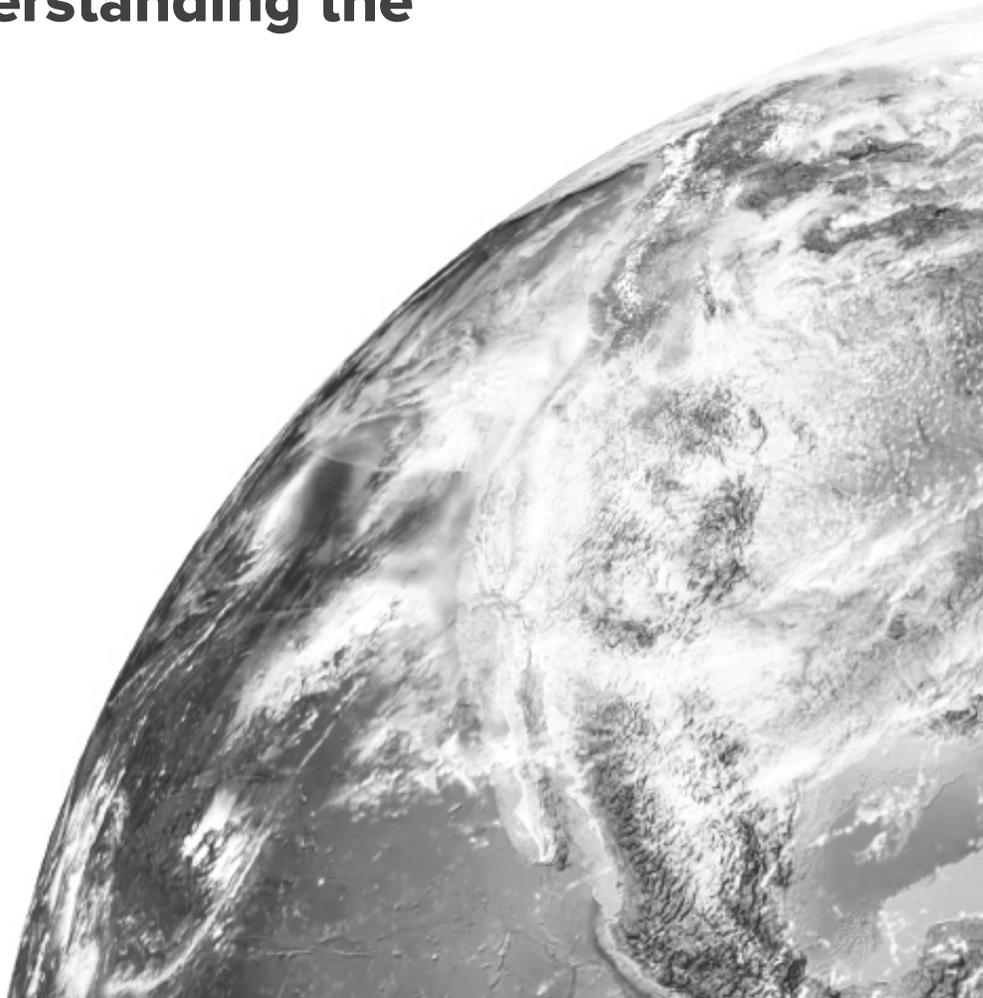


**BORDERS IN
GLOBALIZATION**

BIG POLICY BRIEF
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Understanding history is critical to understanding the borderlands



Understanding history is critical to understanding the borderlands

One of the central challenges to any interdisciplinary study of borders is that of meaning. Each discipline involved in the study of borders, from political science to public administration to sociology, geography, history, anthropology and law brings with it its own unique grammars, lexicons, and epistemologies. This rich tapestry of knowledge can produce exciting research, but only when they are able to at the very least understand how one another create meaning in the process of their work.

In this, the study of borders is no different. Each discipline that engages with border theory and research can offer its own unique insights, but they also come with their own assumptions, which may conflict. While some political scientists for instance, view borders as outgrowths or manifestations of the sovereign power of the state, some sociologists and historians might instead see borders as patterns of “claims-making” around issues of identity or culture.

