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Ceuta, Melilla, and the Co-Construction of Borders and Migrant Identities: Moroccan and Spanish Media Discourse

Ceuta, Melilla y la co-construcción de fronteras e identidades migrantes: el discurso mediático marroquí y español

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Abstract

Ceuta and Melilla are often the epicenter of political debates in Spain and Morocco, in part owing to their Spanish sovereignty being disputed by Morocco. This issue is further complicated by Morocco's paradoxical role in migration to these cities, serving as a sojourn for migrants while simultaneously policing the borders that it protests. In this study, I use critical discourse analysis and media framing to analyze 200 Moroccan and Spanish news articles to highlight how migrant identities and borders are co-constructed. Findings show that borders are discursively constructed differently across countries and publication languages while also tied to migration, juxtaposing migrants against the borders through an aggressor-victim relationship.

Key words: Ceuta, Melilla, borders, Spanish media discourse, Moroccan media discourse

Resumen

Ceuta y Melilla suelen ser el epicentro de los debates políticos en España y Marruecos, en parte porque Marruecos disputa su soberanía española. Esta cuestión se complica aún más por el papel paradójico que desempeña Marruecos en la migración a estas ciudades; sirve de lugar de paso para los migrantes y, al mismo tiempo, vigila las fronteras por las que protesta. En este estudio, uso el análisis crítico del discurso y el marco mediático para analizar 200 artículos de noticias marroquíes y españoles para destacar cómo se construyen conjuntamente las identidades migrantes y las fronteras. Los hallazgos muestran que las fronteras se construyen discursivamente de manera diferente en los distintos países y en los idiomas de publicación, a la vez que están vinculadas a la migración, yuxtaponiendo a los migrantes con las fronteras a través de una relación agresor-víctima.

Palabras clave: Ceuta, Melilla, fronteras, discurso mediático español, discurso mediático marroquí

Introduction

The notion of borders has long been a polemic topic in contemporary global political discourse, and is often embedded in issues surrounding migration and the marginalization of individuals in these border spaces. The cities of Ceuta and Melilla present a unique migratory situation, being under Spanish sovereignty yet geographically in Morocco. Moreover, their borders represent different things to different parties: the borders can be seen as a statement of sovereignty by Spain, one that not only creates a barrier against transnational movement into Spain and Europe, but also asserts a claim over these cities in the ongoing sovereignty dispute with Morocco (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017). Furthermore, Spaniards and indeed other Europeans may see it as a means of protection and separation between Europe and Africa; Moroccan workers may view it as a barrier to be crossed regularly for work; it is the workplace for border guards; migrants see it as a barrier to reaching a sanctuary (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017). These different positionalities vis-a-vis borders, however, are shaped by the sociocultural and political history of these spaces and the unequal distribution of power among different social groups that has been borne out of this history. Thus, borders can play a significant role in constructing the agents and recipients of marginalization.

Here, it is necessary to define “borders” and “migration” for the scope of this study. Borders are commonly understood as “politically defined boundaries separating territory or maritime zones between political entities and the areas where political entities exercise border governance

measures on their territory or extraterritorially” (International Organization for Migration, 2019). However, this definition largely adopts a state-centric bias, taking the nation-state's authority as a given rather than a historically constructed and contested entity. This study, by contrast, emphasizes that borders are also social constructs and sites of power struggles, exclusion, and violence.

Similarly, migrants are broadly defined as “a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons” (International Organization for Migration, 2019). While this definition is inclusive, it is important to note that such categories are not universal and often disputed. As Crawley and Skleparis (2018) highlight, these classifications are products of political processes, not fixed or natural, and can reinforce a problematic dichotomy that discriminates against those designated as “migrants” by deeming them less “deserving.”

Public discourse can similarly be critical to the shaping and contestation of such identities. Media discourse is especially influential and complex, since it involves a variety of participants: producers of texts, those whose interests they may represent, individuals or groups that are the focus of news stories, and the consumers of news (Devereux, 2014; Fairclough, 1995). Considering the uneven roles of these active and passive participants, the potency of media discourse can extend to shaping individual, group, and community ideologies and identities (Krzyżanowski, 2010). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995) and media framing (Littlejohn and Foss, 2010) together serve as a useful analytical tool that acknowledges the role of power and political ideologies in shaping mass discourse (Ramanathan and Tan, 2015), and its ability to uphold social inequities. Similarly, media framing serves as a useful theoretical framework for identifying how a story is structured and organized through media (i.e. how it is “framed”) as well as how their specific structure and organization shapes the public’s understanding and opinion of the content reported (Littlejohn and Foss, 2010). In the case of migrant representation in the news, CDA captures how the media works to impose otherness onto migrants, create sentiments of “us versus them” amongst its audience, and reinforce the notion of borders and the need for their policing. Media coverage focusing on migration is particularly relevant, and has been a point of debate. Media framing, in turn, sheds light on how media coverage is framed to perpetuate stereotypes about migrants, ultimately contributing to creating a heightened sense of “us versus them” by way of metaphors (Deb and Charvak, 2015). Using a corpus of 200 news articles from Morocco and Spain published between 2012-2023, I employ CDA to examine how the Spanish and Moroccan media use migration and migrant identities to discursively construct the Ceuta and Melilla borders. In highlighting both latent and manifest attitudes towards migration and borders, this study provides a lens for understanding the interplay between discourse, identity, and migration in the construction of the Ceuta and Melilla borders.

