

# The Price of Mobility

## *On the Border Industrial Complex and the Role of Private Industry in Enforcing Migration Restrictions*

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### ABSTRACT

**Abstract:** This research paper explores the origins of the border industrial complex, current United States policies supported by private corporations regarding border infrastructure, and the impact of these policies on Central American asylum seekers. My analysis draws from critical border studies literature on the existence of borders as political tools, as opposed to “neutral lines” demarcating sovereignty, examining how border policies fuel the neoliberal economy. Given this background, I examine the commercialization of human mobility using border policies at the U.S.-Mexico border as a case study. The question at the core of my investigation is, to what extent does corporate investment in U.S.-Mexico border militarization obstruct protection for Central American migrants seeking asylum in the United States? In response, I argue that it is important to examine the issue of corporate involvement in U.S. border policy because of how this involvement impedes the implementation of progressive immigration policies by centring focus on the border security market and decentring human rights. More specifically, I contend that border violence funded by corporate investment in state bordering becomes a means of maintaining racial hierarchy through movement and citizenship restrictions against racialized migrants from the Global South.

### Introduction

The U.S.-Mexico border is the most frequently crossed border in the world (Young, 2016). As a site of high activity, it has been a subject of interest for critical international political economy scholars due to the amount of money paid out by corporations funding border infrastructure relative to state funding directed to humanitarian efforts. U.S. budgets on border and immigration control have been expanding since the mid-1980s, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Customs and Border Patrol (CPD), and the Coast Guard together have issued hundreds of thousands of private contracts through the 2010s (Miller, 2019). By blurring the line between politics

and industry, corporations and their corresponding political influence through lobbying and donations hold significant political capital in funding border militarization. Here, migrants fall through the cracks of the border industrial complex—a system that profits from migrant criminalization—and existing international refugee protections. Accordingly, profit generated by border militarization takes priority over a humane response to asylum-seeking.

The issue of corporate involvement in U.S. border policy is important to examine because of how it impedes the implementation of progressive immigration

policies by centring the border security market and (de)centring focus on human rights. Accordingly, the animating question for my research is, *to what extent does corporate investment in U.S.-Mexico border militarization obstruct protection for Central American migrants seeking asylum in the United States?* I argue that the border exists primarily as an industry where private interest is safeguarded over migrant rights. My argument consists of a three-pronged evaluation: first, I will explore the origins of the border industrial complex. Next, I will examine current American policies supported by private corporations regarding border infrastructure. Finally, I will discuss the impact of these policies on Central American asylum seekers.

My investigation draws from critical literature on the existence of borders as political tools, as opposed to “neutral lines” demarcating sovereignty, exploring how border policies fuel the neoliberal economy. Critical security studies challenge our understanding of what security is, who or what needs to be securitized, and why. In particular, it examines environmental, gendered, and racial (in)securities (Manchanda, 2021). By “securitize,” I refer to a political process of identifying an external and existential threat and establishing measures of state “protection” against the constructed threat. This analysis requires serious examination of environmental, gendered, and racialized inequities. In this way, critical scholarship recognizes that existing global power dynamics are grounded in historical realities of inequality that have produced gendered and racialized hierarchies through binaries, including the colonized and the colonizer, white and non-white people, and settlers and displaced peoples. Similarly, critical border studies literature establishes that “the border is not fixed [or only] physical,” but instead that “borders are carried on the body” as representative of a relationship between the state and an individual (Angulo-Pasel, 2018, pp. 18, 22). The field examines the formation and impact of bordering practices beyond simple territorial demarcations, bringing the border into view as a changing, unnatural political construction. In other words, state-bordering processes are not insulated from racial and gender

constructs. As such, I will leverage two principles in my analysis: first, the border is not a “natural” line, but a shifting political and corporate instrument. Second, lived migrant experiences and identities are important and indicative of the shifting role of the border. Given this theoretical framing, I will critically examine the commercialization of human mobility using border policies at the U.S.-Mexico border as a case study.

