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Introduction: Special issue on *Insecurity, deportability and authority*

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Insecurity, deportability and authority

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Abstract

Security is more than ever a central theme in the study of international migration. For the past twenty years, research on the securitization of migration has burgeoned. While these initiatives are to be applauded, we believe they may also have misdiagnosed the problem. For example, it may not be that the concept of 'security' needs to be 'humanized' in order to be more in tune with migrants' concerns. Rather, the problem may lie in the use of the 'migrant' as an analytical category. The 'migrant' remains an inherently statist construct. The starting premise for the collection of articles in this special issue is that it is the tendency of academic research to mistake the statist category of the 'migrant' as an analytical category that has prevented the literature on the migration–security nexus from meaningfully reflecting the lived experience and aspirations of its human respondents, particularly as regards their encounters with forms of institutional authority, practices, resistance and resilience. We use the rubric of deportability to open up a variety of ways of thinking and talking about migration and security that do not fall back upon statist tropes. The authors in this collection take up this challenge by framing and employing concepts such as statelessness, sedentariness and expulsion to redefine our understanding of the relationship between movement and order. They take inspiration from multiple brands of social and political theorizing where conditions of violence and forced removal qualitatively differentiate the experiences and encounters of a particular group.

Keywords

Deportability, insecurity, migration, practices, violence

Introduction

For the past twenty years, research on the securitization of migration has burgeoned. Key aspects of the literature include an emphasis on the social and political construction of migration as an object of security, the expansion of the security apparatus for controlling migration, the centrality

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or the marginality of politics within the security realm, and the intersection between migration and other objects of security concern – principally those of terrorism, public health and climate change (Adamson, 2006; Bigo, 2002; Bourbeau, 2014; Côté-Boucher et al., 2014; D'Appollonia, 2012; Salter, 2008; Tsoukala, 2012).

Within the broad literature on the securitization of migration, there have been regular attempts to develop ways of talking about the migration–security nexus that are more attentive to the security concerns of migrants themselves. A small literature on migration and 'human security' is the most obvious outgrowth of these attempts, reflecting a broader effort in security studies to introduce the concerns of 'real people' over the concerns of 'societies' or 'states' into the way we understand security (e.g. Ferreira, 2019; Koser, 2005; Truong and Gasper, 2011).

While these initiatives are to be applauded, we believe they may also have misdiagnosed the problem: It may not be that the concept of 'security' needs to be 'humanized' in order to be more in tune with migrants' concerns. Rather, the problem may lie in the fact that the term 'migrant' already privileges statist understandings of security and 'dehumanizes' mobile populations. The 'migrant' remains an inherently statist construct, one that takes the territorialization of space and populations for granted and categorizes populations in terms of national origins, histories of movement and residential past – elevating the significance of ancestry and past deeds – and reifies these differences over and above the ongoing political processes that render those who have been categorized as 'migrants' foreign and subject to alternate forms of governance and rule (Anderson, 2019a; Dahinden, 2016; Scheel and Tazzioli, 2022; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002). The starting premise for this collection is that when academic research takes the statist category of the 'migrant' as an unproblematic analytical category, rather than a concept that has been primarily created to serve statist processes of securitization, it will struggle to adequately encapsulate the lived experience and aspirations of human respondents, particularly as regards their encounters with forms of institutional authority, organized violence and threats. This is a point that has been well developed in the broader migration studies literature, but requires further elaboration in the study of migration and security.

It is in this respect that we believe there is a need to develop alternate ways of speaking about the forms of insecurity faced by those people who become the object of migration control practices. We take inspiration from the move made by De Genova (2002), who offers the 'condition of deportability' as an alternate analytical starting point. In our assessment, the concept of 'deportability' escapes the statist trap by offering an ontology that is devoid of statist problematizations and instead critically disposed to principles of 'sovereignty' and 'territoriality'. To clarify, 'deportability' is not a synonym for 'deportation' or 'deportees'. Rather, it is a way of describing what it entails to have been categorized as a 'migrant', specifically focusing on the condition of being subject to lawful violence and forced removal from a state's jurisdiction. The concept of deportability emphasizes the way that exposure to the threat or possibility of lawful violence shapes people's social and political encounters and relationships: defining how they are able to move about in urban areas, shaping their tendencies to engage in political activism and protest, and determining the forms of abuses they tolerate in workplaces, camps and prisons. In this respect, the concept of 'deportability' does not reflect a mere narrowing of focus to practices of deportation or more broadly 'immigration control'. Rather, it offers the prospect of an entirely different ontology for the critical study of those political institutions and practices that have securitized 'migrants' and 'migration'.

