

The Mediterranean as a Laboratory of Border Externalization: Critical Perspectives from the South

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Abstract

Despite the growing prominence of decolonial approaches to borders and migration, the field of border externalization studies remains in need of a critical re-thinking of its main paradigms in order to move beyond state-centrist, Eurocentric and presentist approaches. Drawing on ethnographic research in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, this themed section develops an approach to border externalization grounded in the Global South. In diverse sites such as Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and Turkey, the papers discuss politics of control and practices of resistance, the multiplication of sites of bordering within the nation-state, the role of global networks of migration management and surveillance, as well as the role of race and migration in the national political debate. Drawing on the field of Critical Border Studies, in particular the concepts of 'borderscapes', 'border entanglements', and 'border work', the papers effectively center the multiple agencies, locations, and scales involved in bordering. They also contextualize border externalization within longer histories of imperialism, colonialism and anti-black racism, and ground their scholarship in participatory and grounded forms of research. Taken in conjunction, the themed section demonstrates the

empirical and conceptual innovations offered by grounded ethnographic research on bordering in the global south.

Keywords

EU border externalization, critical border studies, Eurocentrism, Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, decoloniality, racism

Introduction

This themed section unites several papers from a panel entitled “The Mediterranean as a laboratory of border externalization – ethnographic perspectives from the South” organized at the 9th Ethnography and Qualitative Research conference in Trento, Italy, in June 2023. The main motivation of this panel was to bring scholars together who study contemporary practices from a Southern (in this case Southern Mediterranean) perspective.

Since US and Australian attempts at extra-territorializing border controls in the 1990s, the theme of border externalization has gone from a marginal subject of research to a substantive sub-field in migration and border studies (Cobarrubias et al. 2023). Border externalization may be defined as a ‘catch-all’ phrase that refers to a wide range of practices adopted by states to carry out border control outside of their territory, in the territory of other states or in the high seas (Cobarrubias et al. 2023). This all-encompassing term includes a wide range of different practices (Stock, Üstübici, and Schultz 2019). According to Fitzgerald (2019), these can be divided into practices of fencing and practices of gatekeeping. The former include measures of border control that physically limit the movement of migrants, through measures such as the building of border walls, the enhancement of border patrol activities, or the interception of migrant boats at sea (Triandafyllidou 2014). Gatekeeping practices, in turn, are more varied, and include a range of legal and bureaucratic measures to restrict movement and illegalize migrants, such as accelerated repatriation agreements, safe third country agreements, but also direct funding for border control operations, or development aid packages (Gazzotti, Mouthaan, and Natter 2022; Stock, Üstübici, and Schultz 2019). The bulk of scholarship on border externalization is focused on the European Union’s practices in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, as well as Sub-Saharan Africa. However, the diffuseness of this practice in many other sites of bordering in the Americas and the Asia-Pacific region has made this a pervasive global phenomenon (Stock, Üstübici, and Schultz 2019; Zaiotti 2016).

With the maturing of the field, three main critiques have recently emerged to the current state-of-the-art in externalization studies, namely its state-centrism, presentism and Eurocentrism. This themed section addresses these critiques by exploring EU practices of border externalization through grounded research on everyday practices of bordering and resistance, the role of migration in the political debate, and the impact of global networks of securitization in different locations of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. Our focus here lies—not accidentally—on the Mediterranean, which, as Ould Moctar has recently reaffirmed, materially and ideologically represents Europe’s very sense of ontological selfhood and security in its asymmetric relationship to Africa. But at the same time, this asymmetry is increasingly faltering in the face of a protracted and multifaceted crisis of

