic communities to move beyond the archeology of trauma and toward a healer ethics that celebrates affirmation, love, happiness, and thriving as legitimate acts of defiance. Ultimately, Marte's work suggests that the future of the field and of diasporic subjects lies in recognizing the "hopeful" rather than "hostile" possibilities of the diaspora, advocating for a mode of belonging grounded in the radical audacity to be "diasporically rooted" and still reach for the stars.

References

Angelou, M. (1978). *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems.* Random House.
Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism.* Duke University Press.
Boyce Davies, C. (1994). *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject.* Routledge.

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso.
Candelario, G. E. B., Danticat, E., Pérez, L. M., Chancy, M. A., & Rosario, N. (2004). Voices from Hispaniola: A Meridians Roundtable with Edwidge Danticat, Loida Maritza Pérez, Myriam J. A. Chancy and Nelly Rosario. *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism, 5*(1), 68–91.
Combs, B. (2023). *Finding Black Joy in a World Where We Are Not Safe.* Sociology of Race and Ethnicity, *9*(4), 471–486. https://doi.org/10.1177/23326492221085026
Copeland, H., & Thompson, K. (2018). Afrotropes: A User's Guide. https://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=9755
DeLoughrey, E. M. (2007). *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*. University of Hawaii Press.
Figueroa-Vásquez, Y. (2020). *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literature.* Northwestern University Press.
Florence + The Machine. (2009). *Dog Days Are Over.* In* *Lungs* [CD]. Island Records.
García Peña, L. (2022). *Translating Blackness: Latinx Colonialities in Global Perspectives.* Duke University Press.
Gilroy, P. (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Verso.
Haraway, D. (2015). Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin. *Environmental Humanities*, *6*(1), 159–65.
Hartman, S. (1997). *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America.* Oxford University Press.
Hartman, S. (2007). *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
Hey-Colón, R. (2023). *Channeling Knowledges: Water and Afro-diasporic Spirits in Latinx and Caribbean Worlds*. University of Texas Press.
Hinderliter, B., & Peraza, S. (Eds.). (2021). *More Than Our Pain: Affect and Emotion in the Era of Black Lives Matter.* SUNY Press.
Jiménez-Román, M., & Flores, J. (Eds.). (2010). *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States.* Duke University Press.
Lambert, R. (2025). *Black Hopes/Black Woes: Early African American Optimism and 21st Century Afro-Pessimism.* Routledge.
Lewis-Giggetts, T. (2022). *Black Joy: Stories of Resistance, Resilience, and Restoration.* Gallery Books.
Marte, M. L. (2023). *Plantains and Our Becoming.* Penguin Random House.
Martín-Martínez, M. (2024). A Girl That Could Finally Do It All": Cardi B and the US Afro-Latinx Ethno-Racial and Feminist Dilemmas. In A. M. Marini (Ed.), *Latinx Representation in Contemporary Popular Culture and New Media* (pp. 73–101). Brill.
Moreno, M. C. (2022). *Crossing Waters: Undocumented Migration in Hispanophone Caribbean and Latinx Literature and the Art*. University of Texas Press.
Moten, F. (2003). *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition.* University of Minnesota Press.
Muñoz, J. E. (2009). *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* New York University Press.
Nash, J. (2019). *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality.* Duke University Press.
Noel, U. (2014). *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam*. University of Iowa Press.
Patterson, O. (1982). *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study.* Harvard University Press.
Peele, J. (Director). (2017). *Get Out* [Film]. Blumhouse Productions.
Rivera-Rideau, P. R., Jones, J. A., & Paschel, T. (Eds.). (2016). *Afro-Latin@s in Movement: Critical Approaches to Blackness and Transnationalism in the Americas*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Romero, G. A. (Director). (1968). *Night of the Living Dead* [Film]. Image Ten.

Savory, E. (1998). Ex/Isle: Separation, Memory, and Desire in Caribbean Women's Writing. In A. S. Newson and L. Strong-Leek (Eds.), *Winds of Change: The Transforming Voices of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars* (pp. 169-178). Peter Lang.

Scheinert, D., & Kwan, D. (Directors). (2022). *Everything Everywhere All at Once* [Film]. A24.

Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being.* Duke University Press.

Smith, D. (2017). *Don't Call Us Dead.* Graywolf Press.

Steele, C. (2019). "Joy Is Resistance": Cross-Platform Resilience and (Re)Invention of Black Oral Culture Online. *Information, Communication & Society, 22*(4), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1386704

Stewart, L. (2021). *The Politics of Black Joy: Zora Neale Hurston and Neo-Abolitionism.* Northwestern University Press.

Velasquez, E. (2023). [Review of the book *Plantains and Our Becoming*, by M. L. Marte]. https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/707145/plantains-and-our-becoming-by-melania-luisa-marte/

Warren, C. (2018). *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*. Duke University Press.

Wilderson, F. B. (2010). *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms.* Duke University Press.

Wilderson, F. B. (2021). *Afropessimism.* Liveright.

Williams-Forson, P. (2022). *Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America*. Tantor Media Inc.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE Vol 50, No 2 (2026)
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press

E-ISSN 2450-4580

Richard Reitsma, Canisius University, United States

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.2.106-117

We Carry the Border with Us: Queer Immigration, Border Crossings, and Culinary Identity in *I Carry You with Me*

ABSTRACT
This article examines the complexities of borders and migrations shaped by queer desire in the film *I Carry You with Me* which tells the true story of a Mexican gay male couple from their youths in Mexico to their precarious success in the NYC restaurant industry. Using the frame of food and foodways which defines the courtship and relationship, the film delves into homophobia, sexile, and precarious migratory status. Food is the language of love, longing, and desire for each other, their homeland, and their families. Carrying their memories of fear and longing with them shows that borders are portable, no matter how they are crossed.

KEYWORDS
immigration; borders; sexile; queer desire; food/foodways

1. Introduction

Heidi Ewing's 2021 film *I Carry You with Me* (*Te llevo conmigo)* is a drama with elements of documentary[1]. The film is based on the real-life story of Mexican gay couple Iván García and Gerardo Zabaleta, two men who meet in the 1990s in Puebla, migrate separately to the US, and establish themselves in NYC. Their love relationship, as explored in the film, is built around food and borders, the narrative hanging on the very real precarity and unseen family violence of US immigration policies.

The two men's love story is framed around cooking, as is their story of migration and living in the US where they own restaurants. Iván's personal story is further infused with food and foodways through his father. The men's courtship is also framed around food. In the immigrant experience, as many critics have

[1] Ewing is known as a documentary filmmaker. As she has stated in numerous interviews, she decided that this film about her friends was best presented as a drama, though it retains occasional elements of documentary, particularly the ending scene which was filmed long before Ewing reimagined the narrative as a drama. In this scene, Iván and Gerardo lament their legal limbo, and Iván's inability to see his now grown child and grandchildren.

Richard Reitsma, Department of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, Canisius University, 2001 Main Street, Buffalo, NY 14208, reitsmar@canisius.edu, https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7792-6690

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

articulated, and as is demonstrated in numerous works of fiction, memoir, and film, food and foodways can be emotionally charged performances of cultural identity, communal and family belonging; a political marker of class, gender, and race; an echo of ofttimes fraught histories; and a memory preserved and passed on (Delgado, 2001; del Pino, 2013; Dusselier, 2009; Kalčik, 1997; Raspa, 1984). Food marks time, place, and geography, and has the ability to function as a time machine overlaying the past in the present and carrying the homeland into a new space and time in an effort to repair diasporic identity fragmentation (Holtzman, 2006). Culinary practices are a sort of ethnic or cultural shibboleth of belonging or exclusion[2]. This film explores how food and people cross multiple borders, with food acting as a sensory machine to transport people across time and space.

