Borders in Globalization Review
Volume 6, Issue 2 (Spring & Summer 2025): 98–112
https://doi.org/10.18357/big_r62202522427

PORTFOLIO
Chief Editor's Choice

Divided Landscapes

Viviana Mejía Cañedo and
Guillermo Arias Camarena

Summary

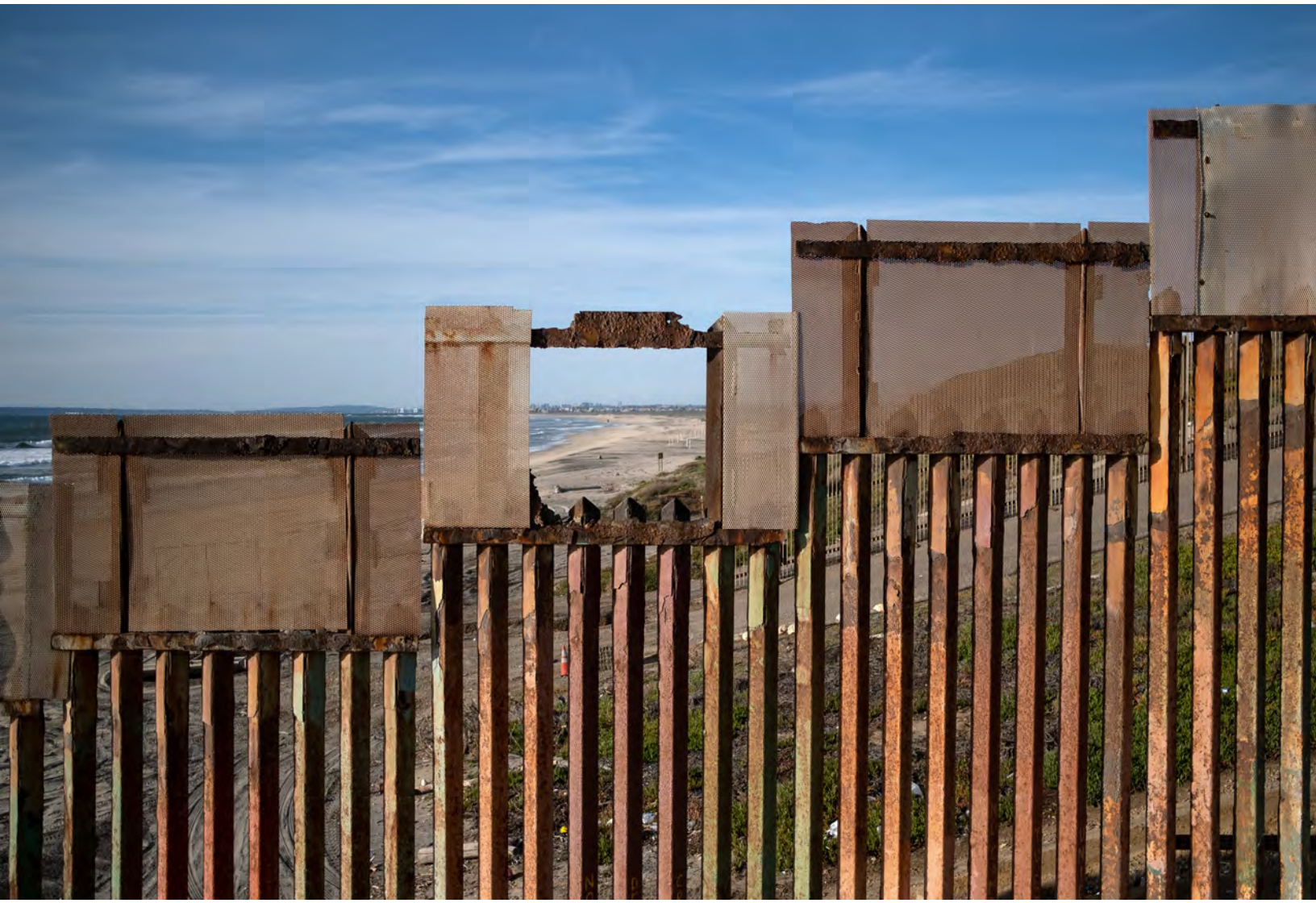
The U.S.–Mexico border i s not only a line of control over human mobility but a wound inflicted on the living world, fragmenting habitats and silencing ecosystems. **Divided Landscapes** brings together the visual and written work of photojournalist Guillermo Arias Camarena and historian Viviana Mejía Cañedo to examine the environmental and symbolic violence of the border. Arias's photographs (selected from his collection, El muro y el paisaje destruido / The Wall and the Destroyed Landscape) reveal the stark imposition of border infrastructure on fragile ecologies. Mejía's essay (first published here) situates these landscapes within longer histories of geopolitical asymmetry, displacement, and resistance. The portfolio invites readers to see the border as a contested site, certainly of violence, but also of memory, resistance, and the possibility of reimagining division as dialogue.

