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# Walking with Migrants: Ethnography as Method in IR

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An INTERNATIONAL STUDIES QUARTERLY ONLINE symposium

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Published Online, 13 July 2017

v1.0

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# INTRODUCTION

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The ‘international’ is an abstract – and thus in one sense *fictional* – object of study, as are the other objects of social science disciplines such as ‘the economy’ or ‘society’. As scholars, part of our job is to conjure these abstract objects, and one of the ways in which we do this is through our choice of methods. Different methods therefore do not just give us a menu of choices through which to study a single, given ‘international’ object; instead, they are significant in part because they generate different incarnations of ‘the international’ as an object.

This symposium on Noelle Brigden’s (2016) recent ISQ article explores the generative power of ethnography as method for studying the international, particularly as concerns mobility. Brigden’s article offers a close study of the pathways and lifeworlds of illegal transnational migrants in Mexico. Through this work, the article explores questions of identity across the migratory routes, highlighting their unstable, improvised and makeshift character. It also evokes the ways in which the presence of state and non-state violence conditions the production of identity, sovereignty and borders ‘from below’.

The contributors to our symposium both applaud and press Bridgen on the contributions and possibilities of a more ‘anthropological’ IR. [Stephan Scheel](#)’s response lays out the possibilities for reading the international through migration as a constituent force, and through social camouflage as a specific form of destabilising sovereignty. [Nora el Qadim](#) searches for the author within the ethnographic method, probes the theme of ‘performance’ within Bridgen’s narrative and reminds us of the salience of state power. [Philippe M. Frowd](#)’s contribution peers around the edges of Bridgen’s piece, inviting her to engage with the limits of mobility, camouflage and ethnography itself as means of comprehending the transnational politics of migration. Finally, [Bridgen](#) responds to our contributors, clarifying aspects of the argument and engaging their critiques.

# RE-SIGNIFYING THE SELF, AND THE WALKING DEAD OF TRADITIONAL IR

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By highlighting the growing importance of practices of ‘social camouflage’ in migrants’ tactics of border crossing Noelle Bridgen’s account makes an important contribution to the fields of border, migration and citizenship studies. Since the central impetus of Bridgen’s article is a critique of traditional IR scholarship and its narrow, state-centred focus ‘on top-down and collective challenges to the nation-state’ (344) I focus on two issues of traditional IR scholarship that are raised by Bridgen’s account. These concern how far migrants’ practices of ‘social camouflage’ and ‘passing’ underscore the need (1) to transcend the state-centrism of traditional IR scholarship; and (2) the need to destabilise on a theoretical level what migrants subvert on the level of the everyday: nation-states’ claim to sovereignty.

## **Moving beyond state-centrism: apprehending migration as a constituent force**

One aspect of transit migration through Mexico that is well exposed in Bridgen’s article is that the entire route from Central America to the US is constituted as a ‘borderzone’ (Squire 2011) by migrants as they engage in multiple struggles over mobility and access to various resources on their journey to the North. What Bridgen’s account shows very well is that these struggles are not reducible to a simple two-party conflict between ‘the state’ and clandestine migrants. There are rather a range of other actors involved in these struggles, including transnational kidnapping gangs, migrants’ friends and relatives who support them, police officers on the make, migrant shelters run by NGOs, and Mexican citizens who may themselves be taken for ‘migrants’ and subjected to deportations. Given the complexity of this picture, Bridgen is right to critique traditional IR scholarship for its narrow focus on ‘the state’ and ‘collective challenges to the nation-state’ (344). Yet, the article does not fully exploit the implications of her analysis for the critique of traditional IR scholarship. Due to its narrow focus on the state traditional IR does not simply provide ‘an incomplete view of globalization’ (343-4). It rather provides skewed and incomplete accounts of core themes of the discipline, including interstate relations, the transformation of the modern nation-state and its claim to sovereignty.

