SOLROUTES

Solidarity and oppression in the border area of Oujda

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Funded by the European Union (ERC, SOLROUTES, 101053836). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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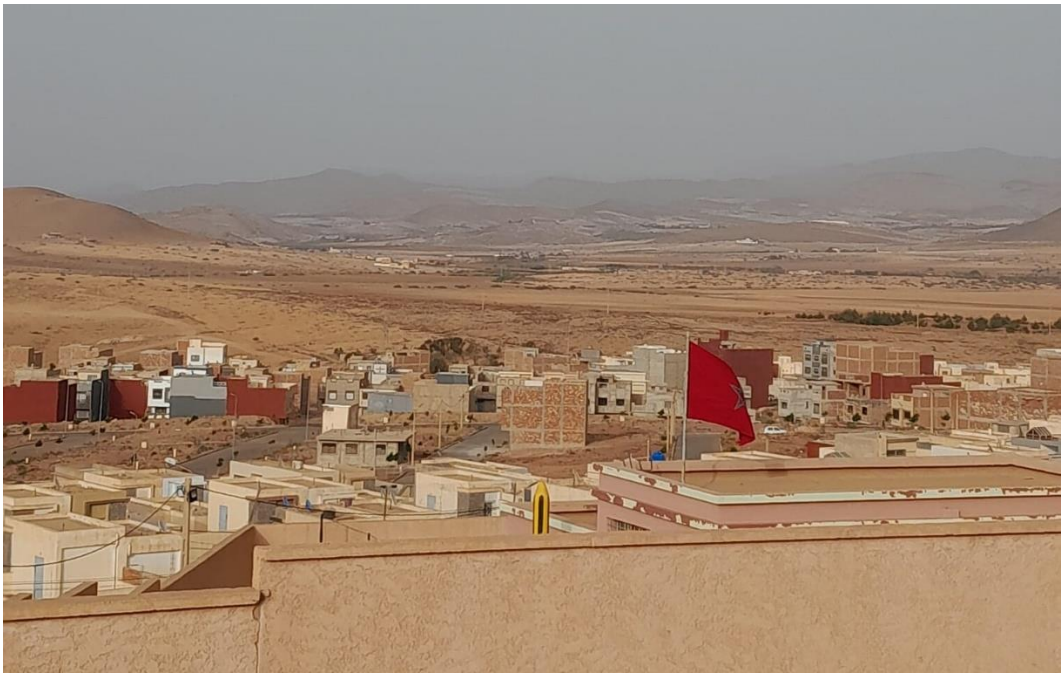
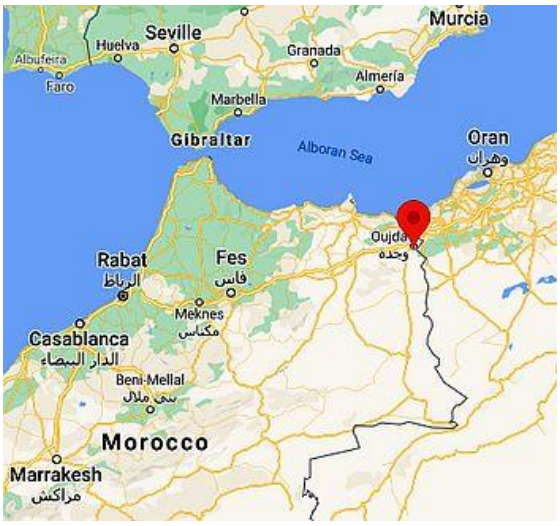


F 1 Algeria seen from Oujda, Michela Lovato, May 2024.



F 2 Oujda on the map, web source.

1. Introduction

The fourth node of the Morocco Antenna of SolRoutes is based on a field research project conducted in Oujda[1], in the country's eastern area, on the border with Algeria. Together with the coastal city of Saidia, 60 km to the north, Oujda represents a node of fundamental importance in migration routes, serving as an intersection point between different movements involving both Moroccan and sub-Saharan citizens. Due to the conflictual relations between Morocco and Algeria, the border is formally closed, which is why Oujda is a highly militarised zone.

My first "encounter" with Oujda occurred in March 2024, during the first GNW in Rabat. On that occasion, the participants in the theatre workshop staged that border, recounting the violence experienced in Algeria, the dangerous crossing, and the arrival in Morocco. The city then emerged repeatedly during my field research through the stories of people on the move (PoM) I met and the encounters with activists operating in the area, demonstrating how fundamental it was to include it in my research path.

I organised the first research mission at the end of the second node, in May 2024. During the first visit, I met with local associations and solidarity organisations dealing with migration and began a general observation of the city. Among these, the church of Oujda is one of the solidarity organisations where PoM can find shelter for a few days – or longer if necessary – and other services.

