
Introduction

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1 Introduction

This special issue, ‘Dis/placing the borders of North America’, considers critical questions about displacement, resistance, and bordering practices throughout the region called ‘North America’. We place scare quotes around this continent’s name because for indigenous communities the imposition of settler-colonial borders over traditional territories has meant that displacement is not only a foundational event but also an ongoing experience. These borders represent the injustices wrought by both historical and contemporary forms of settler colonialism. Questions of displacement and borders remain intensely salient in the current North American context and beyond. As such, there is a need to examine the linkages, continuities, and variations between the borders of North America because states are increasingly focused on border control as a collaborative partnership, both within the region and globally. We theorise the region of North America through all of its borders: from those within Canada all the way through to Mexico’s southern border with Guatemala and Belize. What is innovative about the framing of this special issue is the cross-regional approach to the study of borders, and the transversal connections it draws across indigenous and migration studies. While the individual authors in this special issue address specific bordering practices, our goal in this introduction is to bring them into discussion.¹

We aim to contribute to broader theoretical and practical debates about border control policies, bordering practices, and indigenous and migrant rights advocacy. The study of the borders of North America promises not only new angles and questions for border studies in general, but also significant insights into the contestation of and resistance to existing border regimes. As scholars who study the practice of borders and migration in the region, we are interested in documenting and analysing the impacts and implications of these state-led practices as well as the efforts of other actors involved in enacting and resisting these bordering practices. Borders reflect and reproduce social inequalities both within and across international boundary lines (Novak, 2011). Borders are productive from both theoretical and empirical standpoints because of the proliferation of actors, spaces, and relations involved in making them work – or in re-working them (Young et al., 2017). The contributors to the special issue explore these multiple spaces of the border and investigate how bordering practices produce marginalisation and inequality – as well as contestation. Indeed, resistance to these borders is evident through the activism and everyday lived realities of indigenous and migrant communities of the region. As such, the contributors focus on different places where state borders are being enacted and refused.

The special issue is organised along three overarching themes that inform these multiple spatialities and temporalities of the border. The first situates the borders of North America in a historical context, acknowledging that the racialised colonial past is indeed present today and plays an important role in how contemporary borders are enacted and contested as well as how mobilities are represented and contained. The

second emphasises the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding the complex dynamics of border internalisation/externalisation, highlighting bordering practices that blur the lines between traditional conceptions of inside/outside as a binary for understanding how borders actually work. The final theme acknowledges that borders in the region operate within a broader global political economy, where migrant labour and migrant bodies are subject to bordering practices in various ways.

2 What does it mean to dis/place North America's borders?

Where are the borders of North America today? Who defines these borders, how, to what ends, and for whom? Which other borders are ignored or erased through the emphasis on nation-state borders and actors? What are some of the less visible geographies, including internal borders, of the region? What transversal forms of cooperation and coordination define border control practices across the region? How do indigenous understandings of land and place challenge nation-statist logics and practices of borders and their sovereignties? We are interested in investigating these alternate, 'other' borders of North America and their relationship to the powers of dis/placement.

Dis/placing the borders of North America provides an opportunity to critically rethink the various ways in which borders become manifest in the daily lives of citizens and non-citizens alike. Following Mark Salter, we use a slash when speaking of 'dis/placement' in order to emphasise the multiplicity and complexity of power relations involved in the movement across borders. In his important essay 'Theory of the /', Salter likens the slash to a kind of suture. Writing for a critical border studies audience, Salter (2012) argues that the suture – what he calls the “process of knitting the inside and the outside together and the resulting scar” (p.734) – is the most appropriate metaphor to express the performative aspects of borders and bordering. The advantage of the suture as a 'thinking tool', he argues, is that it “focuses our analytical attention on those moments of tension, anxiety, displacement, rupture or abandonment” (p.735, 740). Our usage of the slash in 'dis/placing' has a similar aim: as an opportunity to understand, critique, and challenge current bordering practices and performances of state sovereignty while examining implications of these processes on and for indigenous and migrant lives. There also remains opportunity for active contestation and resistance to these practices and state-led impositions of control. The practice and performance of the border reproduces division, exclusion, and marginalisation along racialised, classed, gendered, and other lines. Dis/placing the borders of North America provides an opportunity to see the practice of borders within its historical contexts; allows for the blurring of the traditional inside/outside binaries that have shaped mainstream understandings of sovereignty and territoriality; and, finally, situates – emplaces – the border within the broader context of the regional and global political economy that provides linkages to the economic implications of bordering practices as well as their impacts on migrant labour.

