#StayHomeSaveLives:

Essentializing entry and Canada's biopolitical COVID borders

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a systematic closure of national borders at a global scale, and a subsequent but selective reopening under the guise of "essential" entry and labor. We examine the Government of Canada's Twitter messaging around border closures and exceptions, using narrative and textual analysis to interrogate how the government has constructed essential and non-essential entry and work in support of national needs including critical infrastructure that sustains the Canadian economy and population. The Canadian government deployed the essentialization process as a biopolitical mechanism to access the labor pool that already existed within Canada and that was readily available beyond the border. Rather than complete closure, the Canadian border had to be "elastic" allowing the entry and making use of the labor of international students, temporary foreign workers, and people with precarious status to sustain national life. Studying the digital spaces of migration management will remain key in any post-pandemic world.

Keywords

Borders, COVID-19, essential, biopolitics, economy, Canada

#StayHomeSaveLives

(Government of Canada hashtag, COVID-19 pandemic, 2020)

"Immigration is essential to getting us through the pandemic, but also to our short-term economic recovery and our long-term economic growth."

(IRCC 2020d)

Who is allowed to stay home? Whose lives should be saved? Whose lives are essential? Whose movement is essential? All of these questions are raised by the Government of Canada hashtag that accompanied most tweets about the COVID-19 pandemic: #StayHomeSaveLives. Since the emergence of the pandemic in Canada in March 2020, the state has used border closures and prioritization measures to control the spread of COVID-19. The pandemic ushered in a systematic closure of national borders at a global scale, and a subsequent but selective reopening under the guise of "essential" entry and work. We define "essentialization" as the differential treatment of subjects based in their perceived value to sustaining the economy, health, and social fabric of a given country, that influences how governments prioritize who can enter and whose labor is required to support national needs. While the categorization of people's movements across and within borders as (non-)essential is not new, Canadian policies and practices under the pandemic have highlighted and reinforced the biopolitical management of the border. Moreover, essentialization through interconnection is a key element to understanding the highly interrelated economies of the United States and Canada that influence how the shared border has been managed under the pandemic. The critical infrastructure and supply chains of both countries rely on the border not being an impediment to trade and other flows. This interconnection has allowed the border to function as a lifeline that was open only enough to sustain the economies of both countries. This essentialization also goes beyond the economy to focus on cooperation between the two countries on COVID-health measures to stop the spread of the virus. While Mercier and Rehaag (2020) argue that the exemption granted to the National Hockey League to allow teams to finish the 2019-20 season in Toronto and Edmonton reveals that the Canadian government's definition of "essential" travel is arbitrary, we argue that pandemic policy shifts reveal the strategic nature of essentialization -- i.e., who is made essential or non-essential. Immigration policy in Canada has from its inception prioritized and valued economic needs (Griffith 2017) and the pandemic has revealed in stark terms how this prioritization process works..

Rules around who qualifies for essential entry and how have shifted over the course of the pandemic, with an initial focus on bringing citizens and permanent residents home (including snowbirds,[1] long-haul truckers, and travelers). In response to advocacy by different groups, the category of essential entry was quickly expanded to include temporary foreign workers, international students, and reunification of families. While some of the analysis we

present here may seem obvious -- specifically the focus of Canadian policymakers on economy, safety, and citizenship -- we tell a more nuanced story. The positioning of international students and temporary foreign workers, valued for their labor and as potential taxpayers, demonstrates a constrained inclusion through exclusion. The concept of inclusion through exclusion captures the way in which their labor is recognized as essential but they -- their laboring bodies and selves -- are not deemed worthy of permanent status (Espiritu 2014; Jaggers 2020; Nyers 2006). One group whose entry continues to be restricted is refugees and asylum seekers (Macklin 2020; Mercier and Rehaag 2020), which contravenes Canada's international obligations towards people in need of protection.

Our analysis sits at the intersection of negotiations over essential entry and essential work, while also interrogating the biopolitical and "elastic" (Gilbert 2019) working out of Canadian bordering practices. We argue the Canadian government has utilized COVID-19 to justify essentialization as a biopolitical tool that prioritizes movement across the border with a focus on protecting the safety and health of Canadians. In this sense, the pandemic has reinforced the biopolitical mechanisms already underlying Canadian border control practices: the border is concerned with - and has implications for - the government of living and practices of dying through the uneven distribution of essentiality (Braidotti 2007; Foucault 2009; Mbembe 2003; Jesus 2020). COVID-19 has disrupted existing biopolitical disciplinary norms that control the population because it has interrupted the usual patterns of social and economic life. Simultaneously, it has spotlighted essentialization as a mechanism that governments use to evaluate the usefulness of various subjects to the economy and to the social fabric. Macklin (2020, 3) argues there are three spheres - legal, political, and economic - that factor into determinations of essentiality, and notes that the categories through which essential entry is distributed are "neither mutually exclusive, nor static." The legal sphere allows the Canadian government to utilize the *Quarantine Act* to override the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* to allow "essential" entry within the interplay of the economic and political spheres. Macklin gives the example of family reunification: it is neither legally nor economically essential to permit families to reunite in Canada but at times it is seen as "politically essential" – and it is in this sense that we are thinking about the role of supporting the social fabric through the essentialization process. The fluidity of whom Canada deems "essential" and permits to enter relates to Gilbert's (2019) concept of elasticity, in the sense that bordering practices are dynamic but also strategic. Canada's border contracts and expands -- "snapping back into place to limit both rights-claims and accountability" (Gilbert 2019, 438) -- according to the interests and priorities of the government at a given moment.

