




## Full Length Article

## Migrant struggles in the Darién Gap-Tapón: Rethinking a more-than-human border

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Darién Gap  
 Migration  
 Mobility  
 Borders  
 More-than-Human  
 Panama  
 Colombia

## ABSTRACT

The Darién rainforest between Panama and Colombia has been commonly conceived as a wild, inaccessible, and lawless borderland marking a social and territorial rupture in the Americas. Yet, recent precarious migration journeys have challenged its imagined function as a “natural border” between the “South” and the “North” of the continent. Amid migration management anxiety, authorities and institutional actors have sought to re-instate the border, by positioning the rainforest as both a dangerous place and a place in need of conservation. In this text, I advance a More-than-Human framework to approach mobility-related complications in this context, which are meaningful in assessing how people on the move navigate re/bordering throughout their trajectories. Conceptually, I rely on the bilingual term *Darién Gap-Tapón* (“clog”) and assess how migrant struggles are mediated by the agencies of non-human lives, geomorphic bodies, and things. In so doing, I comment on a thematic analysis of an eclectic virtual dataset produced between 2021 and 2024, including 19 portrayals of migrants’ journeys on YouTube. Using the metaphors of *unclogging* and *relogging* in my analysis, I approach the complicated, overlapping, and often diffuse ways in which the Darién both *borders* migrants’ mobility and *struggles* along with migrants for mobility. I hence contribute to the dialogue between Critical Border Studies and More-than-Human ontologies aiming at imagining viable analytical alternatives on dominant unequal forms of global migration management.

## 1. Introduction: despite the “jungle”

“Despite being one of the most dangerous *jungles* in the world, [the] Darién is a transit location for thousands of refugees and migrants, most of them from Venezuela, Ecuador, Haiti, and African and South Asian nations” (UNHCR, 2024 my emphasis).

The Darién, a binational borderland at the Eastern end of the Isthmus of Panama, is embedded in one the world’s most biodiverse, dense, and humid rainforests. The region’s governance has been historically thought of as difficult, limited, and unachieved as “the environment present[s] substantial, even unprecedented obstacles” to human activity (Miller, 2014, pp. 191–192). Yet, recent developments challenge this view. At least 1.1 million persons of over 70 nationalities, mostly en route to the United States (US), crossed the Darién from Colombia to Panama in an unauthorised manner between January 2021 and August

2024 (*Migración Panamá, 2024a*). As migration management anxieties have risen steeply, local and national authorities have increased their presence in the region, while international organisations and humanitarian advocacy groups have followed.

Scholarship has problematised the expanding scale of recent cross-border mobility against the backdrop of evolving South-North migration geographies in the Americas.<sup>1</sup> Analyses have focused on the stringent environmental conditions impacting on-foot journeys and the precariousness shaping people’s movement (Cabrera García & Carillo González, 2023; Sarrut et al., 2023; Álvarez Velasco & Cielo, 2023). Activists, journalists, and researchers have pinpointed the difficulties of migration trajectories in the region, the production of death, slow violence, and irregularisation as forms of management (Echeverri Zuluaga et al., 2023; Yates, 2024; Álvarez Velasco & Miranda, 2024), and the generalisation of gender-based and sexual violence (Obinna, 2024; Reyes-Muñoz, 2024; Salcedo, 2023). Scholars have also explored

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term *Americas* throughout the text to refer the regions generally called North, Central, and South America, and the Caribbean in English-speaking geography.

the geopolitics of these forms of coercion, entrenched in the expansion of strategies of externalisation of US-border control (Acevedo & Richards, 2024; Ardalan, 2025; Garrapa, 2023) and the design of transactional foreign policies (Adamson & Greenhill, 2023; Masferrer et al., 2023; Palma-Gutiérrez, 2023).

I contribute to this evolving literature by focusing on the impact of recent mobility in dominant political imagination, shaping the Darién as a *no-human's-land*. I depart from the observation that, historically, this borderland has been thought of as “wild” (Velásquez Runk, 2015, p. 130), ungovernable, and uninhabitable due to its physical characteristics. Such framing has been useful to depict the region as an unreachable “natural” confine, dividing the continent semantically, ideologically, and territorially. With recent cross-border mobility, however, these ideas are becoming increasingly unstable. Hence, I analyse how long-standing imagination locating the Darién as an untamed, inaccessible, and lawless borderland, constituting a social and territorial rupture between the “South” and the “North” of the Americas, has been both challenged and repositioned amid recent migration. This example, I contend, illustrates how contemporary forms of precarious human movement disrupt hegemonic understandings of “natural borders”, often portrayed as geographic “buffers” containing migration and other forms of social struggle, physically and metaphorically, between an imagined non-functional South and a perceived functional North (Chimni, 2009). Taking mobility as an ontological departure point (Cresswell, 2010; Dahinden, 2016; Hannam et al., 2006; Mazzucato & Schapendonk, 2025; Schapendonk et al., 2021), I argue that this transition has significant implications for understanding the continuities, transformations, and politics of precaritized South-North migrations.

In unpacking this view, I adopt the notion of *Darién Gap-Tapón*, a single term in *Spanglish* characterised by a dash to emphasise its semantic fluidity.<sup>2</sup> I do so to highlight the complexity of understanding this place as a “natural” border, with different meanings and diverging political significance depending on the position we observe it from across the global geographies of a distinctive South and North. In expanding this reflection, I argue that recent mobility in the region is productive of a certain form of material and discursive debordering. To illustrate this process, I adopt the notion of *unclogging* (*Spanish: destaponamiento*)<sup>3</sup> as a metaphor for the effect of cross-border mobility on the function of nature in “clogging” the way. Meanwhile, I contend, authorities and other actors resist this occurrence, most notoriously through the continuous production of migrants’ precariousness through management policies that repositions the Darién as a dangerous “natural border” in need of conservation. Hence, I pay attention to the material and discursive forms through which this sort of rebordering expands, conceptualised as *reclogging* (*Spanish: retaponamiento*).

I use the Darién’s example to engage in a discussion about More-than-Human-borders, drawing on the work of scholars interested in post-human ontologies (Barad, 2003; Durand & Sundberg, 2019; Oliveras-González, 2023; Ozguc & Burridge, 2023; Squire, 2014; Sundberg, 2011). In so doing, I centre on the political agency of More-than-Human lives, geomorphic bodies, and things, adding to both the un- and reclogging processes analysed. My approach suggests a dialogue between More-than-Human ontologies and Critical Border Studies (CBS), helpful in unpacking the transformation and contestation of diverse forms of contemporary global migration control. With the Darién

<sup>2</sup> A combination of Spanish and English. Whilst the region is commonly known in English as the *Darién Gap*, in Spanish it is often called *Tapón del Darién*. These two expressions do not constitute literal synonyms, even if they have semantically been equated in common (bilingual) geographical parlance. It is inspired by Anzaldúa’s seminal work *Borderlands/La Frontera* (2012 [1987]) to appeal to the complication of political geography from a multilingual – South/North dialectic.

<sup>3</sup> A term based on the further problematisation of the fluid bilingual terminology offered throughout the analysis.

Gap-Tapón as a backdrop, I contribute to the literature on “migrant struggles” (Aradau et al., 2022; Casas-Cortés et al., 2015; Domenech & Boito, 2019; Varela Huerta, 2015, 2020) by suggesting an original framework to study More-than-Human agencies in the development of the encounters between people on the move and diverse forms of mobility control, potentially constitutive of a politics of escape/desertion from dominant forms of migration management (De Genova, 2017; Metcalfe, 2021; Mezzadra, 2020; Rho, 2021; Squire, 2021).

The text is organised in four sections plus a conclusion. In the first part, I lay out a theoretical framework to analyse the role of more-than-human agencies in shaping migrant struggles *at* and *beyond* the territorial border. In the second part, I delve into the question of the Darién Gap-Tapón as a More-than-Human border. I trace the constitution of the Darién as both a “dangerous object” and an “object of conservation” in political imagination, with significant implications on migration management and control. In so doing, I reflect on the analytical potential of the notions of “unclogging” and “reclogging” in my example. In the third section, I comment on my methodological design. In the fourth section, I empirically illustrate the overlaps between unclogging and reclogging, by sharing the findings of an interpretive thematic exploratory analysis, based on an eclectic dataset gathered online, including 19 portrayals of migrants’ journeys across the Darién which were independently posted on YouTube. I conclude by highlighting how a focus on More-than-Human migrant struggles serves to reimagine analyses of contemporary mechanisms of unequal global migration management.

