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Finding Ways to Spain: migration experiences in the navigation of Beni Ensar-Melilla border

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Abstract: Existing literature has examined transnational migration in the border zone of Beni Ensar (Morocco) and Melilla (Spain) from various perspectives. However, there is relatively little exploration of the experience of crossing this border. This article aims to address this gap by utilizing qualitative research conducted with migrants assisted by the Spanish Red Cross. The work employs a theoretical framework of migration trajectories and focuses on three types of border crossing experiences: by land, by sea, and as unaccompanied minors. The objective is to comprehend how participants describe the Beni Ensar-Melilla border area, the strategies they employ to navigate the border, and the significance of crossing it for them. I argue that, firstly, in order to navigate this challenging borderland, participants needed to cooperate with other migrants and demonstrate persistence. Additionally, unaccompanied minors relied on specific laws and reception conditions. Secondly, the act of migrating is linked to ideal plans in Europe that, if realized, have the potential to enhance the lives of participants and their families.

Keywords: migration trajectories; navigation; Beni Ensar-Melilla borderzone.

Encontrando Caminhos para a Espanha: experiências migratórias na navegação da fronteira Beni Ensar-Melilla

Resumo: A literatura tem examinado as migrações transnacionais na zona de fronteira entre Beni Ensar (Marrocos) e Melilla (Espanha) a partir de diversas perspectivas. Entretanto, a experiência de atravessar essa fronteira permanece relativamente pouco explorada. A partir de uma pesquisa qualitativa realizada com migrantes assistidos pela Cruz Vermelha Espanhola, este artigo tem como objetivo preencher essa lacuna. O trabalho emprega o conceito de trajetórias migratórias e concentra-se em três tipos de experiências de travessia da fronteira: por terra, por mar, e como menores desacompanhados. O objetivo é compreender como os participantes descrevem a área de fronteira entre Beni Ensar e Melilla, as estratégias que empregam para atravessar a fronteira, e o significado dessa travessia para eles. Primeiramente argumento que, para navegar pelo desafiador território fronteiriço, os participantes precisaram cooperar com outros migrantes, assim como demonstrar persistência. Além disso, os menores desacompanhados contaram com leis e condições específicas de recepção. Em segundo lugar, defendo que o significado de migrar para os participantes está relacionado a planos de vida ideais na Europa que, se concretizados, têm o potencial de melhorar as vidas dos entrevistados e as de suas famílias.

Palavras-chave: Trajetórias migratórias; navegação; zona fronteiriça Beni Ensar-Melilla.

Encontrando Caminos hacia España: experiencias migratorias en la navegación de la frontera de Beni Ensar-Melilla

Resumen: La literatura ha abordado las migraciones transnacionales en la zona fronteriza entre Beni Ensar y Melilla desde diversas perspectivas. Sin embargo, la experiencia de cruzar esta frontera sigue siendo relativamente poco explorada. A través de una investigación cualitativa realizada con migrantes asistidos por la Cruz Roja Española, este artículo tiene como objetivo abordar esta brecha. El artículo emplea el concepto de trayectorias migratorias y se centra en tres tipos de experiencias de cruzar la frontera: por tierra, por mar y como menores no acompañados. El objetivo es comprender cómo los participantes describen el área fronteriza entre Beni Ensar y Melilla, las estrategias que utilizan para cruzar la frontera y el significado de dicho cruce para ellos. Argumento que, en primer lugar, para navegar la desafiante zona fronteriza, los participantes necesitaron cooperar con otros migrantes, además de demostrar persistencia. Asimismo, los menores no acompañados contaron con leyes y condiciones específicas de recepción. En segundo lugar, sostengo que el significado de migrar para los participantes está relacionado con planes de vida ideales en Europa que, de concretarse, tienen el potencial de mejorar las vidas de los entrevistados y las de sus familias.

Palabras clave: Trayectorias migratórias; navegación; zona fronteriza Beni Ensar-Melilla.

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INTRODUCTION: "I COULD NOT COME BY PLANE"

"I could not come by plane". This is how Souleimane[1], a 32-year-old Malian, summarized why he had to undertake a long, dangerous, and unauthorized journey from Mali to Spain, utilizing various means of transportation to pass through Niger, Algeria, and Morocco before reaching the Iberic country. His statement encompasses key points concerning the situation faced by him and the participants of this article: the available mobility options to Europe for individuals like Souleimane, and the reasons that compelled him and thousands of migrants, every year, to seek alternative routes to reach Spain.

The individuals studied in this context are non-white people and come from relatively poor backgrounds, originating from former sub-Saharan and Maghreb African colonies in a post-colonial world. They encounter numerous obstacles in their aspirations to build a life in Europe. Stringent mobility regimes (SCHAPENDONK ET AL., 2020) exist in several forms, limiting their ability to migrate from different parts of the African continent to Europe. The configuration of world's topography is not solely determined by its natural physicality; social--spatial factors play an important role in shaping and influencing patterns of mobility (AMIT; KNOWLES, 2017). It is evident that the world is structured in a way that aims to prevent people with the characteristic of those examined here from getting to Europe.

Therefore, the migration trajectories (SCHAPENDONK ET AL., 2020) of the participants from their places of origin to Spain involved a combination of regular and irregular practices, allowing them to advance through the territory towards their intended destination. Since direct, regular migration was not feasible, the interviewees described various strategies they employed to navigate through a world that is heavily controlled, ultimately finding ways to reach the continent.

