

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Viral Borders: Migration, Deceleration, and the Re-Bordering of Mobility during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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States' efforts to govern the COVID-19 public health emergency have been entangled with the ongoing work of producing and enforcing borders. Thus, on a global scale, the public health crisis has been converted into various spectacles of ostensible border "crisis." Rather than seeing borders as purely a matter of control, however, it is instructive to situate the tactics of border enforcement in relation to the primacy, autonomy, and subjectivity of human mobility. If we start from the human freedom of movement and recognize border enforcement as a reaction formation, various tactics of border policing can be seen to introduce interruptions that temporarily decelerate cross-border mobilities. Compelled to revert to a kind of "standby" mode, migrants are temporarily immobilized and must find ways to convert their waiting from "dead time" into more or less productive time. Waiting to be re-activated, their mobilities remain an intractable and always potentially disruptive constitutive power.

Keywords: COVID-19, migration, borders, temporality, waiting

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In this article, I consider some examples of how the government or management of the COVID-19 public health emergency during the first year of the pandemic manifested itself in various specific instances of the government of migration through state tactics of (re-)bordering. By (re-)bordering, I refer to the variety of tactics and technologies deployed by states to revise and reconfigure how they *produce* borders (and therefore also how they continue reproducing them), how they maintain and sustain borders, how they enforce borders (and reinforce them). That is to say, I understand borders not to be fixed and objective realities, not inert things, but instead to be the effects of deliberate and purposeful activity—the products, in other words, of *work* (De Genova, 2016). Hence, the efforts of states to govern the COVID public

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health emergency have become substantially entangled with the ongoing work of producing and enforcing borders, and thus, on a global scale, the public health crisis has been converted into various spectacles of ostensible border “crisis” (De Genova, 2013). Importantly, these recent border enforcement spectacles provide important instances where state tactics and techniques of control aimed at blocking and *immobilizing* migrant and refugee mobilities through detention and other forms of containment or entrapment, always remain tentative and tenuous intermissions. Moreover, at times, such interruptions also become occasions for the coercive and commonly violent *re-mobilization* of those same formations of human mobility through diversionary tactics that re-route them, or through deportation regimes that literally force migrants and refugees into renewed movement, either by returning them to their points of origin or, increasingly, by dislocating them to altogether new and unforeseen destinations, however temporary.

The Autonomy of Migration and the Tactics of Bordering

Border policing and militarization, migrant detention, immigration enforcement, and deportation are reaction formations of state power. They involve the material and practical organization of tactics and techniques of control, but they arise always *in response* to a prior fact of human mobility. Rather than seeing these ever more devious and violent formations of state power as if these were purely a matter of control, therefore, it is instructive to situate this economy of power in relation to the primacy, autonomy, and subjectivity of human mobility on a global (transnational, intercontinental, cross-border, postcolonial) scale. This primacy of autonomy and subjectivity is true, I contend, as much for refugees as for those who come to be derisively designated to be mere “migrants” (De Genova, Garelli, & Tazzioli, 2018).¹

If we start from the human freedom of movement and recognize the various tactics of bordering as reaction formations, then border policing and other forms of migration governance can be seen to introduce interruptions that temporarily immobilize and decelerate human cross-border mobilities with the aim of subjecting them to processes of surveillance and adjudication. Of course, these state tactics are also sometimes deployed to stop and reverse migratory movement. Violent push-backs at borders, deportations, and other types of expulsion, notably, should be recognized as veritable forms of “forced migration.” Indeed, these coercive state measures that impel people across borders are arguably the purest examples of “forced” migrant mobility. But a narrow focus on only the exclusionary and repressive features of border regimes tends to aggrandize and fetishize anew precisely the premier conceit of border “control,” and thereby obfuscates the more complex and productive work of borders in mediating the subordinate inclusion of human cross-border mobilities.