Recent work by geographers engaged in border studies underscores that borders are not only topographical (i.e., locatable in space and marking geopolitical boundaries), but also topological, in the sense that borders are applied unevenly over space and time (Coleman and Stuesse, 2014). A topological approach moves beyond Euclidean space and Cartesian cartographies and “redefines our understanding of space and surface, so that they are no longer understood in terms of fixed points with determinate positions, but

as dynamic and continuous fields of relations” [Hepworth, (2014), p.112]. For example, a topological approach to borders argues that the very act of producing a border makes not only an inside/outside, but also multiple inside-outs and outside-ins. As Hepworth (2014, p.112) puts it:

“although borders are used to indicate a clear division between two states or spaces, the practice of defining that border actually results in numerous, seemingly paradoxical positions that may, simultaneously, be both included within, and excluded from, the political community.”

In this way, a topological understanding of borders captures both the multiplication of borders in the contemporary context and the discretion and selectivity built into how they function (Coleman and Stuesse, 2014; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) as well as their reliance on temporal and spatial strategies of pre-emption and deterrence – what Stockdale (2016) refers to as the “politics of anticipatory governance.” Moreover, state borders are an ongoing project of colonisation and there is a need for a more robust engagement with border studies in and of settler colonial nation-states (Fortier, 2013; Simpson, 2014; Walia, 2013).

States have proven adept at inventing an ever expanding vocabulary to define and re-define classes and types of migration and migrants. This is a regular part of border control, even if it has irregular effects, such as the proliferation of ‘irregular citizens’ who are inadvertently caught up in the state’s deportation apparatus and have their citizenship rights unmade (Nyers, 2019). Such regularities underscore the relations of violence that are an everyday part of bordering and border control. Indeed, violence is often presented as an inevitable reality of state borders and an acceptable consequence for those who choose to contest the exclusionary power of the border (Jones, 2016). Both De León (2015) and Jones (2016) provide a direct challenge to the naturalness of borders and the perception that irregular flows of migrants are driven by traffickers and smugglers. Instead, the authors argue that borders produce the violence that surrounds them. Through the existence of the border, violence becomes a naturalised reality with the hardening of the border acting as a key source of violence (Jones, 2016). Border control practices reinforce the harm associated with the migration process and increase the likelihood of death without actually deterring migration to the point where, for example, the US border is increasingly transformed into a militarised zone of exclusion with greater technological investment and human capital expended in securing it (De León, 2012; Squire, 2016). This conceptualisation of borders as violent articulations of the state is largely echoed in the literature on Europe that highlights the similarly porous nature of the border and the inability of states to actually ‘control’ migration, all while ensuring the continuation of violent expressions of sovereignty over migrant – and indigenous – populations (Andersson, 2014; De Genova, 2017; Mainwaring, 2012; Vaughan-Williams, 2015).

3 A North American approach to border studies?

A key question guiding this special issue is to consider what migration, displacement, and borders mean in the context of the region of North America. We are interested in thinking about how the borders of North America are related and what we can learn from examining them together. Although they work in contingent, contextualised, localised ways, they are also inextricably linked by economics, politics, and migration. Several

edited volumes have sought to consider migration and borders in the region in a more holistic way, although in most cases individual contributions remain focused on one national border rather than on examining its connections with others (cf. García, 2006; Hoerder and Faires, 2011; Simmons, 1996). The special issue asks what we can learn from thinking about displacement and borders from a regional perspective or scale. Is there a distinctive ‘North American’ approach to border studies? What might be the value of such an approach, given the European-Mediterranean and US-Mexico focus of much work to date in the field? Our aim is not to propose the existence or non-existence of such a field of inquiry. Rather, we want to open a conversation about the value and urgency of asking critical questions about bordering in a distinctly settler-colonial context.

