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**Acts of desertion: Abandonment and renouncement at the Sonoran borderzone**

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**Abstract**

What are 'acts of desertion', how do they feature in contemporary border struggles, and what might an emphasis on such acts bring to the analysis of the politics of mobility? This article seeks to address these questions in the context of the Sonoran borderzone, which crosses Mexico and the US. It develops an analysis that sheds light on contemporary border struggles in terms that acknowledge both the intensity of security practices as well as the significance of migratory acts, without pre-fixing the relation between the two. The analysis shows how 'acts of desertion' involve differentiated dynamics of abandonment and renouncement, which demand appreciation of the ambiguities of contemporary border struggles. As acts that variously involve a dynamics of refusal, the article argues that acts of desertion challenge the limits of liberal citizenship, without wholly transcending its limitations.

Keywords: migration, borders, acts, desertion, power, contestation

**Praxis abstract**

This article highlights the political significance of acts of unauthorized migration as well as the problems of over-investing in migrant subjectivities. It suggests that an analysis of acts of desertion has important implications for concrete interventions in contemporary border struggles, both academic and non-academic. Rather than perceiving border struggles in terms of an antagonistic political formation, the article suggests that an emphasis on the ambiguities of acts of abandon and renouncement fosters a subtler, if perhaps less emotionally and politically satisfying, reading of what is at stake in contemporary border struggles. Rather than leading to an intervention that proposes a programme of action, such an analysis emphasizes the importance of various partial and momentary interventions, which require on-going practical effort and assessment.

## Introduction

What are 'acts of desertion', how do they feature in contemporary border struggles, and what might an emphasis on such acts bring to the analysis of the politics of migration or mobility? This article seeks to address these questions in the context of the Sonoran borderzone, which crosses Mexico and the US. It aims to develop an analysis that can shed light on contemporary border struggles in terms that acknowledge both the intensity of security practices as well as the significance of migratory acts, without pre-fixing the relation between the two. As such, it aims to bring different approaches that fall under the broad remit of border and migration studies in dialogue with one another, while also pointing to some important distinctions in approach that are not only disciplinary, but also analytically and politically significant. In so doing, the paper refuses a disciplinary division that separates the analysis of institutional measures and practices of border security from migratory practices or experiences. This refusal reflects an understanding of sovereign power and the agency of subjects as mutually constitutive rather than as dichotomous. It also indicates a concern regarding the way in which such separations can either reproduce relations of domination by silencing migrants (in an emphasis on control), or can only counteract such relations by 'giving migrant's voice' (in an emphasis on migratory experience). While the latter emphasis on 'giving voice' is an important strategy at the contemporary juncture in challenging uneven relations of power (Squire, 2012), I would suggest that it remains insufficient where simply conceived of in terms of narrative and experiential representations of marginalised groups. More specifically, I suggest that an emphasis on voice may risk overlooking some important dynamics that are integral to the contested politics of mobility, such as those whereby political subjects are constituted as such through their 'exit' (Virno, 1996: 199).

Why, then, is it important to build bridges between studies of migratory experiences and studies of border security or migratory regulation? I contend that this is important because the two fields of research have similar political stakes yet can sometimes intervene at cross-purposes. A study of border security might wish to explore how particular forms of governing differentially condition the capacity of migrants and citizens to act (e.g. Bigo, 2011). By contrast, a study of migrant experiences might wish to consider how border security practices are shaped through migrant 'projects' (e.g. Andrijasevic, 2011). At stake here are questions regarding political agency, which Heather Johnson (2014) suggests is critical for scholars of border and migration studies. Yet while Johnson argues that agency is about having the capacity to effect change and that these changes can be either conservative or emancipatory, Anne McNevin argues against a dichotomous understanding of political agency. Specifically, McNevin cautions against adopting a reductive account of power that emphasises either the primacy of sovereign control or the 'autonomy' of human mobility (2013: 194). For her, what is important is that the *ambivalence* of power and contestation is brought to the fore in contemporary research on borders and migration.

McNevin's intervention highlights a key concern of this article that is reflected in my attempt to bridge border and migration studies: the importance of avoiding an analysis that privileges either migration or its control in favour of one that emphasises their complex relationalities (Squire, 2011). Yet the question remains as to how to proceed in the attempt to develop such an analysis of the interplay between migration and migratory control, without analytically privileging one over the other and without simply re-inscribing a problematic divide. It is here that I want to suggest an emphasis on *acts of desertion* might provide an analytical entry point that enables a more nuanced engagement with the ambiguities of contemporary border struggles. Such an emphasis entails both a refusal to fix the relation between what we might call border security and what we might call migrant agency prior to contextualised analysis, while also questioning the conceptual grounds on which analyses of sovereign control or migrant autonomy proceed. The first part of the article develops the conceptual tools by which to analyse acts of desertion, emphasising the importance of bringing into conversation an analytic of the act with an analytic of desertion. It suggests that an analysis of 'acts' is important in countering reductive conceptions of politics in contemporary border and migration studies, and it emphasises 'acts of desertion' as critical to our understanding of contemporary border struggles. The second and third parts of the article explore the ambiguities of such acts through undertaking an analysis of diverse acts of desertion across the Sonoran desert that crosses Mexico and the US. The second section focuses on acts of desertion that might be understood in terms of processes of abandonment. Drawing on Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics as 'making live and letting die', it suggests that practices that can be conceptualised in terms of sovereign or biopolitical power are best understood as complex productive *and* destructive processes constituting citizenship, rather than simply reducing migrants to 'bare life'. The third section focuses on acts of desertion that can be understood in terms of processes of renouncement. Drawing on Paulo Virno's notion of exodus, it suggests that migratory practices can be understood in terms of an 'engaged withdrawal' with-from liberal citizenship as an uneven 'regime' of rights and responsibilities. Similarly to acts of desertion that involve abandonment, I suggest that these are complex productive *and* destructive processes. By examining these diverse acts of desertion I therefore draw attention to their implicit ambiguities, and conclude by reflecting on the implications of such acts for academic and non-academic interventions in border struggles across the Mexico-US border region.

