



# Beyond presentism in border externalization studies: Upcycled spatio-cultural geographies of imperial times<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This Special Issue Introduction signals how post, decolonial and historical gazes enhance studies of border externalization efforts by European Union (EU) institutions and Member States in African countries. Research has only begun to acknowledge how economic, political and social geographies of extraterritorial migration management stretch back in time connecting to longer histories of empire. Predominantly, externalization studies have remained thoroughly embedded in a Eurocentric post-Cold War time frame where externalization was conceptualized as the spatial outgrowth of the European Union yielding a de-historicized spatiality, epistemology and narratives. This SI highlights the “methodological presentism” hitherto at work in border externalization research, and poses ways of challenging the associated epistemological boundaries. This introduction, and the themed articles therein, de-centre dominant spatio-temporal assumptions in border externalization research by applying a historical gaze on border practices through postcolonial and decolonial theory. We argue that future research on externalisation, and on the role of borders more broadly, would benefit from this approach, situating what seems an innovative spatial and political practice in a longer, and more instructive, timeframe.

## 1. Intro

This Special Issue (SI) seeks to advance the study of border externalization by reckoning with the underexplored connections between these policies and longer colonial-imperial histories. The SI's focus on connecting research of North, West African and European externalization to developments spanning deeper temporal scales is a key theme addressed by all contributions, and paves the way for important comparisons in the SI as a whole. This undertaking deepens and facilitates recent attempts in migration studies to decentre and re-historicize dominant Eurocentric epistemologies and ontologies used to understand migration and border control, since these are evolved through the foundations of still unfolding colonial encounters. However, as a specific political and material process imbued with certain regimes of knowledge, externalization, its linkages to colonial imperialism, and the current-day implications for mobilities and wider societal dynamics deserves specific attention. To this end, this SI brings together a series of original contributions, which furthers this research agenda across

countries, regions and continents, but with a focus on Euro-West African relations.

The urgency of border externalization policies and the human rights abuses they can engender, have generated a vast literature on the spatial transformations afoot. What the literature has not been able to answer sufficiently, is to what extent border externalization is a continuity with the past (and with which pasts) or in what ways it signifies ruptures. To challenge the methodological presentism in much externalization literature we suggest taking a historical approach inflected through post-colonial and decolonial theory. The contributions herein examine how externalization activates and re-produces racial tropes in EU-Moroccan borderlands (Gross-Wyrtzen and El Yacoubi); how it is conditioned by pre-existing social and spatial histories in the Mauritanian-Senegalese border (Ould Moctar); how externalization can re-activate forms of indirect rule in the Gambia (Gaibazzi); how it reinvigorates a civilizing mission in Niger (Jegen); how it can be challenged through anti-deportation activism in Germany (Korvensyrjä); and ultimately how a historical post and decolonial approach toward externalization can

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point to possible futures (Kramsch).

In academic research from the early 2000s, and concurrent with a significant geographic expansion in European states' border control practices, scholars increasingly focused on European practices of "remote control", "extraterritorial" or "externalized" borders (Guiraudon and Lahav, 2000; Boswell, 2003; Lavenex and Ucarer, 2004; Balzacq, 2009). These practices and policies we gather under the notion of "border externalization", we here work from a general definition of these as processes whereby nation-states, bilateral or supranational actors complement migration control policies across territorial borders with initiatives realizing such control beyond a single national territory. This may include the transfer of detention, deportation or patrolling practices outside states' territory and through inter-regional mobility governance (Bialasiewicz, 2012; Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Gabrielli, 2017; Moreno-Lax and Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019), but also repatriation practices by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), case processing for refugees in camps operated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Brachet, 2016) in addition to development programs, dissuasion campaigns and more (Vammen et al., 2021). Important work has focused on such themes as the expansion of European control in geographies such as Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, Niger or Turkey (El Qadim, 2017; Üstübcü and ad Icdugy, 2018; Cuttitta, 2020); the heavy-handed Australian outsourcing of detention centres to Papua New Guinea or Nauru (Hyndman and Mountz, 2008); or the export of US control measures to countries like Mexico, Guatemala and other Central and South American geographies (Alvarez-Velasco, 2024; Menjivar, 2014).

Accordingly, border externalization has become an established literature developing a rich spatial vocabulary to interpret transformations in borders (Fitzgerald, 2020; Cobarrubias et al., 2023) and how borders and the work they do have been an integral part of global flows and processes, rather than antithetical to them (Van Houtum et al., 2005). As the literature has matured, self-critique has emerged that there is a need to rethink *presentist* and *Eurocentric* perspectives underscoring much externalization literature, acknowledging how such tactics have also been put to use in American, Asian and African contexts, including South-South relations (İşleyen and El Qadim, 2023; Zardo and Wolff, 2022; Lemberg-Pedersen et al., 2024). In line with those critiques, this SI suggests that postcolonial and decolonial historical approaches represent one possible remedy. To be sure, the pervasive political, humanitarian and socio-geographic consequences of accelerating border externalization policies do provide strong grounds for sustained and in-depth critical research of policy-developments in the here-and-now. As Gross-Wyrtzen and El Yacoubi note in their contribution, the extent to which European governments, political economic architectures and geopolitical interests underpin externalization agendas and policies, also means that the study of these should center partly on analyzing European dynamics. It is more problematic though if externalization research remains embedded in a Post-Cold War and Eurocentric frame. When this happens, the result is a de-historicized spatiality often premised on the idea of EU institutions or Member States as the principal and privileged first-mover of sociopolitical developments. Thus, in earlier research, externalization was often conceptualized as the spatial outgrowth of a Schengenian border imaginary. Distancing itself from such assumptions, this SI instead highlights how "methodological presentism" continues to do crucial work within the policy-making underpinning border externalization, but also within the strands of research devoted to examine such processes (see also Kramsch, herein).

