CHAPTER 3

Remote Areas in the Mediterranean
A View from Europe's Southern Borderland

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Abstract

This chapter examines how the variable geopolitical dynamics of the EU's border regime have affected the Mediterranean's southern shore. I focus on one of Europe's most controversial border areas: the city of Melilla, a territory of 12 km^2 located in north-eastern Morocco under Spanish sovereignty since 1497. When Spain joined the Schengen Area in 1991, both Melilla and Ceuta, the two Spanish territories in North Africa, became the gatekeepers of 'Fortress Europe'. This put Melilla at the centre of the EU's political agenda, but was locally experienced with a sense of increased detachment and isolation. In this chapter, I explore ethnographically this general experience of marginality and how it is connected to the constitution of Melilla as an offshore border zone. I build on Edwin Ardener's notion of 'remote areas' as a distinct and identifiable type of place to explain why the problem of identity is experienced with particular intensity in places like Melilla, and argue that this feeling of vulnerability evokes a larger constellation of relations, connections and disconnections across the Mediterranean region and beyond.

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Introduction

The question organising this volume concerns how the Mediterranean has been shaped historically by connections and disconnections spanning space and time. Locating the Mediterranean from this perspective involves considering the historical, legal, political, and social entanglements not only between specific locations, but also between conceptual (and geopolitical) domains such as 'East' and 'West' and 'North' and 'South'. To do this, we must examine the spatial logics, material infrastructure and discursive systems that shape the experience of living *somewhere* in the Mediterranean, and ask how this constellation of connections and disconnections determines the significance of particular places, how it puts them in relation to other locations, and how it situates them within a larger regime of value. The asymmetrical but also mutually constitutive nature of these encounters force us to reconsider how we use 'centre' and 'periphery' as categories, and to rethink our mental map of this part of the world (Hauswedell, Körner, and Tiedau 2019).[1]

My take on these questions is based on my research in north-eastern Morocco, and focuses on how the rebordering of the Mediterranean (Suárez Navas 2004) at the turn of the 20th century 'relocated' certain territories in the EU's periphery.[2] I draw my material from one of Europe's most controversial borderlands: the city of Melilla, a territory of 12 km^2 in north-eastern Morocco which has been under Spanish sovereignty since 1497. Along with the twin city of Ceuta, also in northern Morocco but on the west end, this is one of the only two EU land borders in Africa.

It is impossible to 'locate' the Mediterranean today without taking into consideration the changing dynamics of the EU border regime and how it has shaped the geopolitical landscape across the region. Melilla is a particularly interesting site to explore this question because of its unique position as a territory that is somehow 'out of place', neither here (Europe) nor there (Africa), or both here and there. Instead of thinking about Melilla as a 'margin' or a 'periphery' and considering how it interacts with the EU as a 'centre', I approach Melilla's condition of liminality as a distinctive topological combination between distance and proximity, between connection and disconnection.[3]

I build my argument around Ardener's concept of remote areas, which first appeared in a piece published in 1987 (reprinted in *HAU* in

2012). In the original text, Ardener presents a peculiar phenomenological account of remote areas that takes him from the Scottish Highlands to the Cameroons. Contrary to what we may think, he tells us, remote areas are constantly subject to change and intervention. They are full of strangers and innovators, filled with rubbish and ruins of the past, in permanent contact with the outside world and always obsessed with communication. Distance is not necessarily the issue, for, even when they are 'reached', remote areas continue to be remote.[4]

Ardener's argument is not just that remote places are not necessarily physically removed but rather that they constitute a distinct and identifiable type of place. Remote areas are places that are identified as *singularities* by dominant zones, and it is the nature of this relation that defines them as remote. This is why not all geographical peripheries are remote, and why remoteness is also not restricted to peripheries. For remoteness is 'a condition not related to the periphery, but to the fact that certain peripheries are by definition *not properly linked* to the dominant zone' (1987, 532). Remoteness is simply, as Ardener puts it, an empty formative to describe 'the interaction between the anthropologist and his field, the definer and the defined, the classifier and the classified, the imagined and the realized' (530).

The text gives us some clues as to how we might identify remote areas. It is a peculiarity of remote areas, he writes, that *events* are much more frequent. Happenings that would hold little or no significance elsewhere acquire in remote areas the significance of *an event*. Remoteness, he argues, is both internal and external; it is both a specification or perception from the outside and an internal response to that specification, which works in the opposite direction. Another, related feature is that people in remote areas are 'at least intermittently conscious of the defining processes of others that might absorb them' (1987, 532). The problem of identity is thus experienced with particular intensity in these places, which may appear distant and unreachable from the outside but feel open, vulnerable, and unprotected from the inside (more on this later).

Ardener's argument is deliberately elusive and it would do him no justice to try to summarise it here. Instead, I draw on the many threads he lays out to try to rethink the question of remoteness in the Mediterranean. In this, I hope to contribute to an ongoing discussion on contemporary forms of remoteness inspired by the reprint of Ardener's classic piece in 2012. Two collections are particularly significant in this

regard. Harms et al. (2014) pick up Ardener's thread in a special issue that explores cases from various parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America to argue that remoteness should be understood not as a spatial concept but as a relational category and a 'way of being'. Geographical distance, in their view, is tangential to the concept. Saxer and Andersson (2019), by contrast, insist that it is unproductive to detach 'remoteness' from its geographical moorings, and that we must consider instead how remoteness 'is made and unmade in the current "world disorder" of shifting geopolitical and economic realignments' (2019, 142). They emphasise three aspects of remote areas: how they are made *through* connections and partial (dis)connections, how they can become economically productive, and how they are easily subject to various forms of 'remote' control.

