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Introduction: Mexico's Southern Border and Beyond

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In this introduction, the editors of the special section situate the study of the Mexico–Guatemala border, lay out the themes of the collection, and summarize the individual contributions.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has refocused attention on international borders and territoriality. At the present time of writing, spring 2022, more than 474 million cases of infection have been reported worldwide and over six million people have died because of the novel coronavirus. Multiple variants of the virus have evolved over time, and nearly every country has been engulfed by its spread, as COVID-19 defies international borders and knows no boundaries. The pandemic has generated food and labor shortages and supply chain disruptions and has aggravated longstanding health inequities and political tensions around the world. Within the United States, these developments were met with the closure of its national borders in March 2020, effectively sealing off the Canada–U.S. and U.S.–Mexico borders to “nonessential” travel. The consequences of this action have been most pronounced at the U.S.–Mexico border, where restrictions have prevented migrants from Africa, Asia, Central and South America, and elsewhere, from claiming asylum. Such attention to the U.S.–Mexico border, and its impregnability, was only exacerbated under the Trump administration, which mobilized racial

anxieties and xenophobia to pursue an anti-immigrant agenda defined by “zero-tolerance” practices and a rigid, law-and-order approach. But while the U.S.–Mexico border has been crucial for understanding international migration and contemporary practices surrounding bordering and immigration enforcement, it has largely overshadowed the increasing importance and political salience of Mexico’s southern border, the Mexico–Guatemala border, which has quickly become a key site for migration and mobility in the Americas.

Indeed, long before reaching the U.S.–Mexico border, migrants from Central and South America as well as Europe, Africa, and Asia cross the Mexico–Guatemala border. This 541-mile (870-kilometre) expanse has experienced its own fortification and militarization, and more recently, the global effects of COVID-19 (Kauffer 2020). Both Mexico and Guatemala, for instance, have sought to curb travel in and around their shared frontier during the pandemic, implementing travel restrictions for “nonessential” border crossings and closing the border, albeit temporarily, altogether. Following the

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World Health Organization's (WHO) declaration of a global pandemic in 2020, Guatemala shuttered its border with Mexico for six months. Similarly, Mexico announced new enforcement efforts against unauthorized migrants at its southern border with Guatemala, referencing health concerns over the spread of COVID-19. In March 2021, a Mexican soldier shot and killed a Guatemalan man at the border, thereby illustrating the cumulative effects of border and immigration enforcement under COVID-19 and the mounting significance of the Mexico–Guatemala border more broadly.

The idea to gather a group of international scholars working on Mexico's southern border first arose on the cusp of these events in early February, 2020. Initially, our goal was to meet and present work at the Annual Conference of the Association of Borderland Studies (ABS) in Portland, Oregon, to contemplate and collectively discuss the Mexico–Guatemala border from a variety of geographical and interdisciplinary perspectives. Meeting in person became untenable for what have now become obvious reasons under the global pandemic, and the conference was subsequently canceled. Nevertheless, we managed to keep these conversations alive through virtual formats among a small group of scholars working to study the Mexico–Guatemala border.

Emerging from this dialogue was the desire to focus attention on the diversification and effects of bordering practices and immigration enforcement beyond the familiar tropes of "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer & Glick-Schiller 2002) and the "territorial trap" (Agnew 1994), which sees scholarly work on contemporary immigration control constrained by the boundaries of sovereign, individual states—most often, the U.S. and its southern border with Mexico. This is especially true within the modern context of international migration throughout North America, as large numbers of migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras travel across Central America and Mexico to reach the U.S., and as both Mexican and U.S. governments implement punitive immigration policies aimed at impeding, incapacitating, and policing migrants. These dynamics, we argue, necessitate an approach that considers multiple international borders, countries, and continents involved with bordering practices and immigration enforcement. The articles in this special section respond to this call by centering developments along the Mexico–Guatemala border as well as in Canada, Guatemala, Mexico, and the U.S., thereby providing an alternative and supplement to the U.S. and U.S.–Mexico border. In doing so, the articles show how contemporary practices around bordering and immigration enforcement in North America unfold and are constituted by a diverse array of international borders, countries, and continents, including but not limited to the U.S. and the U.S.–Mexico border.

Within the Anglo-speaking world, however, Mexico's southern border with Guatemala has remained relatively understudied (see: Carte 2014; Galemba 2017, 2018;

Walker 2018, 2020). Historically, the region has been more diffused and less populous than its northern counterpart, the U.S.–Mexico border, but in recent years has become increasingly visible as a site of cultural, economic, and geopolitical struggle. A series of high-profile developments, in particular, have precipitated a renewed and urgent focus on the Mexico–Guatemala border. These developments include the so-called "migrant caravans" travelling north from Central America, which has seen large numbers of migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras gather to travel across Mexico together. While advocacy groups organized caravans in the past to protect migrants as they travelled north, those in 2017 and 2018 ignited contentious debates in both Mexico and the U.S. over international migration and border and immigration enforcement.