While its contributions differ in approaches, objects, temporalities and geographies, this SI collectively talks about postcolonial and decolonial approaches as comprising one fruitful direction for the study of border externalization. This is because they offer a host of tools to counter long dominating assumptions based on a Westernised and Westphalian monocular gaze (Ó Tuathail, 1996). Certainly, long stretches of the colonial era predate that of the Westphalian notion of sovereignty, but it is also true that the latter evolved to be superimposed

in later stages of the high colonial period. At the level of externalization policy and practice, this gaze is reproduced in such images as Frontex cartographies, which depict human movement solely from a Eurocentric vision of masses of people from the Global South headed for European territory (Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy, 2012). The same applies in EU institutions using water and militarized metaphors to discursively depict people displaced as waves, tsunamis or even weapons headed in Europe's direction. This representation transforms extraterritorial border control into a "whole-of-route"-approach that is increasingly coupled with exceptionalist counter-measures justified through discourses of "hybrid attacks" and weaponization of migrants (European Commission, 2023).

The contributions of this SI point out that these discourses suffer from serious flaws. First, the resulting analyses are of limited use for understanding the complexity of intra-state and regional contexts and dynamics which stretch far beyond the immediacy of spectacular here-and-now crises of sovereignty and humanitarianism. Secondly, and more fundamentally, it reproduces ontological assumptions and figures of migration, based on long-standing racial hierarchies whereby the migrant by his/her/their very existence and choice to move represents destabilization, chaos and violence against the Western, postcolonial and nationalized order of things (Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias and Pickles, 2015; Scheel and Squire, 2014; Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019). In original ways, the SI contributions herein push debates about externalization forward by challenging and decentring the epistemological assumptions associated with this Schengenian gaze and its embedded border imaginary. This SI therefore represents an attempt to carve out a fruitful direction of research on border externalization through post and decolonial, historicized and localized analytical approaches to such policies.

To develop the post and decolonial historical gazes we are proposing, this Special Issue Introduction proceeds as follows: We first provide reasons as to the importance of this approach in studying border externalization and what specifically this SI contributes to that effort. The next section situates this SI in the broader development of relevant literature. We introduce calls for historical and postcolonial approaches in Migration Studies more generally, and briefly introduce some of the existing work that attempt to address the specificity of externalization in a historical, post- or decolonial fashion. We then present several theoretical approaches useful for embarking on this endeavor. Next, the article signposts four cross-cutting themes that run through the contributions to this SI. These themes are: border externalization as 'not-new'; developing a non-eurocentric postcolonial gaze; intersections with racialisation; and understanding externalization beyond migration control. We conclude with some final words on what post and decolonial *longue durée* approaches toward externalization might contribute to understanding the stakes of migration politics today.

## 2. The importance of thinking the post- and decolonial in border externalization

Post and decolonial lenses offer a productive path to engage with border externalization further developing a necessary interrogation of Europe's colonial amnesia in ways applicable to the field of migration studies (cf. Gandhi, 1998). We here talk of approaches spanning both the "post" and "de"-colonial not because we seek to collapse them, since they have distinct and important starting points and trajectories from Asia, Africa and Latin America, but because our contributors use aspects from both, and also because our own thinking is indebted to both approaches (cf. Lemberg-Pedersen et al., 2022). While the two approaches' contributions have differed and even engaged in debates regarding their respective objects, temporalities and geographies, we find that a commonality between them is their challenging of the continuing dominance of Eurocentric and colonial trajectories in epistemology and systems of power. As such, they may also be viewed as constituting a combined critical potential across methods and theories that allow for the interrogation of a range of geographies, systems of knowledge and

political economies, including those of border externalization. A way to advance this understanding is through Laura Ann Stoler's (2011) concept of *colonial aphasia*, which denotes the occlusion of knowledge about colonial encounters to such an extent that it becomes an obstacle for the creation of a sufficient vocabulary about certain situations. This results, she explains, in an inability to comprehend, integrate and even speak of colonial contexts, which are otherwise crucial for understanding contemporary debates, policy issues and inquiries. Countering such aphasia, and departing from pure historiographical research, this SI is premised on the stance that a sense of connection with the past, broadly understood, is central to the ambition of postcolonial inquiry, and that through such connectivity, pasts can be used to problematize the present and its possible futures (cf. Mayblin and Turner, 2021; Lemberg-Pedersen, et al., 2022: 10; Lemberg-Pedersen et al., 2024). Establishing continuity, trajectories or critical junctures thus concern demonstrating "the contemporary force of imperial remains" (Stoler, 2008: 196). This point is salient when applied to the context of border externalization, and our argument is that post and decolonial lenses provide important insights of urgent relevance for this rapidly evolving policy field of migration control.

