~16~

MELILLA, THE BORDER AS SOCIAL FABRIC OF A CITY

Nina Sahraoui

The Spanish enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta in northern Africa are the only territorial borders of the European Union with the African continent. Melilla is around 12 square kilometers with 84,000 inhabitants and is separated from mainland Spain by 225 kilometers—a six-hour boat journey across the Mediterranean or an hour flight on small planes. The departure of these planes from Melilla depends on weather conditions, especially in the winter. Melilla is also approximately 400 kilometers overland from Ceuta—a long journey over mountainous roads and two international borders. Thus the two Spanish border cities have limited contact.

Melilla constitutes, in many ways, a liminal space. Shaped by its colonial heritage, it is highly dependent on local border crossings with the neighboring Moroccan region of Nador but is also surrounded by one of the most sophisticated border fences ever built. Inhabitants of Melilla, the Melillenses, are mostly Christian or Muslim but there is a small Jewish community and more recently a Hindu community. Since 1986, the Muslim community was granted the possibility to apply for Spanish nationality, and thus political rights (Guia, 2014); yet to date many have not obtained it. Unlike mainland Spain, Melilla does not belong to the European Schengen zone of free mobility; therefore migrants who arrive in Melilla remain in the enclave for varied periods of time, which makes it a waiting room to Europe. Moroccan citizens residing in the neighboring region are allowed to cross the border to Melilla, per a special agreement between Spain and Morocco, but are not allowed to stay overnight. Hence, migration is the very social fabric of the city and shapes its daily social life.

While local forms of mobility across this border rarely feature in the media, photographs of the city's triple fence and in particular of migrants climbing the very last wired fence before attempting to enter Melilla, are by now part of a shared imaginary around the notion of "fortress Europe."

Image 1: Mellila, a symbol of Europe's increased militarization of borders

The view in Image 2 was taken from one of the planes that connect Melilla and the "Spanish peninsula", which is how inhabitants of Melilla refer to the rest of Spain. The border runs along the hills on its western side.

Image 2: View from the plane of the border that connects Melilla and Malaga

The two enclaves in northern Africa each have a Center for the Temporary Stay of Immigrants (CETI), run by the Spanish Ministry of Employment, that accommodates undocumented migrants and asylum seekers who have managed to enter the enclaves and hope to continue their journey toward continental Europe. In 2016, migrants in the CETI of Melilla were mainly from Syria, Guinea, Algeria, Morocco, Burkina Faso, the Ivory Coast, and Lebanon. This Center is situated only 300 meters away from the militarized fence, right next to the border. Migrants' stay in the enclave can range from a couple of weeks to several months (and in some cases years), as they await the results of administrative processes. The photograph on the left in Image 3 shows the fence of the CETI, where migrants hang their clothes to dry. The photograph on the right, depicting the border fence, was taken on the road going to the CETI, a few meters from its entrance.

Image 3: Fences in urban spaces

The border impacts Melillenses' social lives in many ways. The "migration industry" (Andersson, 2014) employs border guards, police forces, social workers, translators, and healthcare professionals. Melilla's economic fate is highly dependent on both international migration and local border crossings.