The focus of this work is on the border between Beni Ensar (Morocco) and Melilla (Spain), which holds significant importance in the trajectories of my interviewees. This location is known for generating media images of the fortified European borders. It exemplifies the audience--directed nature of border control shows (ANDREAS, 2001), as political forces aim to convey the message that they are actively preventing unknown foreign individuals from entering the continent. Bauman's (2016) book title, which refers to the so-called 2015 migration crisis as the arrival of "strangers at our door", encapsulates this notion. There interviewees had to employ different sets of practices to prevent their mobility from being halted.

1 To protect participants' identities, all names mentioned in this article are fictional.

Recent literature on the migration in the border area of Beni Ensar and Melilla has approached the topic from different perspectives. Kobelinsky (2020) studies this area, examining how migrants' journeys and subjectivities are influenced by the risk of death along their route to Europe. Weitzel (2018) explores the role of voice, sound, and hearing in individual strategies of resistance at border crossings in Melilla. Di Renzo (2017) explores the narrative construction of online news regarding migrant crossings of the Morocco-Spain borders. Gazzotti (2020) questions the rise of border humanitarianism as a tool that perpetuates the degradation of migrants' lives in Moroccan borderlands. Sahraoui (2020) analyses bodily experiences of women in the contact with humanitarian healthcare assistance in Melilla.

The subject of how migrants narrate their experience of crossing the border to enter Melilla remains relatively unexplored. This article aims to bring three distinct types of experiences of border crossing to address this gap. These include a land crossing, a sea crossing, and the experiences of unaccompanied minors. My objective is to answer the following, interrelated questions: How do the participants describe the border area of Beni Ensar? How did they navigate the challenges of crossing the border in Beni Ensar to reach Melilla? What are the meanings of crossing this border attributed by them?

The data collection for this study was conducted between July and September 2021 at a Full Reception Migrant Center of the Red Cross in Málaga, Spain. During that period, I was working as a social education intern at the center and conducted an ethnographic study for my master's thesis.

In the next section, I will present characteristics of the dynamics of mobility that participants take part when attempting to migrate to Europe. I will define the terms "migration trajectories", "navigation", and "hot returns". Following that, I contextualize this work, providing data on irregular migration, describing Spanish Red Cross' humanitarian work, and introducing the methodological note applied here. Subsequently, I will analyze the following topics: the characterization of Beni Ensar-Melilla as a hostile place, the role of cooperation and persistence in navigating the border by land and sea, and the practices of unaccompanied minors in navigating the reception system and the border between Morocco and Spain.

Firstly, my argument is that in order to successfully navigate the borderland, participants were required to collaborate with fellow migrants and exhibit perseverance. Moreover, unaccompanied minors depended on particular laws and reception conditions. Secondly, the significance of migration for the participants is linked to their aspirations for a better life in Europe, which, if achieved, have the capacity to improve the well-being of both the interviewees and their families.

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METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

To collect data for this study, I engaged in participant observation while interning at the social education department of the Red Cross' Full Reception Immigrant Center in Málaga from July to September 2021. I obtained authorization from the humanitarian service of the Spanish Red Cross in Málaga to conduct my research and reference their organization in my future work. Additionally, I interviewed both current and former users of the center, as well as staff members. Each participant signed a consent form, granting me permission to narrate their stories using fictional names.

In addition to participant observation and interviews, I used ethnographic techniques to gather information during my time at the center. These techniques included maintaining a field journal, creating detailed factsheets about individuals, objects, location, and taking photographs. Being at the center provided me with the opportunity to establish rapport and build a relationship with both migrants and workers, which in turn facilitated informal interactions and conversations prior to conducting the interviews.

As a qualitative research method, I employed the life story approach (BERTAUX, 2003), in which the interviewer prompts interviewees to narrate their lived experiences. This method allows for an analysis of how participants frame and interpret their experiences while recounting the events of their lives. Given the significance of migration trajectories in my study, I also focused on participants' spatial biography (AMIT; KNOWLES, 2017, p. 176), examining how they dynamically reconfigured time and space, constructing a sense of "here" and "there" to depict scenes from their lives.

For this article, I will utilize mainly four of the 20 interviews conducted, consisting of two with users and two with former users of the Full Reception Immigrant Center of the Red Cross in Málaga. These participants are Francis, a 22-year-old Cameronian who crossed the border Beni-Ensar and Melilla by land; Nasif, Sudanese, 23, that crossed the border by sea; besides Achraf and Farid, Moroccans, respectively 19 and 18, who reached Melilla unaccompanied and when they were underage. The duration of their trajectories from their home countries to Spain varied, ranging from some days for the Moroccans to more than two years for Francis and Nasif.

Participants' narratives often contain gaps, with certain parts that remain unclear or incomplete. Some individuals may choose to avoid providing specific details of their experiences when questioned. For instance, in the case of the Tunisian couple Malek and Amina, they declined to elaborate on how they crossed the Spanish border in Beni Ensar, opting to simply mention "passing the border". In addition to that, in some cases, a single interview may not be sufficient to fully cover their experiences.

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SPACE CONTROL, MIGRATION TRAJECTORIES TO EUROPE, AND "HOT RETURNS" IN BENI ENSAR

Briefly describing three main points of the mobility dynamics experienced by the participants on their way to Europe can shed light on the different barriers they faced in accessing the continent.

Firstly, if individuals wanted to travel to Europe as tourists, as third-country nationals, they are required to provide authorities with inbound and outbound tickets, a Schengen visa[2], convincing reasons to go back to their countries (e.g., a work contract in the country of origin), funds to support their stay, health insurance, a credit card, and other documents that require material resources beyond the means of a significant portion of the global population.