The ideas I present in the following pages are inspired by this theoretical engagement, which I wish to push further in three directions. First, I want to go back to a point made by Ardener that has been overlooked in later discussions: the idea of remote areas as 'singularities'. Second, I wish to reflect on the ethnographic traces of remoteness in the field. And last, I want open up the discussion to reflect on the nature of connections and disconnections more generally, shifting the focus away from 'remote areas' as places (or localities, as discussed in Chapter 1) to 'remote areas' as locations, and focusing on how locations like Melilla can help us reimagine spatial hierarchies in the Mediterranean.

The Making of a Singularity

Arguably, Melilla has always been 'singular' in geopolitical terms.[5] The territory upon which it was built was seized by the Spanish in 1497, as part of a military effort to secure a number of small garrisons along the North African coast following the end of the Spanish 'Reconquista' of Al-Andalus (1492). For nearly four centuries, Melilla operated as a prison colony (*presidio*) where the Spanish crown disposed of political enemies and cast away the undesired. The citadel comprised a small cluster of buildings surrounded by fortified walls, accommodating a population of a few hundred soldiers, prisoners, and auxiliary personnel (Calderón Vázquez 2008). Initially, noble and rich men were sent there to perform military duties in what was often considered a form

of deportation, but over time it became a penal settlement for the general criminal population.[6]

We can trace the beginnings of Melilla's economic and political transformation to the second half of the 19th century, when the territory under Spanish control grew from 1 to 12 km^2 in surface. At that time, Europe was immersed in the Scramble for Africa. The Alaouite dynasty had successfully kept Morocco out of the European race throughout the 18th century and most of the 19th, but pressure from both the French and the British was mounting. In 1844, Sultan Abd al-Rahman lost the Franco-Moroccan war and officially recognised Algeria as part of the French Empire. A few years later (1856), he agreed to make Great Britain Morocco's 'protector'. Armed confrontations between Spain and the Moroccan Sultanate broke out soon after, culminating in the War of Africa (*Guerra de Africa*) in 1859. Morocco lost the war, and as part of the peace treaty the sultan was forced to hand over a large stretch of land around Ceuta and Melilla (Ponce Gómez, 1988).

Soon after Melilla's enlargement, the citadel was declared a free port (1863). This was the first step towards the making of Melilla as a fiscal 'singularity'. Gradually, Melilla was incorporated into a regional network of weekly rural markets linking the presidio with Taza, in Morocco, and Oran and Algiers in Algeria. A few years earlier, in the late 1850s, a French shipping company had established regular lines linking the two Spanish territories to Marseille, the coast of Algeria, and the Atlantic coast of Morocco (Saro Gandarillas 1984). This, along with the establishment of the free port, opened up new trading opportunities. Caravans from French Algeria, sometimes travelling for as long as 16 days, came to Melilla to buy English products shipped in from Gibraltar (sugar, tea, cotton, and candles). Moroccan traders sold chickens, eggs, wax, vegetables, cattle, leather, and wool and bought manufactured products to be exported to the Moroccan hinterland. Jewish merchants from Tetouan, Tangiers, Gibraltar, and Oran arrived in Melilla, attracted by the new trading opportunities as middlemen, while Berbers became the main couriers of cross-border trade.[7]

The first half of the 20th century was a period of economic and urban expansion. Spain's colonial policies shifted from Central and South America towards the southern shore of the Mediterranean, and military campaigns in Morocco became increasingly common. In 1912, Spain was handed formal control over the northern strip of

Morocco to prevent French monopoly in the southern Mediterranean.[8] Not everyone in Spain favoured military intervention in Morocco, but the Spanish economy was in shambles, and the government faced mounting pressure from financial, industrial, and commercial interests that were seeking new markets in order to compensate the sudden fall in trade with the ex-colonies (Bunes Ibarra 1995).[9] The wars (1893, 1909, and 1921) brought tens of thousands of soldiers to Melilla in several waves, raising demand for produce, textiles, and other services, and leading to an increase in trade revenues on imports. Tax revenues were then reinvested in construction work and generated employment for thousands of migrants, both Spanish and Moroccan (see Bravo Nieto 1996). Engineers were brought in from mainland Spain to design a new urban plan for the city, and 14 local newspapers were launched. Melilla had its own Rotary Club, and a Chamber of Commerce to defend the interests of trading and banking houses (Castro Maestro 2003; Moga Romero 1988). It was a time of prosperity, and the population grew rapidly, from a little under 9,000 in the 1900 census to over 81,000 in 1949.[10]