Similarly, we want to highlight the connections between deportability and practices. Four different forms of a practice approach have been presented in the past few years: the comprehensive, complementary, discursive and relations forms (Adler and Pouliot, 2011; Bueger and Gadinger, 2014; De Jong, 2022; Der Derian and Wendt, 2020; McCourt, 2016; McNamara, 2015; Pouliot, 2016; Sending, 2015; Tazzioli, 2021). Some practices do seek to go beyond the state and to escape

the statist trap while at the same time challenging methodological nationalism in many forms – especially when non-state actors are involved.[1] Contributions in this special issue speak to these forms of practices, as we discuss in more detail below.

The contributions assembled in this special issue take forward this 'practice' agenda and explore its sources and implications. They also speak to the literature on continuity, change, resistance and resilience. The remaining sections of this introductory article detail our understanding of De Genova's deportability while making sure to intertwine it with the contributions of the special issue, lay out how the articles relate to the four forms of practices and the issue of continuity and change, and finally make steps into analysing the relationship between deportability and practices and the resilience or resistance of their chosen referent objects.

Deportability and security

'Deportability' is more than a descriptive or analytical term. The concept represents the first step in a normatively grounded project to reorient the way we study the politics of migration. In order to realize the heuristic potential of this move, we need to move away from demographic and political scientific objects of study to politico-cultural ones – a move from the study of people and policies to the study of a 'condition'. Deportability does not reflect an attempt to capture the characteristics, interests, emotions, etc. of a population or population subset such as 'illegal migrants' or even 'deportable people'. Nor does it represent an attempt to fully describe and understand the logics, modalities, implementation and effects of deportation policies and practices. Rather, the particular statist tropes that the concept of deportability contests are that (a) 'illegal migrants' are a 'problem' that (b) 'deportation' practices are designed to solve. Instead, 'deportability' represents the attempt to theorize the 'condition' of being subject to the potential of deportation. This move does important critical conceptual work, moving away from the tendency within the literature on migration and security to accept that people who migrate are the problem to be studied and to theorize the behaviours of officials that are justified in the name of addressing this problem as bona fide attempts to subject migratory processes to state control. By moving the literature instead to the study of the socio-political condition of deportability, the lens is reversed, and we instead begin from an attempt to problematize governing practices and their implications for the security of those who are affected by them.

This move has already created important space for researchers to critically challenge statist ontologies in two important ways. First, deportability research has explored how the conditions of deportability extend to a wider variety of people beyond those who might be formally subject to deportation proceedings: so-called illegal immigrants. This includes those people who have been illegalized but not been deported. Other work demonstrates how deportability shapes the lives and experiences of those formally designated as legal migrants. So, for example, research into the recent revitalization of temporary work programmes in the United States has shown how deportability constitutes a central dimension of these regimes and the manner in which migrant workers are disciplined into dutiful work and discouraged from resisting or appealing for labour rights (Basok et al., 2014; Binford, 2013; Vosko, 2018). Other work has explored how deportability has come to shape the lives of contemporary refugees, particularly as states have moved towards more limited and temporary offers of protection and made such protection increasingly dependent upon demonstration of dutiful work, law-abiding behaviour and other demonstrations of 'good citizenship' (Lewis, 2013; Öberg and Sager, 2017). Perhaps the most intriguing line of work is the literature that explores how deportability shapes the lives of those formally considered 'citizens'. Here, for example, European researchers have studied the limits of European citizenship by exploring how Roma in Europe fall into the condition of deportability, despite their possession of the status of European

