

# Retoryka granic

## Rhetoric of the Borders

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## **La Valla and the edge of sovereignty: A rhetorical study of protection and isolation in Melilla** **La Valla i kres suwerenności. Retoryczne studium ochrony i izolacji w Melilli**

### Abstract

This paper analyzes interviews with residents of the Spanish enclave of Melilla in the North of Africa to examine common assumptions about the border in their speech. Following Wendy Brown (2010), its main aim is to challenge the assumption that the border fence is a symbol of state sovereignty. To do so, it draws on Balibar's (2002) tripartite conceptualization of the border: overdetermination, polysemy, and heterogeneity. The conclusion reached is that *la valla* (the fence) in Melilla, rather than reflecting state power, security, or sovereignty, actually signals the decline of sovereignty and the state's inability to address the complexities of the globalized world. The border not only fails to protect but also causes isolation, economic and social suffocation, and disrupts everyday ties with those on the other side. This conclusion is supported by a review of the evolution of Melilla's fence, the rhetoric of protection used by the nation-state, and an analysis of the metaphors and analogies employed by the interviewees. The paradox of a border that does not protect is reflected in memories of a time when crossing was less restricted. These stories question the supposed threat from the other side and the claimed safety of this one. Finally, the idea that Melilla's future lies in a stronger relationship with Spain and Europe is rejected for the vicious cycle it produces.

W artykule poddano analizie wywiady przeprowadzone z mieszkańcami hiszpańskiej enklawy Melilla w Afryce Północnej w celu zbadania dominujących założeń dotyczących granicy obecnych w ich wypowiedziach. Odwołując się do koncepcji Wendy Brown (2010), zasadniczym celem jest zakwestionowanie tezy, że granica stanowi symbol suwerenności państwa. W tym kontekście wykorzystano trójdzelną konceptualizację granicy zaproponowaną przez Étienne'a Balibara (2002), obejmującą jej naddeterminację, polisemiczność i heterogeniczność. Wnioski z analizy wskazują, że *la valla* (ogrodzenie) w Melilli nie odzwierciedla władzy państwa, bezpieczeństwa czy suwerenności, lecz przeciwnie – sygnalizuje erozję suwerenności i niezdolność państwa do sprostania złożonościom zglobalizowanego świata. Granica nie tylko nie zapewnia ochrony, ale powoduje izolację, ekonomiczny i społeczny paraliż oraz zakłóca codzienne więzi z mieszkańcami po drugiej stronie. Ustalenia te poparte zostały analizą ewolucji płotu granicznego w Melilli, retoryki ochrony stosowanej przez państwo narodowe oraz metafor i analogii obecnych w wypowiedziach respondentów. Paradoks granicy, która nie chroni znajduje odzwierciedlenie we wspomnieniach czasów, gdy jej przekraczanie było mniej restrykcyjne. Opowieści te podważają zarówno domniemane zagrożenie płynące z „tamtej strony”, jak i rzekome bezpieczeństwo gwarantowane „po tej stronie”. Ostatecznie odrzucona zostaje również wizja przyszłości Melilli opartej na zacieśnianiu więzi z Hiszpanią i Europą, gdyż prowadzi ona do błędnego koła zależności i ograniczeń.

### Key words

*la valla*, Melilla, sovereignty, border, rhetoric*la valla*, Melilla, suwerenność, granica, retoryka

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## **La Valla and the edge of sovereignty: A rhetorical study of protection and isolation in Melilla<sup>1</sup>**

### **1. Introduction**

In January and February 2025, my partner and I conducted research in the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, located on the Moroccan coast of the Mediterranean Sea, to examine *la valla*, the border fence that delineates these Spanish autonomous cities from the adjoining Moroccan territory. As part of this research, we carried out semi-structured interviews with sixteen residents of the cities from a range of professional and social backgrounds to gather diverse perspectives on the border fence. Ten interviews were carried out in Melilla and six in Ceuta. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, with initial contacts introducing us to further interlocutors. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and focused on experiences crossing the border, what the border signifies for them, the border fence, as well as reflections on migration and belonging. This paper examines how the border is narrated and how border thinking is contested in interviews with Melilla residents, in order to shed light on the rhetoric of the border. Taking its cue from Kenneth Burke's assertion that rhetorical analyses should always be prepared to expose mystifications, this paper specially examines common assumptions about the border in the interviewees' speech<sup>2</sup>. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using narrative

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2. While much of the public and media attention on Melilla has rightly centered on the violence and death associated with border crossings, this paper deliberately focuses instead on the everyday experiences and rhetorical framings of the fence by residents. This is not to minimize the tragedies that occur at the border, but to highlight another dimension of how the fence functions symbolically and structurally in local life.

analysis, attending both to the rhetorical strategies employed by the interviewees and to the ways in which their testimonies frame the border as a lived and symbolic reality. The overarching aim of the paper is to demonstrate that, following Wendy Brown (2010), the fence is not an icon of states' sovereignty rather a stage play and a red herring. To embark on the analysis of Melilla's fence and its presence in the speech of its residents, next section examines the notion of border.

