‘I am From Busia!’: Everyday Trading and Health Service Provision at the Kenya-Uganda Border as Place-Making Activities

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Abstract

Critical researchers in anthropology, politics, and history have profited from the spatial turn, or the idea that spaces produced through practices and perceptions influence observable social action, in showing how people at borders derive specific economic and social benefits from their unique location. This is especially relevant in African border contexts where state presence is often modified or resisted by local agendas. However, less work examines how cross-border activities, locally-held perceptions, and geographic location interact to generate different versions of what it means to ‘be at’ a border for border-crossers and residents themselves. This paper, in responding to calls for interdisciplinary and multiperspectival approaches to border studies, argues that theorizing border towns as dynamic ‘places’ clarifies how individuals impact and construct different meanings at and across borders. It empirically develops this idea by examining two spheres of everyday activity occurring at the Kenya-Uganda border: cross-border trade and health service provision.

Introduction

> The tracing and tracking of who we are and where we belong, has, for many of us, increasingly become a question rather than a priori given. It is not without coincidence perhaps that in this time of high trans-spatial mobility that questions like ‘where are you from?’, ‘where are you now?’ are so often heard these days. These are surely interesting geographical times. (Ernste, Van Houtum, and Zoomers 2009, 578)

The border crossing at Busia, Uganda is alive with activity. Iron gates do little to slow the hurried flow of people moving back and forth. Officials dressed in olive green uniforms gesture at truckers to come down from their cabs for inspection. Bicyclists in bright pink shirts balance passengers and huge sacks while shouting to clear the way. I enter the Ugandan migration office with questions running through my mind. Who are these people? Why are they crossing? A migration official examines my passport, scanning its data into a computer. “Where are you going? Kampala?” she asks. “No, I am staying in Busia, Uganda, right across the border,” I replied. Incredulous, she looks up. “Why? There is nothing here!”

In actuality, Busia belongs to a pair of lively and fast-growing towns straddling the Kenya-Uganda border and situated along the Northern Corridor trucking route from Nairobi to Kampala. The southern section of the boundary between the countries was set in 1902 when the former Eastern Province of Uganda was transferred to the East African Protectorate, now Kenya (Pirouet 1995). Samia and Teso ethnic groups present in the region continued to live on both sides (Soja 1968). The contemporary political economic significance of this location is illustrated by the fact that, at least

in the Ugandan case, the state elevated its status from Sub-District to a separate District in 1997 (BDLG 2009).

Furthermore, the towns' location at the conjoining of two East African Community (EAC) Common Market member states increases its importance at the regional scale, drawing attention from past Ugandan and Kenyan presidents (Lorch 1994) and state 'revenue protection units' of border security officers charged to crack down on undocumented trade (Whyte and Muyinda 2007). When the EAC Common Market was formally launched on 1 July 2010, at least on paper it aimed to "eas[e] border crossing for member of Partner States…and harmoniz[e] immigration procedures" (EAC 2009, 6). Removal of formal borders was heralded as a way to facilitate freer movement of goods and people—which in turn would improve the overall economic development of the region. One of Uganda's leading daily newspapers expressed this sentiment with the accompanying image seen in Figure 1.

[Figure 1. Newspaper Image of EAC Borders Being 'Cut'**]**

> At 3:00 PM today, a map of East Africa with ribbons on the borders will be presented before the ambassadors of Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda at the Kampala Sheraton Hotel. Each of the ambassadors will then cut the ribbon at the border post of their country…The picturesque gesture will symbolize the turning of a historic page in the region's long voyage to a single East African government with the commencement of the common market. Governments and responsible ministries across the region are embracing the epic moment with optimism because of the opportunity for growth and wealth it will present. (Mugabe 2010)

This excerpt and image, when combined with the ostensible aims of the EAC agreement, embody two persistent ideas: that borders are discrete, physical constraints that can be 'cut' to allow easier passage, and that there is a link between removing these kinds of borders and gains in state-led economic development.

Yet, much of the contemporary literature on borders provides evidence that complicates such arguments. Within political geography, critical interrogation of cartographic representations of territories has revealed how borders are not just 'lines in the sand' (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009) but also sites of contestation and cooperation (Scott 2003). Anthropologists, concerned with manifestations of power and identity, have also problematized linear conceptions of geopolitical borders (Donnan and Wilson 2001), exposing deeper relationships between borders and residents that do not correspond to traditional notions of the 'nation-state'.