In terms of financial capacity, for third-country nationals to be able to travel to Spain as tourists in 2023, with a maximum stay of 90 days within a 180-day-period they are required to demonstrate they have at least 108€ per day, and a minimum of 972€ regardless of the duration of their stay (MINISTERIO DE ASUNTOS EXTERIORES, UNIÓN EUROPEA Y COOPERACIÓN, 2023).

In 2019, 47% of the world population lived below the poverty line of upper-middle-income countries, which was defined as US$6.85 per person per day, and 23% lived below the poverty line of lower-middle-income countries, which was defined as US$3.65 per person per day by The World Bank (2022, p. 41).

Secondly, the European labor market is exclusively open to highly qualified non-Europeans, making it extremely challenging for the participants to secure employment in Europe before migrating. This poses a significant obstacle, especially considering that the group under study primarily consists of underemployed individuals in their countries of origin who, in most of the cases, lacked access to formal education systems.

Lastly, when travelling through the African continent towards Europe, the interviewees traverse several national territories that have their own borders, migration laws, and are guarded by local authorities. These areas are referred to as transit migration zones (see SCHAPENDONK, 2012, p. 578), where individuals experience periods of waiting "in-between" the country of origin and the intended destination.

2 Some third-countries nationals are exempt from a Schengen visa. The European Union takes this decision on a case-by-case assessment of each country according to various criteria, including illegal migration, public policy and security, as well as the country's commitment to human rights and individual freedoms (see Regulation (EU) 2018/1806, article 1).

In addition to the national constraints to movement in sub-Saharan Africa and Maghreb, European countries engage in collaborations with non-European states to prevent irregular migration into their territories. Noteworthy examples are the European Union-Turkey refugee resettlement statement[3], the European Union-Libya partnership aiming at combating smuggling networks[4], and the controversial United Kingdom-Rwanda return program[5].

Given the socio-spatial constraints outlined above and participants' narratives about their (im)mobility in various spaces, the theoretical perspective chosen for this study is that of migration trajectories. This framework aligns with the body of literature known as the "mobility turn" (URRY, 2000; SHELLEY; URRY, 2006), which has been developed since the early 2000s. Drawing on interdisciplinary contributions from fields such as migration studies, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies, it transcends the traditional division between social research and transport research, "putting social relations into travel and connecting different forms of transport with complex patterns of social experience" (SHELLEY; URRY, 2006, p. 208).

Migration trajectories can be defined as "open spatio-temporal processes with a strong transformative dimension" that may involve multiple journeys in various directions (SCHAPENDONK ET AL., 2020, p. 2). For those who are on the move, a trajectory represents a multitude of potential paths that are constantly susceptible to change (GRILLO, 2007, p. 200-201). This process is affected by migrants' orientations, personal projects, available options, their narratives about where they came from, and where they are going to (id.). It is also shaped by both well-defined plans and the fluidity to adapt them based on personal and collective circumstances (GRILLO, 2007, p. 200-201).

Migrants' plans can be redefined due to voluntary (e.g., family circumstances or employment opportunities) or involuntary (e.g., lack of social or financial capital to keep moving) factors regarding staying or not in an initially perceived transit area (VAN DER VELDE; VAN NAERSEEN, 2011, p. 221). Moreover, their journeys are as significant and complex as other phases of migration (MAINWARING; BRIGDEN, 2016), such as planning, departure, and arrival.

Analyzing the international movement of people as a series of journeys challenges the presumed sedentary perspective often found in migration studies, which assumes that not being on the move is the norm (SCHAPENDONK ET AL., 2021, p. 3245). This framework also questions the simplified narratives provided by institutions regarding migration. For instance,

3 https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/
4 https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-migration-policy/central-mediterranean-route/
5 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/migration-and-economic-development-partnership-with-rwanda/migration-and-economic-development-partnership-with-rwanda-equality-impact-assessment-accessible

The European Union Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) describes migrant journeys to Europe as unidirectional flows between places of origin and settlement, which depoliticizes and decontextualizes contemporary wars, economic inequality, and the post-colonial context that are connected to their movement (MAINWARING; BRIGDEN, 2016, p. 248).

Amit and Knowles (2017, p. 172-175) provide insights into the trajectories of migrant individuals and emphasize the process of navigation. They argue that navigation is a constant reorientation away from initially settled points in space and time. People encounter unpredictable contingencies, complex layers of movement, and circumstances that require continuous reevaluation. These elements were taken into consideration in the interpretation and description of the migrant trajectories studied.

The authors (AMIT; KNOWLES, 2017, p. 172-173) also introduce the concept of "tacking" to highlight the idea of finding spaces of mobility in the world. They refer to the classic understanding of navigation, which typically involves linear movement between two points in a territory. However, they propose a different perspective, a volatile, open, and fluid process characterized by motion within motion and composed of small steps that collectively form movement. According to them (AMIT; KNOWLES, 2017, p. 174), navigating is essentially "about finding a way through the physicality of the world". Therefore, tacking, as a concept, aligns with the notion of migration trajectories and implies ongoing adjustment and modification (AMIT; KNOWLES, 2017, p. 166). For migrants to continue their journey, it may also be necessary to alter their path or even their original intended destination (id.).

Nasif's story illustrates that. The 23-year-old Sudanese was in Libya and paid smugglers to cross the Mediterranean to Sicily, Italy, twice. Both times, he was returned to the shore by the Libyan police. One day, when he was about to give up and go back home, he and some friends who also wanted to reach Europe came across a Sudanese man while wandering the streets in Tripoli. The man welcomed the group into his house and, according to Nasif, mentioned that "there are places called Ceuta, Melilla, and Tangier in northern Morocco", where they could enter Spain. This contact provided them with an option they were not aware of before and changed the course of their journeys to Europe.