citizenship (Hepworth, 2012; Lind and Persdotter, 2017: Van Baar, 2017). On this last note, research could benefit from further conversation with work taking place in the Global South, where more aggressive and expansive moves by states and public officials have rendered a range of population groups subject to the threat of forced removal. A key example here comes in the work by Salah Punathil (2022) on the manner in which long-term Muslim residents in Assam have been stripped of citizenship rights and rendered deportable, making them subject to detention, stripping them of voting rights (see also Minca et al., 2022: 17–21). While much work on deportability continues to focus on the experiences of those formally defined as 'illegal migrants' by the state, these efforts broaden the scope of deportability research outside of the boundaries of this population and thereby help deliver on a promise contained in some of the earliest work on deportability, which really attempted to situate this condition in relation to a longer historical trajectory wherein diverse groups, including elites subject to banishment, 'citizens' subject to exportation and prolonged imprisonment in penal colonies, and minority citizens subject to ethnic cleansing programmes have all become subject to conditions of 'deportability' (Gibney, 2020; Walters, 2002). It would seem that these moves would help to sharpen the critical edge of deportability research by enhancing our ability to discern precisely how this discriminatory form of violent governance practice is evolving and offering us a clearer understanding of the changing motivations of the contemporary state.

The second move worth making note of is the way research has explored the variegated nature of deportability across space and time. Researchers have expanded our understanding of the range of practices through which people are 'illegalized', going beyond the more obvious and violent practices of surveillance, arrest, detention and forced removal to explore how encounters with healthcare workers (Molina, 2010; Nijhawan, 2005), social workers (Van Osch, 2022), spiritual leaders (Guzman Garcia, 2018) and other civilians can accentuate the condition of deportability and make people more aware of and sensitized to their vulnerability and precarity. At the same time, research has been keen to point to the gaps in this otherwise totalizing framework: the spaces outside of surveillance, the periods of minimal policing and the forms of solidarity that lessen the weight of the condition (Enriquez and Millán, 2021; Valdivia, 2019). Researchers have referred to a 'continuum' of deportability, which means that the feeling of exposure to deportation and its impacts upon behaviour can also vary across population groups, space and time (Anderson, 2019b; Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2014). This notion of variegated deportability is exposing the sites within the condition that allow for resistance, contestation and change.

In this special issue, Franck and Vigneswaran (2024) aim to deliver on some of this promise by exploring how Myanmar workers move along the 'continuum of deportability', specifically by moving in and out of legal and informal statuses that entail differing degrees of deportability. Such strategic moves might appear unthinkable from the perspective of many vulnerable and precarious workers in Europe and North America, where possession of valid papers is commonly regarded as providing categorically superior protections and rights. However, in the labour market and policing conditions of Thailand and Malaysia, Myanmar workers are more ambivalent towards the value of such moves to make themselves less deportable, seeking protection from other actors, including brokers, employers, traffickers and public officials willing to use discretionary power in their favour. By exploring this alternate context and this specific orientation towards deportability, the authors aim to reveal a different dimension of the agency of deportable populations, which they describe as 'hacking': the 'repurposing' of institutionalized forms of political status in ways that compel the 'reprogramming' of systems of control.

Somewhat curiously, and perhaps due in part to its micro-political focus on the experience of specific individuals within specific contexts, the scope of understanding in the variation of deportability across space and time has remained somewhat limited to the boundaries of specific migrant groups within receiving nation-states, and to the daily and life trajectories of those specific migrant

groups. More ambitious work has instead attempted to study variation across space and time, noting how deportability begins within the context of 'sending' states, or places of origin, and extends back to those same sites after practices of deportation or 'voluntary' return, as an array of political actors and institutions increasingly work to prevent remigration. Again, there is much room here for work based in the Global North to learn from the insights of Global South research. For example, Franck's (2016) work on the experience of Myanmar migrants in Malaysia goes beyond simply noting spatio-temporal variation in deportability, to chart out how migrants actively navigate the landscapes of fear. Alternately, Mahdavi's (2011) study of the United Arab Emirates explores how sending states are actively implicated in the processes through which deportability is constructed. In these ways, and by studying deportability across scales, these works create the potential for us to more actively resist the tendency of deportability research to fall back into the traps of methodological nationalism. In some respects, the tendency to reintroduce and renaturalize national borders as the methodological parameters of research – as national cases, as studies of national regimes of deportability, etc. – risks reducing deportability to a mere means through which states discipline migrant populations and, in its most simplified forms, perhaps indirectly offers the knowledge resources for states to enhance, accentuate and more strategically deploy deportability as a strategy to both encourage 'self-deportation' and more powerfully discipline workforces. By instead resisting these implicitly statist framings, other research offers the potential to both map out the full extent of the phenomenon and point to the opportunities for agency within this global and interconnected regime.