These perspectives confront the persistent views of international borders as natural limits of territory (Agnew 1994) or rendered superfluous by either globalization (Ohmae 1994) or transnational networks (Castells 2000). Indeed, these largely Eurocentric characterizations are less applicable in Africa where states' capacities to locate and enforce their borders are diminished (Bakewell 2007). Instead, processes of globalization actually open new spaces and ways in which people can manage, reshape, and ignore what appear to be clear lines on official maps (Brunet-Jailly 2011; Rumford 2010). It is apparent that "borders increasingly are interfaces between

people that show themselves and are represented contingently" (Ernste, Van Houtum, and Zoomers 2009, 578). As a result, Megoran, Raballand, and Bouyuou rightly warn that "it is always a danger that political-discursive studies of boundaries will overlook or displace economic considerations, fail to come to terms with everyday experiences of negotiating borders, or miss out important general elements in the equation that may be place specific" (2005, 735). In a similar vein, Engel and Nugent observe there is need for better understanding "the nature of material borders and the social processes around this" (2010, 4). At the theoretical level, these kinds of concerns have been captured in calls for 'multiperspectival study of borders' that "draw[s] attention to the fact that some borders remain invisible, not usually to those on the outside but those living within" (Rumford 2012, 897).

However, little research actually articulates this multiperspectival approach through empirical analysis of place-specific and everyday border experiences: when the comment of the Ugandan official—'there is nothing here!'—is juxtaposed with the vibrant reality just outside the door, it draws attention to the ways that borders take on a multiplicity of meanings for different people. Specifically, it points to a series of questions that serve as the guiding lines of enquiry for this paper. What does it mean to be at a border? What feelings and experiences contribute to these meanings? Finally, in what ways do these ground-level observations align with—as well as contest—socioeconomic forces operating at and through wider international scales?

First, I outline current thinking on space via the 'spatial turn' that has heightened the significance of border studies. Then, I review how this has been applied to study of African borders, focusing on its limitations for fully understanding everyday dimensions of border life. This leads me to argue that a dynamic theoretical framework of 'place' begins to enact a multiperspectival approach to border theory by showing how location, materiality of borders, and everyday perceptions and practices intersect to generate different senses of what it means to 'be at' a border. I illustrate this through two different spheres of border activity especially salient in Busia, Uganda and Busia, Kenya: legal and covert trading, and health service provision. These spheres, I argue, are both embedded within and contribute towards wider perceptions about border life, Finally, I conclude by arguing that the strength of interdisciplinary and multiperspectival approaches to border studies lies in their ability to accommodate the changing nature of borders rather than assuming their disappearance altogether (Johnson et al. 2011).

Methodology and data sources

To understand how a range of people perceived and derived meaning from being at the border, I conducted 28 semi-structured ethnographic interviews with local residents including teachers and hospital staff, border officials, and traders.[1] These were accompanied and informed by extensive participant observation throughout the towns and at the physical border crossing. Furthermore, I held focus groups with Ugandan and Kenyan women's groups, *boda boda* or bicycle taxi drivers, and long-haul truck drivers. A concluding focus group at the end of the fieldwork brought together many of the participants to discuss preliminary findings and provide feedback as a vital reliability check.

The spatial turn and African border studies

Escobar asserts that "Western philosophy…has enshrined space as the absolute, unlimited and universal, while banning place to the realm of the particular, the limited, the local and the bound" (2001, 143). Such treatment takes spatial units like territory as 'natural' objects of study. Until the 1990s, this was the dominant narrative of space, especially in political science and its sub-discipline of international relations.[2] After Agnew (1994) challenged social scientists to avoid this 'territorial trap', Brenner also called for space to be considered "no longer as a static platform of social relations, but rather as one of their constitutive dimensions, itself historically produced, reconfigured, and transformed" (1999, 40).

Current theorizing on space views it as "the product of social practices and conventions which in themselves are the result of symbolic and discursive acts" (Engel and Nugent 2010, 2). Space is not 'natural' but rather created, modified, and undone by human activities (Cresswell 2004, 30). Likewise, spaces are not containers or environments in which social activities occur: rather, they are actively appropriated and given meaning (Eva 1998; Paasi 2003). Warf and Arias, surveying how this 'spatial turn' has changed social scientific and humanistic research, explain that these statements are significant because they derive from the realization that "*where* events unfold is integral to *how* they take shape" (2009, 10, italics original). Interdisciplinary and 'critical' approaches are particularly concerned with processes that reinscribe as well as destabilize existing economic, social, and political configurations across a range of spaces (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007).

These insights on space have impacted border studies in several relevant ways. First, it has renewed critical interest in African borders across disciplines (Newman 2006). As the fixity of territory was questioned, the 'ideal' nation-state defined by physical land was also subject to criticism. Anthropological attention turned towards the "emergence of new theatres where other [non-state led] agendas may thrive" (Engel and Nugent 2010, 3) especially at 'margins' like geographic borders (Das and Poole 2004; Feyissa and Hoehne 2010). Also, the spatial turn stimulated economic and political studies examining the transformation of African border towns and their relation to 'centers' of capital and power (Konrad and Nicol 2011). Borders were seen "less [as] a boundary dividing [contiguous border towns] into two nations than a bridge linking them in mutual dependence…by centralizing their marginality in their economic strategies and through common border experience" (Flynn 1997, 315). Historical studies also illustrated how these kinds of practices had persisted, documenting how Africans in these contexts often could "exploit the ambiguities of their border location to the full" (Nugent and Asiwaju 1996, 9-10) in ways not be possible in interior settlements or capital cities (le Meur 2006; Nugent 2002). Retheorization of space as a constituent element of social relations shed new light on differences *among* spaces, rather than treating territory as a uniform object.

