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ESSAY
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Border Studies: A New Trajectory for a New Canada - US Relationship

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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.*

Border studies in the Canada–US context has long been concerned with understanding the multitude of ways in which the two countries are linked economically, socially, and culturally. Some key areas of focus are trade relations, security cooperation, sub-national governance, and transboundary environmental management. Because these linkages are complex and often shaped by unique north-south connections, Canada–US border studies have benefited from a grounding in border regions, despite the one-size-fits-all approach to borders, with policies crafted at the binational scale in locations far from the borderlands.

Since the inauguration of US President Donald Trump in January 2025, the landscape of the Canada–US border and broader bilateral relations has fundamentally changed. Once praised as the "world's longest undefended border," the narrative surrounding the Canada–US border relationship abruptly shifted from a successful model of bilateral coordination and shared security to an adversarial threat. This shift is best captured in the contrasting words of two US presidents, Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump.

In 1988, President Reagan stated:

> *Let the 5,000-mile border between Canada and the United States stand as a symbol for the future. No soldier stands guard to protect it. Barbed wire does not deface it. And no invisible barrier of economic suspicion and fear will extend it. Let it forever be not a point of division but a meeting place between our great and true friends.*

While in 2025, President Trump signed an Executive Order that stated:

> *Gang members, smugglers, human traffickers, and illicit drugs of all kinds have poured across our borders and into our communities. Canada has played a central role in these challenges, including by failing to devote sufficient attention and resources or meaningfully coordinate with US law enforcement partners to effectively stem the tide of illicit drugs.*

The Canada–US border, which has long been a connector between families, the production of goods, and coordinated response, has entered a new era of politicization. This politicization is quickly reshaping the border and our borderlands, creating new questions and emerging areas of research for border studies in North America.

Canada–US border studies has often focused on ways to minimize the "friction" of the border with an overarching goal of increasing the mobility of goods and people in both directions. The signing of the Canada–US Free Trade Agreement in 1989 ushered in a new era of integration in supply chains, later expanded by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and maintained by the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA/USMCA/T-MEC) in 2020. These trade agreements fostered highly integrated manufacturing relations between Canada, the US, and Mexico, particularly in borderland communities where employment was increasingly tied to cross-border trade. Understanding the integrated nature of North

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American trade has therefore long been a topic of key importance for border studies.

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Canada and the US developed a bilateral approach to border management, deepening intelligence sharing and dovetailing processing. The 'perimeter' security approach—which has long undergirded the Canada–US approach to border security—was vastly expanded through the advancement of trusted traveller and trader programs such as NEXUS and FAST, as well as the broadening of preclearance to include land, marine, and rail. These programs sought to dovetail security with efficiency without sacrificing either, all with an eye to increasing mobility and connectivity by screening away from the borderline itself.

Whether regarding the movement of goods or the movement of people, the fundamental principle supporting the management of the Canada–US border is a long-standing relationship of trust. With the aggressive rhetoric and actions by the Trump Administration toward Canada, that trust is now broken. Cross-border relations—and the border itself—now face new challenges that will require new ways of understanding border relations and hence new research trajectories for border studies.

While defining those trajectories may be problematic amidst a rapidly changing political landscape, it also presents an incredibly valuable opportunity for border scholars of the Canada–US relationship to not only provide timely and relevant research but also to shape a new narrative about the border. With the bilateral relationship now fundamentally altered, how the border is manipulated and used may also fundamentally change. Border scholars have a critical role to play in explaining how the border works as well as its role in broader social and economic conditions. Going forward, border studies will need to evolve to advocate for the protection of the mobility we still enjoy, while also pivoting to explore the fundamental reshaping of our cross-border linkages and the challenges and opportunities associated with this new border relationship.

It could be argued that the field of Canada–US border studies is more important today than ever before. The architecture of cross-border connectivity—constructed over many decades upon a foundation of mutual trust—is not only at risk but may be irreparably fractured, with collateral damage felt disproportionately in the borderlands. Nowhere is this more tangible than in the Peace Arch Park, which has long served as a symbol of peace and friendship between the two nations. The Arch, constructed in 1921 to commemorate the end of the War of 1812 and the ensuing 100 years of peace, sits astride the borderline and is marked by inscriptions reading "brethren dwelling together in unity" and "may these gates never be closed." The Arch itself is surrounded by a BC provincial park on one side and a Washington State Park on the other. For nearly 100 years, people could freely access the park from both sides of the border and enjoy shared space with friends and family. While surveillance was conducted by US authorities, there were few limitations preventing access. Following heightened use of the park during the COVID-19 pandemic, Canadian and US authorities restricted access to the park. A place that was once a symbol of friendship and unity and a valuable cultural heritage for cross-border families is now littered with signs prohibiting access and threatening US immigration enforcement, combined with active patrolling by US Border Patrol. The Arch now stands as a stark symbol of what is at stake if relations continue to erode and the border continues to thicken. Border studies should be geared toward advocating against this trajectory.