Living and dying in transit

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Publication date:
2025

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

LIVING AND DYING IN TRANSIT

VIOLENCE, BODIES AND SURVIVAL IN THE TUNISIAN BORDERLANDS

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PhD Dissertation 2025

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Photo by Aphinya Jatuparisakull

Ahlam Chemlali holds a BSc in Biomedical Science and MSc in Health Science with a specialization in Conflict and Health from the University of Copenhagen. Prior to her PhD, Chemlali spent nearly a decade at DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture, working on issues related to torture, violence, and human rights across Sub-Saharan Africa, the MENA region, and South Asia.

Since 2021, Ahlam Chemlali has been affiliated with the research group and international graduate program Global Refugee Studies at Aalborg University, teaching courses on migration, borders, violence, gender, and social science methods.

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Ahlam Chemlali was awarded the Elite Researcher Travel Grant in 2023 supporting her research stay at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and Yale University.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

As always, there are so many people to thank. First and foremost, the people in Tunisia, especially all the women I had the honor of getting to know, to whom I am deeply indebted. Thank you for trusting me with your stories, for your time, generosity, and honesty. This work has been carried out with deep respect and admiration for your resilience and your struggles for a better life. I have done my best to honor your lives and your stories in these pages, and I carry them with me always. To the many gatekeepers, friends, and colleagues 'on the ground' who opened doors and helped me make sense of things during turbulent and unpredictable times, you have become dear friends and comrades. Mariem Koudhaï, Adnen El Ghali, Hajar Araissia, Dr. Mongi Slim, Rachid Koraichi, Papa Abdallah, Yousra, Chams, Samir, Bourassine, Ahmed, and so many others I cannot name here, alf alf shoukran.

Thank you to my supervisor, Steffen Jensen and my co-supervisor Sine Plambech. I owe a special thanks to Steffen, who, beyond being a generous and supportive supervisor, has consistently gone above and beyond in his role as a mentor, colleague, and friend over the past 15 years. Steffen has offered me countless opportunities for collaboration and critical engagement, and over the years has instilled in me a great deal of confidence as a young scholar, which has meant the world to me. I look forward to continuing to build on this foundation in the future. Thank you, Sine, for contributing to my understanding of the structural dynamics within academia, insights that have shaped my own vision of the kind of academic I strive to become. I was also fortunate to have Hans Lucht as my 'unofficial official' supervisor who stepped in at a crucial moment in my PhD, when I returned from the field disillusioned. Thank you for helping me make sense of my data and, most importantly, perhaps even without knowing it, boosting my confidence in writing ethnography. It has been a privilege to learn from you.

I am thankful to my two research institutions: DIIS – Danish Institute for International Studies, and Aalborg University. At DIIS, I am especially grateful to my colleagues in the migration unit for always having an open door. Thank you to Ida Marie Vammen, Lars Erslev Andersen, Ninna Nyberg Sørensen, Nauja Kleist, Yang Jian, and Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde. I have also enjoyed many conversations, lunches, and laughs over the years with wonderful colleagues including Mona Sheikh, Marie Kolling, Finn Stepputat, Peter Albrecht, Dino Krause and many others. A special thanks goes to Sylvia Enøe, Ricki Merz, and Maiken Bjerrum, for all your help and assistance, from finances and IT to finding the right books, always done with a smile. Special shout-out to the PhDs at DIIS and our "shut up and write" sessions, which carried me through some intense periods. Sofie Henriksen, Alberte Bové Rud,

Sarah Seddig, Fannie Agerschou-Madsen, Karen Philippa Larsen, and Valentina Massone, it has been an absolute delight to be on this marathon together. I am especially thankful to Sofie, for finding amusement in the absurdities and the baby walk-and-talks by the sea.

