

Glossary / Glossaire / Glossar Border Studies

Border Thinking

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Border thinking is a concept which constitutes a way of thinking that derives from the borderlands, is deeply rooted in the subaltern experience of coloniality, and which proposes alternative, decolonial ways of knowing, thinking, and becoming.

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The concept of border thinking describes a way of thinking which is deeply rooted in the subaltern experience of coloniality and the borderlands while at the same time freeing thought processes from colonial and modern epistemologies in order to promote alternative, decolonial ways of knowing, thinking, and becoming. It has gained prominence through the work of the Argentinean decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo, who, in turn, has developed his concept based on Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. As an epistemological position, border thinking contributes to a shift in knowledge formation away from binary thinking and the hegemonic knowledge production of Western modernity to other cosmologies and alternative knowledge traditions which operate outside the frame of the colonial matrix of power. In the wake of Mignolo's *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, a series of critics and decolonial thinkers have further developed the concept of border thinking in order to engage in a critical re-thinking of what knowledge is and how it has been produced in the Western philosophical tradition. Exposing an awareness of modernity's underside—that is coloniality—decolonial critics focus on border thinking as an embodied consciousness and epistemic location from which reality is lived and thought.

Border Thinking

Introduction

The idea of 'border thinking' has gained prominence through the work of the Argentinean humanities scholar and decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo, who developed it in his book *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledge, and Border Thinking* (2012 [2000]). Mignolo based his idea on the writings of the Chicana author and feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, who first developed the idea of thinking from and with the border in her influential book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (2012 [1987]):

I theorize border thinking from my experience of dwelling in the borders: as the son of immigrants in Argentina, as métèque in France, and as hispano/latino in the United States. It was Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderland/La Frontera* that made me realize that I was dwelling in the border without being aware of it. *Borderland/La Frontera* is border thinking in action. Anzaldúa is not 'studying' borderlands. She inhabits them. (Mignolo and Weier, 2017, p. 13)

In her book, Anzaldúa describes the experiences of the 'New Mestiza,' her term for a new radical subject position of a queer border dweller who transcends territorial, societal, and normative borders. The 'New Mestiza' internalizes border thinking, which is resistant and oppositional and which reflects (felt) border spaces. This special relation to the borderlands creates a "new *mestiza* consciousness" (Anzaldúa, 2012 [1987], p. 99) that breaks with binary modes of thought and is infused with 'pensamiento fronterizo' (border thinking). Developing "border thinking in the form of the epistemology of 'mestiza consciousness,' she posits transcultural forms of knowledge as forms of resistance that resignify dominant forms of knowledge from the point of view of the non-Eurocentric rationality of subaltern subjectivities" (Fellner, 2019, p. 115). The concept of border thinking then describes a way of thinking which is deeply rooted in the subaltern experience of coloniality and the borderlands while at the same time freeing thought processes from colonial and modern epistemologies in order to promote alternative, decolonial ways of knowing, thinking, and becoming.

Border Thinking – From Modern/Colonial World System to Decoloniality

Mignolo uses Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system theory (1974) as a starting point and continues by engaging with postcolonial theory and subaltern knowledge (Mignolo, 2012 [2000], pp. xxviii). Mignolo's aim is to break free from the epistemic tradition of the Enlightenment and modernity and to foster a true decolonial thinking for the future. His first step is to acknowledge that there is no modern world system but only a "modern/colonial world system" (ibid., p. xxv) since the two processes of colonial practices and modern developments were never separated. In alignment with South American thinkers like Anibal Quijano or Enrique Dussel, Mignolo argues that the basis for modernity is coloniality (ibid., pp. 52-60). That is why Mignolo refuses the concepts of post-modernity and alter-modernity because these concepts still cling to the notion of modernity and its epistemic roots and thus cannot overcome the oppressions of modernity/coloniality (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2009, pp. 18ff.). These epistemic roots and the way in which knowledge is produced and legitimized play an important role for the construction of the

modern/colonial world system. According to Mignolo, a colonial matrix of power with Eurocentric hegemonic (absolute) knowledge production has developed through colonialism (Mignolo, 2012 [2000], pp. xiff.). European colonization divided the world geographically, created spaces of center and periphery and produced “colonial difference” (ibid., pp. xxvf.). Simultaneously, western capitalism emerged and was fueled by this colonial difference (Mertlitsch, 2016, p. 136) that entailed the idea of the ‘other’:

The question of ‘otherness’ is fully a modern/colonial question [...] ‘otherness,’ as we sense and think about it today, is a Western construction from the Renaissance on and is constitutive of the Western concept of ‘modernity.’ For ‘modernity’ is nothing but a concept and a narrative that originated in and served imperial Western purposes (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2009, p. 11).