## History of the Border Industrial Complex

The U.S.-Mexico border was created soon after Mexico’s defeat in the Mexican-American War in 1848, when both states signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo with the objective of ending hostilities (Alvarez, 2019). In this process, Mexico had half of its territory—the current American states of Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado (as well as parts of others)—annexed by the U.S. (Massey, 2016). In return, the rights of Mexican citizens were to be protected in the newly acquired territory, and the state received \$15 million USD and an American promise to absorb millions of dollars in Mexican debt (Johnson, 2000; Massey, 2016). More specifically, this transfer guaranteed “statutory whiteness for civilized [Mexicans]” (Spanish-speaking, Christian people), as well as property rights for rich landowners (Johnson, 2000; Ybarra, 2018, p. 4). This created racial, class-based requirements for citizenship. As a result, many Mexicans did not access citizenship rights despite the signed guarantee. Importantly, the treaty only dealt with citizenship for people in newly bordered territories, not migration across borders. This was because states did not anticipate non-white Mexicans settling north of the border, given their alleged “racial inferiority” (Massey, 2016, p. 163). Here, the corresponding racial and class hierarchy separated white and non-white Mexicans who could claim citizenship in the U.S. from poorer (particularly Black and Indigenous) communities who were deemed “deportable” (Ybarra, 2018, p. 4). This hierarchy is a direct result of the process of bordering, and reveals two fundamental characteristics of the U.S.-Mexico border:

1. Violent criminalization was and is inherent to the process of bordering.

2. The role of racial hierarchy as the original reasoning for citizenship restrictions is what makes current migrant deportability possible.

The border created by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was, at the time, primarily symbolically relevant (Alvarez, 2019). It would later shift and expand into a profitable, privatized military operation nearly a generation later—what is now the border industrial complex (BIC). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, globalization allowed the U.S. to begin expanding transnational capital by militarizing and securing the border region (Palacios, 2017). In the 1990s, the simultaneous end of the cold war, emerging technological military advancements, and global embrace of privatization created an advantageous vacuum in the security market. Later, the expansion of the BIC was justified by U.S. anti-terror policies in reaction to 9/11 (Palacios, 2017). Formerly, neither Mexico nor the U.S. was a dominant military force in the border region, where Mexican Indigenous peoples resided. Regionally, these new industrial complexes were created along border states known as the “Sun Belt” (Palacios, 2017, p. 91). This area was a lucrative business location because of a lack of workers’ unions; low corporate taxes and employer insurance costs; federal subsidies; limited population regulation; and available oil, coal, and uranium in the region (Palacios, 2017). Importantly, the location allowed U.S. border security to monitor and control population flow from Mexico. While the Mexican government facilitated the establishment of transnational industries in the border states, the American economy was the primary beneficiary of the integration of the border states into the global economy (Palacios, 2017).

Currently, American border security is comprised of three collectives housed under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS): the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (CIS), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Notably, the BIC is more than just the DHS and border security corporations: it includes Congress and other political actors. Border

militarization—the process of stationing military personnel and resources in border regions—is fueled by the border security market, where private actors in the security industry seek government funding for infrastructure projects (Kawakubo, 2020). To this end, the DHS has been outsourcing public responsibilities to private corporations since its inception in 2003 during the early American war on terror era (Kawakubo, 2020). Over time, corporate interest has shifted to the forefront of U.S. national security agendas.

The expansion of the BIC and the corresponding shift in the borderland region was a deeply racialized project. Notably, popular white supremacist ideology in the region supported the incoming U.S. armed forces (Palacios, 2017). Further, the U.S. border industry has its origins in racism. In the 1900s, Democrat politician Coleman Livingston Blease—a white supremacist known for exploiting racist biases among low-income white communities along the border—proposed a law that criminalized Mexican migrants (Southern Border Communities Coalition, 2023). The policy was adopted and required migrants to pay a fee to cross the U.S.-Mexico border through official ports of entry (POEs), where they risked frequent dehumanizing and harmful screening procedures. As a result of the high cost and potential violence, migrants were deterred from entering POEs and would pursue informal border crossings at the risk of being charged with felonies and jail time (Southern Border Communities Coalition, 2023). Current American policies on curbing irregular and illegal migration follow similar rhetoric, as the U.S. paints migrants as threats to the state, justifying migrant deterrence initiatives. This consistency shows that border and migrant criminalization is a racially-coded, profit-seeking initiative.

