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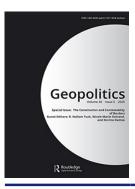This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

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INTRODUCTION   OPEN ACCESS   Check for updates

The Constitution and Contestability of Borders

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ABSTRACT
This article introduces the special issue on the constitution and contestability of borders. Reflecting the processual turn in critical border studies, Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy (2019, 5) describe bordering as the set of practices and techniques that generate the forms of difference that enable distinctions between political subjects. Drawing on the concept of the borderscape, this special issue contributes to research within the field of border studies by examining how this social process of bordering is both co-produced and contested. This introduction describes the three main contributions of the Special Issue. First, our analysis draws attention to the ways in which bordering practices are co-constituted through interactions and negotiations between many different actors and institutions. Attention to co-constitution demonstrates how the borderscape produces differentiation through mundane, material practices, such as access to work, medical care, education, mobility, language, and bureaucratic encounters. Second, we emphasise how bordering practices are relational – appearing and operating differently on different people and in different contexts. Finally, by emphasising the processes of social and legal contestation that underlie bordering, we argue that the borderscape offers a uniquely valuable analytical tool to help us understand bordering as contingent, fragmented and containing multiple contradictions.

Introduction

Within the field of critical border studies, the term border has increasingly been used and understood as a verb rather than a noun. Instead of a fixed, material location at the edge of the territorial state, the border has come to be understood as a social process, defined by a set of dynamic social, political and spatial relationships (Brambilla 2015; Balibar and Williams 2002; Paasi 1999). That we have come to understand the border as a process rather than a location is, of course, the product of a specific set of social and political circumstances. During the 1990s, the advent of new forms of communication technology and the end of the Cold War produced confident predictions of

a new form of social relations structured more by digital interaction than by territorial borders (Castells 1996). At the same time, the mobilities turn (Cresswell 2012; Urry 2007) emerged out of novel ways of thinking about the production of space during the 1980s (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith 1991; Massey 1984), arguing that social theory needed to develop a better way of seeing social relations on the move. Since the turn of the 21st century, however, there has been a clear recognition that the acceleration of electronic communication and certain forms of international mobility are by no means incompatible with increasingly coercive controls on migration. To paraphrase Didier Bigo's description of the liberal government of migration in the European Union's Schengen Zone, social theorists have begun to learn not to confuse the speed of well-channelled movement with freedom (Bigo 2010, 1).

Borders, as Etienne Balibar (2003, 1) famously put it, 'are dispersed a little bit everywhere'. Writing at the end of the 20th century, Balibar's observation foreshadowed the processual turn (Brambilla 2015, 14), foregrounding the simultaneous dissolution of some traditional elements of territorial borders alongside the expansion and diffusion of bordering into our everyday lives. Where, at the turn of the 20th century, the invention of national identity documents and territorial border controls marked the advent of what the historian John Torpey called the 'crustacean type of nation' (1999, 93), the turn of the 21st has seen new forms of governance and knowledge production have enabled bordering practices to imbricate themselves within mundane elements of our everyday lives. Borders, in other words, creep ever further beyond the external territory of the nation-state (Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, and Pickles 2015; FitzGerald 2020; Menjívar 2014; Ostrand 2024), and ever deeper into the internal structures of state institutions (Barker 2018; Bendixsen and Näre 2024). This diffusion, as Balibar (2003, 8) emphasises, has not meant the declining relevance of border regions, but rather has pulled the territorial margins firmly inward, as well as outward (FitzGerald 2020). At the same time, the diffusion of bordering has necessarily engaged a multiplicity of state and non-state actors in processes and practices of border control, in turn generating new sites in which difference is produced and contested (Achermann, Marie Borrelli, and Pfirter 2023; Bosworth 2025; Ostrand 2024; Ostrand and Statham 2021). Bordering practices have also expanded and reconfigured temporal structures, producing varied regimes of waiting, acceleration, and delay as instruments of governance, such as long asylum processing times that keep individuals in liminal legal and temporal states, unable to move forward with their lives (Jacobsen, Karlsen, and Khosravi 2020). Not only, then, is the border a process rather than a fixed location, but it is a highly social process involving an increasingly complex assemblage of actors, spaces, and temporalities.