Mignolo searches for a way to overcome modernity and simultaneously recognizes the colonial difference from subaltern perspectives. To achieve this goal, Mignolo introduces the concept of border thinking (Mignolo, 2012 [2000], p. 6) which he defines as “the moments in which the imaginary of the modern world system cracks” (ibid., p. 23). In other words, the practice of border thinking is a means to make other worlds (and not other modernities) possible (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2006, p. 219).

Mignolo has developed his concept of border thinking by taking inspiration from “the local histories of Spanish legacies in America” (Mignolo, 2012 [2000], p. 66) and from the imperial conflicts between Spain and the USA in the 19th century that led to the physical border between Mexico and the USA and the border relations between Cuba/USA and Puerto Rico/USA (ibid., p. 67). He positions his theory very consciously within these territories of colonial and postcolonial struggles and refers to Indigenous, African American, Chicana, South American, and postcolonial writers and theorists. Mignolo uses W.E.B. DuBois’ term “double consciousness” to characterize border thinking (ibid., p. 52). He compares DuBois’s double consciousness to Anzaldúa’s “new *mestiza* consciousness,” to Moroccan philosopher Abdelkebir Khatibati’s “an other thinking” and to Edouard Glissant’s “creolization” because, according to him, all these concepts are articulations of border thinking that distance themselves from the epistemology of Eurocentrism (Mignolo, 2012 [2000], p. 87). Border thinking is about knowledge and understanding, epistemology and hermeneutics and it inherently challenges the hegemonic ways of knowing and constructing the world (ibid., p. 5). The goal of border thinking is to question and contest hegemonic and imperial epistemologies of racism, sexism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and ethnic hierarchies (Mertlitsch, 2016, p. 137). For Mignolo, the principle of border thinking is “*thinking from dichotomous concepts rather than ordering the world in dichotomies*. Border thinking [...] is, logically, a dichotomous locus of enunciation” (Mignolo, 2012 [2000], p. 85; emphasis in the original). In this sense, border thinking is not only a double consciousness, but also a “double critique” since it is situated at the border of the modern/colonial world system and is able to reflect on both sides (ibid., p. 84). Mignolo calls this border position “exteriority” (ibid., p. 67). This exteriority is the place of non-hegemonic languages, discourses, practices, and perceptions of the world. That is why “border thinking is the epistemology of the exteriority; that is, of the outside created from the inside” (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2006, p. 206). Border thinking implies a thinking from the border and “dwelling in the borders means re-writing geographic frontiers, imperial/colonial subjectivities and territorial epistemologies” (ibid., p. 214). Not universality, but plurality forms the basis of border thinking (ibid., p. 210). Although border thinking refuses to be grounded in modern, western philosophy and epistemologies, it is always connected to this epistemology because it emerges from and still stays in the “conflictive dialogue with European political theory” (Mignolo, 2011, p. 52). It is outside the colonial matrix of power but it is simultaneously talking and thinking in reaction to it. Therefore, border thinking can function as a “critique” and a decolonial method (ibid.), that is a method that aims at transcending modernity and connected notions of inferiority and otherness, oppression, and injustice. Realizing “trans-modernity” is only possible by thinking and speaking from the point of the supposed other, from the exteriority of the borderlands (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2009, p. 19).

Closely related to the concept of border thinking is the idea of “epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo, 2013):

Decoloniality requires epistemic disobedience, for border thinking is by definition thinking in exteriority, in the spaces and time that the self-narrative of modernity invented as its outside to legitimize its own logic of coloniality (ibid., p. 12).

Since knowledge production in the modern/colonial world system is based on western, Eurocentric thought and is mainly expressed in hegemonic European languages, border thinking becomes a means to disobey to this way of understanding and knowing the world. For this reason, both Anzaldúa and Mignolo write a critique of hegemonic western European (colonial) languages that oppress and neglect Indigenous languages and discriminate against them so that only a certain kind of imperial language, thought, and way of knowing becomes legitimate (Mertlitsch, 2016, p. 135). Border thinking opens up knowledges that are not rooted in Greek and Latin traditions, the legacies of European Renaissance, Enlightenment philosophy, and the six dominant imperial languages (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2006, p. 207). In its refusal

of Eurocentric, intellectual traditions of thought, border thinking is a liberation of the epistemological categories of western modernity.

These people refuse to be geographically caged, subjectively humiliated and denigrated and epistemically disregarded. For this reason, the de-colonial epistemic shift proposes to change the rule of the game – and not just the content (ibid., p. 208).

