

# Unruly Migrations, Abolitionist Alternatives

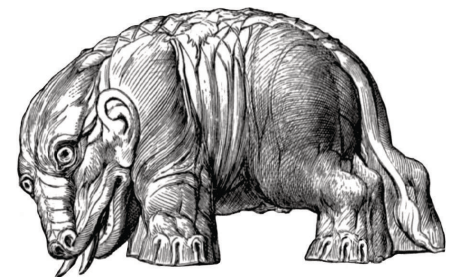
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## Abstract

This essay considers how appeals for the abolition of structures of unfreedom, situations of violence and harm, and enduring practices of neglect and dehumanisation are generated through acts of unruly migration. It does so on the basis of a close engagement with a counter-archive of migratory testimonies that was produced during 2015 and 2016 with people who had migrated – or were planning to migrate – across the Mediterranean to Europe. Drawing inspiration from Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s conceptualisation of ‘organised abandonment’, the essay suggests that key dimensions of an abolitionist politics are evident in refusals of the racialised, gendered and classed dynamics of militarism and colonialism that are integral to the border complex. In so doing, it also reflects on *alternatives* – transformative imaginaries and forms of organising that emerge through what are interpreted as abolitionist acts of migration.

**Keywords:** Migration, Borders, Abolition, Mediterranean

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*'Everybody is free.'*  
(Nigerian woman, Rome)

*'Let us live in security.'*  
(Cameroonian woman, Rome)

*'Consider us as humans.'*  
(Ethiopian man, Malta)

Freedom, security, respect: these are just a few of the demands advanced by people migrating across the Mediterranean in precarious conditions during 2015 and 2016. In this essay, I argue that, although these statements stand as appeals to equal treatment, they can also be interpreted as appeals for the *abolition* of structures of unfreedom, situations of violence and harm, and enduring practices of neglect and dehumanisation. Indeed, by reading further into these demands, I suggest that a range of abolitionist alternatives emerge that refuse the power and violence of racialised, gendered and classed bordering practices. These alternatives beckon a world where it is no longer the case that “White people normally go to Nigeria” while Nigerians face barriers in return (Nigerian woman, Rome);<sup>[1]</sup> a world where people are no longer denied the right to migrate while “security issues are not solved” in the regions from which they flee (Cameroonian woman, Rome); and a world where the contributions that people migrating can make “not only to the economy but also in policy-making” are no longer ignored (Ethiopian man, Malta).

My aim in this essay is to further reflect on some of the ways in which unruly acts of migration can be interpreted as a refusal of the concrete manifestations of violence and harm that are embedded within racialised, gendered and classed bordering practices. I use the term ‘unruly’ in broad terms here, to refer to migrations that in various ways challenge or exceed the attempts of states to govern migration (Tazzioli 2019). Rather than confining my focus to state power in a narrow sense, I draw from Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s suggestion that the prison industrial complex involves “all sorts of people and places that are tied in, or want to be tied in, to that complex” (2012, 3f.). A similar argument can be made about the ‘border industrial complex’, which Todd Miller (2021) examines in the US context to highlight how territorial borders function as sites of border security, military technologies, policing, transport and logistics (plus much more besides), thus implicating a range of private corporations as well as state agencies and civil society organisations. This is also evident in the European context, where bordering practices cut across and extend far beyond territorial borderlines (Balibar 1998), tying all sorts of ‘people and places’ into the border complex (see also Anderson 2014).

Just as Ruth Wilson Gilmore highlights how the prison industrial complex developed in response to multiple struggles during the 1950s and 1960s in the US (2012, 5), I want to suggest that the border industrial complex can similarly be interpreted as having developed in response to the struggles of those migrating. In this essay, I interpret such struggles as a form of *refusal* or escape from experiences of violence and harm, which arise where citizens are abandoned to processes of forced depopulation and “lucrative death” (Estévez 2021), where people on the move are abandoned to physical ele-

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**[1]** The quotes throughout this essay are from the interviews conducted as part of the *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat: Mapping and Documenting Migratory Journeys and Experiences* project, with people who had made – or who had contemplated making – the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean Sea by boat to Europe. Interviews were carried out during 2015 and 2016 in Kos, Malta and Sicily as well as in Athens Berlin, Istanbul and Rome.

ments across deserts and seas (Doty 2011; Heller/Pezzani 2012) and where those seeking refuge are subject to the ‘slow violence’ of impoverishment (Mayblin 2020). I draw on abolitionist literatures to suggest that these practices of escape are conditioned by forms of ‘organised abandonment’ that “extract” or “compromis[e]” the “very resources that people need to survive and live with dignity” (Miller 2021, 143). The essay begins by discussing violence and harm in terms of *abandonment*, before highlighting the significance of escape understood through the lens of *desertion*. It then reflects on some of the ways in which the concrete demands advanced by people migrating can be interpreted as appeals to *abolition*, focusing specifically to the refusal of militaristic and colonial structures and institutions that condition many precarious forms of migration today. In conclusion, the essay briefly reflects on *alternatives* – transformative imaginaries and forms of organising that emerge through what I interpret as abolitionist acts of migration.

