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## (Im)moral Mobilities in a Swiss Borderland

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### ABSTRACT

Based on an ethnographic case study in a Swiss valley on the border with France, this paper sheds light on the emergence of a *regime of (im)moral mobilities*. It investigates how and why the presence of a specific border in a *peripheralized* region – in this case a national border separating spheres of income inequality – informs and results in dynamics of morally contested mobilities. The analysis shows how some cross-border mobilities, while being legal (such as living in Switzerland and shopping in France or living in France and working in Switzerland), are negotiated by borderlanders, who perceive them as damaging to the economic and social well-being of the valley. It focuses on everyday practices and discourses to illuminate the informal and mundane (re)production of borders and boundaries. The deployment of the regime of (im)moral mobilities – and all the discourses and practices it comprises – produces *immoralized* individuals who are stigmatized, as well as *moralized* persons who feel they belong to a collective.

### KEYWORDS

Regimes of mobility; borders; boundaries; peripheral places; (im)morality; borderlands

## Introduction

Val-de-Travers is a narrow valley between two mountainous ridges, barely 20 kilometers long and 3 kilometers wide, situated at the Swiss border with France. It is often presented as being “at the periphery of a peripheral canton [Neuchâtel]” (Kleiner 2020). In the words of many *Valley-ers* – the emic term used by my interlocutors and translated from the French word *Valloniers* –, entering Val-de-Travers means arriving in a “hole,” on an “Indian reservation,” in a “poor” and “isolated place,” a vocabulary that thematizes the stereotypes of which they see themselves as victims. Some Valley-ers feel that they are marginalized by people and public authorities from the surrounding localities and that they have to fend for themselves (Mairy 2008).

Indeed, Val-de-Travers has experienced various economic crises, the closure of many local companies and shops, and a sharp population decline over the course of the twentieth century (Jelmini and Vaucher 2008). The municipal tax point per inhabitant of the three municipalities in the valley – a Swiss indicator to measure the economic resources (wealth and income) of the local population – is the lowest in the canton (DEAS 2018b).

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The social, economic, and geographical position of the valley, a form of “nested peripheralization” (Pfoser 2017), (re)produces an “imagined community of fate of the Valley-ers” (Charmillot and Dahinden 2021). Informed by this process of peripheralization, the current local dominant conception of membership in the imagined community appears to be mainly grounded in local and socioeconomic values, such as supporting the local economy.

In this context, the porosity of the nearby national border, reinforced by the Swiss–European Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP) in 2002, is seen as problematic by some local actors. Although cross-border mobilities are legal, they might be *immoralized* by some inhabitants who argue that they do not support local development and who perceive them as damaging to the economic and social well-being of the valley. The daily flow of people, money, and goods across the border – reinforced by economic differences between Switzerland and France – is contested by some long-term residents of the region who carry out their main economic activities there. According to a study conducted by a local newspaper, the price of a shopping cart of food in France is more than 30% cheaper than in Switzerland (Hofer 2018). In parallel, while the median monthly salary in Franche-Comté (the neighboring region in France) was around 1,800 euros in 2018 (Insee 2021), in the canton of Neuchâtel it was about 5,500 euros (DEAS 2018a).<sup>1</sup> Worried about harmful consequences for the Val-de-Travers – such as the loss of revenue and, presumably, its possible negative effect on social life – some people engage in practices and discourses that aim to limit, or at least deter, certain cross-border mobilities (human as well as non-human). These practices, discourses, and strategies produce and reproduce an informal system of classification and control that values and judges cross-border mobilities.<sup>2</sup>

On this basis, this research raises the following question: In a peripheralized region such as the Val-de-Travers, how and why does the presence of a specific border – in this case a national border separating spheres of income inequality – inform and result in dynamics of (morally) contested mobilities? To answer this question, I propose to delve into what I call “a regime of (im)moral mobilities.” It is not a question of identifying the precise contours of this “regime,” which cannot be “captured” as such. Rather, I aim to explore the everyday effects of this conflictual field of practices and negotiations between a variety of actors at different levels. In other words, I am interested in how cross-border mobilities impact a “local order” and how these mobilities are morally negotiated by Valley-ers. Rather than the legalities of who is entitled to enter or remain in Europe (Eule, Loher, and Wyss 2018), I am thus interested in how moral considerations, i.e. “conceptions of good and bad, just and unjust, acceptable and reprehensible” (Massé 2016), regulate these mobilities. In so doing, I contribute to border studies by offering an ethnographic insight into the informal, mundane, and thus often invisible practices that participate in the regulation of cross-border mobilities.

More specifically, through the analysis of the local deployment of the regime of (im)moral mobilities, I shed light on the interrelated social, economic, and symbolic consequences of cross-border dynamics.<sup>3</sup> Thereby, I aim to go beyond the dichotomy between border and boundary by combining these two perspectives (Fassin 2011; Fischer, Achermann, and Dahinden 2020). While borders refer to territorial limits defining political entities and legal subjects and to all related regulations – formal and informal – (re)produced by an unlimited number of actors (Fischer, Achermann, and

