Abstract: Security provision figures prominently at international boundaries. Although previous studies in African border contexts demonstrate how such practices are complicated by factors including states' diminished capacity or willingness to uniformly enforce official policies, they do not fully link these observations to the materiality of border towns or the experiences of border-crossers. Furthermore, there is an imperative within border studies to move beyond descriptive analysis and conceptualise borders as dynamic processes that are contingently expressed through everyday activities. Drawing upon qualitative fieldwork in two border towns at the Kenya-Uganda boundary, and theoretically informed by work in critical geography, this paper makes three arguments: (1) everyday enactment of border security is reshaped by locally held perceptions and expectations of border town life; (2) the security of the physical border is implicated within more general concerns for safety; and (3) the geographic concept of 'place' shows how analysis of security 'filters' as they actually unfold through contingent 'moments' captures the significance of these two spheres for the border region.

Keywords: security, borders, Kenya, Uganda, place, human geography

Introduction: ‘we just cross!’
On 10 July 2010, as the FIFA World Cup Final ended, two bombs ripped through separate restaurants in Kampala, Uganda that were showing the match on television. Dozens of football fans were killed in the attacks; security throughout the country was increased. After the Somali extremist group al-Shabbab eventually took responsibility, ordinary citizens continued talking about the events. Since these were highly visible attacks, one might have expected the effects to radiate outward and raise considerable anxiety about threats that could pass into the country without notice.

Yet in Busia, Uganda, the ripples of the events interacted with other sets of perceptions on security, producing opinions among border-crossers on what it meant to ‘be safe’. Busia is a major border town far from the capital city that

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lies alongside its Kenyan counterpart sharing the same name. Since the border’s porosity is well-established to residents, people were indeed more aware of the unique security concerns arising from their location. However, these perceptions were accompanied by assertions that Busia would continue being ‘safe’. A telling moment occurred at the end of my interview with a Kenyan health worker named David.2 When I asked him what it might feel like to be stopped at the border given the potential for heavier restrictions on movement after the Kampala bombings, he exclaimed, “we just cross! Just yesterday I was relaxing with friends in Uganda!” Further conversation revealed he could not imagine the border being closed, or movement restricted, due to the bombings.

His words provide a window into some of the questions that confront border scholars, towards which this paper aims to suggest some answers. First, within contexts where functions of international borders overlap and intersect with competing outcomes, how is the notion of ‘security’ impacted by everyday perceptions and practices? Second, how is the security of the physical border embedded within wider concerns for safety held among ordinary border-crossers? Finally, what theoretical or conceptual tools can link observed local security practices with everyday experiences in the borderland?

This paper is organised in the following manner. After providing some context of the fieldsite and the methods used, I explore how borders have figured in a range of literatures, but particularly in geographic terms. I relate these diverse treatments to African contexts where official capacity to delimit and maintain boundaries can be challenged. This leads to a discussion of structuration theory, a tool used by some border scholars but one that I argue has flaws for explaining the relationships between border-crossers and security regimes. Instead, I advance the concept of ‘place’ to help shed light on the wider significance of borders as more than just discrete lines that divide territory. Viewing borders through this lens reveals how everyday practices and perceptions, as they are expressed through contingent ‘moments’ of interaction, are central to the constitution of border security. To illustrate these arguments, I draw upon my research in Busia to show how migration officials try to ‘filter’ certain people and activities from going through the border proper. Yet, in the course of enacting this property, officials exerted considerable flexibility depending on the situation. Then, I turn attention to town residents who perceive ‘bad’ people and behaviours being allowed into the wider border towns due to the porosity of the border. Finally, I discuss the tension between migration officials charged with implementing a certain imaginary of border security and border-crossers who, through their everyday activity and perceptions, demand free movement.3

2 Since sensitive subjects like illicit trade and sexual practices were discussed with respondents, all names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect their privacy.
3 In this paper, ‘the border’ is conceptualised as the formal crossing point, including its two sets of gates, the no-man’s land that lies between them, and the migration officers located there. Analytically, this differentiates the formal crossing from the towns lying on either side of it. During fieldwork, it became apparent that residents tended to use ‘security’ in two ways that corresponded to these different parts: first, in reference to migration officials charged with ensuring the intactness of the physical border at the formal crossing, and second, to a general sense of (un)safeness existing in the towns due to people moving through the border.
Context of the fieldwork
The research questions imply several criteria in the selection of a useful case: a somewhat settled population around a monitored crossing; the presence of transactional activities like trade, migration, or transport; and perhaps most crucially for revealing insights to the ‘everyday’, a relatively peaceful and stable locale. Such a site could reveal established and tacit patterns of practice in ways not possible to do in the sensational and often-studied minority of cases involving politicised boundary disputes or violent conflict at borders.4

Busia Town Council, Uganda and Busia, Kenya fit these criteria well. According to the most recently available censuses, the Ugandan side has a population of approximately 36,000 people while the Kenyan side contains 30,700 people, with both figures projected to increase (BDLG 2009). Agricultural goods including beans, soya, sugar, and maize tend to move eastward from Uganda to Kenya. Meanwhile, manufactured products such as batteries and radios are transported eastward to interior markets in places like Uganda, Burundi, and Rwanda. At Busia, the respective governments apply duties and taxes to goods being transported by trucks in large quantities. To evade this taxation, local residents and migrants often work as informal transporters, delivering small amounts of both types of goods via bicycle using either the main crossing or the panyo paths outside the Town Council limits.5

The towns’ location at the conjoining of two East African Community member states, as well as along the Northern Corridor road network which is a major artery towards the port of Mombasa, has also increased their economic importance at the regional scale. As a result, state ‘revenue protection units’ of border security officers whose task is to restrict undocumented trade and collect appropriate duties often work at the border (Whyte and Muyinda 2007).