The argument advanced within this essay is grounded in my engagement with a counter-archive of migratory testimonies that was produced during 2015 and 2016 with 271 people in Germany, Italy, Malta and Turkey who had migrated – or were planning to migrate – across the Mediterranean.<sup>[2]</sup> The counter-archive forms part of a larger collaborative project, which was designed to amplify the voices of those most directly impacted by the European Commission’s 2015 migration policy agenda (see Squire et al. 2017; 2021). I have engaged with these testimonies in sustained terms, to focus not only on the lived experiences that they document but also the claims to which these experiences give rise (Squire 2020; cf. ‘Gabriel’ with Squire 2017). My aim here is not to present a comprehensive or conclusive analysis of the testimonies, whether in an individual or collective sense. Neither is it to suggest that migration is reducible to abolitionist acts. Rather, I aim to shed light on some of the ways in which unruly acts of migration entail a refusal of concrete manifestations of power and violence that are embedded within the border complex, in so doing gesturing toward abolitionist alternatives.

## Abandonment

Much has been written in the field of migration and border studies about the ways in which people migrating are subject through processes of abandonment to state-sanctioned practices of violence and harm. For example, Alison Mountz (2020) highlights the longer histories of racialised violence that are embedded in diffuse practices of interception at sea, island containment and detention, showing how these together represent the ‘death of asylum’. Behrouz Bouchani (2018), who spent six years in offshore Australian detention on Manus island, documents first-hand his experience as ‘an illegally imprisoned refugee’ of the ‘Kyriarchical’ system that pits detainees against one another. In the European context, violence and harm have been examined both in relation to the deaths of people ‘left to die’ across the Mediterranean Sea (Heller/Pezzani 2012; Albahari 2016; Mainwaring 2020), as well as in terms of the systemic neglect experienced by many in refugee camps (Davies et al. 2017). Scholars have convincingly shown how both humanitarian and militaristic or security-based modes of governing are implicated in the continued violence against people on the move (Tazzioli 2019). They have also importantly pointed to the longer-standing relations

<sup>[2]</sup> The first phase was completed during September–November 2015 and involved 136 interviews with a total of 139 participants at three island arrival sites: Kos, Malta and Sicily. Difficulties in recruiting research participants in Malta due to reduced arrivals resulting from an ‘agreement’ with Italy during the time-period of our research led to some of the interviews being carried out at this site between December 2015 and March 2016. The second phase was completed during May–July 2016 and involved 121 interviews with a total of 132 participants at four urban sites: Athens, Berlin, Istanbul and Rome.

of colonial violence implicated in border policing across the ‘Black Mediterranean’ and beyond (Saucier/Woods 2014; Danewid 2017).

I find it helpful on multiple counts to conceptualise these manifestations of violence and harm, along with the practices of neglect and dehumanisation within which they are grounded, in terms of Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (2015; 2020) notion of ‘organised abandonment’. It is worth noting that Gilmore’s work is primarily orientated toward the US prison system and, in this context, she develops the concept of organised abandonment as a means to highlight the impact of neoliberal austerity measures on racialised communities who face imprisonment at a much higher rate than the average. Nevertheless, understood more broadly as a mode of “extracting, polluting or compromising the very resources that people need to survive and live with dignity” (Miller 2021, 143), the concept of ‘organised abandonment’ facilitates appreciation of the recurring harms that are produced through racialised as well as gendered and classed bordering practices. These are manifest at multiple phases along what are often long and fragmented migratory journeys, whether in terms of the multiple ‘drivers’ of migration and the forms of extraction, pollution and compromise that these involve (Estévez 2021, 25ff.; Squire et al. 2021, 102ff.), or in terms of the on-going situations of violence and harm that demand an on-going struggle to survive and live with dignity *en route* and on arrival (ibid., 135ff.). The concept of organised abandonment is particularly helpful here in moving beyond dehistoricised and deracialised conceptions of abandonment, which have been prominent within migration and border studies due to the heavy influence of Giorgio Agamben’s conceptualisation of sovereign power.

