SPECIAL SECTION: BORDERLANDS AND RELIGION

Introduction

Materialities, Histories, and the Spatialization of State Sovereignty

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■ **ABSTRACT:** In the introduction to this special section of *Religion and Society*, we discuss existing and potentially new intersections of border theories and religious studies in relation to two contested regions—US-Mexico and Israel-Palestine (as part of the history of the Levant)—respectively. We argue for a recentring of borderland studies through an analysis of political theologies, affective labor, and differing configurations of religious heritage, traces, and materiality. We thus define ‘borderlands’ as translocal phenomena that emerge due to situated political/economic and affective junctures and that amplify not only translocal but also transnational prisms. To explore these issues, we put into dialogue studies on religion, borderlands, walls, and historical/contemporary conditions in the context of US-Mexico and Israel-Palestine borders. In particular, we argue for recentring analyses in light of intensifications of state control and growing militarization in contested areas.

■ **KEYWORDS:** borderlands, iconography, Israel-Palestine, materiality, militarization, religion, sovereignty, US-Mexico

In *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape*, the winner of the 2008 Orwell Prize for political literature, the Ramallah-based Palestinian writer, lawyer, and political activist Raja Shehadeh (2007) narrates the daily reality of the subordinates living under the yoke of a lingering Israeli occupation within walled lands. The book describes six walks that express the author’s continuing efforts to overcome existence within the walls. These walks serve as a way to thwart and subvert his current subaltern condition and find solace and refuge from the daily hurdles and impossible existence of the occupation. While addressing the nature of his own walks, he harks back to his grandfather’s experience of the land in Palestine under the British Mandate (ibid.: 1–2):

As a child I used to hear how my grandfather, Judge Saleem, liked nothing more than coming to Ramallah in the hot summer and going on a sarha with his cousin Abu Ameen leaving behind the humid coastal city of Jaffa and the stultifying colonial administration that he

served and whose politics he detested ... [T]o go on a *sarha* is to roam freely, at will, without restraints. The verb form of the word means to let the cattle out to pasture early in the morning leaving them free to wander and graze at liberty ... A man going on a *sarha* meanders aimlessly, not restricted by time and place going where his spirit takes him to nourish his soul and rejuvenate himself ... Going on a *sarha* implies letting go. It is a drug-free high, Palestinian style.

Through his walks, Shehadeh negotiates the changing landscape and the growing encroachment on his right of movement (or right to roam). In this colonial situation, new borders, fences, and military checkpoints are placed, marking the land and impinging on and restricting the right of movement, and so *sarha* becomes a highly political ritual within the borderlands reality in Israel-Palestine. It is a way of being in the world, experiencing freedom while being under oppression in much the same fashion as the Mexican-American situation defined in Chicano literature as *nepantla*, a term denoting existence between worlds or in between spaces (Irwin 2007).

Shehadeh's narrative needs to be viewed as a counter-hegemonic discourse and a form of ecology of self at the borderland. Following Walter Mignolo (2007), Robert Irwin (2007) regards these acts as a form of decolonization that constructs an alternative and competing discourse to contemporary (Western) hegemonic types of knowledge and borders. Therefore, in his landscape narrative, Shehadeh is actually supplying us with a borderland 'fiction', which, for lack of other counter-hegemonic structures, serves as his way to exist in his current political predicament and indeed subordinate position. Hence, a 'fiction' of rituals of meandering is one of the forces that animate the affective space of a contested borderland.