In Bridgen’s case alone, we can identify at least three examples that illustrate this point: 1) the ongoing fortification and militarization of the US-Mexican border in response to the persistence of clandestine migration and its impact on the policy agendas of the two countries (Andreas 2009); 2) the changing relationship between the Mexican state and its citizens who ‘may feel suspect in their own country’ (351); and 3) migrants’ ability to undermine, through practices of social camouflage, the state’s capacity to distinguish between national citizens and migrant others on the basis of national stereotypes and racial profiling. What all these examples illustrate is the need to take seriously migration as a ‘constituent force’ (Andrijasevic 2010: 162) that actively shapes the production and transformation of social and political space, including border and citizenship regimes and interstate relations. Hence I would like to invite the author to reflect further on the significance of an ‘anthropological lens’ on practices of clandestine migration as a means of critiquing state-centric IR scholarship.

Two lines of thought might provide useful starting points here. The first is provided by the *autonomy of migration* literature which could provide an efficient antidote to the state-centred focus of traditional IR as it prioritises migrants' viewpoint in the investigation of border regimes and migratory processes (Mezzadra 2011; Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Scheel 2013). The second line of thought is provided by the emerging field of *International Political Sociology* (IPS). This promotes a research practice that apprehends practices as transversal relations that cut across, traverse and connect different spatial scales, including the local, the national, the international and the global (Basaran et al. 2017). This twofold move – to prioritise migrants' practices and to understand their practices as transversal and relational – would provide a viable conceptual framework to abandon the state-centrism of traditional IR in order to conceive of clandestine migrants as political actors whose politics reside precisely in connecting and complicating the scales of the local, the national, and the international.

### **Revisiting an anachronism that refuses to die**

A second major point conveyed by Bridgen's article is the growing importance of practices of identification in states' attempts to regulate mobility and control access to their territories. Indeed, states' move towards 'governing by identity' (Amoore 2008) through various devices of identification such as passports or ID cards is reflected in migrants' increasing resort to 'fake documentation' (346, cf. Vasta 2011; on this point see also the comment of Philippe Frowd). However, as Bridgen rightly notes, having the 'right' papers is not enough. Migrants also have to perform the scripts of the identities that these papers are meant to certify. The crucial point is that the use of stolen, manipulated or falsified identity papers is provoked by ever more restrictive border regimes. Additionally, the kinds of identity scripts migrants try to perform in order to cross international borders and avoid deportation is shaped by formal requirements and informal decision-making criteria of immigration officials. This entanglement of migratory practices and border regimes defies any simplistic structure-agency-divides or a simple juxtaposition of migrants' capacity to act with regimes of control in terms of a heroic, antagonistic 'resistance' (cf. Scheel 2017, forthcoming).

What Bridgen's account, as well as my own research on the appropriation of mobility to Europe via visa (Scheel 2017; 2018, forthcoming) indicate, is that the move towards governing human mobility by identity provokes, and is confronted with, a *politics of self-resignification* by which migrants frustrate states' attempts to render mobile populations legible and 'migration manageable'. Just as migrants' practices of social camouflage deprive the national stereotypes of their certainty as reliable criteria that allow border guards to discriminate between citizens and migrant 'others', visa applicants hollow-out the decision-making criteria of consular staff when they perform the alleged identities of *bona fide* travellers. In this way migrants call into question one of the few remaining tokens by which nation-states seek to attribute credibility to their alleged sovereignty – the claim to control access to their territory.

In my view, migrants' practices of social camouflage and appropriation thus create the challenge to destabilise on a theoretical level what migrants efficiently subvert on a practical level: nation-states' claim to sovereignty. Hence, while I fully agree with Bridgen's assessment that migration does indeed challenge sovereignty' (352), I would like to encourage her, in line with Nora El-Qadim's and Philippe Frowd's interventions, to consider the implications this might have for the theorization of one of the core concepts of IR theory. To my mind, this would allow her to highlight, once more, the benefits of ethnographic research for dismantling the parameters of traditional IR scholarship.