We build on Macklin's (2020) model that analyzes Canada's essentialization policies across legal, political, and economic spheres by drilling down into government messaging that reveals the uneven distribution of essentiality and the biopolitical border at work. Our analysis focuses on official communications via Twitter by the Canada Border Services Agency, Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Public Safety Canada, Health Canada and Public Health Agency of Canada, Global Affairs Canada, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the key government departments involved in designing and implementing bordering policies and practices under the pandemic. We examine messaging around border closures and exceptions to analyze this prioritization process and the discourses of "essential entry" as they intersect with "essential work." The data collection takes a digital-media-centric approach (Schroeder and Cowls 2018; Schäfer and van Es 2017) as Canadian officials have relied on social media channels like Twitter during the pandemic. We employ an interpretive approach to data analysis, making use of narrative and textual analysis, to examine how the Canadian government has constructed essential entry and work. In what follows, we trace Canada's "essentialization" process over the first eight months of the pandemic. We begin by situating our analysis in the scholarship.

The elastic biopolitics of essential bordering

State bordering practices, health orders, and essentialization processes are mechanisms of biopolitical governance aimed at managing the pandemic. Governments exercise various forms of biopolitical intervention to protect borders from entries that might put their citizens at risk, to protect the health of the national body, and to economize individuals' productivity. These biopolitical mechanisms also underpin practices related to the border and the economy under the pandemic, by producing a differential distribution of mobility and protection at local, national, and global scales. Bordering practices utilize human capital and human productivity to support the economy, drawing distinctions between essential and non-essential work and entry - but "essential to what?" (Jaggers 2020). In the case of those permitted to enter because their work is deemed essential it is often because the work they do (or will do) meets basic human needs of the population: "It makes you wonder whether some of these workers are considered all that essential. Might "expendable" be a more fitting term?" (Jaggers 2020). It is in the context of labor, laboring bodies, and laborers that we see the most intimate scale of how biopolitics operates – both before and during the pandemic.

On a global scale, states have deployed border closures as a blunt tool to control the spread of the pandemic and protect the national body. Bashford (2002) argues that biopolitics is not only about managing the population within a nation-state but also applies to border control: i.e., managing the population outside state boundaries as well. Her concept of "medico-legal border control" (346) is relevant to the pandemic context as it captures how states exclude people based on health status, specifically targeting infectious diseases such as HIV and tuberculosis. Even before the pandemic, immigrants to Canada were required to undergo medical examinations to confirm they were free of infectious diseases (Alvarez et al, 2002). The biomedical management of the border, then, is not new but the pandemic highlights this biopolitical governance of borders. Similarly, the prioritization of economic concerns and functions related to bordering practices during the pandemic is neither new nor unexpected: it is a continuation of the neoliberal governance rolled out in states like Canada over several decades. Migration has come to be viewed and governed through "an economic logic on the basis of cost-benefit analysis" (Amelina 2021, 5). Under this logic, potential immigrants to Canada were "transformed...into trade-enhancing commodities who must justify their skills and talents in the language of business" (Abu Laban and Gabriel 2002). Certain skills are valued for permanent residence while others are deemed worthy only of temporary residence. The pandemic underscores that many sectors of the Canadian economy rely on imported laborers, and that these expendable, non-citizen workers are critical to Canada's critical infrastructure. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of this critical infrastructure, which the Canadian government defines as the "processes, systems, facilities, technologies, networks, assets and services essential to the health, safety, security or economic well-being of Canadians and the effective functioning of government," (PSC 2020) to support food systems and supply chains. The interconnected economies of the US and Canada rely on the seamless movement of border traffic, which factors into how the border has been managed under the pandemic. Canada has introduced policy measures that selectively close and (re)open their borders for "essential" purposes to sustain economic functions, focusing on health, agriculture, and retail sectors.

Crucially, the pandemic has upended the hierarchy under which manual labor had previously been framed as "low-skilled" labor when in fact it was these very skills that were deemed "essential" under the pandemic, since it was the personal support workers, agricultural workers, grocery store clerks, etc. who were required to risk their lives to sustain the wider society. Border elasticity is crucial to our analysis of how people can be deemed essential for entry

and labor but not treated as essential in terms of personal protection. Gilbert's (2019) notion of elasticity is concerned with how states govern their borders, building on research regarding how the geographical and political spaces of a state are "deterritorialized, reterritorialized, and extra-territorialized" based on the state's interest to expand global trade networks and restrict the mobility of undesirable people on the move (Gilbert 2019, 424). The concept of elasticity also captures the shifting justifications for bordering practices that strategically limit states' accountability for the policies and practices they implement. In her development of the concept of border elasticity, Gilbert (2019, 425) builds on Weizman's (2007) concept of "elastic geography" and reminds us that, "highly elastic space is often more dangerous and deadly than a static, rigid one." For it is through this very elasticity that the state "obfuscate[s] and naturalize[s] the facts of domination," which are hidden in the complexity and illogic that is created, while also asserting that only the state has the technical "know-how to resolve the very complexity it created." This elastic space of the border is key to the biopolitical management of mobility during the pandemic because it allows states to respond and adapt to immediate national needs through essentialization, allowing them to prioritize who can enter and whose labor is valued and for what reasons. "Essential" and "non-essential" are oppositional categories deployed by the government to protect their citizens, and their deployment has profoundly uneven implications for those governed through this process.