I returned to Oujda in November 2024 to make deeper contact with migration routes from the inside, encountering the experiences of those living in unauthorised mobility. The main method used in this phase was social theatre, with the organisation of two Theatre of the Oppressed (ToO) workshops with people in transit, hosted by the catholic church in the city. The third and final mission to Oujda occurred in January 2025, aimed at deepening the relationships developed and completing field observations. In February 2025, some activists I met in Oujda were involved in the ToO Workshop organised in Tangier on solidarity and borders.

[1] The city, capital of the region, had 410,000 residents in 2014.

The field research led to encounters with various subjects who relate in different ways to the migratory experience and the border apparatus: PoM, families of migrants, solidarity actors, and people involved in managing migration flows in Oujda.

This report aims to convey the complex dynamics observed between solidarity, borders, and migrations. The border appears as a place where relationships of oppression and solidarity practices intersect, in complex and non-linear dynamics. The ethnographic material on which we base our analysis was collected through classic ethnographic practices (interviews, participant observation), social theatre as a participatory method, and moments of discussion and sharing with PoM and solidarity actors. This text shares some reflections from the fieldwork, aware that we do not have the space to be exhaustive.

2.The Theatre of the Oppressed as a research method

The methodological choice to integrate social theatre practices with classical ethnographic methods arose from a series of needs encountered during the field research, in a border context highly surveilled and traversed by vulnerable situations. In this sense, creating theatre workshops with PoM and solidarity actors proved to be a way to respond to two main needs. First, it created safe spaces for sharing, where the workshop setting constituted a protected context to externalise traumatic and sensitive experiences, which were difficult to access through traditional interviews. Second, it responded to our difficulties in accessing the field due to contextual elements and structural limitations. On one hand, the level of surveillance in the city of Oujda limited the possibilities for ethnographic observation, making a series of places and encounters in public space inaccessible – the theatrical device allowed for their representation and narration. On the other hand, theatrical expression allowed for overcoming communication barriers through body language, facilitating the communication of complex experiences. The migratory journey is a bodily experience: bodies crossing borders, colliding with barriers, adapting to new environments, resisting. Theatre work allows for the emergence of embodied knowledge, enabling access to dimensions of migratory and solidarity experiences not always verbalised, such as bodily memory, perception of border spaces, and resistance strategies. The body narrates movements, clashes, drives: in the harmony of different bodies that, starting from different trajectories, meet at the border, the narrated experience becomes collective. Following the theories of the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1992), theatre becomes a space where the oppressions experienced in a particular condition can be recognised. A workshop on the border becomes a way to observe the different systems of oppression produced or reinforced by the border apparatus: it is a chain involving migrants, solidarity people, and border actors. Upon recognising the dynamics of oppression experienced, the group proposes practices of resistance or response.

From a methodological perspective, this approach is configured as a collective method of knowledge production in which the conduct of research is decentralised. This methodological approach allows for building a research process that becomes a space for collective critical reflection, in a transformative process that restores agency to the subjects involved.

Two theatre workshops are the basis for our reflections in this text: the ToO Workshop held in Oujda in November 2024 with PoM, and the Theatre and Solidarity Workshop held in Tangier in February 2025 with solidarity people.

2.1 Introduction to the theatrical practices used

The Theatre of the Oppressed involves interactive dramaturgical practices that aim to reflect on situations of oppression. The objective is to create a performative space in which the perceptions, knowledge, beliefs, practices, and behaviours of a group of people gathered at a specific time and place around a theme subject to reflection are highlighted. Reflecting on power dynamics at various levels, it proposes actively thinking about practices of recognition, denunciation, and resistance to oppression, thus proposing emancipation.

Forum Theatre and Image Theatre are among the dramaturgical practices used in our workshops. The general structure of Forum Theatre involves the representation of sketches describing a concrete situation concerning the sphere of daily life and containing power dynamics within it. In Image Theatre, participants model their bodies or those of others to express attitudes and emotions. These images are then juxtaposed and "energised". In both practices, dynamic intervention from outsiders is required: the audience is invited to reproduce the scene, replace the actors, ask questions, change actions or discourses, encouraging different developments and interpretations that come to propose active intervention in the dynamics of oppression.

As the dramatic exploration unfolds, audience members can establish connections with their own experiences. The dramatic and performative presentation of phenomena and problems can introduce alternative perspectives and ways of thinking, in which different experiences are brought into dialogue in the face of an oppressive problem and situation. On stage, therefore, a continuous negotiation occurs, in which participants offer personal viewpoints, perceptions, and interpretations.

By translating individual experiences into theatre and reflecting on them through artistic methods, (Gross-Wyrtzen, 2020) both actors and audience can creatively transform the unfolding of the scene in many ways. The process of emancipation begins in the attempt to change representations; in these identities that meet, we observe how they are linked to forms of social action (Kaptani and Yuval-Davis, 2008). In this space, issues that may be difficult to talk about are addressed; it becomes a tool for recounting everyday experiences of violence and marginalisation that are difficult to verbalise (Maggie et al. 2018).