One of these parameters is the assumption of sovereignty as the defining feature of the modern nation-state. If sovereignty is, however, understood as comprising both the formal authority of rule-making *and* the empirical capacity to enforce these rules (Thomson 1995) then migrants' practices of passing and appropriation expose a significant gap between these two dimensions, a gap that calls for a conceptual destabilisation of one of the foundational notions of traditional IR theory. Hence, instead of assuming sovereign nation-states as the unquestionable playground of 'international relations' and their theorization, migrants' proven capacity to subvert border controls invites a conception of a sovereignty that builds on Judith Butler's notion of the performative (Butler 1993). From this perspective sovereignty emerges first and foremost as a claim, and nation-state borders as stages where states try to substantiate this claim through performances that reveal this claim, more often than not, as a 'political delusion' that, while mostly falling short of its promise, expresses a practical will with very real effects (Cocks 2014; Weber 1998). Such a theorization of sovereignty might contribute, just like migrants' practices of appropriation and passing, to eventually lay to rest 'this anachronism that refuses to die' (Butler 2004: 54).

# CAN IR BE ANTHROPOLOGICAL?

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There has been an increasing interest in ethnographic methods in IR. In parallel, anthropologists have taken interest in international phenomena, especially migrations and borders. In this context, Noelle Bridgen's article presents an argument in favour of 'the continued inclusion of ethnography as a method for exploring the dynamic relationship between territory, state and nation' (343), and that the interplay between migrants and states can be best understood "at the analytical and methodological borders of International Relations and anthropology" (344). She puts this in practice by "taking an ethnographic journey" along the routes of transnational migration in Mexico. She examines the ways in which migrants and nationals improvise and recompose their identities in their attempts to cross the border or to improve their economic situations. She argues that these performances and counter-performances subvert the "territorial and symbolic sovereignty of the nation-state" (353).

Noelle Bridgen's article provides an opportunity for considering the benefits of interdisciplinary research and the different ways in which it can be pursued. Indeed, IR has engaged with 'ethnographic methods', although this expression is in fact used to describe a variety of approaches ([Vrasti 2008](#)): their common denominator is an emphasis on fieldwork, usually through participant observation or interviews. Yet there is rarely much time to reflect on what it means for IR scholars to use these methods. What can an interdisciplinary approach, between anthropology and IR bring to this discussion? Migration and borders are particularly useful topics to reflect on this, since the emergence of dedicated fields of 'migration studies' or 'border studies' have brought together scholars from different disciplines. I would like to engage with Bridgen's article by focusing on the articulation of anthropology, IR and the study of migrations and borders.

## **IR and reflexivity**

Reflexivity is central to anthropology, but far from central in IR, despite the rise of discussions on this topic (Jackson 2010, Amoureux and Steele 2015), including explorations of autobiographical and/or narrative IR ([Inayatullah 2011](#), [Dauphinee 2013](#)). In this case, interdisciplinary work raises this question: should the use of the methods of anthropology bring IR to more reflexivity? Can this be a topic for dialogue between IR scholars and anthropologists? Bridgen's article offers an opportunity for exploring this dialogue in practice.

Bridgen explores a transnational phenomenon with IR as a starting point but using the tools of anthropology, ethnographic methods. In this way, she follows the footsteps of others before her, referring to – without entering – a debate on the uses of ethnographic methodology in political science (footnote 6, 345). It would be interesting to discuss her endeavour from the vantage point of anthropologists who have worked on transnational issues, especially since they have taken a keen interest in migrations and borders. For example, Ruben Andersson in his work on what he calls the 'illegality industry' ([2014](#)), also looks at the interactions between migrants and the system that produces illegality. One important aspect of his work is the space he gives to analyzing his own place in this system,

as a researcher “eating from” migrants (35). One could ask Bridgen, similarly, to clarify her position in the system she presents. Although she presents the different mode and sites of her ethnographic work (345) and of the “more humble, speculative position” that emerges from engaging with “everyday people” (344), one would expect from an attempt to use anthropology in an interdisciplinary endeavour to put reflexivity more clearly at the heart of this exploration. For example, what is her own identity, how is it perceived, and in what way does it interact with that of migrants she interrogates? Does she also in a way engage in performing an identity in these encounters? What is her role as a narrator in her writing and analyzing this? And what would this tell us about the performances she observes?

