Border security as practice: 
An agenda for research

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Abstract
The ambition of this special issue is to contribute to contemporary scholarly analyses of border security by bringing more focus onto a specific field of inquiry: the practices of the plurality of power-brokers involved in the securing of borders. Border security is addressed from the angle of the everyday practices of those who are appointed to carry it out; considering border security as practice is essential for shedding light on contemporary problematizations of security. Underscoring the methodological specificity of fieldwork research, we call for a better grounding of scholarship within the specific agencies intervening in bordering spaces in order to provide detailed analyses of the contextualized practices of security actors.

Keywords
border security, ethnography, the everyday, practice, street-level bureaucrats,

Introduction
The aim of this special issue is to contribute to contemporary scholarly analyses of border security by bringing more focus to a specific field of inquiry: the everyday practices of the plurality of power-brokers involved in the securing of borders. The competing discourses and rationalities of border control, theorized by critical border and security scholars alike, intersect in complex ways with the everyday professional routines and administrative procedures of those involved in the governance of border security at different scales (local, regional, national or supranational). This special issue invites us to apprehend border security also as an outcome of these brokers’ practices.

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while this introduction specifically aims to offer methodological insights for the study of border security as practice.

Borders and frontiers have long been intense sites of securitization. As contemporary borders become deterritorialized and disaggregated, those border security functions have migrated away from the territorial limits of states to dispersed and heterogeneous sites located beyond geopolitical border lines, as well as inside the societies they are meant to secure (Balibar, 2004; Walters, 2006; Côté-Boucher, 2008; Squire, 2011). Scholars have assessed issues such as border officials’ discretionary and exceptional powers (Bigo, 2007; Salter, 2008; Pratt, 2009), the escalation of cross-border policing over time (Andreas, 2009; Nevins, 2010), new border security technologies (Adey, 2009; Amoore, 2009; Smith, 2013), migration control through citizenship regimes and deportation (De Genova and Peutz, 2010; Aas, 2011), the sometimes gendered and xenophobic dimensions of border security (Pratt and Thompson, 2008; Pickering and Cochrane, 2013), and the acts of resistance of border-crossers and their allies (Nyers, 2011; Rygiel, 2011).

While modern borders have been taken to express the power of the nation-state (Donnan and Wilson, 1999), state power is nowadays exercised by delegating practices of state sovereignty to local, transnational and private actors outside the state apparatus and away from traditional state actors (Guiraudon and Lahav, 2000). Emerging actors and sectors have security mandates and engage in new policies in the name of security, while traditional security actors behave in new ways with new justifications: police forces, intelligence agencies, private security actors, technology companies, banks and airlines – among others – are collecting, exchanging and analysing data, making decisions about travel and mobility, and conceiving of their tasks as those of border security managers. Civilian actors have started policing and enacting borders (Doty, 2007). In some countries, local police forces are taking on an increasingly important role in immigration policing (Coleman, 2009). A limited but growing body of research has also started exploring the combination of market indirect control and direct oversight upon border security (Cowen, 2010), thus adopting neoliberal logics (Andrijasevic and Walters, 2010; Côté-Boucher, 2010). Such combinations can promote the commercialization of border security (Beaudu, 2007; Doty and Wheatley, 2013), shift liability for security to private for-profit actors (Scholten and Minderhoud, 2008; Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2012), and blur the divide between private and public engagements in security (Berndtsson and Stern, 2011). These devolution strategies also introduce cost-effectiveness and market logics in border security that turn private actors into regulators (Lahav, 2008; Walters, 2008). In a nutshell, whether they are public or private security professionals, policing officials, immigration bureaucrats, non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers, soldiers and border guards, customs officers, drug enforcement teams or even diplomats, each of these actors involved in securing borders evolves in quickly transforming institutional fields distinguished by their own standards, specific regulations and political stakes. These fields remain to be studied through empirical research.

As a set of legal, expert and technical responses to complex political and economic problems that threaten to impede or illicitly benefit from the global circulation of privileged people and commodities (e.g. terrorism, drug trafficking, migrant smuggling), these heterogeneous actors present different, and sometimes contradictory, answers to issues raised by the securing of borders. It is these answers that come together under the label ‘border security’. Taking security as variegated practices that maintain complex relationships with security discourses, legal regimes and policies constitutes an approach that adds a layer of complexity to our understanding of contemporary bordering.