During three months’ fieldwork in these towns, I conducted participant observation and semi-structured ethnographic interviewing among residents, government officials, and migrants to understand how the physical border figured in their lives. Initial observation enabled me to identify four significant categories of people in the town councils: truckers, boda-boda drivers, women employed in the towns as entrepreneurs and commercial sex workers, and money-changers.6 Knowing that these people relied upon being physically present at a particular location for their income, I organised focus groups as a way of generating a large amount of data relevant to the activities in which these members were engaged while respecting the value of their time.7 Responses from the focus groups were corroborated and followed up with in-

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4 This does not diminish the importance of territorial conflict to the study of borders, especially of those in Africa. Rather, it links the selection of a case study to the research design which aimed to examine patterns of social interaction embedded in a particular spatial location.
5 Panyo is the Kiswahili word meaning ‘rut’. In this context, it refers to the informal dirt paths that spread around the customs point with the intended effect of circumventing officials.
6 Boda-bodas are bicycle taxi drivers who transport goods and people around and between the towns. Since a focus group with the moneychangers was later cancelled, they were not included in the final study, although it is important to acknowledge their presence in the towns.
7 In all interviews, but especially in focus groups involving female sex workers or people affected by HIV/AIDS where trust and discretion were vital, a locally-recruited assistant reviewed the interview guides and facilitated discussion using participants’ preferred language(s) where necessary.
depth interviews conducted throughout the remaining fieldwork period. Although five spheres of activity emerged in the full study—economic trade, secondary education, health service provision, community development, and security—this paper focuses on security as an illustrative topic that featured prominently in everyday conversation.

**African borders and security: barriers, bridges, and the ‘spatial turn’**

Borders emerged as objects of study during the First and Second World War periods when concerns about territorial control were heightened (Kolossov 2005). Previously, notions of frontiers as edges of civilisation held fast in the discourses of politicians and historians, especially in colonial contexts (Curzon 1907). Subsequent academic efforts delineated, categorised, and classified boundaries into typologies (van Houtum 2005). Prescott (1987) illustrated this systematic approach by compiling case studies spanning land, maritime, and atmospheric boundaries. These were usually characterised by a definite link to physical features.

Then, functional approaches concerned with the results of borders replaced identification of the locations and forms of boundaries (Paasi 2005). Fischer (1949) was one of the first voices calling attention to the relationships between borders and people. He questioned geographers’ preoccupation with identifying borders marked by landforms and physical features, instead arguing that more focus should be placed on understanding how they impacted aspects of human settlements. For instance, “the transportation net gets adjusted to the boundary, market towns take their specific importance from it, habits of the local population are shaped by it, ideas are moulded under the impact of different educational systems” (Fischer 1949, 197-198). Other geographers like Minghi took up this line of enquiry: “it is the significant similarities and differences between the sociopolitical communities the boundaries divides that are reflected in its functions” (1963, 407). Such functions are uncovered by “concern[ing] ourselves with the role of the boundary in determining spatial patterns of selected behavioral activity” (Minghi 1963, 428). This foreshadowed work in international relations during the 1970s that identified how boundaries contributed towards inter-state conflicts (Kolossov 2005, 608). Starr and Most viewed borders as ‘interaction opportunit[ies]’, arguing that “a border creates a certain structure of risks and opportunities in which various interactions appear to be more or less likely” (1976, 588).

These conceptions of borders as distinguishable ‘barriers’, in the case of Prescott, or ‘bridges’ between states as suggested by Minghi, influenced future researchers. As Paasi observes, “political geographers and political scientists have for a long time perceived boundaries as fixed, stable empirical entities which divide the global space into bounded units that change mainly as a consequence of conflicts” (1998: 69). Therefore, they were seen as ‘natural’ outcomes of physical geography (Pavlakovich-Kochi, Morehouse, and Wastl-Walter 2004).
Until the 1990s, this was the dominant narrative on spatial entities like borders, especially in political science and its sub-discipline of international relations. Then, human geographers like Agnew (1994) challenged social scientists to avoid this ‘territorial trap’ whereby categories like states were only containers for human activity. From sociology, Brenner also called for space to be reconsidered “no longer as a static platform of social relations, but rather as one of their constitutive dimensions, itself historically produced, reconfigured, and transformed” (1999, 40). These developments prompted the geographer Edward Soja to make a provocative observation about the ‘spatial turn’:

Contemporary critical studies in the humanities and social sciences have been experiencing an unprecedented spatial turn...Scholars have begun to interpret space and the spatiality of human life with the same critical insight and interpretive power that have traditionally been given to time and history on the one hand, and to social relations and society on the other (Soja 1999, 261).

