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Drawing Ambivalence

Moroccan Youth on the Move and the Experience of Melilla

Elisa Floristán Millán

Abstract: This article reflects on the significance of Melilla, a Spanish enclave and southern border of the European Union (EU), in the migratory experience of the Moroccan youth on the move to Europe who call themselves *harraga*. The methodology combines a multisited ethnographic approach (Marcus 2001), from Casablanca to Paris, with a multimodal one (Westmoreland 2022), collecting information through in-depth interviews, life stories, participant observations and a drawing workshop. Although the institutional violence in the governance of the mobility of this youth makes Melilla resemble a city-prison (Khosravi 2021), in my reflections I argue that this border has an ambivalent impact on the whole migratory experience of the *harraga* youth. On the one hand, frustration, everyday violence, and racism appear; on the other, friendship, autonomy and networking.

Keywords: autonomy, European Union (EU), *harraga*, Melilla, migration, Morocco, racism

August 2021 in Melilla. Sun, oppressive heat and high humidity. The clock has just struck midday. The streets are empty and most of the shops are closed, as August is the official summer holiday month in Spain. I decide to stroll through the Rastro. The Rastro is a neighbourhood near the city centre where young Moroccans who have rejected the Child Protection System or have been determined to be above the age of majority try to make a living. Some sell second-hand clothes; others sell items they have found in the rubbish. There are also some who carry shopping bags for the elderly in exchange for a few coins. Others are simply begging.

I am very tired because my fieldwork is not progressing. The boys and girls know and trust me, but they have other concerns than arranging an interview to tell me their life story. In the mornings, they are very tired because they have spent all night trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea clandestinely as stowaways on the boats that cross to the mainland, a practice they call 'risky'. In the evenings, on the other hand, they are too agitated to interview. As they prepare for 'risky', many consume drugs such as amphetamines to be able to run faster and without fear. In this state, it is impossible for them to sit and talk to me.

After strolling through the Rastro and saying hello to some young people, I enter a bazaar, where I buy some paper and coloured pencils. I think that maybe there are some young *harraga* resting on the beach who would like to do some drawing. Before I reach the beach, I run into Mustapha, Marwan, Omar and Youssef.

Mustapha is 19 years old; he arrived in Melilla from the city of Fez and swam across the border. He declared himself an adult without any interest in being categorised as an unaccompanied foreign minor (UFM). His objective was to move clandestinely to a village in France, where his family lives. He speaks very little Spanish and has never been to school, and he can neither read nor write.

Marwan is 24 years old. He was a UFM and was sheltered in a centre for child protection in Barcelona. He speaks Spanish very well and is also fluent in En-

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glish. He left the centre without being regularised due to a lack of interest on the part of the administration and some irregularities. Although he became rooted in Catalan society and even had a girlfriend for several years, he was deported to Morocco. He is now trying to cross the border again but this time as an adult.

Omar, 17 years old, is from a suburb of Casablanca. The national police arrested him at sea while he was swimming to Melilla. He was taken to the closest reception centre for minors, Fuerte La Purisima. Despite being considered a minor and, therefore, categorised as a UFM, he decided to reject the Child Protection System, due to the institutional mistreatment he suffered within it, and to try to cross clandestinely to mainland Spain. He has no clear destination and is not overly interested in defining his itinerary.

Finally, there is Youssef. He is originally from an Amazigh village near Melilla. Although he is a minor, he never wanted to stay in the reception centre. Although he wants to reach the mainland, when life in the streets gets tough, he swims back to visit his mother.

They are arguing. It turns out that they almost managed to sneak on to the boat yesterday, but one of them was late and then the port guard stopped them. Mid-argument, they see me coming and ask what I am doing with so much blank paper. They agree that drawing is a good way to kill time until lunch.