I was honored to receive funding from the Independent Research Fund Denmark, as well as the EliteForsk travel grant, which made it possible for me to undertake research stays at UCLA and Yale University. My time at UCLA was particularly rewarding. I had the space to write and think, and I returned feeling inspired and full of new ideas for my research and work ahead. This was thanks to the many people I was fortunate to get to know during my stay. My sincere and heartfelt gratitude goes to Aomar Boum for being such a supportive mentor. Thank you for opening my eyes to new ways of thinking and disseminating knowledge, it has been a true privilege to learn from you. A very special thanks to Norma Mendoza-Denton, Laurie Kain Hart, and Philippe Bourgois. Thank you for being so welcoming, not just to me, but to my family as well, and for your encouragement, generous feedback, and the many lovely dinners. Beyond being brilliant scholars, you are, most importantly, kind, thoughtful, and fun human beings. To Jason Throop, Cecilia Menjívar, Jason De León, Roger Waldinger, Gail Kligman, and many others, thank you for engaging with my work, for your time, and for the insightful conversations. I hope to return one day

Beyond these academic institutions, I have been so fortunate to meet people through serendipitous encounters, people who, over the years, have inspired me, helped me, pushed me, and guided me. Yumna Masarwa, Henrik Rønsbo, Rikke Haugbølle, Zina Weisner, Ida Vandsøe Madsen, Anna Simone Reumert, Eva Melstrom, Kheira Arrouche, Nabil Ferdaussi, Amelia Frank-Vitale, and Wendy Vogt, thank you. It has been a joy and a privilege to get to know you, and I truly hope our relationships will continue to grow. I am deeply indebted to Gabriella Sanchez, not only for introducing me to many of the wonderful people just mentioned, but also for how much you have helped me navigate academia. You have included me, connected me with others, invited me to talks and workshops in El Paso and the Sonoran Desert, involved me in papers and special issues, and opened countless doors and opportunities. You have shown me what true generosity in academia can look like, and for that I am immensely grateful. I only hope to one day be in a position to reciprocate.

Lastly, to my family. Although my father passed long before I ever considered pursuing a PhD, in many ways, he guided me toward it. From a very young age, social justice and curiosity about the world were values instilled in us. You always said, *whatever you do, do something of use to others*. And although you are no longer here physically, your presence continues to guide me, leaving traces along the way, like the opening poem by Lisan ad-Din, which I recently discovered in one of your old notebooks, as if you

had written it down for me to find. Shoukran baba, this dissertation is dedicated to you.

To my dear mother, you will never read anything I write, but you inspire every word of it. As I've grown older, I've come to understand more and more just how much you've done, for me, for us, and for our family. Your migration story, your struggles, and your resilience are woven into every page of this work. I wouldn't be here without your love and belief in me. To my brother Mohamed and my sister Hanan, I love you. Hanan, thank you for being my best friend and life witness. I am forever grateful for you, and I would be lost without you. Your softness inspires me daily. Never change - *courage!*

To my boys, Salik and Isak, my sun and moon, you are my everything. Thank you for the constant interruptions and joyful disruptions, for slowing me down, and for reminding me of what truly matters in life. I love you beyond words. To my husband, Sulejman, the biggest of thanks. Not only for our beautiful, wild boys, and for being the most loving and present father, but for standing by my side through it all and for believing in me. Your unwavering support, quiet strength, and incredible patience carried me through some of the hardest moments. Without you, none of this would have been possible.

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You are not from the castle, you are not from the village, you are nothing at all
Franz Kafka, The Castle, 1926

My tormenter came in the darkness of dusk
Appearing like a glowing star in the horizon
I said such a lovely visit
Don't you fear to wander in the darkness of night?
She replied with tears in her eyes
Those who wander in the seas fear not drowning

Lisan ad-Din Ibn al-Khatib, 14th Century

PROLOGUE: CIRCULATIONS IN TRANSIT

I stood pushing my son Salik on the swings at 'Ice Park'; a playground in La Marsa that despite its name was a lush, green space filled with trees and the scent of flowers from a nearby market. It was around ten in the morning and I had taken him out to play so my husband could get some well-deserved rest. Salik was obsessed with the swings. He could sit on one for hours, laughing as I pushed him back and forth. It was a simple, rhythmic motion, push, laughter, push, laughter; our own quiet ritual.