Borderscapes: Thinking Against Dangerous Borders

The concept of the borderscape emerged out of the cultural foment of the end of the 20th century, employed both to imagine a new post-borders world, and to describe the diffusion of bordering practices across space, time, and social institutions. *Borderscape 2000*, a theatre piece written and performed by the Chicano artist and poet Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the Pocha Nostra group, imagines a dystopian future in which the United States and Mexico have been dissolved into a series of multi-racial republics, controlled by a Chicano prime minister (Gómez-Peña et al. 1999). The narrative – the first recorded use of the term borderscape – centres around a series of characters including El Mexterminator, and CyberVato, who roam the post-national United States, upending established hierarchies of race and nation, embodying instead a radical hybridity. Mixing a surreal, futurist fascination with *fin de siecle* digital culture with the symbols of Mexican and Chicano identity, *Borderscape 2000* presents a deliberately provocative vision of what the denationalised circuits of production enabled by borderless global capital might do to the US–Mexico border (Kun 2000). On one hand, Gómez-Peña's *Borderscape* reflects a critical development in the Border Art movement, shifting away from depictions of the border as a physical site, towards the border as a metaphor (Bolikowska 2011, 6). At the same time, *Borderscape 2000* represents an effort, as Gómez-Peña (2002) puts it, to challenge colonial depictions of 'dangerous border crossers', and perform a vision of the world after borders.

After Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes, the term borderscape was used by a number of scholars in geography to describe the material and social construction of border spaces. As Agnese, Anne-Laurezary, and Szary (2015) observe, representation is central to this understanding of the borderscape – not as a static locale, but a discursive relation that gains meaning through narratives, images and depictions of the border that come to be experienced as real (Struver in Agnese, Anne-Laurezary, and Szary 2015, 5). In their work, the scholars Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007) use the term borderscape to emphasise the 'inherent contestability' of bordering as a de-centred and contingent relationship, rather than a fixed space that assumes a 'territorial arrangement of the world' (Alonso 1994) in which the meaning of human subjectivity is bound to the nation-state. Rather than a binary relationship between inside and outside, citizen and foreigner, the term borderscape emphasises the multiplicity and contingency of social relations that constitute difference (Perera 2007, 206). As an analytical lens, borderscapes have proven useful in making visible the contestability of the divide between inclusion and exclusion, belonging and non-belonging, in and out (Perera 2007; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007, xxviii).

In taking up the borderscape concept, scholars have attempted to develop a more nuanced understanding of the spatiality of bordering. In

the introduction to their edited volume *Borderscaping*, Chiara Brambilla, Jussi Laine, James Scott, and Gianluca Bocchi suggest that the concept of bordering is not sufficient to capture the 'new spatiality of politics' produced by globalisation, and offer the borderscape as an alternate concept (2015, 2). The borderscape, they argue, can help to liberate the geopolitical imagination from the territorial trap (Agnew 1994) towards a new set of political and epistemic possibilities (Brambilla, Laine, and Bocchi 2016). This attention to the production of space has been taken up more recently by Krichker (2021). Krichker's study of Melilla, the Spanish enclave in North Africa, argues that the borderscape is constructed through the imagination and experience of space (2021, 1233–1234). As Krichker observes, Melilla's distinct position as a site of bordering is defined and contested by the different ideas about what it means to be on European territory articulated by Spanish residents, local police, and sub-Saharan migrants (2021, 1236–1237).

Research on the borderscape has also reflected shifting conceptions of the relationship between the state and subjects. Visions of the state as an 'entity over and above the human individuals who make up society' (Radcliffe Brown 1950, xxiii) have given way in political anthropology and sociology to an understanding of the state as an entity without institutional fixity, diffused through society. In these depictions (Hansen, Thomas, and Stepputat 2001; Trouillot 2001) state-making is an everyday practice, defined by everyday negotiations and contestations between institutions and people. Drawing on Gramsci's insistence that the state and civil society cannot be theorised separately, Michel Trouillot depicts the state as a 'third-order object' (Abrams 1988, 76) – an ideological project which takes shape through daily encounters. In a real sense, then, the border is a 'state effect' produced via a series of 'techniques that enable mundane material practices to take on the appearance of an abstract, nonmaterial form' (Mitchell 2006, 171)

If, as Sharma and Gupta (2006, 11) observe, 'everyday practices [are] the primary arena in which people learn something about the state', the concept of the borderscape helps us to see how the distinctions between citizen and foreigner, belonging and non-belonging, are produced through everyday interactions between people and institutions. Camilla Nordberg and Paula Merikoski's (2025) contribution to this issue illustrates how the border is enacted through encounters between migrants and social services where language barriers and little clarity in communication have led to the imposition of a guardian and loss of financial independence. Critically, however, the borderscape is both a site of production and contestation. Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007) and more recent accounts of the borderscape (Brambilla and Jones 2020; Krichker 2021) have emphasised how borderscapes also contain and enable specific forms of resistance and counter-hegemonic practices.