## Corporate Profiteering and the Border Security Industry

The U.S.-Mexico border has transformed from a solely geopolitical boundary into its own economy. A recent report titled “More Than A Wall” profiled the 14 largest corporate players—security and technology firms and global arms companies—that profit from

and fuel the border security industry (Miller, 2019). Namely, they are Accenture, Boeing, Elbit Systems, Flir Systems, General Atomics, G4S, General Dynamics, IBM, L3 Technologies, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, PAE, Raytheon, and UNISYS (Miller, 2019, p. 34). The majority of these firms are listed on public stock exchanges, with the exception of General Atomics. Over the past two decades, U.S. border agencies (particularly ICE, CPB, and the U.S. Coast Guard) have spent billions of dollars issuing hundreds of thousands of government contracts for private companies. These contracts amount to around \$80.5B USD in total between 2005 and 2019—UNISYS alone has gained \$2B, IBM has \$1.7B, Boeing has \$1.4B, and Lockheed Martin has \$1.2B (Barrows-Friedman, 2019). Importantly, as new surveillance technologies emerge, these companies invest in more than a physical wall—the border is becoming a technological operation. New installations, including robotic dogs, autonomous surveillance towers, and drones, are replacing traditional border security (Miller & Botha, 2022). Elbit Systems, for example, is a primary contractor for the construction of “smart walls” (high-tech surveillance systems) in the West Bank and blockaded Gaza Strip (Miller, 2019, p. 50). Elbit has received contracts totaling \$187 million USD in revenue from the U.S. government as a return on political investments since 2004, and the company has been active in mobilizing American right-wing politicians to “ensure [the company’s] continued service” at the southern border (Barrows-Friedman, 2019; Miller, 2019; NNIRR, 2021). The U.S. has also experimented with new border surveillance technologies in the Gaza strip through Israeli companies, which, if successful, are replicated along the U.S.-Mexico border (Khalek, 2016). Ironically, nationalistic state-bordering projects foster cooperation between companies and countries across the globe. This cooperation is because securitizing states and their investors share the position that money has no borders and requires no surveillance, but vulnerable people do.

Wall Street investors also benefit greatly from the BIC. Shareholders in companies involved in the BIC include the Vanguard Group (who also hold shares in

companies that manage private prisons), Blackrock, and Capital Research and Management (who own arms shares in Airbus, State Street Global Advisors, and Lockheed Martin) (Akkerman, 2021). This is known as “passive investment,” where investors buy diverse shares based on the weight of companies publicly tracked by their market values on the Wall Street and London stock exchanges, allowing investors to determine how and why investments in the BIC are made (Akkerman, 2021). This new kind of corporate ownership, where select big investors hold shares, has been called “asset manager capitalism,” and these asset-management firms (Blackrock, the Vanguard Group, etc.) quietly build wealth through passive investments (Akkerman, 2021, p. 19). Given this information, the following question surfaces: Who owns the border industrial complex? Investments in pension funds, insurance companies, university endowments, and individuals’ savings make up the money shareholders use to fund the BIC (Akkerman, 2021). Put simply, the money invested in the BIC by asset managers is public money. Without knowing it, people are paying for the border surveillance industry.

Private actors stand to gain from militarizing the U.S. border, as companies that manufacture surveillance and biometric technology reap enormous profits from securitizing initiatives. The market for border security corporations is highly lucrative, and political divestment from border militarization means politicians risk decreased campaign funding and public support. Key corporate stakeholders in the BIC, including Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics, Raytheon, Boeing, and Northrop Grumman, contributed \$27.6 million USD towards Congress defense and border committees and \$6.5 million to Homeland Security Committee members from 2005–2018 (Miller, 2019). These financial investments directly shape immigration policy, as evidenced by the release of the \$23 billion USD DHS Appropriations Act (in 2018), the largest immigration and border security budget in American history (Kawakubo, 2020). As the conflation of government and industry blurs the lines between political and corporate leaders, security actors become exempt from democratic accountability.