Furthermore, navigating is influenced by chance, the risks taken by individuals, and a willingness to experiment. It requires the capacity for improvisation when unexpected factors arise, or situations go awry (AMIT; KNOWLES, 2017). The experiences shared by participants, which are described in the next sections, illustrate the process of navigating and the tacking practices they employ during critical moments when crossing the Beni Ensar-Melilla border to enter Spain.

Navigating practices are inherently fragile processes (AMIT; KNOWLES, 2017). Consequently, exercising resourcefulness and adapting to different situations along the way to ensure safety, avoid danger, and progress towards a desired destination may not be sufficient to prevent immobility. Considering the information above and the fact that the spatial social fabric is shaped and co-constituted by the individuals who traverse it (AMIT; KNOWLES, 2017, p. 175), the presence of migrants in Beni Ensar, Morocco, who repeatedly attempt to cross the border with Spain but face failure, indicates that this area is an immobility hub (SCHAPENDONK, 2012).

For many migrants who reach Europe irregularly, Beni Ensar represents a destination that they reach after months or even years of leaving their homes, having endured various challenges along the way. This was the case for Francis, a 23-year-old Cameroonian, who spent over two years on the road before reaching northern Morocco. Having departed from Cameroon in 2019, he traversed Nigeria, Benin, Niger, and Algeria before finally arriving in northern Morocco in 2021. Throughout his journey, Francis took occasional breaks to work in Algeria and Morocco, especially during times when he ran out of money to keep advancing along the route he envisaged towards Spain. Additionally, he experienced multiple instances of being turned back in Niger and even faced arrest but managed to escape the authorities in the same country.

The border zone of Beni Ensar and Nador, besides being a region where migrants arrive physically and psychologically exhausted, is also known as a place in that the so-called "hot returns" [*devoluciones en caliente* in Spanish] happen. Since the early 2000s, the Spanish state has implemented a policy of automatically expelling individuals who enter Melilla irregularly through the border fences. The term "hot returns" highlights the rapid and expedited nature of these deportations, which are often conducted shortly after the individuals are apprehended or intercepted at the border.

These pushbacks involve handing migrants over to the Moroccan police without conducting adequate identification procedures or taking into account individual circumstances, such as potential asylum claims, or protection needs. These practices contradict Spanish and European regulations on migration and can result in human rights violations, including the denial of the right to seek asylum and protection from persecution (CARRERA, 2020).

DATA ON IRREGULAR MIGRATION TO MELILLA, ASYLUM CLAIMS IN SPAIN, AND THE SPANISH RED CROSS' HUMANITARIAN WORK

According to the Spanish government (MINISTERIO DEL INTERIOR DE ESPAÑA, 2023, p. 2), out of 31,219 migrants who entered Spain irregularly in 2022, 1,175 reached Melilla by land (id., p. 10), and 169 by sea (id., p. 7). The exact number of individuals subjected to pushbacks in Melilla is uncertain due to conflicting data among Spanish authorities.

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One notable case is the investigation conducted by the Spanish Public Defender's Office [*El Defensor del Pueblo*] into an incident referred to as "tragedy of Melilla" by the media. During this event, approximately 1,700 migrants attempted to cross the fence between Beni Ensar and the Spanish exclave, resulting in the deaths of at least 23 migrants. The investigation concluded that 470 illegal hot returns took place at the occasion (MARTÍN, 2023; DEFENSOR DEL PUEBLO, 2023). However, the Spanish Civil guard argued that only 101 pushbacks took place, and that all of them where legal (MARTÍN; LÓPEZ-FONSECA, 2023).

Regarding asylum statistics in Spain, the country received 116,135 or 13,2% of the 881,220 first-time applicants within the European Union in 2022 (EUROPEAN STATISTICAL OFFICE, 2023). Given Spain's geographical position near the northern part of Africa and the consequent influx of migrants to its territory in recent history, the country receives significant attention from the European Union. To manage migration in the region, the Spanish Ministry of Work, Migration and Social Security, along with the European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund[6], provides financing for a migration management system.

Based on the Spanish Royal Decree 441/075 (2007), the Spanish Program of Humanitarian Attention to Immigrant Persons established facilities to accommodate immigrants in Melilla, as well as in other key cities throughout the country. The management of these facilities was entrusted to the Spanish Red Cross, selected by the Spanish government for this purpose.

The Red Cross, founded by Henry Dunant in 1863, is an international organization dedicated to assisting and protecting victims of armed conflict and other crises. With a global network of over 80 million individuals, it provides aid to communities facing health and social issues, disasters, and conflicts (INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS, 2016). Guided by seven Fundamental Principles including humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality, the Red Cross ensures its humanitarian nature and upholds its identity (INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS, 2023).

The Spanish Red Cross [*Cruz Roja Española*] was established in 1864 and has a rich history of humanitarian interventions. During its first century, it provided aid in armed conflicts like the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) (CRUZ ROJA ESPAÑOLA, 2023b). In the 1980s, the organization prioritized voluntary work, and in the 1990s, it expanded its social interventions with vulnerable groups across the country (CRUZ ROJA ESPAÑOLA, 2023b). In 2022, the Spanish Red Cross assisted over 12 million people nationally and internationally, supported by approximately 263,000 volunteers (CRUZ ROJA ESPAÑOLA, 2023) and more than 14,000 workers (CRUZ ROJA ESPAÑOLA, 2022). Its longstanding history and robust structure have established the Spanish Red Cross as one of the most esteemed and influential non-governmental organizations in the country.