We also argue that post and decolonial approaches towards border externalization can address and engage with several critiques against externalization policies, as well as the risks faced when researchers make use of the category of externalization. This includes, first, the point that analyses derived from the externalization concept are in need of being *decentred from Eurocentric* as well as *state-centric* perspectives (El Qadim, 2014). This connects with a second critique revolving around assumptions of the *unidirectionality of policy transfers* from the EU and outwards, which are often embedded within the border externalization concept (cf. Triandafyllidou, 2022). These assumptions fail to take into account that the policy venues of externalization, like colonial and imperial policies, involve multiple actors and issues, and therefore rather function as multilayered "portals" of policy transfers, where interests and policies simultaneously run in multiple directions, through multiple actors (Cobarrubias et al., 2023). A third point concerns the risk that border externalization facilitates *decontextualized analyses* and *superimposed policies* upon local histories and dynamics. This point is akin to a critique developed by the wider "postcolonial turn" in migration studies, where scholars warn against dehistoricized conceptualization of complex local crises through concepts such as "forced migration" or "displacement." For instance, Aurora Vergara-Figueroa's (2018) has analyzed how, in a Colombian context, the international migration language of "forced displacement" and "forced migration" have served as a form of epistemological erasure of local causes and dynamics behind reiterative episodes of dispossession and displacement of a particular and stigmatized Afro-descendant community. Fourth, the *concepts presentism* also obfuscates on several levels. It's use as a description of attempts to implement migration control "upstream" in a number of former colonial territories abstracts these spaces from European involvement in such brutal recent histories as violent racialisation, settler colonialism, genocide, as well as dispossession, enslavement and commodification. This risk of epistemological erasure through abstract conceptualization is in line with the point made by Peo Hansen and Jonsson (2017) that the EU since its inception, has cultivated a self-image as a democratic and decolonizing alternative to the empires of old Europe. The paradoxical consequence of this self-representation, however, is that EU institutions have typically sidestepped Member States' colonial relations and continued influence in neighboring regions altogether. In terms of colonial aphasia, the Union appears therefore unable to comprehend the language and epistemology of post- and decolonial critique, preferring instead to view colonialism as a page turned on history. We would argue though, that colonial archives across the globe offer multiple precedents of the logic and political imagination which is today subsumed under the BE bracket.

The contributions to this SI critically engage with the border externalization concept. They situate themselves within the ambition to

identify and counter reductive assumptions, but approach it from different angles. A cross-cutting finding in all of the contributions, however, is that European or EU externalization policies can be seen as re-enacting colonial logics, epistemologies and asymmetrical power-relations between European countries and African postcolonies. Mindful of localized contexts, each contribution identifies specific forms of ongoing implications of these encounters. In their contribution, Gross-Wyrtzen and El Yacoubi warn that the concept of externalization reproduces colonial narratives depicting European countries as chief agents of history and development. In his conclusion, Ould Moctars offer the observation that such narratives exist in vacuums since they are, and have always been, ahistorical and out-of-context in relation to the geographies where they are imposed. Jegen argues, for example, that the export of "international migration language" to Niger through EU-funded Migration Capacity Building Programmes whose focus on civil registries and biometric databases are in synch with ambitions during French colonial mobility governance. In his contribution, Gaibazzi details how EU-Gambian relations on repatriation grants the IOM an autonomous role over Gambian authorities, repeating colonial logics of clientelist collaboration. Korvensyrjä demonstrates how the politics of readmission and deportation in Germany attempt an erasure of colonial era connections with West Africa that are challenged by anti-deportation activists.

Combining these critiques, we can say that when it comes to policies of border externalization, epistemological erasure serves to reproduce a range of Eurocentric and unidirectional assumptions. The narrative that externalization is tantamount to European countries imposing their priorities of "ordered" and "managed" migration on non-European countries, and generating "ripple effects", which then emanate outwards into the EUs neighboring regions was part and parcel of 2000s scholarship on the concept and policy (Casas et al., 2011; Bialasiewicz, 2012). But while this might indeed be the ambition of European states, as an analysis of the phenomenon of externalization policy, it seriously mischaracterizes its complex and multidimensional interrelations. This is exemplified by the cross-cutting European border externalization policies in countries like Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt or Rwanda narrated through notions like an "external dimension" of asylum or "migration management partnerships." Even if the EU or individual member states negotiate strategies, Action Plans and Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with non-European countries, these agreements tend to ignore long-spanning and ongoing relations to Europe, as well as crucial local contexts, dissent and counterhegemonic histories.

Excavating forgotten histories of imperial mobility management allows us to re-insert them into the chronologies of European policies on migration, border control and humanitarian intervention. At the same time, such postcolonial inquiry also reveals how the current concept of externalization, *as well as the practices it is used to describe*, in fact cover over and obscure centuries-long foundations of racial and socioeconomic hierarchies of bifurcated mobility and residency-privileges. Thus, when it comes to border externalization, the topicality of a post or decolonial lens become its instrumentality for identifying the trajectory of still operative colonial-imperial assumptions of socioeconomic and racial hierarchies and registers of space and mobility at work in current-day European policies on border externalization (Casas-Cortés et al., 2023).

### 2.1. *Echoes of externalization and the upcycling of imperial logics*

We argue that the current political vision of border externalization, replete with its ontological, epistemic and politico-legal frameworks, constitutes an *upcycling* of colonial logics. By upcycling, we here understand the act of re-adapting something into a new product, giving its components a second life through re-use. Elements of this upcycled product are recognizable, while others are not. It is not merely a rehash of what once was nor is it something completely new. In other words: the reuse of the components of border externalization happens not just in

the sense of certain control technologies and policy dynamics, which superimpose figures of migration derived from racialised and decontextualized epistemologies. It also implies that forms of externalization policy upcycle the imperial gaze that identifies certain (“transit” or third country”) territories as spaces of containment by working through the residual political imagination of *imperial annexed spaces*.

This SI then seeks to contribute to the study of border externalization by suggesting the fruitfulness of post and decolonial historically inflected gazes on this kind of border practice. First, this SI focuses its post and decolonial historical gazes on border externalization. By doing this, the SI challenges understanding externalization as a specific *crisis response* to migratory phenomenon, never seen before. Focusing on border externalization from this gaze resists the argument that these bordering practices are somehow innovative and indicative of a globalization of borders. The idea that borders are everywhere seems to itself have a history. By bringing in imperial history, externalization becomes part of a much longer and complex history of managing movement and ideas among and between different empires, cultures, territories and continents of the world (see Gaibazzi; and Gross-Wyrtzen and El Yacoubi herein). Furthermore, this historical approach towards externalization helps to undercut a geographical imaginary assuming a geographic base in the form of a world of nation states which is undercut or somehow transformed by a recent phenomenon called externalization (see Korvensyrjä herein). Numerous interventions of imperial powers in colonial territories included managing the movement of people, be it by encouraging movement and settlement; by enforced displacements; or by limiting entry. The population-ordering function of borders, including externalized borders, thus has a longer history.