#DigitalMethodology

This paper takes a digital-media-centric approach (Rogers 2018) through examining the language and framing of communications via Twitter by the six Canadian government departments responsible for bordering policies during the pandemic: Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), Public Safety Canada (PSC), Health Canada and Public Health Agency of Canada (HC and PHAC), Global Affairs Canada (GAC), and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Social media platforms are utilized by the Government of Canada to engage the public on key issues such as immigration and can be viewed as a tool that plays a "meaningful role in promoting a healthy democracy" (Government of Canada 2020). Schroeder and Cowls (2018) argue that using data sources such as Twitter allows social sciences research to unveil new insights and develop new methods. Jia Xue, for instance, used Twitter content to analyze and understand the public response to

the COVID-19 pandemic (University of Toronto 2020). A digital approach offers the opportunity to engage with "datafied society" that is well apparent during the pandemic (Schäfer and van Es 2017).

We collected Twitter data from the six departments listed above, starting from the beginning of messaging around the pandemic in March 2020 through the end of October 2020. We selected March as the starting point as it was the first communication about COVID-19 in Canada on Twitter, and we ended our analysis in October 2020 as the messages of border closures seemed to be stable and consistent; in addition, the Canadian government's 30 October 2020 Economic Update offered a clear end date for our analysis because it highlighted Canada's budget around post-pandemic immigration plans (Government of Canada 2020). Some of the tweets from PHAC and GAC during this period were not accessible since they had already been deleted and we thereby retrieved the data from the Internet Archive[2]. Notably, we did not find tweets related to border closures on the PSC feed even though this department deals with the security and safety of the border.

We employed an interpretive approach to data analysis, making use of narrative and textual analysis to examine how the Canadian government has constructed essential and non-essential entry and its relationship to essential work. By utilizing collaborative and iterative strategies of data analysis, we worked together on a weekly basis and looked at the messaging of the Canadian government month by month from March through October 2020. Completing this chronological timeline of the data allowed us to see an overall picture of messaging around the essentialization process. At a micro level, we examined and interpreted each tweet individually within each month, then we did a month-by-month analysis of these tweets that summarized key changes or developments. Combining these overall monthly analyses provided more detailed examination of significant shifts in policy and priority. We then coded the data into several topics consistent with the emergent issues during the pandemic such as economy, citizenship, labor, border closures, shifting immigration policies, and exceptions through the lens of essentialization. Finally, we employed discourse analysis to interpret textual contents and policy implementation (van Dijk 2001; Wodak and Krzyzanowski 2008). Discourse analysis allowed us to explore and analyze the developing narrative that prioritized, produced, and established essential and non-essential subjects during the pandemic within Canadian socio-economic and political contexts. Our analysis offers insights into Canadian practices of bordering, essentializing subjects, and economizing bodies under the pandemic.

Categorization through essentialization

A key aspect of how the COVID border emerged in Canada relates to the management of the boundary between the United States and Canada. As noted above, the interconnected economies of these countries rely on the smooth functioning of the border to sustain critical infrastructure and supply chains. This was true before the pandemic and, as a result, it is a crucial component of how the essentialization process has worked under the pandemic. Under a US-Canada joint initiative, the land border was closed to non-essential travel as of 21 March 2020. The announcement of the closure noted it as a "temporary restriction" (CBSA tweet, 20 March 2020) and the border remains closed at time of writing (late July 2021). In the official statement linked with this Twitter announcement, the closure was described as a "collaborative and reciprocal measure" in line with the "cautious" and "prudent approach" to limiting the spread of COVID-19 recommended within each country's borders (CBSA 2020b). Crucially, the announcement underscored the border as a lynchpin in the economies of both countries:

> The U.S.-Canada land border serves as an economic engine that supports over $2.4 billion dollars in daily trade. ... The United States and Canada recognize it is critical we preserve supply chains between both countries. These supply chains ensure that food, fuel, and life-saving medicines reach people on both sides of the border. Supply chains, including trucking, will not be impacted by this new measure. Americans and Canadians also cross the land border every day to do essential work or for other urgent or essential reasons, and that travel will not be impacted (CBSA 2020b).

While the announcement reassures people on both sides of the border that the measures attempt to strike a balance between protecting public health and safety while supporting the economy, it is clear that, "The US & Canada Border is open for business" (CBSA tweet, 21 March 2020).

