



Yto Barrada, Ferry boat Tanger-Algeciras (Fonds National des Arts Contemporains, France).

# The Mediterranean, Frontier or Intersection?

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Although Mediterraneity, as a collective identity construct, is not confined to a state of precise limits, does not exist, the fantasy of believing ourselves to be Mediterraneans is very attractive. The Mediterranean identity can be detected in small things, apparently simple but that determine our lifestyle, such as a sauce. However, immigrants of the southern shore who attempt to reach the northern shore of this sea have no awareness of this identity construct. For them, the Mediterranean is rather a frontier, the limit that stops their longings, the hopes to attain a better future. Thus, the waters of this sea have become a deposit of bodies we should not turn our back on if we want to build a dignified society.

The Mediterranean does not exist. This is the conclusion we reach immediately if we try to define the nature of being Mediterraneans. It is risky to think that the geographical area around this vast extension of water is something more than the juxtaposition of its different regions. How can Mediterraneity be defined? What does it involve? We do not know; like any other collective identity construct not limited to a state of precise limits, Mediterraneity does not exist. Nevertheless, the fantasy of being Mediterranean is attractive, the broad mirror in which so many inhabitants from such different places can see ourselves reflected... It is a legitimate and very human longing to want to belong to a group that goes beyond ourselves or our immediate landscape, which embraces far more than the small world in which we live. But can we dare to define what we have in common without this ending up as a tourist brochure or a report in *National Geographic* and without avoiding hackneyed stereotypes? As a writer who thinks about identities I ask myself: does

this common essence exist? I tell myself that we must flee from essentialisms, which are by definition damaging and harmful and usually no more than weapons to perpetuate subordination. However, the image of the Mediterranean is so suggestive... This image does exist, forms part of our imagination, of an imaginary made of highly quotidian intangibles. The elements that come to mind when we try to define this belonging have to do with the light, the landscape, cuisine or climate. The Mediterranean character is detected in small things, in those apparently secondary elements that greatly determine our lifestyle, our characters and our day to day. But perhaps we only detect this reality because we have learnt to do so. Who knows if the tourist advertising does not condition our way of seeing the sea we are discussing here. The Mediterranean identity, although it does not exist, would fulfil all the characteristics of any healthy collective identity: it is neither granitic nor hermetic and we do not know exactly where it begins and where it ends, at what

point we can say that something has ceased to be or started to be Mediterranean. Moreover, like any other joint construct, it is experienced differently by each of the individuals who live in this geographical area.

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Clearly, this vision of Mediterraneity is the one we have on the northern shore; it is a construct created, taught and disseminated from the northern shore and for the northern shore. As someone who comes from the south I can assure you: down there we have never heard of the Mediterranean, we have never been asked if we were Mediterraneans or not. The first time we were aware of the existence of a shared sea was thanks to the ferry company, Transmediterránea, which was going to carry us from one shore to the other on our first crossing, and also through the corridor with the name of the sea in question and that we would use for the long crossings to our host country. We immigrants and children of immigrants coming and going along the peninsular coast every year barely had any Mediterranean awareness. For us, the small town we came from and the one where we spent most of the year were significant, but we took the journey between these two towns through lands where we did not identify with anything we could define as Mediterranean. On motorway signs and service areas there is barely a whiff of the Mediterranean. On the route there were more elements for us to feel part of the patria of immigrants than to discover we were Mediterraneans. Nevertheless, we children of immigration have sought out this common element that unites all the countries around this sea; we find the notion conciliatory and are enthusiastic when we visit El Empordá and recognise the

barren landscape of our infancy, or when we go to Majorca and get excited by the almond, fig and carob trees. Also when we learn about other cuisines and we remember our mothers telling us that we, as people from the Riff, do not cook like Arabs, and we understand that they were referring to an element as particular and Mediterranean as the sauce.

However, despite the temptation of this notion of belonging, we know very well that there is only one Mediterranean. For decades now other immigrants less fortunate than us, different simply because they lack a piece of paper, discovered that the Mediterranean is a frontier, the limit that puts a stop to their longings, the hopes of reaching a better world. For some time now the waters of this sea have not stopped spilling bodies onto its peaceful southern shores, the bodies returned from the north of all those who paid with their lives for the great crime of being a pioneer thirsty for hope, of being youths who want to work. The mothers down there have discovered at last that it is a sea of fear: that terrible space the children dare to challenge and from which many do not return. My generation and those who have come after have grown up and become adults with the images of bodies floating in the sea, a bloodbath that we have been repeatedly told had no solution. They now say the same about those fleeing war and they are received with tear gas. Nevertheless, later we will travel to the south and praise the hospitality characteristic of the place. What exoticism!

I wonder: is it really so? Is it true that there is no alternative and that this is the only way we have of existing? Of course not. Clearly, the Mediterranean could be far more than a mass grave of the desperate and the hopeful; if it is for the inhabitants of the north, who only have the possibility of dying by accident, it should also be so for those of the south. The Mediterranean could be something else because, in fact, it was not that long ago. When I was young,

during the 1980s, the bilateral agreements between Spain and Morocco allowed you to cross the border with a simple passport. There were no fences in Melilla, nor so many queues to enter Europe, nor so many bureaucratic impediments. Naturally, neither were people drowning because they were stopped from entering. Now we are told that things are much more complicated, that they cannot let everyone enter, and they anaesthetise our empathy with the dead with phantoms of mass invasions. From here we have been complicit in this misfortune, simply with our silence.

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But what changed? Why from a certain moment did it become impossible to cross the Straight from below without an infinite stream of red tape? What happened to us in the south for us to suddenly become such suspicious individuals, so potentially dangerous? Very simple: we became Europeans, we gave up part of our Mediterraneity to become citizens of the north. From the moment we started looking towards our neighbours above the Pyrenees we started to see ourselves more like them than like those below. I have grown up with this vision of things and, obedient, I believed it: we, they told me, are a democratic country, and religion is separate from the state, not like you. We have left behind machismos that we have now almost eradicated, and that in your societies are still apparent. We have killed the

patriarchy. We have no corruption, not like in your countries, where you cannot do anything other than through bribery. For us freedom is sacred, not like for you, who are still submissive and do not value it.

Unfortunately, the crisis of the last few years has put all our shames, those here on the northern shore, on the table and has revealed, as if someone had suddenly switched on a light in a dark room, that all these highly southern Mediterranean elements are also in the north. Although some are determined to tell us that we are like Denmark.

So the political construction of a united Europe directly influences this idea of the Mediterranean and how we relate to it. Perhaps we have decided that, as the Europeans that we are, we must distance ourselves from these roots that would make us more North African than Scandinavian? I do not know, but I do know that this political construct has a lot to do with what is happening today and what has happened over the last few decades in the Mediterranean. The conflict does not, of course, lie in the Union as such, but in how it has been constructed. Making Morocco or Turkey the frontier of Europe without demanding from these two countries democratic guarantees and the dignified treaties supposedly defended by European ideals is a perversion and a crack in the very foundations underpinning this construct. The dead of today and yesterday are no accident; they are not the result of nothing. And, of course, they are more than avoidable.

European humanitarian ideals become meaningless if they are at the cost of shipwrecked people. If we turn our back on what happens beyond and within its limits, it is impossible to construct a dignified society.