Archiving as embodied research and security practice

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Abstract
This article explores the importance of embodiment in (research on) archival practices on state counter-terrorism policy in Nigeria. In doing so, the article seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion around methodology and methods in critical security studies and other related fields in international relations by focusing on (researchers’) bodies as sites of knowledge production and intervention. Building on three empirical themes of fragmentation, labelling and gatekeeping that emerged from fieldwork in Abuja, Nigeria, I demonstrate how embodiment operates in active research contexts in the production – and problematization – of in/security. To do this, I draw inspiration from ideas around state archival practice; embodiment in critical security studies, especially as discussed in feminist and postcolonial work; and in/security theory to scaffold my broader methodological approach. A focus on embodiment, the article argues, marks the researcher’s body – and research – as integral to the development of theories and findings about security. At the same time, exploring the ways in which the (researcher’s) body is (re)produced in relation to identity and subjectivity encourages greater reflexivity in our research practice and fieldwork, as we are continually reminded that our work and our words are grounded in the standpoints that we occupy. The article concludes by identifying some useful strategies from my fieldwork for grappling with the challenges and tensions that emerge from bodily encounters in (security) research process.

Keywords
Archives, critical security studies, embodiment, ethnography, Nigeria

Introduction
Archival process involves situated knowledge(s) and material practices – including sorting, storing, preserving, assembling, and so on – in active contexts through which the archive is reproduced. These processes or practices, however, are increasingly complicated in security research in which the embodied presence and encounters of the researcher conjure implicit – but ever-active – norms of insider/outsider and insecurity at multiple sites. This article analytically situates the (researcher’s) body, understood here as a product of discursive practices, as the focal point in (research on) archival practices on state counter-terrorism policy. Approaching archiving as

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embodied research and security knowledge/practice offers significant normative and methodological insights, as well as implications for critical security researchers and research.

There is a growing literature on, and increased attentiveness to, methodology and methods in critical security studies and other related fields. These studies highlight the messiness of security research and the ‘security life of methods’ driven more directly by what actors – including researchers and researched – in security and politics do, how they do it, and the effects of their actions (Aradau et al., 2015a: 5; see also Aradau and Huysmans, 2014; De Goede et al., 2020; Salter and Mutlu, 2013). Therefore, in ‘attending to methods’ (Mol, 2002: 157), a plurality of these studies draw upon a range of conceptual and methodological approaches, including ethnographical tools such as participant observation, to make visible the complexity surrounding security research processes and findings and to do justice to the researcher’s reflexivity while developing potentially useful fieldwork strategies (Salter and Mutlu, 2013).

Still, embodiment has been surprisingly neglected in this discussion, even though the underlying premise of this research enterprise conceptualizes ‘methods as practice’ (Aradau et al., 2015b). Specifically, methods are what researchers – and those they encounter in their research process – do, along with how these are shaped by, and shape, new forms of knowledge and social arrangements. In a few examples in which the body is considered – De Goede’s (2020: 261) work on secrecy vignettes, for example – it is treated as providing supplementary evidence ostensibly to ‘accompany more formal writing in order to incorporate the excluded, invisible or unsayable’ (De Goede, 2020: 263–264). This, however, allows for a certain level of ‘proximity’ – or distance – and the privileged ‘critical’ space or position of security researchers, ignoring the fact that research itself is an instrument for emancipation or intervention.

To be clear, the relevance of the body has been discussed in studies of archival research, feminist security studies and studies of qualitative research more widely (Gentile, 2009; Magnat, 2011; Maynard, 2009; Monaghan, 2001; Parashar, 2014; Wilcox, 2011), as well as in studies of discourses and practices of security (Adey, 2009; Noxolo, 2014; Puumala and Pehkonen, 2010). With this in mind, the aim of this article is the re-centring of bodies in critical security studies as sites of knowledge production to show how they work in research processes in producing and problematizing in/security. Put otherwise, the article argues that we are all embodied beings and that embodiment operates in charged research contexts and mediates data-elicitation practices and fieldwork, as well as the development of findings and theories about security.

In making this argument, the article contributes methodologically and empirically by showing how embodiment operates in security research through a discussion of my fieldwork in Abuja, Nigeria, researching archival records related to state counter-terrorism policy. At the same time, the article contributes conceptually by building on three core empirical themes from my fieldwork: fragmentation, labelling and gatekeeping. More specifically, I conceptualize fragmentation as an embodied bureaucratic process that produces obfuscations; labelling entails embodied constructions of secrecy and insecurity; and gatekeeping points to embodied practices of setting criteria for ‘access’ and evaluating risks associated with the release of sensitive documents. I demonstrate through these concepts how bodily practices and encounters during my fieldwork enabled the (re)production of in/security and highlight the different notions of state security practice, including gendered, bureaucratic/individual interests and neocolonial/imperialistic designs.

As argued in this article, such re-centring of bodies in security research marks the ‘privileged’ bodies of security researchers as integral to the development of findings and theories about security. Also, analysing the complex ways in which the body is (re)produced and implicated with – but not reducible to – questions of ethnicity, nationality, gender and other aspects of our identities (and subjectivities) draws attention to the plurality of bodies who are (security) researchers and researched. What is more, including researchers’ bodies is an essential part of our reflexivity, as we
are continually reminded that our work and our words are grounded in specific standpoints that we occupy, which has consequences in our research process and findings. This argument indeed has salient resonances beyond critical security methodology, including for discussions on state archival practice, postcolonial archives, political geography, secrecy studies, ethnography and fieldwork, securitization of research and the conceptualization of security more broadly, among other related fields within international relations.

