

## **Nador-Melilla Border: Theory and Ethnography**

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**Abstract:** This paper combines personal observations of life in the region of the Nador-Melilla border with the theoretical insights of Wendy Brown's work<sup>1</sup> on borders and barriers to argue that the Moroccan and Spanish border guards perform sovereign state control as a way of disguising the extent to which the border really functions as a divider of the richer global north from the poorer global south. The tens of millions of dollars poured into bolstering the Nador-Melilla border protects by deflecting or intercepting the perceived causes of economic desperation and violence targeted at EU nation states. In the process, the ever-increasing militarization of the border intensifies its own kind of violence towards the people and the region it crosses over.

**Keywords:** Border Studies, Violence, Nador, Morocco, Melilla, Spain.

I met with the self-named "Social Group Nador" once or twice a month while living with my wife, Joan Gross, in Nador from February through September, 2013. They were a group of young college-age men who met every Sunday at 4 p.m. in La Pyramide café to discuss a topic, all the while practicing foreign languages (the rule was that you could speak in any language but your mother tongue). One of the questions that came up on occasion was what made Nador interesting, why was it a good place to live. The consensus answer contained two parts: its being embedded in the Amazigh/Rifi culture and its proximity to Melilla. Conversations led eventually around to the question of whether Melilla should stay Spanish or return to Morocco. Eight out of ten of the young men gathered one day voted that they wanted it to stay Spanish, claiming that if Morocco took it back over, it would just become a dump. One guy said that what he liked about Melilla was that it showed you could have a decent city that was clean, with good roads and infrastructure in the same space as Morocco. He saw Melilla as mainly a Moroccan town, or at least a Rifi town, but different in that the powers-that-be kept it maintained. Another pointed out the relative freedom and anonymity young men enjoyed on the other side of the border. Several others smiled and nodded in agreement. That was countered by a young man who gave voice to common criticisms

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1. Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

of the racist Spanish border guards, police and military who could make life miserable for Nadoris visiting Melilla.

I would like to take my cue from the discussion group, because, first of all, I agree with them in their pointing to the Nador-Melilla relationship and the border in between as having a tremendous impact on everyday life in the region and thus deserving to be the center of discussion (the topic of what Nadoris think about their Amazigh/Rifi culture will have to wait for another day). I propose to try and reveal some of what I found to be the texture of that relationship, as discussed with me by people from Nador, Melilla and beyond. As a field researcher, I am better able to provide some idea of the vitality of messy, everyday life of the Nador-Melilla geographical space. I find myself drawn to the recording of smaller stories that nest within more expansive narratives. I seem to be better at collecting personal opinions than quantifiable data. So with that in mind, I will try here to illuminate some micro-level ethnographic aspects of the Nador-Melilla connection. I will use interactions and encounters recorded in my fieldnotes to flesh out some aspects of what people think about life on the border, as well as their impressions of what it's like to live under the "weight" of the Nador-Melilla relationship.

But I also want to try and apply these anecdotal findings to the astonishingly relevant and powerful border theory developed by Wendy Brown.<sup>2</sup> I believe her book, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, comes closer than anything I have read to helping make sense of what is going on at the Nador-Melilla border. Her general theoretical points shed a very helpful light on the powerfully asymmetric; often tense; quite complex site that is the border at Beni-Ensar (which I am also calling the Nador-Melilla border). I propose to juxtapose my personal observations and conversations with locals about Nador and Melilla with paragraphs explicating Brown's thoughts on the nature of barriers and borders. I have tried to arrange them so that the one illuminates the other and vice-versa. In brief, the part of what Brown discusses that interests me is the decline of state power in the form of the decline of state sovereignty, and the specific effects it has upon borders, which, after all, are some of the most distinctive markers of the reach of state sovereignty. Let me first lay out very briefly some of Brown's relevant points and then try to illustrate them by drawing out examples from discussions with locals about the conditions along the Nador-Melilla border.

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2. Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*.