Logically, Melilla was deeply affected by the loss of the Protectorate. The declaration of Moroccan independence in 1956 led to the first diplomatic rows over the sovereignty of the Spanish exclaves, revealing the vulnerability of their geopolitical position. Soon, the Spanish began to abandon their businesses in northern Morocco and return to mainland Spain. The mines were deserted and eventually shut down, and thousands of soldiers returned to mainland Spain. By the early 1980s, the population had reached a low point of 58,000 inhabitants. After that, Ceuta and Melilla fell into oblivion. In mainland Spain, the African territories came to be known as a popular destination for one of two things: performing the mandatory military service and buying cheap foreign goods. Save for the young men who were sent to there to perform the mandatory military service, or those who regularly made the trip down to '*el moro*' (Morocco) to buy *hashish*, very few people in mainland Spain could point the location of the North African territories on a map. Melilla had one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. It lagged behind in basic infrastructure: tap water was not drinkable, there was no natural gas – bottled butane gas is still today shipped in from the mainland – the sewage system was deficient, and the electricity supply unstable. Muslim districts faced the worst condi-

tions, and tensions between the Spanish and the Muslim communities were at an all-time high (Soto Bermant 2015).

Meanwhile, across the sea, the EEC was taking its first steps to consolidate Europe as a unified political and economic space. As Europe prepared to eliminate internal borders through the creation of the Schengen Area (1985), the porosity of the Spanish border became a problem. As Elbek argues in Chapter 2 of this volume, the Schengen Agreement did not simply remove the borders of the EU; rather, they were shifted to other locations. Like Italy, Spain found itself at the centre of this process of relocation. The Spanish government was required to pass a new immigration law, and the Spanish North African territories acquired unprecedented relevance in the national political scene.

This was the second turning point in the making of Melilla as a 'singularity'. Financed in large part by the EU, the process of legally and *materially* turning Melilla into Europe's gatekeeper was swift. After the arrival of the first group of sub-Saharan migrants in the late 1990s, the Spanish government built a perimetric fence around the city. Three years later, construction work began for the CETI, a temporary detention centre for asylum seekers and refugees. Continued assaults on the fence led in 2005 to the erection of second and third perimetral fences, raising six metres above the ground and equipped with infrared cameras, sound detectors, and watch posts. A road was built along the fence to allow regular border patrols, supplemented with a police helicopter at night. In addition, Morocco built a secondary fence covered in razor-wire across the other side. Spain increased border patrol personnel and special divisions were sent in from the mainland for rotating 'border shifts' lasting between two and three weeks. The Spanish territory became a buffer zone and a funnel, which both attracted and contained migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and, in the first periods, even South Asia. Increased Frontex operations in the Mediterranean and in the Atlantic near the Canary Islands made this (and Ceuta's) route even more important.

Gradually, Melilla became an object of outside intervention, engulfed in EU visions of development for a new border regime, and increasingly dependent on funds from the European Union not only for border infrastructure but also for social and economic development. Through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF), the local government was able to finance development projects ranging from basic infrastructure

(a water desalination plant, a refuse dumping ground, an industrial park, an incinerator plant and a ring road, to name only a few) to transport communications, the rehabilitation of new leisure spaces (most controversially, a golf course sitting across the temporary stay centre for migrants), and numerous training programmes to encourage the growth of the private sector in the city. These grand infrastructural projects generated employment opportunities for the local population, while attracting private companies specialised in construction, security, and general maintenance looking to catch a substantial government contract.

More generally, the influx of outside monies turned the local government into a gatekeeper with the power to decide, distribute, and allocate. The effect was a reconfiguration of the economy of the city, splitting it into two main fields: the public sector, which employs around 40 per cent of the population, commerce (comprising mostly informal trade across the border), and the services sector (also partly informal), which provides a livelihood to most of the remaining 60 per cent.[11]

But turning Melilla into an offshore borderland also required some 'border acrobatics'. This is the term Ferrer-Gallardo (2007) uses to describe the complex system of selective permeability that was put in place to ensure the safeguard the informal border economy. Closing of the border of Melilla completely would have been disastrous for the local economy, both in Melilla and across the border in Nador, which was one of the poorest and least 'developed' regions of Morocco. To avoid the dangers of cutting out all sources of income to those at the bottom of the ladder, and also to secure that Melilla could continue to profit from a reserve army of frontier workers willing to take on poorly paid jobs as domestics, cooks, cleaners, handymen, mechanics, and so forth, a series of regulatory exceptions were put in place. First, an agreement between Spain and Morocco eliminated visa restrictions for Moroccans who could prove residency in the provinces neighbouring the two Spanish territories, and allowed free movement across the border for local people. Second, the Spanish government negotiated a special clause with the EU to keep Ceuta and Melilla outside the European Free Trade Area, thus preserving their 'privileged' position as free ports and, with it, the continued influx of trade revenues and tax income levied on incoming merchandise from Asia, Europe, and America. The stakes were high, with the city pocketing up to 60 million euros annu-

ally in local taxes alone. Far from becoming an inexpungable fortress, then, Melilla was reconfigured as a space in between, located inside the European Union but outside the European Free Trade Area, and partly outside the Schengen Area, a 'layered border' carved out between Spain and Morocco where different categories of people had access to different spaces.[12]

Melilla thus entered into a very particular relationship with Europe, not only politically and economically but also symbolically. It was configured as a 'singularity' (in fact, Ceuta and Melilla are classified by the European Commission as 'special economic zones'[13]), in the sense of being, by definition, *not properly linked* to the dominant zone (Ardener 1987, 532), which is not the same as saying disconnected from or unlinked to. In the same way as the Spanish crown used Melilla's physical location as an instrument to cast away an undesired population, amid a wider process of reconfiguration of EU borders and externalisation of the border regime to the southern Mediterranean periphery, the EU found in Melilla the ideal location for an offshore border zone. A place cut off from the European continent but administratively linked to it, a magnet for migratory flows and a perfect site for their contention. At the same time, Melilla's geopolitical location at the interstices between the EU and Morocco (but also North Africa more generally) opened up important economic opportunities. To preserve its 'singularity' as a free port was to protect an economic circuit that was kept partly hidden in the shadows, apparently (but only apparently) disconnected from the visible routes of global capitalism.

