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Encounters with the Spanish Guardia Civil at a Border Crossing in Melilla

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Barak Kalir



State officials in securitized migratory fields – such as: border controls, detention and deportation units, combatting trafficking, etc. – operate regularly with a strong conviction that no outsider knows better than they how to perform their job. As state-securitized operations often tread thin ethical lines, involve “sensitive” maneuvers, and are based on guarded know-how, it is preferable and easy for officials to fence off attempts at studying their work.

Frustrated attempts at studying state securitized migratory operations have taught me that formal requests for collaboration mostly go unanswered or are simply turned down. But I have also learned that face-to-face interactions with officials can dramatically influence the chances for getting access.

Plus, there is yet another factor that determines the chance of getting access to the field. Chance. Getting lucky. It is something we rarely discuss, for obvious reasons. Luck does not lend itself to sophisticated theorization, neither can it be put in methodology books or research proposals as it sounds unserious and even stupid to base your fieldwork on chance. Yet, as all of us who managed access to difficult fields know all too well, to some extent, often to a crucial extent, we just got lucky. That is not to say that we didn't ceaselessly try to get access by all kinds of formal and informal means. It simply means that without that breakthrough, which was largely a matter of chance – often in the form of an unexpected face-to-face interaction – we would have probably not made it. At least not in the form and to the extent that we eventually managed to make it.

Let me illustrate this “getting lucky” dynamic with an anecdotal scene from my recent visit to the border fence around Melilla, the Spanish enclave and more recently autonomous city in North Africa. In the past two years, I have been studying the Spanish deportation regime mainly with national police units in Madrid and Barcelona, where most detentions and deportations take place. To the border of Melilla I went as a tourist – who does not need formal permission to visit – after my formal fieldwork had been completed. I was planning on simply observing firsthand some of the places that came up in the narratives of some interlocutors.

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One morning I went to observe the traffic around the *Paso Fronterizo Barrio Chino* that connects Melilla to Beni Ansar on the Moroccan side. Almost every day, thousands of *porteadoras* cross from Melilla to Beni Asnar carrying huge bales of goods on their backs. *Porteadoras* are Moroccan citizens, mostly poor women, working for wholesalers who pay them around 3–5 Euro per 50–80kg bale that they bring into Morocco as “private luggage”. A bilateral agreement between Spain and Morocco stipulates that any luggage that is carried on crossers’ body is tax-free. As Melilla is a tax-free city, the prices of clothes and household items are often considerably cheaper in Spain and thus make for an attractive import to the Moroccan market. Orchestrating and keeping the order at the *Barrio Chino* are dozens of *Guardia Civil* officers.



Porteadoras at the crossing border of Barrio Chino in Melilla (Photo: Barak Kalir)

Getting out of a taxi, I started walking towards an open field where I spotted a group of men who were sitting on the ground, encircled by a few *Guardia Civil* officers. A voice from behind ordered me to stop – an officer kindly asking where I was heading to. “Just walking around”, I said. The officer asked for my ID, which I readily provided. He inquired about my intentions, now more specifically asking if I were a journalist or an NGO worker. “An ordinary tourist curious to see the border crossing”, I explained. The officer told me that the open field where the men were sitting was a closed military area. I looked surprised, remarking that there were no signs to this effect anywhere to be seen. He insisted but told me politely that I could go anywhere I wanted towards the other direction.

I walked another 100 meters and stopped to watch the long line of *porteadoras*. At a certain point, I took out my mobile phone and started taking photos. Within 15 seconds, another officer walked up to me. He aggressively demanded my ID and angrily asked what I was photographing. I explained that I was taking photos of the *porteadoras*. “Would you have liked to be photographed if you were there in line with a bale on your back?”, he rhetorically and hostilely asked. He then threw my ID at me and walked away not before shouting at me that taking photos of the women was strictly forbidden. Important to note: photos of *porteadoras* are widely published in the Spanish press as well as other media outlets.

I walked a few meters further and stopped under the shadow of a lone tree, observing the long line of *porteadoras*. Within less than a minute a third officer came up to me. When he asked what I was doing, I sarcastically asked whether the *Guardia Civil* had any form of communication between officers because he was the third one who approached me with the same questions within the space of

200 meters and in less than 10 minutes. He insisted on me answering his question and providing my ID. “So you are from Holland, ah?”, he moved his eyes from the ID card to my face a few times. “Yes”, I muttered and asked him if it was so exceptional that someone like me came to the Barrio Chino to observe this border spectacle. “Oh, you think it’s spectacular?”, the officer admonishingly asked and then added: “I think that it’s shameful.” “Me too!”, I quickly seized on the opportunity to be on the same side with the officer. “I meant that it’s a shameful spectacle but a very interesting one to observe firsthand, don’t you agree?” I was hoping to prolong the conversation in this direction. I’m not too sure what it was, but the officer abruptly changed his tone of voice and began talking to me as if we were old friends. In the next few minutes he explained to me the ins and outs of the business around the porteadoras, the bribe that the wholesalers need to pay to the Moroccan border police, the competition that the old women nowadays face from young unemployed men, the routine of checking the bales for drugs, and so on. We had a lively conversation and seemed to agree that this was a type of shameful modern semi-slavery. Feeling it was an opportune moment, I told the officer that this was the reason why I wanted so much to take photos of this phenomenon. He nodded in understanding and casually said: “Well, if you want you can take photos of the women.” Finding it hard to believe, I carefully confirmed that it was permitted for me to take photos. “Sure, no problems. The only thing is that you are not allowed to have any of us in your photos.” I nodded in agreement and said I had no intention of photographing the Guardia Civil. “Then it’s fine, go ahead”, he encouraged me. I pulled out my phone and started to take photos before heading further east towards the revolving door at the border entrance.

A few meters further I stopped to watch how the porteadoras pushed their bale across the border gate to someone on the Moroccan side, then tried to get back as quickly as possible to the Spanish territory to start another round with a new bale. Within a few minutes another officer approached me. I was asked the exact same questions and was ordered to provide my ID. This time the officer took my ID and went into a checkpoint where I could see him reading out my details into his walkie-talkie. After a while he approached me demanding in an authoritarian voice that I explained my intentions and asking if I took photos. I said I did but only of porteadoras and with the permission of his colleague. “You are only allowed to take photos with permission form headquarter or from me, the commander at the border. I don’t care what anyone else said to you.” Next, the commander forced me to erase all the photos on my phone. He then threatened me that if anything would appear on Facebook, Instagram, or in the newspapers, he would know how to find me. He gave me back my ID and ordered me to leave the border crossing site.

Luckily, this was just a touristy anecdote with no serious repercussions for my, by then, completed fieldwork in Spain. Luckily, I could easily recover the deleted photos on my (very smart) phone. I walked away thinking about the open-endedness of face-to-face encounters, even with military officers of the same unit who supposedly enforce clear and strict rules at this border crossing. 300 meters, 30 minutes, 4 encounters, and a world of difference in how my access to this “field” could potentially look like. Satisfying or not, we must come to terms with the fact that next to all our hard work, preparation, planning, and strategizing, we all can use a stroke of luck.

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This is a shortened version of a [post](#) published on 17 November 2017 on the [Border Criminologies Blog](#) in the themed series on “Accessing the Migration Apparatus” organized by [Damian Rosset](#) and [Christin Achermann](#), University of Neuchatel and nccr – on the move. The series originates from a panel that took place during the 2017 [IMISCOE Annual Conference in Rotterdam](#). It reflects on the way access shapes the researchers’ position and the scientific knowledge they produce.



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