Second, the historically inflected gazes that this SI collectively emphasizes also contributes in another manner by going beyond simply identifying potential colonial continuities in migration control. Situating analyses epistemologically in the postcolony means acknowledging that what former/current colonial powers do is far from all that matters. Pre-colonial histories, local understandings and practices of mobilities, South-South relations and geopolitics all have an impact on what externalization actually looks like or accomplishes. A critique of the colonial echoes in externalization should not unduly re-center European actors (or Global North actors). In the contributions to our SI, we see how different local and regional dynamics entangle, conflict, or merge with different colonial understandings, as well as with recent iterations of border externalization. Ould Moctar’s contribution, for instance, stresses how current attempts of EU border externalization involving the city of Rosso at the Senegal River cannot be understood without its regional and colonial histories of racialised social conflicts. This intermeshing produces something new, and the SI contributions seek to develop languages capable of capturing this understanding. As Jegen stresses in her contribution, this also demand transcending the depoliticized policy language through which border externalization takes place, since it obscures these historical-political contexts. The point is not to simply ask what the local effects of externalization are, but more profoundly that externalization must be understood through these historically and territorially embedded dynamics.

Thirdly, this approach of the SI must also take seriously the “post” in postcolonial, that is, the chronological trajectory. By this we mean that what has happened since formal political independence of many of these countries also matters in understanding how externalization plays out. All these contributions show that if by post- and decolonial approaches we are simply digging for the traces of the imperial reflected in current practices and regulations then we are unwittingly disqualifying

histories, efforts and movements of the independence and post-independence periods (see Gross-Wyrtzen and El Yacoubi; Ould Moctar; and Gaibazzi herein). What has happened since formal independence also matters, even in how decolonial narratives have been invoked for different political and strategic uses by multiple actors.<sup>2</sup> The ways in which border externalization recreates colonial era frameworks is reflected through and conflicts with dynamics that move beyond the colonial timeframe. This includes issues such as South-South migrations and diplomatic relations, trade networks, ethnic relations, and cross-border dynamics that reflect independence-era histories. Border externalization, therefore, cannot be seen simply as the reactivation of the colonial era, so that all other initiatives not involving the métropole in the independence period do not matter. South-south solidarities, mobilities, development initiatives, and even conflicts cannot be reduced to a pause button on some grander colonial narrative that is now reactivated through externalization (see Kramsch herein). It is as if the postcolony is saying to the métropole: “Hey! Our story is not only about you!”.

### 3. State of the art

The consolidation of research on border externalization by European nation-states overlapped, chronologically, with work on European Union enlargement, concepts such as ‘Europeanization’ or early studies of the European Neighborhood Policy. In this regard, border externalization seemed connected to, or even resulting from, the contemporary process of European construction (see for example [Lavenex and Ucarer, 2004](#); [Andreas and Snyder, 2000](#); [Bigo, 2001](#)). Externalization research was framed within the creation of a new regional political bloc, as well as the intricacies of understanding the seemingly ‘new’ spatialities of externalization. This framework led to a focus on the present. This was at the expense of research that drew parallels with other historical processes. In fact, the very term “externalization” seems to signal a sequentially spatial but also temporal reaching out of states’ borders. This temporality stems from the fact that border externalization functionally instantiates geographies of migration control *preemptively* and far *beyond* European states’ territorial boundaries. The prevailing discourses of “stemming the flow” and “whole-of-route”-approaches aims at realizing a European halt to the cross-border movement of people many thousands of miles before they would actually reach any European territory.

Furthermore, externalization literature can inadvertently harken a spatial imaginary where the external borders of Europe’s nation-states are settled. Externalization then falls into a new temporal phase of policy, one that overlaps with an outward directionality toward so-called “third” or “transit” countries. However, this assumes that Europe’s borders were established as internal affairs and that the engagement with mobility and population management in those “non-European” spaces is somehow a recent occurrence. In this light, debates on offshore asylum processing centers, and the Danish, British or Italian attempts to send asylum seekers to Uganda, Rwanda and Albania have been portrayed as ‘innovative solutions’ to European and global control controversies even if already decades old. Of course, analyses must factor in how contexts and geographies change. Yet our claim is in fact that we must not only go back to the Treaty of Maastricht in order to understand the evolution of border externalization, but into the deep time of colonial encounters and their racialised geographies of mobility. In important ways, the trans- and extraterritorial transfer of refugees in fact constitutes a reversion to previous, colonial, forms of management.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, how newly decolonized independent states narrate the decolonial in certain ways fitting their nation-building project, or examples of Italian oil companies in postcolonial Libya (disingenuously) positioned themselves as a decolonial alternative to Big Western Oil (see [Tjønn and Lemberg-Pedersen, 2022](#); [Adderley, 2024](#)).

Lingelbach (2022) has shown how World War II refugee transfers were already a complex, intercontinental imperial issue in the British Empire. Similarly, the notion of *EurAfrica* (examined by Hansen and Jonsson, 2015) emerged at the turn of the 20th century as a European political imagination of a shared imperial space, which fused early discourses of Europeanism and European unification with ideals of shared imperial grandeur where colonial spaces were constituted as an upstream base for strategic raw materials feeding European industrial growth. Africa was understood as a space for common European extraction, expansion and settlement, similar to the “West” for the United States and to Siberia for the Russian empire. Though these practices were not referred to as “externalization” or focused on the same target populations as today, such examples still illustrate that the logics of current border externalization has important precedents in the imperial-colonial practices of Western states.