To sum up, we can say that the twofold production of Melilla as an offshore borderland and as a special economic zone was the result of a series of turning points that brought together local and outside interests to reconfigure the legal, economic, and political structure of the city and thus transform its 'relative location' (Green 2012). In both cases, it was a reconfiguration of international alliances and interests beyond Melilla's control that made Melilla strategically significant. These conjunctural crossroads configured, layer after layer, the complex economic and political structure that we find in Melilla today. This begs the question how people living there became entangled in this process of resignifying Melilla and how the political work that went into turning it into Europe's sentinel fed into local visions of belonging and identity. In the following section, I turn to my ethnography to

discuss how this was a double-edged sword, which appeared to bring Melilla closer to the centre of power but in fact made it more remote.

Remote Areas Are Full of Strangers

Let me begin with a personal observation about doing ethnography in 'remote areas'. When I first arrived in Melilla, in the summer of 2008, the six-metre-tall, triple security fence already surrounded the city. Melilla had made international headlines briefly in the late 1990s, when the first group of sub-Saharan migrants arrived seeking EU asylum, and again in 2005, when thousands of migrants attempted to enter Melilla in five coordinated break-ins in just over a week, leaving six migrants dead. These dramatic events were a wake-up call for the Spanish government, which decided to raise the fence from three to six metres in height. Nonetheless, even then, very few people outside Spain knew of the existence of the Spanish North African territories. And even Spaniards like me, who knew of its existence, would have had trouble pointing to it on a map.

As the years went by, Melilla's appearance in international news headlines became more and more frequent. The group 'jumps' (*saltos*) became more common, and Melilla quickly garnered attention from journalists and political activists. Images of migrants climbing over the fence made the covers of national and international news outlets several times in the years between 2005 and 2018, including a photograph taken in 2014 by local activist and NGO founder Jose Palazón that went viral online (Image 3.1). The photograph showed 11 men sitting atop the border fence as a police officer approaches, while two Melillans play golf below, on the Spanish side of the fence. The woman is in mid-swing while the man is turned toward the migrants, watching the dramatic scene.

The sudden proliferation of these images responded to the efforts of activists and journalists to show the outside world what was happening at Europe's back gate. But it also unwittingly served a local interest in overplaying the immigration drama. The images of dozens if not hundreds of black African bodies, their clothes torn, climbing makeshift ladders or tying hooks to their shoes to climb over the fence made the perfect pitch to apply for the EU's Emergency Fund. It was all part of what De Genova has termed 'the border spectacle', that is, the circulation of violent, spectacular and grotesque images in the media

Image 3.1: Migrants climbing over the border fence while two Melillans play golf.
Photo: José Palazón. Released under CC BY-SA 4.0.

that produce a vision of the border as a problem, and of the illegal migrant as a threat that needs to be managed, controlled, acted upon. In the case of Melilla, this was so obvious that even the journalists who covered some of these events in 2014 published an open letter in social media to publicly express their discomfort with the way in which their work was being used by the local government to create a social panic around the border.

At some point during this process of 'mediatisation', I started to notice that when I presented my work at conferences and workshops and mentioned Melilla, instead of the blank stare I had grown accustomed to in the first years of my research, I was met with a nod of acknowledgement. More and more people seemed to have heard about Melilla, and, even if they did not remember or could not pronounce the name, they certainly knew of its existence.

In the field, and at around the same time, I started to notice ethnographic traces of Melilla's remoteness. The number of 'strangers' started to grow exponentially. Activists, journalists, foreign scholars, even artists had something to say about Melilla, and would make the

occasional pilgrimage to draw attention to the 'immigration drama'.[14] Things that happened in Melilla became *events* to be witnessed, reported, documented. Melillans became the protagonists of a story written elsewhere, permanently under the gaze of external visitors and critical observers.

The fact that, in a way, I was one of those strangers myself meant that their interactions with me were also mediated by this deeply ambivalent feeling of exposure. I remember with particular vividness one evening in April 2017. One of my friends and regular informants, a well-connected and very influential woman in her mid-fifties (let us call her Anna), had organised a group dinner for me and my guest, a French scholar who was involved in our research project. Anna took us to a fancy restaurant in the city centre, where we were introduced to our dinner companions, a man and a woman, both university professors. After exchanging the usual pleasantries, our hosts began to talk about Melilla. After a brief introduction to the city, the conversation turned, quite quickly, to two of Melillans' favourite topics at the time: the increased, and increasingly disruptive, presence of the MENA (a legal acronym that stands for *menores extranjeros no acompañados*, unaccompanied foreign minors) and the radicalisation of the local Muslim population that has taken place over the past few years. The general message conveyed was that Melilla had become more dangerous, that it was 'not what it used to be'.