In this article I reflect on the presentation of Melilla[1] by the migratory Moroccan youth on the move to Europe, self-described as *harraga*. Using a multimodal (Westmoreland 2022) and multisited (Marcus 2001) ethnography, I want to argue that the experience of Melilla is ambivalent as it is part of a continuum of structural violence that is intensified by the spectacle of the border (Genova 2018), which has a double nature: negative and creative (Sur 2021). The negative and oppressive nature of the borders makes Melilla the first place on the migratory journey where the youth feel trapped and segregated, and they experience their subalternity due to racial hierarchies and humiliation. Meanwhile, the oppressive nature of the borders leads to a more creative aspect, whereby solidarity, autonomy and intragroup help networks arise. Although the structural violence of the city is a continuous struggle, Melilla is also a nurturing place where they experience resistance.

Multimodal Ethnography to Represent the Multidimensionality of *Harraga* Experiences

The first time I carried out fieldwork in the autonomous city of Melilla – a Spanish colonial enclave in North Africa bordering the EU – I found Moroccan children and adolescents sleeping in the streets and trying to escape[2] from the city by crossing the Mediterranean Sea as stowaways on boats.

After working extensively with these *harraga* in the city and observing that, not without difficulty, many of them did eventually manage to travel to Europe, I felt that if the boys and girls I worked with moved across borders, my research should follow them, thus becoming a multisited ethnography (Marcus 2001). I decided to follow their itineraries between Morocco, Spain and France: from Casablanca to Paris.

This article and the methodology that underpins it strive to break with research that focuses exclusively on the border space, as it argues that experiences are understood and configured in the time and space of the migratory itinerary. Just as I intend to distance myself from the spectacle of the border (Genova 2018), I distance myself from the methodological nationalism (Heyman 2017) that derives from it too. Moroccan youth on the move to Europe are much more than Moroccans, and much more than migrants. Their ways of being and existing in the world are conditioned by the legal frameworks regulating migration to Europe, but also by a set of values, ideas and practices that they develop collectively during the migratory journey. Thus, neither Morocco, nor Melilla, nor any other locality or country can be considered a 'natural container' for these young people.

It was thanks to doing fieldwork in various localities that I was able to grasp the centrality of creativity in everyday life in Melilla, and not only the negative and oppressive experiences (Sur 2021). In my research methodology, I adopted a transnational and multisited approach, which required the deconstruction of classical anthropological techniques that can be invasive and unhelpful for the participants. Initially, I conducted in-depth interviews and life histories but found that these methods were overused by professionals such as police, social workers and lawyers, and that they can often lead to a power dynamic that discourages youth from sharing their stories. Additionally, these stories can often involve difficult and traumatic experiences that are difficult to articulate in words, turning the interviews into interrogations rather than exchanges of information.

As an alternative, I turned to more participatory and open methods that involve the construction of collective knowledge. Specifically, I used multimodality, a methodology that recognises the multidimensional nature of social practices and experiences and uses a range of sensory methods, such as drawing, to generate a more comprehensive and diverse understanding of migratory experiences (Westmoreland 2022; Heidbrink 2021). Drawing workshops allowed me to reach a group of young boys who were otherwise difficult to engage with due to their limited Spanish, lack of formal education, and drug abuse.

By using drawings, I was able to tap into their visual and highly evocative ways of expression, opening a world of shared meanings and knowledge. This approach places the subjects of the research at the centre and repositions them as the true protagonists of the study.

Escaping from Melilla: Between Forced Immobility and 'Risky'

> No doubt Mustapha liked the workshop because he kept asking me for blank sheets of paper to draw on. In his last drawing, he paints the Melilla ferry. On it, people *with papers*. He points them out to me with an angry look on his face. Then he shows me the three ways of doing 'risky': climbing to the ferry with ropes, walking up a ladder or hiding under a lorry. The three ways of doing 'risky' are death – he says *Death, death and death*. (Fragments of the drawing workshop, Melilla, August 2021)

Fig.1 Anonymous. A ferry in Melilla, Drawing workshop, Melilla, August 2021. Used with permission.

This picture depicts Mustapha's harrowing attempt to board a ferry from Melilla to mainland Spain as part of his 'risky' journey. It highlights the inequality in access to transborder mobility, with citizens holding papers able to travel on the ferry while those without papers, like Mustapha and his companions, attempt to access it clandestinely, risking their lives. The picture also reveals the structural oppression and social hierarchies faced by non-citizens in Melilla, with those holding documents occupying the top position on the ferry, while the undocumented – and a straw dog – are relegated to the bottom on the shore.

