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JOURNAL ARTICLE (PEER REVIEWED)

Through Whose Eyes? Triple Colonisation, Vulnerability, and Global Trespassers in Documentaries about Girls Crossing Borders

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Abstract

Although the concept of 'feminisation of migration' has gained prominence since the 1980s, the stories of refugee and migrant girls remain largely overlooked. While digital platforms have recently enabled these girls to reclaim their narratives and share lived experiences of growing up on the move, adult-produced documentaries still tend to portray them primarily as vulnerable. This framing undermines their roles as agents of social change and limits the transformative potential of their stories. To explore this tension, this article examines the representation of girls crossing national borders in two 21st-century documentaries: *Crossing the Border to Go to School in the U.S.* (2020) and *Ein Weiter Weg Wohin?* (Further, But Where?) (2020).[1] The former follows Mexican sisters who commute daily; the latter recounts the journey of a Syrian refugee girl. Drawing on postcolonial, feminist, and childhood studies, the article analyses how these documentaries, while illuminating underexamined lives, reveal instances of what is here termed 'triple colonisation'. It challenges the assumption that individual gendered life stories automatically transform global perspectives, arguing instead that traditional documentary forms can obstruct the translation of personal migration narratives into broader critical debates. The article then identifies moments of 'global trespassing' within these narratives, drawing on John McLeod's recent work (2024) on transnational

1 Author's translation of the German documentary title. Throughout this article, all English quotations from this source are taken from Arte's official English subtitles. Arte uses the term 'refugees and migrants' in the title of the series, and this terminology is retained throughout the article. The United Nations similarly employs the term 'refugees and migrants' to capture the diverse causes and characteristics of forced and voluntary movement, while also recognising the specific legal protections afforded to refugees under international law (see UN DESA 2016).

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storytelling. By centring the girls' own perspectives rather than adult constructions of vulnerability, this approach highlights how they navigate and disrupt adult- and gender-imposed boundaries while forging connections across borders. Contributing to debates on representation in migration narratives, this article underscores the need to amplify the voices of migrant and refugee girls and to reimagine, rather than constrain, their transgressive and transformative potential.

Keywords

Migration; Girlhood; Television Documentaries; Representation; Triple Colonisation; Global Trespassing

The image of the displaced child has become a powerful tool in visual media and is increasingly used to evoke emotional responses from global audiences. The 2015 photograph of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler lying face-down on a beach in Türkiye, and Banksy's 2019 Venice mural depicting a shipwrecked child wearing a lifejacket and holding a pink flare exemplify contemporary visual imagery in which the figure of the refugee child is politicised to arouse public concern for global crises. Swiftly circulated worldwide through digital media, these emotive, adult-produced images of displaced children crossing borders aim to raise international awareness of the extreme risks faced by those fleeing conflict and persecution. Their use, however, has become increasingly debated within both public and academic discourse, due to concerns about the ethical implications of representing children's suffering, the reduction of complex lives to symbolic imagery, and the reproduction of unequal power dynamics between subjects and viewers. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), children constituted an estimated 41 per cent of the 123.2 million forcibly displaced people worldwide in 2024 (UNHCR 2025: 36). Among them, women and girls made up approximately half of all refugee, internally displaced, or stateless populations and faced heightened risks of discrimination and gender-based violence.

These figures reflect broader demographic shifts that scholars have termed the 'feminisation of migration'—a trend observed since the 1980s in which women and girls constitute an increasingly visible and significant proportion of global migrant populations (Tittensor & Mansouri 2017). This shift has prompted greater attention to the gendered dimensions of migration, yet the specific experiences of migrant and refugee girls remain strikingly underrepresented in both mainstream media and academic discourse.

This article examines how migrant and refugee girls are portrayed—and often silenced—within adult-framed media accounts, with a particular focus on documentary film. While many of these works are well-intentioned and seek to raise awareness, they often depict girls as passive symbols of suffering rather than as active social agents. Documentary, as a genre, occupies a powerful space between journalism, education, and art; it is widely perceived as offering truthful or authentic accounts, making it a particularly influential form in shaping public perceptions of displacement and childhood. Yet this same truth-claiming capacity can obscure the layers of mediation involved in documentary storytelling—especially when children are its subjects. Traditional media forms—particularly televised interviews and voiceover-led documentaries—continue to frame these stories through simplified, often pathos-driven tropes. These formats tend to filter girls' experiences through institutional, journalistic, or humanitarian lenses that prioritise emotional impact over narrative complexity. As a result, even when girls' stories are made visible, they are frequently reframed in ways that dilute their political and personal significance. In contrast, digital media platforms have begun to offer alternative spaces where displaced girls can reclaim their narratives and assert their voices (Douglas 2018; 2022). Freed from many of the editorial constraints of traditional media, digital spaces enable more direct, self-authored storytelling and peer-to-peer engagement, allowing girls to speak with rather than be spoken about.

To explore the representational tensions outlined above, this article examines two documentary films from the early twenty-first century—*Crossing the Border to Go to School in the US* (2020) and *Ein Weiter Weg Wohin?* (*Further, But Where?*, 2020)—produced during periods of heightened xenophobia in the United States and Europe, respectively. The former follows two Mexican sisters who cross the U.S.–Mexico border each day to attend school in California, while the latter traces the journey of a Syrian refugee girl who flees war with her father and later resettles in Germany. Through close readings of these texts, the article interrogates how migrant and refugee girls are represented within adult-curated, Western-centric narratives that often reproduce structural inequalities even as they aim to humanise their subjects.