Bios

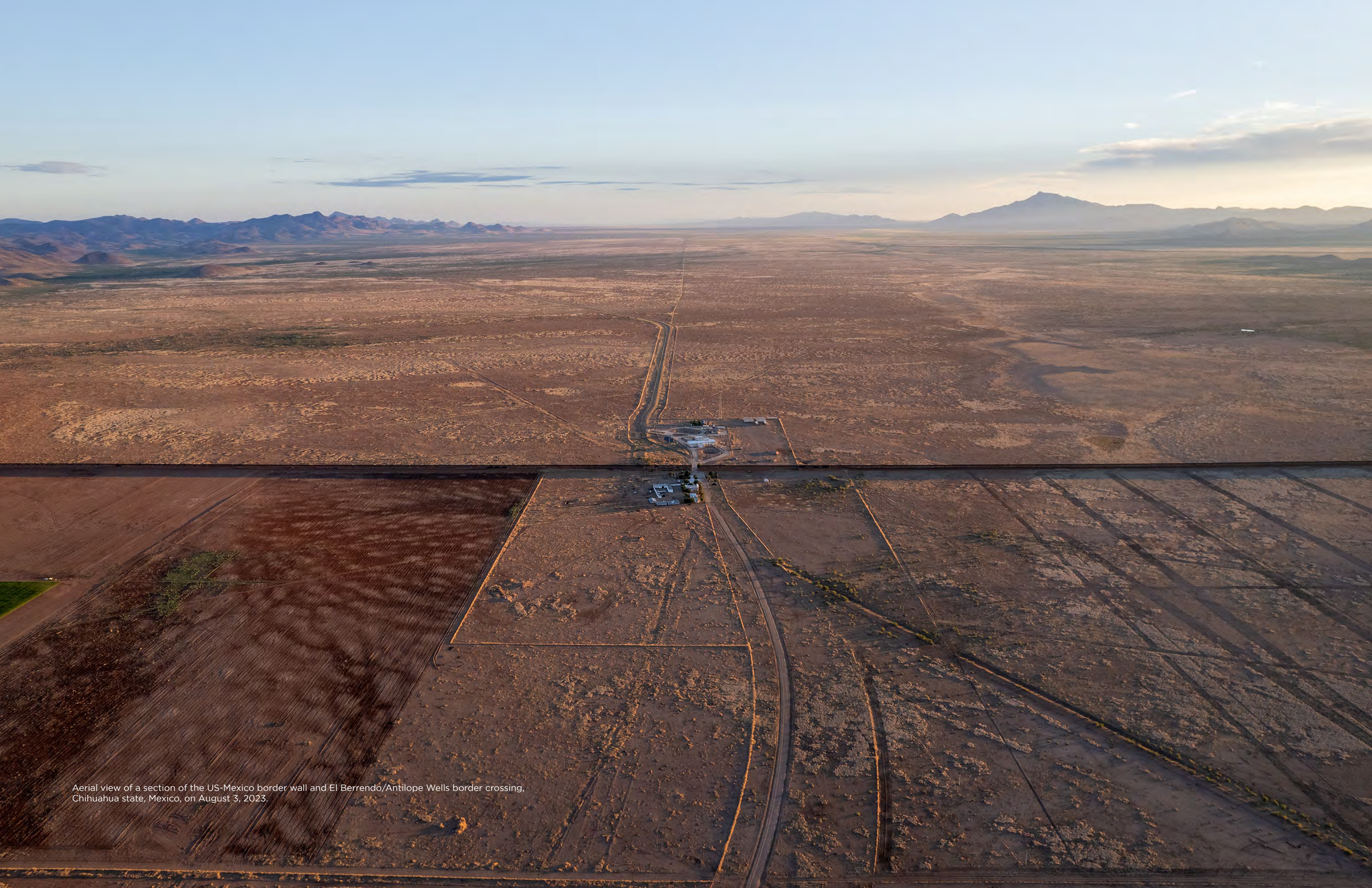
Viviana Mejía Cañedo holds a PhD in History from the Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas at Universidad Autónoma de Baja California. She is the author of *Fall by the Way: Migration Legislation and Psychiatric Institutions in California in Relation to Mentally Ill People of Mexican Origin, 1855–1942* (City of Mexico, 2019). She currently coordinates the undergraduate History program at the Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales, Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, and is a Level I member of Mexico's National System of Researchers (SNII). Her primary area of research focuses on Mexico–United States migration. Learn more: https://www.uabchumanidades.com/academicos-administrativos-fhycs/dra.-viviana-mejía-cañedo