Like the other subjects of this article, Mustapha is a young man who migrates to Europe without an adult companion. The political, economic and social crisis in Morocco, which has severely impacted its dependency care system, has led many young people to seek a better future abroad instead of becoming adults in their own country (Jiménez Álvarez 2011). These young people contest this difficult situation by migrating to Europe clandestinely, with many crossing the land border between Nador (Beni Ensar) and Melilla, particularly those born in eastern Morocco and the Rif region.

Once in Melilla, despite their being considered possible minors under the restrictive EU migration policies and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Spanish Organic Law on Foreigners (4/2000) categorises these adolescents as economic migrants. This has created a contradictory legal situation in which they are viewed as both subjects of protection and objects of expulsion (Empez Vidal 2014; Hernández 2014; Mendoza 2017; Suárez Navaz 2004).

Furthermore, being underage does not always provide a protective framework for these young people as they do not fit into the hegemonic and colonial representations of childhood, which perceive childhood as a blank slate for future adult development (Liebel 2016). The Child Protection System, which is geared towards producing future workers for European capitalist economies, can shift from viewing these young people as children at risk to viewing them as dangerous (Candelas 2016), making them effectively unprotectable.

In this sense, I see these young migrants as trapped between two opposing legislative frameworks that, although seemingly antagonistic, function as a double form of oppression. They are viewed as undesired and unprotectable children, following in the wake of Michel Agier's (2008) concept of undesirability, and as economic migrants who are not entitled to stay in Europe. The double oppression functions through the instrumentalisation of the Child Protection System and its protocols to manage and control the mobility of these young people.

In Melilla their containment is also carried out through institutional mistreatment. This mistreat-

ment includes systematic delays in the delivery of residence permits and refusals of legal guardianship. In other words, while the boys and girls receive boarding and lodging in these centres, they do not receive guardianship, resulting in no effective institutional protection and no exercisable rights. In this way, Melilla has become a security belt whose objective is to control the passage from Africa to Europe (Floristán Millán 2022).

Navigating Oppression and Racism: *Harraga*'s Strategies for Movement

The immobilisation of young *harraga* in Melilla is navigated by them in different ways. On the one hand, there are many boys and especially girls who decide to trust that with good behaviour and by adapting to the ideals of hegemonic childhood, they will be able to obtain regularisation and escape from Melilla. On the other hand, many young people reject the Child Protection System and engage in autonomous street practices aimed at clandestine crossing, as can be seen in Mustapha's drawing.

These street practices are part of everyday life in the city and are carried out in tension with institutions. In their aim to keep moving, the youth decide to live on the margins between the street and the child protection centres, or directly on the street. They build self-managed, substandard dwellings, called *chabolas*, in which they live in groups of affinity and kinship, in order to sustain their lives in a situation of social exclusion and lack of protection. They carry out actions in a grey area between legality and illegality.

However, the real aim of all these practices of sustaining life outside institutions is to escape from Melilla and overcome the forced immobility that they are subjected to. To this end, the action that structures the daily life of these young people is 'risky'. That is what Mustapha tried to show in his drawing. 'Risky' is a practice of clandestine migration that involves hiding in the ferry that crosses the Mediterranean Sea. Although it is a practice that occurs almost daily and that especially boys attempt repeatedly, it can cause severe injuries or even death. 'Risky' is a fundamental practice that has received a great deal of attention in political, mediatic and academic discourse due to the intensity of the power relationships that occur at the border.

Nevertheless, the city of Melilla is not a significant experience exclusively because of the danger of the clandestine crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. Both during 'risky' and other practices, the daily lives of the protagonists in this article are marked by racism. For many, Morocco is the first place on their migratory itinerary that is not their country of origin, and they experience racial hierarchies in most cases for the first time. While they describe their situation in Morocco as *hogra* (humiliation in Arabic), it is not until they leave their neighbourhood, village or 'duar' that they realise how they are viewed by the EU and judged on racial criteria. This division becomes clear to young people like Marwan, who divides his blank sheet of paper in two to represent two constraining realities.

