Chapter 9

Can the Forests be Xenophobic?

Migrant Pathways through Croatia and the Forest as Cover

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According to research by forestry scientists, the forests in the most forested region in Croatia, Gorski Kotar, are a mixture of fir and beech trees, where the coniferous trees slightly outnumber the deciduous ones.[1] One important feature of these so-called natural forests" is their dense network of forest roads, which are very often used by people working in the forestry industry (Klepac 1997) as well as by walkers, hikers, and mushroom and fruit pickers—both from the local areas and beyond. In the last few years these forests have also become a part of the landscape for migrants, mostly from the Global South, who pass through them on their journey to Western Europe. They move along the so called "Balkan route." Since 2018 one of the most used northern parts of the Balkan route traverses northwest Bosnia and Herzegovina (Beznec and Kurnik 2020; Hameršak et al. 2020; Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020), and then clandestinely proceeds into the EU via the Republic of Croatia.

Croatia, while a member of the EU, is not yet a Schengen state and sits at the EUs external border. The migrants' journey then continues into Slovenia, which is also an EU member state but, unlike Croatia, a part of the Schengen area. It is here that the migrants' transit from Croatia to Slovenia frequently passes through the Gorski Kotar region, since it is located in northern Croatia and sits on the border with Slovenia. Thus, as a result of its specific geopolitical position, the Gorski Kotar region and its forests are a locus of intense migratory movement. Attempts by migrants to cross the borders are systematically prevented by the European Union acting through local state authorities, and differing border strategies and

tactics are employed. These include mass pushbacks or fast-track deportations back to Bosnia and Herzegovina or to Serbia. These deportations are extensively documented in different forms (by journalists, NGOs and activists' reports, individual testimonies of different actors, and indirectly by gaps in official statistics), but they are also systematically covered up and denied by Croatian authorities.

The aim of this chapter is to explore how recent migratory movement through the forest landscape has shaped social relations in the forests, where we want to consider *how* the forests are responding to the migrants as they pass through them. The reason we take this approach is because in the Croatian social context the loudest narratives about the effect that migrants have on the forests are ones that are offered by far-right groups. In their accounts, they offer examples of how they think the migrants are disrupting both human and animal social life in the forests. But we argue for caution when considering the alleged disruptiveness of the migrants to "forest life," especially when bearing in mind accounts from other social contexts. As we explain in the first part of the chapter, in other social contexts where scholars have analyzed the relation between "nature" and right-wing and far-right narratives, and also in writing by some biologists about invasive species, it is clear that these are all *human* representations of how nonhuman life responds. Furthermore, they are selective, in that these representations are based on specific human interests. Due to this, in this chapter we consider alternative narratives about human-forest relations, based on published reports about pushbacks and borrowing Kohn's (2013) suggestion to read the forests in a semiotic way. In our analysis of these narratives we analytically approach the forests as agents, asking whether there is evidence that the forests themselves are making a distinction between the migrants, residents, or police who pass through them. Based on this analysis, we offer the conclusion that what is shared is that the forests are providing to all the human figures who pass through them a form of cover that conceals their activities when they are in the forests. Notably, when offering this cover, the forests do not discriminate between these human figures based on human concerns, such as their origin or residency. Consequently, we argue that the forests cannot be determined to be intrinsically xenophobic. However, the way that the forests are represented by humans *can* be xenophobic, and they are represented in a multiplicity of different ways that are often conflicting.

Forest Entanglements

When one considers the narratives circulating in the Croatian media about the relation between migrants and the forests, one sees that migrants are often depicted as being a problem for the forests. As a result of this rela-