The analysis is situated at the intersection of postcolonial, feminist, and childhood studies, and is anchored by two key theoretical frameworks. First, it proposes the concept of triple colonisation to describe how representational frameworks shaped by Western, patriarchal, and adult-centric logics converge to constrain how displaced girls are portrayed and perceived. This framework extends Petersen and Rutherford's (1986) notion of double colonisation by introducing age as a critical axis of marginalisation, showing how adult authority interacts with colonial and gendered power to appropriate and reframe girls' life stories. Second, the article engages with McLeod's (2024a) concept of 'global trespassing', which captures how displaced subjects challenge sanctioned borders—literal and symbolic—in their pursuit of agency and belonging. This framework reveals moments in which migrant and refugee girls assert voice and authorship despite the constraints of adult-directed media. Together, these concepts provide the basis for an intersectional, media-sensitive reading of how voice, agency, and resistance emerge within, and sometimes in spite of, dominant representational regimes.

The article proceeds in four main parts. It begins by developing the framework of triple colonisation, situating it within broader scholarship on representation, intersectionality, and life writing. It then offers close readings of the two documentaries, demonstrating how each reflects—and occasionally challenges—dominant tropes of girlhood, migration, and media authorship. A third section explores moments of global trespassing, where girls transgress adult- and gender-defined boundaries through language, digital platforms, or embodied practices such as sport. Finally, the article briefly turns to Elizabeth Liang's autobiographical performance *Alien Citizen: An Earth Odyssey* (2017) as a counterpoint, illustrating the representational possibilities that emerge when displaced girlhood is narrated from within, rather than framed from without. By tracing these intersecting threads, the article contributes to ongoing debates around the politics of voice and authorship in gendered life narratives. It argues that representations of migrant and refugee girls must be understood not only through the lens of trauma or vulnerability, but as sites of political contestation—where narrative control, power, and resistance are actively negotiated. In doing so, the article calls for a critical rethinking of how displacement is mediated, and how displaced girls can—and do—author their own transnational lives.

Triple Colonisation: Western, Male, and Adult-Centric Perspectives

Before turning to close readings of the selected documentaries, this section situates the analysis within existing scholarship on life writing, representation, and the intersecting structures that shape the portrayal of migrant and refugee girlhood. Drawing on feminist, postcolonial, intersectional, and childhood studies, it considers how visual and narrative forms frequently reproduce layered marginalisation, particularly when mediated through dominant Western, male, and adult-centric frameworks. Scholars such as Mohanty (1988), Spivak (1988), and Lugones (2008) have long examined how colonial and patriarchal systems suppress the voices of subaltern and racialised women. Extending these insights, this section brings age into sharper focus, arguing that childhood operates as a crucial, yet often underacknowledged, axis of power. The concept of triple colonisation is proposed as a way of articulating how Western, patriarchal, and adult authority converge to shape—and often constrain—the narrative possibilities available to displaced girls.

While resonating with longstanding critiques in feminist and postcolonial theory, this framework highlights how adult-centric forms of storytelling compound existing structures of silencing, thereby limiting the ways in which refugee and migrant girls are represented, heard, or understood.

The documentaries examined in this article, which depict the real-life experiences of girls navigating international borders, can be understood as biographical texts within the wider field of life writing studies. Smith and Watson (2010: 4) define life writing as 'writing that takes a life, one's own or another's, as its subject,' encompassing a range of media including oral, visual, and digital forms. Within this broader category, life narratives involve acts of self-presentation that may be mediated or co-constructed. As Caetano and Correia note, the study of life narrative involves engaging with stories in mediated settings, while attending not just to what is said, but also to what is left unsaid or actively silenced (2023: 1). Carlson similarly points to the influence of 'hidden or often ignored mediations' (2024: 1). According to Jenkins, most stories about children are in fact 'written by adults, illustrated by adults, edited by adults, marketed by adults, purchased by adults and often read by adults' (1998: 23). These observations reinforce the idea that refugee and migrant girls' stories are rarely told in their own words or on their own terms.

Both documentaries examined here focus on teenage girls and offer brief but revealing insights into the lives of migrant and refugee youth navigating everyday border crossings—both literal and metaphorical. While differing in tone, scope, and cultural context, both *Crossing the Border to Go to School in the US* and *Ein Weiter Weg Wohin?* attempt to document the routines and reflections of girls negotiating dislocation and identity. However, their stories are shaped through highly mediated forms that foreground adult-produced narratives, raising important questions about authorship, framing, and voice. Indeed, it proved challenging to identify works—in any medium—authored by migrant or refugee girls themselves, particularly on the topic of migration. In print-based life writing, memoirs by girls in these contexts are rare and typically co-authored with adults; Malala Yousafzai's memoir, published when she was sixteen, remains one of the most visible examples (Yousafzai & Lamb 2013). Similarly, while a broad survey of digital platforms reveals many interviews with refugee and migrant children, these are predominantly framed, edited, and distributed by adults. As Gilmore and Marshall argue, prevailing portrayals of girls in crisis tend to invite empathy by casting them as passive and vulnerable (2010: 667)—a representational mode that shapes many of the visual and narrative conventions found in the two documentaries examined here. This framing provides a critical starting point for the close analyses that follow.

Crossing the Border to Go to School in the U.S. is a four-minute documentary produced by Hamelin for the BBC's *Crossing Divides* series (2020). The film portrays a typical school day in the lives of the sixteen-year-old twins Ana Fernanda Bernal and Ana Luisa Bernal, who live with their mother in Mexicali, Mexico. Each day, the girls cross the border to Calexico, California, to attend Calexico Mission School, a private Christian institution. Ana Fernanda and Ana Luisa are just two among thousands of such 'transborder' students (West 2019). According to the series editor, the project's aim was to explore 'the power and possibilities of encountering people with conflicting opinions, across divisions of race, class, faith, politics and generation' (Kasriel 2019).

