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Globalizing Borderlands Studies in Europe and North America

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Globalizing Borderlands Studies in Europe and North America

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BORDERLANDS AND TRANSCULTURAL STUDIES

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EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
JOHN W. I. LEE AND MICHAEL NORTH

Globalizing Borderlands Studies in Europe and North America

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Portions of Olga Sasunkevich's chapter are adapted by permission from *Informal Trade: Gender and the Border Experience* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015): 1–18, copyright © 2015. Portions of Ann Plane's chapter previously appeared in *Dreams and the Invisible World in Colonial New England: Indians, Colonists, and the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). Some material from Veronica Castillo-Munoz's chapter will appear in different form in her forthcoming book *The Other California: Migrations, Land Struggles, and the Making of Multi-Ethnic Communities in Northern Mexico*, to be copublished by the Huntington Library Press and University of California Press.



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Globalizing Borderlands Studies in Europe and North America

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| Introduction

John W. I. Lee and Michael North

This volume is the product of an extensive multiyear collaboration between the Ancient Borderlands Research Focus Group (University of California, Santa Barbara) and the Baltic Borderlands International Research Training Group (University of Greifswald, Germany). This joint project brought together for the first time European and North American researchers studying a diverse range of periods and places, all sharing an interest in borders and borderlands studies. A series of research meetings, including a major conference, several seminar presentations, and many informal conversations enabled participants in our group to refine their own analyses and engage with each other's work. The chapters in this volume thus represent part of an ongoing, international, interdisciplinary endeavor whose goal is to open additional scholarly dialogue on borderlands around the world. The chapters cover a broad range of periods and places—from North Africa in the time of the late Roman Empire to the twenty-first-century Baltic littoral. Together, they shed new light on the complex processes of boundary construction, maintenance, and crossing, as well as on the importance of economic, political, social, ethnic, and religious interactions in the borderlands.

What are “borderlands?” Borderlands can be understood as spaces of interaction both physical and conceptual. They can encompass a

wide range of processes, ranging from military conflict at the peripheries of states or empires to hierarchical dependency patterns to zones of overlapping religious belief or cultural practice to economic activity across modern nation-state political boundaries. Beyond this broad working definition, the chapters in this volume do not attempt to follow a single prescriptive theoretical approach. Rather, our goal is to conduct an interdisciplinary dialogue about the diverse approaches to identifying borderlands spaces and analyzing borderlands processes.

Whether physical or conceptual, borderlands are spaces that lie at the intersections of frontiers, borders, and boundaries. Any dialogue about borderlands therefore inevitably requires engaging the terms “frontier,” “border,” and “boundary.” In this volume, we recognize that all three terms share the notion of delimitation but also that each carries specific meaning. A frontier involves the important dimensions of space and action: the frontier is a moving and ever-expanding, though never clearly definable, area at the fringes of settlement. Frontier can also be taken to mean a shifting line of engagement and sometimes conflict. By contrast, the border represents a relatively static model of territorial demarcation that can be expressed physically—whether through human-constructed border stones, walls, or fences—or through natural features such as rivers, mountain ranges, and even trees that become endowed with human-constructed meaning as border markers. Political borders can also be constructed bureaucratically and institutionally without the existence of physical markers, as in the case of modern nation-states. Boundaries, meanwhile, are more useful as term for describing the mental constructs and discourses that help define and divide overlapping cultural, social, ethnic, religious, and linguistic spheres. In all three instances—frontier, border, and boundary—it is possible for different participants to perceive the same phenomena differently depending on their situations, needs, and interests, and for researchers to interpret borderlands dynamics and processes differently depending on the evidence available to them, the issues that interest them, and the methodologies they employ.