Guillermo Arias Camarena is a Mexican photojournalist with over three decades of experience documenting major social, political, and humanitarian issues across Latin America. He has worked with international agencies such as Agence France-Presse, The Associated Press, and Xinhua News Agency, covering events including the Central American migrant caravans, presidential elections, and the Mexican Drug War. His projects *El cerco (The Fence) and The border wall and the destroyed landscape*, both supported by Mexico's National System of Art Creators, examine the U.S.–Mexico border as a lived and contested space and the destruction left by the border wall construction, and have been exhibited and published internationally. Arias has received numerous awards, including the Visa d'Or Paris Match News award (Visa pour l'Image), Istanbul Photo Awards, POY Latam prizes, and the Walter Reuter German Journalism Prize. Learn more: https://www.guillermoarias.com/about

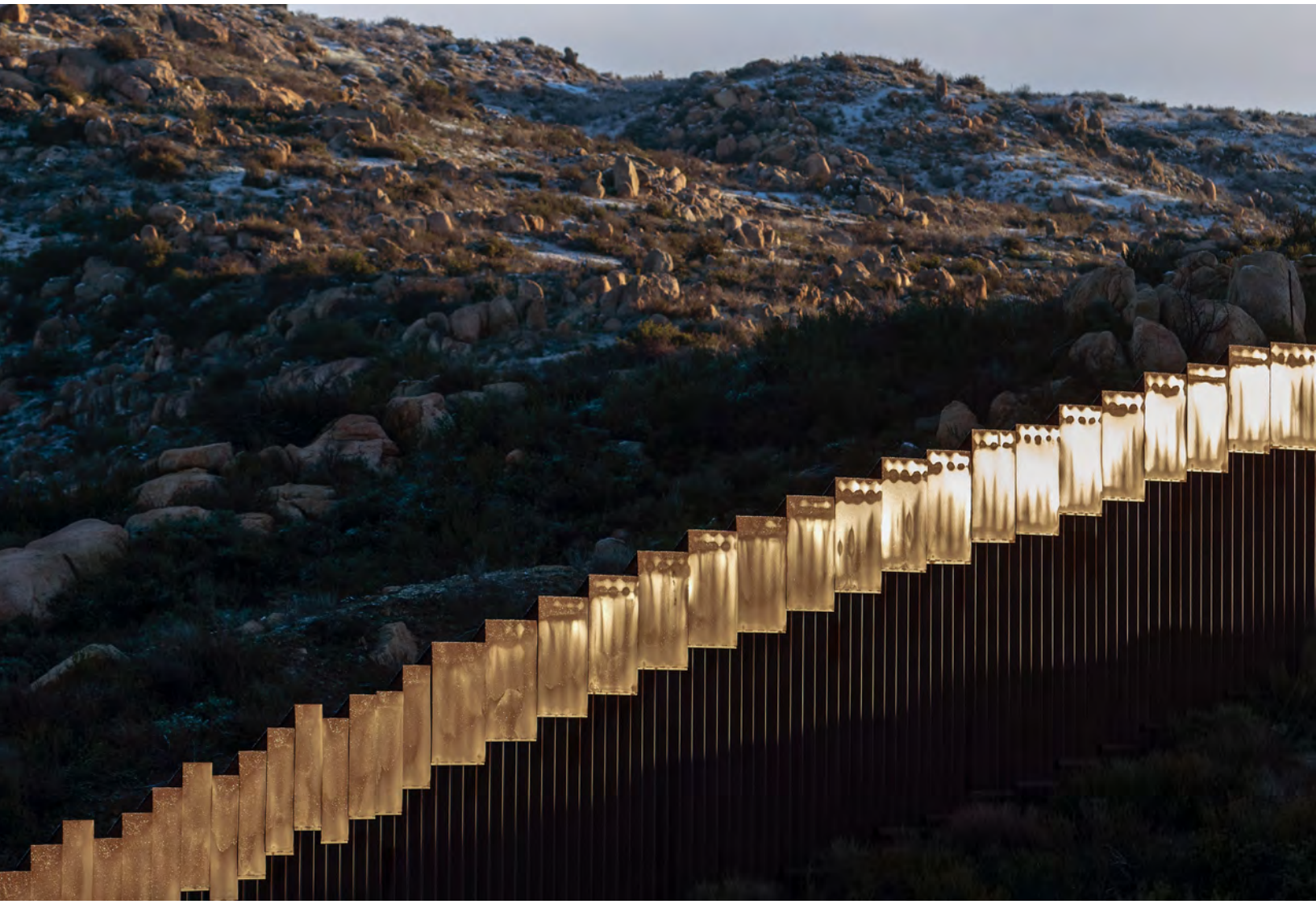
Creative Commons
CC-BY-NC 4.0



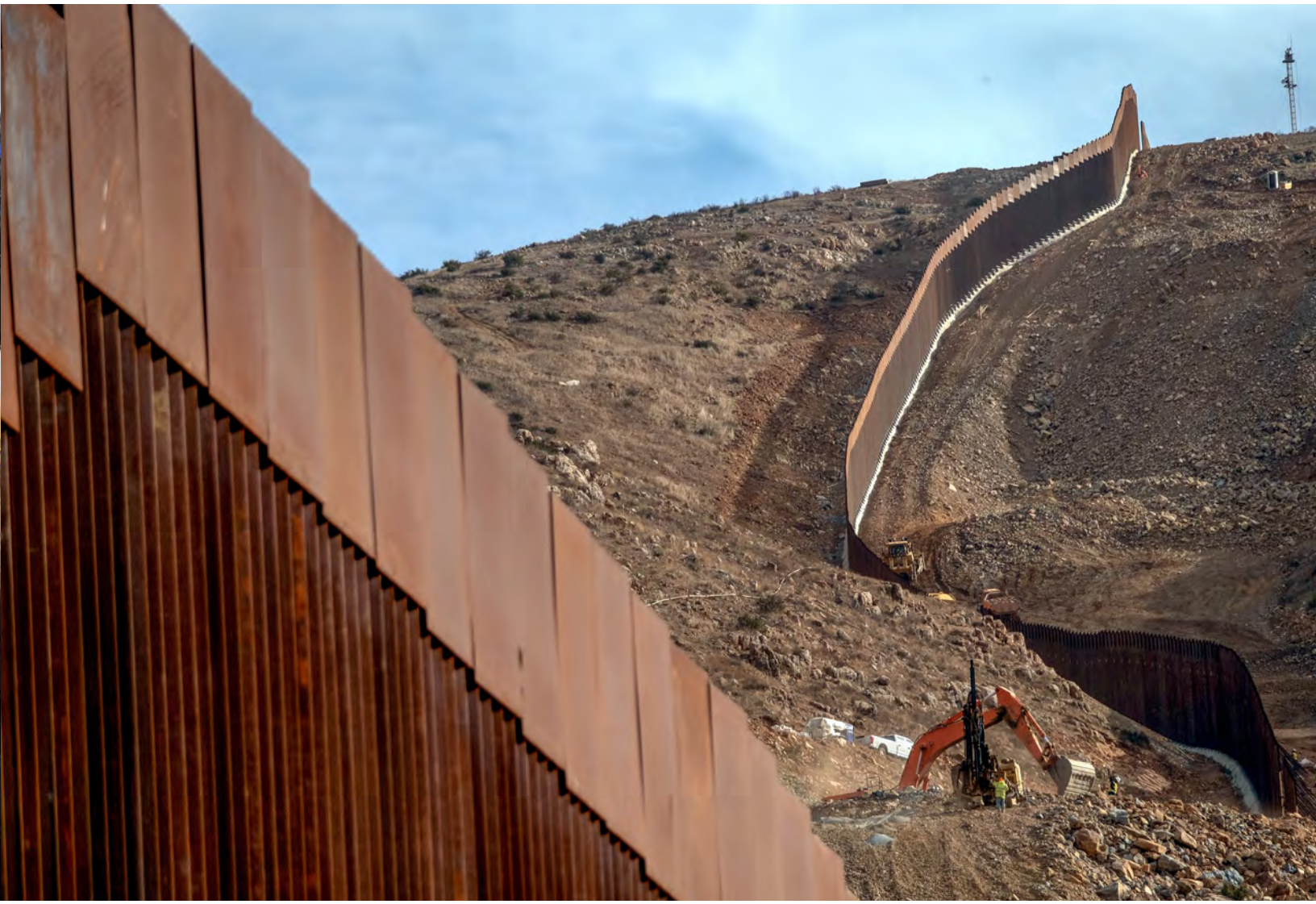
Deteriorated US-Mexico border wall at Friendship Park before been replaced, in Playas de Tijuana, Baja California state, Mexico, on February 16, 2023. United States authorities announced they resume this week, border wall construction at the iconic Friendship Park with the replacement of primary and secondary barriers in a .03 mile stretch on their southwestern border with Mexico.



Aerial view of a section of the US-Mexico border wall and El Berrendo/Antilope Wells border crossing, Chihuahua state, Mexico, on August 3, 2023.