This was hardly surprising to me, having grown accustomed to these kinds of conversations. But something was different this time, perhaps due to the presence of my colleague, whose foreignness was greater than mine. The whole evening was punctuated by a series of awkward interactions between our hosts and the restaurant staff, and in particular the waitress who was serving us, a young Muslim girl. It started with small gestures: calling the waitress *garçon*, as one would in a French restaurant, with a quick clap of the hands to draw her attention. And it slowly escalated as they complained about the food and, later, the bill. What was particularly interesting was that these scenes of disagreement were enacted not with anger or irritation but with an air of condescension. At one point, our host caressed the face of the waitress, telling me how 'lovely' she was, speaking about her in the third person as if she were not present. The girl looked manifestly uncomfortable, but kept silent and smiled. Our hosts' behaviour during these brief scenes was that of a colonial elite: a kind of patronising

disdain meant to be seen by others, and particularly by us, foreigners. A power-wielding act that implicated us directly as accomplices and spectators.

On our way out of the restaurant, Anna told me about a friend of hers from Madrid, a judge, who, during a brief visit to Melilla, had joined a guided tour to visit the fence. These tours were organised by the local government in collaboration with the military and national police bodies, and were offered to journalists and scholars visiting the city. During the tour, she found a shoe with a hook tied to it (of the kind migrants use to climb over the fence). She took it home and hung it up on the wall of her living room in Madrid. 'You should see it!' my Melillan friend told me, full of admiration. 'How beautiful!' our dinner companion remarked. A few days later, I was able to book my own 'tour' of the fence, with my own private 'guide' from the Spanish military police.

The creation of this new terrain of 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld 2005), a terrain punctuated by what I call ethnographic traces of remoteness, has to be understood in context of the wider political process that turned Melilla into an object of intervention. The frequent media frenzies formed around Melilla's border spectacles put Melilla on a global stage. Every attempt by migrants to break into Melilla that was reported in the media set off a wave of criticism towards Spanish border policies in general and Melilla's border patrol officers in particular. In response, after every break-in, Melillans turned to social media to share their concerns and defend themselves from outside criticism, invoking their right to protect the city against intrusion, and denouncing (what they perceived to be) the irresponsible attitude of journalists, politicians, and activists who became 'experts' on Melilla after spending barely one week in the city. I lost count of the times I witnessed the same sequence of events: break-in attempt, followed by a critical piece published in a newspaper or on TV, followed by a heated discussion in one the several closed Facebook groups Melillans turn to to voice their concerns.

After a while, I realised that these virtual platforms had become a safe space where people felt free to speak their mind about all sorts of controversial issues, not only in relation to the border, but also cases of corruption, or issues to do with marginal neighbourhoods in the city, petty crime, unemployment, transportation, and so on and so forth. The things people would not say to me (or to each other) face to face

in a cafeteria they voiced openly here. This was all the more surprising looking at the numbers: the largest of these groups numbered over 20,000 members (which, in a city of 80,000, amounts to 25 per cent of the population). Yet, the tone of the conversations was intimate, almost familiar. Reading the comments and posts in these groups, I had the sense of having gone behind the scenes and entered a sort of backstage, a space of social or cultural intimacy away from the public eye (Herzfeld 2005; Shryock 2004). And, indeed, the reason these virtual spaces were 'safe' was that they had been carefully removed from the gaze of external observers. This was achieved through a combination of very restrictive privacy settings and thorough background checks on members who wished to join in order to make sure that they were *genuine* Melillans.

I began to follow these groups closely, searching for further ethnographic clues and patterns. After some time, I noticed that, paradoxically, the more this place seemed to be connected to the outside world, the more people complained about feeling disconnected, isolated, and abandoned. And the more Melilla was 'securitised' and 'militarised', the more people seemed to feel vulnerable and exposed. The ethnographic question for me then became: how and why did this supposed increase in 'connectivity' make people feel more disconnected?

Living in a Caged City

To begin with, some topographical elements are relevant. Melilla can be said to be 'objectively' remote (in the sense of distant) from the rest of Spain. Being physically removed from the hinterland has material consequences. There are the frequent water cuts and electricity outages, for example, due to the fact that the Melilla's electricity and water desalination plants do not have the capacity to meet the demand of a rising local population. There is also the dependency on shipments from Spain for basic food supplies and potable water, for there is not enough land in Melilla for either farming or agriculture, and the water coming from the desalination plant is not drinkable. And there are problems with transportation. Reaching Melilla is not easy. Flights to mainland Spain are very expensive, even with the discount for Melillan residents. And the only alternative is the overnight ferries, which take around eight hours to reach the Spanish coast. When the weather is not optimal, especially if there are strong winds, both the ferries and

the planes are grounded. And, if the bad weather persists, there may not be a way out of Melilla for a few days at a time. These material factors contribute to the perception of Melilla as a 'blank' area in the middle of nowhere, a space-in-between removed from the world.