Spatial concepts were now thought to be “the product of social practices and conventions which in themselves are the result of symbolic and discursive acts” (Engel and Nugent 2010, 2). Therefore, borders and borderlands could be recast as social constructions created and appropriated by people, rather than as pre-given entities separate from human experiences (Cresswell 2004, 30).

Crucially for study of security and African borders, this ‘spatial turn’ opened several avenues. First, it highlighted how ‘marginal’ spaces like borderlands could be active and lively sites of social contestation in their own right. By illuminating disjunctures between ‘official’ policy and ‘actual’ occurrence in these locations, researchers began refuting Kopytoff’s (1987) assertion that African borderlands were politically empty (Nugent and Asiwaju 1996). Especially in issues of security, it became clear that some African states did not have the capacity to delimit their boundaries, giving rise to studies of local practices and contestations by border residents hoping to circumvent or manipulate ‘official’ policy to extract benefits (Bakewell 2007; Feyissa and Hoehne 2010).

The spatial turn also highlighted the importance of examining how space is constructed and negotiated. This generated wider interest in historical research questioning the colonial contexts in which African borders were created. Conventional wisdom held that boundaries were arbitrarily imposed upon colonised people, “decided upon in complete disregard of local needs and circumstance” (Touval 1966, 291). This process was exemplified by the European ‘scramble for Africa’ during the 1800s which climaxed at the 1885 Berlin Congo Conference where representatives aimed to stabilise their territorial boundaries (Pakenham 1991). However, Herbst (1989) argues that boundaries actually reflected rational decisions by Europeans to maintain their authority with the least amount of necessary force or financial investment. Katzenellenbogen disputes this claim, saying that “assum[ing] boundary setting

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8 Two notable exceptions are Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau. Lefebvre defined social space as an “outcome of a sequence and set of operations [that] permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others” (1991: 73). De Certeau (1984) argued that urban spaces like streets were subject to human usage and creativity on an everyday basis.
was a rational, well considered process would be more than a little misleading. Ignorance, misconceptions, sheer uninformed greed and ineptitude also played major roles” (1993, 1).

Both do agree that characterising African boundary construction as either arbitrary or emerging at a single conference overlooks important relationships among colonial authorities, colonised elites, and borderland residents, as well as the fact that boundary-making was an iterative process. Clapham (1999) shows how in many African cases the state was created by boundaries, not the other way around. As a result, “these boundaries defined and legitimated the particular kind of power structure which grew up within post-colonial African states” (Clapham 1999, 55). For instance, especially in states that derived much of their income from customs duties or depended on agricultural exports for trade, control of borders provided financial support for state functioning itself.

This economic imperative continues to intersect with security operations along African borders, as Roitman (2004) shows via ethnographic research on the ways by which border-crossers’ trading agendas sometimes align with policing efforts. Additional recent work illustrates how daily life and security activity occurring within these supposedly ‘peripheral’ regions continues to be vital to the functioning of states (Das and Poole 2004). As Le Meur observes in Benin, administration officials operating in the borderlands tap into different discourses of “locality, of autochthony, of state authority…according to the context and the stake” (2006, 891). Raeymaekers (2009) echoes this conclusion by arguing that unofficial trade that evades documentation along the Congo-Uganda border is actually a means by which local people try to make a living despite significant hardship and geographic isolation. Nugent’s (2002) work at the Ghana-Togo border also illustrates how state institutions and community political relations are shaped through daily decisions involving social ties across the boundary.

Taken together, this evidence highlights the complex relationships among states trying to exert their authority—often through the enactment of security regimes—and border-crossers who selectively engage with security apparatuses depending on the situation. In total, African border communities are interesting sites for studying how “processes straddle both the formal and the informal which in all practical purposes merge together” (Soderbaum and Taylor 2010). Examination of interactions with officials at these locations illustrates how “the clear rules expressed in the law are blurred as one moves away from the centre of state power, where its capacity [to] rigorously uphold the rules is limited” (Bakewell 2007, 17). As will be evidenced and argued in the empirical sections, activities occurring in Busia exhibit a similar tension between economic imperatives for freer crossing and official border policies.

**Theorising everyday border security via structuration theory: a critique**

However, this paper also aims to link such empirical material to more general social theories, showing how everyday border experiences bear upon processes like the enactment of security regimes. Indeed, the relatively peaceful locale that border-crossers experience at Busia provides opportunities to examine how border security interacts with a general sense of ‘being at the border’. Critical voices have begun analysing everyday perceptions and practices as vehicles for
“mov[ing] against already established forces and representations” showing how these practices and discourses “bend and foil the space instituted by others” (Raeymaekers 2009, 57). Paasi also argues “territories are not frozen frameworks where social life occurs. Rather, they are made, given meanings, and destroyed in social and individual action. Hence, they are typically contested and actively negotiated” (Paasi 2003, 110). Within the context of African border security, these observations point to a central tension in social theory between agents and structures—between border-crossers and the range of social, political, and legal regimes that constrain and direct activity towards particular ends. Since there is not enough room in this paper to systematically cover the breadth and depth of approaches to this classic problem, I will focus on one particular theory from which borders theorists increasingly try to derive an explanation of how individuals impact a range of structures and yet are simultaneously constrained by them: structuration theory.9