tively recent change in terms of "who" is walking in the forests, there is an apparent tension between local inhabitants and those passing through them. Members of local far-right groups inform the public via social media about the activities of migrants passing through the region (c.f. Goreta 2020). They criticize the Croatian government for not actively engaging the armed forces to defend Croatian national borders or the property of Croatian citizens, claiming that migrants are devastating the property of people in the local area on a large scale. In a newspaper report at the end of 2020, images were published that had been taken by a surveillance camera on a forest path, which showed many people walking through the forest in the dark. In the text that accompanied these images, a member of a far-right group spokespersons described his own experience of walking in the forest when migrants were present, claiming that they are armed and that they attack and rob other people who are in the forests. In his account, he explained that the way he and other locals act in the forests has changed because of the migrants' presence, saying, "While we walk through the woods, if there are not many of us, we do this in silence. But this is not good at all because of the wild animals. For example, if a wolf or bear hears us then it will take cover. [Making noise] is how you should walk through the forest. But now we are quiet because the migrants move in large groups, from twenty, thirty, to fifty people." Referring to the migrants, he continued: "I have met animals in the forest a million times, and never had any problems, but it is better to not have anything to do with these ones." "I would rather meet a bear in the forest," he concluded, "than a group of migrants." Similar narratives are voiced not just by actors from far-right groups, who are actively agitating for a "solution" to the "migrant problem." On social media, such as Facebook, it is also possible to find many photographs of food wrappers, containers, and clothing that are presented as having been left by the migrants. If such photographs are shared digitally where it is possible for readers to leave comments, often the comments are derogatory concerning the plight of migrants.

Nevertheless, such narratives are not unique to Gorski Kotar. The role that far-right groups in Gorski Kotar have given themselves—propagating narratives that suggest people walking through the forests are harmful to the local environment—is one that groups in other locations have also given themselves. As Biehl and Staudenmaier (2011) have argued, there is a long history of entanglements between ecological movements and right-wing exclusionary ideologies. In their account, Biehl and Staudenmaier discuss the important role that "nature" had in nineteenth-century ideologies developed by figures such as Ernst Moritz Arndt, who wrote *On the Care and Conservation of Forests* in 1815. They also draw out how such lines of thinking developed into National Socialist ideology, where "ecological themes played a vital role in German fascism" (ibid.: 30). Biehl

and Staudenmaier make it very clear that the relation between nature and far-right ideologies is not a new one. As they explain, these far-right ideologies are supported by an underlying conceptual framework that proposes the presence of a natural order of things that subsumes all other interests, including human ones. These ideologies propose that it is this natural order of things that humans should respect and protect, and that society should be organized around nature's processes in order to preserve "social-ecological harmony" (ibid.: 27). From this emerges the key idea of needing to *defend* this natural balance.

Furthermore, there is not only a historical interest in "defending nature." Recent research (Darwish 2018; Hage 2017) on far-right ideologies and their relation to nature has identified the presence of a similar trope. Present-day ideologies seek to defend nature's balance and to represent nature, with far-right ideologues as not only self-appointed defenders of nature but also its self-appointed spokespersons. For instance, Darwish (2018) has written about the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement, exploring the relation between far-right subcultures, masculinity, and environmentalism in a narrative analysis of the podcast *Nordic Frontier*. In her account, she has described how members of the Nordic Resistance Movement offer themselves as self-appointed protectors of the Nordic forests (50) and set themselves up against a series of "significant others." One of the groups that she suggests is treated by the Nordic Resistance Movement as a significant other is the group she terms "Racial Strangers," which includes immigrants, Jews, and all non-Aryan people (72). In Darwish's analysis of the podcast, she describes how the hosts portray the Racial Strangers as having "little or no respect for Nordic nature" (73) and present them "as a foreign species outside its 'habitat' that lacks the necessary means to understand the Nordic flora and fauna" (73). Thus, like the nineteenth century ideologies that Biehl and Staudenmaier (2011) have described, these narratives also promote the idea that Racial Strangers in the Nordic natural habitat disrupt the balance of the "natural world," which in turn should be protected.

Bearing all this in mind and returning to consider those narratives about migrants in the forests of Gorski Kotar, we suggest that a similar structure is visible. Like Darwish's (2018) discussion of how the Nordic Resistance Movement describes Racial Strangers as a "mass," far-right activists in Croatia talk about the masses passing through the forest and about migrants in terms of their disruptiveness to the local social context of Gorski Kotar. In these accounts, they are not only considered to be disruptive to the property and activities of the local people, which includes their interest in developing the region as a tourist area, but they also disrupt the relation between the local people and the forests. As we have just

mentioned, some claim that the way local inhabitants walk through the forests has changed since migrants have started walking in them. Yet perhaps the most important and notable similarity is how far-right activists present themselves as defenders of the forests, as well as defenders of the people who live in and near them. They declare they are defending the forests and local areas because no one else will, a point they constantly refer to in their calls for the Croatian government to "wake up to the migrant problem." Thus, there are notable parallels between these historical accounts, figures in the Nordic Resistance Movement, and those who want to "defend" Gorski Kotar.