To reiterate, narrating border externalization as a new or innovative policy then, implicitly retells a story of consolidated nation-state borders which then ‘respond’ to migration by externalizing control attempts. Thus despite the productive research focus on distinct spatialities of bordering that surpass the boundedness of the state, externalization literature has yet to incorporate the spatial insights on connectivity of post- and decoloniality that see the boundedness of nation-states as a process that in and of itself interacted with colonial territories and imperial politics and cultures. Emergent literature is suggesting paths which can overcome the territorial and methodologically nationalist traps (Agnew, 1994; Anderson, 2019) still plaguing externalization and migration studies literature (see also Cobarrubias and Novak, 2024).

This foray into a historical, post and decolonial gaze on border externalization segues well with a broader turn in Migration Studies to account for diverse forms of historical mobilities and their governance.<sup>3</sup> Early calls to engage the past emerged in the field of Forced Migration Studies. Marfleet states that Migration Studies often exhibit a tendency to “actively forgetting” certain events or dynamics in the history of European migration politics (Marfleet, 2007: 136–138). This tendency leads to the privileging of certain historical contexts and policy lessons over others. Chimni (2008) specifically calls for a reckoning with the historical relationship of colonialism to humanitarianism in research and in policy, in order to understand how current border interventions toward asylum, ranging from focusing on care to focusing on control, have important imperial precursors. More recently, Elie (2014) identified a generalized “presentist focus” in studies which have excluded many historical precursors to current migration politics (see also Walters, 2015: 5). This yields a framing which reproduces colonial matrices of power (Quijano and Ennis, 2000), by excluding political, epistemological and socioeconomic parallels and continuities. Also, Lucy Mayblin’s work, *Asylum after Empire* (Mayblin, 2017) has made an important step in correcting that exclusion in the case of the UK, primarily by overcoming the assumed rupture in asylum practice post-WWII.

Other work on the history of migration control shows how research attention to the links between current migration policy norms and the colonial era can generate alternative understandings of the present (McKeown, 2008; Bashford, 2014). Vigneswaran (2019) signals how colonial independence processes in the mid 20th century lead to important shifts in policies on human mobility indicating breaks and continuities between imperial era practices and the emergence of new states. He signals the need for focusing on colonized spaces as an origin for understanding recent migration control, rather than a European state concern with a slipping Westphalian notion of sovereignty. Mongia’s (2018) work on the history of post-slavery indentured migration within the British Empire demonstrates how many notions of recent migration

policy between continents (free versus forced migration, and contract in origin among others) reflect post-abolition imperial politics. This work in the broader field of Migration Studies (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018; Demir, 2022) contains important correctives of previous research and calls attention to how future work can be reframed. Our argument here is that while colonial contexts of mobility and displacement have been inadvertently relegated to current irrelevance, they in fact offer a crucial repository for understanding the evolution of European migration control in general, and externalization in particular. Critical engagement with externalization policies offers a crucial path through which the problems of de-contextualization, presentism and privileged histories in the study of migration politics can be appraised. As the above section suggests, research into the historical continuities of migration and its governance is relatively new. Specific research into the long-term histories of border externalization is even more recent. The work of Korvensyrjä (2017), Lemberg-Pedersen (2019), Ould Moctar (2020), Deridder et al. (2020), Gross-Wyrtzen and Gazzotti (2021); Stambøl and Jegen (2022); and Cappiali and Pacciardi (2024) being relevant in regards to European state externalization efforts. We are glad to say that this SI includes most of the authors listed here as some of the first (and as of yet, few) who have investigated the postcolonial resonances of border externalization.

Aristide Zolberg’s early study of remote control (Zolberg, 2003; Zolberg, 2008), while not using the term “externalization” is also relevant since it focuses on the early 20th century introduction of visa applications in a country of origin as a means of culling migratory candidates prior to departure. This measure was introduced by the United States as a way of controlling for racial components of future US residents and thus demonstrates a way in which extraterritorial border control played into historic scientific racism. His work is oft-cited in studies of recent border externalization as an example of an early study. The fact that Zolberg’s concept was developed from historical research is often overlooked though. We take his referential work as an invitation to engage in further historic work and the potential insights to be gained from such an enterprise.

Despite the relative newness of approaching externalization historically, numerous theoretical tools are available to engage this work. Bhabra’s (2014) and Subrahmanyam’s (1997) works on, respectively, connected sociologies and histories stress attempts to understand the extraterritorial moves of externalizing states in a longer timeframe. Rather than seeing these as recent spatialities, externalization is to be understood as overlaying itself upon formerly existing connections, networks, patterns of politics, culture and trade that in part condition the forms, actors and results of different externalization projects. Achiume’s (2019) work on migration and decolonization suggests understanding former metropole and colony-relations as co-constituting the current world order (on uneven power terms) and therefore as co-sovereigns in processes of co-determination. Also, Yann Moulrier Boutang’s work (1998) on the *longue durée* of slavery’s abolition, foundational for the Autonomy of Migration approach, suggests that current migratory categories, forms, policies and even citizenship regimes are conditioned by struggles over mobility crisscrossing imperial territories. Those mobilities were genuine problems of governability and helped to shape modern contract law, citizenship and border practices, many of which Moulrier-Boutang argues are inherited from the long 19th century. While recent studies have interpreted border externalization through the Autonomy of Migration approach (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015) they have often focused on recent policy and not on longer historical continuities or ruptures.