2. Food and sexile

For Iván and Gerardo, food is the language of courtship. When desire, particularly queer desire, is added to the ingredients "the language of food, nostalgia, and desire" become entangled in complicated ways (Mannur, 2007, p. 13)[3]. For some, a nostalgic longing for home and the pang of migratory separation can be addressed in comforting ways through food, but for others, such as queer sexiles[4], home is precisely the space of violence they desire to escape and for which they have different pangs of separation. Food can be bitter reminders of discontinuity, of pain and rejection from the family table. Sexile, by force or by choice, from one's family is often symbolized by ejection from communal/familial dining, echoing Gloria Anzaldúa's reframing of homophobia as a "fear of going home and not being taken in" (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 42). This dual understanding of homophobia as both queer violence/rejection and queer fear of going home frames *I Carry You with Me*, where the desire for home(s), and the impossibilities of return, is the vinegar in their narrative.

The two young men migrate separately to Puebla as internal sexiles in Mexico, having moved to avoid their respective lives back home. For Iván (a *chilango* i.e. a native of CDMX/Mexico City), "home" is a straight-passing closet where he

[2] The word shibboleth is a linguistic password from the Bible, meaning ear of corn or ford, which was pronounced differently in tribal dialects, leading to slaughter. Similar food pronunciation shibboleths throughout history include the Vesper Uprising in Sicily against the French using the word *ciciri* (garbanzos) to distinguish French occupiers from Sicilians, and the infamous massacre of Haitians on the border with the Dominican Republic of the pronunciation of the word *perejil* (parsley).

[3] See also M. C. Ferreira de Almeida (2011).

[4] "Sexiles" refers to people who have (im)migrated due to homophobic oppression as well as those exiled from their communities because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. While exile is understood as a legal/political category, sexile may be detached from official categories, implying an individual's undesired uprooting from their home. See M. Guzmán (1997) and R. C. Mizzi (2013).

can pretend to be straight with his ex-girlfriend Paola and their son Ricky. Though his father catches him in makeup and wearing a *quinceañera* dress when he is young, no punishment results and it was likely an open secret that his generally supportive parents knew (00:44:47). The scene of being discovered in makeup and a *quinceañera* dress is visually repeated in fragments throughout the film, filtered through mirrors and barred windows. By contrast, Gerardo's home in Chiapas is dominated by an abusive, homophobic father. Iván passes and remains closeted in order to see his son and maintain family ties, while Gerardo flees his abusive father.

While Iván initially passes as straight, as Ricky's father, while maintaining a strained, complicated relationship Paola, Gerardo refuses to pass, sometimes paying the consequences of being harassed and gay-bashed, particularly when walking the streets with his drag-performing friend Cucusa (1:09:33). In the gay bar in an abandoned religious building where they first meet, the drag queen Cucusa Minelli performs with a backdrop of an image of Saint Sebastian, a patron of sorts for gay men due to his portrayal as a suffering ephebe. Cucusa sings Amanda Miguel's *Él me mintió* / *He lied to me* (00:26:14), an apt metaphor of Iván's life as a straight-passing gay man. This metaphor of Sebastian-like suffering and deception continues into his life in the US, where he continues to lie to his family about his sexual orientation (he only came out just prior to the film's premiere in Mexico). He also lies to Gerardo about his culinary successes in the US. It is worth noting the ambient contrasts between Gerardo and Iván, particularly around the theme of deception. Iván lies about his child and the mother which is only revealed when Gerard espies the purportedly happy family one night (00:24:42). When his mother, Paola, and Ricky show up at his apartment and the truth of his relationship with Gerardo is revealed while simultaneously denied, it is at night, raining heavily (00:41:14). And again, when Iván calls Gerardo from a phone booth in New York, spinning lies about his successes, it is night, and we see him through a urine-yellowed, dark, scratched, blurry phone booth (1:05:29). Gerardo, by contrast, is almost always portrayed in light. Only once they are together in NYC do we see the clouds lift from Iván's life and they are portrayed in brighter light, more clarity, and crisp coloration, even when filmed at night or in interiors. The light returns to Iván's life quite literally when Gerardo, defying his partner's admonition to forget about him, crosses the border and ends up in snowy New York. This return of light, of "going home" to a new home, is reflected most visually initially when they are learning English together in front of a big bright window where they put up a Post-It note spelling window in Spanish phonetics as *guindo* (1:17:35). They also practice culinary vocabulary such as learning the words for mushroom and grill. The return of light continues as we see the young men celebrating pride, openly living parts of their truths for the first time.

Gerardo is from a land-owning family in Chiapas. When he is 8 years old, his father, responding to town gossip about his effeminate boy being a *mampo*

(Chiapan slang for faggot), abandons the confused child at night in the *milpa* (corn fields), telling him to find his way home, if he is man enough (0:36:24). Despite evolution in gender and sexuality perspectives in Mexico and the diaspora, there are still deeply entrenched understandings of gender as exclusively binary often expressed in extremes of *machismo /marianismo* leaving the queer subject at "the margins of society occupy[ing] an ambiguous space outside the gender binary" (Cervantes, 2014, p. 131). As occurs in this film, when a Latino male comes out as gay, the community often imposes a feminizing identity[5]. This is demonstrated when the couple visits Gerardo's family's estate in Chiapas for his birthday and Iván is mocked for doing "women's work" in the kitchen such as washing dishes (0:35:01). Curiously, immigration often restructures understandings and performances of such strict gender identities particularly in contexts of food and foodways as men often work in kitchens and prepare their own meals (Alfonso, 2012; Gabaccia, 1998; Williams, 1984). It is precisely after this tense family meal that Gerardo sees both through the window and in the mirror, the brutal experience of his abandonment in the milpa.

Gerardo denies his birthright as eldest son, rejecting the rough "masculine" labor of the ranch, and wearing unsuitable clothing (including a long house robe his mother made for him). During his last visit home, he tells his mother he is leaving to be with the man he loves, permanently rejecting his birthright and the hetero patriarchal masculinities implicit in that world as reinforced in the TV image of traditional Mexican masculinity a la Vicente Fernández on the TV in the background (1:11:20). Gerardo viscerally knows the fear of going home, while Iván's fears keep him closeted. The shadow of death, from homophobia to border crossings, flavors the film. Gerardo is fully aware that one can die crossing the border. He himself has crossed various other treacherous borders between life and death, beginning in his childhood crossing the threshold of masculinity and familial belonging when his father abandons him in a remote *milpa*. Gerardo's peregrinations are multiple, and his border crossings are frequent brushes with death. When he first meets Iván, he says "Let's just say I got out alive" to describe the reason for his internal sexile from Chiapas. Having barely escaped Chiapas with his life, he risks his life again when he crosses into the US to be with Iván.

Iván's motivation to migrate is entwined with his sense of destiny and professional opportunities for himself, his lover, and his son. Gerardo's motivations first to leave Chiapas are to live an honest life and escape violence, fleeing the repressive atmosphere of his father's *rancho* to Puebla where he lives openly as a gay man. Nevertheless, they both carry the borders with them. While in the film Gerardo claims not to see himself in Mexico (1:29:50), having abandoned his

[5] For more on the gay male as feminine, active/passive definitions of sexual identity, and the gay implications of immigration to the US see A. R. del Castillo and G. Güido (2014).

past, in an interview in 2025 at BAAD! (Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance), he expressed his desire to go back. But as Gerardo says in the film, there's nothing else to do but *seguir*, keep going on (1:38:30). Both men carry with them their loves, their memories, and their dreams. Iván cannot separate dreams and memories, as displayed from the opening scenes of the film that intersperse him riding the NYC subway while dreaming of his past and an imagined present in Mexico, centered around food and foodways. This visual conflation of time and geography is repeated again near the end of the film, when he narrates in voiceover "Have you ever had that dream where you're back in Mexico? I have it all the time . . . The colors of the market. I can see them. It's so real. There are days when the feeling doesn't leave me. I carry it with me, wherever I go. Sometimes I confuse my dreams with memories. Because a part of me is still there" (1:40:26).