**Beyond discourse, policy and institutions: How do border security actors act?**

The editors of this special issue are convinced that a research agenda addressing border security from the angle of the everyday practices of the diverse actors who are appointed to carry it out
(Infantino, 2013, 2014b) is essential for shedding light on contemporary problematizations of security (Côté-Boucher, 2013). We want to ensure that there is a balance between abstract theoretical work and empirical field-driven analysis. It is true that critical security and border studies scholars are taking an increased interest in the practice of security after a linguistic or discursive turn lasting nearly 20 years. Success has many parents: this ‘practice turn’ can be derived from Bourdieu’s emphasis on field, habitus and doxa (Bigo, 2002; Williams, 2007; Adler and Pouliot, 2011; Adler-Nissen, 2013), from ethnographic accounts of anthropologists or auto-ethnographic accounts of international relations scholars (Beier, 2005; Vrasti, 2008; Inayatullah, 2010), and from feminist scholars and others working on the everyday (Cohn, 1987; Guillaume, 2011; Dauphinee, 2013). In addition to looking at public and political statements, policy documents, laws and policies, this special issue is an invitation to analyse the practices, beliefs and actions of strategists, policy makers and practitioners, particularly street-level decision makers. This accompanies a more extensive interest in the ‘widening and deepening’ of security, as well as in the proliferation of security sectors, actors and technologies.

We are thus engaging with the ‘practice turn’ in critical security and border studies scholarship as a privileged entry point into the dynamics shaping contemporary border security – that is, we ‘treat practice as the place to study the nature and transformation’ of our research object (Schatzki et al., 2001: 2). However, we draw on a specific understanding of ‘practice’ that goes beyond examining simply the language or the policy to engage with the actual participants and actors, to analyse not simply their words but also their understanding of the meaning of those discourses (Hansen, 2006). While we recognize that discourses are effective (they carry social and political effects), we favour a more empirical and more interpretive approach to the notion of practice that emphasizes *how actors act and how they give meaning to their actions*.

The ‘practice turn’ constitutes a methodological orientation towards the meaning of particular policies, institutions or ideas as understood by the actors in these fields (Leander, 2008; Salter, 2013a). Such an approach requires some level of research interaction with those who enforce borders, especially private and public street-level actors and mid-level managers. Pouliot (2010: 83) sets out the clear empirical imperative in this sense:

>a key premise of objective research and practice theory in general is that in order to understand a different lifeworld, one must ‘go to the village’ so as to immerse oneself directly and interact with those that inhabit this world. Induction and the recovery of practice logics (or background knowledge) is thus the required first step in social scientific research.

This empirical imperative has been engaged in the study of diplomacy regimes (Neumann, 2005), while ground-breaking work has been done by Bigo and others in the European field (Bigo, 2011; Leander, 2011), which the authors in this special issue supplement by investigating particular sites in Europe and the global South. Consequently, we further underscore the importance and uniqueness of fieldwork research. The contributors shed light on the study of contemporary border security regimes by privileging grounded perspectives.

Our focus on border security as practice thus underscores the importance of grounding our observations within the specific agencies intervening in bordering spaces in order to provide detailed analyses of the contextualized practices of security actors (Infantino and Rea, 2012). Contributions in this special issue take into account the heterogeneity of everyday security practices and point to the importance of providing nuanced local details and context that render the texture of the social relations and networks embedded in the making of border security. These authors invite us to examine the practices that sustain the dispersal of borders away from geopolitical lines and as they unfold in local settings. Such a grounded approach emphasizes not only what border security stakeholders say, but also how they act as they engage with each other and with
border-crossers in these specific contexts. It provides glimpses into the logics and justifications they espouse in concrete border security situations, into the meanings they give to their actions and into the outcomes of those actions. Practice-focused analyses of border security also take into account how the legislative, technical and administrative resources and instruments relied on by these actors not only contextualize but also mediate bordering practices.