Ceuta and Melilla: A Political and Historical Overview

Located along the northern coast of Morocco, these two autonomous cities experienced various shifts of political control over the centuries. While Ceuta and Melilla were once controlled by the Romans and later the Vandals, 711 AD brought both cities under Muslim Berber rule with the Umayyad conquest (Vicente, 2005). The campaign to retake Muslim-controlled territory began only a few years later among Christian kingdoms in the north of the Iberian Peninsula; however, the Reconquest was a gradual process of reclaiming territory that culminated in 1492 with the surrender of Granada. Spain gained Melilla shortly after in 1497, and Ceuta in 1668 (Ribas, 2012). The development of these cities thus became a part of Spanish colonialism that had stretched across the Atlantic around the same time period, and again in the early 20th century when Spain and France occupied Morocco. While French and Spanish protectorates were respectively divided between south and north, Spain had additional territories in southern and central Morocco, including Sidi Ifni and Cape Juby. Despite the dissolution of the French protectorate in 1956 (Miller, 2013) and the Spanish protectorate in 1958 (Gangas Geisse and Arenas, 2011), Sidi Ifni was not returned to Morocco until 1969 (Pennell, 2000), and Ceuta and Melilla were not ceded at all and remained under Spanish control. Given this history, neither Spain nor the UN recognizes Morocco's territorial claims to these cities; in fact, the Madrid-based think tank, Elcano Royal Institute, has asserted Spain's legal and historical claims to these cities, taking on a moral and ideological stance that that Ceuta and Melilla - unlike Morocco - are "democratic spaces" and "European cities" that uphold human rights and rule of law. (Del Valle Gálvez, 2025). However, these cities continue to be a point of contention in Morocco, where they are commonly viewed as occupied territories and residuals of Spanish colonialism (Saddiki, 2017).

Because of the geopolitical and historical relationship between Spain and Morocco, Ceuta and Melilla have developed in relatively unique conditions and therefore present distinctive sociocultural settings in comparison to the Spanish mainland. Caught between Africa and the E.U., Ceuta and Melilla are politically part of the Global North and geographically part of the Global South. For Spanish authorities, this has incited a fear of Moroccanization of these two cities, which in turn could present a challenge to sovereignty (Castan Pinos, 2009a). Demographically, a slim majority of the population in both cities combined are Christian, while Muslims form the largest religious minority, comprising 40% of the population (Fernández García, 2020). Cultural pluralism also extends to language use: while Spanish is the official language in both cities, Moroccan Arabic is spoken by 42% of the Spanish bilingual population in Ceuta (Moscoso García, 2015). Melilla is similarly characterized by extensive bilingualism with Spanish and Riffian Amazigh (Sánchez Suárez, 2003), though data on the number of speakers is not available. Despite their prominence, however, Arabic and Amazigh have been largely invisibilized: both are relatively absent from the cities' educational systems (Fernández García, 2016; Moscoso García, 2015) and have been denied official recognition at the government level, even after attempts to amend the Statute of Autonomy in order to recognize Amazigh in Melilla (Tilmatine, 2011). This institutional invisibility

consolidates the diglossic situations in Ceuta and Melilla, which arguably naturalizes both linguistic and social hierarchies in societies (Ready, 2018). In Spain, this hierarchy not only places Spanish - both as a language and identity - at the top, but also relegates other languages and identities into the periphery as *the other*. As I demonstrate in this study, this dichotomy of “us vs. them” bears a great deal of relevance to how migrant identities are constructed and understood by the general public. Likewise, narratives that reinforce this dichotomy serve as a dividing line that justifies the construction and surveillance of the borders.

Discourse on migration to Ceuta and Melilla typically centers around undocumented instances, most of which involve migrants using these two cities as entry points into Europe rather than as final destinations. Despite various measures taken to prevent entry into Ceuta and Melilla, many migrants manage to cross over each year. However, many of these individuals are quickly turned away by authorities. One increasingly common form of deportation includes *devolución en caliente*, or *pushback*. This involves sending undocumented migrants back to the country they entered from (in this case, Morocco) through procedures that do not necessarily comply with existing legal rules or agreements (López-Sala, 2020; Šalamon, 2019). Despite its increasing ubiquity, this practice has been criticized for the legal complications it creates, since many of the migrants who end up deported in this fashion are actually asylum seekers who - under this practice - are denied access to asylum procedures that could have otherwise guaranteed their safety (López-Sala and Moreno-Amador, 2021). Despite these criticisms, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that pushbacks did not violate the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (European Court of Human Rights, 2020).

Activity between Morocco and the two Spanish enclaves is heavily monitored and regulated, and consists of both documented and undocumented movement. In all cases of border crossings, the physical border itself - as well as any surveillance and policing in the border area - is a critical component to the discussion of migration control and what the border means for different parties on either side of it, as well as for those who come into contact with it. Both cities have had fortifications dating back to Spanish colonization, and so the physical borders may first and foremost be seen as a statement of sovereignty by Spain, one that not only creates a barrier against transnational movement into Spain and Europe, but also asserts a claim over Ceuta and Melilla in the ongoing sovereignty dispute with Morocco (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017). Yet the border represents a different type of space for different communities. The Spanish state and Spanish citizens may see the physical borders as a means of protection and a separation between Europe and Africa; Moroccan workers may view it is a barrier to be crossed regularly to go to and from work; it is a place of work for border guards; migrants see it as a barrier to reaching a sanctuary or better life opportunities (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017).

While physical borders date back to Spanish colonization, the modern fences around Ceuta and Melilla were first constructed in 1993, and have since been reconstructed multiple times over the years, particularly after major breaches where numerous migrants have attempted to cross over the fences at once. These fences have been rebuilt and modified by various companies over the years, including Dragados, Ferrovial, Proyectos Y Tecnología Sallén, Eulen, Initec Infraest, Acciona, and Mora Salazar, with a total of 87 contracts among these companies between 2005-2016, and

95.9 million euros spent on the Ceuta border, and 36.6 million euros on the Melilla border (Akkerman, 2019). Modifications to the fences have included increasing their height (Castan Pinos 2009b), adding multiple rows of fences (Alscher, 2005), and adding razor wire to the tops of fences (Saddiki, 2010), as well as adding tear gas sprinklers, three-dimensional detection cables, surveillance cameras, and sound/movement/heat sensors (Ribas, 2012). Additionally, in 1999, the Spanish government implemented the Integrated System of External Vigilance (SIVE), a plan for guarding the southern borders against small, flat-bottomed boats - *pateras* - carrying unauthorized migrants towards Spain, with a special focus on Ceuta, Melilla, and the Canary Islands. Citing an obligation to protect Spain and the EU borders, the Spanish government created the SIVE structure to detect and intercept pateras. (Carling, 2007). Operated by the Guardia Civil, SIVE was primarily developed by Indra Sistemas, an IT and defense systems company that has developed surveillance systems for various European countries, and has actively lobbied the EU for research funding and coordinating projects to further develop police force collaborations across countries to deter migration (Akkerman, 2019).