The economy that comes into focus under the pandemic, which we refer to as the COVID economy, is tied to critical infrastructure, supply chains, and exploitable labor. This means that although there is initially a clear focus on the repatriation and wellbeing of Canadian citizens, we very quickly see measures implemented that position temporary foreign workers as essential to the functioning of key sectors of the Canadian economy, including agriculture, and ensure that international students continue to be able to work in low-wage jobs in the healthcare and food sectors under work permits with increased permissible hours of work per week. While international students and temporary

foreign workers are encouraged to continue working on the frontlines, they are consistently not mentioned in tweets that insist COVID bordering and economic measures are designed to support the health and safety of Canadians. In other words, while their labor is recognized as essential to sustaining critical infrastructure under the pandemic, their health and safety are not prioritized in the same way as that of Canadian citizens and permanent residents who are seen as the beneficiaries of these protective measures.

On Friday, March 13, 2020, the first official day of the pandemic in Canada, officials issued a series of communications that signaled how they would approach the pandemic in the days and weeks to come: a focus on containment but also on securing the economy and protecting citizens and citizenship. Multiple government departments issued messaging on Twitter on this date. GAC announced a global travel advisory: "Avoid non-essential travel to all destinations outside Canada until further notice due to measures put in place to control the spread of #COVID19" (GAC - travel.gc.ca, Tweet, 13 March 2020). On the same day, the CBSA emphasized that "ports of entry are open for business" (CBSA tweet, 13 March 2020), reassuring the country that these gateways for economic activity were a priority in the government's pandemic response. Also on 13 March, IRCC announced that all citizenship ceremonies and tests were cancelled "until further notice" (IRCC tweet, 13 March 2020). These citizenship-related measures reveal how officials might begin to define essentiality: while seemingly addressing a mundane bureaucratic process, the indefinite postponement of such procedures for people who have met the requirements for citizenship shows that non-citizens are valued differently. The clear distinctions drawn from the beginning between people with different immigration statuses led us to organize our analysis of differential essentialization in relation to these categories. Cognizant of Bakewell's (2008, 432) cautions related to the pitfalls of research that works within the categories assigned by states, insisting on the importance of what he terms "research beyond the categories," we pay attention to how notions of essential entry and work are mobilized differently across and within these categories but also to those people whose movements and presence do not so easily fit into the state's policy grid. Our analysis of the positioning of various modes and streams of entry to Canada reveals how officials frame and understand members of different groups as "potential contributors" to the economy and society over the immediate and longer terms. In applying Gilbert's (2019) conceptualization of the elasticity of the border, we are concerned with the expansion and contraction of which immigration categories qualify as "essential." In what follows, we examine messaging focused on people seeking entry through four categories: citizens and permanent

residents, temporary foreign workers, international students, and refugees. The latter three are categories that are often the most vulnerable to Canadian immigration policies and are in precarious positions, while Canadian citizens tend to be understudied in migration and refugee studies scholarship.

Canadian citizens and the institution of citizenship

Official communications demonstrated a clear prioritization of Canadian citizens from the outset. Initially, efforts focused on supporting those who were outside the country to return by making them aware of available consular and financial assistance. For example:

> "The #CBSA is prepared to help Canadians! As many Canadians heed the advice of the Government of Canada to return home due to #COVID19, learn what to expect when crossing at the land border." (CBSA tweet, 22 March 2020)

In the early days of the pandemic, the Government of Canada announced that it would repatriate Canadians on board the *Grand Princess* cruise ship that was experiencing an outbreak of COVID-19. The armed forces were deployed to repatriate Canadians from the ship as Minister of Foreign Affairs François-Phillippe Champagne stated, "ensuring the health and safety of Canadians both at home and abroad remains our priority" (GAC 2020b, 2020c). Over the early months of the pandemic, the government continued to repatriate Canadians, provided emergency loans of CAD$5,000 for those needing financial support while awaiting repatriation, and offered support for those unable to come home through partnerships with countries and organizations (GAC 2020d). Repatriation operations concluded on 17 July 2020, by which time approximately 56,500 Canadians had been repatriated (GAC 2020e).

While initially only citizens and permanent residents (PRs) were considered essential for entry, "foreign nationals who are immediate family members of Canadian citizens or permanent residents" became part of the essential category in June 2020 (IRCC tweet, 8 June 2020). The admissibility of family members of Canadian citizens and permanent residents is not "legally essential"; however, family reunification especially with "immediate" family is seen as "intrinsically essential" in the sense that millions of citizens and PRs advocated for their entry during the pandemic (Macklin 2020, 6). In the news release accompanying the announcement, IRCC (2020) recognized that the "temporary border measures put in place to fight the spread of COVID-19, while necessary, have created challenges for some families" (IRCC 2020a). Referencing this shift in policy, CBSA explained the policy was meant to

"support family unity while enforcing #COVID19 enhanced border measures" (CBSA tweet, 9 June 2020). These efforts received additional support when Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino later announced, "action to speed up spousal application processing and help families build their lives together in Canada" (IRCC tweet, 24 September 2020). In October, "extended family members" could now seek permission to enter and that term expanded to include "people in a long-term exclusive dating relationship and their dependent children, adult children, grandchildren, siblings and grandparents" (IRCC tweet, 8 October 2020). Meanwhile, the government reduced the minimum income requirement necessary to sponsor a parent or grandparent in acknowledgement that many families "may have been financially impacted by the exceptional circumstances of the #COVID19 pandemic" (IRCC tweet, 11 October 2020). These measures demonstrate the value of family reunification to sustaining Canada's social fabric; while not economically essential, reuniting families of citizens and permanent residents who had been separated by pandemic border closures was reframed as essential to the Canadian population.