### **Acts of desertion**

What does an emphasis on acts of desertion entail analytically? Simply put, it involves two dimensions: an analytics of the act and an analytics of desertion. I conceive an emphasis on 'the act' as helpful here, because it implies a 'break' from sovereign and biopolitical power, which sometimes appears inescapable in the work of scholars who are influenced by the work of Giorgio Agamben. Agamben's (1998) work has been highly influential in the fields of border and migration studies over recent years. In particular, his work has influenced a range of critical scholars concerned with the ways in which refugees or migrants

are constituted as 'bare life' through the operations of sovereign biopolitics (see Vaughan-Williams, 2011). Before discussing the concept of the act, and acts of desertion more specifically, I thus first want to turn to the work of Agamben as this has been taken up in the border and migration studies literatures specifically.

Agamben's conceptual work is complex and nuanced, and I cannot do justice to the details of this here. My aim is rather to suggest that Agamben's work can be problematic for scholars of borders and migration studies, particularly given his claim that sovereign power has been implicated 'from the start' with biopower (most simply: power over life). Agamben (2005) conceptualises biopower in relation to the power of the sovereign to declare a 'state of exception'. He thus follows Carl Schmitt in conceptualising sovereign power in terms of a state whereby normal legal procedures are abandoned. For Agamben, the modern internment camp is an exemplary space of exception, while the refugee is an exemplary political figure. However, Agamben does not conceptualise the camp space or the refugee figure as implying a straightforward relation of exclusion. Rather, he suggests that these imply a relation of abandonment or the 'ban' as an ambiguous 'zone of indistinction' that brings to light what he conceives as the metaphysical remainder of 'bare life'. This is reflected in Agamben's understanding of the production of bare life by sovereign power as that which 'can be killed but not sacrificed' (i.e. as a form of life that does not qualify as political life but that cannot simply be excluded from this). For Agamben, then, the fact that sovereign power and biopower are implicated from the start represents a paradox whereby 'bare life' is inextricably linked to political life.

Agamben's work has been taken up and developed by a range of critical scholars within the fields of border and migration studies (e.g. Doty, 2011; Edkins and Pin-Fat, 2005; Perera, 2002; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2005; Rygiel, 2010; Vaughan-Williams, 2011). Nevertheless, a series of critical questions have also been raised regarding the implications of developing an Agambenian approach in this field of research. These have been mainly developed along two main lines. First, questions have been raised about the limitations of Agamben's apparently 'timeless' metaphysics of exceptionality (see Connolly, 2004; Huysmans, 2008). While Agamben's intervention is clearly onto-political rather than ontical or concrete in its emphasis,<sup>1</sup> these interventions nevertheless highlight the risk for scholars of borders and migration studies in developing an a-social or a-historical analysis when engaging Agamben's conceptual framework. Crucially, and leading to the second main line of critique, there is also a risk that such scholars reduce the politicality of migrants or refugees by engaging such subjects through the lens of Agamben's theorisation of 'bare life'. Indeed, it has been argued that Agamben's conceptual framework can exacerbate the drive of many contemporary border security practices toward processes of abjectification (see Walters, 2008; Author, 2009; Rygiel, 2011, 2012; McNevin, 2013; Johnson, 2014). By starting with an understanding of sovereign power and biopower as mutually implicated conditions of modern politics, a borders and migration scholarship drawing inspiration from Agamben thus risks overlooking those ways of being political that escape or exceed 'bare life'.

It is in this regard that I want to emphasise the significance of bringing an analytic of 'the act' to the fields of border and migration studies. The concept of the act has been developed by Engin Isin and various collaborators in relation to the analysis of citizenship (Isin and Nielsen, 2008; Isin and Saward, 2013). An act in its most straightforward sense can be defined as a political intervention through which established scripts and subjectivities are disrupted, thus creating a new script and thus bringing into being political subjects that did not previously exist (see Isin, 2008). Importantly for this article, the notion of the act does not imply a reduction of politics to interventions that are tied to habitual arrangements or sedimented relations of power.<sup>2</sup> Rather, an analytics of the act suggests that even whilst habitual arrangements or sedimented relations of power are important, disruptive interventions that highlight the limits or ambiguities of such arrangements or relations are also of particular political significance. In this regard, acts are neither conceived of as internal or external to existing social relations, but rather as working at, on, and through the limits of such relations.

