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# Re-bordering life and labor during the COVID-19 pandemic: Perspectives from Latin America and the Caribbean

**Soledad Álvarez Velasco[1], Nicholas De Genova[2] and Stephan Scheel[3]**

**Abstract**

Five years after the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic public health emergency, and amid a growing body of specialized scholarship arising from this exceptional historical moment, this Theme Issue underscores the analytical and political urgency of revisiting the early years of 2020–2021 from the situated perspectives of migration and borders across Latin America and the Caribbean. This period offers crucial insights into the ongoing transformations of mobility and control across the Americas. The "emergency" conditions of the pandemic enabled a redoubling of border enforcement and anti-immigrant/anti-refugee policies, intensifying pre-existing re-bordering dynamics at national and transnational levels—particularly through the expanded reach of U.S. border externalization. Simultaneously, these conditions gave rise to intensified spatial struggles: from border crossings to mutual aid networks and autonomous organizing aimed at sustaining migrant lives increasingly exposed to abandonment and premature death. By foregrounding ethnographic accounts of these seemingly localized experiences, this Theme Issue reveals how early pandemic dynamics shaped—and continue to shape—new hemispheric geographies of re-bordering, exclusion, and resistance. Revisiting these cases offers valuable insight into enduring forms of social struggle in defense of life and labor, where the autonomy and subjectivity of migratory projects emerge as central to contesting the expansion of our authoritarian present.

**Keywords**

COVID-19 pandemic, Latin America & the Caribbean, state of exception, re-bordering, migrant struggles

[1]Departments of Anthroopology and Latin American and Social Studies, University of Illinois-Chicago, IL, USA
[2]Department of Comparative Studies, University of Houston, TX, USA
[3]Institute of Sociology and Cultural Organization, Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Germany

**Corresponding author:**
Soledad Álvarez Velasco, Departments of Anthroopology and Latin American and Social Studies, University of Illinois-Chicago, 1200 W Harrison St, Chicago, IL 60607, USA.
Email: solalv7@uic.edu

Much has been written about how the unresolved tension between the unceasing, autonomous, and subjective force of migrant mobility and the reactive formations of border control intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2021; De Genova, 2020, 2022; Denaro and Boccagni, 2024; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2024; Scheel et al., 2024; Stierl and Dadusc, 2022; Triandafyllidou, 2022). At first glance, a Theme Issue devoted to this theme might seem belated, appearing 5 years after the onset of the global crisis. However, the belated proliferation of scholarship on this subject has been steadily growing, not merely reflecting the customary slowness of academic publishing but also symptomatic of the larger-scale social reluctance to fully take account of the sheer monumentality and gravity of the experience of the global public health emergency and the multiple intersecting economic, political, and cultural crises that ensued.

The seven articles assembled in this Theme Issue, foregrounding the situated perspectives arising from ethnographic accounts of migration and borders across Latin America and the Caribbean, together make a significant contribution to this ongoing if overdue critical endeavor. Temporally, they focus on the first 2 years of the pandemic (2020–2021)—a critical period marked by some of the most restrictive mobility control measures, which deeply affected entire populations and disproportionately harmed migrant communities. Spatially, they are grounded in diverse ethnographic situations that bring into focus some of the most critical lived realities of migration and borders across Latin America and the Caribbean, one of the global regions most severely affected by both the public health emergency and the intensification of re-bordering practices and migrant struggles it set into motion.

This temporal and spatial lens offers crucial insights into a pivotal historical moment that may seem to be rapidly waning into the oblivion of purposeful forgetting. Yet, the early phase of the pandemic provides essential analytical tools for understanding the ongoing transformations of mobility and control across the Americas. It reveals how the pandemic's exceptional conditions enabled a redoubling of border enforcement and anti-immigrant/anti-refugee policies—amplifying and accelerating trends already underway at both national and transnational levels, particularly through the expansive reach of U.S. border externalization. At the same time, these conditions gave rise to intensified spatial struggles—ranging from border crossings to mutual aid networks and autonomous organizing—aimed at preserving migrant lives increasingly exposed to abandonment and premature death.

Today, with Donald Trump's return to power in the United States—advancing a resurgent far-right authoritarian agenda and a renewed anti-immigrant onslaught, with reverberations across the Americas and beyond (De Genova, 2025)—the measures of the pandemic era no longer appear as historical exceptions but as *precedents* for governing migration through continuous states of exception and authoritarian brutality. Revisiting the experiences of Latin America and the Caribbean during those early pandemic years affords valuable insight into the many forms of social struggle that have since been reactivated to sustain life and labor. Among these, the protagonism of migrant struggles stands out as increasingly vital in confronting and contesting the expansion of today's authoritarian present.