### **1.1. Conceptualizing the border: overdetermination, polysemy, and heterogeneity**

In his influential essay "What is a Border?," Etienne Balibar (2002) identifies three defining characteristics of borders: their overdetermination, polysemy, and heterogeneity. By overdetermination, he refers to all the demands and considerations that go into the making of a border. As he maintains, "no political border is ever the mere boundary between two states, but is always overdetermined and, in that sense, sanctioned, reduplicated and relativized by other geopolitical divisions" (Balibar 2002, 79). In other words, what borders signify goes beyond merely marking a territory as other divisions and historical and political developments influence them as well. Therefore, they always operate in relation to other borders. In the case of Melilla, the history of the border attests to Balibar's observation. The border between the Spanish enclave and Morocco has existed since the nineteenth century. The Treaty of Wad Res that concluded a war between Spain and Morocco marked the territory of the town that had been sparsely populated by Spaniards who had settled along the Berber inhabitants of the Rif since the late fifteenth century. But the perimeters remained merely a documented spatial border until 1971 when a barbed wire fence structure was erected following a cholera pandemic in Morocco. This short barrier roughly reached one meter and was only a local issue. However, the surveillance of the border became crucial when Spain joined the European Economic Community, which later became the EU, in 1986. As a result, Spain's borders effectively became the external borders of the EU and, accordingly, no longer just a national concern but part of the Schengen Area's external frontier. Melilla represents one of the "favoured border points" of the Schengen area, where, as Balibar notes, "each member state is becoming the representative of the others" (2002, 78). And since this new status necessitated enhanced control, and, more importantly, compliance with EU standards, there was increased pressure to strengthen these borders to ensure more regulated movement in and out of the region. This is how the rather weak border fence was fortified in the late 1990s to become a double, three-meter-high fence. Spain continued the elevation and reinforcement of its fence in Melilla. In 2005, a third layer was added that was six meters high and had razor wire placed on top of the see-through structure.

Humanitarian opposition pushed Spain to remove the wire and replace it with inverted combs in 2018<sup>3</sup>. In its current form, the eleven-kilometer Melilla-Nador border is ten meters high and is the highest border structure in the world (Border Forensics 2024). Along with the two other characteristics that will promptly be recounted, this unruly and complex history of the border will be traced in the way the citizens of Melilla speak about the border to illustrate how the lived experience and rhetorical framing of *la valla* challenge the dominant narrative of the fence as a symbol of state sovereignty.

The second element in Balibar's triad is the polysemic nature of borders, which "simply refers to the fact that they do not have the same meaning for everyone" (2002, 81). This characteristic becomes evident in the different experiences of those who interact with the Melilla border. For Melillan residents seeking to cross into Morocco or return home after a day trip, the border signifies long hours of waiting. For residents of the adjacent Moroccan city of Nador, it entails the same, if not more prolonged, delays, compounded by the newly imposed burden of obtaining a Schengen visa, which was previously unnecessary due to their ability to cross using local residency permits. For migrants without access to regularized means of entry, the border becomes an insurmountable barrier. While this second characteristic is a widely recognized issue, familiar not only to those who live in borderlands such as Melilla, but even to travelers who have witnessed how triage plays out in separate passport control queues in any airport, the third characteristic of the border—heterogeneity—is less immediately apparent and more complex to grasp. The border is heterogeneous in so far as political, socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic borders no longer coincide and are not at the border anymore (Balibar 2002, 84). They are instead present anywhere that selective control is to be found. It is in this ubiquitous sense that most of the interviewees related the border to its geopolitical manifestation. Since they can be invisible, borders emerge in both the physical description of the wall and the security measures, and also in the way interlocutors speak about other spheres of life shaped by them, such as mobility, economy, and daily interactions. Thus, borders are divided into multiple, distinct forms that function to organize a territory across different dimensions.

With this polyvalent focus on the border, we are better positioned to interrogate its function. An account of how the border has developed and transformed allows for a better examination of its impact on confining the nation and shaping people's identities. For, as Balibar maintains, the nation has come to be the basis for identity in the modern times. The history of the border demonstrates its impact on people's movement and the way they socialize and the possibilities available

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3. The migrants who jump the fence would already have come in violent contact with the razor wire on the Moroccan side of the border before they arrived at the Spanish 'humanitarian' border.

to them for building new contacts and identities. For this reason, it is important to consider the role of sovereignty, the absolute power of the nation-state to install and guard the border. Scholars in border studies and political theory have long emphasized that sovereignty is not a monolithic or static entity, but rather one that is enacted and contested through performance, which unfolds across the dispersed and heterogeneous sites where the border operates as a mechanism of exclusion from the political community (Johnson et al., 2011; Brown 2010).

