ESSAY
SPECIAL SECTION

Borders in Globalization Review
Volume 7, Issue 2 (Spring & Summer 2026): 54–55
https://doi.org/10.18357/big_r72202622723

From Border Lines to Border Composites: Toward Complex Border Ontologies

Christian Wille

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

Over the past decades, border studies has undergone a remarkable transformation. What was once a relatively clearly delimited field of research within political geography and international relations has evolved into an interdisciplinary, theoretically plural, and methodologically open field. Borders are no longer understood primarily as fixed territorial lines of state sovereignty, but increasingly as social and cultural processes. While this development has been widely described, considerably less systematic attention has been paid to the ontological shift it implies.

From the Bordering Turn to the Composite Shift

I argue that border studies is currently undergoing a conceptual transformation that I describe as a *composite shift*, building upon the bordering turn (van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002). Whereas the bordering turn reformulated borders as both products and producers of social practices, the composite shift foregrounds the tendency to increasingly conceptualize bordering processes as relational and partly dynamic composites.

For a long time, border studies was grounded in a linear ontology of the border. Even where borders were understood as dynamic, the line frequently persisted as an implicit reference point in scholarly reflection. Since at least the 2000s, however, this conception has come under growing pressure. Globalization, digital control technologies, new mobility regimes, transnational networks, and postcolonial perspectives have demonstrated that borders no longer operate (exclusively) at territorial edges. Rather, they diffuse beyond territorial margins, materialize within data infrastructures, become operative in airports, databases, urban spaces, and follow people as embodied and mobile border regimes.

Border studies has responded to these developments and observations by developing new approaches. Concepts such as *borderscapes* (Brambilla 2015), *assemblages* (Sohn 2016), *bordertextures* (Weier et al. 2018), *border complexities* (Wille 2024), or *ethnographic border regime analysis* (Hess and Schmidt-Sembdner 2021) represent attempts to conceptualize borders as (dynamic) composites. What these approaches share is the assumption that borders consist of a multiplicity of heterogeneous elements: practices, discourses, technologies, bodies, and more, which are interconnected and may become effective as borders through their specific and variable constellations. This ontological shift can be described as a *composite shift*: a movement away from the (processual) border as a line towards bordering processes as relational composites that are not themselves the border, but rather performatively bring borders into being. Borders are therefore no longer conceived as prior to their performative enactments.

Borders as Relational Composites

The development outlined above both emerges from and contributes to several recent trends within border studies. First, the composite shift continues the movement from borders as lines toward borders as processes.

Christian Wille, University of Luxembourg

Creative Commons
CC-BY-NC 4.0

The analytical focus here has shifted from territorial demarcations to dynamic bordering processes that are spatially and scalarly distributed, while operating in mobile and selective ways.

Second, the composite shift integrates the increasing interdisciplinarity of border studies. The move toward powerful composites, often described as regimes or formations, has sensitized the field and opened it to cultural studies, anthropology, media studies, literary studies, and the sociology of technology, among other perspectives. Borders as relational composites can scarcely be explained through a singular disciplinary logic.

Third, the composite shift responds to the growing attention within border studies to everyday practices, affects, and subjectivities. Borders understood as composites bring into view not only state institutions but also their entanglements with subjects' experiences, emotions, bodies, and perceptions. Borders thus no longer appear merely as techniques of control and sorting, but also as lived, embodied, remembered, or imagined phenomena.

Fourth, the composite shift helps to make sense of the contemporary simultaneity of debordering and rebordering. The resurgence of territorial walls, nationalist sovereignty discourses, and geopolitical conflicts does not signify a return to simplistic linear borders. Rather, polymorphic composites emerge in which physical barriers, algorithmic governance, biometric control, and affective mobilization become intertwined. Their powerful interplay is characteristic of contemporary borders and can be grasped through the idea of relational composites.

Fifth, the composite shift incorporates the growing significance of technologies within bordering processes. Smart borders, biometric border regimes, AI-supported filtering techniques, and digital surveillance infrastructures demonstrate that borders are no longer organized solely territorially but operate within socio-technical regimes that become performatively effective.

Finally, the composite shift reflects another development: Border studies has moved beyond the search for a shared grand theory and instead cultivates a hybrid and plural field of research. The strength of border studies, therefore, lies less in theoretical-conceptual coherence than in its capacity to bring together diverse perspectives on borders in analytically productive ways.

Against this background, the composite shift can be understood both as a reaction to and a continuation of current trends within border studies. It does not describe a complete replacement of earlier understandings of borders, but rather an expanded (and sharpened) analytical-conceptual lens that rejects rigid line-thinking in favour of dynamic relational thinking.

Towards Complex Border Ontologies

The future of border studies may therefore lie less in the further differentiation of subfields than in the question of how the polymorphic elements of bordering processes can be conceptualized together, how such relational composites "work," and how they can be investigated in adequate ways. The emerging discourse on complex borders (Gerst et al. 2018) or *border complexities* (Wille 2024) already indicates a sensitivity within border studies to questions of relationality, non-linearity, and emergence. However, a broader debate on how borders can actually be analyzed as complex composites is only beginning to emerge (Wille and Gerst 2026).

The composite shift, therefore, points not only to an ontological transformation within border studies. It may also mark the beginning of a complexity-sensitive border research agenda that understands the border as an emergent and contingent effect of complex relational composites.

Works Cited

Brambilla, Chiara. 2015. "Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept." *Geopolitics* 20 (1): 14–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2014.884561

Gerst, Dominik, Maria Klessmann, Hannes Krämer, Mitja Sienknecht, and Peter Ulrich. 2018. "Komplexe Grenzen. Aktuelle Perspektiven der Grenzforschung." *Berliner Debatte Initial* 29 (1): 3–11.

Hess, Sabine, and Matthias Schmidt-Sembdner. 2021. "Grenze als Konfliktzone—Perspektiven der Grenzregimeforschung. Grenzforschung." In *Handbuch für Wissenschaft und Studium*, edited by Dominik Gerst, Maria Klessmann, and Hannes Krämer, 190–205. Baden-Baden: Nomos. https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845295305-190

Wille, Christian. 2024. "Border Complexities. Outlines and Perspectives of a Complexity Shift in Border Studies." In *Border Complexities and Logics of Dis/Order*, edited by Christian Wille, Carolin Grandits-Leutloff, Falk Bretschneider, Sylvie Grimm-Hamen, and Hedwig Wagner, 31–56. Baden-Baden: Nomos. https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748922292-31

Sohn, Christophe. 2016. "Navigating Borders' Multiplicity: The Critical Potential of Assemblage." *Area* 48 (2): 183–189. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12248

Van Houtum, Henk and Ton van Naerssen. 2002. "Bordering, Ordering and Othering." *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 93 (2): 125–136. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9663.00189

Weier, Sebastian, Astrid M. Fellner, Joachim Frenk, Daniel Kazmaier, Eva Michely, Christoph Vatter, Romana Weiershausen, and Christian Wille. 2018. "Bordertexturen als transdisziplinärer Ansatz zur Untersuchung von Grenzen. Ein Werkstattbericht." *Berliner Debatte Initial* 29 (1): 73–83.

Wille, Christian and Dominik Gerst. 2026. "Rethinking Complexity in Border Studies." *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, Published online March 2026. https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2026.2633123.