

TOWARDS A POLITICAL ECOLOGY
OF THE US-MEXICO BORDER:
BORDER ZONES, THE NON-HUMAN,
AND ABOLITIONIST VISIONS

by

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ABSTRACT

The increase of crossings at the US-Mexico border over the past few years has garnered international attention, as images and reports of family separation, human rights abuse, and migrant death have abounded. This violence is neither accidental nor random; it is the result of decades-long policy and enforcement by the US government that has expanded rapidly over the past three decades, growing to include technology, surveillance, and the use of non-human nature. Examining these processes over space and time helps us to understand how the US government creates and maintains violence at/near the US-Mexico border, and the impact it has on both people and land across the globe.

This practicum seeks to examine the ways in which US Border Patrol uses non-human actors/nature to control, detain, and punish migrants at the US-Mexico Border. Pulling together different theoretical frameworks – including political ecology, environmental justice, and abolition – it explores the various forms of violence migrants face both at/near the border and in detention centers, including the physical, spatial, and temporal. The paper then puts critical border and immigration literature in conversation with abolitionist ecologies, discussing how race, class, and other socially produced differences inform and shape these geographies. An exercise in both theory and practice, this practicum ultimately calls for radical reorganizations of political and social life in the US and the abolition of borders and immigration systems.

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To my friends, my partner, and all those I consider family – thank you for the love and care you have shown me, and that we share. It gets me through.

This practicum is written in solidarity with all people whose movement is criminalized, regulated, and subject to the whims of the state. It does not claim to be more than it is. I am indebted to those who have worked tirelessly against them systems and whose work inspires my own – may all of us be granted strength and protection as we create/await a new world.

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INTRODUCTION

2022 was the deadliest year for migrants crossing the US-Mexico border on record. According to an internal United States Border Patrol (USBP) memo, at least 853 migrants died trying to cross the southern border over the past twelve months, most commonly due to heat exhaustion, exposure, dehydration, or drowning (Montoya-Galvez 2022). Considering the vast terrain of border zones and long-standing underreporting by government agencies¹, this is likely an undercount. Even if migrants make it across the border, they still face risks of violence and death; in June of 2022, over fifty people were found dead in a tractor-trailer near Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas (Edison and Svitek 2022). Authorities ultimately determined they were migrants being smuggled across the border and that they had died from heat stroke and asphyxiation; the incident accounts for the deadliest human smuggling case in recent memory.² These deaths are neither accidental nor random; they are the result of decades-long policy and enforcement by the US government that criminalizes movement. These bordering strategies have expanded rapidly over the past three decades, growing to include technology, surveillance, and the use of non-human nature. Examining these relationships and tools helps build understanding of how the US government creates and maintains violence along and around the US-Mexico border, and the impact it has on both people and land across the globe.

This research paper explores a political ecology of the US-Mexico border. It rejects an apolitical and ahistorical approach to ecological and environmental issues by not only politicizing the environment but also engaging with the ways in which race, class, culture, and the nation state,

¹ See US Government Accountability Office 2022. The report estimates that the true number of deaths along the border may be twice as high as reported, which equates to thousands of deaths going underreported.

² Smuggling in this context refers to the multi-million-dollar industry at the border, in which migrants pay people/groups to help them cross the border.

among others, actively (re)produce the environment, as well as the way they determine who is affected by environmental harms and degradation. This practicum centers multiple research questions: *What is the relationship between human and non-human actors/nature in the creation of border geographies? How does US Border Patrol leverage non-human nature/actors to inflict violence on migrants at the US-Mexico border? How can political ecologists use abolitionist and environmental justice frameworks to work towards abolishing violence within these spaces?*

The paper will first examine how human actors – specifically USBP – spatially and temporally use non-human aspects of border zones to control and punish migrants. Non-human actors/non-human nature include the “natural” environment in and through which migrants traverse, such as topography, flora and fauna, weather, water, as well as technology and infrastructure. It will then put critical border and immigration literature in conversation with abolitionist ecologies and environmental justice frameworks, interrogating how race, class, and other socially produced differences inform and shape these geographies. While many scholars have researched the border, few have sought to put political ecology, critical border studies, and abolition in conversation with each other. This paper’s main areas of study are the designated border zones/sectors within which United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP) operates (Figure 1). CBP is the parent agency of US Border Patrol and works closely with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). At the southern border of the US, CBP oversees nine sectors spanning Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. The paper will largely focus on Arizona and Texas, due to most border literature centering those two states.