The theatrical experience stimulates the imaginative capacity of participants (Wrentschur, 2021), proposing the development of symbols, narratives, and new imaginaries. In this sense, Forum Theatre can be seen as a dramatic and participatory research approach, in which dialogue, sharing, negotiation, and association give rise to new imaginaries and new narratives of the same. In this space, the category between researcher and researched breaks down, research becomes collective, and marginalised people become co-producers of knowledge (Liamputtong 2007).

2.2. The Theatre of the Oppressed workshop in Oujda

The Theatre of the Oppressed workshop in Oujda was organised in collaboration with the city's ecclesiastical reception facility. The proposal for the workshop aimed to create a space for expression and collective reflection for PoM who were either accommodated by or gravitating around the church. The initial program included two daily workshop sessions for five consecutive days: one dedicated to

people in the church's long-term reception program, the other aimed at people in transit through the facility[2]. The church had made available a series of internal rooms for conducting the Workshops.

Dado, the theatre trainer, and I approached this experience with a conscious openness to the unexpected: it was my second time entering that place, for Dado the first. We did not have a predefined structure, but rather an adaptive approach that allowed us to propose theatrical exercises modelled on the emerging needs of the group and the contextual possibilities.

The composition of the groups reflected the transitory nature of the migratory experience itself: every day, we recorded new attendees while other participants did not return. Even during individual sessions, the coming and going of people was constant, determining a continuous reconfiguration of the group. The sessions saw the participation of a variable number between 9 and 20 people at a time, predominantly men, with only two women participants among the PoM. The final session brought together more than 50 people in the final workshop.

We found ourselves working with people at different stages of migratory movement: those who had just entered from Algeria, those who had been living in Oujda for a few months waiting to figure out how to organise the rest of their journey, those who had returned to Oujda after being pushed back from Melilla or Ceuta, those trying to settle in the city. Different temporalities intersected in the workshop, enriching it with diverse perspectives and experiences regarding the border. Participants came from different African states: numerous from Sudan and South Sudan (especially among newcomers), some from Egypt and Niger, and a French-speaking group mainly from Guinea and Cameroon. Thus, French, Arabic, and English alternated, in a context where bodily communication was nevertheless privileged.

Occasionally, reception workers - sub-Saharan and European - also participated in the Workshop, making the workshop a space for discussion on the role of solidarity in the migratory context. This presence allowed for a dialogue between experiences, perspectives, and roles that normally interact in more formal and structured contexts. People on the move enacted the work of solidarity, just as solidarity people enacted scenes of crossing the border: theatre was a space for reflection and confrontation on different ways of seeing each other.

The workshop took place in a non-neutral location: within the reception context, a space that did not belong to the participants. To access it, a permit, a ticket issued by the reception office, was necessary, without which entry was precluded.

The emerging themes touched on different points of migration routes, following a temporal progression that touched past, present, and future: the account of the abandoned home, the experience of border violence, and the constant tension towards Europe. Theatre proved to be a space for reflection, despite the difficulty of re-elaborating the present: of people who tell their stories while still in Oujda, next to a border and about to cross others. The migratory journey is the present, and the future is uncertain and possibly violent. The atmosphere was characterised by tension, confusion, and continuous movement. Some participants presented injuries that made movement and walking difficult. It was complex to maintain concentration, manage intense emotions, and

[2] The facility offers accommodation in three different situations: people in transit, vulnerable/sick people, and people involved in job training projects.

contain reactions like nervous laughter and confusion – manifestations of the difficulty of managing violent stories when one is not yet in a safe place, when the journey is not yet concluded.

F 3 Photo taken at the ToO Oujda Workshop, November 2024.

2.3. The Theatre of the Oppressed workshop in Tangier

The idea of proposing a workshop space for elaboration and discussion for solidarity people operating at the border was born at the end of the Oujda workshop, in response to a need expressed by the church's solidarity workers to have a space for discussion about their experience of the border. The workshop is thus intended to be a space for the multiple emotional, relational, political, and practical challenges that characterise the experience of those who work daily with PoM, proposing itself as a temporary device for collective care and critical self-reflection.

The invitation to the workshop was extended to some of the solidarity organisations encountered during the field research in Morocco and led to the composition of a diverse group of 11 people, involving Moroccan, sub-Saharan, and European operators working in border contexts. The composition of the group represented the complexity that characterises border contexts: the age range of participants (20-50 years), the diversity of geographical origins, the variety of positions regarding the migration phenomenon (migrants active in support associations, Moroccan citizens engaged in solidarity projects, European operators in volunteer projects or international cooperation), and the multiplicity of professional approaches (reception, legal accompaniment, health support, advocacy) constituted elements of particular richness for the workshop process. This allowed an exploration of the concept of solidarity at the border from different angles. The workshop took place in a neutral structure in Tangier, not the workplace of any of the participants, and it was held for 3 days, according to the availability of the participants.