Ein Weiter Weg Wohin? (Further, But Where?) recounts the journey of Perwin, a young Syrian refugee girl, who describes fleeing Syria for Türkiye in 2012 with her father in order to reunite with her mother, who had already sought refuge there. Four years later, as a teenager, she moves with her parents to Germany, where the film finds her attending a high school in Baden-Baden. The seven-minute documentary was produced by Augé and Hannover, Florianfilm, the German broadcaster SWR, and the European public broadcaster Arte, as part of its *Gesichter der Flucht—Vom Gehen und Ankommen: Your Exit* series (2020). Florianfilm (2020) describes the project as chronicling eight refugee and migrant experiences since 1945, stressing the historical continuity of migration.

Both documentaries were filmed and released in contexts of heightened xenophobia. *Your Exit* responded to growing anti-refugee sentiment in Germany between 2010 and 2015, while *Crossing Divides* was produced in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum and amid rising anti-immigration rhetoric in the UK. Despite differing national contexts, their shared goal was to humanise refugee and migrant experiences through personal storytelling. Yet despite these efforts, both works present girls from the Global South—Mexico and Syria—in ways that reflect the expectations of viewers in the Global North. This framing reflects entrenched representational patterns in which girls are cast as passive sufferers rather than active agents, echoing the adult-centric and externally mediated dynamics described earlier. Despite growing interest in migration narratives across media and scholarship, few representations meaningfully disrupt these framing conventions—and girl-authored accounts, particularly in documentary form, remain exceptionally rare.

To understand why these representational patterns persist—despite the stated intention of humanising refugee and migrant experiences—it is useful to turn to postcolonial theory. Postcolonial frameworks interrogate how the Global South is imaged by the West as 'other', inferior, or in need of saving. As McLeod notes, such narratives position the West as occupying a 'superior rank,' thereby legitimising its interventionist gaze and sustaining global hierarchies (2010: 49). This gaze often manifests in humanitarian storytelling, where marginalised subjects are presented through frames of pity, rescue, or emotional uplift, rather than as narrators of their own lives. Within such accounts, refugee and migrant girls are frequently depicted through adult-led narratives that reinforce institutional and journalistic interpretations of migration and girlhood. These framing choices—whether visual, editorial, or structural—limit the scope of the girls' narrative agency and reflect broader traditions in which marginalised subjects are more often spoken for than heard directly.

It is within this context that the concept of triple colonisation becomes analytically useful. As a framework, it enables a more nuanced critique of the intersecting power structures that mediate the portrayal of displaced girls. Historically, both women and postcolonial subjects have been marginalised within life writing traditions. Moore-Gilbert, for example, highlights how these voices have often been excluded from dominant literary canons and overlooked in broader cultural narratives (2009: xiv–xxiv). This insight resonates with Petersen and Rutherford's foundational concept of 'double colonisation' (1986), which refers to the dual oppression experienced by women in formerly colonised nations—caught between colonial and patriarchal systems. When age—specifically childhood—is introduced as a third axis of analysis, this layered exclusion becomes even more pronounced, revealing how adult authority further mediates and constrains access to voice and representation.

To account more fully for these intersecting dimensions of inequality, it is helpful to turn to intersectionality theory, which offers a framework for analysing how multiple systems of power operate simultaneously. As Crenshaw's foundational work demonstrates (1989), identity categories such as race, gender, and class do not exist in isolation, but intersect to produce specific and often compounded experiences of discrimination. Subsequent scholarship has extended this framework to include additional factors such as age, migration status, and disability, generating more nuanced accounts of structural marginalisation. Postcolonial theory, when brought into closer dialogue with intersectional approaches, enriches this analysis further. As Wallaschek argues, such a convergence sharpens our understanding of multi-layered discrimination and the complex entanglements of power (2015). While postcolonial theory foregrounds the enduring legacies of colonial domination and global inequality, intersectionality allows us to examine how these histories interact with social categories like gender, age, and migration status to produce distinct forms of representational constraint.

Bringing these frameworks together enables a more precise interrogation of how overlapping hierarchies—colonial, gendered, and generational—shape both the production and reception of migrant girls' life narratives. It is within this intersectional-postcolonial space that the concept of triple colonisation

takes shape. This article proposes the term to describe how Western, patriarchal, and adult-centric representational frameworks converge to constrain the ways in which migrant and refugee girls are portrayed. Building on Petersen and Rutherford's (1986) notion of double colonisation, the addition of age—specifically childhood—as a third axis of marginalisation draws attention to how adult authority functions alongside colonial and gendered power to shape, limit, and often appropriate the life narratives of displaced girls.

With this framework in place, the article now turns to close readings of the selected documentaries. It applies the concept of triple colonisation to explore how representations of displaced girlhood are mediated by intersecting structures of power. These narratives are frequently filtered through tropes of vulnerability, rescue, and passive suffering, which obscure the girls' agency and voice. As McGillis argues, 'children remain the most colonized persons on the globe' because adults continue to construct and control how they are represented (1997: 7–8). Through the lens of triple colonisation, refugee and migrant girls emerge not only as subjects of postcolonial and patriarchal power, but also as figures constrained by adult authority—particularly within global media and humanitarian discourses.

Girls Crossing Borders Every Day

The BBC's short online documentary film *Crossing the Border to Go to School in the U.S.* (2020) portrays a typical school day in the lives of the sixteen-year-old twins Ana Fernanda Bernal and Ana Luisa Bernal, who live with their mother in Mexicali, Mexico. Each day, the girls cross the border into the U.S. to attend a private school. Ana Fernanda and Ana Luisa are just two among thousands of such 'transborder' students, who commute because they hold U.S. citizenship (West 2019).

The documentary opens with an image of the girls presenting their American passports to a U.S. Customs and Border Protection officer. Ana Fernanda states: 'Every single day, since I was four years old, I've crossed an international border' (0.00–0.23 min.). The film thus invites the viewer to consider how normative experiences of childhood (school, innocence, routine) coexist uneasily with the regulatory apparatus of the border. As Nuñez and Urrieta argue, transborder students must acquire what they call 'border literacies'—a set of embodied and cognitive practices that include reading 'the world of surveillance', anticipating intrusive questions, and performing obedience and compliance in order to avoid suspicion or punishment (2020: 21). These forms of literacy are not formally taught yet are essential to the girls' navigation of their daily commute—highlighting how the border not only separates nations, but shapes childhood itself through gendered and racialised expectations of behaviour.