Brown<sup>3</sup> argues that the “transnational flows of capital, people, ideas, goods, violence, and political and religious fealty,”<sup>4</sup> in tandem with the development of neoliberal ideologies, have weakened state sovereignty and reduced it mainly to a managerial role. Today’s ubiquitous barriers, though often set up along nation-state boundaries, are not defenses against attacks by state militaries, but are established to control transnational flows. Nation-state sovereignty has been eclipsed by the steady growth of international organizations, like the World Trade Organization, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and in the case of the Melilla-Nador border, the European Union. Paradoxically, she argues, the spread of barriers between nation-states reflects this decline of state sovereignty and the growth of these global forces. The “functional inefficacy” of the new walls undercuts the projection of state power associated with their physical presence. They operate in a more theatrical way, as stage props of a state sovereignty that is in reality violated, contested and corrupted on a daily basis. The barriers also disguise the extent of the dependence of various national economies on the ability of goods and especially cheap labor to infiltrate the border barriers, even as the barriers project an aura of state power, control and interdiction.

Joan and I had dinner one night at the outdoor restaurant at the port of Melilla with our Oujda branch campus professor friend, Mehdi. We were joined by Saida, his translator at the University of Granada campus in Melilla. She was born in Antwerp, but came back to Melilla with her parents during summer vacations and then permanently after college because they had returned to Melilla when they retired. She claimed to be more at ease in the heavily Moroccan influenced but still European world of Melilla. Her parents both came from Farkhana, a Moroccan village bordering on Melilla, though her family has always had members living in Melilla. Her mother was married at fifteen and then they moved to Belgium. Saida spoke Flemish, French, Tamazight, and Spanish, which she learned during vacations back in Melilla, and a little English. She got hired on as a translator because the EU had a program of promoting cross-frontier cooperation, so they paid for students from frontier countries, like Ukraine, Morocco, etc., to take classes provided by EU countries and the EU provided the translators. The University of Granada was offering a weekend course in international law which Mehdi was taking. Saida and another translator were paid to work with him and other Moroccan students taking the class that did not know Spanish. She mentioned the problem of dealing with male suitors only interested in marrying for

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3. Ibid., 21-25.

4. Ibid., 22.

papers. That was a constant source of irritation for women in her position. She wanted to marry a Muslim and she wanted to marry a Tamazight speaker, but she had to be able to trust his motives for marriage. Her parents would not be deciding for her, she claimed. She was educated and intelligent enough to do it herself.

In the summer Saida worked in the ticket office in the port of Melilla. She said that Moroccans often put a twenty euro banknote in their passports when they pushed them through the window to claim their reserved tickets. She had to give the money back because there was nothing she could do for them. She only verified reservations or sold new tickets on the spot if there was room. The bribe served no purpose. She could only speculate that they were so used to bribing everyone to get through that they did it out of habit. They just assumed there was something she could do for them. She also said that it was heart breaking to have to deal with all of the immigrant families who had been held up at the Beni-Ensar border and thus missed their boat loading time. In Sebta there was a line expressly for boat passengers, or so they said. Not in Beni-Ensar. Probably because the port of Beni Ensar had ships that directly competed with Melilla ships for the immigrant traffic. That had caused the Moroccan powers that be to purposefully slow down the traffic and make the Moroccan boat option seem more viable. There was nothing she could do. If they missed their launch, they had to pay a twenty percent penalty and get rebooked. She also said that Moroccan scalpers moved around the port selling boarding passes to immigrants waiting to board. Ironically, the passes were free and were given out when the passengers got their tickets. But many passengers did not know this or assumed they were being saved a step later in the process. It was the same thing but on a much smaller scale for nonresidents of Melilla and Nador Province at the Beni-Ensar border. At least a dozen paper peddlers existed whose “job” it was to give you a paper to fill out before you got to the actual passport inspection and stamping office. You owed them a few dirhams in exchange for the service rendered. Again, the papers were actually free once you reached the office (though often out). These guys had created a way to make a profit out of border anxiety. Perhaps it would be closer to the mark to say that this was the kind of job that typically cropped up in the informal sector. In any case, we finished dinner about midnight and escorted Saida home. Joan had left earlier to attend a Moroccan wedding elsewhere in Melilla. Mehdi and I then went for a walk and about 1am ended up on a park bench in the center of Melilla in front of the closed gate to the central park. Prostitutes very quickly came up to us and asked what we wanted. They spoke Arabic, which suggests that they weren’t local women, but from the Moroccan interior.

