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A photograph of a white SUV driving on a road through a border crossing. The road is flanked by a large, curved metal wall. In the background, there is a hillside with some buildings and a billboard. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple filter.

**BEYOND THE NATION-STATE?  
BORDERS, BOUNDARIES, AND THE  
FUTURE OF DEMOCRATIC PLURALISM**

**SALZBURG GLOBAL SEMINAR IS GRATEFUL TO THE FOLLOWING ORGANIZATIONS FOR THEIR SUPPORT FOR THIS PROGRAM:**



**SALZBURG GLOBAL SEMINAR WOULD LIKE TO THANK ALL PARTICIPANTS FOR DONATING THEIR TIME AND EXPERTISE TO THIS PROGRAM.**

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# SALZBURG GLOBAL SEMINAR

SALZBURG GLOBAL  
AMERICAN STUDIES  
PROGRAM

## BEYOND THE NATION-STATE? BORDERS, BOUNDARIES, AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRATIC PLURALISM



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**DIRECTOR, PEACE AND JUSTICE**

Charles Ehrlich

---

**SENIOR PROGRAM MANAGER**

Antonio Riolino

---

**RAPPORTEUR**

Mike Videler

---

**EDITOR**

Aurore Heugas

**PHOTOS**

Christian Streilli

---

**INTERVIEW AUTHORS**

Audrey Plimpton  
Oluwadamilola Akintewe

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## BEYOND THE NATION-STATE? BORDERS, BOUNDARIES, AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRATIC PLURALISM

**Democracy in the US and across the world faces complex challenges. Social, economic, and racial divisions are driving political and cultural polarization. Gaps are widening between people and power, and internal and external authoritarian movements are directly challenging the nature of pluralist democratic societies and cultures.**

Within that context, the geopolitical borders and boundaries of pluralist democracies are being contested, redrawn and remade. At the same time political and cultural changes around questions of race, class, ethnicity, and gender are transforming the landscape of borders within different democratic societies, and are redefining our understanding of democratic identity and resilience.

The 2023 Salzburg Global Seminar American Studies Program focused on the contestations and renegotiations of boundaries beyond the nation-state, and how they are changing the representation of democratic pluralism. The program also looked at the ways in which American Studies as a discipline has engaged with borders, boundaries and lines of demarcation as tools of disenfranchisement and exclusion, and what that engagement might suggest for other contexts and societies.

During this year's program, our participants debated crucial questions:

- **A BORDER REASSESSMENT:** How do borders contribute to the reinforcement of national identities, us versus them? Why are borders comforting? What do they provide? Why was “Build the wall” so catchy?
- **BORDERS OF THE MIND:** What do the changing boundaries within pluralist democracies tell us about the nature of “borders”, be they physical, spatial, religious, historical, cultural, social, and otherwise? How do populations move in and out of these figurative spaces that are delineated for them? What are current trends in cross-border relations and reconciliation in different countries?
- **BEFORE AND AFTER THE BORDER:** How do indigenous communities experience modern geopolitical borders? How does the existence of reservations affect identity and interaction with others inside and outside the delineated boundaries?
- **SHIFTING SPACES OF CONTAINMENT AND DETENTION VERSUS HOPE- SPACES:** How can societies identify spaces of inclusion, civic engagement, and representation for marginalized and racialized communities, including people without documents or authorization, migrants, and refugees? How and where are new borders and boundaries being created to reduce pluralism and representation? What are the consequences for democratic and civic identities? How does the enduring legacy of redlining and segregation impact unequal treatment before the law?
- **CULTURAL BORDERS AND BORDERS IN CULTURE:** Borders in Fact: How do these cultural forces shape the current changing conversation of outer and interior borders? Borders in Fiction: How do contemporary literature, theater, and other cultural works contribute to our understanding of boundaries?
- **BORDERS AND AMERICAN STUDIES:** What does a reassessment of borders and boundaries mean for the future of American Studies? How does it resonate with national identities and transnational cultures across the globe?

This report summarizes some of the discussions and takeaways from this year's session.

## INTRODUCTION

The 2023 Salzburg Global Seminar American Studies Program explored the nature, contestation and renegotiation of boundaries within and beyond nation-states, and how they are changing the dynamics and representation of democratic pluralism. The program also looked at how American Studies as a field has engaged with borders, and what that engagement might suggest for other contexts and societies.

This report meditates on the challenges and opportunities that come with understanding, rethinking and resisting borders in order to foster democracy, equality, and social justice. As such, it highlights some of the rich discussions had and insights realized throughout the four-day Beyond the Nation-State? Borders, Boundaries, and the Future of Democratic Pluralism program. Separate sections are dedicated to the relationship between borders, national identities, and democratic pluralism (section 2), indigenous perspectives on modern borders (section 3), migration on the southern U.S. border, (section 4) cultural borders and borders in culture (section 5), and American Studies' engagement with borders (section 6).





## CHANGING BORDERS, NATIONAL IDENTITIES, AND DEMOCRATIC PLURALISM

Myriad borders impact our world, be they social, cultural, legal, religious, historical, or spatial. Program participants explored these borders as discursive and material “bordering practices” so as to interpret them as contingent social and cultural products. In particular, we asked: What do the changing boundaries within pluralist democracies tell us about the nature of various kinds of borders? How do borders contribute to the reinforcement of national identities, at times with negative consequences for pluralism and representation? And what effects does the legacy of discriminatory laws and policies have on the state of social equality today?

