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# *The More Things Change ...* Governance and Resistance along the Mexico–Guatemala Border

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*With the politics of borders, the socio-economic divide between the United States and Mexico is evident. The geographic proximity to the U.S. makes the Mexico–Guatemala border an extension of the U.S. border enforcement regime. This article argues that the politics surrounding the U.S.–Guatemala border have not necessarily changed, because, at the core, the main objective of these border governance practices is to stop the movement of undesirable bodies (Khosravi 2011). Further, the article argues that the practices of containment force migrants to resist through their movement and seek strategies of survival. By comparing the administrations of Peña Nieto and López Obrador (AMLO) and analyzing the survival strategy of migrant “caravans” through border policy analysis and fieldwork conducted in 2014, I show that this border is a site of struggle between the state’s power and migrants’ forms of resistance. I find that border tactics are influenced by U.S. border enforcement requirements of increased militarization and policing, but also aim to restrict and control certain populations. The result is the perpetual securitization of people and the militarization of pathways. Migrants, however, also employ forms of organizing such as travelling in mass groups to achieve safe passage, thus exercising their agency through movement. The bordering practices and the forms of resistance indicate that this border is a constant site of struggle that requires further examination.*

## Introduction

Compared to the United States–Mexico border, Mexico’s southern border has been described by scholars and social activists (Ruiz et al. 2020; Meyer & Isacson 2019) as long, porous, and sparsely populated. Yet, Mexico’s border policy for its southern border with Guatemala continuously receives both political attention and military aid. To a large extent, this attention has to do with the dependent bilateral relationship between Mexico and the U.S. vis-à-vis prominent issues such as immigration, trade, and drug trafficking. Multiple U.S. administrations have used the important bilateral trade relationship to pressure Mexican governments to act

as a “buffer state”, to contain and restrict northward migration of now primarily Central American migrants coming from the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America: Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (Isacson et al. 2015; Meyer & Isacson 2019). The target populations of these border enforcement policies appear to be those deemed by the nation-state (both Mexico and the U.S.) to be “irregular”, “undocumented”, “unauthorized”, and/or “illegal”. Mexico has actively policed and militarized its southern border, often using multiple security forces at the municipal, state, and federal levels as well as the military (WOLA 2015).

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The result has been a pattern of violent deterrence and containment that places "unauthorized" migrants on dangerous and secluded pathways, increases their vulnerability, and makes them susceptible to human rights violations by the same security forces who are theoretically supposed to be respecting their rights as outlined in Mexico's 2011 *Ley de Migración*.

This article argues that due to the geographic proximity between the U.S. and Mexico, border governance in Mexico has not only been influenced by the U.S. and pressured to be an extension of the U.S. border regime, but the core politics surrounding the Mexico-Guatemala border have not necessarily changed in practice because these bordering tactics aim to stop the movement of "undesirable" populations. These policies of containment are typically presented with political narratives of protection, such as the case with the *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS) in 2014 (Angulo-Pasel 2019). However, on the ground, deterrence and the restriction of movement, rather than protection, appear to be the objectives of the Mexican government. Nevertheless, while containing and disrupting irregular migrant movements may be the principal objectives, these policies and discourse have also created resistance. Thus, this article further argues that the Mexico-Guatemala "border", in all its manifestations of nation-state enforcement (practices of containment, surveillance, intimidation, apprehension, detention, deportation) is a site of struggle, which propels migrants to resist through movement because these border policies do not address the historical and sociopolitical conditions that motivate this migration. Analyzing the entanglement of border practices between Mexico and the U.S. provides the opportunity to examine an overlooked arena of the struggle between power (Mexico's border regime and punitive border practices) and resistance (migrant survival strategies to travel north).

This article primarily uses discourse and policy analysis to observe how border policies, and narratives surrounding those policies, are used to negatively construct and frame "unauthorized" migrants as security threats and/or criminals. This negative framing sets the political agenda by "othering" migrants through fear and justifies punitive policies (Pope 2020). I also use data from fieldwork conducted in 2014 to highlight the effects of these policies on migrants and the struggles they face. The fieldwork consisted of semi-structured interviews with migrants and key informants, participant observation, and reflexive journal field notes. It took place in the states of Veracruz and Oaxaca. Theoretically, I employ critical border studies, which allows us to analyze the intersections of the nation-state's border regime and migrants' experiences and struggles. I utilize critical border theory to question what borders are, who implements border practices and to what end, where borders are located on-the-ground, and how migrants try to regain

control over their movements vis-à-vis the power of the nation-state.

After providing a history of the entanglement of the border relations between the U.S. and Mexico, the article will focus on two cases which showcase how the border between Mexico and Guatemala is not only an extension of the U.S. border regime, but more importantly, is also a site of struggle between those who seek to contain and those who seek to move. The first case involves the two most recent presidencies in Mexico of Enrique Peña Nieto and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). The case of these two presidents offer an interesting juxtaposition in that at first it appeared as though there may have been a break from the "business as usual" of hardline border enforcement through promises and political rhetoric from AMLO, but the practices quickly reverted back to the same tactics and techniques of border control. This case highlights the use of power and containment through discourse and policy. The second case showcases migrant struggle through resistance by examining the migrant "caravan", which has become a prominent strategy of resistance for migrants as a result of border enforcement tactics.