This larger dialectic between human mobility and the forces arrayed to govern it reconstitutes these heterogeneous formations of mobility as something that comes

to be apprehensible and classifiable, alternately, as “migration,” or “asylum-seeking,” or the “forced migration” of “refugees” in flight from persecution or violence—which is to say, as one or another variety of target and object of government. In other words, the very distinctions that we customarily use to mark the difference between “migrants” and “refugees,” or between “migration” and “forced migration,” are themselves principally governmental contrivances that serve above all else to subdue and discipline human mobility into legible and manageable categories. There is, therefore, a permanent epistemic instability within the government of transnational human mobility, which itself relies upon the exercise of a power over classifying, naming and partitioning migrants/refugees, and the more general multiplication of subtle nuances and contradictions among the categories that regiment mobility. Indeed, such a proliferation arises as an inescapable effect of the multifarious reasons and entangled predicaments that motivate or compel people to move across state borders. Simply put, refugees never cease to also have aspirations and, against the dominant tendency to figure them as pure victims (and thus as the passive objects of the compassion, pity, or protection of others), they remain *subjects* who make more or less calculated strategic and tactical choices about how to reconfigure their lives and advance their life projects despite the dispossession and dislocation of their refugee condition (Garelli & Tazzioli, 2017; Osseiran, 2017a, 2017b; Picozza, 2017; Stierl, 2017). And likewise, migrants are often in flight (or fleeing) from various social or political conditions that they have come to deem intolerable, thereby actively escaping or deserting forms of everyday deprivation, persecution, or (structural) violence that may be no less pernicious for their mundane character (Mezzadra, 2001, 2004). In other words, many migrants may themselves feel absolutely compelled to undertake their journeys and are often inclined to understand their own mobility as veritable cases of “forced” migration, even as they nevertheless exude tremendously strategic subjective dispositions toward their own migratory projects. Hence, the labels “migrant” and “refugee” commonly remain suspended in a state of tension and ambiguity, and may only be sorted into neat and clean distinctions or separated by hermetically-sealed partitions through more or less heavy-handed governmental interventions.

Furthermore, it is imperative to underscore once again that the multiple formations of violence that comprise border regimes themselves increasingly convert the humble act of unauthorized border crossing into a life-threatening endurance test, thereby often contributing to desperate forms of flight, and arguably *producing* refugees. Yet, even under the most restricted circumstances and under considerable constraint, these human mobilities exude a substantial degree of autonomous subjectivity whereby migrants and refugees struggle to appropriate mobility and realize their migratory projects. Thus, even against the considerable forces aligned to immobilize their movement, or to subject them to the stringent and exclusionary rules and constrictions of asylum, the subjective autonomy of human mobility remains an incorrigible force.

COVID-19 and the Re-Bordering of Mobility

Across the world, states confronted the public health emergency presented by the COVID-19 pandemic with varying degrees of ineptitude arising from a general failure of preparedness that was symptomatic of a more fundamental and systemic disregard for human wellbeing, consequently veering between the extremes of heavy-handed authoritarian biopolitical overreach and reckless necropolitical negligence (Aradau & Tazzioli, 2021; De Genova, 2020). On a global scale, however, with specific regard to “irregular” or “illegal” migration, states have largely seized upon the COVID public health crisis as a pretext and as an opportunity for implementing or intensifying draconian controls at their borders, resorting to a simple-minded logic of “national” quarantine to justify violent border closures, and often vicious tactics of migrant and refugee immobilization, more generally. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), at least 174 countries had implemented travel bans, border closures, and other mobility restrictions “to contain and mitigate the pandemic—totaling a minimum of 33,712 restrictions as of March 23,” 2020 (Chishti & Pierce, 2020). Plainly, the disproportionate impact of such pervasive restrictions on cross-border mobility affected “ordinary” (presumptively “legitimate”) international travel. With the rising panic around the COVID pandemic, nonetheless, the perceived “problem” of migration—and illegalized migrant and refugee movements, in particular, staged as spectacles of “unauthorized” border crossing (De Genova 2002, 2013)—very predictably came to be re-framed as a contagion of suspect, unruly, unwashed bodies, presumptive carriers of infectious diseases and vectors of an uncontrolled transmission of the ghoulish virus. The frequently racialized equation of border-crossing “foreigners” with the putative threat of contagion is nothing new, of course (Stern, 1999, 2002). Nonetheless, like the coronavirus itself, migrants and refugees have been depicted as a disruptive and dangerous menace that somehow intrudes from “outside” the presumptively self-contained space of each nation-state, and triggers a simplistic and often cruel logic of implausible insularity and self-isolation in the guise of public health precautions. Thus, the feckless bordering of the pandemic has served to unleash a pandemic of viral borders.