## 2. More-than-Human borders and migrant struggles

More-than-Human approaches have been integrated in the CBS agenda through a diverse set of methodologies and epistemologies. CBS has been interested in exploring human agencies, with a strong presence of biopolitical analyses, founded in post-structural thought (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022a; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012; Salter, 2012; Vaughan-Williams, 2015). Departing from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, scholars working from post-humanist and More-than-Human perspectives have added to this conversation. They have highlighted the extent to which hegemonic views on borders are often dominated by anthropocentrism, blurring our understanding of how political agency is configured and exerted (Durand & Sundberg, 2019; Oliveras-González, 2023; Ozguc & Burridge, 2023; Squire, 2014; Sundberg, 2011). Scholars working from this angle have insisted on unpacking the agencies of non-humans in processes of bordering, debordering, and rebordering as an alternative and more comprehensive approach, going beyond the ontological divide between the “social” and the “natural” world (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022b).

Oliveras-González (2023, p. 534) grasps the essence of More-than-Human borders, by arguing that “borders and terrain are neither purely social nor purely natural constructs. [Rather, they] are relationally co-constituted by human and non-human processes, which turn them into More-than-Human assemblages.” The relational aspect of humans and non-humans becomes substantial to understand the production of space. Hence, it is possible to analyse the political agency of inanimate things and non-human lives in shaping and contesting borders (Durand & Sundberg, 2019; Panelli, 2010; Squire, 2015; Sundberg, 2011). In this view, agency is not pre-given or exclusive to human actors. It is better understood as a “relational construction” which “comes into being through the ‘heterogenous entanglements’ between human and more-than-human entities” (Ozguc & Burridge, 2023, p. 477). Agency is thus understood as an “enactment” (Barad, 2003, p. 827) rather than a capacity. Borders are then shaped by contingent historical associations between humans, plants, non-human animals, machines, and things, and are mediated through specific arrangements and enactments (Durand & Sundberg, 2019). Adding to this view, scholars have also suggested the need to reflect upon how the less-than-human – in form of lost existences, corpses, or non-grievable lives – can also integrate the multiplicity of assemblages that constitute borders in this spatial setting (inter

alia Akampurira & Marijnen, 2024; Falcon, 2023; Cassidy et al., 2020).

In practical terms, unsettling the human as the key referent of the analysis allows us to rethink “borderwork” – or the everyday work put into “envisioning, constructing, maintaining and erasing borders” (Rumford, 2008, p. 2). A More-than-Human approach suggests that the labour of non-human lives and artifacts in producing, maintaining, and contesting the border is substantial to understand borderwork’s complications (Ozguç & Burridge, 2023). The challenge in such process, however, emerges when observing and analysing the agency of non-humans, whose interpretation is necessarily mediated by humans who monopolise language and self-conscience (Latour, 2013). Therefore, wider attention is to be placed beyond discursive constructions surrounding borders which, albeit necessary to understand how these come into being and with which consequences, can overlook the implications of the materiality of More-than-Human transactions. Epistemologically, I propose to analyse More-than-Human borderwork by embracing a “materialdiscursive” approach (Barad, 2003, 2007) to explore the “entwinement of social forces (mechanisms and narratives of migration [and border] management) with physical or material forces (climatic or environmental elements)” (Squire, 2020a, p. 6). This perspective allows us to locate More-than-Human agency in the materialdiscursive relational entanglements constituted by and derived from borderwork.

Based on this materialdiscursive framework, I observe More-than-Human borderwork in the context of specific long-scale, precarious mobilities. In so doing I find inspiration in the “mobilities turn” in migration studies (Adey et al., 2021; Cresswell, 2010; Dahinden, 2016; Hannam et al., 2006; Schapendonk et al., 2020) to focus on people’s cross-border trajectories beyond the idea of “migration as an isolated event with a clear beginning and an end” (Mazzucato & Schapendonk, 2025, p. 2). I am thus interested in the encounter between the More-than-Human and multiple and overlapping dimensions of people’s mobility in form of embodied, imagined, and experienced “journeys” (Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016). In this view, my study is positioned beyond assumptions of fixed origins and destinations in “migration”, contra “state-centred and sedentary foundations of social sciences that pitch ‘mobilities’ against ‘places’” (Dahinden et al., 2023, p. 635). This approach allows me to focus on a relational understanding of the Darién as a “place” that is co-constituted – produced, transformed, and challenged – through people’s im/mobility (Dahinden et al., 2023; Leese & Wittendorp, 2018).

I also take into consideration that “places” in this context are objects of/subjects to specific “regimes of mobility” (Cresswell, 2010; Schapendonk et al., 2020) that reveal the existence of certain patterns of global political organisation. Contemporary regimes position some cross-border mobilities as more “desired” or “wanted” than others, according to race, gender, class, ableist, and other overlapping power structures (Brigden, 2018; Trabalón, 2024; Vachuska, 2023). I am particularly interested in the ways in which “undesired” or “unwanted” mobilities and places are co-constituted in the context of more-than-human re/bordering. I therefore use the notion of “migrant struggles” to examine the “spatial frictions” (Schapendonk et al., 2020) emerging from the uneven encounters between irregularised and precarised mobilities and the multiple forms of control issued by the regime in place. These struggles come as a diverse set of subjective enactments deployed and envisioned in the face of globally extended and unequal bordering practices, which can either openly challenge dominant mechanisms of migration management or be practiced as everyday refusals and resistances without being necessarily explicit political “battles” (Aradau et al., 2022; Casas-Cortés et al., 2015; Cordero Díaz & Garibo García, 2019; Domenech & Boito, 2019; Varela Huerta, 2015, 2020). Importantly, migrant struggles are necessarily imbued with a certain constitutive power with the potential to enhance people’s desertion/escape from the mobility regime in place (De Genova, 2017; Mezzadra, 2020; Squire, 2021), but also to assist in constituting and transforming places that play a role in a given mobility regime, as in the

example of the Darién.

I contend that, from a More-than-Human perspective, such struggles are necessarily crossed by the political agencies of non-humans. A More-than-Human perspective revisits migrant struggles amidst the relational entanglements between humans and non-humans at the border and within bordering assemblages. In other words, *More-than-Human struggles for mobility* become a conceptual possibility to locate the power of non-human agency in people’s practices of, adaptation of, navigation in, and resistance to unequal border management and control *at and beyond* the physical border. In addition, “places” can also be transformed amid these More-than-Human border struggles. Such transformation, I argue, can be significant by transforming political imagination around “places” or changing their roles within a specific mobility regime. In the example of the Darién, More-than-Human struggles are part of shaping both mobility and “place” as is illustrated in the next sections.

Empirically, I suggest locating the analysis over spaces of contested mobility in which the relations of people on the move and bordering are mediated by the encounter between humans and “nature” as a materialdiscursive signifier (Barry & Suliman, 2023; Durand & Sundberg, 2019; Sundberg, 2011). This view problematises the purported ontological division between the human and the non-human as a key proposal of Western anthropocentrism anew (Querejazu, 2016). Specifically, my approach is relevant for the analysis of recent developments within the mobility of large and precarised groups of persons on the move across geographic spaces that are often understood as *hostile, untamed, wild, and/or inaccessible* “natural borders” (De León, 2015; Doty, 2011; Panelli, 2010; Velásquez Runk, 2015). In so doing, I suggest that the materialdiscursive relational entanglements that emerge in these spaces, between humans on the move, and non-human lives, things, and artifacts are productive of novel meanings, unsettling traditional understandings of “nature” and the border as a “natural” byproduct. In this view, borderwork tropes, commonly used to build images and ideas of deserts, rivers, mountains, jungles, or forests (among many others) as “natural borders”, are resignified materially and discursively in light of the direct experiences of people on the move. Throughout the process, humans configure entanglements with the non-human lives they encounter, the weather conditions that accompany their trajectories, the geomorphic bodies present in the scene, and the things and artifacts added to and emerging from this geography of mobility. Following Barad (2003), such entanglements are to be read as agential enactments. These have the potential to affect the setting of im/mobility, the possibilities of political action, and the political/institutional scene. A More-than-Human perspective allows us to advance in our understanding of how the “natural border”, often used as a device of unequal global bordering, debordering, and rebordering, is challenged, as humans encounter the agency of non-humans amidst their own contested mobilities.

