"Reborn in Guate":
Making Resource Frontiers in Asylum in Guatemala's Northern Petén

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Abstract

The last decade and a half have seen a dramatic increase in the outsourcing and offshoring of asylum processing and resettlement to countries in the Global South. This article advances a new theoretical framework to examine the surge in new asylum regimes worldwide. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in several externalised asylum sites and specifically in Guatemala, it looks at these recent developments through the lens of 'resource frontiers.' Merging critical political ecological approaches on resource frontiers with research on migration externalisation, I argue that 'asylum frontiers' are the social spaces connected to the exploration and development of a resource sector that extracts value from people on the move. I centre my analysis on the US-driven development of an asylum regime in Guatemala's northern Petén region. I consider the specificities of Guatemala's emerging asylum frontier, detailing how this arrangement sits with the country's own histories of asylum and enforced return. In tracing how different political actors – migrants, Indigenous Mayan refugees, and deported Guatemalans – 'live with' these frontier economies, I show how individuals also utilise state framings to advance their own frontiers.

1. Introduction

On a sunny June afternoon in 2022, the cathedral square above the pastel-painted town of Isla de Flores is abuzz with activity. Banners are festooned across a far corner of the square, publicising the celebration of World Refugee Day in the Petén: Guatemala's northernmost region. Under the slogan 'Reborn in Guate,' the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) newly established Petén office has put together a programme of art, dance, music, and poetry.[i] Knitted clothing and homemade sweets are for sale on long tables, while a gallery of artwork depicting narratives of resilience is displayed in erected white canvas tents. A raised stage at the centre of the tents provides a platform for a succession of folkloric acts throughout the day. Guatemala is well-known as a country with tragic histories of conflict. Hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans left the country in the face of US-instigated civil war violence and genocidal policies against Indigenous Maya (Schirmer, 1998).[ii] However, these celebrations are not for refugees from Guatemala, but rather migrants claiming asylum from surrounding regions *to* Guatemala. A young Honduran teenager stands on the stage, rapping about the hardship of long journeys. He is followed by an older Honduran man, who gives a speech emphasising the kindness shown by people locally. A canvas tent on the side is open for visitors, providing information about the resettlement support offered by local organisations.

In Flores and Santa Elena, the regional capital of the Petén, located across a causeway from the island town, the concept of claiming asylum to – not from – was little heard of prior to the last decade. Now, public information campaigns on asylum in Flores – one of many new 'Cities of Solidarity' around Guatemala – are inescapable.[iii] Not far from the Refugee Day celebrations, tourist-style posters in Santa Elena's central bus terminal extoll Guatemala as an asylum destination. One stretches dramatically along the façade of the arrivals hall, so as to be strategically visible to those arriving at the station. The poster is fringed with stick figures of people running for safety and the logos of UNHCR and the Guatemalan non-governmental organization, *El Refugio de la Niñez*.[iv] At its centre, it features a family holding hands as they clamber over train tracks. In large blue font, with the words 'danger,' 'protection,' and 'refugee' highlighted, it reads:

> "If your life is in danger, and you cannot return to your country, you can ask for protection as a refugee in Guatemala. We can help you!" (*Si tu vida corre peligro, y no puedes regresar a tu pais, puedes pedir proteccion como refugiado en Guatemala. Te podemos ayudar!*).

Around another corner in the terminal, signs point towards a small office, the Attention Center for Migrants and Refugees. There, seven institutions converge in what UNHCR staff locally term their 'one-stop shop' – the *Procurador de los Derechos Humanos* (Human Rights Defenders), *Conamigua* (the National Council for Attention to Migrants of Guatemala), *Medicos Sin Fronteras* (Doctors Without Borders), *Cruz Roja* (Red Cross), UNHCR, and *El Refugio de la Niñez.* Inside, Guatemalan social workers wait patiently for anyone wanting to learn more about claiming asylum in Guatemala. UNHCR information signposts advising these services are also strategically located along the highway that cuts through the Petén: sandwiched between Honduran and Mexican borders

and passed through by migrants making long journeys northward. Just a few blocks down from the bus terminal is UNHCR's new regional office. On occasion, their fleet of distinctive mobile unit vans are visible, having returned from advertising claiming asylum in Guatemala along the country's major migration routes and border posts with Mexico.[v]

Figure 1: Advertising asylum for Guatemala at Santa Elena's bus station, photograph by author.

Figure 2: UNHCR mobile units for advertising asylum in rural regions, photograph by author.

Figure 3: World Refugee Day Petén, photograph by author.

What explains these dramatic transformations taking place in Guatemala's rainforested Petén region? In the last five years, Guatemala's national asylum and resettlement system has received a significant boost of support from the US government. As part of a regional approach begun in 2017, known as the Regional Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Framework (or its Spanish acronym MIRPS), Guatemala, together with Mexico and other Central American countries (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, and Panama), is steadily developing the capacity to receive and support asylum claims in the country. This strategy differs from extraterritorialised asylum, where destination country authorities conduct asylum procedures and provide housing and some humanitarian support (Endres de Oliveira & Feith Tan, 2023; Levy, 2010). Instead, it involves funding the entire development of national refugee processing and resettlement practices.[vi] The buildup of Guatemala's asylum capacity came just prior to the US' controversial asylum and transit ban. Under the policy, announced in May 2023, large-scale restrictions are imposed on who can apply for asylum at the US southern border. The majority of those who travel through Mexico and Central American countries must seek asylum there first.[vii] Although the 'asylum ban' policy was initially successfully challenged by the American Civil Liberties Union in May 2023, it has since been upheld by the 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals. The US government is scaling back domestic asylum procedures but funding its development elsewhere. By financing Guatemala's asylum system and that of surrounding countries, American policymakers are deepening their external borders, without seemingly derogating on international legal responsibilities.

This article advances a new theoretical framework to examine the surge in new asylum regimes worldwide, and specifically in Guatemala. The last decade and a half have seen a dramatic increase in the outsourcing and offshoring of asylum processing and resettlement to countries in the Global South (Dastyari et al., 2022; Morris, 2023a). The EU has adopted this model in Eastern Europe, Turkey, North Africa, and Central Asia (Follis, 2012; Gazzotti, 2021; Lambert, 2021), as has the UK in their recent attempted arrangement with Rwanda (Morris, 2023b). Australia uses migrants as a form of economic development with Pacific island nations and across south Asia (Morris, 2023a; Nethery and Gordon, 2014). The US has long utilised military bases for migrant interdiction efforts, as well as funding detention centres in other regions and working with law enforcement officials from nearby countries to limit migrant routes (Loyd & Mountz, 2018). I look at these recent developments through the lens of 'resource frontiers' to emphasise how political, economic, and moral capital is extracted from migrants as part of an expanding extractive frontier. As a theoretical concept, the resource frontier is used to explain recent frontier-makings around the extraction of resources (Cons & Eilenberg, 2019; Tsing, 1993). Remote areas are reconfigured as 'zones of opportunity,' involving new articulations of territorial governance, as well as regional and international networks of accumulation and security. Studies of resource frontiers have focused on more typically thought-of extractive spaces, such as where new mineral or petrochemical resources have been discovered (Watts, 2018) or monocultural crop booms (De Koninck et al., 2011). I see *asylum frontiers* as the social spaces connected to the exploration and development of a resource sector that centres on extracting value from people on the move.