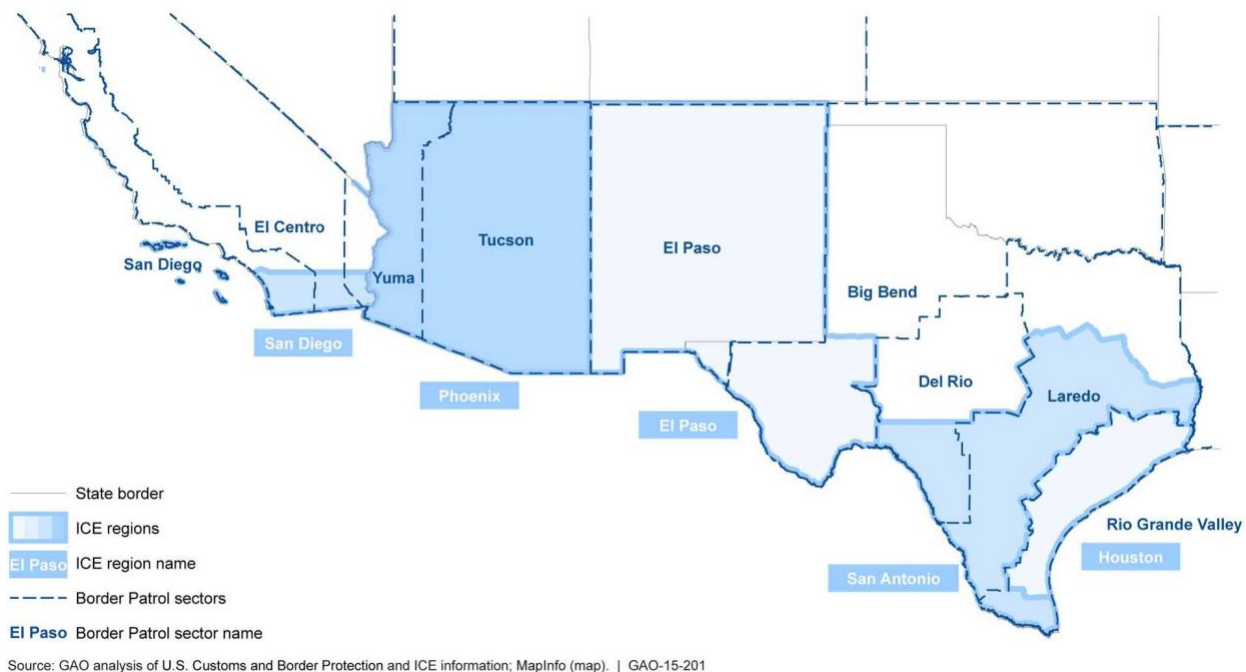


Figure 1: U.S. Government Accountability Office map showing Border Patrol sectors, 2021.

METHODOLOGY

The paper will consist of a literature review that surveys a variety of academic articles, books, government reports, news coverage and reporting of/on the border, and other related media. It will begin by providing a primer on current US-Mexico border policies and expansion over the past three decades. The practicum will then establish the theoretical frameworks it will be applying to the border – political ecology and environmental justice – before problematizing the human/non-human binary through both post-humanist and indigenous ontologies. The first section of the practicum will examine how human actors, specifically USBP, use non-human actors/nature to further their aims. Through examining the ways in which these agencies use technology, the natural landscape, and infrastructure to restrict, control, and hurt migrants, the paper posits border zones as violent geographies (Springer and Billon 2016). The paper will then move on to examine various aspects of these border operations: first, how the state weaponizes time to harm migrants;

second, how race and socially reproduced difference inform these geographies; and finally, how the state spatially expands its bordering operations through detention centers and prisons. By pulling together these different threads, this practicum seeks to expand conversations about borders and enclosure within the field of political ecology. It ultimately offers a prefigurative critique that rejects carceral logics and helps scholars to better understand the social and economic forces that shape/inform environments and geographies.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Border Policies and the Environment