To foreground the above argument, I draw on three main sources of theoretical and methodological inspiration, including the idea of (state) archives – or archiving – as embodied security practice (Gentile, 2009; Maynard, 2009); ideas around embodiment in critical security studies, especially in feminist and postcolonial work (D’Costa, 2016; Parashar, 2014; Wibben, 2009; Wilcox, 2011); and in/security theory (McDonald, 2008). The rest of the article unfolds as follows: I begin in the next section by detailing the methodology, including the above-identified theoretical insights, and methods employed in this article to theorize archiving as embodied research and security practice. Then, I elaborate on my fieldwork ethnography in Nigeria and provide a brief account of the state archive in Nigeria to contextualize my intervention in this article. In the final sections, I demonstrate and interrogate the multi-sited emergence of in/security in my research process (and findings) through the concepts of fragmentation, labelling and gatekeeping.

**Archiving as embodied research and security practice**

This article draws on two months of fieldwork undertaken from February to April 2020 in Abuja, Nigeria, at various governmental and nongovernmental sites – including the Ministry of Justice, the Office of the National Security Adviser, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Interior, the British High Commission and the British Council in Nigeria – which forms part of the research for my doctoral thesis exploring state counter-terrorism policy (Chukwuma, 2020). This research was specifically interested in texts produced by Nigeria’s federal executive that contain official articulations about counter-terrorism strategies in Nigeria, such as policy documents, speeches, minutes of meetings, reports and security handbooks, among other texts designated as ‘public records’ in circulation since 2009.

The study of archival processes and practices at governmental sites, especially in the context of research around counter-terrorism or security more generally, offers significant insights on the reproduction of archival knowledge, state power and in/security (see, for example, Gentile, 2009; Peterson, 2018). Yet the role of the researcher and research in this production is often not adequately accounted for. Thus, taking cues from Aradau and Huysmans’s (2014: 603) idea of methods as ‘inscription devices and acts’, I approach archiving as an embodied research method through which security and insecurity emerge. As ‘devices’ and ‘acts’, methods enact and disrupt social and political worlds in multiple ways, and this makes it possible to situate and question the knowledge(s) produced through my research process and findings. Thus, the next move I make in this article is to draw upon an assemblage of ideas on archiving, embodiment and the social construction of security to scaffold the methodological standpoint adopted in it.

There is a significant body of work on archives as social and cultural constructs that reproduce asymmetrical power relations, grand narratives, silences, nationalism and colonialism, among other things (Harris, 2002; McEwan, 2003; McKemmish and Gilliland, 2013; Nesmith, 2002; Stoler, 2002). Even more importantly, state archival practice has been explored to illustrate the ways in which security is re-enacted through acts of classification and secrecy (Peterson, 2018), surveillance (Maynard, 2009; Weld, 2014) and restrictions (Gentile, 2009). Gentile’s (2009) ethnographical study of counter-terrorism policies in Canada, for example, illustrates how the researcher’s presence and encounter with the state archive permits the reproduction of opposing identities...
and national security. It demonstrates the queering of state archives, in which particular (queer) bodies are marked as potential security risks, denied access to relevant information and/or erased from Canadian history. I draw on this idea of state archives as (re)produced through embodiment and located ideas in active research contexts, though the outcome of such (research on) archival processes is more complex than Gentile’s work suggests. In view of this, I draw insights from other work in critical security studies and beyond to develop a broader conceptualization of embodiment to show how it operates in security research settings.

Indeed, questions about the significance of the body in research processes and knowledge about security have been posed in critical security studies, especially by feminist and postcolonial scholarship. As a term, *embodiment* often refers to a recognition that we (researcher/researched) access – and act upon – the world through our bodies because we are situated in space and time. However, such ideas of ‘flesh-witnessing’ or about the materiality of the human body have increasingly been questioned by feminist scholars in international relations and security studies, who have demonstrated how the body is (re)produced through social and political relations and the body’s relationship to identity and subjectivity (Wilcox, 2011). Feminist security studies, in particular, shows how the concept – and practice – of security is underpinned by particular (gendered) conceptions of the body. It illustrates, for instance, how ‘war bodies’ or bodies that can be killed or injured are (re)produced through discursive practices (Parashar, 2014: 1), as well as how the body of the soldier, the body of the rape victim and the body protected by the laws of war construct (international) security in various ways (Wilcox, 2011). Across various disciplines, feminist methodology considers how the body matters politically and pays attention to the interrelationship between the researcher and the researched (Swati Parashar, cited in Sylvester, 2011: 696–699). Furthermore, postcolonial notions of the body offer a complex and nuanced understanding of embodiment that often overlaps with, extends or builds on feminist ideas (D’Costa, 2016; Parpart, 2020). Much of this work argues that in our increasingly global, postcolonial world, the body has emerged as a site not only for (the articulation of) oppression and colonial violence, but also for resistance, change and challenging social injustice (Parpart, 2020).

Building on this important collection of work, and in writing my own body and research into the (re)production of archival knowledge vis-a-vis in/security, I take cues from Wilcox’s (2011) call for thinking through and beyond feminist/gendered (as well as raced/classed/(dis)abled, etc.) theorizing of embodiment. The conceptualization of embodiment invoked in this article sees ‘the body’ as changeable, fluid and transformable in its social (and political) meanings within active research contexts. More generally, ethnographic fieldwork has been described as an embodied practice in which the researcher’s body is implicated in the research process and knowledge production (Coffey, 1999; Monaghan, 2001). The complex identity and positionality of researchers, especially those from the Global South who reside and work in Western institutions, has also been explored (Giwa, 2015; Macaspac, 2018; Parashar, 2019; Sultana, 2007). In this regard, Ellingson (2006) argues that researchers’ bodies matter in research processes and findings regardless of the research method adopted.