I was still only weeks into my fieldwork, but I could feel I needed a break. This place had become familiar. Nearby, a small amusement park buzzed with life: teenagers skipping school, couples stealing kisses under trees, families picnicking in the shade. Occasionally I would meet other expat parents, exchange stories about their challenges of raising children in Tunisia. Public parks were sparse, so we came here often.

As I was pushing, and making funny faces at Salik, my phone vibrated in my pocket. Once. Then again. And again. A persistent buzz. Assuming it was a call, I ignored it at first, but then saw it was a series of WhatsApp messages from Ahmed, a Tunisian friend.

'Sbah el kheir Ahlam' (good morning, Ahlam) 'I'm sorry to send you such awful news this early in the morning'.

The next message: 'This. Just hit the news'.

The next message, a link, followed. Reluctantly, I clicked on it.

Violence and death were omnipresent. If they weren't happening, they were being talked about; from the banal to the spectacular. Sure enough, a gruesome crime had taken place. The link detailed the discovery of a mutilated body in a bloody plastic bag in Le Kram, a working-class neighbourhood of Tunis. It was summarily dismissed by the media as an 'exotic African juju-case'. The victim was presumed to be a 'young sub-Saharan woman in her twenties'. The police's immediate suggestion? An 'African imprint', and there was mention of 'black magic and witchcraft'. The case was quickly closed. What I didn't realize then was that this case was to become pivotal for my research and would follow me across Tunisia, from the northern suburbs of Tunis to the southern Saharan hinterlands. The police labelled it an 'inside job', migrant-on-migrant crime. But it was more than that. It was a case of brutality, of impunity, of bodies that disappear and reappear only as cautionary tales among the migrant communities. It blurred the line between the everyday and the horrific, between sensationalized violence and the quiet, persistent violence that stayed in the shadows.

I couldn't shake the image of her, the dismembered, nameless body wrapped in plastic. And neither could the women I spoke to in the following days and weeks. In Bhar Lazreg the case lingered in the air, spoken about in beauty salons, in kitchens, in fearful whispers. I left for the south and some weeks later reached Medénine. There

Awa Touré, a migrant woman I met, mentioned the case out of the blue, during a conversation. In fact, she knew the woman. I was stunned. Awa had texted with her just days before she was killed, grown uneasy when she stopped replying. Her name was Valentina Logbo. She was from Akoupé-Zeudji just outside Abidjan, the same small village as Awa. Like many of the other women she lived and worked informally and tried to send money back home. She had worked as a maid for a wealthy Tunisian family in Tunis. But Awa said she was treated badly and wanted to leave. The dismembered body had a name. Valentina Logbo.

The Ivorian women I spoke to all told the same the story: that it was a Tunisian who had done this. Some suggested it had to do with her wanting to leave, or even an affair or jealousy. They had heard too many stories like this, of migrant women beaten, raped, murdered; their disappearances met with silence. *'Ici, c'est la vie pour nous',* Awa told me. *'Ils nous traitent comme des animaux… des sauvages'* (Here, this is life for us. They treat us like animals… like savages). The Ivorian women stuck in Medénine had made a small commemoration for her and Awa had tried to reach her family back home, to be the bearer of bad news.

Although it was a particularly heinous crime, a spectacular and extreme act of violence, it was woven into everyday life. This made me think of all the violence that takes place far away from the border. The case speaks to the fact that a space of transit is not just one of movement across cities and borders; it's also a space of movement and circulation of bodies, dead and alive; of stories, rumours and distrust; of remembrance and solidarity; and a space where certain bodies became disposable. In transit bodies speak. Even dead bodies have agency and can mobilize, as the dead bodies washing ashore do by making the invisible visible.

That day on the swings, Valentina Logbo spoke.

