IDEA BRIEF

Reimagining Lands

Reimagining Canadian Studies: Borders, Land, and Settler Colonialism

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I want to examine the intersection of land, First Nations issues, and settler colonialism through border studies and its relevance for Canadian Studies. I'm a sociocultural anthropologist who focuses on international borders, so I first recognize that border studies and Canadian studies are different disciplines, and that Canadian Studies examines more than the international border it shares with the United States. Nevertheless, the border plays a disproportionate role in the field than it does in American studies or other academic disciplines. Border studies offers a different perspective for anthropological questions and I want to turn that lens onto Canadian Studies. Drawing on the work of Corey Johnson and Reece Jones (2011), I would like to think about the future of Canadian Studies through place, performance, perspective, and politics.

Many scholars have revised the concept of place when it comes to bordering practices as extending beyond the imaginary line that separates and joins Canada and the US. While the place/location of bordering practices does include the individual booths where agents from CBSA or CBP screen travelers, there are other institutions of power involved in the practices of bordering which can take place thousands of miles away, as I experienced with my interlocutors crossing the border into Canada during the annual Canoe Journey. Upon landing via canoe in Sidney, BC, the "border" for them was a phone at the end of a dock that connected to an agent in Ottawa. While this was nevertheless an agent of the state in a traditional sense, it undermines the idea that "the border" is always experienced at the location the traveler happens to be.

Place is interrelated with performance, Johnson, Jones, and Salter's (2011) second concept. The "formal" delimitation of national territory and security are maintained by the state. I'm writing this in January at the Dublin airport having just gone through US Customs and legally crossing the border across the ocean from US territory.

Similarly, other preclearance locations across Canada concern the practices of border agents who admit or exclude. Salter's third aspect of performativity is most promising for the future of Canadian studies: popular performances and the ways settlers and Indigenous nations both support and subvert meanings that contest state hegemony. My experience with Indigenous canoe journey participants in the Pacific Northwest demonstrates that many refuse to acknowledge the Canadian or American state when traveling across the Salish Sea. Their primary obligation when traveling from the Olympic peninsula to Vancouver Island, for instance, is to ask permission to land from the tribal nation that receives them. This was a subversive act that has ripple effects across the entirety of the Salish Sea where tribal nations assert a shared, political identity as Coast Salish to explicitly erase the international border as a settler colonial object. Through repeated performances, they reshape the place of the Canada/US borderlands into an Indigenous space that contests the state.

Borders remain structures of inequality, I argue, because of the settler colonial framework that shapes contemporary securitization. As both thing and process, bordering is something both performed by the state as well as through the daily actions of those who live in the borderlands. This process is regularly contested and cannot be controlled by those who claim power.

Perspective, the third concept, questions *who* does the bordering and under which circumstances? What are the various social positions from which different agents border? At the 2025 biennial meeting of the Association for Canadian Studies in the US, one keynote speaker, André Lecours, addressed the relationship between the return of the Quebec sovereignty question and the changing relationship with the US due to Trump's attacks on Canada. He highlighted the central role identity plays in political and economic affairs. Chris Rumford's (2011, 68) observation that "borders are woven into the fabric of society" undergirds the need for a holistic approach to understand our contemporary world and the directions it may go. Often absent from this theorizing are First Nations. When they are included, it is often solely within the territorial boundaries of the state. Not only does this exclude what are seen as cross-border tribal nations, it reifies the borders of the state by treating state borders and the identity boundaries they create as primary. This is a continuation of settler colonialism and the ways nation-state borders perpetuate it through obfuscation. If First Nations perspectives on the border, as both thing and process, are neglected, particularly when viewing First Nations as political entities as opposed to ethnic minorities within the state, then scholars will ultimately fail to capture a holistic perspective of how the border functions and the effects this has on the broader

Canadian, and American, societies. The importance of Quebec in discussions of Canadian identity through thoughtful incorporation of politics, economics, and sociocultural identity should extend to First Nations to avoid reinforcing a hegemonic, state-centric view of the border.

Sarah Green's concept of tidemarks in border studies also has relevance in this discussion; looking at the border as it changes over time demonstrates that the border is not static, but malleable. Other historians (such as Sheila McManus and Paul McKenzie-Jones) have examined this as well, particularly with reference to First Nations and borderlands. There are social justice implications for analyzing the border from different perspectives and their fluctuations over time which ultimately makes Canadian Studies all the more relevant today.

The final concept, politics, that I borrow from Johnson and Jones concerns the politicization of place and space. Drawing again on my ethnographic work with the Coast Salish, I offer an example of how Coast Salish national identity exemplifies this process through protest at the Peace Arch park, which straddles the border between Washington and British Columbia. Indigenous activists chose that location because it directly challenged the hegemony of the national states. They transformed the park from a place that was neither solely "Canadian" and "American" territory by recasting it as an Indigenous space through the relationship between landscape and history. They turned the entirety of the Salish Sea into a political symbol that erased the settler colonial border by reminding those in attendance of the fluctuating nature of the border and their presence there since time immemorial. Coast Salish leaders reminded people – settlers and First Nations alike – that they are all on unceded Coast Salish territory. This served as an inclusive welcome with a request to recognize Coast Salish custom and the artificiality of the international border that divides them.

Remembering that settler colonialism remains a force in the present and not solely historical memory, should direct our attention to the various ways it matters today. Including Indigenous peoples in the work that scholars do, be it anthropology, border studies, or Canadian studies, challenges the ways we view land and the identities we create that connect to it. Attention to land can force us to look beyond territory and toward territoriality – to the people and institutions through which power operates. Including Indigenous nations recalibrates the ways we divide land, politics, and power, which is and has always been contested. Canadian Studies in the future should wrestle with not just settler colonialism as a core component of the Canadian project; the role of the international border, considered through a settler colonial lens, reveals new possibilities for questions about the potential futures for Canadian Studies as a truly interdisciplinary endeavor.

Works Cited

Johnson, Corey, Reece Jones, Anssi Paasi, Louise Amoore, Alison Mountz, Mark Salter, and Chris Rumford. 2011. "Interventions on rethinking 'the border' in border studies." Political Geography 30 (2): 61-69. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.01.002