Studying practice entails paying sociological attention to the set of shared understandings and disagreements, implicit social and cultural norms, skills, competencies, informal knowledge, attitudes and embodied dispositions that make up border security. It means engaging border security, and its related policies, as a socially negotiated space from the perspective of what actors appointed to secure borders actually do. In order to take into account the ways in which borders are performed, border studies engaged in a conceptual shift from the notion of borders to the notion of bordering and bordering practices (Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012). Andersen et al. (2012) draw scholars’ attention to the notion of the ‘border multiple’ as the result of the multiple practices through which borders are made. Rumford (2008) introduces the concept of ‘borderwork’ to take into account the role of ordinary people in performing borders. Practice is thus the starting point for developing a deeper knowledge of the diverse configurations of actions that make up border security and for elaborating fine-grained analyses of the variety of ways in which border security is enacted. Studying border security as practice also benefits from taking an anthropologically inspired approach to understanding how actors mediate policy processes (Wedel et al., 2005). As Wilson (2012: 91) notes, ‘in a world with some new and many shifting parameters of power and order, and with many continuing structures of governance in and beyond the state, an anthropology of policy is much more than a good entry and exit point in border studies’.

**Border security actors as policy translators**

Actor-centred policy perspectives that emphasize implementation and enforcement have somehow been left aside from critical security and border studies. As soon as border security is considered to be enacted, it can no longer be viewed as the sole result of discursive, political, legislative or technological changes. The insights brought from the policy implementation perspective (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Lipsky, 2010: Brodkin, 2011) are particularly promising for analysing border security-related policies and programmes in practice (Infantino, 2014a). An implementation perspective looks to this phase of the policy process as a distinct one, which remains to be analysed in its own right through empirical observations. As border security policies and programmes are enacted, they lose their abstraction – through their everyday practices, the wide-ranging actors involved in securing borders give practical meaning to border security. It is these practical meanings and the implications of this angle of analysis for the problematization of border security that this special issue aspires to put forward.

Security actors are interpretive actors in their own right. If border security actors are interpreters of policy and regulations as they go about their work routines inscribed in specific organizational cultures, settings and concerns, this means we accept that they can reflexively adopt (or not) dominant security discourses. Border security practices are always intertwined, incorporated but also challenged not only by those who cross borders, but also by those who govern them. Admittedly, border security actors are not always reflexive about their practices. Drawing on Bourdieu, Pouliot (2008: 258) reminds us that ‘practices are the result of inarticulate, practical knowledge that makes what is to be done appear “self-evident” or commonsensical’. However, interviews (and field observations) can still reveal how security actors invoke different meanings for the technologies, enforcement techniques and administrative tools they employ. They relay the technical problems
involved with relying on sophisticated technologies and make explicit their competing uses by different generations of border officers (Côté-Boucher, forthcoming). As they mobilize their discretionary powers, and as they make decisions on the basis of both the formal and the tacit understandings granted by their work routines and training, border security actors favour some directions to give to their actions while discarding others. Consequently, they not only produce policy outcomes, but also operate a translation process that opens up the possibility for critique: ‘policies are not just transmitted and implemented: they are translated into new genres for every step and every new actor or scale involved, and simultaneously the process generates new spaces of contestation’ (Stepputat, 2012: 444).

By paying attention to the ways in which border security policies and programmes are implemented, altered and renegotiated, the contributors to this special issue develop renewed analytical perspectives for the problematization of border security in an age of global mobility of people, commodities and ideas. Paying attention to practice brings about a take on borders and security that refuses top–down implementation models in policymaking and rather speaks to the intermissions and tensions between rationalities and actions, discourse and practice. Research into concrete, everyday practices allows for a reconceptualization of security as a set of mediated processes situated at the junction between, on the one hand, the actions and worldviews of diverse border security actors and, on the other, security discourses, strategies, policies and technologies. By investigating how different rationalities and logics interact in border security, we are interested in the ways in which the practices of security actors intersect with, shape and transform both border priorities and the organizations involved in the governance of borders. Practice-based analyses of border security policies and programmes bring valuable insights not only into ‘the outputs of government programs … [but also into] the real outcomes of policies in the sense of what actually happens to people’ (Castles, 1998: 9–10). Most of the studies presented in this special issue point to the real human consequences of border security for the vulnerable.