Despite extensive investment in the borders around Ceuta and Melilla, these efforts have done little to deter or dissuade unauthorized migration, and instead have made it more dangerous for people to get past these obstacles, risking severe injury or death (Akkerman, 2019). Numerous news articles have reported on the injuries and deaths of migrants who have attempted to cross over the fences, either as a result of the hostile features of the fences themselves, or of violence on the part of Spanish or Moroccan authorities at the border. These risks are not just limited to land-crossings; many migrant fatalities have occurred in the water in drowning accidents. In many of these scenarios, passengers in pateras are often ordered by their smugglers to go overboard and swim once they reach a certain distance from the Spanish shore (Carling, 2007). While this allows smugglers to return safely to Morocco, many migrants are either unable to swim, or get overtaken by strong currents, thus making water crossings just as hazardous as land crossings.

The inherent dangers and humanitarian crises unfolding at these borders underscore a critical tension with the principles of humanitarian border management (HBN), an approach to border management that purportedly prioritizes the safety and human rights of crisis-affected populations while simultaneously respecting national sovereignty and security (International Organization for Migration, 2025). However, the practical application of this approach has proven problematic. In an analysis of humanitarian discourse regarding borders and migration, Ticktin (2015) identifies three central issues that arise from humanitarianism at the border: first, the problematic construction of refugees as victims, often within a hierarchical framework of victimhood (Lafaut and Coen, 2019); second, “rapid response” operations that impede a contextualized and historical understanding of the root causes of emigration; and third, the prioritization of sentiments over fundamental rights. Similarly, Aris Escarcena (2021) observes that “the humanitarian spectacle of reception and protection intensified as a symbolic display that sought to show the compatibility between violent border control practices and humanitarian practices protecting vulnerable migrants and asylum-seekers” (p. 72).

Migrant Representation in Media Discourse

CDA as an analytical framework highlights the overlap between social practices and linguistics practices, and centers on how society’s structural inequities manifest in language. As such, this analytical framework acknowledges the role of power and political ideologies in shaping mass discourse (Ramanathan and Tan, 2015), and its ability to uphold social inequities. In the case of migrant representation in the news, CDA is particularly relevant because it captures how media discourse works to place the labels of otherness onto marginalized migrants and create sentiments of “us versus them” amongst citizens of a nation. CDA creates opportunities for critiquing the implications of such media discourse by posing questions as to how persons are referred, how characteristics are attributed to persons and from what perspective are arguments framed and for what reasons, amongst others (Ramanathan and Tan, 2015). Such questions are used to expand on the implications of this study.

The topic of migration heavily influences political discussions in nations experiencing significant immigration or emigration, a reality evident in its widespread media presence. Yet, a substantial portion of this discourse portrays migration through a negative and politicized lens. Research by Fengler et al. (2022) analyzed news coverage in 11 diverse African and European countries, including Spain. Their findings indicated that while European news primarily focused on host countries’ economic and security concerns - often decontextualized from migrants’ countries of origin - both European and African media outlets largely omitted migrants’ personal narratives. In another study looking specifically at Spain, Horsti (2016) examined multimodal representations produced by the BBC, and found that undocumented migration primarily represented migrants either as threats or as victims. This is also present in Spain-based sources; Chakour and Portillo Fernández (2018) highlight various lexical resources that convey belligerent and military registers, as well as dehumanizing labels for migrants, such as being *sin papeles* (without papers). These negative connotations are especially prevalent in specific cases: Rodríguez Borges (2010) notes the xenophobic discourse widely present in the newspaper, *El Día* (published in Tenerife, Canary Islands), regarding undocumented migration to this archipelago, in which this type of migration was represented as a national emergency. Other studies have also shown that xenophobia in the media targets specific, racialized groups: Martínez Lirola’s (2014) study found that the representation of Sub-Saharan migrants are particularly represented as vulnerable victims lacking in autonomy; Martín Díaz (2012), whose study focused on Latin American migration to Spain, found that media discourse represented Latin American migrants as culturally compatible with Spain, but only insofar as being a useful tool for the ethnic stratification of the Spanish labor market. Martín Díaz also noted the increasing Islamophobia in the 2000s, which positioned North African migrants as culturally distant and unsuitable sources of cheap labor.

Moroccan media similarly produces dehumanizing discourse about migrants that may perpetuate xenophobia. Ouhemmou and Moumine (2020) note that migration is often described as an

invasion, and that Sub-Saharan migrants in particular are represented as invaders who bring crimes, poverty, filth, and disease. They further contrast this treatment with descriptions of Syrian immigrants and refugees, who are often depicted in a more positive and optimistic light. Such depictions can play a critical role in shaping public opinions about migration. In a study of Moroccans' perceptions of Sub-Saharan migrants on the Facebook page of the Moroccan newspaper *Hespress*, Chentoufi and El Allame (2024) found that the newspaper's media framing contributed to shaping negative attitudes towards migrants and criticisms of immigration policies. While there is a great deal of negativity aimed towards migrants in Morocco, there is evidence that these attitudes may be shifting somewhat: Dib and Sandy (2023) examine the depiction of Sub-Saharan migrants in Moroccan print newspapers before and after Morocco's migration reform policy of 2013. Focusing specifically on *Assabah* and *Almassae*, two major newspapers in Morocco, they found a dramatic change in the depiction of Sub-Saharan migrants before and after the reform, particularly in the overall tone of article headlines. In the case of *Assabah*, they note that prominent depictions of criminality shifted to a focus on looking at migrants through a humanitarian lens.

Present Study and Methods

Media discourse has the power to influence through its wide reach of audiences across the globe and can thus inform political and institutional policies or practices therein. The present study uses CDA as an analytical lens to examine how the Spanish and Moroccan press use the theme of migration and migrant identities to discursively construct the Ceuta and Melilla borders. Specifically, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do news outlets discursively represent the Ceuta and Melilla borders through discussions about migration?
2. How are migrant identities constructed through discussions about the borders?
3. What linguistic strategies are used to construct these identities?
4. Are there key differences in representation between Spanish and Moroccan media discourse?

