



Interreg
Grande Région | Großregion
Fonds européen de développement régional | Europäischer Fonds für regionale Entwicklung



Glossary / Glossaire / Glossar Border Studies

Border as Method

Astrid M. Fellner
Saarland University

Rebekka Kanesu
Trier University

Cultural Border Studies / border theory / border epistemologies / border thinking / borderscapes
/ critical Border Studies

The concept of border as method views the border as an episteme that questions the relation of knowledge to action by adopting the logic of the border as an approach to research border multiplicities beyond territoriality and hegemonic paradigms.

Fellner, A. M. and Kanesu, R. (2024): 'Border as Method,' in Fellner, A. M. and Nossem, E. (Eds.): *UniGR-CBS Online Glossary Border Studies*,
DOI: 10.22028/D291-36971

Building on Sandro Mezzadra's and Brett Neilson's concept of border as method, this article explains how the border in border research can go beyond its traditional function as an object of study and work as an epistemic framework. Understanding borders as methods entails adopting a research position which follows the logic of the border and treats the border as an epistemological position, which gives rise to border thinking, a way of thinking and knowing, which refers to the creativity and the energy that emerges from subaltern subject positions. As an epistemic device, which also has its twin in the concept of ocean as method, border as method is helpful in the project of keeping these subaltern knowledges alive, contributing to a powerful form of decolonization. As this article shows, it is this shift in perspective in the understanding of the border from research object to research angle that the idea of border as method entails which informs various other conceptualizations of borders, such as the concept of borderscapes. Most conspicuously, it is also an important line of thought which informs the concepts of bordertextures and bordertexturing, epistemological counter-formations which acknowledge that a border epistemology necessarily entails thinking against and beyond western paradigms.

Border as Method

Border as method is currently one of the most important and widely cited concepts in Cultural Border Studies. It serves as a new research angle that transcends the meaning of borders as objects of study. Instead, the border with its associated characteristics becomes an epistemic tool that helps understand and question complex phenomena of inclusion, exclusion, movement, power, inequalities, and dominant border discourses.

The concept of border as method gained prominence with the book *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (2013) by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson. Their idea echoed the concept of ocean as method, introduced by Isabel Hofmeyr in 2012. In her article, Hofmeyr had shown how the sea could be both a site and subject of investigation as well as theorization. The Indian Ocean, she argued, offered vast possibilities for transnational research and intellectual work beyond the confining borders of nation states and limits offered by area studies. Since then, the field of Oceanic Studies has taken the ocean "both as a topical focus and as a methodological model for nonlinear or nonplanar thought" (Blum, 2013, p.151). As methods, oceans and borders have similar functions: they divide and constitute space, they connect, they enable and channel movement, and they create and challenge subjectivities (Fellner, 2021, n.p.).

Mezzadra and Neilson's study adopts a similar stance towards the border, understanding it not only as a research object but also an episteme. In their study, they claim that contemporary globalization has not led to the diminution of borders but to their proliferation, which is linked to the intensification of competition within global labor markets (Fellner, 2019, n.p.). According to them, borders are a social method of division as well as of multiplication: not only do they divide geographical and social space but they also multiply social differences. For them "the border is an epistemological device which is at work whenever a distinction between subject and object is established" (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013, p.16). However, they are not interested in studying this 'device' as an object itself, but in exploring the effects of bordering processes. This focus on processes as well as their general openness to tensions between concepts and empirical manifestations informs their understanding of the constitutive moments of the border (ibid., p.17). Consequently, they define method as "the relation of action to knowledge in a situation where many different knowledge regimes and practices come into conflict" (ibid.). In this regard, the authors' understanding of method reaches far beyond simple methodologies as it describes a more general relation to the world that has profound political dimensions. Method is a combination of performative practices and epistemologies since it is "as much about acting on the world as it is about knowing it" (ibid.).

