

# ABS World: Making a Worldwide Border Studies Community

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During the 2011 Annual Meeting of the Association for Borderlands Studies (ABS), organized in Salt Lake City, a motion was adopted at the Board of Director's Meeting to create a visioning committee for ABS leadership. The underlying idea behind this endeavor was to consider how the association would develop over the next five to ten years. This motion came about after several very successful years for the ABS as a scholarly association. The ABS membership had grown year after year and, above all, it had become increasingly more international. Conference attendance was up, and the primary publication of the ABS, the *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, had distinguished itself as a leading forum for borderlands research.

Today, more than half of the ABS membership lives in one of thirty countries outside of the United States. As the ABS grows to meet the challenge of accommodating its ever more international and diverse membership, it has become necessary to renew some of the traditional logistical and organizational practices in order to match the new circumstances. At the same time it was considered equally important that this was not to be done at the expense of the original Southwestern U.S. and Mexican founding membership of the ABS. Despite its internationalization, it was fully agreed in the visioning committee that the ABS needs to continue to retain its original emphasis on the study of the United States-Mexico borderlands region as one of its key focal areas.

In the visioning committee the debate then focused on ways to identify and tap into growth opportunities in order for the ABS to take the lead and seek to become the premier global organization in the field of border studies. It was quickly concluded that what we needed was cooperation, not competition, with other relevant border studies networks. We wanted to foster greater linkages and more intensive dialogue between various networks and organizations focusing on border issues. We would like to see the ABS play a key role in facilitating this dialogue.

As a practical manifestation of this pursuit, the initiative to launch ABS world conferences every fourth or fifth year was accepted at the 2012 ABS annual meeting in Houston. It was here, where the University of Eastern Finland offered to take charge of organizing the first ever ABS World Conference in Joensuu, Finland, and St. Petersburg, Russia, in the summer of 2014.

The ABS World Conference does not aim to initiate another competing border conference series among dozens of established and high profile events. On the contrary, the idea is that by offering a forum for a regular global gathering of border scholars, it will help structure the field and

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\* Jussi Laine is a researcher at the Karelian Institute, University of Eastern Finland. He is also Conference Manager of the ABS World Conference – Joensuu/St. Petersburg June 9–13, 2014. The Association for Borderlands Studies (ABS) is the premiere scholarly association focusing exclusively on border issues. Formed in 1976 with an emphasis on the United States-Mexico borderlands, the ABS has become an association truly global in its scope and its membership. As an association devoted to the greater understanding of borders, we embrace multidisciplinary approaches and perspectives from border researchers worldwide.

facilitate the development of more thematically and/or geographically specific meetings and conferences and, in this way, strengthen the overall profile of border studies internationally.

The Association for Borderlands Studies aims to provide important linkages among scholars around the globe. The ABS World Conference is a practical example of working towards this goal. Having a broader conference not tied to any specific country or continent is expected to bring new possibilities to those living outside the United States, where the ABS Annual Meetings are held. While the ABS Annual Meetings held in conjunction with the Western Social Science Association's annual conference will remain as the main gathering of the association, having a broader forum for border dialogue circulating in various locations all around the world is very much needed in order to broaden both the traditional geographical and disciplinary borders of the association itself; to foster its global reach by encouraging participation from all corners of the world; and in pushing forward twenty-first century scholarship on borders and borderlands. The ABS World Conference aims to bring together various border studies networks to discuss issues of common concern. Its welcome is by no means limited to academics only; the world conference, as well as the association as a whole, is open to policymakers, diplomats, law enforcement agencies, non-state actors, artists, and many others alike.

This first ever ABS World Conference will include a fascinating field trip to the historical borderland of Karelia, and will be the first truly globally oriented event sponsored by the Association for Borderlands Studies. As of now, participants from 47 countries have already sent in their proposals for presentations and panels. The conference is organized by the VERA Centre for Russian and Border Studies at the University of Eastern Finland in cooperation with the Centre for Independent Social Research and the European University at St. Petersburg, Russia. Significant financial and scientific contribution has also been received from the African Borderlands Research Network (ABORNE); the Finnish Association for Russian and East European Studies (VIETS); and the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies. Among other interesting side events is a pre-conference Round Table "Co-operation between the research community and regional actors in Cross-border Cooperation (CBC)," which will also be organized in cooperation with the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR).

The organizing theme for the 2014 World Conference is: Post-Cold War Borders: Global Trends and Regional Responses. The issue of borders, their changing significance and symbolism presently looms larger than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Common understandings of global de-bordering, supported by optimistic notions of globalization and a new post-Cold War world order, has arguably succumbed to the reality of ethnic and cultural juxtaposition and increasing complexity and instability in the world system. We can recognize global *megatrends* that are changing the nature of borders while, at the same time, there are obviously different regional responses to these trends.

The unprecedented expansion and transformation of the global economy and the concurrent fluidity of people and goods within a context of increased securitization, signifies fundamental societal challenges that directly relate to borders. As a result, borders appear to be very much on cultural, social, scientific and political agendas. However, despite new border studies perspectives

that favor a broad cultural, economic and complex governance view of borders and borderlands, a strict top-down international relations view of borders continues to dominate policymaking. This current era of heightened globalization requires that we pay more attention to the tendency of increased governance of borders and border regions, and – at the same time – at the regional responses to such developments.

State borders are commonly understood as multifaceted social institutions rather than solely as formal political markers of sovereignty. In this view, borders help condition how societies and individuals shape their strategies and identities. At the same time, borders themselves can be seen as products of a social and political negotiation of space; they frame social and political action and are constructed through institutional and discursive practices at different levels and by different actors. Thus, through regional responses to globalization, borders are reproduced, for example, in situations of conflict where historical memories are mobilized to support territorial claims, to address past injustices or to strengthen group identity – often by perpetuating negative stereotypes of the “other.” However, through new institutional and discursive practices contested borders can also be transformed into symbols of co-operation and of common historical heritage.