## Annual Number of Clients/Lobbyists Lobbying US Customs & Border Protection

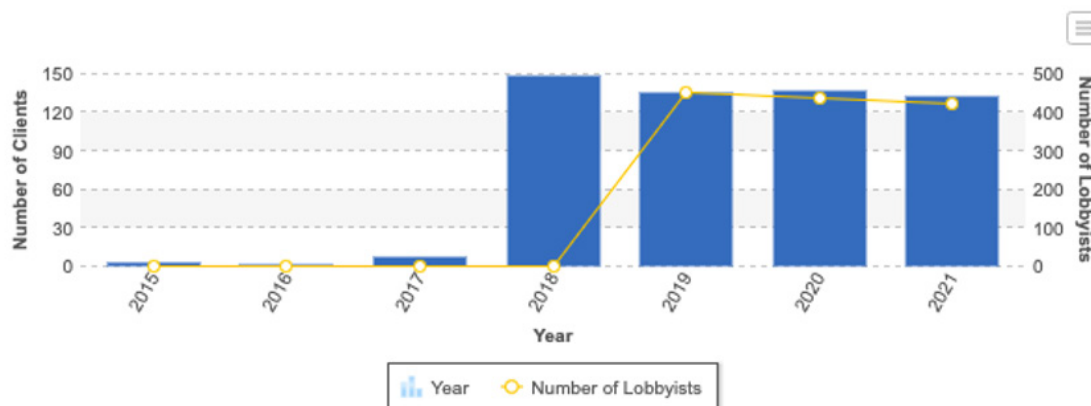


Figure 1: Number of Border Security Lobbyists from 2015-2021 (Open Secrets, 2021)

Interestingly, the top border contractors for CBP and ICE contributed three times as much money to Joe Biden's presidential campaign as they did to Donald Trump's (Miller, 2021). The bipartisan support for the BIC has continued to alter American migration policies, encouraging increased border militarization and migrant "deterrence" programs that institutionalize an exploitative power asymmetry between military personnel and racialized migrants at the border.

The securitized border is a non-partisan neoliberal phenomenon: a state governance approach where privatization and profit-seeking dominate as a political strategy. By definition, neoliberalism transforms social goods into commodities by shrinking government power and expanding corporate influence. What would have been considered a human right or public good before the late 20th century is now an opportunity for private enterprise. In context, while mobility is a human right, neoliberal policies commodify human movement by incorporating migrants into private industry (i.e., establishing private detention centres). States are incentivized to expand border militarization efforts because the more a state securitizes, the more its investors make. Framing non-white migrants as an existential security threat creates an opportunity for

corporate profiteering, and the BIC continues to expand. Clearly, the border is more than just a line on land where states meet. The border is a flexible political instrument, a military tool, and an expanding industry that sets a price on human mobility.

## Central American Experiences at the Border

The existence of the BIC is a human rights issue. The primary consequence of heightened border security infrastructure is migrant criminalization, and the issue is exacerbated by private interest in commodifying migrant mobility across borders. Here, the criminalization of migrants through the BIC is justified by xenophobic framings of migrant identities that weaponize racist stereotypes as justifications for violent exclusion. Studies examining public perceptions of Central American migrants in the U.S. noted the popular archetype is "that of a young man, between 14 and 28 years of age, tattooed, throwing up gang signs" (Ybarra, 2018, p. 2). This assumption is inaccurate, as there are, on average, more undocumented women migrants than men who seek refuge and reside in the U.S., with the majority of migrants being between 35



to 44 years old (Veera, 2023). Still, this framing of young black and brown migrants as “super predators” (a term popularized by white American politicians in the 1980s and 1990s) has violent consequences for migrants themselves (Douglas & Sáenz, 2013, p. 200). The unfounded characterization of migrants as a threat to the state serves to justify state-endorsed private securitization initiatives and erases migrant vulnerabilities. Accordingly, race matters in immigration policy discourse because the reinforcement of racial hierarchies “marks people as rightless” (Ybarra, 2018, p. 10). This reinforcement directly mirrors the racist logic employed in forming the U.S.-Mexico border, which continues to subject non-white migrants to state violence by excluding them from accessing citizenship and distorting legal immigration pathways. This distortion includes barring access to critical healthcare services, legal services, education, work with liveable wages, and other necessary resources while in detention and across the border. The condition of migrant precarity due to displacement is compounded by racist border controls.

Migrant criminalization on the basis of racial and ethnic exclusion is institutionalized through the border-to-prison pipeline. This “pipeline” refers to CBP contracts extended to private security companies that profit from transporting undocumented migrants to detention centres and other security facilities once arrested by Border Patrol in the desert (Miller, 2019). To respond to the border “crisis,” private companies have marked their services as essential to allow CBP to apprehend migrants and have “thousands of open beds” in private prisons ready for their arrival (Egan, 2014, para. 1). Investors in these for-profit prisons have seen high returns as they transport millions of migrants across the border to detention facilities (numbers of migrants that have been increasing annually), which themselves are sites of violence against migrants (Miller, 2019; American Immigration Council [AIC], 2022).