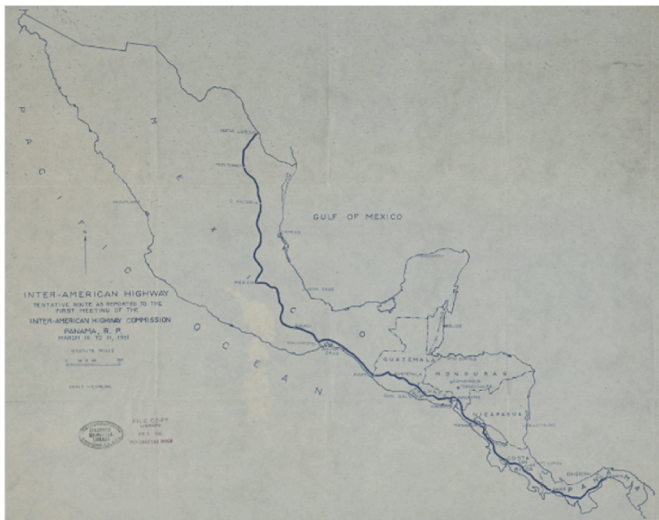
### 3. Beyond the Gap/Más allá del Tapón: The Darién as a More-than-Human border

To illustrate how More-than-Human agencies are at the interplay of border struggles in the contemporary global geography of migration control, I place my attention on the Darién Gap-Tapón, the region where the Panamanian-Colombian international border extends. I use the term in a combination of English and Spanish (i.e. *Spanglish*) throughout my reflection to highlight the complications of the materialdiscursive elements at play in how this place has been configured (and disputed) as a “natural barrier” (Hernández Hernández & Ibarra, 2023; Winters, 2019) to mobility and other forms of social movement. My aim with this bilingual framing is to note how two distinctive forms of historical political imagination, both driven by an anthropocentric understanding of the region, are overlapping in our contemporary understanding of the Darién. Taking these differences seriously, and as illustrative of a contested political global geography between an English-speaking “North” and a majority Spanish-speaking “South” in the Americas, is substantial

to trace recent political transformations amid precarious migrations in the region.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, the Darién was turned into a “gap” from a mostly Northern/Western, US-American perspective. This should be understood beyond pure linguistic semantics. Miller (2014) and Velázquez Velásquez Runk (2015) argue that identifying the Darién as a “gap” is necessarily intersected with the politics of the “failure” (Harmon, 2019, par. 1) of US Pan-Americanists to complete the *Pan-American Highway*, which today reaches 14 countries in North, Central, and South America, including Panama and Colombia. Originally proposed in the late 1800s as a hemispheric railway that would connect the “Western Hemisphere” (Rutkow, 2022), the project has been in the making since the early 1900s (Rabe, 2011).<sup>5</sup> This moment coincides with Theodore Roosevelt’s *big stick* diplomacy, part of the US government strategy of building a “sphere of influence” in the region (Immerwahr, 2019). Supported by the buoyant automobile industry, the construction of the first trace of the *Inter-American Highway* connecting Texas with Panama started in the 1920s (Rutkow, 2019). The original plan envisioned connecting the road with a second trace linking South America from the Darién to Patagonia, at the southernmost part of the continent. To date, however, the 106-km (65-mile) Pan-American linkage between Yaviza in Panama and Riosucio in Colombia connecting the road across the Darién has not been built (Colectivo Darién, 2021, p. 105490; see Image 1 and Image 2).

The notion of *gap*, referring to the missing section in the Pan-American connection project, popularised in both vernacular and official parlance (Velázquez Runk, 2015). The “hazards of the Central American environment and the early vibrancy of North American



**Image 1.** US projection of the Inter-American Highway in Mexico and Central America (1930s).

Source: Library of the US Library of Congress (1931)

<sup>4</sup> I pay attention to the complications of these two hegemonic, colonial, and dominant languages for the sake of making a concrete, general argument in this case. However, similar arguments could be advanced when thinking about the politics and complications of geography in the example of the hundreds of indigenous languages spoken across the Americas, the multiple forms of creole languages which have evolved in the last centuries, and the myriad variations of other colonial languages spoken in the region (notably Portuguese, French, and Dutch, among others).

<sup>5</sup> Aware of the colonial origins of this notion, I use “Western Hemisphere” throughout the text to highlight the interplay between migration across the Americas and the US Government’s attempt at consolidating a regime of mobility control in the region.



**Image 2.** Current end of the Pan-American Highway in Panama.

Source: Self-creation. Note that a portion of the Darién rainforest is administered in Panama as “Darién National Park” (*Parque Nacional El Darién*) and in Colombia as “Los Katíos National Natural Park” (*Parque Nacional Natural Los Katíos*).

environmentalism” (Miller, 2014, p. 189) have often been used to explain why the project is unfinished. These explanations have also been used as tropes to advance a “pervasive representation of a *wild* Darién” (Velázquez Runk, 2015, p. 130 my emphasis). Two powerful ideas have consolidated in parallel, one centred on nature as being *stronger* than humans – to the point of being hazardous, threatening, or dangerous to their existence – and another sustaining that that same nature needs to be preserved as an *object* of human conservation. Both have contributed to the consolidation of the anthropocentric notion that the Darién is a gap where humans cannot/should not rule. Today, the Darién as a “gap” is often portrayed as one of the most untamed, lawless, perilous, and “wettest regions in the world, [where] frequent rainfall can trigger landslides in the mountainous terrain[,] temperatures can reach 95 °F (35 °C) with high humidity, exacerbating persistent thirst and hunger [whilst its] wildlife, including crocodiles and venomous snakes, add[s] to [its] dangers” (Roy & Baumgartner, 2024, p. 11).

Anthropocentrism has been also at work in the historical transformation of the Darién into a *tapón*, from the point of view of authorities and people in the South of the Americas. *Tapón del Darién*, historically the preferred expression in Spanish, is often used by governments, media, academics, and some locals talking about and working on the subject (Cabrera García & Carillo González, 2023; León Rojas & Antolínez Uribe, 2021; Polo Alvis et al., 2019).<sup>6</sup> Importantly, there are some semantic considerations of how to understand this notion in English, when thinking about the Darién’s materialdiscursive construction as a no-human’s-land from a local, arguably “Southern”, point of view. Following Velázquez Runk (2015, p. 143), a literal translation of *Tapón del Darién* could be “the Darién stopper.” Another possibility could be “the Darién plug.” In any case, these translations are associated with the existence of an *alien object* blocking human activity. I argue that, in

<sup>6</sup> The notion seems to be entrenched in a certain coloniality, as the dense rainforest blocked the way of 16th Century Castilian/Spanish troops exploring the place, and who in return, seem to have talked about the natural blockage impeding the advancement of their colonial quest at their return to Europe (March, 1960).

practice, the semantics of the term might be better thought of as a “clog” or a “clogging” in this case.<sup>7</sup> Semantically, these verbal nouns seem to imply that the stoppage in place is derived from an *endogenous* process in which an obstruction is progressively consolidated – but not imported or driven by an *exogenous* object as is the case when a “stopper” or “plug” is put in place. This difference matters for the analysis. Whilst the term *Tapón del Darién* is derived from a similar type of material impossibility shaping the anthropocentric notion of “gap” in English, the political imagination behind it varies. Nature, from the point of view of Spanish-speakers, has evolved and expanded in this place across time and space as an autochthonous feature, which is seen as *clogging the way*.<sup>8</sup>

During the 20th century and from a local-national perspective, the Darién was progressively imagined as a natural *clog* that both protected and disconnected two countries which used to be one, in both Panamanian and Colombian national historiographies (Suárez Pinzón, 2011).<sup>9</sup> Such view is still active when approaching border politics in the region. In local narratives, the Darién is often seen as a “forgotten borderland” (Carrillo-Bonilla et al., 2014) and a national “confine” (Castillero Calvo, 2012). Paradoxically, this characterisation has also been substantial in the Darién preserving its configuration as an “anthropologically and historically rich area of outstanding biodiversity” (UNESCO, 2017) inhabited by, among others, Emberá, Wouaan, Kuna, and Afro-Darién communities (Chapin, Herrera, & González, 2010). Politically, the materiality of the place has often been used to mobilise the idea of a divided space crossed by a “nature-ruled” international buffer, leading to consolidating a politically effective “territorial trap” (Agnew, 1994, 2009). *Tapón*, as a materialdiscursive construct, has been mobilised by both Panamanian and Colombian governments as an alibi for political in/action, regarding the conditions of local communities, the care for non-human lives, and a long list of issues connected with well-being at a planetary scale (Ticktin, 2019). The exotisation of the Darién, as a mysterious, untamed place, and the racialisation of its dwellers following categories derived from different generations of modernisation discourses have led to advance a certain form of popular bordering geopolitics centred on *no-human’s-landness* (Dalby & O Tuathail, 1998; Velásquez Runk, 2015).