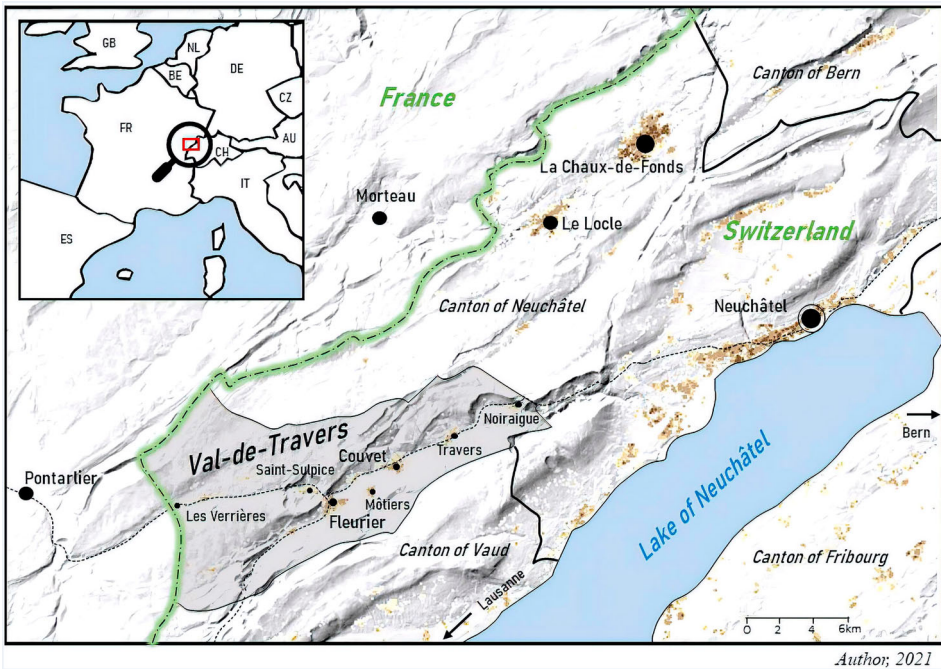
Dahinden 2020), boundaries refer to the creation, maintenance, institutionalization, and contestation of social and symbolic differences (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Thus, I analyze the practices and discourses that morally exclude (or include) people engaged in cross-border mobilities (a form of *boundary-making practices*) and that morally “seal” the national border (a form of *bordering practices*). In other words, although the national border is legally porous, those who cross it to take advantage of it (e.g. to save money) are exposed to moral judgments. In this sense, the border is morally salient while it is legally rather discreet. Hence, exploring the deployment of the regime of (im)moral mobilities requires questioning the symbolic and social boundaries of local communities while putting them into perspective with the (non-)reinforcement of national borders. Specifically, I identify three layers of practice and discourse that demonstrate how the national border is related to and used in the production of other boundaries: localizing, evaluating and ostracizing practices.

In what follows, the first part of the article shows how cross-border dynamics have infiltrated the valley and how they permeate daily life. I then present my conceptualization of a regime of (im)moral mobilities, before briefly describing my methodology. In the second part, I explore everyday practices and discourses of long-term residents in order to illuminate the informal and mundane production and reproduction of borders and boundaries. Through a regime of (im)moral mobility perspective, this article reveals how cross-border mobilities are informally and morally negotiated and regulated by “ordinary actors” whose everyday lives are embedded in and affected by broader economic and political configurations. In particular, it shows how dynamics of inclusion in and exclusion from a local moral community (Wuthnow 2018; Eckert 2020) are informed by individuals’ cross-border practices and participation in the local economy, rather than ethno-national categories that have been the focus of many studies (critically see, e.g. Fox and Jones 2013).

### Everyday Cross-border Dynamics in Val-de-Travers

In the daily life of the inhabitants of Val-de-Travers, the national border (with France) is omnipresent. It is not only a border checkpoint in the last village of the valley – rather it is experienced, contested, and performed on a daily basis by the people there. In line with recent conceptualizations in border studies (Wilson and Donnan 2012; Kolossov and Scott 2013; Agier 2016; Paasi et al. 2019; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2019), I look at the border not as a line, but as a process (“doing or experiencing the border”) and investigate how the border deterritorializes (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009) and inserts itself into a given space – in this case, the Val-de-Travers. The two border regions – the French and the Swiss – are connected and interdependent (Tissot and Daumas 2004; Maffre and Charbonneau 2011) yet they differ in economic and political terms (Crevoisier et al. 2006; Dubois and Rérat 2012; Rérat et al. 2012). These differences are the driving force behind a whole series of “entangled mobilities” (Kleist 2020) (Figure 1).

As an illustration, I will briefly describe mobilities related to the labor market. The higher salaries in Switzerland encourage some French people to cross the border every day to work in Val-de-Travers – around 1,300 according to the statistics of the canton of Neuchâtel (DEAS 2019). Thanks to the existence of this cheaper workforce in the



**Figure 1.** Val-de-Travers.

French border region, companies from other Swiss cantons or other countries – particularly in the watchmaking sector; a historical economic activity in the region (Jelmini and Vaucher 2008) – have settled in Val-de-Travers. As a result, more and more people living in France are looking for a job on the Swiss side of the border. This has led people from more distant French regions (e.g. Paris or Brittany) to settle in the French Franche-Comté region.<sup>4</sup> As people working in Switzerland and living in France spend a large majority of their income in France, tensions emerge due to the loss of income and taxes, despite agreements between Switzerland and France on a rate of tax retrocession (currently 4.5% in the canton of Neuchâtel). In parallel, some people move from Switzerland to France to lower their rent but keep their job in Switzerland and maintain their Swiss income.

