
Book Review: Shannon Clarke

For decades, the European Union (EU) represented openness after the horrors of World War II and the divisions of the Cold War. The Schengen Agreement (which eliminated border controls among its member states) sought to do the same when it was established in 1985, pointing toward a new “borderless” world. But journalist Matthew Carr tells a different story in *Fortress Europe: Dispatches from a Gated Continent*. In this carefully researched work of non-fiction the ideals of open borders come up against the reality of nativism and economic self-interest.

The term “Fortress Europe” has been adopted across disciplines to describe regional isolation and hyper-surveillance.¹ The human cost of this behaviour is high, and yet, governments remain committed to a complex system of exclusion. Based on two years of reporting and ethnographic research, Carr argues that European dreams of free movement have led to the creation of a continent obsessed with perceived threats at its gates: “At no time in history have so many people attempted to cross international borders without authorization, and at no time have so many governments gone to such lengths to try to stop them.” (7).

In its introduction, Europe is immediately established as a site of immobility and violence. “Incidents at the Border,” cites numerous clashes between migrants and border police in Morocco; deaths at the border between Ukraine and Poland; a decade of suicides at a detention centre in Germany. Part One, *Hard Borders*, situates migrants within a larger story of constructed borders and illegality. (“A Gated Continent” offers a truncated history of Europe makes clear that the ubiquity of border controls — such that many people don’t think twice about producing a passport today — shouldn’t be taken as a natural phenomenon.) Thus, the first half of the book works to establish the hypocrisy of the agreement when considered alongside the lived experiences of those who take the rhetoric to heart.

In chapters like “Postcards from Schengenland” and “Small Island: British Borders” Carr interviews migrants living in camps, detention centres, shelters or sub-par housing throughout Europe. But it’s the “border states” of Spain, Greece, Malta and Poland that draw special interest. The focus on these spaces is deliberate: wealthy countries like the U.K and France have thrust the responsibility of directly policing the continent to peripheral Schengen members and North African transit countries, actively encouraging violence at international and regional borders. Carr locates his interviewees in the towns and cities that escape the attention of tourists from outside Europe – places like Lampedusa, Italy where (white) Europeans come in search of rest, and where migrants exist as “living ghosts” left in a state of limbo. These detention towns reveal the poor quality of mercy extended by European states – when it’s extended at all. Says one refugee lawyer in Greece: “They aren’t allowed to come; they’re not allowed to stay and they’re not allowed to leave.” (92).

Part Two, *Border Crossings*, shifts to examining the ways migrants defy borders and the mechanisms of the deportation regime, including the half-hearted attempts to curtail the movement of cheap labour and other contraband enjoyed by Europeans (detailed in “Traffic”). Carr’s

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thorough investigation of these sites includes migrants and governments, but also a network of far-right organizations and political parties, local activists sympathetic to migrant rights, the UN, various NGOs, charities and smugglers. These short but carefully observed profiles are a strength of the book. For example, Carr writes of Atif, a young man from Afghanistan he meets in Calais. Atif, with his “brilliant smile” and cheerful demeanor, asks him if it’s possible to swim to England (122). Carr finds that despite efforts to keep people out, sheer determination brings them to Europe via creative and often dangerous routes. Furthermore, a deeply felt sense of injustice has moved many to resist through hunger strikes, riots, protests and acts of self-harm from within detention centres. In “Hands Across the Border” he highlights a growing contingent of activists and lay people working alongside migrants to dismantle the oppressive border regime. Many, like Maltese fisherman Ray Bugeja and a French architect, Phillipe Longue (“[he] estimates that he has provided temporary home to some three hundred migrants at this house…” [203]) act in direct defiance to border police, putting themselves at risk for arrest and violence from their far-right compatriots.

Yet, Fortress Europe stumbles in its reluctance to interrogate white supremacy as a specific goal of this fortifying project. In fact, the term doesn’t appear in the book at all (“race” and “racism” do but always in connection to specific events and places, never as an overriding ideology). While Carr rightfully highlights the racism that underlies the fears driving the militarization of borders, unlike Nicholas De Genova’s “European Question,” there is no direct confrontation with whiteness. The book comes close in its chapter “Western Borders,” where the European system is linked to those of the U.S. and Australia; and later in a short sub-section on the deportation of Jews under Nazi Germany. Though it seems clear that Carr believes the vilification of migration is race-based, xenophobic and Islamophobic, he never examines whiteness beyond extreme cases of far-right violence or thinly veiled comments by politicians and journalists. Race is far from the only factor determining who gets to enter Europe – and how they’re treated when they get there — but it plays too big a role in anti-immigrant discourse to be only hinted at.

Despite its failure to interrogate systemic white supremacy, Fortress Europe complements scholarly writing on migrant rights, deportability and detention regimes, including research on the economic incentive for states to selectively enforce its borders. With his juxtaposing of European tourists to the detained migrants with whom they share space, Carr’s writing can also be read alongside writing on the construction of citizenship. The Schengen Agreement, it seems, is to be enjoyed by a certain person, the kind whose Icelandic vacation delay gets space in national newspapers, while others wait, stranded in Calais only miles away, for a chance at a regular life in France.

Fortress Europe is a comprehensive indictment of Europe’s deportation regime. Carr unequivocally condemns the treatment of migrants within and just beyond Europe’s borders. Yet, he also believes that a more humane future is possible. Unfortunately, as debates over borders rage on in London and Brussels, ever more European governments are seeking to fortify their territories and restrict the movements of migrants. In that way, the hopeful calls to action are still relevant; and Carr’s critique of the continent as “a tomb, where the best and noblest aspirations of Europe are buried” (271) eerily prophetic.

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