Combining both *Gap* and *Tapón* when referring to the Darién constitutes an invitation to think about how this place has been imagined historically, from the perspective of the tensions and complications of power emerging within the contested geographies of the Global South/North. I suggest using the term “Darién Gap-Tapón”, as a single expression and linked by a dash, to highlight the fluidity, variances, and contradictions that shape the Darién’s global political imagination, in tension with recent cross-border mobility. For decades, I argue, the materialdiscursive construct of the place as a *Gap-Tapón* served to imagine a “natural barrier” (Winters, 2019, p. 235) to mobility and other forms of social struggle. This view was already problematic before recent migration, as a large extent of Darién’s human communities are inherently transnational. In their case, the international border is blurred in a quotidian manner, not only through mobility dynamics, but also by maintaining kinship, social, and political interactions that outweigh state-centric analyses (González, 2010). In any case, throughout the 21st century, with visible intensity in the last decade, cross-border terrestrial

migration across the Darién Gap-Tapón has consolidated as a latent political and humanitarian concern in the imagination of a broad set of actors, challenging the dominant political/geographical mindset. According to official statistics, more than 1.1 million persons have crossed from Colombia to Panama through the Darién on-foot and in an undocumented manner between 2021 and August 2024 (Migración Panamá, 2024a). In 2023, border-crossers shared at least 70 nationalities (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Latently, migration trajectories across the Darién are driven by the exacerbation of global inequalities, the punitive shift in the international border regime architecture, the globalisation of migration routes, and the social-economic legacies of the Covid-19 pandemic, among others (Marcelin & Cela, 2024; Palma-Gutiérrez, 2024; Ceja & Ramírez, 2022; Vera Espinoza et al., 2020; Álvarez Velasco, 2021). Defining characteristics of the great majority of these journeys are precariousness, irregularisation, and racialisation as active forms of unequal migration management (Álvarez Velasco, 2023).

Amid increased regional and international attention to cross-border migration, the imaginary *Gap-Tapón* seems to be progressively destabilised, both materially and discursively. I call this process the *Darién unclogging* (*destaponamiento*). I rely again on a Spanish/English word game to place the attention on how this materialdiscursive transition is entrenched in the contestation of unequal forms of South-North mobility control in the “Western Hemisphere.” Mobility from the South is at work in the unsettling of the Darién as a materialdiscursive “barrier” to migration towards the US and Canada in the North. Besides, the ongoing political unease in the face of this unclogging is to be understood as a form of resistance to the materialdiscursive transition over the Darién. Contemporary cross-border trajectories pose a challenge to the dominant form of political imagination which envisions the Darién as a *no-human’s-land*.<sup>10</sup> One marker of soaring resistance to the unclogging can be seen in the increased production of precariousness, through the emergence and adaptation of a set of practices specifically designed to govern South-North migration trajectories, under a racialised, unequal, and violent rationale (Squire, 2020b). I am interested in how such developments are part of the political contestation of the ongoing unclogging, through diverse mobility-control strategies entrenched in repositioning the historical image of the Darién as a “natural barrier”, acting as a buffer in practice. I call this contextual form of borderwork *reclogging* (*retaponamiento*).

Reclogging unfolds whilst mobility in the Darién is framed as a specific form of “transit migration” (Cruz-Piñero et al., 2024), including people starting their journeys from different points in the Americas and thousands of other persons racialised as “extra-continental” subjects, who are often turned into “passive victims or alternative objectives of management” (Trabalón, 2024, p. 13). Moreover, it has also been established that governing this situation as a “crisis” is entwined with specific political goals that differ from sheer humanitarian objectives, including the normalisation of violence and the intensification of exceptional anti-migrant measures (Álvarez Velasco, 2021, p. 20). Examples include the production of migrant hypermobility and exhaustion, such as in the case of Panama, where a government-led strategy of “controlled flow” between the Southern Darién border and the Northern border with Costa Rica has been on the go for the last years (Yates & Bolter, 2021).

Reclogging is also intersected by diverse forms of “moral economies” that have evolved amid recent migration legitimising exceptional political action (Cruz-Piñero et al., 2024). Authorities and institutions increasingly depict the Darién as a “death-producing space, inhabited by irregularised migrants, coyotes [“smugglers”], drug traffickers,

<sup>7</sup> I enormously thank Dr. Esteban Devis-Amaya at Oxford-Brookes University for noting this and suggesting the use of the term “clog” in the analysis.

<sup>8</sup> The wilderness of the environment has also been part of the explanation of why Western European projects failed in their aim to control this strategic zone. For instance, Scottish settlers abandoned their colonial project in the Darién by the end of the 17th Century due to, among others, environmental and natural constrictions (see McKendrick, 2018). French colonial entrepreneurs abandoned the idea of building an inter-oceanic canal in the second half of the 19th Century for similar reasons (Velásquez Runk, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Panama obtained its independence from Colombia in 1903.

<sup>10</sup> Much of this hegemonic contemporary imagination is entrenched in a certain presentism. For instance, systematic South-North migratory trajectories across the Darién Gap-Tapón have been documented since at least the 1960s, including those of people starting their journeys in the Americas and elsewhere (see inter alia Polo Alvis et al., 2019).

guerrillas, and paramilitaries, [which] has diverted attention away from both the political production of violence and the vital struggles of diverse bodies experiencing mobility and immobility along the migrant trail” (Álvarez Velasco & Cielo, 2023, p. 346). These occurrences have served as a “moral alibi” (Doty, 2011) to expand and deepen the externalisation of the US border since the early 2000s, at least.<sup>11</sup> Under the haze of environmental protection, “the US Agency for International Development contributed \$6.5 million for a debt-for-nature swap for Darién National park [Panama], funds [which] assuaged US guilt for spillover problems in Panama caused by drug eradication efforts in Colombia” (Velásquez Runk, 2015, p. 146). Interestingly, the funds were to be invested in, among others, increasing the security and control across the park – at the border with Colombia – at a time in which hundreds of refugees fled the neighbouring country’s armed conflict via the Gap-Tapón (Tickner, 2004). The un/reclogging processes are summarised in Table 1.

A More-than-Human perspective constitutes a productive possibility to interpret the unfolding of meaningful migrant struggles amid un- and reclogging in the region. Migrant solidarities exemplify this point. Actions of care, affective cooperation, and support allowing people to continue or reimagine their trajectories in face of restrictive and often violent forms of control – also known as “mobile commons” (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013) – are shaped by specific environmental dynamics in the Darién. Yet, these are in constant transformation due to the increasing use of the place as a mobility corridor and the related economic transformations deriving therefrom, affecting among others the ecological balance of the place (Álvarez Velasco & Cielo, 2023). Such developments suggest that actions of care and political disruption should be analysed from the standpoint of the changing relations forged between humans and non-humans, lives and things, such as bodies of water, plants, paths, rocks, trash, personal effects, and the like. In fact, myriad testimonies of persons who have crossed the Darién involve narrations of the roles played by non-human lives, things, and artifacts, not only in the completion of their journeys, but also in the failure to achieve them, and in producing, for example, migrants’ deaths (Yates, 2024).