As Salter (2013a: 90) notes, ‘following the actual empirical practices of agents on the ground, the practice turn can provide politically and theoretically salient critiques of contemporary international relations’. These critiques are all the more powerful because they speak to the detail of security practices. Contributions fill what Didier Bigo designates in this issue as the ‘lack of attention to the dispositions of the agents and the contexts’ involved in border security. Empirically sound research has the potential to call into question generalizations about border security and offer a vital corrective to the overly legalistic tendency to view the border as a site of exceptional politics. Given the oft-administrative, repetitive and more or less valued character of their work within the security field, border agents themselves do not understand their role to be that of unencumbered sovereign, but of a very constrained bureaucrat (see e.g. Côté-Boucher, 2013). Practice-based research constitutes an invitation to be cautious with an all-encompassing understanding of border security – expressing one main logic or rationality in all contexts, all practices, all security networks and institutions – a tendency within critical border and security scholarship that Walters (2011) aptly calls the ‘global security hypothesis’.

Research grounded in ethnographic methods nuances grand claims about the nature of security endeavours by taking into account the heterogeneity of practices enacting security at material and immaterial borders. Our critiques become reflective of the actual practices of security actors, as well as of contemporary internal debates and tensions within border security institutions, thus providing nuances to official border security rhetoric. By doing so, these critiques speak to the role taken by scholars in participating and generating public debates about border security issues and, more widely, to contemporary debates about the public, social and political engagement of social science researchers, their impacts on policymaking and their relationships with the media when it comes to their fields of research (Burawoy, 2005; Schepers-Hughes, 2009; Fassin, 2013).
The politics of fieldwork research on border security

Research projects building from immersive experiences do not test a preformed hypothesis: they follow an inductive approach. Rather than presume to test how border security is conducted, researchers go to the field to understand how actors conceive their roles, how they go about their daily routines, how they incorporate security practices and perform their identities, how they justify their actions. They pay attention to how power is experienced in its fine capillaries, not at the centre but in its extremities (Foucault, 1980: 96). In order to learn about these everyday practices, the researcher in the field develops a certain familiarity; she does not conduct her investigation at a distance. What we learn about border security as practice comes from face-to-face contact with those who govern borders, and with those who are made vulnerable, or further privileged, by this governance.

As a result, a research project is not interested in practices if it stays at the level of discourse. Practice-based research entails a deep immersion into a particular group, a study of its specific subcultures and the subjectivities these sustain, combined with sensibility towards how the researcher understands the field, how his or her presence may have affected it, and how he or she is changed by that immersion. Contemporary fieldwork research (including ethnography) in international relations, border studies and security studies is concerned with understanding precise bureaucratic cultures and group dynamics. In this sense, practice-based and fieldwork research has a particular purchase on border security measures because discretionary judgements about admission and examination are made by low-level bureaucrats, informed by complex policy structures, and aided by new technologies and changing bureaucratic cultures. Focusing on the everyday practices of border security provides much needed flesh on the bones of broad-picture, strategic policy analysis.

Studying practice requires any of the following steps involved in the painstaking labour of fieldwork: making travel arrangements; setting up and carrying out interviews with individuals often bound to silence in relation to the security practices particular to their workplace, or prevented from criticizing their organizations publicly; undertaking participant observations in protected settings; gaining the trust of research participants; and taking pages and pages of field notes, as well as sorting through, copying and analysing one’s data. Studying practice in border security even adds a layer of complexity to most fieldwork research endeavours: obtaining research access in the security field is a difficult task. For that reason, contributors were asked to speak to issues of research access and to those arising from the collection of empirical data in such a field.

Therefore, there is an undeniable politics specific to ethnographic research on border security. The fieldwork researcher’s embeddedness carries with it important ethical consequences, and this is particularly true for research on border security practices. Practice-based research, especially the ethnographic kind – with its participant observation, interviews and embeddedness in a border setting – is inherently political. Many who have interacted with security practitioners will have heard the reproach directed towards critical researchers for their ‘lack of contact’ with the reality of the daily pressures, political stakes and organizational challenges experienced by border security professionals. Practice-based and fieldwork research presents a strong empirical basis for those who would wish to challenge this perception as well as generate informed interventions into public debates about border security.