To date, there has been a European focus in research and theorising of borders and migration (see, e.g., Balibar, 2009; Bigo and Guild, 2005; De Genova, 2017; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Rumford, 2010; Stierl, 2019). Within the USA, scholarship on borders is dominated by studies focused on the US-Mexico border. Indeed, this emphasis is signalled by Konrad and Nicol (2008, p.15) who suggest that Drache’s (2004) book aimed to be “provocative, and to heighten the visibility of the rediscovered [Canada-US] border” in the post-9/11 context. The language of ‘re-discovery’ is noteworthy, both in the sense that the events of 2001 elicited a renewed interest by the US Government in policing its northern border, and in terms of a reinvigorated scholarship about the historical and contemporary Canada-US border (Karibo, 2015; Konrad and Nicol, 2008; Young, 2018). And yet, even the Canada-US border has been well-covered relative to other borders in the region: most notably the Mexico-Guatemala border but also what under the administration of President George W. Bush in the USA came to be known as “the third US border, that is, along Central America and the Caribbean, embracing parts of South America as well” [Hussain, (2013), p.10; emphasis in original]. Hussain (2013, p.10) argues that “Bush’s third US border was a border both Mexico and Guatemala grappled with since their independence.”

Over the past two decades, state actors within North America have worked to coordinate border control, refugee, and immigration policies. The Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement is perhaps the most well-known example of coordinated border control policies. However, the international boundary line between Canada and the USA has been re-conceptualised as a common cause in many other ways as well, and in particular through the language of ‘partnership’ (Gilbert, 2007). State policies focus on securing borders to promote trade and prosperity, even as vast economic disparities contribute to displacement and are crucial to understanding human mobility both globally and within the region. The history of the refugee regime has resulted in a consistent focus on political over economic and other factors for forced displacement (Nyers, 2006). It is a legal impossibility to be granted asylum on economic grounds, let alone displacements related to climate change, environmental pollution, or urban gentrification. This legal and discursive reality influences how states police their borders and shapes who has access to safety, security, and refuge, and who does not. The economic asymmetry produced through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) – and its 2018 reincarnation as the USMCA – can be viewed as a causal factor for migration in a neoliberal economic order. The inception of the NAFTA agreement fused the markets of North America, which increased both the opportunity and the need for precarious labour, while the US and Canada remained focused on trying to prevent unwanted migration. Restrictive border policies of the NAFTA era have not decreased such migration but

rather increased the precarity associated with the journey and the experience on arrival (Ackleson, 2005; Donato et al., 2008; Good Gingrich and Young).

Simmons (1996, p.22) notes that the so-called 'leading countries' in North America – i.e., the USA and Canada – “have long histories of reliance on colonization and immigration to develop lands, to exploit resources and to meet farm and industrial labour demands.” This ongoing history continues to shape regional migration trends and contributes to the policies and practices that states enact to control their borders, manage migration, and deny indigenous claims. State officials have focused ever more on securing their borders in ways that promote prosperity; indeed, throughout North America, there has been a focus on 'national' over 'human' security. We argue there is a need for a discussion about the parameters of who counts as a refugee and a person in need of protection in the region. The framing of displacement is so well-established that refugees are understood to be coming from elsewhere, outside of the region, because the context is not understood as producing refugees 'worthy' of protection. This stems from a long history that is dominated by how the USA has defined refugees on its territory and in the region, based in an interpretation of the UN Refugee Convention that favoured offering asylum to people fleeing communist regimes and entrenched through US foreign and domestic policies during the 1980s Central American refugee crisis (García, 2006; Nolin, 2006; Young, 2012). And yet, as what has become widely known as the 2018 migrant caravan vividly demonstrates, there has been a dramatic increase in requests for asylum in the USA and Mexico by nationals of the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras since 2008 (Beuze, 2017; UNHCR, 2015). In the August 2016 San Jose Action Statement, Canada committed, along with eight other North and Central American countries, to a regional approach to strengthening protection of Central American refugees (UNHCR, 2016). This regional refugee crisis opens a political and theoretical moment for broader discussions about migration in North America, including the implications of Mexico's 2014 Plan Frontera Sur (Southern Border Plan), the reality that US officials now consider the Mexico-Guatemala border their southern border, and the ongoing harmonisation of Canadian and US policies.