However, these approaches to space still arguably do not go far enough in capturing the complexity and significance of borders. For example, there is a tendency to take the object of a border for granted, and then focus on the instrumental or extractive dimensions of border crossing (Diener and Hagen 2009). Failing to interrogate the very meaning of a border comes at the expense of ignoring deeper, more complex relationships between people and borders (Amin and Thrift 1994; O'Dowd 2010).

This reinscribes all-encompassing narratives of 'borderless worlds' (Ohmae 1994) via globalization.

Furthermore, identification and repeated reference to a range of 'spaces' reifies categories like 'center' and 'margin': by "encouraging us to look to space first, and borders second…the spatial turn may work to subordinate borders to spaces, as if the former were somehow dependent upon a prior spatial ordering" (Rumford 2010, 166). Rather, as Konrad and Nicol (2011) argue using their study of border culture at the US-Canada border, new theoretical approaches to borders should be predicated upon a critical and pluralistic understanding of borders' social and cultural dimensions.

Finally, geographers warn of going too far with this post-modern, constructivist enterprise altogether. Sack argues that "privileging the social in modern geography, and especially in the reductionist sense that 'everything is socially constructed,' does as much disservice to geographical analysis as a whole as has privileging the natural in the days of environmental determinism" (1997, 2). Heyman (1994) also cautions anthropologists from using the term 'borderland' to describe any interaction characterized by social difference regardless of the presence of a spatial element. Such wide usage means that conceptions of space, as well as borders, have become "blurred in popular usage" (Alvarez Jr. 1995, 448).

Theoretical framework: 'place' and borders

While the lens of space is useful for understanding processes and activities in a critical sense, I argue that using a dynamic theorization of 'place' augments conventional social and economic analyses of borders by strengthening the links among location, activities, and meanings. Specifically, these links are vital for understanding how different meanings of 'being at' borders are created, modified, and sustained. Such theoretical insight, while established in human geography, is usefully applied to border studies. In this section, I outline what such a theoretical framework of 'place' looks like.

Agnew (1993) articulates three features of all places. First, places have a geographic location: regardless of scale or size, they exist somewhere in space. Second, they physically manifest the effects of wider economic and social processes. Gieryn explains that "place is stuff. It is a compilation of things or objects at some particular spot in the universe" (2000, 465). Finally, places are characterized by the investment of meanings, values, and memories; they are able to contain and convey subjective feelings. 'Place' as a concept "refers to discrete if 'elastic' areas in which settings for the constitution of social relations are located and with which people can identify" (Agnew 1993, 263).

Places come into existence as people "ascribe qualities to the material and social stuff gathered there: ours or theirs, safe or dangerous; public or private; unfamiliar or known; rich or poor; Black or White; beautiful or ugly; new or old; accessible or not" (Gieryn 2000, 472). Processes of place-making are ripe for analysis because "it remains the case that where we are—the place we occupy, however briefly—has everything to do with what and who we are…Your locus deeply influences what you perceive and what you expect to be the case" (Casey 1993, xiii). As people act upon

their perceptions and expectations, they "stabilize and give durability to social structural categories, differences and hierarchies; arrange patterns of face-to-face interaction that constitute network-formation and collective action; [and] embody and secure otherwise intangible cultural norms" (Gieryn 2000, 473). Everyday routines and activities, therefore, are like a practical 'glue' that holds places together (Pred 1984). Put more fundamentally, the significance of place derives from the fact that "we do not live in 'space'" (Gibson 1986) but rather 'in places'.

How places are created and changed

In this section, I elaborate how everyday perceptions and practices bring definition to places. Cultural geographers have long studied how the ways in which things and people are organized reflect implicit perceptions and interpretations (Anderson and Gale 1992; Cresswell 2004). Places can "sustain difference and hierarchy by routinizing daily rounds in ways that exclude and segregate categories of people, and by embodying in visible and tangible ways the cultural meanings variously ascribed to them" (Gieryn 2000, 473). Yet, places also bring people and objects together, leaving open the possibility of engagement and cooperation (Sennet 1990). Also, as people accumulate memories and expectations in places, they can generate bonds to them: "we associate places with the fulfilling, terrifying, traumatic, triumphant, secret events that happened to us personally there" (Gieryn 2000, 481). Places can also influence the formation of identities by stirring up feelings of pride or shame, for instance, because people had attachments and experiences there.

