A Political Economy of Borderscapes

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A Triad to Set the Scene

First, a person. AICHA is seventy-two years old. She is short and walks upright despite a small hunch that has grown in the past few years. She recalls the border always as *qbal* (before). Before the border between Tunisia and Algeria closed for more than two years, from March 2020 to July 2022. Before the revolution of 2011. At other times 'before' refers to a period in the past few years when crossing and 'working the border' were easier. Aicha is a trafficker, though neither she nor anyone around her would refer to her as such. The term trafficker, or *knatri* (contraband trafficker) evokes a masculine figure that haunts imaginaries of crisis-ridden Tunisia today. No, instead, Aicha 'buys-and-sells' between Tunisia and Algeria. She does not use the infamous Isuzu semi-trucks that have become the trademark vehicles of contraband trafficking. Rather she organizes herself with other women from the region to pay a driver in a private car who takes them back and forth. Other women, whose purses are tighter, take public transportation to the *hadd*, the border, that they cross by foot until they arrive in Algeria and take a cab. Aicha buys-and-sells from the city of Tabarka in the Northwest of Tunisia to the city of El Kala in Algeria, a few kilometres away from the border. Sometimes she does not even make it to El Kala but stops at one of the stores on the way, which cater to Tunisian traders looking to buy cheap Algerian products. There she pays in Tunisian Dinars, which reassures her. Algerian currency is too hard to count and the money changers at the border are known to be scammers. From Algeria, Aicha brings different products; sometimes a whole wheel of Algerian red cheese known to be more delicious than its Tunisian counterpart, and at other times household cleaning supplies. She brought in air fresheners for a while because their small format and high prices would yield more profits than other commodities. She brings in small quantities to avoid getting them confiscated by customs agents or have to pay a bribe that would cost her more than she makes. The only period where she brought in more goods – like entire chickens she would sell in town – was when she became friends with one of the customs agents, a higher-ranked one, and would make him food in exchange for looking the other way.

Aicha is not an exceptional character. Instead, she is representative of the mundane border-work that escapes stereotypical imaginings of what constitutes a border. Profiles

of traffickers call into question the allure of the border as a romanticized space of male bandits at the edges of the nation. Through Aicha, I want us to attune ourselves to the gender dynamics that make up the fabric of border economies. Rather than imagining that male traffickers are replaced by women – as if borders became sites of emancipation – it might be helpful to consider how different social actors deploy gender binaries in everyday transactions at borders.

Second, a commodity. 'Touch this one, it's as soft as silk'. I pass my fingers through a narrow opening in the plastic bag and touch a brown duvet. I close my eyes and sigh. 'It's very soft indeed'. I am in the town of Ben Gardane, one of the cities in the Southeast of Tunisia closest to the border with Libya. The market is quiet on a Sunday afternoon as all the *rahalat*, the bus trips filled with people coming from the entire country to go shopping in Ben Gardane, have left. Though I came here for research purposes I am now eyeing the soft brown duvet with an enamoured gaze while I picture myself wrapped in it during one of the cold humid days of Tunisian winters. The duvet cost 130 Dinars in Ben Gardane but almost 250 Dinars if I were to buy it instead in a market in Tunis. The price of the commodity increases the further away from the border it is. Indeed, it is easier to bring goods across the border than it is to move them from border towns to the rest of the country. Barricades of the National Guard – the police between towns – are strategically placed on routes all across Tunisia, stopping cars and asking for the one thing a commodity smuggled across countries does not have: a receipt. In order to evade law enforcement, traffickers have a few strategies: bribes, having people on the lookout, and using smaller national roads instead of highways. For this duvet, there is another scheme – using a logistics company that operates formally. These companies' trucks are known and therefore do not get stopped, and even if they did the company produces release certificates that legalizes the transport of merchandise across the territory. The duvet I am eyeing can hardly be called an (il)licit commodity. It has been bought in Turkey's large wholesale market, though it was made in China. It was then sent in a container ship to the port of Tripoli and driven through Libya until the Tunisian border. The duvet crossed the border in the truck of a trader in broad daylight and arrived at Ben Gardane. It was only in the crossing from Libya to Tunisia that the duvet became de facto contraband, no taxes paid on it, and no receipts produced.