4 Decolonising borders?

When indigenous communities refuse to recognise settler borders, they pose a challenge to the placement of the state – its taken-for-grantedness – and highlight some of the conceptual difficulty in 'placing' the border in the first place. Settler-colonial relations are predicated on domination and dispossession (Coulthard, 2014). Boundaries are not only important for the territorial demarcation and segregation of indigenous communities but also as a means of access and control to the resources on which the land is situated. The dominant actors in the North American region (states and private economic actors) hold great sway over the operation and terms of borders and mobilities but these are not the only actors engaged in working out how these borders work. The borders of North America are both a colonial legacy and an ongoing colonisation. At the same time, they are regularly resisted, ignored, and refused by indigenous peoples, communities, and nations whose territorialities precede, contradict, and refuse the borders of contemporary nation-states (Madsen, 2016; Midzain-Gobin; Simpson, 2014), by people toiling every season as migrant workers on farms across Canada to sustain the nation without access to

membership in it (Encalada Grez; Good Gingrich, 2010; Hennebry, 2012), and by people on the move across the region who seek out safety and opportunity across borders despite the barriers erected along the way (Brigden; Good Gingrich and Young). These struggles challenge us to re-think border studies in the context of North America and of settler-colonial states more broadly. Contributors to the special issue examine these questions from different perspectives including the borders enacted and navigated by indigenous nations (Midzain-Gobin) and temporary residents of Canada (Encalada Grez; Jackson; Venkatesh).

Scholarship and advocacy in this area contribute to our understanding of how borders are contested and resisted, how they are potentially ‘decolonised’ (Fortier, 2013; Thobani, 2007; Walia, 2013). And yet, as Watts (2016) has argued, decolonisation may not be the appropriate project or lens because it continues to centre settler-colonial states at the heart of the colonial project. What are the politics and theoretical implications of decolonising or refusing the borders of North America? In an important contribution to this discussion, Simpson (2014) looks to the Mohawk community of Akwesasne for how it challenges traditional conceptualisations of the border by insisting that it constitutes a sovereign nation coeval with that of Canada and the USA. Simpson (2014, p.10) argues that:

“Sovereignty may exist within sovereignty. One does not entirely negate the other, but they necessarily stand in terrific tension and pose serious jurisdictional and normative challenges to each other: Whose citizen are you? What authority do you answer to? One challenges the very legitimacy of the other.”

Indigenous sovereignty is in direct tension with the settler-colonial state and serves as a challenge to that legitimacy. It is an active contestation of state practice that Simpson (2014, p.11) refers to as ‘nested sovereignty’ in the sense that indigenous people are at once both recognised and unrecognised, seen and not-seen by the state (Smith, 2015). More than this, the idea of ‘nested sovereignties’ that call each other into question has ‘implications for the sturdiness of nation-states’ in general, but especially in those navigating nested sovereignties: “If a Haudenosaunee person is to travel internationally, for example, on a confederacy passport, then the very boundaries and lawfulness of the original territorial referent is called into question” (p.11). Legitimacy and authenticity are generally recognised when they are understood in the terms established by the international system of sovereign states. The ability to cross borders without the regularly required documentation, pushing back against the bureaucratic confines of the settler-colonial state, signals a tension built into how states control their borders as indigenous communities are able to traverse and refuse their existence. More than an alternative to the multicultural politics of recognition at work in Canada in particular, ‘refusal’ questions the legitimacy of the authority and sovereignty claimed by the settler-colonial nation-state (Simpson, 2014).