As noted above, on 13 March 2020 - even before the border was closed - the government cancelled all citizenship procedures including tests and ceremonies, although IRCC later announced that it was still accepting citizenship applications: "We're continuing to accept new completed citizenship applications. Submitted applications will experience processing delays due to #COVID19 restrictions" (IRCC tweet, 1 May 2020). This demonstrates that citizenship continued to be a valued status and connects with plans for the post-pandemic recovery, in the sense that the messaging around citizenship applications suggests the government does not want to lose potential applicants and future citizens. This announcement gives people hope with no ability to follow through since all ceremonies and tests are on hold. The indefinite postponement of such procedures for people who have met the requirements draws a line that marks non-citizens as non-essential in the short term even as it envisions a longer term when converting non-citizens into citizens will be a goal. Interestingly, on 2 April 2020, IRCC announced a special virtual citizenship ceremony for a doctor based at the University of Manitoba:

> The IRCC Citizenship team responded to an urgent need to facilitate #COVID19 research by coordinating the extraordinary first virtual citizenship ceremony for Dr. Ng yesterday. His new Canadian citizenship and passport allows him to perform essential work related to combatting #COVID19 and saving Canadian lives (IRCC tweet, 2 April 2020).

Ng's research focuses not on understanding the virus or developing a vaccine, but rather on supply chain management and "developing resilient supply chains in tackling the negative impacts posed by the COVID-19 pandemic" (Rutkowski 2020, np). This in a sense encapsulates the Canadian approach, with an emphasis on supporting critical infrastructure and ensuring the smooth functioning of the economy. This example is also noteworthy because this was a special exemption to the indefinite cancellation of processes that would make citizenship available to other qualified individuals. As the tweet continued: "Please note that all citizenship ceremonies and citizenship tests remain cancelled until further notice" (IRCC tweet, 2 April 2020). As Ng explained, "'IRCC decided to grant me Canadian citizenship using its discretionary power - based on that I am providing service with outstanding value to Canada'" (Rutkowski 2020, np). While perhaps a justifiable move under the uncertainty of a pandemic, there is little doubt of the additional anxiety that this indefinite delay creates for those ready to take on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (Harris 2020b).

Temporary foreign workers

While initially caught up in the border measures, temporary foreign workers were very quickly promoted to "essential." On 20 March 2020, only one week after the initial cross-departmental messaging around avoidance of non-essential travel and entry, IRCC announced the first exemptions to travel restrictions:

> To safeguard the continuity of trade, commerce, health and food security for all Canadians, we will be updating exemptions to travel restrictions to include foreign nationals who have already committed to working, studying or making Canada their home (IRCC tweet, 20 March 2020).

While Minister of Agriculture Marie-Claude Bibeau insisted that, "Temporary foreign workers are absolutely necessary for our farms and our agribusinesses, filling over 60,000 jobs across the country" and "Our very food security depends on them" (Harris 2020a), their entry was not immediately deemed essential. As IRCC clarified: "The travel exemptions announced on March 20 are not yet in effect for temporary foreign workers, international students or approved permanent residents that have not yet landed in Canada" (IRCC, 23 March 2020). Exemptions for these groups came into effect on 25 March, drawing a distinction within the category of essential. Over the coming months, the Canadian economy continued to rely on the importation of temporary foreign workers to support key economic sectors such as agriculture and meat processing. Temporary foreign workers have been differentially affected by COVID-19 outbreaks at farms and meatpacking plants across Quebec, British Columbia,

and Ontario, , because they lacked the appropriate health, social distancing, and housing conditions (Kelley, Wirsig, and Smart 2020). Foreign workers were valued for their labor and their contributions on the frontlines; their work was deemed essential, whereas their lives were not.

Despite the exemptions announced early in the pandemic that shifted temporary foreign workers into the essential work and therefore essential entry category, employers continued to request additional supports to ensure their labor needs including encouraging unemployed "Canadians" to consider working in agriculture (HC and PHAC retweet of Employment NS Social Development Canada, 8 May 2020). New policy measures announced in May made it easier for temporary workers already in the country to switch jobs: "Today we announced new measures to support employers in critical sectors, such as agriculture and health care, to meet their ongoing labour needs by allowing temporary workers already in Canada to return to work quickly" (IRCC tweet, 12 May 2020). Most temporary work permits are tied to a specific employer, which creates challenges and delays that make it difficult for a temporary foreign worker to move to a new job as they typically must "wait for a new work permit to be issued before starting to work at their new job" (IRCC 2020c). The policy change allowed workers to begin their new job while their permit was still in process, cutting the wait time from "10 weeks or more, down to 10 days or less" (ibid). In the news release that accompanied this tweet, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion Carla Qualtrough argued:

> Temporary foreign workers are an integral part of the Canadian workforce and Canada's COVID-19 response. They are helping us meet urgent labour needs, to ensure our food security and deliver essential goods and services. While there will always be jobs for Canadians who choose to work in these sectors, these changes help support our economy by ensuring that temporary foreign workers already here can contribute during these extraordinary times (IRCC 2020c).