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**“BORDERS ARE UNDENIABLY INSTRUMENTS OF POWER THAT SHAPE  
HOW WE PERCEIVE THE WORLD AS WELL AS OUR PLACE IN IT.”**

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Borders are undeniably instruments of power that shape how we perceive the world as well as our place in it. For instance, Jim Crow laws in the U.S. and apartheid laws in South Africa historically functioned to keep people “out of” as well as “in” determined spaces and positions. Despite globalization processes, borders continue to perform divisionary functions, albeit around changed points of contestation that are shaped, among other things, by America’s “culture wars”



and increasing political polarization. An illustration of this is the U.S. Supreme Court’s opinion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* (2022), which discarded the federally protected right to an abortion and effectively returned the authority to regulate the procedure to individual states. This decision accentuated the U.S.’ internal borders relating to values, morality, and religion, and created new legal boundaries concerning healthcare and individual autonomy. Such changes in the contours of borders, moreover, highlight their fluidity and their direct connection to social values, political mobilization, as well as the systems of social order that are in place.

Borders can also be understood as ordering devices, rallying points, and sources of comfort. They in part define people’s relation to the state and are, in an important sense, tied up with the formation of national identities, symbolizing “who we are” and “what is ours.” However, disproportionate border practices around such identities may – in extreme cases – evolve into nationalism. The idea that the U.S. is “at war” on its southern border, for example, is difficult to understand without placing it in a context of increasing nationalistic thought around ethnic, religious, or national identities that require defending. The 2019 El Paso shooting, in which a 21-year-old shooter killed 23 persons and wounded 22 others after writing an explicitly racist and xenophobic manifesto, moreover, shows us that such ideas may engender different forms of violence.

Outside of the U.S., border practices contribute to the reinforcement of “national” identities as well. In India, where the current government promotes the country as a homogeneous Hindu nation, the depiction of Muslims as internal enemies erects internal borders along religious differences. After achieving electoral victory again in 2019, the government enacted divisive laws that among other things reformed the institution of divorce for Muslims (“triple talaq”), revisited its Kashmir policy, and amended citizenship laws. These developments, coupled with calls for economic and physical violence against Muslims, normalize an intensifying politics of othering and threaten democratic pluralism.

Histories of discrimination often have enduring legacies that negatively affect democratic pluralism, equality, and representation. In many U.S. states, the



history of Black voter suppression continues to cast its long shadow, as legal battles play out in legislatures and courtrooms over the manipulation of electoral districts (gerrymandering) and the effective restricting of voting rights. Also, land ownership by black American families has decreased manifold over the last century. This is due, in part, to property taxes and the fact that, in the absence of a will passing down the land to specific individuals, the law allows all the next heirs to quietly sell their piece of land. Apart from highlighting the lasting effects of discriminatory policies, these examples illustrate the emancipatory as well as repressive potential of law in relation to bordering practices and the protection of democratic pluralism.

Lastly, expanding on the historical conditioning of boundaries, the 1923 Greek/Turkish population exchange – provided for in the Lausanne Treaty – brings into focus how large-scale cross-border displacements can bolster nation-building efforts and help redefine urban borders with lasting effect. In Greece, where the incoming population was much larger than the outgoing one, the arrival of population “exchangees” resulted in enormous infrastructural projects, the creation of new neighborhoods on the urban fringes, demands that newcomers contribute to the nation’s economic mobilization, and the successful integration of the refugee identity into the national narrative. On the Turkish West coast, real estate developers are buying historical properties in villages previously home to people displaced from Greece, transforming them into hotels and vacation homes while the selling heirs move to less enticing areas.

These vast urban renewal projects have changed the character of cities and towns and have masked past injustices. In otherwise different circumstances, these developments have an echo in the American context. The location of new roads, despite the normal association of roads with linking people together, has actually divided neighborhoods and created segregation and economic division between earlier communities. Red lines - often delineated by inner-city expressways – in particular divided communities, and in some cases city building projects plowed through or completely removed whole neighborhoods with distinct ethnic or cultural populations. In those instances, new development has either bulldozed or sanitized history.



## BEYOND THE NATION-STATE: INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND MODERN BORDERS

American indigenous peoples not only have a special relationship to their land, they have also been subjected to extraneous boundaries that come with political, social, and practical consequences. While formally co-equals in treaties with the U.S. government, in reality native people were subjected to violence and discriminatory practices. As such, we asked: How do indigenous communities experience modern geopolitical borders? What do reservations represent to them, and how do the latter's existence affect identity and interaction with others inside and outside the delineated boundaries?

Many indigenous persons on Turtle Island – as North America is known to several Native American cultures – in fact refuse to recognize modern geopolitical borders, including those of the United States, which they see as colonial borders. What is more, they perceive a sincere irony in current border wall rhetoric and policies, pointing out that people who migrated to the U.S. over the centuries did so through open borders. Despite these and other sentiments regarding modern borders, indigenous people are forced to confront these borders daily. Importantly, native American tribes depend for their legal existence on the U.S. federal government, and some groups struggle to have their tribal status recognized. The experience of living in the shadows of modern borders also manifests itself in relation to the forty or so tribes who live in areas along the U.S.-Canada and U.S.-Mexico borders on land that was once united but is now separated by legal and sometimes physical frontiers.