More-than-Human ontologies also add to our understanding of how the Darién is reimagined amid diverse migration struggles, beyond hegemonic views that locate this space as a barrier, confine, or buffer. Winters (2019) has highlighted how people on the move “make place”

throughout the Darién throughout their “transit” across their region. In their view, a productive form of migrant struggle is developed through creating a relation with the “transited” space. Through the subjective experience of mobility, this space can be turned into a “place” where migration experiences can be signified in the memories of those on the move, and those they encounter. Yet, “making place” in this case is also to be analysed through the role played by non-human lives and things. The objects, discarded, lost, or left throughout migrants’ “transit” can be understood as agential devices that reflect the existence of a migration struggle, even if humans are not necessarily part of the scene (Squire, 2014). Migrants’ belongings and “trash”, left throughout migration journeys across the Darién reveal the immanence of people’s movement.

#### 4. Methodology: Tracing More-than-Human struggles in the Darién Gap-Tapón on YouTube

My empirical demonstration of the More-than-Human entanglements shaping the un/reclogging of the Darién Gap-Tapón is founded on an eclectic methodological approach. I follow scholars working on More-than-Human methodologies (Dowling et al., 2017; Fox & Alldred, 2023; Lupton & Watson, 2021; Muecke et al., 2023) who highlight the need to re-focus our ontological standpoint on agency to advance research in More-than-Human worlds. In this view, inspired by the work of Barad (2007, 2003) and Latour (2013, 2005), agency is not to be understood as individual attributes that shape social inter-actions but rather as capacities emerging from “intra-actions” (Barad, 2007) between the materialities of both humans and non-humans (Fox & Alldred, 2023, p. 395). Irazo & Dupain (2025, p.7 my emphasis) explain this difference, arguing that “while inter-action assumes that agents or forces exist independently prior to entering into relation with one another, intra-action challenges individualist metaphysics (atomism), asserting that all ‘phenomena’ and/or ‘subject’ exist and operate only within broader, always-open configurations or entanglements of forces that are continually in the process of becoming.”

Aware of the difficulties of tracing such “becoming” entangled in intra-actions between humans and non-humans, I engage seriously with Muecke et al.’s call to analyse More-than-Human agencies “upon lines of causality” (2023, p. 370). This move engages with non-human agency in terms of its potential rather than in terms of intention. To trace such potential, I pay attention to the emotions, affects and performances shaping and resulting from more-than-human intra-action amid the processes of un/reclogging (Dowling et al., 2017). Specifically, I analyse More-than-Human agencies taking into consideration how humans “make with” (Haraway, 2016) non-humans reality “through both ideas and more physically through the act of living within the world” (Lobo & Hine, 2023, p. 492). I thus use this onto-epistemological basis to develop a reflexive analysis aimed at tracing human accounts (textual, linguistic, graphic and others) of the non-human beyond the assumption that such references are inherently anthropocentric. I thus observe the more-than-human agential “becoming” shaping migrants’ experiences in the Darién Gap-Tapón jointly with non-human lives, ambiances, and things. More generally, I make a call to analyse affects, emotions, and “doings” (Barad, 2003) co-constituted by humans and more-than-humans in a diverse set of materials produced by people beyond possible anthropocentric bias accompanying More-than-Human research (Lupton & Watson, 2021).

Interested in grasping a bottom-up sense of the entwined un/reclogging processes at stake, I conducted an interpretive thematic exploratory analysis based on an eclectic dataset gathered online, pursued as an “interpretive account of patterned meanings across a dataset, and the implications of those” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 286). I covered developments in the period between early 2021 (coinciding with the flexibilization of Covid-19 mobility restrictions in the region) and August 2024 (moment of writing of this article). The bulk of the data emerged from 19 portrayals of migrants’ journeys across the Darién posted on YouTube. I focused on a set of smartphone-recorded

**Table 1**  
Types of materialdiscursive de/re bordering in the Darién Gap-Tapón.

Type	Main features
<i>Clog/ Clogging</i>	Materialdiscursive historical construct based on the idea that the Darién constitutes a geographic buffer between the South and the North of the Americas due to its endogenous “natural” characteristics
<i>Unclogging</i>	Materialdiscursive challenge to dominant political imagination around the Darién as a “natural” buffer, emerging along recent precarious, long-scale, cross-border mobility
<i>Reclogging</i>	Materialdiscursive process repositioning the Darién as a “natural” buffer between the South and the North of the Americas, based on situating the place as non-human land, and a dangerous “jungle” in need of conservation, among others

<sup>11</sup> In 2023, the Joe Biden-led US government announced the opening of several “regional immigration processing centres” (aka, “Safe Mobility Offices”) across the region, jointly with the governments of Colombia, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Ecuador “to further reduce unlawful migration across the Western Hemisphere” (Department of Homeland Security, 2023a). Canadian and Spanish authorities worked in tandem with the US government in this programme (Mixed Migration Centre, 2024). In January 2025, the Donald Trump-led government announced the closure of these offices across the region (Montoya-Galvez, 2025).

audiovisual files, formatted as individual experiences and independently published online, in a mixture of biographical, narrative, and performative accounts of experiences, shared by journey-makers on this social medium.<sup>12</sup> Essential to my methodology is the awareness that contemporary forms of long-scale precarious migrations are inherently connected to contemporary mechanisms of self-representation, with “the daily use of technologies by migrants generat[ing] political actions.” (Fernández de la Reguera, A. et al., 2024, p. 62).

Throughout the research, I engaged with social media to analyse the linkage between migration and the More-than-Human in a novel manner. As an audiovisual repository of the entanglements between humans and the More-than-Human in migration, YouTube allowed me to conduct visual, audio, and textual analysis, based on narrations and the audiovisuals shared by people on the videos. My approach was based on following entanglements while challenging the notion that human accounts of the non-human are inherently anthropocentric (although several are). This analytical take led me to distinguish between some human-centred accounts and some more-than-human intra-actions amidst migration across the Darién Gap-Tapón. The distinction proved to be valuable in illustrating the un/relogging processes. As discussed in the next section, I contrasted these findings with a set of official declarations and institutional, and (traditional) media reports produced in the same period.

Regarding the mechanics of data collection on YouTube, I started by modifying my browser settings to incognito mode (to depart from an algorithmic tabula rasa) and modified my search criteria to videos published in the studied period. I used three inductively defined terms in Spanish (“Darién”, “to cross”, “to migrate”) to advance the main search and organised the first 100 results (defined as the cap for my exploratory research) according to highest replay numbers. I sorted videos in two groups: Those posted by institutional, corporate, and (traditional) media accounts and those posted by individuals themselves. I focused my analysis on the second group of videos, aiming at identifying an independent, migrant-led account of the journeys. I proceeded to manually analyse these materials. I identified key themes under the categories of unlogging and relogging based on iterative visual analysis and with the support of YouTube generated transcriptions (in Spanish). I reached a first level of thematic analytical saturation by video 19, after analysing some 900 min of video (about 15 hours). Testimonies were anonymised in full. I use a list of numbers (1–19) to refer to the videos I extracted the information from. I made the choice not to include the URL of these videos to maintain absolute confidentiality of both journey-makers and the data discussed. I comment on my main findings in the remainder of the text.

## 5. The Darién Gap-Tapón Un/Re-clogged

### 5.1. A dangerous “jungle”

For a long time, the Darién Gap-Tapón has been referred to as a “jungle.” This trope has popularised in official and vernacular parlance to articulate the environment and security related precariousness accompanying people’s journeys throughout this borderland. A recent report by Human Rights Watch states that:

“The Darién Gap is a swampy *jungle* that lies between the Colombian state [sic] of Chocó and the Panamanian province of Darién, forming a *natural border* not only between those countries, but also between

South and Central America. The terrain is steep and slippery, the rivers rushing, especially during the rainy season. Most routes follow paths that crest a rugged mountain range with ridges as high as 1,800 m (6,000 feet)—where flags mark the Colombian-Panamanian border [...] People crossing call the highest pass “Death Hill” (*Loma de la Muerte*) and the Turquesa river “Death River” (*Río de la Muerte*), for the large number of dead bodies in its waters.” (Human Rights Watch, 2024, 11 my emphasis)

“Jungle” seems to be connected to the description of the Darién as a dense, thick rainforest, using the anglicised form of *jungle*, originally imported to English from Hindi and Maharati (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024; cf. Minca, 2023). But as the text continues, the expression’s figurative form becomes increasingly notorious. “Jungle” is also used to refer to a “wild, tangled mass [...] a place, notoriously lawless and violent” (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2024), and has been used as such since the 19th century in literature and political conversations in the English-speaking world.<sup>13</sup> “Jungle” acts as an anthropocentric signifier that conceals a specific form of politics “product of a dialectical relationship between nature and culture” (Dove, 1992, p. 231). In the case of the Darién Gap-Tapón, “jungle” describes an ontology of a dual dangerous/conservable “natural object” to be both feared and preserved by human “actors.”