However, one is not historically bound to where one came from. Rather, it is more accurate to think of places as 'becoming', as processes. Doreen Massey captures this angle, explaining "there is the specificity of place which derives from the fact that each place is the focus of a distinct *mixture* [emphasis original] of wider and more local social relations. There is the fact that this very mixture together in one place may produce effects which would not have happened otherwise" (1997, 323). Therefore, since places "gather things, thoughts, and memories in particular configurations" (Escobar 2001, 143) within a wider spatial context, the multifaceted appreciation of places which I am advocating views them as dynamic events that are never quite identical or permanent over time.

Place and 'being at' borders

Keeping their attention on the ways by which spaces are created and reshaped through everyday activity, critical spatial theorists had emphasized the constructed nature of space as vital for understanding social phenomena. However, social construction necessitates some sort of platform upon which it can occur. As geographic philosophers like Casey argue, place is exactly such a platform—a way of 'being in the world' (Casey 1993)—albeit unstable and itself the product of struggle and re-imagination (Cresswell 2004, 39). The blocks of this platform consist of geographic location, manifestations of economic or social processes, and the investment of meanings.

Using this framework of place helps to more fully analyze how geographic location, material forms, and intangible perceptions contribute towards a mutable 'sense of being' at borders. As locations, perceptions, and practices vary, they generate multiple meanings for different people over time. Therefore, when applied to border studies, this theoretical approach disrupts sweeping generalizations about the nature

and functions of borders in the face of sustained change: places—especially borders—will not disappear and lose their significance (Arreola 1996). Rather, they will be reconstructed and re-imagined in ways that reflect how different people use, perceive, and interact with them (Virilio 1999; Flynn 1997).

Therefore, conceptualizing borders as dynamic places that are constituted by, and interact with material and intangible elements enables one to see how they are "historical—and, just as much, economic and political, social and ethnic—and, in all these various respects, contingent upon human beliefs and actions" (Casey 2011, 390). Indeed, when Rumford calls for social scientists to "think from borders" (2010, 167) he draws vital attention to the multitude of borders—physical, mental, social—which increasingly do not always co-exist with traditional spatial categories and yet bear upon everyday lived experience to greater degrees (Balibar 2002). Inclusion of place theory, I argue, contributes to new approaches in border theory because it acknowledges how both the materiality and temporality of border experiences transcend conventional geographic, methodological, and disciplinary categories to create a plurality of border meanings (Raeymaekers and Jourdan 2009).

While this theoretical insight highlights the importance of borders' ambiguity and multiplicity (Lentz 2003) it raises a vital empirical question: how are border locations constituted by, and give expression to variegated meanings and feelings? In the following section, I explore how two different spheres of activity salient in the lives of people in Busia—legal and covert trading, and health service provision—in order to empirically demonstrate how the concept of 'place' can open a multiperspectival approach to understanding the significance of borders.

Border trade and health service provision as place-making

Economists use the concept of an 'arbitrage economy' to explain how residents derive material benefits from borders. Differentials in prices and availability of goods and services on either side cause buying and selling patterns to align themselves along these axes. Leamer (2007) suggests that borders function as barriers between two unequally 'filled' containers representing the need for goods and services. If the barrier is raised, then the levels should equalize. Until this happens, people will move between these containers to take advantage of both real and perceived differences. Therefore, according to this logic, people cross borders to access lower prices (Anderson and O'Dowd 1999). However, I argue this alignment is not always straightforward, especially when residents try to negotiate access to services. Furthermore, this overly instrumental and state-centric view of the border ignores other drivers of movement that are rooted in elements of place. In the following two subsections, I describe how arbitrage in two spheres—trade and health service provision—is complicated and even reversed by other social and economic factors. Then, in the subsequent section, I discuss how it is during these moments of friction that people express their perceptions of the border—and therefore shed light on what it means to 'be at' the border.

Trade as economic arbitrage

Trading practices feature prominently in the border literature (Wekesa 2010). The most visible kind of trading activity in Busia involves long-haul trucks. Trucking facilitates the exchange of largely agricultural goods grown in Uganda for

manufactured goods made in Kenya. As a checkpoint along the Mombasa-Kampala route, Busia is where goods are inspected and taxes are applied based on their declared value. Data describing the contents being transported are electronically transmitted by the sending company to the revenue collection authorities at the station. This information is compared to the truck in a 're-verification' process that sometimes includes 'spiking', or the piercing of bags to check their contents. Electronic verification is relatively new in Busia, have only been introduced in 2009. Prior to this time, paper documents were sent to the revenue authorities. Delays in delivery, therefore, meant that truckers commonly waited up to five days in Busia before they could be 'cleared' for movement. Although some truckers expressed appreciation of the new system—overall stopping times have generally fallen to two days or less—frequent power outages often disrupt the service.