Indeed, the concept of organised abandonment is important because it draws attention to the responsibility of state authorities for the precarity and mortality of people on the move, yet without reducing violence and harm to the actions of ‘the state’ or sovereign power alone. As the works highlighted at the start of this section indicate, various forms of violence are enacted by multiple agencies through the abandonment of people migrating – including at sea, on islands or in detention. Yet in such contexts, responsibility for harm is often evaded. For example, offshore detention or practices of interception at isolated sites render violence and harm relatively hidden. Moreover, the containment of migratory struggles within sites such as deserts and seas provide authorities with what Roxanne Lynn Doty (2012) describes as a ‘moral alibi’ for border deaths. State-sanctioned forms of violence and harm in this regard persist, while culpability for precarity and mortality is evaded (Squire 2017a). The causes of precarity and mortality are of course complex and multifaceted, but the concept of organised abandonment is helpful in facilitating appreciation of the *persistent production* of precarity for those who are targeted by racialised, gendered and classed bordering practices (see also Mayblin/Turner 2021, 133). It is in this context that I suggest practices of escape or desertion from situations of violence and harm form a critical dimension of migratory struggles.

## Desertion

To examine migration through the lens of escape is to highlight the constitutive power of migratory struggles; an aspect that has been strongly emphasised by scholars of the ‘autonomy of migration’ (Mezzadra 2004; Papadopoulos et al. 2008). Elsewhere (Squire 2015), I have drawn on such works to suggest that a shift of focus from escape to *desertion* can facilitate appreciation of the dynamic relations between migratory struggles and the state-sanctioned practices of violence and abandonment briefly discussed above. The definition of desertion derives from the term ‘desert’, which is related to the Latin *desertus* meaning ‘left waste’. As a verb, to desert not only translates as ‘to abandon’, but also as ‘to withdraw’. As an act of abandon that is treacherous, desertion means to leave a place empty, yet it also refers to the failure to remain at a key moment (Oxford Dictionary, np). In other words, desertion implies both abandonment *and* renouncement. The concept of desertion can thus be approached from multiple directions. On the one hand, the violence of the border complex involves desertion as a form of abandonment, through which racialised, gendered and classed bodies are subject to violence and harm – or left to ‘waste’ (Bauman 2003). That is, those compelled to migrate in precarious conditions are rendered vulnerable to premature death, in Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (2007) terms, or subject to a living death, in Achille Mbembe’s (2003). Yet, on the other hand, desertion also involves a form of renouncement or withdrawal – including from situations of organised abandonment. This is no more evident than in the struggles of people on the move to escape lived experiences of violence and harm through the act of withdrawal, or ‘leave-taking’.

An analysis of desertion is suggestive of the ambiguities that arise in confronting the violence of organised abandonment, as well as of the ways in which practices of escape open up what Reece Jones (2012) calls ‘spaces of refusal’ that exceed the operations of state-sanctioned violence. Another way of conceptualising this is through Paulo Virno’s conception of exodus as a mode of engaged withdrawal. Virno argues that escape or exodus is not simply a process of hiding or of taking a backdoor exit, but rather involves the *opening* of an exit through an act of “founding leave-taking” (1996, 197). In other words, escape is not just about disappearing but about the failure to be seen, which involves “a free-thinking inventiveness that changes the rules of the game” (ibid., 199). More than simply a refusal of the violence of organised abandonment, escape can in this regard be understood in terms of the creation of alternative forms of existence. It is in this sense that we might engage desertion through the lens of engaged withdrawal as a means to consider how people migrating in precarious conditions reject and reconfigure experiences of violence and harm, generating abolitionist alternatives to the border complex and to processes of organised abandonment in so doing. In the next section, I provide initial insights into some of the ways in which these alternatives emerge from an analysis of the claims or demands of people on the move.

## Abolition

I was afraid to be taken to the army because normally the students are exempted for [a] temporary [period] to serve the army. But with my friend, they didn't allow them... so they went to the army. And I didn't want that to happen to me. [*without translation:*] I don't kill anyone.

(Syrian man, Berlin)

I had to serve in the army. And at the first checkpoint in the border, I will be taken away, because I, I didn't go to the army myself. I would be taken away to serve the army and carry the weapons to kill innocent people. I didn't want to carry the blood in my name.

(Syrian man, Berlin)

I was called, summoned to the army, I didn't want to join the army. If I join the army, I have to kill people. I don't want to kill anybody, not from inside either [the] opposition, or the regime. Furthermore, I wanted to do my postgraduate studies.