In this introduction we elaborate these arguments before introducing the seven contributions to this theme issue. The first section explains the historic particularity of the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted both the role of bordering practices as means for performing notions of national sovereignty in times of a perceived loss of control as well as their principal effect of sustaining and reproducing racialized hierarchies and inequalities. The second section outlines, in turn, the specific pre-pandemic relations and patterns of migration in Latin America and the Caribbean, generally considered to be one of the most unequal and most violent regions of the world. The third section draws on Giorgio Agamben's conception of the state of exception to develop an understanding of the practices of mobility and migration control that were invoked during the pandemic as means of re-bordering life and labor. The fourth section then

introduces the seven contributions of the theme issue which also highlight that these bordering practices provoked new strategies of survival and struggles by migrants. The fifth concluding section emphasizes, finally, that many of the evidently violent measures of border and mobility control introduced during the pandemic were, in effect, precedents of contemporary modes of governing migration and authoritarian rule.

## The historical specificity of the initial phase of the pandemic

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a global pandemic. Eight months went by before the first vaccine was developed and made accessible to the most vulnerable segments of the public (Watson et al., 2022). During those initial months, on a global scale, we collectively confronted the pandemic's most intense and painful impacts. We were thrust into a bewildering "new normal" marked by lockdowns, the staggering loss of millions of lives and the omnipresent specter of infection, illness, and death, and the sweeping reconfiguration of economic, political, and social life. Following a well-known script drawn from the historical record of epidemic responses dating back to the Black Death (1347–1351), spatial confinement measures—such as quarantine, isolation zones, sanitary cordons, quarantine hospitals, and the near-total suspension of border crossings, except for so-called "essential" movements—were implemented to immobilize presumably infectious populations and contain the spread of the contagion (Snowden, 2019).

The noun *confinement* derives from the Latin verb *confinare*, meaning "to border on," "to set bounds," or "to restrict within limits." In epidemiological contexts, this etymology is far from incidental: it reveals the foundational role of bordering logics in the governance of disease. Historically, reinforcing existing physical, social, and medical borders—or establishing new ones—has been a recurrent strategy for managing public health crises, especially during their initial and most critical phases. As Alison Bashford (2004) notes, these exceptional public health strategies have never been driven by solely medical considerations: they are deeply entangled with colonial and postcolonial histories of population control, in which containment has served to uphold hierarchies of class and race through spatial immobilization. When SARS-CoV-2 began to spread rapidly across borders, these same logics of exceptional re-bordering and containment were swiftly reactivated in the early weeks following the World Health Organization's pandemic declaration. Air, land and sea mobility restrictions within and across national territories were imposed to control the movement of bodies and labor, reproducing and intensifying long-standing social hierarchies while reshaping nearly every aspect of daily life—particularly for migrants, whose very existence depends on their ability to move and sustain life across closed and fortified borders.

The spatial confinement regime adopted during the initial phase of COVID-19 was not in itself unique to the first pandemic of the 21st century. Yet, as Didier Fassin (2020) aptly argues, there was something unprecedented about it. For the first time, the confinement script was imposed simultaneously on a global scale, producing a historically singular condition: a temporary, planetary time-space of seemingly synchronized lockdowns and widespread economic, political, and social shutdowns. Instituted in the name of preserving life—or rather, more precisely, excluding certain lives or rendering them exceptionally disposable through their subordinate inclusion as "essential" labor, in order to preserve other lives—the spatial confinement measures laid bare biopower's capacity to "make live and let die," to recall Michel Foucault (2003:241).

Although the unprecedented global call for confinement during the early months of the pandemic was unevenly implemented—shaped by divergent national political and cultural contexts, local conditions, and uneven state responses—the re-bordering processes it set in motion shared a common feature: the closure of borders and the exclusion of migrant and asylum-seeking populations, both adults and minors, from mechanisms of life preservation. Rendered disposable and

deliberately abandoned by most national systems ostensibly designed to protect life, migrant communities experienced not only the persistence but also the intensification of their struggles. Across nation-state territories and border zones, migrants activated or renewed autonomous and often imperceptible forms of resistance—drawing on what Dimitris Papadopoulos and Vassilis Tsianos (2013) designate the "mobile commons"—to sustain the material and social reproduction of their lives. This is why, the exceptional re-bordering of the pandemic must be understood not only through mechanisms of control but also through the struggles for life that unfolded across, within, and around those bordering practices, as Claudia Aradau and Martina Tazzioli (2021) contend.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a disproportionate impact for migrants in particular because it unfolded at a historical moment already profoundly shaped by an intensified proliferation of borders. In the decades preceding the pandemic, re-bordering practices had already multiplied — with borders becoming diffuse and delocalized, both externalized and internalized — generating what Étienne Balibar (2002) describes as "complex bordering functions" that no longer merely demarcate the outer limits of a nation-state's sovereign space, but actively regulate the movement of people, capital, and labor based on differential rights and privileges, across and within both geographic and social spaces (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Since at least the 1990s, this proliferation has manifested in the implementation of legal measures that produce migrants' "illegality," detainability, and deportability (De Genova, 2002, 2021; De Genova and Peutz, 2010); the construction of physical walls and other barriers between state territories, as well as in the expansion of immaterial walls (Dunn, 2009; Nevins, 2002); border militarization (Dunn, 1996); the grisly escalation in border-crossing deaths (De León 2015; Heller and Pezzani 2017; Weber and Pickering, 2011); restrictive visa regimes (Scheel, 2019); successive waves of racist anti-migrant and border enforcement legislation, culminating in the outright criminalization of migration (Atak and Simeon, 2018; Dowling and Inda, 2013; García Hernández 2024; Stumpf, 2006); the expansion of the carceral immigration state (Hernández, 2011, 2017; Hester, 2015; Martin, 2024); and the systematic dismantling of asylum (Mountz, 2020). The multiplication of these mechanisms has aligned with the heterogeneous strategies of border externalization deployed mainly by the United States and the European Union toward their borders facing the so-called Global South and the adjacent buffer states that are commonly induced to serve as de facto border guards (Andersson, 2014; Casas-Cortés et al., 2016; De Genova 2017; Menjivar, 2014).