A variety of literature (Meierotto 2012, Grineski and Juarez-Carrillo 2012, Liverman et. al 1999, Peters et al. 2018, Cunningham and Bede Scharper 2017) broadly identifies USBP operations as having negative impacts on humans and the natural environment on and near the US-Mexico border, including but not limited to pollution, waste, water scarcity, biodiversity and habitat loss, soil erosion and flooding, and varying forms of environmental degradation. US law allows for the waiver of any legislation that could interfere with border enforcement and construction, including key environmental protections such as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (104th US Congress 1996, IIRIRA, Section 102; 109th US Congress 2006, Secure Fence Act, Section 3), and faces limited oversight. Since 1994, the US government has enforced a border strategy called “Prevention Through Deterrence” (PTD), which relies on the logic that by concentrating personnel and resources in urban areas, migrants will be forced to traverse more remote and harsh terrain that is “less suited for crossing and more suited for enforcement” (US Border Patrol 1994, 6). Similar to the Cold War policy of “Mutually Assured Destruction,” PTD relies on game theory, which views "human beings as calculative individuals, constantly monitoring our environment in order to undertake informed and rational decisions about

risk and reward” (Boyce 2019, 193). In game theory, everyone is an adversary, and all decisions involve cost-benefit analyses in which actors can reap maximum benefit while incurring the least harm. However, game theory actively leaves out other complex dynamics and impulses that influence people’s decisions to migrate, such as “the vicissitudes of political economy, the transnational bonds of affection, the desperate hardships or dangers experienced in a person’s community of origin, and peoples’ selfless desires to provide opportunity and support to those they love,” among others (Boyce 2019, 193). Based on the rational logic of game theory, if the aims and goals of PTD are not met, then what follows is a continuous scaling up of risks, surveillance, and policing on the border.

Cunningham and Sharper (2017) remark on the sharp rise in fencing and border infrastructure throughout the 21st century, which stands opposed to notions of a “borderless globe” that emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the signing of the Schengen Agreement and Maastricht Treaty (57-58). Instead, borders have become more fortified at the expense of people and the environment, producing a type of social ecology in which “the causes and patterns of human displacement come together in a border landscape...one in which the social exclusions fostered by security fencing simultaneously generate ecological degradation” (Cunningham and Sharper 2017, 58). In the United States, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security post-9/11 built out the US’ immigration, border, and counter-terrorism operations, allowing for Customs and Border Patrol (CPB) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to expand their staffing and infrastructure exponentially (Martin 2019, 245-246). Numerous studies, as well as statistics from USBP itself, have shown that PTD has not significantly lowered the amount of people attempting to cross the border, even during periods of decreased migration (Cornelius and Salehyan 2007; Aiken and Silverman 2021). In 2021, USBP reported over 1.7 million encounters with migrants at

the border; in 2022, that number jumped to 2.3 million (US Customs and Border Protection, 2022). Even as the overall number of crossings have increased since the establishment of PTD, its core logic continues to operate: the environment must be either controlled and/or leveraged to carry out border operations.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Political Ecology and Human/Non-Human Connections

Political ecology has long paid attention to the relationship between human actors and non-human actors along the border. Instead of focusing solely on the former, “non-human nature and its components” – which can range from dirt and bacteria to climate and rainfall – are seen as not only “imping[ing] upon the world of human struggles” but being bound up with them (Robbins 2020, 224). As institutions, states, and other forms of human organization are created and interact with the non-human environment, all parties are actively transformed through these connections and assemblages. Non-humans, instead as being viewed as separate or static, are “collaborators in complex relationships,” impacting people and institutions at every level (Robbins 2020, 224). Sundberg (2011), discussing post-humanist political ecology, advances a “*relational ontological* approach framing the human and nonhuman as mutually constituted in and through social relations,” all of whom participate in constituting the world (322). This approach also calls for a reconceptualization of how the human/non-human *participate* in these co-constitutive processes. Instead of “framing agency as the product of conscious intention...[restricting it] to the all-knowing human,” a post-humanist approach imbues all actors “*with capacity to act with the coming together of things* that is a necessary and prior condition for any action to occur, including the actions of humans...[agency as] *doing-in-relation*” (Sundberg 2011, 321; Braun 2004, 1354). However, this paper does not seek to place the non-human “above” the human nor obfuscate the

material, spatial, and discursive violence the latter perpetrates on the environment and/or other humans. Menon and Karthik (2017) argue that political ecology “calls into question the very nature of these binary oppositions – human and non-human – and their limits by examining the epistemological basis of these categories” (92). In that same vein, this paper aims to question western binaries of nature/culture and the ways in which this can be re-produced through frameworks such as post-humanism and other modes of western thought.