Famously outlined by Giddens (1984, 1979), it proposes an explanation for social change that recognises the influence of structures on human activity while leaving room for agents to reshape these very structures. He argues that structures have dual natures—that they are both the “medium and the outcome of the social practices they recursively organise” (Giddens 1984, 25). Furthermore, structures are kinds of ‘virtual orders’ that are only made real through action. However, Sewell takes issue with this conclusion, pointing to the material and observable dimensions that structures sometimes possess. He revises the ‘duality of structure’ to mean structures are “composed simultaneously of schemas [rules, in his usage] which are virtual, and of resources, which are actual” (1992, 13). Therefore, he argues that social structures of varying scales are constituted through agents’ repeated reference to these rules and resources (Sewell Jr. 1992, 6). Between these competing views, there is consensus that structuration fundamentally argues that individuals are faced with certain limits on their ability to repeat past actions, make decisions in the present, and imagine future possibilities.

Structures in either Giddens’ or Sewell’s usage take several forms as security at borders. These might include crossing gates, migration offices, and queues for submitting paperwork. Equally, the presence of these actual structures should give insight into the virtual structures to which individuals may ascribe: legal codes on migration, norms of ‘proper’ interaction with authority, and even the idea, if fictive, of the nation-state itself. Then, as border-crossers, migrants, residents, and authorities negotiate among themselves in the course of their daily activities, they selectively support some of these structures. As a lively borderland, Busia is a good site for examining how such processes unfold.

Brunet-Jailly (2005) uses structuration to propose a comprehensive framework for understanding how transborder processes like migration and capital flows are influenced by actors operating in borderlands. Diener and Hagan also observe how structuration opens the possibility that the “meaning of the border and its daily function are mutable and must therefore be studied relative to the

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9 For instance, another stream of work debates the usefulness of critical realism for understanding how structures ‘emerge’ through social activities (Cruickshank 2011; Morawska 2011; Valentini 2010; Pratt 1995; Archer 1982).
group imagining it” (2009, 1208). However, these claims that theoretical and methodological opportunities exist for empirically testing structuration theory, while intellectually interesting, actually reveals a significant flaw: the apparently neat compromise afforded by structuration theory between structure and agency does not offer clear mechanisms by which it could occur. Owing to the duality of structure, in which “the structural properties of social systems do not exist outside of action but are chronically implicated in its production and reproduction” (Giddens 1984, 374), the process of structuration is difficult to either identify or observe (Bakewell 2010). Archer (1982) goes further to argue that it effectively conflates the concepts of structure and agency. Therefore, Gregson (1989) rightfully points out that if one cannot analytically separate these concepts or move them beyond abstraction, structuration theory is not very helpful for research concerned with the impact of one on the other. In the context of border security, it is still unclear how and to what ends border-crossers both construct and deal with mental, physical, and social structures during interactions with the border and the security apparatuses located there.

This broaches a second critique of structuration: activities and actors are not divorced from spatial relationships. In short, geography matters. Human movements and material structures exist in some form of physical space. Although Giddens questions conventional, Cartesian conceptions of space by explaining that all social activities are situated within what he calls ‘time-space’ (1984, 83), he does not offer a critical explanation of what he means by ‘space’ or how it is produced—a symptom of Agnew’s territorial trap whereby space is taken for granted. Inclusion of a nuanced theorisation of space like that described earlier is a crucial step that recognises how “social relations are becoming increasingly interconnected” (Brenner 1999, 40). Indeed, border towns like Busia are not discrete points on a map: instead, as I will show in future sections, a range of other locations—capital cities, sites of production and consumption elsewhere in East Africa, the ‘other side’ of the border—are also visible and present. Furthermore, historical debate over the development of African borders is evidence of the greater importance states have attached to certain geographic locations, like border regions, over others.

Theorising borders and security practices as places and ‘moments’

In light of these flaws in structuration, the problem that confronts theorists is how to conceptualise borders in such a way that “reflect[s] the multidimensional nature of border change at a variety of levels—transcontinental, national, and sub-state regional” and empirically show how “a range of ‘border transcending’ and ‘border confirming’ processes represent narratives in the economic, political, and cultural spheres” (L’Estrange and O’Dowd 2008, 11). This task is even more vital given the observation that as multiple kinds of borders co-exist and interact—mental, social, material—so also do a variety of tensions exert themselves upon border-crossers with divergent effects (Ernste, Van Houtum, and Zoomers 2009).

I argue that a progressive approach to ‘place’ moves border theory towards such a holistic conceptualisation by augmenting traditional social theory with spatial insight. ‘Progressive’ in this sense echoes the work of Doreen Massey (1993), where it signals a non-essentialised view of places as interconnected, dynamic, and temporally-contingent. This largely constructivist approach to place, as
several geographers go to great lengths to illustrate (Agnew 1993; Cresswell 2004; McDowell 1999), captures the significance of three factors as they interact: spatial location, material or built forms, and intangible feelings or perceptions. Furthermore, as Massey explains, these interactions link across conventional categories of scale: “very few places aren’t in any way implicated in wider processes that you may or may not wish to contest…The global doesn’t just exist ‘up there’. It is made in places and there is hardly a place on the planet that isn’t party to that making” (2009, 412).