It was within this racist anti-immigrant landscape of border violence that the pandemic's global confinement measures did not merely introduce new restrictions; they entrenched and intensified pre-existing bordering mechanisms, deepening their impact on migrants' lives and exposing them to heightened forms of differential and organized abandonment, to echo Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007). In this context, migrant communities, particularly those racially marginalized, and migrant mobilities, particularly those precariously positioned within transnational corridors, during the COVID-19 pandemic found themselves disproportionately subjected to necropolitical deathscapes (Mbembe, 2003)—whether through exclusion from health care, forced immobility or forced mobility via continuous border push-backs, deportations, detention, or exposure to deadly routes. Such subjection is inseparable from the enduring structures of racial capitalism (Gilmore, 2007; Robinson, 1983), where race and migration status function as technologies of disposability, extraction, and containment (De Genova 2023). In this sense, the pandemic not only intensified mobility control; it crystallized the role of borders as technologies of racialized abandonment and death-making and re-fortified global/postcolonial hierarchies. And it is precisely in this context that the migrant spatial struggle for *life* multiplied, provoking spatial reverberations across borderlands, migratory corridors, and national, regional, and global geographies alike (De Genova, 2022; Landherr 2024; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2024; Scheel et al., 2024).

## Situated knowledge from and about Latin America and the Caribbean

How did pre-pandemic dynamics of re-bordering and migrant struggle take shape across Latin America and the Caribbean, and how were they reconfigured during the unprecedented global disruption of the pandemic's initial phase? These are the central interconnected questions that have inspired this Theme Issue. These questions cannot be addressed without considering the region's underlying structural conditions and contradictions.

Since the turn of the new millennium, Latin America and the Caribbean have been identified as the most unequal and violent region in the world (ECLAC, 2020). This sociopolitical condition is incomprehensible without acknowledging the enduring colonial legacies that continue to sustain and reconfigure deeply entrenched social, economic, and racial hierarchies. Furthermore, the persistent and inordinate influence of U.S. economic, political, and military power through an unrelenting history of interventionism, which has shaped the region's political, economic, and migratory landscape to serve imperial and neo-colonial interests since the 19th century (Gonzalez, 2022; Grandin, 2006). These underlying structural conditions have been further exacerbated by the ongoing failures or utter refusals of the region's national governments to implement redistributive socioeconomic policies and sustain state infrastructures of care, health, and social welfare protection capable of addressing either this historical legacy of underdevelopment or the onslaught of neo-liberal capitalist austerity and hyper-precaritization. As a result, the needs of historically dispossessed and marginalized populations—primarily Indigenous, Black, women, and migrants—have remained callously if not brutally unmet (Bada and Rivera Sánchez, 2021; Escobar, 2014; Gago, 2017). It is therefore no coincidence that many among these groups have been forced to survive within the expansive informal Latin American and Caribbean economies, where—even before the pandemic—more than 50% of the economically active population were employed (ILO, 2020), often struggling to endure the hyper-precarity to which they have been systematically relegated and confined. The various combinations of socioeconomic marginalization and despair, political malfeasance and corruption, violent persecution and state repression, civil wars and state terror, and catastrophes arising from climate change have resulted for many in a permanent inviability of life that makes migration (and all of the concomitant lethal risks of navigating multiple violent and vicious borders) an ever more compelling alternative.

These regional structural conditions are essential to understanding two key developments that unfolded during the early years of the pandemic—the period to which this Theme Issue dedicates its critical scrutiny. On the one hand, from the very onset of the COVID-19 outbreak, the region became one of the most severely affected in the world—not only in terms of mortality, with a significant loss of life but also through escalating poverty rates and the heightening of existing inequalities (ECLAC, 2022). On the other hand, this immediate impact—closely linked to the region's expansive informal employment—meant that a large portion of the population simply could not comply with mandates for spatial confinement, as daily survival depended on unceasing intra-urban or rural–urban mobility (Carrión Mena, 2023). As a result, the region saw the implementation of some of the most severe lockdown measures globally during the early weeks of the pandemic—including curfews, stay-at-home governmental orders, the total suspension of internal and international travel, restrictions on the return of nationals to their countries of origin, and the militarization of borders (Álvarez Velasco, 2021; Zapata et al., 2022; Haldane et al., 2022).

