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Subordinating Space: Immigration Enforcement, Hierarchy, and the Politics of Scale in Mexico and Central America

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In recent years, security and immigration enforcement has expanded rapidly throughout Mexico. From checkpoints and patrols to a vast system of detention and deportation, Mexican officials have implemented far-reaching measures to curtail international migration from Central America. Many of these efforts have been concentrated along the Mexico–Guatemala border and deep within southern Mexico, culminating in Programa Frontera Sur, a militarized approach to border security implemented in 2014. In this article, we explore how security and immigration enforcement in Mexico rely on spatial hierarchies that divide north and south. The practice of security and immigration enforcement has received significant attention across many disciplines. The notion of spatial hierarchies and the ways in which scalar differentiation impinges upon well-being has been less covered. As we show, these hierarchies partition North and Central America according to colonial modes, subordinating the latter as inferior while working across global, national, and local scales. Crucially, the linkages between securitization and the spatialization of hierarchies provide insights into nation-building and regional identity, where Mexico and the United States are increasingly designated as separate from South and Central America.

Introduction

Recently, a series of so-called “crises” along the United States–Mexico border have drawn significant attention to bordering practices, immigration enforcement, and international migration in the U.S. In Summer 2014, thousands of women and children from Central America arrived at the U.S.–Mexico border along the Rio Grande Valley in south Texas. While many of these arriving migrants voluntarily turned themselves over to immigration authorities to claim asylum,

the Obama administration was quick to declare “an urgent humanitarian situation” and “crisis on the border”, requesting more than \$3.7 billion to expand detention facilities, increase surveillance efforts, and hire additional Border Patrol agents (USBP) and immigration judges (Shear & Peters 2014; Rose 2019). This emphasis on deterrence, rather than aid or assistance, exposed not only the federal governments’ inability to respond to the sudden increase in migration

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but also its unwillingness to accommodate migrants from Central America, as the majority of these asylum-seekers were apprehended, detained, and eventually deported (Preston & Archibold 2014).

Less than four years later, another so-called "crisis" erupted at the U.S.–Mexico border as a large caravan of migrants set off from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, in hopes of reaching the U.S. For years, advocacy groups in Mexico and Central America had organized similar caravans to protect migrants as they travelled north; however, in 2018, the event kicked off a media frenzy in the U.S., igniting public debate over international migration and border and immigration enforcement once again (see for example: Agren & Holpuch 2018; Semple 2018a). The Trump administration described the movement of people from Central America as a "national emergency" and "invasion", mobilizing military personnel at the U.S.–Mexico border to intercept them (Shear & Gibbons–Neff 2018). Trekking across Mexico on foot, the caravan travelled approximately 3,000 miles (4,828 kilometres) before reaching their destination in Tijuana, Mexico, where they were placed in temporary encampments and shelters along the border. Many migrants eventually returned home or settled in Mexico, while others waited weeks and months to claim asylum in the U.S. (Alvarez 2019). By the end of 2018, Trump officials had announced the Migration Protection Protocols (MPP), or "Remain in Mexico" program, effectively sealing off the U.S.–Mexico border from Central American migrants and asylum-seekers alike (Tackett et al. 2018).

Together, these events reflect the growing importance of Central American migration and an ever-expanding landscape of border and immigration enforcement aimed at impeding, incapacitating, and policing migrants across North America. The U.S., for example, has steadily fortified and militarized its southern border (Andreas 2009; Jones 2011, 2012), while extending the reach of immigration enforcement and surveillance far into the U.S. interior by fusing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) with city, county, and state police departments (Coleman 2009; Menjívar 2014). Meanwhile, a growing, robust, and fully private industry of immigrant detention has emerged to satisfy the U.S. federal government's appetite for holding and incarcerating migrants (García Hernández 2019; Loyd & Mountz 2018; Macías-Rojas 2016). Yet, Mexico has also worked simultaneously to restrict migration from Central America. From blockades and immigration checkpoints to a formidable system of detention and deportation, Mexican officials have rapidly expanded policing and border and immigration enforcement throughout the country. Such efforts have included a series of high-profile operations beginning in 2001 and culminating in *Programa Frontera Sur*, a far-reaching plan authorized in 2014 by then-president Enrique Peña-Nieto. Under this strategy, and bolstered by the U.S., Mexico has fortified its own southern border with