Two works in this special issue attempt to redress this issue from different angles, specifically by taking the understanding of deportability to more macro scales. First, Plambech's (2024) study of sex workers specifically explores the transnational forms of debt bondage that shape experiences of deportability. In this case, the financial objectives and familial obligations that led her respondents to leave Thailand and Nigeria in order to travel to Europe are just the beginning of a web of payments and dependencies that bind these sex workers to exploitative work conditions in their destination countries. Here, debt bondage accentuates the condition of deportability, in part because it adds to the implications of an 'unsuccessful' or 'incomplete' migrant journey, tainting the journey with the sense of failure in the eyes of kin members. In addition to providing a pointed critique of the human trafficking framework, her study points to the need to challenge the parochialism of much research into deportability, through transnational research designs that allow us to see how this condition is constituted across the multiple spaces and times of an overall working and mobility trajectory.

Second, Micinski (2024) places the deportability literature into conversation with an emerging literature in international relations that focuses on the way that deportation and expulsion practices have become tied into the strategic interactions of nation-states (Adamson and Tsourapas, 2019; Greenhill, 2010). By taking the discussion of deportability up to the global scale, this piece reignites a line of research that has been somewhat neglected in the original agenda laid out by De Genova: the theorization of deportability as part of a 'global deportation regime', an agenda that has been considerably slowed by the lack of conversation among researchers working on deportability and international relations research into governance regimes. Crucially, Micinski notes that, in addition to the conventional interpretation of deportability as being a means thorough which actors acquire sovereignty *vis-a-vis* subject populations, the condition can also generate forms of leverage in negotiations among states, to be deployed, in particular, to extract concessions in other forms of negotiation.

Speaking of deportability as a condition that is not necessarily defined by the purpose or end goal of deportation, or exclusion more broadly conceived, opens the pathway for multiple lines of interpretation regarding the type of power that the condition enacts and reproduces. The majority

of deportability research has tended to interpret the condition within the theoretical contours originally laid down by De Genova. In this framework, deportability is primarily seen as a condition that renders labour subject to exploitation and to a lesser extent buttresses the claims of politicians and officials to sovereign authority vis-a-vis human bodies and lives. Somewhat curiously, a third strand of interpretation within De Genova's work, that of the reading of deportability as a form of racism (De Genova, 2007), has been less fully explored. This is particularly curious given, as explored in the work of Aranda and Vaquera (2015), racial profiling is such a crucial factor in determining which bodies will be routinely illegalized in immigration enforcement practices. Given the more entrenched commitment to the study of racial dynamics in the United States, works such as that of Flores (2020) have explicitly insisted on this connection between deportability and race. In the European context, such explorations have been somewhat more muted by a scholarly tendency to disavow the presence of racism in ancillary practices of ethnic chauvinism, xenophobia, discrimination, etc. Here, deportability research risks losing its critical edge as it implicitly sanctions the legitimating discourse of the immigration enforcement regime, or what Jansen et al. (2014) describe as a kind of blindness that refuses to recognize the racism inherent in immigration control regimes.

Kalir's (2024) article seeks to address this gap through a study of deportability in Spain. His work specifically focuses on the policy of 'qualified expulsion' whereby Spanish politicians claimed to aim to target deportation on those unauthorized residents who had committed criminal offences. Through an ethnographic study of the implementation of this policy, Kalir reveals how systemic racial prejudice and the racial prejudices of individual officers meant that 'qualified expulsion' worked to accentuate the deportability of racialized residents. By explicitly bringing race into his analysis, Kalir works past the veneer of race neutrality that characterizes much work on deportation in Europe, to expose how race is instead hard baked into the condition of deportability and the racially unequal and variegated fashion in which it engenders fear and oppression.