In addition to these re-bordering measures that affected the general population, specific state mechanisms were implemented to directly target migrant communities already dwelling in the region before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. To fully grasp the impact of such measures, it is also essential to understand recent shifts in migrant mobility and the pre-pandemic landscape of border control.

Between 2005 and 2020, the number of international migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean more than doubled, rising from 7 to 15 million (IOM, 2022). The region has not only become the fastest-growing destination for international migrants globally, but it has also undergone a profound transformation in its migratory patterns. In the years preceding the pandemic, Latin America and the Caribbean had emerged simultaneously as a region of origin, destination, and transit for South–South, South–North, and even North–South migratory flows. At the same time, it was actively reshaping its mobility control mechanisms. In other words, long before the onset of the pandemic, the region was already grappling with intense socioeconomic, political, and migratory pressures.

Recent Latin American scholarship explains that this transformation was the result of a convergence of factors, chief among them the fact that, unlike the increasingly restrictive anti-immigrant border regimes of the Global North, Latin American and Caribbean countries have historically upheld open-door policies, visa-free entry agreements, and legal frameworks that upheld migrants' rights and the right to refuge (Acosta 2018; Domenech et al. 2023; Gandini and Selee, 2023). However, beginning in the second decade of the 21st century—beginning ten years before the pandemic—a selective "punitive turn" began to take shape in the region (Domenech, 2020).

Although it is beyond the scope of this Introduction to provide a detailed account of the causes behind this shift, it is important to underscore that it reflects a selective, racist, xenophobic, and reactionary regional response to the growing presence of international migrants—particularly "extracontinental" migrants from the Global South (especially Africa and Asia), as well as heightened and newly diversified migrant mobility trajectories from the Caribbean (particularly Haiti, but also Cuba and the Dominican Republic) and some countries in South America (most importantly, the massive forced displacement of Venezuelans). To contain and reduce these movements, a range of restrictive measures were already implemented prior to the pandemic. These included the imposition of new visa requirements, the detention and deportation of migrants, denials of entry through ports and airports, and the curtailment of regularization pathways and asylum recognition procedures (see: Domenech and Dias, 2020; Álvarez Velasco, 2022; Domenech et al., 2023; Stang and Stefoni, 2016; Tijoux, 2016; Gómez Martin and Malo, 2019; Gandini and Selee, 2023; Herrera and Cabezas, 2019).

In the tightening of selective and racialized border controls across the hemisphere, the historical direct interference of the United States has been refashioned. The United States has extended its border enforcement regime well beyond its territorial borders through mechanisms of remote control—such as visa regimes, in-transit detention, forced confinement to increasingly dangerous routes, and deportations. While these practices have been thoroughly documented in Mexico and Guatemala since at least the 1990s (París Pombo 2022; Varela-Huerta, 2015), they have also been gradually extended to more geographically distant countries where the presence of Latin American, Caribbean, and extracontinental migrants from Africa and Asia in transit to the U.S. has grown significantly. Moreover, as several authors have noted, more subtle forms of border externalization were already taking shape in countries such as Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, and Ecuador prior to the onset of COVID-19 (Gómez and González Gil. 2022; Hiemstra, 2012; Winters and Mora Izaguirre, 2019; Álvarez Velasco, 2025). While these processes of re-bordering were already underway, the declaration of the pandemic deepened and accelerated a trend already unfolding in Latin America and the Caribbean—and globally—amplifying their impact on migrants' lives and exposing them to intensified forms of subordinate inclusion and organized abandonment.

## Times of exception: Re-bordering life and labor

To understand the political logic behind such tactics of re-bordering and migrant abandonment, it is useful to turn to Giorgio Agamben's (2005) concept of the *state of exception*, which reveals why and how states across the region suspended many migratory legal norms under the guise of responding to the public health crisis. According to Agamben, a state of exception is distinguished by the suspension of the constitutional order and the consolidation of executive ruling power. Such measures are usually justified through the invocation of "crisis," creating a form of rule that operates outside the law —even openly violating basic legal norms — by intensifying its sovereign power over *life* through violence and coercion exacted upon the lives and bodies of people. For Agamben, this logic of the sovereign decision on the exception inherently risks becoming permanent, whereby the suspension of juridically inscribed rights and protections in the name of preserving the larger juridical order during an "emergency" comes to be routinized normalized, and juridically inscribed human sociopolitical life, reduced to a condition of "bare" or "naked" life, ensures the exercise of a power over *life* itself as its primary target (2005: 17–22).