It is important to also point out here that this interest in defending or protecting the forests, or even the "natural world" in its entirety, from incoming non-native species, is not exclusive to right-wing discourse. There are accounts within biological literature about how non-native or invasive species have not adapted to the "natural habitat" in the same way as native species have. For instance, Hettinger (2012: 7) describes non-native species as those species that are "foreign to an ecological assemblage in the sense that they have not significantly adapted with the biota constituting that assemblage, or to the local abiotic conditions, and the local biota have not significantly adapted to them." The question of how troublesome these non-native species are to the local environment remains unresolved and open for debate. Brown and Sax (2004: 530) maintain that in environmental and scientific communities, invasive species tend to elicit a "visceral emotional response," which they suggest is because there appears to be "something deep in our biological nature, related to xenophobia toward other humans, that colours our view of alien plants and animals."

Brown and Sax claim that this shares many parallels with those ideologies and discourses that determine "nature" to be something untouched, and that harbor "a tendency to view some prior condition as 'pristine' or most natural, and therefore the state that should be preserved" (530). From this they go on to say that while they do not want to claim that invasive species are "good," they do "plead for more scientific objectivity and less emotional xenophobia" (531). They conclude that it is the analytical work of scientists that creates this xenophobic response to invasive species, rather than invasive species being a problem per se.[2] They propose that not all native species should be treated in a uniform way, whereby they are all treated as "good," and in turn all non-native species are treated as "bad." They offer examples of native species, such as malaria-carrying mosquitoes, that cause enormous damage to local habitats, and of invasive species that have purposefully been introduced to benefit humans, such as crop plants that bring great benefits (483). While these scholars discuss the role of invasive species for quite different rea-

sons from those of far-right activists or agitators, one aspect that is shared is how these self-appointed spokespersons' construction of the relation between incomers and local habitats has a fundamental influence on the way both are perceived. Irrespective of their positions, they are all speaking *for* nature. As Comaroff has concluded in a discussion about invasive species in South Africa:

> The fetishism of alien species and the dangerous politics of enmity it begets should alert us to the consequences, in these times, of the all-too-human effort to enrol nature as alibi in the effort to address vexed questions of sovereignty, belonging, entitlement, and distribution—to draw lines, sometimes necropolitical lines—in what is an increasingly border-less, yet unequal, world. (Comaroff 2017: 46)

Thus, as he describes, the concept of "nature" is appropriated for discussions of "sovereignty, belonging, entitlement, and distribution." In sum what becomes visible from these accounts is that it is human interpretations, as well as human re-presentations of "natural" landscapes, that determine who is welcome and who is unwelcome in them. Furthermore, it is clearly a human interest to label certain actors, be they human, plant, or animal, as "invasive" or as "unwanted" in a particular landscape.

"Reading the Forests"

It is because of this point that we now turn to consider how the forests themselves are responding to the human actors who are inhabiting them, either permanently or temporarily. Here we ask how the forests are responding to those figures who have joined this "multispecies muddle" (Haraway 2016).[3] This requires taking an analytical perspective that treats the forests as agents, rather than as objects to which humans are doing things. To our minds, Eduardo Kohn's (2013) work on how forests think offers a way to read the forest's response. Using the example of anteaters' snouts, he suggests that over time anteaters have adapted to the need to have longer noses to be able to access ant tunnels. In doing so, in an evolutionary sense, they have adapted to the environment. It is through the "logic of evolutionary adaptation," which Kohn argues takes a semiotic form, that it becomes possible to read meaning into these adaptations. In this sense, it is possible to consider "nonhuman organisms as selves and biotic life as a sign process, albeit one that is often highly embodied and nonsymbolic" (Kohn 2013: 75). As a result, if one accepts Kohn's ideas about reading forest life in this semiotic way, an observational window is opened through which we can explore how forest life might be responding to human activity.