All participants in our joint project acknowledge the important historiographical and political currents that have shaped our interest in

borderlands as an interpretive concept. For those of us coming from the European side, a borderlands approach has helped counterbalance the earlier use by many historians of the “frontier thesis” of Frederick Jackson Turner.¹ Historians of Medieval Europe, for example, used Turner’s model to propound the idea of medieval frontier societies, especially in the Iberian Peninsula. Robert Bartlett for one sought to explain the emergence of Europe as a consequence of conquest and acculturation that resulted from the expansion of the frontiers of Christendom.² Yet, recent research has questioned the concept of medieval frontier society, as historians such as Nora Berend have demanded research on the emergence of both real and imagined frontiers.³ David Abulafia as well emphasizes the ambiguity of borders. For Abulafia the “medieval frontier” represents not so much “an identifiable phenomenon, a hard fact, as a conceptual tool” that historians use to make sense of the social and political developments that resulted from the encounters between medieval societies of diverse values and assumptions.⁴

According to Abulafia, these borders were part of a set of assumptions with which neighboring societies with differing customs, languages, or ethnic identities met one another.⁵ They interacted to the degree that they distanced themselves from each other peacefully or even violently. The degree of interaction depended on population density. Urbanized Mediterranean societies experienced different kinds of contacts than less settled areas such as Ireland and the Baltic region.⁶ In the Eastern Baltic, social and ethnic segregation among Germans, Estonians, and Latvians intensified over the course of the fifteenth century. Elsewhere, the boundaries between German and Slavic peasants, who lived within sight of one another in the settlement territories of the southern Baltic, appear to have leveled out socially. These German-Slavic borderlands featured extensive wilderness that initially functioned as a physical buffer between groups while leaving enough space for settlement and crossing-over. Through imperial expansion and crusading from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries, these empty spaces began to fill up, resulting in a gradually increasing demand for territorial demarcation. Social and cultural boundaries, as well as territorial borders, emerged within these encounters

between Estonians, Latvians, and Germans during the Middle Ages and the early modern period.⁷

Cultural transfer studies, which have devoted increasing attention to the mechanisms and patterns through which both object and ideas are exchanged, also enrich recent discussions of borderlands studies. Michael Werner and Benedicte Zimmermann, for example, have advanced the concept of *histoire croisée* to analyze historical processes that interact simultaneously on the global and local level. Rather than emphasizing bilateral transfers alone, *histoire croisée* is especially useful for examining multilateral entanglements in a temporal and spatial framework where many actors interact together on various levels, in various directions. As a recent study notes, “*histoire croisée* illuminates the synchronic tangle of political, economic, intellectual, artistic and human dynamics involved in processes of cultural exchange.”⁸

Furthermore, “invisible borders” have become of particular interest to historians studying early modern Europe. With the Reformation and the emergence of confessionalization, religious coexistence assumed new forms and created new religious borderlands.⁹ The size and the character of the borderlands were determined by the interaction with the “other side.” The processes of border formation, then, began to involve more than simply drawing a political line; they also started to encompass forces of socialization, integration, and harmonization. State-building in early modern Europe contributed to the dissolution of borderlands understood as overlapping spaces and to the consolidation of state borders, which went hand-in-hand with a homogenization of territory. This process was ultimately finalized in the emergence of the borders of nation-states.

In the past few decades, the processes of globalization and integration have once again significantly changed our perspectives on borders and their adjacent lands. Recent European borderlands research, stimulated by the discourse on enlarging the European Union—arguably the most comprehensive redefinition of Europe since antiquity—is characterized by a concern for the impact of political-historical bordering processes on contemporary de- and re-bordering. Taking note of the growing importance of socially and culturally constructed boundaries,

scholars now increasingly deemphasize the idealized impermeability and homogeneity of national borders. The downplaying of static borders and the consequently upgraded significance of cultural boundaries has profoundly changed the meaning of borderlands within the European context. Mobility, interaction, and cross-border activities within a unified Europe have liberated the national and territorial borderlands from the territorial and cognitive periphery and moved them into the spotlight of attention.