## 1.2. The rhetoric of the border: The lived experience and figurative language

Attending to the human dimension of these dynamics, this paper turns to the lived experiences of those directly affected by the border's operation particularly through the notion of isolation and confinement. Clad in a language of metaphor, these accounts draw on personal memories to describe how everyday routines and perceptions shifted over time and how *la valla* introduced a tangible rupture in their lives. As an integral part of a collective consciousness, the progressive transformation of the border is noted to have gradually impacted their lives in terms of everyday crossings, the informal economies crucial to local livelihoods, and most importantly, the social dynamics, leisure practices, and patterns of interaction that once sustained a sense of connection on both sides. This is especially relevant to Melilla where, contrary to the similar autonomous city of Ceuta, the fence has an overbearing presence. In Melilla, *la valla* is not just visible, but also walkable, and embedded in everyday life.

Melilla is particular not only because of the role of the fence in framing it but because various other confining elements contribute to its isolation. Aside from *la valla*, Melillans also speak about the Mediterranean, which separates them from mainland Spain and is most often mentioned to emphasize its isolation. Compounding this sense of disconnection, residents also point to the unreliability of air travel, noting that flights are often cancelled when weather conditions are unfavourable. Hence, in such a layered experience, the fence appears as not only what marks a territory but as the element that exacerbates the city's isolation. Similar to Balibar's administrative sense of the border, the city itself works as a heterogeneous border operating unevenly and across multiple, dispersed dimensions.

The sense of remoteness is not only conveyed in the distance between the city and the mainland but also in terms of the general ignorance surrounding its location, as it is often mistakenly imagined to be near the other Spanish enclave of Ceuta, situated roughly four hundred kilometres away, across from Gibraltar. What's more, media coverage of Melilla is barely interested in covering any other story but the one that has come to represent it: front line of Europe's battle against

illegal immigration. Public narratives from either side of the political divide mostly reduce the border to a site of tension and render the migrant a faceless foreigner who jumps the fence or crosses the sea. And this is primarily framed in terms of security or protection. But it is mostly visible in discourses of far-right political parties such as Vox that push for stricter border control and higher expenditure on the border. “In line with Trump’s program to erect a wall at the US border with Mexico,” their proposal was initially that “the cost of erecting this wall be financed by Morocco, but now it is proposing that it be paid for with Spanish funds but with the economic collaboration of the European Union, as it is the southern European border” (Fernández-Suárez 2024, 27). Of course, the militarized rhetoric that frames migrants as a threat against which Spain and the European Union must be defended does not go unchallenged within the Spanish cultural scene. In cinematic representations of the border, aesthetic choices subvert such narratives. Benito Zambrano’s film *El Salto* (2024) is one such critical instance. It opens with surveillance footage depicting a night-time mass attempt by migrants to cross the fortified fence, an image reminiscent of mainstream media portrayals that cast migrants as a menacing force. However, as the film unfolds, this initial framing is gradually destabilized. Through a series of flashbacks, the viewer is introduced to the personal journeys of the migrants, tracing their trajectories from arrival in Morocco to the climactic moment of the border crossing. By the film’s end, what initially appeared as a threat is recontextualized through narrative intimacy and the faceless mob in the beginning of the film is humanized (Manzanas Calvo 2026b). Quite in contrast to what anti-immigration political discourses, which fuel fear and reinforce the border through language, what Zambrano has achieved in this film is to offer the viewers on this side of the border a different image of migrants. After watching the film, one is left wondering whether *el salto* (the jump) in the title refers to the migrants overcoming the physical fence or to a leap in the viewers’ own understanding.

This cinematic refutation finds a parallel in journalistic investigations that likewise expose the violence obscured by the rhetoric of protection and questions what is being done to humans in the name of defense and security. One such investigation is Border Forensics’ 2024 report, which meticulously reconstructs the events of the deadly border incident in Melilla, where dozens of migrants were killed or disappeared during a coordinated assault by Moroccan and Spanish security forces. The report dismantles official narratives of law enforcement and protection by analyzing video footage and eyewitness testimony, and reveals instead an act of repression that contradicts the supposed humanitarian image of border control.