The soft brown duvet illustrates the entanglements between formal and informal economies, where border crossing constitutes only a small part of the transnational circulation of commodities. The lifecycle of the duvet unsettles the marking of goods as (il)licit, illegal, coming from the informal economy or the black market. Rather commodities pass through circuits that exist beyond the imagined boundaries between 'the economy' versus the 'contraband economy', revealing how formal versus informal or licit, illicit, and illegal come together in transnational flows of exchange.

Third, an image. In the photograph, you can see a table. A crowded table. On it, cash organized by types of banknotes more or less piled on top of one another. There are packs and packs of ten and twenty Dinars, a few banknotes of fifty Dinars and small piles of Euros and Dollars. There is almost always cash and there is often something else next to the cash. Gold jewellery, pills, boxes of medicine, brown packs concealing weed, ri-

fles, semi-automatic weapons … The photographs are released almost daily, with a caption that says 'official announcement from the national customs agency'. The captions share where the possessions were taken, border posts along Tunisia's Eastern and Western borders, and stash houses often in poor governorates like Sidi Bouzid that are in-between smuggling regions and larger cities. The photographs are released on the Tunisian customs' social media page, which takes and shares pictures of arrests and possessions taken, often through these spectacular arrangements where large tables are filled with cash, gold, drugs, and weapons. Some photographs even show the equipment used for smuggling; trucks and cars with zoomed-in images of concealed trunks and hidden safe boxes. At times they are even photographs of people arrested, positioned with their arms over their heads, their faces barely blurred. The captions of these photographs detail the times and locations of the arrests depicting 'traffic', 'illegal', 'schemes' and 'networks'. These photographs are shared widely by media outlets that often copy-paste directly from the police forces' press releases.

These images are only a small example of the work of producing borders as exceptional. This economy of photographs reinforces social discourses on borderscapes as sites of lawlessness that require policing. In doing so, a certain 'allure of the border' as a sensational space is produced. Border economies become akin to illegal and dangerous smuggling that hoards money and passes dangerous goods into the nation-state.

Introduction

I begin with this triad – person, object, and image – to attune us to the myriad of ethnographic possibilities that can be observed at borders. How can we apprehend processes of exchange and circulation ethnographically, meaning by attending to the mundane as multifarious but also as the basis for theory-making?

How do we theorize the circulation of goods like make-up brought by a female trader, cigarettes smuggled through desert routes at night, red coral fished from protected maritime sites in Algeria, sent to the Tunisian Northwest and hidden in ships headed to Southern Italy, medicine passing through Tunisian pharmacists to Libyan cities and a set of comforters with an infamous tiger on them, made in Central Anatolia, shipped to the port of Tripoli, brought without receipts to the border-post of Ras Gadir, carried by a transportation company to be sold in the market of Boumendil in downtown Tunis? What is the link between Aicha and her air fresheners from the North of Algeria, a soft duvet sold in Ben Gardane, and a photograph of contraband cash from an arrest by customs? What is the difference between the northwestern border of Tunisia and the Southeastern one? How does one attend to the specificity of borderspaces while also revealing how they bring together on national and transnational scales?

Goods, circulation routes, and individuals that work the border are so multiple and different that they require us to ask: What constitutes a border economy? Can we even speak of a single entity 'the border' and a linked phenomenon, 'the economy'? And finally, how do we study circulations across borders, not as exceptional, informal, or illegal but rather as core phenomena that produce the sense of an 'economy'?

In this chapter, I grapple with the contradiction that makes a border economy, as it places the border as a different, if not an exceptional site for economic exchange, as much as it is a space through which various modes of circulation, beyond the binary of formal versus informal, travel. The inherent instability of the border, as geography and as concept, is nonetheless generative. By beginning by a border, I highlight how processes of exchange and circulation use but are not restricted to borders. I foreground instead a *political economy of borderscapes* that attends to the social fabrics of exchange and circulation. Moreover, I show how it is in the constitutive tension between representations and ethnographic realities that border economies get produced as sites for economic livelihoods as much as for state control. Ultimately, I show how border economies are neither just about borders, nor they are just about the economy in the strictest sense.