While the deportability literature's critical efforts to move beyond statist understandings of deportation have opened up a variety of new lines of empirical and explanatory research, they have also fostered a certain degree of analysis of its correlational concept of change. Rosenberg (2024) offers a stimulating twist on this question by arguing that there is an inherent risk in looking at deportability as an unsolvable problem. That is, understanding deportability from a top-down statist perspective suggests that only important structural change can eliminate it. There is a need, argues Rosenberg, to include a normative/moral line of argument: to analyse the moral judgments of the members of the welcoming community/society. Rosenberg argues that many citizens support deportability not on the basis of fear or insecurity, but because they believe that migrants are unsuitable for membership in their political community. This argument has a clear and powerful implication in that modifying laws and migration policies will only take us so far in addressing migrants' insecurity. Enhancing, inducing and consolidating a cosmopolitan empathy in the West may in fact be one of the most consequential actions to ameliorate the dynamics of deportability.

Practices, continuity and change

Practices are a fundamental aspect of all of the contributions assembled here (Best and Gheciu, 2014; Bueger and Gadinger, 2014; De Jong, 2022; Der Derian and Wendt, 2020; McCourt, 2016; McNamara, 2015; Sending, 2015; Tazzioli, 2021). As previously mentioned, four forms of practices have been identified. The first one, labelled comprehensive, posits the priority of practice in all security actions. That is, the production of security is not the result of rational decision nor of norm-following or communicative action, but of routinized know-how practices. Here,

practices can explain both continuity and change since practices are not only the vehicles of reproduction but it is also from practices that social change originates (Adler and Pouliot, 2011: 16). Kalir's contribution speaks to that. In his study of deportation practices in Spain, he contends that the use of qualified expulsions by the police has not only allowed for continuous deportation practices but also reinvigorated such practices by aiming at all categories of illegalized migrants. The anxiety that deportability generates (i.e. continuity in practice) was intensified by the introduction of a brand-new category of deportation: qualified expulsions (i.e. change in practice).

The second form, the complementary form, argues that practices are not necessarily in competition with discourses or norms. Practices might not be the only comprehensive element constituting all aspects of security production and reproduction, but are an important element of such processes. In his article, Micinski aligns his analysis with the complementary form. Micinski does not frame the relationships between culture, economy, politics and practices in a competitive way, in which one explanation holds ontological priority over the other. On the contrary, he argues that his approach nicely complements – perhaps even improves – the refugees rentier state and the broader argument on migration diplomacy (Adamson and Tsourapas, 2019; Tsourapas, 2019). Micinski demonstrates convincingly that deportability can be a strategic practice used by states to achieve their foreign policy objectives. He is not suggesting that such a strategic practice explains everything about foreign policy decisionmaking, but he does contend that it sheds light on several of its facets.

The third form, the discursive form, contends that our security world is a world of textual practices. Discursive practices construct identity (Der Derian and Shapiro, 1989; Doty, 1996; Hansen, 2013). This is best illustrated by Plambech in her study of undocumented sex workers from Thailand and Nigeria in Europe. She argues that recasting the phenomenon as 'indentured sex work migration' – rather than human trafficking – provides a solid corrective to the narrative on sex trafficking. Plambech describes the usual and often heard dilemma in discussions of sex trafficking: either one considers sex work and trafficking as problems requiring care and anti-trafficking interventions or one views them as requiring better and more rigid border enforcement. By employing 'indentured sex work migration', she seeks to highlight the potentiality of employing discursive practices to create meaning about these women and their intertwined social fabric.

Finally, the fourth form, the relational form, argues that security emerges from transactions and connections – from relations. From this perspective, Sending et al. (2015) posit that the concept of (diplomatic) practice becomes understandable: From a relational perspective, it does not make sense to say that an institution – such as international law or multilateralism or sovereignty – structures or secures a certain order. It is the continual use or performance of the material and symbolic resources that are recognized as being vested in these institutions that helps produce and reproduce certain orders. This line of argument is reaffirmed by Pouliot (2016: 9), for whom practices are not only structuring, in that they indirectly produce an unlevelled playing ground; they are also structured – that is, they are enabled and constrained by a variety of situational, dispositional, relational and positional social forces. In this special issue, the contribution by Franck and Vigneswaran speaks to this relational form of practice. These authors go beyond the substantialist understanding of the relationship between migrants and states as being a finite object of analysis. What we understand as the 'state' and as 'migrants' emerge from transactions, connections and relations. Accordingly, Frank and Vigneswaran demonstrate the limits of merely studying states' attempts to control work permits and citizenship rights or migrants' efforts to oppose and/or abide by the rules of the state and the state system. Rather, the relationship between migrants and states is one of repurposing and reprogramming in which the very meaning of both the state and migrants is enacted.