Guatemala and deployed hundreds of immigration authorities to the south alongside blockades, checkpoints, and patrols, converting this region into an expansive dragnet and enforcement operation targeting Central American migrants (Isacson et al. 2014, 2015). Since its implementation in 2014, Mexican authorities have apprehended hundreds of thousands of migrants across southern Mexico (Fredrick 2018). By 2015, rates of deportation in Mexico had nearly doubled over the previous year, and since the program's announcement in 2014, the Mexican government has removed more than half a million migrants, far exceeding deportation efforts in the U.S. and in some years, removing twice as many migrants (Bonello 2015; Fredrick 2018). Therefore, Mexico, alongside the U.S., is now key in controlling, monitoring, and regulating migration across Central and North America. However, while ample geographic attention has been given to bordering practices and immigration enforcement in the U.S. context (see: Ackleson 2005; Coleman 2007, 2009; Coleman & Kocher 2011; Winders 2007), much less has been devoted to the ways in which these mechanisms operate in Mexico, Central America, and beyond (see: Brigden 2018a; 2018b; Van Ramshorst 2021; Vogt 2018, 2020; Walker 2018).

In this manuscript, we examine *Programa Frontera Sur* and related Mexican immigration policy to uncover the spatial dimensions and contested politics of immigration enforcement in Mexico and beyond. Drawing from a decolonial framework, which refers to the historical process of divestment from colonial power replete with its forms of knowledge and ways of understanding the world (Noxolo 2017; Radcliffe 2017), we explore how Mexican immigration enforcement relies on a form of "spatial hierarchies" that divide North America from Central and South America through colonial logics. Here, we define spatial hierarchies as the imagined economic, political, and social ordering of territorial spaces. While the notion of hierarchy, particularly as it relates to scale, has been utilized by geographers for some time (see for example: Delaney & Leitner 1997; Jonas 1994; Massey 1994; Smith 1992), it has rarely been employed in relation to bordering practices and immigration enforcement (see: Walker & Winton 2017). As we demonstrate below, Mexican and U.S. officials mobilize such hierarchies and a colonial imagination to partition North America from Central and South America, subordinating Central and South America as inferior while simultaneously reinforcing North America's economic, political, and social superiority. Our use of spatial hierarchies is particularly useful, we argue, in signaling a distinction from the mere "externalization" or "outsourcing" of borders and immigration enforcement (see for example: Menjívar 2014; Vogt 2020), allowing for a more nuanced apprehension of these historical processes across multiple scales. In addition, our attention to spatial hierarchy and its production through Mexican policy evades the well-worn characterization of the U.S. as



sole perpetrator of geopolitical harms. This is not meant to divest responsibility from the U.S., who has flexed its colonial power in strategic and violent ways throughout history (see: Grandin 2004; 2006; Rabe 2012; Schoultz 1998). Rather, it is to show how states such as Mexico and the U.S. are concurrently imbricated in contemporary modes of colonial oppression, especially regarding the control, monitoring, and regulation of international migration across Central and North America.

To develop these arguments, the paper is structured as follows. First, we review the literature in geography on hierarchy and the politics of scale. Second, we provide the historical context and geopolitical backdrop through which southern Mexico and the Mexico–Guatemala border emerged. As we show, the historical creation of the Mexico–Guatemala borderlands has been contingent upon colonial practices and a unique form of Mexican exceptionalism that has sought to differentiate Mexico from its southern neighbors. Third, drawing from policy analysis, we examine how border and immigration enforcement in Mexico produce and rely on spatial hierarchies by examining three key policies: *Plan Sur*, the Mérida Initiative, and *Programa Frontera Sur*. In doing so, we demonstrate how bordering practices and immigration enforcement produce a spatial imaginary in which Mexico and the U.S. are increasingly designated as superior and set apart from Central and South America. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on the implications of these hierarchies for understanding more recent developments, including the Trump administration’s Migration Protection Protocols (MPP), or “Remain in Mexico” program, and the Biden administration’s attempts to undo it.

The Mexico–Guatemala Border and Beyond

The construction of spatial hierarchies is rooted in the long *durée* of Mexico’s economic and political relations with its international neighbors. Current policy and practice did not emerge in a vacuum, and the current configuration of the border was forged as part of the national imagining and making of Mexico in the 19th century. Such an endeavor—the national construction of Mexico—as it were, necessarily entailed differentiating it from its southern counterpart, Guatemala. Such processes of nation-building, which render borderlands marginal and peripheral to the territorial state, become integral to the assertion of sovereignty in historically entangled areas. The state of Chiapas, in particular, illustrates the contested history of this region, reminding us anew that political boundaries are often instantiated through top-down forces operating quite far from everyday cross-border connections.