Critical geographers insist that the relational and socially constructed nature of places is vital for recognising the mutability of borders. As perceptions and practices among people shift, the places they inhabit are transformed: “places are never complete, finished or bounded but are always becoming—in process” (Cresswell 2004, 37). Also, if places are indeed “historical—and, just as much, economic and political, social and ethnic—and, in all these various respects, contingent upon human beliefs and actions” (Casey 2011, 390), they leave open the possibility of being (re)shaped by other places via everyday movement of people, capital, and ideas (Castells 2000). Therefore, processes of place-making extend through an immediate location into other places: Nairobi and Kampala, despite being very distant, still have considerable symbolic and actual presences in the borderlands at Busia.

Crucially for study of security processes at borders, Massey (1993) also introduces the concept of ‘power-geometry’ to analyse how the relative social and physical mobility of individuals influences not only observable relationships among people and places, but also their particular arrangements and trajectories in time and space. Linking mobility to place is key for understanding the significance of being prevented or allowed to cross borders. As Gielis (2009) argues in his discussion of migrant translocality, ordinary places like homes, offices, or queues can give expression to successful movement, the aspiration of future movement, or the inability to move at all. At borders—where location, material, and feelings interact—power geometries can emerge as “particular moments…in intersecting social relations” (Massey 1994, 120). Nugent (2010) also uses the idea of a ‘moment’ to describe the everyday variations from ‘official’ border-crossing policies that form longer term ‘conventions’ or understood practices. For instance, as will be shown in the observation data, in Busia where capacity is limited but demand for crossing high, migration officials can temporarily suspend the rules for certain situations—especially where there could be mutual benefit or familial relationships to consider. As these practices become normalised, tacit agreements carrying practical if not legal weight can emerge.

Combining a progressive sense of place—one that is sensitive to the temporally contingent ways by which people give meaning to their physical and social environments—with Nugent and Massey’s ideas of moments turning into conventions can shed new light on the traditional structure-agency debate earlier described. To illustrate the usefulness of this concept, I turn my attention to the perceptions and practices surrounding security provision at the actual border between Busia, Uganda and Busia, Kenya. Then, I show how these interact with local practices, producing a sense of ‘being at the border’.
Security practices at the formal border crossing in Busia

In this section, I draw upon interviews with and participant observation among border-crossers and migration officials at the formal crossing to illustrate how they dealt with the unique challenges posed by the presence of a border. While they verbally emphasised how the border should function as a clear barrier to individuals and groups posing threats to the communities, observation of the ways by which officers performed their duties demonstrate a more flexible approach that I argue is influenced by local economic needs for mobility.

There are several steps in the process of going through the ‘official’ border at Busia. First, one passes through a main gate painted yellow and black if entering from Uganda, or black and red if entering from Kenya. This leads into a zone called ‘no-man’s land’. A NGO director recounted how the creation of this area was an attempt by both governments to mark their territory:

You know that no-man’s land; there formerly were homes there. So you wouldn’t know when you were in Kenya or Uganda...So you can imagine, they [the government] said ‘we need this thing cleared. We need to end here. We need to know where the other country starts’ (Matthew, interview).

However, to suggest that neither state has a presence in this space would be incorrect. Rather, both countries have migration stations in this area. Individuals lacking a Kenyan or Ugandan passport and wishing to cross through the towns en route to another destination are supposed to stop at both of these offices in succession. Wooden ledges outside of the buildings serve as desks for filling out the appropriate forms. Inside, officers stamp the foreign passport and issue a visa if necessary. On the Ugandan side, each passport is scanned to verify its authenticity and retrieve vital data like birthplace, age, and a photograph; such technology was not observed at the Kenyan office. Then, the individual exits the building and continues onward. Other people not connected with the state security help facilitate this otherwise ‘official’ crossing. Men ‘hang around’ offering to help foreigners complete their documents whether or not they are asked. Moneychangers settle into groups around each station, providing a mix of shillings and dollars for paying fees and converting between currencies. Even a Barclays bank, guarded by two uniformed men, stays open beyond normal business hours to serve truckers arriving throughout the evening.