Yet fieldwork knowledge production on border security is not devoid of tensions and challenges. If it is instilled with a destabilizing critical potential, it also bears a dangerous quality. Getting to the detail of social life in a security milieu can generate questions as to the appropriateness of a policy, of a security method, or of a whole border security project. But it can also contribute to dynamics of appropriation of such research by offering invaluable details to border security
institutions as to how it may be possible to ‘better’ govern border-crossing individuals – an eventuality that shows the intimate relationship between knowledge production and policymaking. This relationship poses ethnographers of border security practices with ethical dilemmas that must be recognized and made explicit throughout the research process.

This is particularly true of the ways in which practice-based and fieldwork research on border security is inevitably engaged in a politics of in/visibility. What should be revealed? What should be left unexposed? Dynamics of publicity and secrecy are inextricably at work in projects researching border security agencies – from conception and fieldwork to data analysis and writing. Outlined in internal regulations and codes of conduct, and taking the form of legal restraints on divulging protected information, framed by the obligation to comply with privacy and confidentiality guidelines and inserted in national and global political games, the duty of non-disclosure curtails access to data for border security researchers. Unencumbered by institutional mechanisms of democratic accountability, security organizations and actors often interact through unofficial channels and wrap their methods and activities within a shroud of secrecy. At the same time, however, while they generally resist scrutiny and external evaluation of their practices, state-based and private security and policing agencies nevertheless find themselves a topic of public debate and critique – in the media, as well as by politicians, NGOs and social movements. As a result, these organizations are part of ‘a general economy of contemporary secrecy’ that responds to a paradoxical, ‘uninterrupted and contradictory process of non-disclosure and revelation’ (Dewerpe, 1994: 15–16).

Fieldwork research on border security inserts itself in this economy, but also at times circumvents it. In this way, the contributions of this special issue challenge the administrative, often undemocratic, enactment of security (Huysmans, forthcoming). Through attempts to monitor the publicity surrounding their activities, security agencies generate recognition for their achievements, while defining securitized objects (terrorism, organized crime, etc.) for public consumption. They are thus deeply involved in the production of public narratives about security, its aims and privileged methods. Examining the practices of these agencies allows taking distance from these narratives, particularly through questioning the assumption of the neutrality of the security policies that they promote. Through research that provides details on administrative routines, on the daily use of control technologies, on security actors’ training practices or on the different rationalities of security at stake in the practices of a plurality of border security actors, what often amounts to technicalities for these actors becomes observable and can be restored to its full political implications. This is possible particularly because of the intimate, close and detailed knowledge that the researcher has developed with regard to these practices, and can point at the political character of the ordinary, the mundane or the seemingly technical. By questioning border security as practice, such careful research work can circumvent the lack of public participation and scrutiny that often surrounds border security practices.

**Getting to border security as practice: Empirical interventions**

Despite scholars’ contemporary interest in the governance of border security, fieldwork-based research on the practices that make up border security regimes is still uncommon. While remarkable pioneering studies of transnational policing in border spaces have been published (see Gilboy, 1991 and Heyman, 1995 on US border bureaucrats, and Sheptycki, 2003 on the policing of the English Channel), ‘the day-to-day experiences of state officials continue[s] to be a crucial missing piece in the growing number of scholarly discussions of … border-zone processes’ (Chalfin, 2010: 9). In the burgeoning scholarship on security, there exists a small range of scholars from geography, criminology, international relations, anthropology and sociology who nevertheless take on the task of shedding light on the practices of enacting border security. These researchers aspire to pay
direct attention to the work routines and organizational culture of [bordering actors and] officers. Such practices are submerged in aggregate statistics and rarely admitted to in formal policy; furthermore, they are only partly visible even to the officers who perform them, since they quickly become normal operating procedures. (Heyman, 2004: 306)

Favouring fieldwork, observation, ethnography and interviews as the research strategies best suited to grasping the practising of border security, these researchers seek to incorporate the ‘institutional memories’ and ‘the voice of civil servants’ in analyses of border control (Mountz, 2010: xx). Strictly speaking, these scholars are not commonly associated with the security literature, but they have focused their attention on observing the everyday practices governing (im)mobility and in/security at borders. From such contextualized analyses, it has been possible to develop renewed theories concerned with the intricate connections between sovereignty and neoliberalism (Chalfin, 2010), the privatization of security governance in border spaces (Berndtsson and Stern, 2011), and the relationships between contemporary immigration policing, citizenship and the state (Light, 2010; Weber, 2011). The articles presented in this special issue are thus part of a larger discussion that aims to place practice at the front and centre of the scholarship concerned with borders and security.