While cognizant of the essential role played by these workers in supporting the Canadian economy and society, the Minister signals the exceptional nature of the announcement when she notes that these are "extraordinary times." Moreover, the focus of the announcement is on support to employers by making it easier for people to remain in the country as temporary residents in order to maintain their labor to support the economy. A subsequent announcement extended the Mandatory Isolation Support for Temporary Foreign Workers program through the end of August 2020 "to help employers with added costs" (HC and PHAC retweet of Agriculture and Agri-Foods Canada, 10 July 2020).

This program was in place to support employers of temporary workers to meet mandatory isolation requirements. Funds were given to employers rather than to workers, despite the fact that the risk is borne by both parties. Their labor is recognized as essential, although their laboring bodies and potential membership in society are not The value of temporary foreign workers' labor to sustaining Canadian supply chains is clear.

International students

International students were on the government's radar screen from the early weeks of the pandemic. Those with a "valid study permit or [who] were approved for a study permit on or before March 18, 2020" were permitted to enter Canada (IRCC tweet, 4 April 2020). Policy measures framed international students as crucial to the ongoing functioning of the Canadian economy both during the exceptional moment of the pandemic and in anticipation of their potential future citizenship. Early measures focused on making their labor more readily available, by extending the number of hours an individual on a student visa could work per week, while later measures focused on retaining and recruiting international students by allowing online learning at Canadian institutions completed outside the country to count towards post-graduation work permits. Beyond the exemption to travel restrictions outlined above, IRCC announced an expansion of the permissible hours of work for international students towards the end of April 2020: "Effective immediately, international students in Canada are able to work more than 20 hrs per week while classes are in session if they are working in an essential service or function such as health care, the supply of food or other critical goods" (IRCC tweet, 22 April 2020). This is in stark contrast to the previously strict application of work restrictions. For example, in May 2019, international student Jobandeep Sandhu was arrested in Ontario for going over the hours permitted by his work permit (Global News 2019) and later deported.

Allowing international students to work extended hours demonstrates the economic value they bring to the country. Prior to the pandemic, it was clear that postsecondary institutions and policies wanted to recruit international students because they were a revenue stream that could subsidize provincial education systems. The pandemic reinforced the value of international students to the Canadian economy and their value as potential future citizens. Under the rubric of "flexibility in post-graduation work permit rules to help international students and Canadian post-secondary institutions" (IRCC tweet, 14 May 2020), IRCC announced that time spent studying online at Canadian institutions in the Fall 2020 semester could count towards an individual's eligibility for a post-graduation

work permit. These measures were later expanded so that "Students are now able to study online from abroad until April 30, 2021, with no time deducted from the length of a future post-graduation work permit, provided 50% of their program of study is eventually completed in Canada" (IRCC tweet, 26 August 2020). The Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWP) is envisioned as a pathway to potential citizenship for students who have earned their degrees in Canada, as IRCC makes clear:

> International education represents a significant economic benefit to Canada, with international students contributing $21.6 billion to Canada's GDP and supporting nearly 170,000 jobs in 2018. International students are also often excellent candidates to apply to remain in Canada permanently, with nearly 54,000 former students becoming permanent residents in Canada in 2018 (IRCC 2020b).

While international students are not legally or politically essential, they are viewed as a "revenue stream" (GAC 2020a) and therefore "economically essential" for Canada (Macklin 2020, 5). To facilitate this anticipated outcome, the government introduced additional measures in July 2020 to make online learning more attractive to international students. The counting of time accrued towards a future PGWP would now "include the time you apply for a study permit, rather than when you were approved for one" (IRCC tweet, 14 July 2020). In recognition that some international students might prefer or need to enter the country to study in person, IRCC provided them with examples of reasons that might be considered essential, including that "you've already been living in Canada and you're returning to your current home; your DLI [designated learning institution] is open and you're going to be attending classes soon; … online studying isn't an option where you are; your studies require a laboratory or similar facility that you'll have access to" (IRCC tweet, 9 August 2020). All of these measures aim to support international students and establish a connection to Canada and Canadian labor market access later on. As the government communicated in October 2020, "We've been making it easier for international students to pursue their studies online from abroad" (IRCC tweet, 21 October 2020). This is an example of Gilbert's elastic border: in this example, the Canadian government is seeking to establish a connection with students even when they are still based in their own countries because they are essential to the Canadian economy – both now (through payment of elevated international tuition fees) and in the future (as anticipated taxpayers who can support Canada's aging population).