### **Borders and Migration from a Critical Standpoint**

In order to critically examine the dynamics of the southern border in Mexico, this article utilizes critical border theory to understand how irregular migration and migrants have been "othered" and represented as a national security "threat". As such, it is not necessarily all migration that the Mexican government seeks to contain and restrict, but rather a certain type of population or as Khosravi (2011) notes, the control of movement of those deemed "undesirable" by the nation-state. Critical border scholars concentrate on the relationship of migration and security to interrogate how and why "unauthorized" migration has been connected to a state's national security discourse. Within discourse and policy, migration has been socially and politically constructed as a threat to be managed and controlled (Walters 2010). This social construction of threat occurs alongside political framing and agenda setting which presents "unauthorized" migrants negatively as criminals or "bogus" refugee claimants. This has been referred to as a "border spectacle" (De Genova 2013) whereby the state, through border enforcement, enacts exclusion and (re)produces "illegalized" migration as a category. The category of "illegal" is placed on "selected migration streams and bodies while other streams and bodies are marked as legal, professional, student, allowable" (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, 67). Within the Mexican context, for instance, migrants from Central American are differentially excluded by being perceived as thieves, drug traffickers, rapists, among others (Isacson et al. 2015). These narratives, therefore, make it easier to justify militarized border

security policies and enforcement operations. Given the increasing xenophobia and local resentment towards foreigners, Mexican citizens may feel this enforcement is necessary given the threat “unauthorized” migrants supposedly pose to their communities (International Crisis Group 2018).

In essence, the securitization of migration is a part of a wider politicization project, which negatively characterizes “unauthorized” immigrants and/or asylum-seekers as a challenge to national identity, culture, and sense of belonging. Thus, since migrants are framed and perceived as a “threat”, “unauthorized” migration becomes a security “problem” to be dealt with using institutional policies that protect public security. According to Huysmans (2000), the security problem (i.e. “unauthorized” migrants that seek to destabilize public order) comes first and the border policy is an instrumental reaction or a tactic/technique to solve the “problem”. Therefore, the policy “protect[s] the state, its society... against the dangers related to an invasion of (illegal) immigrants and asylum-seekers” (Huysmans 2000, 757).

Framing “unauthorized” migration and migrants as a “threat” also reinforces the concept of “othering” as these migrants are not part of the social cultural fabric. Through the use of “us versus them” political narratives, nation-state governments are able to objectify the other. Additionally, these fabricated “threats” objectify the other using elements of race and culture, which shows existing post-colonial hierarchies (Aradau et al. 2021). “Unauthorized” migration management, therefore, effectively becomes a continuation of the colonial project where foreigners are subjugated and racialized (Walters 2010; Loyd et al. 2012; Walia 2021). Overall, border policy becomes a political project of belonging, of who belongs and who does not (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019). Bordering practices, in turn, can happen everywhere and in everyday life (Balibar 2002), not only at geographic boundaries like the Mexico–Guatemala territorial line. As will be shown below, border enforcement may begin at the southern border but the “border”, in its many manifestations, follows the “unauthorized” migrant throughout their journeys. As such, the border follows and surrounds “unauthorized” migrants because bordering processes and practices have the potential to be materialized anywhere (Nyers 2008; Khosravi 2011).

Alongside constructing negative narratives through “threat” and “othering” discourses, the externalization of border enforcement is another tactic used by sovereign states to contain and restrict “unauthorized” migration and is a key bordering practice that is directly connected to the perception of migration as a “threat”. According to Casas-Cortés et al. (2015), this process is “based on the direct involvement of the externalizing state’s border authorities in other countries’ sovereign territories, and outsourcing of border

control responsibilities to another country’s national surveillance forces” (73). Since nation-state actors view the regulation of this migrant population as imperative to protecting the country’s internal public security, government officials need to ensure that this “threat” does not reach its territorial border. At the same time, if this population does reach and surpass the border, border enforcement has to also shift internally within the nation-state’s borders. These bordering practices have been referred to as promoting a “delocalization” of the border (Walters 2006), a “spatial stretching” of the border (Amoore 2006), and/or the state’s “remote control” (Lahav & Guiraudon 2000) whereby both state and non-state actors may participate in the border enforcement regime. Using externalization as a tactic again challenges the conventional ways we think of “borders” as territorial lines dividing nation-states since policies related to border control can happen anywhere (Balibar 2002) and not just at the official line between two sovereign nation-states.

In addition, by critically exploring borders, we observe that despite the continued attempts by the nation-state to control, borders are difficult to regulate because they are not only fixed territorial lines. States try to enact their sovereign power by executing different tactics and techniques to maintain territorial claims, but borders become fluid and shifting boundaries. The “border” is constituted as a transnational space, an “ambivalent space at the fringe of two societies” (Biemann 2002, 1). By examining these shifting boundaries, we are able to (re)define the border by “giving attention to the fluidity of nation-state borders and the complexity of the experiences of those who live in them and/or across them” (Brambilla 2015). With this standpoint, we can understand migration from the migrants’ perspective. Thus, when observing the Mexico–Guatemala borderlands, we can reconceptualize this space as a site of struggle. A site of struggle between the nation-state’s border regime, which is trying to contain and disrupt “unauthorized” migration, and, migrants, who are resisting the state’s techniques of power and domination and living everyday lives through the struggle for survival. This type of migration can also be looked upon as struggles over human mobility, or the right to move (Sharma 2020). Within this struggle, mobility or movement becomes the means of survival. As Franck (2019) notes, these struggles “shed light on both the consequences and limits of state power in the attempts to control and discipline [migrants]” (22).