The EU would appear to have built Melilla, on the one hand, into an outpost of liberal, social democratic, universal inclusion (university outreach programs and translators, free border crossing privileges for border residents, free health care, etc.), and on the other into a barrier against African and Asian migrations to the European Union. The Moroccan State participates in the charade that the border represents an instance of national sovereignty by patrolling who exits and enters on its side. The low-level harassment of its own citizens as they cross back and forth could be construed as a representation of the fading strength of Moroccan state sovereignty in the region. The Moroccan guards would appear to be performing sovereign border control as almost a way of disguising the extent to which the border really functions as a divider of the richer global north from the poorer global south. In truth, as Brown puts it, the border acts as a barrier to global migrations of nonstate actors, such as individuals, groups, movements, organizations, etc.<sup>5</sup> The border thus exists mainly in response to transnational developments and not as a means to protect either the Spanish or the Moroccan State from threats posed by other sovereign entities.

We were back at the harbor restaurant in Melilla a month or two later. The table next to us had three drunks who insisted on pulling over chairs and joining us. One was a female museum guard; one was a male member of the Guardia Civil (Spanish national police force); one was a Rifi born in Melilla. The two men were childhood friends and the woman was the Spanish man's wife. We introduced ourselves as visitors from Nador. That prompted the woman to tell Joan that, while there is no problem for a Moroccan buying a house in Spain as long as they have the money, Moroccans are not allowed to buy houses in Melilla unless they have Spanish citizenship. She explained that they have to do that because there are so few Spaniards living in Melilla and they don't want to lose its Spanish identity. She named about 4 shops that are still owned by Spaniards and said that the rest are owned by Moroccans, Jews, South Asians, and now there is a Chinese owned store on every block.

The policeman member of the threesome said that he often pulled border duty, especially at Farkhana, and at one of the pedestrian crossings. He said that one time a subSaharan African woman handed him a baby with the umbilical cord still attached. She was with her husband and she told the cop, "You take him. You can give him a better life than I can." He took baby and gave it to a welfare agency. I couldn't tell from his account whether or not it had been handed over or through the fence or whether it was passed in the

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5. Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, 21, 32.

middle of the crossing zone, not that it matters much. He said that he had been sent to Melilla to recuperate after having been injured in a Basque terrorist explosion in Pamplona where he was first stationed as a cop. His dad had also been a cop and his best friend, also a cop, was killed in the blast. He was suffering from PTSD. He started sobbing as he retold the blast story.

He eventually dried his tears and then started telling us about other border activities he'd witnessed. He claimed that Moroccan border guards shoot undocumented migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa when they attack the Melilla border defenses. Whether they used live ammunition or something else, he did not know. The 'assaults' on the Melilla border fences involved groups of undocumented migrants charging en masse, hoping that their relatively large number would mean at least somebody would make it over before the Moroccan and Spanish guards could beat them back. Once over, they theoretically had the legal right to seek asylum and to receive humane treatment. The cop acted as if the Spanish border guards had nothing to do with the violence at the border. He even denied that the Guardia Civil sometimes threw migrants who made it over the fences back into Moroccan territory. (Macarena, a Spanish friend living in Nador who works for a human rights NGO, told us later that the Spaniards were also known to shoot during border 'assaults'). While we were all talking, a Guardia Civil motorboat patrol noisily exited from the port in a zodiac with two big engines. The other zodiacs parked in the harbor also belonged to the Guardia, according to the policeman. They were going out to patrol against speedboat-driving drug runners, he said.

The conversations about border violence got us interested in trying to follow up what was happening between the guards and the sub-Saharan undocumented migrants. We had heard that Médecins Sans Frontières worked out of Beni-Ensar or Nador and that they were deeply involved.

We also heard that they stored some of their material in the Nador Catholic Church, so we went there for the next Sunday service to try and talk to somebody involved. There were 8 nuns and 6 people in the congregation that Sunday, plus an older retiring priest and his younger replacement. Fortunately for us one of the congregation members was a sub-Saharan African. We invited him out to a café after the service to talk. He was from Cameroon and spoke fluent French. He told us that he met the younger, incoming priest in Bni-Ensar, where he currently resides. He had left Cameroon after his parents died. He went to Nigeria and then to Niger, across Algeria and then into Morocco. He had spent time in the Mt. Gourougu forest. He was robbed

