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The Crisis at the Polish-Belarusian Border: Sites and Things

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Abstract

The ongoing humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border has not attracted mass public attention in Poland or in the world. Rare visuals of asylum seekers and migration conditions are rather provided by activist portals, and thus they circulate among those working to solve the crisis. Consequently, access to knowledge about the experience of undocumented migration across the Polish border and its conditions is limited. Observing the material background and the traces of the route, both in terms of its topography and instrumental equipment, allows us to get closer to the inaccessible information. The authors propose a preliminary typology of migration sites and objects used by people on the move. Such a research strategy not only examines migration processes through secondary

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symptoms, but it can also be understood as a supportive gesture towards asylum seekers. Material analysis makes it possible to reveal the experience of migration in a way that does not infringe on the precarious security of people on the move.

Keywords: migration; border crisis; humanitarian crisis; Polish-Belarusian border; materiality; asylum seekers; people on the move; forced migration

Introduction

In the first half of August 2021, near the village of Usnarz Górny, a group of thirty-two Afghan men and women sat in protest when the illegal practice of pushback was being applied to them, thus preventing the Polish Border Guard from pushing them back to Belarus.[1] Although they were not the first asylum seekers[2] on the territory of Poland to be denied this right, the moment became the symbolic beginning of the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border.[3] Trapped, they were forced to live on a small piece of land. In the published calendar of the crisis for the year 2021 (Amnesty International, 2022), under the date of August 18, one can read: "Social media photos show a group of 32 people from Afghanistan in a makeshift camp. Some of them are on Polish territory."[4] The "makeshift camp", as an exemplary realization of the architecture of survival,[5] began to appear in the following months also in other places in the forest and wilderness. Among those directly involved in the crisis process (asylum seekers, activists, state services, media), it was

1 The group was detained, surrounded by both Polish and Belarusian border guards, and, contrary to the Geneva Convention, its members were refused the right to file their applications for international protection. What became a symbol was the image of a girl in a yellow sweater with her cat – Mariam, then 15 years old; she was probably the most photographed member of the group.

2 Aware of the ongoing debate in Poland over the politicization of the use of specific categories to describe people on the move, we have decided to apply inclusive categories in our paper. For the debate see Wagner (2022). The word "migrant" appears in the article only as a synonym.

3 In Arabic-language media, this crisis has been called "the border crisis" (أزمة الحدود – *azmat al-hudud*), cf. Traba (2022). In this paper, we use both "the border crisis" and the category of "humanitarian crisis" as defined by Susan Martin, Sanjula Weerasinghe and Abbie Taylor: a "situation in which there is a widespread threat to life, physical safety, health, or basic subsistence that is beyond the coping capacity of individuals and the communities in which they reside" (Martin et al., 2013, p. 123). Following Kamila Fiałkowska, we do not use the category of "migrant crisis" (in the case of both the events of 2015 and the present situation at the Polish-Belarusian border). "Migrant crisis" implies a situation caused by humans referred to as "migrants" and indirectly justifies racism and violence against them as a necessary protection; see Fiałkowska (2022).

4 For more information about the migration policies in Poland and the context of the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border see Czarnota et al. (2021); Czarnota & Górczyńska (2022); Palęcka (2022).

5 *Architecture of Survival* is the title of a series of photographs by Tomasz Szerszeń that capture abandoned huts from the Greek island of Samothrace (Szerszeń, 2017). Another, more recent example is the use of this category by Natalia Romik in the exhibition *Hideouts: The Architecture of Survival* (31.03.2022 – 17.07.2022, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, curators: Stanisław Ruksza, Kuba Szreder, research collaboration: Aleksandra Janus). The authors of the exhibition note that it is an "artistic tribute" to this architecture (Romik & Janus, 2022).

called variously an encampment, a nomadic place, a hideout, or a camp. With time, more and more such camps started to appear in the forest at various distance from the border. They have become an element of the forest landscape. Although they are deserted (there are no people), they are still full of things.

Between December 2021 and April 2022, photographic documentation of the camps was collected by a documentation team.[6] Most of the images were captured with a cell phone in low/natural light. The documentation was mainly collected by taking photographs of (a) the camp in the context of the landscape: the wilderness or forest; (b) objects in the camp in their original position; if it was necessary for the cognitive work, they were then moved so that their details would be visible. Currently (May 2022), the visual documentation includes over 500 photographs of these spaces and objects. The collection is part of the emerging Humanitarian Crisis Archive of Researchers at the Border (*Badaczki i Badacze na Granicy*, BBnG), which includes testimonies, narratives, photographs, and digitized drawings. The Archive is being developed and the collection should be available in winter 2023.

People hiding in the forest and their "abandoned" belongings are images that have already been seen in this area and, more broadly, in this part of present-day Poland (Engelking, 2018; Majewski, 2019), especially as a result of actions against the Jewish population carried out by the German army after June 1941 (*Einsatzgruppen* shootings), and the capture of people hiding in the forests by both the occupier and his local helpers (Engelking, 2011; Grabowski, 2011; Monkiewicz, 1989). Today, these images are part of the so-called Holocaust imaginary (see Kowalska-Leder et al., 2017, esp. entries "Las" [Forest], "Buty" [Shoes]). The Holocaust, which is the best-known and best-described state of emergency so far, has an impact on the reception of the current humanitarian crisis, especially in the visual sphere: it activates cognitive scripts (schemata, cognitive scenarios) produced in relation to the Holocaust past[7] not only in the local inhabitants who are confronted with these images almost every day, but also in activists, journalists, and researchers. The second source of images produced before the period of the Polish-Belarusian border crisis which one can assume shapes responses to this migration, is a global album of images documenting the 2015 border crisis in southern Europe (d'Haenens et al., 2019).[8]

6 The documentation team includes (apart from Natalia Judzińska) Anka Kolber, Dominika Ożyńska, Łukasz Krzywiec and Renata Lesner-Szwarc, to whom we would like to thank very warmly. We would also like to thank local activists for their enormous support and for being our guides in this difficult terrain in the first months of the crisis.

7 These scripts are also activated in other ways, for example, they manifest themselves in the language used by different social actors. Categories such as "deportation", "hideout", "roundup", "blackmailer", "righteous" appear in narratives about the border crisis.