Europe's universalist project (Ould Moctar 2024, Amin 1988). Building on a decisively Southern perspective—both in geographic terms and in terms of conceptual frameworks—the aim is literally to ‘talk back’ to some of the predominant paradigms that continue to direct our understanding of how borders operate across places and scales (Mudimbe 1988; Black Mediterranean Collective 2021). By so-doing, this themed section draws on broader debates about the modalities and infrastructures of border securitization in the field of Critical Border Studies—particularly with regard to its engagement with border externalization. At the same time though, we propose an “epistemic decentering” (Sarr 2018, 107) of the (multiple) subjects of border externalization, by “bringing to matter” (Mbembe 2017, 47) how externalization policies actively construct their domains of intervention, thus generating a new playing field—a mixed, a hybrid space that fundamentally alters the way such interventions and narratives are implemented, resisted and contested. More broadly, therefore, we feel that ‘decentering’ the epistemic privilege of “Northern” knowledge, and ‘recentering’ “the South” in migration and border studies ideally should come in a pair. While the first exercise ideally entails shaking up some of the sacred conceptual homes of ‘critical’ social sciences, the second means we need to foreground the South more empirically and conceptually. Our themed section thus explicitly builds on the argument that border studies all too often remains trapped in social science frameworks that have been historically developed in a particular European context, while (falsely) assuming these concepts and theories to be universal (Amelina 2022, Amelung et al. 2024, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Gorodzeisky and Leykin 2022). Taking seriously the coloniality of power, in contrast, requires embracing critical perspectives from the global South. To the crucial question of how critical border thinking can move us beyond Eurocentrism (Grosfoguel 2008), Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2020) answers that ‘recentering the South’ should not only involve more emphasis on studying migration in the South—including South-South migration—but also engaging critically with the geopolitics of knowledge production. The special section she introduces concretely explores how state-level and local actors in six countries—Ecuador, Mexico, Malaysia, Indonesia, Libya, and Niger—negotiate being interpellated and mobilised as transit states and gatekeepers in someone else's externalization policies. It also examines how stakeholders within these “Southern positionalities” perceive, conceptualize, and negotiate these externalization discourses and technologies. That is exactly the direction our themed section intends to take in the Mediterranean context.

By doing so, the themed section explicitly engages with scholarship that calls into question the Eurocentric nature of much scholarship in the field of Mediterranean studies on borders and migration (Giglioli, 2025; Hawthorne, 2022; Black Mediterranean Collective, 2022; Lombardi Diop, 2021). Starting from the insight that the Mediterranean has become a “contact zone” (Vacchiano 2013) where new mobile policies and forms of mobility are being tested, the papers in this volume make a breakthrough in considering this question not only from the migrants whose lives are affected, but from the often-tense reconfigurations that current externalization policies generate between the multiple actors caught up in their implementation (see also Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht 2022). After briefly discussing our conceptual engagements with the field of critical border studies, we will turn to lay out how our own theoretical agenda engages with contemporary critiques in the growing field of externalization studies.

Critical Border Studies

Critical Border Studies (hereafter CBS) emerged in the early 2000s as a critique of methodological nationalism that remained pervasive in the study of borders, both in political geography and in international relations. First and foremost, CBS sought to decenter the study of borders from a physical line on a map, by highlighting the constructed nature of borders and nation-state territoriality, and by decentring the border line as the main location where border work occurs. Drawing on broader calls in political geography to avoid the 'territorial trap' of naturalizing nation-states and their borders, as well as more general calls to actively study the production of geographical space (Smith 1984; Agnew 1994; 2015), CBS considered state territoriality—and thus borders—as an outcome, and not a starting point in the organization of space. Rather than taking borders as a given, this meant analysing (re-)bordering practices, agencies, and normative frames in an active sense. This also meant recognizing borders as spaces of contestation, struggle, and negotiation (Casaglia 2020). CBS also broke with the notion of borders as single places or lines on the map, framing them instead as convoluted and diffuse attempts to contain mobilities. To paraphrase Étienne Balibar (2002), borders are not fixed places in an immutable geographical space, but rather contextual entities in a vast spatio-temporal space.

