ESSAY
SPECIAL SECTION

Borders in Globalization Review
Volume 7, Issue 2 (Spring & Summer 2026): 38–40
https://doi.org/10.18357/big_r72202622796

Texturing the Border as a Fractured Locus: The Futures of Cultural Border Studies

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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.*

The 50th anniversary of the Association for Borderlands Studies (ABS) provides an occasion to revisit a familiar narrative: that of Border Studies as a disciplinary success story, emerging from a small group of political geographers in the 1960s and 1970s and developing into a vibrant, interdisciplinary domain over the past fifty years. While this genealogy is undoubtedly important and has been highly influential, particularly within political geography, it represents only one among several possible points of departure. Framing border studies primarily through this lineage risks narrowing the field's intellectual horizon and underrepresenting other, equally formative traditions. In particular, it can obscure the extent to which border studies has also been shaped by scholars working from different positionalities, disciplines, and epistemic traditions, including those rooted in cultural inquiry and in borderland experiences themselves.

While this trajectory has clearly played an important role, it can sometimes underrepresent the extent to which borders, both as lived realities and as objects and sites of knowledge (production), have also been theorized, narrated, and contested from within borderlands contexts themselves. In this regard, the contributions of Chicano/a/x studies, alongside cultural, feminist, queer, postcolonial, and decolonial scholarship, have been particularly significant. Rather than simply adding further perspectives, these traditions have broadened and shaped our understanding of what borders are, how they are experienced, and how they could/should be studied.

Chicano/a/x studies, in particular, represents a paradigmatic shift. Rather than treating the border as a static line or a neutral object of analysis, it foregrounds the voices, experiences, and epistemologies emerging from the borderlands. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987, 6) remains a foundational intervention in this regard, famously conceptualizing the border as "una herida abierta," not simply a site of division, but of embodied pain, creativity, and transformation, which simultaneously becomes productive as "the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country, a border culture" (1987, 25). This work did not merely make border subjects visible; it re-centred them as producers of knowledge. In doing so, it challenged the externalizing gaze that had often reduced borders to objects of study rather than recognizing them as agents in their own right.

My own approach to border studies is rooted in these traditions. Drawing on cultural border studies and the concept of bordertexturing (Wille, Fellner, and Nossem, forthcoming), I understand borders as dynamic, entangled formations, woven from discursive, material, affective, and experiential threads. Borders are not merely "there"; they are continuously produced through practices of meaning-making, representation, and interaction. This perspective resonates with broader shifts in the field toward understanding borders as processes rather than fixed entities. However, it also pushes further by insisting that these processes cannot be adequately captured through frameworks that seek coherence, systematization, or disciplinary closure.

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The concept of bordertexturing offers an alternative epistemic posture. It invites us to approach borders as layered and relational, resisting reduction to singular explanatory logics. Borders are considered textured: they carry histories, emotions, and contradictions that cannot be flattened into data points or simplified abstract models, and, as having texture, point to their materiality and to their real-life power and effects for those who cross or live (in) them. Bordertexturing thus foregrounds the density of lived and sensed experience and insists on the importance of language, discourses, as well as experiences and sense-ability in the production of border knowledge.

Building on this, and following María Lugones, I propose to conceptualize the border as a "fractured locus" (2010, 748ff). A fractured locus is a site of epistemic multiplicity that holds contradiction without resolving it. It enables partial connections rather than unified frameworks and foregrounds resistance, ambiguity, and relationality. Crucially, a fractured locus refuses the urge to smooth over the discontinuities that characterize border contexts, allowing us to account for intersecting histories, asymmetrical power relations, hybrid forms of subjectivity, and even the simultaneity of contradicting logics. Thinking of the border as a fractured locus also entails a shift in how we understand knowledge production itself. It requires an analytical stance grounded in situated knowledges (cf. Haraway 1988), relational thinking (cf. Glissant 1990), and an ethics of methodological unfinalizability. This stance stands in sharp contrast to approaches that seek to stabilize borders as objects of analysis or to subsume them under totalizing theoretical frameworks. Importantly, it also counters the persistent tendency within parts of (cross-)border studies to treat the border as a passive setting, as a backdrop against which social, political, or economic processes unfold. Such perspectives risk erasing both the voices emerging from borderlands and the agency of the border itself as a meaning-generating force.

This critique becomes even more urgent in the current global context. We are living in a moment marked by intensifying geopolitical conflicts, economic inequalities, and technological transformations, including the rise of algorithmic governance and what might be described as data colonialism (Couldry and Mejias 2018). These dynamics are producing new configurations of borders as more dispersed, more infrastructural, and increasingly embedded in digital systems. At the same time, they generate a pervasive sense of global fracturedness: a world that is simultaneously hyper-connected and deeply divided.

In this context, data-driven and technocratic approaches to borders often prove insufficient. While they offer tools for managing complexity, they frequently do so by disentangling and thus simplifying it, thus reducing lived experiences to quantifiable metrics and overlooking the affective, embodied, and relational dimensions of borders. The growing reliance on algorithm-induced decision-making, especially algorithmically-modeled policymaking, further intensifies this problem, as it introduces new forms of opacity and power asymmetry into border regimes.

Against this backdrop, humanities-driven approaches become not only relevant but necessary. Cultural studies, gender and queer studies, as well as post-/decolonial frameworks, provide tools for engaging with ambiguity, contradiction, and meaning-making in power-laden contexts. They foreground the importance of representation, discourse, and also embodiment, enabling us to understand how borders are experienced and contested in everyday life. Moreover, with large shares of knowledge production becoming increasingly automated, the value of humanistic inquiry, such as its attention to nuance, context, interpretation, and sense-ability is heightened.

The future of border studies, I argue, lies in embracing this shift. Rather than reinforcing narrow genealogies or disciplinary claims to authority, the field must acknowledge its multiple, entangled origins and ongoing struggles over meaning and power. Concepts such as bordertexturing offer ways of navigating this complexity, foregrounding the relational, affective, and epistemically plural nature of borders.

In a fractured global landscape, the task is not to produce neat, unified theories but to develop methodologies capable of engaging with complexity. This entails recognizing borders not as objects of analysis, but as dynamic, contested, and agential compo-sites of world-making. It also requires a commitment to amplifying voices from the borderlands and to rethinking the very terms under which knowledge about borders is produced.

Only through such a reorientation can border studies move beyond some of its inherited constraints and more fully account for the richness, urgency, and political stakes of borders in the present.

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