Trucks traveling eastward into Kenya deliver maize, beans, and soya to commodity markets in Busia, Uganda. Here, men pack them into 90 kilogram sacks and mark them with different colored symbols depending on their origin and content. Observation at the Ugandan commodity market revealed how middlemen traders, primarily hired by purchasing companies in Kenya, negotiated with Ugandan sellers to buy these goods and transport them through the border. Middlemen like Jonas depend upon payment, often commissions, from buyers for their incomes. Giving a hypothetical example, he explained how fluctuations in price make his work as a middleman difficult. Sometimes, his buyer agrees to buy maize at a given price, say 11 Kenyan shillings (KSh) per kilogram. Yet, the price increases to 16 KSh later that day—before the maize can be shipped. Although he reports this difference to the buyer, it is unlikely to be paid because the buyer already agreed to the lower price. "So then I have to discuss with my partners," he explained. "Ok, today we work for free. That money, that 5 shillings, has to come from our pay" (Jonas, interview). Despite these issues, increasing Kenyan demand for agricultural goods means that the commodity market in Busia, Uganda is quickly expanding to accommodate higher volumes.

[Figure 2. Commodity Market and Delivery Point in Busia, Uganda**]**

These 'legal' trading practices work well for larger companies sending high volumes of goods on a regular basis. However, it is less convenient for smaller businesses that may only need to send a few trucks every month at irregular intervals. Furthermore, there are economic incentives for misrepresenting the actual value of goods being transported. Historically, Busia was a major 'smuggling'[3] town; several informants reported that high value products like cigarettes regularly crossed without taxation. Smaller businesses employ *boda-boda* men to transport orders of agricultural goods stored in the commodity markets to the waiting trucks on the Kenyan side. By dividing these orders into smaller batches and moving around the customs checkpoint via *panyos*, or 'rut' paths in Kiswahili, they avoid having to use trucks that would be searched and taxed at the formal crossing. Though recent crackdowns by revenue authorities aim to reduce this small-scale smuggling, it continues and thrives in different forms:

> It [smuggling] is improving in its tactics. They're using people with disabilities who have these tricycles. They know that even the

> enforcement officers will empathize with them…You'll see they are using children for this smuggling. (Gideon, interview)

Larger-scale smuggling, mostly via trucks, is still embedded into trading practices and the wider political economy of Busia. Jonas explained how he and other agents modified paperwork to suggest that a lower valued good like maize, taxed at 100 KSh per 90 kilograms, was inside a given truck, when in fact it carried a high value good like sugar, taxed at 468 Ksh per 50 kilograms.[4] Pocketing the difference supplemented their income. To avoid its discovery via random spiking, sugar was packed in the back of a truck and covered by legitimate sacks of maize. However, Jonas was quick to differentiate between 'tax dodging', what he did, and true 'smuggling': "if you leave that job [smuggling] there will still be others who are willing to take that risk. Most of the agents are here to just dodge tax" (Jonas, interview). Furthermore, he reported bribes of 10,000 Kenyan shillings were regularly paid by companies to police officials, a fact corroborated by other traders:

> The police are weak. If they try to do their job, the tycoons [companies] say 'or else we will eat your badge'. Police have to cooperate…The new ones [officers] going now, they are training with the older ones who have been doing this. It is a cycle. (Jonas, interview)

Health service provision: accessing and negotiating with difference

Comparing how arbitrage unfolds in a trading context with services involving the treatment of human bodies themselves reveals how 'crossing' the border does not always result in straightforward outcomes. Rather, the presence of the border both confers valuable benefits to residents in terms of accessing vital services and complicates their delivery by establishing boundaries around who gets access and at which price.

'Health services' encompass the range of small clinics and medical facilities present in both town councils. Busia, Uganda organizes its health services in numerical order with higher Roman numerals indicate increasing scale of available treatments and radius of service provision. Health Centre IV is the highest available centre in Busia District, Uganda. It contains inpatient, outpatient, and maternity facilities for assessing patients and undertaking surgeries. Informal reports from nurses indicated that the centre regularly accommodated 24-30 patients in addition to up to 20 mothers a day. Meanwhile, in Busia, Kenya, services are administered through the Ministry of Health via the district hospital. Able to accommodate over 150 patients and perform diagnostic tests like X-rays, it is larger in size than Health Centre IV. The range of available services and procedures, which is much more comprehensive than that offered in Busia, Uganda, are painted in black lettering on its outer walls next to the entrance gate.

To fund these services, the Kenyan hospital engages in a cost-sharing scheme where patients contribute towards a portion of their care. Drugs, if needed but not available in hospital, can be purchased from local chemists. Meanwhile, the Ugandan health system depends on supplies centrally distributed from the government in Kampala. In the opinion of a nurse at Health Centre IV, this approach starves peripheral clinics of drugs and essential treatments: "if you go to the villages outside the town council,

you will see the place yourself. That is not even third world country: you may call it fifth world!" (Anne, observation data).