For this study, I conducted an analysis of digital press published in Spain and Morocco. My data consists of 200 news articles from 2013-2023 (inclusive) that report on migration to Ceuta and Melilla, a theme which was specifically chosen for a previous study. These articles were chosen based on availability and accessibility via a Google News search, since Google News provides a broad, accessible initial sweep of press coverage, especially for identifying a wide range of articles related to this topic. I used keywords such as *migration, migrant*, *Ceuta*, and *Melilla* in the relevant languages to locate articles. While Google News provided an accessible tool for this initial search, it is critical to acknowledge a key limitation: Google News aggregates content and its algorithmic prioritization of certain articles or sources means it does not yield a perfectly

representative sample of the overall media landscape in any given country. To mitigate this and enhance the systematic nature of the media selection, I ensured all selected sources were definitively based in Spain or Morocco. Additionally, I attempted to diversify the sources as much as possible. For example, in cases where I consistently found articles from a single news outlet, I prioritized looking for articles from different news sources to broaden the sample’s scope. I also identified popular, widely read newspapers in each country (Arrese et al., 2009; Benchenna et al., 2017) and attempted to include articles from these publications. The distribution of articles is shown in Tables 1-3:

News outlet	Number of sources
20 Minutos	6
ABC España	5
Ceuta Actualidad	1
Ceuta al Día	1
Diario de Navarra	1
El Confidencial	3
El Confidencial Autonómico	1
El Confidencial Digital	1
El Diario	8
El Español	7
El Faro Ceuta	1
El Independiente	1
El Mundo	16
El País	16
El Periódico	5
El Público	2
Europa Press	8
InfoLibre	3
La Gaceta	2
La Razón	3
La Vanguardia	2
La Verdad de Ceuta	1
OK Diario	2
Onda Cero	1
Periodistas en Español	1
RTVE	2
Total	100

Table 1: Spanish News Outlets

Table 2: Moroccan News Outlets (Arabic Language)

News outlet	Number of sources
بلادنا24 - Bladna24	1
المساء - Almassaa	2
أحداث أنفو - Ahdath Info	10
24 24 ساعة - saa	2
التبريس - Altpress	1
SNRTNews	3
الحرة - Alhurra	3
هسبريس - Hespress	23
الصباح - Assabah	5
Total	50

Table 3: Moroccan News Outlets (French language)

News outlet	Number of sources
Le matin	11
La nouvelle tribune	6
La vie éco	4
Aujourdi'hui le Maroc	8
L'Opinion	1
Bladi.net	10
Ya Biladi	5
article19.ma	1
L'Économiste	1
Le 360	2
OujdaCity	1
Total	50

I compiled 50 Arabic and 50 French language articles from Morocco, and 100 Spanish language articles from Spain, and imported these articles into the qualitative research software, NVivo. Here, I organized files based on key variables such as country of origin, publication language, and publication date. Initially, a preliminary set of codes was developed based on existing literature on migration discourse and the study's research questions. As I engaged with the texts, new themes and patterns emerged, leading to the development of additional codes. This process allowed for the refinement of a comprehensive coding framework, which was then systematically

applied across the entire corpus. Owing to space limitations, my analysis features the English translations of articles.

Using CDA and media framing, I identified various overarching themes surrounding the co-construction of borders and migrant identities, though the scope of this article will center around a comparative analysis between Spanish and Moroccan media. My analysis of Spanish media discourse will focus on the personification of the borders as the victims of attacks, the border space as a policed space, as well as the ways in which borders create a dividing line between Spain/Europe and Africa, reinforcing an “us vs. them” dichotomy. My analysis of Moroccan media discourse will similarly look at how migrants are portrayed as aggressors against the border. Additionally, I highlight discourse surrounding Morocco’s cooperation with Spain with border patrol, as well as discourse labeling Ceuta and Melilla as occupied territories. Additionally, I examined different linguistic features and strategies employed in the articles, paying close attention to word choice, sentence structure, metaphors, etc. Finally, as I analyzed the data and came across recurring themes, I also noted recurring terminology being used. As such, I also conducted a word frequency search in these instances, and will use these findings to supplement observations in my textual analysis.

Analysis: Spanish Press

This section of the analysis focuses on Spanish media discourse, and will examine the following themes: (1) the personification of the borders as victims; (2) border spaces as policed spaces; (3) borders as the dividing line between *us* and *them*. While the analysis draws on a small sample of the articles collected for this study, Table 4 notes the number of sources in which these themes appear:

Table 4: Thematic Overview of the Spanish Press

Themes	Number of sources
Personified borders	20
Border space as a policed space	14
Border between ‘us’ and ‘them’	28

Throughout this analysis, I highlight how such discursive representations of the Ceuta and Melilla borders are constructed through discursive representations of migrants.

Personified Borders

Much of the media discourse produced in Spain describes incidents involving groups of migrants (un)successfully crossing the Ceuta and Melilla borders. In many of these cases, these incidents are described as a*saltos* (attacks), which occurred 47 times in a word frequency search among Spanish news articles:

> Massive attacks on the border. More than half a thousand Sub-Saharans have tried to enter Ceuta and Melilla in recent hours by swimming and jumping the fence and some 200 have succeeded. In the case of Melilla, the situation has been especially difficult due to the aggressiveness of the avalanche: there are six civil guards injured and the fence has a huge hole, about 40 meters.
>
> (*El Mundo,* 2013)
>
> After the latest events of massive attacks on the Melilla fence, which are on top of those (events) that Ceuta has been suffering, it has become necessary for Spanish institutions to promote a declaration that recognizes, in the face of Morocco's activity, Spanish sovereignty over these two cities and the inalienable defense of the unity of Spain.
>
> (*La Gaceta,* 2022)
>
> Almost ten months after the massive entry of some 10,000 immigrants into Ceuta in less than 48 hours, Morocco has once again looked the other way. This time it has been in Melilla where two massive attacks on the fence in two days have resulted in more than 800 immigrants entering the autonomous city.
>
> (*Europa Press,* 2022)

In the above excerpts, the attacks are described as "massive" and against the Spanish border (*El Mundo*) or the fence (*La Gaceta*). These descriptions – while focusing on inanimate entities – indirectly criminalizes migrants as aggressors against Spanish society. First, this is done by personifying the border and fence in depicting them as recipients of the attack, an act which is typically against sentient beings capable of feeling pain or harm. In this sense, the political border and physical fence in their personified forms may represent Spanish society as a whole, and thus an attack on national security that evokes a sense of national crisis. Moreover, such descriptions serve to naturalize borders as a way of justifying discriminatory migration management. An attack on the borders, then, is an attack on Spanish citizens, who are positioned as victims of migrants' criminal behavior. This is further perpetuated by descriptions of migrants entering the cities as an "avalanche" or "massive."

