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On Migrations and Borders

The questions of borders and migration have acquired special urgency in the twenty-first century, when unprecedented global mobility has coincided with intensified practices of surveillance, securitization, and territorial control of nation-states. Trends in contemporary migration and bordering mechanisms continue the tendencies that emerged at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first century: contemporary societies are increasingly shaped by tensions between the unrestricted global circulation of goods, capital, and information on the one hand, and the growing restriction of human movement on the other. Recent events, including the so-called 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Poland-Belarus border crisis that began in 2021, and the displacement caused by the war in Ukraine, have demonstrated that borders remain central instruments through which states negotiate security, sovereignty, humanitarian obligations, and national identity.

At the same time, migration has become one of the most politically polarizing and socially transformative phenomena of the contemporary world. Economic inequalities, armed conflicts, climate change, and labor demands continue to generate large-scale movements of people across and within states, challenging traditional understandings of citizenship, belonging, and territoriality. As Hein de Haas argues, migration should not be regarded as an exceptional crisis but rather as an intrinsic component of broader processes of social and economic transformations (de Haas, 2024). The persistence of migration alongside increasingly restrictive bordering practices reveals a fundamental contradiction of globalization: while the modern world depends on interconnectedness and mobility, states simultaneously attempt to regulate and contain those very flows.

As borders and migrations play such a crucial role in shaping of the contemporary global order, they must be examined not only as geopolitical realities but also as cultural, social, ethical, and symbolic processes. Contemporary border regimes influence everyday experiences of inclusion and exclusion, determine access to rights and mobility, and shape public discourses surrounding identity, security,

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and otherness. The study of borders and migration is therefore essential to understanding some of the defining tensions of today's world systems.

1. An overview of the history of migrations

In *How Migration Really Works: 22 Things You Need to Know about the Most Divisive Issue in Politics*, Hein de Haas, a well-known Dutch sociologist and geographer who has focused his research of over thirty years on migration, proposes an epistemic framework to explain and interpret the contradictions involved in the public discourse on migration. He does so by debunking various myths that have arisen around migrations. He also identifies turning points in the history of this phenomenon, arguing for the constant presence of migratory movements in human history.

One of the first commonly recognized significant peaks in global migrations is the nineteenth century, which witnessed an intensified expansion of Europeans into the New World, "in countries such as the United States, Canada, Argentina and Brazil, as well as Australia and New Zealand" (de Haas, 2024, p. 17). As de Haas observes, "This massive out-migration coincided with the peak of European imperialism, when many European soldiers, colonists, missionaries, administrators, entrepreneurs, and workers settled in colonies in Africa and Asia" (p. 17). The consequences of colonization processes on the flows of people became conspicuous later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though the pattern of the movement became reversed, as de Haas suggests, as Europe transformed "from the world's main source of colonists and immigrants to an important destination of migrants" (p.19). It can be argued that many official governmental programs aimed at addressing the problem of labor shortages with immigrant labor, including the program inviting guest workers in Germany, or the Bracero Program in the U.S., were, in a way, a delayed effect of postcolonial transformations that reversed the migration mechanism.

Another important trend identified by de Haas also took place at the end of the nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, when colonially-driven migrations simultaneously occurred with migratory flows prompted by conflicts, wars, and political transformations. The scope of this article does not permit the analysis of all the political determinants mentioned in that context, and there is extensive scholarship devoted to that period of history. However, it should be emphasized that despite the distinct character of each type of migration at that time, determined by their specific context, they share a common denominator, regardless of their scale. Migrations generated by both the well-known historical events of that period, such as the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the October Revolution of 1917, World War I, or the ones that took place locally, such as the Bieżeństwo of 1915 from the western borderlands of the Russian Empire, pertain to displacement rather than mobility. Combined with the aforementioned colonially-driven as well

as economically-driven movements, all these flows contributed to this exceptional increase in human mobility, which concurrently resulted in the rise of anti-immigrant sentiments. Issues related to migration became more pronounced after the end of World War II, with that era's redrawing of national borders, which in turn contributed to the major displacement of people, followed by the emigration of people escaping newly established communist regimes. Analyzed from today's perspective, numerous analogies to the contemporary character of migrations can be identified, which debunks the argument that the scale of modern migratory movements is exceptional.

