CULTURAL EXHIBIT

Every frontier

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I was heading towards Casablanca airport in February 2016, driven by the chauffeur of the institution that had invited me to participate in the city's book fair, when suddenly loads of people appeared on the sides of the motorway waving papers and trying to catch our attention. It was a strange, unexpected incident, the significance of which I didn't immediately grasp. Lots of people ask for things on the streets of Morocco but they are usually in urban centres, not on the edge of a busy highway. And I also couldn't work out what they were waving in the air. There were men, women and children. All had sun-burnt faces, most were white-skinned, though their cheeks, noses, foreheads and chins displayed the characteristic shadow, the singed tone of people who have been living out in the open and walking long distances. Their inflamed skin was really striking but it was the expression in their eyes that led me inexorably to reach out to their innermost state. Ever since I have been trying to understand what the gazes of those individuals held that was able to hook into me and break down any resistance my conscience might have offered. It was something like this: their eyes challenged the people comfortably ensconced in their cars, and penetrated the hidden recesses of our being. Or at least that is what I felt at the time. I lowered the window to see them more clearly, and felt guilty, naturally, at a curiosity that verged too closely on the voyeuristic. But I couldn't stop myself, those eyes sought mine out and wanted me to share in cruel experiences I had heard a lot about from afar, via the mass media, but had never faced first-hand. Imagination is one thing, I can imagine what they have endured and their current daily struggles, but confronting the idea of something is far removed from experiencing it in reality: what we imagine is the measure of what we can tolerate. They are refugees, commented my chauffeur, Syrian refugees.

They were waving passports that prove that was what they were: they had escaped from a war the entire world was aware of. I reflected how sad it was that to gain the sympathy of others they had to demonstrate it was merited, as if the stories of who we are and what has happened to us aren't enough, as if being an individual recounting your misfortunes isn't enough to receive a helping hand, even in the most extreme situations. And that suspicion should predominate rather than any desire to listen to what the other is trying to tell us.

I imagined the geographical expanses all those refugees must have crossed and understood why the array of pages that comprised their passport was the object to which they had clung tooth and nail, since it was the only thing that could demonstrate who they were, where they came from and the barbarism inflicted on their people. How many frontiers had they have crossed to reach the far-west tip of North Africa from Syria? Many countries, many different landscapes, with such diverse inhabitants who in some cases will have helped them and in others will not only not have helped but will have placed obstacles in their path. Some areas they must have crossed are also in socio-political conflict, whether simmering, as in Egypt and Tunisia, or openly bellicose, as in Libya. That whole odyssey to reach a country, Morocco, that doesn't recognise their right to asylum. And that is why most were heading to the northern frontier, the one with southern Europe, represented by Ceuta and Melilla, two Spanish cities on the North African coast.

My mother, who spends periods of time in the town where we were born in the province of Nador, and in the city of Vic close to Barcelona where we grew up, has been telling me for some time about the refugees coming into the area. They crowd the streets, she told me in 2014, they beg and don't realise that local people are themselves struggling to survive.

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I hadn't been back to Morocco for seven years. I mean, seven years since I'd been back to "my" Morocco, to the place where I was born. And the last time I went was a short visit for a television report, so I'm not sure it counts. I flew on a low-cost flight, a phenomenon that has really changed the long journey my family used to undertake when we went back in the summer. I observed the people in the airport on my flight: men and women of different ages and some children. Very old men from the first wave of emigration, wearing Tergal trousers and knitted hats and young women in carefully chosen matching clothes taking photos with their smart phones.

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It seems very strange to reach the province of Nador in under two hours; the endless hours on the road necessary to cross the length of the peninsula when you opt for the overland route make the transition from one world to another more tangible; the move is more

physical. You notice the change in landscape, southern Andalusia already seems very like the arid coast of North Africa. But by plane it all happens in two hours in the seats where we passengers are packed, there is no physical transition – we go from one place on the map to another with no intermediary stages. It gives a false sense that the two realities aren't so far apart, which is a complete illusion. Once air-travel was what the rich did, now returning to your town in this manner makes us think we have gone up in the world, though the human landscape is almost the same as the one on the buses that travel by road, women with babies, tired old people and modern youngsters. The plane spares us the place that was the most distressing part of the journey, the frontier crossing.