In this context, reservations boundaries – porous as they are – represent to many indigenous Americans' "small amount that we have left." It is where indigenous peoples get to govern themselves, including through policies that are directly aimed at and tailored to their people's wellness. Homelands thus represent sovereignty and jurisdiction. At the same time, the concept



of a homeland represents something much more fundamental: the right to exist as indigenous people. While many indigenous people now live in urban communities – taking their indigenous citizenship with them – this does not undermine the importance of homelands for indigenous identity. Indeed, the absence of reservation land drives some to spend significant financial resources to purchase land in a determined effort to restore land access and ownership.

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**“THE CONCEPT OF A HOMELAND REPRESENTS SOMETHING MUCH MORE FUNDAMENTAL: THE RIGHT TO EXIST AS INDIGENOUS PEOPLE.”**

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Acknowledging that the effects of a long and violent history cannot be repaired overnight, many indigenous groups are nevertheless fighting for the full realization of their treaty rights, considering these to be non-negotiable. And as they find that the U.S. government is generally uninterested in spending resources on them, some indigenous groups engage in active political mobilization to have their dual citizenship rights respected. In light of this, and recognizing that indigenous voices have been systematically silenced, some Salzburg Global Fellows believe it imperative to improve the representation of indigenous persons in American society generally, especially in debates that concern them directly.



## THE IMPACT OF “COLONIAL BORDERS” ON INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

**Indigenous Fellows discuss resilience, cultural heritage, and the ongoing struggle for Tribal sovereignty**

*By Audrey Plimpton*



Vicky Scott

As Indigenous women living in the US, Vicky Stott and Karen Diver shared their perspectives on modern geopolitical borders. Their comments highlight the importance of bringing Tribal nations into the conversation about borders and land ownership.

Before modern-day borders, Indigenous communities could move fluidly across the North American continent. Vicky described how Tribes “had very detailed, very intrinsic transit systems all throughout the continent. We had economies that were built off a very Indigenized system. We had an entire food economy that existed before 1492 that really helped pave the way for us to maintain our nationhood [and] who we are as Indigenous people.”

The impact of borders on Indigenous communities in North America has been



Karen Diver

to “impact and disrupt our families, our cultural structures, our languages, [and] our ways of being”, Vicky reflected. She “does not recognize the geopolitical borders, especially in the United States” and views these as “colonial borders” because of the violence that her family, community, and Tribal nation have experienced as a result of colonialism.

Land is vital to Tribal communities because “our Indigenous homelands, our land, the physical infrastructure of it, [and] the space of it is very much connected to our language, our culture, and our spirituality, how we connect to it, how we see it, [and] how we envision it,” explained Vicky. However, her tribe does not have a dedicated reservation and instead has “had to fight for our lands to gain them back. We have had to use our own financial resources to purchase back our traditional homelands.”

Karen added that for many Indigenous groups, reservation boundaries “delineate the small amount we have left of our homelands”. Her tribe has also had to work to purchase their land back from private owners, which is a priority for them as “those remaining homelands became a method of our survival because our Indigeneity is tied to that relationship with land”.

Stressing the ability of Tribal nations to govern themselves and manage their own land, Karen encouraged others to “understand the absolute right of Indigenous peoples in the US and Canada, and increasingly so in other places where they’re fighting for their land tenure rights. They are people who have governed themselves long before colonizers showed up.”

Karen explained the importance of Tribal citizens holding dual citizenship to both their Tribal nation and country, as Tribes “are a cultural people. We are not just a race. But more importantly, because of treaty obligations, we are a political entity.”

Working with Indigenous communities in other countries, Vicky’s work centers around “supporting and safeguarding the rights of Indigenous people across various countries” and pushing for the inclusion of Indigenous voices in international organizations like the EU or UN. She spreads the message of “affirming our identity, affirming our sense of human agency, who we are, our connection to the land, and the significance of that”.

The challenges facing Tribal nations connect with the struggles of other oppressed communities both in the US and worldwide. Vicky emphasized the importance of building solidarity networks across communities, remarking that “when we’re able to see each other, we’re able to understand what we do, what we experience as part of being a human being, [and] that it’s all connected. Your struggle is our struggle, and our struggle is your struggle”.

Allowing Tribal nations to develop for their own benefit is “about creating wellness in a community and self-determination and promoting self-governance,” Karen explained. She pointed to several long-term goals for Tribal nations, including that the government “give us our land back at least within the reservations. Give us access to traditional territories, which are broader than our reservation borders, because those are our traditional use areas, [and] resource us adequately.”

In working towards these goals, Vicky elaborated that “Tribes being able to leverage our sovereignty and our treaty rights can play a significant role in terms of the conversations that we can have, [and] in terms of how we engage with our government in the changes and the transformation that needs to take place. I think that part of this is also us continuing to develop relationships with each other [and] building community, which is going to be especially necessary going forward.”

As Karen poignantly reflected, “You can remove the native from their homeland, but you cannot remove it from their heart.” For Karen, Vicky, and other Indigenous peoples, the conversation about borders and land ownership is essential for the preservation of their culture and the promotion of their rights.