To do so I keep the triad of person, object, and image as a running thread throughout the chapter. Though they are mutually constitutive, they help devise a political economy of borderscapes. First, entering through the account of people working the border offers a glimpse into the social structures that make borders, as they deploy individuals not as ideal types of traffickers, but instead as embedded in social networks and gendered performances. Second, by following what commodities move through borders, we attend to the heterogeneity of exchange and circulation processes that cannot be restrained to border spaces. Finally, investigating the slippage between state representations – in images or discourses – and the multiple lifeworlds that make border economies, pries open the 'power-effects' (Foucault 1991) of these representations, as they serve to criminalize what is imagined beyond the national economy. Through these ethnographic insights, this chapter ultimately argues that entering the economy through borders means investigating social processes stretching across geographies and scalar articulations working with or in friction with a sense of a national economy. By unsettling the notion of the border economy, this chapter shows that investigating economic practices at borderscapes in fact offers new insights into what the economy is in the first place.

Theory and Methodology

The notion of a border economy, which exists in state representations and social discourses, imagines a different economy happening at the nation's edges. At the same time, it is also a scholarly notion that merits further unpacking. I locate how a 'border economy' is first and foremost a key device in making of the economy as a bounded sphere, an object of intervention, knowledge, and rule.

Scholars of political economy have long shown how 'the economy' has been produced historically as the seminal object of modern power. Timothy Mitchell (1988) reveals how the nature of power has shifted through devices that 'enframe' and 'contain'. The notion of border economy contains, within a space, economic processes as if they were separated from others and limited to a scale of the border. Similarly, Callon (2006) highlights how economists have rendered practices that are heterogenous and multiple into an abstract and performative object called the 'economy'. In their seminal work on borders, Van Schendel and Abraham (2005) lament how social scientists, in over-determining the national scale, have reified borders and the economic processes occurring at borders, as

exceptional. These works show the collusion between popular and academic representations as they concomitantly make the border into a contained site of knowledge and rule. Indeed, the production of knowledge on borders cannot be separated from the hegemonic representations that already circulate on borders. They are co-produced, meaning to interrogate borders theoretically is to acknowledge, refuse or be in conversation with the politics of border representations in the first place.

A conception of the economy as a bounded sphere cannot be separated from the scale through which this economy operates: the national scale. Historically, the making of the economy as a distinct sphere emerges from the production of a national space that becomes the naturalized scale of intervention (Goswami 2004; Mitchell 1998). The concept of border economy plays a central role here because it imagines a scale of the economy, not necessarily as transnational but rather overlaid onto the national economy. In other words, a border economy is an economy at the edges of the nation, thereby always centring the national scale first. In considering the frame of national economy today, anthropologist Hannah Appel (2017) highlights 'how national economies become both intelligible, possessing representational unity or naturalized authority, and compelling – the stuff of fantasy and desire, power and subjugation' (295). Her sense of the national economy as a space of 'as-if' mirrors the sense of a border economy possessing both 'power effects' (Foucault 1991) – as different modes of control and policing happen at the border – and representational power – the border is exceptional and dangerous to the nation-state. In other words, a border economy is the necessary mirror of a national economy. The border economy becomes a constitutive outside that threatens the notion of the economy as occurring naturally within the boundaries of a nation-state and therefore gets criminalized. The term 'border economy' reveals the ideological and political work of naturalizing the nation-state, criminalizing marginal regions, and producing hierarchies of what constitutes a sanctioned, good and moral economy.

To pry open the sense of a border economy, I consider instead what would it mean to look at economic practices at borders as enmeshed in larger socio-economic phenomena. I collapse together mundane economic practices that invest the border as a site of passage and accumulation with more sensational practices at the border like smuggling, trafficking, or contraband. Van Schendel/Abraham (2005) foreground the notion of the (il)licit as a moving spectrum of circulation of various goods that come in ever-changing interactions with regulatory authorities. However, even the notion of the (il)licit exceptionalises the border as a space where a specific kind of exchange occurs. As such, the (il)licit does not quite resolve yet the 'allure of the border' in scholarship that often centres the exceptional nature of the political economy of borders. For Malik and Gallien (2020: 740), border economies matter because they make the fabric of statecraft, as 'borderlands are spaces where markets and states are co-constituted'. This opens up the question of how to study borders by attending to the specificity of the scale they conjure without exceptionalising them? Is there even such a thing as a border economy, an economy at borders, or an economy of borders? What is the use of the scale of the border?

In the case of Tunisia, borders are often examined through smuggeling or governance. Perhaps there are funding incentives that nudge research towards a security lens or perhaps there are actually security questions to be posed by border regimes. Yet, research on borders ought to be read next to state representations of chaos at its borders. In

Tunisia in recent years, the figure of the contraband trafficker, in particular, has crystallized passions and deviated conversations away from class struggles, capitalist extraction and the state's role as an agent of economic capture. Contraband traffickers themselves are not outside capitalist capture, but they have been cast as separate from the crony capitalism of bankers, state agents, and elites. Instead, the *knatri* is a danger like no other. As such, in this terrain of saturated representations, the role of scholarship in debunking these tales becomes ever more important.