somewhere and lost his passport. He was a self-described “clandestin.” He said that getting to Niger wasn’t difficult. But in getting into Algeria, they had to hire a guide to show them across the desert. When they made it to Tamanrasset they were told they could take buses. It turned out not to be that easy. The trick was to buy the bus ticket, then find a taxi that would cooperate in taking the clandestins by a back road that flanked the police checkpoint in town. Once past the checkpoint the taxi and the bus would rendez-vous and the clandestins would get on the bus. It worked out for him and those he was travelling with. They weren’t hassled again. The bus went to Oran. From there they took a train to Maghnia, the Algerian border town across from Oujda. Cops did not check train passengers. At the border they had to hire another guide to get them across to Morocco. The Cameroonian then went to the university of Oujda campus where an African tent city had been set up. He did not stay because he said the people there were waiting for money from home to continue their voyage. He did not have anyone at home to send him money so he went to the forest camp on the side of Mt. Gourougou. There was a “Spanish market” every Sunday in Beni-Ensar where the people of Melilla came to buy whatever it was they thought was fresher and cheaper than in the city. The Africans walked the kilometer and a half down from their camps to beg and also to pick up damaged fruit etc., at the market. He said that he eventually left the forest camp because they were living like animals. They never bathed. Few had any education. The Cameroonian said that the forest camp guys had eaten all of the chimps that were re-introduced to the area. Many of them enjoyed bush meat and many of them knew how to build effective traps. They also liked to eat the wild boars that roamed the area when they could catch them. He now slept on the floor of a shop in Beni Ensar. When the owner closed up at night, the Cameroonian had a blanket he curled up in and slept in until the guy came and opened up the next morning. He acted as a night watchman in exchange for a place to sleep.

The Cameroonian talked about the “frappes,” which is the French word for the massed assaults they launched against the Melilla border in the vicinity of Farkhana. He said that the camp at Gourougou was broken up by nationality and even by clan-identifying groups, but that they got together to launch a frappe. They would sneak into a ditch in the dead of night that was close to the border. Then at the signal, they rushed the border guards. The guards fired plastic bullets and used batons, according to the Cameroonian. Some got hurt, some got arrested, some got through. Those arrested were beaten up and either then escaped from the beatings or were thrown in police trucks and transported to Oujda and thrown over the border. The Médecins

sans Frontières had been helping take care of the wounded left over from each frappe. They would call ambulances for the worst and have them transported to the Nador hospital. (We later found out that Médecins sans Frontières had pulled out and left some of their stuff behind in the church. They claimed that neither the Moroccan government nor the EU was doing anything meaningful to solve the border troubles and that they would not be a party to a conflict that nobody sought to resolve). The Cameroonian had been caught during several different frappes and thrown back over the border each time. The last time was a month ago. He claimed that if you could get to Melilla, then there were humanitarian groups that would get you to Spain, find you a job, hook you up with a lawyer and help you start to get residence there. I did not know whether that was true or not, but the idea of all of that help on the other side provided enough incentive to keep him engaged in ongoing attempts to make it across. He mentioned that both Tangiers and Melilla were places where you could catch zodiacs to get across the Mediterranean. He said it cost a thousand euros per person and the boats typically held twelve. One was the guide who drove and presumably returned with the boat. He said that it was possible to swim at night from Beni-Ensar to Melilla, if you were a good swimmer. He knew some who had done that. He also said that there was an officer at the Beni-Ensar border who sent out men to recruit African clandestins. The officer charged them a certain amount and then at night, he opened a certain door in the defensive perimeter, and the clandestins passed through there. He said that there was also a boat route out of Beni-Ensar. He claimed that he was in negotiations with some sailors who were leaving in three days. If he could come up with the money (he was vague about the sum), they would smuggle him aboard and take him with them to Europe.

The interdiction of African and Asian migrations to the EU that is the function of the Nador-Melilla border is ideologically legitimated in European liberal democracies by the post-Cold War spread of the “Clash of Civilizations” discourse and the way it has produced a sense of impending threat. As Brown describes it in a related context: “two disparate images are merged to produce a single figure of danger justifying exclusion and closure: the hungry masses, on the one hand, and cultural-religious aggression toward Western values, on the other.”<sup>6</sup>

Just as the Nador-Melilla border protects by deflecting or intercepting the perceived causes of economic desperation and violence targeted at EU nation states, so the barrier creates its own kind of violence towards the

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6. Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, 45.

people and the region it crosses over. The perceived need to protect the people of the EU exacerbates European/Melillan xenophobia and covertly promotes the suspension of law at the border in the name of carrying out that protection. Ironically, the supposedly liberal, open, secular society of Europe/Melilla that is being protected reacts to the external threats by becoming ever more jingoistic, militaristic and insular. Though border defenses have no effect on the most serious forms of terror, the image in the global north of bedraggled immigrant hordes banging at the gates coupled with the specter of the Muslim terrorist slipping through security cracks creates the demand that states do whatever it takes to close and secure their national borders. The creation of the “Fortress Europe” mentality and its attendant anxieties is one kind of violence the Nador-Melilla border contributes to.