Just to give an example from the social context of Gorski Kotar to further illustrate this approach, in 2014 the forests of Gorski Kotar were victim to an ice storm, when due to a set of specific weather conditions ice glazed the branches of the trees of the forest causing them to snap because of the weight. The damage caused to the trees by the storm was so extensive that it was declared a natural disaster and the forests are still recovering. Scholars who have studied this event (Teslak et al. 2020) argue that one of the main causes of this storm is climate change since the warmer air temperatures are creating the conditions for these meteorological events. Thinking about this in terms of Kohn's (2013) suggestion that we can read the signs of the forests to see what they are "thinking" through the way they adapt or respond, we can conclude that in this case the trees in the forests are suffering in these human-forest relations. It is also not just the trees, since other forms of life in the forests are also suffering due to not having the benefit of the cover that the trees once offered them. Therefore, in terms of how the forests in Gorski Kotar respond to the migrants passing through them, we argue that it is possible to see their responses in the migrants' accounts of their experiences in the forests and their interactions with the forests.

To do this, we explore representations of the forests in published pushback reports since, while they are scarce, they are also the most diverse accessible sources about migrants' movements taking place in these forests. More precisely, we will refer to reports gathered in the Border Violence Monitoring Testimony Database, the most comprehensive and still active collection of reports for the so-called Balkan route and Croatia. Before we discuss this further, it is important to point out two specificities of the pushback reports that we are going to analyze in detail.[4] First, these reports only outline the spatial configuration. When they try to label and geographically situate the space, it is done in a rudimentary way, for example: *the first motorway* (14 August 2018, No Name Kitchen), *the road no. 1* (13 August 2018, No Name Kitchen), *E65 motorway* (11 October 2018, Balkan Info Van), *B road* (6 September 2018, Balkan Info Van), and so forth. The reports also represent the forests in general terms such as *forest, river, wooded hills,* and *mountains*, or *small path in a forested area* (24 July 2019, No Name Kitchen), *some open woodland* (1 September 2018, Balkan Info Van), *nearby woodland* (25 August 2018, Balkan Info Van), *forests of Croatia* (27 July 2019, Border Violence Monitoring), as well as *wooded hills of the Croatian forest* (6 September 2018, Balkan Info Van), *woods in the mountains of Croatia* (1 September 2018, Balkan Info Van), *forest in Croatia* (26 July 2019, Border Violence Monitoring), or as formulated in a pushback report from 27 February 2019: "We walked a lot in forests, sometimes through small villages, sometimes we even crossed high mountains" (No Name

Kitchen). This kind of representation of space leads us to the second specificity of the pushback reports in terms of offering material for analysis. The abstract and rudimentary representation of space in these reports is because the reports tend to be in an administrative style and have specific goals (ones that do not focus on the description of landscape if it does not have "forensic" value). Moreover, both the people on the move as well as the activists who are documenting their experiences, who are also very often foreigners, are not familiar with the spaces they are discussing, such as the toponyms and the configurations of the terrain. This is evident in mistakes in naming places that reflect the position of people on the move but also the position of activists as foreigners, outsiders, and intruders.[5]

Despite such representations of space in these reports, it is possible to discern ones related to the Gorski Kotar area. Some reports refer to toponyms in Gorski Kotar, some of them to toponyms in Slovenia or in other regions in Croatia that indicate that the route probably went through Gorski Kotar, and some of them include toponyms or refer to walking distances, which makes it possible (although in some cases less probable) that the route went through Gorski Kotar. For some reports one can be sure, and for others one can only suppose with more or less certainty, that they refer to Gorski Kotar.

The Forest as Cover

From our readings of these reports what becomes visible is that although the forests necessarily represent an obstacle for people on the move, since they are something else that migrants must overcome on their way to their final destination, they are also an environment that enables people to move unnoticed by authorities or residents of the area, which has become the heavily guarded EU external border. This means that in the forests people can hide from unwelcome encounters, and (almost) every encounter is unwelcome and has the potential to result in a pushback. In fact, such encounters with others are one of the few mandatory elements of every pushback report since a pushback is the result of an encounter with authorities. The use of forests as a cover is implicitly presented in all the reports dealing with the movement through forests. Some reports explicitly name the forest as such: "The group of eleven males left Velika Kladuša on foot and crossed the Croatian border through the forest. They walked during the day using the cover of the forest and waited for the night to cross exposed areas" (7 August 2018, Balkan Info Van, emphasized by authors). Here they explicitly equate the cover of the forest with the cover of night or darkness. Where there is no forest, people must wait

until night fall to offer them cover in order to be able to cross "exposed areas" and, vice versa, during the daylight they use the forest as the cover for their movement.