The idea of border as method then entails an understanding of the border as an "epistemic angle" (ibid., p. viii) that allows to perceive the conflicts and tensions that surround acts of inclusion and exclusion while at the same time paying attention to the heterogeneity of borders without reducing them to simple dividing lines (ibid.). Through this understanding of the concept of border, Mezzadra and Neilson want to stress the problem of differentiation between interior and exterior or inclusion and exclusion (ibid., p.18), especially in the context of global economic interaction. They portray inclusion and exclusion not in terms of opposing categories but rather as continuum (ibid., p.7). They argue that geopolitical, social, linguistic, symbolic, and cultural borders now overlap in a way that enables new forms of exploitation and dominance (ibid., p.vii). As they explain:

Borders, far from serving merely to block or obstruct global passages of people, money or objects, have become central devices for their articulation. Borders play a key role in the production of the heterogeneous time and space of contemporary global and postcolonial capitalism. (ibid., p.ix)

Following this approach, they show how the border functions as a method that articulates and connects political boundaries, globalization, cycles of capital flow, accumulation, and labor migration in a heterogeneous way, producing different processes of inclusion and exclusion (ibid., pp.3f.).

Stressing the ontological presence, the force and violence of borders as well as their epistemological effects, Mezzadra and Neilson foreground the concept of the multiplication of labor, which emphasizes the constitutive heterogeneity of living labor as well as the articulation of labor regimes and different forms of exploitation. They give a series of examples of how the border functions as a method for various fields of world-, power- and labor making. The book deals successively with the changing functions and locations of borders, the tradition of 'fabrica mundi' (fabrication of worlds), which, following the Renaissance philosophers Pico della Mirandola and Giordano Bruno, interpreted borders in terms of their geographical impacts, the development of modern cartography and area studies, the international division of labor, temporal aspects of bordering, governmentality and sovereignty, the management of migratory movements, and various forms of political subjectivities, such as the figure of the citizen-worker (ibid., p.251). With regard to the effects of contemporary bordering processes, Mezzadra and Neilson focus on labor struggles and world market relations. They argue that the proliferation of borders continuously fabricates new frontiers of capital that transcend into new markets and commodities thereby multiplying opportunities of labor and potential exploitation (ibid., pp.61ff.). Exemplifying the spaces and temporalities of labor, they refer e.g. to the differences between migrant care workers and financial traders and their different opportunities and pathways on the global labor market depending on the borders that open up or that close for them (ibid., pp.103ff.). Mezzadra and Neilson point out how borders not only exclude, but include various types of people and workers in a hierarchical, differential and uneven manner. The power or violence of the border therefore does not only apply to its exclusive function but also when it includes in the form of "differential inclusion" (ibid., p.159). Through this process of inclusion, people are disciplined and controlled according to their different types of labor and connected rights and possibilities for mobility (ibid.).

Furthermore, the meaning of time is exemplified by the work of Indian "virtual migrants" who work in IT businesses, regulating their working hours according to other time zones (ibid., pp.131ff.). "The tendency for work to colonize the time of life" (ibid., p.21) is one aspect of the multiplication of labor through intensification. Moreover, diversification, which, as Marx already had it, refers to the ways in which capital is constantly expanding and creating new kinds of production, and heterogeneity, which concerns the legal and social regimes of the organization of labor. Depicting how the frontiers of capital, living labor and borders are deeply connected, the work owes much to the Italian autonomist or operaist tradition.

Mezzadra and Neilson also focus on the "labor of translation" (ibid., p.270) to map new understandings of the common (versus a singular commons). Translation, as the authors insist on, is "paramount in the organization of border struggles" (ibid., p.281) and is essential for a politics of the common, which must both "extend beyond any rhetorical invocation of a world without borders" and "renounce any attempt to turn the border into a justice-giving institution" (ibid.).