Methodologically, studying borders remains a puzzle for ethnographers. In this chapter, the border implies the territorial demarcations of the nation-state. Yet that definition is already unstable as territorial borders are never fixed, their colonial constructions at times contested while we increasingly notice processes of externalisation of borders (cf. Garnaoui, this volume) or the production of racial borders inside national spaces (cf. Parikh, this volume). Rather than confining borders to the nation-state, I begin with territorial borders while acknowledging the capaciousness of the term 'border'. The oscillation of borderscapes as both invisible and hyper visible speaks to a methodological conundrum on how to study a space without containing it. How do we conduct research at borders without reifying them and reproducing the sense of borders 'as real'? The question requires us both to take borders seriously, while also unsettling their hold on collective imaginaries. To enter a border through its actors, has often meant a kind of hyper masculinist ethnography – smuggling with smugglers – which raises major ethical questions. Instead, I am attuned to the discomfort of border research, a gendered discomfort, but one that pushes the researcher to remain in a generative liminal in-between, not completely studying the border for itself and not completely discarding it either. The gendered discomfort comes from the fact that both representations and realities at borders reify gender binaries. The contraband traffickers, *knatria,* are represented as these hyper-masculine figures, as much as the large majority of them are indeed men. Border economies are not sites for female liberation, because though they might be perceived as threats to the nation, they *are* little threats to the patriarchal representations that make nation-states and borders alike. As such the research spaces I had to navigate were mainly masculine and even when – as with Aicha who begins this chapter – women were involved, they were also surrounded by men – sons and brothers, drivers, border agents, money changers. It is in the methodological tension of studying *with* men or hearing *from* men while attempting to be careful about the hyper-masculinist representations that might be reproduced that I began to feel discomfort. Discomfort, a bodily affect, becomes a way to foreground the liminal, the neither/nor that is essential to attend to border economies.

In my ethnographic inquiries with people 'working' or 'living' at the border, I often encountered comparisons across borders. If I began with a first border, it is because my research on the Tunisian-Algerian border brought me to the 'second border', between Tunisia and Libya. In the Northwest of Tunisia, the border with Libya gets often recalled as a point of comparison, both to contrast the openness and plenitude of the Libyan border and to point to a shared history of marginalization where border regions remain forgotten in state development projects. In these conjurings, the idea that 'the state does not like its borders' was often repeated. More than discursive comparisons, traders themselves often work across borders. In the South, smuggling routes pass through the Al-

gerian or Libyan border depending on goods needed, oil prices, and the security regime at a given time. In the North, traders, especially before the revolution, often crossed the entire country to buy goods in Libya allowing comparisons across spaces. Finally, illegalized migration brings the Mediterranean seascape in relation to land borders as Europe externalizes its borders and migrants get stranded in North Africa or as dispossessed young people from the Northwest, who can no longer live off smuggling, take new routes to Europe from Algeria. Moreover, borders are part of geographies with varied economic structures. For example, agriculture and border trade often happen in similar vicinities, and workers shift from the former to the latter. These processes require us to understand these regions not only as border regions but rather as spaces of intense economic circulation not solely oriented around borders.

As such I unpack the concept of border economy without fully doing away with it. Instead, I show how through an idea like border economy, a sense of the economy as a bounded object comes to be strengthened. By saying this, I open up both a theoretical and methodological inquiry. What does it mean to unsettle a concept without replacing it with another? In doing so, I want to emphasize that borders exist, in the practices of states but also in the practices of people who labour on and across them. Borders exist for states and for all kinds of transnational and global institutions who choose to criminalize, participate or ignore economic processes at the border. The border is a strategic line for intervention and representation. Moreover, there are economic processes that take the border as a site for accumulation, exchange, and circulation. Yet by constituting these as border economies, we forget that the border is a site inextricable from transnational scales which overlap in various arrangements depending on the actors and commodities circulating.

Keeping the triad of person-commodity-discourse, I weave into the story two figures of border economies; Salah who works as a contraband trafficker at the border with Algeria, and Marouene who is a money changer in the town Ben Gardane near the border with Libya. The observations recounted by these two individuals tell us something of the political economy of borderscapes in Tunisia. The stories enmesh individuals, commodities and circulations with the modes of representation – of borders as sites of criminality and suspicion – they are caught in.