The CBS research agenda has important ramifications in contiguous sub-disciplines. In migration studies, for instance, the adoption of critical border thinking has led to a re-assessment of the spatial lexicon (or 'spatial tunnelling', Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015) that characterizes much research in this domain, reflected for instance in the analytical framing of migration push and pull factors, before-and-after trajectories, or sending, transit and receiving countries. It is also part of broader debates in contemporary political geography on who counts as a political agent (Cowen 2014; Benwell and Hopkins 2016; Gibson 2013; Müller 2012) and on the effects of political practice beyond intentionality (Dittmer 2014; Müller 2012). Furthermore, CBS has critically reassessed the figure of the migrant by placing people on the move at the centre of the analysis, in terms of relationships with other migrants, with the states of origin, transit and destination, and with the other actors involved in the itineraries—as exemplified in the so-called autonomy of migration approach (Mezzadra 2011; Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos 2008; Bojadžijev and Karakayalı 2007). The will of migrants, their experiences, and their desires, constitute a (de)constructive force capable of generating new realities associated with their movements, while authorities in charge of implementing border policies find themselves having to respond to and interact with migrant movements and their generative force of new spaces and itineraries (Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, and Pickles 2015). This acknowledgement has increasingly pushed forward an infrastructural and thus, trans-scalar, understanding of the ways borders, and border externalization practices more specifically, both determine and are determined by migratory phenomena—as exemplified in the emerging fields of digital border studies, more-than-human perspectives, as well as a widening political ecology of bordering infrastructures (e.g., Squire, 2014, Dijstelbloem 2021; Pallister-Wilkins, 2021; Raeymaekers 2023; Trauttmansdorff and Felt 2023).

Within the field of CBS, three recent concepts are particularly central to this themed section: borderscapes, border entanglements and border work. All three concepts adopt the CBS imperatives to move beyond nation-state territoriality in the study of borders, while also drawing attention to the multiplicities of actors, operating at a variety of scales, involved in

bordering processes. The borderscapes literature suggests that borders develop across space, shaping the mobility of people, commodities, and knowledge both within and beyond the territorial nation-state (Brambilla 2015; Pallister-Wilkins 2016). It also centres the importance of bordering technologies, particularly in the way in which they shape frames of belonging and non-belonging through spatial strategies of inclusion and exclusion (Brambilla 2015; Pallister-Wilkins 2016), as well as the entanglement of material and immaterial elements in the shaping of border landscapes. Thus, it resonates with scholarship on the political ecology of borders, which highlights the shaping of (often hostile) environments that underpin spatial strategies of migrant in- and exclusion (Pallister-Wilkins 2020; Pezzani 2020; Dijstelbloem 2021; Raeymaekers 2023).

The term 'border entanglements', instead, foregrounds the multiplicity of actors and scales involved in border governance globally (Walters 2006; Raeymaekers 2019; 2014). It highlights the co-construction of mobility, immobility, and border enforcement, for instance in Mountz' (2011) concept of 'border enforcement archipelagos', or Stierl's (2017) examination of border entanglements in Greek EU-rope, while also promoting an understanding of the interconnection between policies and governance frameworks, for instance in El Qadim's (2017) and Gazzotti's (2021) analysis of the EU-Morocco development-migration nexus.

Finally, the term 'borderwork' highlights the visions and practices of a variety of actors (states, international organizations, citizens, non-citizens, smugglers, etc.) in envisioning, constructing, maintaining, and erasing borders (Frowd 2018; Rumford 2008; Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht 2022; Mengiste 2021). More specifically, the term foregrounds how particular spatial imaginaries are translated into concrete arrangements, invariably generating new sources of contestation and (re-)enactment (Reeves 2014; Raineri 2021). It has been used, for instance, to describe how different agencies, like smugglers and migrants, as well as state and non-state actors construct, navigate, and facilitate migration (Mengiste 2021; Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht 2022). Despite the rich trajectories of scholarship within CBS, various scholars have underlined that everyday dimensions of 'borderwork' remain understudied (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009; Reeves 2014; Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht 2022).

Overall, this themed section draws inspiration from these three areas of research, and CBS more generally, as it seeks to centre the multiple agencies, locations and scales through which bordering processes occur. However, it also seeks to centre everyday experiences and practices of borderwork (Parker and Vaughan Williams, 2009; Reeves, 2014; Vammen et al, 2022) in highly contested sites of bordering in the global South. The next section will discuss how this approach allows this themed section to contribute to current debates at the forefront of scholarship on border externalization.