Our point of departure in this special section is that, against the current proliferation of borders of various kinds on both global and local scales (Donnan and Wilson 2010; Wilson and Donnan 2012), there is also a proliferation of borderlands far and beyond their original settings within Chicano studies or solely along the US-Mexico border. By and large, we concur with Alvarez's (1995) assertion that when social scientists speak of borderlands, they usually refer to the so-called Hispanic borderlands (the region in the southern United States from the Pacific Coast to Florida) as still valid in contemporary conceptualizations and academic encounters with this canon. However, we suggest that new analytical prisms emerge by engaging *comparatively* with the realities of other borders such as Israel-Palestine, Croatia-Bosnia Herzegovina, and Syria-Turkey, as well as those of Russia and its former USSR neighbors. We wish to take an approach that enhances existing debates on borderlands that have not placed the multifaceted realm of religion at their core and also to open up some domains of the (ethnographic) study of religion to important reflections on the nature of the transformation of sovereignty. We see a study of the intersection between religion and borderlands as following up on Ernst Kantorowicz's ([1957] 1997) classic work on medieval theology and the transformation of the sovereign, *The King's Two Bodies*. If we account for a transformation of the *corpus mysticus* (mystical body) of Christ into sixteenth- and seventeenth-century royal institutions and then, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its reappearance in affective experiences of the sacredness of patria and nationalism, a question should be addressed: where and how is the 'mystical' power of the sovereign now emerging (or being repressed) at different borderlands? Kantorowicz's argument is that the power of the sovereign is much more than meets the eye. It is profoundly rooted in the nature of a power of divine presence—as the transformation of the *corpus verum* (true body) of Christ into a *corpus mysticus* of the church—and an economy of distribution of grace. If this manifestation of *corpus mysticus* has been historically imbued in attachments toward the patria and the nation, we wonder how this form of power is evidenced in borderlands. In other words, which sovereignty does it produce, which divine presences does it enfold, and how does it reproduce or break down existing economies of grace? Thus, we see the relation between studies

of borderlands and religion as dialogical and productive in at least two areas: post-colonial studies and religious studies.

First, an anthropological focus on religions helps us to shed important light on the (post-) colonial reframing of regimes, practices, and fantasies of the national/nations. Although questions of conversion, enculturation, pilgrimage, rupture, and temporalities have been important, especially in fields such as anthropology of Christianity, we argue that a focus on contested religious spaces/materialities and on the potential of the national to mark or disavow affective religious experiences is equally paramount. This is because religious practices are forms of affective labor that, in borderland spaces, get reinscribed in multiple forms of sacrificial, cumulative, and dispossessing economies. There are politics of religious caring (and uncaring) that borderlands generate. Moreover, religiosity is materialized, revived, or objected to through fences, militarized spirituality, and the effect of uncaring. As Alexander D. M. Henley argues in his article in this special section, early-twentieth-century boundary-making in colonial Levant was intrinsically connected with (and not the cause or after-effect of) “the bureaucratization of religious difference and the compartmentalization of religious and secular institutions.” In the present day, ‘traditional’ contemporary religious leadership and the acolytes’ labor they produce are symbiotically related to the making of a ‘line in the sand’ with regard to earlier drafting of national borders.

Even more, as Irwin (2007) argues for the resilience and consolidation of saintly devotions at the US-Mexico frontier, in the early part of the twentieth century, borderland studies contributed to the development of an interdisciplinary and trans-American approach. This does not reify but actually interrogates and destabilizes notions of the nation-state and, we argue, helps to investigate how the sovereign may be dislocated and relocated through religious terrains and prisms. In short, we want to highlight here how a borderlands-religion prism sheds light on discursive practices, materialities, and economies of state formation, as well as processes that, in effect, weaken them. Thus, this temporality of co-existence allows for a study of the intersection between religion and borderlands as rooted in places and yet as becoming disconnected and unstable in these same spaces. In this sense, the interface of religion and borderlands is a ‘radical’ one.

The case illustrated by Alberto Hernández and Amalia Campos-Delgado in this section explores the ‘unmatching’ of different religious forms and devotions that have come into being at the Tijuana-San Diego borderland. A proliferation of religious practices and devotions in Tijuana cannot be seen as separated from the militarization and securitization of the border with the US. Yet the transformation of saintly devotions, such as those to Juan Soldado, Jesús Malverde, and the Santa Muerte, shows how migrants and the processes of migration are constitutive ways in which enfleshed religions challenge existing divisions between legality and ‘illegality’. Migrants’ agency through religious terrains defies contexts of (too often) dispossessing histories and unequal citizenship conditions, so that practices of faith, as Hernández and Campos-Delgado express it, present “everyday defiance of social and cultural vectors of imposed spatial partitions.”

