

Transdisciplinary Views on Boundaries

Towards a New Lexicon

Edited by

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About This Text

What do researchers talk about when they talk about borders?

International debates on boundaries and borders have multiplied along with the global restructuring of the economy, the crisis of state sovereignty, and the increased migration flows from developing countries. Border studies have emerged as a field of study from the joint effort of geographers, anthropologists as well as political scientists to tackle the multifaceted complexity of borderland identities and landscapes. Nowadays, a trans-disciplinary approach more and more is replacing the affiliation of border scholars to separated fields of knowledge. However, as this convergence is far from complete, its potential for territorial development is limited. The book urges the need to apply trans-disciplinary methods in the making and management of boundaries. Though this can be done in multiple ways, the construction of a trans-disciplinary lexicon is key to facilitate a mutual understanding between researchers with different backgrounds, as well as between researchers and policy makers. However, such a lexicon also serves to “misunderstand” each other, unfolding the ambiguity of the border as a quality that cannot be eliminated in theory or in practice.

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Table of Contents

Transdisciplinary Views on Boundaries

Introducing a Transdisciplinary Border Lexicon 10

Luca Gaeta and Alice Buoli

Lowering disciplinary barriers

How this volume is structured

Chapter 1 - Borderscap-es/-ing: Reading the Moroccan-Spanish 21

Borderlands Constellations

Alice Buoli

1.1 The relevance of the borderscap-es/-ing notion from a trans-disciplinary perspective

1.2. Origins and understandings of the borderscap-es/-ing perspective

1.3. Reading the North Moroccan-Spanish border through the borderscap-es/-ing lens

Conclusions

Chapter 2 - Boundary Objects: How the Romans Protected the Border's Invention 46

Gianluca De Sanctis

2.1. Arbitrariness and functions of the boundary

2.2. Boundary signs

2.3. The boundary-god

2.4. Vulnerability and reification

Chapter 3 - Connectedness and Separateness: On the Aesthetic Presence and Material Performances of Everyday Artefacts and Thresholds 64

Paolo Patelli

3.1. Bridges and doors

3.2. Between politics and artefacts

3.3. Architectures of Schengenland

3.4. The unintentional (geo)politics of airports

Conclusions

Chapter 4 - Design: Questioning Boundaries in a Time of Urgency

76

Micol Rispoli

4.1. Design and Politics

4.2. A new philosophy of space: the disappearance of the outside

4.3. Objects, things, assemblages: towards a political ecology

4.4. A call for openness and situatedness

4.5. Questioning boundaries in design practices

4.6. A space for hesitation and alternative livable relationalities

Chapter 5 - In-between: (Sub)urbanisation from the Outside-in and the Generative Role of Borders

100

Camilla Perrone

5.1. Bringing the border at the centre stage after the explosion of the erstwhile urban/rural and society/nature binarism

5.2. A (Sub)Urban Political Ecology approach to the city-nature reconciliation

5.3. Urbanisation from the outside and the generative role of borders as In-between

Chapter 6 - Infrastructures, Borders, and the Making of the African Territory: The Case of Zambia

112

Giulia Scotto

6.1. Infrastructure

6.2. Infrastructures and borders

6.3. Northern Rhodesia: of railways and borders

6.4. Border genesis and *Uti possidetis*

6.5. Independent Zambia

6.6. Trans-African nation building

6.7. Coda

Chapter 7 - Mapping: Questioning Boundaries, Rights and Sustainable Development in the West Nile Region, Uganda

132

Alessandro Frigerio

7.1. The political correlations of mapping

7.2. Maps, self, power	
7.3. The African challenge: Mapping from the outside vs mapping from the inside	
7.4. Mapping and capacity development: reconciling borders and practices in the West Nile region	
7.5. Openings: self-mapping and rights	
Chapter 8 - Practice: Holding Breath When Crossing Boundaries	162
Luca Gaeta	
8.1. Three reasons for dealing with practices	
8.2. Moving beyond dualisms	
8.3. Boundary-producing practices	
8.4. Practices on the move	
Chapter 9 - Production: Historicizing Border-Making	181
Laura Di Fiore	
9.1. Political borders and territory. A proposal for historical analysis	
9.2. State borders as a plural enterprise	
9.3. The borderlands' role	
Conclusions	
Chapter 10 - Publicness: Public and Private Spaces in the Age of Diversity	194
Rossella Ferorelli	
10.1. Some attempts to describe and measure publicness (and their limits)	
10.2. A geo-cultural perspective: diversity in urban culture	
10.3. A historical issue: digitalization of everyday life	
10.4. Publicness in the <i>hic et nunc</i> : emerging phenomena	
Conclusions	
Afterword - Boundaries at the Intersection of Macro and Micro-Politics	216
Agostino Petrillo	
References	222
The Authors	260