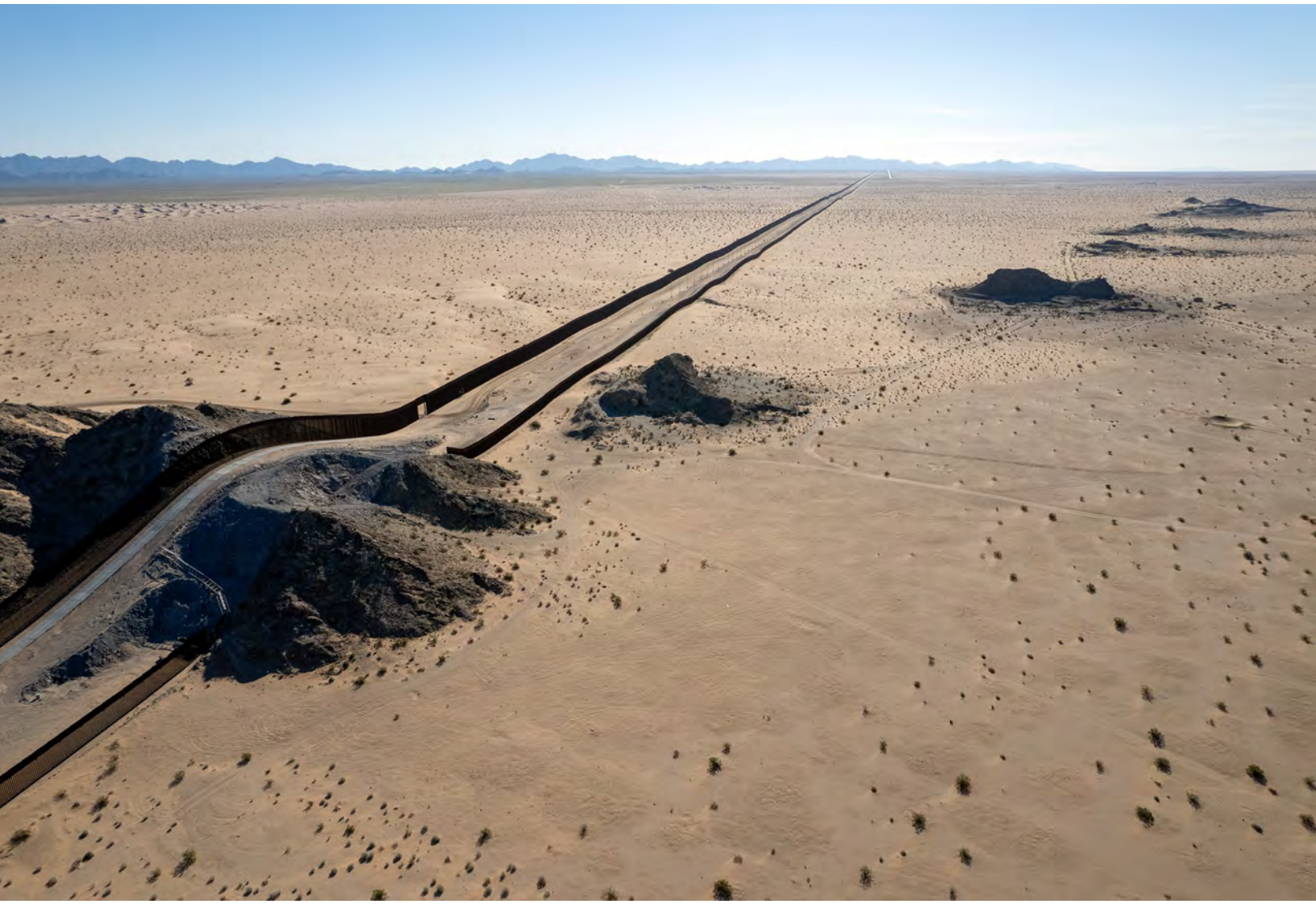


The sunlight reflects over a a section of the US-Mexico border fence is seen in Tecate, Baja California state, Mexico, on February 22, 2019. A winter storm left cold temperatures, heavy rains and even snow on the mountains in Baja California state and northwestern Mexico.