Recent mobility across the “jungle” can be thought of as a form of debordering, contesting the longstanding functionality of the Darién as a *Gap* and as a *Tapón* (“clog”), blocking precarified, irregularised, and undesired South-North cross-border mobilities. The effect of such materialdiscursive “unlogging” – inherently in tension with longstanding imagination of danger, *no-human’s-landness*, and precarity around this place – is the exponential increase of migration management anxieties of diverse kinds. As a reaction, “relogging” – or the set of materialdiscursive rebordering practices aimed at repositioning the Darién Gap-Tapón as a “jungle” to fear/conservate – has expanded. Amid this un/re-clogging, from a more-than-human perspective, it is possible to trace how the Darién both borders (along with states) and struggles along with migrants,<sup>14</sup> in often overlapping manners, that complicate usual clear-cut divisions between nature and culture.

The idea of the Darién as a “dangerous object” accompanies common takes on the expansion of precarious mobilities across this borderland. Analysed in the mainstream through structural migration “drivers” and “enabling” mobility factors, journeys are often portrayed as paradoxical, counterintuitive, and somehow irrational. A recent report by the UNHCR states that:

“Despite the multiple *tragedies* experienced in the Darién *jungle*, the desperation, the operation of smuggling and trafficking networks, and the expectations generated about better conditions in the northern part of the continent *continue to push* thousands of refugees and migrants to embark on a new course through the Gulf of Urabá [Colombia] and the Pacific.” (UNHCR, 2023, 2 my translation and emphasis)

Criminality is often used as a discursive instrument to re-clog the Darién Gap-Tapón. The issue is pervasive in official communications as evidence of the perilousness and lawlessness of the “jungle.” A Panamanian officer argued that what goes on throughout the Darién “is not a legal [mobility] flow, [it] is trafficking in persons [...] Organised crime is vastly involved in this business and, who knows, perhaps some of these people [migrants] are part of international [criminal] organisations” (Ojeda, 2024). The “jungle” is thus envisioned as a

<sup>12</sup> In some journey depictions posted online, and in close relation to ability, possibility, and limitations, the YouTube format allows to identify a type of “connected migration” (Risam, 2018, p. 58) in which migrants’ political agency is mediated by people’s ability/willingness to “monetise” their experiences performing as “content creators” or “YouTubers” (Munger, 2024). I understand these moves in the context of “digitally mediated migrations” (Collins, 2023) within the broader scope of “digital capitalism” (Pace, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> The colonial setting of this process throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries of British Imperialism has been addressed for instance by Dove (1992) and Mohanty (1992).

<sup>14</sup> I thank one of the article’s anonymous reviewers for this conceptual suggestion.

no-human's-land where migration is not only "unnatural" but also adds to the danger of the "place". Hence, governments in the region advance in the re/objectification of the Darién as a "jungle" to be *feared* with the aim of re-constituting the place discursively and materially as a geographic "buffer". A campaign launched by the Panamanian Government in 2023 "to discourage the irregular flow of people through the Darién, by showing the reality faced by those who embark on the perilous journey" (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores Panamá, 2023) is particularly revealing (see Image 3).

The evident graphic tropes of the poster portray the intention to (re) activate a sense of insecurity and desolation when imagining the Darién. The dense vegetation, the fog, and the scarce lighting work to the effect of re/objectifying the place as a "jungle". The imagined audience of this campaign was not exclusively people on the move as stated by authorities. The artifact seemed to address a plurality of actors dealing with migration management anxieties at local, regional, and global levels. From this point of view, crossing the Darién seems to be synonymous with "leaving oneself to die by attempting to cross the jungle" (#3).

These depictions add to the criminalisation of solidarity with people on the move, useful in advancing reclogging. The Panamanian Migration Authority has stated that "international organisations give [migrants] maps, knowing that they will be raped, knowing that they will be robbed, they give them maps so they come through that *dangerous jungle* ..." (Migración Panamá, 2024b). The same government banned Médécins sans Frontières' work with Darién crossers in early 2024 (Taylor, 2024a).<sup>15</sup> On social media, US-American activists have denounced the actions of NGOs working with persons on the move while showing the "lawlessness" of the Darién "jungle." Some have insisted on revealing



Image 3. "Darién is not a route. It is a Jungle".

Source: Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores Panamá (2023)

<sup>15</sup> Reasons for this ban, according to the Panamanian government, had to do with the organisations' alleged failure in sharing data on victims of sexual abuse as required by law (Dfáz & Collins, 2024).

the "truth of the *natural* setting" where the "migrant invasion [to the US] starts" (Fact Check This, 2024).<sup>16</sup> A blunt re-clogging strategy was announced by current Panamanian president José Raúl Mulino during his electoral campaign. He stated that he would "close the Darién, and repatriate [...] people [migrants] accordingly" (Torrado, 2024 my emphasis).<sup>17</sup> The Darién was to be repositioned as a "buffer" at the border, while re-establishing the place as a "natural" object, both entrenched in and productive of danger for humans, who insist to move across the region in "unnatural" ways. This sense has been echoed in several conversations advancing the consolidation of the issue as a top security-related diplomatic priority. In words of a top-rank US officer:

"The Darién is [a] regional challenge [...] Recognising our shared interest and responsibility to *prevent the risk to human life*, disrupt transnational criminal organisations, and *preserve the vital rainforest*, the governments of Panamá, Colombia, and the United States intend to [...] end the illicit movement of people and goods through the Darién by both land and maritime corridors ..." (Department of Homeland Security 2023 my emphasis).

## 5.2. More-than-danger?

As a challenge to such discursive framings, I engaged with people's journeys across the Darién from a More-than-Human perspective. In so doing I aimed at nuancing the "danger" posed by the "jungle" in key of struggle, by focusing on "humans and nonhumans as interrelated and co-productive of the interactions which comprise vitality or life" (Lupton & Watson, 2021, p. 465). In my research, videos posted on YouTube were filled with graphic and narrative descriptions of the journeys' harsh environmental conditions. I was particularly keen to identify More-than-Human entanglements revealing of intra-actions. I thus paid attention to people's discourse (monopolised by humans, yet revealing of intra-actions shaped through emotions, affects, and demonstrated through performances) and to the visual elements shaping the analysed scenes. This exercise of self-reflexivity, based on a More-than-Human methodological approximation, allowed me to gather a sense of some assemblages and enactments that reveal certain forms of more-than-human agency throughout migration journeys across the Darién.

In the Darién, people's bodies and minds were affected by "mud up to the knees all the time!" (#15) and by "rain [which at times] stopped, but then came back, making us [journey-makers] wet for days" (#10). Videos often revealed how mobility speed and trajectories were frequently shaped by embodied environmental impacts on journey-makers. Hunger, thirst, and limited access to clean water were also constant. A journey-maker explained: "It was unbelievable. I had just started climbing the first mountain, and I began to throw everything away ... my shirt ... I was all sweaty ... I was all soaked in my own sweat" (#6). Another argued that "in the middle of the jungle, the heat is unbearable ... when you walk ... at night you cannot sleep. It's just madness" (#10). Fainted bodies on camera, one being carried by a couple of young migrants on improvised hammocks made with Darién's wood and people's cloths (#6), revealed the impact of the environment

<sup>16</sup> Amidst increasing migration visibility across the US Southern border in recent years, US and Canadian domestic commentators have expanded their social media coverage of cross-border mobility in the Darién. See Besinger and Rios (2024)

<sup>17</sup> Since mid-2024, the current Panamanian government has advanced in fencing the territorial border with Colombia through a combination of barbed wire and an steep rise in patrolling by the national border service "to block the majority of border passages" (Colomé, 2024 par. 5). Since September 2024, the administration has also implemented a deportation scheme for undocumented Darién border-crossers (mostly "extra-continental") in agreement with the US government (Sulbarán, 2024).

on people's bodies. Physical exhaustion was accompanied by emotionally mediated elements. People not only dealt with embodied disease but with its material-discursive immanence "due to the unhealthy weather" (#10) and the proliferation of "unknown types of viruses" (#6). Anxiety was constant, as "so many people get lost and die in the jungle ..." (#11). Some animals were a source of angst during the journey, as people "had to be wary of the massive spiders and poisonous frogs (#10)." A journey-maker commented how their group had to deal with "two massive snakes [which] came out of nowhere ... [which they] killed as they could (#10)." These enactments between humans and more-than-humans are revealing of the bordering capabilities of the Darién (see [Image 4](#)).