Limits and Challenges in Externalization Studies

The main conceptual focus of the first twenty years of studies of border externalization was on how this practice reconfigured spaces of bordering (Cobarrubias and Novak 2024). Multiple studies theorized the extension of border control beyond national territory through metaphors such as 'remote control' (Zolberg 2003; 2008; Lavenex 2006), or 'offshoring and outsourcing' of border surveillance (Bialasiewicz 2012). Others discussed broader reconfigurations of bordering spaces, such as the re-scaling of practices of border control

(Moisio and Paasi 2013; Samers 2004), and de- and re-territorialization (Vaughan-Williams 2008). In this sense, the first generation of border externalization studies was in line with broader trends in Critical Border Studies to decenter and denaturalize the territory of the nation-state.

More recent scholarship on border externalization, however, has highlighted how both the sites of research and the spatial metaphors used by the first generation of externalization studies primarily reflected the perspective and priorities of countries of the global north that are externalizing their borders (Cobarrubias and Novak 2024). Thus, the last couple of years have seen multiple calls to break with state-centric, Eurocentric and presentist approaches to border externalization. Scholars of border externalization have argued that focusing simply on state actors misses the fact that externalization practices are facilitated, implemented, and contested by a wide variety of actors, including local and international non-governmental organizations (Cuttitta 2022; Dini and Giusa 2020), as well as international organizations (Cobarrubias et al. 2023; Lavenex 2015). Paying attention to the latter is particularly important as international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have an important role to play in subcontracting or facilitating the transmission of norms, and in playing an intermediary role between states negotiating border externalization (Cobarrubias et al. 2023; Gaibazzi 2023). At a conceptual level, accounting for the multiplicity of actors involved in border externalization shows the partial fallacy of the term 'externalization' itself, which—by marking an internal/external divide—takes the space of the nation-state for granted. Indeed, practices of containment of migrants to certain regions also exist within the nation-state, or supra-national blocks such as the European Union, highlighting how externalization is better conceived of as a multi-scalar process. Various scholars have shown that externalization practices often focus on the management of migration routes (Cobarrubias et al. 2023), such as through the 'arterial border' model in Mexico, based on the surveillance of main migration routes (Vogt 2017), and thus must be conceived of as multi-sited.

Yet, while some scholars appear to call for the abolishment of the term 'externalization' altogether—insisting on its Eurocentrism and lack of colonial historical roots (e.g. Gross-Wyrtzen and Gazzotti 2021; Frowd, 2022)—we instead embrace studies that call for an active enquiry into how actors that are deliberately co-opted and marginalized in such and policy frameworks 'think' of themselves (Cherti and Collyer 2015) while they actively renegotiate priorities and redirect histories that are not entirely of their own making (e.g. Tsourapas, 2017; Adamson and Tsourapas, 2019). Such a move, we feel, not only serves to provincialize Europe from a critical border perspective, but it also recontextualizes the current humanitarian-security nexus that is so amply emphasized in present(its) bio-political analyses of the current European border regime in a wider geopolitical Mediterranean context. This is to say also that we should think of the Mediterranean not just as the Southern shores of Europe, but also as the northern tip of a continent—Africa—that is rife with geopolitical tensions around the politics of migration and development (e.g., El Qadim, 2014; Cassarino, 2018; Roman, 2018; Karadag, 2019; Derrider and Pelckmans, 2020; Gaibazzi 2023). A final step in overcoming Eurocentrism in the study of externalization is thus to consider the form that 'development'—in the sense of global capitalist development—takes in Global South contexts in conjunction with the increasingly globalized policies of migration, borders and international development cooperation (Ould Moctar 2024; Pradella and Cillo 2021).