In Isin's work acts are conceived specifically in relation to the constitution of political subjectivities. This can be interpreted in terms of the examination of citizenship not simply as a regime or series of governing practices, but also as a site of creative transformation. The ambiguity of citizenship in this regard is captured by a distinctly political reading of Arendt's emphasis on the claiming of a 'right to have rights' (see Isin, 2008; Isin, Nyers and Turner, 2010). More than simply an analysis of the enactment of citizenship, such an approach also considers how acts can *disrupt* the very grounds on which citizenship as a 'governmental regime' or series of governing practices rests (see also Squire and Darling, 2013). In this regard, an analytics of acts does not imply an impossible search for interventions that transcend the metaphysical bounds of sovereign power and the biopolitical production of 'bare life'. Moreover, an analytics of acts does more than emphasise the significance of interventions that inhabit the paradoxical constitution of migratory subjects as those who can be killed but not sacrificed (Edkins and Pin-Fat, 2005). It is my contention that an analytics of the act is important because it also points toward the potential for transformations that more profoundly destabilise existing social relations along with the rationalities of power through which these are produced. It is with this in mind that I interrogate the significance of acts of desertion in this article.

Before pursuing an analytics of desertion further, I also want to stress the importance of an analytics of acts for critically intervening the politics of mobility in terms that do not assume either sovereign power or migrant autonomy as the grounds for such a politics (Squire, 2011). I conceive such an approach as analytically important for at least two reasons. First, an analysis of acts hints not only at the impossibility of separating 'structure' from 'agency' but also of the problems of mobilising such terms analytically in the first place. Rather than appealing either to sovereignty or to autonomy as conceptual categories, emphasis is on the mutual constitution of political subjectivities and more or less sedimented or habitual social arrangements and relations. Second, while an analysis of acts remains attuned to the intimate connection of power and resistance it also remains attuned to Foucault's insistence on the

irreducibility of resistance to power (Morris and Patton, 1979: 55). Therefore, the possibility for transformative change remains open in the emphasis on acts as disruptive both of existing social relations as well as of the subjects that these involve and produce. An analysis of acts in this regard does not so much do away with 'agency' in the sense of a capacity to effect change, as it does enable us to reject the terms of the debate on which structure and agency rests. Specifically, the analysis here rejects a conception of agency that implies intentional or autonomous actors who are more or less constrained or enabled by sedimented social structures. Instead of pursuing variations of 'structuration' theory and developing a conceptual framework by which to examine state sovereignty and/or migrant autonomy, this article seeks to facilitate analysis of transformations of social and political relations through an examination of various concrete 'acts' and the subjectivities that these can effectively create – as well as those that they can potentially destroy. Specifically, this article reflects on the significance of acts of desertion through which the individualised conception of subjecthood on which liberal citizenship rests is both constituted and contested.

But why turn to an analysis of acts of *desertion* here, rather than to acts of citizenship as many analysts of borders and migration have done (e.g. McNevin, 2006; Nyers, 2008; Rygiel, 2010)? I want to suggest that an emphasis on acts of desertion is important for several reasons. Such acts feature heavily in many contemporary border struggles, but are often overlooked.<sup>3</sup> These are politically significant acts that neither simply reproduce nor fully transcend citizenship as a 'regime' or series of governing practices, and are thus neither purely conservative nor purely emancipatory in their formation. As I will show in the next part of this article in relation to struggles across the Sonoran borderzone, migratory acts of desertion such as escaping one citizenship regime only to be captured by another are struggles that remain immanent to citizenship but at the same time temporarily exceed citizenship. Related to this, regulatory acts of desertion that leave migrants stranded in the desert reproduce citizenship while highlighting the limits of its liberal arrangement. Thus, acts of desertion can be understood precisely as opening up the complex *ambiguities* of power and resistance or contestation, since they involve both a refusal or rejection as well as a challenge to the limitations of the rights and responsibilities associated with liberal citizenship. Acts of desertion thus point to ways of being political that challenge reductive conceptions of power and its contestation, by destabilising the grounds on which analyses of sovereign power or migrant autonomy rest. Rather than examining migrant acts in opposition to border security, and rather than partially weaving such acts of migration back into citizenship, I thus want to consider the political significance of border struggles that involve a refusal of citizenship through different 'acts of desertion'.

It is important at this point to add a note of caution regarding the intervention that I seek to develop here. In developing an argument regarding the importance of acts of desertion I do not mean to counterpose acts of desertion to citizenship in oppositional terms. My interest is in the *relation* of desertion to citizenship, the latter of which I define not in terms of status but both in terms of the practices that produce citizenship as a governmental 'regime' as well as in terms

of acts that demonstrate the impossibility of citizenship as a regime through the disruption of its unified or smooth functioning. On my reading, acts of desertion in part bear political significance because they signal a departure from citizenship without a thoroughgoing escape to a realm 'beyond' citizenship. If we accept that liberal state citizenship is key to the framing of political being at the contemporary juncture, then it would seem that a critical analysis might need to work with as well as against citizenship in order to open up political horizons that exceed such a frame. Similarly, migrants often work with and against citizenship in resisting relations of power (see McNevin, 2012). My argument regarding the significance of acts of desertion in this regard does not mean to suggest that migrants do not seek the protections and rights that citizenship entails.<sup>4</sup> Rather, my aim is to suggest that migratory acts also entail struggles through which concrete citizenship arrangements are disrupted and contested, and whereby citizenship is engaged through an active process of withdrawal with-from its habitually inscribed or sedimented limitations (see also Nyers, 2006).