Examining the subsequent cases of migration increases at the end of the twentieth century, de Haas highlights two new trends. The first tendency is "the rise of non-Western migration destinations . . . in the Arab Gulf" (de Haas, 2024, 2) in the 1980s. This shift was followed by other migratory processes in Europe in the 1990s that coincided with increased mobility of citizens from Eastern and East-Central Europe. These transformations were accompanied by further labor shortages in "Old Europe" as well as the development of the European Union with its noble founding principles that assumed cooperation and exchange among member-states, and, later on, allowed unrestricted movement within the Schengen zone, first established in 1985 and subsequently expanded by the addition of new countries. These pivotal changes created an apparently propitious atmosphere for the unrestricted flows of people. However, as the favorable atmosphere towards both internal and external migrants depends on the profitable economic situation and the sense of security of ordinary citizens within any nation-state, the 1990s already showed signs of anti-immigrant attitudes in various Western European countries, supported by the common (and often distorted) rhetoric representing immigrants as stealing jobs from legitimate citizens, not assimilating with their host countries' cultures, and violating the law.

It has to be noted that what just commenced in Europe had already happened in the U.S., as after a period of relatively moderate attitudes towards migration that resulted in The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, which was an amnesty/legalization program for immigrants already living and working in the U.S., the 1990s brought an increased number of legal acts and actions whose aim was to restrict immigration and the immigrant rights including the Immigration Act of 1990, California Proposition 187 of 1994, Operation Hold the Line from 1993, Operation Gatekeeper from 1994, and Operation Safeguard from 1995. These 1990s actions constructed the framework for modern U.S. immigration enforcement, increasing reliance on detention and a militarized border.

Parallel to these developments were analogous changes in European border regimes, leading to the creation of the concept of "Fortress Europe", which dominated discourse on the security of European borders, particularly after the 2015 refugee crisis, followed by the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border that began in

2021, and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022. Matthew Carr, in *Fortress Europe: Dispatches from a Gated Continent* (2012), explores the consequences of such recent events, maintaining that, contrary to the original tenets founding the European Union, today's governments have developed a highly intricate system of border control and exclusion (Carr, 2012, p. 245). He further notes that this phenomenon extends beyond Europe, explaining that "Fortress Europe" forms part of a broader network of barriers established throughout the industrialized West over the past two decades to prevent some from entering wealthier countries, while also restricting their mobility more generally (p. 231), which points to ethical contradictions displayed by liberal democracies.

The equivocality of migration mechanisms has led to an oversimplified categorization of human flows. As Hein de Haas argues, there are generally two approaches to migration. On the one hand, it is perceived as a problem, since according to this discourse, migrants "inundate" other countries, take away the jobs from the citizens, oftentimes break the law, and, finally, fail to accomplish integration processes. As de Haas concludes, "All of this has amalgamated in the notion of a 'migration crisis' that requires drastic countermeasures – such as stronger border enforcement, refugee resettlement schemes, and development aid for poor countries" (de Haas, 2024, p.1). On the other hand, some voices argue that migration should be treated as a solution to the growing problems facing advanced economies and high-income countries. In that context, as de Haas indicates, immigrants can help solve labor shortages, support aging populations, offer cultural contributions, and generally "boost growth and innovation and to rejuvenate our societies" (p. 1). Such conflicting ideas are reflected in the polarization of attitudes towards migrations, resulting in two migration *doxas* that propound "pro- and anti-migration narratives" (p. 2), thus disregarding the complex character of this phenomenon. As the fear of unlimited human mobility is more prevalent in the public discourse, and migration narratives are dominated by the image of immigrants who threaten the security and stability of receiving countries, this leads to the implementation of further restricting mechanisms aimed at controlling human movements. Migration, then, is one defining feature of globalization, and borders are the mechanisms through which states attempt to regulate, channel, and control transnational mobility.