> Marwan divides a page into two asymmetrical parts. The smaller part represents his world and that of other young people like him in Melilla. He draws a sad, black sun, a boy's face marked by a scar, a policeman beating him, hands in handcuffs and a poisonous snake. On the other side, a yellow shining sun and different families shaking hands. Marwan explains that these are the racist *melillitas* who look down on them. He also draws flowers, palm trees and a swing, but includes a donkey as a symbol of the ignorance and hypocrisy of those who are unaware of their reality. Lastly, he draws a brain with one part in black, representing Moroccan children whom people consider rotten, and another part in red, representing those who live in Melilla with papers. (Fragments of a drawing workshop, Melilla, August 2021)

Fig 2. Anonymous. My life in Melilla, Drawing workshop, Melilla, August 2021. Used with permission.

Marwan gives great attention to the depiction of the citizens of Melilla who look down on him and his peers. The city's clientelist character, heavy State Security Forces presence and the existence of a fence around the city create a hostile environment for them. This treatment can be traced back to the legal category of UFMs, which oppresses young *harraga* as racialised foreigners. Institutional spaces like the National Police and child protection centres imprint

racism on them. The UFM label goes beyond legal status, and is often associated with criminality, marginalisation and poverty. These experiences of racism mark the young people, who understand that the *hogra* they faced at home can also have racially motivated dimensions in their migratory journey.

Gendered Immobility

Yasmin's situation is further complicated by the gender-based discrimination she faces. As a woman, she faces greater obstacles and risks when trying to occupy public spaces covertly. Despite enduring mistreatment from child protection centres and holding on to hope for regularisation, Yasmin is becoming increasingly frustrated with the slow progress.

> Two years here and I feel trapped, I swear I can't stand it any more, I've tried everything. With Moroccan nationality, things are going very slowly. The next option is to get married, but who am I going to marry? Besides, the paperwork is very slow, Elisa, in three years I haven't even got a visa. Really, Elisa, my only option is doing 'risky'. I know it's very dangerous, but what could I do if I don't have anything else? I can hold out for another year, but not much longer, I swear. (Fragments from field diary, Melilla, August 2021)

These feelings of frustration and desperation are often experienced alone, without the support of adults apart from the activists and volunteers from associations that work with young people in street situations. The regime of immobility to which these young people are subjected can lead to a sense of ruin or being in ruin, characterised by seeking conflict (*mushkila*) with peers, volunteers and adult professionals in associations, as well as self-harm or drug abuse.

> I ask where Ahmed is and the rest of his companions tell me they don't know, 'he's unbearable. He's in ruin, he's lost his passport and he says it's our fault that we stole it. He's looking for a fight all day long'. (Fragments from field diary, Melilla, August 2021)

The journey of Moroccan youth on the move to Europe is marked by racialised border violence and institutional mistreatment, resulting in frustration and humiliation.

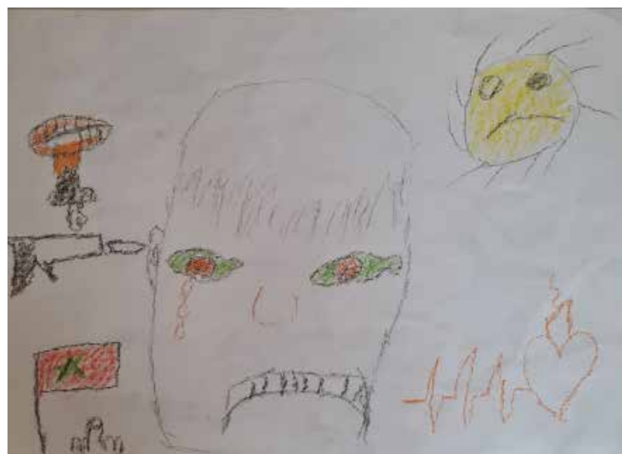

Fig 3. Anonymous. Self-portrait, Drawing workshop, Melilla, August 2021. Used with permission.