To summarise, this article seeks to draw out the ambiguities of contemporary acts of desertion in terms that acknowledge the critical difference between dynamics of migration and of control, without inappropriately separating such dynamics or analytically privileging one over the other. Acts of desertion here are not held up as a political ideal as would sometimes appear to be the case in the autonomy of migration literature (e.g. Mezzadra, 2004; Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos, 2008). Nor are acts of desertion conceived of simply in terms of biopolitical regulatory practices, as an Agambenian reading might imply (e.g. Puleo, 2014). Rather, different acts of desertion are opened up to further analysis in terms of the ambiguous relations and interventions that they involve. These ambiguous relations and interventions reflect the ambiguities of the concept of desert or desertion itself. The term 'desert' is related to the Latin *desertus* meaning 'left waste'. As a verb, it not only means to abandon, but also to withdraw. As an act of abandon that is in some way treacherous, to desert thus not only means to leave a place empty, but also involves a failure to remain at a key moment.<sup>5</sup> As a noun, the desert is an area that lacks vegetation, while as an adjective it refers to desolation and uninhabitation. The concepts of renouncement *and* abandon are thus integral to the concept of desertion.

In order to capture these two dynamics in concrete context, I will now go on to examine different acts of desertion that emerge across the Sonoran desert. The first of these I conceive of in terms of acts of desertion that abandon migrants through what Michel Foucault conceptualises as a form of biopolitical racism that 'makes live and lets die'. The second I conceive of in terms of acts of desertion that renounce citizenship through what Paolo Virno conceptualises as 'exodus' as a form of engaged withdrawal. I want to suggest that these diverse acts of desertion do not simply constitute the Sonoran desert as a site of abjection, but so also do they constitute it as a borderzone through which struggles over mobility involve the disruption of and contestations over the limits of liberal citizenship.

## **Acts of desertion I: Abandonment as ‘making live and letting die’**

In order to appreciate the acts of desertion through which migrants are abandoned across the Sonoran borderzone, it is important to consider the context within which such acts take place. Notable here is the desert environment through which struggles over human mobility are enacted. While the ‘camp’ has become a site of significant interest for scholars of borders and migration studies, the desert has by comparison been relatively overlooked as a site marked by the biopolitics of abandonment.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly surprising, since various desert environments now feature as sites of detainment.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, institutionalised detention facilities are present across the Sonoran desert, not only through the Florence and Eloy detentions centres but also across a range of more localised sites (see Doty and Wheatley, 2013). Migrants crossing the desert are frequently captured and subject to detainment. Since 2005 the policy of ‘catch and release’, a form of immediate ‘voluntary’ removal, has been replaced by detention and expedited removal.<sup>8</sup> In addition, migrants crossing the desert without papers are captured and detained under Operation Streamline, which is a fast-tracked legal process specifically designed in order to enter undocumented migrants who are apprehended into the federal criminal justice system (see Burrige, 2009). First time offenders can be jailed for up to six months, while second time or multiple ‘offenders’ can be jailed for up to twenty years. Trialled *en masse* with chains around their ankles and wrists, migrants are given limited time to consult with their solicitor, and to respond to charges in pre-specified terms in linguistically-defined groups with headphones to guide them. Operation Streamline is a chilling legal process to observe, and as such has been widely criticised in terms of its procedural and human rights implications.<sup>9</sup> Many migrants who are captured in the desert are subject to such proceedings.

But how have such proceedings come to be part of the routine of border security practices in this region? It is here that further appreciation of how the Sonoran desert itself has emerged as a borderzone marked by a struggle between migration and migratory control is crucial. The desert is now a key crossing point for migration to the southwest of the United States from the north of Mexico. It forms part of the longest land border between what might be called a state of the ‘global North’ (the US) and a state of the ‘global South’ (Mexico), while simultaneously lying at the ‘borderlands’ created by the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement. It crosses the northern part of the Mexican state of Sonora as well as southern parts of the US states of Arizona and California. It is cut through in by the US border fence. This has been reinforced and extended since the mid-2000s, but remains unevenly developed with solid pedestrian fencing in some places (such as border towns) and with crude vehicle barriers in others (such as isolated desert terrain) (see Dear, 2013). This uneven development of the border fence feeds into an existing dynamic of ‘funnelling’ migrants through the desert, which began as a form of ‘prevention through deterrence’ in the mid-1990s (see Nevins, 2010). Further exacerbating the challenges that migrants face in crossing the border, humanitarian activists have been criminalised and are no longer able to rescue migrants in need of help due to the fear of criminal charges being issued against them (Cook, 2011; Regan, 2010). Instead, Border Patrol agents are trained to rescue migrants in distress

and to keep them under surveillance prior to their detention and deportation. Not all migrants are always abandoned in the desert, in this regard. Some are captured and removed. Nevertheless, in the context of failed measures of deterrence and the funnelling of migrants through the desert without established forms of protection, border patrol agents, coyote networks, fellow migrants, humanitarian activists, local residents and even those at a distance can be understood as enrolled in acts of desertion through which unauthorised migrants are left to survive the harsh desert terrain. It is in this regard that I suggest acts of desertion involve processes of abandonment.