2. Borders and their vicissitudes

To understand the current status quo of contemporary border regimes and bordering mechanisms, it is necessary to recognize critical moments in the history of borders. Alexander Diener and Joshua Hagen, in *Borderlines and Borderlands: Political Oddities at the Edge of the Nation-State* (2010), emphasize that, despite recurrent claims about the emergence of a "borderless world", borders remain fundamental to contemporary political, economic, and cultural organization (Diener & Hagen,

2010, p.4). The authors identify significant transformations in the history of nations and trace the historical evolution of borders from the fluid frontier zones of ancient empires to the territorially precise borders associated with the modern nation-state. They argue that, unlike contemporary borders, premodern frontiers were often unstable, permeable, and only loosely defined. The gradual consolidation of centralized states in early modern Europe, which started in the sixteenth century and “evolved over several centuries” (p. 5), transformed borders into increasingly fixed territorial markers linked to sovereignty, administration, and national identity. Consequently, transformations in the concept of the border from “vaguely defined” (p. 6) and permeable into a more precisely delineated space paralleled sociopolitical changes – a shift from the feudal system to the modern state system (p. 6). As a result, as Diener and Hagen aver, “[t]he idea of the nation-state, where the political borders of the state would coincide with the cultural boundaries of the nation, had become the ideal, although not the norm, by the beginning of the twentieth century” (p.6). Significantly, the craving for more precisely defined borders included both European states and their colonies (p. 6), thereby propagating this concept of territorial divisions across a wider global context.

What also seems important in the history of borders is how the processes of their establishment have occurred, as it is to a large extent relevant to understanding the contemporary location of the borders. As Diener and Hagen note, “[v]arious proposals for border delineation emerged beginning around 1500” (p. 7) and the first precise ideas how to divide territories appeared at the end of the eighteenth century, when the view “that borders should coincide with ‘natural’ features had become widely accepted” (p. 7), as those natural borders were considered “more stable and less likely to generate conflict” (p. 7). However, borders have never been neutral geographical facts. Rather, they have been shaped by political interests, imperial ambitions, and competing interpretations of territory and identity. The notion of “natural borders” frequently served to legitimize territorial expansion, as the term could be interpreted in manifold ways that would address the interests of individual states that were stakeholders in the discussion on borders. Therefore, the criteria applied to define the borders were far from objective – for example, a natural border could be defined as the one that “should follow physiographical features, such as rivers or mountain ranges” (p. 7), which, as Diener and Hagen argue, was “a view that provided a convenient justification for annexing new territories” (p. 7). On the other hand, a natural border could also be understood as the one that demarcated a territory which would “encompass all the members of one nationality” (p. 7), which could again explain the territorial advances of some states. Consequently, these unclear criteria reinforced states’ own “particular geopolitical agendas” and “particular territorial aspirations” (p.7). Consequently, borders emerged not as objective divisions but as historically contingent and politically negotiated constructs.

The process leading to the establishment of more objective border paradigms was interrupted and at the same time accelerated by World War I. This, according to Diener and Hagen, led to both “dramatic territorial realignment” (p. 7) and “triggered a surge of interest in border studies” (p. 7), which resulted in attempts at providing new criteria defining the borders that would prevent conflicts of that scale in the future. However, since the interests of individual states were still at stake, “the dichotomy between natural and artificial borders” (p. 7) remained prevalent and border “studies tended to be highly subjective, often reflecting their authors’ national origins” (p. 7), as it used to be in the past. As a consequence, new research undertaken throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s deemed borders “arbitrary, subjective, and the result of human decisions, not forces of nature” (p. 8). The analyses of the borders of that time included “empirical descriptions of border locations, before-and-after case studies of border realignments, and new systems of border classification” (p. 8), leading to the conclusion that the popular “natural-artificial distinction was pointless” (p. 8), even though this division remained valid in mainstream discourse.

This line of thinking persisted from the 1950s through the 1970s, when scholars initially concentrated on individual case studies before border research was largely neglected by the end of the 1970s (Diener & Hagen, 2010, p.8). Instead, political geographers shifted their attention toward states and the internal processes associated with modernization (Diener and Hagen, 2010, p. 8). In this perspective, borders were considered relatively unimportant because they were viewed simply as divisions between separate modernization processes rather than as factors shaping those processes themselves (p. 8). The Cold War further reinforced this approach by diminishing the perceived significance of international borders and redirecting scholarly attention toward questions of power, while borders came to be understood mainly as “passive territorial markers” (p. 9).