### **Performance and spectacle in migration and border studies – and IR?**

Rituals, performances and the theatre are important topics in anthropology, as well as in other disciplines such as psychology or sociology. Here, Bridgen convincingly uses a theatrical metaphor to show both migrants and Mexican nationals play along the lines of national, racial, class and urban/rural scripts and thus complicate territorial control, although the state tentatively reasserts its authority in attempts to categorize the dead. An important contribution of her article is the parallel analysis of the performances of both migrants and citizens: she shows how the passage of migrants and the proximity of the border lead Mexican nationals to also play on their identities, as a method of infiltration in relation to criminal predators who seek to assault, kidnap or extort Central American migrants, or as a way to camouflage, or sometimes unintentionally.

Bridgen describes how migrants ‘perform’ different ‘scripts’ and she uses a theatrical metaphor all along her articles, with different sections entitled and numbered as ‘acts’. She also mentions the “political theatre of borders” (344). However the term ‘performance’ is not itself defined. Goffman is cited to define interactions and the way they are ‘staged’ (344). Similarly, Butler is only referred to in a footnote on laughter (343), though the idea of a ‘subversion’ (in this case not only of identity but also of sovereignty) seems to reference her work on gender. Or does the theatrical metaphor elaborate on the idea of “border spectacle”, proposed by anthropologist and geographer Nicholas de Genova ([2002](#), [2013](#)) to examine the production of ‘illegality’ by border policing and the ways in which it enacts scenes of ‘exclusion’? The relation of these references to the use of the term performance is not clarified, but has important consequences for the implications of the term, especially for the purpose and contents of the performance: is the performed identity based on some substance, or is it a pure social construction? And who performs for whom? In Bridgen’s text, it is not always clear *who* performs or can perform: most of the article focuses on migrants, yet “their drama changes the theatre of the state” (352) and “States use migrants’ deaths as a stage to project their authority” (351). Can the state also ‘perform’? Or is performance the preserve of individuals? Finally, who is the audience of these performances? It seems from the text that one problem for migrants is precisely the diversity of potential audiences, however the metaphor is not explored in this respect. How does Bridgen envisage this? What is the status of ‘performance’ in this article and how can this concept benefit IR?



## The 'everyday folk', the subaltern and power

This leads us to a final set of questions about the place of 'everyday folk' in this interdisciplinary endeavour. Indeed, while the ethnographic method has been used in IR before to look at 'everyday people', most notably by feminist research, it is also most often used to look at agents of states and international organizations, diplomats and bureaucrats. How can interdisciplinary work be helpful to look at 'everyday folk', and what does this bring to our understanding of IR?

Bridgen first states that she wants to bring the masses back into world politics by walking in their shoes, yet she also refuses the misplaced celebration of their performances as "purposive resistance to the state", when in fact they are required by the unfolding of a "human tragedy" (344). While this concern is an important one, Bridgen's precaution somehow leads her to eschew the issue of power relations and to understate what her study might bring to the study of the agency of the subaltern. Yet this question has led anthropology to a dialogue with political science. James Scott's 1985 book *Weapons of the Weak*, for example, which I have found useful for my own work (2014, 2015), while underlining the agency of peasants in Malaysia, understates neither the constraints that frame their lives and action, nor the difficulty of these lives. It is interesting to note that Scott's work was later directed to geographical zones that directly question the sovereignty of states - Zomias (Scott 2009). What is Bridgen's approach to state power and citizens' agency? State power appears in the article mostly through 'sovereignty', but I believe that Bridgen's work, as well as IR, would benefit from a more direct engagement with the issue of power as framed by anthropologists.

To sum up, while Bridgen states that a focus on the practice of transnational migration is "in itself a political act" (345), I would ask her in what ways it might also truly be an 'anthropological act'.

# THE UNDERBELLY OF TRANSNATIONALISM

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Philippe M. Frowd  
University of York

One of the most striking elements of Noelle Brigden's [article in the pages of ISQ](#) is just how much it foregrounds the voices of her interlocutors. Her ethnographic sensibility is itself a challenge to many conventions of empirical research in International Relations, and at the same time extends some lines of critique around the discipline's visions of mobility and migration. In my view, her article raises four conceptual and political points of interest: how we link mobility and immobility, what role identity plays in border/migration studies, the value-addition of ethnographic approaches, and the utility of transnationalism to study the politics of border control.

