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Past, Present, and Future of Border Studies: An Indigenous and Global Overview

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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

Today, the territoriality of borders is under tremendous pressure. First, self-determination and nationalist movements pose internal regulatory and policy challenges to states. These are variously leading to regulatory, functional, and territorial processes of either fragmentation or integration. This concern captures the role of new nationalisms, Indigenous resurgence and self-determination, as well as cross-border cultures, histories, and memorialization that displace and challenge the spatial limits of intergovernmental functions and regulations (Corntassel et al. 2026; Stark et al. 2023; Corntassel 2021; Asch, Borrows, and Tully 2019; Corntassel 2012; Daigle 2018; Treuer 2019; Sassen 2006, 2015; Snelgrove et al. 2014). But there are other geopolitical dynamics in motion here. New mobile border logics—resulting from cross-border connectivity, transnational regulation, and sovereignty found across trade flows and human mobility, climate change, and security regimes —affect borders and ultimately the *modern* state system (Agnew 2017; Dalby 2020; Hale 2018; Hale and Barlett 2018; Sassen, 2015).

These logics connect non-contiguous states and regions of the world through mobility and flow corridors linking airports and seaports (Marquez 2019; Khanna 2016), requiring global border infrastructures to be located away from territorial boundaries (Brunet-Jailly 2019). This is not always clear. The visibility and invisibility of borders, as well as their territoriality and the spatial natures beyond it (Kelsen 1926; Lavenue 1996; Radnitzky 1906), have dramatically changed our traditional understanding of borders.

Hence our thinking today encompasses three related questions that together speak to these countervailing pressures associated with *mobile border logics* and *self-determination*:

i) In what specific ways are bordering processes affecting state territoriality, the spatiality of trade flows, and human mobility, not only inside/within the confines of states' international boundaries, but across international or transnational legal and regulatory regimes (Goldman, 1964)?

ii) How are Indigenous peoples' and nations' awareness, resurgences, and new politics of nationhood and nationalisms affecting, challenging, and re-drafting intergovernmental relations inside states (Marks 1993, 2001; Andersen 2012; Stark 2016; Borrows 2016)?

iii) Finally, how are these politics affecting the geopolitics of borders across global regimes?

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—Past—

Political theorists have argued that state sovereignty is increasingly unbounded from territoriality (Agnew 2017, Elden 2013; Sassen 2006, 2015). Sovereignty does not end, or begin, at the border. Sovereignty extends into relational and functional networks and flows, such as global trade regimes and currency systems; these are not landlocked but are increasingly untethered from territory. Indigenous nations assert their sovereign authority in ways that often transcend states and emphasize confederacies, ancestral trading hubs, and kinship networks (Ambers & Corntassel 2025). Counterintuitively, bordering processes now extend far beyond the border at transportation hubs, seaports, airports, which are nowhere near a boundary line (Collinson 1996; Ohmae 1991; Chen 2005; Salter 2008; Vaugan-Williams 2010; Bigo 2011), and in pre-clearance screening and other surveillance and security-related processes (Hataley and Leuprecht 2018; Hale 2018, 2019; Hale and Anderson 2018; Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir 2019), including some that are reliant on algorithms (Amoore 2020). Sometimes borders are attached to mobile goods and people and follow them around the world, increasingly so with micro and biometric technology (Hiller 2010; Muller, Leite, and Mutlu 2017; Salter 2012). Even at the border itself, complex jurisdictional coordination means that some spaces, such as shared security and clearance areas, defy the territoriality principle of mutual exclusivity: sovereignty overlaps and jurisdictions blur (Stern 1986, Longo 2018). For example, Indigenous nations' relationships with lands, waters, and more-than-human kin often traverse state boundaries.