In analyzing the proliferation and the heterogenization of borders, which produces differentiated subjectivities and legal statuses, Mezzadra and Neilson draw the attention to borders as material relationships rather than objective facts. Analyzing the interrelated material and ideological work done by bordering practices, the book helps deconstruct the understanding of borders as dividing lines between interior and exterior, instead focusing on the multiple connections that exist between people across borders. Focusing on border struggles across various geographical scales, and combining theory with a number of case studies drawn from various parts of the world, the authors approach the border not only as a research object but also as an epistemic framework, which enables new perspectives on the practices of border-making and the maintenance of borders as essential tools for the production of labor power as a commodity.

While the book *Border as Method* shows how the proliferation of borders produces a vital ground for the proliferation of contemporary capitalism, it has also inspired scholars to think of examples where the border can be a method for empowerment, liberation and anti-capitalist struggles. As it turns out, this shift in perspective in the understanding of the border from research object to research angle informs various other conceptualizations of borders.

One of the first border scholars to pick up on and develop Mezzadra and Neilson's concept of border as method was Chiara Brambilla (2015a; 2015b; Brambilla et al., 2015). Brambilla develops the concept of borderscapes as method as a way to analyze the border as site of conflict, struggle and becoming (Brambilla, 2015a p.29). She places the concept of borderscapes within the field of critical Border Studies as it offers new epistemological, ontological and methodological takes on border complexities and politics by conceptualizing border spaces beyond territorial and state-centered characteristics (ibid., pp.16ff.). Borderscapes relate to practices, norms, and ethics of bordering, performances, struggle, and the ever changing and fluid dimension of border spaces that shape political subjectivities and processes of inclusion and exclusion (ibid., pp.19ff.). Borderscapes are connected with "questions of politics" (Brambilla et al., 2015, p.4) since they point to conflicted spaces where hegemonic and counter-hegemonic border practices and discourses cumulate (Brambilla, 2015a, p.20).

In her article "From Border as a Method of Capital to Borderscape as a Method for a Geographical Opposition to Capitalism" (Brambilla, 2015b), she explicitly applies the idea of borderscape(s) as method to reflect on and criticize contemporary capitalism. First, Brambilla states that the unequally developed landscape that builds the ground for capitalism is based on geographical core concepts such as border and landscape and the way they structure the world. She proposes that geography should also come up with alternative concepts to capitalism such as resistance, which she offers through the concept of borderscapes (ibid., n.p.). Similar to Mezzadra and Neilson, Brambilla proposes not to reduce the border to the geopolitical line between states, but to rethink it and consider its multidimensional meanings in order to gain a more complex understanding of the relationship between capital and state. To her, landscape is a liminal space that is characterized by movement and change, which expresses social conflicts and therefore has the potential to illuminate the relationship of territory, borders, and capital. Drawing on Appadurai's (1996) idea of -scapes, which he understands as dimensions of global cultural flows, Brambilla sketches her own concept of borderscapes as a fluid and unequal form of globalization landscapes. The processual and de-territorial borderscape is always "in the making" while it articulates hegemonic spaces and times of global capitalism (Brambilla, 2015b, n.p.). At the same time, however, borderscapes are "common goods" – very much related to Mezzadra and Neilson's view of the common – and can thus be places of anti-capitalist resistance (ibid.). Borderscapes as method therefore encourages us to rethink the relation between space and the political as it articulates the constant conflict and negotiation processes between the border as a method of capital and as a common good for the "geographical opposition to capitalism" (ibid.). Using borderscapes as method then signifies "a shift from a fixed knowledge to a knowledge capable of throwing light on a space of negotiating actors, experiences, and representations articulated at the intersection of competing and even conflicting tensions" (Brambilla, 2015a, p. 29). It "opens a new space of political possibilities, a space within which new kinds of political subjectivities become possible" (ibid.).