Throughout the colonial period, Chiapas was part of the *Capitanía* of Guatemala. Following independence from Spain in 1821, Mexico and Guatemala both sought to influence Chiapas. After Chiapas joined Mexico in

1824, Guatemala continued its territorial claim with some regions of Chiapas favoring joining Guatemala (Kenyon 1961). The boundary treaty of 1882 settled on the border between Chiapas and Guatemala and was finalized in 1895 (Romero et al. 1897). The Soconusco region, located in the southwest corner of Chiapas, maintained its autonomy until 1842.

Although the administrative divisions had been implemented on the map, the lived reality for much of the population remained one of interconnection, porosity, and unclear political demarcation. So much so in fact, that monuments were installed by the International Commission of Limits and Water in the 1960s to signal the separation of the two nation-states. Inhabitants often did not know which side of the border they were on. Galemba’s (2018) ethnographic work captures how those on both sides trace their roots to Guatemala but cross-border flows in both directions occurred at different political junctures. Many inhabitants, for example, fled this area for Guatemala during the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

The ongoing economic and political linkages of the border region is a pattern orchestrated early on. Chiapas’s coffee growing region was sparsely populated in the 1800s resulting in Mexico’s importation of Guatemalan labor. Workers were often indigenous and eventually naturalized as Mexican citizens. Guatemalan resentment towards Mexico continued over the loss of territory with intermittent attempts at reclamation (Hernández-Castillo 1992). As a result, Mexico embarked on a vigorous policy of Mexicanization along its southern borderlands. In the 1930s, fortified by the nationalist ideology of *mestizaje*, Mexico’s assimilationist policies included: forced acculturation through the prohibition of the indigenous languages, the burning of indigenous clothing, and the installation of Hispanicization centers and frontier schools. All of these efforts were accompanied by strong anti-Guatemalan rhetoric. According to Galemba (2018), “Even though indigenous communities in the highlands of Chiapas were also targeted for integration policies, highland indigenous groups were considered distinctly Mexican. In contrast, indigenous groups at the border were more intensely targeted for assimilation because they shared ethnic affinities with Guatemalan indigenous groups” (39).

Crucially, becoming Mexican meant no longer identifying with indigenous heritage for the majority of the border population along Mexico’s side of the border. This, in spite of the fact that Chiapas has the largest indigenous population in Mexico. The social organization of cultural difference has been key to national demarcation in contemporary times. During Guatemala’s civil war in the 1980s, nearly 200,000 refugees fled into Mexico (Jonas 2013). Mexico would eventually establish refugee camps, although Guatemalans could not purchase land or travel outside of the camps (Ogren

2007). The deep connections between communities on both sides of the border stemming from history, kinship ties, and wage labor relations has been viewed by the Mexican government as a destabilizing force. In 1984, Mexico moved refugees to Campeche and Quintana Roo. Those who refused to relocate were provided with fewer services (GAO 1989). This brief historical context articulates how Mexico has engineered spatial hierarchies in pursuit of a nationalist advantage.

Nearly 200 hundred years of nation-building in Mexico has created an internalization of the political boundary between Guatemala and Mexico. With that comes an association of indigeneity with Guatemalan nationality in spite of close cross-border ties and the characteristic porosity of this boundary. The formation and development of a bordering regime did not concertedly take hold until the exodus of indigenous Guatemalan refugees began fleeing the counterinsurgency war. The influx of Guatemalans into Mexico altered conceptions of this area as primarily nonindigenous. Anglophone accounts of the making of Mexico tend to elide how nation-building, securitization, and migration are fraught with a coloniality of power (Van Young 2004), a framework based upon what Aníbal Quijano refers to as the "racial" social classification of the world population (2000, 2010). Thus, proceeding from a perspective of de-coloniality attends to the oppression and control of social life built into the classification and differentiation of bodies. A decolonial framework uses historical hindsight to illuminate patterns of power which have shaped our intellectual, political, economic, and social world (Mignolo 2008; Lugones 2010) and the ways colonialism's effects continue to endure and manifest less tangibly (Santos 2010). Ariadna Estevez's work (2012), which she calls a Mexican epistemology for studying migration, operates in a similar vein by placing neocolonial power and migrant subjectivities in conversation. Similarly, Amarela Varela (2019) uses the concept of disposability (*basurización*) to understand how the framing of migrants as illegal facilitates the production of abject subjectivities. Such analytics lay bare the terrain upon which contemporary immigration policies proceed, namely in the cases presented here, through the subordination of southern Mexico and Central America.

