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CITIZENSHIP DESERTS: REFUGEES AS DIGITAL NOMADS¹²

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Thank you so much for organizing this conference and hello from North Carolina! It is an honor to join you, especially being the first one. So I'm going to be talking about what I call citizenship deserts, which is what I call non-places for abandoned citizens, and I'm going to explain a little bit what those words mean. But what I'm really talking about is, of course, the refugee crisis, as we watch, and we see Syrian, Afghan, Iraqis, Somali refugees, and many others risk their lives to reach Greece. And, of course, it's not just the European problem; we have the ring of Muslims across the Bay of Bengal. And we also look at global warming pattern, and then we hear more and more about environmental refugees.

I'll talk about what I call the citizenship deserts as a way of thinking about the relationship between citizens and non-citizens, and what is happening between the two is not just an issue for scholars of communication, social media, digital nomadism, but really a political and social matter that might give us a glimpse into what the world is becoming.

So I'm not going to talk too much about what a non-citizen is, and what a citizen is. A non-citizen is usually somebody who does not have the rights and benefits, and the privileges associated with a nation, but what I do stress, especially since we're talking about nomadism, is the idea that the position of non-citizens I use is based on two very important principles. One of them is the freedom of movement, which we already heard about as it is so important to nomadism, and which is also related to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, Article 13. But also the duty of hospitality, which is actually Article 14.

The idea they are free to move changes a little bit in the digital world, and I'll get to that, but I also think about non-citizens, especially refugees, and this idea of moving around. I'll encourage us to look back at some of the roots of them, I'm not gonna go in depth in all of them, but they're really related to this idea of escaping, flying, moving away, sometimes even just being pushed away from a place. So the concept of non-citizenship is also very much related to the idea of exile, the idea of moving away from home. And again, every time you're moving away, you also have to be

¹² Videoreport: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJ5mgUVFQS4>

hosted by somebody. So, when I think about non-citizens I encourage the listeners to think about the refugee crisis happening, and all the examples I have on the map that I've created, about the fact that when we think about Syrian refugees we think about the stories that we see digitally. Some of you might follow Twitter accounts, or Facebook stories, or anywhere where you see these posts.

You really think of a non-citizen in two ways: one is the dependent non-citizen, and the other one is the hyper non-citizen. So the idea of a citizenship deserts is the way we abandon non-citizens. There are some key features of what I call deserts, using the metaphors from many philosophers. Many people have written about this before, so this idea of abandonment, and what's happening in the refugee camps right now, shows us that there's a real presence, a real focus on the here and now happening with refugees.

So the concept of time becomes very much about the here and now, refugees don't have a pass, they really sometimes don't have a future. So the focus is on the moment here and now, something is happening in the present time. The focus is also on their presence not just in terms of time, but in terms of corporeality, coming from their body. They are right here. So their physical presence becomes really interesting digitally because, again, there's that immediacy in terms of the presence that we might have not only when we control body. So this idea is relevant to citizenship deserts in the state of abandonment. We usually control body. Think of prisons, think of even airports, in a less dramatic way. So the digital world becomes important because those bodies then become apparent, become real in terms of the way we see them.

So not only it's about time, not only it's about presence. The idea is that in the citizenship deserts we don't think of refugees as anything other than refugees. So this is the ability to see themselves, or see ourselves, as anything else, the idea of imagination, and the idea of thinking of something other than it is now. It becomes really hard. Again, the digital world prevents us from thinking of anything other than the images that we see. When you see a refugee, you don't really think about her as a doctor she used to be in Syria. So the ability to see them other than what they are now becomes really tricky.

So these three key features become important for not only this idea of refugees in a desert but in a digital desert. The metaphor of nomadism becomes really important, because I argue that the stories that we see now exist specifically in the digital world. Think about how many of us would not be able to connect to the stories of refugees. So their stories are just as powerful as they are in this very online digital presence. This nomadism that is real for them in terms of physical movement becomes a digital movement, too.

Now the other part that becomes really important in terms of the digital nomads is that technology is the key to monitoring the refugees and also providing aid. There are many examples, and some of them on my website, about agencies that actually use technology and the digital presence to monitor the movement and to provide aid. And this becomes the key because, when you have so much movement, the control of the movement that I mentioned earlier becomes really hard.

And then the last thing I would say about the digital presence is that the technology and the real kind of digital presence that they have also allows them to become, going back to the corporeality, more real in terms of the sense of normalcy.

So one of the many stories we hear about refugees is asking them what they have with them, what they bring. When you have no sense of home, when you have to leave everything behind, one of the things that often is mentioned is phones or mobiles, something that allows them to connect to the others back at home, back with others. GPS systems are very key when you're walking through Europe, or in the middle of the sea. So it's both in a sense of normalcy, in a sense of safety, and something to become so central to their physical presence is connected with the digital.

Now, the last thing I would say about why this all matters in terms of the citizenship desert metaphor, and how this is particularly important for digital nomads is the arising non-placeless. So we've done so much to think about how sense of place and connection to somewhere physical usually makes us who we are, the refugee crisis, and what I call citizenship deserts are really teaching us how not being somewhere. So this idea of thinking not of just a place physically or even digital-

ly, but how we have to really let go of our traditional understanding of citizenship tie to nationality, tie to a place, tie to a language. All those things are more of the traditional way, and we have to re-imagine them completely. So it is very much a digital task but also a philosophical one, a political one to really think about how non-placeness defines us who we are.

So the two alternatives I always end for my work. One could be: hey, let's forget it. Let's just close all the camps, not make them deserts, let's send everybody home, solve this crisis, which, of course, is a horrible one, but just having everybody find a sense of home. Let's just go home, by the way we're used to. The alternative, the second option is to think about how the refugee crisis, and what's happening in citizenship desert, is really a glimpse into the future for all of us. What we should be thinking about is a lesson in non-placeless - in not being somewhere, whether it's physically, digitally, the connectivity to others. How it comes about in very different ways that are much more about communication and about relationship with others that are not the traditional ways of citizenship.