Declaring a COVID public health emergency as its pretext, the US under the Trump administration summarily suspended the consideration of virtually all asylum petitions at land borders.² Relying on an obscure 1944 statute³ by which the government authorizes itself to block the entry or otherwise expel migrants or refugees purported to be “public health threats,” the director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued an order barring the entry of asylum seekers and others arriving at the border without prior authorization to enter (Chishti & Pierce, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control nevertheless admitted that closing the border does not effectively safeguard public health. This measure was coupled with the enforcement of a push-back provision, introduced in 2019, that compelled asylum seekers awaiting hearings to “Remain in Mexico,” where they were stranded

in over-burdened reception facilities and hostels until their cases might eventually come up for review. With a treacherous Orwellian irony, this policy was officially named the Migrant *Protection* Protocols (MPP),⁴ even as it subjected asylum petitioners to due process violations, family separations, extortion, and kidnapping. Approximately 30,000 of these asylum seekers who were forced to “remain in Mexico” and were never able to attend their court hearings, furthermore, were “deported in absentia” (Villagran, 2021). Such measures have not only made a travesty of the very pretense of upholding any ostensible obligation to offer asylum (Mountz, 2020), but also ensured that these asylum seekers, now re-branded officially as deportees, would suffer far more severe punitive repercussions if they were ever apprehended as “illegal” migrants upon re-entry. Due to the pandemic, moreover, after March 18, 2020, all asylum hearings were indefinitely suspended in the US leaving everyone stuck in Mexico in a condition of protracted waiting and torturous uncertainty with no relief in view, while commonly confined to overcrowded unsanitary circumstances that directly exposed them to a radically heightened risk of COVID infection. As COVID-19 cases surged in June 2020, U.S. migrant detention facilities had an average infection rate five times higher than that of prisons, and 20 times higher than that of the general population. When migrant detainees staged organized protests against the U.S. immigration and detention facility authorities’ mismanagement and cynical disregard of the risk of COVID infection, furthermore, they were repressed violently, including the use of chemical agents that induced respiratory distress.⁵ Furthermore, more than a year into the pandemic, there was still no routine COVID testing for newly arrived migrants taken into custody in overcrowded detention camps at the U.S.–Mexico border.⁶ The border enforcement policies that were cynically justified in the name of protecting the public health of an expressly “national” body politic against the spectral risk of “external” vectors of viral transmission were clearly multiplying the conditions of possibility for that risk, and inordinately intensifying the real perils for migrants and refugees deemed to be “undesirable” and “undeserving” of protection—above all, the most elementary health safeguards. Thus, the putatively “anti-viral” tactics of border policing ensured that the already deadly border (De Genova, 2021a; De León, 2015) would itself become the site for a great conflagration of viral infection.

Simultaneously, the US introduced the cynical contrivance whereby the same Central American countries from which most asylum seekers arriving at the U.S.–Mexico border had fled would be designated “safe third countries” for the purposes of deporting asylum seekers who had fled violence or persecution in neighboring Central American countries.⁷ Hence, Guatemalans and Salvadorans would be dumped in Honduras, while Hondurans and Salvadorans could similarly be dumped in Guatemala, and so forth. Thus, the US imposed upon its junior partners in the region to accept and detain the asylum seekers who could not otherwise be refouled to the neighboring states, from which they often claimed to be fleeing for their lives, but they would thereafter be deported and indefinitely imprisoned in other countries labeled as “safe third countries” but deemed unsafe by many of their

own ostensible citizens. In other instances, the US deported unaccompanied Central American minors to Mexico, callously abandoning them in a country where they had no familial or social ties and no prospective sources of material or legal support. Likewise, the US accelerated the more general expulsion of any migrants or refugees already in custody, forcibly returning many who were later found to be COVID-positive upon arrival in the countries to which they were deported. Thus, the accelerated U.S. deportation regime itself came to operate, very predictably, as a devious vehicle for the reckless international transmission and proliferation of the virus. Of course, these long and circuitous detours could only ever eventually amount to extended and arduous forms by which migrants and refugees are trapped or contained within their own mobility and have their migratory itineraries significantly prolonged and diverted to altogether unforeseen destinations en route (Macías-Rojas & Tazzioli, 2021; Tazzioli, 2019). Nonetheless, the cumulative effect for many would be that their actual migrations were interrupted and decelerated, but not halted or reversed.