It is important to note that forests do not provide consistent cover but are interrupted by *open woodland* (1 September 2018, Balkan Info Van), *rivers* (8 July 2018, No Name Kitchen), *roads* (23 November 2018, No Name Kitchen), *houses* (30 November 2018, No Name Kitchen), and other objects constructed by humans. The diversity of this environment can also offer additional cover as in the case of houses. People sometimes, for instance because of the cold, leave the forest environment, in the strictest sense of the term, and hide in empty houses and shelters dispersed within the forest (1 December 2018, No Name Kitchen). More often leaving the forest and the cover of the trees increases the danger by making people on the move literally more visible, uncovered (25 August 2018, Balkan Info Van; 23 November 2018, No Name Kitchen). The covering function of the forest is even more evident in those descriptions of situations in which people are spotted by the police (or locals) near to but outside of the forest. It is in these descriptions that the forest becomes a place where people hide from immediate danger: "The larger group was spotted attempting to cross the stretch of river, protected by a border fence. The police spotted the interviewee and his companions by the river and began to shout at them. The group was scared and fled into the nearby woodland (back into the Croatian interior)" (25 August 2018, Balkan Info Van).

We will later consider the forest as a place of trailing and capturing people, but what is important to note here is that the forest offers such conditions for people on the move today. Such descriptions of the forest as a place of escape from danger are visible not only in reports that refer to traveling on foot (predominantly through the forest) but also in those that refer to traveling by vehicle in the region, which is greatly forested and where roads mostly go near or through the woods:

> After three days of walking, they reached a forest in Croatia where they were picked up by two vans that were supposed to take them further north. At this point they separated into two groups, with fifteen people in each van. During their ride to Slovenia, a police car tried to stop them. One of the van's drivers jumped out of the moving vehicle and accordingly one of the individuals pulled the hand brake to stop the vehicle. All the individuals exited the van and ran into a forest. (2 November 2018, No Name Kitchen)

Here, the forest terrain offers cover in the sense that it cannot be easily accessed by those forms of transportation that are usually used for following and capturing people on the roads.

The two fragments cited above about escaping from the police to the forest continue with sentences that reveal an ambiguity in the forest's role

in migrants' clandestine movements through this region. We have already referred to this ambiguity by using the terms "cover" on the one hand and "obstacle" on the other when describing the forest. While the already quoted parts of two passages speak about forests offering cover and a place to escape from danger, the rest of these sections speak about forests as a dangerous place—"It was dark and hard to see anything in the forest" (25 August 2018, Balkan Info Van)—and a place that is limited in resources required for survival. "Thirteen of them reached the forest and hid there for two days, during which time they ran out of food. '*We were starving, and we were so thirsty*'" (2 November 2018, No Name Kitchen). Because of these difficult conditions in the forests, in both cases people were stopped from moving onward. In the first case "the group became dispersed and consequently the interviewee and two other young males were caught" (25 August 2018, Balkan Info Van), and in the second "they [the migrants] decided [….] to search for the authorities" (2 November 2018, No Name Kitchen). How demanding forests are for people who are forced to cross them clandestinely can be seen in these reports when they explicitly appear as a place of struggle: "They struggled in the forests because they ran out of food after four days. For five days they walked without eating and [for] three days without water" (7 June 2019, Border Violence Monitoring). Although a lack of food and water does not necessarily lead to people surrendering themselves, which did not happen in the abovementioned case, it can be a reason for this (28 November 2019, Border Violence Monitoring, No Name Kitchen; 14 September 2020, No Name Kitchen). In addition to a lack of food and water, another reason for people giving up is bad weather in the forests:

> After they entered Croatia, they walked through the deeply snow-covered forests, which hindered their progress significantly. Although they had enough food with them, the snow remained a persistent problem for them, and they considering giving up. On the fifth day of walking, in the afternoon of 18 January, they decided to walk into a nearby town, hoping to find some authorities who might take them back to Bosnia. They all felt very cold and their clothes and sleeping bags were wet. (18 January 2019, No Name Kitchen)