As this brief description demonstrates, the two regions are affected on a daily basis by the differences associated with the national border, and this drives a multitude of human and non-human mobilities. Some of these mobilities are perceived as problematic for the Val-de-Travers and are presented as a threat to the social and economic well-being of the valley. In the Val-de-Travers, the process of “region building” (Paasi 2014) informed by the national border is a long-standing phenomenon (Tissot and Daumas 2004). Local contestations have continuously emerged, and long-term residents have questioned the “morality” of cross-border mobilities, recently facilitated by Swiss and European political processes. Currently, there is no legal barrier to a French national being employed in Switzerland and, despite some taxes on certain food products (e.g. meat or alcohol), shopping trips are allowed. Apart from some efforts to protect the local economy (e.g. by financially supporting “Val’Action,” an organization of local entrepreneurs and

shopkeepers), regional and cantonal authorities are only marginally involved in local contestations and rather engage in cross-border cooperation. It is therefore mainly the practices and discourses of “ordinary actors” that reveal the informal and mundane deployment of a local regime of (im)moral mobilities, partly induced by wider state-based migration and mobility regimes.

### Theorizing an Informal Regime of (Im)moral Mobilities

Mobility practices and their (in)formal regulation take place in complex political, social, and economic systems (re)produced by a multitude of actors – public and private, individual and collective – operating across local, national, and transnational scales (Tsianos and Karakayali 2010; Rass and Wolff 2018). This complexity forms and is formed by regimes of mobilities that evolve over time, that are performed according to specific local contexts, and that materialize through various instruments of control (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Baker 2016; Fradejas-García and Mülli 2019). Following Glick Schiller and Salazar, I do not conceive of one regime of mobilities, but of an array of intersecting regimes of mobility with varying logics, principles, objectives, and rules that “normalise the movements of some travellers while criminalising and entrapping the ventures of others.” (2013, 189).

To explore these dynamics, Hess and Kasperek (2017) introduce an “ethnographic border regime analysis” and propose to approach the border from the perspective of the autonomy of migration (Tsianos and Karakayali 2010; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). They investigate how the forces of migration and mobilities “challenge and reshape the border every single day” (S. Hess and Kasperek 2017, 60). An ethnographic border regime analysis implies paying attention to the different levels and dimensions that constitute “the border,” including not only regulations, institutions, and technical devices, but also moral beliefs and representations, discourses, actors, and practices (S. Hess and Kasperek 2017, 60).

Building on these authors, rather than adopting a nation-state perspective (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), I explore the daily, often banal, and unspectacular negotiation strategies of “ordinary actors” with regard to different mobilities. By taking Val-de-Travers as an everyday space and by analyzing the “small stories” (Brambilla 2015) of borderlanders, I reveal the specificities of the local dynamics around cross-border mobilities, namely, the everyday deployment of a regime of (im)moral mobilities. This emerges and spreads through social interactions in the physical and digital spaces, and is performed through informalities. Informalities are improvised, plural, and mundane elements that do not follow standardized procedures; they express the “fumbling of an order still under construction” (Hibou 2015, 142) and can participate in the production and reproduction of borders and boundaries.

Therefore, this paper seeks to identify how and why ordinary actors in a peripheralized region engage in moral negotiations with regard to cross-border mobilities. Studying moral questions is nothing new in the humanities (Howell 1997; Lee and Smith 2004; Fassin 2013; Pellandini-Simányi 2014) and this paper does not aim to contribute to the long-standing philosophical debates concerning the nature of morality (Mattingly and Throop 2018). Following Hitlin and Vaisey, I define morality as “any way that individuals or social groups understand which behaviors are better than

others, which goals are the most worthy, and what people should believe, feel, and do” (2013, 55). I thus explore ethnographically how ordinary actors produce a certain local morality that can engender dynamics of exclusion and inclusion. My focus is empirical rather than philosophical or semantic and I adopt an “inductive approach” that seeks to understand what people “regard as the most salient moral distinctions” (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013, 57). In other words, I suggest that while some mobilities might be morally accepted (e.g. studying abroad or traveling), others might be morally rejected (e.g. grocery shopping outside the place of residence or work) (see, e.g. Zhang 2019). I approach morality as the local norms and values concerning the economic and social survival of the imagined community. In turn, I explore the daily materialization of these objectives through different strategies, practices, and discourses at the individual and collective levels.

Ethnographic research on borderlands has largely documented the daily practices of cross-border mobilities (Balogh 2013), the processes of identity formation (and instrumentalization) in these places (de Fátima Amante 2010; Holt 2018; Danero Iglesias 2019), and the exchanges and cooperation between border regions (Prokkola 2019; Sharples 2020). However, few studies consider “ordinary borderlanders” (Strüver 2005; Rumford 2008, 2014) as actors (re)producing specific logics of border control in an “open border context,” for example in a region where the European Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons applies. Hence, this article includes the role and perspective of hitherto neglected actors in the informal and mundane negotiations and regulations of cross-border mobilities, i.e. long-term residents.