Border Space as a Policed Space

Besides migrants, Spanish and Moroccan authorities are also key participants that are represented in discourse about the borders. In these instances, the Spanish Civil Guard is typically foregrounded as the primary party protecting the borders:

> The chief colonel of the Command of the Civil Guard of Ceuta, José Luis Gómez Salinero, alluded a few days ago at the Pilar festival that the civil guards carry out a 'tough and complicated mission' of control and surveillance in the 8.2 kilometers of land border perimeter that separates Ceuta from Morocco.
>
> (*20 Minutos,* 2018)

In an article focusing on migrants crossing over the fences, the Civil Guard are depicted as doing their job; namely, defending the borders, which are represented as heavily policed spaces. This is especially observable through the description of their responsibilities: “control” and “surveillance” of the border, presumably for the purposes of monitoring migration. In other examples, however, descriptions of Spanish authorities are shown to be overwhelmed by the arrival of migrants, thus constructing the border as a site of conflict and even violence:

> The immigrants didn’t force the fence nor did they jump it: they ran in a group for a kilometer and a half until they were returned by the police. The mass surprised the Moroccan and Spanish authorities, who were deployed along the border perimeter before they received warnings of a possible avalanche.
>
> (*El País,* 2017)
>
> More than 100 sub-Saharan immigrants jumped over the Ceuta border fence, taking advantage of the collective prayer time of the Sacrifice Festival and have caused seven civil guards to be injured. The immigrants used quicklime, weapons to cut the fence and balls with feces to get away from the agents. The jump over the fence took place at 9:00 a.m., when these immigrants managed to gain access through the Finca Berrocal area, the same place through which 602 immigrants managed to gain access on July 26.
>
> The Civil Guard was not able to contain the immigrants and seven agents were injured due to the violence used in the assault, according to sources from the Government Delegation.
>
> (*El Mundo,* 2018)

In each of these excerpts, the Spanish authorities are depicted as overburdened with the task of containing migration, which is represented as a confrontation or struggle against migrants. In *El País*, these opponents are an "avalanche," while in *El Mundo*, police are shown to be overpowered through strategic offenses on the part of migrants who picked a specific time to cross over and attacked and injured police in the process. This description - while depicting what seems like an unsuccessful attempt of the police to contain the situation, once again reinforces that need for border protection (even more protection, perhaps), highlighting the crisis at the border that's been orchestrated by migrants.

Border between "Us" and "Them"

Perhaps one of the most salient themes that were repeatedly highlighted through Spanish media discourse was that of borders reinforcing an "us vs. them" dichotomy between parties on either side of the border. In some cases, the border is shown as the dividing line between Spain and Morocco:

> In the case of Ceuta, it is estimated that in the area closest to the border there are currently a thousand Sub-Saharan Africans waiting to enter the city illegally. This high number of people forces the agents to maintain constant attention in the border environment, especially considering that these immigrants live hidden in the mountains near the border, in subhuman conditions, often mistreated by the Moroccan police, often at the mercy of the mafias and waiting for an assault.
>
> (*20 Minutos,* 2014)

This excerpt describes spaces on the Moroccan side of the border, and establishes the need for a border in the first place. Like previously cited excerpts, this description juxtaposes migrants and Spanish authority figures, situating them in a conflict between attackers and defenders, respectively. However, the Moroccan police are referenced as a third party that contribute to Spain's need for a border: while migrants are portrayed as agents of violence when they are in contact with the Spanish police, they are transformed into victims of mistreatment of the Moroccan police while simultaneously having a poor quality of life in Morocco. While discourse about the Ceuta and Melilla borders are clearly tied to discussions about migration to these cities, these discussions may also be connected to another broader discussion: that of the relationship between these two nations and their long history of political conflict:

> The Government of Morocco has spent years attacking Spain from its institutions, promoting the organized assault on the fences of Ceuta and Melilla and claiming those Spanish territories both in forums national and international.

(*La Gaceta,* 2022)

This excerpt echoes the language of the *20 Minutos* excerpt, similarly holding Morocco responsible for enabling “the organized assault on the fences.” However, it also attributes this behavior to a long-standing feud with Spain that extends beyond the matter of migration; specifically, the sovereignty of Ceuta and Melilla.

While border-related discourse certainly emphasizes a dichotomy that separates Spain and Morocco, such discourse frequently reinforces a dividing line between the EU and Africa as well, establishing Ceuta and Melilla as two focal points in European security:

> Asked who will pay for this proposal, the Vox leader pointed out that Spain has sufficient resources to do so, although it must also 'demand economic collaboration' from the EU, since 'Ceuta and Melilla are the southern border of Europe.' In this sense, he rejected that Morocco takes care of the construction because, as he has pointed out, they want to do 'things right' and the African kingdom 'puts up fences that are useless.'
>
> Among its decalogue of requests, it also calls for a greater number of agents to control the border and for the endowments to be permanent, such as the Police Intervention Unit (UIP) of the National Police or the Reserve and Security Groups (GRS) of the Civil Guard, because, as they point out, this problem 'is not isolated.'
>
> Currently, he denounces the training, the agents 'have a brutal lack', without bulletproof vests, nor anti-cut gloves, without gas masks, nor suits to repel burns, among other means, according to Ortega Smith. Thus, he asks the Executive to allow the use of riot gear at the border, something that is currently prohibited.
>
> 'We only ask that they act as in civilized countries,' he pointed out, before pointing out that using rubber bullets for two agents to defend themselves against an avalanche of 700 people is 'proportionate and even insufficient.' In this sense, the deputy has demanded that electric guns also be allowed.
>
> (*La Vanguardia,* 2019)
>
> Now Vox points out that the cost must be 'assumed by Spain' with its own economic resources. However, it does require 'economic collaboration' from the European Union, because Ceuta and Melilla are 'the southern border of Europe' and the European partners, Ortega Smith stresses, 'have to understand that we are protecting them from this avalanche.'
>
> (*El Mundo,* 2019)

These two excerpts draw on political discourse from Javier Ortega Smith, General Secretary of Vox at the time of these articles’ publication. Here, he draws in the E.U. as another responsible

party in the matter of migration, since Ceuta and Melilla are considered entry points into the rest of the E.U. These news reports also go on to contrast Spain from Morocco through a Global North vs. Global South lens, labeling Morocco as "the African kingdom" alongside Ortega Smith's quote about Morocco's security measures being "useless." Additionally, the North vs. South contrast is further emphasized by the reference to "civilized countries." Presumably, Ortega Smith is alluding to E.U. nations. Taken with the earlier juxtaposition between the E.U. and Africa, this implies that African countries - particularly, those migrating through Morocco - are not among the civilized. Finally, the role of Ceuta and Melilla as Spain and Europe's fortress is evident in Ortega Smith's claim that Spain is attempting to protect the rest of the E.U. from an "avalanche," thus justifying the suggestion that the E.U. involve itself in managing migration to Ceuta and Melilla.