With regards to Eurocentrism, various scholars have lamented how, particularly in the Mediterranean context, the majority of critical scholarship on migration is conducted from its northern shores, primarily for reasons pertaining to the international political economy of academic research (Isleyen and El Qadim 2023). This means that most scholarship on border externalization is focused on politics and policies from the perspective of countries externalizing their borders, particularly the European Union, and has thus failed to recognize the autonomy and agency of states implementing border externalization for their neighbours (Cobarrubias et al. 2023). But some scholars have shown that many states of the global south have a long history of managing flows of people across borders as part of their own projects of nationalization and development strategies (Adamson and Tsourapas 2020), and have simply adapted this practice to externalization pressures. Thus, it is important to see states of the global south not as passive recipients of immigration policies, but as complex actors negotiating their own geo-political agendas (Gazzotti, Mouthaan, and Natter 2022). In this context, it is worth highlighting how border externalization may indeed serve as a spatial fix (Harvey 2001) for labour shortages in so-called "transit" states, such as Turkey, Mauritania, Libya, and, to some extent, Italy—where such policies have recently appeared to bolster dynamics of uneven capitalist development. Several studies have recently demonstrated how the differential bordering of migrant workers through externalization not only aggravates migrant-citizen antagonisms in specific local contexts, but in so doing, externalization also actively feeds into dynamics of racial capitalism, or the differential positioning of racialized subjects with regards to risk and well-being across geographic scales (e.g., Landherr 2024, Raeymaekers 2024, Pradella and Cillo 2021). Such contributions not only invite us to investigate the broader range of political and social imperatives in which so-called local migration policies are actively embedded—including the reconfiguration of nativist labour regimes (see also Pica, El Arabi, this volume), but they also invite us to contextualize these imperatives into a wider frame of global capitalist restructuring, crisis and reinvention beyond an orthodox framing of neo-colonial or imperialist agendas. In this context, we take inspiration from postcolonial scholarship that emphasizes how any attempt to theorize capitalism without cornering the lived experiences of those who are precisely defined as not quite (or not yet) human, not quite (or not yet) modern and civilized, indeed risks to re-enact exactly that racializing violence it aims to resist, and which eventually makes capitalism thrive as a modernizing project.

In this context, it is worth emphasizing a final point: with regards to the critique of the 'presentism' of CBS, recent scholarship has begun to analyse current practices of border externalization as the legacy of older imperial practices (Jegen 2023; Gaibazzi 2024; Gross-Wyrtzen and El Yacoubi 2024), drawing on calls to contextualize current practices of border externalization within longer histories of colonial domination, postcolonial relationships, and specific histories of state-formation (Gazzotti, Mouthaan, and Natter 2022; Cobarrubias et al. 2023; Ould Moctar 2020, 2024), as well as to centre lenses of race, class, and gender (Gross-Wyrtzen 2023). This follows parallel attempts to contextualize current practices of border control in the Mediterranean within longer histories of colonialism, processes of racialization, and contemporary neo-imperial practices (Hawthorne 2022; Giglioli 2017; Black Mediterranean Collective 2021; Raeymaekers 2022; 2024). Developing studies of border externalization in this manner thus contributes to a thick description of the Mediterranean's entangled histories that are not just shaped by Europe, but that should be situated in a longer history of inter- and disconnections that have actively shaped, and continue to shape, the

Mediterranean border space (Horden and Purcell 2000; Chambers 2008; Giaccaria and Minca 2011; Hawthorne 2022; Abulafia 2011).