Child compliance and adult authority also shape the film's broader representation of power dynamics. The physical border shown at the start of the documentary symbolically reflects the metaphorical boundaries the twins must navigate in adhering to decisions made on their behalf by their mother. Soon after the opening, the film shifts in time and place: in the darkness of early morning, the girls' house in Mexicali is shown from the outside. The caption states it is 4 a.m., and a piercing alarm clock sounds. One girl lies asleep under her bed sheets while the other prepares for the day by ironing a school uniform skirt. The passage of time is repeatedly emphasised through auditory cues, on-screen text, and visual sequencing: at 5.30 a.m., the girls rest with earphones in the back of their mother's car; at 6.30 a.m., they queue at the Mexicali–Calexico port of entry; at 8.00 a.m., the school bell rings; at 10.30 a.m., students take a break; at 4.15 p.m., the girls rush back to border control; and at 5.30 p.m., darkness falls again. Finally, at 9 p.m., one girl is shown asleep on the sofa beside her schoolbooks. These repeated visual and textual time markers emphasise how closely the girls' lives are structured by the clock, which dictates their daily movements, responsibilities, and rhythms. In this sense, time itself becomes another border—regulating their autonomy, reinforcing adult authority, and shaping their experience of girlhood through routines of discipline and compliance.

While driving her daughters to the border at five in the morning, the girls' mother explains in Spanish that 'as a single mum, it's very hard. But it's worth it. Education is the inheritance I'm leaving them' (1.08 min.). The girls' tight, exhausting schedule—reiterated through the film's insistent time markers—emphasises the expectation that they will work diligently to fulfil their mother's aspirations. There is little space for rest or leisure in their present lives, as the girls are required to orient themselves toward a future-defined success. Early in the film, the girls state: 'We're U.S. citizens, because we were born in the United States' (1.12 min.). This legal status implicitly justifies the daily strain of border crossing, positioning endurance as the price paid for access to opportunity.

In their exploration of borderland parentocracy, Tessman and Koyama observe:

> Some Mexican parents use U.S. citizenship for their children as a strategy for expanding prospective opportunities for education, employment, and future well-being. Low-paying jobs, insufficient housing, water, and sewage infrastructure in Mexico make the Arizona side of the border appear as the best, if not the only, option for their children's potential upward mobility. (2019: 329)

The logic outlined here aligns closely with the mother's stated rationale in the film. During the early-morning drive to the border, she tells the camera in Spanish: 'As a single mum, it's very hard. But it's worth it. Education is the inheritance I'm leaving them' (1.08 min.). Her comment reinforces the idea that educational access and future security justify the demands of the girls' daily routine. However, this framing—like the film itself—remains focused on adult aspirations and sacrifice. In the brief car interview, the mother's reflections are not balanced by any commentary on how the girls themselves feel about their strenuous schedule. While this may be due to editorial constraints or time limitations, it also reveals how adult-centred logics of opportunity often obscure or sideline children's own affective experiences. In this way, the documentary reproduces a broader tendency in migration storytelling: to centre parental motivations and structural constraints while sidelining the nuanced, and potentially dissenting, voices of children.

Towards the end of the documentary, shots of the fences surrounding both the school and the Calexico border control are shown, while Ana Fernanda's voice states: 'People that jump the border want to get a better life, opportunity. I can relate to them, just because life hits them hard too' (3.05 min.). On the one hand, this remark reaffirms the film's earlier suggestion that sacrifice is a necessary condition for future success. On the other, when read alongside the repeated imagery of fencing and containment, Ana Fernanda—and perhaps the filmmakers—also appear to suggest that life as a 'legal' American student is neither uncomplicated nor entirely free. Like the lives of undocumented migrants, it is shaped by regulation, restriction, and constant negotiation. In this way, the boundary between privilege and hardship is rendered more porous and unstable than the documentary initially implies.

Although the film ostensibly documents a day in the lives of the Bernal twins and their daily border crossings, the majority of perspectives presented belong to adults. For example, the school principal, Oscar Olivarra, praises his borderland institution, asserting: 'Being bilingual while being at the border, it's almost like a superpower. You're that glue. You're able to bring two worlds together' (2.10 min.). This adult-centred framing of education positions schooling as an outcome of adult intention and values, rather than as something shaped by the girls' own strengths, aspirations, or interpretations of their experience. As Gilmore and Marshall caution, we must remain attentive to 'the ongoing dangers of a politics based on a universal girlhood in need of rescue' (2010: 669). In this film, adults—whether as parents, educators, or authorities—occupy the roles of rescuers, decision-makers, and law enforcers, all seemingly confident that they know what is best for the girls.

Extending these observations through postcolonial theory—and the argument that representations of migrant and refugee girls often enact a form of triple colonisation—it is useful to return to the scene featuring the school principal. Both he and the Bernal sisters' mother speak primarily about the advantages

of attending school in the U.S., thereby reinforcing Western-centric knowledge hierarchies. The implicit message is that education in Mexico is less valuable, and that upward mobility depends on access to Western institutions and English-language instruction. This portrayal echoes McLeod's argument that postcolonial narratives often rely on stereotypical generalisations about the Global South to uphold the cultural authority of the West (2010: 49). As a BBC production—an institution historically tied to British cultural diplomacy and soft power—the documentary participates in this dynamic by centring U.S. schooling as aspirational, without interrogating the structural inequalities that make it necessary for the girls to cross a border each day. Moreover, by foregrounding the principal's authoritative perspective while giving the girls little opportunity to explain their own experiences or choices, the film reproduces a familiar representational pattern in which a male adult speaks for girls rather than with them. Ana Fernanda and Ana Luisa are thus positioned within a 'superior' configuration of power—male, adult, and Western—and are denied narrative agency over their own educational trajectories.