Constitution and Contestability

The contributions to this special issue apply the concept of borderscape across diverse yet constitutive vantage points. Focusing on the conceptual level, Maayan Ravid argues 'that race should be central to discussions of borderscapes', showing how such a lens blurs the distinction between differential inclusion and exclusion and situates them 'along a shared order and within historical context that affects migrants and citizens' (2025, 11). Wiebe Ruijtenberg and Neske Baerwaldt use it to demonstrate how migranticized people 'engage in mobility work to live', including 'by adjusting to, subverting, or simply surviving the systems that seek to govern them' (2025, 3). Next, Camilla Nordberg and Paula Merikoski apply borderscapes to sites of bureaucratic and slow violence, focusing on how language barriers shape people's experiences of welfare encounters and produce silences as well as alternative types of agency. Finally, Dorina Damsa and Nicole Ostrand take up the concept when analysing how both knowledge and nonknowledge are mobilised by a multiplicity of state and non-actors in helping legitimise (and contest) deportation as an 'acceptable' form of governance strategy.

Collectively, this special issue contributes to research within the field of border studies by examining how the social process of bordering is both co-produced and contested. Following Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy (2019, 5) we understand bordering here as the set of practices and techniques that generate the forms of difference that enable distinctions between political subjects. No longer conceptually confined to the margins of the polity, these practices of difference making create and reproduce the symbolic and material boundaries that sustain the existing social order (Ravid 2025). Echoing Perera (2007) and Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007) the contributions in this special issue see the borderscape as continuously constituted by an array of practices of social and spatial differentiation that produce contingent relations of inclusion and exclusion (Brambilla 2015, 15; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

Building on this understanding, this collection makes three core contributions to the empirical and conceptual development of the borderscape. First, each of the papers in this special issue show how bordering practices are co-constituted through interactions and negotiations between many different actors and institutions. Echoing Trouillot (2001) and Mitchell (2006), the borderscape produces differentiation through mundane, material practices, such as access to work, medical care, education, mobility, language, and bureaucratic encounters, that enable distinctions between inside and outside and the in-between. This in-between is important as it complicates simplified binary narratives on inclusion and exclusion, belonging and non-belonging,

where someone can belong, partially belong and not belong in different times, spaces and contexts.

Second, each contribution demonstrates how bordering practices are relational and differential – appearing and operating differently on different people. They are produced in socio-political environments shaped by legal and policy landscapes, where state and other actors' behaviour is generated in relation to others. For example, as Dorina Damsa and Nicole Ostrand (2025) show in their contribution, Frontex and national police agencies had to respond to pressure by civil society on their use of physical force by incorporating new actors into bordering processes and by generating new practices and understandings of what is perceived as 'legitimate' violence (see also Ostrand forthcoming). Still what is perceived as 'appropriate' is shaped by racialised and gendered stereotypes, where a racialised man's distress is much more likely to be seen as a threat and requiring physical force. Across the contributions, this relational quality of the borderscape is understood as a product of the colonial and racial logics of border control that structure these legal and policy landscapes and subjectivities.

Finally, the contributions in this special issue understand the borderscape as contingent, fragmented and containing multiple contradictions. Challenging the categorical binary of inclusion/exclusion, the borderscape concept emphasises how illegality and exclusion from immigration status is constituted through social and legal processes that are far more contested and less stable than they may seem (Armenta 2017; De Genova 2013). In his autoethnographic description of commuting across the US–Mexico border, Peña (2023) emphasises the blurriness and contingency of the borderscape. While the radio airwaves suggest a borderless world, Peña's (2023, 787–790) experience of daily border crossing emphasises the contingency of bordering, depending on which bridge he uses to cross the Rio Grande, whether he chooses to use his Secure Electronic Network for Travellers Rapid Inspection (SENTRI) card to cross the bridge, and whether or not he is travelling with his wife. Echoing Peña, each contribution emphasises the contingency, fragmentation, and liminality of bordering (Elías 2021; Tazzioli 2020). Yet, echoing Bosworth's (2025) recent study of border control as logistics, qualities of contingency and fragmentation do not necessarily equate to weakness. In certain cases – as in the role of non-knowledge in deportation (Damsa and Ostrand 2025), this contingency or partiality works to reinforce border controls. In other cases – as in the experience of Anastasia described in Wiebe Ruijtenberg and Neske Baerwaldt's (2025) contribution – it works to contest it.