3. The dual border

Despite Gerardo's initial affirmation that he cannot see himself in Mexico, both men continue to exist on both sides of the border. Part of each of them remains in Mexico, and they have brought Mexico with them across the border. This duality of the border having been crossed yet existing perpetually in the present in New York City is reflected in numerous ways in the film. One of the ways is how the film is structured, narratively switching from the present to the past, visually coexisting the time frames in one shot, erasing the artificial border of time. The fragmented pieces of their broken pasts in Mexico visually erupt in the film through memories viewed through windows, mirrors, bars, rippled water, and a sometimes-blurry camera focus, grounding the past in the present, and Mexico in New York. This overlay of past and present is perhaps most evident in a scene where Gerardo is in a car, leaving his family home for the last time, and looks in the side mirror at himself as a young boy (1:30:35). This moment reveals that he is bidding goodbye to his past, but, also, that he is carrying that past, including the love (for his mother, for the land) and the trauma (of the *milpa*) with him. His motivation to leave a life he built as an openly gay man in Puebla, with a career, is his love for Iván. Love motivates their respective border crossings, and love also both erases the border by carrying it with them.

The frequent mirror images, as well as blurry images of the protagonists through dirty or barred windows reflect the splintered selves: of child/adult, gay/straight-passing, immigrant/Mexican (hated as immigrants in the US, hated in Mexico as gay men). These contrasting identities cry out to be healed, to integrate into a whole, but the film argues that in many ways, these identities can never be fully healed and integrated, because of US immigration policy separating fathers from sons, children from parents, and Mexicans from Mexico, with no resolution.

4. Carrying Mexico with them

They carry Mexico with them in various ways, such as through their attendance at Spanish language church services honoring the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, the patron saint of Mexico, Queen of Latin America, and protectress of immigrants (1:35:31). She herself is representative of border erasures, crossing the boundaries between the divine and the human, between the indigenous and the Spanish[6]. Another example of Mexico in Brooklyn occurs visually in their apartment. When Iván is speaking to his mother, his dying father, or his son Ricky via video calls, he is usually seen on a couch with a reproduction behind him of a Diego Rivera painting (1:33:40), echoing, like *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, multiple border crossings. Painted in 1931 while he was on commission for murals in the US, Rivera's painting *Flower Festival: Feast of Santa Anita* is a visual echo to a pre-Colombian statue *Kneeling Female Figure* (Mexica, 1325–1521). The artwork, produced in the new nation-building fervor after the Mexican Revolution, valorizes the indigenous past, formerly shunned and denigrated, particularly under the preceding Porfiriato dictatorship which focused on Europeanizing Mexico. Rivera's work crosses temporal boundaries and cultural borders in an artistic creation of a new national identity from the violent wreckage of the past. That it is in the background as Iván, through the wonders of technology, crosses the borders of time and space to communicate with his family, represents an historical and cross-border continuity similarly inflected with violence.

Another way in which the film demonstrates that they carry Mexico with them, effectively erasing the border, is the numerous scenes where they have recreated Mexico in their restaurant, from the cuisine (we are shown Iván plating a dish of *chiles en nogada* 1:23:59), to hosting *quinceañeras* and similar celebrations replete with piñatas (1:24:02). Their restaurant is also decorated seasonally, including *Día de Muertos ofrendas* or altars (1:24:02) which include food for the departed such as Iván's father who ignited his love of foods. In this way they recreate the space and taste of their homeland and keep alive a sort of time machine of the past ever present[7]. Iván and Gerardo break bread with their New York community as well as with the dead during *Día de Muertos* celebrations, where we see the *ofrenda* to Iván's father, replete with all the elements necessary for the deceased to cross the border, from his favorite foods and drinks, to the vibrant yellow-orange *cempasúchil* flower guiding his spirit all the way from Mexico City to Brooklyn New York, from the land of the dead to the land of the living (1:35:19). The dead return to us across the borderland of death through the act of love. Again, and

[6] It is said that she appeared to Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin on the *Tepeyac* (hilltop) where indigenous people worshipped the Aztec mother earth goddess Tonantzin.

[7] See Alfonso (2012), and Vázquez-Medina (2017) on food in the construction of diasporic space via restaurants.

again the film reminds us that borders exist to be transcended through love. The only border of love that cannot be crossed so successfully is the love of father to son, as Ricky has tried for many years to legally enter the US to visit his father, who cannot leave the US to visit his son as he would never be allowed re-entry (1:27:05). For decades, the love of Iván for his son has not been enough to cross the border, and near the end of the film we see how this tension of what Iván carries with him (the legal impossibilities of family reunification) threatens to destroy him and his relationship with Gerardo (1:39:00). The legal impediments also prevent Iván from bidding his father farewell on his deathbed (1:33:00). The *ofrenda* to Iván's father, erected with love, and adorned with foodstuffs associated with the deceased, triggers Iván's memories of his father a *tamalero* (street vendor of tamales). He recalls both how his father discovered him without judgement in *quinceañera* drag, and how together they would make and sell tamales on the street. Iván's self-perceived destiny to become a successful chef is directly correlated to his father. That paternal/filial love for each other, and their shared love of food, is what motivates Iván's internal migration to Puebla, and then to NYC, and then motivates his father's spirit's journey to New York after his death.

5. The Food of Love: Chiles en Nogada

The intertwining of love, food, and borders in the film is particularly significant in one particular dish, *chiles en nogada* which threads its way throughout the film. Iván initially courts Gerardo through the intricate preparation of the dish, which the film highlights repeatedly, demonstrating the cultural importance of the meal, which begins in their intimate domestic setting and then, later, in the US becomes part of the key to success, one of the signature dishes at their restaurant in Williamsburg, NY. Much like the aforementioned cultural elements that carry Mexican identity across time and space, *chiles en nogada* function the same way, though with the added contexts as the food of love between Iván and Gerardo, as well as demonstrating the culinary memories of the foodways that Iván carries with him. His memories involve the markets, the ingredients, the aromas, his father's voice calling out to people to eat his food. For Iván, food is love for Gerardo, his father, his son, and his community.

Iván's culinarily motivated internal migration specifically to Puebla was to learn how to make *chiles en nogada*, a regional specialty with fiercely defended variations by region and family. At their first meeting, Iván tells Gerardo that he bribed the nuns of the convent where it originated to get the authentic recipe[8]. This

[8] There is a *vexata quaestio* as to the origin of this dish, whether it was invented by the Claretian Nuns or the Nuns of the Contemplative Augustinians in the convent of Santa Mónica, both in Puebla. We don't know which convent Iván bribed. There is also debate as to the original ingredients and if the dish was planned or invented based on the scant foodstuffs available.

is the dish Iván later creates to woo Gerardo. The hybrid dish "speaks" in space/geography and time/history. The fruits of the dish (which often include panochera apple, sweet-milk pear, creole peach, and pomegranates) grow on the skirts of Puebla's Popocatépetl volcano; these are mixed with *picadillo* (mincemeat), stuffed inside a poblano chili, then covered in a walnut nougat sauce (*nogada*) and sprinkled with pomegranate seeds and parsley. It is tied to Mexican national identity and Independence (September 16) because the ingredients become available in August/September, and the colors coincide with the Mexican flag (red pomegranate, white nougat, and green chili and parsley)[9]. Some of the key ingredients of the dish, the pomegranate and walnuts, are also migratory foods, having been brought to Mexico from Spain (and to Spain from Western Asia) and thus the dish, like Mexico itself, is emblematic of *mestizaje*, migrations, and transformations.

The intimacy of the elaborate and laborious first creation of this dish over a single burner rickety stove in a shabby apartment in Puebla is an act of love by Iván for Gerardo, as well as an expression of his attachment to his country (0:19:09). The dish becomes symbolic of how Iván, through food, creates a home for Gerardo in NYC. The *chiles en nogada* that symbolize Mexican independence and national identity indicate Iván is a talented chef.