There is now a powerful body of literature on migration externalisation (Bialasiewicz, 2012; Boswell, 2003; Freier et al., 2021; Gazzotti et al., 2023; Vammen et al., 2022). This includes such strategies as maritime and third-country interceptions, biometrics, carrier sanctions, agreements and border control training with so-called 'transit' countries, public messaging campaigns, and extraterritorial claims processing and detention. Some of the scholarship flagging up these trends focuses directly on asylum externalisation (Dastyari et al., 2022; FitzGerald, 2021; Hyndman & Mountz, 2008; Moreno-Lax, 2017; Morris, 2019). Following this model, countries in the Global North

outsource asylum processing and refugee resettlement to neighbouring states in exchange for financial and development support. Alongside the research that visibilises these moves, there is also important work centred on the migration industry: a vast industry of corporate, non-governmental, government, solidarity campaigners, and other actors characterised by profit-making activity from people on the move (Andersson, 2022; Cranston et al., 2018; Franck, 2018; Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sørensen, 2013; Golash-Boza, 2009; McGuirk & Pine, 2022; Morris, 2017, 2021a). More specifically, contracted workforces, politicians, and media workers gain through the representation of border securitisation. Electoral support for right-wing anti-immigrant platforms rides on the production of hysteria around the Other. From border security and detention management corporations to healthcare providers, humanitarian organisations, legal firms, and research institutes, a range of actors have a stake in the migration industry, and in increased securitisation. Asylum is not only transferred to the private sector but also southern state governments, whereby economic logics of profit run through dispersal (Freier et al., 2021).

My work draws on these two bodies of scholarship to develop the theoretical framework of 'asylum frontiers.' This analytic looks to capture the transformation of seemingly marginal spaces into locations for refugee processing and resettlement. Here, I offer three rejoinders to the conceptual terrain of the migration industry and migration externalisation literature. First, I suggest that rather than focusing on industry actors, what matters is the assemblages of materialities, cultural logics, political economic processes, ecologies, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility (Cons & Eilenberg, 2019; Morris, 2021b; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). To think of migration governance in this Deleuzian sense enables us to see the social and material elements that rework remote spaces into new kinds of productive sites – sites slated for refugee processing and resettlement. Second, I emphasise a focus on *value* over profit as a way of considering the many motivations of actors involved in advancing new asylum frontiers. Value generation takes numerous forms, including political, economic, symbolic, as well as moral value. Committed humanitarian but also corporate and state workforces are not just on the hunt for investment opportunities. While wanting to eke out a living, many are trying to better people's lives (Malkki, 2015). At the same time, asylum also holds use-value for migrants, who are entangled in an imbalanced performative economy (Morris, 2023c). Migrants, particularly from the Global South, must produce 'pictures' of lives eligible for protection that fit templates of victimhood and vulnerability (Cabot, 2013). In this way, many migrants work to transform themselves into an economic asset through refugee status (Bardelli, 2020): a form of unfree labour "that is at once exploitative and generative of new forms of belonging" (Calvão, 2016, p. 456).

This leads to my third contribution in that much of the scholarship on the migration industry and migration externalisation tends to reinforce the international refugee regime even as they critique it. States that take on third country asylum arrangements are decried as rife with human rights abuses or not holding the capacity to take on such modernist technical endeavours. In developing the asylum frontiers analytic, I begin with the premise advanced by some critical migration and refugee studies researchers and migrants that asylum is structurally bound up in the governance of race and place (Bhagat, 2024; Espiritu, 2014; Mayblin, 2017; Picozza, 2022). From its colonial foundations, asylum has functioned by creating categories and ideologies that legitimate various capitalist modes of accumulation and nation state projects. To this day, the international refugee regime operates as a form of racialised border control, fostering life hierarchies and reproducing racial categories in the present (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). Representations of Global South violence marshalled as anti-externalisation advocacy are dehistoricising and demeaning, reeking of white western salvationalism (Danewid, 2017; Morris, 2023a). Such Conradian imaginaries also provide more moral capital and

mobile labour to the overall asylum system that supports the expansion of asylum frontiers (Morris, 2019).

In making these arguments, I build on my ethnographic fieldwork in three very different places – Guatemala, Jordan, and Nauru – to trace the emergence of new asylum industry frontiers. Over the last near decade, I have been tracking new fronts of extraction related to expanding asylum regimes. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Australia, Geneva, Fiji, and Nauru for a total of fifteen months between 2015-2016; in Jordan for three months across 2018-19; and in Guatemala across 2021-2023. The case of Nauru was particularly extreme in that the island nation's entire economy soon revolved around the asylum industry (Morris, 2019, 2021b, 2023a). Overlapping regimes of resource governance buoyed mineral and migrant processing regimes as asylum replaced phosphate as a new but equally resource cursed extractive sector. Local tensions, self-harm, and other forms of extreme exploitation characteristic of capital-intensive resource extraction zones coursed through Nauru's new national asylum regime. In Jordan, I witnessed the burgeoning growth of the asylum industry as an array of NGOs and UN agencies received contracts connected to Syrian refugees (Morris, 2020). International NGOs, such as the International Rescue Committee and the Danish and Norwegian Refugee Councils, brought immense material resources that were inaccessible to refugees from other regions (namely Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen). Meanwhile, the Jordanian government used refugee rights as a strategic instrument of foreign policy: what Victoria Kelberer (2017) and others have termed 'refugee rentierism' or 'refugee rent-seeking' strategies (Freier et al., 2021). But I found that the motivations of the Jordanian government and contracted workforces could not be reduced to economic interests alone. Many individuals were sympathetic to the experiences of migrants displaced from nearby regions. This logic of moral value is set within Jordan's history as a host state for substantial numbers of Palestinian and Iraqi refugees.