Multiplication of Borders, Deceleration of Migration

In the very crucial sense that they introduce interruptions that decelerate the momentum of migrant mobilities, whole countries and indeed multi-country corridors of migratory transit are converted into de facto open-air detention camps, but ultimately, they commonly do not necessarily stop or reverse migration. This is especially visible when we consider the detention camps that have arisen as statist “solutions” to migrant/refugee “reception,” where newly arriving migrant mobilities are slowed down for the purposes of registration, processing, and adjudication. Inasmuch as these state-run camps decelerate the momentum of migratory movement, they resemble the self-organized migrant and refugee camps that have proliferated in border zones where migrants and refugees must wait to strategically plan their attempts to autonomously cross the next frontier. These include such places as Calais (at the French entrance to the tunnel that crosses the English Channel), or Gourogou (the mountain in Morocco just outside of the Spanish enclave of Melilla), which have been very longstanding self-organized migrant sites for staging border crossings, or more short-lived sites such as the Eidomeni camp (at Greece’s border with Macedonia) during the height of Europe’s so-called “migrant crisis” in 2015, or the camps in Serbia where thousands gathered in the ensuing years in the hope of crossing into Hungary. But this process of deceleration is also evident in the de facto detention of newly arrived migrants and refugees in remote so-called “reception centers,” where asylum-seekers may even be free to come and go, and finally are free to leave altogether and disappear into migrant “illegality,” but are otherwise sequestered by receiving states in remote locales far from any practical means of re-commencing their migratory journeys (Mountz, 2020). Frequently, then, particularly under circumstances that do not culminate in outright deportations, detention in its various forms serves to interrupt migratory movement

temporarily instead of halting it, operating in effect as “decompression chambers” (Mezzadra & Nielson, 2003; cf. Andrijasevic 2010, pp. 158–159; Karakayali & Rigo, 2010, pp. 133–134; Papadopoulos et al., 2008, pp. 196–202). Hence, there are migrants and refugees who, in one way or another get “stranded” or “stuck,” temporarily immobilized en route, whether they get blocked at border crossing sites, or pushed back and contained in makeshift self-organized border zone camps, or in shelters or hostels operated by charities, humanitarian NGOs, or solidarity organizations, who must wait out the border regime, hoping to eventually prevail in their mobility projects (Jacobsen et al., 2021; Osseiran, 2017b; cf. Khosravi, 2018). In such examples, it is crucial to see that these “standby” tactics of migrant and refugee autonomy (De Genova, 2021b), and their counterpart in the detention facilities of various states’ border regimes where migration is coercively stalled, are indeed not so much simple examples of “exclusion” in any pure sense, as they serve to modulate the terms and conditions of a kind of subordinate “inclusion” that is first of all instigated by the autonomy and sheer determination of the migrants themselves. And these forms of temporally prolonging the migratory process through tactics of interruption and deceleration seem to be similarly evident when states deport migrants to states other than their countries of origin, as in the recent efforts of the US, but also as has been done for years in the deportation from North African countries of African migrants and refugees aspiring to reach Europe to spaces of abandonment at the southern edge of the Sahara, particularly in Mali (Collyer, 2010; Lecadet, 2013).

Notably, in the context of the deportation dragnets and mass expulsions of migrants enforced in response to the COVID pandemic, the equation of migrants with contagion has sometimes also characterized the reactions of so-called “sending” states against returning migrants or deportees, where they are similarly figured as invasive and unwelcome external vectors of disease and viral transmission, and thereby re-branded as unwelcome “migrants,” even in their countries of origin (and presumptive citizenship). Hence, during the pandemic, migrants have been increasingly challenged by a *double* process of re-bordering by both “sending” and “receiving” states, driven by the false and ultimately futile logic of preemptive and punitive exclusion, commonly leaving the migrants trapped in protracted and indefinite transit, all the while exposed to heightened risks of exposure and infection. From the standpoint of public health, of course, this is plainly a self-defeating strategy that merely multiplies the conditions of possibility for the virus to spread, but it underscores the extent to which a neo-Malthusian public health rationality mercilessly subjects some human lives to a statist calculus whereby those lives are deemed to be expendable and may be disregarded and discounted as “affordable” deaths. For those who survive these travails, furthermore, the renewal of their migrations frequently becomes all the more urgent and necessary as the only reasonable remedy to their “failed” migratory projects.

From the U.S.–Mexico border, to Mexico’s southern border and multiple borders across Central America, to the self-organized migrant camps at Calais, to the