Over 160 recent reports collected by Human Rights Watch detail the mistreatment experienced by asylum seekers at the border resulting from Border Patrol officers’ misconduct—a number that only skims

the surface of the crisis (Sullivan, 2021). Migrants are frequently denied adequate food or water, as well as critical healthcare services, while detained and are faced with a legal system that is nearly impossible to navigate without funding, connections, and English-speaking representation (AIC, 2021). Stories of U.S. Border Patrol officers physically abusing and even killing migrants at the border are not uncommon (Akkerman, 2021). Moreover, distinct migrant groups face distinct kinds of abuse. Children, too, are faced with various intimidation and violence tactics—all of which occur without institutional oversight.

Migrant experiences at the border are also socially mediated, as race, class, age, and gender intersect, rendering racialized women migrants especially vulnerable to abuse. Women and gender-diverse communities are subjected to gender-based violence, including a range of sexual and physical abuses at the hands of detention security actors and while waiting for asylum at the border (Women’s Refugee Commission, 2022). The U.S. national government has received over 4,500 complaints concerning child sexual abuse in ICE detention centres between 2015 and 2019, and there have been approximately 2,000 abuse complaints from women migrants filed against border patrol agents between 2012 and 2015—95% of which have gone unresolved (Haag, 2019; Sullivan, 2021). Notably, in 2020, an ICE whistleblower made reports of alleged forced hysterectomies and medical abuse occurring while migrants were in detention, and more than 40 women migrants have since come forward with testimonies (Manian, 2020). Experts have noted that incidences of abuse likely occur in significantly higher numbers than reported due to underreporting.

Queer migrants, in particular, are hyper-exposed to violence in their origin states, the migratory process, and in detention. They face a lack of access to menstrual hygiene products and healthcare services; face an increased risk of sexual violence, exploitation and bodily harm; and experience a range of physical and psychosocial trauma (Parish, 2017). To this end, transgender migrants are frequently subjected to gendered violence in detention facilities, including the refusal of hormone and healthcare services, and for

trans women, detention in all-male facilities (Lubhéid, 2020). On the whole, this kind of misconduct occurs primarily within privately funded and run ICE detention centres.

Border agents do not simply inflict physical harm, nor is their violence restricted to detention centres. CBP agents make their harassment of migrants public through online platforms, including Facebook groups (Gutierrez, 2021). Evidence of racist and sexist content posted by CBP agents regarding migrant women was released by attorneys in 2016, and agents have still not been held to account. Despite the recurrence of harm in and out of detention centres, Border Patrol agents are not required to document and file incidents of violence. Currently, there is no mechanism to generate information specifically regarding gender-based violence suffered specifically by documented border crossers at U.S. POEs beyond personal testimonies (Gutierrez, 2021). The lack of indicators and data on the conditions in detention ensures the invisibility of violence against migrants and shields the perpetrators from accountability.

Women are frequent victims of violence at the border because there is a link between militarization and gender hierarchy. Patriarchy privileges men, and men assert dominance through patriarchy. The resulting gender hierarchy justifies violence as a method of domination and therefore normalizes it (Vera, 2013). This gender hierarchy is institutionalized through the militarization of borders, where the framing of migrants as a security threat and the narrative that security agents exist to “protect the nation” justifies gendered violence against migrants. Consequently, sexual violence is often used as a weapon against women on the border’s militarized terrain. Despite these cruel realities, the corporate gains from migrant incarceration drastically overshadow attention directed towards the human rights abuses normalized within detention facilities, as more migrants in prison create more profit.

## Discussion

My research aims to refute the popular misconception that the securitized border exists primarily as a line of defense to protect American citizens. The securitized border exists primarily as an industry. Still, proponents of the BIC argue that the absence of militarized borders would result in an influx of “unchecked” migrants to the U.S., whose presence would destabilize the state. However, anti-immigrant contentions that black and brown refugees are inherently violent, are a risk and a burden to the state, do not pay taxes, or are difficult to integrate into society have been proven untrue (Center on Extremism, 2018). The reality is that the racist exclusion from citizenship has been occurring since the inception of U.S. statehood.