The proposal of the Workshop was the creation of a space in which to activate processes of listening and expression for the experiences of solidarity people at the border. From the workshop process, a series of particularly significant emotional experiences emerged:

- Anger in the face of institutional violence and systemic omissions towards migrants.
- Frustration derived from confronting traumatic experiences for which adequate response resources are not available.
- Discouragement in working with women with dependent minors, stuck in situations devoid of prospects for either local integration or access to safe migration paths.
- The sense of powerlessness in the face of situations of abuse and violence against migrants.

The workshop allowed the externalization of complex experiences and proposed elaboration processes that are difficult to activate in the daily border emergency. The theatre circle proposed to stop and observe the individual at the border, finally reflecting on the personal experience and listening to the psycho-physical state. The group functioned as a temporary community of listening and confrontation, proposing the elaboration of collective strategies. While some issues were addressed and some strategic proposals were shared, the brevity of the workshop did not allow for going in-depth into some of the issues raised. Experiences of oppression and intense violence were shared, for which there was not adequate space, even for us as conductors to effectively listen. This was verbalised, and an attempt was made to respond by proposing the relationships born from the Workshop as a tool for exchange and listening beyond the workshop itself.

3. Conducting research in a highly surveilled context

I stop by the hotel reception to pay for my stay; the lady speaks only French and we exchange a few words. She asks if I'm leaving tomorrow, I confirm – "and you'll return to Rabat?" I reply no, I'm heading to Fes – from where I arrived a week ago. To respond calmly, I have to control myself: I had never mentioned Rabat to her; in fact, my communications with any employee of this hotel have never included information about myself. On the first day, I spoke with the girl at reception but only about technical aspects of the room. How does this lady know that I live in Rabat? Or that my final destination will be there?
I feel a bit anxious and decide to postpone my visit to the cemetery. I go back to my room and start thinking. The control here is diffuse and fragmented; many are involved in an innocuous exchange of information that ultimately creates a complete picture. H. asking me which hotel I'm staying at to "show me the way without needing to activate Google Maps," the hotel asking me which city I'm coming from and which city I'll go to, M. asking me what plans I have for the afternoon – and so on, a bit from here and a bit from there, various pieces of information about who I am and my movements are collected. I'm aware of this; it's not the first time I've felt under surveillance, and by now I behave as if it's always the case, as if eyes are constantly fixed on me – it just caught me by surprise that even the lady at reception knew I live in Rabat, and I feel a bit tired of always having to be on guard[3].

[3] Fieldwork notes, Michela Lovato, Oujda, November 2024.

I am reporting a piece from my field diary during the mission to Oujda, in which I recount how control is diffuse and what impact it has on me. Oujda is a context that allows me to reflect on what conducting research in highly surveilled contexts means. In a politically tense and non-touristic area like Oujda, I, a white woman moving around the city, am visible. Different people ask me questions about who I am, what I do, who my contacts in the city are, and what my plans are. Under the narrative of protection towards me, profound forms of control develop. This control is exercised not only by the military presence but also by the city's social fabric. Like, for example, the woman at reception who knows I stay in Rabat without me ever telling her.

In Oujda, I present myself as a doctoral student studying migration and solidarity, meeting various actors whom I had already met before. I inform the associations I intend to meet, and before I arrive at one of these, I'm asked for a photo of my passport and the exact time of my arrival in the city. Since my arrival, I have found myself constantly having to answer to someone about my program for the day, being invited to do certain things rather than others, meeting certain people rather than others, and avoiding a series of things. The methods of control towards me are varied, ranging from advice on what to do to more or less clear limitations, expressed in different communicative ways. For example, under the guise of advice for my research, I am told not to meet certain people and not to go to certain places because "there's nothing to see"; not to meet families of people who disappeared – who had nevertheless asked to meet me – due to migration, otherwise I would be "yet another European researcher who comes here to take what interests them without thinking about the families' pain."

The sensation of being watched profoundly impacts conducting the field research: I move with the feeling of having to "behave well." Thus, avoiding going where I have been told I cannot, and avoiding meeting people I have been told not to meet. On one hand, this profoundly limits my research, having the effect of self-censorship typical of having to operate under surveillance (Bachelet and Hagan, 2023). On the other hand, this experience allows me to observe the context and reflect on how solidarity actors and people on the move inhabit it, having to constantly negotiate with the control apparatus to ensure themselves a space of movement (Lovato and Stimmatini, *forthcoming*).

My presence in the field must be constantly negotiated, which means I have to meet people with local roles, justify meetings, and motivate my presence there. The time I spend at the Church of Oujda, for example, is legitimised externally by the fact that I am European and of Catholic training.