Indeed, for Melillans, the problem of remoteness manifested itself principally as one of mobility, or lack thereof. One thing that caught my attention from the early days of my fieldwork was how often people complained about the difficulties in getting out of Melilla. First, there was the question of travelling to mainland Spain. At times, the journey seemed to take on Odyssean qualities. The cost, the length of the trip, the lack of destinations, the variable schedule, they all seemed to conspire to keep people in. Any interruption of regular transportation with mainland Spain, however brief, was experienced as a national crisis, reported in local newspapers and discussed at length in cafés and online forums. Then there was the problem of crossing the border in the other direction, out into Morocco. Almost everyone I met told me about the long lines of cars that form in both directions (going in and out of Melilla) due to the large volume of informal trade, and how this meant that driving out of the city could take up to two or three hours. This was perhaps one the most frequent complaints I heard during the time I spent in Melilla. Soon, I realised that these complaints always came coupled with nostalgic references to the past. 'It was different back then,' said the taxi driver on my first day in Melilla (2008), on a ride from the airport to the border crossing point of Beni Enzar:

> Back then crossing the border took only about twenty minutes. We all used to go to Morocco every Sunday for lunch, or to have Moroccan tea and pastries. But now, now it takes at least two or three hours with all the contraband! I used to take customers through the frontier at least four or five times a day, but now, now I won't do it for less than a hundred euros.

The paradox of living in a 'caged city' summed up the encounter with remoteness very well for Melillans, who seemed to experience this relocation as an implosion of their social space. Concerns were thus expressed in terms of a restriction of movement in classical narratives of structural nostalgia that evoked a shrinking social universe. This is hardly surprising if we consider that within a few decades Melilla had gone from being the centre of one social universe (Spanish Morocco)

to becoming the periphery of another (Europe). This relocation was experienced in spatial terms. Thus, while stories about the past talk about expansion, about how easy it was to 'go out' into Morocco – in other words, about Melilla moving outwards – narratives about the present talk about implosion, about the outside creeping in. Indeed, as Ardener suggests, there is a heightened sense of vulnerability to exposure and intrusion. This vulnerability manifests in different ways, but the dominant image is that of a city under siege, always in danger of being invaded. There is an exaggerated sense of vulnerability and exposure, of ease of entry (the following quotes are taken from one of the Facebook groups I mentioned):

> I don't know how this is going to end, but there are hundreds and hundreds of them and we need to stop it.
>
> We need to end the 'calling effect' because they are entering the city with total impunity. This is not racism, just preoccupation for our city, we have Sub-Saharans, Algerians, Moroccans.
>
> Melilla is our home and we have to defend it, like we would defend our own homes if they were attacked. … We are alone in this battle and if we don't do anything nobody will.

To the outside observer, these may seem like the typical anti-immigrant rhetoric that can be heard in any city across Europe. But it is one thing to engage in this kind of discourse living in Paris, Madrid, or London, and quite a different matter if you are in a place like Melilla, surrounded by a six-metre-high fence, hearing the police helicopter patrol the skies every night, and waking up every morning to local news about a break-in attempt (perhaps even coming across a group of fleeing migrants yourself on the road). In these 'eventful' conditions, the 'threat' of migration has a distinctively material quality to it.

It is worth recalling Ardener's point: while they may look inaccessible from the outside, remote areas feel open and vulnerable from the inside. This is a theme that recurs in the most unexpected places. Once, I signed up for one of the guided tour to visit the catacombs of the old citadel. The tour ran on the same day of the week almost every week of the year and was offered, free of charge, by the Department of Tourism. I was interested in hearing how the story of the city was told in a semi-official context such as that one, and I was also curious to see

who had signed up for the tour. I had noticed that there was an ample offer of guided visits and other leisure activities for foreign tourists in the city, but had failed to see a single tourist in over a year.

The visit began at the Museum of Sacred Art, a small museum built in a former Franciscan convent that had direct access to the underground tunnels. I arrived ten minutes early. The two receptionists were chatting lazily by the entrance with a security guard. Inside, a carefully arranged selection of objects collected dust. I walked in and looked around. The permanent collection featured several images of St Francis of Assisi, patron saint of Melilla, and over one hundred pieces of 'Christian art', mostly saintly figures, from the 17th to 21st centuries. A life-size statue of Christ carrying the cross presided over the room. One by one, a group of around ten people walked in. All of them were Spanish: around half were actually from Melilla, and the other half had either lived in Melilla in the past or had relatives living there. The audience was local, then. A few minutes later, a young girl dressed in a blue uniform with the logo of a private security company introduced herself as our guide. Following her lead, we began to walk down the stairs, towards the tunnels.

The entire visit lasted approximately one hour, and I was surprised to find out that the whole purpose of the tour was to 'relive' the infamous siege of 1774, when the troops of the Moroccan sultan besieged Melilla for over three months and Melillans took refuge in the tunnels built under the citadel. The passages were completely refurbished a few years ago, and some of the rooms have now been 'staged' to illustrate the siege: 'this is how they cooked', 'this is where they slept', 'these were their weapons', 'from these windows they could see the Spanish ships approaching', and so forth. The climax arrived at the end of the visit, as we entered the largest chamber. There, we were invited to watch a short film showing a re-enactment of the final days of the siege projected on the wall. We stood in the dark, huddled together, as epic music played in the background and a first-person voice-over recounted the dramatic final moments of the siege, as it had been recorded in the chronicles of the time.