## **MIGRATION: FROM MILITARIZATION TOWARDS SPACES OF HOPE**

The southern U.S. border is characterized by militarization, containment, and enforcement, touching the lives of many who live there or pass through. Simultaneously, the border is moving “inward” through the expansion of border policies to other states and moving South as Mexico also enforces U.S. migration policies on their side of the border. In this context, Fellows explored the uncertainty, complexity, and hardship experienced by many migrants in relation to America’s borders, considered the potential for change, and examined how borders also constitute spaces of hope.

With gangs inserted into local economies and climate change affecting livelihoods in places of origin, violence and poverty lead many people to undertake treacherous journeys North to the U.S.. On their way, they often face severe natural obstacles – e.g. the Darién Gap on the Colombia-Panama border – and manmade impediments such as walls and fences. They encounter a U.S.-Mexico border that is highly militarized and are subjected to dehumanizing practices such as ankle monitors, iceboxes (“hieleras”), and separation policies. Moreover, the U.S.-Mexico border and the people that cross it out of desperation are subject to intense political narrativization. False information and misconstrued numbers are used to depict migratory flows as an invasion by “criminals”, “terrorists”, and “rapists” seeking to “enrich” themselves. Reducing the complexity of migration to slogans like “Build the wall!” provides clearcut limits, divisions, and alliances.

Against this background, Fellows believe that the U.S. and other nations are at a crossroads on how to approach border security and migration in the next 100 years. As current practices contrast sharply with the traditional image of the U.S. being a nation of immigrants and the belief that Ellis Island – where millions of immigrants entered the U.S. from 1892 to 1954 – portrayed Americans, migration policies are both influencing and influenced by political polarization and stand in an ever more fragile relationship to principles of democratic pluralism. Some Fellows therefore call for a careful reexamination of who bears responsibility for migratory flows. They also advocate for rethinking the notion of migration deterrence towards creating the conditions for living a life of dignity in places of origin and press for the realization of a dignified reception for newcomers. Moreover, the legal definition of “refugees” may need to be updated to include those displaced by climate breakdown.

While the hardship and suffering of migrants cannot be denied, Fellows also probed how physical borders and the practices that accumulate around them constitute spaces of hope. Hope can, first and foremost, be found in the personal stories of people who are driven by desperation to cross borders in the sincere hope that life will improve “on the other side”. Border “activism” on the U.S.-Mexico border – ranging from graffiti writings to installations on border fences as well as performances – counters the divisive effects of borders by turning them into spaces of dialogue and hope. And finally, hope can be found in the resistance practiced by local communities, cities, and states that provide migrants with resources, services, and solutions.

# HUMAN RIGHTS HAVE NO BORDERS: REFORMING IMMIGRATION AT THE US-MEXICO BORDER

**Fernando Garcia and the Border Network for Human Rights pave the way for inclusive immigration discourse and human rights reform**

*By Audrey Plimpton*



Fernando Garcia

Fernando Garcia is the founding director of the Border Network for Human Rights (BNHR). He has spent the last 25 years fighting for human rights in the U.S.-Mexico border region through his organization's unique community approach and has successfully directed U.S.-Mexico border campaigns focused on human rights. Under Fernando's guidance, the BNHR continues to work tirelessly to educate, organize, and civically engage border communities so that they may empower themselves and demand the changes and rights they deserve.

The U.S.-Mexico border is the deadliest land route for migrants worldwide and 2022 was the deadliest year on record, as reported by the International Organization for Migration. Fernando Garcia works directly with migrant communities in El Paso, Texas, a town situated at the U.S.-Mexico border and at the center of discussions on migration.



As the founder and executive director of the Border Network for Human Rights, Fernando heads one of the leading human rights advocacy and immigration reform organizations at the U.S.-Mexico border. He founded this organization to fill the need for a “community-based human rights organization” that would give impacted community members a “voice on issues that they were being subjected to”. The Border Network for Human Rights now has a membership of nearly 7,000 individuals in West Texas and Southern New Mexico.

Leading this organization for the last 25 years, he has worked towards three main goals. In his own words, “The first one is to inform and educate members of the border community and migrants and refugees that come across the border about civil rights and human rights; it is important for us to combat misinformation and abuse through information. The second is to organize those members of our community at the border [including] residents, U.S. citizens, [and] migrants through community organizing strategies. Finally, to engage them to change their reality, to change strategies, [and] to change policies that are impacting them [such as] immigration policy, militarization, and criminalization.”

Fernando believes that “the U.S.-Mexico border is going to shape the character and identity of the whole country for the next hundred years”. Looking at U.S. history, “Ellis Island [and] the Statue of Liberty created the idea of a nation of immigrants. But this time around, the U.S.-Mexico border is going to shape that idea. Either it is going to be about border walls and militarization, or it’s going to be about diversity and inclusion. We don’t know yet and our organization is at the center of that discussion at the border.”

A Gallup poll found that, due to a large increase in the number of migrants trying to enter the U.S. at the Southern border in recent years, 41% of Americans want less immigration. The Border Network for Human Rights contributes towards changing the largely negative perceptions of immigrants which are prevalent in American discourse nowadays.

In order to accurately reflect the realities of immigration, Fernando suggests that we “have the voices of the directly impacted communities present in all of these discussions, whether they are national or international. I think that something is lost if the discussions are happening only among politicians or academics and they don’t [include] the people who are being impacted. For me, having that voice included in the debates about the border is important because there’s this distorted idea that community members in particular do not understand their own reality. I think they understand it very well. I think we need to elevate that voice first.”