Since then, I have continued to follow the extraction of value through to Guatemala. I conducted fieldwork in Guatemala City and Guatemala's northern Petén region over three separate month-long field trips in 2021, 2022, and 2023. During this time, I interviewed or spoke informally with asylum seekers and refugees for Guatemala, representatives from relevant government departments, UNHCR, and NGOs involved in Guatemala's new asylum system. In 2023, 597 asylum applications have been filed to the country's new National Commission for Refugees (*La Comisión Nacional para Refugiados* or CONARE).[viii] At the time of writing, 872 refugee visa holders and 2,348 asylum-seekers resided in the country.[ix] The Petén had the highest number of claims after Guatemala City (a 10% increase from that same period in 2021), but still incredibly low numbers compared to other global regions. In addition, the number of Guatemalans returnees almost doubled overall from 40,650 in the first nine months of 2021 to 73,808 in the same period in 2022 (UNHCR, 2022). I attended high-level migration meetings and took part in multi-day rangers' trips to the northern Guatemala-Mexico border: one of many employment schemes for foreign nationals on refugee visas in Guatemala. I also spoke informally with migrants making journeys northward through the Petén, many of whom stay at the network of *Centro Migrantes* that provide accommodation and food for stays up to five of days.

My research coincided with Kamala Harris' first international trip abroad as Vice President in June 2021. In a controversial speech at the *Palacio Nacional de la Cultura* in Guatemala City, Harris pledged a tough on borders approach. As part of their so-called Root Causes Strategy, Harris is heading the Biden Administration's efforts to advance local livelihoods in the Northern Triangle region of Central America: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. These efforts include funding a range of employment opportunities, as well as pushing for the advancement of regional asylum systems to dissuade migrants'

asylum claims to the US. Many of the organisations I met were familiar faces, as were the forms of cultural production, such as World Refugee Day, designed to naturalise commonplace assumptions of people as refugees. Encountering these forms of mobile labour and expertise pushed me to understand the externalisation of asylum as a 'frontier assemblage' (Cons & Eilenberg, 2019). Material and discursive, human and non-human agencies are all involved in shaping the configurations of emerging asylum frontiers. Throughout, I follow Gazzotti et al. (2023) in paying attention to political and social heterogeneity to scrutinise domestic contexts of migration externalisation. Certainly, the diverse geographical contexts of Guatemala, Jordan, and Nauru have their own particularities: Guatemala is itself a settler colony based on *criollo* notions of nation building and governed by a *ladino* elite (Martínez Peláez, 2009).[x] By bringing these sites together, I gloss over many social, political, and economic specificities. But in so doing, my intention is to expansively consider the global trend towards offshored and outsourced asylum models as they zig-zag from north to south.

In what follows, I ground my theoretical framework of asylum frontiers in Guatemala's northern Petén region. This first section considers the purchase of the resource frontier analytic in making visible contemporary asylum frontiers and their histories. Thinking about asylum externalisation as resource frontiering also de-exceptionalises geographies of containment and control. The Petén is not unique; rather, it illustrates the forms of exploitation and administrative violence baked into the racialised mobility regime of the international refugee system. The third and fourth sections take their inspiration from Dolly Kikon's (2019) work on oil and coal mining to trace how different political actors – migrants, Indigenous Mayan refugees, and deported Guatemalans – 'live with' these frontier economies. These sections ask how the development of a national asylum system in Guatemala sits with the country's own histories of asylum and enforced return. Migration restrictions are by no means one-directional, imposed by the Global North on a passive Global South. Powerful local and regional actors hold their own agendas to engage in but also subvert asylum controls. In the case of migrants, this entails embodying resource frontiers. Asylum holds use-value for the aspirations of migrants in a context of increased limitations on moving and working across borders. The article closes by revisiting the consequences of these new insitutionalised asylum locations. Given that state and non-state agencies are continuously investing in asylum expansion, the focus on asylum frontiers contributes substantially to the interrogation of asylum. This analysis is necessary to make sense of the realities facing migrants today. By effectively critiquing the promotion of asylum, we might better consider alternatives that support local livelihoods, rather than driving the perpetual expansion of asylum frontiers.

2.   Asylum Frontiers

The rapid transformation of agrarian and forest spaces into sites of intense resource extraction have galvanised an interest in the study of resource frontiers (Cons & Eilenberg, 2019; Karrar, 2021; Kikon, 2019; Ross, 2014; Tsing, 2008). As a theoretical concept, the resource frontier is used to explain recent frontier-makings around the extraction of resources. Resource frontiers are often taken to be the incorporation of marginal spaces and ecologies as coveted zones of potential. They are highly imaginative in that these are spaces where the material realities of place are interwoven with different visions and cultural vocabularies. Socially constructed representations of resource frontiers vary. They are at once construed as crucial spaces for economic activity (Patel & Moore, 2017), dangerous lawless sites outside of the optics of state control (Tsing, 2005), and an untouched wilderness ripe with possibilities (Li, 2014). These often-fictive framings of frontiers all centre in some way on the critical need for intervention. Research in these fields has long considered natural resource extraction and the rapid

transformation of remotes spaces into socially and ecologically destructive production sites.

In recent years, more marginal spaces are being transformed into locations for refugee processing and resettlement across the Global South. These policies produce similarly transformative effects to those described by political ecologists in the production of resource frontiers. Extractive processes push many people to move from homeland regions. This includes massive land-grabs, ecological destructions from mining, and the implementation of neocolonial development programs, all of which generate migrations, new resources and profits (Sassen, 2014). People are then subject to the extractive systems of legal technologies that track their movements across territories (Walters, 2004). Here, the resource consists of racialised migrants, whereby the bureaucratic practice of refugee classification serves to regulate people's movements and value (Morris, 2021a). Migrants are made valuable to humanitarian organisations and state agencies because of their designation as vulnerable people (Coddington et al., 2020; Martin & Tazzioli, 2023). But this is not to imply that migrants are outside the asylum industry in terms of the biopolitical function of their labour power. Rather, as I have argued elsewhere, asylum claimants are also entangled in the 'intimate labour' of making an asylum claim (Morris, 2023c). Migrants are pushed to identify as – and perform – what Liisa Malkki (1995) has referred to as 'refugeeness' in order to legalise their movement across borders. This "embodied performance of trauma" (Pine, 2020: 212) entails recounting intimate experiences and narratives of trauma in order to move elsewhere. Asylum policies then change physical spaces and territories in line with new forms of human extraction, as I experienced ricocheting from the Pacific through to the Middle East and Central America. Like the resource extractive impacts typically described by political ecologists (Watts & Peluso, 2013), these epicentres of extraction and production often wreak havoc on migrants and local communities (Morris, 2019). As this article goes on to show, the forms of violence produced by asylum frontiers are also site-specific phenomenon rooted in local histories and social dynamics, yet connected to macro processes of material transformation and power relations.