Across the issue, each of the contributions draws on the concept of the borderscape to describe how these practices of bordering are fluid. Returning to Appadurai's (1994, 324–39) description of fluidity, this way of understanding bordering emphasises how the borderscape is

continually (re)shaped by a multiplicity of actors, socio-political contexts, and its temporal and spatial dimensions. Understanding borderscapes as fluid invites engagement in the contingent, everyday constitution and contestation of bordering, towards a (re)imagining of and (de)constructing of borders. Rather than trying to concretise, operationalise, and generalise borderscapes (Tallis 2023), we see fluidity and contingency as important for generating future imaginations and social configurations, as they leave space open for creativity. As Damsa and Ostrand (2025) show, conceptualising borderscapes in terms of their fluidity also avoids complacency, as it requires constant attention to how change occurs across various policy and practice contexts, including the incorporation of reforms which ultimately sustain and legitimise violent systems of bordering.

Each of the contributions in this issue foregrounds the ways in which bordering is relational and co-constituted. In conceptual terms, this analysis of the borderscape emphasises how practices of inclusion and exclusion are interlinked. As Ravid (2025, 12) observes in her contribution, efforts to see inclusion and exclusion separately have 'occluded attention to processes taking place outside state lines or view'. For Ravid (*Ibid*, 1), both migrants and citizens are 'differentiated along the same racialised scales that undergirded colonialism, empire, nation-state building and global capitalist development'. Ravid offers racialised differentiation as a unifying analytical framework that connects the often separate articulations of differential inclusion and exclusion. This approach produces a deep scepticism towards the 'essentialist politics of difference' (Genova and 2013, 1191–92) at the heart of western conceptions of citizenship, suggesting that the practices of difference making that include some subjects necessarily mark others out for exclusion.

This attention to co-constitution also emphasises the ways in which the borderscape is continuously enacted, negotiated, and contested by multiple actors. In their ethnographic study of migration between Cairo and Amsterdam, Wiebe Ruijtenberg and Neske Baerwaldt (2025) describe how bordering is not simply imposed in a top-down fashion but encountered and surmounted by migrants in varied ways. Drawing on the concept of social reproduction from feminist theory, Ruijtenberg and Baerwaldt articulate bordering as 'mobility work', describing the activities required of people on the move to cross borders meant to keep them out and settle in places designed to exclude and subordinate them. Bordering, crucially, is not simply an imposed identity, but constituted through labour, requiring exhaustive social resources to gain partial and precarious forms of membership.

Similarly, Camilla Nordberg and Paula Merikoski's (2025) study of language diversity and bureaucratic violence in the Finnish welfare state describes how the bordering process displaces responsibility for accessing

social services in an intelligible language onto individuals. This process of responsibilization, Nordberg and Merikoski argue, operates as a form of bureaucratic violence to the extent that it forces migrants to engage in mundane administrative practices that limit their access to services, and ultimately harm their ability to fully enact membership. In both cases, however, the border is not just a site of sovereign state violence but also as a space where alternative subjectivities and agencies emerge (Brambilla and Jones 2020). As such, the contributions also engage with the normative dimensions of the border through analysis of arguments used to justify specific border practices and policies as well as strategies of resistance, transgression, or against hegemonic borderscapes (Brambilla 2015).

As Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy (2019, 5) argue, bordering works to produce difference. Across this issue, the production of difference is examined both theoretically and empirically. Drawing together the concepts of differential inclusion and exclusion, Ravid argues that efforts to differentiate and categorise individuals subjects for the purposes of immigration control operate within a hierarchy structured by a racial logic of colonial rule. This is what Ravid calls 'differentiation along racist scales'. Echoing Ravid, the other contributions in this special issue situate the border within its colonial history, as both an epistemic and material structure that reproduces colonial hierarchies of knowledge, mobility, and membership. These bordering practices extend the colonial logics of exclusion, classification, and control into contemporary migration governance. Damsa and Ostrand, in this issue, argue that colonial logics continue to shape non/knowledge production related to deportation and the institutions and processes that govern it, often obscuring or not accounting for other kinds of knowledge and seeing the world (Bosworth, Parmar, and Vázquez 2018). Examining how linguistic hierarchies function as exclusionary mechanisms within welfare institutions, Nordberg and Merikoski (2025), argue that migrantized people are expected to assimilate linguistically to claim rights, reinforcing broader power asymmetries, "rooted in complex processes of state formation, colonisation, and migration'. Ruijtenberg and Baerwaldt (2025), too, show how mobility work is structured by colonial hierarchies, movement depending on access to historically accumulated advantages. They argue that the 'citizen – migrant' distinction reflects a colonial world order, past, present, and future, sustained through law and territorialisation.

Critically, these practices of difference making themselves operate differentially. As Mostafa, one of the participants in the Ruijtenberg & Baerwald's study observed, borders are like stones of different weights, placing different burdens on differently situated people. Those carrying the heaviest stones have less time, energy, and resources compared to those whose movements are easily facilitated. The differential effects of this burden, Ruijtenberg &

Baerwald argue, in intricate ways with nationality, race, gender, class, age, and ability, suggesting how mobility work sustains global systems of inequality. Empirically, these bordering practices operate differentially and, importantly, engender multiple claims and counterclaims, new political possibilities, and political subjects (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007).

Accordingly, the contributions in this special issue examine borders as sites of struggle, continuously enacted, contested, and negotiated, whether through the politics of non/knowledge production as a means of legitimising or contesting the border (Damsa and Ostrand), differentiation of both citizens and migrantized people predicted on racialised colonial hierarchies (Ravid, Ruijtenberg and Baerwaldt), the negotiation of access to rights and the enactment of bureaucratic violence (Nordberg and Merikoski), actively co-constituted not only by state actors but by migrantized people themselves (Damsa and Ostrand; Nordberg and Merikoski, Ruijtenberg and Baerwaldt), all calling for (epistemic) justice.

Conclusion

In the early stages of *Borderscape 2000*, a futuristic Chicano cyborg called El CyberVato played by Roberto Sifuentes cajoles the audience to come and see a new vision of the 21st century, filled with a panoply of 'dangerous border crossers' – characters who challenge and provoke stereotypical depictions of the 'Latino threat' posed by Mexican immigrants to the United States (Chavez 2025). Reflecting on *La Pocha Nostra's* contribution to the Border Art movement, Gómez-Peña and Wolford (2002, 81) described the group's performance as 'embodied theory', a means of both contesting existing bordering practices, and bringing a new world into being. In the twenty-six years since Gómez-Peña's first articulation, the meaning of the term borderscape has both gained and lost its meaning. *La Pocha Nostra's* vision of a borderless post-NAFTA world in which categories of race, gender, and class have been systematically turned upside down feels particularly far away. Yet, as the borderscape has been taken up by scholars across the field of critical border studies, the concept has retained critical potential to analyse the present and perform a new kind of future.

The contributions in this special issue then recognise and situate the struggle for (epistemic) justice within broader histories of empire and the enduring coloniality of power (Quijano 2000). As postcolonial and decolonial scholars have shown, the hierarchical and exclusionary bordering logics of Western nation-states are inseparable from histories of colonial conquest, racialised classification, and epistemic domination (Bhambra 2015; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Mignolo 2011; Quijano 2000). Borderscapes then become a field of epistemic struggle, where migrantized people,

positioned as marginal enact modes of resistance, transgression, or refusal of the state's epistemology and governance (Jones 2012). Resistance is not exceptional, but embedded in the everyday, through incremental acts of navigating systems designed to exclude, in an insistence on presence despite expulsion, and in the production of alternative narratives and claims that unsettle the terms of recognition. As the contributions in this collection demonstrate, practices such as mobility work, the articulation of alternative knowledges, and counter-claims to recognition collectively contest the idea of all powerful states that cannot meaningfully be challenged, leaving open cracks and fissures that can be exploited in pursuit of (epistemic) justice. The contributions in this special issue collectively highlight the need – and possibility – for alternative politics that challenge the epistemic, material, and symbolic violence of contemporary bordering regimes.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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