European Union's "hotspot" reception and detention camps in Italy and Greece, to the "ghettos" of dislocated deported migrants in sub-Saharan Africa, to Australia's island prison camps for asylum seekers on Manus and Nauru in the South Pacific—migrants and refugees' predicaments of being stalled, waiting, strategizing and biding their time, represent a whole spectrum of differing degrees of being "on standby" (De Genova, 2021b). In short, on a global scale, it is an effectively universal feature of border policing that illegalized or otherwise "unwanted" human mobility is subjected, to greater or lesser degrees, to various forms of deceleration—from coercive dislocation and confinement to more amorphous forms of containment, including being "contained" within their own unfinished mobility projects (Macías-Rojas & Tazzioli, 2021; Tazzioli, 2019). And of course, for many, during such periods of indefinite waiting and uncertainty, they are frequently relegated to a condition of protracted unemployment and marginalization, even abject destitution. These circumstances are part of a larger process of precaritization that systematically disciplines migrants and refugees into their ultimate sociopolitical condition of disposability *as labor*. Their eventual disposability as labor, however, must first be predicated on the material and practical enforcement of the disposability of their lives (De Genova, 2015, 2021). This is amply evident in an exaggerated way in the context of the COVID pandemic, where over-crowding in unsanitary conditions directly multiplies the risk of infection and the potential for death. Through such mercenary exercises in putative prophylaxis, on the pretext of protecting the public health of their citizens, state tactics of re-bordering in the face of the pandemic can be appropriately characterized as a verification of what Achille Mbembe (2003; 2019) has called the *necropolitics* of state sovereignty, for which "the material destruction of human bodies and populations" remains a "central project" (2003, p. 14).

The Necropolitics of the Pandemic

The often brutal tendencies of these border regimes have plainly exposed migrants and refugees to an inordinate risk of COVID infection as border closures have interdicted and confined migrants in over-crowded and unsanitary migrant detention prisons with no provision of adequate health care. The most infamous example of this predicament is, of course, the Moria detention camp on the Greek island of Lesbos, originally designated to have the capacity to house a maximum of 3,000 migrants and refugees. Long foreseen to be the very predictable scene of an impending humanitarian catastrophe, the camp's population had at times swollen to more than 20,000. By September of 2020, this notorious so-called "reception center," first created as an emergency "hotspot" for the supposedly speedy registration of newly arriving asylum seekers in 2015, was estimated to contain a population of 13,000 people. As Europe's largest refugee camp, Moria was overwhelmingly populated by people who had fled dangerous conflict zones, with a very large number of families with children as well as hundreds of unaccompanied minors, trapped indefinitely

by the cynical stalemate of a European asylum system that would not process and resettle them elsewhere across the European Union, in outrageously over-crowded and squalid conditions, and now in the midst of the uncontrolled pandemic. Under circumstances that remain controversial and somewhat opaque, the Moria camp was burnt down on September 8–10, 2020, in a series of arson fires. The fires quickly ignited portable gas canisters used for cooking, and devastated the camp completely. The fires were variously attributed to either the desperation and exasperation of the migrant inmates of the camp protesting the severe medical lockdown restrictions imposed on them by camp authorities after the discovery of 35 positive COVID cases and the more general mismanagement of the pandemic, or alternately believed to be the wanton handiwork of local Greek fascists exploiting the situation; not implausibly, the fires may have been caused by both. Virtually the entire resident population of migrants and refugees were violently blocked from entering the nearest village by armed bands of hostile Greek residents, who also created roadblocks to impede the passage of emergency medical teams and even Greek military personnel seeking to reach the burned-out disaster site to provide relief. Thus, the newly homeless camp residents were summarily left abandoned to sleep and camp out on the remote rural roadsides. Meanwhile, even while Moria burned, Greek coast guards policing the maritime border were engaged in illegal pushbacks on the Aegean Sea, interdicting unseaworthy migrant boats and rafts, and forcibly dragging them and abandoning them on the open sea in Turkish waters (Kitsantonis & Kingsley, 2020; cf. De Genova, 2021b).

The specifically necropolitical dimension of all bordering is abundantly manifest whenever migrants' lives are effectively deemed disposable, whereby migrants (particularly those who are illegalized) and rejected refugees are systematically and disproportionately relegated to conditions that enforce a greater likelihood of their premature deaths (De Genova, 2015, 2021). However, this presumptive expendability of migrants' lives is inseparable from the larger configuration of forces that render them to be eminently disposable labor (De Genova, 2018). Here, we must recall that Michel Foucault's well-known proposition of the concept of biopolitics, which designates a modern form of power that responds to a general injunction to cultivate life, to 'make live', as he puts it, is always accompanied by the concomitant prerogative to 'let die' (1997/2003, p. 241; cf. 1976/1978, pp. 136–138). In this respect, it is always crucial to not apprehend the necropolitics of borders and migration regimes in a one-sided way as a purely "exclusionary" impulse, and instead to see the systemic production of border violence and death as intrinsic to the larger biopolitics of these regimes, which produce and regulate illegalized migrants' lives in order to ensure their subordinate inclusion (De Genova, 2002). While there is indisputably a necropolitical cruelty to these diverse processes of abandonment, in other words, most instances of the more purely exclusionary dynamics of border necropolitics remain inextricable from the larger biopolitics of borders as mechanisms of subordinate inclusion (De Genova, 2013, 2015, 2016). It is in this regard that we are repeatedly confronted with the apparent paradox that the very same illegalized

