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Beyond Fifty Years: Expanding the Temporal and Epistemic Horizons of 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 of Borderland Studies (ABS) marks an important milestone in the development of border studies as a recognized field of inquiry. Over the past five decades, the ABS has played a crucial role in institutionalizing border research, fostering interdisciplinary dialogue, and creating a global community of scholars. This anniversary, however, invites not only celebration but also reflection on the broader temporal and epistemic horizons of border studies. My brief intervention argues that while the ABS represents fifty years of institutional development, the intellectual and conceptual history of border studies extends much further back. Bringing a cultural studies perspective to this discussion allows us to see border studies as an open-ended paradigm whose past predates its institutionalization and whose future lies in further embracing its interdisciplinary and epistemic plurality.

The Past: Expanding the Genealogies of Border Studies

The ABS has been central in shaping border studies as an identifiable field. Yet, celebrating fifty years of the ABS should not suggest that border studies itself is only fifty years old. Rather, its institutionalization represents only one strand within a longer and more heterogeneous intellectual genealogy, as cultural border studies (Fellner and Wille 2025), in particular, demonstrate through its sustained engagement with borders as cultural, symbolic, and epistemic formations that both precede and exceed the association's history. Most notably, Chicanx studies must be recognized as a foundational site for theorizing the border as a paradigm rather than merely an object of study. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (2012; originally published 1987) constitutes a decisive epistemological intervention in this regard. Anzaldúa reconceptualizes the US–Mexico border not simply as a geopolitical divide, but as an "open wound" (6) where multiple worlds intersect, producing hybrid identities, conflicting epistemologies, and new forms of subjectivity. Her notion of mestiza consciousness articulates a mode of thinking that emerges precisely from inhabiting contradiction, ambiguity, and in-betweenness.

From this perspective, the border emerges as an epistemic site, a locus of knowledge production. Chicanx, postcolonial, and decolonial frameworks are foundational here, shifting attention from borders as lines to borders as lived, embodied, and relational processes shaped by experience, narrativity, and positionality. This epistemic reorientation also informs recent developments in cultural border studies. The concept of bordertexturing (Wille, Fellner, and Nossem forthcoming), for instance, draws on Anzaldúa's writing-as-weaving (2012, 88) and develops it into a methodological approach that understands borders as complex textures composed of discursive, affective, material, and political strands, highlighting their relational, multiple, and unfinished character.

Recognizing the centrality of Chicanx studies thus enriches, rather than displaces, the field's broader

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genealogy, which includes anthropology, history, literary studies, and postcolonial theory. Seen from this perspective, border studies do not begin with its institutionalization but emerge from a constellation of traditions that have long conceptualized borders as dynamic and contested formations embedded in everyday life. The ABS, then, appears as a crucial site for its consolidation and ongoing transformation.

The Present: Convergence and the Visibility of Cultural Border Studies

The present moment in border studies is marked by increasing convergence across disciplinary perspectives. The field has moved decisively from studying borders as static entities—a "line in the sand" (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009)—to analyzing "bordering" as a dynamic and relational process. This shift has opened up space for approaches rooted in cultural studies, literary analysis, and the arts. In particular, we have witnessed the emergence of cultural border studies as a distinct focus since the 2010s, resulting from the convergence of the cultural turn in border studies and the border turn in cultural studies (Nyman and Schimanski 2021; Fellner 2025). While this marked a more explicit engagement with cultural, symbolic, and discursive dimensions, such perspectives build on earlier contributions: anthropological work on "ethnic boundary making" (Barth 1969), as well as interventions by scholars such as Victor Konrad and Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary (2023), who have foregrounded culture and power as central to understanding how borders and borderlands are produced. Together, these developments have expanded border studies into an interdisciplinary field attentive not only to territorial and political formations but also to cultural representations and the cultural practices through which borders acquire meaning.

Concepts such as borderscapes (Brambilla 2015), border poetics (Schimanski and Wolfe 2007), and border aesthetics (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017) reflect this shift toward understanding borders as complex, multi-layered phenomena. My own work on bordertextures builds on this perspective, conceptualizing borders as interwoven textures composed of discursive, material, and affective strands. Such approaches resonate strongly with the broader move in border studies toward complexity, relationality, and multi-scalar analysis.

The increasing presence of scholars from cultural studies and the humanities within the ABS reflects this ongoing transformation. It signals a field that is becoming more inclusive in its epistemologies and more attuned to the diverse ways in which borders are produced, experienced, and understood.

The Future: Reopening the Past, Deepening the Field

Looking ahead, border studies will continue to expand its temporal and epistemic horizons, recognizing its past as open, and extending beyond institutional histories to include marginalized traditions. Future developments will involve closer integration across disciplines, including new methods, such as participatory and digital approaches. In this context, cultural border studies plays a key role in connecting the field to broader debates in the humanities and social sciences, particularly in decolonial theory, critical race studies, and environmental humanities. Rather than drawing boundaries around the field, its future thus lies in its continued openness: embracing multiple genealogies, fostering interdisciplinary dialogue, and approaching borders not only as objects of study but as epistemologies in their own right.

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