Furthermore, if we analyze migrants’ experiences, we learn that they experience multiple struggles in their journeys, but migrants are also capable of their own tactics in order to break away from their sociopolitical conditions and practice their right to move to survive. Similarly, feminist border theory (Aaron et al. 2010; Ruiz-Aho 2011) has paid particular attention to studying marginalized voices, which are usually silent when the referent object is the nation-state. Giving voice

to marginalized populations deconstructs the power hierarchies that borders create and, instead, centres subaltern forms of knowledge. The case of migrant “caravans” is a perfect example of how migrants seek strategies within their control in order to achieve their own goals of mobility. By examining borders through the migrants’ perspective, I show that they are not “threats” but rather claims-making agents, who seek, and to the extent possible, request rights to which they are entitled.

At the same time, however, it is also important not to romanticize migrants as heroines who are able to overcome all struggles of “unauthorized” migration. There continues to be ongoing debates about structure and agency with regards to migrant (im)mobility (Papadopoulos & Tsianos 2013; Squire 2017). Migrants may grapple with bordering practices beyond their control, but they are not simply passive victims in this migration space and can enact forms of resistance albeit within a small space for action (Stierl 2020). Therefore, during their journeys, migrants encounter forms of constrained agency (Angulo-Pasel 2018). In all, a migrant journey may start as an individual movement but can quickly become a collective action. Organized movements, like the so-called Central American “caravans”, may seem like a simple act of walking together. But, as part of the struggle, it also resembles a political mobilization and creates a new socio-political space to express themselves in solidarity. Thus, through the exercise of movement, of walking together, “collectively joining together in movement, and through their movement, [they are] manifesting their grievances or demands by appropriating space and indeed producing a new space through their movement” (Aradau et al. 2021, 16).

In sum, through the cases of the two latest presidents, Peña Nieto and AMLO and the migrant caravans, we will see how these migration struggles interact. But first, I will provide a history of U.S.–Mexico border relations which sets the scene for migrant struggles.

## **A History of Entanglement: Mexico–U.S. Border Relations**

To appreciate the dynamics of the Mexico–Guatemala border, one needs to examine the entangled history and relationship of the border that divides Mexico and the U.S. Like many other borders that divide economically prosperous regions from those labelled as either part of the “developing world”, “Third World”, or the “South”, geographic proximity to more affluent countries creates more impetus for hard security policies. Astutely, Anzaldúa (1987) argues that the U.S.–Mexico border is “*una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (pg. 25). Furthermore, fear and insecurity are strong drivers for the securitization of borders, especially

when “migrants attempt to cross between regions of great economic disparity”(Mountz & Hiemstra 2014, 383). As such, with respect to border enforcement, the Mexican–Guatemalan border can equally be seen as an externalization of the U.S. border. In the last decade, it may also be argued that Central American countries such as Guatemala, for instance, are trying to contain and disrupt the movement of “unauthorized” migrants, and thus also become border enforcers for the U.S. For example, in January 2021, the Guatemalan government ordered the military to stop a migrant “caravan” attempting to cross into Mexico, complete with tear gas (Ochoa et al. 2021). This pattern of militarization within the region reproduces images reminiscent of the civil wars back in the 1980s.

Consequently, with respect to border enforcement relations, Mexico has always had an intertwined relationship with the U.S. As will be further elaborated below with the examples of two Mexican administrations, Mexico has been referred to as a “buffer state” and a border enforcer for the U.S. Therefore, as many critics point out (Ochoa et al. 2021), a central challenge for Mexico continues to be its dependency on U.S. border policy. This relationship has a tense history, which can be traced back to Mexican independence and the controversial war of North American Invasion in 1846 where Mexico lost vast territory to the U.S. Then, during World War II, the *Bracero Program* was implemented between the two nation-states due to the labour shortage in the U.S., where more than 4.5 million Mexican agricultural workers circulated in and out of the U.S. for more than 20 years. Nevertheless, despite the family ties this program cultivated, when the program ended in 1965 and was replaced with the *Border Industrialization Program* and the *Immigration and Nationality Act*, the U.S. government did not provide any legal pathway for immigrants to stay in the U.S. The *Border Industrialization Program* was the beginning of the maquiladora industry along the Mexico–U.S. borderlands, which has created labour exploitation by foreign-owned companies. While an in-depth examination of these events and associated border policies are beyond the scope of this article, they are important in that they highlight Mexico’s asymmetrical relationship with the U.S. and demonstrate a source of resentment among Mexicans vis-à-vis their dependency with respect to the U.S. being the principal source of capital and the country who typically drives the economic relationship.