When residents of Busia, Kenya or Busia, Uganda cross the border, there is an understanding they do not always have to show documentation to officials. Numerous observations confirmed that, if the intention is to simply cross over for purchasing small items or visit family members, people did not bother with passports and walked through the zone: “we just pass; we never stop!” (Emily, focus group). Furthermore, boda-boda men transporting large sacks frequently went back and forth without providing identification. 10

Indeed, living with and among local families on the Ugandan side demonstrated the extent to which residents’ everyday economic lives depended on an ability

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10 In the event of overnight stays, Ugandan policy requires residents to prove a familial connection via documentation that is approved by the station supervisor and kept on file (Migration Officer #9, interview).
to cross the border relatively quickly and frequently without hassle. For instance, many household activities involved items purchased elsewhere. These included buying staples like maize flour for *posho* and *chapatti*, preparing meals using charcoal for the stove and groundnut oil for cooking, generating electricity with kerosene when the main power was cut, and, if the power stayed out, finding internet access and mobile phone charging stations in Busia, Kenya. Furthermore, residents and migrants expressed preferences for accessing these everyday goods and services. Cooking oil and paraffin were significantly cheaper in Kenya, even with fluctuating exchange rates. Meanwhile, Kenyan women described how they bought maize in Uganda because it was of higher quality and priced lower at 20 Kenyan shillings (KSh) than what was commercially available to them in Kenya at 45 KSh. Business owners also took advantage of these differentials. Martha, a second-hand clothing seller, remarked that products like thread and sewing machines were only available in Kenya. Judith, a hotelier who catered to foreign tourists and development workers, recounted how she regularly bought cheese in Busia, Kenya because it was only available there. These kinds of exchanges illustrate how Busia depends on large- and small-scale cross-border exchange.

However, as a temporary resident of Busia, Uganda who frequently crossed the border for shopping, interview appointments, and observation sessions, I occupied an ‘in-between’ social location in the eyes of the migration officials with whom I interacted. Although my intended destination was obviously limited to Busia, Kenya, and that over time I became more comfortable interacting with these officials, nevertheless I was a clear *muzungu* and could not claim special exemption like a local.11 Anticipating the need to cross back and forth on a regular basis, I asked informants how I would be able to cross into Kenya without paying multiple visa fees. Geoffrey, a former *boda-boda* driver, told me that common practice was to inform the officials of your business and leave your passport there while in Kenya. There was no need to complete an entry form, since the duration of the visit was less than one day. Then, upon returning to Uganda, you would retrieve your passport from the Kenyan officer on duty (Geoffrey, interview). My research assistant confirmed that it only applied in cases of short trips of a few hours at most.

The prospect of being separated from my travel documents was not reassuring. However, not knowing any differently early in fieldwork, I attempted to cross in this way on a trip to ascertain *matatu* prices in Busia, Kenya.12 First, I visited the Ugandan migration office, explaining the situation and asking for confirmation of how to proceed. After being told to go to the Kenyan migration office, I continued through the no-man’s land and entered the other office. I encountered a similar situation here. The official examined my documents, then declared that he would hold onto them: “if anyone asks you for your passport, say that it is at the Kenyan migration office” (Migration Officer #4, observation data). On future trips across the border, this understanding held even when the officer on duty changed throughout the day.

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11 *Muzungu* is a term that is applied to foreigners.
12 A *matatu* is a converted van used for transporting passengers.
However, when I tried to cross in a similar fashion on 5 August 2010, the date of Kenya’s constitutional referendum, there was a new officer. As I handed him my passport and explained how I was crossing for a brief shopping trip, he handed it back to me. “Where is your form?” he sternly asked.

Researcher: I have crossed before, only for shopping, and didn’t need one then.
Migration Officer #8: That is a local practice, and it is very dangerous. What if you were arrested in Kenya and you had no passport? How would we know where you came from? These are dangerous times. I want you to have an enjoyable stay.

Subsequently, I was required to fill out a blue entry form on each visit, even though the format of the questions did not permit responses that expressed only a few hours for shopping. Even this was not satisfactory on every future incident: another Kenyan officer who had approved several of my ‘informal’ crossings prior to the referendum now attempted to block my passage:

Migration Officer #7: I see you cross here many times! Now, you pay for a visa!
Researcher: But before, I gave my forms and passport and they were stamped.
Migration Officer #7: No, you need a visa to enter.
Researcher: Even though I am only crossing into Busia, Kenya to buy some fruit? I will return in an hour.
Migration Officer #7: (pauses) Fine. Just go. (tosses passport through the window without stamping it)

Residents crossing for trade reasons could also be subjected to forcible seizures and harassment. Martha acknowledged that guards sometimes demanded small payments in order to allow safe passage. A local doctor described how high value goods, like medical supplies legally transported into Uganda from Kenya, could also be taken despite the production of receipts showing their intended use (Muhamed, interview). As they relate to the enactment of border security, these reported experiences demonstrate how officials felt comfortable exercising a degree of flexibility depending on the circumstance and stated reason for travel. The ‘filter’ of official capacity to limit entry could be justified on other grounds like income generation or intimidation, especially in cases where residents already expected to move freely. These practices—much like Nugent’s idea of ‘moments’—were also time- and context-dependent.