I left the museum in a daze. After spending over an hour walking in single file through the entrails of the citadel and being told about the dangers faced by our 'forebears', the sense of vulnerability and exposure was genuine. I began to walk towards the city centre and passed by the 'Ethnographic Museum' and the 'Archaeological Museum', both

housed in a beautifully refurbished 17th-century armoury. The two receptionists were chatting lazily by the entrance with the security guards. I kept walking and looked around. I noticed how everything in the old city had been replaced with a newer old-looking version of itself: the cobblestones on the road, the military watchtowers, the central square, the walls, even the old canons fired in the 19th century to determine the new limits of the city are replicas. Everything looked perfect and slightly unreal, like a life-sized model of itself.

I found myself wondering how many millions of euros were spent on this as I stopped at one of the viewpoints to take in the view of the entire city. I glanced across the horizon lost in my thoughts, until my eyes stopped at a group of around 20 young boys standing around in a parking lot some 20 metres below from where I was. I had seen them many times before. They were the MENA, Moroccan street children from Fes, Casablanca, and other big cities in Morocco who come to Melilla in the hopes that they may be able to sneak into one of the ships headed towards mainland Spain. During the day, they walked aimlessly around the city, begging for food from passers-by or rummaging in rubbish bins. In the evenings, they sought shelter by the cliffs, where they could hide from the rain and the police. Although some are as young as seven or eight, horror stories about them circulate widely in social media (they are violent, they are thieves, they are drug addicts, they do not want help, and so on), and the moral panic was so strong back then that there had been suggestions of creating vigilante groups to 'keep them at bay'.

Standing on that viewpoint, as I replayed in my head the stories I had just heard about the siege, I realised that the reason people were so terrified of these children was that they represented a visual 'glitch' in a carefully manufactured landscape. The 'spectacular' drama of African migrants climbing over the fence was but the narrowing tip of the iceberg. In the eyes of Melillans, the greatest dangers were less 'spectacular' and much more ordinary: street children roaming the streets of the city and begging for food, old men collecting plastic water carafes to sell in Morocco for five cents apiece, smugglers pushing the large, heavy bundles of clothes, heaps of rubble, discarded plastic wraps and cardboard boxes tossed on the pavement. To be Melillan was to be haunted by the materiality of those daily 'intrusions'.

Who Then Are We, *Really*?

In this chapter, I have tried to show how Melilla came into being as a particular kind of place through its connections to and disconnections from other locations. Instead of focusing on the question of identity and belonging (as is common in the anthropological literature of border areas), I focused on the idea of Melilla as a *location*. This led me to examine Melilla in relation to Edwin Ardener's notion of 'remote areas'. Ardener's argument is that remote areas constitute a distinct and identifiable type of place. These are places that have been marked as *singularities* by dominant zones, and it is the nature of this asymmetrical relation that defines them as remote. The problem of identity is experienced with particular force in these places, which appear isolated and unreachable from the outside, but feel vulnerable and exposed from the inside. Melilla, I have argued, is one such place. For all the performative work that goes into turning Melilla into a European space, the perception from the inside is that Africa is always lurking in the shadows, ready to absorb the city. To dismiss these concerns as mere 'racism' would be to miss the point. Something is known here about the material and symbolic conditions of Melilla's existence that cannot be explicitly articulated. That 'something' concerns precisely the relationship between Melilla and other locations elsewhere, across the northern shore of the Mediterranean.

By concentrating on the question of *where* Melilla is – that is, on how Melilla is positioned or 'located' in the Mediterranean region and how it is connected to and disconnected from other locations *elsewhere* – I hope to have made visible the multiplicity of 'trajectories' (Massey 2005), both synchronic and diachronic, that have come together to constitute Melilla as a particular kind of place. Like Lampedusa, Melilla embodies both a centre and a margin (see Elbek, Chapter 2 in this volume). It was thrust into the international limelight in the early days of the migration crisis, and quickly became a symbol for the tragedy of irregular migration, with images of black African bodies jumping over the border fence making headlines around the world. This relocation put Melilla at the centre of the EU's political agenda, but was locally experienced with a sense of increased detachment and isolation. The more connected Melilla was to Europe, the more remote it appeared to those living inside. This general experience of marginality, of being, as it were, on the outside looking in, evokes a larger constellation of rela-

tions, connections and separations across the Mediterranean region and beyond.

It is clear that to be 'somewhere in particular' in the Mediterranean is to be part of a wider definitional space shaped by the experience of colonialism and historically divided between Europe and Europe's southern 'neighbours'. North Africa occupies a special place in this cartographic landscape, being symbolically severed from the rest of Africa and connected – but only *selectively* – to Europe. Far from creating a homogenous political landscape, the 'rebordering' of the Mediterranean (Suárez Navas 2004) that began with the creation of the Schengen Area in the 1980s continues to metamorphose through the signing of new partnerships, neighbourhood policies, and bilateral agreements that outsource EU border control to third countries and generates zones of 'awkward engagement' (Tsing 2005) like Ceuta and Melilla.

Does this mean that we can consider the southern Mediterranean a vast, undifferentiated 'remote area'? Probably not. As Del Sarto (2010) has shown, the extension of governance patterns and functional regimes from the EU to its periphery is highly differentiated and the resulting political landscape is far from homogenous. Nonetheless, as more and more countries are recruited to defend and protect a privileged political, economic, and conceptual space (Europe) from which they themselves have historically been excluded (Soto Bermant 2017), we may wonder how these processes affect the zones of intimacy that flourish in the backstage of public culture.