The first section of this analysis traces the racist, violent origins of the U.S.-Mexico border. This section reveals the ongoing racist logic embedded in current security practices, where the criminalization of migrants and asylum seekers is justified by xenophobic ideologies. Borders determine who has access to land and on what basis they have access to it, and who can claim citizenship and its corresponding freedoms. Given the history of the border and the BIC, I posit that these questions are deeply racialized and embedded in violently enacted colonial power dynamics as racialized communities from Central America continue to be excluded from U.S. citizenship.

The following section critically examines the stakeholders in the BIC. This study identifies the border industry as a network of domestic and foreign corporations, political leaders, private investors, and public money. Investment in the border industry has generated hundreds of millions of dollars for politicians and corporations over the course of the 21st century. As more migrants seek entry, the border modernizes and expands beyond physical territory, generating more profit. By design, border securitization fuels the migrant “crisis.” For example, Trump-era policies like “Remain in Mexico” have resulted in the expulsion of thousands of asylum seekers who must now wait indefinitely for court dates in Mexican border towns (Isacson et al., 2021). Increased border crossings are generated by

this cycle: migrants will attempt to cross the border, be expelled, then try again. This persistence is evidence of the inevitability of human mobility. The issue is not migration, the problem is in responding to migration by commodifying it.

This final section of my analysis clarifies that migrants are not a monolith—they have different identities and corresponding vulnerabilities. Contrary to the rhetoric espoused by stakeholders in the BIC, the majority of migrants are seeking refuge in the United States from violence and insecurity, not bringing it with them (Buxton & Miller, 2019). Still, the border does not discriminate between individual migrants. Militarized borders have differentially gendered impacts, and securitization policies must be analyzed in relation to race and gender, given that patriarchal dynamics embedded in militarization shape how migrants are treated by the state. Due to the culture of fear and lack of accountability mechanisms created by security agents, many abuse victims do not come forward with their stories. This evidence shows that gendered violence at the border is

- a result of border privatization and securitization policies;
- institutionalized through the impunity of the agents; and
- facilitated by silencing migrants.

In this way, migrant rights, including the right to due process, the right to seek asylum, and the right to freedom from torture and inhumane treatment, are systematically denied in the BIC. My investigation suggests that not only does corporate investment in the BIC obstruct protection for migrants and asylum-seekers, it creates and exacerbates new vulnerabilities.

## Conclusion

The “border crisis” narrative justifies profiteering from violence against migrants, as the border “crisis” is politically manufactured. The real crises are the ones that drive migration, including economic insecurity, climate disaster, and gender-based violence. However, from Gaza to Mexico, profiteering from imprisonment and violence against those seeking refuge is standard in the BIC. Border surveillance is a non-partisan for-profit industry, where the privatization of formerly public institutions as

part of a neoliberal economic model has put a price on mobility for communities in the Global South. My research suggests that not only does current corporate investment in U.S.-Mexico border militarization obstruct protection for asylum-seekers, but it also creates new vulnerabilities.

Increasingly, activists and former BIC shareholders have been calling for divestments from the border industry (the movement of money out of the border security industry to stifle firm activity and expansion). For example, two of the largest U.S. pension funds, CalSTRS and CalPERS, have divested from two companies in the BIC, announcing that they will not be financing private prisons (Akkerman, 2021). To this end, shareholder activism is a powerful tool for change within corporations, and grassroots campaigns like Divest Borders have mobilized the general public (especially students) to call for an end to the BIC. While the future of the BIC is not within the scope of my investigation, future avenues of research could examine necessary conditions for the end of the border regime, as well as examples of divestment and activist work abroad that could be reproduced at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Ultimately, this paper has established that the U.S.-Mexico border as it exists today is primarily a for-profit military site which relies on racist migrant profiling and criminalization to accrue profit for investors. Rather than characterizing migrants as human beings entitled to protection, militarized borders construct migrants as monolithic, subhuman threats. Criminalizing movement gives migrants the impossible choice of *not* escaping potentially life-threatening threats in their home countries to avoid criminalization, or of seeking new land and risking state violence. Either decision can be fatal. Mobility is a human right, and it is inevitable.



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