## **Mobility and immobility**

Brigden's article has a welcome enthusiasm for transnationalism and mobility. We should also be conscious of its opposite situation — *im*-mobility — and how people can challenge state sovereignty in important ways within it. Indeed, many of the challenges to sovereignty that Brigden is keen to highlight happen in ways that are not reliant on the forms of motion we typically associate with unauthorized migration. Writing in 2003, Peter Nyers warns us of what we lose as we focus on “the hype about the hybrid identities generated through border transgressions” (Nyers 2003: 1070). His [work on the 'abject cosmopolitanism'](#) of Algerians without status in Montreal, organized through the *Comité d'action des sans-statut*, demonstrates specifically how communities can still challenge the sovereign state without legal status and without transgressions of the territorial border. The Algerians 'stuck' between a Canadian state who wouldn't give them refugee status on one hand, and an Algerian state deemed too risky for Canada to deport to, exemplified the role *immobility* must play in the study of clandestine transnationalism. Brigden is careful not to romanticize mobility, but the questions she raises about immobility are crucial at a time in which people on the move must be 'transnational' in place, whether that is in southern Libya, on a Greek island, or in a camp in Turkey.

## **'Passing' and the question of identity**

The article's consideration of 'passing' is illustrated with fascinating empirical twists, but also challenges some of the ways we speak about the links of borders and identity in IR. The “similar phenotype” (347) that binds together Peruvians and Guatemalans is not only a means of evading control but also an economic strategy for smugglers to make savings. It is difficult not to extend this line of thinking about race and value to the Mediterranean smuggling economy, in which black Africans and Syrians are [assigned to safer or more dangerous decks of smugglers' ships](#) depending on their ability to pay. With [recent reports](#) consistently showing African migrants subjected to abuse and a racialized slave trade in Libya, it is clear that not all have the option to so playfully 'pass' through new accents, clothing, or styles. Brigden's emphasis on the fluidity of 'passing' does provide a welcome

contrast to much of the ways that identification at borders figures in work on mobility (see [Ajana 2013](#), [Broeders and Hampshire 2013](#), and many more). While this literature is sensitive to the fluidity of identity — it derives much of its critical energy from showing the mismatch with identification — it nevertheless tends to focus on the (mal)functioning of *digital* systems that seeking to impose stable, permanent ID. Bridgen's piece expands our vision of identity and border filtering in some helpful ways.

### **Political ethnography and the role of objectivity**

I particularly enjoyed Bridgen's effort to bring a clear ethnographic sensibility to the audience of one of International Relations' flagship journals. While IR is now home to many sub-fields in which political anthropology methods are in vogue — for better and for worse — researchers using these must often repeatedly prove their bona fides as 'real social scientists' in various contexts. Ethnographic methods are particularly suited to the study of migration 'from below' (see [Hellman 2008](#) and [Andersson 2014](#)), and as Stephan argues it is also an important way of showing the gap between juridical sovereignty and sovereign power. Yet this approach's analytical payoffs also raise certain challenges. Studying migration 'from below' means jettisoning the comforts of hierarchical scales and neat categorizations. Who is a smuggler? Who is a migrant? How reliable is the person who asks "that's good for your book, no?" (351) and how does one corroborate his story? This is something the subjects of Bridgen's study themselves often cannot find out — as we find out more at the micro level, we realize how little we really know.

### **The transnationalism of control?**

If we study migration from below, as Bridgen does, should we also study its management in this way? I think so. Using [Vicki Squire's distinction](#) (2011) between a 'politics of migration' interacting with a 'politics of control', we should ask how the people in this latter category of practice transform and even challenge sovereignty themselves. Interestingly, Bridgen's article sits alongside Deborah Avant's [piece on networks of security governance](#) in the subsection of ISQ 60(2) dedicated to 'transnational processes', and the conclusion to her piece briefly tackles the extension of policing inside and beyond national space. Yet as Nora's contribution argues, Bridgen is not as incisive as she could be on the multiple channels the state operates through. [My own fieldwork](#) in West Africa continually brings me in contact with the 'improvised transnationalism' represented by the thickening web of security intervention around borders. We see it in the ways Euro-African police cooperation straddles continents, awkwardly shifting global expertise into local contexts. Strikingly, international interveners in the region often liken themselves to their 'local' partners when they find themselves journeying cap in hand back to their own Western capitals and headquarters. These practices of security and control seek to reinforce state sovereignty, to be sure, but their modes of operation defy neat categorizations of global/local and inside/outside. Thinking and researching migration *and* its control from the 'bottom up' is crucial to understanding the ways both these forms of transnationalism reinforce and challenge sovereignty.