This is what tended to transpire across the Americas in the wake of the declaration of a global health emergency, culminating in a perverse intersection between public health policy and comprehensive mobility control, and effectively establishing a *de facto* state of exception in migration governance, with severe effects on the bodies and lives of migrants (Álvarez Velasco, 2021). The threat of contagion, the reinforcement of borders, and the institutionalization of exceptional measures in migratory matters served to immobilize people, and was deployed to render them docile. Although this tactic largely succeeded for a time, it nonetheless tended to merely decelerate migrants' mobility projects (De Genova, 2022), and frequently also provoked migrants to resort to new forms of struggle for the preservation of their own lives and livelihoods. All of these contradictions and conflicts unfolded within a rather short period, particularly during the years examined by the contributions to this Theme Issue.

Among the most critical exceptional measures registered by the collective research project *(Im) Mobility across the Americas and Covid-19* (https://www.inmovilidadamericas.org/) were border closures—and, in some instances, their militarization. This was the case along several key borders in the region: between Chile and Peru, Peru and Ecuador, Ecuador and Colombia, Guatemala and Honduras, and Mexico and the United States. Beyond migration alone, several of these governments declared national states of emergency, which included suspending rights such as freedom of movement and assembly, curtailing both internal and cross-border mobility. Curfews were also implemented in various countries, including Cuba, Barbados, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic, among otherss. Additionally, processes of migratory regularization and asylum requests were suspended or severely restricted, often justified through emergency legislation. Migrants and asylum seekers were confined to legal limbo, facing prolonged waiting periods, many times in border zone spaces of confinement under inhumane conditions. At the same time, legal frameworks were revised with new explicitly anti-migrant orientations in countries such as the United States, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru (see the Digital Archive of *(In)Movilidad en las Américas*, 2024; see also Álvarez Velasco, 2021; Haldane et al., 2022; Zapata et al., 2022).

Measures implemented by the U.S. government were decisive, generating a domino effect with ramifications across the hemisphere. Under the first Trump administration, a series of exceptional measures were adopted to restrict migrant mobility under the pretense of measures to safeguard public health. Chief among these was the invocation of Title 42—a rarely used public health provision from the U.S. Public Health Service Act of 1944 —which allows the ruling government to prohibit the entry of individuals to prevent the spread of communicable diseases (Chishti et al., 2024). Under Title 42, migrants and even asylum seekers who arrived at the U.S. southern border seeking international protection, were denied entry. This measure effectively suspended existing

asylum procedures, resulting in the immediate expulsion of more than 2.5 million people, disproportionately affecting migrants and refugees from Central America, Haiti, and other Global South countries. This exclusionary exceptional measure remained in effect until May 2023, well into the Biden administration, when it was finally rescinded (Garrett and Sementelli, 2023).

On the other hand, despite the numerous global measures to restrict air travel during the first months pandemic, the United States sustained forced air travel through regular deportation flights that continued unabated, even to countries, such as Haiti, with fragile healthcare systems and commonly without adequate COVID-19 testing or health protocols, as documented by Witness at the Border (2020). These practices disproportionately affected Latin American and Caribbean migrants, exposing them to dangerous conditions, including prolonged detention, violence in transit countries such as Mexico, and relay deportations across Mexico's southern border—all consequences of ongoing U.S. externalized border enforcement (Cartwright, 2020). In their contribution to this Theme Issue, Gustavo Dias, Bruno Nzinga Ribeiro, and Isadora Lins França analyze these U.S. pandemic-era deportation flights, detailing their specific impacts on Brazilian migrants as a consequence of the binational cooperation agreement between the right-wing administrations of Bolsonaro and Trump.

Furthermore, the "Remain in Mexico" Program, launched by the first Trump administration in 2019, continued throughout the worst phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, further endangering asylum seekers by forcing them to remain in overcrowded, unsanitary, and often violent and traumatic conditions along the Mexican border while awaiting their chance to petition for asylum in the United States (Mercado et al., 2021). As Guillermo Castillo demonstrates in his contribution to this Theme Issue, although new enrollments were suspended outright in March 2020, many asylum seekers, particularly Central American adults and minors, who were already in the program remained stranded for months or even years, with limited or no access to legal support or healthcare, and faced recurrent predatory violence and persecution in the territory of confinement that Mexico had become.

In tandem with these re-bordering measures, the COVID-19 pandemic also transformed labor dynamics across the region, further endangering migrants' already-precarious survival. Many remained in exploitative jobs without protections, exposed to infection, or were left jobless and homeless. In numerous cases, they were also denied access to healthcare due to their irregularized migratory status. The pandemic laid bare and further aggravated the reality that being an irregularized migrant or asylum seeker commonly means living under conditions of hyper-precarity: excluded from state-run social and economic assistance programs; daily subjected to the erosion of any semblance of "rights"; exposed to the constant threat of detention and deportation; and routinely facing nativist discrimination and xenophobic racism (see the Digital Archive of *(In)Movilidad en las Américas,* 2024).