A Person is a Gendered Social Network

'There's no more border, no more smuggling, no more anything!' exclaims Salah. I grab my tea and drink a sip. I began to ask a question but the sound of exclamations at the next-door table stops me. We are sitting in a coffee shop in a small town in the Northwest of Tunisia. Today, most of the chairs are turned towards the screen on the opposite wall showing the crushing loss of the Esperance Sportive de Tunis, one of Tunis's main football teams. Salah glances at the TV as his face turns into a grin. I try again. 'What do you mean'? 'Is this because of your winter arrest'? I continue. Salah owns an Isuzu truck, a highly valued good in the border zone between Tunisia and Algeria. The Isuzu trucks have become seminal objects in the imagination of border contraband, as people routinely joke that to own an Isuzu is to be a trafficker. In the past few years, small trucks have

no longer been allowed in the border posts between Algeria and Tunisia. In doing so, authorities have entrenched a separation between illegal smuggling which passes through routes other than border posts, and illicit trading using private cars and which strategically plays with the quantities of goods and the relations of bribery with customs agents.

Salah is from a mountain village nearby Algeria, another requirement in order to smuggle goods in and out of the border. Trafficking in the Northwest operates radically differently from the more known Southern contraband routes. Here, families from small villages closest to the *khatt*[1] (the line) have a monopoly on what passes or not. Indeed, most contraband has to go through intricate mountain routes that only the 'children of the area' know of. The kin relations do not end at the *khatt* but rather extend into villages located on the Algerian side where families – whose relatedness precedes colonialism – receive packages and give money. As Ghanem (2020) working on the Algerian side of the border has shown, most people have kin across the border and these relations have served as a departure point for smuggling since the demarcation of borders in the postcolonial era.

The lines between trafficker, worker, and law enforcement are often blurred as within the same family one often finds a customs agent, a trafficker, and a labourer too. Salah himself has a brother in the forestry administration, another one who illegally migrated to France before the revolution and the last one who is a coral diver working with smugglers in Algeria. Kinship relations at borders are conduits for cross-border circulation. They constitute part of extended social networks that rely on relations of trust, rather than legal enforcement, to maintain functioning economic activities.

Kinship relations are also deployed metaphorically against national identity. Kinship tropes of neighbouring countries as *khawa khawa*[2] or as 'cousins' often get mobilized to assert the relations of trust necessary for cross-border trade. In another setting, in the town of Medenine in the Tunisian south near the border with Libya, a trader listed to me last names from the South that he deemed originally 'Libyan' last names. These historical narratives of lineage produce fictive kin relations, that mobilize tribal identities that pre-date colonial times. Yet these discourses are often brought together with other tropes that reify belonging to the nation-state. Tunisian border traders joke that they are sly, in contrast to the perceived naivete of Libyans who 'do not know how to count' or the sternness of Algerians who are too stubborn for business. The co-existence of tropes of transborder belonging with national stereotypes draws attention to the necessity of overlapping scales that produce multiple identities mobilized in different ways at borders.

The gendered aspect of border trade – Aicha in contrast to Salah – bears recalling. It emerges in my own ethnographic inquiry, as a woman conducting research by borders. In bringing Salah's story – typically masculine – to the forefront, I highlight the importance of gender without pretending that it means an ethnography of women. Instead, it is precisely the gender essentialisms that render borderscapes generative sites from which to unpack gender. For example, it is because women are perceived by male customs agents as less threatening than men that they get mobilized as traffickers too.

1 The *khatt* (line) refers to a specific Tunisia-Libya border road but interestingly gets used as synonymous of "border" across Tunisian borderscapes.

2 'Brother-brother', a popular expression used between Algerians and Tunisians.

Yet borders produce new forms of gendered domination. At the Libyan border, women from the poorest governorates like Sidi Bouzid, unable to find work in agriculture, move to Ben Gardane and work as fuel smugglers. Often, they do not own cars and work as drivers under the supervision of men. This kind of exploitative labour mirrors that of female agricultural workers who have become a public symbol of gender exploitation in Tunisia in recent years (cf. Garraoui, this volume). Precisely because the border is still imagined as a specifically male space, these women are invisibilised. In contrast, Aicha, whose story opens the chapter, uses the border to her own advantage, playing with the price differences between Tunisia and Algeria to make an income. Her border labour is embedded in a kinship network where she is a matriarch and provider. Salah, too, exists at the border because of his familial relations that stretch across border lines. These stories, from Salah to Aicha, to the women in Ben Gardane, reveal how borders operate similarly to other spaces of circulation, playing representations against each other and using social networks as the basis of exchange.