**Perceptions of border security and wider fears of insecurity**

For residents, the continued functioning of the border proper as a kind of filter is directly linked to broader patterns of insecurity or criminality that exist in both border towns. Besides the fact that the sheer quantity of people crossing was enormous, and therefore the quality of checks were suspect, there were also questions about the character of individuals associated with border security. Some Kenyan women described how officials “usually ask for some money if you are carrying some goods from Uganda, yet the money we have is very little” (Alice, focus group). Ugandan sex workers also explained how officials “come to the bars to buy us; they use brokers to come and look for us. The **boda-boda** men walk with our photos and show them around” (Christine, focus group). As a result, migration officials were implicated within local social ills.
Meanwhile, other people indirectly connected to the mundane work of crossing also occupied the border space. For instance, the men ‘hanging around’ the stations to offer assistance with forms were viewed suspiciously: it was commonly believed that they were dangerous people who, if not trying to cheat and rob people crossing, were drug users and drunks. Two boda-boda drivers described how they saw the situation:

Bartholomew: You see that man standing by the door [of the Kenyan migration office]? I hold on your bag and stare at him, because he was going to try and steal from you! (Observation data)

George: They will try to cheat you like that drunkard who tried to get in the car with us. You can give them 100 shillings or 100 dollars. They will still drink until they are dead.
Researcher: Who does this?
George: Kenyans, Ugandans, everyone! (Observation data)

James, a Ugandan school teacher, also recalled some problems that students faced as they crossed:

James: The border tries to minimise some of these wrong elements from coming from one country to another, because we have some people who fear to cross that border point.
Researcher: Why would they fear the border?
James: There is bureaucracy at the border point. You have to go to office to office, seeking permission to cross over. Since they [students] have these admissions letters and identity cards, they are not restricted. But there are always these fears, especially for those coming for the first time. They may be harassed at the border. So that one keeps some of them away. Some of them, they steal their money at the border point. There was a student who was just in tears because his money had been stolen as he was struggling to change to Ugandan standard (James, interview).

Migration officials responded by claiming that attempts to monitor such a busy crossing would inevitably be imperfect. Not only do people expect to be able to freely cross, especially if they are residents, but also identifying risky individuals is difficult: “the bad people, those who cause insecurity, are a problem because you cannot know who is carrying a weapon, and people forge travel documents” (Migration Officer #10, interview). They stressed that collaboration with local police ensured that criminals posing threats are stopped. A police officer for Busia Town Council, Uganda cited recent efforts:

Police Officer: We have a joint operation looking for those drug addicts who would hide in that no-man’s land…It is a big stretch where these criminals especially addicts who, when they are planning their criminal activities they go and sit in groups. They smoke; they drink. So we have a joint operation. They [Kenyan police] struck from the other side, and we struck from this side, and we managed to round them up.
Researcher: But if they are in no-man’s land, where do they go afterwards?
Police Officer: In the night, they mix up with the rest of the community members because people are criss-crossing in and out. So at a time when they feel done with their running, they can pretend to be normal with their respective homes of residence.
However, some residents questioned the efficacy and value of collaboration largely because the actual punishment was perceived as being very light. One non-governmental organisation coordinator expressed his frustration:

Gideon: People are smoking in the very open place, in the no-man’s land.
Researcher: And who controls the no-man’s land?
Gideon: Nobody, no one there. Sometimes, but not always, you’ll find that the Kenyan police and the Uganda police, they join hands together and they just corner them and arrest them. But even after arresting them, after a few days, you just see the guys out. Yeah? And they go to prison for only a day, or two weeks, because it seems the law has a light sentence. So you’ll always find them smoking, even if I went with you right now from here.

Clearly, while Busia is not the site of large-scale weapons trading or other high-profile criminal activity, acts of petty bribery, commercial sex, and drug use weigh significantly upon the minds of residents. These are the kinds of criminal behaviour that appeared in the everyday discussions among residents.

Here, it is vital to stress three points. First, the physical location associated with the border crossing—the no-man’s land—is the site of actors engaged in various processes of filtering who gets through to the other side. Whether such a filter ‘works’ in a normative sense is less important than recognising that these officials contribute towards a particular configuration of border security through a flexible application of policy derived from local needs for everyday mobility. Second, these officials coexist with, and are supported by other kinds of people who have their own agendas and are themselves highly mobile. Sometimes, individuals who find themselves in this area take advantage of the ‘mixed up’ qualities in the no-man’s land. Third, this inherent porosity feeds into a strong perception among town residents that the social problems originating and accumulating here jeopardise the wider ‘security of the border’ by allowing threats to pass right under the eyes of officials; one hotel owner exclaimed “criminals just disappear through the border!” (John, interview).

**Tensions between border security and wider safety concerns**

However, the enactment of security policy within the context of a busy border is hardly straight-forward. Practically, there are issues of institutional capacity to strictly maintain a viable ‘filtration’ function. The Ugandan police officer earlier mentioned admitted that “given the inadequacy of provision of security equipments at the border line, you never know if a criminal can beat up security there” (Police Officer, interview). This is multiplied by the existence of many panyo routes around the formal crossing which are impossible to continuously monitor. In a focus group, truckers also complained how officials often demanded extra payment before allowing safe passage; yet, their imperfect presence was still regarded as better than nothing. Bashir, a representative for the truckers’ union in Busia, explained the situation:

Bashir: You see people taking advantage of the ignorance. We have been having people who know it [policy], but they want to take advantage of your ignorance so they can benefit.
Researcher: Who are these people who take advantage?
Bashir: Of course the security men! Because people will want to move freely with their goods, but they will ask for money.
Researcher: If the border were completely open, what do you think would happen?
Bashir: That border, for us, if it were left open there will be insecurity.
Researcher: Meaning what?
Bashir: People will begin illegal trade, trading in drugs, drug trafficking will increase. Stealing property from Kenya and Uganda as it used to be. It has been happening all along. Because this border is very wide. It is not like Malaba [a nearby border town] where there is a river. People take advantage of it.