# ON METAPHORS, METHODS AND MOTION: A RESPONSE

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Noelle K. Brigden  
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My article used ethnographic methods to explore how migrants improvise and ‘pass’ to evade border policing, thereby complicating fixed identities and the enforcement of a territorially bounded nation. In making this argument, I hope to demonstrate the utility of ethnography for understanding globalization and the study of IR. Taken together, the extraordinarily thoughtful responses from Phillip M. Frowd, Nora El-Qadim, and Stephen Scheel ask for clarification of two metaphors that help structure my argument: the metaphor of *performance* and the metaphor of *flows*. Elaboration of these ideas invites scholars to pay greater attention to the role of the state and to more carefully consider the inverse of mobility: i.e. immobility. Thus, the commentators lead us closer to an ethnographic reconceptualization of sovereignty.

## **Performing Migration, Performing Sovereignty**

In my article, I apply a theatrical metaphor to discuss how undocumented migrants ‘perform’ a variety of identities, including Mexican nationality, to navigate across a fluid and dangerous social terrain. The potential for these ‘acts’ destabilizes identity as a reliable cultural tell, thereby complicating the capacity of the state to police movement. This work joins a burgeoning ethnographic literature that examines migrant agency to challenge mainstream concepts of sovereignty, security and citizenship in the study of international relations (cf. Innes 2014; Innes 2015; Nyers and Rygiel 2012; Mainwaring 2016).

In response, all three commentators redirect our gaze to the performances of the state. Nora El-Qadim asks whether states also ‘perform’ and she asks us to think carefully about the audiences for such performances. Inspired by the fluidity of identity signaled by migrants’ passing, Stephen Scheel builds on Judith Butler’s (1993) discussion of the performative to conceptually subvert the notion of state sovereignty. Philippe M. Frowd notes the importance of ‘improvised transnationalism’ in the extension and deepening of border security. Recent scholarship that builds on feminist approaches to security to highlight the performative, contested and improvised nature of borders provides a strong basis for this analytical move (cf. Hiemstra 2014; Mainwaring 2016; Mainwaring and Silverman 2017; Mountz 2010; Mountz 2013; Mountz and Lloyd 2014; Salter 2008; Squire 2011).

To urge readers in this direction, the final ‘act’ of my article acknowledges the role of states in this political theater of borders. In his critique, Scheel is correct that research on the performativity of everyday state practice potentially unsettles sovereignty by spotlighting the ongoing nature of state making. However, to conduct this research, ethnographers must trespass difficult logistical boundaries, gaining access to the state as a fieldsite, which is one explanation of why ethnography has made small inroads into IR (Lie 2013). In the sort of nights that keep researchers awake, puzzling over the politics of their own role in the theater of borders, I have often felt wary about the relative ease with which I could interview a vulnerable, clandestine population, migrants whose very survival depends on being

undocumented and illegible to the state. It is much more difficult to witness the inner workings of the state itself; the entry points to the state are more closely guarded than the entry points to the underground. Power and politics makes such access and the task of 'ethnography of the state' inherently difficult, but ever more important (Mountz 2007; 2010).

### **Migration Flows, Stuck Spaces**

I use a metaphor of flows to discuss globalization. By importing anthropological methods developed as ethnography of flows (Nordstrom 2007) and 'ethnography en route' (Coutin 2005), my argument emphasizes human and cultural movement within a transnational corridor and the contradictions inherent in state efforts to restrict such movement. In so doing, I attempt to trouble the imagined boundaries between settlement/transit and citizen/foreigner. Unfortunately, the imagery summoned by the metaphor of flow may obscure immobility.