Commodities Moving Through Border Regimes

Moving from Salah himself to Salah's work helps consider the many modalities of exchange, and circulation encompassed under the notion of border economy. Salah is not really solely a trafficker. He does everything, transportation, manual labour, a few businesses here and there, and the smuggling of red coral or electronics from Algeria. He used to at least. He swore off trafficking these days after his car was seized at the border last winter, making him run from one court to another and pay a large fine in order to get his beaten-up white Isuzu back. As Maxim Bolt (2012) has shown for the Zimbabwe-South Africa border, the entanglements between formal and informal labour are central to the making of borders, as 'unregulated business and law-bound waged employment constitute one another' (117). Indeed, most petty contraband traffickers deploy their activities across a spectrum that blurs the distinctions between formal, informal, and illegal.

As Salah once explained, every border village has its informal entryways controlled by village men that traffickers have to negotiate with. Trafficking worked differently before, when the border posts of Melloula in the North of Tunisia and Hammam Bourguiba near the town of Aïn Drahem were sites of open corruption, as traffickers always accounted for the *rashwa* (bribe) for Algerian and Tunisian officials. According to local tales, the high days of contraband were during the years of the revolution from 2010 to 2011 when police forces were terrified to even argue with young men crossing and the focus on other regions left the Northwest at peace. Today, things are very different. Most traffickers lament the progressive and growing criminalization of harmless border smuggling. They noticed how much more suspicious authorities have grown, banning trucks without a commercial patent, and restricting access to single men traveling alone. Then with the Covid-19 pandemic, the border shut completely which rendered smuggling through mountain routes even more dangerous as the military was deployed across both sides.

Border economies exist in entanglements with local, national, and global processes that have transformed economic dynamics at borders and elsewhere. The temporalities of border regimes are central to understanding the shifting processes of circulation. Key

moments like the opening of the Tunisia-Libya border after 1987, mark material and ideological transformations in cross-border trade (Meddeb 2020). Border workers of all sorts often evoke that moment as the turning point for the transformation of southern border areas. The date does not mean cross-border trade was absent before but rather denotes the production of temporalities by social actors to make sense of their own trajectories at borders. In a similar vein, the time of the revolution not only marks national collective imaginaries but ones at borders too. The period of uncertainty that followed the events of December 2010 and January 2011 intensified smuggling as traders and traffickers took advantage of the reshuffling of the police state. At the same time, the period of the revolution gets romanticized and removed from the global processes of border surveillance that have increased not just in Tunisia but in the region in the past decade often under the cover of security. Finally, the pandemic of Covid-19 marked borders anew as states closed their frontiers altogether. The Tunisian-Algerian border which remained closed for more than two years is particularly illustrative as its closure coincided with what Algerians call 'a revenge for the *hirak*'[3] where the health situation became an excuse for state control.

Because of how dangerous smuggling became during the pandemic, only high-return goods circulated, mainly drugs, fuel, medicine, and red coral. Recently Salah's village became a hotspot of an investigation around the death of an Algerian man who was trafficking pills with young men from the Tunisian side. The rumours were that the Algerians came without the money hoping to rip off the Tunisians, who responded by throwing rocks at them. One of the rocks hit an Algerian, killing him instantly. The investigation was from the Algerian side but they quickly sent Tunisian police units to the village to find the perpetrator. 'They'll close in on us even more now', Salah says sighing. 'There's no work in *contra* and there's no future at this border'.

To see borders from the perspective of the state seldom attends to the layered processes that both make and break borders. Following Schendel and Abraham (2005), I locate the extent to which borders are sites of anxiety for the state. Through economic practices that take the border as a site of exchange and accumulation, we come to understand that it is perhaps too simplistic to imagine the state as anxious or all-empowering at its borders. Instead, economic arrangements deploy state agents as part and parcel of the *political economy of borderscapes*. Accepting bribes or looking away is not a Tunisian, authoritarian, or Arab state agent's particularity. The nature of borders themselves requires this incommensurable gap between representation and practice. A border is excessive in the sense that it is essential for representational power at the same time as a glance at this scale reveals layered and complex processes which escape representations. Borders, because they are excessive, also unsettle the imagined homogeneity and coherence of the state. State agents come into daily contradictions with state imperatives to police and control the border, showing how one should locate the state as a site of fragmented institutions organizing social actors with contradicting agendas.