Accordingly, a range of strategies have been advanced for writing the body into research to demonstrate how it operates in knowledge production. These include incorporating autoethnographic narratives (see, for example, De Goede, 2020); drawing on bodily senses in research processes and findings (Sparkes and Smith, 2012); interrogating the specific ways in which bodily practices and encounters affect knowledge production (Ellingson, 2006); and semantically writing the body as self, portraying it as fluid and changeable (Spry, 2006). The approach developed in this article draws specifically on how bodily practices and presence activate certain bodily inscriptions and identity markers (including race, gender, class, age, nationality and ethnicity), producing different notions of identity and subjectivity, to highlight and query the emergence of in/security in my encounters with the state archive in Nigeria.
In view of the preceding discussions, I approach security in its broadest sense, as practice, as conceptualized by McDonald. According to McDonald (2008), security/insecurity emerges from, or is (re)produced through, social and political practices, which produces varied ideas of security in different contexts. Accordingly, I examine the ways in which in/security emerges from, or is located in, different sites and through different procedures during my fieldwork. These include bureaucratic processes of fragmentation that diffuse and obfuscate, (embodied) constructions of secrecy and threats through labelling, and gatekeeping practices by which criteria for access are set and risks of releasing sensitive documents are assessed. These processes and practices essentially entail the evaluation and juxtaposition of my embodied presence against (unstated) norms related to an individual’s status as insider/outsider, valid or invalid researcher, or significantly threatening. Finally, I conclude by outlining the methods that form part of my broader methodological framework: these include field notes detailing daily observations, conversations and other research activities, and two unstructured interviews with individuals, including one archivist, at Nigeria’s Ministry of Justice.

My fieldwork ethnography in Nigeria

The following section demonstrates the rearticulation of identity and, more importantly, the significance of the researcher’s body in its production. I actively performed different identities through bodily practices such as speaking with a ‘British’ or ‘Nigerian’ accent; dressing mostly in a suit as a way of transforming my body to project an image of a certain class/age/gender; and presenting copies of my published works and my university’s business card, which were always carried on my person and voluntarily displayed to security guards, archivists and other state officials. These bodily practices invigorate certain bodily inscriptions, especially my skin colour (categorized as Black African), as well as other identity markers such as (male) gender, nationality, ethnicity and age, which were significant in gaining ‘access’ to particular research sites, documents or audiences from various state and non-state actors.

More importantly, my identity was precariously (re)articulated in three ways: First, as a member of the Nigerian diaspora, owing to my affiliation to a university in the UK, speaking with a British or Nigerian accent, my skin colour and my inter-racial marriage. On one occasion, I explained that I was as ‘Nigerian’ as anyone else, but a state official at the Ministry of Justice insisted that the diaspora label was well suited since I resided in the UK and was affiliated to a UK university.1 Constructed thus, my relationship with archivists was often less cordial and more formal. Second, as Nigerian Igbo, an articulation that highlights my ethnic connections and, in so doing, exposes the layers of my Nigerian identity with regard to my Igbo ethnicity (see Giwa, 2015). Third, as an academic researcher, owing to a large extent to the display of my published works, the introduction letter from my university explaining the purpose and scope of my research, my use of academic terms and my dressing in a corporate manner to evoke an image of a serious-minded researcher in spite of my relatively young age. Moreover, my masculinity contributed, whether directly or otherwise, to reinforcing this identity of academic researcher, as (counter-)terrorism and security (research) are routinely gendered as male, and this often determines who is regarded as a ‘serious’ researcher (Wilcox, 2011). The gendered dimension of my embodiment was especially crucial in the setting of criteria for access to government sites by security guards, as I show later in this article.

Furthermore, I generally smiled during conversations and avoided showing frustration even when asked probing questions by archivists or other state officials regarding my research focus on counter-terrorism policies or my interest in official texts. Also, I ensured that I was seen to be abiding by the procedures and rules at each governmental site – such as going through security checks promptly, in
the process presenting my body for inspection and walking slowly from an organization’s gate into the main reception area, making myself, and various body parts, visible to security cameras, security guards and other individuals, particularly by keeping my palms open and my hands out of my pockets – to avoid having my motivations put in doubt. Overall, these bodily practices in my encounters with the state archive enabled the (re)production of in/security, whether through designating a threatening identity or by invoking implicit norms related to insider/outsider status.

Record-keeping at the government sites I visited encompasses the management of organizational registries, departments and online repositories, along with the reproduction of memory, as when archivists, librarians and other state officials shared stories about state counter-terrorism policies and practices in Nigeria (Jarvis and Holland, 2014). On the one hand, the interpretations offered by archivists, librarians and other state officials expand the ‘field of the security professional’ through the formulation of ‘truths’ about counter-terrorism, while, on the other, managing security threats in archival processes (Bigo, 2002). According to a librarian at the Ministry of Justice, organizational registries are typically used for managing staff records, while other documents related to my research focus circulated within different organizational departments, online repositories and memory. The fragmentation of records was, in part, due to the ongoing issue of terrorism in the northeast of Nigeria, which meant that different aspects of the state’s counter-terrorism policy were managed by – and within – separate state organizations and departments. Indeed, Nigeria has faced issues of ‘terrorism’ since 2009, and the state’s counter-terrorism policy and practices have continuously been scrutinized and criticized by human rights groups, foreign media, researchers and other internal/external actors (Agbiboa, 2015). Thus, research on counter-terrorism policies – or practices – often brings about questions of secrecy, suspicion and obsfucations (Mateja and Strazzari, 2017). Yet my embodied presence and encounters increasingly obscured and transformed archival practices and data elicitation, and thus show exactly how the researcher’s body – and research – is integral to the production of in/security.