In response, Frowd correctly reminds us that we must be attentive to immobility. Elsewhere, I have challenged the binary of im/mobility to call attention to the complexity of migrant agency under conditions of border control (Brigden and Mainwaring 2016). In this vein, Amelia Frank-Vitale (2017) argues that we might better conceptualize what in my article I call 'transnational homelessness' as a permanent state of forced mobility, rather than immobility, because the state compels migrants to move indefinitely within transnational circuits, denying them the right to stay safely in their intended destinations.

Indeed, a man who had voluntarily returned to El Salvador from the United States leaving most of his family in the adopted homeland, echoed a common sentiment among the people left behind: "To be a migrant is to be exploited...migrants are migrants, whether they move or not." With these words, he expressed both a profound sense of alienation in his country of origin and a resignation to his family's transnational destiny. The experience of undocumented migration and international displacement is neither a rupture nor a transition from citizen to outsider. Instead, Salvadoran migrants' lived experience of illegality simply perpetuates the lack of membership in their homeland; even the people who never leave home are, in an important sense, transients trapped in their own polity. Binary notions of mobility and immobility, settlement and transit, citizen and outsider, fail to capture this reality or its implications for state sovereignty.

By disentangling multiple crosscutting im/mobilities within 'stuck spaces', we may also find ways to address El-Qadim's concern that my initial article did not achieve a deeper understanding of subalternity. The interplay between im/mobilities may help us make sense of the power and agency that structures conditions of subalternity.

However, to conduct this research, ethnographers must trespass difficult logistical boundaries, gaining access to 'stuck spaces' as fieldsites. Violence structures immobility, whether in communities of origin where people become trapped by violence and poverty or in state-run detention and prison facilities in countries of transit or destination. Based on my own fieldwork experiences, the ethics and logistics of listening to people experiencing 'stuck spaces' can sometimes be more challenging than listening to people moving through clandestine corridors. For example, in my first project, it was relatively easy to initiate interviews about violence and state borders along the smuggling route, despite the fact that migrants inhabit the precarious position of undocumented outsiders. In contrast, in my new project, I have found it more difficult to gain access and approach interviews about violence

and the gang borders that segregate home communities in places where potential interview participants can afford (in paper) the protections of citizens. Transnational mobility, and its accompanying possibilities for anonymity and distance, produces unexpected opportunity for voice, even for a vulnerable population of migrants. Immobility, which by definition denies such possibilities, implies unique ethical and safety challenges for ethnographers and their research participants. Thus, power and politics make ‘ethnography of stuck spaces’ inherently difficult, but ever more important.

### **Ethnography Moving Forward: Into State and Stuck Spaces**

In summary, I would like to re-issue the commentators’ call for ethnography of the state and ethnography of immobility. Such research has the potential to transcend conventional dichotomies that organize the conceptual map in the social sciences: immobility/mobility, state/society, local/global, domestic/international, material/ideational, change/stability, public/private, political/criminal, legal/illegal. These binaries both reify and conceal the transformative effects of social improvisation on sovereignty. Ethnography, in particular, can move this analytical journey forward, by helping us recognize the agency and influence of everyday people in global politics. In this way, the research agenda emerging from the commentary presented here is eclectic, empirically grounded, transnational scholarship that challenges us to think critically about citizenship and the transformation of the nation-state under conditions of both globalization and fragmentation.

Ethnographic scholarship requires us to tackle difficult ethical challenges and logistical boundaries. El-Qadim insightfully asks how I perform my own identities during fieldwork and writing. I agree with the need for such careful reflexivity in ethnographic scholarship, and I have discussed my positionality during this fieldwork elsewhere (cf. Brigden 2017). Following her suggestion that we must consider ethnographic work in IR as both a political act and an anthropological act, it is worth considering the ethics and practicalities of the research performances and relationships necessary to access the state and stuck spaces: what do the limits to access and the fieldwork performances such limits require from researchers signal about the politics of state and stuck spaces, and about the politics of sovereignty and globalization more generally? Reflection on the boundaries that researchers trespass and reinforce, whether wittingly or unwittingly, in their everyday fieldwork engagement can also provide insights that help us understand the ongoing construction of the nation-state and its limits.

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