Since the publication of Mezzadra and Neilson's book and Brambilla's articles, the concept of border as method has caught on in Border Studies, especially in decolonial thinking, where it fell on fertile grounds, which had already been carefully prepared by Walter D. Mignolo. In his book *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledge and Border Thinking* (2012 [2000]) Mignolo had already developed the idea of border thinking in 2000, showing how the border can be used as (epistemological) method for decolonization. In his book, Mignolo is searching for a way to overcome modernity and simultaneously to recognize the colonial difference from subaltern perspectives. The tool to achieve this goal is border thinking (Mignolo, 2012 [2000], p.6), which Mignolo defines as "the moments in which the imaginary of the modern world system cracks" (ibid., p.23). In this sense, the practice of border thinking is a means to make other worlds (and not other modernities) possible (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2006, p.219). He positions his theory very consciously within the territories of colonial and postcolonial struggles. Border thinking is about knowledge and understanding, epistemology and hermeneutics, and it inherently challenges the hegemonic ways of knowing and constructing the world (Mignolo, 2012 [2000], p.5). The goal of border thinking is to question and contest hegemonic and imperial epistemologies of racism, sexism, patriarchy, heteronormativity and ethnic hierarchies (Mertlitsch, 2016, p.137). For Mignolo, the principle of border thinking is "thinking from dichotomous concepts rather than ordering the world in dichotomies. Border thinking [...] is, logically, a dichotomous locus of enunciation" (Mignolo, 2012 [2000], p.82). In this sense, border thinking is not only a double consciousness, but also a "double critique," since it is situated at the border of the modern/colonial world system and is able to reflect on both sides (ibid., p.84). Therefore, border thinking can function as a critique and decolonial method (ibid.). As a method, border thinking tries to transcend modernity and connected notions of inferiority and otherness, oppression and injustice. This entails the realization that "trans-modernity" is only possible by thinking and

speaking from the point of the supposed other, from the exteriority of the borderlands (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2009, p.19).

Border as method is also an important line of thought, which informs the concepts of bordertextures and bordertexturing, which are being developed by the Working Group Bordertextures at the UniGR-Center for Border Studies (WG Bordertextures, 2018; Wille et al., forthcoming). In this conceptual imaginary, the geopolitical border itself stops being a suture sowing together two different and distinct national fabrics, and becomes a texture: a complex and multi-dimensional trope and topos woven of numerous threads, such as politics, economy, cultural practices, racial, sexual and other discourses, which combine and intersect to create a trans-national continuum on both sides of the border (WG Bordertextures, 2018, p.2). Insisting that the formation of territories and bodies are inherently interwoven, thus making *the* border a texture whose analysis necessarily requires a theorization of socioeconomic structures, institutions and flows, the act of bordertexturing, as Fellner has it, can become an important tool in literary and cultural analysis where “it means listening to the varied stories of the border, conducting a deep mapping of the borderlands which picks up on differently orchestrated heteroglossic border voices” (Fellner, forthcoming a). Bordertexturing relies on the idea of border as method, “viewing the border as an epistemological counter-formation, which acknowledges that a border epistemology necessarily entails thinking against and beyond western paradigms” (Fellner, forthcoming b). For Fellner, bordertexturing then becomes a critical borderlands practice, which can serve as a form of epistemological unknowing.

In many ways, the thought of border as method is inspirational when it comes to the reflection of the various everyday border relations that currently influence our societies. While Mezzadra and Neilson demonstrate the border’s role in the globalization of labor, contemporary capitalism and connected struggles, they also challenge us to think about other socio-political arenas where borders function as a method of differential inclusion. As the examples of borderscapes, border thinking, and bordertextures may suggest, the double-bind of the border can direct our attention to the focal points of power struggles, contested spaces and knowledge systems as well as to emancipatory sites. There may even be many other cases of when and how the border can be used as a method. In all these theorizations, the border is a very powerful tool. It can both multiply and intensify power relations, hierarchies and exploitation, as Mezzadra and Neilson argue, or it can diversify perspectives, foster mutual communication and engender empowerment, decolonial thought and contest oppression as the concepts of borderscapes and border thinking show. Furthermore, when engaging with the concept of bordertextures and the act of bordertexturing, the idea of border as method helps to (dis)entangle hybrid zones of inter-woven and continuous existences.