1 INTRODUCTION: INTO THE SHADOWS

Chaque jour est une question de survie.
C'est quelque chose très quotidien, très quotidien. Nos vies ne valent rien ici. [1]
- Françoise, Bhar Lazreg

This is something we feel. I can't explain it, but we are feeling it every day.
- Samir, Zarzis

This dissertation explores life and death in transit within the Tunisian borderlands through a bottom-up and gendered lens. I argue that violence in the borderlands is neither random nor meaningless but the effects of intentional and carefully designed European border externalization policies. By outsourcing border control to North Africa Europe has also externalized violence and death. This strategy keeps suffering far from its own borders, out of sight and out of mind while trapping and containing people on the move, pushing them into the shadows. My study makes visible the cascading consequences of this political phenomenon, exposing how European border externalization shapes and endangers the lives and bodies of those in the borderlands.

To unpack these dynamics, I investigate what I call the 'ripple effects' of border externalization that cast shadows over the borderlands. These shadows creep into cities, neighbourhoods, alleys and rooms. They slip between people and conversations, they become as intimate as a kiss. They carry with them the stealthy and invisible dimensions of the border spectacle. In the suburbs north of Tunis, the liminal spaces of Medénine and Zarzis, and the frontline of Sfax, invisible deaths and slow violence, ordinary, mundane, everyday violence and struggle, take place daily, out of sight of, but bearing the stamp of the border. These are not the well-documented deaths at sea or at physical border crossings but the consequence of immobility, poverty and neglect: falls from scaffolding, untreated illness, gas poisoning, backstreet abortions. Violence shaped by structural inequalities, marginality and abandonment. This dissertation shifts focus from the spectacular to the everyday, from visible crisis to hidden suffering. It explores violence that is diffuse and difficult to trace back to a single policy, state or oppressor, but is intricately linked to European border policies.

[1] 'Every day is a question of survival. It's something very everyday, very everyday. Our lives are worth nothing'.

Tunisia, located along the central Mediterranean migration route connecting Africa to Europe has recently surpassed Libya to become the main 'transit country' in North Africa, placing it at the heart of EU migration policy (CSIS 2025; Carnegie 2024). Tunisia has developed into a crucial laboratory for the European Union's border externalization, where enforcement strategies and technologies, on land and at sea, are tested (Naceur 2021; Garelli & Tazziolli 2017). This dissertation investigates how these policies shape local and gendered experiences and the ways in which violence manifests in the borderlands by asking: How do migrants and local actors navigate and negotiate everyday violence and border externalization in the Tunisian borderlands?

By doing so I aim to contribute new insights into Europe's expanding borders in North Africa, the human consequences and how new strategies for survival emerge and are negotiated. The migration policies, both European and Tunisian, are the constant backdrop and background to this dissertation. In the foreground I have placed the people, migrants and locals, and their everyday lives and lived experiences. While focus is on the ripple effects of EU externalization, I also aim to explore the internalization of these policies, their entanglement with Tunisian domestic policies and the increasingly hostile treatment of migrants 'stuck in transit'.

This study follows two main tracks. One examines how people navigate and negotiate violence in the borderlands through a gendered, embodied and localized lens. The other explores the spatial dimensions of transit, interrogating the spaces and places that make up movement and immobility in the borderlands. By analysing confinement beyond the carceral system, in the form of 'stuckness' and immobility, this study challenges the notion of transit as a linear passage of movement. Instead, it asks: How can we conceptually reimagine spaces of transit?

To engage with this question, I look at transit both empirically and conceptually, recognizing it as a crucial lens through which to understand the borderlands. I examine how Tunisia has become a space of transit, how people navigate this space, and how my fieldwork and ethnographic analysis can approach these questions from below. My ethnographic approach bridges the micro and macro, foregrounding the lived and embodied experiences of migrants while situating them within broader structural forces. Guided by this framework, my research questions are as follows:

I. How do West African migrant women navigate everyday life in the Tunisian borderlands?
II. How can we understand violence in contemporary migration management?
III. How can we reimagine spaces of transit under global border regimes?