Academics have just begun the work of documenting the emerging spatialities of flows and mobilities and their unique mobile bordering logics. The logic of borders is shifting from the place and boundary of state territoriality to flows and function that also have their own original scales and spatialities. For Indigenous peoples, boundaries are not necessarily seen as zones of exclusion but more as spheres of relationality and care where protocols, principles and Indigenous international laws work together to protect these sacred relationships. In addition, addressing environmental issues requires rethinking state boundaries locally and worldwide: scholars of the Anthropocene underscore how frames of planetary boundaries and Indigenous knowledge are needed to systematically address climate change (Rockstrom 2009, 2015; Dalby 2020). Indeed, in the past, deviations from the exclusive and contiguous territoriality of national borders, such as foreign embassies and diplomatic immunity (codified as "inviolability" in the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations), were considered exceptions to the rule; but are these exceptions now the new norm? For instance, multi-tiered and functional international agreements, but also local and regional regulatory and policy alignments, have had a tremendous impact on trade flows and human mobility. As such, researching the logics underpinning the spatiality of those agreements and how they challenge states' territoriality is groundbreaking in itself. For example, discussions with World Customs Organization officials have suggested that algorithms are new customs borders. Other partners find that regulatory alignment is a real challenge within the European Union and within the United States–Canada–Mexico Agreement because of the complex, multitiered nature of the trading blocs. Indeed, we posit that researching public and private regulatory systems and their governance is of particular importance; we think that it is time for social scientists to explore and advance the required epistemological shift from a state-centric and territorial logic to nodal, mobile, and electronic logics with a dual focus on the internal and external forces that challenge the territorial integrity of states. State logics of control, colonization, and coercion are being challenged and will need to adapt to the complex realities of the self-determining authority of Indigenous nations via movements such as Land Back, Water Back, and Fire Back.

—Present—

There has been significant debate for some time as to how to theorize the changing nature of borders in a globalizing world. Concepts such as "the vacillating border" (Balibar 2002), "mobile" borders (Amilhat Szary 2015; Sassen 2015), and "borders in motion" (Konrad 2015) have been predominant; however, these discussions remain fundamentally state-centric, and importantly, while they engage with Agnew's idea of the "territorial trap" (1994), they do not go beyond a territorialist logic. By stressing concepts such as the "border-zone" (La Pradelle 1928), "bending border" (Chen 2005), "border regions" (Paasi 2018), "states' border realism" (Iwashita 2016), "borderities" (Amilhat Szary 2015) or "borderscapes" (Rajaram and Grundy Warr 2007, Brambilla 2015) to understand the nature of borders and border regions, these literatures posit states as central to border questions. While innovations such as "borderscaping" (Brambilla 2015) underscore the importance of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic imaginaries and their "territorialist imperatives," they still offer only partial glimpses into the changing logic of borders because they remain conceptually grounded in a statist/territorialist view of borders (Agnew 1994; Brenner 1999; Stark 2016). Instead, we hold that research should expand beyond Sassen's "notion of borderings and bordering capabilities" (2015, 45). We consider an epistemological shift from a state-centric and territorialist logic to a spatial and mobile logic to be necessary. This shift is occurring through treaty making, such as the 2014 Buffalo Treaty, which reaffirms and renews the sacred relationship between buffalo and Indigenous peoples, as well as through new protections for water and rivers by drawing on Indigenous

governance practices, such as the 2017 Whanganui River agreement, and more recently, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Tribal Resolution on the Rights of the Longperson Water System in 2026.

We assume that the scholarly community needs to think differently to understand the variable geometries of spatialities and functionalities of new bordering processes. In particular, we need to understand when bordering processes challenge state territoriality with multiple functional and/or mobile multiscale logics at local or global scales and, importantly, when nationalists or Indigenous nations assert territoriality from within the state. At times, Indigenous boundaries of protection and care directly confront state exclusions and imperialistic notions of territoriality. To accomplish this, we posit that new research needs to simultaneously look both inside the state and across the international community and transnational actors (Jessup 1956; Lhuilier 2016).

—Futures—

Based on the above conversation, the future of border studies would ideally provide an expanded understanding of the emerging spatial and mobile logic of borders, including research on the various scales and spatialities of borders and the ensuing public policy and governance challenges to territoriality and international boundaries.

In practice, a future research agenda requires policy and research to collectively document *how* these changes and their innumerable policy implications increasingly challenge the territoriality and bounded regulatory integrity of states both locally and globally. In this way, new research should advance border studies beyond a territorialist logic. Territorialist approaches have made inroads that underscore the complexity of the imaginary, identity, cultural, social, and political-scapes that are foundational to human communities. Relationships grounded in place, stories, and languages have flourished for millennia and mark a contrast with the precarious logics of territoriality through erasure and often violent control over populations (Corntassel 2024; Corntassel 2021; Simpson 2017; Coulthard 2014).