Similarly, De Genova (2023) theoretically rereads Marx’s engagement with slavery in the light of racial capitalism and historical research in to the 19th century Atlantic economy in order to develop a theory of borders and migrant labor. Working through Du Bois and Mbembe, De Genova posits that the colour line identified by Du Bois “in the aftermath of the era of decolonisation that defined the latter half of the twentieth century, the problem of the colour line has become widely synonymous

<sup>3</sup> While much work remains to be done, we note that Human Geography has benefitted from an engagement with postcolonial thinking with a historical gaze for over two decades (see Blunt and McEwan, 2002; Ryan, 2004). Yet, this is a rather new, and welcome, direction for Migration Studies as a whole.

with borders,” (De Genova, 2023: 234). In this sense De Genova is emphasizing that a critical theory of the work borders do today must incorporate an understanding of how borders are inserted into racialising structures, historically and currently (see also Mbembe, 2017). This racialising function cannot ignore a longer history of global economic interaction predicated on a historical chapter such as the Atlantic slave trade. All of these theoretical interventions into the long *durée* of migration politics suggest that border externalization must be understood as a historical continuity despite specific policy or technological innovations. In like manner, this Special Issue contributes to a more nuanced historical geography inserting recent border externalization attempts within a longer history of imperial governance and the consolidation of nation-state borders. One goal of this SI then is to avoid or correct potentially “aspatial” (Massey, 2012) readings of externalization that ignore connected historical geographies.

#### 4. Cross-cutting themes

In this special issue, we highlight four ways in which historically attentive post and decolonial approaches are useful for advancing research into border externalization. These four themes form the crux of the contribution of our SI, characterize several or all of the contributions and demonstrate the potential of this research agenda. They are: Border externalization as ‘not-new’; developing a non-eurocentric postcolonial gaze; intersections with racialisation; and understanding externalization beyond migration control.

1. **Firstly**, studies of border externalization often over-emphasize the strategies’ newness and innovativeness. Even if critical of their effects on human rights, the conclusion has often been that border externalization somehow represents a new phase in the extraterritorial practices of nation states. There are reasons for this miscomprehension, including that many studies of border externalization emerged in an attempt to understand concurrent processes of Europeanization, but this presentist-geographic focus can then be said to have affected the study of externalization as a whole. Yet, extending the evolutionary chronology of externalization policies further back in time uncovers a vast array of similar precursors, and referring to the colonial histories of European states challenges the methodological nationalism often implicit even in externalization research. These colonial histories recast European states as imperial states, and the emergence of national borders as part and parcel of the management of imperial territories and mobilities therein. What now seems appropriate to label as externalization or extraterritorial border work may in fact reflect practices that were intra-imperial only decades ago. And in this regard externalization serves to re-produce spatial dynamics from the colonial era.

In his contribution on the Mauritania/Senegal border, Moctar argues that externalization projects reify the Senegal river as a colonial era border, and in a similar way, in their study on Moroccan borderlands Gross-Wyrtzen and El Yacoubi argue that externalization “reproduces colonial narratives” by reintroducing territorial divisions, as well as racial stereotypes and categories from that era into the present. The authors highlight that the focus on the present in studies of externalization can inadvertently confirm the notion that externalization is a response to recent migratory ‘crises’. In this manner, Europe declares a blissful ignorance and surprise when perceiving current mobilities as unrelated to historical and current relations between EU member states and these territories. Gaibazzi’s study of repatriation in the Gambia introduces the idea of “indirect migration management”, playing on the colonial notion of indirect rule, and examines how IOM repatriation projects utilize local family and community networks in managing deported migrants. This he argues recreate colonial modes of governing human mobility in the region. Jegen analyzes recent European Union Trust fund (EUTF)-backed externalization projects in Niger and compares them to French colonial attempts at governing migration and mobility. She sees in both cases attempts to create a nexus between state population and territory that ignores local and regional patterns and

understandings of mobility. In her contribution, Korvensyrjä signals a colonial imaginary of space – Westphalian in this case – as a moral geography underpinning externalization efforts in a manner that ignores history. This imaginary is countered by anti-deportation protestors in Germany with the “borders of Berlin”, an imaginary the reinscribes colonial history as constitutive of current migratory policies and the cooperation with externalization efforts on the part of African states.

In all of the contributions, then, we see that current efforts at border externalization in fact have strong echoes with the past and specifically with imperial history. In some cases, these resonances are that of a similar logic at work, as when Jegen identifies the French empire’s attempt to order Niger according to a logic where population equals territory is upcycled in the EU’s attempts at anti-smuggling operations and rewriting Niger’s migratory laws. In other cases we see this ‘not-newness’ as reflecting specific practices, as when Moctar argues that the physical infrastructures of externalization, such as funding for border posts, reinscribes the colonial territorial border that divides the two sides of the Senegal river. In the afterword by Kramersch, these echoes of history are weaved into a present showing how the relation to an outside, and the diverse ways in which “outsides” were constituted, are part and parcel of how Europe is currently understood and how this understanding may evolve in the future.

2. **Second**, by postcolonial, we refer to taking into consideration a history that does not unduly center Europe or colonial powers. Border externalization research can take pre-colonial histories, as well as regional and local historical developments during or after colonization into account without ontologically privileging the relation between colonizer-colonized as the constitutive beginning of reality. In this regard our post and decolonial approaches function as a contrapuntal gaze forcing our attention elsewhere (see the afterword by Kramersch), for example to how regional dynamics among African states and politics affect(ed) the ways in which externalization attempts by non-African powers are now implemented and the effects they have. Additionally, by prioritizing attention to other regional and local histories in sites of externalization, we seek to avoid an inadvertent recentering of Europe that can occur even in critical work. By over-emphasizing colonial histories, and the colonial continuities of current border externalization, researchers can inadvertently emphasize that what matters in the territories where externalization occurs is what happens when European powers intervene. If we ignore pre-colonial histories, or how post-independence dynamics evolve in relation to borders, we can inadvertently resituate Europe at the center, even if we are doing it critically.