Indigenous peoples have long incorporated the non-human/other-than-human into their ontologies and cosmologies.³ Ojibway scholar Waaseyaa’sin Christine Sy, quoting Elder James Dumont, discusses four different aspects of Anishinaabe relationality to the earth: since all beings – from humans to trees and beyond – are seen as “persons,” all relationships are “personal...inclusive...familial (i.e., kinship, relatives)...and reciprocal and mutually reciprocal” (Sy 2018, 227). Margaret Noodin (2018) invokes the Anishinaabe term *ganawendamaw* as a verb that “connotes as spectrum of animacy for all life, allowing rocks, water, and humans to be described as coequal partners in the creation, maintenance, and evolution of a place” (247). Water, land, and oil cease to be resources for extraction and depletion and instead are part of a complex system, in possession of a voice: “not the anthropomorphized symbolic transfer of human values to nonhuman, but the genuinely other view of the world we all share” (Noodin 2018, 248). Bringing indigenous thought into discussions of political ecology and posthumanism help us to problematize the binary of human/non-human and offers us a more holistic way to engage with the “environment.” In critiquing borders and border regimes, this scholarship and storytelling show

³ While this section lays out clear examples of indigenous scholarship that has sought to articulate some of these modes of relationality, I am aware that western scholarship cannot fully articulate these ways of being, nor should they necessarily have to. Instead, I aim to honor and hold space for these ontologies/cosmologies and highlight their continuous dismissal/reframing within western institutions.

us the ways in which people and culture have been (dis)located through borders and related forms of enclosure. The logic of these regimes relies on the decimation of indigenous ontologies and epistemologies to create these violent geographies.

In addition, a strict binary of human/non-human suggests that humans all interact with and are affected by the “environment” in the same way, and that they share the same socio-historical relationships to land and place. Polly Pallister-Wilks’ work studying Black migrants in the French Alps offers insight into how we might incorporate aspects of post-humanism into border studies while also applying critical lenses of race and mobility; drawing from Black feminist critiques of post-humanism, the scholar aims to “interrogate the ways such ecology-mobility entanglements are generative of less-than-human, racialised subjects as well as racialised geographies of whiteness” without overdetermining Black embodiment by nature itself (2022, 3). This process allows for the “articulat[ion of] the co-constitution of race and natural environments beyond reproducing the nature/culture binary,” while still paying attention to ecology (Pallister-Wilks 2022, 4). As discussed later in the paper, the racialized logic(s) through which border regimes operate and reify ultimately decide who is granted mobility and the freedom of movement. By paying attention to the ways in which race, class, mobility, and the environment co-constitute each other at and near the US-Mexico border, this paper aims to not only engage with the role of the non-human, but also the logics and social, political, and economic processes that inform these actions and policies.

Environmental Justice and Violence

This paper also seeks to situate bordering and border regimes within the field of Environmental Justice (EJ), viewing environmental injustice *as violence* on both people and the environment

itself. Erik Kojola and David Pellow (2021) explain that framing environmental injustice as violence “underscores that environmental injustices constitute direct assaults on entire communities (including bodies, identities, and ways of knowing) and ecosystems,” resulting in long-lasting harm and trauma on all beings (103). Moreover, it emphasizes that these practices “are designed to maintain the health of highly valued populations – people and species who matter – at the expense of those whose lives matter less and are differentially valued by the state” (Kojola and Pellow 2021, 104). By focusing on the state as a driver of violence – as well as the hierarchies embedded within its violence work – political ecologists can engage in more meaningful critiques that are transformative and/or abolitionist in practice. While this paper focuses on the ways in which USBP uses the environment to harm human beings, it also recognizes that this does not necessarily exclude the non-human. Deborah McGregor (2010), writing towards EJ grounded in Anishinaabe worldviews, posits injustice as “not only inflicted by dominant society upon Aboriginal peoples, people of color, and people in low-income neighborhoods but also upon Creation itself” (28). This does not stand in opposition to traditional ideas of EJ but rather adds to it, helping to expand the scope of what constitutes violence and who/what can experience or internalize it. Understanding the interconnectedness of all beings – including those whose lifeways directly depend on the “environment” – better enables us as scholars to understand the impacts of environmental injustice throughout time and space. Just as we recognize that migrants face immense violence at/through the border, we also recognize that the *entire* environment is transformed through border operations.