Furthermore, the constant pressure by the U.S. government to increase border enforcement and its connection to containing “unauthorized” migration was greatly influenced by the national security threat of the drug war and its correlation to “unauthorized” migrants who were perceived as the criminals participating in the drug trade. In the early 1970s, the Nixon administration declared the “War on Drugs” and perpetuated a consistent rhetoric linking migrants and the drug trade,

which furthered criminalized “foreigners” (Nevins 2001). Therefore, Mexico has had a complicated history with respect to migration. In 1976, the Mexican government passed and implemented the *General Law of the Population*. Whereas earlier laws focused on importing foreigners to modernize and increase population growth, these laws were amended to become more restrictive to immigration in 1976. The resulting law was unfavourable to immigrants, especially those found to be entering Mexico without legal documentation. At the same time, however, given the proximity to the U.S., there was a strong history of emigration (Fitzgerald 2005), which was encouraged as a form of development through the use of remittances. The migration-development nexus was in full force in Mexico, and the image of the “migrant hero” (Sørensen 2012) was well promoted among government officials. While the Mexican government persuaded the U.S. to embark on immigration reform for its nationals living in the U.S., the *Law of the Population* criminalized undocumented migration (Garcia Aguilar 2015). In fact, it made it a felony to enter Mexico without legal documents or to be found with an expired visa; crimes punishable for up to ten years imprisonment (Gonzalez-Murphy & Koslowski 2011). This hypocrisy was recognized both internally and externally as pressure mounted by civil society organizations in Mexico, and U.S. government officials, to “practice what you preach”.

The negative framing of irregular migrants continued into the 1990s. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was implemented in 1994, created contradictions where policies facilitated and increased trade and opened markets and access to cheap Mexican labour, but paid little attention to allowing the mobility of this cheap Mexican labour. Furthermore, NAFTA's economic policy increased the number of Mexican farmers and workers seeking job opportunities by privatizing collective farms thus eliminating agricultural subsidies, deregulating agriculture, and selling land to foreign investors (Fernández-Kelly & Massey 2007). While NAFTA created disparities, inequalities, and displacement among Mexicans, the U.S. government implemented several border enforcement operations along the U.S. Southwest border, including Operation Hold the Line/Blockade (1993) in El Paso, Texas and Operation Gatekeeper (1994) in San Diego, California. The social construction of the criminal irregular migrant was distinct from the trusted business travelers whose movements were not only allowed but encouraged with the implementation of NAFTA. Thus, the securitization of the border and militarization of border enforcement is dependent on the population in question. Prior to NAFTA, U.S. border policy had already begun a more restrictive pattern with the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, where the government actively criminalized the hiring of “unauthorized” workers by U.S. employers and began to increase funding for Customs and Border Protection (CBP) as well as Border Patrol (BP) agents.

When Vicente Fox came to power in 2000, there was increasing pressure to change restrictive immigration laws in Mexico. The Fox administration was able to secure bilateral immigration reform discussions with George W. Bush but the attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11) halted all negotiations from moving forward. With respect to migration management, the norm in both the U.S. and Mexico became to increase the securitization of “unauthorized” migrants. Prior to 9/11, however, the national security discourse vis-à-vis irregular migrants had been established by the Fox administration with the implementation of *Plan Sur*. However, its objectives were remarkably reinforced after 9/11 as *Plan Sur*'s intentions clearly linked the control of illicit flows, such as drugs and arms, as well as “unauthorized” migrants by explicitly promoting the control and vigilance of migration flows “from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to the southern border” (Garcia Aguilar 2015, 60). This political narrative illustrates how “unauthorized” migration becomes embedded in the national security discourse. The securitization of migrants in Mexico continued in 2002, when the U.S. and Mexico established the *Smart Border: 22 Point Agreement* (Office of the Press Secretary 2002), which sought to enhance control and security at Mexico's southern border. Throughout these policies, civil society groups within Mexico continued to criticize the government for its lack of commitment to the protection of migrant rights in favour of national security objectives and kept pressing the government to develop reforms to its restrictive migration policies.

This explicit conflation between “unauthorized” migrants, and illicit flows like illegal drugs and arms was not only an increasingly accepted narrative among the public, but was further solidified by the Calderon (2006–2012) administration, when together with U.S. support, it launched the *Mérida Initiative* and the “war on drugs and organized crime”. The *Mérida Initiative* was a foreign aid package that combined economic, technical, and intelligence aid in order to combat organized crime (which included transnational migration) all in the name of “defending sovereignty and national security” (Garcia Aguilar 2015, 61; Benítez Manaut 2011). One of the main pillars of the policy, for example, included creating a 21st Century Border Structure which would “facilitate *legitimate* commerce and movement of people while curtailing the illicit flow of drugs, people, arms, and cash” [emphasis added] (Ocampomi 2021). As a result, since 2006, Mexico experienced an extreme rise in violence throughout the country. During Calderon's tenure, over 40,000 people were killed in military operations and inter-cartel violence (Mercille 2011). The following sections examine the two latest Mexican administrations to highlight the exercises of power the nation-state enacts to control and contain “undesirable” migrant populations and the correlation to U.S. political pressure to extend its border enforcement regime; and, how migrants, despite these border tactics, exercise their rights and resist through organized collective movement.