6. The American Dream realized?

Iván's talent, plus the support of Gerardo are essential to their success in the US. In his home country he is excluded from loving Gerardo and is unable to get work as a chef. We see Iván from early scenes preparing and selling tamales in the street with his dad. After he migrates to Puebla, he is seen cleaning kitchens and restaurant bathrooms, relegated to non-culinary labor due to systems of patronage, despite his culinary degree. He is surrounded by male cooks creating dishes that he knows how to make better, having learned from his father, and having studied in culinary school.

After being discovered with Gerardo by his mom and Paola, Iván loses access to seeing Ricky. His dead-end jobs can't afford to support Ricky, let alone pay his own rent, so he decides to immigrate. As gay men, and as immigrants (for whom "they hate us" – is a constant echo in the film) they lead fragmented lives, rejected in the US as "illegal Mexicans" and in Mexico of their memories, hated for being gay. When Iván proposes immigrating to the US, Gerardo suggests it's because his closet door has burst open. Iván, however, considers it his culinary destiny. Gerardo tells Iván that if he crosses, he could die. He also warns him that the US kills one with loneliness, a fact borne out by Iván's friend Sandra

[9] It was purportedly first prepared for the visit of the independence leader and future emperor Agustín de Iturbide after the Treaty of Córdoba ending the War of Independence.

who immigrates with him and nearly dies in the desert crossing, only to end up returning to Mexico, broken down by the loneliness and humiliations she suffers as a consequence of her status. Iván survives in NYC only once Gerardo arrives.

Gerardo reminds him that Mexicans are hated in the US, and asks him what he would do, harvest grapes or *aguacates* (avocados). Food becomes a linguistic identifier, a rhetorical reminder of both their sexuality and their Mexican identity. Right after suggesting Iván could harvest avocadoes, he says "*Iván somos gays, no cosechamos aguacates*" / "Iván we're gay, we don't harvest avocadoes" (0:47:35). The food joke is linguistic as the Spanish word *aguacates* (from the Nahuatl word *ahuacatl*) can euphemistically mean testicles. Food is Iván's language, and Gerardo speaks to him in food using a culinary joke to remind him that he is Mexican and gay. Their relationship, begun with a discourse on *chiles en nogada*, continues to operate through the rhetorical language of food, even after Iván leaves for NYC.

Gerardo is not interested in immigrating to the US; he has a job as a teacher and has managed to navigate life as a gay man. When Iván calls Gerardo and lies to him about how well things are going in New York, he navigates this conversation using food, telling Gerardo all the dishes he is allowed to make (when in reality he is a food delivery person), and how Americans are strange, using too much parsley (the bitter herb of Iván's solitary sexile), and almost never using cilantro, to which Gerardo replies that Americans are uncivilized (1:46:20). At the end of the phone call, Iván tells Gerardo to forget about him, to live his life, understanding that his American Dream is at a dead end, and he has failed (1:07:22). Gerardo, however, decides to abandon his career and his family, and to immigrate, first attempting to get a legal visa, and then crossing the border without appropriate papers. This turns out to be Iván's salvation as he is no longer alone, Gerardo's love sustains him and he finds success, unlike Sandra.

The two men, who have been together for three decades, of which at least 25 have been in the US, are strongly considering going back to Mexico[10]. They have not seen their son, nor their 2 grandchildren, nor Iván's mother since leaving Mexico. As they said in a recent interview for BAAD!, they are exhausted, done with the much-vaunted American Dream, and view the migratory policies of this country in the last 25 years as a farce[11]. They contribute taxes, own restaurants, employ many people, and contribute much to the US but get nothing in return. It is clear from the film and their public conversations since, that Iván would just pack a backpack and go, but Gerardo reminds him of all the obligations they have in the US to resolve before than can go back to Mexico, a place now relatively

[10] Mexico has changed: as of 2022 same sex marriage is legal throughout Mexico.

[11] Due to the irregular circumstances under which they entered, once they leave the US, there is no legal possibility of return.

safer for them as gay men while the US no longer feels safe for them as Mexican immigrants.

Iván carries with him stronger memory connections to Mexico than Gerardo, because of his son, his mother, and the gastro-nostalgia he inherits from his father, which involves "the transfer of nostalgic culinary knowledge from the private sphere of families . . . to the public in … restaurants" (Vázquez-Medina, 2017, p. 65). Gerardo, however, rejected his birthright and everything of his life in Mexico due to the horrific abuse he experienced from his father for being gay. This explains why Gerardo has few if any flashbacks or nostalgic feelings for Mexico in the film, while Iván has flashbacks and actually sees himself in Mexico. Iván's recreation of *chiles en nogada* is political and personal because he resignifies the national dish as a queer and immigrant narrative, a cross-cultural language of belonging. The dish, like their lives, blends disparate ingredients into one, blending seemingly incompatible parts into a unified, delicious whole. These formerly rejected men have created for themselves and others a home away from home, a community of inclusion. As Vázquez-Medina (2017) notes, "the regional, personal, and private tastes of home become the flavors of the Mexican nation upon crossing the geopolitical border" (p. 65). It is, then, particularly noteworthy that Iván, a gay man, rejected from the national home, creates the space, taste, and culinary language that symbolize the homeland he and Gerardo fled[12].

7. Conclusion

The film concludes with Iván's phone conversation with his mother, and subsequent heart wrenching conversations with Gerardo over his frustration at not being able to return to Mexico, as he tearily asks the unresolvable question of how a nation can inflict emotional violence, keeping families separated, lamenting that US immigration policies separate a father from his son, motivating his complicated desire to return. The fact that Iván and Gerardo, the rejected queer bodies of the Mexican diaspora, carry Mexico with them (from the *chiles en nogada*, to *quinceañeras*, to *Día de Muertos ofrendas* to *Virgen de Guadalupe* to Diego Rivera art with Aztec echoes), serves as a visual call for Mexican inclusion of the sexile and US incorporation of the Mexican diaspora. These queer Mexican bodies, like Mexican art and Mexican food, transcend borders. The couple's food of love, their queer, binational, intergenerational love, transcends borders and reminds us that the border is carried within.

[12] The movie prompted Iván to finally come out to his mother and his son, who had assumed up until two weeks before the movie premier in CDMX that Gerardo was just his good friend. After the premiere, his mother called him to say how proud she was of him, and his son Ricky posed for pictures with audience members. As Heidi Ewing the director said in the BAAD! talkback, it was the most expensive coming out ever.

In conclusion, this film shows us how foodways, queer and ethnic identities, and violence are deeply intertwined, but also how foodways can lead to communal reconciliation. This journey of love is framed around *chiles en nogada*, an homage to Iván's love for Mexico, for his father, and most importantly, for Gerardo. The dish is emblematic of their migrations, as internal immigrants, as Mexicans in the diaspora, from the private gay and immigrant closet to the public big screen. The film is also a border crosser, moving from documentary to drama, from personal to public, reaching out across borders in an act of love and reconciliation.

References

Alfonso, I. D. (2012). We Are What We Now Eat: Food and Identity in the Cuban Diaspora. *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies, 37*(74), 173–206. https://doi.org/10.1080/08263663.2012.11006007

Anzaldúa, G. (2007). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (Third Edition).* Aunt Lute Books.

Cervantes, V. (2014). Still Flaming. In A. R. del Castillo, & G. Güido (Eds.), *Queer in Aztlán: Chicano Male Recollections of Consciousness and Coming Out* (pp. 131–142). Cognella.

Del Castillo, A. R., & G. Güido, (Eds.). (2014). *Queer in Aztlán: Chicano Male Recollections of Consciousness and Coming Out*. Cognella.

Delgado Salazar, R. (2001). Comida y cultura: identidad y significado en el mundo contemporáneo. *Estudios de Asia y África, 36*(1), 83–108. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3dnp4k.7

Del Pino, Á. M., & N. P. Soler. (2013). *Comidas bastardas. Gastronomía, tradición, e identidad en América Latina*. Cuarto Propio.