migrants and rejected refugees castigated as an “undesirable” menace, once they have made their way across these violent and lethal borderscapes, are also not infrequently later deemed to be “essential” workers whose very disposability renders them “indispensable” to various well-established labor regimes that routinely satisfy the demands of capital accumulation.

Border Struggles and the Politics of Mobility

Even confronted with the ever more devious and deadly reaction formations of border policing and immigration enforcement by state powers, the constitutive force and autonomy of human mobility must nonetheless be central in our analyses of the veritable making and remaking of our contemporary world. Particularly under the restrictions imposed by states during the pandemic, it is abundantly evident that migratory projects and itineraries have been subjected to often violent reversals as a result of border closures, increasingly militarized border control, more heavy-handed detention regimes, and intensified deportation dragnets. Nonetheless, even under the most repressive conditions and confronted with such cruel reversals, it remains vital to discern the autonomous force and subjective versatility of migrants and refugees who continuously recalibrate their own strategies and tactics in the agonistic effort to realize their mobility projects (De Genova, 2017). Even against the considerable forces aligned to immobilize their migratory projects, which may to greater or lesser extents compel them to revert to a kind of “standby” mode of tactical waiting, migrants’ subjective autonomy remains an incorrigible force. And waiting to be re-activated, their mobilities remain an intractable and always potentially disruptive constitutive power.

The autonomy of migration is inherently and objectively political, inasmuch as migrants and refugees can be understood to act in a manner that asserts the primacy of their human needs over and against the border, the police, the law, and the state. This is objectively the case, regardless of whatever ideas that any given migrant may have formulated consciously or articulated. Recall the thousands of refugees on the march across Europe in 2015, charging one border after another. Or think of the caravans of hundreds of Central Americans who arrived at the U.S.–Mexico border in 2018, triumphantly scaling the border fence in a celebration of their defiance. With the concept of a politics of incorrigibility (De Genova, 2010), I have sought to highlight not only the objective intractability of migrant subjectivity within the workings of border regimes that seek to “manage” or govern human mobility, but also the more overt and explicit subjective manifestations of migrants’ acts of insubordination in such moments of deliberate disaffection and defiance. I designate this as a politics of incorrigibility, moreover, because it confronts state power and its border, immigration, and asylum regimes with the impossibility of changing or “correcting” the abject excess that its own system of illegalization has generated and sustained.

Proponents of the autonomy of migration perspective have advanced the proposition that migration can itself be understood to be a social movement in an objective sense (see, e.g., Bojadžijev & Karakayali, 2010; De Genova, 2010; Mezzadra, 2001, 2004, 2011; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2003, 2013; Mitropoulos, 2006; Papadopoulos, Stephenson, & Tsianos, 2008; Stierl et al., 2021). In the American context, the recurrent mass caravans of recent years, composed of migrants and refugees (mainly Honduran and other Central American women, children, unaccompanied minors, and LGBT persons) signal an increasingly prominent example of such migrant autonomy and collective self-organization as a veritable social movement. These mobilizations have been a repeated and persistent occurrence over the last decade or more, organized more or less annually by the transnational migrant solidarity organization Pueblo Sin Fronteras (People Without Borders), often in the run-up to Easter Sunday to evoke the Viacrucis (“Way of the Cross”) associated with biblical narrative of the passion of Jesus. More recently, the organization of caravans has notably become a generalized tactic. The caravans provide a model of collective, organized migrant/refugee self-protection against the predations of the migratory journey as well as an affirmative protest mobilization against unjust border and immigration policies. It is crucial to note, however, that a very large portion of these are people fleeing violence in numerous forms, including state repression, as well as disasters associated with climate change, and they aspire to petition for asylum. This is precisely the sort of diminutive but nonetheless audacious refugee self-assertion and self-organization that may be called the autonomy of asylum (De Genova, Garelli, & Tazzioli, 2018). In this perspective, the questions of asylum—including the stringent and exclusionary juridical provisions for refugee recognition and protection, and the hegemonic narratives of victimization, persecution, and forced migration—must be rendered apprehensible and commensurate with the irreducibility of refugees constrained but nonetheless substantial autonomy, freedom of movement, and subjectivity. Hence, we may be better attuned to the ways that “asylum seekers petition for protection and at the same time refuse to accept the spatial traps and restrictions imposed by the asylum regime’s ‘rules of the game’” (2018, p. 248). The mass caravans of asylum seekers whose collective mobilization defies the customary and obligatory narratives constructing them as pure victims repudiate and defy the hegemonic expectation that bona fide and legitimate refugees could only ever be the objects of someone else’s pity, compassion, and protection, and instead affirm and boldly assert their subjectivity and autonomy.