On the Nador side of the frontier the border intensifies the violence and criminality involved in getting around the blockade. This is especially true and especially sad in the case of the poor women smugglers at one end of the economic scale who sacrifice their health in the name of transporting on their backs giant sacks of low-level contraband across the border (sometimes referred to as “Donkey Women”). At the other end and with far greater consequences for Nador society and its economy are the drug runners and the mafias they form a part of. The greater the levels of border security, the more sophisticated and violent the organizations formed to evade them. As Brown puts it, barriers and borders “intensify the criminality and violence they purport to repel, and hence, both generate the need for more fortifications and policing.”<sup>7</sup> Greater border security produces a chain reaction in the size, cost and sophistication of operations developed to circumvent it. Smuggling procedures that were confined to moving contraband expand to include clandestine human traffic, and that human traffic, once interested in mainly seasonal work or rotating migration, becomes attracted to permanent settlement as a response to the increased difficulties in traversing the border. More intensive border restrictions drive up the costs of migration and thus increase the desire to resettle permanently in Europe.<sup>8</sup>

One day I was having tea at the Hotel Victoria with Muhammad, the brother of a friend. He had spent ten years in Germany. He had a German wife who still lived up there. While we were talking two Sub-saharan Africans passed by selling phones. I was surprised at that because there were so few in Nador. Muhammad began talking about the stereotypes surrounding them: they were involved in black magic, they had money but wanted to appear poor.

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7. *Ibid.*, 38.

8. *Ibid.*, 91; 112.

Then he recounted a story of his father who had some paralysis in his face. He went to a traditional healer who told him what to take for it and then said, "And don't look at a black man." He then went to a regular doctor, who told him to go to the hospital to have an x-ray. When he got there, he walked into the x-ray section and the technician was (...) black! Muhammad laughed and said that his father got well anyway. He said that the latest trick is for Africans to buy cars and equip them with battering rams and charge the border. He said that there was a YouTube of this. He also said that he had heard of using a fake back seat and trunk and filling them with live bodies. If driven by someone with a local residence permit, they wouldn't get stopped on either side. He said the Spaniards have purchased special electronic devices that could detect human heartbeats hidden in cars, so they did not have to inspect, they just waved the magic wands. He chuckled as he told this story: "Some Africans bought an old junk car, took out the engine and put four people in that compartment. They pushed the car up to the border and said that they'd run out of gas. The border agents on both sides let them through!"

My sense at the time was that most Nadoris had negative reactions to the presence of sub-Saharan Africans in their city. However, not all the Nadoris felt this way. Some did identify with the suffering of the sub-Saharans gathered in the camps around Mt. Gourougou. *Nador City*, the local YouTube news service, periodically ran stories and interviews about the clandestins' frappes, which were sensitive to their suffering. Aisha told Joan that she once went to the filthy Nador hospital to visit a relative and was appalled to come upon five Africans whose blood covered the waiting room floor. One man was bleeding from several different head wounds and a woman had wrapped her scarf around his head. She said that a woman from a human rights NGO and a nun were there with them. She had seen a television program the other day that talked about the violence against them. She knew a Nadori woman who bought 100 baguettes to hand out to the undocumented migrants. She drove up to Gourougou and the Africans came out of the woods to collect the bread. Aisha said that many of the migrants had high school or even university degrees, which showed they were good, hardworking people. She said that a Nador psychologist she knew told her that.