8 See also an analysis of the circulation and type of images of refugees in a report prepared for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in 2015 (Berry et al., 2015); their circulation introduced images of refugees portrayed as victims or, conversely, threatening persons; the dominant practice was the "collective subjectification" of refugees – they were shown in (male) groups. This period also saw the circulation of images of people forcing their way through fences and security measures. For more on the imagery of the process of crossing the border, or the "border spectacle" see De Genova (2013, 2017). Researchers point to the increased circulation of images of overcrowded boats and abandoned belongings on the beaches (although only 5% of the migration movement

The categories of description, methods, and research perspectives developed in Holocaust studies have only been used occasionally with reference to border crises. Such uses have appeared in the context of deportations (Peutz & De Genova, 2010), extermination (Mbembe, 2018, p. 3), and human rights (Weber, 2016, p. 80). The Shoah was mostly mentioned as an important point of reference, mainly in terms of the findings of Giorgio Agamben and Hannah Arendt, in an attempt to show the coherence and continuity of the mechanisms of exclusion. Methodological proposals drawing on Holocaust studies came only from scholars who had already worked in this field and turned their attention to the ongoing crises (Agamben, 2008; Bauman, 2004, 2016). Much more frequent were references or comparisons to the Holocaust itself (Stone, 2018; Wachholz, 2020). There were also occasional comparisons to other crises.[9]

The camps themselves were found in different ways: they were found by chance during walks undertaken by activists;[10] their sites became known as a result of contact between asylum seeker groups and humanitarian aid organizations; they were located thanks to information provided by the local community; in two cases information came from the uniformed services.[11]

The analysis presented below considers the photographic documentation of the deserted camps in the Hajnówka district, and it follows a pattern similar to that which influenced the preparation of the visual material. The first interpretative step concerns wide shots, "zoom out" frames including the landscape, that is, the forest, the space of the camp. The next one focuses on individual objects and things ("zoom in" analysis). The combination of these two perspectives allows to see the visualized objects in their material-spatial context. The section on objects belonging to asylum seekers is preceded by a preliminary typology of spaces in which they were found, i.e. an analysis of the types of camps.

A Preliminary Typology of Forest Refugee Camps

The proposed classification has been developed on the basis of the functionality of the camps before they were abandoned by their former disposers. The typology is a preliminary proposal: the functions of camps sometimes changed or overlapped. It may happen that the configuration of the deserted objects, seemingly allowing one to infer

took place by sea). The 2015 global circulation of images introduced several objects-symbols: boat and dinghy, life jacket and lifebelt, thermal blanket. See Kurz & Mościcki (2016); Memou (2019).

9 For example, the wars in the former Yugoslavia, or the crisis in Hungary in 1956 (Szabó et al., 2020).

10 Natalia Judzińska has been involved in these activities since October 2021; Roma Sendyka visited the border area in September 2022, and contacted activist organizations and volunteering individuals. Both authors were involved in clearing the forest camps.

11 These locations were then passed to the organization *Dom Przyrody i Kultury* (The House of Nature and Culture), engaged in cleaning the forest (it is an association registered in 2020 in Teremiski, whose activity is focused on nature, art and cultural education). As a result of the work of its members and associated activists, some of the items were recycled or cleaned and used again to provide humanitarian aid.

the function of the site, is misleading (the arrangement and type of objects tell a completely different story than the human witnesses). Frequently, a precise identification of the type of camp is simply impossible without additional information. Inferring from the preserved physical state of the camp is easier when the camp is "new", which means deserted a few days earlier. However, a camp may be found after a longer period of time and therefore its state may have been altered: it may have been searched (and therefore reshaped) by people or animals, it may have been partially cleaned up (by asylum seekers themselves, by activists), and finally, its original structure may have been affected by weather conditions.

The material dimension of the camp, which makes it possible to infer its type and functionality, is created by various types of objects that were found in the forest left by asylum seekers. Among the items, one can find: various printed forms (travel insurance, coronavirus tests, airline luggage stickers), personal belongings (toys, curling irons, razors, books, including prayer books, prayer rugs), clothes, shoes, cosmetics, medicines, and food; items acquired on the road intended for the journey (sleeping bags, rubber boots, power banks, thermoses). In these places, one can sometimes find relief kit items (disposable cutlery, paper soup cups, thermoses, warm clothes) provided by humanitarian aid workers.[12] In the second part of the article, we propose a preliminary typology of items found in asylum seekers' temporary camps located in forests.

a. Stopover

The first type of camp site proposed is a *stopover*. This is a place where asylum seekers are only for a moment: to eat, drink or smoke a cigarette. These spaces contain only food wrappers, water bottles, and empty cigarette packs or cigarette butts. A cigarette pack can give us information on how long a person has been on the way, due to the alphabet used to write a warning about the harms of smoking. If the person has been on the way relatively short, then the inscription will be written e.g. in the Arabic alphabet (they still have resources brought from the country they left). In other cases, the warning will be written in Cyrillic characters (resources acquired while waiting to cross the border in Belarus).

12 The Border Guard publishes information on its social media and official website suggesting that humanitarian aid does more harm than good, for example: "While patrolling the border area in the vicinity of the village of Brzezina (area of official responsibility of the Border Guard Post in Michałowo), three backpacks, so-called 'aid packages', were found. […] [They] contained clothes, food, power banks, two cell phones, two SIM cards (Polish and German) , and power of attorney forms. […] The modus operandi of the 'activists', who in this way provide assistance [to illegal migrants], exposes illegal migrants to the risk of losing their health and lives. The state border in the vicinity of the village of Brzezina runs through an area which is very difficult to access, the marshes and swamps of Lake Siemianówka" (Szczepańska, 2022c). However, this post is inaccurate on several points. For example, the aid package is not the whole content of the backpack, but only a small part of it; the backpack also contains food, water, cup and cutlery, space blanket, and warming plasters.

b. Overnight camp

The *overnight camp*, another of the proposed types, is a space in the forest where people have stayed for a certain period of time – usually, in most of the cases, not longer than one night (Fig. 1). Camps of this type are usually well hidden and located at least a few dozen meters from roads and paths. Depending on the capabilities and construction skills of the group, various amenities appear in them, such as makeshift canopies or wind shelters made of fallen tree branches.