> Ahmed has drawn his face and, above all, his green eyes, the most characteristic thing about him. Tears of blood come out of the red pupils. The sad mouth. The sad sun. At one end he has drawn his heart, with the heartbeat with sudden changes and fire. At the side of his head, a gun is pointed at him. Above the gun, a key. 'This key is the one that will stop me from shooting myself. I must find the key that will fix my head.' (Fragments from the drawing workshop, Melilla, August 2021)

These experiences not only leave painful memories but also continue to impact the young people's situation even after they reach the mainland. The amplified violence in Melilla is not an isolated incident but rather part of a structural continuum that persists throughout the entire migratory journey.

After Melilla: Modernity, Mobility and Desires

All the young people interviewed for this article have their own dreams and goals, whether they are short-term, medium-term or long-term, that they hope to achieve once they leave Melilla. Because Melilla is, or rather should be, a short stay, a stop along the way, one cannot understand the experience of daily life in the city without all those dreams, which involve travelling, moving and getting to know Europe. In a way, it is the desire for modernity and access to a global youth culture that shapes their dreams (Rodríguez García de Cortázar and Gimeno Monterde 2018).

Some authors suggest that these young people have unrealistic expectations that are based on distorted imaginaries (Ortega Torres and Gutiérrez Sánchez 2018). However, I do not agree with this as-

sessment. Based on my research, I believe that these young people have realistic objectives that reflect their personal interests and desires. Mistaking their aspirations for distorted imaginaries is a result of what Didier Fassin (2015) terms the moral economy of the border and the assumptions about what migrants should desire. As Zacarías explains, this is what he refers to as 'zigzagging'.

> I don't know if after Melilla I'll be in a youth centre. First, I want to zigzag, you know, move around, see the world [laughs]. Then when I find a place where I want to be, I'll be in a centre. (Fragments from field diary, 2022)

The concept of zigzagging challenges the victimising portrayal of young migrants by the humanitarian sector, which tends to frame mobility as solely driven by negative factors such as impoverishment, political persecution and discrimination. In contrast, for these young people, migration holds a positive aspect that involves experiencing new realities, accessing new job opportunities and exploring different places. Omar compares his life in Melilla to that of a growing plant, with the city acting as water that will help him bloom and eventually reach his dream destination – Tlasa is a square in Frankfurt where he hopes to join friends from his neighbourhood in Casablanca. Although the border is oppressive, it is also a space of hope and possibilities (Sur 2021).

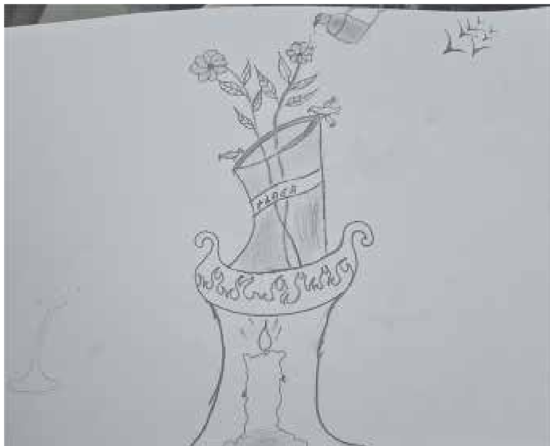

Fig 4. Anonymous. Life as a growing plant, Drawing workshop, Melilla, August 2021. Used with permission.

Networks of Solidarity and Tactical Resistance

The uncertain and intense time spent in Melilla highlights the importance of what will happen afterwards – all the dreams that will be fulfilled and the difficulties that will have to be faced. Therefore, the Melilla experience becomes a networking opportunity, a space for accelerating socialisation, where support, care and information networks are formed, which will be crucial later.

This experience is facilitated by the rejection of the Child Protection System. While I do not consider the reality of these young *harraga* on the streets of Melilla desirable, I do believe that their lack of protection leads to the construction of intense relationships of solidarity, friendship and fraternity that subsequently cross borders and are maintained throughout the migratory journey. The struggle for survival and flight from the city facilitates the creation of intense networks that are small forms of tactical resistance emerging from the lack of protection and social exclusion.