5 Outline of the special issue

The special issue begins with two papers that examine bordering practices that transgress, question, and even refuse nation-state borders. Liam Midzain-Gobin introduces us to the Unist’ot’en Action Camp, a camp established by the Unist’ot’en Clan of the Wetsuweten

in northern British Columbia in 2009. Midzain-Gobin argues that a kind of bordering practice is engaged if a visitor is determined as bringing harm to the territory. In contrast to hegemonic understandings of borders as working to organise settler authority over territory, these bordering practices draw upon traditional indigenous ways of being, with the effect of contesting and undoing settler sovereign authority. Moving from indigenous bordering practices that refuse Canada's borders from within to clandestine crossings of the US-Mexico border, Noelle K. Brigden compares historical and contemporary human smuggling operations. Whereas immigrant rights activists and slavery abolitionists have been celebrated for their border transgressions, for-profit smugglers have been vilified as violent predators; this despite the surprising similarities in social practices and relationships that underpin these dramatically different cases of migration brokerage. Brigden's counterintuitive comparison between the contemporary smuggling route and the historical freedom trail shows how normative imaginaries reshape social boundaries and territorial borders in North America, calling us to think through these historical echoes.

The next two papers focus on the work of state actors who implement North America's official borders (i.e., those of the USA, Canada, and Mexico) at different sites and scales. Nancy Hiemstra focuses on extraterritorial bordering practices enacted by several US Government agencies throughout Central and South America. These practices simultaneously assert and conceal US power and its effects. Hiemstra argues that as the USA extends its border policing activities through time and space, it conceals its direct role in migration policing activities that violate human rights and fuel illicit activities. These transversal border control partnerships transfer responsibility for the negative impacts of bordering practices to other states and to the private sector. Luann Good Gingrich and Julie E.E. Young examine the production and function of what they term the 'NAFTA border' as a transnational social field in the day-to-day lives of migrant women who organise their livelihoods in the in-between space of the Mexico-Guatemala borderzone. Through the narratives of Central American women in a town near this border, they analyse the everyday practices and official procedures that produce symbolic violence, documenting the paradoxical enforcement and definition of state borders in relation to the (im)mobility of migrant women through extraterritorial or transnational policing of movement into and through Mexico. Crucially, the simultaneous openness and closure of state borders via migration management regimes produces an entrepreneurial context that makes possible – even makes necessary – a range of gains and profits at the expense of individual people on the move.

The final set of papers offers three takes on temporary foreign worker programs in Canada. The first contribution by Vasanthi Venkatesh examines labour migration to Canada in the context of Canada as a settler-colonial nation-state and offers a productive comparison to the context in Israel-Palestine. Venkatesh situates the contemporary politics of agricultural work in both contexts in relation to the ways in which settlers asserted sovereignty and jurisdiction and displaced indigenous populations through farm settlements and agricultural production. She critiques how citizenship and jurisdiction are produced through an imagined discourse around farm work that requires the subordination and precarious status of both migrants and indigenous populations. Samantha Jackson similarly focuses on the production of citizenship through temporary foreign worker programs but argues that 'citizenship-making' power has been devolved to the private sector in Canada's labour migration programs. Employers not only act as border guards, deciding who can stay, who returns, and their labour conditions, but

increasingly define the terms of citizenship as well. Finally, Evelyn Encalada Grez argues that the ways in which migrant women from Mexico are integrated into the Canadian labour market go beyond the material. From rules at the farms and upon the point of recruitment, to the seasons of life and work in rural Ontario, migrant women face borders that prevent them from fully expressing their love and desire as full human subjects. Love disciplines these women because they take part in the program in order to support their families at home. At the same time, migrant women love regardless as a form of resistance to a coercive labour and immigration regime that favours production over reproductions of love.

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Notes

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