Refugees and asylum seekers

Since January 2017, Canada had experienced a rise in asylum seekers crossing the Canada-US border between official ports of entry in part related to policies implemented early in his tenure by then-President Donald Trump. Between February 2017 and March 2020, 58,318 refugee claims[3] had been filed by people the government referred to as "irregular border crossers" (IRB 2021). Despite this focus on the high number of asylum seekers making their way to the border over the previous three years, official messaging of the COVID border measures offered surprisingly few references to how they would impact people in need of protection. Indeed, over the eight-month period covered by our data collection and analysis, refugees were rarely mentioned and clearly not prioritized although, as Macklin (2020, 7) observes, their entry is "legally essential" due to Canada's obligations under the 1951 UN *Refugee Convention*. In fact, a key feature of the global response to the pandemic was the near complete closure of pathways of refugee protection (Feng 2020). March 2020 saw a series of announcements to this effect in Canada, beginning with notification that, "We're cancelling all refugee claimant appointments until April 13, 2020. If you had an appointment, we'll contact you to let you know when your new appointment will be" (IRCC tweet, 15 March 2020). As with the indefinite postponement of citizenship-related procedures, the impact of this delay for refugee claimants created additional uncertainty and stress on top of the precarious status they were already facing as they awaited the outcome of their claims.

In addition to its more recent prominence as a destination for people seeking asylum, Canada has a long history of leadership in the area of refugee resettlement. In previous years, Canada was consistently second only to the United States as a country of resettlement; as of 2018 it took the top spot due to drastic cuts in US resettlement numbers under the Trump administration. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the agency mandated to assist states party to the *Refugee Convention* in resettlement efforts. Early in Canada's pandemic response, the UNHCR suspended refugee resettlement globally: "We are taking steps along with @UNmigration to suspend resettlement departures for refugees. This is a temporary measure that will be in place only for as long as it remains essential" (IRCC retweet of UNHCR, 17 March 2020). The use of the term "essential" in this context is interesting in that refugee resettlement is designated as non-essential on a temporary basis but this is communicated as an essential policy move. There are no further mentions of the halt to resettlement to Canada until World Refugee Day on 20 June 2020, when the government marks the day with a series of tweets but continues to ignore the impacts of border closures on refugees from all categories apart from directing people to the IRCC website for information. For

example, “On #WorldRefugeeDay, Canada stands in solidarity with the millions of people around the world who long for what is often taken for granted: a safe place to call home” (IRCC retweet of CanadianPM, 20 June 2020). The celebratory note struck in the tweets belies the harmful impacts of closing the border to resettled refugees and asylum seekers alike.

While there is at least an explicit acknowledgement of changes in policy that will affect refugee claimants already inside Canada’s borders and refugees awaiting resettlement from abroad, asylum seekers are absent from the discussion of the COVID border. In contrast to the intense focus on so-called “irregular border crossings” over the previous three years, asylum seekers all but disappeared from official social media communications during the pandemic. For example, buried in the link that accompanies a tweet from CBSA President John Ossowski that “highlights what CBSA is doing at the border to help keep Canadians safe and healthy” (CBSA tweet, 26 March 2020) is an oblique reference to asylum seekers:

> Canada and the U.S. have entered into a reciprocal arrangement to direct back individuals who cross our border at irregular points of entry. Exceptions may be made for unique circumstances, such as an unaccompanied minor, but generally persons crossing our borders at irregular points of entry will be directed back (CBSA 2020a).

The language deployed here is noteworthy: there is no mention that asylum seekers who cross the border irregularly are entitled to legal protections. Instead, the brief statement focuses on “irregular points of entry” as opposed to the situations facing people who might attempt to enter at these points. Equally troubling is that Ossowski offers no clarity regarding what might happen to asylum seekers who are turned back to the US. Although Canadian officials had reportedly “received assurances from their U.S. counterparts that the people they turned back wouldn’t be deported,” Coletta (2020) reports that at least nine were detained and given a final order of removal from the US, one of whom had been deported.

Over the summer of 2020, there continued to be limited and implicit references to this situation on official Twitter accounts. For example, we see an implied reference to asylum seekers as “irregular border crossers” here: “#NowIsNotTheTime to try to cross the border to see if you will be allowed to enter Canada. You will be turned away” (CBSA tweet, 7 May 2020). In June, the RCMP makes another implicit reference to irregular border

crossings, noting that it "will continue to patrol the border between ports of entry, to help keep Canadians safe" (RCMP tweet, 3 June 2020). The agency issued a similar reminder in July: "Crossing the border is still restricted, be it by boat, car, airplane or on foot" (RCMP tweet, 24 July 2020). Finally, Minister Mendicino announced "a series of initiatives with Nigeria to improve migration and border management while reaffirming Canada's commitment to fighting human trafficking, migrant smuggling, and irregular migration" (IRCC tweet, 29 July 2020). Asylum seekers from Nigeria had represented the highest percentage of "irregular border crossers" over the previous three years (IRB 2021).