A brief history of the state archive in Nigeria

The discourse and practices around state archives in Nigeria can be located in the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern regions by the colonial administration in 1914, which brought into being the Nigerian state. In particular, discussions about the custody and safekeeping of official colonial records and other reference documents are described in various colonial dispatches in 1929, 1936 and 1948 (Ukwu, 1995). For example, the 1948 dispatch was accompanied by a memorandum from then Deputy Keeper of Public Records in England and Wales Sir Hilary Jenkinson in which the subject of preservation of the official records of the Nigerian government was emphasized. However, it was not until 1954 that the Nigerian Record Office (renamed as the National Archives of Nigeria in 1957) was established by the colonial government, owing to a lack of storage facilities and personnel (Abioye, 2007). Arguably, this so-called lack served as legitimation for producing, circulating and organizing the colonial state archive in ways that sustained colonialism (see Harris, 2002).

The literature on state archival practice in Nigeria typically approaches the composition of state archives as fixed, autonomous and self-accounting (Abioye, 2007; Adelberger, 1992). Yet the rationalist assumptions involved in such an approach ignore the social and political relations embedded in the reproduction of the state archive. For example, the National Archives Act (1999) makes provision for a 25-year access rule to public archives and imposes restrictions on the disposal, transfer or sale of private archives without permission from the director of Nigeria’s national archives, among other regulations (Abioye, 2007). Furthermore, the continuing effects of colonialism in state archival practice in Nigeria, including in the production, preservation and circulation
of records, are often taken for granted. The preservation of records in the different regions that constitute the postcolonial Nigerian state (this includes the North, the South and the East), including colonial records specific to each region, illustrates this point (Adelberger, 1992). Such practices of fragmenting and dispersing records that, at least in part, reinforce the idea of a collective (nation), as well as its splits, function in other significant (embodied) ways in my research process, which I now turn to discuss.

**Fragmentation as embodied bureaucratic process**

For various reasons, state archival practice in Nigeria often involves managing records within different departments (or regions, as described above). For example, as an individual at the Complex Casework Group (CCG) described, the continuing problem of terrorism and the lengthy period of prosecution for suspected terrorists justifies keeping relevant records within this subdepartment at the Ministry of Justice (Interview 1). However, the notion of fragmentation developed here suggests a bureaucratic process shaped by bodily practices and encounters involving various state/non-state actors in archival processes and fieldwork rather than a singular moment of storing records at a particular (sub)governmental location. This bureaucratic process, in effect, diffuses and obscures. Essentially, my embodied presence and practices are juxtaposed against tacit assumptions of insider/outside status or reinforce a significantly threatening identity in these encounters, as I show below.

During my fieldwork, I was informed by officials at different state ministries about the collaboration between the British government and the Nigerian government in the fight against terrorism. For instance, the CCG – a subdepartment within Nigeria’s Ministry of Justice that is responsible for the prosecution of terrorist suspects – was described as the ‘brain-child of the British High Commission’ by a state official.3 This and other outcomes form part of the broader – and far-reaching – intervention of the British government in security processes and practices in Nigeria, including prison-building and policy recommendations such as a recommendation for the abolition of the death penalty (see El-Enany, 2020: 89).4 British involvement in counter-terrorism policy and practice in Nigeria is widely acknowledged and, accordingly, I was consistently referred to the British High Commission and the British Council in Nigeria as alternative sites – or, rather, a more appropriate avenue – for collecting data owing to the diasporic character of my identity, which was reinforced through my presence and other bodily practices.

In one instance, these British (state) organizations were described as an extension of the state archive in Nigeria by an official at the Ministry of Interior: ‘If they don’t give you the documents you need, just go to the British High Commission and the British Council. [They should] have copies of them. And those ones would not have a problem releasing them to you.’5 My identity as a member of the Nigerian diaspora implicitly informed this deferral, not least because my affiliation to a UK university, (speaking with a) ‘British’ accent, and other elements and bodily practices that reinscribed my diasporic image were perceived as threatening to the Nigerian state organizations. At the same time, the ‘liberal values’ promoted by the British government – which supposedly contrast dramatically with the gatekeeping norms and practices of its Nigerian counterparts – were pertinently emphasized. The overlapping of the national/racial dimensions of my embodiment permits the construction of multiple storage points – Nigerian and British – producing obscurity with regard to the boundaries of the Nigerian state archive, how it might be accessed, and by whom. As Hughes and Garnett (2020) observe, such fragmenting and obfuscating processes differ considerably from obstruction/restriction; here, there was no specific moment of refusal or denial of access but rather a series of deferrals to different organizations.
My visits to the British High Commission and the British Council for information around counter-terrorism in Nigeria, including foreign intervention and assistance, further illustrate this bureaucratic process of fragmenting, diffusing and obscuring, shaped by embodiment. Moreover, the relationship between these British organizations and the Nigerian government sheds light on the governance of security threats in Nigeria, including terrorism, and tacitly highlights the continuing effects (and practices) of colonialism:

From the British High Commission, I was directed to the British Council for further assistance. The member of staff at the British Council admitted that a library and an archive were managed by the British Council and were open to members of the public. However, they had been closed down due to security issues in Nigeria, as requested by the Nigerian government.