Referring to this and similar situations, the No Name Kitchen's monthly report of January 2019 employs the term self-deportation for such practice: "The hard conditions of the walking 'game' prove challenging enough that groups sometimes purposefully alert authorities to their location in the hopes of being 'rescued'" (No Name Kitchen and Balkan Info Van 2019: 7). Due to the hard conditions in the forests during the winter period and bearing in mind the regularity of pushbacks, alerting the authorities and "surrendering" can be understood not only as an essential way to

save life but also as a "reliable, albeit dangerous, means of transport and return to BiH [Bosnia and Herzegovina]" (ibid.).

Thus, one of the dangers of the forests for migrants lies, paradoxically, in their covering possibilities. In addition to the forests offering cover for people on the move, they also offer a cover for police just before making arrests. According to the reports, in order to hide their presence in the forest the police dress themselves in casual clothes as a form of camouflage or cover. Dressed as civilians, wearing the same clothes as local residents or hikers, they can be conceived as being, if not "natural," then at least, in contrast to police officers, a regular element of the forest. Aside from dressing as local residents, police can take on the guise of smugglers, who for migrants are also not a "foreign element" of the forests but, on the contrary, at least in some cases, are expected and waited for.

> The group spent one night in the forest. The following day around 3 PM, a man appeared close to them, wearing casual clothes, and signaling them to come out of the forest to enter a van that would transport them to Italy. *"This man said to us: 'Come, come, come. We are not police and no police is coming. We will take you to Italia.' Okay, so we went into the car. When we were inside of it, the man said to us: 'Wait until the next car is coming.' Okay, [we] were waiting. But two or three minutes later we could hear some voices and see some men who had guns. And one of them said: 'Sit down here, we are police,' but they did not have police ID cards. We sat for one hour on a road, it was raining heavily, while he called to the police station."* (31 August 2018, No Name Kitchen)

Encounters with the authorities are, of course, not the only encounters that take place in this precarious context of escape. The reports highlight encounters with officials, but they also refer to encounters with locals, smugglers, and hunters, among others. For example, one group in the forest encountered "a number of hunters, whom they begged not to inform the authorities" (11 November 2018, No Name Kitchen). It is not known in this case whether the hunters reported their encounter with migrants to the police, but other reports suggest that encounters with locals or other civilians in the forest can be a prelude to pushback, since they alert the police. The implicit cooperation of local people is an important element of the multilevel European border apparatus.

In addition to encounters with others in the forests, the detection of migrants or discovery of their presence by others who remained unnoticed can, according to the reports, also lead to pushbacks. As one of the reports says:

> After about one week of walking, they approached the Kolpa river bordering Slovenia in the early morning hours. When they arrived, they found the river to be flowing much stronger than they had anticipated. . . . As the rest of the nine were already tired, they decided to light a fire to make tea. . . . They

> saw flashlights coming down from the mountain and inferred that someone had seen their fire and informed the authorities about their presence. They immediately put out the fire. While several officers passed close to their campsite, they remained undetected and the officers proceeded past them unaware of their presence. . . . As several individuals were preparing to inflate plastic bags to use as flotation devices on the river, they turned their heads and saw again several officers coming down from the mountain with their pistols drawn. They ordered the group of eight to stop, which they did. (11 November 2018, No Name Kitchen)

The police apprehension of migrants, described in the report we cite below, has the same structure of the police failing and then succeeding in discovering people. It began as a siege of an otherwise empty "building in a forest next to a road," which migrants used that night "to shelter from the cold."