Thus, the high cost of staging state sovereignty becomes clear considering the human dimension of bordering practices. Of course, when we probe into the rhetoric of the border, they prove present and visible in the minds and tongues of even the people who live in its vicinity. But interestingly, because of their proximity to the border, their lived reality nuances and challenges those notions. An awareness of the high cost of the border, especially its economic impact on their lives is one of those instances that lived reality challenges official narratives of protection. This was mentioned in terms of economic suffocation and the border's fortification gets associated with a general sense of institutional neglect. In the interviews, there were constant references to the COVID-19 pandemic, which residents treat not as a mere health crisis but as a moment that marks a shift in the political function of the border when Morocco closed the border unilaterally. In their critique, they mention the many forms of border crossing that foreground moral and visual rhetoric to, for example, denounce the violence and dehumanization enacted at the fence, especially against women porters whose activities were halted in 2018. Criticisms were also toward the EU, which reveals how transnational bureaucratic policies shape local decline. Analogy was another technique used to make sense of the border. Interviewees situate Melilla in a global geography of walls by drawing on parallels to the Jerusalem or the US-Mexico border wall. This article thus focuses on the disparity between institutional and policy-driven interpretations of the border and the lived experience of those who inhabit the borderland. It is through these recollections that we gain insight into what Balibar describes as the dispersed and uneven nature of borders, experienced in the texture of everyday life at the edge of the state. With these findings, it is safe to say that the fortification of the border fence has negatively impacted if not outright impoverished Melilla.

## 2. The rhetoric of sovereignty

If you're not interested in dialectics, as is the case for me and many others I know, then borders only serve as a reminder of that dialectic that we reject. We're not interested in it.

Nieves, Melillan poet (personal interview)

In utter disregard of certain borders—or, in some cases, under the cover of such borders—undefinable and impossible identities emerge in various places, identities which are, as a consequence, regarded as non-identities.

Etienne Balibar (2002, 77)

There is a recurrent theme in the interviews that the Melilla-Nador border is not an inevitable division, but rather an artificial and politically imposed separation that has progressively severed the ties of what was once an intimately connected

community. Narrativizing this continuity reconfigures and resists the fence when examined through the distinction between borders and boundaries. As conceived by Edward S. Casey who approaches edges phenomenologically, borders and boundaries are distinct from other delineating concepts such as “brinks, rims, margins, thresholds, [and] frames” despite “their common purpose of demarcating a given place or region [and setting] it off from other places or regions” (2011, 385). The difference has to do with their being “decidedly two-sided” (2011, 385). This difference is important because it implies crossing in contrast to the other kinds of edges, which are solipsistically oriented toward the interiors. But in spite of their similarity in their bilateral nature, the two terms are still different in terms of porosity, where ‘boundary’ signals a more penetrable entity than border. These considerations are best exemplified in Melilla’s *la valla*. As the nation’s edge, the fence erected on the border is planned to act as a rim to frame the nation and mark it from the difference that lies beyond it. Contrary to its earlier form, the current fortified border is sealing off a region where communities have coexisted for centuries regardless of imposed official border thinking from both sides. Accounts of lived experience in these territories attest to a more interconnected sense of separation, which challenges the rigid border and renders it more akin to a boundary. As Henk Driessen maintains, “both Spanish and Moroccan authorities perceived and represented the Spanish-Moroccan frontier for more than four centuries as a hard and fast line of division between ‘civilization’ and ‘savagery,’ a divide that was mainly defined in terms of religion. In daily life, however, it was a zone of interaction between two different cultures, which, in spite of religious antagonisms, knew very well how to deal with one another in various ways” (1991, 34).

Therefore, the fence gives a new dimension to the separation of the communities by instituting a physical and symbolic rupture, which is overall recounted in terms of confinement in the interviews. Beginning with a Melillan from Berber background, the impact of *la valla* is described through the ensuing disconnection of communities that he compares to a woven carpet coming undone. He uses the metaphor of ‘the carpet’ to highlight the textuality and interconnectedness of the people on the two sides of the border:

[...] for the last 20 years I’ve been crossing the border, [...] I am from Melilla, totally from Melilla, and, from a generation of our parents and grandparents from the neighbouring country of Morocco [...] We are on the same geographical carpet, [...] we are here a few kilometres away, 10 kilometres, [...] if we look a little bit at the geography, we are totally neighbours, we are really the same regime, separated only by a metal fence that really acts as a veil for mentalities so that society does not mix, to differentiate and highlight the border line of the country of Morocco and the autonomous city of Melilla. (personal interview)

Signalling an awareness of change, he nevertheless points not to the origin of the border, which predates his history, but to the period when it was fortified and the notion of “crossing” acquired a new bureaucratic and epistemological weight. Now in his late forties, this interior designer with ties on both sides of the border is emphasizing on crossing only in the past two decades to demonstrate the role of the fortified fence in obstructing movement. As an *atravesado*, with the border crossing him and his family, it is this new dimension of hindered passage that begins his history and marks *la valla*’s identity. He is wary of the politics and consequences of bordering processes and rightly designates the fence as an icon of nation states’ obsession with flaunting and staging their sovereignty.