Yet, the Darién "also gives you back!" (#6) as a journey-maker explained. They commented how they "drank clean water from the sources that went down from the top of the hills ... after four days in the jungle ..." (#10) revealing a specific geomorphic feature allowing some mobile bodies to continue their trajectory in face of exhaustion. Videos showed how people refreshed their bodies in natural pools along clearings amid the forest (#2) and in quiet sections across rivers (#4), where "families play as if they were on a holiday" (#6). The hydrological system in the Darién allowed some journey makers to get some physical relief and anxiety solace on the precarious journey. My analysis revealed that these assemblages between human and hydrological bodies were present at different moments and at different trajectories across the Darién (see [Image 5](#)).

Some people explained how they dealt with hunger during the journey: "We found some wild green plantains; my friends ate them raw ... We had no food at all. It was better to have something in our bodies than not" (#10). Journey-makers used wild edible roots and fruits as food, many times allowing for their journeys to continue, although sometimes humans had to learn what and how to eat first to avoid indigestion or poisoning. With regards to non-human animals, experiences are mixed. A young man commented on his involvement with a *tigrillo*<sup>18</sup> wildcat: "We suddenly met a tigrillo ... We were scared as hell. But then, we realised they were more afraid of us, than us of them! They just ran off! (#10)." In the videos, it was shown how the presence of specific bird species was revealing of a specific topography, in a sense showing the way, allowing mobilities to transform (#6). Regarding waterbodies, a journey-maker revealed how they accidentally fell into a river "where people had died trying to cross" (#10). They revealed a particular More-than-Human assemblage: "It was just mud all over. It was dark. I could not see my hands. I began to touch what I could.



**Image 4.** Mud and mobility.

Source: YouTube – A child's shoe covered by Darién's mud.



**Image 5.** "As if they were on holiday!" (#6).

Source: YouTube – Image blurred to maintain anonymity

Suddenly I caught a tree's root which was headed directly towards the river ... *That tree saved my life!*" (#10). Trees, standing, falling, transformed, appeared as common route markers across the Darién throughout my observation (see [Image 6](#)).

These enactments reveal an agential assemblage between humans crossing the Darién and non-humans in place ([Barad, 2003](#)) shaped by how the latter "affect human bodies and its biochemical responses [...] which [potentially] become political responses ..." ([Oliveras-González, 2023](#), p. 533). These forms of unclogging are mediated by migrant struggles in that they unsettle the scene of borderwork in place, echoing how humans "make with" ([Haraway, 2016](#)) non-humans their journeys, by navigating, adapting or contesting the existing regime of mobility. Placing our attention on the relational agency enacted between humans and non-humans in the Darién's case emerges as a possibility to trace an analytical alternative to views that seek to re-objectify the rainforest as a geographical "buffer" within a specific regime of mobility.

Ideas about "danger" can be reimagined through More-than-Human encounters in the Darién. Recording from the edge of an abyss, a journey-maker showed a harsh, muddy, and rainy landscape crowded by endless trees. Anxiously, they reflected: "People are left to their own selves here, in the Darién jungle. Danger is everywhere ... you might fall, you can get injured. People crawl [in the mud] Even children ... The Darién journey is so harsh. This is not a game" (#2). But these same views coexisted with those that argued that "danger is psychological ... once you get used to the jungle, you just need to have a clear, positive mind and faith" (#6). Emotions in this context of struggle "cannot be confined to biological, neural, [or] physical dimensions [but] they are malleable through social interaction and political agency" ([Gellwitzki & Houde, 2022](#), p. 1473) which is necessarily mediated by the More-than-Human in the Darién. Videos revealed how people adapted to a certain type of rainforest mobility by attuning their times, their speed, and their trajectories to the geomorphic features and the non-human lives shaping their "place" of displacement. The consolidation of *safer* (or at least more transitable) routes and paths, shaped by geography and geomorphic bodies seemed to have emerged from a process of assemblage between humans and non-humans across time (see [Image 7](#)).

The More-than-Human also shapes mobility choices to an eschatological dimension. A journey-maker reflected on how "the jungle forces you to make [tough] choices" (#11). Their group left someone behind, "an overweight guy who had a low-tension problem ... he was so extenuated that we could not wait for him any longer." This reveals that More-than-Human struggles are not only conditioned by emotions but also by embodied abilities and differences, to the point of marking a line between life and death. Research also revealed how migrants struggle

<sup>18</sup> Sometimes called *Oncilla* or Tiger Cat (*Leopardus tigrinus*) in English.



**Image 6.** “Life-saving trees” (#10).  
Source: YouTube



**Image 7.** A route unveiled by the rain.  
Source: YouTube

with the less-than-human in their journeys. People dealt with human remains (“we saw human bones across the path ... it was impressive” (#6)); corpses (“I saw two bodies floating on the river ... I just wanted to leave that jungle as I could (#11)); deadly smells (“It smelled quite

putrid. Someone died there ... It is really difficult to walk that section ... (#2)”; and dead souls (“some people [migrants] invoked the dead for protection ... It was the scariest thing of the journey ... if I reveal in this video what we dealt with, YouTube will remove it!” (#11)). Interestingly, some journey-makers commented on how their encounters with corpses and the less-than-human allowed them to reflect on the need to make specific mobility choices and “understand that the *jungle* gives and takes away” (#10).

### 5.3. A “place” to conserve

Throughout the research, border-crossers showed how human-made contamination amid migration was visible all over the Darién Gap-Tapón. A migrant, showing a pile of discarded clothes, bottles, and sanitary rests at the shore of a river regretted that “unfortunately, in what once was a virgin landscape, you can now sense human contamination everywhere” (#6). Official reports have stated that increased mobility has had a severe impact in terms of a “pollution crisis” (Taylor, 2024b), water stress, and affectation on local human and non-human lives (Human Rights Watch, 2024; ICG, 2023; Ministerio de Ambiente Panamá, 2022). Panamanian authorities have insisted on “the irreversible environmental damage” (France 24, 2023) caused by migration in the Darién, something supported by virtually all governments in the region. A news clip from 2023 titled “Apocalyptic Scenes Abound in Darien Gap as Migrants Smash Record in Race to US Border” stated that “what was once one of the most remote and pristine jungles on planet earth is now an environmental disaster [...]” (CBN News, 2023). The note was accompanied by a set of images focusing on migrants’ “trash,” discarded boots, bottles, and clothes (see Image 8).

These concerns are often instrumentalised to re-clog the Darien Gap-Tapón through the advancement of a particular form of conservationist politics that insists on positioning migrants and their belongings as “anti-natural” and, therefore, subjects of scrutiny, acting as “predators” of the “jungle.” After an in-situ visit, the Costa-Rican minister of security stated that “the damage in the natural setting of the *Tapón del Darién*, caused by the mass movement of people, is striking. This scenario is not suitable for these types of *human uses*. From the natural point of view, the affectations to this *natural sanctuary* are irreversible” (AFP Español, 2023 my translation and emphasis). Such messages add a sense of moral environmental responsibility, which needs to be read carefully. These mechanisms are often used to legitimate – or even “greenwash” – unequal and often violent forms of migration control, without necessarily advancing an “ecology of repair” (Blanco-Wells, 2021) aimed at balancing human and non-human interactions in the Darién.