At the start of 2021, the first major caravan since the COVID outbreak was on the march. Originating in the Honduran city of San Pedro Sula in the aftermath of the combined economic and social devastation of the pandemic and then two back-to-back hurricanes (Eta and Iota) in November⁸—but also as a more general repudiation of the violence, corruption, and impunity of the Honduran state as well as societal violence and endemic poverty⁹—it was perhaps the largest caravan to date, with estimates ranging from 7,000 to 9,000 participants. Upon crossing the border into Guatemala, the migrants and refugees were met with a militarized response

that culminated on January 17, 2021, in a fierce assault by state security forces wielding crude wooden truncheons hewn from tree branches, and deploying tear gas. Citing the requirement that no one can be granted entry into the country without proof of a negative COVID test, the Guatemalan authorities justified their violent reaction on the basis of “national security,” citing the risk of mass contagion, while also criminalizing the caravan with the allegation that it was “infiltrated” by gang members (La Jornada, 2021). A viral border, indeed.

This, finally, is a crucial dimension of the larger underlying dynamic that the COVID pandemic helps to elucidate: the frenzy of re-bordering instigated in the face of the pandemic has served in fact to unleash a veritable pandemic of viral borders, an infectious and highly promiscuous contagion of border policing tactics that has spread with a viral velocity and ferocity. If the pandemic has supplied the pretext for this convulsion of reactive and reactionary militarized border policing, however, the deeper infrastructure sustaining this extravagant and brutal response lies in the subcontracting of junior partner states such as Mexico or Guatemala to serve as de facto border guards in what is effectively an externalization of the U.S.’s border regime across the full extent of Mexico, Central America, and beyond.¹⁰ For at least the last two decades, the US has persistently deployed its economic power and political force in order to exert pressure and inexorably enlist and command the compliance of other states across the Americas to marshal their border control, detention, and deportation capabilities toward the ends of intensifying the punitive repercussions for autonomous cross-border human mobility. During the same era, the European Union has pursued an analogous strategy in its own extended “neighborhood” of externalized bordering, from Turkey and North Africa to deep into sub-Saharan Africa (Andersson, 2014; De Genova, 2017). In these ways, state powers in the so-called Global North also conveniently outsource the most vicious violence of their border regimes to more overtly “illiberal” states that operate with fewer pretensions of humanitarianism and greater levels of impunity. Thus, both the proliferation of borders on a planetary scale and the increasing consolidation of supra-national border regimes, which encompass and integrate multiple state powers as well as various non-state contenders for sovereign power, emerge as complementary sites for staging the unfinished business and open-ended racialized struggles of our global postcolonial condition. Hence, the viral spread of re-bordering has not been occasioned by a random or sporadic sequence of haphazard interactions and exchanges, but rather by the steady, predictable, and largely systematic integration and consolidation of border regimes that exceed the limits and constraints of any single nation-state’s sovereignty or territorial jurisdiction. This of course is not to suggest that these border regimes are somehow not riddled with their own contradictions and conflicts, but it does nonetheless underscore their transnational, intercontinental geopolitical scope. And furthermore, their contradictions and conflicts operate, in effect, as a kind of convulsive harmonization on a larger scale. The processes of border externalization, which have become entrenched over the last two decades, therefore amplify the viral character of re-

bordering tactics as they reverberate across the transnational geographies of ever increasingly extended and interconnected border regimes. The COVID pandemic has thus served as a kind of Petri dish for the proliferation and accelerated spread of such tactics of re-bordering.

In all of this, however, the proliferation, fortification, and re-entrenchment of borders remains fundamentally a reaction formation, responding always to the primacy of the autonomy and subjective force of human mobility, and the elementary exercise of our existential freedom of movement. And the transnational, intercontinental geopolitical scope of these border regimes is indeed a kind of inverted reflection of the truly global character of these formations of human mobility themselves. That is what the caravans illustrate in a resplendent way. The autonomy of migration and refugee movements repeatedly presents itself as an obstreperous subjective force—and indeed, a pronouncedly postcolonial reprise—enacting various configurations of human life in its active (productive) relation to the space of the planet, and thereby reasserting the primacy of human life as a mobile constituent power in itself.