Given the state of health services in the towns, Ugandans cross into Kenya for two major reasons. First, drugs and services are more available in Busia, Kenya than they are in Busia, Uganda. A doctor at Health Centre IV illustrated from past experience:

> We know Kenya is just a stone throw away from here. So people who could not access medicine for tuberculosis in Uganda can access it in Kenya. It [the border] is very good, because where you lack, the other people have. Also, in the area of blood transfusion. If we do not have blood in Busia, the nearest place is Tororo which is about 23 kilometers away from here, or you have to go to Mbale. Now look at a situation where you have a very sick child, you have a bleeding mother who needs [an] urgent transfusion, and here you don't have blood. And, there are some services which you can't really get unless you go to hospital. In this case, we don't have X-ray machines; ultrasound scanning facilities are not here. So if it were really necessary to have a scan done, you send them to Kenya. (Muhamed, interview)

More gravely, he expressed frustration at what he saw as a chronic lack of funding and distribution capacity: "we have spent almost four months without any supplies. [pause.] Drugs aren't here; we sit and write and patients die" (Muhamed, interview). It was common knowledge among hospital staff that medical supplies in addition to agricultural and manufactured goods were smuggled on a daily basis into Uganda: a hospital worker at the Kenyan District Office admitted that "there's a lot of smuggling of drugs from Kenya to Uganda. I've never seen people smuggling drugs from Uganda to Kenya. Prices are very high" (Alfred, observation data).

Regardless of the legality of their acquisition, even if drugs were available in Uganda there are other factors driving movement across the border for access to health services. Unlike trade, where crossing the border is precipitated and encouraged by a discount in price, healthcare services are expressly marked up for non-residents:

> Researcher: If I were a Ugandan crossing over to Kenya, how would I pay?
> Muhamed: It's written on the notice board: non-Kenyans, double. It's a fact. It is written there. If you are not a Kenyan, you pay double the price.
> Researcher: What do you think of that scheme?
> Muhamed: To me, it is a way of limiting non-Kenyans from accessing their services. Also, to ensure that resources are not taken by other people. It's a way of control.
> Researcher: Do you find that Ugandans are still willing to pay that doubled rate?
> Muhamed: Very willing. You are not going to waste time. This is a border town; people are busy doing business. I cannot afford to waste three hours because I'm sitting in a line waiting for service. People are willing to pay whatever amount for their health because

> they think 'if I get this service in time, I'll be able to compensate the money I have used'.

Even when the costs are higher, perceptions of faster service and convenience in the Kenyan hospital, as well as the immediate availability of vital supplies, drive people to cross. An administrator at the Kenyan District Hospital observed, "services in Uganda are not as developed as here. Just going by what I normally see, if you go to outpatient care here, you will find so many Ugandans. But if you go to Uganda, and ask how many Kenyans, you may find two—unless it is specialized services like those in Tororo" (Farouk, interview).

However, this leads to tensions surrounding questions of fairness. A doctor reported how the hospital struggles to practically accommodate the influx of additional patients within its annual budget:

> We are making our budget based on the population of our district. If this is a person that we did not budget for, now he is coming for the same services. They are supposed to be charged higher. If we are not going to charge him a bit higher, we are likely to have a deficit in covering our entire population…That is when you are planning for 80 people, but you may get 200, especially if there is an outbreak like cholera or TB. (David, interview)

The two-tier pricing scheme, as a response to the reality of residents crossing for access to 'better' health services, is a fierce point of contention. At the final focus group, Farouk, a Kenyan, Bashir, who was a Ugandan representative for truckers, and Gideon, a Ugandan by birth but having family in Kenya, debated the usefulness and 'rightness' of the policy:

> Farouk: We use this money to purchase health services, equipment, and materials. Look at the border crossers: they are not changing in numbers. But from a distance they are benefiting.
> Bashir: But in our projects, we plan for visitors because they are a stone throw away. Put these people, these mobile populations, in the plan!
> Gideon: Yes, there needs to be more focus on health. It's the truth, I'm sorry, but Kenyans don't farm! Yet they eat our Ugandan food. Suddenly it doesn't matter. We don't charge double for food!

This exchange illustrates how the functionality of the border remains central to health service provision. From the perspective of Ugandans who are willing and able to pay, the fact that much-needed tests and supplies are readily available just across the border draws them towards Kenya rather than to more distant Ugandan towns. Yet, Kenyan medical staff and administrators, trying to marshal limited resources in the service of 'their' district, invoke a particular version of the border as a marker of difference to delimit a territorial and social claim. Expectations of crossing to receive competitive prices that might hold in contexts of everyday trade do not necessarily carry over into other spheres like health service provision.

Perceptions of life in the border towns

These trading and healthcare practices contribute to wider perceptions about what it means to be in a border town. To capture these factors, I asked residents to imagine how their lives might change if 'the border' were completely removed, suggesting free movement between Uganda and Kenya with little in the way of obstruction or delay. Several chose to view the border through economic lenses: as one district official considered this situation, he worried Busia would lose its uniqueness as the edge of Uganda:

> The town will not gain anything from that…The maize is collected here because, under this arrangement, this is the end point of Uganda. It has to come here finally to be bulked for export. But if there is no revenue office…people will be at liberty to pick their maize, go and take it there, and other people will be at liberty to come here and pick the maize. It will remain like any other town. (District Official #1, interview)

Yet Susan, a Kenyan woman, expressed what an 'open border' might mean for her future in positive, aspirational terms: "it would be good because I have never been to Kampala before. I could get the opportunity to reach there without any restrictions or big expense" (Susan, Kenyan women's focus group).