If we focus on 'acts of desertion' that occur through the funnelling and subsequent abandonment migrants across the desert environment, the Sonoran desert can be understood as a site marked by abjection in the most extreme sense (see Doty, 2011). Although it is difficult to find the remains of human bodies that die in the desert because they decompose quickly and are often scattered by animals, it is nevertheless clear that many migrants do die in the desert. Some estimates suggest that between 329-827 migrants died per year crossing the Mexico-US border between 1998-2008 (National Immigration Forum, 2010: 17), with 171 bodies located during 2008 in the Tucson Sector crossing the Southern Arizona desert (Jiminez, 2009: 15). Yet a question remains as to whether the desert site is one that is simply marked by death and processes of abjection that this implies? Without overlooking the devastating increase in migrant deaths at the border, and while acknowledging the processes of abjection that the governing practices sketched above entail, I want to suggest that migrants crossing the Sonoran desert are not simply reduced to 'bare life'. Rather, I suggest that acts of desertion through which migrants are abandoned in the desert are complex, ambiguous and involve 'productive' as well as 'destructive' dimensions. As such, I suggest that they can be more appropriately understood through Foucault's discussion of the biopolitical drive to 'make live and let die'.

In Foucault's discussion of the biopolitical drive to 'make live and let die' he distinguishes biopower from sovereign power and the related right to 'take life or let live' (Foucault, 1997: 241). Without entering into a debate regarding whether Foucault meant and/or was correct to emphasise a distinction between sovereign power and biopower here, I want to indicate the analytical importance of this emphasis on 'making live and letting die' for understanding the dynamics of contemporary border struggles across the Sonoran borderzone. For Foucault, biopolitics has a massifying dimension, and while directed less at individual human bodies than at 'man-as-species' it nevertheless implicates disciplinary power in its individualising dimensions (Ibid: 243-250). Biopolitics is orientated less toward individualised interventions, and more to general interventions in areas such as the birth rate, the mortality rate and environmental effects. It involves a power of 'regularization', which can combine with the power of discipline to normalize (Ibid: 245-53). Foucault equates the power of 'making live and letting die' with racism, which he conceives as a way of separating groups within a population and thus subdividing the species it controls (Ibid. 254-5).

Foucault conceptualises this form of biopolitical racism in relation to state power, in particular the drive toward biological purification associated with the Nazi State (Ibid: 258-9). However, I want to draw on his insights regarding governmentality as a means to emphasise operations of power that are not simply confined to 'the state', while considering how his notion of 'making live and letting die' might be developed through an examination of struggles across (and beyond) the Sonoran desert. What is important here is that Foucault's theorisation is not simply concerned with the 'destructive' dimensions of biopower and its operation of collections of bodies en masse. So also is it concerned with the 'productive' or generative dimensions of such processes – of how these also 'make live'. In this sense, a Foucauldian reading shifts our attention away from an Agambenian reading of the desert as a site marked by a politics of the camp and the production of 'bare life' (Puleo, 2014). By contrast, I want to suggest that the acts of desertion that emerge across the Sonoran desert might be better understood in terms of the *separation* or fragmentation of migrant populations, which is not only reflected in the way in which some migrants are left to die but is also reflected in the ways in which others are made to live in the sense of an enforced endurance. Such a process is thus not only destructive, but also productive. In other words, migrants who are abandoned to endure the desert might be understood as an act of desertion in the sense that it not only abandons migrants to the physical forces of the desert, but also creates new subjects with new scripts through 'making them live'.

The abandonment involved in 'making live and letting die' is not an act of desertion that is simply imposed on migrants, but rather it might be understood as an act of desertion through which the mobility of migrants is appropriated in various ways. This is to indicate that migratory forces and migratory regulations are relational in their formation and cannot be separated out analytically or temporally distinguished in terms of stages of development. But in what ways might the process of making live and letting die be conceived of as productive in this context? It may appear to be largely fortuitous as to who dies and who lives in the desert terrain. However, migrants with the physical strength and psychological or spiritual determination to endure the difficulties of crossing the Sonoran desert may also be perceived as holding productive value from an economic perspective. Survivors who escape detention can potentially emerge as a precarious form of economically productive life, feeding into an exploitable pool of excess labour (see De Genova, 2004). Moreover, from a political perspective, survivors can play an important role as scapegoat and target of populist political agendas (see Squire, 2009). Desertion as abandonment in this regard is an ambiguous act, since it is not only destructive but can also be productive in various ways.

Indeed, acts of desertion that involve a productive and destructive dynamic of abandon can play a key role in the creation of 'new subjects' and 'new scripts'. Clearly it is important to emphasise that this is a differentiated process, which emerges through diverse temporal dynamics. Some may achieve full citizenship in the future. Others may face a precarious future as members of an exploitable labour force. Still others may be detained and face the prospect of death on a future crossing. A particular migrant might face all of these futures at different

points in time. Far from simply being constituted as 'bare life', migrants facing acts of desertion that 'make live and let die' thus have a much more complex and differentiated social and political existence. Nevertheless, these differentiated and ambiguous relations do not simply emerge through a dynamic of abandonment. So also can they involve what I call a dynamic of renouncement. Going further, I thus now want to consider acts of desertion as those that *renounce* existing social and economic relations, in order draw out the ambiguities of migratory politics in new directions.