The ‘wideness’ of the border, in his usage, referred to the unpatrolled and contiguous nature of this land crossing. Such qualities are perceived to permit criminals through the border, as well as into the border towns. More fundamentally, migration officials are expected to identify and prevent threats from entering ‘their’ territory, yet inflexible enforcement is at odds with economic and social imperatives to allow relatively free movement. The embeddedness of everyday mobility in the economic and social life of Busia heightens this tension: “the migration office is both a service and a security operation. The fact is, many people here have family on both sides, or they go buy things from the other side. We cannot stop them from visiting! But, we have to make sure that there is safety” (Migration Officer #9, interview). His colleague also admitted “mobility is a gap, a vulnerability here” (Migration Officer #10, interview). Although residents and officials might aspire for the ‘filter’ to be quite strong in the face of mobility, it is apparent that local economic needs, negotiation of ambiguous spaces, and physical geographic conditions influence what it means to ‘be secure’ here.

Discussion: border places and security ‘moments’
This tension is analytically evident when cast in terms of Agnew’s and Massey’s progressive approaches to place. There are two related locations under analysis: the formal border crossing that includes an area of no-man’s land shared by the two countries, and the space occupied by the towns that is divided by the crossing point. These spaces accumulate a range of objects that manifest social, economic, and especially security processes: large gates guarding access, passport scanning machines, ink stamps, signs indicating ‘migration office’ buildings. Elsewhere in the towns, but also at the crossing, are physical reminders of criminality like drugs and perceived problems like huddled groups of men drinking. These objects and activities generate a range of emotions—mostly fear and suspicion—among border-crossers. By expressing their frustration at the perceived poor performance of migration officers and police forces while calling for freer regimes of movement, residents reinscribed what a ‘good border’ should look like: one where official filtration efficiently deals with the forms of criminality seen in Busia yet does not infringe upon daily movement for economic exchange (Coplan 2010).

Given these observations, there remains a pressing theoretical question: how can these findings be cast in order to show their significance for the enactment of border security? As earlier described, some theorists turn to structuration theory in order to explain how certain security regimes might emerge at borders. However, arguing that this approach effectively conflates the agency of border-crossers with the structures they supposedly constitute, I advance that the concept of place—and its constituent elements of location, material forms,
and intangible feelings or perceptions—more effectively capture the range of borders that exist in Busia. Using place in this way recognises how the border towns and their inhabitants are implicated in wider processes through flows of capital and expressions of (in)security when compared to other places. Furthermore, the notion of a security ‘moment’ more concretely operationalises border-crossers’ agency: during contingent interactions like face-to-face conversations with officers or decisions to cross the border despite knowledge of danger elsewhere, people shape the prevailing ‘practical’ norms that sometimes run counter to ‘official’ security policy or expectations. Furthermore, external events like the Kampala bombings or the Kenyan referendum provide opportunities for people to relax, harden, or otherwise modify their relationships to security structures, each other, and the border itself. This is a restatement of Massey’s concept of power-geometry.

Conclusion

In this paper, I sought to answer three questions. First, how is the notion of ‘security’ reshaped through everyday perceptions and practices? Second, how is the security of the Kenyga-Uganda border embedded within wider concerns for safety and criminal activity held among ordinary residents? Finally, what theoretical or conceptual tools can link observed local security practices with everyday experiences in the borderland? I found that ideas of security were impacted by participation in, and knowledge of security ‘moments’. The imperatives of ensuring safety while facilitating transit for commerce puts tension upon migration officials who are then negatively evaluated by residents.

These views of state security apparatuses as well as observed circumventions of official policy implicate the practice of border security within wider fears about drugs, smuggling, and other crime. The wideness of the border at Busia extends both geographically into the territory of each state and mentally into perceptions held by residents that threats can infiltrate through an unguarded border at Busia. Yet, practical activities like shopping demand mobility as well as expectations of economic advantage in order to precipitate border crossing. Therefore, individual decisions to cross despite potential dangers are embedded within, and constituted by senses of differences among places at the border.

Finally, an answer to the third question lies in recognising how an enduring perception of mobility is informed and sustained by everyday practices. David’s exclamation that ‘we just cross!’ points to the need to be sensitive towards the fact that residents’ own expectations connect them upwards to the state and its security apparatuses, across to different places, and down to the micro-level reality of what it means to ‘go through the border’. It illustrates how a progressive approach to ‘place’ links physical location, material forms, and perceptions or practices in ways that are dynamic and non-essentialised. As Megoran, Rabelland, and Bouyjou assert, “a further purpose of border-crossing policy is to perform and inscribe geopolitical notions of sovereignty, national identity and territoriality. Re-theorised thus, ‘the border’, whilst at the skin of the state literally, rhetorically is at its heart” (2005, 734-735). Therefore, the task that confronts scholars concerned with the study of international boundaries is to demonstrate how processes of bordering are implicated in social change—or, in other words, to ‘place’ borders back at heart of geographic theory.
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