When scholars of American literature examine the unique character of Puritanism in New England writings from the 19th and 18th centuries, for example, how might they discuss the effects of geo-spatial borders on its influence in Atlantic Canada, or the role the researcher’s own perspectives might play in the identification of historical and linguistic patterns in borderland spaces?

SOME CONSIDERATIONS

To gain a more complete understanding of borders, borderlands and bordering practices, investigators should consider the following: first, while borderlands are primarily territorial, time is an integral element in determining the borderland’s role as a “place”. Borderlands have temporal contexts; they shift and change across time and their meaning as a place between nation-states changes as well.

In the context of North America, Canadian-American borderlands are not discrete regions, but zones composed of many overlapping borderlands that retain [distinct cultural and regional identities](#), even as they share a similar discursive space. Though they are often spoken of in similar ways, these borderlands have different historical-geographic axes that must be recognized. Like other discursive spaces, these borderlands are organic; they grow, shrink, and change over time.

Consider the unique character of trans-continental railways in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries. As the railways extended from east to west – and from north to south – they did more than carry materials and people; they carried culture, drawn from the social, economic, and political hubs of their origins. As the lines extended, they stretched the cultural boundaries of the regions from which they drew their labour. [Railroads became quasi-borderlands](#), pushing through the boundaries of the pre-established cultures they sought to connect.

RESEARCHERS MUST COME TO UNDERSTAND THE HISTORICAL POSITIONING AND CONTEXT OF BORDERS AND BORDERLANDS AS WELL UNDERSTAND THEIR OWN POSITION WITHIN THE WORK.

Historical analyses of bordering practices show researchers that the study of borderlands must become more reflexive. Researchers must come to understand the historical positioning and context of borders and borderlands, as well as understand their own position within the work. Research of this kind emerges from relationships between investigator and the subject of their investigations, and without an acknowledgment of that, such research will be incomplete.

What is needed is a tool or model that allows for such

reflection and interrogation to take place, one that can be shared by the wide assortment of research fields involved. One such model is the [spatial grammar](#) of borderlands.

There are three principle elements of spatial grammar. The first is that spatial grammars are post-modern. Like all post-modern positions, spatial grammar is skeptical of the central role given to the nation-state in the study of borders, when history, culture, and discourse are just as important to bordering processes. Borders are not merely the edges of the nation-state but liminal spaces – edge regions where the process of Othering and exclusion occur en masse. A national boundary line is not necessary for these processes to occur.

Spatial grammars also recognize the elasticity of time and space in bordering processes; as communications technologies advance, borderlands experience time-space compression which reduces the “friction of distance”. Through the compression of time and space, cultural and economic exchanges grow easier, and thus bordering processes expand as more space – and time – are absorbed into the borderlands.

Finally, spatial grammar allows researchers to more closely investigate the “de-territorialisation/re-territorialisation” paradox. While post-modernity works to de-territorialise regions of the world by diffusing borders throughout new and expanding borderlands, many of these same regions are experiencing efforts by nation-states to carve out new spheres of influence and new regions of control and power. In such regions – Northeast Asia, for example – the forces of de-territorialisation are hard at work blurring the boundaries between “Chinese”, “Taiwanese”, Korean, and Japanese cultures (through exchanges of music, literature, fashion, youth-culture, etc.) while traditional states like China, Japan, and Korea struggle to retain control over geographic spaces.

THE POLICY

Recognition of the central role that history – and therefore historical analysis – plays in understanding the growth and change of bordering processes is less about specific policy goals, and more about perspective. Policy developed for contemporary geopolitics or to manage contemporary issues in the borderlands don't stay confined to the present. Policy decisions made for contemporary issues will have long-standing impacts in borderlands and may even shape the emergence of new fracture-lines within regions with long-standing cultural borders. The imposition of the border along the 49th parallel for example disrupted centuries-old trade networks, family-networks, and systems of cultural exchange. Those disruptions continue to make themselves known throughout the many borderlands along the Canada-US border.

More information and research can be found by visiting the Borders in Globalization [website](#).

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