Space, Hierarchy, and the Politics of Scale

As a key concept in geographical inquiry, understandings of scale have shifted significantly from its history as a foundational cartographic and operational principle. Whereas cartographic scale represents a fixed, mathematical relationship between the Earth and map, operational scale refers to a tangible, partitioning of space through hierarchies such as local, national, global, and so on. Crucially, however, scholars have demonstrated how this notion of scale is socially produced rather than ontologically fixed (Delaney &

Leitner 1997; Jonas 1994, Smith 1992). In this way, scales do not exist as fixed, hierarchical levels of activities and processes but are instead outcomes of those very same activities and processes, and it is precisely this complex and recursive relationship between the social and spatial that produces and reproduces space itself and a pronounced geographical imaginary (see: Delaney & Leitner 1997; Dodds 1997; Marston 2000). In other words, these hierarchical divisions of space represent specific ways of interpreting and seeing the world, a political and spatial imagination that illuminates the "hidden geographies" (Agnew 1993) of power relations and the ways in which these dynamics unfold over time and space.

To this end, scholars have long remarked on the centrality of scale in political discourse (see: Cox 1998; Jonas 1994). Here, scholarship has advocated a constructivist approach to scale, examining how the concept is produced both by and through cultural, economic, political, and social relations. Judd (1998), for instance, discusses how the state's ongoing construction of scale through administrative and governmental structures enables and restrains political possibilities. Similarly, Morrill (1999) examines how wider scales of government, including the national-scale, has been harnessed to achieve capital allocation and industrialization, subjugating more local, rural concerns for those of the broader U.S. Taken together, these studies show how hierarchy and scale are implicated in decision-making and the various power geometries that shape administration and governance.

This production of space—and thereby scale—has been central to nation-building and boundary-making in Mexico. As Smith (1992) explains, it "is geographical scale that defines the boundaries and bounds the identities around which control is exerted and contested" (66). These processes delineate territorial arrangements of power, marking socio-spatial boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. In defining who belongs and who does not, this differentiation relies on hierarchical categories such as ethnicity, race, religion, and class, among others. Power and state sovereignty, thus, work through territorial divisions and control over boundaries that are fundamentally hierarchical in nature, where space is partitioned, controlled, and administered according to perceived cultural and political differences. In Mexico, these scaling processes have involved differentiating the southern frontier in Chiapas from Guatemala, subordinating the latter as distinctly indigenous and non-Mexican. While these spatial hierarchies are socially produced, evidenced by close cross-border ties and the porosity of the border, they nonetheless, have powerful material consequences, for "once these layers are presupposed, it is difficult not to think in terms of social relations and institutional arrangements that somehow fit these contours" (Marston et al. 2005, 422). Thus, as we demonstrate below, Mexican immigration policy has relied upon such hierarchical divisions of space to

engage in border and immigration enforcement, which continuously subordinates Central and South America as inferior and separate from a superior North America, including the U.S. and Mexico.

Subordinating Space: Spatial Hierarchy in Mexican Immigration Policy

While the boundary between Mexico and Guatemala remained indeterminate and porous from the political independence of both countries to the late-twentieth century, the region was permanently transformed during the Cold War as thousands of Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, and Salvadorans crossed into Mexico, fleeing civil war and political upheaval (Coutin 2007; García 2006; Jonas & Rodríguez 2014). From 1954 to 1996, death squads, revolutions, and military coups, often instigated by the U.S., ravaged Central America (Grandin 2004, 2006; Rabe 2012). Many displaced Central Americans sought refuge in Mexico, the U.S., and Canada. Obtaining asylum, however, was difficult, as they encountered restrictive immigration and asylum policies across North America (García 2006). While the majority eventually returned home, the initial exodus worked to solidify the Mexico–Guatemala border’s significance and visibility, especially for Mexican and U.S. officials who recognized its strategic importance in controlling Central American migration. In the aftermath of these conflicts, the Mexico–Guatemala border became central to Mexican immigration policy, especially as neoliberalism took root in the form of structural adjustments programs, free trade agreements, and dollarization. Such policies, which emphasized austerity, deregulation, and privatization, not only exacerbated economic inequalities throughout Latin America but also led to further outmigration from Central America, as individuals increasingly sought economic opportunities abroad (Brown & Cloke 2005; Moodie 2006, 2010).