Towards a Political Ecology of the US-Mexico Border

“The idea is that if enough people get hurt, they’ll stop coming.”

— Jason De León, interviewed for *The Verge*⁴

Non-Human Entanglements

Non-human actors/nature within the border zone simultaneously impede and facilitate USBP’s regulation of people and movement. Boyce (2016) suggests a “metabolic” theory of the state, in which surveillance, security, and policing practices “are continuously animated by a dynamic exterior that becomes the target of agents’ and agencies’ efforts to incorporate, digest, and subject ever-greater kinds and volumes of objects, bodies, landscapes, and data to centralized legibility and control” (246). This approach understands the state as constantly seeking to mitigate any issues that non-human actors may directly or indirectly pose to implementation of border strategies. These “frictions” inform the amount of energy the state must expend in the process, causing the “mobilization of resources and energy to overcome these environmental obstacles [to become] one of the primary dimensions of military, security, and administrative practice” along the border (Boyce 2016, 254). Sundberg (2011) posits the Sonora Desert (fig. 2), located in USBP’s Tucson sector, as a non-human actor which “inflects, disrupts, and obstructs the daily practices of boundary enforcement” through its high temperatures, largely unmarked paths, and vast topographic landscape (319-320). All these aspects make it more difficult for USBP to detect and detain migrants, which in turn causes the state to increase funding, personnel, and various technologies to meet this goal.

⁴ See Del Valle (2022).



Figure 2: A border fence near San Luis, Arizona in the Sonora Desert, separating the US (left) and Mexico (right). Source: Don Bartletti for the Los Angeles Times (2013).

While the environment might complicate border operations, it is also essential to carry out USBP’s objectives. PTD seeks to close off routes that are close to urban areas and/or frequently used by smugglers, intentionally funneling migrants into areas that are more dangerous and difficult to traverse. These routes often increase exposure to elements and chance of injury or death. The exploitation of desert climate and topography is coupled with the use of border technology and surveillance, another non-human actor. These include sensors, cameras, aerial military drones, facial recognition technologies, and other digital forms of tracking and surveillance (Del Valle 2022; Newell et. al 2017; Heyman 2008). The increased use the of Predator B drone in border zones, for example, is not only representative of the militarization of immigration control but also the ways in which this technology can completely (re)produce the environment from one of supposed “wild/open terrain” into one of *predation*, along lines of class, race, and mobility (Fojas

2021, 81). As Camilla Fojas (2021) writes in their research on drones, the USBP's weaponization of the landscape create two very different experiences of nature at/near the border: "either it is a reward and reprieve for the irksome labors of the middle class, or it is natural punishment for migrants" (81). In these cases, human actors (USBP) use two different types of non-human actors – technology and the desert landscape – to maximize the amount of physical exhaustion and violence they can enact on migrants crossing through these areas.

Chambers et al. (2021) found a significant correlation "between the location of border surveillance technology, the routes taken by migrants, and the locations of recovered human remains in the southern Arizona desert" (443). This forms a "spatial violence that tends not to be visibly recognized as such...[what] may seem like open, borderless spaces, such as deserts, mountains, or seas, become active agents in the practices of border enforcement and in the logistics of border crossing" (Schindel 2022, 431). By blaming migrant injury or death on the harshness of the environment, states can obfuscate the ways in which they themselves have created these violent geographies. As Jason De León (2015) explains, "the fact this violence has been outsourced to [non-human nature] does not mean these fatalities should be characterized as 'unintended consequences' or natural events" (67-68). It is part of a larger, structural process that increases the distance between the US government and death occurring on the border, foreclosing any chance of accountability or reform.