According to the staff at the British Council, the records kept at this library and archive had been dispersed by the British Council to other organizations and individuals, such as the Managing Conflict in Nigeria programme, to which I was, once again, referred. Much of the debate around researching security policies and practices, especially in so-called dangerous or undemocratic countries, often reproduces limiting assumptions about the securitizing of research sites, participants or objects, which closes them off to (disembodied) ethnographers or security researchers (Chappuis and Krause, 2020). Moving beyond questions about access/restriction – as suggested by Bosma et al. (2020) – allows for a deeper understanding of how (security) research processes or practices are shaped by embodiment. Specifically, my encounters at these British organizations, in which I presented evidence of my university affiliation and explained the purpose of my research in a noticeably ‘British’ accent to reinforce a diasporic image, enabled the deferral to other (non-state) organizations and individuals for documents on Nigeria’s counter-terrorism policy. The staff at these organizations portrayed this as an extraordinary favour or privilege due to my being a UK resident.

Furthermore, a letter of introduction, outlining the nature and purpose of my visit, was requested at the state ministries. Accordingly, I presented copies of reference letters from my university addressed to the head of the organization, usually the federal minister. Schwell’s (2020: 92) idea of bureaucratic fetish in fieldwork highlights how the collection of data (such as official permits and introduction letters) and the categorization of researchers within bureaucratic systems makes their existence visible. In a sense, this bureaucratic process of collecting, identifying and categorizing researchers could be seen as a way of fragmenting and obscuring that occurs either within a particular governmental site or externally and is primarily configured by the researcher’s body. The purpose of my research and my university affiliation, as outlined in the reference letters and the in-person follow-up on the letters, largely determined which department within – or outside – a particular state organization would attend to my request for access, as shown in my conversation with an official at the Ministry of Defence:

Although the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) stipulates those records within state organizations should be made available to members of the public, as long as they are not classified, however, for security-related documents . . . like the one you require . . . unfortunately, the rules do not always apply. The individual suggested that an executive summary should be attached to my original reference letter addressed to the minister of defence, explaining further the purpose of the research and my affiliation. This would help the minister decide on the appropriate department to treat my request.

Exceptionalizing and securitizing (public) documents related to counter-terrorism or security more generally – as in the above conversation – inadvertently produces secrecy in security research processes (De Goede and Wesseling, 2017). Hughes and Garnett’s (2020) work, for example, which
involved accessing the website of the US Army’s FOIA reading room, illuminates the ways in which state secrets are reproduced through a series of ambiguous practices, including through the redaction of FOIA-requested data and restrictions on the US Army’s FOIA website. As the above field note indicates, however, secrecy in (security) research processes could be enabled by the bodily practices and presence of the researcher, through the production of a particular (threatening) identity. For example, the reference to my presence – ‘the one you require’ – and the suggestion offered by the state official during our conversation are underlined by implicit assumptions of insider/outsider status that determine whether ‘the rules (will) apply’ – or not. My request for access was redirected (by the minister of defence) from the Ministry of Defence to the Army Headquarters. Interestingly, some of the officials that I spoke to at the Army Headquarters explained that this referral was absurd since the Ministry of Defence oversees most of the records related to defence and the armed forces.8

In sum, state security and interests are often described as the justification for, or the underlying logic of, state archival practices or security practices more generally (Cox, 2010; Zinn, 1977). The above discussion, however, demonstrates how the bureaucratic process of fragmentation is shaped by embodiment and produces complex ideas about state security practices. More specifically, it highlights and implicates the above-mentioned British (state) organizations and the British government in archival processes – and practices – in Nigeria that ultimately contribute to reinforcing state power and British (imperialistic) interests (Stoler, 2002). This has significant social and political implications, as my research findings clearly identify British influence in counter-terrorism policies in Nigeria, which reproduces a specific (problematic) understanding of, and approach to, counter-terrorism framed in terms of the ‘global war on Islamic terrorism’ (Chukwuma, 2021).

That said, both archives and the production of knowledge through research, including theories and assumptions about counter-terrorism and security more broadly, are essentially fragmentary and incomplete. As discussed above, my embodied presence and encounters during fieldwork in Nigeria increasingly influence the process of knowledge production, as well as my findings. The Nigerian government, for example, collaborates with several internal and external actors, including Western countries such as the USA and the UK, in the fight against terrorism, as alluded to during my conversations with state officials in Nigeria. However, during my fieldwork, my interlocutors shared information specifically about the collaboration between the British government and the Nigerian government and how much the Nigerian government values that relationship.

Labelling: Embodied constructions of secrecy and insecurity

While secrecy permeates virtually all aspects of social life, it is increasingly pertinent in security policies, practices and research processes (including before, during and after research fieldwork). For instance, designating certain documents or sites as ‘restricted’ or ‘secret files’ operates as a code of concealment, reproducing privileged categories and subject-positions of the state and those who act on its behalf, including archivists, and less privileged categories for other subjects, who may have their access denied or restricted (Peterson, 2018). The production of secrecy has received considerable attention in secrecy studies (Birchall, 2011; Maret, 2016) and, more recently, a growing collection of scholarship in critical security studies has explored the (re)production and effects of secrecy in security research (De Goede et al., 2020). Rather than an obstacle to overcome, secrecy – how it emerges, its implications and what it tells us about security (and research about security) – is approached in this literature as an object of study and analysis. Building upon this notion of secrecy, I show how embodiment enables – and shapes – the discursive construction of secrecy and insecurity through acts of labelling. Seen in this light, secrecy is not simply relational and productive but deeply embodied, given that the (researcher’s) body is integral to its (re)production.
Some of the records encountered during my fieldwork were designated ‘restricted’ even though they had been officially ‘declassified’.\(^9\) This was mostly due to the fact that most of these records, especially court judgments on terrorism cases, were either still in their pre-declassified folders or had ‘restricted’ stamps on them at the time of my fieldwork, which increasingly blurs the distinction between what is restricted or public, secret or non-secret, as well as by whom or how these categories are defined in different contexts. For instance, state organizations or departments may constitute certain documents as public, while individuals, archivists and researchers may define them differently in (active) research contexts. During our interview, an archivist at the Ministry of Justice explained further:

> Although it is public document, but we know that people are always mischievous with such information. We do not know what you will do with these documents when you leave the shores of Nigeria. We do not trust the public (including researchers) that such information would not be used against the government. Also, we are not sure about the content of the information in our possession. This is because such information is not properly stored and catalogued to differentiate between restricted and public documents. This lack of proper record-keeping keeps us on the edge about granting access through which certain weaknesses may emerge. (Interview 1)

The archivist expresses concern regarding the (mis)use of public files, especially how they may be used to undermine the integrity of the Nigerian government and its efforts to address terrorism, and perhaps the interests of the organization (or archivist) from which it emerged. Yet, for the most part, this act of labelling and secrecy required evaluating my embodied presence against norms governing an individual’s insider/outsider status or threatening identity. As discussed further below, I engaged in further conversation with the archivist to explain my research goals and affiliation, displaying a positive or calm demeanour during this conversation (including by smiling and nodding to show agreement, among other bodily gestures). My affiliation to a university in the UK, indeed, evoked the idea of a ‘native informant’ or collaborator with a foreign/Western institution, perceived as inappropriately threatening (Spivak, 1993). At the same time, the complexity of my identity as a Nigerian who normally resides in the UK temporalized my fieldwork, fixing it to/within a specific timeframe that presupposed my (final) return to the UK.

In addition, the overlap and fluidity of the different categories of secret and non-secret due to the ‘lack’ of an effective cataloguing system (and my presence) also facilitated concealment or secrecy. As Belcher and Martin (2020) note, secrecy does not always indicate ‘sensitivity’ but can instead show moments of inaction, a lack of clear policies, busyness on the part of the officials or a reluctance to reveal internal tensions and disagreements. Thus, in one sense, the ways in which labelling and the selective (dis)closure of information marked by embodiment in security research processes implicate the archivist are more complex than is often assumed. For example, in my conversation with the archivists, they expressed concern about (losing) their jobs and individual safety, as well as a lack of proper training to do their jobs effectively (which partly accounted for their suspicion and assessment of my presence). Many studies on state archival practice often take the state as a homogeneous actor, and the archivist is constituted as a static state official (Harris, 2002). However, as demonstrated here, constructions of state secrecy and in/security by archivists (or state officials) may overlap with other referents, including individual/job security and organizational security.

Labelling and classifying documents by archivists also functioned in other important ways in ‘disclosing’ information that was either undisclosed to the public or regarded as classified at the time of my fieldwork. This highlights the production of secrecy through disclosures, specifically through the interpretation of supposedly classified information on state counter-terrorism
practices. This, in effect, collapses the boundary between concealment and disclosure, secret and non-secret. Recorded much later in my fieldwork, after several encounters with different organizations, individuals and archivists, the following field note and the experience it describes are illuminating:

Having established a good understanding of the context, the archivist had little doubt about my familiarity with the organization and the collaboration between state organizations in Nigeria and other institutions within and outside the country. The archivist pulled a file from a drawer and showed me, saying ‘this is what you are looking for . . . but can I ask you what you want to do with this information?’ The archivist emphasized that it is ‘restricted’ from the public, including researchers, but summarized the content of the file.10

The archivist summarized the content of the purportedly ‘secret file’, which included documents about human rights allegations against the Nigerian government by different groups and how the Nigerian government had responded to these claims. More specifically, the archivist stated that the counter-terrorism approach of the state had been found to uphold ‘human rights standards and good global practices’.11 The archivist’s interpretation thus functioned as a way of both disclosing and obscuring given that the documents from which it was extrapolated were ostensibly labelled/defined as ‘restricted’ or ‘secret files’. The production of secrecy through the archivist’s interpretation or disclosure is significant not least because it was markedly informed by my embodied presence and identity, as the archivist attempted to articulate the state’s counter-terrorism efforts in a good light to a security researcher and/or Nigerian living abroad.

Indeed, trust-building during ethnographic fieldwork, particularly in bureaucratic settings, through various techniques such as hanging out, self-declaration and ethnographic interviewing, among others, has been described as useful for revealing ‘secrets’ or obtaining hard-to-find information (Bahira, 2001). Apart from an implicit assumption regarding the objectivity of secrecy, how do we know that trust has actually been established? Or that a particular secret has been revealed? Walters and Luscombe’s (2020: 63) idea of ‘postsecrecy’ partly captures this conundrum, in which what comes after secrecy might not necessarily be a clean break, a revelation or a transparent time disentangled from the suspicion, memory, intrigue, hierarchy and fear that might once have attached to the secret. In the above field note, for example, the imaginary of threat is ever-present, though less emphasized, as my embodied presence nonetheless evokes questions and suspicion. However, practices such as speaking cautiously when responding to the probing questions posed by the archivist enabled the rearticulation of diasporic/researcher identity (at least to a less threatening degree).