Plan Sur

Responding to this outmigration from Central America, in 2001—before the September 11, 2001 attacks—Mexico announced *Plan Sur*, a then-new comprehensive enforcement program located along the Mexico–Guatemala border. Under mounting diplomatic pressure from the U.S. government to curtail Central American migration, Mexico increased inspection activities and deployed military personnel to its southern border (Andersson 2005; Ogren 2007; Solís 2007). As Galemba (2018) explains, *Plan Sur* was largely motivated by the expectation that if Mexico strengthened its own southern border, the U.S. would improve its treatment of Mexican immigrants. The program, which followed from several high-level meetings between former U.S. President George W. Bush and Mexican President Vicente Fox, installed frequent patrols and established interior checkpoints along high-traffic corridors in

border states like Chiapas, Tabasco, and Veracruz. Drawing from partial U.S. financial support, although the amount of funding is still unknown, the initiative authorized the construction of staffed kiosks and barriers along Mexico’s remote jungle frontier with Guatemala (Hagan 2006, 2008). It also expanded detention and deportation, introducing new policies that streamlined removal of migrants through ports of entry into Belize and Guatemala, regardless of their nationality (Ogren 2007). Importantly, *Plan Sur* required collaboration and the coordinated efforts of Mexican federal, state, and municipal agencies, including the National Institute of Migration (INM), Secretariat of the Interior (SEGOB), and Office of the Attorney General, whose work was previously separate (Hagan 2006, 2008; Ogren 2007). Whereas before 2001, Mexican agencies pursued border and immigration enforcement separately, through haphazard and disorganized attempts, *Plan Sur* ensured a smooth and seamless operation. The program ultimately signaled a new era of border and immigration enforcement in Mexico, which until then, had been largely absent from the federal government’s approach to immigration. Under *Plan Sur*, Central American migrants were now subject to policing, detention, and deportation throughout Mexico.

From the beginning, Mexican and U.S. officials framed *Plan Sur* around a security threat posed by the flow of narcotics, terrorism, and transnational crime from Central and South America, designating these areas as separate from, and a danger to, North America (Ogren 2007; Solís 2007). Among *Plan Sur*’s main objectives were orders to combat smuggling and drug trafficking from Central and South America into North America, and under its implementation, the Mexican government dispatched army and navy troops throughout the Mexico–Guatemala borderlands who had previously focused on organized crime and drug interdiction elsewhere (Ogren 2007). By the end of 2001, in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration had identified the Mexico–Guatemala border as a strategic site of cooperation and international security between Mexico and the U.S., labeling it “America’s third border” (Solís 2007). U.S. advisors and policymakers described it as a region in desperate need of state intervention, a “soft underbelly” where “venal criminals alike flood into Chiapas with a view to reaching the U.S.” (Grayson 2006). This language was echoed by Mexican officials, and speaking in the U.S. months before *Plan Sur* was announced, then President Vicente Fox declared that “The most pressing issue between both countries is drug trafficking... Only by joining forces with strategic coordination [and] sharing information, we can face and defeat this situation” (Sanchez 2001). Here, Fox alluded to the flow of narcotics through Central and South America by describing drug trafficking as “the most pressing issue” between Mexico and the U.S. According to Fox, the “only” solution was to cooperate with the U.S., “joining forces” to coordinate and share

information. In doing so, Fox positioned Mexico and the U.S. as separate from and endangered by Central and South America, thereby articulating a spatial imaginary that partitioned North America from its counterparts to the south. Central and South America were, thus, depicted as "lawless", "ungovernable", and thereby inferior (Cirino et al. 2004), while Mexico and the U.S. were seen as civilized and orderly, hence superior.

This hierarchical subordination of Central and South America, was also evident among INM officials. Responding to a question posed during a press conference in 2001 before the Mexican public, INM Commissioner Felipe de Jesús Preciado Coronado explained that, "I can tell you of the very serious problems of insecurity, of the unhealthiness of sleeping on the streets in all the border cities. This is due to thousands of undocumented immigrants entering Mexico, and for national security, and national sovereignty, this institute will have to solve the problem" (BBC 2001). Preciado's response drew attention not only to the "problems" and "insecurity" generated by Central American migration, but also its "unhealthiness". Drawing from longstanding tropes that describe migrants as dirty and disease-ridden (see: Harper & Raman 2008), such rhetoric worked to depict Central American migrants as contaminated and impure. Crucially, these same tropes were widely circulated and deployed during colonialism to portray indigenous bodies as contaminated, dirty, and sick. Similarly, Preciado evokes images of mass migration and countless numbers of immigrants waiting to enter Mexico by referring to the "thousands of undocumented immigrants entering Mexico" that threaten Mexico's national security and sovereignty. It is through this language that Central and South America are distanced from North America and subordinated as inferior, depicted by Mexican officials as backward and dangerous places teeming with criminal activity, disease, and large numbers of immigrants. *Plan Sur*, therefore, signified not only a novel approach to border and immigration enforcement in Mexico but also one that officials increasingly justified through a discourse of colonial logic that distinguished North America as superior to and separate from Central and South America. This approach and strategy to border and immigration enforcement portended the arrival of Mexico's War on Drugs and the Mérida Initiative in 2006 and 2007.