4. Oujda: crossroads of migratory routes

In my ethnographic work, the sidewalk in front of the Church is among the significant places for ethnographic observation in Oujda. This place represents a gathering point for many PoM, both those accommodated in the reception facilities and external people. The sidewalk gets Wi-Fi, which is why many people sit here to call their families in their countries of origin. Information and chats are exchanged, people tell each other about their journeys and share future perspectives. Around this, there is an informal micro economy: Niham, a hairdresser in Sudan, cuts hair for a few dirhams, and nearby there is a Moroccan establishment that allows migrants access to the kitchen in exchange for money. Sitting on the sidewalk allows me to know and encounter many stories.

Oujda is a city where different migratory movements intersect. Many of the people I meet on the sidewalk later participate in the ToO Workshop: for example, there is Shibli, a Sudanese minor who

arrived from Algeria few weeks earlier, with his arm bandaged due to crossing injuries; Ahmed, Egyptian, arrived from Algeria three days earlier; there is Sunday, a Sudanese woman in her ninth month of pregnancy, who has been living here for seven months with her husband working in a local pastry shop; there is Dahim, in Morocco for several months, with a broken hand after being pushed back from Melilla; Babacar, who lived and worked in Casablanca where he broke an arm, and returned here to receive treatment support; then Amadou, Diabate, young Guineans who have been living in Morocco for several years and in Oujda who are training as electricians to find work.

Oujda is a border crossed in different ways. It is an exit point for many Moroccans attempting the *harqa* from Algeria, Libya, or Tunisia, as well as for sub-Saharan citizens navigating the North African space while waiting to understand which border might open for them. It is also a place of settlement for sub-Saharans, mainly with families, who are trying to find work, and where there is a large community of university students from sub-Saharan countries.

As a strategic migratory node, Oujda offers a privileged observatory for analysing regional migratory dynamics. In July-September 2024, the ecclesiastical reception structure recorded 1,500 entries, with a daily presence oscillating between 80 and 100 individuals. The increase in incoming flows into Moroccan territory can be read as a consequence of the closure of the Tunisian route and the conditions of structural violence against migrants in the Libyan context. In November 2024, the stories I encounter in Oujda report the regional migratory tensions given by the deportations of black people on the move to the Algerian desert[4]: many people recount that, after having lived in Tunisia, they were taken by the Tunisian police and brought to Libya or Algeria, from where they then crossed to come here to Morocco. "At the moment," Baby Max tells me, "Morocco seems to be one of the few still open"[5]. On the other hand, several Sudanese people also chose to move to Morocco to try to enter Europe after having lived in Egypt.

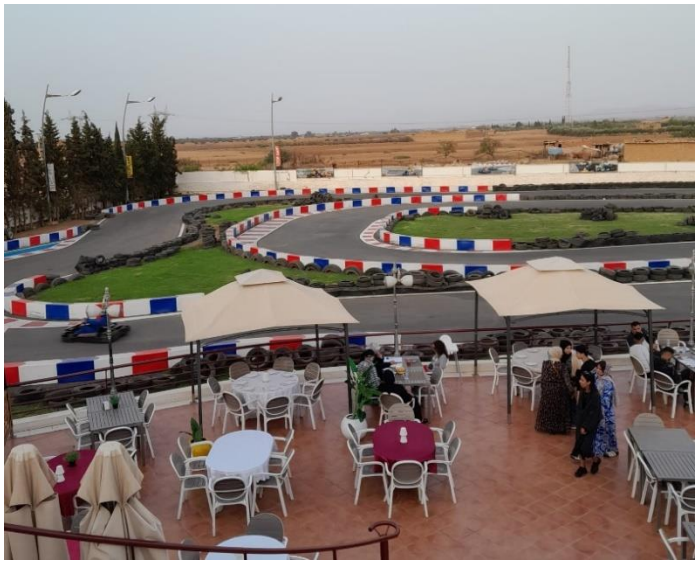
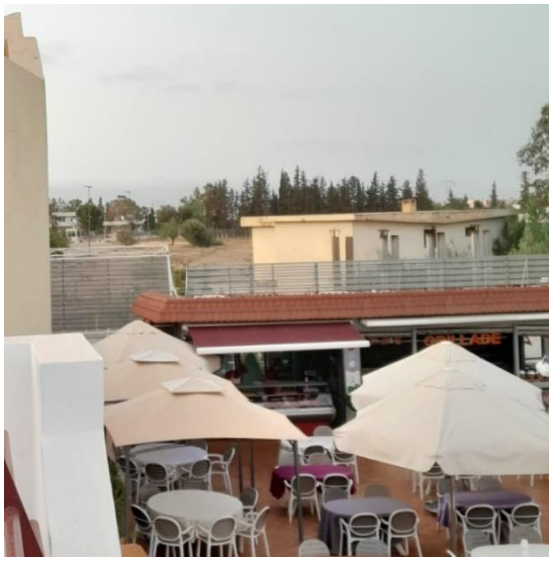
Those who have just entered Oujda stay in the Church structure for two nights, then leave. The days of transit are filled with rest but also planning. Some plan to move to Casablanca or Fes, where they have contacts or where they know they can find temporary work, or those who plan to stay here and keep Oujda as a base in the various attempts to migrate towards Tetouan, Nador, or Fnideq. The solidarity here is structured around movement, on the idea that after three days of hospitality, people must leave to make room for the new arrivals from Algeria. R., a worker at the church, explains this: “ours is a transit centre, which means that the people who arrive here after a few days must continue their journey.” A solidarity that is functional to the transition and based on the fluidity of the transition itself. This conflicts with a transit that is extended: the militarisation of borders makes passage increasingly complicated, requiring numerous attempts and longer stays.