I have been obsessed with the frontier between Nador and Melilla for years. As a young girl and adolescent I spent many hours there, my feet tucked in, curled up in the car, waiting and waiting. To enter Morocco because the officials only allowed you to get through quickly if you gave them "the price of a coffee", and on the way back, to enter Spain, because anyone coming from the south was suspicious and controls were painstaking and time-consuming. All frontiers are strange, artificial creations that order, segregate, separate and signal a concrete place where one set of realities is marked out from another; it is an artificial location. Cultures, civilisations, whatever you want to call them, tend to change slowly from one into another, not in the drastic, violent manner one crosses a frontier. In the specific case of this frontier it is clear that is in fact how things are. The reality separating Nador from Melilla isn't so different. If one looks at the economic indicators, GNP, unemployment, etc.it is plain that this Spanish city is more like Nador than the peninsula. Moreover, its human landscape is quite similar, as there are many inhabitants of Melilla who are called "Muslims", who are from the Rif, whether because they are by now simply locals, or recent or more long-term immigrants. And, conversely, many of these Melillans who speak Amazghit look at their counterparts from the other side of the frontier as if they belonged to a very different social class to their own.

The frontier

The frontier has always been a place where people are classified: those who have Spanish nationality and those who don't, those who have permission to reside in Spain and those who don't, those who are from towns near the frontier who have a special permit allowing them to enter Melilla, but not to cross the strait. Those who have relatives in Europe who have arranged the documents so they can cross and those who haven't, those who have money and those who don't, because if you can prove you have a large enough sum in your current account you can get a visa without any hassle to enter Schengen territory.

They don't know where they've landed up, my mother would say when she saw the Syrians on the streets of Nador. What do they expect people to give them if the locals live in dire poverty? And obviously, the refugees hadn't come to such a poor area in order to stay, that was never their intention, they had come there to be near the frontier that would allow them to step foot in a territory where they could claim asylum.

Hardly any Syrian refugees now remain in Nador. When my uncle takes me to his house on

the city outskirts, we notice some girls by the entrance to a mosque. They are asking for charity, saying “help me” to passers-by and someone has the bright idea of asking them if they are really Syrian, or if they are lying. They insist repeatedly that they are, that they do come from where they say they do. Their Arabic, that is so eastern, is proof enough but the man decides to persevere with his joke that I feel is cruel and decidedly unfunny. With their hair whitened by the sun and the same shadow on their faces I had seen in Casablanca, the girls are wearing flip-flops they drag along when they play jumping games.

The next morning I take a stroll through the city centre. It is a very different panorama from the one when we used to go there in the summer: now it is quiet, there are few people around, and the hustle and bustle I remember is nowhere to be seen in a place that seems to be operating at half-speed. Even the markets are very quiet. It’s not that people have left, but we, the children of immigrants, only know Nador in the summer, when it’s thronging with all the families who live abroad and have come back for a holiday. It’s an entire social class, the immigrant class, they call us “the people from abroad” and there must be tens of thousands who return every year to visit their place of birth. It is not for nothing that the region of the Rif has experienced this phenomenon so intensely. Every family has someone who lives abroad; entire families have departed. It is a region that has been punished for decades by drought, exploited by the Spanish protectorate before independence and then deliberately abandoned by Hassan II’s regime because of the supposedly rebellious spirit of its people. Migration is part and parcel of the history of every family: first they went to cities in Morocco, then to Algeria and finally to countries within Europe. Spain is a very recent destination for emigrants. So, every summer, you can see the people who left on the streets of Nador with their children and grandchildren, turning everything upside down, inflating prices and altogether disrupting the tranquil daily life I can now see here out of season. However, I keep walking and see few refugees – I really don’t. I can’t find that scenario depicted by mother anywhere.

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Before I set out on this trip an acquaintance who lives in France had advised me to speak to a human rights organisation. I made an appointment with Omar Naji, the general secretary of the AMDH, the Moroccan Association for Human Rights. Their headquarters is in the Lardri Chaik district. Nador’s coastal road has been developed; you can see that a lot of money has been spent on the Corniche opposite the Mar Chica. They have even built a Hotel Mercure. You can see that the Moroccan government wants to invest in the area and make it attractive to tourists. However, as we walk into the city, the landscape changes radically. The association is based in a poor area with unmade roads, two or three-storey houses in a bad state and the usual lack of a proper rubbish collection. There is a market next to the AMDH’s office, fruit and vegetables on wooden carts or on the ground. I wait by

the entrance to the building and a toothless, old lady asks me what I'm looking for. I tell her about the association and she asks me if I need help from them. She tries to persuade me that they're no use, that they talk a lot but do nothing. "What do you expect them to do?" she asks me. "They just spend the money they get on the rent."