Dusselier, J. (2009). Understanding Food as Culture. *Environmental History, 14*(2), 331–338.

Ewing, H., (Dir). (2020). *Te llevo conmigo/I Carry You with Me.* Sony Pictures.

Ferreira de Almeida, M. C. (2011). Cocinando identidades en el Caribe expandido: literaturas, comidas, y música. *Revista Cuadernos de Literatura, 15*(30), 88–106. https://doi.org/10.11144/4103

Gabaccia, D. R. (1998). *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*. Harvard University Press.

García, I., H. Ewing, G. Zabaleta, & C. Rice-González. (2025). Post Screening Panel discussion of *I Carry You With Me.* Presented at BAAD!: Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, 18 February 2025.

Guzmán, M. (1997). 'Pa' la escuelita con mucho cuida'o y por la orillita': A Journey Through the Contested Terrains of the Nation and Sexual Orientation." In F. Negrón-Muntaner, & R. Grosfoguel (Eds.), *Puerto Rican Jam: Essays on Culture and Politics*,(pp. 209–228). University of Minnesota Press.

Holtzman, J. D. (2006). Food and Memory. *Annual Reviews of Anthropology, 35,* 361–378. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.35.081705.123220

Kalčik, S. (1997). Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity. In L. Keller Brown, & K. Mussel (Eds.), *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity* (pp. 37–65). University of Tennessee Press.

Mexica artist(s). (1325-1521 CE). Kneeling Female Figure [Stone carving]. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, United States. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/307630

Mannur, A. (2007). Culinary Nostalgia, Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora. *Melus, 32*(4), 11–31. *Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures*. https://doi.org/10.70091/Atras/vol05no2.12

Miguel, A. (1981). Él me mintió [Song]. On *El Sonido, Vol. 1* [Album]. DIAM Music.

Mizzi, R. C. (2013). Sexiles in the Classroom: Understanding Intersectionalities of Sexuality, Immigration, and Education. In M. S. Plakhotnik, S. M. Nielsen, & D. M. Pane (Eds.),

Proceedings of the 11th Annual College of Education & GSN Research Conference (pp. 122–129). Florida International University.

Raspa, R. (1984). Exotic Foods among Italian Americans in Mormon Utah: Food as Nostalgic Enactment of Identity. In L. Keller Brown, & K. Mussel (Eds.), *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity* (pp. 185–194). University of Tennessee Press.

Rivera, D. *Festival de Flores: Fiesta de Santa Anita* (1931). Encaustic on canvas. MoMA.

Vázquez-Medina, J. A. (2017). 'Cooking Mexican': Negotiating Nostalgia in Family-Owned and Small-Scale Mexican Restaurants in the United States. In M. Garcia, E. M. Dupuis, & D. Mitchell (Eds.), *Food Across Borders* (pp. 64–78). Rutgers University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1trkkjk

Williams, B. (1984). Why Migrant Women Feed Their Husbands Tamales: Foodways as a Basis for a Revisionist View of Tejano Family Life. In L. Keller Brown, L., & K. Mussel (Eds.), *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity* (pp. 113–126). University of Tennessee Press.

LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE Vol 50, No 2 (2026)
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press

E-ISSN 2450-4580

Lucía Bausela Buccianti, University of Salamanca, Spain

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2026.50.2.118-130

Feminist Solidarities and their Limits in the Decolonial Landscape of Sole Otero's *Walicho*

ABSTRACT
This article analyses the graphic novel *Walicho* (2023) by Argentinian comics artist Sole Otero, as it intertwines space theory, feminist critique, and decolonial perspectives through visual storytelling. Structured as an anthology, the narrative follows three Spanish witches whose migration to Buenos Aires in the eighteenth century catalyses social and colonial transformations within Mapuche land. The work explores Buenos Aires as a colonial and postcolonial space shaped by hybrid epistemologies, drawing on indigenous cosmology, Catholic imagery, and European witchcraft. Through characters across historical periods, Walicho criticises enduring colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist structures while interrogating the possibilities and limits of feminist solidarity.

KEYWORDS
comics; migration; space; decolonial; Latin America

1. Introduction

By the end of the twentieth and beginnings of the twenty-first century, the "age of migration" emerged as a result of the dismantling of colonial empires which, due to complex globalisation and neo-imperialist processes, triggered technological, economic, political, and social shifts (De Haas et al., 2014). As contemporary history is shaped by migration, the medium of comics has often portrayed these movements and their significance from different perspectives, either as autobiographies, biographies, or narrating the lives of fictional characters who are migrants, refugees, or racialised people[1]. Latin American comics, in particular, often present similar stories, where shared political and economic processes are thematised, but these are "filtered by the particular characteristics, history, social qualities and economic realities of each country" (Fernández et al., 2023, p. 2).

[1] Although a thorough review of the literature exceeds the scope of this chapter, many scholars have explored comics which thematise migration. I can highlight monograph of Serrano (2021), Davies & Rifkind's book (2019), or Nabizadeh (2019).

Lucía Bausela Buccianti, Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Facultad de Filología, Universidad de Salamanca, Placentinos, 18. 37008-Salamanca, bauselabuccianti@usal.es, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8116-7018

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

With comics serving as a powerful medium for exploring themes of identity, history, and power, Sole Otero's *Walicho* (2023) is a remarkable combination of transnational storytelling, feminist discourse, and postcolonial critique by means of visual elements regarding specific features of Argentinian society.

Comics artist, illustrator, and textile designer Sole Otero has built a career deeply shaped by her involvement in collectives of women artists and a transnational approach to storytelling, and she has frequently discussed issues of migration, Argentinian identity, and female agency in her works. Otero began publishing comic strips on her blog in the early 2000s and joined the Latin American collective *Historietas Reales* in 2009, followed by her participation in the international women's comics group *Chicks on Comics* (2010–2017). Her work gained international visibility from 2015 onwards, with publications in Spain and the release of *Poncho Fue* (2017) and *Intensa* (2019), the latter produced during her residency at the Maison des Auteurs in Angoulême. Her subsequent graphic novels, *Naftalina* (2020) – which received multiple awards in Spain and France – and *Walicho* (2023), consolidated her international reputation; notably, although *Walicho* was created in Angoulême with European funding, it engages critically with contemporary Argentina as a culturally heterogeneous society in which indigenous languages and beliefs persist.

Her latest graphic novel, *Walicho*, consists of nine different stories which take place at different times in history, but the characters and their plotlines are connected around three sister witches who, at the end of the eighteenth century, migrate from Europe to Spain. Even though they are at the core of the story – and the history of Buenos Aires –, they are never the direct protagonists, and since all the other characters and events orbit around these witches, Otero uses them to portray past colonial practices and their present after-effects in Argentina. Connecting contemporary protagonists to colonial land appropriation, the forceful imposition of economic and ideological systems, and the selfish subjugation of the land and its peoples for personal gain, the different protagonists of all these stories weave a cryptic tapestry of abuse, fear, and oppression whose perpetrators feel atemporal and ever-looming (Table 1).

Table 1. The stories of *Walicho*

Nº	Title	Time Setting	Main Events
1	(untitled)	1776	Three mysterious women arrive by ship to the port of Buenos Aires with a goat and steal a baby boy.
2	Lo bueno de esa época	2020s	A man tells his best friend how he has witnessed a sex ritual involving dancing naked women and a goat and this has negatively impacted his relationship and libido.