Fernando has observed a wider movement in the United States “to shape the next face of the country. For me, that movement comes in the form of human rights where all the minorities are coming together to understand that we have been impacted by the same systems, [such as] poverty, militarization, etc. Immigrants are going to be border residents and an important and relevant part of that movement. We’re aiming to be part of that movement that changes U.S. policy, not only in terms of immigration but in terms of housing, health care, education, [and] anything else.”

Fernando came to Salzburg Global Seminar to “represent and translate the concerns of thousands of community members living at the border who might not have access to this kind of discussion”. He viewed this as “the opportunity to bring their voices [and] their concerns about what is happening with them and what’s happening in other borders in the world and how that relates to them”.

One of the proudest moments from Fernando’s career will occur on November 18, 2023 when the Border Network for Human Rights celebrates its 25th anniversary. Throughout the years, the organization has upheld the “same framework of trying to achieve human rights through community engagement and participation” while adapting to new challenges.



## CULTURAL BORDERS AND BORDERS IN CULTURE: THE POWER OF ART AND STORIES

To make sense of borders, they should be brought into culture. As such, we asked: How do we best conceptualize culture's own relationship to borders and bordered spaces? How do contemporary literature, theater, and other cultural works help us understand and challenge boundaries? And what are the challenges of using border-oriented stories and other forms of culture in educational and other practical contexts?

Often, culture is conceptualized as residing within a bounded space, such as the U.S., where it stops at the border and gets drawn into cross-border exchange. Fellows discussed how to rethink the modern notion of culture in relation to borders through a performative approach, in which we do not "have", but rather "engage in" and "do" culture in performances that do not stop at any particular border. In this regard, border art and writings provide important resources for unlearning the taken-for-granted idea of culture as contained and constrained by borders. Moreover, they show us that borderlands constitute privileged spaces for cultural production, even if productive border traverses can have decidedly tragic events at their roots (expulsion, discrimination, dehumanization). Art can be a powerful tool for resisting and rethinking societal borders. The example of border "artivism" in the context of the U.S.-Mexico border, mentioned above, is relevant in this context. Furthermore, revisiting cultural legacies can make people contemplate the enduring effects of historical boundaries. For example, memorials to the American Confederacy have in recent times been extensively documented and debated, raising questions concerning their place in modern society and their compatibility with democratic pluralism.

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**“STORIES HAVE AN EXCEPTIONAL POTENTIAL TO CHALLENGE BORDERS, FOR THEY ALLOW AUDIENCES TO TRAVEL TO DIFFERENT PLACES AND CULTURES(..)”**

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Stories have an exceptional potential to challenge borders for they allow audiences to travel to different places and cultures, inviting them "to live many lives". In fact, going beyond entrenched dichotomies and harmful stereotypes, they often engender empathy; stories that embrace minority perspectives can provide a moral imagination roadmap when probing the rejections and losses involved in integration and assimilation. The work of American author Toni Morrison is particularly powerful in this respect, as she engaged not just with various border crossings but also sought to erase borders in her writing. Moreover, diasporic historical fiction traverses national and temporal borders and transgresses the boundary between truth and fiction by imagining unlikely

unions and entanglements that are overlooked in national progress narratives. Confronted with the missing archive of history – e.g., regarding the crypto-Jewish community – fiction may also help to recover “what life must have been like”.

Historically, theater has also been a productive cultural activity for exploring border crossings and the idea of offering refuge to those seeking sanctuary. Some works of drama examine explicitly what exclusion looks like and how it is fostered. Others investigate what inclusion might look like and how it could be cultivated. Furthermore, modern American drama contributes to understanding the construction of identity by encapsulating and intersecting multitudes of identities.

However, in educational and other practical contexts, using cultural works to examine borders more closely may pose particular challenges. For instance, some teachers struggle to educate students about how to avoid reading literature as propaganda. Furthermore, recent book bans have erected new boundaries that make it more difficult to access progressive works. Finally, in relation to migrant communities, storytelling may not always have the imagined effects. For instance, portraying migrants as victims may induce readers to act in a personal capacity, decrease migrants’ agency, and leave untouched the systems that spur and complicate migration.



## A TALE OF INTERGENERATIONAL IMPACT OF MIGRATION

**Martina Kohl shares her fictional memoir “Family Matters” and the power of storytelling in bridging cultures and generations**

*By Audrey Plimpton*



Martina Kohl

Martina Kohl is a public diplomacy practitioner, scholar, writer, and teacher. In March 2023, she concluded a thirty-year career as a cultural affairs specialist at the U.S. Embassy in Berlin, Germany. Her book “Family Matters”, a fictional memoir, was published by PalmArtPress Berlin (English & German) in the spring of 2023.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

**Audrey Plimpton, Salzburg Global Communications Associate: Can you tell me about your new book “Family Matters”?**

**Martina Kohl, Writer and Lecturer, Humboldt Universität:** It’s a story about a family [over] four generations. It’s [about] moving between the two worlds. German immigrants meet in Manhattan, the couple gets married, [and] they

have a kid. The father decides “We’re moving back to Germany”, which does something to the family because while he recalls Germany as he emigrated as a young man, his wife left Germany with her family when she was a toddler. She has no memory of the old country. Then there’s the nine-year-old son who was plucked out of his environment and from Manhattan to a little village. That’s how the story starts. What does it do to the family members? What does it do to the wife who doesn’t have a choice? She has to come along, or she will lose her son because a woman at that time, about 1900, doesn’t have a right to her own son. Then [there is] the next generation, where the daughter of that little boy marries a G.I. It’s a very German story, but it’s also wherever the troops were stationed. So, she decides she’s moving to the US, [and] she’s becoming an American. That is a very interesting story, this fascination with America and at the same time asking yourself the question, as all these generations do: “Where do I belong? What does home mean to me? What is the consequence of such a decision like going back? Which is going back for what? For one person, but not for the other? What consequences does a decision bring about?” When you don’t make a decision, it also has consequences. I’m playing with that over four generations- this fascination and at the same time homesickness and this back-and-forth push and pull between these two countries.