Next, I asked what would happen if the border were closed, or if walls—physical or legal—were built with the effect of inhibiting movement. Truckers complained that it would slow down their business and delay their jobs. Teachers also said "we are blessed at the border because we can access goods more easily compared to those in the interior" (Benjamin, interview), partly because their students could access school uniforms at a lower cost from across the border in Kenya (Rose, interview). Medical authorities echoed this sentiment:

> if you compare those clients from the border and those that we are serving from the interior, there is that difference in payment. Those ones from the interior, they have it so hard compared to those ones in town…But these ones in town, because they interact with others across the border, they know. People are more aware. (David, interview)

Though the service-oriented profile of Busia's economy attracts people who want to supplement their incomes, this quality was not unanimously viewed as an asset: *boda-boda* drivers confided that living at the border entailed all sorts of risks including theft and assault because of the perception that they were better off due to the constant transport business (Kenneth, Ugandan *boda-boda* focus group). Jonas, the Kenyan middleman, negatively expressed what it was like to live in Busia and be involved in trade:

> Life at the border is not easy. If things go wrong in Uganda, we are still affected…If you gave these people [traders, middlemen] the chance to move elsewhere, I bet 90% would choose to leave because of what they have seen…You have to risk to live at the border. I know because I was born here; I was raised here. So I wake up every

> morning, and I say ‘be strong. One day you won’t be here’. (Jonas, interview)

These findings point to the kernel that lies at the heart of this discussion: what does it mean to ‘go across’ this border? By widening the concept of arbitrage to recognize that people carry with them ideas about what the ‘other side’ is like and subsequently make decisions informed by these ideas, I argue that reducing their agency to ‘making do’ misses the larger point: these perceptions and activities are both reflective of, and constitute Busia as a particular place in which residents and migrants live.

Additionally, it would be incorrect to conclude that arbitrage activities are wholly socially constructed and limited in scope to this location. While these individuals bring meaning into exchanges through their motivations for crossing at whichever frequency they choose, they are connected to other non-state sellers, producers, and owners of capital located elsewhere—Kampala, Mombasa, ‘the interior’. Instead, residents negotiate among competing perceptions, needs, and situations in an iterative fashion that occurs on an everyday basis. Through these processes, they create and shape the border towns as dynamic places characterised by permeability and mixed advantage.

These processes extend beyond the confines of a given arena—an observation implied through my first conversation at the Ugandan security office: ‘where are you going? There is nothing here!’ Geographers using the concept of ‘place’ also demand that social scientists recognize that multiple scales overlap and intersect (McDowell 1999). For instance, individual truckers moving goods across East Africa are situated within a transnational—even global—economic framework that links regions together (Castells 2000).

Conclusion: ‘I am from Busia!’

By exploring everyday trade at the Kenya-Uganda border, I have demonstrated how residents view the border as a marker of differences in terms of price and availability of goods or services. To an extent, the existence of the border is a large reason for exchange occurring in the first place: without differences in currency, prices, and availability, arbitrage in the economic sense would not happen to a similar degree. Furthermore, individuals seeking employment often migrate to Busia knowing that informal opportunities in services like hotels, bars, and *boda-boda* transport are readily available.

However, arbitrage activities in Busia are not merely exchanges mapped onto a static geographic feature called ‘the border’. Rather, they involve a host of secondary players operating a variety of scales, including family members, companies in Kampala and Nairobi, and national ministries that set regulations. Furthermore, using arbitrage as a kind of analytical shorthand ignores the range of feelings and perceptions associated with both crossing and living in the border towns. Indeed, crossing the border also entails transgressing an important invisible boundary between ‘those people’ originating from the other side and ‘ourselves’—which, most explicitly in the case of the Kenyan two-tier pricing structure for health services, carries material consequences.

Responding to a need for showing the multiperspectival signifcance of borders (Rumford 2012), I also argued that place theory reveals how residents and migrants derive multiple meanings out of the everyday process of going across the border. This augments the contributions of border scholars using theories of space by strengthening the links between observable activities and perceptions, location, and feelings. Instead of characterizing border towns as discrete points along a busy trade route or as territorial points of entry, I engaged with residents and migrants to reveal how their perceptions and activities also conveyed differing versions of what it meant to be at the border. The matter-of-fact, almost offhand, remarks of Bashir who represented truckers' needs amplifies this conclusion:

> I move around with my business. People, they know I am from Busia, from a border town. So they always ask me, 'Bashir, where are you from? Are you from Uganda, or are you from Kenya?' I don't know where I come from. I just say that I am from Busia! (Bashir, focus group)

When asked to choose between two locations as his preferred origin, he chose neither. The attempts to 'pin him down' to a country fail because traditional territorial 'containers' merge, fold, and interact to form a wholly different place at the border (Raeymaekers and Jourdan 2009). Sometimes this process is fraught with tensions appealing to and reinscribing perceived differences between 'us' and 'them'. At other times, people completely circumvent physical borders via *panyo* routes because landforms, legal loopholes, and economic imperatives form valuable conduits of stable, resilient connections.