Furthermore, contrary to research that focuses on cross-border mobilities to understand people’s attitudes with regard to otherness and to illustrate the interrelation between border practices and feelings of (un)familiarity (Spierings and Van der Velde 2008; Klatt 2014; Szytniewski and Spierings 2014), this regime of (im)moral mobilities perspective focuses on the production of (in)visible boundaries that might concern all who benefit from the agreement on the free movement of persons in Europe (citizens or not) and who are included in or excluded from a moral community (Wuthnow 2018; Eckert 2020). Following Wuthnow, moral communities consist of “a sense of boundedness that separates insiders from outsiders, [...] and everyday practices that verbally and behaviorally reinforce common norms about persons’ obligations to themselves, their neighbors, and the community” (2018, 43). While I acknowledge that the use of the term “community” runs the risk of essentializing social processes, as developed elsewhere (Charmillot and Dahinden 2021), I mobilize this notion to illustrate the situational emergence of a sense of membership to a collective. I argue that exploring the everyday negotiations of its (evolving) contours through a regime of (im)moral mobilities perspective can reveal collective dynamics that shape processes of inclusion and exclusion beyond ethno-national categories (Dahinden 2016) and enable further discussion of research on identities (Vila 2005) or “ordinary cosmopolitanism” (Agier 2016) in borderlands.

### **An Ethnographic Approach to the Regime of (Im)moral Mobilities**

My ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over the period of 15 months. After carrying out expert interviews with local historians, geographers, and politicians, I went to the

valley weekly to conduct observations in different public spaces, including cafés, museums, and parks, but also during specific events and activities, such as round tables, festivals, film screenings, and community events. I also had the opportunity to live in the valley for three months and volunteer (as a French teacher to beneficiaries of the Migration Service) with a local organization that I joined before my stay. In addition to many informal discussions, I conducted 30 semi-directive interviews with persons working or living in the region. The occupational fields of my interlocutors included hairdressing, real estate, local factories, food services, local businesses, and public administration. The interviews focused on people's life stories, their mobility practices, their experiences in the valley, and their professional activities. Most of my interlocutors also expressed their doubts, fears, and the problems they – and the valley – have encountered. In parallel, I also conducted observations on Facebook, as digital spaces have become “unavoidable” for social science researchers (Caliandro 2018). On websites and social media and in blogs people not only express opinions, but they also share information, structure networks of acquaintances, and exchange experiences. I was thus able to identify the tensions and contestations that emerged, particularly in relation to the proximity (and porosity) of the national border.

Acknowledging that not all Valley-ers participate in the (re)production of a regime of (im)moral mobilities, this paper focuses on a portion of the population in the valley, namely, those who – intentionally or not – strengthen the moral community. As emphasized above, these are mainly long-term residents, regardless of whether or not they were born in the valley. In contrast, some (mostly young) Valley-ers considering leaving the region seem to be less involved in the contestations of cross-border mobilities; or at least they do not appear threatened by the presence of cross-border commuters or by shopping trips in France, perhaps because they project themselves outside the valley.

Finally, this article focuses specifically on the Swiss side of the national border. While the French region certainly plays a role in the emergence of a regime of (im)moral mobilities, one should not forget that the valley's relationship with the rest of the canton and more broadly with Switzerland is also a critical factor (Charmillot and Dahinden 2021). Indeed, the effects of Neuchâtel's “marginality” in Switzerland, and the Val-de-Travers' double marginality with respect to other Swiss cantons are a major tension that feeds into the cross-border dynamics at the heart of this paper. Thus, this paper investigates how border dynamics – such as cross-border mobilities – impact and order the daily life of a region situated at the “periphery of the periphery” within its own country. Specifically, it shows that the transnational border openness contrasts with a form of local and informal closure that deploys around the aforementioned regime of (im)moral mobilities.

## Deployment of the Regime

The regime of (im)moral mobilities in the Val-de-Travers emerges through three layers of mundane and informal practices that draw the contours of the moral community. These three layers of practices – which seek to promote the development of the region and to prevent mobilities that contribute to its decline – take many forms (material or immaterial) and reify not only the border, but also other forms of boundaries, beyond a Swiss–French dichotomy.

## Localizing

Localism has different definitions. There is the anthropological – or empirical – definition, understood as “a set of ideas about the significance of place” (Strathern 1984, 44). It refers to understanding how people represent the place in which they live and/or work. There is also what I call the doctrine of localism, understood as a movement “to buy local” (Hess 2008, 625), to make an economic (and social) contribution to the local community.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the political definition is summarized “as the view that policy is best when it operates at the level closest to the people it affects” (Parkinson 2007, 23). My understanding of localism integrates these different definitions. I demonstrate how discourses and practices situated in the Val-de-Travers value different forms of local contribution and how local actors contest certain policies. In other words, some Valley-ers seek to regain control over certain mobilities that are portrayed as damaging to local development. They emphasize the need to “localize” people and their practices to prevent the valley from declining further (Henguely 2015).

Pascal, a man in his sixties who grew up in the Val-de-Travers and who admits to being “nostalgic” for his childhood, shared with me his current and past experiences in the region. He argued that there were more social and collective activities in the past, that many shops, bars, and restaurants have disappeared, and that he would not want to be young now. He added “*we’re a small, economically weak region*” and “*if we don’t stick together, it’s complicated.*” Pascal is not the only one who worries about the Val-de-Travers; other inhabitants have shared similar concerns with me. This is also the case for Bertrand, a retired person I met in a restaurant in the region. We exchanged views on the increase in the number of French cross-border commuters. He told me that the problem is not the increase, but their practices: “*They don’t buy local! They come with their sandwiches or eat at the company cafeteria and leave.*” Bertrand claimed that in the past this was not the case: “*employees were from the region and kept the businesses going.*” This concern for the region, a loss of social and economic life, is leading to strategies to support local consumption and practices.