In sum, the three main critiques to the current state-of-the-art in externalization studies—namely its state-centrism, Eurocentrism, and presentism—have called to the fore the limits of a relatively new research domain which, if not reoriented epistemologically, risks to reinstate the very problem it critiques. As Cobarrubias et al. (2023) argue, the stringent focus on the contemporary in the contemporary externalization literature risks hiding the deeper histories of what we now call externalization, and which are often imbued with colonialism and racism. Building on our own longitudinal engagement with Mediterranean histories of migration and racial capitalism (Raeymaekers 2024; Giglioli 2025), we agree with such recent calls to repoliticise border and migration policies from a longer-term post- and de-colonial perspective. Current migration and bordering policies of the EU are not just recent responses to recent ‘crises’, but they are also an expression of an entrenched ‘state of repetition’, of apparatuses of surveillance, containment, captivity, displacement, forced labour, and dehumanization that has historically characterized the government of Black lives in the European colonies, and across the Mediterranean, as some of the contributors to this themed section clearly demonstrate (see also Lombardi-Diop 2021). In this context, we find, it is important to invert the epistemological trajectory of critical border inquiries in the wake of these longer histories of colonial and racial oppression (Sharpe 2016), while also highlighting the continuities of mode of governing populations from the colony to the present. In part, therefore, we tend to build on older calls to excavate the ideological and material linkages that tie colonial histories with contemporary border governance, as the historical separation between blackness and the heritage of European humanism precedes the current material violence against Black bodies (Davies and Isakjee 2017; Marfleet 2007; Davies, Isakjee, and Dhesi 2017; Mayblin 2017; Hicks and Mallet 2019). With this imperative in mind, the next section discusses in detail how this themed section addresses core issues of state centrism, presentism, and Eurocentrism in border externalization scholarship.

Approaches to externalization grounded in the global south

Based on fieldwork in Morocco, Turkey, Tunisia and Libya, the papers in this themed section provide a nuanced understanding of how politics of border control and practices of resistance overlap in everyday border spaces. They also discuss the multi-scalar nature of processes of externalization, the role of migration and border control in the political debate and in competing nationalisms in various contexts of the global south, as well as methodological considerations about conducting ethnographic research in these sites. By focusing on the multiplicity of spaces and actors involved in bordering, as well as everyday experiences of bordering, the papers also respond to calls in Critical Border Studies to denaturalize nation-state territoriality and to decenter the border line.

In particular, the papers develop a grounded approach to border work (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009; Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht 2022) in the Global South. Through scholarship in different sites of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, they discuss how diverse North African agents (states, NGOs, activists, migrants) are not simply recipients of or respondents to EU policy, but negotiate political authority and wield agency in shaping the operation of the EU border regime on the ground (see also Gazzotti 2021). This is particularly the case in El Arabi and Pica’s contributions to this themed section, which

discuss the policies of urban dispersal adopted by the Moroccan and Turkish government respectively in order to deal with migrants. Cuttitta's article on Libya adds a different angle to everyday negotiations of border externalization by focusing on the little-studied aspect of migrant mobilization in Libya.

Racialized logics of control and surveillance

The papers also highlight the double tension that characterizes current bordering practices, between what Miriam Ticktin describes as 'the dual logic of protection and surveillance' (Ticktin 2016, 29), which also reflects the acute tension that exists between the progressive militarization of border regimes and the deliberate abandonment of migrant bodies in segregated encampments. As Agier (2014) highlights, the progressive transformation of global refugee policies in a systematic politics of encampment, particularly in the Mediterranean context, has also contributed to an increasing, and often deliberate, displacement, not only of human bodies, but also of their right to be in places. Various papers of our themed section address this tension between encampment and displacement. For example, in Pica's contribution, his research on the recent anti-Syrian mobilizations in urban Turkey explains how the border in this context also becomes a mobile threshold that marks a hierarchy between individuals who are categorized and segregated within the same space. As he writes, the material dimension of migrant abandonment becomes effectively reflected in space, as migrants who are not considered to represent the 'national' identity are casted into enclaves of non-belonging. Not coincidentally, his contribution mobilizes the terminology of race, as contemporary bordering policies also reflect the complex logics of the production, circulation and reconfiguration of race in this local context (see also Gross-Wyrtzen and El Yacoubi 2024). Similarly, Córdova Morales explains how in the Tunisian context, anti-Black racism is on the rise as European border externalization policies hit the ground in the local context. While the EU commission uneasily navigates its will to police external borders with its performance of human rights defender at a subregional level, migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa are literally trapped between the humanitarian encampments of UNHCR and the ever-more weaponized authoritarianism of the current political regime. In that sense, both Pica and Córdova Morales appear to share Ticktin's a skepticism of humanitarianism in the sense that its ideology reflects an expression of a politics of reordering the boundaries of the human in spatial terms (Ticktin 2016). To paraphrase Natasha King: the border regime literally produces illegality (King 2016) in the sense that it operationalizes the boundary between legality and illegality in space—and it does so increasingly in racial terms. Asking just how and where this racializing border is operationalized indeed forces us to engage in enquiries that take seriously both the interscalar networked space of border policing and the way their localized implementation effectively transforms territories and the possibility to inhabit those from the perspective of those affected.