Interestingly, in August 2020, asylum seekers were recognized for their contributions as essential workers on the frontlines of the pandemic, when Mendicino "announced a temporary measure which will provide a pathway to permanent residency for asylum claimants working in the health-care sector during the #COVID19 pandemic" (IRCC tweet, 14 August 2020). Asylum seekers who had been barred from entry and/or whose determination proceedings had been put on hold during the pandemic were now recognized for their efforts and their "exceptional service" to Canadians (IRCC 2020e). As Macklin (2020, 8) analyzes it, "This exceptional initiative for refugee claimants appeals to the logic of deservingness and 'earned' citizenship: non-citizens may be put on a path to citizenship as a reward for extraordinary sacrifice to the nation." It is important to note, however, that while permitted to apply for permanent resident status under this policy, there is no guarantee that it will be granted, or that citizenship will be accessible later on. France implemented a similar policy in December 2020 but promised a fast-tracked process for citizenship to not only health workers but also cashiers, garbage collectors, housekeepers, and childcare workers. Marlene Schiappa, France's deputy minister for citizenship, suggested this was a reward for their "great services rendered" and announced these applications would be processed quickly by reducing the residency requirements from five years to two (BBC 2020). That Canada's temporary measure is only available to asylum seekers working in the healthcare sector exposes the biopolitical rationality underlying it: this slight opening in pathways to citizenship is accessible only by people with precarious status who are exposed to the risk of death even as they work to save lives of the most vulnerable citizens living in long-term care homes.

Future directions: the biopolitics of digital borders

Essentializing biopolitics during the pandemic illustrates the interconnected economy between the US and Canada in which subjects were allowed to enter Canada based on their value to the Canadian economy and social fabric. Much of the functioning of Canada's pandemic border and economy, through the essentialization of entry and work, was connected to critical infrastructure that can be "stand-alone or interconnected and interdependent within and across provinces, territories and national borders" (PSC 2020). Border control was already key to critical infrastructure and the pandemic has made this more evident. Borders are selectively open and closed to meet the economic and security needs of a particular government or moment. Under the pandemic, the border plays an even greater role in making bodies productive for the Canadian economy and social fabric. Border officials are recognized as essential workers making "sacrifices" on the frontlines, while the "selflessness" and sacrifice of non-citizens including those with precarious legal status to the Canadian economy and society are only reluctantly accepted in service to these "extraordinary" circumstances. Importantly, these contributions are recognized for their role in supporting and sustaining the national body: "*Our* health care system relies on immigrants to keep *Canadians* safe and healthy. IT companies and those in the food sector rely on the talent of newcomers to maintain supply chains and expand their businesses, creating more jobs for *Canadians*" (ibid; emphasis added). International students, temporary foreign workers, and refugee claimants are deemed critical to sustaining these functions, as recognized by the exemptions and policy measures introduced over the early months of the pandemic to permit their essential entry and work, and yet it is an inclusive exclusion. This is the very definition of biopolitics, which was already in operation within Canada's border management system and which the pandemic brought into stark relief. The Canadian government deployed the essentialization process as a biopolitical mechanism to access the labor pool that already existed within the country and that was readily available beyond the border. Rather than a complete border closure, the Canadian border had to be elastic (Gilbert 2019) and permeable to sustain national life by allowing the entry and making use of the labor of international students, temporary foreign workers, and people with precarious status. The protection of those people defined as "Canadians" is what is truly essential while a whole class of exploitable workers toils within the networks and systems as critical elements in the infrastructure of daily life.

The use of digital methods – focused on Canadian government department tweets – offers a glimpse into how technologies are being used to manage migration. Digital communications and practices are more ephemeral and

often more difficult to study because they are not preserved in the same way as paper-based records, and they are easier to conceal from public scrutiny. The pandemic saw many in-person interactions and functions shift into the virtual realm and it remains to be seen how many will shift back. The Government of Canada's (2020, 85) Economic Update allocated CAD$72.1 million to allow IRCC to "modernize" its Global Case Management System by "moving away from its current cumbersome paper-based system to a digital platform." Studying the digital spaces of migration management will remain key in any post-pandemic world. Moreover, the digital realm allows for even more elasticity – i.e., the flexible expansion and contraction – in border management practices; therefore, a biopolitical analysis of digital border control is essential. We can already anticipate several questions related to the digital divide: will technological access and literacy become another mechanism of migrant exclusion and control? Will inability to access or prove COVID vaccination allow the Canadian government to push asylum seekers back to the United States? The digital border is already a tool through which states push the border out (e.g., biometrics, drones, apps, and social media monitoring were in use well before the pandemic). Proposals about a so-called vaccine passport will introduce a new layer to the biopolitical management of digital borders.

Endnotes

1. Snowbird is the colloquial term for people who migrate annually from colder northern parts of North America to warmer southern parts during the winter months, most often retired people.
2. The Internet Archive saves digital information so that it can be accessed even if the original has been deleted.
3. Refugee claimant is the Canadian term used for people seeking asylum who are awaiting a decision on their file.

References

Twitter accounts

CBSA https://twitter.com/CanBorder

GAC https://twitter.com/TravelGoC

Health Canada and PHAC https://twitter.com/GovCanHealth

IRCC https://twitter.com/CitImmCanada

PSC https://twitter.com/Safety_Canada?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor

RCMP https://twitter.com/rcmpgrcpolice?lang=en

Internet Archive https://archive.org/

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