Calling it a myth, Johnson et al. present sovereignty as the conventional understanding of an absolute and exclusive power exercised within fixed territorial boundaries and recognized by other international actors (2011, 66). This idealized model, which divides the world neatly into inside (order, law, the state) and outside (anarchy, danger), functions as “a straw man” that cannot withstand the empirical realities of globalization (2011, 66). Rather than treating sovereignty and its territorial expression as stable givens, Johnson et al. call for an examination of how it is performed across formal and popular registers. Borders, in this view, become crucial sites for studying the contingent and contradictory enactments of state power. Scholarship in the field of border studies has established that nation states rely on their borders to create and preserve the inside/outside divide (Michaelsen and Johnson 1997; Vila 2000; Anzaldúa 1987). Bearing the word ‘order’ within it, the border does not only maintain division but it does so through its address to the citizens. This is evident in Ana Maria Manzanás’s reading of the b/order in her interpretation of the MAGA slogan ‘Build the Wall’ in the United States. Drawing on Etienne Balibar’s notion of “interior frontier”, Manzanás interprets the imperative call not only related to erecting the physical structure at the US-Mexico border but as an injunction addressed to the citizens (2026a).

Furthermore, this speaker’s metaphor of the veil reveals his conviction that the fence was constructed precisely to prevent the boundary from functioning as a site of ongoing crossing and disrupting the textured continuity evoked in his earlier image of the carpet. Like a needle stitching the ends of a tear in a fabric, the back and forth passage of the people sews together communities and families on both sides of this border. But what the iron, rigid and unmalleable veil does is only prevent the straddling of what Gloria Anzaldúa would call “an open wound” (1987, 3). This is in total disregard of the fact that despite borders being emblems of political sovereignty, they are still thresholds and necessarily sites of contact and transition (Agier 2016). Concealing instead of treating the wounds, *la valla* imposes a different kind of discipline that deliberately averts the gaze from the

other side of the border and redirects it northward toward Europe. It is therefore not just a geopolitical fact but an invasive imposition that distinguishes “us” from “them”, and its absurd dimension becomes more salient by focusing on the filial relationship between their referents in the quote above: the “totally Melillan” individuals divided from their parents on the other side. It is thus through the tireless cultivation of ignorance, aimed at defining and refining who belongs and who does not, that the border fulfills its persuasive function and succeeds in producing and monitoring identities.

That the border was more porous than it is today is present in other interviews when memories of school trips or daily excursions are told:

When I was a child, there wasn't even a border; there were no checkpoints in the Rostro Gordo pine forests. On school trips, we used to cross a wire fence, we would jump over it and suddenly we were in the Moroccan pine groves celebrating a field trip. We lived in a city that was in constant movement, in constant communication, and that brings great richness” (personal interviews).

Unlike this current behemoth, the border was once discontinuous, with significant breaks and gaps, and was more permeable and permissible. Not only did the absence of checkpoints allow for easier passage, but at least in two other interviews it was mentioned how they would incorporate the border into their games, hopping over sections where the low barbed wire had collapsed. The border was therefore embedded in the rhythms of everyday life rather than imposed as a rigid barrier. It served as a line to designate boundaries and signaled “possibilities and edges for something else” (Casey 2017, 90), and those crossings softened its divisive function. In this way, the acknowledgment of shared experiences and similarities on both sides destabilizes border thinking (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 149-150), even in the face of the psychological imprint left by the later erection of the fence.

Thus, the value of listening to the accounts of those living in borderlands lies precisely in their ability to debunk the staged performance of the border. Despite the diminished role of the border as a boundary since the erection of *la valla*, the paradox of new border walls—a term used by Wendy Brown (2010) to describe those emerging after the 1990s—remains evident in Melilla’s case. The continued circulation of residents and the regular *saltos* (jumps) by migrants expose the persistent porosity of the border. As a result, attempts to impose fixed and homogeneous identities on each side achieve limited success. The interviews point to a striking intermingling of people and sustained cross-border movement that complicates such narratives. In this context, the complexity of residents’ storytelling actively resists what Balibar (2002, 76) describes as the nation-state’s “application of a simplifying force” in its effort to define and manage identities. As the epigraph to this section illustrates, it is within, and in defiance of, borders that ambiguous and unstable identities emerge. One resident echoes this view

by asserting that, although the nation-state seeks to impose purity and integrity through the delineation of borders, the lived spatial experience in Melilla resists such simplifications:

I have a kind of epiphanic memory: the first time I went to the *Rastro* alone. It's a neighbourhood, the old Jewish quarter [...] The first time I went there alone, I was 14, maybe 13 or 14, and it felt like I was in another world. That's when I became aware that even within such a small city, only 12 square kilometres, there were other borders. And perhaps the most serious border is not the one that separates Beni Ansar from Melilla. (personal interview)

This pre-fence memory primarily illustrates a complete awareness of here/there that the border creates. But it also simultaneously points to the disavowal of the border by finding it where you least expect it. This reveals that the sense of unity the border seeks to impose is illusory and further proves that, at least in her case, rather than a separation between us/them, the border counterintuitively achieved to enable a mode of perception that unsettles binary thinking. Later in the interview, she also links this to the distinctive character of Melilla, a place where name after name and example after example testify to its deep-rooted plurality, and where a long history of multicultural coexistence and mutual interdependence has sustained the fabric of everyday life. She does not dismiss the difficulty and frictions contained in this exchange but insists, drawing on Spanish philosopher María Zambrano, that “life is made of conflicts” (personal interview).

What she does is concede the difficulty of coexistence, only to rebut the paternalistic border discourse that promises protection from a constructed enemy on the other side. To support her argument, she appeals to history, to Francoist legal and social divisions, recalling that under Franco, “the law said Christians should stay with Christians and Moors with Moors” (personal interview). The speaker is a poet and writer, and one of the authors of *A mi Querido Abdelaziz... de tu Conchita* [*To my Dear Abdelaziz...from your Conchita*] (Dieste and Muriel García 2020), a book that itself reflects on friendship and relational life across cultural divides and draws on this historical memory to foreground the persistence of everyday coexistence during the Spanish protectorate in Morocco. Despite official frameworks of exclusion, what prevailed was a daily reality of mixed relationships, commerce, love, and coexistence. She draws on this analogy between the two forced imposition of borders to argue and insist that “life wins.” Opposing the purpose of *la valla* as a persuasion that “life is a form of poverty,” she instead argues for the richness of relational life that resists the epistemological closure that both past and present political systems have attempted to impose. As a defender of “the liminal, the borderland, where new thresholds constantly open and close” (personal interview), she holds Melilla to possess the power to generate an alternative epistemology that rejects nationalistic closure and embraces the

ambiguity and interdependence inherent in coexistence. This gives rise to what might be termed reverse border-thinking: not the drawing of lines, but relating in spite of them.

This framing of the borderland as an epistemological opening invites closer attention to how residents articulate its complexity and, as the following accounts will demonstrate, unsettles the protective narrative of borders by exposing instead the harm inflicted by border closure. The interviews reveal a proliferation of metaphors in the articulation of the border. In addition to the recurring portrayal of the fortification and its intermittent closure as a veil, corporeal metaphors also emerge to further connote a sense of suffocation and captivity. The notion of strangulation is invoked in reference to the city's market economy, which has been progressively stifled by the incremental sealing of the border, in both tourism and commerce sectors. This prevalence of metaphors attests to the difficulty of articulating the border's contradictory nature and the power of figurative language to grapple with it, particularly as it manifests in the economic disruptions it produces:

Realize that there has been a significant rupture in the Melillan market via Morocco, which had existed for decades, years, that thanks to the Moroccan market, Melilla has been a tremendous business hub at a national Spanish level. [...] Realize that the real economic lung of Melilla has been contraband, the famous contraband, and of that of Ceuta equally, in parallel. ...it was thanks to the contraband that our merchandise has reached, I speak in plural, all of Africa [...] With these decisions, whether it's the excuse of the coronavirus era, which was an excuse, it has been somewhat the key point of before and after. It has plunged the city of Melilla into a gradual depression [...]. (personal interview)

In line with studies conducted prior to the closure of the border that depict a vibrant local economy, characterizing Melilla as “one of the main bazaars of the Maghreb” (Ferrer Gallardo 2007, 83), this interview also demonstrates why crossing the border was vital to the city. It documents the economic consequences of the fortified border and also reveals the vulnerability of the city in contrast to ideas of being under the auspice of a powerful, liberal, sovereign state. The state's “compromised sovereignty from its edges” (Brown 2010, 22) underscores the two-sided nature of the border. You may build walls or manage checkpoints, but your control over the border is still dependent on cooperation from the other side. When the neighbouring state of Morocco unilaterally suspended cross-border trade or transit, the powerlessness of the fenced-in city became visible, and the border no longer functioned as a protective threshold but as a point of exposure.