When engaging with the idea of border as method, we should also consider its limits as brought forth e.g. by Rumford (2014). He criticizes that Mezzadra and Neilson’s account of border as method still concentrates too much on visible, hegemonic borders like state borders, which are recognized by all parties (ibid., p.43; p.50). Instead, he proposes a multi-perspectival approach to borders that detaches itself from the need for border consensus, state-centeredness and visibility (ibid., pp.45ff.). Through this perspectival shift, Rumford sheds light on different kinds of borders that emerge and change through everyday borderwork in different places and that are neither recognized by everybody nor visible or relevant to all (ibid., pp.50f.). With this move, he seeks to decenter the (state)border as privileged space for understanding globalized processes, while at the same time adopting a standpoint that chooses to “see like a border” and “far beyond the border” rather than just looking across the border (ibid., p.52).

Taking this multi-perspectival approach into account, we may critically ask how, when and where the border becomes a method. Being aware that borderscapes or -textures are ever changing, uneven membrane-like configurations, we always need to figure out for whom the border can function as method in a certain spatial and temporal setting and who is in- or excluded under these circumstances. Thus, the notion of borders as method becomes even more powerful when we direct it at the invisible border spaces by listening to the quiet voices, seeing beyond hegemonic border sites and acknowledging the small and hidden border struggles of the everyday. Using the border as a method to see the liminal spaces that unfold between power laden border encounters, reveals the analytic potential of this epistemic angle. To us, border as method goes far beyond the notion of state and territory as it is intertwined with various powerful symbolic and ontological boundaries, e.g. between identity categories like race, gender, class and ethnicity or between different knowledges, mobilities, politics, emotions, imaginations and temporalities. It is exactly these aspects of the border episteme that allow us to use the notion of border as method as a tool to critically develop more complex and sensitive understandings of conflicted border and boundary relations.