**AP: What was the key inspiration for your book?**

**MK:** My book has its roots in family history, and it really happened that that family came back to Germany and made a very unhappy person out of my great-grandmother. I didn’t know more about her than that. I always wondered, “What was it like for her?”, because these are ordinary people in my book. They didn’t keep papers. They didn’t keep letters. You know, they were just ordinary people, but big things happened to them, or they made big decisions that affected the family and the next generation and the next. That fascinated me and I wanted to give that woman a voice, which she had lost. I wrote the book in English because she had to give up her language. That’s how it all started, and then I filled in the blanks. That’s why it’s a fictional memoir. I imagine what it was like for these people, and also for the little boy. I wanted to write this book about the women in the family, and then this little boy kept demanding to be heard because he’s the only person who knows everybody in the book. I played with that, and for me, it was important to take these people seriously and to try to imagine what it was like for them at the time. That was really interesting.

**AP: How can literature be used to promote intercultural understanding?**

**MK:** I think in order to understand the other, whatever it might be, we need to develop some kind of understanding for the other. Storytelling can do that, and what you get then is empathy. Empathy opens the heart. It’s “I see you as a human being. Through your story, I understand something larger”, and that is the power of storytelling. We can relate. We can explain. I can understand or begin to understand another culture, [and] another way of thinking. Humans are suckers for stories. That’s part of the human story, that we relate to each other

by telling stories. It might be gossip that we're exchanging, but we're learning something about each other. Writing is absolutely crucial because it opens up the world for us and makes us relate to other human beings.

**AP: In discussions of borders and migration during this American Studies program on “Borders, Boundaries, and the Future of Democratic Pluralism”, what do you think the US can learn from Germany and vice versa?**

**MK:** Well, let me give you one example. Let's say you take a cab in New York and the driver has a heavy accent. Americans would not question that this person is an American. In Germany, if somebody has a heavy accent, that person gets asked, 'Where are you from?' all the time and that's a fundamental difference. There's this country, the United States, that has defined itself as an immigrant nation and Germany has not. That you can still sense today... the makeup of German society has changed dramatically and we could learn a bit more. We could take on this openness that American society has that we don't quite have. On the other hand, Germany is pretty good at supporting incoming immigrants. The social safety net is totally different from in the States... I think the German state, the German system, does that pretty well, that people get training, that kids can go to school, that there is some kind of funding there that tides them over until they're ready for the job market.

**AP: How do you think the discussions from this program can inform your current and future work?**

**MK:** It's getting all these different perspectives. There's so much to learn [about] how people look at the world, how they see things differently, to realize that we might have a limited viewpoint... To me, it's fascinating to listen to other people's stories. When I do readings from my book, it's a family story. Then people come up to me and tell me their story. I have breakfast with somebody here, [and] they tell me their story and there's always something you can relate to. This program does what literature does- you have access to somebody that you wouldn't have otherwise. It's very, very special.

## STORIES FROM THE US-MEXICO BORDER: A COMMITMENT TO CHANGING MIGRATION NARRATIVES

**For Michelle Rumbaut, combating biases against immigrants is a tough ask, but not an impossible one**

*By Oluwadamilola Akintewe*



Michelle Rumbaut

Michelle Rumbaut volunteers with the Interfaith Welcome Coalition in San Antonio, Texas, welcoming newly arrived refugees at the Greyhound bus station. She has served on the board of various non-profit organizations with environmental and cultural missions and currently works at Guadalupe Regional Medical Center in Seguin, Texas.

Michelle's upbringing as the daughter of Cuban immigrants vividly shaped her own experiences. As a first-generation American, she understands the feeling of vulnerability and upheaval that comes with migration, which has given her great respect for all immigrants.

In 2016, Michelle joined the Interfaith Welcome Coalition, a nonprofit created



in response to the high numbers of unaccompanied minors coming across the US-Mexico border. As a volunteer, she welcomes newly arrived refugees and immigrants at the Greyhound bus station in San Antonio.

The Interfaith Welcome Coalition partners with other nonprofits to provide food and supplies at the US-Mexico border. Michelle is often the “first smile” these newly-arrived migrants encounter in the United States. She described her role as “to smile, give confidence and assurance, and tell them: ‘You are welcome here. How can we help you? Let us help you understand the bus route that you’re about to embark on. Let us give you some food and some water’”.

Upon her invitation to join the Salzburg Global American Studies program, Michelle initially believed the invitation was intended for her brother who is a scholar and a policy analyst. She explained that she was “surprised to receive another email re-emphasizing that the invitation was for me...I’m here because I have been writing these immigrant stories”.

For years, Michelle “had been writing stories about immigrants I met at the San Antonio border, to present them in a better light. These are people trying to build their lives. That’s all and we should support them”.