While the above discourse specifically comes from one particular political party, Vox, discourse that perpetuates a "Fortress Europe" ideology is also evident in other types of news discourse that is not necessarily attached to any specific political affiliation:

> With the incorporation of Spain into the EU in 1986, the 11-kilometer perimeter that encloses the town on the Moroccan coast began to divide two worlds as one of the most unequal borders on the planet. The one of Melilla is, next to the one of Ceuta, the only terrestrial demarcation between Europe and Africa.
>
> (*El País,* 2022)
>
> In 1986, when Spain entered the club of the European Communities, Ceuta and Melilla became the only territories on African soil of what is now the European Union. So, the country, fresh out of the dictatorship and in full reconstruction, was not quite attractive for immigrants, but a decade later, with the Schengen Agreement, the cities changed their role: they went from being the gateway to Spain to the window to Europe. At the end of the century, the construction of the Melilla fence began, financed with community funds.
>
> (*El Español,* 2020)

As noted above, these reports are not directly connected to political discourse. However, similar to the Vox-related discourse I previously cited, these reports also perpetuate a clear divide between North and South, with Ceuta and Melilla as the gateways into Spain and - more importantly - into Europe. This is especially notable through the description of Ceuta and Melilla as cities that "divide two worlds," creating a stark contrast between the two regions, to the extent that it implies a degree of foreignness between the two.

Analysis: Moroccan Press

In this section, I analyze discourse from the Moroccan media, and will similarly examine how the Ceuta and Melilla borders are discursively constructed primarily through discourse about migrant identities. Here, I look at the following themes: (1) criminalization of migrants; (3) Ceuta and Melilla sovereignty. Table 5 highlights the frequency with which these themes occur in both Arabic and French language publications:

Table 5: Thematic Overview of the Moroccan Press

Themes	Number of French sources	Number of Arabic sources
Attacks on border fences	15	13
Ceuta and Melilla Sovereignty	12	15

Attacks on Border Fences

Much like Spanish media, Moroccan media produces discourse that criminalizes migrants in highlighting migrants’ attempts to climb the fences around Ceuta and Melilla:

> Five new deaths were recorded on Saturday evening among individuals who stormed the metal fence in the province of Nador, bringing the death toll to 23, according to local sources.
>
> A member of the public force and 18 attackers are currently under medical surveillance, the same source said.
>
> (*Le matin,* 2022)

This excerpt foregrounds the criminal actions of migrants, describing them as active agents - “attackers” - who “stormed” the fence, words that connote violence. More than that, this excerpt goes beyond criminalizing migrants’ actions (“stormed”) and extends this to their identities by labeling them as “attackers.” Through these word choices, not only are migrants indirectly held responsible for the death and injuries that are mentioned in this excerpt, but the border is also established as a stronghold meant to barricade the cities from these individuals. This notion of borders as a fortress against migrants is not only established through these discursive representations of migrants - it is further reinforced through the portrayal of Moroccan authority figures as the defenders of these borders:

> Police forces succeeded on Monday in thwarting an attempt by over 100 migrants from Sub-Saharan African countries to jump over the border fence in order to cross into the occupied city of Melilla.
>
> (*Hespress,* 2021)
>
> …The capital, Rabat, announced that it thwarted more than 54,000 attempts to cross towards the European Union since the beginning of the current year, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees recorded the arrival of around 40,000 people in Spain since the beginning of 2018.
>
> (*Hespress,* 2018)

These two excerpts from different articles published by the same news source both describe Moroccan authorities as having "thwarted" (إحباط) attempted migration among massive numbers of Sub-Saharan migrants from "African countries" into Melilla and the European Union, as noted in each excerpt, respectively. While brief, these reports communicate a great deal about border and migration ideologies. First, the designated names used for origins and destinations says a lot: migrants are portrayed as a vague, amorphous mass without nationality - only that they are Sub-Saharan (i.e. not Moroccan) and from African countries. Such descriptions uphold the notion of migrants as dehumanized outsiders attempting to enter specific destinations: Melilla, and by connection, the European Union. The Melilla border, then, is established as the dividing line between Africa and Europe. Second, if migrants are discursively constructed as aggressors against the border, then authorities - namely, Moroccan authorities - are established as the defenders of the border, having "thwarted" migrants' attempts - a term that evokes war and self-defense.

While generally unacknowledged in the Spanish press, Morocco's role in border control has been acknowledged by the Spanish government, as reported in the Moroccan press:

> In a related context, the Spanish government confirmed that Morocco cooperates in the issue of repatriating Moroccan migrants who arrive in occupied Ceuta irregularly, highlighting that as soon as one of them is intercepted, the Moroccan authorities are immediately notified by their staff at the borders, and the deportation process takes place in their presence.
>
> The Spanish Ministry of Interior praised what it described as the 'active cooperation of Morocco in receiving its citizens,' emphasizing that 'this cooperation is undoubtedly effective, as it hinders the activities of networks involved in smuggling Moroccan migrants,' citing a 25.6% decrease in total irregular arrivals to Spain in 2022 compared to 2021.