The Mérida Initiative

On December 11, 2006, newly elected Mexican President Felipe Calderón deployed 6,500 soldiers alongside federal police to the state of Michoacán. Military Humvees, helicopters, and navy gunboats provided support for the mission, as ground troops descended on locations affiliated with drug production, trafficking, and distribution (Enriquez 2006; McKinley 2007). Over the previous decades, Mexico had been consumed by escalating cartel violence and drug-related conflicts.

Addressing the public from a military base nearby, Calderón asserted, "Mexico does not surrender and will not surrender... We will not falter in fighting Mexico's enemies. We will give no truce or quarter to criminals" (Madrazo Lajous 2016). Soon, this mobilization spread across Mexico, engulfing half a dozen states and much of the active military and police force—7,000 troops occupied the resort town of Acapulco, 3,300 soldiers and federal police flooded into Tijuana, and nearly 6,000 more swept through the Sierra Madre (Boullosa & Wallace 2015; Grillo 2012). Mexico had officially declared war on drugs.

In the following months, Calderón's offensive resulted in dozens of high-level arrests and record seizures of cash, narcotics, and weapons (González 2009). Buoyed by this success, Mexican and U.S. officials promptly announced the Mérida Initiative, a bilateral security cooperation agreement that pledged \$1.4 billion to assist Calderón's administration in waging its war on drugs (see: Ashby 2014; Gallaher 2015). Under the three-year initiative, Mexico received military and police training from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), as well as new technology and equipment, including biometric scanners, x-ray machines, transport helicopters, and surveillance aircraft (Grillo 2012). Support also extended to upgrading software systems, government databases, and police registries. The first tranche of money arrived in 2008, as the Bush administration worked to deepen its "shared responsibility" with Mexico in breaking "the power and impunity of drug and criminal organizations" (Ashby 2014). Subsequent funding for the program continued under the Obama and Trump administrations, both of which expanded the initiative over time. Importantly, a significant portion of funding from the Mérida Initiative was appropriated for Central America. In 2008, the Obama administration launched the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) as a separate, yet related, program which provided equipment and training to law enforcement and drug interdiction operations across the region (see: Meyer & Seelke 2014). Mexico and the U.S. were now formally bound in fighting the drug war, which threatened North America from within Mexico and beyond its southern border.

While the Mérida Initiative centered on counternarcotics, it also explicitly addressed border and immigration enforcement, and much of the provisioned U.S. aid was intended for the fortification and militarization of the Mexico-Guatemala border, further incorporating Mexico into U.S. security interests following 9/11 (Ashby 2014). By 2010, Mexico and the U.S. had attached a key stipulation to the agreement, which announced the creation of a "21st century border" aimed at curtailing immigration and cross-border activity in the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands (Ashby 2014). In doing so, Mexican and U.S. officials continued to conflate migration with narcotics, terrorism, and transnational crime from Central and

South America. For example, shortly after the Mérida Initiative was announced, Mexico's attorney general Marisela Morales visited the Mexico–Guatemala border, asserting that “the illegal flow of people and merchandise that exists and the delinquency it generates demand a strengthened institutional coordination” (Kovic & Kelly 2017). Here, again, Mexico and the U.S. were positioned as separate from and endangered by Central and South America, with Morales declaring that the “delinquency” generated by flows of people and goods from south of the border required “strengthened institutional coordination”. Much like the rhetoric utilized during *Plan Sur*, this spatial rendering imagined Mexico and the U.S. as superior and in need of protection, whereas Central and South America were seen as criminal and dangerous.

Similarly, in the U.S., the Atlanta DEA chief explained to reporters in 2009 that “the flood of Hispanic immigrants into American communities... helped to provide cover to drug traffickers and distributors” (Arrillaga 2009). Others suggested that members of Al Qaeda and Hezbollah conspired with smugglers to enter the U.S. from Honduras and other countries across Central America (Grayson 2006). This spatial hierarchy separating North America from its counterparts to the south while subordinating the latter proliferated in the wake of the Mérida Initiative, culminating in widespread fear of “spillover” violence (del Bosque 2009) that implicated Central American migrants in the war on drugs and further rationalized Mexican and U.S. intervention to propagate “international security” that subordinated Central and South America while communicating North America's economic, political, and social superiority. These dynamics were only exacerbated by *Programa Frontera Sur*.