In my quest to analyse the consequences of border externalization I follow the lead of Ghassan Hage who speaks of a 'forensic ethos' that manifests in certain forms of feminist, colonial and Marxist analysis (Hage 2018). '*It is an ethos that is more Columbo than Hercule Poirot in that we know from the start who the murderer is'* (ibid.) The point Hage makes is not to find out *who*, but find out *how*. This distinction shapes my approach: rather than focusing on the EU policies themselves, I examine their consequences, the ripple effects, and how these effects seep into the social fabric, shaping the everyday, the intimate, the body.

Drawing on insights from anthropology, geography and feminist geopolitics, this study investigates how both migrants and locals in Tunisia experience and navigate the complex ripple effects of European border externalization. Taking a feminist, bottom-up approach to migration and transit, I aim to contribute to both migration and critical borders studies as well as contribute to a feminist geography of the border (Hyndman 2000, 2004). Specifically, I draw on feminist geopolitics, a field that has long examined how political relations take shape and are challenged within everyday, embodied spaces (Hyndman 2004; Williams & Massaro 2013) to examine how border externalization materializes in migrant bodies and in transit spaces. This allows me to bridge the intimate, local, national and global, contributing to an embodied feminist geopolitics of borders that places bodily experiences at the centre of analysis (Hyndman 2012; Massaro & Williams 2013; Vogt 2018). Additionally, by reframing transit as not just a space of passage but also one of confinement, this dissertation contributes to carceral geography and expands the discussion on marginality, carcerality and confinement beyond prisons and camps (Jefferson, Turner & Jensen 2019).

While much scholarship on border externalization, defined as the outsourcing of migration control to non-EU countries through partnership agreements, funding, and capacity-building to deter migrants from reaching European territory, has taken a state-centric or 'top-down' approach (Lemberg-Pedersen 2019; Cuttitta 2020; Cobarrubias et al. 2023), my study adopts a 'bottom-up' perspective. By foregrounding the lived experiences of migrants, it examines how externalization policies unfold on the ground, producing ripple effects. This approach allows for an exploration of the ways in which macro-structural policies materialize in micro-level interactions, shaping everyday life in the Tunisian borderlands. Rather than viewing externalization solely as a set of policy agreements, this study interrogates its manifestation in daily struggles, precarity and strategies of survival.

My dissertation suggests that life in transit is neither brief nor fixed; it stretches across spaces, from Tunisia's fringes to Europe's margins. Transit is not self-contained but reflects multiple trajectories shaped by spatial dynamics such as dispersal, or detours when migrants are re-routed back to Tunisia after being captured at sea illustrating how transit operates across scales, time and space. It juxtaposes spaces that

feel both carceral and limiting while simultaneously bursting with the potential for movement.

Building on the logic of the 'violence continuum' (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004) and the 'carceral continuum' (Moran 2015; Foucault 1979), my thinking initially took me towards a 'transit continuum'. In this framework, violence and carcerality intersect with movement and stuckness, challenging the notion of transit as a linear or one-dimensional space. Instead, transit unfolds along a continuum, encompassing both mobility and stasis, freedom and constraint, demanding a more fluid and dynamic understanding. I now see transit as an ever-shifting interaction of individuals, policies, spaces and material conditions, a complex root system rather than a fixed structure. Rethinking transit in this way, allows us to see transit as a fluid, relational process rather than a static category. A central ambition for this dissertation is to shift focus from the sensational 'border spectacle' (De Genova 2013) to the mundane and everyday. Though it may seem paradoxical to examine both the mundane and violence, my central argument is that this very tension defines contemporary borderlands, where violence and death are not anomalies but embedded in daily life. I contend that violence must be understood as an everyday condition of contemporary migration management, blurring the line between the exceptional and the routine. Rather than focusing solely on crises or visible suffering, this study traces the ripple effects of externalization as they extend into cities, homes and intimate spaces in the looming shadow of the border. As the opening quote states, 'this is something we feel', in bodies, hearts and minds, not just at the border but woven into the very fabric of everyday life in the borderlands.