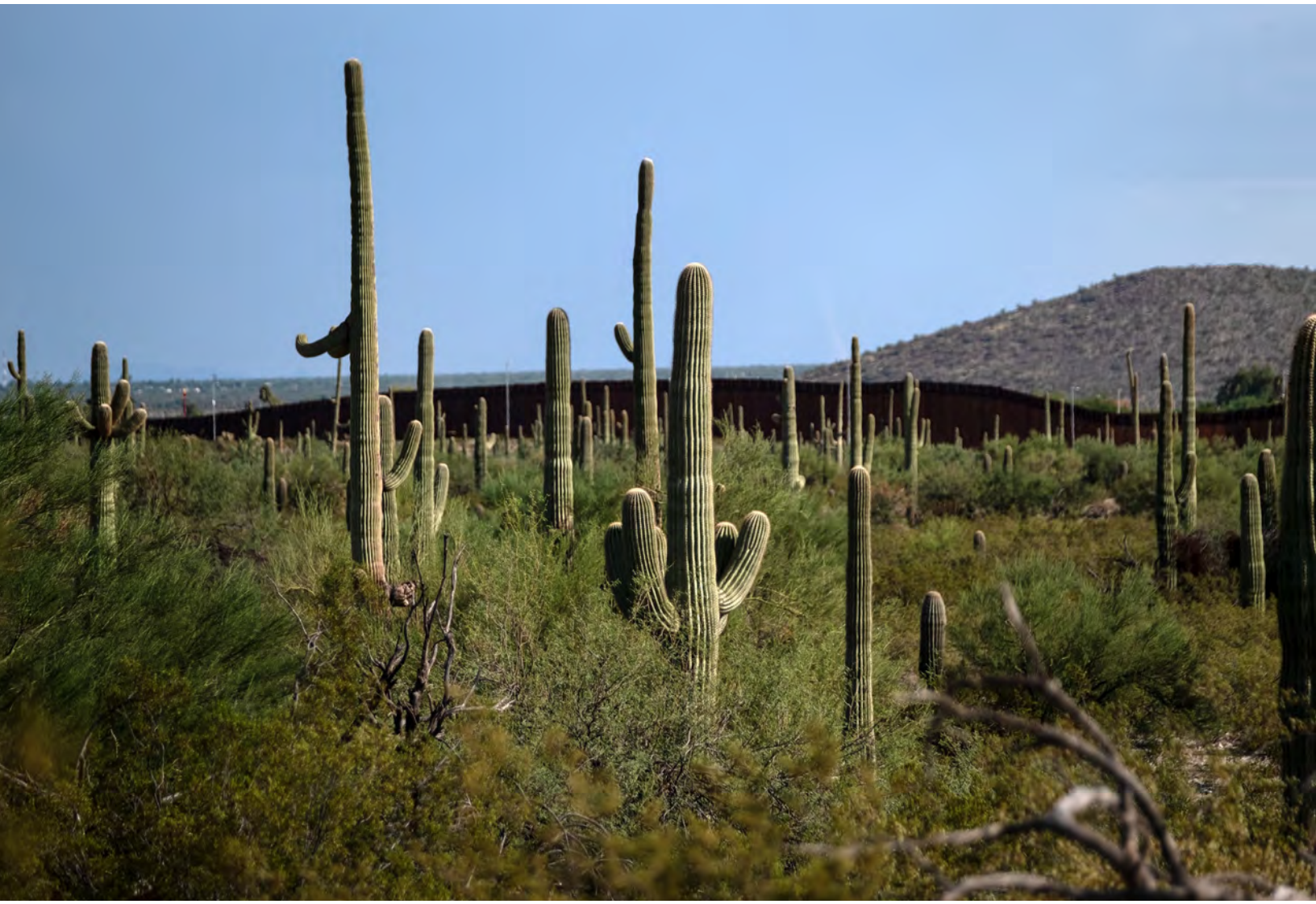


Construction crews work on a new section of the US-Mexico border wall at El Nido de las Aguilas, eastern Tijuana, Baja California state, on January 20, 2021, in Mexico.

Hills are seen through the US-Mexico border wall at El Berrendo, Chihuahua state, Mexico, on August 3, 2023.

