

Border Environments: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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ABSTRACT: "Border Environments" is deeply informed by a rich body of recent studies, which has not only exposed the overlaps between geopolitics, biopolitics, and ecopolitics of migration but also laid open the concept of borders themselves as sites in which political economy and political ecology collide, intersect, and shape each other. Over the course of a global pandemic that simultaneously upended all notions of border control and continues to have a devastatingly disproportionate effect on migrant populations and border communities not just in the Americas but across the world, "Border Environments" coalesced into a multidisciplinary, multilocational, and multidimensional investigation of the space, place, and concept conspicuously and persistently absent from existing macrostructural analyses of climate change and migration: the border itself. Each contributor engages in rich, site-specific explorations of borders as interfaces; the scope of their work extends far beyond the southern border of the United States. Iconologies, narratives, aesthetic forms and performative practices examined in this issue put the heterogeneous landscapes of Latin America in generative dialogue with other distant and proximate, intra- and inter-national border environments: the Marcellus Shale that connects New York and Pennsylvania, the Gangetic delta straddling India and Bangladesh, the sandy straits of the South China Sea.

KEYWORDS: Border, environment, migration, geopolitics, biopolitics, ecopolitics.

On August 3, 2019, a man drove more than two hundred miles across Texas to the border town of El Paso with the express purpose of "killing some Mexicans" (Attanasio). Preceded by Charleston in 2015, Charlottesville in 2017, Pittsburgh in 2018, and Christchurch, New Zealand, just four months earlier in March 2019, the shooting spree that left twenty-three dead and an equal number grievously wounded in the parking lot of a Walmart near a pedestrian bridge spanning the US-Mexico border seemed numbingly familiar amid the accelerating paroxysms of deadly violence perpetrated by individuals against immigrant and minority communities across the United States and around the world. It was not the *modus operandi* of the perpetrator, however—a paradigmatic example of what sociologist Cynthia Miller-Idriss has termed "post-organizational extremism," fueled and sustained by dispersed on- and offline communities rather than unified ideologies or hierarchical chains of command—but its rationale that made this particular act a paradoxically powerful point of departure for launching the project we came to call "Border Environments" in the fall of 2019.

Tellingly titled *An Inconvenient Truth*, the manifesto circulated online in anticipation of the massacre appropriated not only the title but also the dire warnings about global warming, toxic pollution, and species extinction, subsequently shorthanded as climate change, that Al Gore voiced in a landmark documentary released in 2006. The coincidence attracted no attention from journalists and scholars at the time and remains unmentioned in recent recollections of the event in the wake of the Capitol insurrection and the

Atlanta killings in January and March of this year. Yet despite the repugnant genocidal solution of "ecofascism"—advocated both by the El Paso shooter and his predecessor in Christchurch (Anson)—the foundational premise of the manifesto revealed a striking convergence with a growing consensus among scholars, policymakers, journalists, and activists over the last decade.

Long studied as a purely human phenomenon predicated on political, economic, and socio-cultural indices, migration is increasingly viewed in conjunction with the rapidly accelerating degradation of the planet's geo-bio-physical systems. As the figure of the "climate refugee" leaves the realm of neologisms to enter the mainstream vocabulary of demographic displacement in both local and global contexts (Lustgarten), this emerging research has illuminated the ways in which climate change inextricably affects human flows, both as an accretive agent of slow violence as Rob Nixon famously put it and in the form of increasingly frequent and more devastating natural disasters (Garcia).

While the Pentagon in 2010 identified climate change as a comprehensive national security threat (Gjeltsen), its unequal impacts on current and prospective migrants have become the cynosure of a rich body of data-driven work by social scientists and legal scholars ("Climate Change, Displacement and Labour Migration"). Historians, meanwhile, have not only expanded the scale and scope of studying climate aberrations on migration across national territories and communities, but also illuminated that the epistemic armature of the El Paso manifesto was hardly unprecedented: environ-

mental conservation and ecological restoration have long served as weapons of political violence against geographic and ethno-racial others in North America (Hultgren; Anson).

The incendiary prospect of literally walling Mexico off from the United States in the Trump era has made the border itself a newly visible zone for reframing migration in socio-environmental terms. In addition to a symbolic and corporeal repository of state sovereignty, enforced through material infrastructures of security, surveillance, and incarceration, the built environments of the border brought public attention to bear on yet another nexus of human and non-human entanglements that was formerly relegated to a select subset of biologists, geologists, farmers, and conservationists. "Nature is fluid; walls are not," warned the geographer Margaret Wild in the *Scientific American*, highlighting the ways in which human flows were deeply embedded in the multispecies movements of ocelots and elf owls, butterflies and flood plains, riparian forests and grazing horses.

"Border Environments" is deeply informed by this rich body of recent studies, which has not only exposed the overlaps between geopolitics, biopolitics, and ecopolitics of migration but also laid open the concept of borders themselves as sites in which political economy and political ecology collide, intersect, and shape each other. But it is the inextricably twinned dystopian visions hypostasized by El Paso and the Wall that ultimately served to focalize our collaborative project. Over the course of a global pandemic that simultaneously upended all notions of border control and continues to have a devastatingly disproportionate effect on migrant populations and border communities not just in the Americas but across the world, "Border Environments" coalesced into a multidisciplinary, multilocational, and multidimensional investigation of the space, place, and concept that was conspicuously and persistently absent from the macrostructural analyses of climate change and migration. This missing link was the border itself, not as an object of study or a source of data, but as a vibrant confluence of the two key terms in our title.

By zooming in on the border as *oikos*, the etymological glue between economy and ecology whose roots lie in the places and practices of everyday life, that "Border Environments" ventures out

into the terrain where metaphors rub up against materiality and data turns into stories and images imbued with the power of death and life. Environments, concomitantly, do not merely signify non-human objects or multispecies differences. Taken together, the two terms rethink borders not in abstract terms of environmental and human objects of study, but rather as lived, embodied, and agential *interfaces* of flesh and place.

Even as each contributor engages in rich, site-specific explorations of such interfaces, the scope of their work extends far beyond the southern border of the United States. Iconologies, narratives, aesthetic forms and performative practices examined in this issue put the heterogenous landscapes of Latin America in generative dialogue with other distant and proximate, intra- and inter-national border environments: the Marcellus Shale that connects New York and Pennsylvania, the Gangetic delta straddling India and Bangladesh, the sandy straits of the South China Sea.

We wish to thank the Central New York Corridor Initiative, funded by the Mellon Foundation, for providing the seed resources for bringing together the diverse collective represented in this issue, and for the collaboration of Gail Bulman (Syracuse University), Oscar Pérez Hernández (Skidmore College), and Beth Jorgensen (University of Rochester) as project co-coordinators along with Debra Castillo and myself. These earlier stages of the research collaboration represented here may be found in the archives of an online symposium convened between September and December of 2020, www.borderenvironments.com, and in an event series of the same name between January and April 2021 whose recordings may be accessed at the web site of the Latin American Studies Program at Cornell University. We wish to thank Matias Borg Oviedo for creating and managing the aforementioned symposium archive, and the staff at the Latin American Studies Program who helped coordinate and record the spring 2021 events, especially Bill Phelan. Our gratitude also goes to the marvelously engaged students of the advanced seminar "Border Environments," taught collaboratively by Debra Castillo and myself at Cornell in 2019 and 2021. Some of their professional work, as well as that of several guest speakers in these seminars, appears in this issue.

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