Changing the rule of the game necessarily means allowing other knowledges and languages to resurface and to give voice to the “epistemically disempowered” (ibid., p. 207). Mignolo thus situates decoloniality in the ‘third world’ because there it is directly grounded in the experiences, (biographical) perceptions, actions, and thinking at the border (Mertlitsch, 2016, p. 135). This thought collides with Anzaldúa’s stories of the borderlands, in which Indigenous and colonial narratives overlap with personal biographical perceptions and border experiences (ibid.). Mignolo’s notion of border thinking is in the end an inherently decolonial project since it speaks to power and produces alternative knowledge that gets its legitimation from the experiences of dwelling at the border. Border thinking is a deeply political and emancipatory attempt to bring about a future vision of society that ceases to oppress and discriminate and starts to cherish multiplicity, pluriversality, and the thinking from and with the border.

Border thinking could open up the doors to an other tongue, an other thinking, an other logic superseding the long history of the modern/colonial world, the coloniality of power, the subalternization of knowledges and the colonial difference. (Mignolo, 2012 [2000], p. 338)

Border Thinking – Taking It Further: Developments and Limitations

Mignolo’s idea of border thinking has been widely adopted, used, and reflected on in many different disciplines like geography, gender and feminist studies, postcolonial theory, literary theory, linguistics or border studies (Saldívar, 2006; Kramsch and Brambilla, 2007; Michaelsen and Shershow, 2007; Grosfoguel, 2009; Laurie, 2012; Garcia and Wei, 2014; Beauclair, 2016; Mertlitsch, 2016; Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert and Koobak, 2016; Fellner, 2017; Fellner and Hamscha, 2017; Waghid and Hibbert, 2018). Although most critics agree with Mignolo’s project of decolonization, there is some criticism of his understandings of border thinking as well as interesting adaptations and extensions, some of which will be shortly discussed here.

Most prominently, Chicano literary scholar José David Saldívar has applied the concept of border thinking as a lens to the works of Anzaldúa and Arundati Roy while combining it with thoughts on minoritized and subaltern studies (Saldívar, 2006). Similarly, literary theorist Nicolas Beauclair uses the concept of border thinking to analyze the Indigenous literatures of An Antane Kapesh and Joséphine Bacon in Québec (Beauclair, 2016). Anthropologists Andrea Dyrness and Enrique Sepúlveda III, in turn, have relied on border thinking in their analyses of diasporic Latinx youth in the U.S., El Salvador, and in Spain. There have also been some recent attempts in Europe to fruitfully apply border thinking in the field of literature and the arts. In her edited volume *Border Thinking: Disassembling Histories of Racialized Violence*, Marina Gržinić, for instance, has collected a series of articles and artistic projects which present a rethinking “of the political, economic, social, and legal structures that are organizing the life and death of refugees and the life and death of citizens and noncitizens” (2018, p. 28) in present-day Europe. Relying on the concept of border thinking and extending it to the notion of “striking the border” (ibid., p. 28), the artists represented in this book “mean to strike against the border in order to clash with the border and to eventually destroy it” (ibid.) Border thinking, for Gržinić entails a re-appropriation, re-contextualization and re-mobilization of the border “by taking into account the division in neoliberal global work that goes along the line of a colonial/racial divide” (ibid., p. 20). Building on border thinking as a way of thinking from the margin, Astrid M. Fellner has used the notion of “alterna(rra)tives,” as a way to refer to new forms of narratives which provide alternatives to dominant hegemonic stories of dispossession in the Americas (Fellner, 2017; 2019). Border thinking also serves as the epistemological position from which her understanding of bordertextures has emerged. Bordertextures, and the act of bordertexturing, according to her, entail a thinking “*through* or *from* the border, rather than thinking *about* it” (Fellner, 2020, p. 291, emphasis in the original) which as a form of decolonial practice may both inform a researcher’s attitude/positionality as well as the decolonial strategies that specific cultural productions use “in order to lay bare the workings of colonialism and imperialism, which have been instrumental in establishing borders in the first place” (ibid.).

Michaelsen and Shershow, in turn, use Mignolo’s border thinking to reflect on notions of democracy and the state (Michaelsen and Shershow, 2007). Analyzing Mignolo’s position on the colonial difference and dichotomies (ibid., pp. 45ff.), they state that although Mignolo refuses a type of thinking in dichotomies

which he ascribes to the west, he reproduces this kind of thinking in binaries, by romanticizing Indigenous thought and thereby creating yet another image of 'the other' (ibid., p. 52).