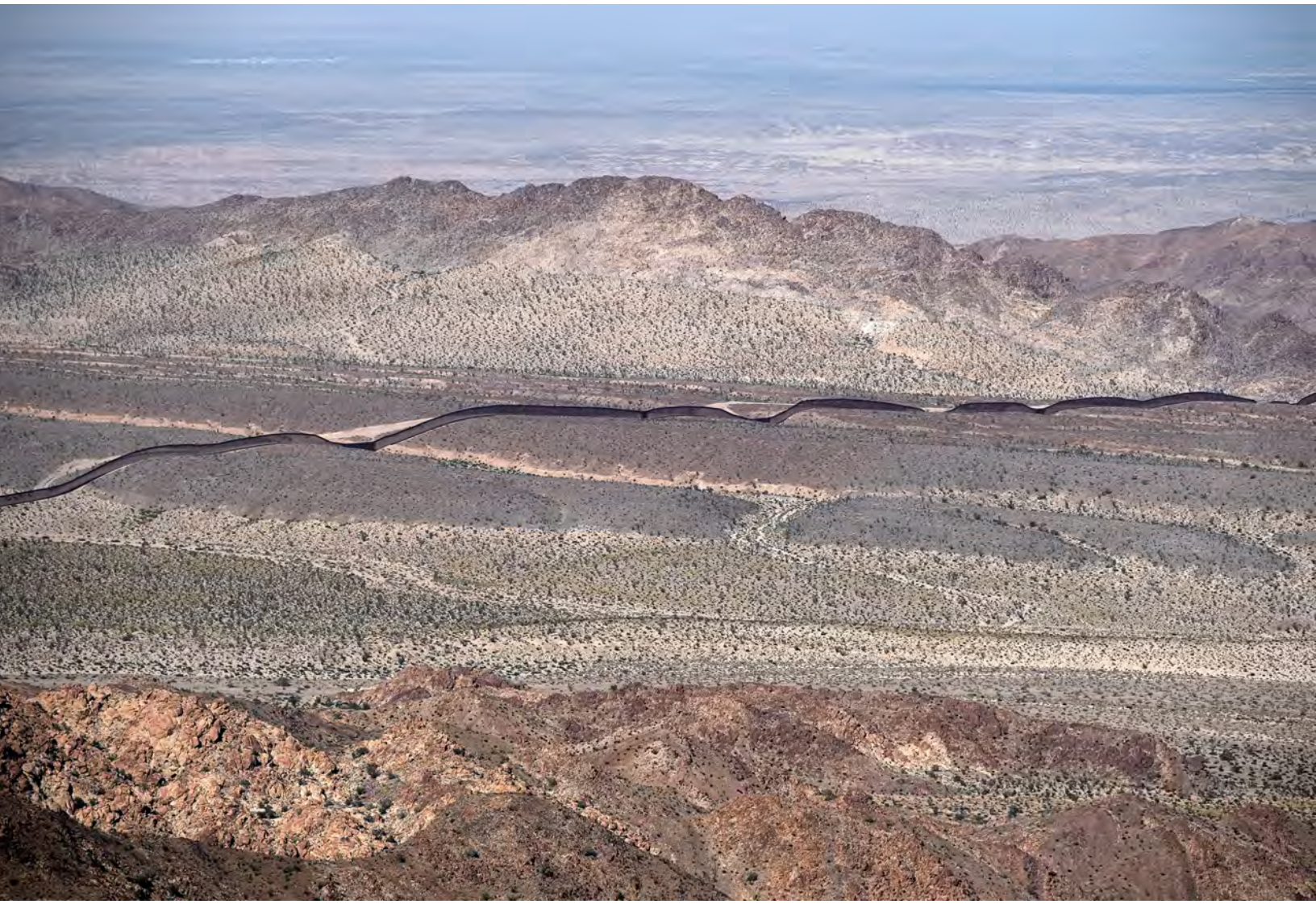


Aerial view of a hill on the desert crossed by a section of the US-Mexico border wall near San Luis Rio Colorado, Mexico, on September 19, 2022.