To further unpack the cultural and political significance of growing up in the borderlands, it is instructive to turn to Gloria Anzaldúa's foundational work, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (2012 [1987]). Anzaldúa's theorisation emerges specifically from the experiences of female border crossers at the US–Mexico border and is grounded in gendered, racialised, and embodied forms of marginalisation. While rooted in the Chicana experience, her work explicitly speaks to Chicanas, women of colour, and white women in the United States more broadly, foregrounding how border identities are always shaped through gendered power relations. While the documentary frames the Bernal sisters' experiences primarily through adult narratives—emphasising sacrifice, educational opportunity, and legal status—Anzaldúa offers a lens through which these girls' daily negotiations of identity, space, and belonging might be reinterpreted. Her notion of the 'mestiza consciousness' challenges binary thinking and embraces contradiction, hybridity, and transformation as generative forces. Rather than viewing the border as a site of division or hardship alone, Anzaldúa reimagines it as a space of resistance and creativity—a 'third space' where new, gendered, subjectivities emerge. This perspective invites a more expansive reading of the Bernal twins' transborder lives, not only as products of adult intention, but as potentially active sites of identity formation. Their bilingualism, bicultural navigation, and daily border-crossing can therefore be understood not merely as burdens, but as embodied expressions of Anzaldúa's 'new mestiza'— a figure shaped by gendered experience and structural inequality, yet capable of reworking those constraints and learning to dwell within, rather than resolve, contradiction (2012: 101). In this sense, the girls' experiences resonate with the possibility of 'global trespassing' (McLeod 2024a), the act of transgressing imposed geopolitical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries, in ways that echo Anzaldúa's feminist rethinking of the border as a lived, gendered condition, even if the documentary itself does not fully acknowledge this potential.

Indeed, while the film gestures toward this bridging logic—particularly through the school principal's claim that 'being bilingual… it's almost like a superpower. You're that glue. You're able to bring two worlds together' (2.10)—it ultimately limits the narrative space for the girls themselves to articulate what it means to live *between* those worlds as female, gendered subjects. Their silence on this point is telling. The representational choices of the filmmakers, in foregrounding adult perspectives and suppressing the girls' voices, risk foreclosing the gendered mestiza consciousness the film appears to gesture toward. This tension underscores the core argument of the article: that even well-meaning portrayals of migrant girls often reproduce *triple colonisation*, where Western, patriarchal, and adult-centric narratives obscure the lived complexities of displaced girlhood.

A Refugee Girl Crossing Many Borders

In contrast to the BBC documentary discussed above—which offers limited space for the personal accounts of the two transborder girls—the seven-minute short film *Ein Weiter Weg Wohin?* centres exclusively on a

single speaker, Perwin, and her account of displacement. The film follows her recollection of fleeing Syria for Türkiye in 2012 with her father, in order to reunite with her mother, who had already sought refuge there. Four years later, as a teenager, Perwin moved with both parents to Germany, where the documentary finds her attending high school in Baden-Baden.

Directed in 2019 by Augé and Hannover and produced by Florianfilm for the German broadcaster SWR and the European public service channel Arte, the film aired in 2020 as part of the series *Gesichter der Flucht – Vom Gehen und Ankommen: Your Exit*. The series features the migration experiences of eight individuals who arrived in Germany between 1945 and the present. These personal narratives are presented in German, with English subtitles provided for Arte's wider European audience. All eight interviewees are referred to only by their first names, and as such, this article refers to the subject of this film as 'Perwin'.

While this film is longer than the BBC piece, its most distinctive feature lies in its narrative focus: it centres entirely on Perwin's voice, rather than those of adults such as her parents or teachers. The filmmakers allow space for Perwin to reflect on her experiences and articulate a sense of self shaped by both agency and resilience. The documentary opens with a confident, smiling Perwin seated in what appears to be a film studio, declaring: 'I love fighting. I want to show that I can defend myself' (0.00–0.20min.). This bold, physical assertion immediately positions her as an active subject rather than a passive victim. By leading with this provocative statement—and by using imagery associated with combat and strength to engage the viewer—the filmmakers may be invoking what Gilmore and Marshall describe as a 'rescue sensibility' while simultaneously foregrounding the 'ongoing danger' that structures the girl's life (2010: 671).

However, the subsequent scene—in which Perwin bows in her martial arts attire at a sports centre—reframes the opening image. Her narrative shifts from one of survival in Syria to one of focus, discipline, and future aspiration, as she works toward becoming a karate champion. In this way, the documentary resists casting Perwin as a passive victim or as someone defined solely by adult decisions. Unlike the Bernal sisters—whose experiences are largely interpreted through adult voices—*Ein Weiter Weg Wohin?* centres Perwin's first- person account and presents her as a narrator of her own story. This shift from adult-mediated framing to self-articulated voice highlights the critical role of agency in representations of migrant and refugee girlhood, and gestures toward the kinds of narrative complexity often missing from more traditional portrayals.

At the same time, it is crucial to remember that this film, like the BBC one, is a biographical documentary crafted by adults. It remains unclear whether Perwin had final editorial approval over its content. However, the conclusion of the film suggests that the producers exercised a degree of sensitivity in handling representations of both refugees and girls. A closing caption reads: 'Perwin lives in Baden-Baden with her parents. She is training for her orange belt. Her brothers are both deaf and dumb and still live in Türkiye. They're not allowed to come to Germany' (5.55 min.). The filmmakers could have placed this emotionally charged information at the beginning, using the rhetorical appeal of pathos to immediately draw viewers into a narrative of extreme hardship. As Gilmore and Marshall argue, Western depictions of girls in crisis often evoke sympathy by positioning the West as the natural site of concern for 'distant suffering' (2010: 684). Revealing the hardship of Perwin's family only at the end avoids the trope of 'fostering feelings of benevolence in Western spectators' (684). By informing viewers at the conclusion that Perwin's brothers are not allowed to migrate and that they both have a disablity, the producers do elicit compassion for the displaced girl and her family; however, this occurs only after viewers have formed an impression of Perwin based on her personality and self-narration, rather than through an initial appeal to pity.