The border, rather than a fixed category, changes temporally, spatially, and in relation to the governance of states and global regimes. The broader context of a border informs the political economy of circulation and exchange at borders.

3 Expression from a research interview. The *hirak* was a social movement in Algeria in 2019.

Against State Representations

'*Irhab* and *tahrib* are two different words for a reason' explains one of the panellists.

Next to me, Marouene's body moves closer to me as his fingers touch my bare arm. He pinches me. I jump in my seat, then look around the room alarmed to see if anyone saw my body rising from the chair and back. I turn towards him. He winks at me and whispers. 'It's what we were talking about this morning'. I sigh, smile, and cover with my hand my bare arm where the trace of the pinch has turned into a pink-red spot on my skin. Marouene owns a money-changing shop in the town of Ben Gardane, a mere twenty kilometres from the border with Libya, and the main hub for cross-border trade in Tunisia. The informal money-changing shops occupy the city centre and are open 24/7, serving Libyan families, all types of traders, and diasporic Tunisians from the south. The main street of Ben Gardane is filled all day with cars coming in and going to the nearby border post of Ras Gadir. Cars with Libyan plates often have families inside them, at times three generations packed into the same vehicle and at others young men cruising in their brand-new vehicles. The cars with Tunisian plates look different, old automobiles and broken pickups that do not have paperwork, some literally held together by ropes, and all going into Libya to be filled with fuel, which will be sold all across the Tunisian south. Some cars stop on the road as the passengers roll down their windows asking money-changers a single question, 'how much?'. Marouene turns to the customers, as his accent switches from the Ben Gardani tone to a perfect Libyan dialect, while giving them today's Libyan to Tunisian Dinar exchange rate.

That day we were sitting in the conference room of the municipality of Ben Gardane. It was not a typical day in town. It was the 7th of March, the anniversary of the commemoration of the Ben Gardane attacks in 2016, when a group of terrorists entered with weapons through Libya hoping to take over the surrounding area. The date is inscribed as a moment of local patriotism as the town inhabitants turned against the invaders and helped the military stop the attack. To commemorate the event, a think tank organized a panel under the theme 'legacies of the Ben Gardane attack'. One of the speakers discussed the difference between *irhab* (terrorism) and *tahrib* (smuggling). The two words sound similar, an irony of linguistics, yet they are different, in terms of origin and more importantly in terms of meaning. The speaker lamented that state authorities stuck in the capital and with very little knowledge or concern with southern regions confused the thriving economy with terrorism and only applied criminalization policies to the border town. 'Yes, sometimes the routes traffickers take are the same as the terrorists', evoking the intricate desert routes taken by white Isuzus filled with cartons containing smuggled goods, from cigarettes to female underwear. The panellist acknowledged that perhaps traffickers themselves smuggled illegal and dangerous objects, weapons, and drugs. Yet *irhab* was not *tahrib* and should be managed differently by the state. The linguistic slippages at play here highlight the constitutive relations between representations and reality. Much like the photographs of the customs office presented earlier, the state deploys – through devices, ranging from images to stories and expressions – representations that perceive what happens at borders as threats to the nation-state. In this state discourse, border economies become sites of lawlessness where criminals rather than traders smuggle Tunisia's wealth out of the country.

People from border regions often understand their geographies within a history of marginalization by the postcolonial state who helped develop the capital and the country's coast. Many people at the border compare the processes of surveillance they are confronted with, to the leniency toward elite corruption in the capital, which itself often mobilizes the border for wealth accumulation. In shifting from the border with Algeria to the border with Libya, I highlight how these borders interact with conceptions of the state that present border economies as inherently suspicious.