The trends that signaled the emergence of the “borderless world” (Diener & Hagen, 2010, p. 9) reversed when the role of borders had been lessening since the 1980s, due to new transformations related to globalization that involved “transnational integration and interdependence” (p. 9). Even though in some parts of the world borders did indeed cease to play the role they used to have a few decades before, elsewhere they retained their power, or sometimes even strengthened their influence. Observing these phenomena, Diener and Hagen note that “[w]hile the apparent “disappearance” of borders across much of Western Europe is often presented as irrefutable evidence supporting the borderless world thesis, these developments do not appear to be the global norm” (p. 9); moreover, “[i]t is difficult to argue that a similar “de-bordering” is imminent in, for example, Africa, the Middle East or Central Asia” (p. 9). Considering contemporary sentiments regarding migration mechanisms and border regimes that prevail in Europe nowadays, it may be assumed that even the de-bordered Schengen zone

will reinstate – at least temporarily – some of its borders as well, which has already happened on several occasions. Consequently, the question of borders has become even more urgent and difficult to address unequivocally.

Diener and Hagen propose two arguments concerning borders in the 21st century as studied from a global perspective. First, the authors argue that globalization has not diminished the importance of borders as decisively as many theorists predicted in the late twentieth century, and therefore, borders are unlikely to lose their perceived importance in the near future. Although processes of economic integration and technological connectivity have facilitated transnational flows of goods, capital, and information, the mobility of people remains unevenly regulated. In this sense, contemporary borders function selectively: they may become increasingly permeable for trade and communication while simultaneously becoming more restrictive toward migrants and refugees (Diener and Hagen, 2010, p. 10). Secondly, they observe that borders in the twenty-first century should be understood not as static lines but as dynamic social constructions possessing both material and symbolic dimensions and “the rich interdisciplinary body of research that has emerged since the 1990s conceives of borders as social constructions possessing both material and symbolic aspects, rather than preordained, rigid lines marking the absolute limits of the state” (p. 9). Their meanings and functions continue to evolve in response to globalization, security concerns, migration pressures, and changing conceptions of national identity and sovereignty. This in turn can result in two scenarios: the “creation of transition zone borderlands” (Newman, 1996, as cit. in Diener & Hagen, 2010, p. 10) or the borderland remaining a frontier “in which mutual suspicion, mistrust of the other and a desire to maintain group or national exclusivity remain in place” (Newman, 1996, as cit. in Diener and Hagen, 2010, p. 10). Consequently, as Diener and Hagen maintain, researchers will continue their efforts to explain the construction of borders, taking into account various processes influencing their establishment, yet, as they finally conclude, “it may be impossible to develop a single border theory applicable and explanatory of all borders at all times” (Diener and Hagen, 2010, p. 9).

These conclusions are endorsed by Astrid Fellner, who argues for “a reconceptualization of boundaries that treats them critically as processes, discourses, practices, even symbols through which power functions” (Fellner, 2021, p. 7). The 2000s “‘cultural turn’ in border studies and ‘border turn’ in cultural studies” (Nyman & Schimanski, 2021, as cit. in Fellner, 2021, p. 8) highlights the multifaceted character of borders, including not only a variety of territory/geography-related terms (such as boundaries, frontiers, borderlands, or borderscapes), but also recognizing the concept of borders as social constructs. Fellner (2021), in her analysis, proposes the concept of borders as “shifting sites of transition and movement”, or “heterotopic spaces” (p. 10). Such shifts in approach to border studies emphasize the complex character of borders, which escapes the

reductive approach frequently applied to analyze these spaces – they are often represented as solely dividing the two nation-states with border markers such as fences or walls enforcing bordering mechanisms and securing border regimes. Moreover, as Fellner (2021) claims, by recognizing other dimensions of borders, the approach to bordering processes and border crossings is also transformed and “Borders are thereby unmasked as contingent social and cultural productions and as instruments of power, which determine and often also substantiate our perception of the world” (p. 8). Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate why borders and migration remain central to the contemporary world: as globalization, displacement, and transnational mobility continue to reshape societies, borders function not merely as territorial divisions but as dynamic sites where power, identity, belonging, and human movement are constantly negotiated.