Overnight camps are distinguished from stopovers by the length of time they are used by people on the move. The duration of stay can be inferred not only from the number of "same-type" items but also from the structure of the soil. In such a place, a group sometimes spends several hours. Sometimes humanitarian aid activists are called to these places when a group runs out of food, needs hygiene products such as diapers, or when all their clothes are wet after heavy rain. If necessary and at the request of asylum seekers, a doctor can be called to such a place.

When the camp is abandoned, objects obtained as humanitarian aid remain there as trash (such as empty thermoses, baby food wrappers, or used warming plasters). Items not needed for the onward journey are also left there, for example, torn pants, snatched raincoats, and soaked shoes. This type of camp most closely resembles and fits the image of a hideout (Fig. 2).[13]



Fig. 1. Overnight camp, January 2022, photo by Natalia Judzińska.

13 The hideout is precisely one of the doomsday scripts reflected in the current crisis. Modern day safe houses are designed to protect not only from human sight, but also from thermal cameras, binoculars, drones, and helicopters.



Fig. 2. Shelter made of fallen tree branches, April 2022, photo by Natalia Judzińska.

c. Station camp

The *station camp* is the space where one of the stages of the refugees' journey ends – they have crossed the border and forests: they have left the self-crossing zone and made it to a specific contact point (Fig. 3 & 4). At this point, indicated by the paid couriers, most of the belongings used for the journey are thrown away. People on the move keep only food and personal belongings they need for the secret transport organized by people smugglers.

These places are characterized by chaos – things are scattered randomly in a small space. The objects found there are mainly those acquired or received for the purpose of (forced) migration, i.e. sleeping bags, sleeping mats, rucksacks, rubber boots, clothes. There are often some cosmetics and hygiene utensils among them as well.



Fig. 3. Station camp, February 2022, photo by Natalia Judzińska.



Fig. 4. Station camp, February 2022, photo by Natalia Judzińska.

d. Pushback camp

The *pushback camp* is the space most marked by violence of all those mentioned above, or, more precisely, by its purely physical dimension (Fig. 5, 6 & 7).[14] It can be a site that served as a stopover, an overnight camp, or a station camp. What characterizes this place is not so much the mere constellation of things left behind, but the fact that all of the previously mentioned types of objects can be found in this particular type of camp. Thus, pushback camps are full of children's toys, sometimes prints and documents, sometimes photographs, personal belongings, and food – often strewn about, uneaten.

They often look like a vital living space from which people have suddenly been removed. In their vicinity, there may be traces of resistance on the forest floor left by people being forcibly removed by the uniformed services. They may also display almost no traces of violence or even previous human presence. This depends on two factors. The first is the time that has passed since the people were pulled out of the camp space. The second is the decision of the officers who show up to capture the asylum seekers,

14 Each type of camp, as well as the very fact of being forced to move through the forest, embodies primarily institutional (as well as symbolic) violence against asylum seekers. Apart from the pushback camp, these spaces are at the same time a manifestation of agency in the context of migration.

specifically whether they will allow the group to take their personal belongings, objects supporting the journey, or food.[15]



Fig. 5. Pushback camp, February 2022, photo by Anka Kolber.



Fig. 6. Pushback camp, January 2022, photo by Anka Kolber.

15 Some officers will allow the group to pack and take the essentials for survival, others will not. The illegal practice of pushback is then used against such persons. Less frequently, they are taken to a Border Guard post (even in cold weather) in order to carry out legal procedures.



Fig. 7. Pushback camp, March 2022, photo by Natalia Judzińska.

e. Escape camp

The *escape camp* is the most hybrid form of temporary forest space occupied by people on the move. It is a place where a group of asylum seekers is suddenly frightened by something and, as a result, they abandon most of the belongings they carry with them and run away to hide from the sudden threat.

Visually, this space closely resembles the pushback camp (objects are scattered about, there are personal belongings and food), but the capture itself – at least at this particular point – did not occur: there are no signs of wrestling or fighting. The limitations of the typology we indicated above make the last two types of camps very difficult, and often impossible, to distinguish without non-material knowledge.[16]

Objects Found in the Camps – A Preliminary Typology

Conceptualizing the meanings evoked by the intense physical and mediatized (in the press, in electronic media, in the actions of artists) presence of things in symbolic circulation after the crisis of 2015 has been a research challenge. Understandings of the meaning and function of things have undergone significant transformations since at least the beginning of the century. Objects have traditionally been framed as tools or commodities gaining meaning in processes of human relations, in their complex "trajectories" and "uses" (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986). Ontological accounts of "matter" itself (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010), new understandings of

16 We would like to thank the participants of the 4th BBnG Seminar (held on April 23 and 24, 2022 in Świnoroje) for their numerous comments. Special thanks go to Kaja Kojder for her precise comments on the challenges in developing camp typologies.

things as self-performing actants (Brown, 2001; Latour, 2005, 2010), studies of new materialism (Braidotti, 2012, 2014), and non-hierarchical relationships between things and living organisms (DeLanda, 2016) have provided a new framework for thinking about the world of objects as coextensive with the human. Posthumanist theories have even more explicitly emancipated the world of things from human authority (Harman, 2002, 2018; Morton, 2013).

Surprisingly, the 2015 border crisis seems to have renewed interest in the social life and function of things, forcing researchers, scholars, and artists to take a step back from available new-materialistic conceptualizations and return to more classical anthropocentric approaches. Again, the function that objects serve in human experience proved fundamental, which was an offshoot not only of private usages of objects by migrant milieus, but also of the political use of things targeted against people on the move. Indeed, the things they carried were mobilized to profile and segregate them (Andersson, 2014; Hall, 2015), their clothing and modes of transport selected allowed official immigration services to identify their origins (Walters, 2015). The fact that some of the migrants owned relatively expensive items (e.g. cell phones, clothes) triggered categorization debates: the public questioned whether a person with certain financial means even fell into the category of "refugee".[17]

At the same time, the media and artists have accentuated some of the many categories of refugee belongings. Life-saving objects (dinghy, vest, and lifebelt), as well as private belongings (Barry, 2019; Grenier, 2017), repeatedly visualized in media or artwork, gained symbolic meanings. Thus a kind of migratory aesthetics was produced (Bal, 2016; Bennett, 2016), in which Holocaust scripts (e.g. disorderly piles of unclean clothes) were reiterated, as well as new elements were added (e.g. the bright "warning" colors of the rescue objects, red, orange, gold, became an expressive component of the new visualizations).