> Several officers approached the building and shot three times into the air. The seven of them remained silent. *"We are silent when police are coming, when they were shooting. They say 'Go! Go! Go!'* [but] *we didn't do anything."* The officers didn't enter the building and eventually ended up leaving. Still, it seemed that they were aware, or suspicious, of the presence of people in the house. Despite the respondent's insistence on leaving, the group decided to stay for the night. *"We must change this place; the police know where we are."* Ultimately, however, the group stayed in the house because they were so cold and so wet that they saw no other option. (1 December 2018, No Name Kitchen)

The next morning, the police returned, and the group was apprehended. (1 December 2018, No Name Kitchen). These descriptions in the reports and in other accounts show that the forests are not only presented as the place of cover for migrants moving forward but also as the place of their interception and arrest. According to the reports, people can be intercepted and arrested by the police at a *river side* (11 November 2018, No Name Kitchen) or *in a forest close to the Slovenian border* (23 September 2018, No Name Kitchen). In this context, the forests are depicted as a "crime scene," with a focus on the authorities and on police misconduct. In line with this, the reports offer detailed descriptions of police (mis)conduct, while the forest as a distinctive setting completely disappears and it is usually not even mentioned after the interception. At such crime scenes, according to the reports, the police order people to sit down on the ground; interrogate, frisk, and strip them; take or destroy their documents, mobile phones, and power sources; confiscate their money; ignore their requests; refuse to let them speak; use electric shocks (stun gun), guns, and pepper spray; burn their clothes; set dogs on them; and physically attack and beat them. Nevertheless, if forests disappear, they reappear again in these reports on pushbacks. When these reports start with an account about an arrest they

start with the forests and end with expulsions in another forest. These forests are never a forest in the region of Gorski Kotar but forests on the eastern borders of Croatia and external borders of the European Union. Bearing in mind that most of the expulsions that take place in Croatia are not done by standard readmission procedures but clandestinely and often violently, the forest functions as a cover for these practices. Furthermore, the reports note that the "pushback points are most often close to streams or downward sloping hills, which serve as natural tools of assistance for the police officers carrying out these actions. People are pushed into the streams or down the hills" (No Name Kitchen 2018: 9).

Thus, when one responds to the question of what the forests offer to those passing through, our analysis of pushback reports suggests that the forests offer a form of cover to different actors on the migrant route that runs through Gorski Kotar. In this sense, the forests appear to take a neutral stance in terms of how they relate to those who are in their midst. In the first instance, they provide a way for people to move without being noticed, where the cover they offer helps people to continue their journeys without being seen. Secondly, and it is here that the neutral stance of forests becomes most visible, forests do not discriminate among those to *whom* they offer this cover. Just as they offer cover to migrants passing through, they also offer cover to other human figures, such as the police, local populations, and smugglers. What is notable here is that their activities also occur under the cover of the forests, and in this sense they are camouflaged. Thirdly, the cover offered by forests presents a challenge for all human figures passing through, irrespective of whether they are migrants or police or local people.

The dense foliage and difficult terrain slow down migrants' journeys and also make the forests a difficult place to navigate. Their terrain is sometimes difficult to identify and a challenge for humans to orient themselves in, which as we have shown is visible in the way that people describe them. It is here that local human knowledge takes a privileged form in the sense that people who are familiar with the terrain are more easily able to navigate through it. For this reason, we argue that from this perspective it appears that the forests are neither unwelcoming to visitors and xenophobic by "nature," nor are they welcoming. Instead, they do not discriminate in terms of those to whom they offer cover, whether they are figures who are frequently in the forests or just people passing through. Indeed, the point that we want to end on is that when one considers forests in this way, the issue of whether they are xenophobic or unwelcoming to visitors from the standpoint of cover becomes very clearly a human interest. When one tries to read the forests in the way that Kohn (2013) has suggested, rejecting or welcoming outsiders does not seem to be an

interest of the forests at all. Rather, the question of whether landscapes are xenophobic is one that belongs firmly in the human realm and is clearly a focus of human interest and discussion.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have set out to consider whether we could describe the forests of Gorski Kotar as xenophobic toward outsiders, such as the migrants who pass through them on their escape to Western Europe. Our point has been that it is very important to not unwittingly get caught up in xenophobic debates about who, or what, is welcome in a specific landscape. As we have discussed there is a long history of the far right appropriating "nature" to shore up their racist narratives. Clearly, therefore, the role that scholars have is an essential one in determining whether landscapes, or in our case forests, can be deemed xenophobic or not. As we have discussed in this chapter, the forests of Gorski Kotar appear to be neutral regarding those to whom they offer cover. But it can also be argued that the cover they offer is actually revealing in that it discloses the status and perception of migrants and current migration practices in local societies, at both the official and unofficial levels.