In thinking about attitudes towards the relatively recent arrival of numbers of Sub-Saharan African migrants, I don't want to over state the extent of Nadori sympathy or anxiety. Their numbers in 2013 were still small, so they were thought of more as a nuisance than an invasion force. That could be changing. It might be useful to quote at length what Brown says about fantasies of dangerous aliens. She states that "Associations of political outsiders with

difference and danger are as old as human community itself (...). Moreover, as Mary Douglas argues, border violations themselves are almost universally associated with pollution and danger. Thus, as sovereignty weakens and borders are more routinely trespassed and as the nation itself loses clear definition, it is hardly surprising that the alien is drawn as an especially powerful and dangerous figure (...)."<sup>9</sup>

I told Muhammad that I thought what he said about the ingenuity of the sub-Saharan migrants was an interesting example of an older Moroccan migrant admiring the daring and ingenuity of younger migrants from another country, even as he resented their presence in Morocco and did not seem at all to identify with their plight. He laughed and said I was reading too much into it. He then told me a border joke. He said that there once was a kid who rode his bicycle across the border at least once a week. The Moroccan border guard searched the sack on his back and the one on the bike, but found nothing, ever. This went on week after week. Finally one day the frustrated guard said to the kid, "Look. I never find anything when I search you, but I know you are guilty of smuggling, so tell me what you are smuggling and by God I swear I will not bother you again." The boy looked up brightly at the guard and said, "Bicycles!"

Muhammad also mentioned that stories about strange circumstances happening at the border were familiar to everyone in Nador and were constantly being retold. I asked him for more examples. He told me that he knew a guy whose father had almost died in the Nador hospital. They called a Melilla ambulance to take him to the hospital there. He did not have papers, but a relative who worked in the hospital got him cleared as a patient who wouldn't have to pay. Muhammad said that the collection of equipment and material in the Spanish ambulance was greater than all of the stuff in the Nador hospital. Ten Melilla doctors worked to save him after he showed up. He had cancer. Muhammad said that, should a patient from Nador die in Melilla, it was very expensive, he did not know why, to have to ship a body back across the border for burial in the homeland. Some families went to extreme measures to cut the costs. Stories were told of families who had been forced to dress dead bodies up in good clothes and prop them up in the back seats of cars in order to fool the border guards and get them cheaply back into Morocco.

The trope of the incompetent or naïve border guard who populates Moroccan border tales and humor is interesting in that it both overstates the

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9. Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, 115.

extent to which borders, in Morocco and elsewhere, have provided security in the past while it also understates the extent to which the state is (un) intentionally complicit in enabling clandestine border crossings. The Melilla-Nador border represents another example of contemporary barriers where “the familiar binaries of law/lawlessness, inside/outside and military/civilian do not hold.”<sup>10</sup>

Joan and I spent several afternoons reading a novel about the border with the help of Fatima, an English language teacher at one of the women’s centers in Nador. She lived in Beni-Ensar but worked in Nador, not an uncommon occurrence. We used to meet at the patio off the back of the train station café to translate and discuss Ismail Othmani’s 2007 novel, *Gourougou: As Related from Beni-Ensar*.<sup>11</sup> The novel opens with a depiction of a border agent verbally sneering and harassing local border crossers with his either condescending or digging inquiries. But it also depicts border crossers getting through without being properly checked by baffling the agents or otherwise disarming them with their startling answers to questions or by seeming to be so harmless and otherwise unlikely to be real smugglers. The agents are in turn spineless when it comes to their own bosses. They live in fear of their own superiors even as they lorded it imperiously over the civilian crossers beneath them. Othmani has captured the kind of border carnival atmosphere

10. Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, 84-85.

11. Ismail Othmani, *Gourougou: Marwiya min Banī Anṣār* (Rabat: Dār Abī Raqrāq, 2007). There are several other novels that reflect to a greater or lesser extent on life in the Nador-Melilla region. A reprint of a 1965 novel about a man working for the Compañía Española de Minas de Rif carrying ore from the Moroccan mines back to the Melilla port is of historical interest, see José Antonio Parra, *Tren minero (novella)* (Melilla: Textos Mediterráneos, 1965 [2006]). Laila Karrouch has followed her protagonist’s immigrant journey back and forth between Nador and Catalonia across two short novels – *De Nador à Vic* (Barcelona: Estrella Polar, 2004) and *Petjades de Nador* (Barcelona: Columna, 2013). The fictional narrative I found most appealing is the raucous comedic text, *Wedding by the Sea*, trans. Susan Massotty (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2000) by Abdelkader Benali, a Dutch-Moroccan who spent his early childhood in the Melilla environs. He has written a comedy of the mishaps and misunderstandings that accompany an immigrant marriage, while also portraying Melilla as an alternative space of escape from the confines of Moroccan mores. Another extraordinary first novel about familial tensions exacerbated by migration has been written by Najat El Hachmi, *The Last Patriarch*, trans. Peter Bush (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2010 [2008]). The way sex figures prominently in both Benali’s and El Hachmi’s books puts me in mind of the thin line walked by North African writers who must navigate between their own writerly interests and instincts and the pressures from Euro-American audiences for prurient, titillating, voyeuristic views into the sexual politics of Muslim immigrant societies. This required tightrope walk has been critically examined most recently in Todd Shepard’s attack on “Vanilla History” in *Sex, France and the Arab Men, 1962-1979* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). Similar issues are taken up by Mehammed Amadeus Mack, *Sexagon: Muslims, France, and the Sexualization of National Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017). And of course Joseph A. Massad’s texts on the universalizing of Western sexual desires and discourses are foundational, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 2008) and *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