The metaphor of a body in need of breathing through contact is echoed by a former sales manager who recalls how Melilla once thrived as a commercial hub, attracting affluent customers from Morocco and specially the Moroccan diaspora

in Europe purchasing 24-karat gold and brand-name goods. With the border's closure during the pandemic and its prolonged sealing for two years, her business experienced a dramatic 60-65% drop in sales. Describing the closure as an attempt to "suffocate Melilla," she emphasizes that "commerce doesn't work because there's a blockade", and articulates how the city's economic lifeline has been deliberately constricted. Building on the same theme of economic suffocation, another interviewee highlights the collapse of tourism as a key consequence of the closed border. She presents the decline of tourism in Melilla as the repercussion of restricting movement:

Of course, part of the economy here, aside from the goods that crossed from one side to the other, depended on tourism. But the tourism we had here came from Morocco—it didn't come from Europe, not even from Spain. If there was Spanish tourism, it was because they had relatives here or it was nostalgic tourism, from people who had done their military service here in the past.[...] The tourists who came and spent money here, in cafés, in clothing shops, in the shopping center they built in Melilla, which created a lot of jobs until the border closed, came from Morocco. And Morocco doesn't only bring poverty, just like Spain. A lot of wealthy people came from Morocco—they came to spend the day, to eat, to have a beer or tea, to sit on the beach, to shop in the mall or in the downtown. (personal interview)

By invoking the absence of Moroccan tourists, she debunks the contradiction of dominant narratives that depict Moroccan mobility as inherently problematic. She emphasizes on Moroccan spending power and cultural presence to reframe cross-border movement not as a security threat but as a form of everyday hospitality and urban vitality. This viewpoint that belies the supposed coherence of Melilla's border politics is not uncommon among the interviewees and is even shared by supporters of strict migration control who admit that the fence, though intended to block irregular migration, also breaks the social and economic patterns of everyday border crossings.

The growing sense of economic and social asphyxiation mentioned above gives way to even the starker metaphor of imprisonment in the following account, where the city's origins as a penal colony resurface in reflections on the current predicament:

This place was a prison colony in the 15th and 16th centuries; it was a place of abandonment, a place forgotten, already a border from its very foundation. [...] What happens is that there have been times when that border was maybe more relaxed, and now it feels much more suffocating. And we also have to remember that we have a barbed-wire border at our backs, and another border in front of us that's made of sea and wind. So we're isolated. [...] We're closed off here ever since Morocco closed the border and shut down customs. Right now, the only direction we can look is north if we want to get out of the hole the city is currently in, ... because Morocco is exerting pressure to suffocate both autonomous cities. [...] for some of us, [...] this is not a city of transit. There's no movement here. This is more like a prison now. [...] It's a very complicated city, and the Spanish state isn't offering any solution, even though this is the gateway to the European

Union. And this should be much better cared for—this and Ceuta—because we are the entrance or the exit of the European Union. (personal interview)

While this metaphor is used to emphasize the city's isolation, the history of the Spanish settlement in Melilla bears witness to a constant exchange. From the beginning, the settlement served military purposes, and as its usage evolved, the meaning of the exchange also shifted, though it remained shaped by dynamics of confinement and even hostage-taking on both sides. From the outset, the Spanish and Rifian Berber communities were mutually dependent, and the state or sultanate to which they belonged continually intervened to determine that relationship (Soto Bermant 2012, 33-40). This part of history is the missing premise in the speaker's syllogism. This rhetorical omission justifies a firm reaction to the prolonged closure of the border by starting to look north and deepen ties with mainland Spain and Europe instead of relying on cross-border movement. A similar sentiment is echoed in recent studies, such as Miguel Ángel Cepillo Galvín's, which argues Morocco has consistently refused to recognize a conventional commercial customs regime with the enclaves (2022, 100). The same northward gaze mentioned in the quote is also present in Cepillo Galvín who emphasizes the need "to reformulate the future economic model of both cities" (2022, 100). Interestingly, this frustration with the hitherto reluctance of the Spanish government to let the autonomous cities join the European customs and which is considered as the only destiny of Ceuta and Melilla does not go unchallenged. It is parodied in the metaphor of the moais—the monolithic statues of Polynesia—used by another interviewee who criticizes the rigid, one-directional gaze toward Spain as well as the lack of recognition of the city's long-standing cross-border entanglements that this mindset advertises.

While hope is turning northward as an exit from the current deadlock, this very gesture risks reaffirming the logic of exclusion that produced the same impasse. The reason is it reproduces the spatial logic of the border that casts Europe as the sole source of salvation while portraying the Maghreb as both threat or absence. We are faced with another paradox again: the fence is condemned for its economic and affective suffocation, yet hope is pinned on entrenchment within the same structures that necessitate the fence's existence. In other words, by turning toward Europe as the only viable future, they risk endorsing the very logic of containment that has plighted their city. This contradiction is not simply a matter of political ambivalence but symptomatic of an epistemological trap. The myth of the sovereign state again renders the north the only exit out of the crisis and leaves no room to imagine alternative relations with the south which, before the fortification, had defined Melilla's everyday economy and social life.