(Syrian man, Berlin)

These three quotes are from different Syrian men, all of whom our research team spoke with in Berlin. Each expresses a refusal to participate in violence as this is concretely manifest in the institution of the armed forces. Given the context of civil war and the prominence of different military groups in Syria, this includes a refusal to participate in military violence advanced by “opposition” groups, as well as by “the regime” (quote 3). None of the men cited above were members of any armed group at the point of fleeing Syria, yet their claims remain significant given that one of the key definitions of desertion relates to the abandonment of military duties. Notably, each expresses their escape from the army in terms of a refusal to kill: “I don't kill anyone” (quote 1); “I didn't want to carry the blood in my name” (quote 2); “I don't want to kill anybody” (quote 3). Indeed, several others with whom we spoke describe similar situations and sentiments, including a significant number of men and their family members fleeing Syria, as well as some fleeing situations marked by conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa (Squire 2020).

In each of these cases, migration as a form of desertion appears to be an act of renouncement or refusal of the violence of warfare (rather than, for example, an act of abandon involving recklessness or the disavowal of responsibility). The quotes suggest a principled form of desertion, whereby the process of fleeing enforced conscription involves a refusal to kill “innocent people” (quote 2). On this basis, I suggest that we might interpret these acts of migration as resembling an anti-militarist or anti-war movement, which rejects recurring dynamics of racial and masculinist violence (see Squire 2020). Beyond an expression of respect or care for others, withdrawal from the conflict is also expressed as a means of respecting one's own life. As one of the men cited above explains: “If you – there is a war raging on in your country and you get the chance to reach a safe country, won't you take that chance?” (quote 2). Another describes: “I have to finish my German studies.

Get my Abitur done. And apply for the Freie Universität in Berlin... My big concern is first my further study... in Syria, everything is collapsing, no studies at all” (quote 1). These affirmations of alternative conditions of existence grounded in safety, respect and education are echoed in the refusal of militarist violence by a fourth Syrian man, who demands that European politicians “use [their] brains, stop selling weapons to our country” (Syrian man, Berlin). Such a demand is suggestive of a refusal of masculinist and militarist power and violence as well as of the wider military industrial complex within which the Syrian conflict is embedded.

While the demands of the three Syrian men in Berlin cited above can be interpreted as forming an anti-war movement, the demands of three Nigerian women in Rome are perhaps better understood as constituting an anti-colonial movement (see Squire 2020). This is evident in the opening quote cited in this essay, which is worth reading as part of a longer interview extract:

**ROM2.06c:** Yeah. [I think we have the right to enter].

**Interviewer:** Why would you say that?

**ROM2.06c:** White people normally go to Nigeria, they are safe, they are ok. I know that very well. So... you know God created everybody.

**ROM2.06a:** Everybody have equal rights.

**ROM2.06c:** So it is the same. Everybody is free. You are free to go to Nigeria, there is your choice. So your push allows us enter Italy freely without no problem, that is what we want.

(Interview with three Nigerian women, Rome)

Particularly striking in this extract is that there is a clear refusal of the targeting of racialised groups of people from the global south, who are identified as facing more extensive barriers in exercising their rights to cross-border migration than ‘White’ people from the global north. This is not simply to demand that “everybody is free” and that “everybody” has “equal rights” but is perhaps better understood as a refusal of the migration of privileged “White people” over others. Unruly migration in this sense can be interpreted as the desertion or enactment of escape from racialised and classed bordering practices. Indeed, a range of people with whom we spoke rejected the processes of dehumanisation generated by such practices: “[W]e want them to treat people like they are humans and not animals”, explained a Syrian woman we spoke with in Kos in 2015. “They shouldn’t think that the Afghani is an animal”, said an Afghan man in Athens. “Don’t consider us as a trade”, a Syrian man in Berlin told us in 2016. “Don’t save us from death and put us in misery”, appealed a Sudanese man in Rome during 2016.

Claims to a shared humanity and to the importance of respecting the human rights of all people were expressed by many of those with whom we spoke (Squire et al. 2021). While the extract above highlights how the racial dimensions of these demands were sometimes direct and explicit, we also found these implicitly or indirectly expressed with reference to the ‘connected’ histories of European states with those from which people had escaped (Bhambra 2014). For example, a Syrian woman in Istanbul echoed the statement of the Syrian man above regarding the continued role of Europe in the

civil war, to say: “Who is responsible [for the bloodshed in Syria]? It is the politics of the powerful countries... The powerful countries are watching us. They are silent. International silence”. An Afghan man in Kos gestured toward the racialised politics of asylum through which Europe denies protection to those migrating, noting that: “Back in time, we used to have Europeans as refugees. We had them in Iraq also... After the second world war.” Describing the failed actions of European states to resolve the issues driving migration, a man from Ivory Coast with whom we spoke in Malta said: “the Europeans of those who colonise us they have a lot of organisations, or [organisations run] by... Europe[an countries] to cooperate with our government in my country”.