3	Walicho	1800	Ailín arrives at an estate to work for three Spanish women. They claim to be doctors but they are accused of witchcraft. Ailín struggles to reconcile Catholic and 'pagan' views.
4	Un poco más normal	2020s	Belén is an agoraphobic woman who works from home. She meets a man named Darío and they chat almost every day. Darío confesses that his family is complicated and dangerous and that his mother and aunts are witches.
5	No nos dejes caer	Twentieth century	Ana is an orphan girl of native origin who's admitted into a Catholic orphanage. She is unfairly accused of being a seductress, and her epilepsy is seen as signs of demonic possession. She's adopted by one of the witches and rescued from the orphanage.
6	No te metas	2020s	Paula, Darío's sister, is trying to find a flat away from her family's influence, but her mother and aunts own most of the buildings in the area.
7	Graciela quiere saber	1994	Graciela went to primary school with Paula and Darío, and she had a crush on him. Told in an epistolary way through a young girl's diary, this story further exposes how Darío's family is 'weird' and problematic.
8	La ley primera	2020s	The male victims of the witched rituals share their account of what they remember. The witches' goat is killed.
9	Yo lo que quiero es divertirme	2020s	Anita and her friends are talking and catching up on each other's lives. Even though they don't personally know the witches, the stories they tell fit the patterns of all the previous characters.

The tacit connection between women from different centuries who have had to face struggles stemming from an oppressive patriarchal system reads as a historical revision aimed at finding there the roots of contemporary struggles which, in so doing, reveals what Acevedo (2020) calls a "feminist genealogy" (p.7). Feminist genealogies in comics are usually stories which can be read independently jump back and forth in time, and even though they have a certain narrative independence from one another, they match as puzzle pieces to ultimately configure a general picture of the present day.

As *Walicho* combines witchcraft, animism, sorority, colonial secrets and contemporary fears, this analysis explores this graphic novel as an Argentinian feminist genealogy which highlights and questions the lingering effects of colonial appropriations on female identity and agency. In order to do so, this chapter first explores the arrival of the three Spanish witches in Buenos Aires and how their migration is framed, arguing possible reasons for their journey and analysing the nature of their magic. Then, the discussion shifts to Ailín, a woman of Mapuche origin who is hired as a maid by the witches in the nineteenth century, and whose connection to the land is deeply affected by these

colonisers. Finally, this chapter refers to the echoes of these past events in the lives of women in the twenty-first century.

2. Arriving in the New World: Colonialism and Witchcraft

The port of Nuestra Señora María del Buen Ayre was not a very important enclave at first (1500s–1690); it was only in 1776 that Buenos Aires was designated by the King of Spain as the capital of the newly created Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata. Therefore, in the mid-eighteenth century, Buenos Aires was not the preferred destination of the European aristocracy, including the Spanish, and the economy of this colonial enclave, though active, relied mainly on local industries, such as tanning (Luna, 2002, p. 64). Since social status in Buenos Aires depended on personal achievements rather than lineage, no surnames or aristocratic connections guaranteed prosperity; rather, it was a matter of individual merit and success. Otero effectively conveys these social dynamics in the opening story of *Walicho*: set against the backdrop of a dark ocean, a ship – accentuated in red – arrives at a small port in the Americas (Figure 1). On board, a wealthy woman expresses disdain at having to travel alongside individuals of lower social standing, which reflects how Buenos Aires, initially, was not a city where aristocratic lineage held significant importance, as mostly people of little means migrated there. More importantly, the reason for the danger foreshadowed in the first panel takes shape in the figure of three women and a male goat, who disembark swiftly and silently, taking with them the rich lady's son – something she does not realise until it is too late. The reasons why they steal this boy are as ambiguous as their character: on the one hand, in the following stories of the anthology, the witches systematically save children from abusive environments, but they also take advantage of men

Figure 1: The witches arrive © Sole Otero (Salamandra Graphic, 2023)

to perform esoteric rituals that lengthen the witches' lifespan. The destiny of this particular child is not explicit, and this serves as a rhetorical device to further the suspicions on these women's self-serving goals.

These first pages of the graphic novel introduce visual cues to important features which will shape the future configuration of Argentinian society: female influence, spiritual beliefs, and violence. The three enigmatic women in red are later revealed to be sisters, who buy a finca and settle in a rural area near Buenos Aires, with the goat always alongside them. They perform sexual rituals with men they have tricked to extend their life span, nurturing their soul and bodies with energy they extract from the land. Given that, in the eighteenth century, "[t] e European bourgeois woman was [understood] as someone who reproduced race and capital through her sexual purity, passivity, and being homebound in the service of the white, European, bourgeois man" (Lugones, 2010, p. 743), their lack of male companions, their active scheming to fulfil their own goals, and their self-serving sexual freedom establish a new or modern perspective on the forces that have shaped Argentinian history. These witches establish themselves as the ladies of a colonial estate and have little to no desire to dismantle the Spanish occupation; despite the fact that they face social backlash for being unmarried women and they refuse to blindly obey any male figures of authority, they do not overtly defy the system and avoid conflict and confrontation. The finca is secluded enough to grant them their necessary isolation, but within this microcosm, they stand as bourgeois figures of authority and land owners who employ *mestizo* workers and surveil their every move.

These women cannot – and will not – be tamed: as almost textbook examples of Ahmed's (2010) "killjoys", they refuse patriarchal, reproductive, and moral scripts, so it is more than likely that they fled their homeland for being labelled as disruptive, sinful, or destructive to social harmony. In fact, European witch hunters were so preoccupied with affirming male supremacy that they alleged women held supernatural powers which challenged God due to a pact with the devil, which is, in essence, a further way to make them subservient to a male figure in a perverted marriage albeit how powerful these women might have been (Federici, 2004, p. 187). Otero's nod at these superstitions is realised through the witches' most valuable companion, the male goat, a well-established European symbol of the devil. However, their connection to the devilish goat is more akin to a business partner or an absolutely essential resource than a husband or a master. The goal of their rituals is to extend their own lifespan, as opposed to the male-centred narrative that aimed at turning sex into work, a service for men, and procreation. Having escaped from Europe, a place in which male figures of authority devised a marital analogy to the devil to justify female knowledge or ambition, the Spanish witches are nothing if not the masters of their power and their own destiny, so it is possible to read the witches' monstrosity as a projection of patriarchal discomfort

after refusing male-centred sexuality and Christian moral order (Ahmed, 2010). Therefore, what a male gaze may perceive as bestial and sinful, Otero depicts as free and natural, serving nothing but these women's own aims and having absolutely nothing to do with procreation, and everything to do with self-preservation.

Even though *Walicho* weaves a complex narrative of female empowerment and independence, the witches purposefully build their finca on sacred Mapuche grounds to take advantage of the "energy that was there" (Otero, 2023, n.p.). They also strongly defend the old mode of existence in which you are either with them or against them, and they enforce a colonial economic system which reduces indigenous women to the condition of servants working as maids and weavers. These witches, powerful, free, and victims of the patriarchy in their own way as they are, still act as colonisers, imposing European magic which consumes the harmonious nature of the rural landscape. This is particularly evident when the witches realize that Ailín, one of their maids, has a sensitivity for the supernatural as well, as it is explained in the following section.

3. The Spirits of the Land: Mapuche Animism

As Buenos Aires started to gain political and economic importance, not only Europeans moved there: many indigenous people left their homelands and moved to this city and its whereabouts to try to make a better living, too. With this, *Walicho* problematises whether the Mapuche who assimilated into colonial society and moved to cities such as Buenos Aires were voluntary migrants, thus joining a trend in contemporary comics which challenges "official histories" that portray displacement as national community-building and recover marginalised and minority voices to represent personal, political, social, and historical peripheries (Vuorinne & Kauranen, 2023, p.13). In this sense, Anzaldúa's (1987) conceptualisation of the New World as a colonial borderland, where identities are fractured and hierarchies are violently imposed, is extremely helpful to understand Buenos Aires in the eighteenth century as a zone of collision of cultural, political, and spiritual forces which do not necessarily depend on geopolitical lines.

One of the indigenous peoples whose identity and structure were deeply shaped by colonialism in the nineteenth century in Argentina are the Mapuche, who are defined by shared social, religious, and economic traits as well as a common language, Mapundungún. At the time of Spanish arrival, they inhabited much of the Argentinian Pampa and Patagonia, as well as Southern Chile. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, Mapuche groups were forced westward to the Andes mountains, and those who remained in Spanish-ruled areas mingled with the Spanish during the colonial period, forming a *mestizo* population that combined identity and cultural traits.