## **Acts of desertion II: Renouncement as exodus or escape**

An understanding of migratory acts of desertion in terms of renouncement cannot be developed without a historical and political contextualisation of the Sonoran borderzone. The contested history of the US-Mexico border is one that is widely recognised, and remains very much alive in contemporary border struggles today. Joseph Nevins (2010) locates the origins of the modern US-Mexico boundary in relation to territorial conquests and imperial competition associated with European colonialism, and highlights the ways in which the US capitalised on the instability of a newly independent Mexico in the nineteenth century. He describes how expansionist tendencies culminated in war and in the occupation of Mexico City by the US. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of February 2, 1848 involved Mexico's ceding of about 40 per cent of its territory, The US thus annexed around one million square miles of Mexican land (Ibid: 23), and the Sonoran desert became split between Mexico and the US. Indigenous communities were restricted from freely moving across their traditional homeland (see Erickson, 2003). From 1924 US border patrol was institutionalised, and developed alongside the migration of workers from Mexico to the US (Ibid: 37-45). It is thus in relation to a long-standing history of migration between Mexico and the US and the redrawing of borders that contemporary migrations need to be understood. Moreover, contemporary migrations from Mexico and the US are also situated in the context of changing labour migrations and the emergence of difficult and insecure working conditions in free trade zone maquiladoras (industrial manufacturing plants) that have emerged in northern Mexico over recent years. It is thus in the longer-term context of US colonialism and contested nationhood, as well as the more recent context of societal conflict and economic impoverishment, that many contemporary migrations from Mexico to the US can be situated.

So in what sense does an emphasis on acts of desertion that involve renouncement rather than simply abandon help us to analyse the border struggles across the Sonoran borderzone? It is here that I turn to the suggestion of scholars from the 'autonomy of migration' literature, in which migration is engaged in terms of 'exodus' or 'escape' (Mezzadra, 2004; Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos, 2008). This body of work has its roots in the theoretical movement of autonomous Marxism that emerged in Italy during the 1960s, and draws particular inspiration from the work of Paolo Virno, amongst others. Paolo Virno conceptualises exodus as "mass defection from the State", not in the sense of a defensive existential strategy but as a "full-fledged model of action"

(1996:197). He suggests that exodus should be conceived of neither in terms of an exit via the backdoor nor in terms of a process of hiding away. Rather, he suggests that exodus is an “engaged withdrawal”, just as opening an exit is a “founding leave-taking” (Ibid.). Thus, he claims:

Nothing is less passive than flight. The ‘exit’ modifies the conditions within which the conflict takes place, rather than presupposes it as an irremovable horizon; it changes the context within which a problem arises rather than deals with the problem by choosing one or another of the alternative solutions already on offer. In short, the ‘exit’ can be seen as a free-thinking inventiveness that changes the rules of the game and disorients the enemy. One only has to think of the mass flight from the factory regime set in motion by the workers of North America halfway through the nineteenth century as they headed off to the ‘frontier’ in order to colonize low-cost land. They were seizing the truly extraordinary opportunity of making their own conditions of departure *reversible*.”

Virno, 1996: 199

There are some interesting resonances here with Isin’s concept of the act, particularly in Virno’s discussion of the ‘inventiveness’ of exodus as ‘changing the context’ or the ‘rules of the game’ within which a given ‘problem’ arises. There are also some intriguing differences, such as in Virno’s discussion of the importance of conserving transformations that have already occurred (Ibid: 206-7), or of protecting ways of life and entrenched habits that are under threat (see also Virno, 2002). For now, however, I want to focus on the importance of Virno’s conception of exodus in conceptualising ‘acts of desertion’ in relation to migratory practices. I do so not with reference to state power, as Virno does, but rather on the basis of an appreciation of the patchwork nature of regulatory practices and relations of power in the context of contemporary border struggles. Moreover, I do so in terms that emphasises the destructive as well as the creative dimensions of escape, which may risk becoming lost in the engagement of Virno’s work by scholars of autonomous migration.

While Virno’s meta-theory of state power and his assumption of the autonomy of the public sphere from the state stand in tension with elements of both Foucault’s and Isin’s work that I draw upon here, the insight that defection is an active process of ‘Radical Disobedience’ that involves a ‘nonservile virtuosity’ (Ibid: 200) is nevertheless a fruitful line of investigation. Interestingly, it resonates with the discussion of secession plebis, which is developed both in the work of Engin Isin (2002: 100-101) as well as Jacques Ranciere (2004), whereby the withdrawal of plebians from the Roman city was a means to voice grievance against the debt bondage that they faced. In line with this work, I want to pursue Virno’s suggestion that exodus or exit entails a process of *engaged withdrawal* that potentially entails a transformation of existing social relations. Virno conceives exodus as involving the exercise of a power that ‘does not become government’, in the sense of the formation of an administrative command apparatus (Ibid: 201). I here develop this in order to consider how migration as an act of desertion from a ‘country of origin’ disrupts uneven and sedimented relations of power that condition struggles over migration or mobility across the