The COVID-19 pandemic, like any natural disaster, has had far more severe repercussions in terms of human suffering and death as a consequence of the systemic sociopolitical inequalities that unevenly distribute precarity (De Genova, 2020; Faas et al., 2020; Manderson et al., 2021). Predictably, the precaritization of migrants and refugees' lives has been exacerbated as states moved to convert crisis into opportunity and border regimes were promptly re-purposed for the devious imposition and enforcement of a fatuous and cynical logic of “national” quarantine (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2021; Heller, 2021; cf. Brandariz & Fernández-Bessa, 2021). Yet, as this article has underscored, the reaction formations of re-bordering instigated under the pretext of public health emergency measures, and the viral borders that have ensued, have mobilized and deployed exceptional forms of violence and cruelty but in no sense succeed to permanently suppress or exclude the incorrigible subjective force of human mobility that persistently re-stages every spectacle of border enforcement as a site of unresolved struggle.

Notes

1. Here, it is of course noteworthy that these mobilities are also facilitated, more than ever before, by the ingenious uses to which people on the move have adapted smartphones, social media, and other digital platforms toward the coordination and realization of their own autonomous and subjective ends. Migrants' digital practices indeed represent a whole new horizon for research (see, e.g., Álvarez Velasco, 2019; Fernández Labayen & Gutiérrez, 2021; Rae et al., 2018; Scheel, 2019; Stavinoha, 2019).
2. Notably, the Trump administration had already sought to severely curtail asylum, particularly for Central Americans and other Latin Americans, when, on June 11, 2018, then-U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions overruled and vacated

- a 2014 precedent known as the “Matter of A-R-C-G,” a legal precedent allowing for victims of domestic abuse and gang violence to qualify for asylum (see 27 I&N Dec. 316 (A.G. 2018), Interim Decision #3929; available at: <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1070866/download>).
3. Title 42 of the U.S. Code is a public health provision. It gives the Surgeon General the authority to prohibit noncitizens from entering the US from a country where the Surgeon General determines there is a danger of communicable disease being introduced into the US. This practice can be implemented by the Surgeon General for as long as deemed “necessary for such purpose.” When someone is being expelled under Title 42, they cannot apply for asylum.
 4. The Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), also known as the “Remain in Mexico” policy, were implemented starting in January 2019, requiring asylum seekers who arrive at official ports of entry along the U.S. southern border to be returned to Mexico and wait there throughout the entire asylum process. Under these MPPs, more than 70,000 people forced to wait in Mexico for their asylum hearings in the US, initially for months, and for some, for more than a year.
 5. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/25/video/immigration-detention-covid-take-aways.html?campaign_id=2&emc=edit_th_20210426&instance_id=29740&nl=todaysheadlines®i_id=44765954&segment_id=56379&user_id=e4627a0fefba21513c81d0eb6b94cea8
 6. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/28/us/coronavirus-migrants-testing.html?campaign_id=2&emc=edit_th_20210429&instance_id=29815&nl=todayshadlines®i_id=44765954&segment_id=56778&user_id=e4627a0fefba21513c81d0eb6b94cea8
 7. Asylum Cooperative Agreements (ACAs), also known as “safe third country” agreements, were initiated unilaterally by executive fiat by the Trump administration in July 2018, beginning with Guatemala. After Trump threatened to ban Guatemalans with valid U.S. visas and to tax migrant remittances, Guatemala complied. In the following weeks, El Salvador and Honduras signed similar agreements.
 8. The Red Cross estimates that approximately 4.2 million people were affected by the back-to-back hurricanes in November 2020 in Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala.
 9. Honduras has undergone prolonged and ongoing repression ensuing from the military coup in 2009 (Gordon & Webber, 2013).
 10. Peter Andreas notably identified these tendencies toward a “multilateral policy harmonization and a ‘pooling’ of sovereignty to build a formal North American security perimeter (a ‘fortress North America’)” (2003, p. 15). See also Álvarez Velasco (2015, 2020); Brigden and Mainwaring (2016). For a discussion of border externalization in the European context, see

“Externalization” in Casas-Cortes et al. (2015, pp. 73–77); cf. De Genova (2017).

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