A statement by the former Colombian Foreign Relations Minister



**Image 8.** Migrants’ “trash” in the Darién.  
Source: CBN News (2023)

during a regional meeting in Mexico to discuss regional migration illustrates this point. He argued that “the Darién is a *living being, with rights*, just like people. Panama and Colombia will teach the world that this is *our* being, and we will *protect* this subject or these rights, *our jungle*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Colombia, 2023, my translation and emphasis). The officer took a seemingly More-than-Human stance (“living being”) in a rhetorical sense (“with rights”), only to reify that the place (“jungle”) was a possession (“our”) to be protected from migrants and migration. The move serves to advance in re-clogging the Darién and re-establishing its role as a “natural border” and “buffer” to mobility. Yet, this moral claim, positioning the Darién as an “object of conservation”, dismisses the evaluation of the complex forms of interactions between humans and non-humans in this context by reducing migrants to *predators* of the “jungle”.

The moral duty to “environmentally conserve” the Darién, illustrated in people’s “trash” and people as “trashers” can be used to imagine journey-makers and their things as environmentally threatening and “out of place” (Squire, 2014; Sundberg, 2008). Yet, this form of re-clogging is challenged by a journey-maker who explained why people needed to discard so many objects throughout the journey. They argued that “the path is so complicated ... with weight and everything ... Your shoulders start to feel the pressure ... Little by little you get more tired, and you don’t realise it ... If it rains, the weight of wet things is suddenly unbearable” (#6). In this narration, migrants’ discarded objects, unattentively interpreted as “trashed” things, adopt a new meaning when focusing on the More-than-Human. Things are affected and transformed by the environment and the material setting of the journey while evincing a migration struggle in place. Other objects that can unattentively be seen as polluting are part of agential assemblages. A woman revealed that “after crossing the border [to Panama], your only guide is God ... and the *blue flags* [Plastic bags] along the river that reveal the path to follow” (#11). According to another journey-maker, these bags were left by former border-crossers and locals to show migrants the way (#2). Across the research, these objects came up at the different points, which seem to be definitive in crossing the Panamanian side of the Darién (see Image 9). These alien objects imported to the rainforest, more than “trash,” serve a function in shaping mobility across the Darién.

The conversation around re-clogging the Darién often builds on how migration has affected the landscape physically and aesthetically (Ministerio de Ambiente, 2022). Logging for path building and the import of hazardous non-autochthonous materials into the Darién ecosystem (including chemicals such as insecticides, creolin, and other related compounds) have been mentioned by authorities and scholars when discussing mobility-related affectations (Periódico UNAL, 2024). But some objects brought by migrants and left in the Darién are not only discarded hazardous objects. They are also signified to a point of revealing relational agency. A journey-maker recorded a young migrant



**Image 9.** “Blue Flags revealing the path to follow” (#11). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)  
Source: YouTube

carrying a guitar throughout the way, which they played for colleagues when resting. He argued that “the kid just loved that guitar ... it *gave* him strength to continue” (#15). In other videos, it was revealed how music played on mobile phones and portable audio players served a similar comforting purpose. Yet, human silence across the rainforest, sometimes allowing for certain non-human sounds (animals, wind, trees, running water, rain and others) to emerge, “served to focus on the trajectory” (#6). Human and More-than-Human sounds seem thus to be part of diverse mobility entanglements in this context.

Decisively, objects left by migrants on the top of the Loma de las Banderas (*Flags’ Hill*) – marking the territorial border between Colombia and Panama on one of the most transited paths in the region – reveal a certain type of non-human political agency. In time, originally marked by a wooden signpost, the place has been populated with dozens of national flags, religious symbols, unopened letters, and myriad personal objects left by journey-makers (see Image 10). Videos revealed how the place is constituted and symbolised through migrants’ objects as a major landmark of the journey. A youtuber argued: “when we saw the flags, you cannot imagine how happy we felt ... a group of people started to pray ... I saw someone emotionally crying as well” (#9).

This perspective challenges the view that “trashed” belongings are evidence of mere negative human affectation over the Darién’s landscape. Such objects are not only reminders of struggle, in the sense of “making place” though migration (Winters, 2019). They also reveal the existence of a relational type of agency shaping mobility mediated through emotions, affect, and performance. Yet, such agency is not only to be traced at the entanglement between humans and the objects imported to the landscape. Geomorphic bodies can have a similar type of agency. The example of the Turquesa River (known by some as the “Death River”), as described by a journey-maker adds to this point: “After walking for 6 hours we realised we were going in the wrong direction ... We arrived at the river’s shore and realised the water flow was going the opposite way ... The river *showed* us where to go ... We started walking along the river’s flow ... We could have died ... But in the end, we made it” (#11). In this case, the river “made with” the journey-makers a path to continue with the journey, within a precarious, yet politically significant setting, as a way to escape/desert the existing mobility regime. A more-than-human view on migration journeys across the Darién Gap-Tapón reveals that *nature* borders (and is instrumentalised to border), but also struggles along with migrants, in often complicated, overlapping, somehow contradictory and, yet meaningful ways.



**Image 10.** “Loma de las Banderas”.  
Source: YouTube

## 6. Conclusion: More-than-Human struggles in the Darién Gap-Tapón

Longstanding political imagination envisioning the Darién borderland as an untamed, inaccessible, and lawless place, constituting a social and territorial rupture between the South and the North of the Americas, has been both challenged and repositioned amid recent migration. From the standpoint of a More-than-Human ontology, the example of the Darién Gap-Tapón reveals how anthropocentric political imagination is at work in shaping material-discursive “buffers”, stylised as “natural borders”, across the contested geographies of contemporary global migrations. Yet, this imagination is neither inherently stable nor fixed. Rather, it seems to be entrenched in dynamics of both contestation and transition, when analysed from the point of view of mobility and the agency of More-than-Human lives, geomorphic bodies and things. Key for the analysis is our attention to the entanglement between divergent – often precaritized and yet politically meaningful – mobilities, and myriad forms of relational agencies shaping the Darién Gap-Tapón, potentially constitutive of assemblages that challenge existing regimes of global mobility, which could be read as forms of contemporary struggles.

*More-than-Human struggles for mobility* emerge at this stage as an analytical possibility to re-interpret the continuities and transitions in contemporary global migration, when looking attentively at the distinctive political ecology of precarious migrations. This lens seems to have at least three potentially productive usages. First, it provides an initial conceptual framework to think anew questions about cross-border migration continuity, transformation, and adaptation amid long-scale mobilities across “places” that are often instrumentalised as sites of stringent border control. Second, it allows scholars to re-evaluate claims about the role of “nature” as a sheer object of migration management and border control by engaging seriously with the possibility that More-than-Human relational agencies have effects on both bordering and debordering. Third, this framework opens a door to reimagine the production and contestation of unequal mechanisms of global migration control, from the point of view of a divergent radical ecology of precaritized mobilities, outside common anthropocentric assumptions.

These analytical possibilities are to be explored elsewhere in the Americas and beyond. There are myriad forms of More-than-Human struggles for mobility across the world where analogue un- and relogging dynamics are to be analysed. In many of these locations – not only rainforests, but also deserts, mountain ranges, archipelagos, aquapelas, cold forests, and a number of other geomorphic formations – the repositioning of anthropocentric tropes of danger, peril, and conservation behind mobility controls are paradoxically driving deaths and precariousness at and beyond territorial borders. A More-than-Human perspective can add to imagining viable alternatives to these unjust moves, often entrenched in calculated forms of unequal global migration management. Decentering the analysis from the “human” adds to our understanding of mobility as part of a wider *global ecology* (Escobar, 2006), beyond standardised forms of bordered coloniality, which fixate a rigid, artificial, difference between nature/culture, locals/foreigners, North/South, and us/them.

### Declaration of competing interest

I declare no conflicts of interest.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks to friends and colleagues who discussed previous versions of this paper at the Universities of Durham, Oxford, Birmingham, and Warwick, as well as colleagues at the Universidad del Rosario. Special thanks to Esteban Devis-Amaya for his conceptual suggestions, Claudia Voigt for her editing assistance, and to the anonymous reviewers and

editors for their comments and suggestions.

### Data availability

Data available on request.

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