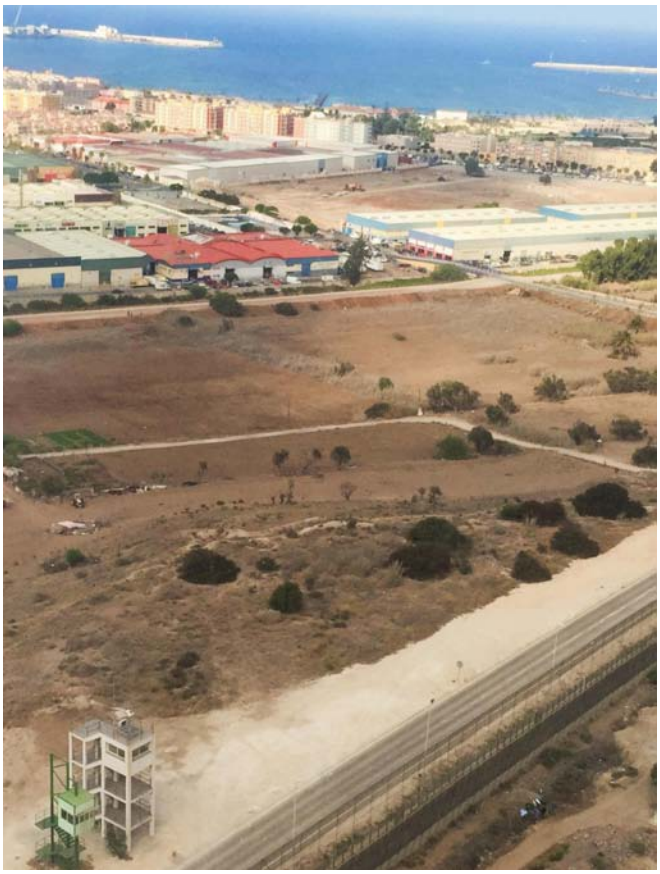

Image 4: Warehouses for storing merchandise near the border.

The regional mobility agreement facilitates movements between the Spanish enclave and the neighboring Moroccan region of Nador. The local border crossings are absolutely key for the enclave's economy. The export of European products to Morocco represents a significant source of revenue: national taxes are lowered due to Melilla's special status and local authorities apply a lucrative ten percent tax to what is called *comercio atípico* or "untypical trade." As depicted in Image 4, after a few dozen meters of military zone at the border, a large space close to the biggest border passage of Beni Ansar (named after the closest city on the Moroccan side) is dedicated to warehouses. The stored merchandise crosses the border on the backs of Moroccan women referred to as *portadoras*. Many sleep at the border to save their place in the queue. Their appalling working conditions and the frequent accidents, at times deadly, have attracted attention from human rights groups, scholars, and journalists.

Leisure activities in Melilla also take place with the border in the background. On Sundays, the border on the eastern side becomes a jogging trail and children playing on the beach can see the Moroccan harbor behind the metallic fences (Image 5). The Melillenses often cross to Morocco on the weekends and holidays for tourism and leisure, escaping the limited confines of the enclave.

Image 5: Children showering on Melilla's beach, the border fence in the background.

Image 6: Ruptures and continuities around the border

Right next to this international border, where the Moroccan flag flutters, a couple of little abandoned houses on the Spanish side remind us of the social and geographical continuities that the political border cuts across. Such continuities are enmeshed with the voids that the militarized fences create by imposing a highly surveilled military zone on both sides of the border. Socially, the city is about multiculturalism as much as it is about defensive identities. Historically a Spanish military outpost in North Africa, Melilla is the only Spanish city to keep a statue of General Franco, as other cities have removed their statues following the 2007 Historical Memory Law. At the same time, the city of Melilla is home to the biggest Muslim community found in any Spanish city. Though the city has

rebranded itself as "Melilla of the four cultures" in all tourist literature, this narrative of cosmopolitanism and diversity hardly conceals the multiform borders and spatial divisions that run through the social fabric of the city. Rather, the life of the Melillenses is paced according to the border. The daily boat arrivals from mainland Spain, the traffic jams at the border with Morocco, the entry of migrants through the fences, the occasional closure of the border, the constant supply of additional military and police forces from mainland Spain, or even the opening hours of the supermarkets situated closest to the border; all of these events shape the city's life. If, as happens on some occasions, the border closes for a couple of hours, life in Melilla feels different.

References

Andersson, Ruben. 2014. *Illegality, Inc.; Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Guia, Aitana. 2014. *The Muslim Struggle for Civil Rights in Spain: Promoting Democracy through Migrant Engagement*, 1985-2010. Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the European Research Council-funded project EU Border Care (http://eubordercare.eu) at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, led by Prof. Vanessa Grotti whom I thank for her trust and support. Fieldwork was conducted from August through-October 2016 and during January 2017.