Hence, a multiperspectival and interdisciplinary appreciation of borders that challenges conventional ideas of territoriality actually "facilitates and enables an empowering understanding of subject and place as well as a normative framework that builds on the shifting of territories, identities and citizenship" (Ernste, Van Houtum, and Zoomers 2009, 581). This opens new ontological and methodological possibilities for theorists who are concerned with the ways that borders are being reshaped by everyday practices as well as global forces (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009). Yet, for residents like Bashir, the experiences of crossing over and being at the border combine in response to a fundamental and persistent geographical question: where are you from? His answer—'I am from Busia!'—testifies to the fact that we live in places, not spaces. Therefore, theoretically meaningful exploration of social worlds, especially at and in borders, is open to a range of material and temporal possibilities while valuing the process of becoming deeply familiar with and analytically sensitive to where one *is*.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and JBS staff for their helpful comments. Also, many thanks to Oliver Bakewell, Jamie Goodwin-White, Stephanie Yorke, and Emily Braid who gave invaluable feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

Endnotes

[1] Given that sensitive subjects, such as illicit trade, arose during interviews, names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of informants.

[2] Two notable exceptions are Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, both of whom influenced future constructivists. Lefebvre defined social space as an "outcome of a sequence and set of operations [that] permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others" (1991, 73). De Certeau (1984) argued that urban spaces like streets were subject to human usage and creativity on an everyday basis.

[3] Yet, the term connotes particular conceptions of (il)legality: for some residents, especially those engaged in small-scale transportation of goods, their actions are not perceived as morally wrong. Rather, they generate needed income and fill a role in the immediate border trade economy.

[4] Accurate as of 1 August 2010.

Figure 1. Newspaper Image of EAC Borders Being 'Cut'

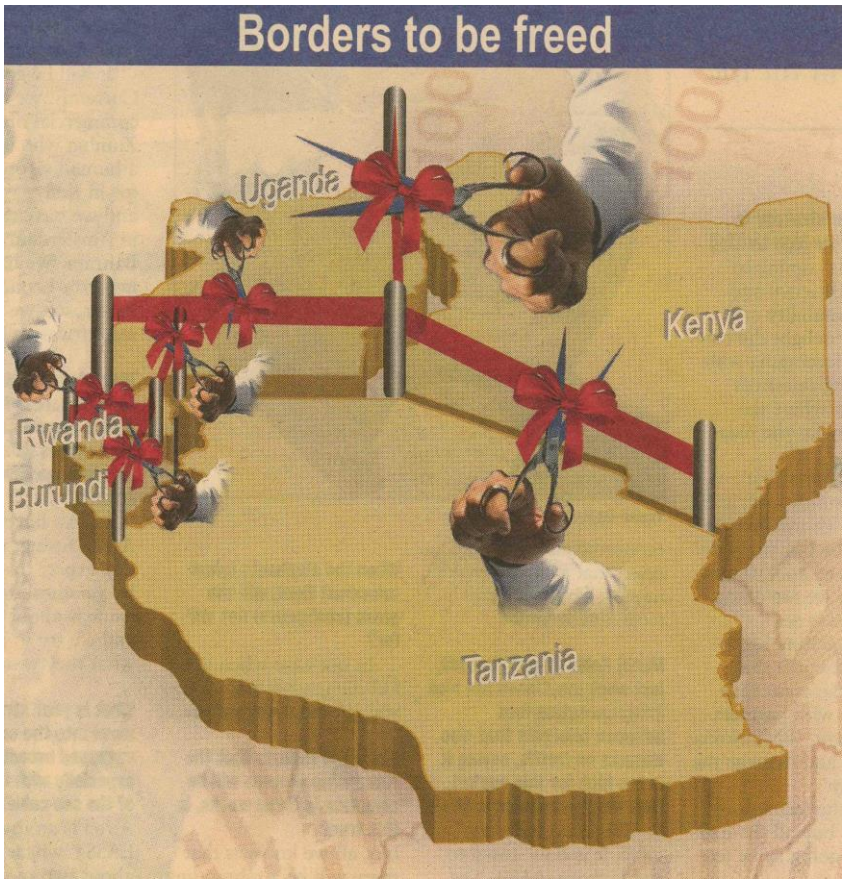

Figure 2. Commodity Market and Delivery Point in Busia, Uganda

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