Sonoran borderzone. This is a theme that Sandro Mezzadra picks up in his discussion of migration as a social movement based on the 'right to escape'. He says:

I want to stress that this is not to claim the irrelevance of the 'objective causes' at the origin of contemporary migrations: war and misery, environmental catastrophes and political and social tyrannies prevailing in vast areas of the planet. The point is to underline the fact that for migrations to exist, there must be an individual motion (made concretely by a concrete woman or man, embedded in family and social 'networks', but nonetheless capable of *agency*) of desertion from the field where those 'objective causes' operate, a reclaiming precisely of a 'right to escape', which, even if most of the time unconsciously, constitutes a material critique of the international division of labour and marks profoundly the subjectivity of the migrant also in the country where she/he chooses to settle down

Mezzadra, 2004: 270, original emphasis

What Mezzadra underlines very clearly here is the importance of considering how migratory practices can pose a challenge to the very conditions through which they occur.

That migrants are willing to undertake the difficult migratory journey through the Sonoran desert is indicative of the challenges that people can face in their 'countries of origin'. The majority of migrants passing through the desert are from Mexico or from other countries in Central America. As already indicated, these migrants often face high levels of poverty and violence in the areas from which they migrate. As Mezzadra suggests, the decision to migrate in this regard can effectively entail an act of desertion that intentionally or unintentionally rejects the conditions of poverty and violence that both citizens and noncitizens are otherwise forced to endure. In this context, migratory practices can be understood as a refusal or rejection of the limited rights and responsibilities of liberal citizenship in the 'country of origin', as well as a challenge to the limitations of liberal citizenship both in the 'country of origin' and in the 'country of destination'. Notably, the migrants who cross the Sonoran desert are mixed, and not simply in the sense that the lines between voluntary and forced migration are blurred. During fieldwork trips to the border town of Nogales in 2011 and 2012, I met a significant number of migrants who had been deported from the US and who were preparing for their return journey through the desert. These migrants have often lived in the US for many years, have family, a home and personal belongings in the US, yet have been living highly precarious lives under the continuous threat of deportation (see Coleman, 2012, Inda 2011). Attesting less to the quality of life in the 'country of destination' than to the difficult conditions under which they both live in and migrate (where the US paradoxically features as both 'country of origin' and 'country of destination'), these migrants engage in an act of desertion that involves a refusal of citizenship rather than simply an escape from conditions that are untenable.

As a “committed undertaking” instead of a “resentful omission” (Virno, 1996: 199), these diverse acts of desertion come together in terms that imply a rejection of the conditions through which migration ensues. An analysis of such acts is not to imply that they involve an idealised politicality, but rather it is to emphasise that migratory politics are often ambiguous. Specifically, migratory acts of desertion that renounce liberal citizenship are ambiguous in the sense that they are not necessarily enacted with clear direction or purpose. They are also ambiguous in the sense that they can involve destructive as well as creative dimensions, and in the sense that they do not wholly escape dynamics of abandonment. Nevertheless, migratory practices across the Sonoran desert can create new scripts and subjectivities in terms that disrupt existing social relations, albeit often only momentarily and in ambiguous ways. The disruptiveness of crossing the desert without authorisation, I suggest, rests precisely on the way in which this involves an act of desertion that contests the limits of citizenship. Rather than simply an act of citizenship based on the claiming of ‘a right to have rights’, such acts suggest that liberal citizenship itself is subject to challenge. As indicated above, this is not to say that such acts of desertion are directly opposed to citizenship, since this would be to grant citizenship more ground as a legal status and political technology than it deserves. Citizenship is neither conceived here as a formalisation of sovereign power nor as a biopolitical regime associated with the welfare state. In contrast to Virno, who conceives politics in antagonistic terms and seeks to realign intellect with action rather than with work,<sup>10</sup> the analysis of what it means to be political developed in this article is much more ambiguous. It contends that the practices of migrants crossing the Sonoran desert are politically significant because they involve acts of desertion that refuse citizenship and renounce its limits, while at the same time making interventions that challenge the very conditions under which migration occurs. To migrate in this regard might be understood as a protest against the practice of migration itself, as well as an intervention that refuses the grounds on which contemporary liberal citizenship rests. That such interventions always or necessarily involve a conscious decision on the part of individual migrants is questionable, just as it is questionable as to whether migrants collectively conceive their migration to form a social movement that poses a “material critique to the international division of labour” (Mezzadra, 2004: 270). Just as some migrants display a strongly engrained political subjectivity on settling in the US (see Weber, 2012), some do not. Regardless, there remain dimensions of migratory practices that are disruptive and politically significant, albeit in terms that are profoundly ambiguous.