These statements are all significant because they point to the ways in which the countries from which many people fled during 2015 and 2016 are connected to Europe through imperial or colonial histories, as well as contemporary trade and military engagements (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018). The statement from the Afghan man in Kos is also suggestive of the ways in which the bordering practices of European states advance a racialised politics of asylum that has persisted over a much longer duration. Unruly migration as an act of engaged withdrawal can thus be understood as challenging these politics through a form of desertion that renounces the violence and harms of racialised, gendered and classed bordering practices, even while remaining vulnerable to them. To draw on the insights of E. Tendayi Achiume, we might interpret migration here as a “decolonising movement” that rejects the “asymmetrical...structure of co-dependence” embedded in the (post)colonial condition, along with the “severe political-economic conditions and the fall-out of these conditions” (2017, 142ff.). Understood as an abolitionist act, unruly migration refuses structures of unfreedom and situations of violence and harm through bringing to light recurring practices of neglect and dehumanisation. Indeed, in speaking back to experiences of the violence and harm of racialised, gendered and classed bordering practices, a range of alternatives to organised abandonment begin to emerge from the testimonies of those cited above: “I propose that they think a little bit about our future. They are people, and we are people” (Syrian woman, Istanbul); “We expect to be treated humanely” (Afghan man, Kos). “[T]ake action... real action... that can really make change in Africa” (man from Ivory Coast, Malta). It is to the potential of unruly migration to establish abolitionist alternatives that I will turn in concluding this essay.

## Alternatives

In her discussion of sanctuary and abolition, Naomi Paik suggests that an abolitionist approach “understands both the interlocking forces that criminalise differently marginalised people (via citizenship status, race, gender, etc.) and the interlocking need for a broad-based movement that empowers all targeted people” (2020, 5). Critical, then, is not only that we pay attention to the various people and places that are tied into the border complex, but also that we consider how those migrating in precarious conditions generate a “reorganisation” of how people live “together in the world” (Gilmore 2020) in the face of compromises to their “surviv[al] and [ability to access resources to] live with dignity” (Miller 2021, 143). One poignant example of this can be



found in the case of the Syrian man from Berlin quoted in the last section as saying: “I don’t want to kill anybody” (quote 3). He explains how, with no family members left, he travelled with a young woman fleeing along the same route as him: “This woman was my road companion, I was her protector, I was her guard. The one who wants to look after her...[they] are in Germany... She is now part of [my] family. I’m her family.” This statement not only highlights how personal and familial relationships transform in situations of precarity (Squire 2017b). It also exemplifies a form of sociality based on relations of care and mutual support, thus gesturing toward alternative ways of living grounded in an appreciation that “life is precious” (Gilmore 2020, np).

So, what does abolition mean in this context, and how might unruly migrations generate alternative imaginaries and institutions to those associated with the violence and harms of the ‘border industrial complex’? A growing body of critical scholarship has made the case for no borders or open borders (e.g. Jones 2019; King 2016; Sharma 2021), including through the analysis of migratory struggles that show how infringements on the freedom of movement are contested or subverted by people on the move and their allies (e.g. Mezzadra 2020; Stierl 2020). In her abolitionist analysis of the Black Mediterranean, for example, Ida Danewid (2021) explores forms of resistance that are grounded in solidarity and abolition, rather than hospitality. Others have made the case for abolishing institutions as a concrete step towards dismantling the border complex, such as in George Boyce’s discussion of the abolition of US Border Patrol (cited in Miller 2021, 86). The contribution of this essay lies in its consideration of how far, and in what ways, people on the move *themselves* engage a politics of abolition – whether directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly. While the testimonies for our counter-archive do not speak to the abolition of borders directly, I have suggested that key dimensions of an abolitionist politics can nevertheless be indirectly perceived in refusals of the racialised, gendered and classed dynamics of militarism and colonialism that are embedded within the border complex. Abolitionist alternatives in this regard are multiple, yet nevertheless come together in a mode of desertion that renounces situations of organised abandonment: “A decent life”, a man from Syria in Berlin suggests. “It’s education!” a man from Gambia in Sicily proclaims. “Open the border” a Syrian woman in Athens requests. Or, as a Syrian woman in Athens states: “We want security, we’re looking for the opportunity to work, for a future for our kids. Is this wrong?”

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