Ailín (Story 3) embodies a perfect example of a migrant *mestiza* in this culturally, politically, and religiously convoluted context. Of Mapuche origin and

raised as a Christian, she moves to the witches' *finca* on the outskirts of Buenos Aires to work as a maid, and she speaks in a creole of Spanish and Mapudungún. Scholars in Latinx studies have identified characters like Ailín as part of a long-standing strategy employed by Hispanic authors and artists to represent cultural transformation without erasing cultural specificity. Positioned "between cultures", such figures do not reflect an impulse toward assimilation but rather an "acquisitive and adaptive culture, ready to use the tools at its disposal to forge new identities" (Espinoza, 2021, p. 177). However, despite assimilating into colonial society, Ailín sees the natural world through the eyes of a Mapuche, finding spirits in nature and connecting with the land to seek for advice or help.

In Mapuche mythology, the Ngen are nature spirits which maintain balance and order between nature and human beings. Otero depicts Mapuche tradition and religious practices in the way Ailín, as a mestiza, interacts with these spirits. The Ngen limit their action exclusively to the wild natural environment; and they usually interact with people only when the latter try to make use of the natural element in their charge. Consequently, the Mapuche who contacts a Ngen must engage in a respectful and affectionate dialogue with it. Ailín, in particular, engages with two of them: Ngen-mawida, a forest spirit, and Ngen-kütral, a fire spirit (Figure 2). Considered the owner of the house who resides in the hearth, Ngen-kütral is summoned with a breath, lighting up the fire to give warmth and hot food to the family. In the same way that the witches' magic is highlighted in red, the spirits of the land are also revealed with this colour, symbolising that the river,

Figure 2: Mapuche animism © Sole Otero (Salamandra Graphic, 2023)

the trees, and all other elements of her natural environment are alive and have a magic of their own. Meaningfully, magic and life persist despite colonial —and capitalist—action, which can be seen, for instance, in a canalised river where Ailín connects with the spirit of the water (Figure 2). As opposed to the colonising witches, Ailín belongs in this land and is part of it; therefore, her connection to nature is harmonious and peaceful, and she is often aided by these spirits.

Figure 3: Witchcraft © Sole Otero (Salamandra Graphic, 2023)

What Anzaldúa (1987) associates with *mestiza consciousness* is realised through the cultural contradictions Ailín daily confronts, her linguistic hybridity and the epistemic tension that Otero builds between the witches' self-serving magic rituals and Mapuche animism (Figure 3). When Ailín sees a supernatural being which does not naturally belong in her land, the devilish goat, she cries "*walicho*" in horror, an expression from Mapundungún that Argentinians still use today. In a positive sense, 'walicho' can entail having fallen in love with a person, but in a negative one, it means 'curse'. It may seem ironic that, being so closely connected with nature and believing in Mapuche mythology, she condemns supernatural forces that are not Christian, but this is because the concept of witchcraft was alien to Andean societies such as the Mapuche. Still, her special sensibility for natural balance allows her to recognise the threat of this foreign power and its harmful potential.

However, when people from the city find out that Ailín, a *mestiza,* believes in these spirits and invokes them, she is persecuted just as if she were a European witch: a violent mob breaks into the finca and burns the entire area to ashes. Going back to Ahmed (2017), Ailín is punished not because she is powerful, but because

she refuses the sanctioned world view: her belief system functions as a feminist refusal of hegemony, which both exposes the social power structure and costs her being perceived as a threat. The Spanish in Buenos Aires target both the practitioners of the old religion and the instigators of anti-colonial revolt, while attempting to redefine the spheres of activity in which indigenous women could participate. Taking into consideration the fact that the New World was described by missionaries as 'the land of the devil' (Federici, 2004, p. 233), it is poignant that Story 2 takes place in rural Buenos Aires. The ambiguity of the setting not only contributes to the mysterious tone of the story, but it also informs of a vast lack of borders. There are no clear delineations between *here* and *there*, *mine* or *yours*. There is just *land*, and the characters live *here* – in the finca*,* at the *house*. The intrusion and violation of boundaries, in many different ways, is caused by a violent mob, not necessarily because of physical trespassing, but by their ignorant brutality and their destructive impulse.

4. A Decolonial Narrative: Atemporal Forces and Sorority

Even though a thorough analysis of each of the stories in *Walicho* far exceeds the limits of this chapter, Ailín is not the only *mestiza* of whom the witches take advantage, and they keep on holding control over the land and performing their life-extending sexual rituals until the twenty-first century. Otero's exploration of Argentina's colonial past and how it has shaped the land and the lives of racialised women and their descendants is a reflection, a critique, and an acknowledgement of forces that have always existed and belonged to the land. This aligns with what Mignolo and Walsh (2018) understands as a modern, decolonial perspective, embedded into the very praxis of living (p. 109). *Walicho* argues that territories are connected to the people, and the violations carried out to the environment have repercussions whose after-effects turn into ripples that can be felt across time. Although the idea that nature is ripe with or consists of invisible spirits – be they shades, demons, fairies, or fates – may belong to mythology and folklore nowadays, philosophical perspectives that ascribe agency and responsiveness to the natural world remain prevalent.

The natural world and supernatural forces are, as it was previously mentioned, systematically portrayed in red. This colour is used to highlight danger in the ship in which the witches arrive, their tunics, and the devilish goat (Figure 1), foreshadowing their intention to disrupt the natural order of these lands and to impose themselves as a Western, dominant force, much like other European colonisers (De Sousa Santos, 2015, pp. 218–219). However, as the comic progresses, this same red is repurposed as an expression of uninhibited sexual passion (Figure 3), and of the unique connections established with nature (Figure 2). While the chromatic scheme and the deliberate use of red initially mark the witches as alien to their environment and emphasise their lack of assimilation, the threat they pose does not arise from

hegemonic or patriarchal power structures, and their witchcraft is chromatically parallel to Ailín's animism. As Venturini (2023) argues, comics are a particularly ripe medium for representing sociocultural diversity and the culturally marginalised, as the combination of word and image opens the door to expressing feminist concerns and providing personal or new understandings of history, so being able to narrate the past from a non-hegemonic point of view transforms notions about the present and the future (p. 63). Indeed, the presence of nature depicted in red is systematic, and even urban environments feature remnants of red energy that can be interpreted as animism, witchcraft, or both.

The first picture in Figure 4, when the rich lady from Story 1 finds out that the witches have stolen her baby, shows a red clap of thunder which echoes the woman's horror and welcomes her to a land that is alive, powerful and, as of that moment, haunted. In the second picture (Story 5), a *patio* at a boarding school run by nuns includes trees whose red trunks connect with the solace that a *mestiza* student finds in nature before finally engaging in witchcraft once the witches rescue her. And last but not least, the third picture in Figure 4 shows the last page in *Walicho*, in which Anita (Story 9) mentions that her boyfriend mysteriously disappears every night: unbeknownst to her, the witches' influence has reached her. This terrifying last panel zooms out and abstracts readers from the context of the character, flaunting the vortex of energy that persists in the world, or Buenos Aires, to this day. Despite everything.

The witches are complex and enigmatic figures, characterized by a blend of light and darkness, who pursue their own objectives and engage in frightening acts of violence. Thus, categorizing them strictly as 'heroines' would be misleading. However, labelling them as outright villains would also be unjust, as many conflicts arise in response to aggression or threats posed by those in positions of power. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of Otero's work is how she overlaps and contrasts female agency and oppression, as all women are in one way or another victims of the patriarchy, and indirectly connects with an issue that Lugones (2008) explores in her review of gender and decoloniality: if gender is not determinant in social hierarchy, what are the forces that facilitate domination and how does the West impose itself by material means? (p. 33). On the one hand, the witches are a perfect example of sisterhood, not only because they lose their powers when they separate, but also because they have an interest in protecting women: they take in little Ana (Story 5) when they find out that she is abused and discriminated against at the boarding school, and they accuse the nuns of failing her sisters, other women.