Introducing a Transdisciplinary Border Lexicon

Luca Gaeta and Alice Buoli

Lowering disciplinary barriers

International debates on borders and boundaries have multiplied along with the global restructuring of economy, the weakening of state sovereignty, and the increased migration flows from developing countries. Concurrently, border studies have emerged as a field of study from the combined effort of geographers, anthropologists, historians as well as political scientists to tackle the multifaceted complexity of borderland identities and landscapes. Rather than clear-cut lines of political partition, borders and boundaries are nowadays understood as thick spaces characterized by specific forms of cultural blending. The traditional concepts of rupture and break or, alternatively, of connection and interaction between pre-given identities and ethnicities (Barth, 1969) are replaced with a focus on the generative and hybridative processes taking place in and around border areas (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). Furthermore, the latter epistemological shift distances itself from the state-centred approach in the study of borders, which was prominent until the conclusion of the Cold War. Instead of being understood solely as basic elements of statehood, borders are viewed as research objects in their own right and beyond overarching political frames. Besides the states' actions to enforce territorial sovereignty and loyalty, the common people's everyday practices come to the fore with an unprecedented protagonism as having agency in the processes of boundary-making and unmaking.

Investigating the border *per se*, and not as accessory to the geo-body of a nation (Winichakul, 1994), has brought with it a reversal of perspective as well as the need for a renewed terminology. Most of the scientific disciplines that were concerned with borders and boundaries over the last century and a half have initially served the interest of nation-states and imperial powers. Colonization was both prepared and followed by an intense amount of border work conducted under the aegis of science. It may well be said that nationalism has permeated almost every scientific discourse on border issues in modern times. Border lexicon accordingly, irrespective of disciplinary fields, has encapsulated and encouraged what Amelina and others (2012) call methodological nationalism. Thus, scientific disciplines not only have assumed – explicitly or implicitly – the border to be an appendage of state sovereignty, but have mirrored the international system of sovereign states in the realm of science. Despite professed ideals of the free circulation of knowledge, well-guarded borders detach each scientific and cultural field from others, based on the assumption that each discipline studies one specific aspect of the world with methods specific to its feature. Interdisciplinary boundaries are in place not only in laboratories, libraries or universities, but also in the educational programmes for primary and secondary schools. Methodological disciplinarity relates to methodological nationalism through the principle of exclusive domain over the portioned world of power/knowledge.

A border however is the kind of place over which there is no exclusive domain, be it political or scientific. As our understanding of borders distances itself from nationalism, a transdisciplinary approach to research becomes not only possible but in fact the most rational option. Given the ambiguous character of the subject matter, border studies are intrinsically inclined to develop at the crossroads of natural and social sciences. To put it in other words, given the increasingly recognised blended nature of borders, encompassing both material and symbolic production, it is little surprise that border scholarship tends to resemble more closely its object of study. Through joint research endeavours, institutes and conferences, a transdisciplinary approach more and more is replacing the affiliation of border scholars to separated fields of knowledge. As Paasi (2011, p. 18) observes, “the terrain of border research is now

fusing and it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish separate academic realms with their own objects, concepts or methods of border research”. This fusion is far from complete, unfortunately, and its potential for investigation is still limited. Here lies the main reason for this collection of essays.