3. Why are migrations and borders still pertinent in the twenty-first century?

Why, then, do borders and migration remain so pertinent in the twenty-first century? One of the main reasons is that contemporary societies are increasingly shaped by global mobility, while simultaneously attempting to limit and regulate it. As Hein de Haas argues, “liberal democracies are caught in a ‘migration trilemma’ between (1) the political wish to control immigration, (2) economic interests in more migration, and (3) fundamental human-rights obligations towards migrants and refugees” (de Haas, 2024, p. 360). This “trilemma” reveals the inherent tensions within modern migration policies, as the “conflicting policy goals seem impossible to resolve satisfactorily, and that largely explains why immigration policies can be incoherent and therefore often ineffective or even counterproductive” (p. 360). Therefore, in other words, even though “ethnoscapes” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 296) are an intrinsic part of today’s world order, it is still unresolved how to address them, and the existing mechanisms of dealing with them remain contentious.

These tensions are further intensified through media and political representations of migration. As de Haas notes, migration often receives extensive media coverage, and it is frequently presented through sensationalist narratives that amplify fear, exploiting the rhetoric of crisis and instability resulting from migrations (de Haas, 2024, pp. 15, 21). We all remember the news with a sensationalist bent after the 2015 migration crisis, the infamous “caravan” that was marching from Central America to “invade” the U.S., and finally the “surges” of Ukrainian refugees that were going to destabilize neighboring states, Poland in particular, after the outbreak of the war, to name just a few examples. The linguistic aspect of such relations cannot be ignored, either, as the language used in these accounts serves to support a particular political standpoint. Moreover, the same migration-related event may be represented in radically different ways, depending on the political or ideological agenda behind its interpretation. Combined with the spread of disinformation, including fake news, or

the activity of trolls on social media, such rendering of migrations further aggravates the tensions. One of the biggest paradoxes of the twenty-first century, in my view, is that while we have unprecedentedly extensive and almost immediate access to information through various media, biased (both ways) and tendentious coverage often results in confusion and leads to misinformation. In the case of migrations, it also generates further polarization.

The instability of the contemporary world order, with many ongoing conflicts and some potential ones in the making, renders the issue of borders and migration relevant, as history has shown that such conditions significantly influence the movement of people. Such instability also contributes to the vulnerability of geopolitical borders, which in turn leads to an increase in their surveillance and security procedures. In that context, it should be noted that the emergence of a new form of conflict, hybrid warfare, has changed the dynamics of conflicts, and its consequences are yet to be learned. Its effects are frequently delayed, but it can influence a society in a much more extensive way than is readily apparent. As NATO experts explain, “Hybrid methods are used to blur the lines between war and peace, and attempt to sow doubt in the minds of target populations” (*Countering hybrid threats*). They aim to destabilize the target country/ies and disorient inhabitants without resorting to a full-scale invasion. Even though it may seem less radical than conventional war, hybrid warfare is dangerous, and it often preys on the fear of the other – an immigrant, a stranger, to accomplish its goals. In such contexts, migrants and refugees often become instrumentalized as political tools or symbols within broader struggles for power and influence, while simultaneously remaining among the primary victims of violence, exclusion, and border securitization.

Lastly, it is critical to understand that neither migration nor migratory movements can be completely stopped. In fact, we probably do not even want to do that, given the potential consequences of such a shift. Therefore, we need to recognize migrations as a natural phenomenon, acknowledge their complexity, and approach them from a critical perspective but without prejudice. Hein de Haas concludes his analysis of migrations, maintaining that they should be treated “as an intrinsic part of broader processes of social, cultural, and economic change that affect our societies” (de Haas, 2024, p. 358). He closes his discussion in the following way:

The evidence presented shows the need to go beyond the usual framing of migration debates in simplistic and polarizing pro- and anti-terms, and to not focus on what migration ought to be, but rather on what migration *is*, in terms of its actual trends, patterns, causes and impacts. Understanding the inevitability of migration, and its central role in economic development and social transformation, will lead us to a totally new way of understanding human mobility – a new paradigm on the very nature and causes of migration that belies almost everything that we are usually told on the subject. As Ronald Skeldon observed, ‘Migration *is* development’; it is a process that benefits some people more than others, that can have downsides for some, but that cannot be thought or wished away. The power of a scientific, and above all nuanced

view of migration as development helps us to understand and – to a certain extent – predict how migration will evolve as our societies and economies change. (de Haas, 2024, p. 358)