Michelle believes that the media plays a huge role in spreading negative stereotypes, which in turn influences public opinion on border and migration issues. After Trump’s victory in the 2016 American elections and the rise of strong anti-immigrant rhetoric, she began to document stories from the border.

She hopes to change the narrative surrounding migration so that people can let go of their biases, listen to actual stories with an open mind, and recognize the value that immigrants bring to the diversity of a nation.



## **BORDERS AND AMERICAN STUDIES**

The program examined how American Studies as a field has engaged with borders, and what that engagement might suggest for other contexts and societies. Specifically, we asked: What has the engagement with borders meant for American Studies substantively and methodologically, and what does a reassessment of borders and boundaries mean for the future of the field?

### **THE STATE OF AMERICAN STUDIES**

Where American Studies emerged in the 1930s in response to scholars' interest in pursuing research that crossed the boundaries between departments and disciplines, the field's rapid expansion after World War II was driven by the conviction that it could help shape the image of the U.S. domestically and abroad. Contrasting with that ambassadorial role – strongly tied to the idea of American exceptionalism – today the cultural studies approach has become dominant in American Studies, placing different groups such as LGBTQI+, Afro-Americans, and indigenous people center stage. There is also a growing interest in how social justice discussions in the U.S. context, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, inform other political spaces. Contemporary work by American Studies scholars demonstrates that while national borders are erected to keep others out and construct homogeneous national selves, those others already formed an integral part of the U.S.' national histories and traditions.

Methodologically, the field embraces border crossings and contestations, as can be seen in its turn towards transnationalism and transdisciplinarity, approaching phenomena using the required tools on a case-by-case basis. American Studies, however, changes shape depending on the context. While for many outside of the U.S. “hope for a better future” is still a key ingredient in American Studies research and teaching, the field overall has markedly reorientated itself towards dissensus rather than consensus, with some asking whether the U.S. is being turned into a uniquely bad actor by inverting the idea of American exceptionalism.

### **NEGOTIATING THE BOUNDARIES OF AMERICAN STUDIES**

American Studies is embedded in a constant struggle to (re)define its own boundaries. Is American Studies about the United States or about the Americas? How does American Studies cut across local, rural, intersectional, and transnational identities? And how to approach the U.S. geographically, with its strong and diverse presence around the world? In addition, American Studies faces a set of interrelated challenges. In recent years, the U.S. has arguably become a threatened democracy, less able to organize free and fair elections and to uphold the rule of law, and its status abroad as a cultural example is declining. In the classroom, it is at times challenging to make apparent to students the connections between texts studied and the world “out there”. Furthermore, there is a need to include more impacted communities at the table. And faced with the structural privileging of STEM-disciplines as ways to fix problems, it is imperative

that fields such as American Studies demonstrate that they can contribute as well.

As every generation reshapes the field of American Studies, opportunities currently present themselves to engage with topics such as mass migration, the rise of nationalist and populist leaders, and the threat of climate change and other cross-border issues. Despite menaces to U.S. democracy, American Studies can demonstrate that the U.S. and other democracies share a series of fundamental values worth protecting against intensifying oppressive action, including by investigating more deeply how people from radically different backgrounds succeeded or failed in fostering liberal democratic governance. American Studies is well-placed to analyze contemporary transnational dynamics as well as those out of which the U.S. grew, challenging monolithic notions of national identity and borders in the process.



## CONCLUSION

The 2023 Salzburg Global Seminar American Studies Program proved a fruitful occasion for re-examining from multiple perspectives the role that borders play in today's world, with particular emphasis on the protection of democratic pluralism in the U.S. and around the world. From this perspective, the Fellows examined, among other things, the role of changing boundaries in the formation of national identities, indigenous peoples' experiences of modern geopolitical borders and those of their reservations, the nature and politics of contemporary migration, and the capacity of culture to help us make sense of and challenge borders of many kinds. Through these conversations, borders emerged as constructed yet powerful phenomena with real consequences for how we perceive the world and act in it, and Fellows identified manifold avenues for reinterpreting, renegotiating, or otherwise challenging boundaries. Finally, American Studies as a field is well-positioned to investigate contemporary transnational dynamics. And while U.S. democracy itself faces challenges, American Studies has a key role to play in demonstrating that the U.S. and other democracies share a series of fundamental values worth protecting against intensifying oppressive action.



# PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

## FELLOWS

### **Kalliopi Amygdalou**

Senior Researcher, ELIAMEP,  
Greece

### **Emmanuelle Andrès**

Associate Professor of  
American Studies, La Rochelle  
Université, France

### **Ewa Antoszek**

Assistant Professor, Maria  
Curie-Skłodowska University,  
Poland

### **Mirza Asmer Beg**

Professor, Aligarh Muslim  
University, India

### **Adi Binhas**

Head of The Excellence Program  
- Senior lecturer, Beit-Berl  
College, Israel

### **Jørn Brøndal**

Professor, University of  
Southern Denmark, Denmark

### **Richard J. Campbell**

Retired Educator, USA

### **Gwili Clifton**

Former Visiting Professor,  
Maynooth College, Ireland;  
Former EFL Professor, Tunisian  
Ministry of Training and  
Education, USA

### **Deborah Cohn**

Provost Professor, Indiana  
University Bloomington, USA

### **Réka Mónika Cristian**

Associate Professor, University  
of Szeged, Department of  
American Studies, Hungary