First, there are individual strategies. For example, although Stephanie, who runs a small grocery store in a village in the region, is aware that financially it is not easy to run a local business, she thinks it is essential to maintain an attractive local offer. She told me that she can do this thanks to her husband’s income; the store alone is not enough to meet their needs. Aware that competition from France is damaging, she offers products that are not available on the other side of the border and tries to develop and maintain personal ties with her customers: “*People don’t come here just to buy food; they are looking for social contact.*” In the same vein, a couple from the region told me that they go to most local events in order to support them: “*Even if we are tired, if there is an event in a village in the valley, we will go. It helps to support them and keep them alive.*”

In addition to these individual strategies, there are collective actions to defend the local materially and symbolically. The most striking example is the implementation of a local currency that can only be spent in the valley. This initiative is part of the Val’Action association, launched in 2016 in cooperation with the municipality. There is one note denomination (“20 Val”) in circulation and the exchange rate is 1 Swiss franc

(CHF) to 1 Val. The vast majority of the valley's shopkeepers are members of this association and therefore accept the Val. The aim of the initiators of this currency is to disseminate these notes as widely as possible to limit the export of revenue. One of them told me that the topography of the Val-de-Travers is favorable to "*making the money stay here.*" The valley is "*a hole, not too big, where money can stay.*" To some extent, this discourse sheds light on the fact that the spatiality of the valley – a so-called "hole" – is a "natural" given that facilitates the reinforcement of economic boundaries, and, in this case, of the national border. Having experimented with this currency, I have noticed that some shopkeepers are not yet used to seeing their customers paying in Val. One shopkeeper told me that I was only the second person to have handed her such a note. This currency still has an informal status in the sense that the main and official currency in circulation is the CHF. However, there are some initiatives to increase its distribution. For example, thanks to donations (public and private) it was possible for several months in 2020 to buy 20 Val for 18 CHF. As Hibou says, formalities are "successful" informalities; informalities that have been validated (2015, 146). The discourse of the members of the association promotes an institutional validation and they have the support of the municipality. However, there are many bureaucratic steps, and being recognized as an official currency might be an impossible dream.

Finally, these localizing practices take place not only in the physical space of the Val-de-Travers, but also in digital space. Different online groups exist, in which people exchange, discuss, and share content. In order to facilitate the exchange and transmission of information these groups bring together people who claim to "belong" to the Val-de-Travers. Local shopkeepers advertise their businesses, promote local consumption and the importance of keeping the shops in the valley alive, and seek to dissuade people from buying in France. For example, a local Facebook page is presented as a means of "*sharing good addresses in the municipality in order to encourage local producers and independent businesses.*" It is also often specified on such websites that advertisements for businesses outside the valley are not acceptable and will be removed from the webpage. In other words, only those who "add value to the imagined community" are included (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002, 128).

These localizing practices establish the basis for excluding actors who do not follow local and moral norms, or, in other words, who spend their income in France (or elsewhere), despite the efforts made to stimulate economic and social contributions locally. Importantly, localism in the Val-de-Travers is largely informed by the recent history of the valley: it evolved from an important watchmaking center in the early twentieth century to a peripheralized region, especially since the economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s (Charmillot and Dahinden 2021). This evolution of the valley's position in the cantonal and national orders has generated a need to support the local economy, which is further threatened by some border dynamics. As observed by Wuthnow in his exploration of the moral fabric of what people consider to be right and good in rural America, "[i]t matters greatly [...] if people perceive – correctly or incorrectly – that the communities upholding their way of life are in danger" (2018, 43).

In the following section, I unfold the (evaluating) discourses that identify and classify practices according to their (im)morality.

## Evaluating

I am interested here in the creation of a “moral order that is fragmented and hierarchical” (Lézé 2006, 2) and which implies an unequal treatment of people with regard to cross-border dynamics. Similar to Zhang’s exploration of the local contestations in response to Mainland Chinese day-tripping in Hong Kong border towns, I observe that “ordinary actors” question what is “the ‘right’ or ‘appropriate’ way of doing business” (2019, 161). The result of this process is not a clear distinction between moral people on the one hand and immoral people on the other, but rather an informal classification informed by individuals’ socioeconomic backgrounds and positions in the local economy. Following Balziger (2016), I identify the moral struggles in different situations and the justifications provided by different actors. In this section, after presenting the form that evaluating – or judging – discourses take, I analyze the “substance,” i.e. the people and practices that are targeted.

To begin with, moral judgments are not often heard in the public space. Instead, they are a rather more diffuse form of control, a social pressure that is felt and internalized by some people, as Pascal mentioned: “*When we go buying in France, we don’t really like to meet people from the valley because I wonder what they will think of us.*” I observed a fear of gaining a bad reputation that emerges with practices deemed “immoral” by oneself, by others, or by what “one thinks others think.” In the valley, there is a dispersed local structure of norms that is notably promoted and materialized through a multitude of logos and images that encourage local consumption. For instance, on store windows one can regularly see the message “I live here, I buy here.” In contrast, discourses are more directive on social media, as stated by Benjamin in a group discussion at a local organization:

I just want to say something about the people who go buying in France. We’ve got Facebook groups for the Valley-ers, where we have to say that we’re from the valley to be accepted. And if someone asks “Do you know when the Leclerc [a shop in France] is open? What time and on what days?” they get insulted! People say “in small villages little shops are closing; you have to go there or there, where it’s such and such’s son, or cousin ...” They are getting burned! “Why are you going to do your shopping in France?”

Thus, there is a form of moral pressure to consume locally. However, these evaluating discourses and practices are more complex than the simple dichotomy of local consumption in the valley versus consumption in France.