In an attempt to lower the disciplinary barriers still existing in our minds, the book urges the need to explore transdisciplinary methods in the study, making and practice of borders. Though this task may be pursued in multiple ways, our contention is that elaborating a transdisciplinary lexicon is key to facilitate a mutual and deeper understanding between scholars with different backgrounds as well as between scholars, policy makers and the wider audiences concerned with issues of bordering. Secondly, the availability of a transdisciplinary lexicon could help framing discussions on borders that embrace ambiguity and twofoldness as well as precision and univocality of meanings. The blending of the material and the social, of the natural and the artificial, of the institutional and the societal aspects of borders, to name only a few, is exactly what transdisciplinary terms can capture. What is gained in terms of insight exceeds what is lost in terms of consistency. Therefore, transdisciplinarity is intended here neither as a new discipline nor as undisciplined. Rather, it is an extroverted attitude enabling scholars to address borders and boundaries as research objects with no fear of thinking outside accepted disciplinary limits. Geographers are entitled to speak of the earth, sociologists are entitled to speak of social structures, and legal experts are entitled to speak of laws: but who is entitled to speak of borders? They all are entitled, albeit none can do it independently of the other’s contribution.

The idea to start a transdisciplinary lexicon came to the authors of the present book when we first gathered in Milan to get involved in a two-day intensive discussion on borders. Few of us shared a common scientific background. We were architects, urban planners, political scientists, economists, philosophers in search of ways for mutually understanding each other.

The fact of being invited to discuss without there being a preliminary statement of the meaning to be attributed to the term around which the discussion revolved proved at first difficult. The use by each participant of their own scientific language threatened to confuse a discussion that instead continued incessantly. The participants somehow distorted or adapted their vocabulary to empathize with others, to get listening, to react to the many stimuli received. Although this was not sufficient to set up a fruitful dialogue on border issues, it revealed how many angles our dialogue had. In so doing, we have become aware of lacking a suitable lexicon for dialoguing on issues related to borders and we have proposed ourselves to start building it. In a second seminar, held a few months later and involving more border scholars, we have discussed a first selection of terms to be included in a transdisciplinary lexicon. The experimental character of the seminar was intentional, and it was useful to test the semantic consistency of the selected terms. The satisfactory results then have led us to write the essays here collected in order to demonstrate what contribution each term makes to border studies.

The terms that are selected to compose this minimal lexicon, on the one hand, derive from research interests, predilections and aversions of the authors, each bearing their own vision of borders. On the other hand, the terms, which are also chapter titles, are chosen as they satisfy two conditions: 1) being currently used in the scientific and social debate on borders; 2) having the capacity to resonate across various disciplinary fields as meaningful and stimulating terms. The first condition means that no invention of new words is needed to foster transdisciplinary discourses on borders. Our opinion is that an accurate selection of existing words, thanks also to their polysemy, can either capture or amplify the blended nature of borders and boundaries. The second condition brings with it an implication that deserves to be considered. A discourse on borders is transdisciplinary not only if it makes disciplinary barriers porous, but also if it addresses different kinds of borders: international and internal, material and symbolic, natural and artificial. There are good reasons to expand the scope of transdisciplinary methods and languages beyond the study of international borders so as to encompass boundaries of any kind through the commonality and the diversity of their manifestations. This implication is perhaps

controversial among scholars, but it seems to us at the same time that which motivates the search for a transdisciplinary lexicon as a contribution towards a general theory of bordering.

For the reasons already explained, our selection of terms is partial and could easily be expanded. According to Paasi (2011, p. 17), for example, “Identity (...) is one of watchwords in current interdisciplinary border studies, often associated with others such as difference and inclusion / exclusion or inside / outside”. Similarly, “power” is a word whose absence from this lexicon could be contested.

What do scholars talk about when they talk about borders? A transdisciplinary lexicon certainly serves to better understand what the object of border discourses is and what are the nexuses among discourses, practices, landscapes and artefacts that constitute borders. Such a lexicon, however, also serves to misunderstand each other, unfolding the ambiguity of the border as a quality that cannot be eliminated in theory or in practice.

How this volume is structured

The book is organized into ten chapters, each one exploring an entry of the lexicon from both a theoretical and applied perspective. Each contribution contextualizes the selected term in relation to relevant border research debates and disciplinary discourses, and addresses the origins, uses, and potential transferability of the word to other knowledge fields. On this basis, the majority of the essays are also drawn on empirical research and case studies (urban public spaces, cross-border regions, trans-national infrastructures, modern and ancient boundary-making technologies and materializations), in order to demonstrate the operational usefulness of the lexicon to address different liminal conditions of contemporary borders.