> During his appearance before members of the Spanish Congress in a plenary session on Wednesday, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez reiterated that Morocco is a 'key ally' to the Kingdom of Spain, emphasizing his conviction that the new framework of relations between the two countries is in favor of the Iberian nation.
>
> (*Hespress,* 2023a)

In this excerpt, Morocco’s willingness to cooperate with Spain regarding migration control is further bolstered by the Spanish government’s approval of Morocco’s conduct. Here, Morocco is praised not only for its collaboration with Spain, but the effective implementation of border patrol, such that undocumented migration had reportedly seen a significant decrease between 2021 and 2022. Additionally, the Spanish Prime Minister named Morocco an ally of Spain’s; however, this pronouncement is also qualified by the mention that this alliance serves the interests of Spain, and accordingly establishes the border as not only a dividing line between Morocco and Spain, but a line that is unilaterally beneficial to Spain. The relationship between these two countries - particularly in how it approaches migration - has been met with some criticism in Moroccan news, which has denounced Moroccan authorities’ treatment of migrants, as well as Morocco’s overall cooperation with Spain, as noted in the following excerpt:

> Mohammed Benissa, a Moroccan human rights activist, believes that '...The Moroccan authorities should consider the humanitarian and social aspects related to the conditions of irregular migrants on their lands and their circumstances while managing the migration file.'
>
> Benissa continues, 'Morocco should relinquish its role as a guard for Europe and prevent the European Union from evading its responsibilities in finding ways to provide peace and end civil wars in African countries, which push their people to migrate in search of a better life.'
>
> (*Hespress,* 2015)

Here, Moroccan authorities have been criticized not only for their treatment towards migrants, but also for efforts to serve European interests, which allows Europe, in turn, to not take responsibility for its own borders and ignore the political issues in many African countries that are often the root of much undocumented migration. While this excerpt further highlights the role of Moroccan authorities serving as a line of defense for Europe, it does so with a critical eye, challenging the belief that Morocco should take part in border patrol that serves Europe’s interests.

Ceuta and Melilla Sovereignty

In this section, I examine how Moroccan media discourse ties discussions about migration to broader political discussions regarding the sovereignty of Ceuta and Melilla. As evident from previous news excerpts, these two cities are frequently referred to as "occupied" cities. In fact, seeing this term appear repeatedly in news articles during my initial readings prompted me to complete a word frequency search. In 50 French language articles, the term *occupé* (and its derivatives) appeared 23 times. By comparison, in 50 Arabic language articles, the term محتل (and its derivatives) appeared 112 times, which perhaps indicates a stronger rejection of Spain's control over the two cities reflected in the latter group of publications. In many cases, this is evident from the mere inclusion of the term "occupied" or similar phrases such as "Spain-controlled," as in the below examples:

> Some eight hundred sub-Saharans tried on Sunday January 1 to forcefully enter the occupied Sebta region.
>
> (*Aujourd'hui Le Maroc,* 2017)
>
> Inside these forests, these migrants spend the majority of their time fleeing from the pursuits of security patrols, which intensify their monitoring of the border fence separating Moroccan territories from the Spanish-controlled city of Ceuta.
>
> (*Hespress,* 2015)

While no further commentary is offered regarding the issue of sovereignty, these qualifying terms used to describe the cities latently contest the present borders. That said, news articles may use other discursive strategies to interrogate the sovereignty matter:

> On their part, the local authorities in the occupied city mobilized their various units, especially the patrols of the anti-infiltration agency and a helicopter belonging to the Spanish Civil Guard, to monitor the movements of the African migrants in the area.
>
> (*Hespress,* 2021)
>
> After facing several criticisms, the authorities in Spain and the occupied city of Ceuta regarding the 'detention of Moroccan migrants in a container' on the Tarajal beach, immediately after they reached the shore from the other side by swimming, the central Spanish government responded with justifications for this measure, stating that it has been in effect since the second half of 2021.

(*Hespress,* 2023a)

For 2018, if we add almost 7,000 migrants registered in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in African territory, we reach a total of 120,205 arrivals in Europe. Spain once again became the leading gateway to Europe last year, with 55,756 arrivals by sea (compared to 22,103 in 2017).

(*Le matin,* 2019)

In each of these excerpts, Ceuta and Melilla are referred to as occupied cities, though each excerpt employs different discursive tactics that separate the cities from Spain’s (and Europe’s) jurisdiction. In the first example, which focuses on Melilla, Spanish authorities are labeled as the generic “local authorities,” and as such distances Spain from its control over Melilla. In the second text, authorities in “the occupied city of Ceuta” are distinguished from the authorities on the peninsula, implying that the authorities in Ceuta are not, in fact, in Spain. Finally, while the third text does not explicitly state that Ceuta and Melilla are occupied, it situates the two cities as being Spanish, yet “in African territory,” putting into question the jurisdictional claims that these cities are a part of Spain and Europe.

Finally, migration to Ceuta Melilla is often discussed in the context of a much broader border-related issue, that is, Morocco’s critical role in serving the interests of the “Global North” while being part of the “Global South.” In some of the news discourse, Morocco is positioned as a key safeguard for Europe whose efforts and successes often go unacknowledged:

'In addition to the economy and other political issues, migration stands out as a pivotal card for the Spanish in managing their relationship with Morocco,' stated the same spokesperson to Hespress, emphasizing the need for other European Union countries, especially those in the south, to consider the effectiveness and efficiency of Morocco's continuous role as 'Europe's gendarme' for decades, not just Spain.

Al-Khashani pointed out that 'despite Europe's full potential, laws, and procedures (such as the Frontex system), it remains incapable of monitoring its borders and coasts,' confirming that Europe has repeatedly acknowledged the 'difficulty of the task' and sought help from Morocco.

The expert concluded that 'the 500 kilometers of coastal borders that the Kingdom of Morocco possesses require Europe to double its efforts in terms of financial and logistical support to complement Morocco's successful efforts in reducing the flow of irregular migrants to European territories.' He further added that 'the cost of taking care of these migrants, their social treatment, and providing suitable humanitarian services for them is heavier and more expensive than supporting Morocco, which the European Union is still hesitant to increase, despite the renewed Spanish demands concerning this issue.'