Programa Frontera Sur

In 2013, while the drug war pressed on, Mexico again turned its attention to Central American migration, as migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras left for the U.S. in mounting numbers (Massey et al. 2014; Spörlein 2015). In June of that year, Mexico's Secretary of the Interior visited the southern border alongside governors from Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, and Tabasco, announcing the formation of a “comprehensive development program” to address “the problem generated by migration” (Peters 2013). Months later, delegates from the INM and Guatemala's national police met with U.S. DEA and FBI counterparts in the border city of Tapachula to discuss preparations for the program (Hernández 2014). With few details released to the public, Mexico slowly increased the presence of army and navy troops along the Mexico–Guatemala border while President Peña Nieto appointed a so-called “migration czar” to oversee ongoing arrangements (Cárdenas 2013; Torres 2015). These developments indicated a large, paradigmatic shift toward the southern border.

Eventually, in July 2014, Peña Nieto, accompanied by Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina, formally announced *Programa Frontera Sur*, a far-reaching plan aimed at border security and immigration enforcement in Mexico (see: Isacson et al. 2014, 2015; Wilson & Valenzuela 2014). The program centered on two main objectives: first, protecting migrants in transit and second, increasing security at the southern border and along well-established migration routes. It should be noted that there is a lack of transparency surrounding *Programa Frontera Sur*. Beyond its initial announcement and decree establishing a coordinating office, no official documentation exists. This absence of information has been highlighted by Mexico's Federal Institute for Information Access and Data Protection (IFAI), which in 2014, requested supporting documents from INM regarding the program. INM declared that no such documentation existed (see: Poy 2014). Under the new plan, Mexico would improve infrastructure at ports of entry, provide temporary work and visiting permits for migrants, and develop new sources of funding for shelters and medical units (Wilson & Valenzuela 2014). Speaking before the United Nations Summit for Refugees and Migrants, Peña Nieto assured policymakers that Mexico was, and would always be, a place of “origin, transit, destination, and return for people” (Castillo 2016). While the government rhetorically emphasized human rights and protections for migrants, however, the program was much different in practice, working to rapidly expand policing and immigration control throughout the Mexican interior in unprecedented ways (Olayo-Méndez 2017).

Following the announcement, Peña Nieto dispatched hundreds of INM agents to the south alongside military and federal police. At the Mexico–Guatemala border, Mexico deployed new surveillance equipment and upgraded existing infrastructure at ports of entry (Isacson et al. 2014, 2015). Crucially, however, *Programa Frontera Sur* depended on a *regional* enforcement strategy, with checkpoints and blockades concentrated along “belts of control” that stretched inland from the southern border to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca and Veracruz, forming a rigid bottleneck for migrants travelling north (Martínez & Castillo 2014). Within each of these “belts”, authorities established frequent patrols and inspections at roads, highways, and train depots, where individuals could be stopped, searched, and interviewed. INM, meanwhile, employed mobile checkpoints and installed new detention facilities across the region as they raided restaurants, hotels, and bus stations (Isacson et al. 2014, 2015). The program also attempted to curtail migrants' use of freight trains, colloquially known as the Beast, directing INM and federal police to intercept migrants at railroad crossings and ordering conductors to increase speeds in high-traffic areas (Castillo 2016; Pérez Silva 2014). Likewise, rail companies were urged to contract with private security forces and construct physical barriers along railways to further impede migrants from accessing trains (Avendaño 2013). Together, these

efforts transformed southern Mexico into an expansive dragnet and enforcement operation that encompassed multiple agencies and hundreds of miles/kilometres of checkpoints, blockades, and patrols. Through this regional enforcement strategy, the program further partitioned Central, South, and North America by dividing northern Mexico and the U.S. from southern Mexico and other countries to the south. Drawing from a spatial hierarchy that located the "problem generated by migration" in and around the Mexico-Guatemala border, Mexican officials distanced themselves from Central and South America, thereby portraying Mexico as superior to and removed from countries to the south, separated by the presence of its new enforcement operation throughout its southern regions.

