



Desert ‘trash’: Posthumanism, border struggles, and humanitarian politics



Vicki Squire*

Department of Politics and International Studies, The University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK

A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Posthumanism
Humanitarianism
Borders
Migration
Materiality

What is the political significance of humanitarian activist engagements with the discarded belongings of migrants? This article explores how bordering practices between states resonate with bordering practices between the human and non-human. It argues that attempts to transform ‘desert/ed trash’ into objects of value are nothing less than struggles over the very category of ‘the human’ itself. Focussing on humanitarian engagements with the objects that migrants leave behind across the Mexico–US Sonoran desert, it explores how the politics of human mobility involves the co-constitution of ‘people’, ‘places’ and ‘things’ in multiple ways. By contrast to a posthumanist analysis that emphasises the agency of material things based on a distinction between the human and the nonhuman, I draw on the work of Karen Barad in order to develop a ‘more-than-human’ account of the materialdiscursive un/becomings of subjects–objects–environments as more or less ‘human’. This allows for an analysis of ‘the human’ as a political stake that is produced through struggles to de/value people, places and things, and that is thus subject to contestation as well as to processes of de- and re-composition. The article assesses the various ways that humanitarian engagements contest processes of dehumanisation through the re-configuration of ‘desert/ed trash’. Rather than emphasising re-humanisation, however, I highlight the importance of analysis and practice that rejects the lure of ‘naïve humanism’ and the problematic over- and under-investments of migrant and human agency that such an approach involves. This is important, the article concludes, in order that the multiplicity of ways by which ‘the human’ is made, unmade and remade is accounted for without assuming either the supremacy or the powerlessness of people.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

What is the political significance of humanitarian activist engagements with the discarded belongings of migrants? This article explores how bordering practices between states resonate with bordering practices between the human and non-human. It argues that attempts to transform ‘desert/ed trash’ into objects of value are nothing less than struggles over the very category of ‘the human’ itself. Focussing on humanitarian engagements with the objects that migrants leave behind across the Mexico–US Sonoran desert, it explores how the politics of human mobility involves the co-constitution of ‘people’, ‘places’ and ‘things’ in multiple ways. By contrast to a posthumanist analysis that emphasises the agency of material things based on a distinction between the human and the nonhuman, I draw on the work of Karen Barad in order to develop a ‘more-than-human’ (Metzger, 2013) account of the materialdiscursive un/becomings of subjects–objects–environments as ‘more or less human’. This allows for an analysis of ‘the human’ as a political stake that is produced through struggles to de/value

people, places and things, and that is thus always subject to contestation as well as to de- and re-composition.

The human/nonhuman distinction can be understood from a Baradian perspective as the product of an observational ‘cut’ through which human subjects and nonhuman objects are produced out of complex intra-acting material-discursive (hereafter materialdiscursive) elements. Barad’s neologism ‘intra-action’ reconfigures the concept of interaction in order to emphasise the inseparability of the various discursive and material elements that lead to particular materialdiscursive configurations of the world (Barad, 2003). Thus, on a Baradian reading, ‘the human’ is conceived as a product of the world in its “open-ended becoming”, rather than as a pre-given category (Ibid: 821; see also Squire, in press-a). In other words, Barad suggests that people neither simply shape the world nor are they simply shaped by it. Rather, people as well as things are made as more or less ‘human’ through the ‘cuts’ that they both make and are made by. Inspired by the work of physicist Niels Bohr, Barad is concerned to highlight the ways in which instruments of observation have a constitutive effect on the world under investigation. Yet this is not a constructivist move in the conventional sense. Rather, Barad’s work invites an approach

* Tel.: +44 (0)24761 51977.

E-mail address: V.J.Squire@warwick.ac.uk.

that recognises the ‘more-than-human’ co-constitution of people, places and things. Translating her thought for a consideration of humanitarian engagements with discarded migrant belongings therefore prompts a consideration of the ways in which ‘the human’ forms a ‘cut’ and instrument of analysis, the effects of which need to be critically unpacked.

In this article I draw on the insights of Barad as a means to analyse ‘the human’ as a political stake in contemporary struggles over migration and mobility. That is, I approach ‘the human’ as produced through struggles to de/value people, places and things, and thus as a category that is subject to contestation as well as to processes of de- and re-composition. I not only explore the ways by which the category of ‘the human’ is contested through humanitarian activist engagements with discarded migrant belongings. So also do I examine how ‘things’ and ‘places’, as well as ‘people’, play a key role in the politics of mobility across the Mexico–US Sonoran desert. In so doing, I argue specifically for an analysis and practice that rejects the lure of ‘naïve humanism’ and the problematic over- and under-investments of migrant (and indeed human) agency that such an approach involves. This is important, the article claims, in order that the multiplicity of ways by which ‘the human’ is made, unmade and remade is accounted for without assuming either the supremacy or the powerlessness of people. Throughout the article I seek to draw on, contribute to, and raise questions for existing analyses of the politics of migrant belongings, while also situating the analysis in the context of a range of broadly ‘posthumanist’ analytical concerns. As such, the article aims to highlight the specificity of a Baradian analysis in terms that demonstrate the significance of multiple contestations and re-configurations of discarded migrant belongings as struggles over the very category of ‘the human’ itself.