In all, constructing secrecy does not simply involve material practices of labelling something. Rather, it includes evaluating and assessing threats in active research contexts, which implicates the security researcher (and the researched) in its production. The practice or process of constructing secrecy is indeed complex and may lead to multiple outcomes, including the disclosure of secret information, which obscures the boundary between (what is) secret and public. Moreover, such off-the-record information, or post-secrets, which often emerges in our interaction with research participants, presents important ethical challenges for critical security researchers: What do we know but perhaps cannot include in our research findings? Are we violating the ‘trust’ placed in us by those we encountered during fieldwork? And, more importantly, how do we ‘write with secrecy’ in problematizing state security practices (Rappert, 2020: 129)? Some useful strategies (which themselves reproduce secrecy) – including anonymizing, storing and redacting sensitive information – have been identified (Glasius et al., 2018). That said, centring embodiment in research processes and moving beyond questions of trust and disclosure allows for the
interrogation of state security practices. In the specific context of my research, for example, the militaristic approach of Nigeria’s counter-terrorism practices, which of course is clearly reflected in policy texts such as Nigeria’s 2016 National Counter-Terrorism Strategy (Office of the National Security Adviser, 2016), for example, contrasts significantly with the claims of recognition of and respect for human rights suggested by the archivist. And, from my findings, so-called secret files do not necessarily divulge unknown – or new – information. Rather, they either reinforce already known ideas or they counter and distort them.

**Gatekeeping as embodied security practice**

Archival research and research in general often involve the participation of different actors, whether directly or indirectly. Thus, the term ‘gatekeeping’ is commonly used in descriptions of how access to research sites, participants and resources was obtained by the ethnographer or researcher (Parashar, 2019). This may include the intervention of individuals within or outside an organization, as well as organizations that provide links to research sites and participants. Such an understanding of gatekeeping runs the risk of essentialism, particularly by producing a fixed identity of a gatekeeper (a term that is often used interchangeably with or in contradistinction to such terms as ‘facilitator’, ‘fixer’, ‘go-between’ or ‘broker’, among others), or articulates gatekeeping as ultimately leading to a determined – either/or – outcome. Barzilai-Nahon (2009) suggests approaching gatekeeping as practice, which would encourage a wider examination of its functions, complexity and effects in research processes. In the context of my encounters during fieldwork, gatekeeping practices involved setting criteria for access and evaluating the risk of disclosing sensitive information to an embodied researcher. Below, I illustrate how the researcher and different actors, including street-level security guards at various governmental sites that are often ignored in the study of archival practice, are increasingly implicated in gatekeeping (Côté-Boucher et al., 2014).

As a matter of standard procedure or routine (Crawford and Hutchinson, 2016), security guards at the entrance of government organizations request that visitors verify their identity, which includes stating the purpose of their visit. In my case, this meant declaring that I was conducting research around state counter-terrorism policy, and this usually led to further questions such as ‘Why are you interested in this topic?’, ‘Why do you want to collect documents from the government?’ and ‘Whom do you know?’ In these encounters, my identity as a (male) security researcher from a foreign university interested in state counter-terrorism strategy intersected with the rationales of the security guards to produce assumptions about insider/outside status in the setting of criteria for entry. ‘Public access’ is granted to all except visitors from foreign geographies (those racialized as white or other foreign nationals). However, the ephemerality and the deeper effects of embodiment shaping this were brought to light through mentioning names of personal contacts, speaking in different local/ethnic languages (including pidgin English and Igbo) and displaying my body parts to security cameras and guards, which implicitly reinforced my masculinity. The guards often reciprocated such gestures by saluting, bowing or referring to me in dignified, gendered ways, using terms such as ‘oga’ (meaning a male boss), conflating the racial/class/national/ethnic/gendered dimensions of my embodiment in granting access.

What is more, given their presumed familiarity with the context, personal contacts or other individuals and organizations who participate in research and often negotiate access to research sites or participants are increasingly aware of the researcher’s body and presence. During my fieldwork – and afterwards – such personal contacts performed other gatekeeping acts, including maintaining communication with archivists and evaluating the risk of releasing sensitive documents, as illustrated in the following note:
Don’t worry, I assured the archivist that that information will not be used in any way that maligns the government. This does not mean, of course, that you cannot criticize certain practices of the Nigerian government as represented in the research data, as such criticism, if done properly, can help improve government practices. (Interview 2)

As this indicates, gatekeeping in security research includes weighing and assessing the implications of the release of ‘sensitive’ documents to researchers by personal contacts even after fieldwork. Thus, keeping in touch with personal contacts after fieldwork or data collection is necessary for ensuring the appropriate use of archival documents. This shows how gatekeeping practices transcend time and space, as my (ongoing) research, bodily presence and diasporic identity, which suggested that I would return to the UK after conducting fieldwork, were considered – and acted upon – by the personal contact in Nigeria. Such practices and relationships present significant challenges for the writing up of research findings, including issues of trust and the choices we make regarding selecting, excluding, remembering and forgetting things. Rappert’s (2020: 129) notion of ‘writing with secrecy’ suggests that we approach secrecy as an underlying condition of security research rather than as something to overcome. Writing secrecy as embodied practice, as argued throughout this article, allows for greater reflexivity and intervention by (security) researchers. This may take the form of clarifying our standpoint and the politics of our research (including through sharing our work, ideas and research findings) with those that we encounter – or form relationships with – before, during and after fieldwork, and rethinking our scholarship as a form of activism.

The distinction between scholarship and activism often suggests a certain level of detachment or critical distance from the security issues we study and write on (Stavrianakis, 2020). However, research itself – that is, deciding what topic to study, how we go about collecting and analysing data, and deciding on the appropriate journal or audience for our work – is embodied and political (Ellingson, 2006). My interest in counter-terrorism policies in Nigeria largely stems from my being a Nigerian national and my keen interest in the country’s politics, as well as my current career goal of researching and writing about security issues.