## **Conclusion**

This article has developed an analysis of contemporary border struggles across the Sonoran borderzone that crosses Mexico and the US, focusing specifically on the ways in which diverse ‘acts of desertion’ feature in such struggles. In distinguishing between those acts of desertion that ‘make live and let die’ and those acts of desertion that involve ‘exodus’ as a ‘committed undertaking’, I have drawn attention to the ambiguities of contemporary border struggles and have cautioned against an analysis that distinguishes migration from its regulation in

any simplistic way. Specifically, I have argued that the acts of desertion through which new subjectivities and new scripts are created can be analysed in relation to the dynamic of abandonment as well as in relation to a dynamic of renouncement. While migratory practices are not necessarily disruptive in and of themselves, I suggest that they do involve a disruptive dimension that is politically significant, particularly in the refusal of the limitations of contemporary liberal citizenship through the unauthorised crossing of the desert. Acts of desertion that involve abandon, like those that involve renouncement, are ambiguous in various senses, most notably in the sense that they involve destructive and creative dimensions. Whichever the dynamic, the act is one of desertion, not in the sense of passive abandonment but in the sense of an 'engaged withdrawal' with-from existing social relations. In the case of the interventions associated with border security, engaged withdrawal can be productive of an exploitable pool of excess labour and of political scapegoats, as well as entailing processes of abjectification. Conversely, in the case of interventions that involve undocumented migration, engaged withdrawal entails a temporary refusal of liberal citizenship rather than simply its active re-claiming. In this regard, acts of desertion are profoundly ambiguous, and challenge the very ground on which liberal citizenship as well as sovereign power and migrant autonomy rest.

Indeed, a key argument developed here is that the concept of acts of desertion (a concept that is ambiguous in itself) enables an analysis that destabilises the assumptions of both sovereign control and migrant autonomy. This is important, I contend, because it guards against the over-investment in migrant subjectivities that belie many analysis of border struggles,<sup>11</sup> without overlooking the political significance of acts of unauthorised migration as these pertain to the contestation of sedimented social relations and the circulations of power/contestation that these involve. This article rests on the assumption that a singular rationality of power or dynamic of power/contestation can never saturate a given field of action. It thus draws on an analytics of acts to counter reductive conceptualisations of power, and to highlight ways in which the dynamics of power/contestation open opportunities for disruptive transformations of contemporary ways of being political. Complementary to this, it draws on an analytics of desertion in order to highlight the ambiguous nature of any such act, and to challenge the assumption that such acts can ever be simply emancipatory or simply conservative. In this sense, the paper enacts an engaged-withdrawal with-from both Agambenian readings of sovereign power and with-from emancipatory versions of the autonomy of migration thesis. It does so because, while it conceives such approaches as highlighting important dimensions of contemporary border struggles, it argues that these do so in terms that are often problematic in terms of engaging with interventions in concrete border struggles such as those across the Sonoran borderzone.

It is here that an emphasis on ambiguity has important implications for interventions in the field of concrete border struggles, whether of an academic or a non-academic nature. Rather than perceiving such struggles in terms of an antagonistic political formation, I suggest that an emphasis on ambiguity fosters a subtler, if perhaps less emotionally and politically satisfying, reading of what is

at stake in contemporary border struggles such as those across the Sonoran borderzone. What we are left with in terms of intervention is less a programme of action than a range of partial and momentary interventions, which require ongoing practical effort and assessment. Acknowledging both the intensity of border security practices and the capacity of migrants to act (without theoretically fixing the relation between the two), such a perspective neither privileges migration nor its control. Rather, it highlights the destructive *and* productive dimensions of diverse interventions, draws attention to the significance of interventions that disrupt uneven and sedimented relations of power, and engages with the struggles of migrants in terms that strive to appreciate their ambiguity as well as their committed undertaking.

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<sup>1</sup> Mathew Abbot argues that Agamben's concern is primarily with an analysis of political ontology. In particular, he suggests that Agamben is concerned with the logic or paradox of sovereignty that reflects the aporetic reliance of modern politics on an apolitical remainder, and reflects our inability to think political being beyond the bounds of a violent metaphysics (Abbot, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Desertion or escape is a concern for scholars of the autonomy of migration literature but has not been developed in any detail in relation to acts. See Mezzadra (2004), Papadopoulos et al (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Migrants often aim for, or wish to achieve, citizenship status for the obvious reason that it affords rights and protections that otherwise are not granted.

<sup>5</sup> From Oxford dictionaries online, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/desert?q=desert> , accessed 20.05.14.

<sup>6</sup> Though see Doty (2011), Puleo (2014); Author (2014); Sundberg and Kaserman (2007); and Sundberg (2011) for notable exceptions.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Israel is currently building the world's largest detention centre in the Negev desert, suggestive of the formation of deserts as spaces that have similar properties to the camp. See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israelis-build-the-worlds-biggest-detention-centre-7547401.html>

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.immigrationforum.org/images/uploads/SouthwestBorderSecurityOperations.pdf>

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<sup>9</sup> For example, see the No More Deaths briefing on Operation Streamline, accessed at [http://www.cultureofcruelty.org/content/uploads/2012/03/nmd\\_fact\\_sheet\\_operation\\_streamline.pdf](http://www.cultureofcruelty.org/content/uploads/2012/03/nmd_fact_sheet_operation_streamline.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> For Virno, the intellect is a means of emancipation from state power, and requires realignment away from its conflation with work, the latter of which is conceived of as a form of subordinated labour.

<sup>11</sup> This over-investment might be conceived of either as a concern with the lack of migrant subjectivity implied by the concept of bare life, or as a concern with the excess of migrant subjectivity implied by the concept of migrant autonomy.