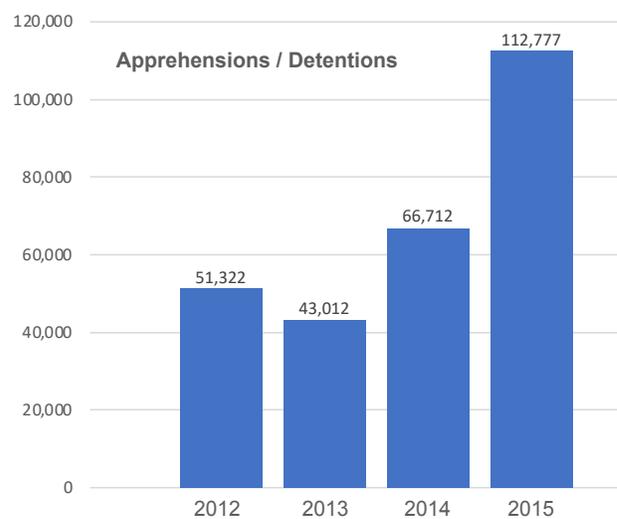
## Exercises of Nation-State Power

### Peña Nieto’s Border Policy

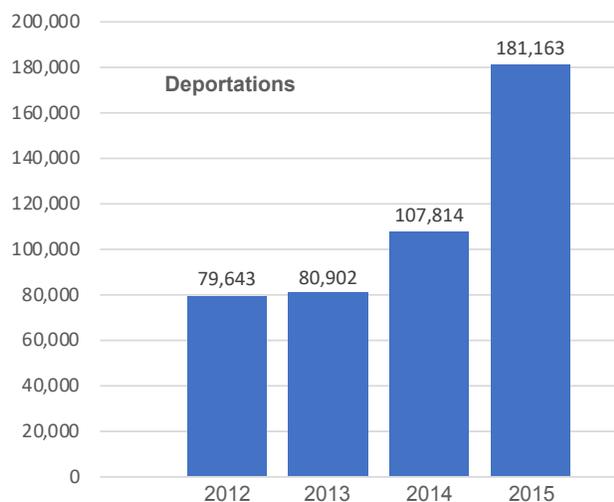
With respect to border enforcement, the Peña Nieto administration followed the security patterns set forth by the Calderon administration. Enrique Peña Nieto is perhaps most (in)famously known for the border policy the *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS) or the Southern Border Plan, which highlights how discourse and policy continued to be used to “other” and contain “unauthorized” migrants. Together with the Guatemalan administration, the PFS was launched in July 2014. The PFS was the latest iteration of Mexican border policy, which although claimed to want to achieve migrant safety, protection, and the respect of migrant rights, actually had detrimental effects on migrants crossing Mexico. Furthermore, when examining the events surrounding the implementation of this policy, we discover that this governance directive was plainly influenced by what was happening in the U.S. borderlands during the same time period. Until this point, Peña Nieto’s immigration policy had been fairly discreet. As a *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) candidate, migration did not appear to be a central campaign issue, nor initially a top priority for his administration (Alba 2013).

According to the Peña Nieto government, the principal objective of the PFS policy was to “protect and safeguard the human rights of migrants entering and transiting through Mexico and to regulate international crossings so as to increase the development and security of the region” (Presidencia de la Republica 2014). This objective, however, appears to promote two seemingly contradictory narratives—one which seeks to protect the human rights of migrants and the other which increases the security of the region. When the PFS was launched, it outlined five distinct action items. Four of the five items relate to border security and controlling migratory movements; all, however, in the name of the migrant’s safety and protection. The principal aim appeared to be to devote funds and enforcement resources to the southern border region to lower the number of U.S.-bound “unauthorized” migrants (Castañeda 2016). This plan involved increasing checkpoints along major train routes and highways travelling northbound and setting up raids within the interior of the country where migrants may be found (ie. hotels, motels, etc.). In particular, the enforcement operations on the cargo train referred to as “La Bestia” were most visible where “migration authorities... blocked migrants from boarding trains, [and] pulled migrants off of trains” (Isacson et al. 2015). In all, this immigration security crackdown along the southern border prompted concerns from international organizations and non-governmental organizations about the excessive use of force by Mexican authorities (WOLA 2015; Boggs 2015; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) 2015).

Once more, the context behind this policy is important to note as it highlights the entanglement of Mexico’s border security relationship with the U.S. During the summer of 2014, the Obama administration established bilateral negotiations with the Mexican government after the U.S. declared a humanitarian crisis at its southern border due to the high volume of unaccompanied children that were attempting to achieve safe passage into the U.S. There was intense media attention surrounding this “crisis”, which showed overwhelmed Border Patrol personnel and facilities as well as discontent among the public in border states (Conlon 2014). The Obama administration sought cooperation and applied political pressure to the Peña Nieto administration to contain the “flow” of irregular migrants travelling to the U.S., ostensibly “stretching” its border enforcement objectives and promoting the use of Mexican border enforcement as a buffer state or a stopgap for “unauthorized” migration. The security crackdown was successful in apprehending and deporting thousands of migrants coming from Central America with approximately a 71 percent increase in apprehensions between July 2014 and June 2015 compared to the same period the previous year (Isacson et al. 2015). Furthermore, in 2015, Mexico apprehended more Central American migrants when compared to its U.S. counterpart: 174,529 apprehended in Mexico (SEGOB-INM 2015) versus 145,316 apprehended by the U.S. (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2016). As can be observed from Figures 1 and 2 below, it is clear that the consequences of the PFS from Mexico’s perspective was to implement a policy of containment in the southern border region and boost deportations.