Importantly, in the evaluating dynamics of (im)morality, economic resources (in terms of income and wealth) and professional position (in terms of social and professional status) of people who consume outside the valley play a central role. Damien, a young man in his thirties who has always lived in the region, defended with determination certain people who go buying in France and who have few economic resources:

The family that has two or three kids, lots of taxes, school fees, they’re lower middle class and even working class; they’re going to end up with a limited budget, they have to feed themselves, they have to pay for everything, what are they going to do? By choosing cheap ingredients, it will cost four times less in Pontarlier than in Val-de-Travers. [...] People are ideological when they can afford to be. Real people, they look with their wallets and we’re all the same. You always look for the best deal, the cheapest stuff, and if you can afford to consume locally, you will. But, if you’re stuck ... I’ve been surviving on 2,000 CHF a

month and at 2,000 CHF a month I wasn't wondering if it's a free-range chicken farm – no, I'm looking at how much it is a kilo. Everybody does it like that.

In contrast, people who are financially well-off and who consume in France are perceived differently. Stephanie told me that “*when people have the means to buy local and go to France, it makes me angry.*” Furthermore, in addition to economic resources, socio-professional status also impacts moral expectations. Nathan, a young man employed in a local company and who has always lived in the valley, categorizes the shopping trips in France by people who work for the municipality as something “*very, very bad! They have a good salary paid by public money and therefore have to promote the region.*” This vision is also reflected in a local (informal) newspaper – *Canarvallon* – published every year during the carnival celebration and which highlights all the anecdotes of the year in the valley:

There's no need to prove it: some of our elected officials go shopping in France. Nothing forbidden of course, but ethically embarrassing since these people are paid (and even well paid ...) by taxpayers' money. Because of their status as public figures, we are allowed to expect them to set an example for the population.

A form of moral stratification of the inhabitants thus emerges, or, in other words, an informal device of inclusion and exclusion informed by economic resources and socio-professional status: Shopping trips in France taken by economically disadvantaged people are tolerated but are stigmatized when people are financially well-off and especially when they work as civil servants or politicians. In addition to being accused of spending tax money outside the valley, people who occupy these two types of professional positions are “known,” “visible,” and under moral pressure to set an example to the population (due to their central function and role in the community). Furthermore, together with local shopkeepers, they represent actors who promote local consumption. If they go shopping outside the region, they run the risk of being regarded as hypocrites, as “*they would not practice what they preach.*” Charles, who worked as a local politician, told me “*I morally restrained myself from shopping in France while in politics.*” He then gave me the example of a former politician colleague who had hired a French company to do some personal work and he remembered that it was controversial in the valley.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, not all spending in France is evaluated in the same way. The construction of (im)morality also comprises non-human aspects (such as the characteristics, availability, or scarcity of the products or services). If a person buys a good in France or benefits from a service that is not available in the valley, then the practice is better perceived. The interviewees are aware of this situation and regularly justify their purchases in France by claiming that it is for specific products that cannot be found in the valley. For example, Isabelle, a local shopkeeper, said that she only goes to France for cheese and pâté that she cannot find in the valley. In a Facebook discussion, I read a tense exchange between two people: One of them wanted to go to the vet in France. The other person immediately and vehemently pointed out that it is possible to obtain this service in the Val-de-Travers.

These considerations suggest that engaging in cross-border mobilities is not incompatible with moralizing practices and discourses. For example, Isabelle finds it very damaging for the local economy that some people buy “everything” in France and complained

about the fact that cross-border workers do not participate enough in the local economy, but she acknowledges buying some specific products in France. Therefore, some people might navigate between being moralized and being moralizing and thus engage in constant negotiations about what is “good” or “bad.”

This set of (sometimes contradictory) practices and discourses leads some people to contest moralizing discourses and to question the legitimacy of those who perform them, which illustrates a constant negotiation of the regime and its local norms. Sarah, who grew up and works in the region, explained to me that there is a form of hypocrisy among some people who moralize. Their discourses, which value the local, are sometimes contradictory because “*everyone goes shopping in France*” and “*at the same time, people complain about cross-border workers who don’t contribute in the Val-de-Travers.*” Interestingly, Sarah, who is in her thirties, explained that she is tired of these tensions and would consider moving out of the region one day. There are thus other voices in the valley that contradict and contest moralizing dynamics. The elements presented in this section inform moral judgments, but each individual may interpret them differently and construct their own classification system (to evaluate their own practices and those of others). As presented by Casas-Cortes et al. (2015, 69), “the border constitutes a site of constant encounter, tension, conflict and contestation” in which not all borderlanders are equally involved.

### Ostracizing

In addition to localizing and evaluating practices, there is a higher layer of practices that aim to economically and socially ostracize people who do not participate in the local economy despite moral pressure. I speak of ostracism in the sense that those targeted are not physically or legally “kept away” but rather economically and socially “ignored” or “avoided” and, thus, excluded (Williams 2007). As Lee and Smith claim, morality can be seen as “practical action,” which refers to “what people believe and what they do in pursuit of [it]” (2004, 2). Ostracism goes beyond discourses and symbols and might manifest in concrete and visible forms of exclusion from the moral community. In this section, I describe the two instruments mobilized by certain people who perform the regime: boycott and gossip.