But, as discussed above, territorialist assumptions limit our ability to conceptually and empirically capture the full complexity of mobile border logic. In some ways, these new invisible electronic and electronical cultural bordering/border processes may also contribute to the closing of cultural, spatial, and political-scapes by superimposing a logic over modern imaginaries of international borders. These new borders empower specific mobility and flows. They also modify state territoriality with new transnational instruments (Benyekhlef 2008; Shaffer 2016; Walker 2017; Supiot 2017; Belov 2018) and global infrastructure/policy that are the gatekeepers of a new global order (Zittrain 2006; Beyer 2008; Frétigny 2013), all of which is of great policy importance.

We thus suggest moving beyond the conceptual dominance of state-centric and territorial thinking in border studies and social and political thought more broadly. We advance an epistemological shift toward a mobile and functional understanding of borders. New Indigenous-led confederacies, treaties, and expressions of international law can set the tone for how our collective futures can be shared.

This shift is necessary to make sense of a world that is changing as borders and bordering processes are now linked to flows and mobility. This is the result of new technologies and policy mechanisms as well as new ideas and competing imaginaries and identities that question the dominance of the state as a singular and strictly territorial unit. This approach shatters the illusion of the nation-state as having a one-to-one correlation between nations and states; rather, states are multinational and have multiple overlapping, consent-based jurisdictional authorities and forms of governance.

—Future Research Methods—

We ground our thinking in the evolution of Euro-American academies toward transdisciplinary research, which expands on traditional disciplinary/interdisciplinary divides. This methodological transformation also links the local and the global in a transdisciplinary framework. In this, our approach expands on Darian-Smith and McCarty's (2017, 57) view that transdisciplinary research (that is, research that occurs at the borders and intersections of disciplines) is the location of much research innovation (as demonstrated by the works of Appiah, Bourdieu, Foucault, Nussbaum, Latour and Sen). Transdisciplinary research is oriented to practical problems. Hence, we suggest that engaging with the policy problems of our non-university partners allows us to produce innovative questions, research, and solutions. It entails not only applied policy research but "questioning particular views, ideologies, and cultural biases" (Darian-Smith and McCarty 2017, 59). Interdisciplinary work suggests parallel overlapping research questions and methodologies and embrace a transdisciplinary approach that allows us to develop unified conceptual thematics and methodologies. Thus, we propose methodological frameworks that bring together two approaches: (1) a deep engagement between Indigenous nations, policymakers, professionals, and academics to maximize collaboration and cross-fertilization of ideas; and (2) a commitment to decentred comparative research. Decolonizing methodologies (Smith 2012), Storytelling methodologies (Archibald, 2008), and Witnessing Methodologies (Hunt 2018) offer some new directions for researchers to centre Indigenous worldviews and partnerships.

This is why we propose a decentred approach to account for small yet important variations in transnational/regional/local contexts, i.e. it is an important recognition of variation in time and space. Decolonization

is a way of decentring state sovereignty. Decentring also opens more space for feminist critiques, Indigenous knowledge, and decolonized empirical and theoretical frameworks that work alongside Western paradigms (Asch, Borrows, and Tully 2019; de Sousa Santos 2014, 2018; Darian-Smith & McCarty, 2017).

Indeed, in suggesting mixed methods, we include primary and secondary qualitative and quantitative data collection (historical, archival, observation, interviews, surveys, and the construction of data-sets/database) that lead to content, statistical, and policy analyses that challenge statist views while enhancing feminist, Indigenous and decolonial analyses.

In practice, decentred research is 'messy' but it is still ideally suited to address our overarching research questions while drawing on local and regional expertise to co-develop key concepts and arrive at methodologies that are appropriate to each case study. Through this messiness, we slowly foster new relationships and new narratives that challenge the colonial logic of territoriality.

In addition, because decentralized comparisons allow for a diversity of approaches to answer a single set of research questions, they are uniquely positioned to deliver research findings that will generate innovative policy suggestions and foster theoretical advances. They are ideal to explore various regions of the world, as we are working in the Americas, Australasia, Europe, and South Asia.

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