While mindful of voyeurism and sensationalism, I recognize the importance of shedding light on violence. It is happening and ignoring it raises questions: if we don't write about it, then how can it be understood? But writing about violence and migrant women does present ethical dilemmas. There is a constant tension between exposing their suffering and risking reducing them to mere victims, inadvertently feeding into the spectacle of their pain and contributing to fetishization and sexualization of their bodies (Sanchez 2019; Vogt 2018). My aim is to foreground lived experiences in all their complexity. Focusing solely on suffering is insufficient, yet refusing to acknowledge the various forms of violence they endure would be a disservice. Following Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois' (2004) concept of the 'violence continuum', I address both the structural, invisible and everyday violence, and the more visible and spectacular forms that they oscillate between in transit.

In this study gender is recognized as a central system of power shaping migration (Nawyn 2010). While this project initially set out to focus solely on migrant women, it quickly became clear that understanding their lived experiences required a broader lens. In the field it became evident that to grasp the realities of these women's lives in transit,

I also needed to understand the spaces they navigated. The women's lives and their encounters in these spaces and landscapes revealed that their lives are entangled with others. Thinking about women and gender in isolation proved insufficient. As a result, this project expanded beyond migrant women to also examine the local and spatial effects. As Doreen Massey (1994) argues, space is not a neutral backdrop but a dynamic and relational construct, shaped by social interactions, power relations and gendered experiences. This realization strengthened my analysis, leading me to include the perspectives of migrant men, local fishermen and cemetery workers; men who share and shape these same spaces. Their experiences are not separate from those of migrant women but are part of the intimate, spatial and embodied borderland that this dissertation seeks to explore.

Given the transient nature of the field, I was inspired by an 'ethnography of transit' that not only focuses on the lived experiences but also the 'social worlds that emerge in transit' (Vogt 2018). Conducting multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Tunisia between 2021 and 2022, I employed in-depth interviews, participant observation, spatial mapping and visual methods. Through this 'montage-style' approach key themes emerged organically. While transit, gender and violence remained central, death became an unavoidable thread. I did not set out to study death, yet it was ever-present, woven into everyday life, shaping strategies, relationships and dreams.

Death also appeared unexpectedly through the experience of motherhood. The two profound transitions mirrored each other. From life to death. From woman to mother. For many migrant mothers, motherhood itself was a transitory journey. Some had buried their babies in the desert, others had lost their children at sea. Many carried children conceived through sexual violence. As a mother myself, I had never associated motherhood with death and violence, yet in this context they felt inseparable, as if motherhood brought death into sharp relief. My fieldwork naturally expanded, stretching from urban spaces to playgrounds and cemeteries. Birth and death are not just complementary but deeply entangled, they continuously shape and sustain life in transit.

Some definitions and clarifications are useful to set out before going forward. I distinguish between borders and borderlands. Borders are often portrayed as arbitrary legal lines drawn in space to denominate state sovereignty. However, migration and border studies have shown the need to focus on the specificities of 'borderlands milieus' rather than only the territorial border itself; that is to understand borderlands as spaces of both governmental interventions as well as practices of people on the move (Anzaldúa 1987). I understand the borderlands as all the effects and practices that may be related back to the border and border policies of both Tunisia and the EU.

The people, my interlocuters or informants for lack of better words,[2] are a diverse group from mainly West African[3] countries who reached Tunisia either by air, land or sea, through both regular and irregular channels. Some arrive with the aim of settling in Tunisia, some to seek asylum, others to move onward to Europe. Some did not even choose Tunisia as a destination but were brought there by either border enforcement or by the strong tides. This mixed group of documented and undocumented migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and rejected asylum seekers I will refer to as 'migrants'. In some cases I will mention their specific status.