Omar tells me they are in the process of mobilising people, organising demonstrations in every city in Morocco. They are doing so because a fisherman from Alhucemas was recently run over and killed by the lorry where police had put the fish they had confiscated from him, and that had triggered revolts against the impunity of the majzen, and the bureaucratic structures of government that seem a throwback to the corruption and despotism of other, darker times. The greatest fear both of the monarchy and the oligarchic minority ruling Morocco is that there might be revolts in Morocco like those in Tunisia or Egypt. It's not for nothing that it is one of the few Arab countries that has not had its spring. Something that seems unlikely to happen, Mohamed VI's country always seems on the point of exploding, but never does.

When I ask Omar about the Syrians, he first tells me that Morocco rarely recognises anyone's right to asylum because that would imply having to assume responsibility for refugees. He reckons that in 2015 there were almost 5000 people in the frontier town, Beni Ansar, all hoping to enter Spain, and now there were none. There were also Iraqis, Palestinians and Yemenis. So where are they? I ask. "Ah, that's the big question", he replies, as if he is about to reveal some key information. Spain has established an asylum office, but it's on the other side of the frontier with Spain. Refugees can see it, but can't get access because to request asylum, you must be inside the country where you want it. The frontier is becoming increasingly impenetrable. It used to be just the Spanish fence that they've made higher and higher over the years. They have even put spikes along the top, lethal knives to dissuade people from trying to climb over. There are security cameras and constant vigilance. But now Morocco has installed its own fence, making it quite impossible to reach European territory from here.

I remember that my grandfather used to go to Melilla to shop, with his "carte nationale", with no need for a passport, or the people who lived in Tangiers and used to go and spend the weekend in southern Andalusia. A bilateral agreement existed between the countries, which was logical enough, given their geographical proximity, but one day all that changed. Schengen arrived, Spain became European and decided it was quite different to Morocco. Restrictions were imposed that we experienced as if they had existed forever. Although we were now the ones being classified, we never challenged that frontier.

But what had become of the refugees in Nador, where have they gone? "They have crossed the frontier", says Omar. But how? If it is impossible… His thesis is that there is a people-trafficking network at the frontier that gets the refugees across, as has been reported at various times. Perhaps some people buy Moroccan passports, change the way they dress and dress like them, but 5000 people can't possibly have crossed like that without the complicity of the authorities. They pay between 350 and 1200 euros to get in, "just imagine what that represents". Apparently a policewoman was arrested not long ago accused of being involved in people trafficking. So many people can't have crossed the frontier without

help from those in charge of the controls.

The sub-Saharans

As we drove from El Aroui airport, we saw some black women begging; they were carrying small children on their backs and older ones walked by their side. The most common image of the frontier on Spanish media relates to incidents when sub-Saharan immigrants occasionally attempt to jump over the fence. When referring to them, television channels and daily papers use language that is far from neutral: “jumping the fence” is often coupled with “assault”, “en masse”, “pre-meditated”, “avalanche”, “hordes”", etc. A language that unambiguously communicates the peril supposedly represented by those foreigners, and naturally creates the impression that our territory is securely protected, that the people governing us know how to safeguard us from the other. The well-honed distinction between refugees and immigrants is one of the incongruities inherent public opinion in Europe on these issues; the fact is the many sub-Saharans who do manage to “jump” the fence include a number from countries at war, wars that don’t receive the same prominence as the war in Syria, because they are old, chronic, and probably because they are African. Once again, the frontier establishes categories between one group of people and another.

I am surprised not to see more sub-Saharans on the streets of Nador, apart from the women we saw begging. I ask Omar and he tells me they are on the Gourougou massif, the mountain nearest to the city. They live in camps of which he has counted five. Camps in a deplorable state, with plastic tents. The sub-Saharans are often brutally beaten by the police who drive up to the mountain to dismantle the tents. “Nador is the only city in Morocco where there are no black people on the streets, they hide because if the police find them, they transport them a long way away into the interior of the country.”