Nevertheless, while the ending may suggest a more sensitive portrayal, it must also be acknowledged that the film occasionally invites viewers to misread Perwin's migration story—particularly through its use of simplified and emotionally charged animated sequences. Throughout the *Your Exit* series, the filmmakers

use animation to illustrate the interviewees' personal accounts. This stylistic choice may aim to lighten the tone or facilitate understanding. However, in Perwin's case, the cartoons at times produce a problematic representational effect. This is illustrated in three animated sequences in the short film, which visualise the emotions and events Perwin describes in voiceover.

The first sequence appears when she recalls her time in Istanbul. Though she fondly remembers the nature and scenery of the city, she also recounts feeling excluded from school. Due to her undocumented status, she suffered during the four years she lived there:

> **In the morning, when I saw the students making their way to school, I just cried. They had really nice uniforms with a shirt and skirt. I didn't want to see it. It really hurt me in a way. Why did they have the chance to go to school and I didn't? (1.08–1.20 min.)**

While she speaks, the animation shows a cartoon girl looking sadly out of a window at cheerful, uniformed children. The image visually condenses Perwin's experience into one of stasis and isolation, suggesting a passive life lived apart from society. Although the alternating shots of Perwin training in a sports centre aim to complicate this reading, the cartoons nevertheless risk reinforcing a view of her as—to borrow Gilmore and Marshall's term—a 'static vulnerable girl' from the Global South, who is immobilised and 'in need of saving' (2010: 680). As postcolonial theorists such as Mohanty (1988) and McLeod (2010) argue, such representations often construct the Global South through tropes of lack, positioning Western subjects and institutions as rescuers or guarantors of progress. In this context, the animation—despite its likely intent to support Perwin's voice—unintentionally reinforces adult- and Western-centric viewing positions, where the displaced girl is visualised as a passive figure awaiting salvation. This illustrates how, even in a film that centres a young girl's voice, the representational logics of triple colonisation can subtly persist.

The second cartoon shows Perwin after her arrival in Germany. She reflects on being the oldest student in her class, a result of the schooling she missed in Türkiye. She explains: 'I find it a bit difficult to communicate with the others. Some of them are a lot younger than me', adding that she often feels her peers look at her strangely because of her age (3.08–3.20 min.). In the accompanying animation, schoolchildren in a classroom are shown staring at Perwin, who is depicted as an exaggeratedly frail elderly woman with white hair. At this moment, the producers use humour as a rhetorical device, offering a moment of levity to ease the emotional weight of Perwin's account. Yet this humour comes at a cost: both the cartoon figures and the visual exaggeration draw attention to her difference and isolation, as the stark contrast between the German children and the oddly rendered Syrian girl is emphasised. From the passive figure 'in captivity' behind a window in Türkiye to the ageing outsider in a German classroom, Perwin is once again framed as vulnerable and out of place. The final cartoon sequence accompanies Perwin's reflections on Damascus:

> **To be honest, I still don't feel completely at home here. I miss Damascus a lot at the moment. On my way to school, I always used to smell coffee and jasmine flowers. The smell was so strong in the mornings and evenings. I had a dream not long ago that I was in Syria after the war and everything looked wonderful and very special, but the city was empty. I couldn't find anyone.' (4.36–5.05 min.)**

Initially, the animation depicts a colourful market filled with scent and life. As Perwin recounts her dream, however, Damascus is transformed into a bleak, empty city rendered in black and white. Perwin herself remains in colour at the centre of the frame, creating a sharp visual contrast between her body and her surroundings. If Perwin cannot feel at home in Germany and Damascus has become a hollowed-out dreamscape, the metaphor suggests a condition of perpetual displacement—emotionally, socially, and culturally. Once again, this risks reinforcing the trope of the vulnerable, pitiable girl from the Global South, suspended between places yet fully belonging to none. Taken together, these animated sequences

demonstrate how the cartoons, while visually engaging, periodically undermine the documentary's effort to foreground Perwin's agency, reinscribing her as a disempowered subject rather than a self-determining narrator of her own transnational life.

These examples support Gilmore and Marshall's argument that portrayals of girls in crisis often culminate in what they call a 'rescue sensibility,' in which education and self-improvement become the prescribed solution to structural displacement (2010: 685). The film's closing moments reflect this logic. Perwin's final words—'a long way ahead of me'—allude to the educational path she must still navigate, a phrase that also functions as the film's German title. In this framing, formal schooling in Germany becomes the route out of her trauma, reiterating the narrative arc in which displaced girls are expected to rise through effort and endurance. While the documentary makes important strides in foregrounding Perwin's voice, it ultimately reinscribes a familiar representational structure: one in which agency is acknowledged but remains tightly tethered to adult- and Western-sanctioned forms of progress.

While the documentaries discussed above largely frame the girls through narratives of hardship and adult-directed rescue, the following section explores instances in which the girls not only cross national borders but also transgress social and symbolic ones, thereby opening up more agentic representational spaces. Drawing on McLeod's (2024a) concept of 'global trespassing', the analysis explores how such moments disrupt prevailing representations and allow for more layered and assertive expressions of girlhood. As a counterpoint to the documentaries, Elizabeth Liang's autobiographical performance *Alien Citizen: An Earth Odyssey* (2017) is also considered, showing how perspective and narrative control can enable more nuanced and self-authored portrayals of migrant girlhood.