The development of an asylum regime in Guatemala is indicative of a shift in border relations. Most humanitarian migrants are hosted in countries in the Global South, proximate to conflict or other disaster zones. However, the last 15 years have seen a dramatic increase in Western countries funding the asylum procedures of countries in the Global South (Dastyari et al., 2022). This trend of developing national asylum systems has found its way to Guatemala. Following pressure and financing from the US, Mexico developed a southern border program in June 2014, known as *Programa Frontera Sur*, to strengthen migration control measures along the Mexico-Guatemala border. Previously, the majority of those making these challenging journeys traveled through the south-western Guatemalan states of San Marcos and Huehuetenango. Heightened US-funded border enforcement in these regions has pushed more people to pass through the northern Petén border, where I conducted my research. The Petén is also the main 'transit region' for those making their way north from Honduras. Most Honduran and Salvadoran migrants intending to travel to the US, but unable to meet the strict visa protocols, will pass through Guatemala. In recent years, more migrants from the Caribbean, South America, Africa, and Asia have sought to reach the US through the Central American isthmus (Selee et al., 2023). They now encounter the buffer zones that unfold as new types of resource governance emerge through expanding asylum regimes.

Guatemala's asylum frontier has arisen in relation to conditions of what Feldman et al. (2011) term 'the accumulation of insecurity.' Successive American governments and many news media outlets have accrued political economic value through the production of hysteria around the Other (Bigo, 2012). Some American politicians and news

media outlets regularly perpetuate notions that Latinos, in particular, are "an invading force" bent on "destroying the American way of life" (Chavez, 2013, p. 3). Blame for the country's deep-seated inequalities is habitually placed on racialised migrants through discourses of 'welfare scrounging' and 'job theft.' But rather than simply bulking up the enforcement structures of their immediate borders and those of surrounding states, the US – like many western governments – simultaneously utilises the international refugee system. The use of the refugee regime in this way is fitting. Although masked by humanitarian precepts, this Eurocentric system was actually set up as a gatekeeping apparatus to control mobility and labour (Behrman, 2019). For Refugee Convention signatories, funding the asylum procedures of countries in the Global South is seen as a form of 'burden sharing' (Boswell, 2003). According to this argument, the growth in southern asylum systems will encourage more states to play a part in supporting refugees locally, and ultimately restrict migrants from claiming asylum at US borders. It enables government agencies to refute the charges of refugee solidarity groups that migrants cannot seek asylum in transit countries because of a lack of a functioning asylum system. By advancing third country asylum policies, the US theatrically displays nation-state sovereignty together with an alleged first world humanitarianism. This Janus-faced approach aims to fulfill the double role of 'saving lives' and 'combating illegal immigration,' engendering a form of humanitarian borderwork that simultaneously cares and controls (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). Indeed, in Guatemala, the promotion of local narratives of refugee protection exists alongside fear-based messaging campaigns, also funded by the US, that highlight the risks of migrant journeys northward (Morris, 2022). This contrasting performance of local protection and deterrence reveals how asylum in Guatemala is partially a smoke screen to conceal the aim of keeping migrants away from the US border.

For the Guatemalan government, more refugees in Guatemala means more American financial investment. In the last fiscal year, bilateral, regional, and humanitarian assistance through the Department of State and USAID averaged $231.3 million per year.[xi] The sort of humanitarian pageantry that I encountered in the Petén also enables Guatemalan politicians to position the country as a haven of democracy, liberty, and universal rights. Yet, underneath the display of Guatemalan refugee protection, few migrants are interested in claiming asylum locally. That the numbers of migrants who actually claim asylum to Guatemala is very low speaks to the symbolic value of the humanitarian-securitisation spectacle. Such a scarcity of migrant resources is largely immaterial to the extraction of value. Rather, the imaginary of Guatemala's new asylum regime provides an assortment of politicians, NGO, corporate, and state contractors with opportunities to reap the benefits of a highly visible intervention.

The emergence of asylum frontiers depends on an extensive assemblage of state and non-state actors, including international organisations, governments, private companies, NGOs, and academic research institutes (Cabot, 2016; Franck, 2018; Morris, 2021a). In fact, the asylum industry, as I and others term it (McGuirk & Pine, 2022; Morris, 2019), is nothing short of gargantuan. Many of the familiar organisations I observed in Nauru and Jordan, such as the UNHCR, the Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, and the International Organization for Migration, expanded their operations to the Petén. These organisational leviathans, like the UNHCR, whose total expenditure in 2022 alone was $5.607 billion, grew to have a substantial presence locally. But alongside clear fiscal interests, many of these workforces come with humanitarian motivations. The imaginary of the refugee regime as a benevolent system that supports migrants in need is part of the 'affective economies' (Ahmed, 2004) of value extraction and generation that drives many people in this field. This abstract imaginary forms a crucial part of the assemblage that unfolds in new asylum frontiers.

The development of local refugee legal systems, bureaucracies, and resettlement services through to forms of cultural production, such as World Refugee Day Petén and Cities #WithRefugees Campaigns, all contribute to fostering asylum in new localities. In the Petén, international organisations, whose work centres on refugees, combine with newly developed Guatemalan organisations, including *El Refugio de la Niñez*, and state migration agencies to promote asylum locally and then provide various forms of material resources. In addition, the Guatemalan government set up a series of national institutions and laws in order to legally 'produce' more refugees locally, and so acquire US financial support. In 2019, Guatemala's National Migration Authority issued a 'Regulation on the Procedure for the Protection, Determination and Recognition of the Status of Refugees.' This regulation created the National Commission for Refugees (CONARE) as an interministerial advisory body to support the National Migration Authority in adjudicating migrants' asylum claims. Staffed with lawyers, social workers, and psychologists, the aim of this body is to adjudicate the asylum claims of migrants for Guatemala and make recommendations to the Guatemalan Migration Institute (*Instituto Guatemalteco de Migración* or IGM): a process described in the next section.

But doing so is challenging in a place radically transformed by settler colonial efforts. Guatemala holds its own recent refugee histories, which the Guatemalan government is attempting to navigate in building a national asylum regime. These dynamics are connected to decades of Spanish then U.S. imperialism and political economic interests. Indigenous Q'eqchi' (Guatemala's second-largest indigenous group at almost a million people) are long-standing inhabitants of the Petén, having been migrating there from Alta Verapaz for centuries (Grandia, 2012).[xii] During Guatemala's 'ten years of spring' (1944–1955), democratically elected President Jacobo Arbenz (1951–1954) initiated a 1952 land reform that gave land to over 100,000 landless peasants and their families (Jonas, 2000). Alleging efforts to stop communism's spread, the CIA sponsored a military coup in 1954 to oust the reformist president, and overturn the agrarian land reform. In actuality, this was done to protect private US business interests, in particular with the United Fruit Company (Colby, 2011). Meanwhile, the 36-year civil war (1960–1996) that followed led to the deaths or disappearances of 200,000 people, along with the displacement of over a million more. After experiencing the massacres of Guatemala's civil war, many ethnic Maya (in particular Q'eqchi') fled to the Petén to escape state violence and repeated loss of territory. Many were then driven into refugee situations in Mexico and the US, not returning until the late 1990s (Carr, 2008). Now, Q'eqchi' are dealing with repeated attempts to push them from the land. This includes state-led colonisation efforts from the 1960s, driven by coffee plantations and cattle ranches, as well as the creation of national parks that are taking over vast swaths of the Petén (Grandia, 2012; Ybarra, 2018). The institutional and structural racism of economic hardship and political and social instability continues to contribute to Maya out-migration (Morris, 2022). At the same time, the Guatemalan government is also dealing with record-breaking numbers of its citizens deported back from the US (Golash-Boza & Ceciliano-Novarro, 2019). These dynamics overlap in contradictory ways with the environmental changes and imaginaries promoted in Guatemala's asylum frontiers.