The analysis of humanitarian crisis through the victims' belongings emerged as a cognitive strategy as early as World War II, both in statements by artists (Zuzanna Ginczanka, Władysław Szlengel) and in the earliest historical analyses (e.g. see Ringelblum, 1988, pp. 64–65 for a description of the circulation of "clothes"). In her postwar essays on "Jewish things", Rachela Auerbach (1946, 1949) treated objects as a kind of material document "that breaks the regime of the unspeakability of the Holocaust" (Ubertowska, 2014, p. 286). Auerbach's recognition that "the tragedy and misery of things was equal to the tragedy and misery of people, and at the same time it was a perfect reflection and metaphor of that misery" (Auerbach, 1946) proved fundamental and permanently present in later academic research on the materiality of the Holocaust (see for instance: Shallcross, 2010). Preceding the classic approaches of sociologists and sociologists of things, the ghetto reporter wrote: "To his host, a thing is a utilitarian object". She then added two subcategorizations, transgressing the pure utilitarian meanings, and allowing conclusions about the existence of the victim: "As a personal thing, it becomes a part of personality, as a component of his dwelling – part of his shell, his background" (Auerbach, 1946). In this view, things are a synecdoche, and as *pars pro toto* they make the late host present,

17 For such a discussion in Poland, see, for example, Ruszkiewicz (2021); see also Darling (2014).

allowing us to infer his or her individual identity. As a metonymy (an object related by causal or logical connection), they testify to the socio-cultural identity of the victim.

a. Personal items

For Bożena Shallcross, the author of *The Holocaust Object in Polish and Polish-Jewish Culture*, material objects are a variant of a readable "cultural text". In particular, personal belongings, including those placed closest to the body ("paraphernalia"), have the potential to identify the existence of victims.[18] Similarly, in the context of the 2015 crisis, personal items of migrants, allowing us to imagine their physical characteristics (age, height, gender) as well as their individual personality or identity (aesthetic preferences, interests, occupation), came into focus, especially as seen by artists (see the influential works of Kader Attia and Ai Weiwei discussed below, see also Barry, 2019).

In the assemblage of 2021 and 2022 photographs of the border camps in Poland which forms the basis of the analysis conducted here, one can also find a variety of objects that help to imagine the asylum seekers' specific, individualized characteristics. The objects in question include personal documents, medical certificates, travel insurance, airline luggage stickers, letters, notes – textual objects that can contain fragments of personal identification details (Fig. 8). On a more generalized level, children's toys can also be found in this category of objects if children were part of the group. There are also cosmetic items, which obviously have an intimate and personal dimension: toothbrushes, cleaning products, lipstick, a mirror, or an eyelash curler (Fig. 9, 10 & 11).



Fig. 8. Personal items – remains of a travel insurance form, December 2021, photo by Natalia Judzińska.

18 Shallcross assumes that "things bear witness to history" and one can generalize the study of Holocaust things by understanding the material world as a "great object metonymy" (Shallcross, 2010, p. 8). Shallcross's summary indicates how enduring the 1946 recognition proposed by Auerbach has become.



Fig. 9. Personal items – cosmetics, February 2022, photo by Anka Kolber.



Fig. 10. Personal items – mirror, January 2022, photo by Anka Kolber.



Fig. 11. Personal items – eyelash curler, February 2022, photo by Anka Kolber.

b. Supporting objects

Traditionally, the subset of things most frequently used to represent the person according to the logic of *pars pro toto* includes clothing (this identification is typical both of Holocaust studies as well as the events of the 2015 crisis). Asylum seekers' clothes appear in an "identity-revealing" function especially in the practices of artists. In his project *La Mer Morte* (*The Dead Sea*) (2015),[19] Kader Attia spread blue clothing on the gallery floor, evoking connotations with the bodies of the drowned as well as the maritime environment of the tragedy (the migrants' belongings here are undoubtedly a "reflection and metaphor of the people's misery"; Auerbach, 1946).

A glance at the photos from the border area in the region of Podlasie allows one to question the above-mentioned identification as the only or dominant one. Most of the clothes left behind are remarkably similar. These are comfortable, simple, and durable garments: jeans, fleeces, tracksuits, raincoats (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12. Supporting objects, February 2022, photo by Anka Kolber.

The clothing is in dark colors, most of the shoes are sporty or heavy-duty; they are waterproof and warm. It is equipment that makes mobility possible; it is the "generic" "tourist" clothing. Thanks to the technological innovations like waterproof films or extra cushioning in shoes it enables moving in the open space more efficiently. In his *Mobilities*, John Urry calls these facilitations "cascades of affordances" (Urry, 2007, p. 84).

The garments do not allow us to guess their owners' personality traits: they only reveal their most general physical characteristics (shoe number, jacket size). They are a kind of

19 See the artist's website: http://kaderattia.de/home/ (Kader Attia, n.d.); photo of the installation *La Mer Morte* (*The Dead Sea*) from the exhibition *Streamlines*, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, Germany 2015–2016.

"salvage kit", "equipment", a material aid used not in the process of self-expression, but to increase the chances of completing the journey successfully and safely. Only the children's clothes clearly deviate from this pattern: they are often brightly colored (Fig. 13 & 14). The contrast between the "camouflaging" garments of adults and those of the children, which can potentially reveal their presence in the forest, may simply stem from the absence of children's trekking clothes on the hiking equipment market.



Fig. 13. Children's pajamas, January 2022, photo by Anka Kolber.



Fig. 14. Children's jacket, March 2022, photo by Natalia Judzińska.

The utilitarian nature of most things that accompany people on the move makes it possible to propose a separate category for them: they are neither "personality indicators" nor part of the social "shell, background" of the migrants. They are objects of an undeniable "supportive" function. These are things whose purpose is essentially practical: SIM cards, warm socks, rubber boots, water bottles, sleeping bags, sleeping pads, and backpacks.



Fig. 15. Supporting objects, February 2022, photo by Łukasz Krzywiec.

The supporting objects may be understood as "assisting objects-allies", (material) helpers that protect from rain (tarpaulins, raincoats, capes), light the way (flashlights), provide warmth (heating plasters, sleeping bags, shoe inserts), cure (medicines, warming gels), satisfy hunger and thirst (food) (Fig. 15). Some of the objects in this category are secured by asylum seekers themselves in their home countries or in transit countries (which can be evidenced by inscriptions),[20] and some are obtained from humanitarian aid groups when already in Poland (Fig. 16 & 17).