The re-bordering measures targeting life and labor had a profound impact on irregularized transit through the migratory corridors of the Americas. In the initial months of the pandemic, cross-border migrant mobilities slowed—especially between March and July 2020—but did not cease. During this period, many migrants re-evaluated their mobility projects and deferred their longer-term migratory plans in favor of seeking to move to less economically depressed areas within the countries of transit where they happened to find themselves. Others simply returned to their countries of origin, opting to rely on family and neighborhood networks to endure the uncertainties and vicissitudes of what would become a long and complex crisis. Similar dynamics unfolded within the borders of single countries, as urban migrants returned to rural communities in search of greater safety and support.

From mid-2020 onward, amid a deepening regional recession (ECLAC, 2022) and despite border closures and containment measures, irregularized transits along the migratory corridors that crisscross the Americas resumed and multiplied—particularly toward the United States, through the

Darién jungle between Colombia and Panama, and toward Chile across the Atacama Desert. While in transit, thousands of migrants traveling in groups or with their families, including children, intensified their self-protection strategies to sustain mobility, where mobility itself often came to be seen as a survival strategy in itself. In their contributions to this Theme Issue, Carina Trabalón and Tania Bonilla, respectively, document the struggles of Haitian and Venezuelan migrants in transit.

Amid the intensification of such "transit migration" between 2021 and 2022, multiple instances of militarized repression unfolded along key corridors: violent crackdowns on migrant caravans—including women and minors—in failed attempts to halt the life-affirming momentum of communities on the move. A stark example was the open, disproportionate, and brutal confrontation between Guatemalan soldiers and migrants at the Vado Hondo border checkpoint on the route north from Honduras (Álvarez Velasco and De Genova, 2023). By the second year of the pandemic, a sharp divide had emerged between increasingly aggressive, necropolitical, militarized control on the ground and the more biopolitical, biosecurity-driven controls over air travel. This bifurcation not uncommonly turned land routes into spaces of contestation, transforming migratory corridors across the Americas into arenas of struggle between life and death (Álvarez Velasco, 2022).

If the de facto state of exception frequently constitutes the negation of migrant life, then migrants' autonomous practices to sustain and protect their lives and secure the immunity of their bodies must be understood as strategies of vital struggle and expressions of a defiant affirmation of life. These practices multiplied during the early years of the pandemic and emerged as vitalist tactics and concrete forms of migrant resistance across the Americas. They ranged from the circulation of collective digital and social knowledge around daily care and mutual aid to the creation of autonomous systems aimed at preventing contagion, ensuring access to food and medicine, and fostering solidarity along migratory routes. These efforts also included political mobilization through campaigns and on-the-ground protest actions—not only to improve working conditions but also to demand legal recognition and access to regularization (see Varela-Huerta and Álvarez Velasco, 2025). The contributions to this Theme Issue document many other everyday practices of migrant resistance. Taken together, they form a repertoire of life-affirming strategies that migrants deployed throughout the pandemic.

## This theme issue

The seven articles in this Theme Issue ground their spatial analysis in empirical data from the U.S.–Mexico border, Mexico, Cuba, Brazil, Ecuador, and key South American migratory corridors traversed by heterogeneous Global South migrants and migrant families, gathered during the pandemic years of 2020–2021. These contributions trace the localized manifestations of an ever-present and persistent tension between the unceasing, autonomous, and subjective force of human mobility and the reactive formations of border control. The articles also examine the localized and heterogenous impacts of U.S. externalized border governance and its geopolitical, geo-economic, and spatial reverberations—not only across the hemisphere's borders and borderlands but also, and more urgently, within the everyday lives and struggles of migrants themselves.

Each piece reveals how pandemic-era re-bordering and spatial containment measures were not novel but instead built upon pre-existing legal frameworks and control policies within each of the national contexts analyzed. These studies illustrate what Nicholas De Genova (2022) has called "viral borders"—state efforts to manage the COVID-19 public health emergency that became entangled with the viral proliferation of ongoing projects of producing and enforcing borders. At the same time, the pandemic also gave rise to new struggles, which signaled shifting spatialities and temporalities in the regulation of life and labor across the Americas. Grounded in intersectional and migrant-centered perspectives, the contributions enrich current debates on the "*world-configuring* function" of borders (Balibar 2002:79; emphasis in original), showing how re-bordering during the

pandemic—justified as a strategy to contain the virus and protect life—generated profoundly contradictory and contested spatial and temporal effects.

Valentina Glockner Fagetti and Elaine Chase (2025) focus on the U.S.–Mexico border, analyzing how migration and public health policies enacted during this exceptional period were cloaked in the euphemisms of child protection and humanitarianism. The ensuing chaos generated by these measures—imposed by U.S. immigration authorities with the complicity of Mexico's National Migration Institute and child protection agencies—enabled the heightened control and punishment of women and children as irregularized migrants through intensified processes of re-bordering and subjectification.