Human geographers have likewise stimulated a reassessment of the concept of borders and bordered spaces. Anssi Paasi and Henk van Houtum, for example, describe borders as “imagination that creates and shapes the world” and “as sets of practices and discourses which ‘spread’ into the whole society” well beyond border regions.¹⁰ Drawing on this formulation, researchers have increasingly conceptualized borders as the outcome of social negotiation processes and have thus focused more on the process of bordering, defined by van Houtum as “the strategic fabrication and control of a bounded sphere of connectivity that constitutes a reality of (affective) orientation, power, and ease thereby expressing desire for protective distance from the outside world.”¹¹ As van Houtum and van Naerssen point out, “semantically, the word ‘borders’ unjustly assumes that places are fixed in space and time, and should rather be understood in terms of bordering.”¹² In other words, borders can be regarded as continuous complex processes that defy simple definition as demarcation lines in space. Rather, they should be reconceived as socially dynamic spaces as well as process-driven practices of spatial differentiation.¹³ This abstract understanding of borders and bordering processes transcends the conventional material and physical view, compelling us to acknowledge the ubiquitous prevalence of bordering processes in society.¹⁴

Those of us coming from the North American side have arrived at similar conclusions through a somewhat different historiographical trajectory. Turner’s “frontier thesis” again forms the starting point here. Turner linked the westward expansion with American identity when he claimed that the frontier was unique to the United States. The frontier influenced the American character that was formed by

its continuous contact with what was described as savagery. In Turner's concept, Indians were subjects to be removed or—when they resisted—overcome. Thus they did not participate in any way in the development of American history. Turner's adept Eugene Bolton modified this teleological history by advancing the idea of borderland(s) as a place where Native peoples could at least negotiate between imperial/colonial powers that played the leading role in American history.¹⁵

Even so, Native networks of interaction were long neglected, despite growing interest in Native American history. Only with Richard White's *The Middle Ground* did a new understanding of cross-border interaction begin to set in.¹⁶ Thanks to White and others, Native peoples began to be taken seriously as actors alongside the European colonial powers, competing and cooperating with them in shaping colonial America. Even so, the "frontier thesis" has retained its attractiveness for some historians. Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, for example, view the frontier as a useful tool for understanding European–Native American relations.¹⁷ They argue that borderlands research does not take power politics and issues of territorial hegemony of the English, Dutch, or French adequately into account. This argument was especially expounded with reference to the European colonial rivalries in North America. Native power was only acknowledged in context with neighboring colonial ambitions that, for example, enabled Native peoples to play English and French colonial administrations against one another.

Against this renewed focus on European powers, another approach has been to reconceive Native peoples as central actors rather than reactive figures. Most notably, Pekka Hämäläinen has provided us a new entry in the list of North American empires: the Comanche Empire. The Comanches, according to Hämäläinen, created an imperial organization in North and Central America, integrating Spanish, French, and Native communities into a vast trading network.¹⁸ The frontier thus became obsolete, as the Comanches created manifold zones of interaction. In a recent review article, Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett provide a useful synopsis of American research from Turner to the present while making clear that future borderlands history has to focus on a broader range of actors instead of a limited number

of imperial representatives. It must take into account the multifold meeting grounds not only between Native people and European settlers, missionaries, traders, and administrators but also between Mexican, African, and American peoples. As Hämäläinen and Truett write, “old empire-centred and nation-centred narratives” need to be adapted to the current awareness of “spatial mobility, situational identity, local contingency, and the ambiguities of power.”¹⁹

The modern U.S.-Mexican political border and the marginalization and exclusion it has enacted have given rise to another take on borderlands, one that has been influential amongst both U.S. and European scholars in our group. Gloria Anzaldúa in her *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* employs poetry and prose to describe what it means to be Chicana on the Mexican-U.S. border. Although Anzaldúa is constructing a Mexican nationalist romantic mythology from the pre-Columbian past to the contemporary Chicana, her concept of borderlands emphasizes the omnipresence of intergroup or intercultural contacts. As she writes, “borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where the lower, middle and upper classes touch.”²⁰ Borderlands situations, then, can occur whenever aspects of different cultural, economic, and political spaces meet or overlap, whether this occurs in a physical, geographical sense or a cognitive and conceptual one, and whether within the physical boundaries of a single political unit or between two (or more) political entities.