20 One of the common food traces found in the woods is the packaging of *lavash*, a type of flatbread that resembles pita. The choice of this product may be attributed to its similarity to the type of bread popular in Middle Eastern countries.



Fig. 16. Warming gel and medicaments, February 2022, photo by Natalia Judzińska.



Fig. 17. Medicaments, February 2022, photo by Natalia Judzińska.

In this category stand out objects that protect and at the same time enable mobility. These include in particular pontoons and rafts – unlike what we used to see in the media coverage of the crisis in the Mediterranean – in unobtrusive colors, sometimes amateur constructions made of recycled objects.[21]

The identification of the category of objects-allies as separate and different from the category of private objects is possible thanks to materiality studies, which allow for the recognition and proper estimation of the causality of objects in networks of object-human relations (Latour, 2010). The possible difference in recognizing the agency of things in migration can be illustrated by comparing two structurally similar, but functionally significantly different "warehouse interiors". In Ai Weiwei's often exhibited installation entitled *Laundromat* (2016), belongings found on the site of an abandoned camp in Idomeni (Greece) were cleaned and ironed, sorted into generic subtypes as in clothing stores, and displayed indicating the generic relatedness and at the same time the diversity of individual pieces as in a vintage store.[22] In this work, things were restored to their dignity, potential functionality, their peculiarity was accentuated – again, they became a metaphor for the migrant's fate and a metonymy for his or her personality.

A similar practice: collecting clothes left behind by asylum seekers, cleaning and sorting them, can be seen in the photographs from the warehouse of one of the aid centers in the region of Podlasie (Fig. 18). The action of the aid groups, although almost identical in practical terms to what was the case in *Laundromat*, is carried out with an absolutely non-artistic purpose: the recovered items do not have a task to represent or provide testimony, but to serve, to act, to return to work – they will be given back to the people in need, they will be used in subsequent actions, and they will again support the process of the move. Things from the Podlasie warehouse are helpers, they have their function and tasks during the migration, they assist people to achieve a specific goal. The agency of objects becomes a valuable capital of relocation. Thus, things are not just derivatives of people's social life (Appadurai, 1986), but conditions of certain social events. In this case, the possible "identarian" function is clearly secondary.

21 See the Border Guard information of May 9, 2022. The site posted a photo of a makeshift pontoon made of an inflated inner tube and tape; https://strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/10098,Na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej.html (Szczepańska, 2022b). On another occasion (May 5, 2022), there was also a photo of a gray pontoon used to cross the Świsłocz River; https://strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/10090,Na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej.html?fbclid=IwAR2UMRc4hbmL9bcd0mdbMMgbAlL6svk7SPXlwHYNh0A7Kv_A9Xe0JV_xKmQ (Szczepańska, 2022a). The Border Guard further mentions "gloves, accessories used to destroy concertina" (razor wire entanglements) or a wooden "footbridge" to allow passage over the wire. Among the assistive items are also items intended for the physical protection of asylum seekers.

22 See a description of the work exhibited in 2016 at New York's Jeffrey Deitch Gallery; http://rtpulsemagazine.com/ai-weiwei-laundromat (Thomas, n.d.).

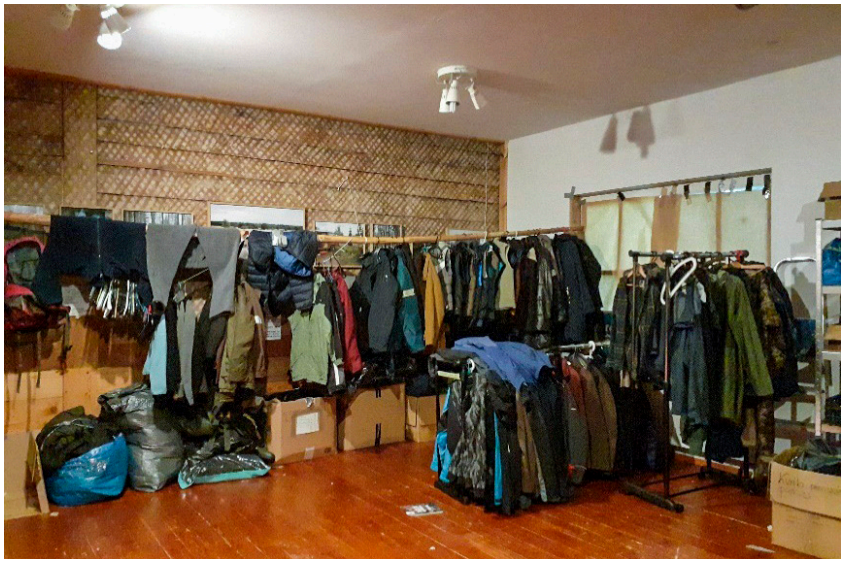


Fig. 18. One of the warehouses run by humanitarian aid activist groups. On hangers – jackets from public donations and those returned to the warehouse from the forest. April 2022, photo by Natalia Judzińska.

c. Life-saving objects

Related to the above category are objects provided by activists offering humanitarian aid. Here, the camouflage principle no longer applies: life-saving objects are often – in contrast to transfer support objects – overly visible, eye-catching. These are red first aid kits, golden thermal blankets, thermoses, power banks (Fig. 19). The warming space blanket[23] has gained an iconic function in the visual culture of both global and Polish humanitarian crises: it appears, for example, in Piotr Zdanowicz's cover design for Justyna Kulikowska's book of poetry *gift. z Podlasia* [A Gift from Podlasie], published in 2021. It was also the central object of an artistic performance to which Joanna Rajkowska invited the participants of the Warsaw demonstration "Stop Torture at the Border" (October 17, 2021).[24] Emergency blankets were transformed into "flags of empathy":[25] on the golden side a contour

23 The blanket is designed for two functions: when a person is covered with the gold side up – it heats; when the silver side of the foil is on top – it cools.

24 See a call for the march: https://www.facebook.com/events/581700886586218 (*Stop torturom na granicy! Marsz solidarności z uchodźcami i uchodźczyniami*, 2021).