First, there is an informal strategy that intentionally aims to exclude people who carry out an economic activity in the Val-de-Travers but whose practices are morally contested. This is the boycott, which I define as a refusal to buy a product or take part in an activity as a way of expressing strong disapproval. Two main immoralized practices can lead to a boycott: (1) subcontracting work in France, and (2) moving to France while continuing to run a business or enterprise in the valley. Nathan, who works for a small industrial company, shared with me the risks involved if his company subcontracts in France and explained that working locally might also be “*a strategy to attract new clients*”:

Clearly, we can lose customers. [...] [O]bviously, in our field, everything is cheaper on the other side of the border. Really everything. But, if we don’t give the local businesses work, we get boycotted. We could subcontract some of our work in France. But if we do that, most of the painters, electricians – they just won’t come to us anymore.

The financial attractiveness of France is also found in the real estate market: There are people who move and settle on the other side of the border and continue to work and maintain part of their social and working lives in the Val-de-Travers. Some scholars refer to this well-known practice as “sleeping abroad and working at home” (Balogh 2013; Lundén 2018). Stephanie gave me an example of a local shopkeeper who moved to France and still works in Switzerland. She sells products from this person and she confided to me that she has customers saying, “*ah you have goods from this person; but I won’t take them because he lives in France.*” She added that “*everything is known and said here. That’s why you have to be careful. The negative spreads much faster than the positive.*”

There is thus a will not to consume products that generate money for people who engage in immoralized practices. In order for a boycott to be effective, it is necessary that its call is disseminated – this is what gossip does. It represents the second ostracizing instrument in the deployment of the regime of (im)moral mobilities and is, as demonstrated by Adkins (2017), a strong instrument of power. Michel, a former local entrepreneur, who not only subcontracted work in France but also moved there, explained to me that he had to close his business:

I was accused, a few years ago, by a friend of mine. I subcontracted abroad. I do it because people want good prices. He accused me and then he wrote to all the local companies in the Val-de-Travers saying, “you should not work with Michel because he subcontracts everything abroad.” I told him that I am a local company and I pay my taxes here. Where I have my products manufactured is my concern.

Thus, although Michel’s practices are legal, they are illegitimate, and word of their immorality is spread around. As is the case with *illegalized* migrants (De Genova 2013), I argue that there is a form of “humiliation” of *immoralized* people. The latter can even be staged in the local newspaper, the *Canarvallon*. In the recent editions, there are portraits and drawings that caricature and stigmatize some of the cross-border mobilities of certain inhabitants. In this way, the newspaper reinforces the diffusion of gossip in a region that is presented, notably by Sarah, as a place where “*everyone knows each other and where everything is known.*”

Through boycott and gossip, facilitated by the “smallness” of the valley, local actors hold (informal) instruments of exclusion from the moral community. In other words, I argue that the national border, despite its legal porosity, has a form of moral impermeability for those who export all or part of their revenue. Interestingly, however, Philippe, a cross-border commuter who has been working in the region for more than 20 years, contested the moral judgments he sees himself as a victim of – such as not consuming locally – and described what he calls the “cross-border culture”:

The Bretons, the Parisians, the people from Lille who settle at the Swiss border to work in Switzerland, they don’t know Switzerland. They don’t have the cross-border culture. They don’t consume in Switzerland. It creates tensions. But it’s not true to say that all cross-border workers don’t consume in Switzerland. It’s a rumor, because some cross-border workers consume here. What do they consume in Switzerland? Tourism, multimedia, petrol. Moreover, we see cross-border workers in Swiss supermarkets because there are products that we don’t have in France. Yoghurts are very good – they are more expensive than in France, but they are very good. It is not every day that we go shopping in Switzerland but

occasionally, yes. We eat meals in restaurants as well. But I'm talking about the Franks-Comtois, those who come from the border region. We consume in Switzerland.

Philippe's statements illustrate the essentialization that cross-border workers experience, especially their alleged non-consumption in the valley. Philippe's discourse nuances this vision and opens new questions, such as the extent to which and how cross-border workers can integrate into the moral community without living in the Val-de-Travers. However, following Erison's (2009) reasoning on negative stigmatizations, one may wonder whether in the Val-de-Travers any person who belongs to a (morally) inferiorized category (e.g. cross-border workers) might be held responsible for everything that another person belonging to the same category does (e.g. not consuming locally). In this case, the negative image that cross-border workers are currently subjected to in the valley seems difficult to transform.

Finally, ostracizing practices of the regime of (im)moral mobilities do not primarily rely on ethno-national origins. Rather, dynamics of ostracizing are based on respect for moral norms. Nathan emphasized this point in our discussion. He explained to me that if a French person settles in the valley, it is a "*good thing*" because he or she "*makes an effort to contribute locally.*" On the other hand, a Swiss person who moves across the border and keeps part of his or her daily life in the valley might be seen "*as a traitor.*" "Betrayal" is a strong word and represents an "ordinary kind of objectification" (Keane 2016, 182) of local morality. In the words of Keane, it is "naming," which "refers to the creation of verbally explicit categories and descriptions and their application to specific persons and actions" and where "an ethical judgment is being offered" (2016, 182). This betrayal of the "local moral order" can be committed by all actors who are under pressure to contribute locally. Therefore, within this framework, the portrait of "immoral" people is not primarily based on national affiliation, but rather on the combination of mobility practices and an individual's socioeconomic background and position in the local economy.