Consequently, fieldwork research points to more than just the choice of a method. For instance, Salter (2013b) suggests that ethnographic approaches are becoming more popular in contemporary critical security studies. Salter apprehends ethnography as a research methodology intended to enhance reflexivity on the engagement of the researcher with his or her object of research. Similarly, together with Schatz (2009: 6), this special issue argues for an ‘ethnographic sensibility’ as contributors adopt ‘epistemological commitments that are about more than particular methods’. In order to guide our contributors towards a research agenda analysing border security as practice, we asked a series of questions that invite more grounded research in border security. Each article in this issue tackles one or more of these questions:

- What are the everyday practices of actors in border spaces (tasks, roles, tactics, strategies, work routines)?
- How do border actors responsible for policy implementation make use of their discretion?
- What resources (technologies, infrastructures, training, enforcement tools, policies) does border governance use? On which legal powers does it rely?
- How do border security actors interact with those who cross or are located within borders? How do they cooperate and struggle with other agencies intervening in border spaces?
- What classifications of security, risk, mobilities, social hierarchies, commodities, objects and human beings permeate their practices?
- How do micro- and meso-level bordering practices dovetail with, shape, dispute or transform border security discourses, rationalities, processes and institutions?

With these questions, we invited each author to put particular emphasis on the lifeworlds of decisionmakers in a variety of border contexts. Didier Bigo’s contribution in this special issue builds on years of interaction with a variety of European border actors and his deep, long-term immersion in the transnational field of security professionals. Highlighted by a series of interviews in various sites, this contribution illustrates how border security itself can be understood through three interlocking but independent ‘universes’: the military, border police and database analysts. Bigo demonstrates how these three types of border agents operate according to different core assumptions, logics and justifications, with diverging effects, all the while showing that border security actors interact according to diverse forms of subjectification. Bigo pursues his theoretical exploration,
gesturing towards a fruitful new direction: Lahire’s reformulation of Bourdieu’s field and habitus theory via a renewed sociology of action. In this sense, Bigo’s article is a crucial development from his previous work and particularly illuminating for examining border security as practice.

Contributors map out in very specific locales how border agents understand and enact their positions, as well as how they interact with ‘the global–local diffusion of ideals about how borders should be controlled’, as Philippe Frowd elegantly puts it in his article. From Frowd, who investigates the implementation of a programme aimed at building new border posts in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, we see how a particular border security field is populated by multiple local, regional and international actors. Frowd shows how Mauritanian border posts are constructed by the European Union, with training sessions being given by the International Organization for Migration, while technology is supplied by a migration policy development centre. We learn that EU directives promote infrastructure construction in Mauritania, with effects that cannot be predicted. If the EU has a strategy of pushing the border outwards, or merging internal and external security, only field research can tell us that funding of the construction of border outposts takes place irrespectively of actual trafficking routes.

Negotiations in international relations are traditionally seen as the exclusive domain of diplomats. An empirical focus on the practices of mid-level actors makes visible an arena for negotiations that tends to be overlooked. In this issue again, Nora El Qadim decolonizes research on border security governance by speaking to the diplomatic labour involved in deportations from France to Morocco. Shedding light on a little-known aspect of border control, she details the cooperation practices surrounding the implementation of forced return. El Qadim insists on the agency of Moroccan diplomatic actors in migration matters, and shows how attention to the cooperation practices of less visible mid-level actors opens up opportunities for challenging migration control.

David Moffette’s contribution draws attention towards the logics and practices of low-level decisionmakers as a vantage point for observing the government of irregular migration in Spain. The author shows how border governance crosses professions and sectors: police officers, judges and bureaucrats are all involved in making decisions in ways that take into account the responses of other sectors; for instance, the police act in ways that judges are likely to see as valid. His contribution invites us to consider the practices of low-level decisionmakers in order to better understand the strategy of ‘governing immigration through probation’, a strategy that makes possible the displacing of the filtering work of borders inside Spain.