6 https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/asylum-migration-and-integration-fund_en

The migrants I encountered who passed through Melilla were accommodated in the Red Cross' Temporary Stay Center for Immigrants [*Centro de Estancia Temporal de Inmigrantes*], where they could stay for a maximum of one month. This open center allowed users the freedom to come and go as they pleased or leave the program at any time. Its main goals were to conduct identification procedures and assess their health upon arrival before the Spanish state took any decision about their administrative status. The unaccompanied minors, in turn, were assisted by different facilities, designed to meet their specific needs.

Eventually, all the participants were relocated to a Full Reception Immigrant Center [*Centro de Acogida Integral de Inmigrantes*], in Málaga, where we were introduced. This is another open center, where individuals are allowed to stay for up to six months. The primary objectives there are to initiate the legal process for asylum claims, provide Spanish language instruction to migrants, and offer psychological, medical, and social support to help them prepare for independent living in the country.

"WELCOME TO HELL": THE DIVERSE, HEAVILY GUARDED, AND ECONOMICALLY ADVERSE BENI ENSAR BORDER ZONE

When he arrived at the Beni Ensar border zone, the Sudanese Nasif saw a handwritten sign in Arabic that stated, "welcome to hell". Migrants who were in that region for several months told him that the sign was placed there as a warning by a Sudanese citizen who had been attempting to cross the border into Spain for many years before ultimately giving up and deciding to return home. Indeed, according to the accounts provided by the informants describing their movement between Beni Ensar and Nador, a port city approximately 15km from the border, the border zone is depicted as a challenging and harsh place to be.

The border, as described by the 18-year-old Moroccan Achraf, consists of a high fence with barbered wire, and police officers patrol the area at intervals of half a meter. The Cameroonian Francis recalls that one of the first things that caught his attention was the diversity of people from various sub-Saharan nationalities at the border zone, including Guineans, Togolese, Senegalese, and Malians. When they mentioned their unsuccessfully attempts to enter Spain by land and sea for months or years, he realized that crossing that obstacle could require a long-term endeavor from his part.

The region was also characterized by a lack of labor opportunities since an important part of its economic activity is historically dependent on the flows of people, goods, and capitals between Morocco and Spain. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and diplomatic disputes linked to the Western Sahara territory, both governments restricted commercial flights (OFFICE NATIONAL DES AÉROPORTS, 2023) and closed the land borders from March 2020 to May 2022 (MARTÍN; PEREGIL; VARO, 2022). According to Francis, in the region, there is "no food nor work (...), it is a place where you go [when you decided] to cross the border".

Two Moroccan families that lived at the Full Reception Immigrant Center in Málaga migrated from Nador. Coming from the Moroccan middle class, they affirmed that the main reason for their migration was the economic hardship stemming from the pandemic, which reenforces the narratives shared by the participants concerning Beni Ensar and Nador from 2020 to 2021. For example, a woman from one of these families worked as a hairdresser but experienced a decline in both product supply and clients due to movement restrictions.

Participants spent over four months in the border zone. As time passed and they ran out of money, their situation worsened. After a few days of sleeping outdoors in a forest and facing the difficulty of jumping over fences, Nasif and his friends decided to return to the urban area of Nador to make a living. However, due to the unfavorable economic conditions in the area, they were not successful. Nasif recalls, "we starved for a long time. I used to wait in front of the bakery, and when someone bought a loaf, they would give me a piece or buy me another one."

Francis was arrested and deported from Spain three times while attempting to climb the wall that marked the boundary between Beni Ensar and Melilla. Initially, Nasif tried to swim from Beni Ensar to Melilla, but he was intercepted and returned by the Moroccan coast guard several times. After that, the Sudanese tried to cross the fence, also without success. The situation for Achraf and Farid, who were Moroccan unaccompanied minors, was different. They were subject to a different set of laws and took advantage of this, as will be detailed in the next sections, after describing Francis' and Nasif's navigation of the border.

According to the participants, the Beni Ensar-Melilla border zone is diverse, with migrants originating from different parts of the African continent, making repeated attempts to reach Spain. The region was economically adverse, particularly due to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of borders between Morocco and Spain. Additionally, the border was heavily guarded by both Moroccan and Spanish authorities both on land and sea. How did the participants manage to reach Melilla?

NAVIGATING THE BORDER: GROUP WORK AND PERSISTENCE

Analyzing the data collected, it becomes evident that three interconnected factors shape participants' experiences and influenced how they navigated the border between Beni Ensar and Melilla. Within the context analyzed, interviewees engaged in cooperative efforts with other migrants, displayed persistent determination in crossing the border, and, in the case of the unaccompanied minors, skillfully navigated the migrant reception system specifically designed for their community.

In challenging and uncertain migration trajectories, especially when trying to reach Europe irregularly through its external borders, migrants from the Global South commonly rely on cooperation with other migrants to endure precarious living conditions while on the move, and

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to increase their chances of crossing borders (BACHELET, 2018). Participants tended to form groups based on mutual identification. I will provide two examples below.

In Nasif's case, nationality played a significant role. As mentioned earlier, a Sudanese individual assisted him and his friends in Libya. Upon arriving in Beni Ensar, Nasif met many Sudanese who shared the same goal of reaching Spain, and they mutually supported one another. He explains that he encountered them "in the forest where they usually set off to climb over the fences of Melilla".

For Francis, the ability to communicate in French and shared living conditions with others in the border zone facilitated cooperation. Since most of those he interacted with came from West Africa, they spoke French – even if not always as their mother language – and communicated that way with Francis. Additionally, the Cameroonian explains that they all resided outdoors, "in the bushes" together. They "became friends, (…) sympathized, exchanged names, and understood each other", enabling them to make plans to cross the border.