For this reason, interdisciplinary approaches to migration and border-related studies remain essential. Because migration intersects with politics, economics, sociology, culture, media, law, geography, and human rights, no single theoretical framework can fully capture its complexity. Interdisciplinary perspectives allow for a more nuanced understanding of migration processes and bordering practices, while also resisting the overgeneralizations and polarized narratives that often dominate public discourse. The contributions in this volume are intended to examine selected aspects of representations of migrations and borders, and to advance a discussion concerning these issues. Interdisciplinary approaches adopted in the analyses included in this collection of essays provide a more comprehensive study of borders and migrations, thereby the aforementioned polarized approaches that lead to overgeneralizations and simplifications. Moving across literary studies, film studies, and cultural studies, the contributions explore borders as lived experiences that structure identities, relationships, and forms of exclusion and resistance.

The volume opens with essays that reconceptualize borders through visual and affective frameworks. Svitlana Kot examines graphic novels about refugees and migrants through the lenses of affect theory and bordertexture methodology, exploring how narratives of legal and illegal migration (de)construct binaries such as welcome/unwelcome and expose the emotional and ideological dimensions of contemporary border regimes. Similarly focused on visual culture, Betül Ateşci Koçak analyzes Mira Jacob's graphic memoir *Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations* as a post-9/11 migrant narrative in which racial belonging, exclusion, and identity are negotiated through fragmented dialogue and intergenerational exchange. Kenan Koçak's contribution extends this discussion of representation to Turkish satirical magazines, demonstrating how caricatures of Syrian refugees reveal nationalist anxieties surrounding migration, integration, and belonging while exposing the affective dimensions of anti-migrant discourse.

A second cluster of essays turns to cinematic and literary representations of migration, trauma, and precarious belonging. Carla Abella Rodríguez examines the representation of African female refugees in *Aisha* (2022) and *Drift* (2023), arguing that both films foreground bodily vulnerability, touch, and “carnal hospitality” as ways of articulating trauma and fragile encounters between self and Other within inhospitable European reception systems. Ewa Antoszek's analysis of Agnieszka Zwiefka's film, *Silent Trees* (2024) similarly investigates the violence of contemporary European migration regimes through the 2021 Polish-Belarusian border crisis. Focusing on the experiences of a Kurdish teenage girl, the article explores denied childhood, captivity, trauma, and “hostipitality”, while also highlighting animation as a medium capable of expressing the psychological

dimensions of displacement and the ethical contradictions of “Fortress Europe”. Małgorzata Martynuska’s reading of Gabriela Garcia’s *Of Women and Salt* expands these concerns through an exploration of intergenerational and collective trauma among Cuban refugees and Salvadoran migrants. The article examines how border crossings, detention, deportation, and family separation shape both individual and inherited forms of suffering, while also emphasizing resilience and survival across generations of women.

Questions of diaspora, identity, and alternative forms of belonging are further developed in the volume’s final essays. Macarena Martín-Martínez analyzes Melania Luisa Marte’s *Plantains and Our Becoming* as a reconfiguration of Afro-Dominican diasporic identity grounded in Black joy and transnational rootedness. Challenging dominant narratives of displacement and victimhood, the article foregrounds community, multiplicity, and thriving as forms of resistance to racialized exclusion and dehumanization. Richard Reitsma’s contribution similarly explores migration, identity, and alternate forms of belonging through the lens of queer desire and Mexican culinary culture in Heidi Ewing’s film *I Carry You with Me* (2020). The article demonstrates how food and foodways function as languages of longing, intimacy, and memory, revealing how migrants continue to “carry” borders within themselves even after crossing them physically.

The volume concludes with Lucía Bausela Buccianti’s analysis of Sole Otero’s graphic novel *Walicho*, which situates migration within broader colonial and decolonial histories. Examining the intersections of migration, feminist solidarity, indigenous cosmologies, and capitalist extraction, the article reveals how colonial migrations continue to shape contemporary spaces and identities in Latin America while also exposing the possibilities and limitations of decolonial resistance.

Announcement

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