**Figure 1: Apprehensions/Detentions at the Southern Border.** Southern border states included in this chart are Chiapas, Campeche, Tabasco, and Quintana Roo. Source: SEGOB-INM 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 (Compiled by author).



**Figure 2: Mexico's Deportations by Year.** Source: SEGOB-INM 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 (Compiled by author).

### *AMLO's Border Policy*

When the Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) administration came into power in December 2018, there were high expectations among civil society leaders that the hard security policies vis-à-vis “unauthorized” migrants that Peña Nieto had implemented would change (Ruiz et al. 2020). First, politically, AMLO was very different from his predecessor. He was from the progressive party, MORENA, which he founded in 2014 after losing two presidential runs, citing electoral fraud. In comparison to the PRI party, the MORENA party represented a progressive leftist position, which advocated for members of the underclass, equality, and social justice (Chouza 2014). Second, with regards to “unauthorized” migration, AMLO advocated for a social and economic development approach in the southern border region to address the root causes of migration rather than Peña Nieto’s security approach. His objective was to foster development with major infrastructure and social projects, which in turn would help reduce migration (Vega 2019). Originally, President AMLO promised to promote a more humanitarian approach to migration. His new administration pledged to change Mexico’s migration policy and placed migrant rights defenders in key policy positions (Ruiz et al. 2020). Thus, despite the previous administration’s punitive detention and deportation policies and U.S. President Donald Trump’s relentless attacks on “illegal” immigration and xenophobic remarks towards both Mexican and Central American migrants, AMLO, even prior to his election victory, campaigned on the need to protect Central American migrants and defend their human rights (López Obrador 2018).

Nevertheless, the complex and dependent border relationship between the U.S. and Mexico proved to make the push towards a more humanitarian approach

to “unauthorized” migration difficult. What has been dubbed the “Trump Effect” in the U.S. had negative consequences on Mexican border policy. In particular, there are two relevant factors that have directly influenced border policy, and both culminated with the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or the “Stay in Mexico” policy. First, there was the “Zero Tolerance” policies, which began to be formulated in 2017, but would not be formally introduced until April 2018. The immigration policies associated with “Zero Tolerance” further criminalized irregular migrants by convicting any migrant with a felony crime if they crossed into the U.S. unlawfully. This set of policies not only justified the separation of families, but also reproduced the divisive “othering” narrative and xenophobic rhetoric of the “illegal” migrant.

Second, there was the migrant exodus from Central America that was referred to as “migrant caravans” and began in October 2018. The Trump administration continued to fabricate an “invasion” narrative using fear of criminals trying to attack the U.S. as a justification for its policies. Again, there was a clear pattern of associating this population with a national security emergency, a narrative that was “reliant on creating a sense of siege” (Pope 2020). In Mexico, these events were occurring during AMLO’s presidential campaign and then while he was President-Elect. Even before he assumed the presidency, however, AMLO was vocal with his support of the members of the migrant “caravans” and offered to provide them with humanitarian protections. Once in office in January 2019, the *Instituto Nacional de Migración* (INM), under the direction of the AMLO administration, began granting humanitarian visas with the right to work to “caravan” members who entered through Tapachula, Chiapas (Joseph et al. 2019). This humanitarian visa process was much different than the more arduous application process for humanitarian visas during the PFS era under Peña Nieto, which could take up to 5 months to obtain and did not provide a work permit (Angulo-Pasel 2021). The INM named this humanitarian visa process the *Programa Emergente de Emisión de Tarjetas de Visitante por Razones Humanitarias* [Emergent Program for the Granting of Visitor for Humanitarian Reasons Cards], which included an expedited screening and interview process and typically took five days (Ruiz et al. 2020). The program proved to be very successful in that by January 23, 2019, there were already 8,727 applications for this humanitarian visa (Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) 2019).

Yet, the Trump administration’s constant focus on “unauthorized” migration coming from Mexico and the multiple migrant “caravans” in the early months of AMLO’s presidency, escalated the political pressure from the U.S. This pressure, along with an overwhelming number of applicants for this new type of humanitarian visa, abruptly halted AMLO’s policy prerogatives. More specifically, the policy shift from the promised humane