### **Laura M. De Vos**

Assistant Professor Radboud  
University, Netherlands/  
Belgium

### **Karen Diver**

Senior Advisor to the President-  
Native American Affairs,  
University of Minnesota, USA

### **Cedric Essi**

Post-Doc, CRC Law and  
Literature / Osnabrück  
University, Germany

### **Astrid Fellner**

Chair of North American  
Literary and Cultural Studies,  
Saarland University/UniGR-  
Center for Border Studies,  
Germany/Austria

### **Gordon Fraser**

Lecturer and Presidential  
Fellow, University of  
Manchester, United Kingdom

### **Fernando Garcia**

Founder and Executive Director,  
Border Network for Human  
Rights, USA

### **Marty Gecek**

Chair, American Studies  
Program Advisory Committee,  
Salzburg Global Seminar,  
Austria/USA

### **Ana Elisa Gomez Laris**

Wissenschaftliche  
Mitarbeiterin, University of  
Duisburg-Essen, Germany/  
Mexico

### **Edna Harel Fisher**

Fellow Researcher, Israel  
Democracy Institute, Israel

### **Reinhard Heinisch**

Professor, Department Chair,  
University of Salzburg, Austria/  
USA

### **Benita Heiskanen**

Professor, University of Turku,  
Finland

### **Tatsuya Honda**

Ontenna Project Leader, Fujitsu  
Limited, Japan

### **Margaret Huang**

President and CEO, Southern  
Poverty Law Center, USA

### **Nirvikar Jassal**

Assistant Professor, London  
School of Economics, UK/India

### **Nicole Jerr**

Associate Professor of English,  
U.S. Air Force Academy, USA

### **Dalia Kandiyoti**

Professor, College of Staten  
Island, City University of New  
York, USA

### **Martina Kohl**

Writer and Lecturer, Humboldt  
Universität Berlin, Germany

### **Tatiana Konrad**

Postdoctoral Researcher,  
University of Vienna, Austria/  
Russia

### **Victor Konrad**

Adjunct Research Professor,  
Carleton University, Canada

### **Diana LaMattina Abdella**

Chief of Staff, NYS Assembly,  
USA

### **Alex Lichtenstein**

Professor and Chair of  
American Studies, Indiana  
University, USA

### **Ana Manzanar**

Professor, Universidad de  
Salamanca, Spain

### **Tracey Meares**

Walton Hale Hamilton  
Professor, Yale Law School, USA

### **Brianna Menning**

Assistant to the President,  
University of Minnesota, USA

### **David Newman**

Professor, Ben-Gurion  
University, Israel

### **Jihun Park**

Graduate Student, Yonsei  
University, South Korea

### **Justin Parks**

Associate Professor, UiT-The  
Arctic University of Norway,  
Norway/USA

## FELLOWS

### Kelly Piazza

Associate Professor, United States Air Force Academy, USA

### Robert Putnam

Professor, Harvard University, USA

### Rafal Rogulski

Director, European Network Remembrance and Solidarity, Poland

### Michelle Rumbaut

Project Administrator, Guadalupe Regional Medical Center, USA

### Alex Seago

Professor Emeritus, Richmond, American International University in London, UK

### Vicky Stott

Senior Program Officer, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, USA

### Mike Videler

Ph.D. Candidate, European University Institute, Italy/Netherlands

### Aleksandra Vukotic

Assistant Professor in American Literature, University of Belgrade, Serbia

## REPORT AUTHOR

**Mike Videler** is a Ph.D. candidate at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, where he studies the discourse of facts in international adjudication. In Fall 2022, he will be a visiting fellow at the University of Ferrara. Since 2017, Mike has taught various law courses at HEC Paris. His professional interests span international dispute settlement, the law of evidence, theories of knowledge, legal and political theory, and progressive politics. Prior to academia, Mike was a Lantos fellow, working in the D.C. office of Congressman Gregory W. Meeks (NY-5), currently chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. He was also a research associate with PILPG and a diplomacy and diversity fellow with Humanity in Action. Mike holds an LLM (EUI), an LLM (University of Amsterdam), an LLB (Utrecht University), and a BA (University College Utrecht). Originally from the Netherlands, he enjoys hiking and learning about wine.

## STAFF

### Oluwadamilola Akintewe

Communications Intern

### Olisa Dellas

Development Associate

### Charles Ehrlich

Director, Peace and Justice

### Benjamin Glahn

Deputy CEO and Managing Director, Programs

### Aurore Heugas

Communications Manager

### Soyoung Park

Program Intern

### Audrey Plimpton

Communications Associate

### Antonio Riolino

Senior Program Manager

## CONTACT

For more information contact:

### Charles Ehrlich,

Director, Peace and Justice

[cehrlich@SalzburgGlobal.org](mailto:cehrlich@SalzburgGlobal.org)

### Antonio Riolino,

Senior Program Manager

[ariolino@SalzburgGlobal.org](mailto:ariolino@SalzburgGlobal.org)

### Aurore Heugas,

Communications Manager

[aheugas@SalzburgGlobal.org](mailto:aheugas@SalzburgGlobal.org)

For more information visit:

[www.SalzburgGlobal.org](http://www.SalzburgGlobal.org)



## **SALZBURG GLOBAL SEMINAR**

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