This critique of Mignolo's concept as being not consistent and maybe too narrow is echoed by Kramersch and Brambilla's reading of Mignolo. The two border researchers, for instance, apply Mignolo's concept to study and analyze the *West African Borders and Integration* (WABI) initiative that models its plans and activities according to the European Union (Kramersch and Brambilla, 2007). Kramersch and Brambilla show that WABI produces an uncritical and idyllic view of the European Union as model cross-border space. Thereby, WABI reproduces Eurocentrism (ibid., p. 98) and strategically neglects Europe's colonial relations to West Africa as though colonial oppression and humiliation cease to be relevant (ibid., p. 109, 114). On the other hand, the authors remind us that the European border spaces which they normally study are not homogeneous but also very contested and conflicted spaces (ibid., p. 108). Concerning their case study, Brambilla and Kramersch criticize that Mignolo's concepts of border thinking and exteriority are too "spatially bounded" and inflexible (ibid., p. 98). According to them, Mignolo fails to theorize the place of exteriority. Alternatively, they suggest a more flexible sense of exteriority that is not fixed to the places of coloniality, which means that border thinking can also arise from and be produced in the west (ibid., pp. 102ff.). They argue, with reference to Mignolo's writings, that border thinking is more about a mindset than about a location, since border thinking means to reflect dichotomous concepts and not dichotomizing the world (ibid., p. 114).

Perspectives from feminist and gender theory on border thinking are especially interesting and important because feminist views are clearly underrepresented in Mignolo's works. Tlostanova et al. (2016) try to use border thinking as a tool to articulate a feminism that is influenced by and articulates the post socialist and postcolonial experiences of the authors and decenters white, European feminism of mainstream gender studies while at the same time engendering a transformative dialog with the field of feminist theory (ibid., p. 211). They write, for instance, that

feminist border thinking is a horizontal transversal networking of different local histories and sensibilities mobilised through a number of common, yet pluriversal and open categories. The positive impulse behind border thinking replaces the negative stance that entraps women in multiple oppressions with the re-existent position of building an alternative world in which no one will be an other (ibid., p. 217).

They also cite Anzaldúa to emphasize that their feminist theory speaks essentially from a border perspective because as scholars with diverse and hybrid ethnic and socio-political backgrounds they embody the border in the same way as Anzaldúa, "to survive the borderlands one must live *sin fronteras*, be a crossroads" (Anzaldúa, 2012 [1987], p. 217, emphasis in the original; cf. Tlostanova et al., 2016, p. 217). Another feminist perspective on border thinking is proposed by the gender theorist Kirstin Mertlich (2016). She criticizes that even though border thinking refers to the placement of bodies and space in thought, Mignolo ultimately neglects the bodily perceptions of the border. She calls these perceptions "border feeling" (ibid., p. 137) and proposes with reference to Sarah Ahmed an extension of border thinking with the notion of feeling as the expression of (bodily) affects and emotions in relation to the border (ibid., p. 138). Mertlich puts emphasis on Anzaldúa's description of the open wound of the border that is inscribed in the body as an embodiment of the border that manifests itself as border thinking and border feeling. Since body and emotions influence thought, knowledge cannot be separated from the bodily sensations and emotions (ibid., pp. 138f.).

The political implications of border thinking are also important for the sociologist Grosfoguel. He coincides with Mignolo in his attempt to foster decolonial perspectives and practices. Studying the capitalist world-system and current anti-capitalist struggles, he uses border thinking as a way to rethink political and economic relations and the cartographies of power (Grosfoguel, 2009). For Grosfoguel, who engages with subaltern leftist politics, border thinking is a means to name and to overcome global inequalities and to imagine alternative futures:

The solution to global inequalities requires the need to imagine anti-capitalist global decolonial utopian alternatives beyond binary colonialist and nationalist and binary eurocentric fundamentalist and third world fundamentalist ways of thinking (ibid., p. 33).

This search for alternative emancipating ways of thinking, understanding, and constructing the world is what unites all scholars who engage with border thinking and who have further developed this concept.

Conclusion – Border Thinking in/for Border Studies?

Dwelling in/on the border and sensing the colonial epistemic and ontological difference bring about the necessary conditions of border dwelling, thinking, and doing (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 207).

In conclusion, border thinking is a way of 'knowing otherwise.' It arises from the border, from the exteriority of the modern/colonial world system, which is why it can function as a double critique. The epistemic borderland from where border thinking emerges is an open but conflicted space of knowledge. Border knowledge and epistemic disobedience have deep political implications and they can be used to reflect one's subjective position within the colonial matrix of power and to promote decoloniality as decolonial subjects.