that often erupts at Beni-Ensar, though he has given it an almost magical realist twist, with snarling customs agents, blonde European tourists taking photos, blind crossers recounting their pilgrimage experiences to agents, dogs talking and taking over the narration, and young children turning out to be experienced border crossing smugglers as well as guides to smugglers.

One day we were working on a passage about a crazy, homeless German woman who lived at the border who had been married to a Moroccan man.<sup>12</sup> She was driven crazy because her husband had stolen her three children away from their house in Germany and put them in schools back in Morocco. He deserted her for no good reason and without even telling her. She spoke German, English, French and Spanish and people said that she was highly cultivated. However, she tended to start shouting whenever she saw an old man with a beard. They reminded her of her husband. She talked incessantly, but to nobody in particular, following people and then asking if they were her husband. She slept in the parking lot near the border. When she slept, the stray dogs would come and sit around her, forming a circle as if they were watching over her, trying to protect her. Her “house” was a big bag full of clothes and paper. Sometimes she was seen reading old Spanish magazines that she got from a *hanūt* owner who used them to wrap purchases. She did not steal and she did not beg. People at the border called her “Deutsch.” They respected her and defended her when necessary. She was the only person who could pass across the border without either the Spaniards or the Moroccans stopping her or questioning her. It was said that money was transferred to her in Melilla. Sometimes she went away for days and then came back clean and elegant, like a Scandinavian princess. One day she was in an accident and died.

Fatima went home that night to her family in Beni-Ensar. The next time we met with her she said that after she got home she was recounting to her older brother the episode in the novel about the crazy border woman and her brother told her that it was based on a true story. He remembered as a child seeing the crazy, homeless “Deutsch” woman wandering about the border crossing, protected by the dogs. Interesting.

Brown addresses the ways that, eventually, border zones bend to the influence of border violence.<sup>13</sup> In the case of the Nador-Melilla border, great swaths of the Mt. Gourougou forest are now off limits to locals who in the past might have gone picnicking, foraging or whatever in the shadow of the mountain. Large, very fast and noisy boats crowd the Melilla harbor

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12. Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, 46-49.

13. *Ibid.*, 112.

interrupting its tranquility as they attempt to apprehend contraband cargo, human or otherwise. As Brown puts it in reference to border areas in general, what were once relatively bucolic environs now resemble more the “staging grounds for guerilla warfare or counterinsurgency.”<sup>14</sup>

I think Brown’s point is reflected in the story of the crazy German lady at the border. Before the enactment of the Schengen Agreement in 1995, control of the border on the Melilla side was a more haphazard, low-priority affair carried out by guards who were happy to receive a tax-free living allowance in exchange for serving in such a provincial post. Tensions existed prior to that, of course, and flared up on occasion as the Moroccan Istiqlal Party would periodically agitate for the return of Melilla to Morocco, or some particularly egregious treatment would be meted out to returning migrants or other border crossers and then make it into the headlines. But by and large, when we first lived in Nador in the middle 1980s, the border operated more as Brown described it at the beginning of this paper: as a stage prop, or a theatrical set where state sovereignty performed its waning right to control its national frontiers, on both sides (with the major exception being the border riots and massive state suppression in Nador carried out in 1984). The crazy lady and her retinue of dogs would have fit perfectly into that era. The border was never “bucolic.” I don’t mean to imply that. But it did have a lot of the carnivalesque quality that Othmani captured in his novel.