Before starting out I had phoned Father Estevan Velázquez as I knew he worked in Nador helping refugees and immigrants. I had been planning to see him in Nador, but he has been away for some months and the nuns who make up his team are busy this week-end with the visit of the bishop. I asked him why he wasn’t in Morocco, and if it was true, as some news reports claimed, that he had been expelled. “Not exactly expelled,” he replied, “but they’ve banned me from returning, which more or less amounts to the same thing.” He tells me that what he used to do, and what the nuns continue to do, was simply to care for immigrants, especially the sub-Saharans living in dreadful conditions on the mountain. They aren’t only in Gourougou, but also in Serwan where they are hoping to get on to a flat-boat out. There are camps for women, who he suspects are victims of the slave-trade. They also provide medical care for people beaten by the police, and often come across people with broken bones and even some who have died. Quite a number of the women become pregnant and they take them to give birth in hospital. Fortunately, he tells me, Moroccan hospitals look after them without creating problems, but, of course, as you know, patients have to pay for any kind of medication and we try to take care of that.

When we talk about the fence, he says that at the present time it is impossible to climb over and that immigrants are trying to cross the sea from Alhucemas in order to reach Almeria

or Motril.

> Seen from here the frontier doesn’t seem to be a place burdened with so many connotations, a place that enshrines the world’s inequalities

As for the local reaction to immigrants, he says there is a bit of everything, some people try to help but many are afraid of approaching them because of the police repression they suffer. And you should never forget the racism that exists in Morocco. In any case it is much more difficult for a sub-Saharan than for a Syrian. Syrians can pass unnoticed among Moroccans, but black people can’t hide the colour of their skin. A skin colour that means you must suffer a specific kind of brutality. I think of the sub-Saharans I have known in Barcelona, long-time acquaintances, and how when I told them that I was born in Morocco they would say, I spent a long time in your country and was glad to do so, hoping for the bonding brought by the experience of crossing the same landscapes.

State and commercial television channels in my aunt and uncle’s house focus on just two topics during the day: the climate-change convention in Marrakesh and Mohamed VI’s visit to Senegal, where he is welcomed with every honour. Inevitably I contrast the two realities: black people being treated like animals near where I’m staying and the monarch who is so clean, so well dressed and fed shaking hands with other black people who are also clean, well dressed and fed.

I don’t want to leave without visiting the frontier, without seeing it afresh, now from the perspective that I won’t be crossing over. I take a taxi from Nador that I share with three women who keep sliding their bejewelled fingers over the screens of their mobiles. Two men have piled into the seat in front. The ancient Mercedes in Morocco make me feel that nothing has changed, with the little handle you must ask the driver for in order to open the window. However, the main roads are smoother, better asphalted and the whole coast seems about to change radically. Before reaching Beni Ansar I soon discover they have built nothing less than a luxury residential complex and golf course.

When I reach the Beni Ansar cross-point I find it hard to believe it is so quiet, and that there are so few cars waiting to cross. It is a Friday in November. Seen from here the frontier doesn’t seem to be a place burdened with so many connotations, a place that enshrines the world’s inequalities. The weather is fine and everything is calm; nobody would think this is in fact a place where the violence from the wider world can erupt. You only have to look up once you’re past the buildings in the vicinity of the frontier control-point to see the high, substantial wire fence and the security cameras that protect Europe. And around the control- point, on the Moroccan side, the narrow funnel-like stretch of land is horrendous. There are beggars, street children sniffing glue, old women in a dreadful state, and youngsters aged before time. A second-hand market sells all manner of filthy, old items displayed on wooden tables or spread over the ground. A place where the detritus of

the world on the other side is recycled, a world so near, yet so out of reach.

Najat El Hachmi

Najat El Hachmi Buhhu is a Catalan writer born in Nador, Morocco. She holds a Degree in Arabic Philology from the University of Barcelona (UB) and she contributes to several media and various radio stations. The strangeness of the feeling of belonging to two different countries, in addition to her desire to bring together both worlds, led her to write her first book, *Jo també sóc catalana* (Columna, 2004). Her works of fiction include her first novel, *L'últim patriarca* (Planeta, 2008), which received the 2008 Ramon Llull Prize, the Prix Ulysse and was a finalist for the Prix Méditerranée étranger. She also authored *La cazadora de cuerpos* (Columna – Planeta, 2011); *La filla estrangera* (Edicions 62 – Destino, 2015), awarded with the BBVA Sant Joan Novel Award and the City of Barcelona Award, and the successful *Mare de llet i mel* (Edicions 62 – Destino, 2018). Her most recent work is an essay on feminism and Islam, *Sempre han parlat per nosaltres* (Edicions 62 - Destino, 2019), which has been well received by critics and audiences alike.