However, the witches are self-serving and they do not care about what happens to other people as long as they are able to continue with their life-prolonging rites. The fact that the witches are united sisters is not enough in an updated understanding of feminism and decolonial discourse, and this is what *Walicho*

Figure 4: Red nature © Sole Otero (Salamandra Graphic, 2023)

argues by means of the contemporary characters, who suffer the repercussions of the witches' doings in Buenos Aires. The three witches perpetuate colonial dynamics, a landscape in which true sorority is impossible, for there will persist oppression and violence (Ahmed, 2017). For instance, Paula (Story 6), is never able to lead an independent life free from the influence of her aunts, the witches: she is trying to buy a flat with her boyfriend, but the witches either own or control somehow all real estate in the area. Since these women appropriated the land in the 1700s and still hold control over it, *Walicho* highlights a form of systemic violence which results from political and economic systems whose normal operation often involves subtle coercive mechanisms that sustain exploitation and domination (Žižek, 2008, p. 9). The case of Belén (Story 4) is more indirect: she is a young woman who lives alone with her cat; she is agoraphobic, and has social anxiety. When she starts texting one of the men that has been abducted by the witches, she starts having terrible nightmares and accidents start happening in her house. The mere possibility of Belén intruding in the witches' business triggers threats against her stability, her peace, her home and what she holds dear.

Therefore, sorority does not work if there is still an interest to preserve colonial dynamics, which are fuelled by capitalist beliefs. In that way, so-called sorority and feminism are not enough. The punchline is, nevertheless, rather disheartening: as it was mentioned, the women in present-day Buenos Aires are completely unaware that these witches are the perpetrators of the abuses which affect them. *Walicho*, therefore, denounces that feminism by itself is not enough if the systemic problems which configure Argentinian society are not accounted for while trying to break down female oppression. Following Freire (2005, p. 49), "[i]n order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which

there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform". Anita and her friends (Story 9) are completely unaware of the role of these witches in the development of their neighbourhood and their partners' involvement with their rituals. However, their influence is everywhere, and it affects them even if they are not the direct descendants of Ailín or other girls at the boarding school in Story 5.

5. Conclusion

Walicho is an anthology of seemingly individual stories which blend mystery, horror, and social commentary. They are all connected by three Spanish witches who migrate to Buenos Aires in the late eighteenth century, and, on a formal level, operate as a narrative device to link the past and the present, thus exposing the persistence of colonial hierarchies in contemporary Argentina. In a more thematic sense, these witches foreground the dynamics of power and oppression related to gender and cultural identity, particularly in connection with the mythology and animism of indigenous Mapuche culture. As Porras Sánchez (2022, p. 10) argues, migration comics represent a facet of reality which overlaps with other important issues in contemporary culture, such as vulnerability, poverty, identity, trauma, memory, and their connection to ethnicity, race, gender, and social class, so their discussion of migration far exceeds a mere story of journeying and family ascendance. By juxtaposing native worldviews about the nurturing role of nature with European witchcraft that draws power from it, *Walicho* highlights tensions between colonial and indigenous ideologies on the use of space.

Moreover, all the stories in *Walicho* depict the three witches as a counterpoint, almost a resistance, to the attempts to corner women throughout history. This graphic novel engages with the complexities of feminist discourse within postcolonial contexts. The depiction of the three witches incorporates elements of female empowerment while critically examining how, in some cases, this empowerment has come at the expense of indigenous identities and cultures. The narrative offers a compelling insight into how these women, once oppressed by a patriarchal system, later assume roles as oppressors in the so-called New World. Otero skilfully reflects the cultural heterogeneity of contemporary Argentina, foregrounding indigenous cultural roots.

Weaving together feminist critique, postcolonial discourse, and impactful visual storytelling, *Walicho* challenges hegemonic narratives in terms of male-dominated and Eurocentric discourse. Otero's work not only examines the enduring impact of colonial and patriarchal structures, but it also contributes to the evolving landscape of Argentinian comics. Through its intricate narrative and layered artistic techniques, *Walicho* provides a compelling critique of how historical power structures continue to have an influence of the life of women and the descendants of migrants and mestizo peoples.

References

Acevedo, M. A. (2020). Nosotras contamos. Notas en torno a construir una genealogía feminista en el campo de la historieta y el humor gráfico (Argentina, 1933–2019) [We Matter: Notes on Constructing a Feminist Genealogy in the Field of Comics and Cartooning (Argentina, 1933–2019)]. *Revista Tempo e Argumento*, *12*(31), 2–28.

Ahmed, S. (2010). Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness. *Signs, 35*(3), 571–594. https://doi.org/10.1086/648513

Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press.

Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books.

Bengoa, J. (1996). *Historia del pueblo mapuche: siglos XIX y XX* [History of the Mapuche People: 19th and 20th Centuries]. Ediciones SUR.

De Haas, H., Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (Eds.). (2014). *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. Palgrave Macmillan.

De Sousa Santos, B. (2015). *Una epistemología del sur: la reinvención del conocimiento y la emancipación social* [An Epistemology of the South: The Reinvention of Knowledge and Social Emancipation]. Grupo Editorial Siglo Veintiuno.

Espinoza, M. (2021). *Migra Mouse*: Immigration, Satire, and Hybridity as Latino/a Decolonial Acts. In N.L: Serrano (Ed.). *Immigrants and Comics: Graphic Spaces of Remembrance, Transaction, and Mimesis* (pp. 173–188). Routledge.

Federici, S. (2004). *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Autonomedia.

Fernández, L.C., Gandolfo, A., & Turnes, P. (2023). *Burning Down the House: Latin American Comics in the 21st Century*. Routledge.

Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum.

Vourinne, A., & Kauranen, R. (2023). Introduction: The Entanglements of Comics and Migration. In R. Kauranen, O. Löytti, A. Nikkilä, & A. Vuorinne (Eds.). *Comics and Migration* (pp.1–41). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003254621-1

Lugones, M. (2008). Colonialidad y género: hacia un feminismo descolonial [Coloniality and Gender: Toward a Decolonial Feminism]. In W. Mignolo (Ed.), *Género y descolonialidad* (pp.13–54). Ediciones del Signo.

Lugones, M. (2010). Toward a Decolonial Feminism. *Hypatia*, *25*(4), 741–759. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40928654

Luna, F. (2002). *Buenos Aires y el país, 1982* [Buenos Aires and the country, 1982]. Stockcero.

Mignolo, W., & Walsh, C. E. (2018). *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Duke University Press.

Otero, S. (2023). *Walicho*. Salamandra Graphic.

Porras Sánchez, M. (2022). Introducción. Un medio migrante: los imaginarios transnacionales y transfronterizos del cómic [Introduction. A Migrant Medium: Transnational and Cross-Border Imaginaries in Comics]. *CuCo, Cuadernos de cómic*, *19*, 7–14. https://doi.org/10.37536/cuco.2022.19.2078

Rifkind, C. (2021). Immigration, Photography, and the Color Line in Lila Quintero Weaver's *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black & White*. In N. L. Serrano (Ed.), *Immigrants and Comics: Graphic Spaces of Remembrance, Transaction, and Mimesis* (pp. 204–224). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315643991

Venturini, X. (2023). Feminismo y autobiografía en dos historietas contemporáneas desde y en Argentina*: Poncho fue* de Sole Otero y *Familia* de Júlia Barata [Feminism and Autobiography in Two Contemporary Comics Set in

Argentina: Poncho by Sole Otero and Familia by Júlia Barata]. *CuCo: Cuadernos de cómic, 21*, 57–77. https://doi.org/10.37536/cuco.2023.21.2294

Žižek, S. (2008). *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. Picador.