TikToking, Sports, and Global Trespassing

While the previous sections highlighted how migration documentaries often frame girls as vulnerable subjects in need of rescue, they also contain moments in which girls enact subtle yet powerful forms of agency that challenge prevailing narratives. This section identifies such moments as instances of *global trespassing*—a concept recently articulated by McLeod (2024a) and developed further here to offer a framework for understanding how refugee and migrant girls challenge both geographical and ideological boundaries. By foregrounding linguistic choices, embodied autonomy, and everyday acts of resistance, this analysis traces alternative modes of representation—ones that disrupt normative assumptions of passivity and point towards a more transformative understanding of transborder girlhood.

McLeod defines the 'global trespasser' as someone who 'aspires to move impactfully amidst and across sanctioned domains in search of new connections', often in defiance of institutional, social, and cultural constraints (2024a: 16). As introduced earlier in this article, this figure provides a useful lens for thinking about how displaced girls engage with and disrupt dominant representational systems. Unlike the sanctioned 'good migrant', who remains legible to dominant systems of belonging, the trespasser enacts both literal and symbolic movement that is frequently unwelcome. Trespassing, McLeod argues, 'has the capacity to unpick the seams of identity … and imagine relationality with others beyond usual customs' (18). Such movements—whether spatial, epistemological, or legal—unsettle normative frameworks and open up possibilities for alternative global solidarities and subjectivities. For McLeod, the stakes of these transgressive boundary-crossings are significant: they do not merely signal agency, but a refusal to be confined by 'straitjacketed notions of race, cultural purity, gender, sexuality, nationality, kinship, and natal origin' (2024a: 20). Within this framework, the girls portrayed in the documentaries discussed here can be read—albeit intermittently—as *global trespassers*, even when embedded within adult and institutional narratives. Rather than overt defiance, their agency is most often expressed through quieter forms of subversion, enacted in everyday, frequently gendered, spaces.

One such moment occurs in the BBC short documentary about the Bernal sisters, when Ana Fernanda asserts her right to speak Spanish while chatting and joking with her friends on TikTok during a school break. This scene follows the principal's comments on the benefits of bilingual education, thereby contrasting the school's ethos with the girls' linguistic autonomy: 'I know it's for our benefit to speak English and they try to enforce it,' Ana Fernanda says, 'but in our free time, we always speak Spanish' (2:30 min.). Her use of the word 'enforce' signals a dissonance between institutional expectations and self-determined identity. By maintaining their use of Spanish in informal digital interactions, particularly on a youth-driven platform like TikTok, the girls enact a form of symbolic trespass. They resist cultural assimilation not through open defiance, but through the casual, everyday assertion of their linguistic and cultural preferences.

This moment gains further significance when considered through the lens of life writing. As Douglas and Poletti (2016) note, digital platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are reshaping how young people narrate their lives by providing spaces for self-authored expressions of identity. The girls' reference to TikTok, even if brief and incidental, gestures towards participation in a broader ecosystem of digital self-representation—one that contrasts with the curated, adult-directed framing of the documentary itself. Douglas and Poletti argue that such platforms provide 'effective means for young people to claim their rights as citizens and agents rather than subjects of adult-led politics' (2016: 121). In this context, TikTok functions as a potential counter-site of autobiographical authorship—a space where transborder girls might represent their lives in real time, shape their own narratives, and challenge dominant portrayals of migrant childhoods.

The contrast between these two life-writing forms is instructive. The adult-produced BBC documentary frames the girls within narratives of educational uplift and institutional care, positioning them as subjects of migration policy and pedagogical intervention. Within that same context, however, the girls' casual use of TikTok and Spanish hints at an alternative mode of expression—one rooted in peer belonging and everyday cultural practice, rather than institutional expectations or adult-defined narratives. TikTok, as an evolving form of digital life writing, thus emerges as a medium that may enable girls to bypass adult mediation and assert transgressive identities on their own terms. In doing so, they perform a small but potent act of global trespassing. This gesture not only reveals the limitations of institutional storytelling, but also highlights how seemingly mundane digital practices can become sites of subtle resistance and narrative reappropriation—foregrounding the refugee and migrant girl not merely as a subject of representation, but as both author and agent of change.

McLeod identifies sport as a key arena of global trespassing—where migrant and refugee bodies cross not only national borders but also the racialised, cultural, and institutional boundaries that structure belonging. Figures like male footballers feature prominently in his work as emblematic trespassers: highly visible yet constrained by expectations of national loyalty, cultural assimilation, and disciplined conduct. Sport, in this reading, is not just a metaphor but a lived and contested space where mobility is both enabled and policed. Perwin's practice of martial arts in *Ein Weiter Weg Wohin?* can be read through this lens. Her training, culminating in the pursuit of an orange belt, becomes a form of embodied trespassing—an assertion of autonomy within a host culture that may not fully welcome her. These scenes show her not simply adapting but actively claiming space through discipline and skill. In contrast to the tropes of passive girlhood often found in migration narratives, Perwin's body becomes a site of agency, and her engagement with sport a subtle, defiant crossing of the boundaries that seek to contain her. Like McLeod's trespassers, she moves beyond sanctioned roles, unsettling fixed notions of identity, belonging, and girlhood in exile.

While the two documentaries foreground institutional narratives of migration, a striking counterpoint emerges in Elizabeth Liang's *Alien Citizen: An Earth Odyssey* (2017), which centres self-authored girlhood and retrospective agency. Though distinct in form—a filmed solo performance rather than a broadcast documentary—*Alien Citizen* extends and complicates this article's analysis of global trespassing by foregrounding a narrative shaped entirely from the subject's point of view.