Conclusion

This article has argued that embodiment should be repositioned as a core methodological concern in critical security studies (and beyond). It has explored the ways in which in/security is (re)produced through archival practices or processes shaped by embodiment at various governmental and non-governmental sites during fieldwork conducted in Nigeria as part of a study of state counter-terrorism policy. The study of embodiment in security research makes visible the complex processes or practices involved in fieldwork and data elicitation, highlighting the different and overlapping ideas of state security practice, including bureaucratic-individual, neocolonial and gendered aspects. This final section begins by restating the contribution of this study to debates around methodology and methods in critical security studies and theories of security more widely. Moreover, recognizing the significance of embodiment implicates this article in the curation of theories and concepts about security and, accordingly, the outcomes sketched herein are fundamentally ephemeral.

This article demonstrates the complexity and messiness involved in security research processes by exploring the workings of embodiment through the empirical themes of fragmentation, labelling and gatekeeping. In doing so, this work contributes to discussions on state archival practice, including postcolonial archives, as well as to discussions around secrecy, ethnographic fieldwork and critical security methods more generally. Importantly, the article provides a useful way to observe how in/security emerges and highlights the role played by the (security) researcher – and
the researched – encouraging increased awareness in our research practice by being attentive to how our bodies, identities and subjectivities are implicated in research processes and knowledge production. In fieldwork settings, for instance, this requires more active participation and engagement in disrupting and diffusing the tensions that emerge through our (bodily) encounters with different aspects of the state or those that we research and write about.

An important contextual caveat: Research on security policies and practices in contexts characterized by ongoing experiences of insecurity often provides room for suspicion and resistance (Helbardt et al., 2010), as was the case during my fieldwork, which was conducted in a context in which the Nigerian state continues to confront the issue of terrorism as well as criticisms of human rights abuses from both local and external actors (Agbiboa, 2015). Therefore, the focus of the research and the researcher’s body increasingly obscure and complicate research in these areas and, accordingly, the research process becomes heavily charged. The negative connotations and implications associated with my identity as academic, researcher, Nigerian-diaspora – although consistently flexible – shed light on the challenges encountered during fieldwork in Nigeria. Moreover, by paying attention to how the body is (re)produced in relation to identity and subjectivity, this article highlights the possibility of different outcomes in security research and fieldwork in areas experiencing ongoing problems of conflict or insecurity. Therefore, some broad practical strategies for critical security researchers can be identified from my research.

Importantly, the gatekeeping practices that played out in different contexts and at various stages of my research highlight how researchers need to be aware of their embodied presence and adopt effective ways of researching, writing and talking about security in the contexts in which they engage. For instance, the security guards at the entrances to the state organizations that I visited in Nigeria may have known little about archival processes, but the researcher’s body and the focus of research informed their decisionmaking in the setting of criteria for entry that cut across racial/national/gendered/classed/ethnic dimensions of my embodiment. Such challenges could be overcome through explaining and clarifying (in simple terms) the purpose of our research with those we encounter either directly or indirectly in fieldwork. Other practical steps might include using research assistants and collaborating with local researchers, as suggested by the frequent suspicion raised by my foreign affiliation and the gendered/racial lenses through which in/security was re-enacted during my fieldwork. However, though such a strategy might address some of the problems associated with fieldwork and gatekeeping, security researchers should be attentive to the (often unequal) relationships that emerge from such research collaborations, especially in those with locally based researchers.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank my PhD supervisors, Lee Jarvis and Elizabeth Cobbett, for their support and encouragement, and for providing feedback on earlier versions of this article. Also, I want to thank the editors of *Security Dialogue* for their patience, commitment and guidance, which helped to improve the article significantly. I also want to thank the anonymous reviewers for their engagement with my article and for providing detailed and insightful feedback. I am also grateful to Polly Pallister-Wilkins and Alexandria Innes for their mentorship, inspiration and feedback on previous drafts of the article. Lastly, this article could not have been written without the encounters and support that I received during my fieldwork in Nigeria. I am deeply grateful to Oladapo Babatunde for our daily conversations and reflections during my visits to various government ministries in Abuja.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The author received the University of East Anglia Faculty of Arts and Humanities Research Grant (2021) and the Sir Philip Rickett Educational Trust Funding (2021).
Notes
1. Field note, 5 April 2020.
2. Field note, 19 February 2020.
3. The CCG was created through a joint effort between the Ministry of Justice and the British High Commission in Nigeria to train and equip lawyers for the purpose of prosecution of terrorist suspects. The CCG is a group (or subdepartment) in the Department of Public Prosecution (DPP), within the Ministry of Justice; see ‘The Critical Case Working Group and the British Embassy’, Ministry of Justice, File no. DPPA/CCG072/14 (accessed 13 March 2020); Field note, 4 March 2020
4. ‘The Critical Case Working Group and the British Embassy’, Ministry of Justice, File no. DPPA/CCG072/14 (accessed 13 March 2020).
5. Field note, 4 March 2020.
6. Field note, 2 March 2020.
7. Field note, 17 February 2020.
8. I obtained a copy of this internal correspondence between the Ministry of Defence and Army Headquarters for reference purposes; see ‘Request for Grant of Access to Conduct Research Mr Kodili Chukwuma’, 28 February 2020, Ministry of Defence, Ref. no. AE/HMOD/73/ABJ 14.
9. These included records of court judgements on terrorism cases, official reports and official correspondence between different state organizations in relation to my research and access.
10. Field note, 14 March 2020.
11. Field note, 14 March 2020.
12. Field notes, 17 February 2020, 18 February 2020, 19 February 2020, 20 February 2020.

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1. Interview with archivist, Ministry of Justice, Abuja, Nigeria, 13 March 2020.
2. Interview with personal contact, Ministry of Justice, Abuja, Nigeria, 13 March 2020

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