Within the context of border regimes, Squire describes these processes as "biophysical violence," through which "people are abandoned to the physical forces of deserts and seas, which directly operate on bodily functions with often devastating consequence" (Squire 2017, 514). Biophysical violence at the border "enrolls various 'natural' or physical elements within its operation...and

highlights the blurred distinction between killing and letting die” (Squire 2017, 520). While USBP does not claim or accept migrant deaths as a result of border policies and practices, their construction and manipulation of border environments points towards a concentrated attempt to harm and punish migrants, directly and indirectly. As Roxanne Doty (2011) surmises, “the logic of [PTD] actually depends on the possibility of deaths and would be meaningless in the absence of this possibility” (608). There is a biological understanding of the body that underlies such policies; how long a human can go without food, how long they can be subjected to extreme heat or cold, and so on. Yet, there is also a filtering element to border operations; the lethal nature of the landscape sorts out “the most able-bodied, disproportionately favoring the younger, stronger, and healthier among prospective illegalized (labour) migrants,” rendering the border a place of “capture” as well as “exclusion” (De Genova 2013, 254). The border, though often viewed as a stationary and fortified entity, is actually amorphous and ever-evolving. Whatever the current needs of the nation state, the non-human is leveraged by USBP to (re)produce landscapes of surveillance and punishment, controlling both current and future mobilities of migrants.

Temporality

US Border Patrol not only exploits and manipulates the environment to make it as physically demanding/exhausting as possible, but also as *temporally* demanding/exhausting as possible. Boyce – building off Chambers et al. – discusses the ways in which USBP weaponizes time, arguing that Prevention Through Deterrence seeks “to isolate clandestine im/migrants, while maximizing the temporal window available for state actors to undertake detection and interdiction” (Boyce 2020, 3). Boyce extends temporal elongation to include other artificial means, including administrative detention, criminal prosecution, and bureaucratic delay, all of which are predicated on uncertainty, vulnerability, and suspension (2020, 4). These processes of suspension not only

affect the person being detained; they have consequences for family, friends, and communities whose lives are connected to and changed by detainment and deportation. Perhaps one of the most widely covered instances of temporal suspension was Donald Trump's "Remain in Mexico" policy in 2020, in which tens of thousands of asylum seekers were prevented from remaining in the US while they awaited their asylum hearings (Blue et al. 2021, 9-11). As a result, they were forced to remain on the Mexico side of the border and were exposed to public health risks during the COVID-19 pandemic, violence, and immense precarity. The state prolongs the suffering of migrants while simultaneously enacting policies that seek to accelerate their removal. The practice of "expedited removal" from the United States, for example, allows immigration authorities to order the removal/deportation of anyone defined as an "arriving alien" under the law (Boyce 2020, 5). The effects of such policies leave physical, mental, and spiritual trauma unable to be quantified and/or measured at large. Navaro et al. (2022) ask us not to approach violence as "just a contingent 'event' with a beginning and an end" but rather to interrogate the "long-term resonance and vibration of violence across spatial, temporal, and material fields," and how these might appear in non-human/other-than-human forms (10). Bordering strategies such as PTD involve *ongoing* processes of control, detention, and punishment that affect *both* land and body. The state's operationalization of time not only affects migrants in the present but (re)produces multi-generational violence with no clear end. Refusing to view this violence as static or a "one-time" event points us towards abolitionist approaches to ecology and geography, which reckon with larger, historical forces that shape and inform these landscapes and the uneven impacts of environmental injustice.