Moreover, borderlands analytics can help us understand the tension between orthodoxy and heterodox religious practices and the borderland as the locus for the failure and transformation of state sovereignty. For instance, in her work on Nuevo León, Mexico, Marie Theresa Hernández (2002) has explored this tension through the study of the re-emergence of ghostly and ‘evil’ presences in Catholic monasteries at the Mexican border. Migrants’ religiosity and the multiple apprehensions of evil can help to shed light on contested borderland sovereignty.

Secondly, by counterpointing parallels and tensions through an East-West prism (Israel-Palestine-Levant and US-Mexico) rather than a North-South or colonial European-Latin American perspective, which has been a typical aspect of borderlands and decolonization studies (see Quijano 2000), we address the religious experience and its changing effects through different and

competing histories of occupation, state control, and resistance. Acknowledging the deep connection between racialization and religious conversion in the Americas (Maldonado-Torres 2014), we hope to open up reflections on how religious practices, materialities, and devotions work at different borderlands, while informing and marking similar and different geopolitical places.

As Alejandro Lugo expands on in this section, the US-Mexico borderlands are marked by histories of American occupation. This complex and predatory history, as a ‘presence-within-the-nation’, has transformed material remains, *cruces* (crossings), and commemoration plaques via an aesthetic of ‘voiding’ Mexican-related histories and presence. By pondering on vestiges of Catholic architecture and newly reinscribed religious iconography, Lugo’s argument is that this occupation is an ongoing process, yet a never fully accomplished one. In that sense, the interface between religion, borderlands, and the sovereign is particularly ambiguous here, as the material presence of a ‘void’ within is constitutive of an American national project at the US-Mexico border.

Following our points of departure, this special section is composed of four articles, two for each of the regions. Lugo examines the military and cultural presence of the US in the Mexican borderlands, from the Mexican War of 1846–1848 to the present. His analysis of traces of the continuing American occupation of Mexican lands demonstrates the historical and cultural erasure, since the mid-nineteenth century, of the continuing historical existence and cultural legitimacy of Mexican communities and modes of living in the region. Stadler and Luz explore the role of sacred places and pilgrimage centers in the context of contemporary geopolitical strife and border disputes. Focusing on two holy shrines that are dedicated to devotional mothers, the traditional Tomb of Rachel the Matriarch on the way to Bethlehem and Our Lady of the Wall (an emergent Christian site), they dialogically read the sacred places together, across the newly constructed Separation Wall between Israel and Palestine. Hernández and Campos-Delgado discuss the border region as a dual reference of movement and immobility that has been for more than a century the setting of people who arrive to stay, to cross into the US, or, recently, to return from the US after being expelled. By engaging with major religious figures who are worshiped and the contrasting social contexts of the devotees, they show that the religious landscape in Tijuana is not shaped by a homogeneous group of creeds, but rather is a multifaceted response—in material and immaterial ways—to the presence of the geopolitical border. Finally, Henley claims that the colonial view of Levantine society as a mosaic of religions established lasting precedents for communal self-governance and power sharing in modern states. By highlighting institutional changes in the Maronite Christian and Sunni Muslim communities, he shows how each reformulated its structures of religious leadership in response to the creation and enforcement of Lebanese borders with Palestine and Syria from 1920 to 1948. Thus, the ‘traditional’ religious leaderships of today are in no small part products of the same colonial geopolitics within which nations were formed.

What Are Borderlands?

It is incumbent upon us at this stage to clarify what we mean by the term ‘borderlands.’ The idea of borderlands has received ample attention among scholars from a variety of perspectives and academic fields (Alvarez 1995; Castillo 1996; Mignolo 2007; Nabhan-Warren 2010). This concept has its origins in Chicano literature—arguably, in Gloria Anzaldúa’s ([1987] 2012) seminal work, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In this classic oeuvre, Anzaldúa, a Chicana herself and a lesbian activist of Chilean origins, draws on her personal experience as a *mestiza* (Spanish for ‘mixed,’ ‘caught in between,’ or ‘a person of mixed origins’) to conceptualize and explain the many forms of borders and border conditions in which people in subaltern positions live. She suggests the

following working definition of borderlands: “A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (ibid.: 4). Building on Anzaldúa, we argue that borderland is not only a place, but a condition of living.