A brief note on language and translation. This research was conducted in Arabic, Maghrebi Darija, English, French and Danish. I navigated these languages and transliterations myself. Translation, as John Felstiner (2001) notes, 'is always an act of loss', a loss of meaning, nuance and sensory depth. Yet, translation is also a practice of negotiation and approximation (MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000). Throughout this dissertation I include original expressions and emic terms in French and Arabic used by interlocutors, such as *bouger* or the Arabic word *qaher* قهر , to retain the texture of their experiences. I use a simplified Arabic transliteration to reflect how the Tunisian dialect is locally pronounced. Any errors are mine alone.

Outline of the dissertation

This article-based dissertation includes a summary report and three published, peer-reviewed journal articles. The summary report unfolds across six chapters that collectively present the empirical, historical, methodological, and conceptual and theoretical framework. It provides a comprehensive overview of the study that sets the stage for the articles that figure as Chapters 7, 8 and 9. A final concluding chapter then synthesizes the study's key findings and provides a brief summary.

Chapter one introduces the inquiry, the research questions and central goals of the dissertation. Chapter two introduces the reader to spaces and places within Tunisia's landscape, mapping the main field sites of research. Chapter three offers an overview of the theoretical and conceptual framework that underpins the study, providing a theoretical lens through which to interpret the findings. Chapter four delves into the methodological approach, addressing the intricacies, challenges and dilemmas of conducting such fieldwork, and fieldwork during times of crisis. It also explores ethics

[2] I find the labels 'interlocutors' and 'informants' to be distancing, alienating and extractive. At the same time, I wish to avoid reducing them to an anonymous mass by calling them 'the people', or assuming naïve familiarity by referring to them as 'friends'. Throughout the dissertation, I will use these terms interchangeably and use pseudonyms when appropriate, recognizing that for some, our relationship developed over years, while for others, it was limited to brief encounters and meetings.

[3] From Ivory Coast, Guinea, Cameroon, Nigeria, Congo, Togo, Mali, Ghana and Sierra Leone. See Annex 1 for full participant list.

in the field and addresses my approach, positionality and emotions. Chapter five contextualizes the study within a historical, regional and political backdrop, dissecting the entanglements of domestic and EU externalization policies and tracing the origins of transit as a concept. This chapter serves as a foundation for understanding the macro-perspective. Chapter six bridges the macro-perspective with the micro-perspective by foregrounding the embodied lived experiences from the field. This chapter presents three different vignettes that breathe life into the macro-structures.

The dissertation includes three peer-reviewed articles (see Table 1). The articles provide an in-depth exploration of the multifaceted effects of European border externalization and migration policies in North Africa, as they play out in the Tunisian borderlands. A common thread running through the articles, is the intricate connections between migrants' lived experience, border policies and spaces of transit, and how people navigate and negotiate them. A second thread is empirical, tracing a geographical journey from north to south, from urban centre to desert periphery and coastal villages. This progression not only maps diverse spaces and geographies but also mirrors conceptual developments, moving from localized experiences to broader systemic analyses. Common to all three articles is a shared focus on the dynamics of transit and strategies for survival, while the progression of the articles offers layered insights. As a whole, they challenge us to see transit as a complex, multilayered phenomenon that is continuously produced and reconfigured across scales ranging from the intimate sphere to the expansive domain of geopolitical strategy.

The first article *'Treading water in transit'* delves into the lives of Ivorian migrant women in Bhar Lazreg, a Tunis *banlieue*, shedding light on the emergence of a new urban underclass and offering insights into how migrants navigate life in the shadows of society. It highlights their gendered strategies for facing the challenges of urban marginality, emphasizing the intertwined concepts of movement and stuckness. It discusses emic terms like '*bouger bouger*' and 'open-air-prison' that emphasize the complex tension between mobility and stuckness, reveal broader processes of containment, and produce strategies for survival that complicate the notion of transit.