The article proceeds in three parts. The first section demonstrates the importance of the Sonoran desert for an analysis of humanitarian politics, and in particular for what I tentatively call a post-humanitarian politics in which people, places *and* things are engaged in contestations over mobility. The Sonoran desert is a key site for contemporary struggles over migration, while the discarded belongings of migrants have featured as key objects through which migration is contested. A consideration of the significance of humanitarian struggles over things at this site is thus timely and politically important. The second section develops a more detailed assessment of the ways by which humanitarian engagements with discarded belongings contest processes of dehumanisation through the re-configuration of ‘desert trash’ or ‘deserted trash’ (hereafter desert/ed trash). In particular, I reflect on humanitarian artistic interventions that re-constitute discarded belongings as indicative of the humanity of migrants. I argue that these ultimately risk invoking a ‘naïve humanism’ that rests on problematic over- and under-investments of migrant agency in which humans are assumed either as supreme or powerless. The third section of analysis focuses on three alternative post-humanitarian engagements with discarded migrant belongings that I suggest invite a more nuanced understanding of the intra-actions of people, places and things: a legal case regarding the placement of water bottles on a nature reserve, a project documenting migrant artefacts, and the cross-border recycling of migrant belongings. I suggest that these interventions demand a reading of post-humanitarianism as a politics of multiplicity that mark the Sonoran desert as a site whereby contestations over the category of ‘the human’ are enacted through things.

Humanitarian politics and the sonoran desert

The Sonoran desert is an important site for an analysis of the contested politics of mobility (Squire, 2011). Cut through by the

Mexico–US border that has been under construction since the mid-1800s (Neivins 2010: 1–46), the desert covers the southwestern parts of the US state of Arizona, the southeastern parts of the US state of California, and the north of the Mexican state of Sonora. To the west it wraps around the northern part of the Gulf of California and borders on the Peninsular Ranges. To the north and northeast, it borders on the Mojave Desert and the Colorado Plateau. To the east and southeast it merges with mountain forests, while to the south it merges with subtropical forestland. The desert is not only split between nation-states and drawn into US–Mexican borderlands. So also is it composed of a variety of military sites, wildlife reserves, private ranches, indigenous lands and detention facilities, to name but a few. The Sonoran desert in this regard is a complex and diverse site, but over recent years has become increasingly marked by the intensification of border control as well as the intensification of humanitarian activism. Indeed, the desert is a site that highlights the precarity of what we understand to be human life, and allows us to see how ‘the human’ moves into and out of being through the intra-action of elements that are material/physical as well as social in their formation. This section thus explores the ways in which the Sonoran desert both shapes and is shaped by social/physical forces or material/discursive dimensions, in diverse ways.

The intensification of border control

The forces of US border control that have emerged across the Sonoran desert over recent years reflect the 1994 Southwest strategy, the aim of which was to make crossing borders illegally so difficult that fewer migrants would attempt the crossing (Neivins, 2010). Otherwise known as ‘prevention by deterrence’, this strategy sought to shift migrants away from urban crossings and toward more remote areas that would render the journey less appealing for those migrants seeking to enter the US (Sundberg, 2008: 873–4). Not only have such developments rendered migrant crossings less appealing, but so also have they rendered them more lethal as migrant deaths have increased over recent years (Burridge, 2009: 79). This is a point to which Roxanne Lynn Doty draws attention in her discussion of the migratory journey following the strategy of ‘prevention through deterrence’:

...crossing the border without authorisation now became an extremely dangerous proposition in which death lurked in every new migrant crossing route, through formidable mountain ranges and along desolate, heat-scorched desert lands.

Doty, 2011: 605

Doty goes on to describe the ‘raw physicality’ of environments such as the desert as having an inherent power, which is mobilised by social and political power in terms that mask the workings of the latter. This, she indicates, is evident where migrants are classified as dying from ‘natural causes’ such as “extreme heat, dehydration, thirst, or exposure to the elements” (Doty, 2011: 607). What Doty highlights here is an insight that a range of scholars have noted: that the physical forces of the desert have increasingly been mobilised as a means to control migrants over recent years, particularly through the strategy of ‘funneling’ those travelling without authorisation through remote and dangerous terrain (Rubio-Goldsmith, McCormick, Martinez, & Duarte, 2006; Shellabarger, Peterson, & Siliis, 2012; Sundberg, 2011; Vanderpol, 2003). While a more-than-human approach conceives human attempts to fully mobilise or master the environment as ultimately impossible, Doty’s analysis nevertheless importantly demonstrates the ways in which the physical forces of the desert are adopted as a

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7493596>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7493596>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)