As a result of the proliferation of borders (of various kinds) in a rapidly globalizing world, borderland conditions are becoming central to states worldwide. They are usually accompanied by border barriers, such as walls or fences, which are constructed to limit the movement of people across a certain line or space. These structures vary in positioning with regard to international borders and topography and have been a growing phenomenon in places such as Croatia-Bosnia Herzegovina, North Korea-South Korea, and South Africa-Mozambique, among others. Analytics of borderlands worldwide have foregrounded histories and conditions of dispossession, conquest, religious revival, and dislocation. In this special section, however, we are focusing only on borderlands and walls in the context of the US-Mexico border and the Israel-Palestine one.

With reference to US-Mexico borderlands, scholars have put a critical focus on national militarized terrains, the production of illegality, and the unequal redistribution and racialization of labor. They have illuminated how processes of *mestizaje* (racial and cultural mixing and practices of distinction), transculturation, religious syncretism, and indigenous mythologies can allow for critiques of nation-state sovereignty as well as the growing use of walls and enclaves. Studies of Israel-Palestine borderlands have parallel histories and genealogies that we wish to put in conversation and comparison with US-Mexico borderlands debates. By making this analogy, we hope to expand the analytics of borderland studies through an understanding of materiality, religion, and political theologies. Recently, Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan (2012) have argued that border studies have been a ‘privileged’ point of entry into multi- and interdisciplinary research on the changing nature of states and nations. However, the focus of their border theory (and that of others) on a notion of culture(s), understood as a shared identity based on performative and hermeneutic representations, needs to be revisited.

Borderland studies should be ‘recentered’ beyond genealogies based on identitarian notions of culture with a focus on militarized terrains, state borders, unequal flows of global labor, and competing political theologies. So we suggest exploring and recentering borderland studies through the analytical articulation of political theologies, affective labor, and reconfigurations of religious materiality, traces, and heritage. Accordingly, we define borderlands as translocal phenomena that emerge in situated political, economic, religious, and affective conjunctures, amplifying translocal as well as transnational prisms. Hence, borderland studies are informed by multi-sensorial ways to be in the world and by ethical and imagined landscapes, horizons, and theologies.

Recentering Borderland Studies

Issues that are key to recentering these studies pivot around borderland realities, anxieties, histories of uncaring, *cruces*, memorializations, and cathartic memories, while different forms of power contour eliciting, encountering, or diverting (*evite*, as Lugo suggests in this volume) official and unofficial histories, their conjunctions, and their sacrificial and predatory natures. A comparison between US-Mexico and Israel-Palestine borders brings into view how borderland dynamics of sainthood, divine elation, revelation, intervention, and abjection can tell different stories of separation and conjoining. In the Israel-Palestine context, as demonstrated by Nurit Stadler and Nimrod Luz in this special section, the construction of the Separation Wall by Israel in the 2000s charged the area with new religious meaning and has been responsible for a fresh dynamic of religiosity in the form of newly emerging sacred sites, iconography, and architecture.

These sites are enabling local Jews, Muslims, and Christians to challenge contemporary borders and aim for a new borderland subjectivity, which allows in some cases for border crossings or, as the case may be, can reduce the dramatic and traumatic effects of new barriers.