The next two sections turn to what Kikon (2019) terms 'living with resource frontiers' when looking at the entangled worlds of oil and coal mining on foothill residents in Northeast India. In the context of Guatemala, *living with* illustrates the conflicting social relations from asylum frontiering efforts. The development of Guatemala's national asylum regime creates tensions related to raw dynamics of refugeeness and return in the region. Excessive American policy interest in Central American migration also allows the Guatemalan government to sideline other types of im/mobilities that are seen as problematic for their image. In particular, this means Mayan civil war ref-

ugees and deported Guatemalan migrants, for whom there is little reintegration support. But these encounters also give rise to a circumscribed agency. In the Petén, migrants are invested with the promise of opportunity and entrepreneurship, utilising these framings to advance their own frontiers.

3. Living with Resource Frontiers in the Petén

Not long after World Refugee Day, I am sitting in a wooden open-air shelter in the dense tropical rainforest of the Mirador-Río Azul National Park in the Maya Biosphere Reserve: a 2.1-million-hectare reserve that encircles one-third of Guatemala's territory. Several park rangers are lying in hammocks, taking well-earned siestas after a morning spent collecting wood in the thick jungle heat. I am chatting with Miguel, one of the team's newest rangers. Originally from Honduras, Miguel is now working for the Fundaeco team as part of their new Empleos Verdes (Green Jobs) programme: a collaboration with UNHCR and the Guatemalan NGO, El *Refugio de la Niñez*. In the programme, Guatemalans together with Central American refugees – so far 70 refugees and an equal number of locals – are trained on environmental conservation and ecology and, eventually, employed as forest rangers in ecological reserves in the Petén. The refugee rangers programme – and employment initiatives for migrants and locals at large (particularly young people identified as potential migrants northward) – has received a significant boost of support in recent years from the US government, operating through UNHCR. The previous year, 17% of undocumented border crossers (279,033 people) were recorded from Guatemala: after Mexico and Honduras, the third most significant country of origin in the region (Pew Research Center, 2021). By funding Guatemala's asylum legal system and resettlement opportunities, such as Empleos Verdes, the U.S. attempts to encourage migrants to stay in southern regions.

Fundaeco's Empleos Verdes is just one of a number of employment initiatives available for migrants (largely from Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador) who have received successful protection claims through Guatemala's newly set up asylum system. In 2022, Guatemala recorded one of its highest numbers of asylum applications since the country established a national asylum system in 2001: 955 applications, but still incredibly low numbers in comparison to other regions around the world (UNHCR 2023). Several of the rangers at the El Mirador camp are refugees whose involvement is funded through UNHCR. The Empleos Verdes program is part of Turi-Integra: a MIRPS collaboration between UNHCR, the Guatemalan Ministry of Labor, and the Guatemalan Institute of Tourism. Local businesses in the tourism sector are encouraged to make jobs specifically available for migrants with Guatemalan refugee status. These efforts are all part of the racialised labour economy of 'putting refugees to work' characteristic of the modes of extractivism rife in the asylum regime (Frydenlund & Cullen Dunn, 2022; Martin & Tazzioli, 2023). Refugees are transformed into labour resources, signifiying a transitioning of refugee policy from emergency relief aid to economic development programs (Bardelli, 2018). As evidence of these steady transformations, several of the restaurants and cafes that ring the island of Flores are partially staffed by refugees from surrounding Central American countries.

Empleos Verdes is one such offering designed to provide employment for regional refugees. The programme has gained traction, lauded by Filippo Grandi, the High Commissioner of UNHCR. In his December 2021 visit to Guatemala, Grandi was specially toured through the Tikal archaeological site by a group of refugee rangers. "Guatemala is a country of origin, transit, destination and return. As a transit country, every year thousands of people cross the territory, but more and more people perceive that it

can also be a destination for those who have to flee violence and persecution," commented Grandi at the time. Grandi's visit to Tikal inadvertently points to tensions in Empleos Verdes. The Petén was long a place of refuge for Indigenous Q'eqchi', who were uprooted and hid in the jungle for years during the decades of civil war violence (Ybarra, 2018). However, the creation of protected parks in the 1990s, which Empleos Verdes now serves, drove many Maya from the land. That conservation programs have now attracted popular appeal for local refugee integration is a steady pattern of racialised dispossession in the region. Many of the resettlement initiatives available in the Petén are designed to support an elite tourist economy: pushing "the frontiers of commodification" (Devine, 2017, p. 638) into new spaces that reinforce racial and colonial legacies. Regional refugees like Miguel and low-waged Guatemalans (many Indigenous Maya) are tasked with maintaining national parks around the country that are visited by tourist elites. This work is physically and mentally demanding, requiring rangers to be away from their families and friends for days, often weeks, on end. In their efforts to put an end to forest fires and the occupation of park territories, some rangers I met had also experienced death threats from narcos and loggers. To evade the threats of powerful narco ranchers operating in the Maya Biosphere, several rangers obtained asylum from Guatemala to the US. That some rangers have obtained asylum from Guatemala, while others have received asylum for Guatemala is emblematic of the tensions that exist in the country more broadly.

The Guatemalan government has capitalised on US financial support, pushing to make Guatemala a more attractive destination than surrounding regions. The US has become notoriously difficult for making an asylum claim, including a virtual ban at the southern border. Asylum seekers are generally treated as suspect through grueling lengthy interviews (Haas, 2023). Asylum claims processing can take several years, often without authorisation to work.[xiii] Across the border in Mexico, migrants are usually required to await the results of their cases in the regional state – and sometimes even city – in which they claim asylum. My interlocutors reported that asylum seekers are sometimes deported for leaving that state without authorisation. Because of the overwhelming numbers of cases in southern border regions, such as Chiapas, migrants face challenges in accessing already strained basic services (Vega, 2021). Nearby countries such as Belize and Costa Rica have also steadily made claiming asylum a challenging process (Freier & Rodriguez, 2021). Asylum seekers face barriers to work and experience mandatory detention, unless they have submitted an asylum application within 14 days of arrival. Meanwhile in Guatemala, posters in popular migration routes visibilise the efforts to tempt migrants to claim asylum locally. UNHCR campaigns like 'Guatemala, Opens the Door to A New Beginning' attempt to promote asylum locally.[xiv] UNHCR mobile unit vans and boats advertising asylum plough across hard-to-access rivers and jungle roads in rural regions. Cultural events such as World Refugee Day have become annually promoted events.