Thus, the participants collaborated with other migrants in Beni Ensar and Nador to find collective ways of entering Melilla. However, working in group did not guarantee success, and they faced numerous challenges before leaving Morocco. Nasif and his friends spent over a month in Nador attempting to swim from the port to Melilla. During this time, most of his friends drowned. Besides that, they faced constant interception by the coast guard and were consistently returned to Beni Ensar.

Consequently, they joined another prevalent practice, which involved assembling in a crowd to attempt to climb the fence that separated the two countries. Nasif recalls, "the word of an impending departure (…) spread. Some thousand people would cross the fences in Melilla". Their endeavor proved unsuccessful, as the Sudanese remembers, "some 30 people passed, the others did not. It was very frustrating". Francis also joined gatherings of fellow French speakers and larger groups on different occasions to pursue the same goal.

Nasif and his friends decided to change their strategy once again and re-entered the port, this time concealing themselves among the rocks near the shore. They patiently waited for three days, carefully choosing the opportune moment to make another attempt to swim to Melilla. Throughout this period, their provisions depleted, and they resorted to improvising a water filter using a piece of cloth.

When the sea was calm, Nasif took the initiative and attached pieces of plastic to his body, embarking on a solo swim towards Melilla, as his friends did not dare to try again, especially after the tragic losses they had experienced within the group. After one hour in the water, Nasif spotted some lights and realized he was nearing the beach. "I felt weary and cold. I had drunk plenty of water. I could not walk nor move", narrates the Sudanese about his state when he arrived in Spain.

Francis, in turn, after spending more than three months in the region, tried to cross the fence once more. He displayed persistence, stating, "I did not think about turning back, as I was certain that, one day, I would cross that barrier." The Cameroonian further emphasizes, "It was reaching that [place, Spain,] and only that", which he desired. Subsequently, he climbed the fence alongside a group and successfully entered Melilla. Although some individuals were apprehended by the Spanish civil guard, Francis managed to escape them. He shows me keloid scars on his hand, stating these wounds were caused by the barbed wire, and that his foot was fractured. Finally, after two years on the road, he had arrived in Spain.

Organizing in groups provided the interviewees with advantages that significantly enhanced their chances of successfully crossing the border, ultimately enabling them to employ "tacking" (AMIT; KNOWLES, 2017) and discover pathways that took them to Melilla. This approach facilitated the exchange of crucial information regarding collective initiatives, such as assembling in crowds to traverse the land border. Moreover, the formation of groups allowed them to swiftly devise collective solutions to the challenges encountered in the border zone.

Another factor linked to successfully navigating the border is the persistence demonstrated by the interviewees. They exhibited a remarkable determination to overcome, after crossing the African continent and different territories, the perilous conditions imposed by the European migration regime and border control in Beni Ensar. In order to reach Spain, they had to persevere, whether by persisting in the known mobility alternatives at that point in their journeys to Europe or by seeking new solutions.

The participants ascribe profound significance to their relentless efforts to reach Melilla, offering justifications for their unwavering resolve to face challenges and confrontations with death, which both materialized as a grim reality and lingered as a haunting presence in the European external borders (KOBELINSKY, 2020).

In that regard, I inquired Nasif about the driving force behind his decision to undertake such a perilous journey across the borderlands, leaving his family behind and risking his life in pursuit of reaching Europe. He conveys the internal dilemma he confronts, torn between "sacrificing my family and leaving them immersed in extreme poverty [in Sudan]" or "sacrificing myself in an attempt to reach the other shore and to get my family out of this state". Nasif firmly believes that once he secures employment, he can provide financial support to his family in Sudan, helping them meet their basic needs. Therefore, Nasif, alongside the other interviewees, opted for the second option, embarking on a path fraught with danger, fully aware of the arduous journey ahead, rather than allowing their loved ones to continue enduring suffering.

In the morning following our interview in September 2021, Nasif boarded a train from Málaga to San Sebastián, located in the Basque Country. From that point onwards, we maintained sporadic contact until June 2023, the time of writing this article. Nasif assured me that he

would occasionally send me updates to confirm his well-being. Since then, he has shared photographs of himself in Paris, mentioning his intention to attempt crossing the English Channel from Calais to reach England. More recently, he informed me that he is now residing in London.

Francis's account aligns with Nasif's perspective as he emphasized that his decision to go to Spain is an investment in the prospects of his children and future grandchildren. He is convinced that by taking this path, he enhances their chances of attaining a better life than what Cameroon can offer. Francis draws a parallel between his demanding journey, which he refers to as a "calvary", and a process of resurrection, stating: "it's like I may have been dead on the road. And (...) I resurrected (...) it's unexplainable". Having surpassed the boundaries of unimaginable psychological and physical suffering, Francis managed to rise again in pursuit of his goal to cross the border and reach Europe.

In this section, I have discussed two interconnected factors that hold great significance in participants' navigation of the Beni Ensar-Melilla border. Firstly, the collaborative efforts undertaken by migrant groups to discover methods of crossing the border and supporting one another amidst the challenging living conditions in the border zone. I have identified distinct patterns in how participants form groups, essentially based on shared language and nationality. Secondly, the persistence and interviewees' determination to continuously attempt to cross the border to get to Spain. This perseverance is closely tied to their perception of themselves as proactive individuals capable of offering improved prospects and futures for their loved ones through the opportunities presented in Europe.