approach to "unauthorized" migration towards more enforcement-based tactics began to take shape after President Trump threatened to impose escalating trade tariffs on Mexican goods entering the U.S. if the Mexican government did not do more to stop the flow of "illegal" migrants coming to the U.S.-Mexico border; thus, laying bare the dependent economic relationship between the two nation-states. The tariffs would start at 5 percent and could eventually increase to 25 percent (Shear & Haberman 2019). The AMLO government, aware that the U.S. is Mexico's number one economic trading partner, knew these tariffs would have detrimental effects on the economy and its popular support. Thus, after a series of bilateral negotiations, all of the factors mentioned above culminated in the *U.S.-Mexico Joint Declaration and Migrant Protection Protocols* (MPP), otherwise known as the "Remain in Mexico" policy. With this agreement, the Mexican government would actively crackdown on migration enforcement at the Mexican southern border and the U.S. would be able "to send asylum seekers back to Mexico to wait for their immigration hearings in the United States" (Meyer & Isacson 2019, 8). According to official statistics from the INM, apprehensions and detentions in the southern states which make up the borderlands with Guatemala (Chiapas, Campeche, Tabasco, Quintana Roo) and overall deportations rose again: apprehensions and detentions from 73,176 in 2018 to 98,076 in 2019; and deportations from 115,686 in 2018 to 149,812 in 2019 (SEGOB-INM 2018; 2019). Once more, similar to the Peña Nieto administration, the new AMLO government found itself acting as an external border enforcer for the U.S., and border practices reverted back to displaying the nation-state's enforcement power.

#### *The Role of the National Guard*

Shortly after the bilateral agreement was reached between the two countries in June 2019, the threat of tariffs was withdrawn, and the border enforcement efforts increased. The AMLO administration employed a new border enforcement technique by deploying the recently created National Guard to the Mexico-Guatemala border to stop "unauthorized" migrants from entering Mexico. Reminiscent of the PFS policy, this militarized security force set up checkpoints along major highways and train routes. There was also accounts that immigration officials raided migrant shelters (Lakhani 2019). Overall, in Mexico, there were and are many concerns with this new security force. First, despite claims to the contrary, the National Guard consists primarily of military or ex-military personnel who have been deployed to assist in migration enforcement. According to a report by the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), the National Guard was to assume all federal policing functions where "the government expected that most Federal Police agents would move over to the new force, but this has not been the case" (Meyer 2020). Instead, three quarters of the National Guard members are from the army or

the navy. Given their broad powers in civilian policing and public security tasks, there are major concerns with using army and navy soldiers due to the lack of accountability and the expanding militarized nature of public security in Mexico (Meyer 2020). In June 2019, the National Guard deployed approximately 21,500 officers as part of the surge of border enforcement operations along the southern border (Ruiz et al. 2020). However, using guardsmen for migration issues further militarizes the border and raises human rights concerns due to the lack of human rights training or interaction with vulnerable populations the guardsmen receive (Meyer & Isacson 2019). As a result, there have been multiple reports of members of the National Guard "assisting" the INM in border enforcement operations, actively preventing migrant "caravans" from travelling to and through Mexico, including physically abusing migrants with riot gear, using tear gas, and forcing them on buses to take them back to Tapachula (Abbott 2020; Tucker 2020; Meyer 2020).

#### **Exercises of Migrant Resistance**

Altogether these border enforcement policies affect the lived experiences of migrants who attempt to achieve safe passage throughout Mexico. They encounter a journey of violence, which begins as soon as that decision is made to migrate; as they prepare to enter a clandestine space. Through migrant knowledge networks, they are aware that their journey will be long and dangerous, but they still move. This act of moving is a form of resistance; they move despite nation-state governments telling them otherwise. Throughout my fieldwork, I found that despite their struggles, migrants are aware that movement is their strategy for survival. They know they are going against the power and laws of the nation-state, but they still move. Thus, through their movement, migrants challenge the border regime and existing structures because that is how they survive. No matter how small, the power to move and resist borders is still there. I encountered migrants who had been victims of physical and sexual assault, as well as kidnapping and extortion. The journey may involve walking for days through the most secluded fields and developing blisters the size of rocks on the bottom of one's feet and/or it may involve trying to board a deadly freight train as a mode of transportation, which can amputate or kill people. Overall, it involves palpable fear and distrust of anyone and everyone along the journey, including the authorities that are supposed to "protect" but instead abuse. The journey is full of precarity, liminality, and vulnerability, but they still move.

Within this migration space, which is filled with struggles between those who seek to contain and control, and those who seek to move, migrants find strategies to survive their migratory journeys, reclaim control over their movements, and overcome the power of the "border". "Unauthorized" migrants move because they have been

forcibly displaced by various forms of structural violence, which excludes and marginalizes them (Hyndman 2004). Bordering practices that disrupt and criminalize a population intercept rather than address root causes of forced displacement and migration. For instance, not only are there great economic inequalities in Central America, but this inequality is caused by a history of exploitation and rural displacement, which makes it difficult to obtain a sustainable livelihood. Initially, AMLO appeared willing to address socio-economic development but his policies reverted back to containment.

Consequently, the Guatemala–Mexico border is a site of constant struggle between the power of the nation-state and the strategies of survival and resistance migrants use to travel north. One such strategy is what has been referred to as the migrant “caravan”, although migrant activists choose to call these movements a migrant exodus to bring attention to the unlivable situation this population faces. Caravans have become more visible, larger and more widely discussed. This is due to the increased use of social media (i.e. Facebook) for organizing, increased safety for migrants, and increased media attention (Sieff & Partlow 2018). This form of organization and migrant resistance became especially known in October 2018 when it received ample media attention and wrath from the Trump administration. This particular migrant “caravan” grew to approximately 4,000 people and its members were primarily from Honduras (Roberts 2018). Nonetheless, it is important to note that these movements are not necessarily new, but rather, have gained more momentum and recognition in the last five years. In fact, for the last decade or so, there have been yearly migrant “caravans” throughout Mexico, two prominent ones being the *Viacrucis Migrante* which began in 2010 (Garrido 2018) and the mothers of missing migrants, which travels north every year looking for their missing loved ones (Kron 2016). Civil society groups, like *Pueblo Sin Fronteras*, typically organize these movements as “an affirmative protest mobilization against unjust border and immigration policies” (Tazzioli & De Genova 2020, 877).