(*Hespress,* 2023b)

This text emphasizes the role that Morocco has played in monitoring and controlling migration for Europe, and especially for Spain. In fact, Morocco is referred to as “Europe’s gendarme,” suggesting not only the militarization of the borders around Ceuta and Melilla, but also that Morocco is Europe’s first line of defense against migrants. Alongside the assertion that Morocco has served in this role successfully, effectively and efficiently reducing undocumented migration into Europe, this excerpt argues that Morocco merits greater support and acknowledgement from its European neighbors, considering all of the work the former has done to protect the latter’s borders from migration. Other articles, however, criticize Morocco’s role of “Europe’s gendarme,” disapproving of the deferential position in which this places Morocco:

> 'In the field of migration and as the Moroccan authorities have stated, Morocco does not act as a service commanded by the European Union or as a quid pro quo. It does so as a partner and within the framework of a shared responsibility, as demonstrated by the figures on migration and security cooperation in recent years, and which some MEPs seem to ignore,' he said.
>
> (*Le reporter,* 2021)

This article similarly takes issue with Morocco being relegated to a subordinate position that demands that it answer to Europe, and that the former’s efforts go largely ignored by the latter. This excerpt goes on to emphasize that the relationship is that of equal and mutual collaboration. In establishing Morocco’s relationship with the EU as that of an egalitarian partnership, the above excerpt implicitly contests the notion of a “Fortress Europe” in which the EU is its own, enclosed stronghold. As this and many other articles in the Moroccan media point out, Morocco is reportedly an active participant in controlling migratory movement from Africa to Europe.

Concluding Remarks

This study examined how Spanish and Moroccan media use migration and migrant identities to discursively construct the Ceuta and Melilla borders, as well as key differences in representation between Moroccan and Spanish media. One of the most salient themes that is evident across all discourse is the dehumanization and criminalization of migrants, establishing borders as a necessary preserver of national security. Particularly prevalent in Spanish media discourse are notions of migrants as monolithic, nameless, and faceless masses who are a threat. What’s more, this discourse reinforces an “us vs. them” dichotomy, which was frequently present in Spanish news articles. These dichotomies come in the form of Europe vs. Africa, Spanish vs. Sub-Saharan, and white vs. non-white; and these divisions are further solidified by discourse about the national borders that serve as a dividing line of the dichotomy. This was evident from the emphasis on the physical border/border fences, oftentimes as the passive victim of migrants’ attacks. Such

language highlights the separation between countries, between continents, and between identities. As a result, migrants - regardless of legal status, perhaps - are thus constructed as the unwanted and dangerous ‘other’ that justify the construction and patrolling of borders.

Media discourse also reveals some of the ways in which the sometimes-strained relationship between Morocco and Spain is manifested in the handling of migration. Both Spanish and Moroccan news articles depict their respective authority figures in different lights. In the case of Spanish media, Moroccan authorities are often blamed for not shouldering sufficient responsibility for stopping clandestine migration, and the Moroccan government in general is called out for their inaction. Spanish authorities, by contrast, are typically shown as the champions of Spain’s borders, and at times the victims of migrants’ aggressions. Moroccan news articles similarly portray their own authorities in a more positive light, and in fact emphasize that Morocco is an essential and active participant in controlling migration for Spain and the EU. Through these portrayals, authority figures are positioned as key participants within border spaces and indeed contribute to the conceptualization of borders as fortresses that cannot stand alone and must be actively defended.

Political disputes that are separate (though not unrelated) from migration may also further complicate some of the conflicting discourse between Spanish and Moroccan media, such as the issue of sovereignty of Ceuta and Melilla. While absent from Spanish news articles, the vast majority of Moroccan news articles refer to Ceuta and Melilla as 'occupied' cities or “Spain-controlled,” both of which imply political control via military conquest, while the generally absent label “Spanish cities” would have attributed a specific and legitimate identity to these cities. While the sovereignty of Ceuta and Melilla was often challenged through the use of these descriptors, this tendency was far more common in Arabic language newspapers than French language ones, which could be attributed to various factors, such as language ideologies that are attached to each language, as well as the predominant political leanings of different Moroccan newspapers. Modern Standard Arabic, the language of publication for many of the news articles included in this study, has become more present in the media through Arabization policy and planning. As such, Arabic language news sources may be more likely to mirror government ideologies regarding Arabic the legitimate national language of Morocco (Ennaji, 1999), as well as associations of solidarity and national identity that have been historically linked to Arabic in Morocco (Bentahila, 1983), all of which may suggest a critical view of Spain’s control of Ceuta and Melilla. Political leanings and general scope of newspapers may also account for the more frequent references to occupation in Arabic language papers: Arabic language newspapers included in this study, such as *Hespress, Ahdath Info, Bladi.net,* and *Altpress* are somewhat left-leaning publications that highlight social issues, often with a critical approach. Still, with the majority of Moroccan newspapers challenging the sovereignty of Ceuta and Melilla, this further obfuscates how migration to these cities is handled between two nations that both make claims to them, and arguably places Morocco in a particularly unusual position of actively protecting the borders that they challenge.

Collectively, these findings prompt a deeper reflection of the conceptualization of borders, as well as bordering practices and ideologies. Morocco and Spain have historical legacies on both

sides of the Strait of Gibraltar that are intertwined, and have undoubtedly shaped these present bordering practices and discourses of dissimilarity between the two countries, as well as between Africa and Europe, thus framing Morocco and Spain border discourse through both temporal and spatial lenses. Looking at the latter, whether borders are explicitly mentioned or implicitly evoked through discourse about impeding the mobility of migrants, media discourse iteratively normalizes spatial borders as inherent divisions between populations. Specifically, this normalization often occurs through consistently framing news *within* existing border paradigms which implicitly reinforce these lines as fixed and unquestionable. Not only that, these divisions mark spaces of belonging (within borders) and of exclusion (outside the borders). This is apparent in media discourse, where being within the borders must be justified and legally authorized. In all other instances, those relegated outside the borders are in spaces of exclusion, and therefore "othered." Because exclusion plays such a key role in the construction and control of borders and thus processes like mobility, citizenship, and even belonging, it is vital that we critique institutional discourse that actively naturalizes these divisions and separations between people. Finding mutually beneficial and humanitarian approaches to migration may indeed require that we denaturalize the concept of borders, as well as normalize the process of migration. Much of the discourse surrounding migration describes migrants collectively as influxes, avalanches, masses, and waves, such that the notion of human migration is perceived as an abnormal phenomenon, or indeed an epidemic, with a border in place as a defense. In reality, migration is a part of the human experience, and has historically been driven by a myriad of factors, some of which are not at all natural (i.e. violence, forced migration). As such, recasting migration as a normal response to abnormal conditions may better inform how institutional powers address migration, and may also serve to recalibrate our notions of border spaces.

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