Mexico's *Programa Frontera Sur*, a sweeping border and immigration enforcement program announced in 2014 by former Mexican President Peña Nieto and extended under current President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has also directed attention toward the Mexico–Guatemala border. Under this policy, Mexico fortified its southern border with Guatemala and mobilized a formidable system of blockades, immigration checkpoints, and patrols aimed at preventing migration. While hundreds of immigration agents were dispatched to the Mexico–Guatemala border alongside new surveillance equipment and infrastructural improvements at ports of entry, *Programa Frontera Sur* has relied primarily on a regional enforcement strategy, concentrating its resources at so-called "belts of control" that now stretch across southern Mexico. Here, authorities have established frequent patrols and inspections at highways, roads, and train depots, where migrants are often stopped, searched, and interviewed. More than half a million migrants have been deported since the program's announcement, thereby exceeding deportation efforts under both the Obama and Trump administrations in the U.S.

Finally, global climate change has seen changing rainfall patterns, irregular temperatures, and extreme weather events beset the region, generating displacement throughout North and Central America. In 2017, for example, Hurricane Nate triggered catastrophic flooding and mudslides from Costa Rica to Guatemala, leading to widespread destruction and over \$787 million worth of damage. These impacts, as well as others, are only expected to intensify as the region becomes warmer, drier, and increasingly susceptible to environmental change in the future, gesturing toward displacement and outmigration over the coming years. Taken together, these developments signal a necessary emphasis on the Mexico–Guatemala border and region surrounding it.

A significant body of scholarship, therefore, has started to emerge from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives situated among and within this region between Guatemala and Mexico. Recently, for instance, Mexico has been understood as both a country of destination and transit

for Central American migrants and its southern border with Guatemala viewed as a microcosm for enacting various immigration laws (see for example: Brigden 2018a, 2018b; Carte 2014; Vogt 2018). There is also a wider literature on borders and place-making, including the ways in which mundane, everyday experiences link up with wider social and political processes of enacting and performing borders at multiple scales (see for example: Galemba 2017; Walker 2020). Despite these current developments, most work on borders and immigration enforcement continues to focus on well-worn areas of study and topics, such as the "externalization" of borders, detention and deportation, and policing, where the U.S. and U.S.-Mexico border remains the only referent. What new insights can scholars generate through attention to other international borders and boundaries? How might concepts and theories surrounding bordering practices and immigration enforcement shift alongside new geographic perspectives? In what ways do other borders, such as the Mexico-Guatemala border, contribute to and inform the operation of better known and studied ones, like the U.S.-Mexico border?

Aiming to overcome this bias, this special section builds upon perspectives from an 'other border' to advance theory-building from places that have been nominally cast as marginal. It is not so much that Mexico's southern border or Guatemala's northern border has been peripheralized, although that is undoubtedly true to a degree, as much the U.S. border with Mexico has loomed so large in our collective political imagination. The intense focus on one boundary at the expense of Mexico's other border neglects how processes related to Mexico's southern border are re-ordering how we come to understand and grapple with borders and bordering more generally.

This collection brings together an interdisciplinary group of early-career and established scholars working in and on less covered areas in Central America and Mexico. The papers fill an important empirical gap with contributions covering a wide range of topics, methodologies, and scales, including local fieldwork on both sides of the Mexico-Guatemala border. The contributors are fairly diverse in terms of their location and provide novel analytical, conceptual, and theoretical perspectives that will advance this burgeoning field of study. Van Ramshorst and Walker center the Mexico-Guatemala border and recent immigration policy in Mexico to advance the notion of "spatial hierarchies", which they use to discuss the ordering and partitioning of territorial spaces. As they demonstrate, border and immigration enforcement, and its reliance on spatial hierarchies, divides North America from Central and South America according to colonial logics, with far-reaching consequences for the world's asylum seekers and migrants alike. In similar fashion, Angulo-Pasel documents the ways in which the Mexico-Guatemala border emerges as a site of constant struggle and tension between, on the one hand, state sovereignty and territoriality, and on the other hand, migrants' everyday survival strategies and forms of resistance.

Drawing primarily from discourse and policy analysis, their paper details how Mexico's southern border has emerged from a deep entanglement between Mexico and the U.S., whereby the U.S. endeavors to enforce a policy of containment through the often-overlooked Mexico-Guatemala border. Finally, Schmook et al. explore the role of climate change in Mexico and Guatemala to better understand how government policy and adaptation are crucial to place-making and bordering within the region. Their analysis underscores the contested politics of this geopolitical region, shedding light on contemporary issues surrounding development, environmental change, and displacement and mobility. Together, these articles, which constitute the special section, point to the growing importance of the Mexico-Guatemala border and region around it.

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