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Notes

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1. As well as beech and fir trees, the forests also consist of mountain beech trees, mountain spruce trees, and premountain spruce trees, among others.
2. When considering the issue of whether it is the analytical work of scholars that elicits this xenophobic response to the invasive species, it might be initially tempting to want to take a deconstructive approach. But Jean-Klein's (2001) writing on a closely related field, nationalism studies, offers a cautionary tale about taking this path. She has argued that in the field of nationalism studies there is a split posture on the part of scholars. On the one hand, when considering Western nationalist projects, scholars have taken "a determined, condemnational, and 'deconstructive' ethnographic stance," engaging in a "quasi redemptive exercise" (85). On the other hand, scholars have taken quite a different approach to "other" nationalisms that unfold in non-Western settings, and in post-colonial settings, where they are considered to be "subaltern, self-liberational, and virtuous," and scholarship appears to be "going out of its way" to assist these kinds of nationalist efforts (85). Furthemore, Hage (2017) has written about something similar in his account of whether racism is an environmental threat, where he has considered the relation between racism and speciesism, and the way that humans are represented as animals in racist narratives. Something that Hage points out is that our deconstructivist interests might be of no interest whatsoever to those persons whose narratives we seek to challenge. Hage argues that antiracist academics try to judge racists on the "logical contradictions, inconsistencies, and discrepancies in their arguments" as if they "are students or fellow academics with whom they are having

disagreements in a tutorial room about how to interpret reality" (2017: 5). As he writes, "it is as if the racists' greatest sin is that they are bad thinkers: they are 'essentialists,' they deviate from 'classical biological racism,' or they make false empirical statements about reality that the antiracist academics work for long hours to correct by highlighting a lot of statistical data that proves them correct" (ibid.). It is for this reason that we argue there is much to think about when considering *how* we might analytically approach such narratives.

3. Rather than considering forests as a unified singular form we propose they should be considered along the lines of what Haraway (2016) has termed a "multispecies muddle." Even though forests are often thought of as a singular living being, they are actually a habitat that hosts a wide range of different species. One of the many definitions that can be found in the *Šumarski list*, a Croatian journal dedicated to forestry, states: "A forest is characterized by harmony and mutual relationships between the living community or biocenosis (plants, animals, microorganisms) and site (soil, climate, relief)." Therefore, when we talk about forests, we talk about "air, water, climate, soil, landscape and the plant and animal world." [Editorial board, "Croatian Forestry at the Crossroads." 2012. *Šumarski list* (3, 4): 119.]. To this list we also add the human world.
4. The Border Violence Monitoring Testimony Database is available at https://www.borderviolence.eu/violence-reports/. Specific reports published in this database are quoted or referred to here in parentheses by date and name of the organization that recorded the report. For example: (7 November 2018, No Name Kitchen).
5. Furthermore, the term forest in the reports does not necessarily correspond to the dictionary sense of "a dense growth of trees and underbrush covering a large tract." (See "Forest." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/forest.) "Forest" and similar terms can also denote nature in general or unpopulated or sparsely populated green areas. For example: "*I asked him, why did they act like that to me? I am not dangerous; I am not a thief. I don't want to stay in Croatia, only* [to pass through the] *jungle*" (7 November 2018, No Name Kitchen). The term *jungle,* used in this and other pushback reports, supposedly comes from the Pashto *dzjangal*, and it was also used for the name of the makeshift migrant camp in Calais, France (Hicks and Mallet 2019: 2). In pushback reports it can be used with or without translation, mostly in parentheses, to mean *forest* or, more broadly, *wooded terrain* (26 July 2019, Border Violence Monitoring) or *woodland* (5 December 2019, No Name Kitchen). Furthermore, boundaries between the forest (understood as an unpopulated area) and an urban area can blur in reports. It is not unusual that reports name as forest even those places that are close to highly urbanized or at least populated areas, such as in the following example: "The family was walking in a forest close to the town called Črnomelj, where they were seen by a man on a motorbike, who called the police. The family noticed the man calling the police and wanted to escape but the local people surrounded them and did not let them leave until the police arrived" (21 August 2018, No Name Kitchen; cf. 2 September 2020, No Name Kitchen).

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