Moreover, even though in anthropology and sociology the creation of moral communities through gossip and "moralizing" practices is a constant (including online communities), in a "peripheralized" borderland such as the one under study, these practices and discourses are largely performed in relation to cross-border dynamics. Thus, cross-border mobilities that emerge from (and reinforce) national differences in political, economic, and social terms not only inform "people's assessment of otherness and the subsequent feelings of (un)familiarity" (Szytniewski and Spierings 2014, 347), but also shape local dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, beyond national affiliations.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have ethnographically explored how and why the presence of a specific border – in this case a national border marking income disparity – informs and produces dynamics of morally contested mobilities (e.g. buying goods in France while living in Switzerland or working in Switzerland while living in France). I have demonstrated the emergence and the deployment of a regime of (im)moral mobilities in the region. The resulting processes lead to symbolic, social, and economic dynamics of inclusion in and exclusion from a local moral community (Wuthnow 2018). Importantly, the

evolving contours of the latter are formed and reinforced in a specific local context where the immorality of certain mobilities is constructed in relation to a process of peripheralization of the valley in the cantonal and national orders and where individuals' socio-economic backgrounds and positions in the local economy matter significantly.

By adopting a regimes of mobility perspective (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013), I shed light on the informal and mundane moralizing discourses and practices with regard to cross-border mobilities. Such a perspective reveals the effects of cross-border mobilities on everyday life in the valley, for example dynamics of ostracization promoted through boycott and gossip. These “practical actions” of morality (Lee and Smith 2004) are indicative of local dynamics of bordering and boundary making induced by broader economic and political developments. Although social and economic impacts on moralized actors might be limited, there are direct effects on mobility practices. For instance, several people “morally” restrict themselves from shopping in France. In this sense, a regimes of mobility perspective demonstrates how different forms of social control aim at preserving moral economies and it invites us to look at the “small stories” (Brambilla 2015) of ordinary actors beyond governmental logics (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015).

This article reveals that the boundaries of a moral community are interrelated with cross-border dynamics and are continuously reinforced and negotiated through localizing, evaluating, and ostracizing practices. Although a “dominant morality” is shared by most of my interlocutors – preventing the place from declining further – the different practices and strategies to support the social and economic development of the valley are subject to local contestations (e.g. not all inhabitants engage similarly in localizing, evaluating, and ostracizing practices). Furthermore, this dominant local moral order (Lézé 2006) and the practices related to it are embedded in forces coming from all scales and may be different in the future – depending, for instance, on Switzerland's relationship with the European Union and on the evolution of economic differences between border regions. This underlines the socio-historical and local embeddedness of the regime.

Interestingly, with e-commerce (which generates financial mobilities) – accentuated not only by the increasing opportunities but also by the current health crisis – as well as the wider infiltration of large distribution chains in all regions of the world, moralizing practices against diversified forms of mobilities that are damaging to local economies might intensify. Therefore, to understand and reveal the diversity of reactions, boundaries, and contestations that develop as a result of “global hierarchies” (Jaskulowski 2020, 392), and in order not to obscure the participation of “ordinary actors” in the (re)production of border control, I call for more ethnographic research with a regime of (im)moral mobility perspective. Such an approach can contribute to border studies by providing a framework for analyzing how different cross-border dynamics challenge borderlands on a daily basis and reveals complex processes of inclusion and exclusion beyond ethno-national categories. These dynamics are not reflected in the emergence of “border identities” (Vila 2005), but are negotiated on a daily basis by ordinary actors (citizens or not) embedded in specific place-making processes situated in time and space.

Therefore, a regime of (im)moral mobilities perspective provides a theoretical framework to combine a border and a boundary perspective (Fischer, Achermann, and Dahinden 2020). Indeed, exploring the practices and discourses (re)producing a regime of (im)moral mobilities – in Val-de-Travers or elsewhere – triggers an examination of

the symbolic and social boundaries of local communities while putting them into perspective with the strengthening – or not – of (deterritorialized) national borders.

## Notes

1. The significant wage difference between the Swiss and French regions must, however, be balanced. The higher health insurance and housing costs and the greater number of working hours in Switzerland put this wage difference into perspective.
2. Although some internal mobilities within Switzerland (e.g. moving to another canton) and virtual mobilities (e.g. buying online) can also be seen as morally problematic, they are less “visible” and less contested by my interlocutors. For example, in the face of young Valleyers’ out-mobility, my interlocutors show a willingness to improve local opportunities, yet the departures do not seem to be (overtly) criticized and stigmatized.
3. Exploring the deployment of a regime of (im)moral mobilities inevitably sheds light on specific social, economic, and political organizations situated in time and space. One can indeed imagine that in less peripheralized border regions than the Val-de-Travers – such as the Lake Geneva region – the inhabitants would consider cross-border mobilities and the border itself in a (slightly) different light, notably in terms of moral considerations.
4. Interestingly, this internal mobility within France causes tensions between “old” and “new” French borderlanders.
5. Although the doctrine of localism is often associated with ecological considerations, these aspects are of secondary importance here.
6. Interestingly, the population at the heart of moralizing and moralized practices is predominantly masculine (or at least it is the most visible population in the public and governmental spaces). In addition to the over-representation of men among cross-border workers (DEAS 2019), they are also over-represented in political institutions (100% of men in the municipal council and 71% in the local parliament) and in the local labor market (60% of full-time equivalent jobs are held by men) (DDTE 2020). Therefore, it might be assumed that this context is informed by, yet also partakes in, the gender dynamics that prevail in wider Swiss society (Fischer and Dahinden 2017).

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