Travelling to Guatemala is easy for nationals of most countries as visas are not required for the majority of foreign citizens. In Guatemala, migrants can then make an application verbally or in writing at any immigration checkpoint, including directly at IGM's Department for the Recognition of Refugee Status (*Departamento De Reconocimiento De Estatus De Refugiado* or DRER) in Guatemala City.[xv] This includes describing the situation that forced that individual to leave their home country. Asylum claimants are immediately placed under the status of temporary resident (*Estatus de Permanencia Provisional*), receiving documentation that provides them with access to social services. From the start, they can also work legally while awaiting the results of their applications: an uncommon practice in most Geneva Convention signatory states. In addition to a small monthly stipend, UNHCR covers asylum seekers' short-term accommodation and provides them with support to find employment. Two weeks after their formal request, applicants travel to Guatemala City for their interviews with the DRER. In what

I have described elsewhere as a process of 'intimate extraction' (Morris, 2023a), applicants must then detail why their left their country of origin and want to settle in Guatemala.[xvi] CONARE will later issue a recommendation on that individual's application. The asylum process itself takes a maximum of three months: generally, far less, given the low case numbers being processed by IGM. The success rate is high at 70-75% (compared to 42% in the US), granting refugee status to most applicants. In case of the rejection of a claim, there are also several avenues for appeal: first to IGM and then a judicial route through Guatemala's court system. Guatemala's legal framework also applies to a broader group of people than in other countries, including complementary protection extended to family members.[xvii] With a refugee visa, migrants can then easily work, open a bank account, and have access to health and education services. There are also grants available through UNHCR for starting up new business ventures.

Figure 4: *Departamento De Reconocimiento De Estatus De Refugiado* in Guatemala City, photograph by author.

Miguel is all too aware that the Guatemalan asylum system is designed to extract value from and keep migrants in the region. For him, embodiment in this capitalist labour frontier is mutually beneficial, even as it involved the tedious self-labour of making an asylum claim. Miguel was a farmer in the eastern rural region of Honduras. Watching many youths turn to gang participation, Miguel feared for the future and safety of his three young sons: a violence that, like in Guatemala, is also tied to histories of US imperialism (Pine, 2008). He tells me, "I didn't want to see my children go down the same path as so many of the other local boys. They start to target you if you don't join in. It was inevitable that my children would be caught up in that." With family in the Petén, Miguel decided to take matters into his own hands and move his family to Guatemala. For Miguel, part of the appeal of Guatemala's asylum frontier is the challenging transnational labour environment experienced between Central American countries. Tough laws across Central American countries prevent people in low-waged employment from easily working outside their country of citizenship. Under the Central American Agreement for Free Mobility (CA-4), citizens from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua can move across participating countries but without the right to employment, healthcare, and education. Several migrants I spoke with, like Miguel, while also having sufficient grounds for asylum, did so because they could not easily access a working visa otherwise. Without visa sponsorship from an employer, those in lower-wage or manual sectors (such as agriculture, construction, and service industries) faced long-winded applications for residence and work permits. In this quagmire of bureaucracy, applying for asylum is one means of living and working across borders.

Others said to me that Guatemala was not their destination but where they intended to save money before moving further northwards. For these individuals, working in Santa Elena under a temporary residence permit during the processing of their asylum claim can help generate finances for future movement. Yet, because of information sharing provisions across UNHCR and state agencies, the possibility of making an asylum claim to the US after having received it for Guatemala is likely limited. Even so, IGM officials

told me that many asylum seekers and refugees for Guatemala end up eventually moving elsewhere. Although there are no guarantees, some migrants believe, rightly or not, that having humanitarian legal documentation means not having to evade authorities on the way to the US border. And so, for those without recourse to start-up capital and who prefer to stay in the region, like Miguel, or at least bide their time before attempting to reach the US, receiving asylum in Guatemala can be an appealing option.

Non-governmental and intergovernmental agencies are central to this unique form of frontier capitalism focused on migrants claiming asylum. In the Petén, asylum externalisation is characterised by the involvement of larger refugee industry players such as the UNHCR, the Human Rights Defenders, Red Cross, and Doctors Without Borders. These familiar faces, who I encountered in other global regions as part of the mobile labour of the asylum industry (Morris, 2023a), combine with local NGOs and government agencies new to refugee work, such as El Refugio de la Niñez, Conamigua, and IGM. Through their industry engagement, these organisations contribute to the institutional development of asylum. This entails the steady proliferation of Migrants and Refugees Assistance Centers (known as CAPMiRs) across Guatemala through to the refugee-focused projects that I observed in the Petén. For UNHCR, there are pressing financial motivations to consider. In 2023, 96% of UNHCR Guatemala's $22.8 million government funding came from the US government. UNHCR staff I spoke with expressed these tensions in conversation. Some felt that an asylum system in Guatemala could be helpful in particular cases, such as gang and gender-based violence or police abuse. However, others described these forms of brutality as easily following migrants across borders. Gangs span state territories (including many originating in the US), they continued, and Guatemala itself has systemic problems with gender-based violence.[xviii] Nor is Guatemala's economic and demographic circumstances positioned to accept large numbers of refugees. One of my UNHCR interlocutors slyly remarked that agreeing to US directives enabled them to fund other "more beneficial" projects locally, such as a childcare center in Santa Elena for local and refugee families. Organisationally, this representative continued, it is in their interests to enhance Guatemala's national asylum regime, rather than labour migration pathways more generally. Refugees are the major source of revenue for UNHCR and other refugee sector agencies. Branching out beyond their market niche could dilute their mandate. But, as the next section shows, this refugees as resource focus has generated tensions locally related to Guatemala's raw dynamics of refugeeness and return.

4. Frontier Frictions in the Petén

Not long after World Refugee Day, I walk through the fruit and vegetable market in the main town of Santa Elena, just across the causeway from Flores. Tropical fruits like papayas, rambutans, and zapotes are piled high on ramshackle market stalls. The slap of corn tortillas shaped between street vendors' palms beckons the lunchtime crowds for freshly made quesadillas. As I select papayas for the weekend, I strike up a conversation with the stall's vendor, Estella, about my research. Estella has much to say on the asylum campaigns that are visibly evident across the town. Like many of the market workers, Estella is Maya Q'eqchi'. Like so many middle to older aged Maya, she also spent years in exile as a refugee. Unprompted, Estella animatedly describes her memories of being a young girl when the civil war broke out. Estella and her family first settled in the Petén to escape state violence and repeated loss of territory. But revolutionary guerilla forces also used the Petén's northern rainforests to hide from the Guatemalan army. Like other parts of Guatemala, they were drawn into the conflict against their will. The 'scorched earth campaign,' advanced by General Rios Montt, led to over 200,000 deaths, while close to a million people were displaced (CEH, 1999). Widespread village-level massacres occurred in overwhelmingly Mayan regions – over 80% of

those killed were Indigenous Maya. Caught in the gunfire between guerrilla forces, Estella and her family eventually crossed the border to Mexico in the 1980s in hopes of survival. "Most of my life, I was in fear of the military finding my family," she says. "We moved between refugee camps in Mexico, almost every year it felt like. Chiapas, Campeche, Quintana Roo," she slowly counts the different states on her fingers. "We never knew if the Mexican government was on our side or if we might be handed over to the Guatemalan army. The Guatemalan army was always coming into Mexico, looking for guerrilla soldiers in the camps. We knew that if they found us, we would be killed without any mercy, we'd seen this happen to others." After nearly a decade living in different refugee camps in southern Mexico, she eventually returned to the Petén as a middle-aged woman in 1995, not long after the peace process negotiations.