In describing her sense of entrapment, another interviewee recalls her arrival in Melilla for the first time. Having seen other border zones like the US-Mexico

divide, she thus recalls her initial impression of the city: “I had already seen borders [...] like the one in Tijuana. But in such a small city, surrounded by that fence, with the sea also blocked off by two breakwaters and guarded by the Civil Guard, the feeling was suffocating” (personal interview). This analogy to other border walls is a rhetorical strategy used by other interviewees as well. Another participant invoked the wall in Jerusalem to offer a prediction about the future: “Drawing comparisons with Palestine might seem shocking, but Palestine is a more advanced phase of wall-building” (personal interview). She is not only lamenting the present but is also signalling a potential, even more alarming, future. In another case, this was done with a mistaken assumption to argue that Melilla is a particular case, claiming that the Mexico-US wall divided distinct populations, whereas “we are the same” on both sides of the border here. But this reflects a limited awareness of the deep familial, linguistic, and social continuities that also exist across the US-Mexico border, which are well documented in academic and testimonial literature (Cisneros 2014; Anzaldúa 1987; Saldívar 1997). In my interview with the Chicano writer Santiago Vaquera-Vásquez, he recalled how, as a child in El Paso, he would ride his bike across the bridge into Ciudad Juárez to buy comic books and then return the same day without any passport checks or delays, just a fluid, everyday rhythm of crossing: “We didn’t see the border as something fixed or dangerous [...] It was just part of life. You went to visit cousins, to shop, to eat. The wall came later” (personal interview). This recollection parallels those of Melillan residents discussed above, who recall a time when the fence was merely a wire easily crossed, and serves to highlight that, contrary to the assumption that cross-border kinship and mobility are exceptional to Melilla, it points to a global pattern in which quotidian movement and shared social spaces have been curtailed as the result of state-imposed walling. Nevertheless, it serves as a bridge to the concluding reflection of the paper: the need for attentiveness to the specificity of the border under analysis. While the regional imaginary that casts Melilla as exceptional may risk overstatement, it remains analytically valid and supports the decision to focus exclusively on Melilla rather than the conventional pairing it with Ceuta.

### 3. Conclusion

This article is written at a turning point in the history of Melilla (as well as Ceuta). Historically, Melilla’s status as an autonomous city has reflected a unique legal and political compromise: while geographically located in Africa, its integration into the Spanish constitutional framework preserved a degree of flexibility that acknowledged its cross-border ties and distinctive position. Apart

from its greater independence from Madrid, being autonomous has meant enjoying more fiscal autonomy. It also allowed for a complex, if informal, relationship with Morocco which was sustained through everyday exchanges. Yet today, as Melilla's border is increasingly securitized and the city moves toward full integration into the European customs union, this exceptional status is being called into question. Proposals such as those advocated by Galvín, which call for the normalization of Melilla's customs regime in line with EU expectations, suggest a future in which the city may become just another external European frontier, severed from its regional context. The danger lies in a transformation that prioritizes institutional over historical ties, and bureaucratic efficiency over lived experience. This article, by foregrounding the voices of residents, tried to offer a cautionary counterpoint. It insisted that any redefinition of Melilla's status must reckon not only with economic models and geopolitical pressures, but with the human meanings of the border and the ways in which its fortification has already reshaped daily life. In this, it falls within a line of knowledge production that sheds light on the reality of this fence (Soto Bermant 2012; McMurray 2020; Steele 2024; Manzanas 2026b).

Following Brown, the paper argued that walls are a “psychic defence” against “internal or systemic failures” (2010, 125). To borrow the irreverent language of social media, walls ‘gaslight’ us into their viability and inevitability. Instead of a narrow focus on Morocco's tactics or Spain's inaction, the border's suffocating effect must not lose sight of a more global landscape. What emerges from the interviews is not a unified call for rescue or deeper incorporation from Madrid or Brussels, but rather a spectrum of sentiments marked by ambiguity and tension, between aspirations for integration into Europe's economic circuits, the enduring reproduction of the south as something to be left behind, and, more often than not, a desire to preserve longstanding relationships across the border. The stories reveal that Melilla's fence demonstrates sovereignty as a precarious performance, not an absolute truth. On this Spanish frontier, sovereignty seems vulnerable: it is expressed through words but weakened by economic pressures, and, more importantly, felt by residents as isolation rather than protection. Essentially, *la valla* highlights the very contradictions of sovereignty it claims to uphold. Perhaps no other quote captures the new predicament Melillans face better than the one offered by the sales manager mentioned earlier. With a reluctant resignation, as if to accept the fate that has befallen their city, she gestures toward a structural critique about the EU's paternalistic border politics and reflects: “They pay to maintain us, but they don't give us the option to be free”.

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