On the one hand, Oujda represents a relatively open door to migratory movements entering the country, but the borders connecting Morocco to Europe are highly militarised and controlled. The analysis of recent developments highlights a political orientation aimed at closing maritime and land northern routes, with consequent diversion of migratory flows towards the country's southern regions, particularly along the Atlantic route towards the Canary Islands archipelago. This itinerary, characterized by high costs as facilitation networks entirely manage it, is accessible exclusively to

[4] These policies have been documented by various research efforts: Desert Dumps, Lighthouse Report, May 2024, see https://www.lighthousereports.com/investigation/desert-dumps/; State Trafficking, Report, RR[X], January 2025, see https://statetrafficking.net/.
[5] Fieldwork notes, Michela Lovato, Oujda, November 2024.

subjects with significant economic availability, and is one of the deadliest routes. In 2024 alone, according to data collected by Caminando Fronteras[6], at least 9,757 people died crossing this route.

5. The spatial, temporal, and social dimensions of the border experience in Oujda

F 4-5 Restaurant in front of the customs office in Oujda, Michela Lovato, November 2024.

We return by car to head toward the border. I film with my phone to capture the changing landscape: wider roads, desert landscapes, children playing soccer on the sides. The light is strange, somewhat diffused. We arrive near customs, I see a police car that lets us pass, until we reach the barriers preceding the now disused customs checkpoint. I wasn't expecting what I see now.

Next to it, there's an elegant, very luxurious restaurant that I wouldn't have expected in a city like Oujda, at such a delicate border between Algeria and Morocco. The establishment has two floors, a large terrace, in the centre there's a stage with a band playing traditional music, and behind it a go-kart track. The waiters are dressed in jackets and shirts, the people frequenting the place are elegant.

We are facing a closed border between two countries formally at war, and this is how this space is managed: an opulent place, with loud music. Moroccan flags, and then the visible fence.

We sit down and order drinks. P. tells us that he often comes here, sometimes just to take a break, that there's always live music here. The care given to this space is not common in Oujda, and P. points out that there are no other establishments along the road to the border: "Someone powerful must own this place, because getting permission to build here is not taken for granted"[7].

I am genuinely impressed by how Morocco organizes the space around the Oujda border. The music is so loud it could probably be heard from the Algerian side. I compare what I see with images of the Ceuta border, which instead appear visibly militarised and aggressive: these are two different ways of

[6] Derecho a la vida report, Caminando fronteras, web source https://caminandofronteras.org/derecho-a-la-vida/.
[7] Fieldwork notes, Michela Lovato, Oujda, May 2024.

spectacularizing the border. As if here the conflictual politics with Algeria are played out through the display of richness. The road along Ceuta allows glimpses of the *valla* between the mountains; here, the path to arrive is almost empty and deserted, in contrast with the luxury of this place. While I am there, P., who accompanies me, points out the places where migrants arrive after crossing, and stop to look for a taxi to take them to the Church. He shows me where, a few years ago, the body of a young Nigerian man was found, where the point is through which people on the move who want to enter Algeria from Morocco pass to go toward Libya and Tunisia. There's the go-kart track, and behind it, people arrive bleeding.

I encounter the border in different ways in the city of Oujda. It extends into the stories of the people I meet, like Said, a Sudanese man, and his little Naim, who is two years old. He was travelling with his wife and their other 4-year-old son when, during the crossing, the latter two were stopped by Algerian police and pushed back, while he managed to pass with the other daughter in his arms. They are here waiting to reunite with the rest of the family. The border is visible in the wounds of the people I meet, who have crossed it or tried to: broken limbs, movement dysfunctions, wounds and infections.

In the experience of PoM and solidarity workers who live here, the border is an immobile backdrop that determines their daily life. The border configures itself as an apparatus producing differentiated spatiality and temporality for the different actors who cross it. The process of re-spatialization of the border transcends the militarised territorial demarcation, spreading through the urban fabric through forms of regulation of public space. In Oujda, control and surveillance devices function to discipline everyday life, subjecting the bodies of migrants and solidarity people to strategic regimes of visibility and invisibility. The presence of racialised bodies of migrants is confined to specific zones of public space: around the Church, in specific peripheral neighbourhoods, and in a marginal park used by some as a living space. The Church, in this configuration, assumes the function of containing and circumscribing black bodies, whose visibility in other segments of public space is systematically denied. This geography of exclusion is also articulated through administrative procedures: PoM who have just arrived are bound to register with UNHCR, under penalty of the concrete risk of deportation to Algeria if stopped by police.