Guillermo Castillo Ramirez (2024) focuses on Mexico and examines how, during the pandemic, the country shifted from being primarily a transit space to reinforcing its role as a territory of temporary (if indefinite) confinement for Central American asylum seekers and migrants. These populations were directly affected by exceptionally strict anti-immigrant policies implemented by both Mexico and the Unites States. In his geopolitical analysis of this spatial transformation, Castillo also highlights the ways in which migrants deployed strategies of waiting and survival amid conditions of enforced open confinement.

Ahmed Correa Álvarez (2024) examines how, in spite of the Cuban state's exceptional public health restrictions imposed in response to the pandemic, this period was also marked by unprecedented levels of social and political mobilization and the largest migratory exodus in the country's history. By exploring the political function of Cuba's sanitary border, Correa Álvarez reveals how it was deployed as part of a broader state repertoire of repression against its own citizens, even as it contributed to the acceleration of a renewed Cuban exodus across multiple borders during the early phase of the pandemic.

Gustavo Dias, Bruno Nzinga Ribeiro, and Isadora Lins França (2024) examine how Brazil under Bolsonaro's right-wing government approached the early pandemic in terms of its impact on Brazilian migrants abroad. They shed light on the neglected consequences of the U.S.'s controversial Title 42 expulsions, particularly the increase in Brazilian migrant deaths, arbitrary detentions, and deportations from U.S. territory. Their analysis underscores the ideological and policy convergences between Trumpism and Bolsonarism in relation to irregularized Brazilian migration. Rather than advocating for the rights and protections of its citizens abroad, the Bolsonaro administration aligned itself with the United States' anti-immigration agenda, dismantling programs intended to support Brazilians overseas and tacitly upholding and reinforcing the economic and political logics driving their migratory projects.

Carina Trabalón (2024) analyzes the intensification of Haitians' transit migrations within and from South America toward the United States in 2021, in the context of contested migration movements and control policies that reconfigured the South American border regime during the pandemic. She focuses on the regional expansion of racialized control targeting Haitian migrants, as well as the multiple survival strategies they deployed while navigating the complex migratory and border dynamics across South, Central, and North America.

Tania Bonilla Mena (2024) focuses on the transit migration of Venezuelan migrant women during the pandemic in Ecuador. She examines the Ecuadorean state's re-bordering practices, marked by social hostility and nationalism, and intensified by a public health discourse that portrayed migrants as threats of contagion within an emergent border regime. Bonilla explores how Ecuador's institutional responses to the pandemic shaped the experiences and constrained the agency of Venezuelan migrants. In response, Venezuelan migrant women deployed multiple self-care strategies to preserve their lives—including reverse migration to Venezuela, even when this meant returning to places that were more precarious but perceived as safer.

Finally, Lorenzo Gabrielli and Amarela Varela-Huerta (2024) adapt the concept of the "border spectacle" (De Genova, 2014)—specifically, the production and diffusion of images of immigration

in contemporary digital journalism—to examine how re-bordering processes in Mexico during the early stages of the COVID-19 public health crisis overlapped with the dual semantics of the illegalization and victimization of migrants in Mexico. Their article addresses a key gap in accounts of the political economy of the border spectacle by conducting a bottom-up analysis of the socioeconomic and material conditions under which visual narratives of migration and borders are produced and circulated.

## Present echoes of the COVID-19 state of exception

Five years have passed since the public health emergency and the ensuing state of exception analyzed by the authors of this Theme Issue, and it has now been more than 2 years since the World Health Organization declared the end of the first global pandemic of the twenty-first century in May 2023. In that context, millions of Latin American, Caribbean, and, to a lesser extent, African and Asian migrants eventually responded to the "emergency" restrictions on their mobility projects by intensifying their northbound migrations as a last resort to sustain lives already deeply impacted by the pandemic. Their growing presence in the United States has subsequently been leveraged to catalyze an anti-immigrant backlash that has fueled the political fortunes of Donald Trump's return to the office of the U.S. presidency. In the brazen pursuit of unabashedly authoritarian measures by the second Trump administration (De Genova 2025), we have witnessed echoes of that earlier moment of public health-driven "emergency" and "crisis," which appeared to authorize a worldwide state of exception. The diverse projects of re-bordering that arose as exceptional measures during the pandemic are now being reinforced and expanded —no longer with the pretense of containing a virus, but instead to punish and persecute a newly imagined "threat," indeed, a newly designated "enemy": illegalized migrants and rejected refugees, overwhelmingly originating from the Global South, and from Latin America in particular.