The border of a state is an essential device of territorial sovereignty to assert the nation-state. Historically Tunisia's borders were not defined, as many political units extended beyond today's borders, and were instead constituted through lineage and tribal affiliations. Both in East and West, Tunisia's borders were fixed through international treaties in the 1980s showing how the work of tracing the border-line is a contemporary ideological work, that produces the nation and the power of the state within that scale. Borders matter analytically because they are sites for the exercise of state power and have 'power effects' (Foucault 1991). Their constitutions through policing, surveillance and containment is an expression of state control. However, it is not enough to say that borders exist as ideological and performative power structures. They have been instilled socially too, as shown by the plethora of terms and expressions referring to borders. For example, the border is often named as line (*khatt*) and as limit (*hadd*). *Khatt* and *hadd* become particularly fruitful entry points to explore the contrast between borders as surface or as depth. In *khatt*, the line is surface, it is shallow and flimsy while in the *hadd* it is deep and marks a stopping point, where the border becomes a limit. The usage of the two words shows how borders can both be 'shallow' and 'deep'. The border is both surface and process, it is a line, meaning it can be traversed, but also a limit meaning it (en)closes a space, that of the nation-state.

Marouene – the money-changer in Ben Gardane – made a fuss about the usage of words that depicted the border, the region, and the economy. Sometimes the words were synonymous, the *khatt* (the line) and *hadd* (the border) playing off one another. Goods circulating were so multifarious they could not possibly all fall under the category of 'contraband good' or even 'cross-border commodity'. The list was immense as were the hundreds of warehouses, shops, and stalls that made up the urban fabric of Ben Gardane (cf. Shâfi'i, this volume). Markets filled with comforters, cloth, and furniture, shops stacking AC units and refrigerators, and warehouses with foreign chocolate or cigarette packs. The 'traders', 'smugglers', and 'traffickers' also came in all shapes and forms. Marouene pointed at different cars on the road, some with veiled middle-aged women from Sidi Bouzid smuggling fuel, while other women, well-dressed and with a driver, made their way to the main Libyan cities to buy make-up for their stores in Tunis. Men, from the thin and nervous young adults who recklessly drove Isuzus at night, to pot-bellied men with expensive watches who already made their fortune in the trade and only handled the contraband money these days. In pointing out to me the myriads of people and transactions that make border trade, Marouene was in a sense acutely aware of how representations of borders have consequences. In *Border as a Method* (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) the authors lament the representation of the border as a wall and show how even in 'walled borders' labour and goods are constantly circulating. Rather, they wish to shift our perceptions of borders beyond the state discourses to see how borders are sites for the 'mul-

tiplication of labour' (ibid. 21). Borders constitute scales for global accumulation beyond – at times – the border regime in place. Yet, by solely dismissing the representations of borders to show the thick social lives underneath, we perhaps forget the entanglements between representations and realities. The representations of borders produce not only reactions from people living at borders but shift their very modes of dwelling in these spaces too.

Conclusion

An ethnography of circulation and exchange in a space often becomes – sometimes despite itself – a story of people. Here, Aicha, Salah, Marouene, and countless unnamed others make up the fabric of the border. The entanglements of their everyday are always co-constituted with representations – the border as lawless and threatening – that produce varying strategies to survive and thrive near borders. Using the triad of person-commodity-discourse as a theoretical device reveals what makes the political economy of borderscapes beyond hegemonic discourses on border economies. Away from representations that set border economies as sites of radical difference, ethnographic insights at Tunisia's borders show instead variegated processes that ought to be historicised and spatialised. Instead forms of circulation and exchange bring different scales together and offer new insights into processes that pass through borders but cannot be confined to them. Moreover, they highlight how border economies engage socio-political processes, people as well as state and global institutions.

Economic processes 'passing' through borders are particularly generative sites from which to study/unsettle borders. Economic processes help foreground notions of circulation, movement, categorization, and criminalization. They also reveal the overlap of scales, both scales of circulation but also ideological scales that produce spaces inside borders as 'national economy' and spaces outside as 'contra(band) economy'. The border economy encapsulates such radically different forms of circulation, actors, and objects that it bears the question of its relevance as a scale. Economic circulations are never solely across borders but rather traverse borders to pass across different sites and scales. It is by taking the border economy as an 'uneasy' analytic that we see the mutual constitution of legal and illegal, and the shifting spectrums from licit to illicit. Instead, the political economy of borderscapes reveals the power effects invested in representations that mark what happens at the border as an inversion – if not threat – of what happens within the 'national economy'. The national economy, a reified bounded unit, that produces a specific kind of knowledge and power effects, in some way loves its borders, as a site from which not only anxieties but fantasies and desires for power and accumulation are crystallized. Perhaps borders matter because they mobilize drama – through sensational representations as exceptionalised spaces – and banality – routine everyday practices – both of which make these flimsy lines into borders.