25 "Emblematic of aid for refugees is the thermal blanket, a thin, lightweight layer of essential insulation, gold on one side, silver on the other. A thermal blanket can also be an evocative flag. Tape one edge to a pole or stick and there it is. A flag to demonstrate empathy or solidarity with struggling refugees everywhere, but particularly right now on the Polish-Belarusian border – for those trapped in marshland or in forests in temperatures that are dropping fast." Visual documentation of the action can be found on the artist's website: http://www.rajkowska.com/en/refugee-empathy-flag/ (Rajkowska, 2021).

of a refugee child was drawn, modelled on a photograph showing one of the "Children from Michałowo".[26] This activity was later repeated several times.[27]



Fig. 19. Emergency blanket, February 2022, photo by Natalia Judzińska.

d. Social background items

Things which reveal not the "personality" but the "social shell", the cultural and communal background of pre-migration existence, are relatively rare in the photographs from the border. Material archives of the Holocaust, in turn, contain many objects that fit into this category: religious objects (Torah scrolls, menorahs, tallit), toys, musical instruments, books, medals, coins, dishes, and art objects.[28] Holocaust victims informed of the "resettlement" had a markedly different way of assembling the material resources that accompanied them on their relocation. Although over time these resources were minimized – looted, or exchanged for food – surviving material

26 The Children from Michałowo are a group of several children with their parents who were arrested by the Polish Border Guard and taken to the post in Michałowo, where, through a fence, these people were seen by activists and the media. Many photos of the group were taken at the time, and photographs showing the youngest members of the group became both medial and symbolic. Afterwards, the group was taken away and the illegal practice of pushback was applied to them – they were all "escorted to the border line". A parliamentary interpellation about the group has been submitted (Interpellation No. 27339 to the Minister of Education and Science, the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration, the Minister of Health on the issue of the "children from Michałowo" – children of refugees, submitting MPs: Urszula Augustyn, Izabela Katarzyna Mrzygłocka, Sławomir Jan Piechota, Marek Hok, Marta Golbik, Joanna Kluzik-Rostkowska).

27 See photos from the action posted on: https://ww.archiwumprotestow.pl (*Archiwum Protestów Publicznych*, n.d.).

28 For example, see the categories proposed by the Yad Vashem Museum (Yad Vashem. The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, n.d.).

documents indicate that even in the very limited luggage, which was to include especially work clothes, utensils, blankets, valuables, and food (Gigliotti, 2009, pp. 46–47), there was room for objects of sentimental value, reminders of the "closing horizon of life" (Shallcross, 2010, p. 54).

In the photographic documentation of the Polish-Belarusian border crisis, objects with a communal function are very rarely encountered. Activists mention *sajadahs* (prayer rugs) and various prayer books (Fig. 20). In the pushback camps, children's toys are a very frequent find representing children's past environments (Fig. 21). In the absence of a broader representation of artistic or cult objects, smaller objects – included in the last category, that is, garbage – notify on the "social background". Packages with inscriptions from a non-European country are an indication of the culture of the country of origin (Fig. 22).



Fig. 20. Social background items, March 2022, photo by Anka Kolber.



Fig. 21. Children's toy, January 2022, photo by Anka Kolber.



Fig. 22. Cigarette pack with an inscription in the Arabic alphabet, January 2022, photo by Natalia Judzińska.

e. Garbage

The 2015 border crisis brought frequent visualizations of the beaches strewn with things that people on the move had disposed of. Piles of migrant belongings were often generalized as "garbage". Giovanna Faleschini Lerner, analyzing the material experience of (forced) migration in Lampedusa, discusses the frequent media use of the trope of "trash" to dehumanize and abjectify people in crisis (Faleschini Lerner, 2021, p. 170). As can be seen in the photos from the Polish-Belarusian border, station "dumps" contain a very limited quantity of "by-products of human activity, useless in the place and time in which they were created" (Frączkiewicz, 2017, pp. 127–128). At the same time, "uselessness", as the anthropology of waste shows, is a subjective take: in practice, the material remains of livelihoods found in the forest can perform multiple functions. Only a small subgroup of objects found there turns out to be expendable: unconsumed food, used medicine boxes, bottles, hygiene products packaging (Fig. 23).



Fig. 23. Garbage, January 2022, photo by Natalia Judzińska.

The sorting of the material remains of migration into useful, re-usable things (in humanitarian aid or as a component of the archive) and things that can be disposed of (garbage) takes place while still in the forest. The initial sorting is sometimes done by asylum seekers themselves or by activists. Activists are sometimes helped by artists, who transform garbage into meaningful objects when post-migrant rubbish becomes part of artistic installations.[29] Abandoned objects are also used to build archives bearing witness to the fate of people on the move, accentuating the "personal and individual dimension of migration" (Faleschini Lerner, 2021, p. 172).

An example of this transformation is the work of the Lampedusian activist collective Askavusa, founded in 2009, who protested against the growing infrastructure of detention by establishing, among other things, a museum of migration (PortoM), whose exhibits included orphaned objects. The installations they created, as well as the display of the objects in the archive space itself (cans, dishes, packaging), redefined "waste" into "evidence" of a humanitarian crisis.[30] Similar shifts of meanings are also performed

29 See, for example, *Barka* [The Barge], a migrant boat made of empty bottles (2011), and *Medusa Archive* (2014), an installation made of things found on the shore in memory of those who drowned during the crossing, by Kosovo-Albanian artist Sislej Xhafa. See Xhafa (2016).

30 See: Askavusa, *PortoM*, https://askavusa.wordpress.com/con-gli-oggetti/ (Askavusa, n.d.).

in relation to the current crisis in Poland: the fifth exhibition of the Virtual Museum of the Anthropocene (*Migracje/Migrations*, April–July 2022) includes, among others, collages/assemblages created by Joanna Sarnecka. One of them, *The Circle of Life*, was made of "things from the forest": SIM cards, a needle case, cigarette packs, shampoo bottles from a Belarusian hotel were arranged next to mossy pieces of wood laid out on a wooden plank or table.[31] The objects documenting the forest area are thus relocated and recoded, and in new conditions, in a different, ordered configuration they become a kind of ritual, symbolic objects recalling their previous users.

Spaces and Things in a Post-Anthropocentric View

The initial typologies of sites and things related to the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border presented above are focused on the materiality of objects used by humans. Migration topographies have been conceptualized based on the location of these sites and abandoned material objects, related to the migration process. The configuration (arrangement, disorder) and type of objects (food, personal belongings, or absence thereof), and whether or not they had been consumed or fully utilized (which was meaningful especially in the case of food and medicines), made it possible to infer the type of location.

