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For the Future of the Past in Border Studies: A Plea for Community Archiving

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This essay is part of the Special Section, ***Border Studies: Past, Present, and Future****, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Association for Borderlands Studies.*

Introduction

This research note advocates for the establishment of community archives within the field of border studies. It highlights the necessity of preserving diverse materials to document the rich and varied experiences of border scholars. The article discusses the current state of archival practices within the Association of Borderlands Studies (ABS) and emphasizes the importance of community involvement in archiving efforts to address inequalities and ensure comprehensive historical documentation for future research.

The Association of Borderlands Studies, soon to celebrate its 50th anniversary, lacks a formal archive. Community archives, defined by Michelle Caswell (2021) as collections of materials gathered and controlled by community members, offer a solution to this gap. These archives empower communities to document and share their histories on their own terms, addressing power imbalances inherent in traditional archival practices.

The Current State of ABS Archival Practices

The ABS has made initial efforts to map its diverse materials, including the Border Thinkers Project led by Francisco Lara Valencia and past conference programs stored in an online Zotero folder. However, these efforts remain fragmented and lack a cohesive strategy. For instance, the Second ABS World Conference archive was sent to the University of Vienna but remains uninventoried and inaccessible online. In contrast, the Citizen Science Project "What Does a Border Mean to You?" made 80 interviews available in open access on the platforms Zenodo (zenodo.org) and PHAIDRA (https://phaidra.univie.ac.at), highlighting the potential for digital archiving.

Challenges and Opportunities in Community Archiving

The ABS faces unique challenges due to its transnational and decentralized nature. Traditional archives, with their national and institutional focus, do not automatically accommodate the needs of a global organization like the ABS. Additionally, there is a growing distrust in the institutions of liberal democracies, including archives (Hudson 2025).

The digital turn has revolutionized community archiving, providing spaces for communities to address their past underrepresentation in institutional archives. Community archives can ensure that diverse voices are preserved. For the ABS, this could mean creating a data collection that includes oral history interviews, printed materials, and born-digital content.

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Proposed Archival Strategies for the ABS

1. **Oral History Interviews**: Building on the work of Francisco Lara Valencia, the ABS could conduct interviews with retiring members. This approach is similar to the exit interview conducted with Randy Widdis at the University of Luxembourg (Venken 2020).

2. **Diverse Materials**: The ABS could gather both digital and analog materials, including social media content, photographs from meetings, and printed documents. The preservation of digital content, such as WhatsApp and Facebook group discussions, is an exciting opportunity to avoid the loss of valuable historical data.

3. **Addressing Biases**: The ABS archive should represent a multiplicity of viewpoints. This includes addressing gender biases and incorporating insights from radical feminist and LGBTQ+ community archiving initiatives. The Global Indigenous Data Alliance's metadata standards for preservation can guide the effort (Carroll et al. 2020).

4. **Multilingual Considerations**: As a multilingual community, the ABS must address the importance of preserving materials in different languages. This ensures that its archive is accessible and representative of the diverse linguistic backgrounds of its members.

Data Culture and Metadata Standards

Data are part of our culture, and it is crucial to consider how to create and share this data for the future. This implies agreeing on the metadata to gather and recognizing that biases are inevitable. The ABS community can learn to gather and govern data collectively. Recent scholarship, for example, emphasizes the importance of data preparation as an integral part of research. This stage should not be delegated to student assistants but treated as a shared stewardship responsibility (Lemercier and Zalc 2021). The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) offers new possibilities for data structuring. For example, AI can assist in creating initial datasets from diverse sources, which can be particularly useful for large collections, such as the ten years of documents from the Center of Border Studies at the University of the Greater Region (Roose 2025).

Metadata standards for an interdisciplinary community like the ABS should be developed collaboratively. This process, akin to the work being done by Ukrainian scholars documenting the ongoing war, involves dialogue among archivists, librarians, and researchers. Lessons can also be learned from the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure project (https://portal.ehri-project.eu), which provides a model for developing metadata standards that transcend individual disciplines.

Bringing an Historian In: The Importance of Context

Historians emphasize the importance of context in archival materials. Documents collected for future historical study must include information about the ways data were collected and digitally enriched. This motivates historians to participate in the development of community archives. While historians are traditionally wary of activist activities, moments of crisis or opportunity—such as the ABS's 50th anniversary—can prompt them to engage in community archiving (it has at least triggered me). Although sharing authority in co-designing a community archive with members of the community is a challenge for historians, recent examples of Ukrainian researchers documenting their experiences highlight the scholarly value of such an effort (Otrishchenko, Kharchenko, and Shevchenko 2025).

Conclusion

The establishment of a community archive for the ABS is, in my view, not just a necessity but an opportunity to create a rich, diverse, and accessible repository on the practices of border scholars. By involving the ABS community in the archiving process, the ABS can ensure that the history of its association, as well as border communities more broadly, is documented and preserved for future research. The digital turn offers unprecedented opportunities for community archiving, and the ABS could seize this moment to build an archive that reflects its transnational and decentralized nature.

Creating a position for an ABS community archivist, comparable to the Journal of Borderland Studies editor-in-chief, would provide the expertise needed for this endeavour. Developing a strategy and securing a budget are essential first steps. Organizing community archiving panels at ABS annual conferences, such as the roundtable moderated by Xavier Oliveras-Gonzalez at the 2025 conference in Seattle, could further support this effort.

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