This was expressed very plainly by Clemens, a Palestinian-Christian devotee living in the Bethlehem area, after viewing a new icon painted recently on the Separation Wall:

Even if it is not now, one day He will hear the echo of our voices and prayers and will bring the Walls down. Because we—as Christians—have the idea that we reject this Wall, first from a political aspect, second from a social aspect, and third this Wall is creating a wall in our hearts ... how can I love people who took my land, stole my dignity, and put me behind this wall like the animals, walls without a roof? That is why we are much influenced, but having Mary on the Wall, our psychology has altered ... Furthermore, because the painting is something that a person can [see], when we get sick—of course, not only when we are sick—every time we pass by here we greet her, we [make the sign of the cross], we say some prayers ... because she is the mother of Jesus Christ ... it doesn't matter from what religious background we come, she is the mother of Jesus. (Stadler and Luz, this volume)

Through her religious beliefs and rituals, Clemens is taking charge of her situation and metaphorically challenging her current borderland situation. This border-crossing consciousness means living daily with the impulse to transcend institutional, religious, legal, spatial, and symbolic barriers that keep the oppressed away from centers of power (León 1999). For Clemens and her fellow Christian believers, the Wall is constantly disrupting their free passage to age-old religious centers in Jerusalem.

In much the same fashion, the rituals involved with Our Lady of Guadalupe (a sacred Virgin venerated by the colonized indigenous population of Mexico since 1531) provides the basis of authority for Mexican-American women to challenge the borders that they encounter and are entangled with (Castillo 1996). Charismatic figures can also embody living revolutions, putting forms of political spirituality and *mestizaje* at the center of the re-formation of state sovereignty and a religious politics. This is the case with the current rereading of Cesar Chavez, the Mexican-American union labor leader and civil rights activist of the 1960s and 1970s, as a religious figure (León 2015).

Borderland studies, while addressing competing histories and spatialities, elucidate, better than ever, prisms of the post-national, that is, how borders are currently defined and how the limits of the political as a collective effort are constructed. Narratives of borderlands—the phenomenology of lines and frontiers—index allegorical styles and metonymic forces that unsettle yet also contribute to performative, systemic violence and state powers. They do so because they address questions around the *réel* (reality) of the friend-enemy agonistic nature of political and affective attachments/circulations, and because they are also reshaping the borders of the 'inner' and the 'outer'. More than ever, borderland studies, by shifting and unsettling rhetorical styles, prompt us to revisit transnational and diasporic perspectives on post-secular geographies and the materiality of affects and sovereignty.

It is clear, for instance, that materialities of ruination as well as the domination of colonial presences are central areas of research on religious borderlands. As Lugo's article shows, there is a continuum between the public religious sphere and the intimate affective attachment to religious iconography. At the US-Mexico borderlands, we need to pay attention to 'unofficial' religious markers. These can take the form of murals underneath highway bridges, the perlocutionary (as imperative) mode of some of their expressions, and traces of Catholic histories, all of which can challenge American hegemonic sovereignty over Mexican histories and presence. However, those same Catholic histories, beyond their subordinate relation to Protestant Puritanism in the

US, can also be an expression of staunch forms of conservative national/state agendas, as has been the case in Tijuana. Catholicism, with its borderland traces, is a laboratory of containment (see Mayblin et al., forthcoming).

Finally, recentering borderland studies also means recentering religion through borderlands. We are aware that the platform and conversations we wish to encourage require further field-work engagements and interdisciplinary analytical work; hence, at this stage more questions can be raised than can be answered. But in that vein, we see a potential in placing studies of existing work on political theologies and material religion within borderland frameworks. For instance, the interface of studies of religion and borderlands allows us to query not only the place and role of evil and theodicy (as the working of divine justice), still morally ambivalent responses to formations of capitalism (Clough and Mitchell 2001), but also fields of affective force that reshape terrains of sovereignty. Competing distributions of labor, affective intimacies, and religious materiality and devotion develop not simply as an effect of different spatial borderlands. They also emerge through a borderlands analytics that centers on questions of histories, the spatiality of dispossession and violence, defacement, a 'void' within, and (as we have argued above) the creative religious potential for the 'unmatched' and the 'radical'. If religious devotions can be seen as negotiations over a proximity (or distancing) of other worlds, perhaps a renewed ethnographic focus on the miraculous and evilness can provide us with a better analytical ground on how borderlands avail partitions and segregation but may also generate processes of (sometimes seductive) subversion of state sovereignty.

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