That theatrical quality continued to characterize the border in 2013 when I last lived in Nador. The game of cops and robbers played by Moroccan agents with their periodic road blocks and their high-speed chases along the backroads of the province went on as before. The way in which a border guard would stop to have his shoes shined and this moment of inattention would be the cue for petty smugglers to race past the space of his jurisdiction all still went on. There was even an inn at Beni-Ensar for border crossers in 2013 called “Hotel Douche,” which, because I am an anglophone, always caused me to smile. And yet the violence at the border had gone up several notches since my last sojourn in Nador. It had been displaced from the most public crossing at Beni-Ensar and now happened mainly at the Farkhana crossing or just along the fence where assaults took place. Sometimes the mountainside camps of sub-Saharan migrants were the scenes of brutal police clearings. In the aftermath of both, the Nador hospital waiting room filled up with bloody victims. The region around the border had gotten more militarized, more aggressive. The intensification of violence and lawlessness

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14. *Ibid.*, 113.

at the Nador-Melilla border must certainly be attributed to the EU remaking the border into an outpost of control over transnational flows, as opposed to its earlier existence as a (perhaps never sleepy but) frontier outpost on two nations' peripheries, a kind of holdover from the colonial era. The tens of millions of dollars the EU poured into bolstering border defenses in the 90's created a dramatic impact. Multiple fences interspersed with guards and dogs and watch towers and razor wire replaced the old drainage ditch that more or less formed the border in the 1980s. The frontier is still porous; economies on both sides still depend on commodities and labor slipping through. The nation states on both sides continue to perform the charade of state sovereignty as they harass and harangue and stamp through or deny border crossers. But the stakes have risen considerably. The drug smuggling and migrant smuggling mafias have gotten more sophisticated and the Nador skyline is now marked by the building projects of reputed drug barons. The local prison is also full of low-level drug mules. The Moroccan and Spanish border guards are both reportedly in the pay of the EU, hired to keep African and Asian migrants at bay. I can't say for certain that Melillans and Nadoris have gotten more xenophobic and culturally insular as their frontier has become more internationalized, but I sensed things were heading that way. I worry that the boys who voted for Melilla to stay Spanish may be placing too much weight on the immediate gratifications Mellila can offer them, and that they may not be calculating the larger, destructive psychological – not to mention social and economic – costs of living in an increasingly violent, increasingly militarized, transnational border zone.

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### مقاربة إثنوغرافية ونظرية للحدود بين الناظور ومليلية

ملخص: تجمع هذه الورقة بين الملاحظات الشخصية للحياة في منطقة حدود الناظور ومليلية مع الرؤى النظرية لعمل ويندي براون بشأن الحدود والحواجز للقول إن حرس الحدود المغربي والإسباني يمارسون سيطرة الدولة السيادية كوسيلة لإخفاء المدى الفعلي الذي تعمل الحدود حقاً بموجبه كنقطة فارقة بين حيز شمالي لعالم أكثر ثراءً، وحيز جنوبي معاكس لعالم أكثر فقراً. وإن ضخ عشرات الملايين من الدولارات لتعزيز الحدود بين الناظور ومليلية يوفر الحماية بالعمل على صرف الأسباب المتصورة لليأس الاقتصادي والعنف الذي يستهدف دول الاتحاد الأوروبي. وفي سياق هذه العملية، تسهم العسكرة المتزايدة للحدود في تكثيف درجات العنف الذاتي وتعزيز أدواته في مواجهة الساكنة والمنطقة التي تعبرها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دراسات الحدود، العنف، الناظور، المغرب، مليلية، إسبانيا.

### **Théorie et ethnographie de la frontière Nador-Melilla**

**Résumé:** Cet article combine des observations personnelles de la vie dans la région de la frontière Nador-Melilla avec les aperçus théoriques des travaux de Wendy Brown sur les frontières et les barrières pour soutenir que les gardes-frontières marocains et espagnols exercent le contrôle de l'État souverain comme un moyen de déguiser l'étendue à laquelle la frontière fonctionne vraiment comme un séparateur du nord global plus riche du sud global plus pauvre. Les dizaines de millions de dollars investis dans le renforcement de la frontière Nador-Melilla protègent en détournant ou en interceptant les causes perçues du désespoir économique et de la violence contre les États de l'UE. Dans ce processus, la militarisation toujours croissante de la frontière intensifie son propre type de violence à l'encontre des populations et de la région qu'elle traverse.

**Mots-clés:** Études frontalières, violence, Nador, Maroc, Melilla, Espagne.