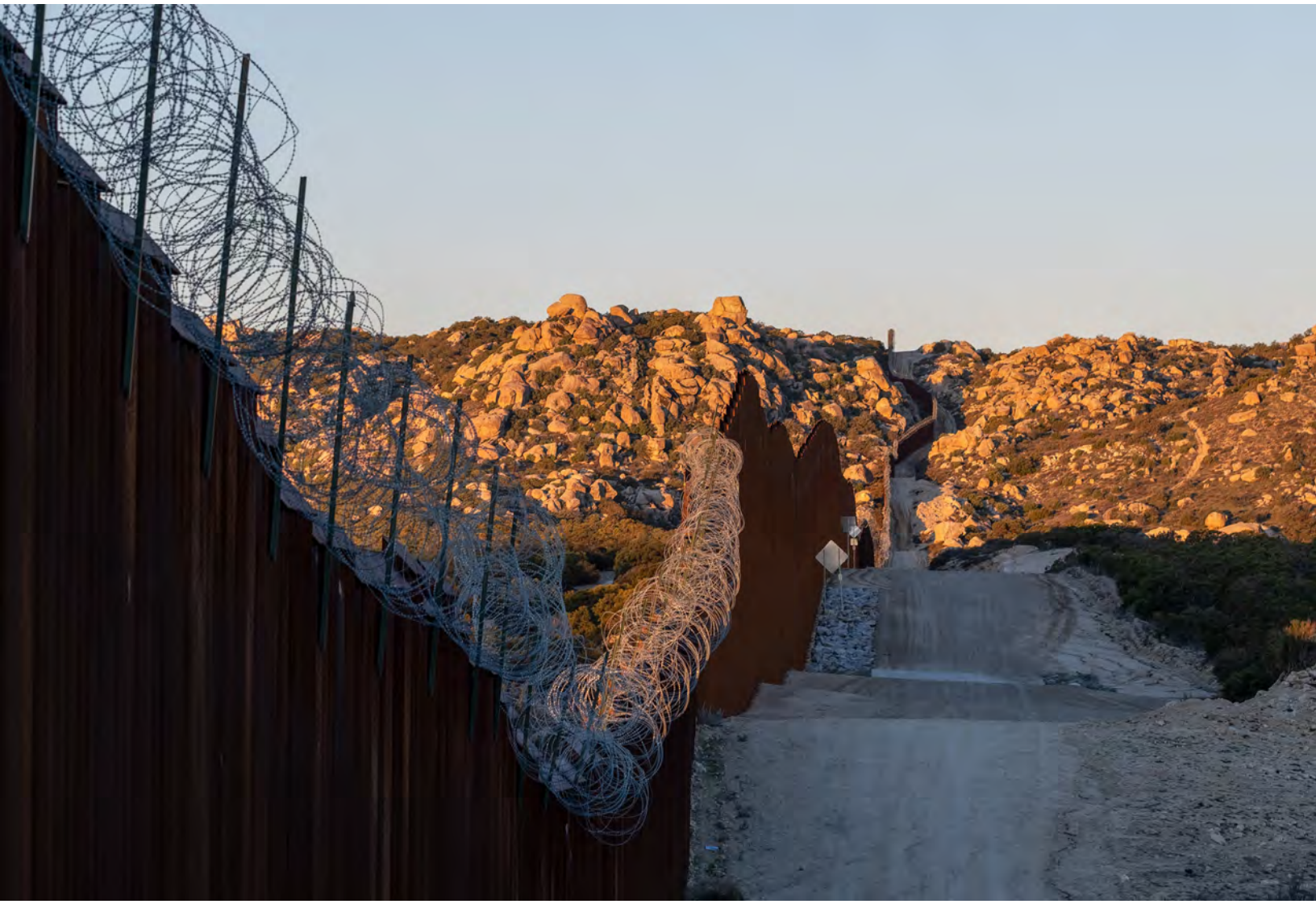


A section of the US-Mexico border wall is seen in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Arizona state, United States, on September 27, 2022.

An unfinished section of the US-Mexico border wall and blasted hills are seen at Guadalupe Canyon east Douglas, Arizona state, United States, on September 20, 2022.



A new section of the US-Mexico border wall is seen from La Rumorosa, Baja California state, Mexico, on September 28, 2022. President Donald Trump's administration built 458 miles of border wall, most of it in places with some type of pre-existing barrier. According to environmentalists and advocates, the destruction left on the landscape by the construction of these new border wall systems has deeply altered some of the richest ecosystems in North America and, instead of stopping illegal crossings, has created new paths for smugglers.



A reinforced section of the US-Mexico border wall is seen near Pueblo, Ca. on February 13, 2024.

Divided Landscape

Stretching for more than three thousand kilometers, from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico, runs a line of tension: the border between Mexico and the United States. This space has undergone increasing militarization and physical segmentation through the construction of walls, fences, and technological control systems designed to stop unauthorized migration flows. However, the border wall is not just made of steel or concrete; it is a wound on the land and a symbol of the asymmetries that define the relationship between the two countries.

Guillermo Arias's images capture the abrupt interruption of ecosystems, the contrast between what was once ecological and social continuity, and the persistence of life despite efforts to divide it. The Mexico–United States border crosses deserts, mountains, rivers, valleys, and coastal zones that form one of the richest and most diverse biological corridors in North America. The construction of physical barriers has disrupted migratory routes of animal species—such as the pronghorn, jaguar, Mexican gray wolf, and many birds—that depend on free movement for their survival. The infrastructure also causes the removal of native plants, soil compaction, habitat fragmentation, and noise and light pollution in previously protected areas. Nature, with no voice in the political debate, pays the price for decisions made in distant centers of power.

Arias's work expresses one of the deepest paradoxes of the border project: while official discourse insists on the need to reinforce national security and control human mobility, it systematically ignores the impact such policies have on the ecosystems they cross. Decisions are made thousands of kilometers away, with no ethical concern for non-human life. There are no protests from destroyed plants or displaced species. Cracked deserts, disoriented birds, and eroded soils have no seat in Congress. Their exclusion from the debate is not just symbolic—it is structural. In the dominant geopolitical logic, nature is a space to conquer, an inert mass that can be divided, fenced, or sacrificed in the name of an abstraction called sovereignty.

The border is not only a geographical line: it is a test of our relationship with the living world. When decisions are imposed without listening to those who inhabit the territory—both human and non-human—a form of violence is perpetuated that will eventually come back to affect us all. The border is a space where power decides who gets to live and who must die in the name of sovereignty. But it is also a space of resistance. Binational communities, civil organizations, shelters, and human rights collectives have emerged in response to the suffering caused by the border, defending the right to mobility, refuge, and dignity.

These photographs show landscapes crossed by structures foreign to their geography; mountains and deserts fragmented by barriers that follow geopolitical, not natural, logics. They also show human presence: footprints, offerings, open windows in the walls, sealed doors. Each of these marks is evidence of a contested memory, of a history that refuses to be locked behind walls.

History shows that borders are social constructions that can change. They can be reimagined as bridges, as meeting points and negotiation spaces, as contact zones where difference is not seen as a threat but as a possibility. For that, we need to question the paradigm that shapes current border policies. Instead of spending billions of dollars to strengthen division, we could invest in cross-border cooperation, mutual recognition of rights, and stronger cultural and economic ties that acknowledge the interdependence between Mexico and the United States. Climate change, humanitarian crises, and global health and mobility challenges demand common responses—not fragmented solutions.

Far from solving the problems it claims to address, the border wall makes them worse. It is a material expression of fear, of institutionalized racism, and of a worldview that favors force over solidarity. But it is also a mirror that forces us to see ourselves: what kind of societies are we building when we choose separation as our answer?

The images of the wall, in all their rawness, are also an aesthetic testimony. They reveal a poetics of interruption—a tragic beauty that does not hide the pain, but makes it visible. As we look at these wounded landscapes, we cannot—and must not—look away.

These photographs are not just a record; they must be a call to collectively imagine a future where borders are not scars, but thresholds.