"YOU CAN'T ENTER, BUT INSIDE...": NAVIGATING THE UNACCOMPANIED MINORS' RECEPTION SYSTEM

The micro experiences of migrants and the relationships they forge with the receiving state and its residents are not fixed or static (FRESNOZA-FLOT, 2017). Rather, they continuously evolve and are mutually constructed. One way in which migrants respond to state policies in their respective contexts is by navigating the legal framework, "using policies to realize one's personal aims" (FRESNOZA-FLOT, 2017, p. 271). Farid and Achraf, two Moroccan teenagers, applied their knowledge of the reception system designed for unaccompanied minors in the Spanish enclave of Melilla to navigate the border.

Their objective was to "maximize their chance to attain their desired objectives in a minimal amount of time" (FRESNOZA-FLOT, 2017, p. 281), which involved utilizing the reception infrastructure while taking into consideration possible medium-term consequences for them, such as obtaining a residence permit in Spain and finding a job in the country. Simultaneously, they employed strategies that allowed them to pursue their objectives without sacrificing their perceived freedom of movement.

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The European Union provides a definition of an unaccompanied minor (Directive 2011/95/EU, article 2, l). According to this definition, an unaccompanied minor is a minor "who arrives on the territory of an EU Member unaccompanied by the adult responsible for him or her by law or by the practice of the Member State concerned". This definition applies to both Farid and Achraf, who were 16 and 17 years old, respectively, when they entered Spain.

The interest aspect of their cases does not lie in how they managed to cross the physical border in Beni Ensar, as both recount that they accomplished it individually and found it relatively easy to enter Melilla. As Achraf, 18, recalls, "there were many migrants there. I entered the door. The police did not see me; they were smoking". Instead, our focus here will be on how they utilized the information they possessed about the Spanish reception system to their advantage, and their navigation of this infrastructure.

Before delving further into this discussion, it is essential to elucidate a crucial element for foreign unaccompanied minors, which is having their age determined by the Spanish state. As Fernández (2018, p. 60) explains, it is of utmost importance for migrants to have this condition recognized. Otherwise, instead of being received by local protection services for minors, they would be categorized as undocumented foreigners, what could possibly subject them to expulsion measures by the authorities.

Determining the age of a foreigner can be accomplished through identification documents such as a passport, birth certificate, or a national identity document issued by their country of origin. However, since most migrants arrive without proper documentation, forensic methods are employed, such as radiology tests, to estimate their biological age. These practices have been subject to criticism and debate in Spain, particularly due to the uncertainty of its results and reliance on Western patterns of physical development, not always applicable to non-white bodies (DEFENSOR DEL PUEBLO, 2015, p. 135), usually the ones evaluated in these procedures. The two interviewees whose narratives are being analyzed in this section underwent these processes and were legally recognized as minors in Spain.

Farid is originally from Nador, near the border zone. Due to having relatives residing in the Spanish exclave, he had visited Melilla multiple times during his childhood. Prior to migrating to Spain, Farid had acquired knowledge about the reception system. Despite being aware that he was not legally permitted to irregularly cross the border, he knew that as an unaccompanied minor, the Spanish government had to provide him with shelter. "You can't enter, but inside…" he explains, emphasizing his understanding that as an unaccompanied minor, he would not be sent back to Morocco.

The notion was also echoed by Achraf, who expressed his certainty that upon arrival and notifying the authorities of his presence, he would reside in a reception center for minors. He confidently stated, "when I arrive, I'm going to live in a center, for sure". Furthermore, he explained his plan, saying, "I [will] go to the police first, [then] they [will] take me to the center".

Their discourses denote that they were aware of others who had followed a similar path before. As a result, they were informed about the general rules that applied to individuals in their situation. Farid expresses that migrating from Morocco as a minor with the intention of staying in Spain is relatively common, stating, "I think it's not everyone, but it's quite a lot of people" do so. He also provides examples of people who entered Melilla under similar circumstances and were subsequently transferred to other Spanish Autonomous Communities: "I know three or four guys who live in Bilbao and [before] were in the center [for minors] in Melilla".

Although they have the legal right to receive assistance from the government, it does not mean that interviewees' experiences in the reception system were optimal. They describe the center as overcrowded, with many teenagers who shared the space being violent and prone to stealing belongings from their peers. In addition to that, they claim that the number of employees was insufficient to the quantity of users in the facilities, and that the staff discriminated against them due to their migrant status. Achraf and Farid also expressed their unwillingness to participate in the activities provided by the center, including psychological assistance and Spanish classes.

Besides the fact that the center was not a pleasant place to be, the Moroccans decided to navigate the reception system because they felt that being there – although the center they lived was open, as the one for adults described previously in this work –, in a certain way, limited their freedom of movement. The two participants narrate different strategies related to this navigation.

Achraf comes from a small city in central Morocco, approximately 7 hours away from Beni Ensar by bus. After arriving in Melilla, he spent three months in the center and two on the streets. Since he was unwilling to stay at the center, Achraf alternated between utilizing its assistance infrastructure and occupying public spaces. "I always slept at the port, beneath the trucks, until morning", recalls the teenager.

The center's rule mandated that unaccompanied minors had to be present from 11pm to 6am, otherwise their enrollment would be cancelled. However, this decision was not final, and users could return and enroll at the center again. Achraf took advantage of this flexibility. "Sometimes I spent four, five days at the port, but sometimes, when I didn't have any food and wanted to eat, I would go to the police, and they would take me to the center", he explains. He also mentions that while at the center, he would claim hunger, receive food, and then return to the port again.