In their analyses of the varieties of cross-border interaction and exchange, the chapters included here draw on new archival sources and new theoretical perspectives to rethink traditional views of border interaction. Although the chapters provide case studies from ancient to modern times, some common themes emerge, notably the importance of economics, migration, and religion in creating, maintaining, and contesting borderlands. Although there are many different ways we could have organized the chapters, we have adopted a chronological arrangement for simplicity. This organization also better highlights the gradually increasing influence of nation-state political boundaries as well as the border-crossing that occurs once these lines are drawn.

Borderlands concepts and models find manifold use in understanding the ancient Mediterranean world, as Elizabeth DePalma Digeser discusses in her chapter. At the most basic level, many ancient historians have come to use the term “borderlands” to describe a physical region in which no single hegemonic power exerts uncontested political domination. These areas, which often arise at the peripheries of empires, can foster both hybridity and the assertion of new identities. Not all ancient borderlands, though, need be physical regions. Scholars of ancient religion such as Daniel Boyarin have explored the formation of religious identities at conceptual frontiers. A borderlands approach is also valuable for understanding the processes of cultural entanglement, identity formation, cooperation, and contestation that can occur among the diverse modern disciplines—archaeology, classics, history, and religious studies, for example—involved in the academic space of ancient studies.

Examining border interactions at the geographic fringes of ancient empires offers a new perspective for historians accustomed to the omnipresence of the nation-state. As Greg Fisher shows in his contribution, the periphery of the late Roman Empire was not marked in the sand. Fisher analyzes the integration of Berbers and Arabs along the borders of the Roman Empire in North Africa, revealing how the imperial administration secured the periphery through noninterventionist means, recognizing tribal leaders by assigning official posts to them. Imperial authority, although often remaining “fuzzy,” was thus perpetuated without the burden of directly controlling areas and tribes. The continuous negotiation between the empire and its adjacent tribal communities created a borderland that was both contact and buffer zone and where autonomous self-rule and Roman control created a hybrid administrative structure.

Manja Olschowski focuses on the medieval transborder economy and the construction of religious and economic borderlands in the Baltic Sea region. She focuses on Cistercian monasteries that for the first time employed the term “border” (*Grenze*) in the German-Slavonic colonization area. The Cistercians obtained property and privileges from princes in order to settle empty or “less populated” areas. Encompassing

the religious life and introducing education and agriculture (livestock breeding, water management), the monastery districts they created had to overcome the borders of the neighboring towns and princely or noble estates to establish trading networks. Continuous economic interaction took place while the institutional borders of the monastic estates had to be renegotiated whenever new property was acquired or privileges were given. This negotiation took place on a social level also as princes and local nobles entered monasteries and abbeys became the burial places of noble families.

Religious life of another sort underlies Ann Plane's discussion of the shaman Squando, who led a pan-Indian rebellion against European settlers in New England during the late seventeenth century. Maine, while still under Native American control in the late seventeenth century, was a target for both French and English European imperial ambitions. By 1676, the region had already been penetrated by fur, fish, and timber trading networks; it was also the target of active campaigning by French Catholic missionaries to the north and a vigorous expansion of English Protestant colonists from the south and west. Plane shows how Squando's visions and activities influenced the pan-Indian rebellion that swept through New England and examines how Squando has been perceived in the following generations.

In Kord-Henning Uber's study of the Duchy of Courland, situated along the southeastern coast of the Baltic Sea Region, religion again plays a role. While European historiography often portrays the early modern confessional state as a homogenized religious space with fixed political borders, Uber shows that this simplistic narrative does not accurately portray the diversity of religious interactions in Courland during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when it was a fief of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. As Uber explains, Courland in this period became a religious borderland, as both political pressure from external powers and the responses of the leading Lutheran denomination to other confessions and beliefs within Couronian society impelled continuous processes of religious de- and re-bordering.

