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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).

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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

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