The sequence of the chapters, organized as lexical items, follows a simple alphabetical principle. At the same time, along with a first level of reading related to the individual contributions, the reader will find resonances and

commonalities across the essays from a thematic, geographical, or cultural perspective.

For example, Chapter 1, 6 and 7 explore the production of territorial and social spaces across manifold (political, symbolical, and social) boundaries by making reference to architectures, cities and regions in the north and sub-Saharan African context (Morocco, Zambia and Uganda). Chapter 3, 4 and 10 have a specific focus on design practices and artefacts as politically charged devices and discursive spaces in contemporary (European) cities and public spaces. Chapter 4 shares with Chapter 5 an attention to the societal relationships between the urban sphere and nature, outside traditional categories in spatial and philosophical disciplines.

Finally, Chapter 2, 8 and 9 address, from various historical perspectives, practices of boundary-making and boundary-marking in the (re)production of borders seen as symbolical, social and material reification of recursive uses, customs and beliefs.

Chapter 1 focuses on the word *borderscap-es/-ing*, as a productive conceptual and methodological perspective for urban studies and creative practice research. By revealing borders in their multiple, dynamic and shifting nature in space, time and society, the *borderscap-es/-ing* notion is addressed as an imaginative and operative notion, not only to conceptualize, re-frame and describe, but also to suggest new ways to intervene on borderlands. The essay unfolds such potential through an empirical exploration of the everyday and trans-scalar, networked border conditions of a specific area, the Moroccan-Spanish borderlands constellation, in the context of past and ongoing re-bordering processes at Europe's borders in the Mediterranean and in North Africa. This case appears relevant to put in practice the *borderscap-es/-ing* notion for addressing the mutual interferences among different transcalar dynamics and agents at / across the border.

Chapter 2 explores the term *boundary object* in the context of Ancient Rome.

In spite of their degree of materiality or their size, *boundary markers* are fundamental devices in the life of human groups. The internal cohesion of a society is, in fact, directly proportional to the solidity of these demarcations. For this reason, in many cultures, the artificial character of the border is constantly removed through the use of myths and beliefs that sublimate the boundary mark, making it descend from above, assigning its invention to celestial deity, or turning it into a real cult *object*. Sacralizing a boundary or making it a god, means, in fact, to assure it against the risk of alteration, subtracting it from the possibility of manipulation by others, making it unquestionable. In this sense, deification can be considered a form of “reification”, a necessary and indispensable “fiction” for the community life of human beings.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the terms *connectedness* and *separateness* as not complementary, but rather correlated and interdependent concepts. Disputed objects and spaces can open up multi-textured discursive and political spaces through their material and behavioural affordances as well as through their potential for affect. Taking Georg Simmel’s reflections on the bridge and the door as a starting point, the chapter explores how mundane and familiar features, artefacts and thresholds of the social world might reveal something of how the two orientations defined by connectedness and separateness are performed. The essay mobilises examples composing a heterogeneous inventory of constructions and representations, including Giedion’s account of Maillart Swiss bridges, the controversial overpasses built by Moses in Long Island, the migrant camp at the entrance of Eurotunnel in Calais, a protest before the gates of Schiphol Airport, and the gateways and bridges depicted on Euro currencies. Each object, space and routine are instrumental in the functioning of a threshold reproducing the tension between the will to connect and that to separate.

Chapter 4 covers the complex relationship between *design* and the issues emerging in the controversial and widely discussed era of the Anthropocene. Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory, together with the New Materialism in philosophy, contributed to the abolishment of the traditional dualities of Modernity, such as the nature-culture divide. Against the modernist

anthropocentric perspective, the surrounding world is not seen as a passive background, but rather as a system of relationships, made of agents – human and non-human – each of them provided with an agency which is also political. Such change of perspective has a profound impact on the very idea and practice of design. Design practices constitute in fact a particularly fruitful field to unveil and reshape the coexistence of different entities, agencies and interweavings that constitute the political sphere.

Chapter 5 digs into the word *in-between* to trouble the traditional urban/rural and society/nature distinctions as spatial, conceptual, and disciplinary boundaries. The current debate on Urban Political Ecology (UPE) offers some thoughts to work across traditional disciplinary divisions and retheorize the city as a product of metabolic processes of socio-natural transformation in an era of planetary urbanisation. Thomas Sievert in his masterpiece *Cities Without Cities (Zwischenstadt)* offers a lucid glimpse into the complexity of post-urbanised landscapes, proposing a more complex interpretation of the “space” of transformation of the city at the intersection, on the ridge and even beyond the codified boundary between urban and rural, society and nature. Urban planner’s singular trust in the creative potential of the built environment is replaced by a free-falling entry into the world of urban/nature, and borders/interconnections dialectics among fragments of urban explosion that include human and non-human actors.