Resilience, resistance and migrants

The articles of this special issue all question the extent to which change is possible – and, if so, how it might be achieved. Specifically, the contributions relate to the concepts increasingly studied in security studies: resistance and resilience (Châteauvert-Gagnon, 2022; Han, 2021; Jaspars, 2021; Krüger and Albris, 2021; McIntosh, 2022). Numerous scholars consider resistance to be the direct opposite of resilience, arguing strongly in favour of resisting what is seen as wrong or detrimental policies rather than engaging them with resilience. For some, the concept of resilience – a product of contemporary neoliberalism – distinguishes between the powerless and the powerful. Since resilience is displacing the burden of responsibility from states to the individual, rendering some individuals powerless and fragile in the face of a shock, Jonathan Joseph hopes that resilience 'disappears as the language and techniques of governance change [and] that communities around the world . . . will continue to show a lack of interest in the idea of being resilient. Better still, they might even show an interest in a much more inspiring French word – resistance' (Joseph, 2013: 41). For Evans and Reid (2015), resilience is devastating, enslaving, and puts chains around all our necks. For other scholars, resistance against one of the most powerful political organizations in the history of humankind (i.e. the state) is an extremely demanding course of action. Because resistance often requires years – even decades – of struggle, it demands resilience to ensure its continuity. Both resistance and resilience demand high-level acts of willpower (Bourbeau, 2018; Clark, 2021; Gitau, 2022; Krüger, 2019; Mälksoo, 2018; Sou, 2022).

In one of the most direct discussions of the relationship between resistance and resilience, Plambech offers a strong position. She argues that the migration of women sex workers is often conceptualized as being part of the global feminization of migration in which a particular burden is directly put on women to ensure the well-being of families in the Global South. She stresses that not all migrants in the sex industry are victims of human trafficking and highlights the capacity of migrant women to make decisions in their lives even in situations of coercion. Women are decisionmakers that are making the best out of limited security opportunities. Focusing on the debt incurred while migrating, Plambech argues that rather than understanding such debt as merely forced upon the migrant women by traffickers, the migration arrangements can be seen as a joint effort by the women and their communities. The idea seems not to try to resist (either European border control or the sex industry or the human trafficking industry) but rather to build a resilient set of actions in the face of a given reality.

Franck and Vigneswaran also tackle the issue of resistance and resilience. They argue that migrants often think pragmatically about their legal status by repurposing and reprogramming their political status. Migrants may move in and out of formal and informal worlds as a way of hacking the system, thereby casting into doubt the strict distinction sometimes made between resistance and resilience. The authors demonstrate that migrants' actions need to be situated along a spectrum in the migration process. It is by consistently moving between formal and informal forms of action that migrants gain their decisionmaking political power. They also demonstrate the limits of thinking about resistance and resilience in mutual exclusivity.

Similarly, Kalir's article describes numerous actions by independent NGOs, investigative journalists and critical academics trying to resist the Spanish Ministry of the Interior's set of practices of qualified deportations. The strategy adopted by these activists was not one of resilience but rather one of resistance deployed on multiple fronts. Kalir demonstrates that in order to misinform the public (and as a result of the repeated contestations and disturbing revelations by independent sources regarding the veracity of 'qualified deportation'), the ministry modified both the practices of qualified deportation and how this practice was enacted.

Concluding remarks

In sum, this collection offers the reader a series of new ways through the migration and security literature. Deliberately working against statist framings of the migrant–security nexus, the collection uses the concepts of deportability, resilience and resistance, along with the ontology of practice theory, to foreground the experiences and resources of those who have been rendered the object of state power, authority and violence. Drawing together multiple bodies of literature, including international relations, geography, anthropology, sociology and philosophy, we aim to provide a way of thinking about security that definitively moves beyond the 'threat' and 'risk' focuses of past decades and instead addresses the question of how one can be both 'secure' and a 'migrant' in today's world.

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Note

1. We thank a reviewer for suggesting this point.

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