

# Border Thinking and the Experiential Epistemologies of International Relations

Written by Marc Woons and Sebastian Weier

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MARC WOONS AND SEBASTIAN WEIER, JUN 2 2017

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In the first ten months of 2016, 6,155 migrants worldwide died trying to cross borders (Missing Migrants, 2016) — 4,663 of them in the Mediterranean alone (UNHCR, 2016). Long merely a statistic in government deliberations, these dead have become increasingly humanized as their mementos travel globally, crossing fatal zones and in some cases earning the dead post-mortem citizenship. Photographs such as that of 3-year-old drowned Syrian boy Alan Kurdi lying face down in the sand on a Turkish beach and 5-year-old Omran Daqneesh sitting in an ambulance covered in a layer of blood and dust have become iconic in a spreading paradigmatic debate concerning how important it is to highlight the personal dimensions of the international. Amid a renewed wave of interest and available funding driven by current global events, Border Studies is being reshaped in debates on the respective importance of, on the one hand, individuals with names and, on the other hand, mere statistics. These debates map onto existing tensions between macro- and micro-level oriented research that sometimes becomes misconstrued as embodying tensions between social sciences and the humanities. The texts collected here seek to overcome these tensions, showing why contemporary Border Studies needs to be trans-disciplinary, less they reproduce the epistemological and political order that has led to current global crises such as those faced by refugees, Indigenous peoples, and planet Earth itself. Beyond a focus on either 'cold' statistics or hyper-personal experiences, this volume argues for an epistemological critique of and within Border Studies that considers Borders and International Relations through the lenses of the individual, their experiences, and their cultures as well as simultaneously through the lenses of the imaginary, the international, and the imperial.

*Critical Epistemologies of Global Politics* combines approaches to borders as global political superstructures, envisioning borders as internalized patterns of affect and subjectivity inspired by disciplines such as Chicana/Chicano Studies and theoretical approaches such as Post-Marxism and Decolonial thinking. While (post-)Marxist thinkers since Louis Althusser have detailed the interwoven character of power and knowledge, as well as culture and political economy, decolonial thinkers have refused to accept as given an international system formed in and through histories of colonialism and empire, thus keeping open the possibilities of radically contesting borders and the modern nation-state form as such. Starting from an analysis of the lived experience of the Mexican-American borderlands or from the constitutive connections between coloniality and modernity, authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Aníbal Quijano, and Walter D. Mignolo have pointed out that it is necessary to stop simply thinking *about* borders and move to a mode of *border thinking*. Borders are not simply an object of reflection; they shape and inflect subjectivities. Such approaches to borders as formations — of both politico-economic structures and subjectivities — challenges exclusively state or system focused approaches to studying borders for being insufficient.

Instead of considering border deaths and displacements as necessary collateral damage to securing systemic wealth and stability and burying the border power's disposable others in abstract anonymity, Border Studies seeks to

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understand experiential epistemologies as central to its hermeneutic project and its political implications. This understanding must be more than just recovering a name (United Against Racism, 2012) and an origin, as do DNA identification programs such as that run by the Greece Police's Criminology DNA Lab (Petrakis, 2016) or by the University of Milan's Labanof forensics laboratory (Scammell, 2015). It must also be more than an attempt to retrace tragic events as exceptional rather than structural, as do new research disciplines such as forensic architecture (Forensic Architecture, 2016). If Dr. Cristina Cattaneo from Labanof Laboratories can describe her vision as "Our battle is not to lose the dead" (Povoledo, 2015), *border thinking* seeks to propose an understanding of borders that lays bare the power structures that produce and even require these dead in the first place. Thus, Border Studies within this volume proposes more than just improved border management, offering instead an inherently political vision of radically different and potentially de-bordered modes of thinking, living, being, and sense-making.

Arising out of a Summer School titled *Borders, Borderlands, Border thinking* held in May 2015 at the University of Bremen in cooperation with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University, the present volume seeks to address global border issues from a *border thinking* platform. While the current problems of the international system have led many scholars to examine the normative values of the inter-state system and global governance, the impact of cultural border constructions and contestations are generally of second-order interest in IR research. Civilizational borders, racial borders, or other cultural borders are often taken as constants to think from rather than internally unstable variables with a considerable crisis potential both for International Relations and IR Theory. The terms borders, border thinking, and borderlands will not only be approached in their immediate political and physical sense, but also as tropes of thinking. Gathering contributions from (and beyond) Gender, Black, Religious and Post-/Decolonial Studies, the volume offers various border-critiques rooted in these fields.

Instead of recuperating the dead beyond the borders, the epistemic critique proposed in the following pages questions both the existence of these borders and sciences' complicity in upholding them. Critical self-interrogation of various academic disciplines is a major thread of the volume. Traditional dichotomies between researcher and object or between scientist and politician are reconsidered, both multiplying the number of analytical dimensions and refuting the notion of both qualitative and scalar differences between approaches to borders in humanities and social science-inflected IR theory. In so doing, the contributions move beyond separations between inside and outside, self and other, critically engaging their own bordering logics to trace a mode of epistemological, ontological, and corporeal interweaving and continuity with reference to the border.

Borders cannot be understood separate from the bodies they affect and form. The geopolitics of knowledge cannot be separated from the lived experience of borders. These are two decolonial perceptions that recur in the book and show why IR cannot understand contemporary border phenomena and formations without Cultural Studies, and *vice versa*.

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