Chapter 6 investigates the relationship between the concept of border and that of *infrastructure* from both a theoretical and a grounded perspective, with a specific focus on urban Africa. In the first part, the chapter provides some operational definitions of what infrastructures are and do in order to understand how they can be productively interacting with the notion of the border. Infrastructures are addressed both as products of capitalism at various scales, and as active technopolitical assemblages of things, people and practices designed to achieve specific political goals but whose consequences are never completely predictable. After elaborating on two theoretical frameworks – that of infrastructures as borders and that of borders as infrastructures – the second

part of the essay deploys them to read the spatial history of colonial and early postcolonial Africa through a series of historical episodes. In particular, the role of railways, highways, national and internal borders in the definition of Zambia's territorial and social structure is addressed.

Chapter 7 focuses on the word *mapping* as the most important tool to visualize and consolidate boundaries, and thus to pursue a political/social/economic project by controlling its spatial reverberations. The ongoing cartographic revolution boosted by digital technologies allows the spatialization and visualization of intangible constellations of data that make the spatial figure of contemporary cities a complex inter-scalar lattice of networks more than a puzzle of bordered tiles, thus questioning the meaning of boundaries. This perspective is further explored with a case study in the West Nile Region, Uganda where current migrations and globalization are boosting rapid urbanization in a context where appropriate maps are lacking and planning and governance tools seem inadequate to face emerging conflicts and challenges. The discussion of the case study allows an overview on the complex relation between maps, boundaries, rights and sustainable development at different scales, opening key research pathways.

Chapter 8 addresses the headword *practice* as part of a transdisciplinary lexicon of boundaries. Taken in the meaning of a recurrent doing, bearing an implicit kind of knowledge, the concept of practice is common to both social and spatial sciences. In these fields, it contributes to redefining the relationship between knowledge and action, thus identifying practices as the source of all pure and applied knowledge. In the study of boundaries, Anssi Paasi applied this concept with reference to discursive practices, which are important in the creation of territorial identities as well as in the regionalization of space. The chapter aims to extend Paasi's account for "boundary-producing practices" beyond the discursive domain, arguing that non-discursive practices of everyday life are factors of equal importance in the production of boundaries. The benefit deriving from practice theory as related to boundaries lies in the opportunity to eliminate the detrimental dualism between the social and material world as a source of inconsistencies in border theory.

Chapter 9 argues that the specific contribution of historians to a transdisciplinary analysis of borders lies in the historicization of the latter. Therefore, the chapter focuses on some historical border *production* processes aiming, on the one hand, to denaturalise the border lines through the historicization of their construction and development; on the other hand, to release the concept of border from the exclusive connection with a rigid version of state territoriality and sovereignty. Focused on political-administrative borders, mainly dating back to 19th century, the essay shows how territorial borders have historically been the result of an interactive dialectic between state institutions and social actors inhabiting the borderlands rather than the pure outcome of institutional acts. The chapter supports the fruitfulness of a transdisciplinary synergy between border studies – in particular their anthropological and geographical components – and the new attention paid to space by recent historiography – inspired by the spatial turn movement – with the aim to set up a different historical narrative of border making.

Chapter 10 focuses the analysis on boundaries created inside domains of urban *publicness*. The essay first starts from a review of the cultural position assumed by methods, existing in literature, which try to assess “levels” of publicness in urban spaces by means of quantitative values of different nature. The limits of such a “positivistic” approach are then questioned to highlight more appropriate conditions and qualities: first, the culture-sensitiveness of the idea of publicness; second, its variation through history, and therefore its specificity in our own era. The research considers these conditions of diversity, numbering, from one side, some extreme cases of cultural specificity and, on the other, analysing some effects of the progressive digitalization of everyday life. The essay argues then for a more humanistic position, taking into account the complexity of our contemporary urban realm simultaneously crossed by several levels of publicness and privacy.

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