Decentred and multiscalar analysis

The papers in this themed section also pay attention to reconfigurations of space and agency engendered through border externalization. Especially in the EU-centred borders scholarship, policies are still too often described as moving from the 'centre' to the 'margins'. Instead, we need to critically re-assess the active translation, modification, and manipulation of the mobile infrastructures and the policies they embody while paying attention to the

interlocking dynamics of space, place, and geographic scales (see also Peck and Theodore 2010). As El Arabi points out in her contribution, border externalization in Morocco has produced new sorts of entanglements between a multiplicity of actors and scales involved in the securitized governance of trans-Saharan migration. It is futile today to depict North Africa exclusively as a 'transit' space for trans-African migrants, as many Sub-Saharan Africans decide to settle there and make a living. Contemporary borderwork, therefore, should rather be seen as a tactical navigation between securing EU-African borders and the necessity to safeguard institutional agency in a rapidly changing regional borderscape. While the spatial dispersal of migrants serves to assert the biopolitical power of the state, we also need to spatially decenter our analysis of the intricate ways actors working at different scales reformulate their agency and authority in the midst of these institutional changes (see also Triandafyllidou 2022). These governance actors, we must acknowledge, also involve non-governmental agencies, like NGO's, solidarity groups and associations. As Cuttitta highlights in his contribution on African solidarity groups in Libya, such groups may also shape a separate space of counter-externalization, in the sense that these unfold in multiple directions and create solidarity spaces at different scales. As he writes, spatialities and directionalities produced by the interplay between solidarity and more-than-local migrant or pro-migrant mobilizations represent an equal and opposite reaction to the externalized regime of migration containment that has been established in Libya since the turn of the century. This attention to multiple spaces, scales and actors involved in border externalization also highlights the globalizing nature of regional border regimes, as well as forms of resistance to them. Cuttitta and El Arabi, for instance, highlight the emergence of globalizing spaces of resistance and communities of practice, exemplified by transnational activist networks, 'civility in transit', and migrant-activist coalitions.

Inversion of epistemological and methodological frameworks

Finally, thinking differently about the unfolding spaces of border and migration management in the EU-African space contributes to a different epistemology of borders, in the sense that it forces us to ask: borders for whom and by whom? On the one hand, we follow Vammen and colleagues who, in a recent agenda-setting contribution, point out that the interlocking scales of border policing in the EU-African space has given rise to new individual, social and political forms of struggle over the way borders are being put to work (Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht 2022; see also Rumford 2008). Inevitably, these struggles highlight new frictions and entanglements between the actors, infrastructures and technologies. The question of how multiple local and global actors shape, perform and contest borders, therefore, becomes once again a central one, as does the question of how mobilities are bent and react to such mobile policies and infrastructures. But we also insist that the mundane, everyday interaction between migrants, border agencies, and infrastructures creates the fertile grounds upon which the space of migration constantly transforms across geographic scales (Gazzotti 2021; Isleyen and El Qadim 2023). What is needed, therefore, is not just a focus on the routines and practices that continue to inform and shape this space, but rather a radical inversion of the epistemological and methodological framework to study and compare contemporary borderwork practice. The contributors of this themed section push for such a paradigm shift, in the sense that their research is based on a participatory and action-based inquiry. Rather than simply playing lip service to decoloniality, their scholarship is grounded in the global south, and thus de-centres