The everyday practices of street life, marked by a strong intra-group solidarity, have been debated academically along the axis between marginalisation, the naturalisation of domination, and resistance. I consider them tactics and small forms of resistance (Scott 2003) because young people themselves have come to express them in this way. Their self-organisation and the objectives they achieve through it are a source of pride. As one young man told me when we talked about his passage through Melilla a year later, with his administrative situation regularised and visiting his family in Morocco: 'I would be more ashamed to go to an association than to live in a *chabola*' (fragment from field diary, Nador, June 2022). Although some practices of Moroccan youth in Melilla can be seen as small acts of resistance, however, not all of them are intentionally resistant. The independence from adult authorities that allows for the formation of intra-group solidarity and care networks is also a result of the lack of protection for these youth. The unreliability of the minority as a resource, institutional mistreatment, the harshness of street life and ultimately the difficulties of escaping from Melilla, legally or illegally, frustrate young people.

It is important to acknowledge that the practices of these young people are situated within a complex interplay of agency and context. Categorising all their actions as practices of resistance is overly simplistic and ignores the broader context of oppression (Campbell and Heyman 2006), so eloquently described in the images produced by my interlocutors. Instead, I take a nuanced approach that recognises the agency, negotiation skills and administrative awareness of these young people, while also

acknowledging the significant impact of their decisions on their trajectories.

Conclusions

This article has reflected on the meaning of the experience of Melilla as the southern border of the EU in the overall migratory itinerary of Moroccan youth on the move. Discretionary governmentality towards these young people produces a forced immobility in this border enclave. Although these young people are categorised as UFMs and therefore subject to protection, they end up facing a double oppression as they do not fit into the hegemonic, canonical idea of childhood and because they are considered economic migrants.

In this double oppression, the Child Protection System in Melilla ends up being instrumentalised for the purpose of controlling the mobility of these young people. Child protection centres become centres of containment and institutional mistreatment that permeate the lives of these boys and girls within them. Therefore, some children, especially boys, decide to reject child protection and try to overcome forced immobility by crossing the Mediterranean Sea clandestinely.

Based on a multisited ethnography (Marcus 2001) between Morocco, Spain and France and using a multimodal approach (Westmoreland 2022) with novel techniques such as collaborative drawing workshops, I have explored the meaning of the experience of Melilla for young *harraga*. I have been able to see the significant ambivalence of Melilla in the total migratory itinerary of these young people.

On the one hand, on the oppressive side of the border (Sur 2021), young boys and girls must engage in the dangerous practice of clandestinely crossing the Mediterranean Sea due to the institutional mistreatment inside the minors' protection centres. Living on the street, 'risky' and sleeping in a *chabola* are some of these practices. In this sense, Melilla is the first place in the migratory journey where they feel segregation and subalternity because of racial hierarchies. On the other hand, on the creative side of the border (ibid.), while daily life in Melilla and the street practices they carry out as a survival tactic are hard, they make possible independent organisation, based on group solidarity and the construction of support, care and information networks. As violence becomes more explicit, young people establish stronger dynamics of solidarity and mutual support, making their passage through the city an ambivalent experience, between structural and everyday violence and autonomy and independence.

Although my first fieldwork experiences in Melilla were very harsh and I considered the social exclusion and lack of protection that young Moroccans on the move faced to be typical of the intensity of the spectacle of the border (Genova 2018), it was not until I completed the multisited fieldwork that I was able to understand that the violence in this border enclave was also accompanied by an acceleration of socialisation and a greater intensity of solidarity and mutual support. Consequently, I consider it to be an ambivalent experience, the result of the continuum of structural violence that runs through the entire migratory itinerary.

Dr. Elisa Floristán Millán is a social and cultural anthropologist. Her thesis is a multisited ethnography that follows the migratory process of Moroccan unaccompanied youth, self-identifying as *harraga*, from Casablanca to Paris. Email: elisa.floristan@uam.es; ORCID: 0000-0003-4661-4879

Notes

1. The reflections in this article arise from fieldwork carried out during 2021, prior to the approval of the New Regulation on Foreigners (Royal Decree 220/2022) and following the ruling passed by the Supreme Court in July 2020 in favour of freedom of movement through Spanish territory for asylum seekers in Ceuta and Melilla.
2. I use the verbs 'flee' and 'escape' because I consider that Moroccan youth on the move to Europe find themselves in forced immobility in Melilla. During my fieldwork, there were more than a few occasions when their situation in the city was compared to that of a prison (Khosravi 2021).

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