In everyday life, practices and social interactions demonstrate a particular politics of exclusion, concerning all who inhabit the space. For example, Dado, the theatre trainer, mistaken for a local person, is stopped by a policeman as he approaches the Church, telling him he cannot move on, since "this place is not *for us Moroccans*"[8]. International and local activists claim to constantly undergo checks and surveillance, monitoring their movements and activities. This regime of visibility is reflected in their practices of using public space, characterised by thematic self-censorship in public contexts, a remodulation of discourses based on where they are, and the need to avoid visible association with migrant subjects in certain areas. As I recounted, I am constantly subjected to questions and advice about where I can or cannot go.

In Oujda, different dimensions of migratory time overlap and clash, revealing how the border accelerates, slows down, or blocks the bodies inhabiting it. Oujda configures itself as an intersection of different temporalities that reveal the multiple dimensions of the border experience. Time in this city assumes different rhythms depending on the subjects who inhabit it. For PoM, time expands non-linearly: movements of waiting alternate with accelerations, suspensions and restarts alternate, pauses of rest and movements. At the Theatre of the Oppressed Workshop in Oujda, the rhythm of the circle was mixed: limping, dragging, and rapid.

[8] Fieldwork notes, Michela Lovato, Oujda, November 2024.

Then there are the operators and solidarity workers, in a constant emergency temporality: the pace is quick and jerky, marked by the urgency of responses to immediate needs, the search for resources beyond the few available, and the difficulty of planning in a context full of unforeseen events. In front of the small church clinic is a line of PoM waiting to receive care; inside, the three nurses work quickly and continuously.

There is the suspension of the stories of those who disappear along migration routes: people who are lost track of, bodies found at the border, bodies of migrant people who have been denied care. Time crystallises and stops. Beside them, family members and close people searching for news of their loved ones or attempting to recover their bodies: a temporality of waiting takes shape, in a time that expands between the anguish of not knowing and the hope of receiving news.
The process of re-spatialization of the border also expands on the socio-relational level, reproducing or amplifying dynamics of oppression between the different actors who inhabit the context. The border configures itself as a space where different systems of oppression operating in society meet and overlap, in complex and non-linear dynamics.

The border determines a socio-political hierarchy in which the bodies of racialised migrants are oppressed in different ways: in physical violence, in control practices, in the denial of movement and regular presence, in the suffocation of spaces of emancipation. In the direct violence of the border, through pushbacks and deportations, and the "slow violence of abandonment" (Gross-Wyrtzen, 2020), made up of daily social and political marginalisation.

In the border context, the work of people supporting migration fits into the delicate relations between civil society and authorities in Morocco. The people I meet in the field share the sense of socio-political repression experienced in their work. Solidarity must constantly negotiate its presence and movement possibilities in the Moroccan context, in delicate relationships with authorities and PoM. "We have to behave well, because we don't have authorisation to operate here, we are only tolerated,"[9] F., a solidarity activist in Oujda, tells me. The experience of oppression lived by solidarity workers at the border is one of the issues addressed in the Theatre of the Oppressed workshop with solidarity workers in Tangier. The border space is imbued with a sense of frustration regarding the limitedness of movement and work capabilities. We walk in the space and the scene freezes, each reports an experience of oppression: Ema is still, arms folded, while Moroccan police identify her; Maria covers her mouth to stop herself from screaming as police officers mistreat a migrant woman in the square, but she is unable to intervene; Tarik, a black solidarity worker, has to shake hands with the police to be able to continue operating; Hiba has her shoulders down because she is alone managing the much work she does in Tangier with migrants.

The control mechanisms they experience can also be reproduced in the non-linear – and obviously unequal – relationships between solidarity workers and migrants. These relationships are based on power asymmetries with the solidarity person on one side, intent on offering support, and the migrant person on the other, blocked in the movement intent and lacking access to a series of necessary services. The violent, tense, and controlling context in which both move pushes them to reproduce dynamics of oppression in their relationship.

Various solidarity associations in the area register and document the people who benefit from their service and share data with local authorities, including people who are irregular in the territory or politically sensitive situations. In this way, they participate in the apparatus of control and monitoring

[9] Fieldwork notes, Michela Lovato, Oujda, January 2025.

of illegalised bodies. This collaboration, motivated by the necessity to negotiate with the hostile context, creates a situation where even solidarity entities somehow participate in border logics.

The logics of oppression are reproduced in spaces dedicated to welcoming and deconstructing the border. From a symbolic perspective, we grasp the meaning assumed by the small ticket that migrants need to access the church's reception, which was mentioned earlier. During the Oujda Workshop, the different dimensions of the lived border also touched on the experience of entering the Church, which is precluded without the presence of the *papier* – which somehow recalls the mechanisms of selection and exclusion of the border.