All those years spent living in exile in refugee camps before returning the Petén, gives Estella pause when discussing the new refugee programs. "It confuses me. These people aren't refugees. They haven't been through the kind of suffering we have," she says. "Many Maya never got their land back and still live as refugees in Guatemala. They have all these programs for the new refugees, and make such a big deal about them, I've heard they get a month of accommodation, but we Maya experience so much inequality that has never been resolved." The concerns that Estella expresses are unsurprising: Guatemala still has one of the most unequal systems of land tenure in the world. Maya like Estella persevere every day, with recent genocidal histories still fresh in their mind. Now, many face forms of economic exclusion perpetuated by structural racism (Ajcalón Choy et al., 2020). Palm oil plantations, taking over great swaths of northeastern Guatemala that are home to Q'eqchi' communities, are continuing to fuel displacement. So too, environmental changes are impacting on local agricultural yields, pushing some farmers to forsake their lands to find livelihoods opportunities elsewhere. For some, this means making the long journey northward through Mexico to the US.

To this day, Guatemala has the second highest number of people deported from the US after Mexico. More than 300,000 migrants were returned from Mexico and the US back to Guatemala between 2019 and 2022 (IOM, 2023). During my fieldwork, these numbers increased, as the Mexican government was surreptitiously bussing migrants from Guatemala and Honduras to the Guatemalan border of El Ceibo. I met several migrants who had been subject to those covert forced deportations. Indeed, at large, most Guatemalans I spoke with had a migration story to tell in the face of difficult local conditions: of dangerous journeys spent hiding in trucks underneath fruits, vegetables, and other produce; of the going rate to make it through Mexico and across the US border. Many of these residents struggle to provide for their families, having experienced poverty, in some cases violence, and in the past armed conflict (Denny et al., 2024). With these overlapping experiences of refugeeness, economic instability, and return locally, it is unsurprising that tensions exist around the Petén's asylum frontier, such as those voiced by Estella. It is for these very reasons that the Guatemalan government treads gently around publicly calling resettled regional migrants 'refugees.' Some officials I spoke with at Guatemala City's IGM emphasised avoiding the term 'refugees.' Not only does it evoke traumatic memories for many, but the government does not want public perceptions that foreign refugees are preferentially treated.

The development of Guatemala's asylum regime also clashes with the inability of many Guatemalans to access meaningful livelihood opportunities locally. Returned Guatemalan migrants face little reintegration support when back in the country, such as employment assistance (Roldán Andrade, 2014). Many struggle to find jobs upon return and apply the skills they have acquired while abroad. On one occasion, I met an older Guatemalan in Flores, who had been deported from the Mexico-US border. He was left without access to food or shelter, with the local *Centro de Migrantes* only supporting foreign migrants, and mostly Hondurans. One local Guatemalan government official

recognised these concerns, continuing, "It is a balance of not angering local populations. Making sure to develop programs that also benefit locals. So that the local community sees refugees as drivers of development." A similar narrative was also echoed by UNHCR representatives I spoke with in the Petén: part of a trend towards 'refugee entrepreneurism,' where refugees are explicitly marketed as a 'resource' (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; Turner, 2020). But the emphasis on refugees as harbingers of economic prosperity, either through their labour power or through the financial support their presence engenders, glosses over the structural causes that accounts for people's displacement. As Nora Bardelli (2018) argues, the focus on labour and capital investment frames the 'solution' to displacement in developmental and market-based terms. Displacement has become "a matter of access to the job market rather than a political question about inequalities, exclusion, conflict, exploitation, [and] assymetrical power relations" (Bardelli, 2018, p. 55).

Yet for the Guatemalan government, foreign asylum seekers and refugees hold political economic value. Guatemalan politicians strategically utilise this migration governance arrangement to offset stereotypes of dangerous conditions locally, attract humanitarian investment, and US development support. Guatemala still retains an image of civil war and present-day violence. Asserting themselves as a place of refugee resettlement is an attempt to cultivate their legitimacy and image at home and abroad. In the Petén, it is also a way for the local government to affirm their sovereignty in a context of historical tensions between bordering Belize and Mexico.[xix] Profit is made from human bodies – both by encouraging regional migrants to claim asylum locally and through the local labour that refugees provide. This is a different form of what Kaushik Sunder Rajan et al. (2012) call the 'capitalisation of life.' The Guatemalan government profits off the presence of refugees within its borders, wherein migrants are given financial value in their legal classification as refugees. Migrants also contribute to flows of money and systems of value through their labour power and engagement in the local economy. As one IGM representative pointed out to me in conversation, the Guatemalan government has a long history of strategically engaging with the US on migration. More refugees in Guatemala means more American financial investment, as does consenting to increased border enforcement locally.

But even as refugees are imagined as new frontiers of market capitalism, asylum frontiers also come with immense *moral* value. For several IGM representatives I spoke with, moral considerations play a substantial role in their desire to support the development of a local asylum regime. One described running clothes and food drives for asylum seeker families in Guatemala City. They emphasised the moral value of this regime in supporting those in need from surrounding regions. These moral values embedded in the international refugee system speak to the 'resource politics' rendered visible in asylum frontiers: a term commonly used by political ecologists to describe contestations over access, use and control of resources (Watts & Peluso, 2013). Although driven with moral conviction, this narrative of welcome – what Krista Johnston (2022) refers to as 'settler care' when examining the arrival of Syrian refugees to Winnipeg, Canada vis-à-vis long-standing Indigenous communities – sits in uneasy contrast to the ongoing exclusions experienced by Maya across the country. By prioritising refugees, the Guatemalan government can gloss over the immense socio-economic disparities experienced by many Indigenous Maya, who are not afforded dominance in the settler colonial order of Guatemala's *ladino*-majority elite.[xx]

These resource politics also extend to larger contestations over access to and control over refugees as resources. As I found in Nauru, many western solidarity activists and media spotlight Guatemala as a site of extreme human rights abuse, "not safe for refugees ... where thousands of people are desperately ... fleeing violence and persecution