The categories proposed in this article do not cover all the possible aspects of materiality of the migration space, i.e. they include objects revealing their functionality in relation to people, following to a lesser extent the objects' relations with the natural environment. Further analysis conducted in accordance with new trends in materialism research would have to go beyond humanistic paradigms. An expanded study of space would include, for example, environmental affordances, i.e. opportunities offered by the ecological surroundings (Gibson, 1977, 1979), as well as questions of the impact of migration on nature (things left in the forest affect its ecosystem and disturb its homeostasis).[32]

However, the disturbance of the ecosystem directly related to the fact of migration is a lesser anomaly compared to the consequences of the militarization of the entire border zone. What we have in mind here is, first of all, the so-called "border barrier" – a 186-kilometer-long fence intended to limit human migration and, in fact, preventing migration of both larger and smaller animals. In the Białowieża Forest, the fence passes through several nature reserves, including a strict one. It is not only the fence, but also the construction works that have a significant impact on the ecosystem – the reserves are torn apart by

31 *Migracje/Migrations* exhibition, curators: Agnes Wludyka, Magdalena Stańczyk; https://wma.museum/migracje-migrations/ (*Migracje/Migrations*, 2022).

32 Pointing out the above problem, a group of activists from the House of Nature and Culture called for a cleanup action: "Recent months are associated with the suffering of many people – the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border continues. Also the nature of the Bialowieża Forest suffers, as we find many traces of the presence of refugees there." See https://www.facebook.com/domprzyrodyikultury/posts/pfbid02gcwTaVUXRsEA62sYbAX9c6tKcFWo2JEeE8BBtUqGWq4UVkidbB5KSt3TV2oVQYaZl (Dom Przyrody i Kultury, 2022).

heavy construction and military equipment, and the sand and gravel used to improve and build roads comes from other areas, which means that new species that disrupt the ecosystem are introduced.[33] On top of that, there is the noise generated not only by construction machinery, but above all by the engines of military vehicles and helicopters.

As we have tried to demonstrate above in this article, in the context of (forced) migration nature can become an ally – it gives shelter from wind and rain, and provides protection from the watchful eye of a thermal camera. However, the natural environment can also be a threat. Groups crossing into wetlands and swamps are much more exposed to the risk of hypothermia from getting wet; they can also drown in the marshes. Sometimes, due to their unfamiliarity with the natural environment of Central and Eastern Europe, refugees are not able to read its ecological script, and the forest becomes a trap rather than an ally – for example, when an anthill is used as a pillow (Fig. 24), or when a camp located in a pit, meant to protect from view, turns into a pond during rain.



Fig. 24. Anthill used as a pillow, February 2022, photo by Natalia Judzińska.

Similarly, a posthumanist analysis of asylum seekers' belongings offers an opportunity to extend the proposed interpretations. As discussed above, things brought into the wilderness

33 Documentation of the damage is collected by the citizens' initiative *Nie dla Muru* (No to the Wall); see https://www.facebook.com/niedlamuru (Nie dla Muru, n.d.)

are meant to support refugees. However, it may happen that the interaction of the thing with the environment is unforeseen, stronger than the assumed alliance with the human being, and the thing stops being an assistant or rescue and becomes an adversary. This happens, for example, when initially supportive objects soak in water (useless sleeping bags, woolen clothing), or decompose (rotten food), or when a warming space blanket on which the sun rays fall turns from an ally into an informer giving away the person in hiding.

If not removed (by the forest service or activists), these objects enter into a relationship with their immediate environment – nature, transforming into habitats for new organisms. This group of objects escapes human causality to the greatest extent: they are "living things", "wasteplants", as the artist Diana Lelonek described this type of entity (Cieplak & Lelonek, 2019; Lelonek, 2021). These new, posthuman microenvironments, hybrid objects, evidence of the contacts of the human and the nonhuman, are largely indifferent to human history and transform the binary relationships of the human and the nonhuman (Fig. 25).



Fig. 25. "Living thing", February 2022, photo by Anka Kolber.

A posthumanist analysis of the ontology of sites and post-migratory objects thus reveals the dynamic and unstable ontologies of the objects studied: things are inhabited by other organisms, they are subject to decay, and they are displaced by animals. An interpretation that captures the mutability of these material-spatial systems can also foster rethinking the interaction with the human being: the one who finds, takes possession of, recycles, or records and exhibits these objects. As proposed by "symmetrical archaeology", which recognizes the influence of organisms and things on human cultures, the contemporary interaction with historical objects is no less important than that which was developed between things, their environments, and their past users (Olsen & Whitemore, 2015).

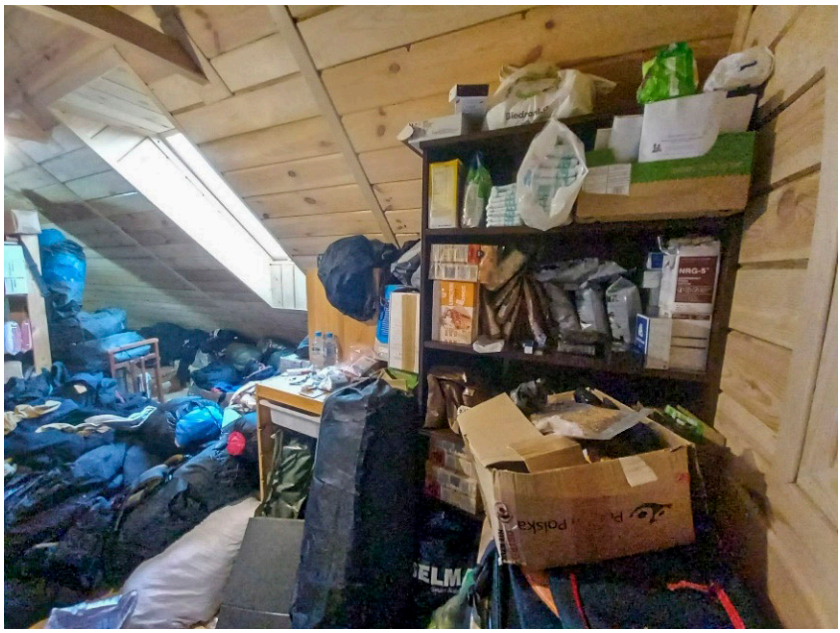


Fig. 26. Things collected in the forest, April 2022, photo by Marianna Podlaska.