Stefan Herfurth traces borderlands interactions in another Baltic region, Swedish Pomerania, during the eighteenth century. Located

at the periphery of the composite monarchy of Sweden or Sweden-Finland, Swedish Pomerania had a German-speaking majority population ruled by a Swedish administrative aristocracy. Although the Swedish aristocracy never sought to transform the German-speaking majority culturally, Swedish intellectuals generated an influential discourse on freedom and liberties in the eighteenth century. Herfurth follows the path of these ideas from the intellectual centers of Sweden into the Pomeranian province across the sea, revealing Pomerania as a cultural transfer area between traditional patterns of belonging that were characterized by a strong notion of manorial economy and new ideas of enlightened subjects in the Swedish realm.

Clinton F. Smith focuses his attention on meeting grounds, negotiation, and violence among Native peoples in the North American Great Plains during the early nineteenth century. Moving beyond the usual notion of borderlands as a site of interaction between Natives and colonial outsiders, Smith shows how peoples of the Great Plains developed their borderlands as overlapping trade and kinship networks, forming a dense web of relationships across the region. Intertribal ties and kinship were central to identity-formation in these Native borderlands, as kinship marked people as insiders or outsiders. At the same time, the fur and the horse trades played a major role. The Lakota formed alliances based on kinship with the Cheyenne and Arapaho in order to get access to the Comanche horses they needed for their expansion. On the other hand, the Lakota had to compete with the Crow and the Arikara, whom they tried to integrate into their networks by warfare.

Immigration and economics also inform Verónica Castillo-Muñoz's study of indigenous families and transnational migration during the early twentieth century. Castillo-Muñoz examines settlement and economic development in Baja California, the northernmost part of Mexico. She discusses how the Mexican government attempted to limit indigenous border-crossing even as it fostered migration and settlement of Chinese and Mestizo workers from Southern Mexico. As she reveals, these new immigrants formed racially mixed laborer communities in the Baja California borderlands.

Gabriela Soto Laveaga explores another set of physical and conceptual

borders in her study of Mexican public health in the 1940s and 1950s. This era witnessed the elaboration of new conceptions of urban and rural space, terms that had previously been ill-defined in Mexican discourse. As Soto Laveaga shows, Mexican medical students who were required to serve “socially excluded” regions for a six-month period played a crucial role in this process. While concepts of health and illness are culturally and socially constructed, the availability and types of health care often had larger economic and political aims. By focusing on public health programs aimed at the poor, Soto Laveaga reveals how the modernizing Mexican state created new conceptual divisions between urban and rural, building imaginary domestic borders that could be used to define populations and regulate behavior. As access to health care became a powerful currency for the ruling government, young doctors became amateur census-takers and geographers who could determine where the borders between “marginal” and “developed” would be drawn.

Last but not least, Olga Sasunkevich examines borderlands economic interactions across the modern national borders of the Baltic Sea region; some of these borders also function as borders between member and nonmember states of the European Union. As Sasunkevich explains, social differences in marginal regions along these national borders, along with their selective openness, have stimulated petty entrepreneurship and local cross-border cooperation, even as the expanding European Union attempts to enact a new border regime regulating all its external borders. Sasunkevich pays particular attention to the gendered construction of these borderlands interactions, showing how women dominate borderlands trade between Belarus and Lithuania.

Taken together, these diverse chapters point the way to further research on borderlands from ancient to modern times. Conventional academic wisdom would have it that a narrowly focused discussion, emphasizing a single period or place, is the proper format for a volume such as this one. Yet, throughout the course of our joint project we have found there is particular value in bringing together researchers focusing on far-flung places and periods. Each specialist benefits from explaining his or her particular field to a wider scholarly audience

and from encountering new and unfamiliar material, while we all find common ground in exploring the broad range of theoretical approaches to the study of borders and borderlands. The very diversity of topics, we believe, results in a more stimulating and thought-provoking conversation than might otherwise occur. In this spirit, the authors and editors hope that these chapters will furnish thought, insight, and inspiration for others embarking on the study of borderlands around the world.

Notes

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