REFERENCES

- Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Univ. of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Blum, H. (2013) 'Introduction: Oceanic Studies,' *Atlantic Studies*, Vol. 10 No. 2, pp.151–155.
- Brambilla, C. (2015a) 'Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept,' *Geopolitics*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp.14–34.
- Brambilla, C. (2015b) 'From Border as a Method of Capital to Borderscape as a Method for a Geographical Opposition to Capitalism,' *Bollettino della società geografica italiana*, Vol. XIII, pp.393–402.
- Brambilla, C., Laine, J., Scott, J. W. and Bocchi, G. (Eds.), (2015) *Borderscaping: Imaginations and Practices of Border Making*, Ashgate, Farnham.
- Fellner, A. M. (2019) 'Border as Method, or the Multiplication of Labor,' Entry in the Knowledge and Documentation Center of the UniGR-CBS, [online] <http://cbs.uni-gr.eu/de/ressourcen/wissens-und-dokumentationszentrum/liste-der-ressourcen/border-method-or-multiplication> (Accessed 3 June 2022).
- Fellner, A. M. (2021) 'Globale Fluchtgeschichten in transmediterranen und transatlantischen Grenzräumen,' in Roelens, N., Heimböckel, D. and Wille, C. (Eds.), *Fuga – Confine – Integrazione / Flucht – Grenze – Intergration*, transcript, Bielefeld, pp.47–64.
- Fellner, A. M. (forthcoming a) 'Drawing the Medicine Line: Bordertextures in Whoop-Up Country,' *RIAS: The Review of International American Studies*, Vol.18, No. 2. Special Issue *The 'Other' Border: The US/Canadian Border in Focus*.
- Fellner, A. M. (forthcoming b) 'Thinking from the Border: Bordertexturing as an Epistemic Framework,' in Wille C., Fellner, A. M. and Nossem, E. (Eds.), *Bordertextures: A Complexity Approach to Cultural Border Studies*, transcript, Bielefeld.
- Fisher, M. S. and Downey, G. (2006) *Frontiers of Capital*, Duke Univ. Press, Durham.
- Hofmeyr, I. (2012) 'The Complicating Sea: The Indian Ocean as Method,' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 32 No. 2, pp.584–590.
- Mertlitsch, K. (2016) *Sisters - Cyborgs - Drags: Das Denken in Begriffspersonen der Gender Studies*, transcript, Bielefeld.
- Mezzadra, S. and Neilson, B. (2013) *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*, Duke Univ. Press, Durham.
- Mignolo, W. D. and Tlostanova, M. V. (2006) 'Theorizing from the Borders Shifting to Geo- and Body-Politics of Knowledge,' *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 9, pp.205–221.
- Mignolo, W. D. 2012 [2000] *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton.
- Rumford, C. (2014) *Cosmopolitan Borders*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Tlostanova, M. V. and Mignolo, W. D. (2009) 'On Pluritopic Hermeneutics, Trans-modern Thinking, and Decolonial Philosophy,' *Encounters*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp.11–27.
- WG Bordertextures (2018) 'Bordertexturen als transdisziplinärer Ansatz zur Untersuchung von Grenzen. Ein Werkstattbericht,' *Berliner Debatte Initial*, Vol. 29 No.1 (Special Issue "Komplexe Grenzen"), pp.73–83.
- Wille, C., Fellner, A. M. and Nossem, E. (Eds.), (forthcoming) *Bordertextures: A Complexity Approach to Cultural Border Studies*, transcript, Bielefeld.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Astrid M. Fellner is Chair of North American Literary and Cultural Studies at Saarland University. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Vienna, where she also received her 'Habilitation' in American Studies. She is the Head of the University of the Greater Region-Center for Border Studies at Saarland University and is co-editor of this trilingual Border Glossary. She is also co-founder of the trinational and trilingual UniGR-Master in Border Studies, in which she (co)-teaches several classes in the field of Cultural Border Studies. She has been interested in Border Studies since her studies on Chicana literature and culture as a Fulbright Scholar at University of Texas Austin in 1990/91. In 2002, she published her monograph *Articulating Selves: Contemporary Chicana Self-Representation* (Braumüller). Within the field of Chicana Studies she also edited the volume *Body Signs: The Latino/a Body in Cultural Production*. (LIT Verlag, 2011) and authored several articles on Chicana literature, Indigenous border literature and artistic practices, forms of (queer) border knowledges and decolonial practices. She also engages in Comparative Border Studies, working not only on cultural practices in the US-Mexican borderlands but also on the US-Canada border as well as in European border areas. Currently, she is working on a project entitled *Alterna(rra)tives in the Canada-US Borderlands*.

Rebekka Kanesu is a PhD candidate in human geography at the Department of Spatial and Environmental Sciences at Trier University. She has a background in social and cultural anthropology and is interested in topics that circle human-environment relations, political ecology and more-than-human geographies in connection to Border Studies. In her PhD project 'Liquid Lines - on rivers and borders in the Anthropocene' she studies the relation between people and the transboundary Moselle river from a political ecology perspective that pays e.g. attention to border- and state-making discourses, eco-social assemblages and cross-border shipping practices. Approaches like 'Border as Method' or 'Border Thinking' inspire her to look beyond hegemonic boundary formations and rethink established epistemological borders e.g. between nature and culture, different scales or temporalities. Furthermore, Rebekka worked as project assistant for the interdisciplinary EU-funded INTERREG Greater Region VA-Project "University of the Greater Region Center for Border Studies" and helped coordinating the CBS publications.

cbs.uni-gr.eu
borderstudies.org

 @unigr_cbs



Interreg 
Grande Région | Großregion
Fonds européen de développement régional | Europäischer Fonds für regionale Entwicklung