The above-mentioned "contemporary interaction" with objects from recent history allows to follow the trajectories of things outside the area of the forest camps. As mentioned above, things are recycled (Fig. 26) or sorted into those suitable for recycling and trash (Fig. 27). Sometimes they become part of activist and artistic archives. Thomas Klipper and Massimo Ricciardo collected refugees' objects in Lampedusa. In 2020 they created the installation *Objects of Migration – Photo Objects of Art History*; they introduced several of these objects into the archives of the Fototeka (Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz) – the objects of migration (unstandardized, unpreserved, untreated) challenged the structured archive of Western art history (Goldhahn & Ricciardo, 2021). We have already mentioned other artistic works using objects-for-migration or their representations: these secondary variants of the objects' existence should also be taken into account in order to fully grasp the dynamic circulation, impact, and social making of material evidence of the humanitarian crisis.[34]

34 The use of objects of migration in artistic practices has significant ethical limitations. Artists often use victimization frameworks to influence empathetic responses from audiences. Thus, attention is particularly focused on the identity and cultural nature of refugees' belongings. In thematizing human-material relationships, artists are now aware of the consequences of the material turn, in which things have their own biographies, purposes, and are actors rather than mere tools of human beings. At the same time, critics of pro-refugee art – especially those coming from the refugee community itself, which is rarely allowed to shape media modalities – point to omissions, errors, and perverse effects of these essentially humanitarian intentions. In particular, the displacement of things beyond their socio-spatial-temporal context is criticized: migration in such a view becomes an example of the "eternal human odyssey"; decontextualization allows the perpetrators of violence to be removed from view, the militarization of the space of migration to be overlooked, the problems of the Global South causing migration to become invisible. The takeover of objects by the Western artistic circuit is directed towards the needs of the non-migrant viewer. This raises questions about ownership and appropriate forms of care for the belongings of people on the move.



Fig. 27. Garbage collected by the activists, April 2022, photo by Natalia Judzińska.

Conclusions

Paying attention to materiality during the ongoing crisis is one of the strategies to investigate the migration process. Observing its symptoms and inferring socio-political phenomena is a way of deciphering object-spatial metonymies, useful as a research-interpretive method especially where direct discursive data (e.g. interviews) from witnesses is not available. However, as we think, and as we would like to emphasize, the method of "material induction" can be considered not as a second-choice measure, but a practice consciously chosen as essential, for it has the advantage of concealing the personalities of people in the process of migration, thus taking care of the precarious (Butler, 2004, 2011, 2016) security of refugees. Moreover, it does not disturb individuals on their (often deadly) dangerous journey. It also does not redirect attention to other actors in the crisis (services, activists, residents). Things in this view become evidence of human causality, and, moreover, of the aforementioned precarity, vulnerability (Butler, 2011) of bodies needing and using allies and caregivers.

Deserted camps, as informal, temporary sites, can be interpreted as sources that provide a wealth of information not only about the physical state of the group, the number of people, their age and gender, but also about the crisis itself, its intensity and course. It is worth remembering that these camps are not a substitute for home. Home-making

in the refugee context, according to Andrea Lauser (2022, p. 277), implies, among other things, improvement and beautification, which in the case of the informal, temporary space of the deserted camps was not visible except in functional form (such as using tree branches to dry wet clothes, or giving some objects a new utility, e.g. using a space blanket as a carpet). Possibly, objects for temporary domestication disappeared from the camps together with people, accompanying them on their further journey, or remained in the forest in a form not associated with domestication. The dominant objects were those that assisted in the migration process.

As we have tried to show, the script of the 2015 border crisis influences the understanding and representation of the material dimension of the crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border, but it is clearly visible that in Poland it is coupled with the cultural grid of Holocaust symbols. However, since the material setting of this route to Europe is different from that perpetuated in the media and post-2015 imagery (the setting of forest, wilderness rather than the sea),[35] both public and private representations of the Eastern Borders Route are changing. An expanded set of symbols (thicket, swamps, wilderness, animals) signals new challenges for people on the move who are not fully prepared to face them (low temperature, unreadable routes). The subjugation of space and the alliance with things become important, even essential, factors in the successful crossing of the border. Migration scholars can thus effectively infer from its material clues while building a model of humanitarian crisis research which would be supportive and safer for the most vulnerable migration actors, and therefore more ethical.

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35 The perpetuation of the "sea odyssey" symbolism has no statistical basis in 2021–22: according to Frontex data, a similar number of people currently move overland across the Balkans as across the Mediterranean (Frontex, 2022).

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Kryzys na granicy polsko-białoruskiej. Miejsca i rzeczy

Abstrakt

Trwający kryzys humanitarny na granicy polsko-białoruskiej nie przyciągnął masowej uwagi społeczeństwa w Polsce ani w świecie, także zainteresowanie mediów jest ograniczone. Rzadkie wizualizacje osób poszukujących azylu i warunków migracji dostarczane są raczej przez portale aktywistyczne i osoby zaangażowane w udzielanie pomocy humanitarnej, pozostają zatem w obiegach środowisk pracujących na rzecz rozwiązania kryzysu. W związku z powyższym dostęp do wiedzy o warunkach migracji przez polską granicę jest ograniczony.

Obserwacja materialnego tła, śladów po migracji, zarówno w rozumieniu topografii, jak i narzędziowego wyposażenia, pozwala zbliżyć się do niedostępnych informacji. Autorki proponują wstępną typologię miejsc migracji, jak i przedmiotów używanych w jej trakcie. Argumentują, że taka strategia badawcza nie tylko analizuje procesy migracyjne poprzez ich wtórne symptomy. Może być również zrozumiana jako gest sojuszniczy wobec osób poszukujących azylu. Analiza materialna pozwala bowiem na odsłanianie doświadczenia migracji w taki sposób, by nie naruszyć kruchego bezpieczeństwa osób w drodze.

Słowa kluczowe: migracja; kryzys granic; kryzys humanitarny; granica polsko-białoruska; materialność; osoby poszukujące azylu; osoby w drodze; przymusowa migracja

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