Take the refugee crisis of 2015, for example, tellingly referred to in the media as the *European* migrant crisis. Turkey, Greece, Italy, Malta, and, to a lesser degree, Spain (but, significantly, not France) came under the spotlight for refusing to harbour refugees fleeing from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The intense media coverage of the crisis, with dramatic images of sinking boats, overcrowded camps, and detention centres, contrasted with the relative silence around the 'other' crisis happening in the war-torn countries where migrants came from, and created a moral narrative of guilt that placed the Mediterranean and its people (particularly those in 'remote' areas like Lampedusa, Lesvos, or, indeed, Ceuta and Melilla) under the permanent gaze of an audience, an 'external observer whose opinion is imagined, *and imagined to matter*' (Herzfeld 2005, 11, emphasis in original). When Herzfeld wrote those words, he was describing a wider phenomenon related to the creation of a new kind of social terrain, a shadow zone produced by the

global stage of identity politics. But perhaps it is not a coincidence that he was writing about Greece. Reflecting on the Gaels and the Bretons, Ardener (1987) notes that it is an important feature of remote social spaces that the question of identity seems to impose itself, so that people living there keep on asking 'who then are we, *really*?' – as if 'they were indeed privileged enough to require to know something that no one can ever know' (526).

Notes

1 This chapter is based on material collected prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. In March 2020, the land border between Spain and Morocco located in Melilla was shut down completely, and remained closed until May of 2022.

2 My connection to the region dates back to my doctoral fieldwork, which I carried out in 2008 and 2009. I have been back to Melilla and Nador several times since, in 2013, 2017, and 2018.

3 For all its uniqueness, it is surprising how little attention Melilla has received from anthropologists working in the region. With the exception of H. Driessen's (1992) monograph, written in the early 1990s, the Spanish enclave has largely gone unnoticed. The neighbouring Moroccan province of Nador, by contrast, is an established fieldsite amongst Moroccan specialists. From David M. Hart's (1976) classical work on the Aith Waryaghar to David McMurray's (2001) more recent monograph on smuggling and migration, this classically 'remote', Berber-speaking region of Morocco was at the centre of heated debates on tribal structures and segmentary lineage in the 1980s and has featured frequently in anthropological debates on the relationship between 'tribes' and 'the state' in North Africa (see, for example, Seddon 1981 and Munson 1989). It was only very recently, when the rebordering of the EU turned it into one of the key migration hotspots in Africa, that Melilla attracted the interest of anthropologists (see, for example, Andersson 2014).

4 This is in many ways similar to Simmel's (1950) arguments on the unity of nearness and remoteness in the phenomenon of the stranger, which he saw as involving both distance at close range, and closeness at a distance.

5 This section is based on a multiplicity of primary and secondary historical sources, the majority written in Spanish. The history of Melilla is remarkably well documented, partly thanks to the painstaking work of local historians, both professional and amateur. The government of the city has financed the publication of many of these works, both directly, and indirectly through the work of the Asociacion de Estudios Melillenses (Society of Melillense Studies), which runs the publication of local history journal *Trapana* since 1987. I am grateful to Vicente Moga, director of the Society, for his help and guidance in looking through the historical and cartographical archives of the city during my research.

6 See Pike (1983, chapter 7) for a detailed history of the Spanish North African presidios in English. For Spanish sources, see Calderón Vázquez, F. J. (2008), Domínguez Llosá, S. and Rivas Ahuir, M. A. (1989).
7 Alongside trade, though, the 19th century was characterised by raiding and occasionally violent conflicts across the border, concerning especially smuggled goods. For a detailed account of some of these conflicts, and how they were mediated through the legal system, see Pennell 2002.
8 See Martín Corrales, E. (1999) for a historical account of the Spanish protectorate of Morocco, and Melilla's role in it.
9 For a full account of Spain's colonial venture in Morocco during the first half of the 20th century, see Balfour 2002.
10 Census data provided by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (National statistics institute), available at https://www.ine.es.
11 For a good, though somewhat outdated, analysis of Melilla's informal economy, see Gómez Rodilla 2007.
12 Regarding the Schengen Area, Ceuta and Melilla were included in the 1991 Protocol of Accession of Spain to the Schengen Agreement as exceptions, where visa requirements could be waived on condition of imposing strict controls at the port and airport of the city to avoid migrants reaching the European continent. So, in practical terms, the Schengen Area begins at the port and airport of the North African enclaves. See Castan Pinos (2008) for more details.
13 For a detailed description of Melilla's peculiar tax regime and its history, see López-Guzmán and González Fernández 2009.
14 In 2015, for example, the Spanish circus company Kanbahiota put on a clown performance by the border fence (https://elpais.com/politica/2015/04/13/actualidad/1428929204_209704.html), and a year earlier, in 2014, actress Jil Love posed next to the fence in a white nightgown and covered in fake blood for a photoshoot to 'raise awareness' (https://elfarodemelilla.es/la-actriz-jil-love-exige-que-se-retire-la-concertina-de-la-valla-de-melilla).

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