... [and] face extremely high rates of murder" (Human Rights First, 2019). Such humanitarian narratives valorise the refugee regime as a racialised regime of white care (Picozza, 2022), where advocates vie over global access to, control over and use of refugees. In these struggles for resource control and ownership, largely white liberal westerners – not people of colour or Global South nations – are represented as the rightful rescuers of Black and Brown refugees. The figure of the refugee becomes a subject of contestation because of its value-generating potential. Ironically, such moralising and racialised representations only boost the values that contributes to the development of asylum frontiers (Morris, 2019). When I asked IGM representatives why enhance Guatemala's asylum regime and not labour migration more generally, they pointed to the morality of developing such an arrangement regionally. Asylum, they continued, also serves a governance function in that it allows the Guatemalan government to better control incoming migrant numbers. Individuals are scrutinised through humanitarian classifications of vulnerability to identify who is most in need.[xxi] This veritable system of resource governance is easily advanced because of the institutionalised fabric of the refugee industry. Established refugee industry knowledge making and mobile labour forces of personnel advances asylum into new frontiers.

Yet, there are powerful economic incentives for both the Guatemalan and US governments to facilitate legal labour migration. In 2023, remittances to Guatemala totaled a record $20 billion, mainly from the US, which comprises almost 20% of the country's entire economy (World Bank, 2023). For the American government, Guatemalan labour and skills – often unfairly low waged – are also indispensable to the US and global economy (Frydenlund & Cullen Dunn, 2022). Nonetheless, despite the demand for jobs abroad, opportunities for many Guatemalans (especially Indigenous Maya) to move and earn money abroad through legal migration pathways are limited. The emphasis on preventing irregular migration yet promoting asylum protection detracts from these lived realities, where many people see irregular migration as less dangerous than the status quo. And indeed, underneath their surface differences, these practices of border enforcement are shaped by a common set of forces grounded in what Mezzadra and Neilson (2019) term the 'operations of capital': a massive global assemblage of extraction, finance, logistics, state and non-state power. Refugee industry agencies continuously invest in asylum expansion, which engenders types of spaces such as in the Petén – that of asylum frontiers. The development of specialist mobile workforces trained in refugee status determination and resettlement through to cultural propaganda on the benevolence of asylum enables the movement of resource production assemblages across frontiers. These extractive frontiers quite often proceed apace, ignoring previous residents, in ways that correlate strongly with processes of wild extraction and destruction characteristic of resource frontiers at large.

5.   Conclusion

Political ecology has long examined questions of natural resource extraction and the rapid transformation of remotes spaces into often socially and ecologically destructive production sites. Forest and agrarian spaces are imagined as places with vacant lands open for settlement and abundant natural resources. More recently, migration studies has paid attention to accumulation practices grounded on human (im)mobility, which can also have devastating consequences. By bringing these insights together, this article demonstrates how political economy is crucial for understanding the formation of southern migration policies. The resources that drove Guatemalan and imperial interests in the Petén – coffee, palm oil production, oil extraction, and biodiversity – revolve around questions of frontier-making. Here, I have shown how frontier practices of accumulation centre on the bodies of migrants too, in their classification as refugees. Migrants are labelled and disciplined as refugees under material regimes of practice

and control. States leverage their position as host states of displaced communities, extracting revenue from other states for maintaining migrant groups within their borders on the basis of ascribing prices to refugee bodies (Morris, 2023c). However, the effectiveness of this is not always realised in practice. Migrants potentialise the logic of commodity in their self-appreciation as capital in ways that are related to their labour power and fulfilling their onwards goals. This system of unfree labour occurs in a context where racial, classed, gendered, and ethnic biases structure how people can move across borders and their reception in what Aihwa Ong (1999) terms 'graduated sovereignty.'

The Petén's new kind of frontier-making is entangled within a massive global assemblage comprised of diverse actors and agents. But rather than painting a homogenising picture of border externalisation policies, this article foregrounds the political and social heterogeneity of this geographical area. The asylum frontiers that this article details in the Petén rub up against continued dynamics of local displacement and return. Frontier extraction, political ecologists show, often creates fractured ecologies. These state-sanctioned practices advance without regard to Indigenous peoples or migrants' aspirations – making the extractive frontiers here comparable to Tsing's extractive Bornean frontier. What we need to do in migration studies is consider more critically the economies and ecologies that take shape when migrants are the resource. It is not only non-humans that result in the reworking of frontier regions but also mobile human life in relation to demands for economic development. We are grappling with very different frontier moments, where western governments and southern elites are pushing border-making into new contexts. Novel socio-economic practices are generated in often remote areas as asylum systems are cropping up where once other forms of colonial extraction dominated (Morris, 2021b). Understanding these spaces as resource frontiers spurs a mode of engagement that makes visible how asylum constitutes a frontier of market capitalism (Brankamp et al., 2023). Concerns from refugee solidarity advocates surrounding the erosion or devolution of western asylum belie how this hyper-extractive system is a method of border control. The ways that asylum sits alongside other practices of migration deterrence in the Petén compels such understandings. The capitalist appropriation of refugee bodies is also contingent on mobilising imaginaries of white western salvationalism (Pallister-Wilkins, 2021). These ideological drivers of asylum marketisation contribute to the material generation of new asylum frontiers. In many respects, the Petén is still a wildcat frontier characterised by the dispossession of marginalised subjects. But frontiers can throw up alternatives, suggesting the importance of thinking beyond asylum and its material and discursive dimensions. Towards that end, chronicling the frictions produced in emergent asylum frontiers, as well as why migrants and residents are engaged in these resource-making projects, offers transformative possibilities for moving beyond asylum.

6. Endnotes

[i] UNHCR is known by the acronym ACNUR in Spanish-speaking countries. However, in this article I use their English acronym UNHCR as it is globally recognisable.

[ii] In Guatemala, the term Maya refers to over 22 diverse sociolinguistic groups, who collectively comprise approximately 60% of the population. There are also other Maya groups across Meso-America including in neighbouring Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras. Although 'Maya' is a homogenising umbrella term that fails to capture the cultural nuances of different groups, identifying as Maya is a way to resist neo-colonial erasure, reaffirm one's heritage and expose the arbitrariness of international border-making. See Lopez Casertano (2022) for an excellent discussion into Mayan experiences in contemporary Guatemala or *Iximulew* ('land of corn').

[iii] A number of cities across Mexico, Central and South America have elected to take part in UNHCR's Cities of Solidarity initiative, including nine cities/departments in Guatemala. See Morris (2021a) for a discussion into marketing methodologies used by UNHCR to 'sell' refugees to new audiences. Yet, as Crawley and Skleparis (2018) argue, the focus on 'refugees not migrants' habitually leads to the exclusion of many people.

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