By focusing on the ways in which a variety of power-holders along two sections of the border of the Republic of South Sudan prioritize particular security objectives and produce definitions of threat in order to legitimize their performance, Lotje de Vries and Mareike Schomerus’s article questions the everyday production of security concerns. Their comparative strategy enables them to shed light on a situation of border security pluralism performed through shifting practices of border policing. As the authors note, these practices shape the extent to which the border is secured, enforced or ignored. De Vries and Schomerus point to informal border policing and the strategic withdrawal of state functions: they argue that in certain contested spaces of the Republic of South Sudan’s border, the state chooses not to police the border and rather surrenders authority as a strategy for exercising sovereignty. Their insight into the practising of border security provides a distinct contribution, and one that could not be assumed or demonstrated from a remote location.

Material presented by the various contributors to this special issue reveals how sensibility towards the mundane rests on the researcher’s attention to detail. We can develop fine-grained ethnographic understandings of the structural dynamics shaping contemporary border control that open up new questions and generate new concepts relative to the governance of border security. In this special issue, Anne McNevin offers an admirable reflection on how her fieldwork research in
Bintan, and the complex border security regime she encountered there, brought her to question the very categories of analysis proposed by the migration scholarship. She underscores the empirical, political but also epistemological consequences of this discovery for border scholars, including the possibility to conceive of human mobility ‘beyond territoriality’. Here, McNevin’s research about seemingly mundane bordering practices not only describes the interconnecting agencies and regulatory bodies at play on this Indonesian island, but also offers a valuable theoretical contribution towards our collective efforts to assess the ‘normative dimensions of border politics’ and the reconstitution of the political through bordering strategies.

Each of the articles in this special issue thus exemplifies ethnographic sensibility as an epistemological commitment, even as they vary in their particular research design. In addition, most of the contributions fill a geographical gap and focus on the practising of border security in the global South. Such a trend speaks of a growing research interest in this field that accompanies the unbinding of security concerns and the transnational diffusion of border security policies and practices. Interestingly, many of our contributors undertake their research in former colonial states where the problematic history of knowledge production and its embeddedness within relations of power and resistance has long been debated, especially in anthropology (Asad, 1973; Rabinow, 1977; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2003). Our contributors offer particularly fruitful reflections in this regard. El Qadim speaks to the possibilities and limits offered by practices of resistance sustained by Moroccan diplomatic representatives against the metrological migration dispositif of the former colonizer. Frowd examines how Mauritanian infrastructures and landscape are reimagined as security spaces through a pedagogy of border control sustained by international migration organizations. Finally, De Vries and Schomerus demonstrate how, notwithstanding local distinctions in visions of security, bordering practices remain essential to state-building, as is shown by the case of the new state of South Sudan.

Despite our efforts to include research articles covering varied security regimes and practices from around the world, there remain some geographical and institutional contexts that are understudied. While there is a great deal of quality work on European cases, there is a real opportunity for exciting fieldwork with US border security actors, particularly given their involvement in border security at home and abroad, as well as along the contested Israeli border and other borders. (Where is the ethnography of Chinese or Indian border policing?) Such research could really deepen our understanding of the dynamics between local and global pressures. The overall funding attributed to border-related research and critical scholarship about bordering practices varies in different parts of the world. The possibility of obtaining research access may be more or less limited in these different regions, or depending on the organizations and agencies being investigated. However, the authors in this special issue demonstrate how the possibility of obtaining research access often rests on the patience and ability of the researcher, regardless of geographical and organizational specificities. Building on distinct theoretical perspectives, these contributions bring unique insights into border security as practised by different actors who are appointed to carry it out in diverse local contexts. There is ample room for further detailed research interrogating and illuminating bordering practices that de-centre the global North from our analyses.

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**Notes**

1. We chose the term ‘governance’ in order to direct attention to the part played in the securing of borders by ‘third parties’ (Salomon, 2002) – that is, in our understanding, private organizations such as for-profit,
non-profit and civilian non-state actors, as well as supranational organizations. The authors in this special issue do not take ‘governance’ for granted, but speak of it as a field of enquiry in its own right (Le Galès, 2004).

2. In this sense, our view of practice is related to that presented in Security Dialogue’s (2012) solid special issue on ‘Governing (In)security in the Postcolonial World’, which calls for the combination of such ‘discourse approaches in the empirical research traditions of a Foucauldian analytics of governing with a methodological “practice turn” that directs attention to competing rationalities of governing (in)security and to everyday forms of practice and local agency’ (Hönke and Müller, 2012: 385).

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