Farid recounts another common practice among minors from his neighborhood back in Nador, involving navigating between Morocco and Spain before turning 18. He explains that some individuals who had spent over six months in Melilla would return to Morocco to spend time with their families. Then, after one or two months, they would cross the border again, reenter Spain, and be readmitted into a center for minors.

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According to the Moroccan, this practice can only be accomplished by those who have sufficient time before reaching the legal adult age. Additionally, they need to be cautious and return to Spain several months before turning 18 to allow for all the necessary paperwork to be authorized to stay in Spain. "In the center for minors in Melilla you need (...) time (...) to arrange your documents", he explains. If someone arrives, for instance, "three months [before their 18th birthday], they can't do nothing", and, in these cases, when the paperwork is done, they are treated as adults by the state.

The government of the Autonomous City of Melilla emphasizes through official channels (CIUDAD AUTÓNOMA DE MELILLA, 2018) that the number of unaccompanied minors received fluctuates due to many teenagers alternating between periods of stay at the reception system and periods in their country of origin. They further state that the lack of stability poses a challenge for the government to implement educational initiatives.

Regarding the causal relationship between participants' strategies and implications of their attitudes, their descriptions provide valuable insights. For them, entering Spain as a minor and navigating the reception system represents the initial step towards an ideal trajectory, which includes obtaining a residence permit, finding employment, sending money back to their families and, ultimately, acquiring Spanish citizenship.

Farid explains that his plan upon going to Spain was to "go to the center for minors in Melilla, live there for some time, and when I turn 18, be able to go to Spain". Here, he refers to what other interviewees commonly describe as "Big Spain", mainland Spain, excluding the Canary Islands, Ceuta, and Melilla, places that are part of their migration trajectories. "Big Spain" is perceived to offer better life opportunities when compared to the aforementioned zones.

Both Farid and Achraf were living in Málaga when we met. Their main goal at that moment was to find stable employment as soon as possible and be able to send remittances to their families in Morocco. Nevertheless, their bureaucratic situation remained a constant source of concern. Achraf explains that after living continuously in Spain for five years, he will be eligible to obtain the "red passport", alluding to the Spanish passport. Once he has it, he will no longer need to renew his residence permit every two years. Being a Spanish citizen, he states, "my card is forever (...), [it] says I am not from Morocco [anymore], my king is Juan Carlos Felipe. I am Andalusian".

For Achraf, obtaining Spanish citizenship represents being treated as an equal to other Spanish citizens on an institutional level, and ensures his ability to stay in the country indefinitely without worrying about the possibility of being forced to leave. Achraf knows several Moroccans who have become Spanish citizens and believes he can do the same.

In this section I have presented how unaccompanied foreign minors utilized the Spanish legal framework to attain their individual objectives. I began by discussing the importance of

age determination for teenage migrants and the associated process. Following that, I described the participants' awareness of the dedicated reception system for them in Melilla. Lastly, I detailed the practices employed to navigate the center for minors and the border between Beni Ensar and Melilla. These practices are interconnected with the Moroccan teenagers' ideal plans of staying in Spain and seeking better life opportunities for themselves.

CONCLUSION

This work contributes to addressing the lack of research focused on the experience of crossing the border in the Beni Ensar-Melilla border zone. More broadly, it also explores the connections between migration studies and mobility studies. To achieve this, I identified and analyzed three different types of border navigation experiences: land crossings, sea crossings, and the experiences of unaccompanied foreign minors. These insights were examined within the framework of migration trajectories.

During the analysis of the collected data, participants (excluding the minors, who encountered somewhat more permeable barriers) described the borderland as a challenging and inhospitable place. The area is heavily guarded and economically disadvantaged. Additionally, they encountered a diverse range of individuals who were repeatedly attempting to cross the borders into Spain. Interviewees formed connections with them based on shared characteristics such as nationality and language, seeking information about available crossing opportunities and collaborating to find solutions for breaching the European border, whether by sea or land.

Besides cooperation, persistence played a central role in the process of navigating the border, as participants continued to put themselves in danger and devise new plans to reach Melilla, even after witnessing the loss of friends and other migrants during their attempts. For them, the pursuit of migration is intertwined with a medium to long-term perspective, as living in Europe represents an opportunity to improve their own and their families' living standards.

The narratives of both adults and unaccompanied minors provide evidence that they feel a sense of responsibility for their own destinies and the destinies of their loved ones. They believe that they can positively influence their loved ones' lives if their ideal plans, which begin with reaching Spain, are achieved. The envisioned path involves arriving in Spain, obtaining a residence permit, finding employment, sending remittances back home, and, in some cases, even taking the exam to acquire Spanish citizenship after residing continuously in the country for a few years.

Taking this into account, participants employ metaphors to convey the personal significance of crossing the border in Beni Ensar. Having surpassed their physical and psychological limits due to the challenges faced during their journey, interviewees compare their experiences to a "resurrection" or a "sacrifice."

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Future research on the topic addressed in this article can explore various themes related to unauthorized journeys to Europe from the perspective of migration trajectories. I will provide two examples. Firstly, investigating how the perception of danger along the way and the risks associated with clandestine travel influence migration experiences. In this regard, Oumar, a 22-year-old Gambian interviewed for this project, compares his travel situation to gambling, stating, "it's risky: winning or losing."

Secondly, exploring the extent to which gender roles, particularly being young, male individuals from predominantly Muslim and traditional societies, serve as drivers for migration to Europe. In this work, we encounter examples such as Francis from Cameroon, who already has a wife and children, assuming the social responsibility of being their breadwinner, and Farid from Morocco, who believes that migrating improves his prospects for providing for his family in Morocco as well as the future family he envisions forming in Europe.

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