In his contribution, Gaibazzi highlights that by situating studies of externalization in the postcolonial trajectories of African territories a “heterogenous temporality” (herein: 1) becomes evident, some threads of which connect to Europe and others not. This sort of post-colonial approach would need to be attentive to dynamics such as local racial formations and regional divisions. Attention to local and regional histories regardless of international intervention helps us understand how border externalization inserts itself into complex dynamics. This attention therefore helps us to challenge the Eurocentrism by in a sense “provincializing” it. Moctar’s contribution understands the EU-supported border externalisation projects in the Senegal river valley as conditioned by the specific socio-spatial dynamics and histories of the region. The type of migration pursued, the forms that ‘illegality’ takes, even the physical structure of the border posts constructed, all of these elements of externalization are co-constituted by historical processes of the region. These include shifts in regional integration with other West African states and industrial changes in the region. Externalization thus becomes part and parcel of this history, and at the same time, this history is embroiled with externalization.

In their contribution, Lesley Gross Wrytzen and Rachidi El Yacoubi analyze the externalized Euro-Moroccan border as a contact zone where overlapping histories of race, color and hierarchy collide and interact. In trying to express this dynamic they reach for a frame that moves beyond a straightforward critique of a neocolonial push. Rather than concentric

circles pushing out from Europe, a three-dimensional plane of encounter and differentiation becomes evident. The racial processes they see exacerbated by externalization in Morocco echo through dynamics of the pre-colonial slave trade in the region and historical notions of blackness. How these intersect with and influence the externalized border and globally circulating notions of race become points of critical inquiry.

Leonie Jegen examines how “co-existing” yet “divergent” understandings of mobility come to the fore when researching externalization projects in Niger. While international actors attempt to implement particular understandings and definitions of regular and irregular migration, Nigerien actors also have their own understandings and lexicons related to mobility. Furthermore, actors in Niger may utilize international vocabulary and categories (like migration and smuggling) but with understandings that diverge from those promoted by EU member states or organizations like the IOM. These understandings of mobility and its governance reflect historical and existing regional dynamics of human movement. Jegen explores these clashes of concepts and understandings as productive fields.

In Korvensyrjä’s contribution we see this postcolonial gaze on externalization moved not only temporally but also spatially. Rather than focus on where externalization projects are putatively ‘implemented’, Korvensyrjä’s piece focuses on anti-deportation activism in Germany. As return and readmission are key elements of cooperation on externalization between different states, her work shows that the critique of externalization moves to the supposed destination countries. These struggles around deportation are interpreted as two moral geographies in conflict. One is a westphalian imaginary of settled national-states where deportation is simply a ‘return’ to one’s proper place. The other, wielded by activists, is what Korvensyrjä terms the ‘Borders of Berlin’ reflecting on the historic Berlin Conference of 1884–5. Here, return, readmission and mobility restrictions are tied not only to a colonial past of extractivism but also to a colonial present. The insistence on limits to people’s right to reside is interpreted as a distinct phase in a much longer history of colonial interaction.

3. A **third** theme crisscrossing the contributions to this SI is how border externalization intervenes in processes of racialisation. In examining colonial echoes of border externalization, attention is needed as to how race and colonial hierarchy were often inextricably fused together as imperial projects. Furthermore, as [Mongia \(2018\)](#) and others have suggested, the founding of modern nation-state borders and their control is done in combination with and as part of many imperial projects, rather than seeing them as mutually exclusive or chronologically sequential. The migrations and mobilities of colonial subjects, and the desire to manage those mobilities, were part of the construction of the nation-state as an equivocation between territory-sovereignty- and people. In this way, and echoing the observations of [Goldberg \(2002\)](#) and [Sharma \(2020\)](#), we understand the nation-state as a racial project as well. Consequently, the efforts to externalize border controls are not only inflected with historical hauntings of racial anxieties, but also intervene in and recreate racial formations targeting populations, diasporas and minorities in the present. This racialising effect needs to be understood as occurring both in the territories of the “externalizer” as well as in the countries and localities being “externalized” to.

This theme is developed throughout [Gross-Wyrtzen](#) and [El Yacoubi](#)’s piece as they examine how long-standing, even pre-colonial, significations of “blackness” become reinterpreted in Morocco’s current climate of EU partner state. In this way, the significance of illegality, blackness, and migration become a dynamic interplay between current and historical elements, as well as local, national or global framings. The authors affirm that the externalized border works as a juncture where multiple understandings of race and difference interact, collide and/or mesh. For [Moctar](#), in the case of Mauritania, this colonial border tracing was historically linked to an understanding of the Senegal river as a national but also racial border. A new migration policy, adopted as part of Mauritania’s border cooperation efforts with Spain, France and other

EU member states, implemented a revamped civil registration system which lead to a re-emergence and affirmation of ethnic tensions inflected by racial distinctions drawn in the colonial period. In [Korvensyrjä](#)’s work the supposed normalcy of return and deportation to one’s nation is seen as a moral geography that writes away colonial racial hierarchy and mobility control into a supposedly neutral legal action of removal. The reworking of this colonial racial hierarchy becomes apparent in how the mobility of peoples whose origin is in the Global South is governed. This is denounced by West African communities in Germany.