Anzaldúa's understanding of border thinking or 'pensamiento fronterizo' is mainly connected to concepts of identity, alterity, and hybridity. It is based on the localization in the (US-Mexican) borderlands, on migration and the personal experiences, feelings, struggles, and identification processes that come with 'dwelling in/on' the border and with being a border 'persona'. Mignolo's term of border thinking is more conceptual and connected to questions of hegemonic knowledge and epistemology. His border thinking is located in the (epistemic) borderland of the modern/colonial world system and it functions as a refusal of and resistance to the colonial oppression of subaltern thought and expression. For Mignolo, border thinking is an epistemic tool to question and fight colonial difference. It is part of the political project of decolonization that he proposes as a third option next to re- and de-westernization (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 223).

One aspect that might come short in Mignolo's theory is the internal critique although border thinking should be a double critique. This can be found more clearly in Anzaldúa's writings when she fiercely accuses the Chicano community, "not me sold out my people, but they me" (Anzaldúa, 2012 [1987], p. 22). She not only criticizes western/American racism and discrimination but also Latin American and Chicano patriarchy and sexism that harm the Chicanas and manifest in their "new *mestiza* consciousness" (ibid., pp. 22f.).

The perspective and practice of a double critique might also be very helpful for Border Studies, for we often study the interstices, the liminal spaces, and the conflicted borderscapes where border thinking emerges. Furthermore, the notion of border thinking delinks the border from a solely territorial understanding and widens the scope for border scholars to engage as well with questions of epistemology. Border scholars can use border thinking to foster decoloniality by applying it as a research lens to critically reflect on and question their own research, its ways of knowledge production and its epistemic groundings. Critical border thinking implies, that

we need vocabulary that comes from many other experiences, not only from the Greek. [...] Epistemic disobedience means to recognize them [hegemonic knowledge] and denaturalize them at the same time (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 161).

Mignolo also notes that we need to overcome disciplinary confines in order to achieve epistemic disobedience (Mignolo and Weier, 2017, p. 12). To him disciplinary boundaries are "meaningless" because they discipline and limit thought (ibid.). Border Studies as a multidisciplinary field of research exactly tries to overcome these confines by transcending disciplinary boundaries or even academic boundaries when engaging with border artists or activists.

Thinking the *in-between* and not thinking in fixed categories might help us see and analyze border relations, contrasting boundaries, and interesting contradictions from non-hegemonic perspectives. How can we develop border thinking further, how can we combine it e.g. with more feminist and affective ways of knowing and becoming or how can we put border thinking into action? These are questions that should be tackled with and elaborated on in Border Studies.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Astrid M. Fellner is Chair of North American Literary and Cultural Studies at Saarland University. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Vienna, where she also received her "Habilitation" in American Studies. She is Project Leader of the EU-funded INTERREG Greater Region VA-Project "University of the Greater Region Center for Border Studies" and is co-editor of this trilingual Border Glossary. She is also co-founder of the trinational and trilingual UniGR-Master in Border Studies, in which she (co)-teaches several classes in the field of Cultural Border Studies. She has been interested in Border Studies since her studies on Chicana literature and culture as a Fulbright Scholar at University of Texas Austin in 1990/91. In 2002, she published her monograph *Articulating Selves: Contemporary Chicana Self-Representation* (Braumüller). Within the field of Chicana Studies she also edited the volume *Body Signs: The Latino/a Body in Cultural Production*. (LIT Verlag, 2011) and authored several articles on Chicana literature, Indigenous border literature and artistic practices, forms of (queer) border knowledges and decolonial practices. She also engages in Comparative Border Studies, working not only on cultural practices in the US-Mexican borderlands but also on the US-Canada border as well as in European border areas. Currently, she is working on a book-length project entitled "Alterna(rra)tives in the Canada-US Borderlands."

Rebekka Kanesu is a PhD candidate in human geography at the Department of Spatial and Environmental Sciences at the Trier University. She has a background in social and cultural anthropology and is interested in topics that circle human-environment relations, political ecology and more-than-human geographies in connection to Border Studies. In her PhD project 'Liquid Lines - on rivers and borders in the Anthropocene' she studies the relation between people and the transboundary Moselle river from a political ecology perspective that pays e.g. attention to border- and state-making discourses, eco-social assemblages and cross-border shipping practices. Approaches like 'Border as Method' or 'Border Thinking' inspire her to look beyond hegemonic boundary formations and rethink established epistemological borders e.g. between nature and culture, different scales or temporalities. Furthermore, Rebekka works as project assistant for the interdisciplinary EU-funded INTERREG Greater Region VA-Project "University of the Greater Region Center for Border Studies" and helps coordinating the CBS publications.

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