Programa Frontera Sur required close coordination between federal, state, and municipal agencies. Drawing from partnerships developed under *Plan Sur*, Peña Nieto established the Coordinating Office for Comprehensive Attention to Migration at the Southern Border, days after the program's announcement (Wilson & Valenzuela 2014). Under the charge of Mexico's Secretary of the Interior, this coordinating body was responsible for organizing operations and ensuring careful collaboration between agencies. While immigration enforcement is entrusted to federal police and INM through Mexican immigration law, *Programa Frontera Sur* involved a wide range of entities responsible for its implementation, from the customs bureau and military to state police, municipal governments, and local administrations (Isacson et al. 2014, 2015). The program also deepened Mexico's sense of "shared responsibility" with the U.S. and others, using the Mérida Initiative to deliver millions of dollars in new equipment, infrastructure, and training (Wilson & Valenzuela 2014). Mexico received patrol boats, helicopters, observation towers, and scanning equipment, as well as support and advising from CBP, DEA, FBI, and ICE officials (Isacson et al. 2014, 2015). These provisions extended across North and Central America, including additional funding for Belize and Guatemala along Mexico's southern boundary, as well as for El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, among others (Wilson & Valenzuela 2014). Guatemala and Mexico also pledged to share migrants' fingerprints and facial characteristics with the U.S. through an integrated biometric database (Isacson et al. 2014). Thus, *Programa Frontera Sur* dramatically expanded policing and immigration control throughout Mexico on an unprecedented scale, entailing restrictive, multi-agency enforcement operations within the interior and a network of transnational support from countries across Central and North America. Yet, despite this, the program has relied upon a spatial imaginary and hierarchy in which Mexico and the U.S. are increasingly designated as superior and set apart from Central and South America, as both countries struggle to restrict migration from south of the Mexico-Guatemala border.

In the wake of *Programa Frontera Sur*, apprehensions and deportations among Central Americans have risen sharply (Bonello 2015; Fredrick 2018; Isacson et al. 2015). Following its implementation in 2014, authorities have apprehended hundreds of thousands of migrants across southern Mexico, holding them in detention centers and temporary facilities before they are deported to Guatemala (Fredrick 2018; Isacson et al. 2015). By 2015, rates of deportation in Mexico had nearly doubled over the previous year, and since the program's announcement in 2014, the Mexican government has removed more than half a million migrants, far exceeding deportation efforts in the U.S. (Bonello 2015; Fredrick 2018). Amid this growing system of policing and immigration control, corruption and abuses against migrants have been widespread, including extortion, sexual assault, and torture committed by military and police (Suárez et al. 2017). Accordingly, migrants have turned to alternative routes and clandestine modes of transportation to evade checkpoints, blockades, and patrols, utilizing remote locations and distant, rugged terrain that isolates migrants from shelters and humanitarian aid (Castillo 2016; Isacson et al. 2015). Routes have become not only longer and more complex but also increasingly dangerous, as migrants are vulnerable to violence and abuse perpetrated by local gangs, cartels, and corrupt officials, as well as environmental hazards such as dehydration, heatstroke, and hypothermia.

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to refocus attention on the ways that the triad of bordering practices, immigration enforcement, and international migration operate in Mexico, Central America, and beyond. We reflected on the increasing importance of spatial hierarchies and spatial subordination in relation to the restriction of mobilities in the context of North America, drawing out how Mexico has worked to restrict migration from Central America. In particular, we unraveled the spatiality of far-reaching border policies like *Plan Sur*, the Mérida Initiative, and *Programa Frontera Sur*. We distilled how the divisions created through policy rhetoric and practice are defined through the production of the social ordering of territorial spaces based on differentiation. Notably, North America is separated from Central and South America, a move which designates the former territories as inferior and the latter as superior, and is based upon longer histories of colonial imaginaries. Calling attention to spatial hierarchies illustrates how states such as Mexico and the United States are jointly involved in regulating contemporary forms of oppression reliant on older colonial logics. What is more, understanding the nuances of subordination indicates an important nuance between "externalization" and the "outsourcing" of borders amid processes related to immigration enforcement. Seen from perspective of how hierarchy

and scale in tandem impinge upon decision-making, the management of mobility becomes a multi-scalar endeavor shaped through numerous actors, some obviously much more powerful than others.

We expect that these dynamics will only continue given recent developments under the Trump and Biden administrations in the U.S. and the López Obrador administration in Mexico. For example, under the Trump administration, bordering and immigration enforcement extended deeper into states such as Mexico and Guatemala, epitomized through recent policies such as MPP and Safe Third Country agreements, and utilized Mexican and Guatemalan territory to control migration from afar. This suite of laws further codified efforts to disenfranchise and exclude migrants from Central and South America at a distance, in the spaces between origin and destination, and required migrants to "remain in Mexico" during legal proceedings and barred them from protection altogether if they pass through another country—inevitably, Guatemala or Mexico—before the U.S.. Mexico has only acquiesced to this draconian approach to immigration and asylum policy, consenting to MPP while bending under pressure to arrest and deport more migrants from south of its border. While the Biden administration has reversed many of these efforts under MPP and Safe Third Country agreements, *Programa Frontera Sur* continues unabated, as both Mexico and the U.S. continue to collaborate to restrict migration from south of the Mexico–Guatemala border. It is within this context that spatial hierarchies become ever-more important in understanding contemporary bordering practices and immigration enforcement.

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