Liang, whose upbringing spanned Guatemala, East Asia, North Africa, the United States, and Europe, reflects on how her racialised appearance, mobility, and cultural dissonance shaped her experiences as a girl growing up across borders. These accounts, especially her reflections on discrimination and exclusion, align her story with the postcolonial concerns explored in the earlier documentaries—particularly the entangled structures of power that define girlhood in migratory contexts. Yet *Alien Citizen* departs from the previous examples in a crucial way: it offers a narrative shaped entirely by the subject herself, free from adult mediation or institutional framing. In doing so, Liang models what it means to claim narrative agency over one's own transnational life.

A particularly vivid scene from the film recalls Liang's time as a teenager in Cairo. Looking out from her apartment window, she watches local children playing football in the street below. Rather than focusing on her own alienation, Liang centres a young Egyptian girl who repeatedly attempts to join a group of boys. Each time she is pushed away and falls, she gets back up and tries again. What marks this scene as powerful is Liang's refusal to portray the girl as a victim or an object of pity. Instead, she foregrounds her resilience and persistence—traits that resonate with the concept of global trespassing as a refusal to accept exclusion, even in seemingly mundane or localised settings. This moment also contrasts sharply with other 'window scenes' in the documentaries discussed earlier. In *Ein Weiter Weg Wohin?*, for instance, Perwin is shown staring out a window in Istanbul, watching uniformed children on their way to school—a moment accompanied by animated imagery that risks framing her as the passive, immobile subject of loss. By contrast, Liang's Cairo recollection offers a girl who moves, insists, and trespasses: not only into male-dominated play, but into the visual field of the narrator, who sees in her a figure of strength rather than suffering (Gilmore & Marshall 2010: 680).

Yet, like the persistent girl in Cairo, Perwin does not remain confined to the margins. Through sport—particularly karate—she reclaims her agency, transforming herself from a passive observer into an active participant in her own narrative. Both girls, in different ways, show how shifts can be made from the symbolic window to the centre of sporting action, thus challenging male- and adult-centred frameworks that seek to define them through absence, dependency, or loss. Although brief, this sequence succinctly encapsulates McLeod's understanding of trespass as an act that not only defies spatial limits but also unsettles social hierarchies and envisions new relationalities. As he writes, the global trespasser is one who 'hopes not only to strike up new relations but also to confront the hostile environments that constrain being' (2024a: 20).

Both Liang's memory and Perwin's karate offer affective, visualised moments of trespassing through sports that invite viewers to rethink who moves, who belongs, and who speaks. While athletes are often framed as 'empowered', they remain constrained by expectations of gratitude, decorum, and compliance. McLeod's analysis, which focuses primarily on male sports figures, highlights these limitations but also exposes a gendered gap, inviting closer attention to how such constraints operate for women athletes. In contrast, these girls demonstrate how global trespassing might emerge not only in spectacular acts of crossing, but also in everyday, gendered spaces—on streets, in sports centres, in schools—through bodies that fight, return, and insist. This is not merely about asserting strength, but it is about rising again after being pushed aside, silenced, or left watching from behind a window. It is about fighting not from a position of triumph, but from the floor, from the embodied experience of exclusion and insisting repeatedly on the right to be seen, to speak, to move, and to belong. If, as McLeod comments, 'trespass engenders significant dissident traction in twenty-first-century representations of human mobility' (2024b), then moments like these—spoken, filmed, or remembered—represent not only transgression, but also hope.

Conclusion: Trespassing Across the Boundaries of Representation

This article has traced how refugee and migrant girls are frequently represented within adult-authored narratives that prioritise vulnerability and compliance. Despite the increasing visibility of female migration, such depictions often obscure or silence the subjectivity of girls themselves. As argued throughout, their stories are too often mediated through what I term 'triple colonisation'—a framework that foregrounds the intersecting forces of Western, adult, and patriarchal authority shaping how refugee and migrant girls are seen, spoken about, and understood. The girls at the centre of *Crossing the Border to Go to School in the U.S.* and *Ein Weiter Weg Wohin?* are thus not only caught within the literal crossings of geopolitical borders, but also within symbolic and representational boundaries imposed by others.

Nonetheless, within these constraints, the girls also find ways to resist. Drawing on McLeod's (2024a) concept of global trespassing, this article has foregrounded how refugee and migrant girls subvert sanctioned norms and create new relational spaces across borders—linguistically, digitally, and physically. Whether through the everyday defiance of speaking Spanish at school with friends in the U.S., or through the disciplined embodiment of a karate stance, these moments reframe the girls not as passive subjects, but as active trespassers of identity, space, and expectation. They are scenes of girls' resistance that refuse the limits of triple colonisation and instead gesture towards alternative imaginaries of self and community. If, as McLeod argues, global trespassing aims to disrupt the 'zonal organization of human relations' (2024a: 20) that structures race, gender, and nation, then these transgressive acts by refugee and migrant girls require a rethinking of the stakes of migration storytelling itself. While traditional documentaries may remain slow to relinquish adult-centred narrative control, social media platforms and performance-based life writing—such as TikTok or Elizabeth Liang's *Alien Citizen*—offer emergent narrative spaces in which refugee and migrant girls may increasingly author themselves on their own terms.

In bringing these girls' stories to the fore, this article contributes to a broader question: how do gendered life stories catalyse social change? The power of such stories lies not simply in their content, but in their capacity to reveal structural inequalities, generate affective power, and reimagine what is possible. The stories of transborder girls must be understood as part of a wider spectrum of narrative resistance, rather than as adult-produced media tools designed primarily to evoke emotion—such as the 2015 photograph of Alan Kurdi, or Banksy's mural of a shipwrecked child in Venice. Whereas those images were created by adults to mobilise concern and elicit affect, the girls' own narratives emerge from lived experience and from acts of trespassing. When such stories are amplified rather than suppressed, they do not merely reflect social realities, they intervene in them, disrupting dominant logics and opening space for new political and cultural futures. The global trespassing girl is not an exception, but a sign. She is not waiting to be rescued; she is already on the move.

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