The anti-immigrant racial panic has moved border despotism and anti-immigrant nativism to the forefront of the political agenda in the United States under the second Trump administration— just as it has done similarly with other right-wing governments in Europe and Latin America. Cruelty, police-state terror, and dehumanization have become central tools of migration governance, where the state of exception has become the rule. Consequently, we are likewise witnessing a new exceptional chapter in U.S. border externalization: the outsourcing of detention and deportation to "third countries." Thus disrupting the conventional logic of deportation—whereby migrants are expelled directly to their country of origin—and instead dumping migrants into indefinite imprisonment with no due process of law whatsoever in unsafe countries under draconian conditions of punishment, most notoriously, El Salvador's maximum-security so-called Terrorism Confinement Center. Guatemala, Panama, and Costa Rica have similarly begun to accept deportees, and the Trump administration has signaled an interest in pursuing similar arrangements with Libya and Rwanda. At the same time, the U.S. border has been further internalized: schools, hospitals, churches, and even courthouses have joined workplaces and private residences as sites for militarized enforcement operations—transforming everyday spaces into arenas for the spectacularly violent and degrading targeting and punishment of migrant lives and bodies.

In this horrific context of visceral fear and escalating police-state terror tactics, as was true during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants have been forced to revise their strategies and adapt their tactics. Thus, their struggles have likewise intensified. On the one hand, migrants continue to sustain and cultivate life and mutual aid amid the ongoing anti-immigrant onslaught; on the other, they are also forging new survival strategies—including re-directing their migratory projects away from the United States, onward toward new prospective destinations. Reverse migration back toward Latin America similarly resembles the early pandemic moment when many migrants returned to their countries of origin in search of greater safety and dignity. Today, that

strategy may be re-emerging and variations on that theme are multiplying. For academic researchers, just as during the height of the pandemic, accompanying, bearing witness, and amplifying migrant struggles is our essential work, and it was this commitment on the part of our contributors that guided the work of this Theme Issue. The unceasing struggles of people on the move across borders and their projects of re-making their lives as migrants and refugees in new countries are vital for affirming and sustaining life against the predations and deprivations of a global/postcolonial/neoliberal regime of racial capitalism, and these migrant struggles supply a powerful vital force for unsettling, cracking, and subverting systems of sovereign power that today confront us with a worldwide entrenchment of authoritarian despotism.

## In memoriam

As we were developing this editorial project, we were confronted with an unimaginable and profoundly painful event. Valentina Glockner Faguetti, one of our contributing authors and a cherished collaborator, passed away suddenly. Her loss has left us with an irreplaceable absence.

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### ORCID iD

Soledad Álvarez Velasco https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8836-7063

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## Author biographies

**Soledad Álvarez Velasco** is an assistant professor at the University of Illinois Chicago. She researches the interrelationship between mobility, control, and spatial transformations across the Americas. Her work has been published in Antipode, Studies in Social Justice, Migration and Society, ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, and Journal of Latin American Geography. She founded and co-coordinated the digital humanities projects '(Im)mobilities in the Americas and COVID-19' and Children on the Move across the Americas funded by the National Geographic Society. She is the author of *Frontera sur chiapaneca: El muro humano de la violencia* (Mexico: CIESAS-UIA, 2016); co-editor (with Ulla D. Berg and Iréri Ceja) of *Migraciones: Colección Palabras Clave* (2021); co-editor (with Amarela Varela) of *Luchas Migrantes en Tiempos Pandémicos y de Crisis* (2025); co-editor (with Nicholas De Genova, Gustavo Dias and Eduardo Domenech) of *The Borders of America: Migration, Control and Resistance Across Latin America and the Caribbean* (2026).

**Nicholas De Genova** is Professor and Chair of the Department of Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Houston. He is the author of *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and 'Illegality' in Mexican Chicago* (2005), co-author of *Latino Crossings: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and the Politics of Race and Citizenship* (2003), editor of *Racial Transformations: Latinos and Asians Remaking the United States* (2006), co-editor of *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement* (2010), editor of *The Borders of 'Europe': Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering* (2017), co-editor of *Roma Migrants in the European Union: Un/Free*

*Mobility* (2019), co-editor (with Martina Tazzioli) of *Europa/Crisis: Nuevas Palabras Claves en 'la Crisis' en y de 'Europa'* (2021), and, co-editor (with Soledad Álvarez Velasco, Gustavo Dias and Eduardo Domenech) of *The Borders of America: Migration, Control and Resistance Across Latin America and the Caribbean* (2026).

**Stephan Scheel** works as a Professor for Political Sociology at the Leuphana University of Lüneburg. He is best known for his work on the autonomy of migration, the digitisation of border and migration management, and the use of migration as an epistemic starting point to counter processes of securitisation. Since February 2023, Stephan acts as the PI of the 5-year research project 'DigID – Doing Digital Identities', funded by the European Research Council (ERC). His first research monograph is entitled *Autonomy of Migration? Appropriating Mobility within Biometric Border Regimes* (Routledge, 2019). Moreover, Stephan has co-edited (together with Evelyn Ruppert) the book *Data Practices. Making up a European People* (Goldsmiths Press, 2021).