4. **Fourth:** Post and decolonial historical takes on externalization demonstrates how border externalization is always about more than the management of mobilities. In a sense border externalization is a shorthand for other processes of which it forms part. For example, examining the work of [Lemberg-Pedersen \(2019\)](#) we can notice how naval patrols to stop slaving vessels, an interesting echo of anti-trafficking work today, also served as a pretext for political and military involvement first on the African coast and later in the interior ([Adderley and Fett, 2022](#); [Adderley, 2024](#)). In that regard, then as now, efforts at managing mobilities must always be examined in the contexts of larger geopolitical interests, such as imperial expansion, regional spheres of power and global geopolitics.

Attention to these sorts of connections in current border externalization projects force additional questions. In connection with the second theme of using a non-Eurocentric post-colonial gaze on border externalization, we can become attuned to how externalization feeds into other social and economic processes and vice versa. For example, in [Gross-Wyrtzen](#) and [El Yacoubi](#)’s contribution we see how cooperation with border externalization forms part of a complex resituating of the Moroccan state vis-à-vis its relations with the EU and the AU. Border externalization then becomes entwined with diplomatic pressures. Yet these diplomatic pressures are also inflected through the re-racialisations afoot in Morocco that affect residents in Morocco from Western and Central African countries, but also those Moroccan citizens that are labeled “dark-skinned”. Border externalization in this case is not only about controlling mobility but about reworking diplomatic relations and reinscribing race and colour as a demarcation in Moroccan society. [Moctar](#) shows how externalization efforts in Mauritania, specifically along the Senegalese/Mauritanian border region, have intersected with histories of structural adjustment and ethnic violence. The new national migration policy of Mauritania and reforms to residency rules has meant that what was deemed to be simply an effort to halt current unauthorized mobilities has actually served to bolster the exclusion of groups of people targeted during internal conflict decades before. Economic reforms funneled land holdings to the victors of that conflict, and hardening citizenship rules have meant it is harder for returning refugees to claim repatriation. Inadvertently perhaps, externalization has then helped to harden lines of ethnic cleavage and inequality and furthermore aided in producing a cheaper labor force in the growing riziculture industry in the area.

For [Gaibazzi](#), indirect migration management not only reproduces governance dynamics from the colonial era but also shows continuities with how development projects were governed in the post-independence era. His focus on return and deportation in parts of rural Gambia shows how social and familial practices in the area are deployed to aid international projects. These social practices are reminiscent of dynamics of indirect rule during the colonial era under the British and practices of extraversion under postcolonial development. The reproduction of development narratives also comes to the fore in [Jegen](#)’s study where migration capacity building projects frame some states as “incapable” and “in need of ‘external assistance and expertise’”. The development process that [Jegen](#) highlights in migration projects in Niger is not limited to mobility management or economic development in one country though. [Jegen](#) understands these externalization projects as helping to reinscribe a broader international order as a norm. In that order, proper migration governance is part of reinscribing the nation-

state and territory as the basis of a global political geography. In Korvensyrjä's piece this theme of thinking externalization beyond migration control comes through in the critique articulated by West African activists against deportation. The denial of their right to reside in Germany is inscribed in a long-standing dynamic of relations between the regions of Europe and Africa. Migration control is connected to questions of international debt as well as historical and current extractivism. In this regard, deportation practices are thus inscribed in a broader set of hierarchical geopolitical and economic practices.

By taking this view of externalization as more than migration or border management, we can see how externalization intersects with spheres ranging from geopolitics, race, development practices and the creation of territory. This aids in understanding the possible effects of externalization in a longer-timeframe into the future. The added value is that we are able to signal, if not yet understand, how border externalization is part of a longue durée of relations between regions, and forms part of a long trajectory of geopolitical alignment, visualization, and other complex effects.

## 5. Concluding words

Post and decolonial perspectives on the study of border externalisation offers crucial tools for historicised problematisations of current policies and their geo-temporal contexts. Moreover, these approaches also serve to reinscribe the constitutive effects of intra- and inter-imperial practices into our understanding of how and why European border control has evolved into its current form. Research into the links between current migration policy norms and the colonial era can therefore lead to alternative understandings of the present (McKeown, 2008). Ultimately, these historical practices – antecedents of current border externalisation – were co-constituters of the imperial world order. As such, the post and decolonial historical research we are proposing, including decentred gazes on externalisation, might foretell the kind of world order that border externalisation is producing today. Or, as the afterword suggests, the multiple gazes might engender as of yet unimagined futures nourished by post and decolonial imaginations in the past and present (Kramsch herein).

What becomes clear from all these contributions is that border externalization does not simply reflect a globalization of borders or a new phase of politics. Borders may well be “everywhere” (Balibar et al., 2004) or mobile (Amilhat-Szary and Giraut, 2015) but as legitimate and useful as those frameworks may be, they should not be understood as exclusive to the present. Furthermore, regarding the cases of Europe-Africa relations highlighted in this SI, externalization does not merely reflect the spread or reaching out of the European Union and its attempts to articulate a foreign policy. Rather, the authors of these contributions and ourselves argue that the political, migratory and border dynamics engendered by externalization are a continuation of long-standing practices and relations between regions and peoples. This continuation is not merely a prolongation along a timeline. There are breaks and ruptures, as the pieces point out. But whether we are examining the reinscribing of the Senegal River as a border, the upcycling of pre-colonial and colonial racial imaginaries in Morocco, indirect rule in the Gambia, ethno-territorial demarcation in Niger, or relation to historical and current extractivism, the “haunting” of the colonial past or the “weight of imperial debris” loom and must be acknowledged in order to grapple with externalization in the longue durée, both its pasts and possible futures.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Sebastian Cobarrubias:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Martin Lemberg-Pedersen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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No data was used for the research described in the article.

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