Racializing Logics

Hierarchies of Criminalization

Understanding the ways in which race, class, nationality, and other forms of social difference are (re)produced at/through the border allows political ecologists to better engage with the material and discursive effects of violence at the border, and what the nation state stands to gain from them. Moreover, it is within these intersections that political ecology can expand its scope and adopt a more abolitionist lens for analysis. Citing the field's lack of engagement with white supremacy and colonialism, Heynen and Ybarra (2021) argue that political ecology must move “towards a structural critique of the ways that exposures to environmental harms and access to environmental goods are unequally distributed by race, class and empire” (2). The scholars argue towards an “abolitionist ecology” which interrogates and organizes against racist and colonial logics that shape and produce uneven relationships to land, property, and the environment. As Harsha Walia explains, “the mass production and social organization of difference is at the heart of border-craft” (Walia 2022, n.p.). This difference, which is ordered and hierarchical, is produced within/across humans *and* between the human and non-human. Border regimes “control through selective inclusions and expulsions, making and maintaining the ‘good versus bad’ migrant” to justify this ordering, as well as the discursive and material violence it produces (Walia 2022, n.p). These regimes are not simply symptomatic of racism, xenophobia, and nationalism; they actively mobilize and legitimate these processes. By constructing ideas of who is imprisonable and who is not, who poses a threat and who does not, states are able to “[lead] communities to unconsciously adopt a notion of ‘safety . . . predicated on banishment, mass criminalization, [and] policing” (Aiken and Silverman 2021, 149). This criminalization allows blame to be shifted to “illegal” and “alien” people instead of confronting the systemic, transnational, and violent conditions that have

caused people to migrate in the first place. Moreover, the depiction of migrants as willingly choosing to enter the country illegally allows for the authorization of border enforcement “through the discursive terrain of liberalism and the rule of law” (Beltran 2020, 92). This tactic ultimately aims to frame the border – and thus, the nation – as being constantly under threat by (racialized) “invaders,” endlessly justifying the need for “protection.” Through these processes, USBP can legitimately claim its actions are seen as lawful and necessary by the general liberal polity, while sidestepping claims of racism and/or xenophobia.

Labor and Mobility

Racialized people continue to bear the brunt of violence inflicted by the US government in border zones. Most communities near the border are poor and heavily Latinx. People from Latin America, specifically Mexico, face the highest rates of surveillance and detention (Sabo et. al 2014, Heyman 2008, Romero 2011). Mexican people are seen as “disposable units of labor who can be summoned, employed, policed, and removed without consideration for national, regional, and community roots” (Heyman 2022, 129). Though migrant labor is a core part of the US economy, it is largely unvalued and precariously maintained, subject to the will of immigration officials and government policies. Leah Montange (2022), referencing the work of David Harvey, points out that “capital needs to both accommodate and control labour’s mobility,” and government regulations can either help or hurt these objectives (966). This can not only lead to contradictions and conflicts within the varying goals of the nation state but also reveal to us how non-citizen mobility is regulated differently than that of citizens, and how race, gender, class, and nationality determine one’s vulnerability to the power of the state. African and Afro-Caribbean migrants also face a disproportionate amount of racism and abuse by USBP, including racial profiling, medical neglect, excessive force, prolonged and arbitrary detention, higher bonds, and low rates of

successful asylum screenings and approval rates, among others (Black Alliance for Just Immigration et. al 2022). This ongoing treatment exposes the ways in which bordering practices are deeply intertwined with anti-blackness in the United States, and the ways in which the United States government continues to police and regulate the movement of Black people.

Black and brown bodies, assumed or rendered illegal, are consistently regarded as “out-of-place” in the border landscape while human and non-human entanglements “enact a form of racialized borderwork that privileges white mobility through, and presence in, the borderscape” (Pallister-Wilkins 2022, 11). Even on a legal, bureaucratic level, there are significant discrepancies in enforcement. Canadians and Europeans make up nearly half of all immigration overstay violations in the US but rarely face detention (Walia 2021, 76). Illegality and race are intertwined; even when a policy might appear to race-neutral, they become “race-based” through their enforcement (Romero 2011, Provine 2013). The policing of movement and labor, as well as racial discrepancies within enforcement, extend far beyond the border zone. It is within this space that we can begin to understand the expansive nature of border regimes and how they are inextricably bound up with the carceral state, all of which use racialized logics to (re)produce processes of exclusion and control.