These contradictions also emerge in daily interactions. Solidarity workers find themselves reproducing hierarchies in defining priorities, allocating limited resources, and constructing categories of deservingness for aid. The very decision about who can access certain services or which narratives of suffering are considered legitimate reflects power dynamics that replicate, albeit in an attenuated form, the discriminatory logics of the border.

6. Discourses and solidarity practices in Oujda

In Oujda, my ethnographic research is based on encounters with three experiences of solidarity associations. To keep anonymity, I have chosen not to report the names of the associations, activists, or their specific activities. These three entities have been operating for several years in Oujda regarding migration issues, supporting migrants and their families, and carrying out advocacy activities. In this section, I reflect on the different positionings of solidarity proposed by the associations, based on the different symbols they employ.

The first time I met the three solidarity organisations on which I base my field research in Oujda, I was struck in all three cases by contextual elements. The first association arranged to meet me in a café in the centre of Oujda: a predominantly male, traditional Moroccan establishment. I met two activists there while drinking coffee: my attention was caught by a depiction on the side wall, showing Africa drawn with roses and a quote from King Mohammed VI about the sense of Africanity. *Whenever I travel around Africa, I feel at home*. We subsequently moved to the association's premises, where the walls were covered with posters against Frontex and the European borders were closed in French.

The second association welcomes me in an office that displays writings mainly in Arabic, including pro-Palestine flyers, and photos of Moroccan political opponents – I linger on the photo of a "martyr of Agadir," a trade unionist who died in unclear circumstances in the '80s, a well-known political opponent during the years of lead. In the third association, among the posted manifestos, I noticed international activists like Malala and Gandhi and the photo of Helena Maleno, with her quote on freedom of movement. Maleno was expelled from Morocco in 2021 for her activism in defence of migrants' rights, after suffering physical violence and judicial attacks for her work.

The visual imagery characterising each space is key to understanding how solidarity towards migrants intertwines with other struggles and claims. In the first case, what immediately strikes me is the ease with which the association chooses to meet us in a downtown café, openly discussing their work. In a context like Morocco, occupying public space in this way means deliberately exposing oneself to others' gaze and hearing. The predominant narrative that emerges from the association's discourse articulates around a pointed critique of European States' responsibilities in the structural violence of migration borders, while highlighting Morocco's vulnerability to neocolonial dynamics that permeate

current geopolitical relations. This position is in line with an institutional discourse that does not question Morocco's role in border violence, but rather denounces how European externalisation policies perpetuate mechanisms of colonial pressure on the country and violence against migrants.

The references of the second association, on the other hand, take a different direction, placing the defence of migrants' rights within the broader context of opposition to Morocco's policies of internal repression and denial of human rights. The cultural references cited evoke the Arab community identity, claiming national political figures and embracing the Palestinian struggle, placing the migration issue within a broader political and social rights narrative. The exclusive use of Arabic indicates that their interlocutor is the Moroccan state, which is also contested for its ambiguous policy on violence in Gaza.

The third association seems to be moving towards a broader community identity that transcends national borders and places the struggle for migrants within the universalist politics of human rights. Its narrative is based on international political and cultural references, invoking international symbols of human rights, with a more decisive stance through the photo of Helena Maleno, a figure publicly rejected by the Moroccan authorities.

In this sense, the demand for migrants' rights, in various experiences of solidarity, fits coherently into broader demands and political perspectives: for national rights and political autonomy, against neocolonialism and asymmetrical relations with European states, and for constructing transnational solidarity networks to protect human rights.

7. Conclusions

The fourth node of the Moroccan Antenna of the Solroutes project is based on a field experience conducted in Oujda, aimed at exploring the dynamics between solidarity, border apparatus, and migrations. The adopted methodology combined traditional ethnographic methods with workshop-based research practices, organized with people on the move and solidarity workers, following the Theatre of the Oppressed methods. Through participatory methods, this allowed for the observation of the complex dynamics of oppression reproduced in the border context.

The border indeed configures itself as a space where different systems of oppression operating in society intersect and overlap, involving various actors, including migrants and solidarity workers, in networks of asymmetrical relationships. This report represents a starting point for such reflections requiring further investigation. It is essential to analyse the dynamics of oppression more deeply through an intersectional lens, examining how elements such as class, racial identity, gender, and other factors can influence and stratify border experiences. Furthermore, how dynamics of oppression are reproduced within different groups of actors: consider, for example, activism with a system of oppression, or migration. This analysis must also include a critical reflection on our positioning as researchers: how do we fit into the dynamics of oppression that characterize the field? How are we impacted by them, and how, consciously or unconsciously, do we become part of them?

The doctoral thesis will provide the space to develop these reflections, exploring the contradictions and complexities of solidarity in border contexts. Thus, it will contribute to understanding the interrelations between resistance practices, control mechanisms, and power dynamics that characterize contemporary border spaces.

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