the frame of analysis and talks back to dominant EU and US-centred paradigms. Thus, it puts the decolonial agenda in practice in a straightforward and down-to-earth manner. This allows them to centre the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean as sites with their own rich political debates, which then incorporate the 'war on migration' in diverse ways. Pica, El Arabi and Córdova Morales's pieces, for instance, shed light on how the 'war against migration' has become a means to alternatively gather electoral support, reinvigorate nationalist feelings, mobilize political opposition, but also re-entrench authoritarian practices. In more general terms, for all the authors of this themed section, the fact of being strongly socialized and rooted in Southern academic and activist environments allows for a research design in a flow of a dialogue that enables new kinds of comparison and connection that would be impossible if written exclusively from a white European academic perspective (Krichker and Sarma 2019).

In a nutshell, therefore, this themed section picks up the invitation to overcome the presentism, state and EU-centeredness of externalization scholarship by adopting a decolonial approach to contemporary borderwork in the EU-African border space. It does so by foregrounding research on everyday practices of bordering and resistance, the role of migration in the political debate, and the impact of global networks of securitization in different locations of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. The next section will summarize in more detail the content of the various contributions.

Contents of the themed section

Paolo Cuttitta opens this themed section with his article "Refugees in Libya. Building Cross-Mediterranean Spaces of Solidarity", where he discusses little-studied forms of migrant mobilization in Libya. Drawing on a combination of document analysis, interviews and participant observation, he analyzes the emergence of the 2021 migrant social movement "Refugees in Libya", as well as the Europe-based "Solidarity with Refugees in Libya" movement born in its aftermath, focusing on the emergence of cross-Mediterranean networks, practices, and spaces of solidarity, as well as the ambiguities of these initiatives. Alongside this interrogative, the paper also raises the more practical question of how to conduct grounded fieldwork in sites with limited access for researchers.

Córdova Morales shifts the focus from Libya to neighboring Tunisia, centering questions of race, as he analyzes how Euro-Tunisian migration policies intersect with forms of anti-Black racism. Drawing on ethnographic research in the southern Tunisian towns of Zarzis and Medenine, he analyzes the transformation of southern Tunisia into a treacherous racialized geography for migrants, with particular attention to the effects of border externalization on the intimate geographies of Sub-Saharan migrants in shelters and makeshift encampments. By framing border externalization as a postcolonial racial project, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the interaction between migration, border externalization, racial formations, and anti-blackness in North Africa.

Sofia El Arabi's piece also focuses on de-centralized sites of bordering, with particular attention to the reconfiguration of border spaces enacted through the Moroccan policy of 'spatial dispersal' of sub-Saharan migrant populations. Drawing on participatory action research in cities of the Moroccan South and North-East, she explores how EU border externalization plays out in the management of migration dynamics in Morocco, the redefinition of the border, and of representations of sub-Saharan migration in the country.

She argues that the multiplication of internal forms of bordering in Morocco represents a manner of governing sub-Saharan migrant populations.

Finally, Cosimo Pica also addresses the reconfiguration of internal geographies in the broader context of EU border externalization, but shifts the focus from the Southern to the Eastern Mediterranean. In his article, he discusses Turkey's 2022 'dilution plan', which sought to limit the presence of foreign residents in certain Turkish cities. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Altindag district of Ankara, he shows how Turkish policies in the context of EU border externalization have reconfigured urban spaces, rendering them both laboratories of new repressive practices, but also spaces in which new counter-narratives and practices of solidarity can emerge.

Taken together, these articles demonstrated the potential of grounded scholarship in sites of border externalization to understand not only the intricacies of daily border negotiations in these spaces, but also to reorient the field epistemologically, highlighting how our understanding of spaces, agents and politics of externalization look differently when explored from the vantage point of the Southern Mediterranean. Examining border externalization through scholarship grounded in the global south does not only involve a broadening of the empirical scope of externalization scholarship, but also responds to a broader imperative of developing a "southern theory" (Connell 2007) of bordering. It is our hope that the scholarship in this themed section may set the ground for similar, comparative and interconnected research in other regions of border externalization worldwide.

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