Beyond the Border: Carceral Geographies and Abolition

Expanding Spatial Scope

Understanding the production of social difference helps in recognizing the ways in which environmental injustice is enabled through processes of border patrol and control. Bordering regimes operate globally, not only producing violent geographies (with)in these areas but anywhere people live, work, and play. This includes leveraging non-human nature and landscapes

to harm people, but also other environmental risks migrants are exposed to because of being detained and imprisoned, such as exposure to hazardous chemicals, pollutants, contaminated water, and other toxic harms (Pellow 2021, 63-63; Ybarra 2020; Bernd et. al 2017). In 2018, thousands of migrant children were exposed to extreme heat and other harsh environmental conditions at the Tornillo Detention Center, nicknamed “el infierno” by residents (Morel and Michels 2018). At ICE detention centers, “rat infestation, sewage spills, maggots in showers, bug infestations, and contaminated water” are commonplace (Pellow and Vazin 2019, 8-9). These forms of environmental violence extend even further; people in border communities⁵ face higher rates of exposure to pollution, proximity to industrial parks/plants, and other environmental harms, as well as the constant presence of immigration enforcement (Grineski et al 2015; Morales Jr. et al. 2012; Heyman 2008). By expanding our scope of environmental harm, we can make crucial connections to carceral geographies. Carceral geography focuses on the spatialization of policing, surveillance, and imprisonment; this not only occurs in or near prisons but in urban and rural areas across the country (Massaro and Boyce 2021). An emphasis on the spatial not only hearkens back how the non-human can be used to (re)produce landscapes but also how different forms of policing can play out over space and time, from undocumented labor to foster care systems. By bridging connections between the carceral state and immigration systems, we can more fully integrate abolitionist and transformative ways of thinking about these entanglements. Within the field, particular attention must be paid “to the histories, legacies, and continuing practices of plantation logics, settler colonialism, enslavement, and conquest associated with racial capitalism,” as well as the ways in which “unequal land and property relations produce violent and uneven geographies” (Pellow 2021, 60). Understanding the ways in which these inequalities are embedded

⁵ Border communities, though a broad term, refers in this case to those who live in cities and towns near the US-Mexico border, and whose lives are shaped by proximity to and policing within these areas.

pushes us as scholars and people to reckon with how systems of power and control can be reformed or dismantled altogether. Recognizing the ways in which geographies have been co-constituted alongside socially produced difference to harm migrants, this paper calls into question the “necessity” of border regimes and asks what it would take to abolish these systems of domination.

Global Connections

While this paper focuses on the US-Mexico border, it emphasizes that border regimes operate globally, and encourages us to look towards other groups for inspiration and solidarity in this struggle. Groups, movements, and entire communities of people have long rejected carceral logics and immigration systems, already carving/living out a prefigurative politic⁶ sans borders. The Sans Papiers (literally “without papers”) revolts in France, for example, confronted the ways in which immigrants had long been subjected to economic inequality, racial discrimination, policing, and segregation. Similar to the United States, the plights of undocumented and/or legally precarious people “are a product of racially informed technologies of exclusion,” and both are shaped by the history of immigrant labor (Miriam 2011, 30). Indigenous peoples across the world also reject borders and interrelated carceral logics. The Red Nation, largely based in the US, “rejects the settler state’s notions of citizenship...that are built upon the genocide of Native people, exploitation of Native resources, and labor of all who are poor and colonized” (The Red Nation, n.d.). They call for the abolition of all borders and ask us to consider what a world without borders might look like. If political ecologists are concerned with environmental justice for all living beings, they must seriously grapple with the social and economic forces that shape/inform environments and geographies, and consider alternatives that do not (re)produce these inequalities.

⁶ For more on the concept of prefigurative politics, see Leach 2013, Raekstad 2018, and Ishkanian and Saavedra 2019.

CONCLUSION

This essay has sought to place the border within larger conversations about abolitionist ecologies and environmental justice. By examining the use of non-human actors/nature to control and detain people at the border, it has sought to reveal the ways in which environmental harms are bound up with the state. Through discussing the temporal, racial, and spatial elements of bordercraft, this paper actively urges scholars to engage with both material and discursive violence at the border, as well as call into question the existence of borders themselves. Political ecologists should continue to incorporate anti-imperialist, intersectional, and abolitionist frameworks into their research, intentionally grappling with the larger, structural forces that shape land and geography. Scholars must demand inquiry that challenges the status quo and incorporates epistemologies and ontologies that are not grounded in white supremacy. This paper takes seriously the task of abolishing all forms of domination and continues to work towards a world in which everyone has a home and movement is not criminalized.

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