There are three prominent reasons why migrants use this survival strategy. One has to do with the issues of security and safety. “Unauthorized” migrants are preyed upon by both state and non-state actors. Members of criminal gangs frequent secluded areas to kidnap and extort migrants. Similarly, federal, state, and municipal authorities abuse and extort people along migrant trajectories. During my fieldwork, I encountered many migrants with stories about their border violence. One story involved a 14-year-old boy who I met at a migrant shelter. Like others, he was escaping violence in his home country of Honduras. When I met him, he was in the process of applying for a humanitarian status in Mexico because he had been gang raped by a group of men. Another story involves a woman, also from Honduras, who was fleeing her country without her children in hopes of finding safe passage to the U.S. to

claim asylum. She wanted to immigrate to the U.S. and then bring her children to join her. When I met her, she was travelling with a man, who I first believed was her spouse. Upon speaking with them, however, I found out that this man was setting out on his journey again within the next couple of days while she was staying behind. Up until this point, they had been travelling together and pretending to be a couple so that the woman would not be harassed or sexually abused by others on their journey. In return for this “protection”, there was an understanding that there was an exchange of sexual relations. Given the gender-based violence that occurs on the journey through Mexico, she felt safer in this partnership. Thus, “caravans” allow migrants to travel in groups which affords them more security during their journeys versus travelling alone. There is strength and safety in numbers, especially when there is press attention. Together these migrants also show resistance to border policies by using their right to move together despite governments’ attempts to stop them.

Second, travelling in large groups that have been organized by civil society means that migrants do not have to acquire the services of coyotes and/or *polleros*. Coyotes/*polleros* are migration facilitators who charge a fee in order to help smuggle migrants through Mexico and into the U.S. As border enforcement and control continues to escalate, the need for coyotes and the cost of acquiring their services also increases. As pathways in Mexico become more violent and dangerous, the service becomes more expensive to account for the risk involved in the journey; services can range from \$5000 to \$10,000 dollars (Isacson et al. 2015). Lastly, travelling in large groups, which are organized by civil society, is a collective social protest of resistance that fosters solidarity among its members. Within this migrant struggle, this form of collective mobility is a social movement that serves to call attention to, and bears witness to the gang violence, poverty, inequality, and environmental devastation its members endure (Wurtz 2020). It is a form of resistance that seeks to identify social and political demands and fights for the rights of its members; the right to move, the right to seek asylum, the right to a life free from violence, the right to survive. Therefore, through the exercise of movement and resistance, migrants that organize and walk in “caravans” are not victims, but claims-making agents who can regain control of the narrative by demanding the rights of asylum to which they are entitled. These social movements will continue as a strategy as long as the conditions in their home countries persist.

## Conclusion

In sum, Mexico’s southern border with Guatemala is an important site of struggle, which requires more attention. When we examine this border, we discover that territorial borders are but a line on the sand (Parker & Vaughan-Williams 2009). In reality and

on-the-ground, this border manifests in many forms; it is an invisible wall. It is the checkpoints along highways and train routes, it is the raids at motels where migrants frequent, it is tear gas and riot gear worn by National Guard members, and, paradoxically it is primarily said to be done in the name of the "protection and safety" of migrants. Although this border is an important site of study, it is also similar to other borders around the world where bordering practices are used as techniques of containment to restrict the movement of unwanted populations.

My research shows that when borders divide a relatively affluent state from one deemed to be a "developing" country, hardline security policies through "othering" discourse and policy are justified and endorsed to deter "unauthorized" migrants. It also shows that when we examine the border as bordering practices, we can easily observe how the more affluent state can use its political and economic leverage to extend and spatially stretch its border enforcement regime into an entire region and to multiple territorial borders. The Mexico-Guatemala border becomes an overlooked site of struggle, which shows the relations of power and resistance. By analyzing the Peña Nieto and López Obrador administrations, we can see how the border security relations between the U.S. and Mexico are entangled, but also how the nation-state enforces its power through containment tactics. By examining migrant strategies of survival, like migrant "caravans", we discover how this nation-state power interacts with migrants' forms of resistance.

Even though irregular migrants suffer countless numbers of human rights violations, from sexual assaults and beatings, to kidnapping and extortion, they are agents with rights and display resilience despite their vulnerabilities. As long as the root causes of corruption, violence, inequality, and poverty, among others, are not legitimately acknowledged and addressed, migrants will continue to move north for a sustainable livelihood and a life that is free from violence. Their movement is their survival strategy. Their movement is their form of resistance to demand basic human rights. Travelling in "caravans" demonstrates their solidarity, their agency as claims-making individuals, and their commitment to finding a better life. This is a form a social protest that calls attention to their living conditions and also actually takes into account migrants' safety and security.

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