The second article '*A mother's choice'* provides an intimate look at motherhood in transit and shifts the focus to the experiences of migrant mothers who are intercepted or 'rescued' at sea and subsequently engage in high-risk returns from Tunisia to Libya. It explores how EU border enforcement shapes the lives of these mothers and their children, creating a cycle of vulnerability and uncertainty. Equally important is the effort to move beyond narratives of violence and suffering by foregrounding the women's strength, knowledge and strategies. The women reveal their intelligence, resourcefulness and capacity to plan and imagine their escape and ongoing movement, as well as their ability to cultivate normalcy and engage in mundane everyday routines amid the purgatory of poverty and prolonged waiting. By emphasizing their tactics,

efforts and workarounds, the article challenges simplistic binary portrayals of migrant women either as passive victims or romanticized heroines, offering a counter-narrative that both acknowledges their suffering and also their agency in the Tunisian–Libyan borderlands.

The third article '*Rings in the water*' introduces the theoretical concept of 'felt externalization'. I propose the concept 'felt externalization' to capture how policies designed to control and deter migration permeate the everyday lives of local actors, from the physical violence encountered at sea by fishermen to the ongoing environmental degradation and spatial reconfigurations of the coastal landscape. 'Felt externalization' is about understanding how these policies are experienced on the ground: as tangible sensations of fear, trauma and loss, but also as a series of affective responses and adaptive strategies that reveal both the resilience and the vulnerability of those living in the borderlands. The articles illustrate the multifaceted and complex ripple effects of European border externalization by revealing the interwoven nature of human rights abuses, environmental crises and loss of life stemming from these policies.

Collectively, the articles reveal the complex entanglement of violence, gender and space in transit within the EU's extended borderlands, as well as the intertwined processes of life and death. Together, they contribute new perspectives by unpacking how border externalization produces layered and interconnected consequences in the borderlands. In this light, Tunisia's borderlands offer not just a regional case but a mirror to wider global dynamics, and a call to imagine alternative futures of mobility, justice and solidarity.

Article	Journal	Publication status
Article 1 **Treading water in transit:** understanding gendered stuckness and movement in Tunisia.	*Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*	Published February 2024
Article 2 **A mother's choice:** undocumented motherhood, waiting and smuggling in the Tunisian–Libyan borderlands.	*Trends in Organized Crime*	Published January 2023
Article 3 **Rings in the water:** felt externalization in the extended EU borderlands.	*Geopolitics*	Published April 2023

Source: European Commission, ERCC – DG ECHO. Map available at https://erccportal.jrc.ec.europa.eu/ECHO-Products/Maps. Used under public access.

2 INTRODUCING THE FIELD: SPACES AND PLACES

> *Place is not a static container, but a dynamic meeting point of perspectives, where different stories and experiences come together and interact.*
>
> — Doreen Massey, *For Space,* 2005.

As the above words of Marxist geographer and social theorist Doreen Massey suggest, recognizing the importance of space and place highlights that places and spaces are not fixed or passive but are sites of interaction, transformation and meaning. This study emphasizes the role of place and space in shaping and contextualizing the experiences of individuals navigating hostile terrain while subjected to various forms of violence and confinement.

The 'field' of this study could be best described as a *montage* of field sites; disjointed yet interconnected frames, each revealing a different angle on externalization. My approach was iterative: following its trails and moving through shifting scenes, spaces and encounters. Starting in Tunis during tumultuous times, the field unfolded like a montage of overlapping frames, including snapshots of conversations, border crossings, playgrounds and diplomatic meetings. Each frame added a new layer, reframing what came before. This approach of 'layering' (Cohn 2006) became essential to understanding how border externalization materialized across different sites, as each encounter recontextualised the previous ones, much like a film sequence that gains meaning through juxtaposition and progression.

The montage emerged not just from the field itself but also through my evolving relationship with it, splicing together perspectives, rhythms and disruptions. It was through this fragmented yet interwoven composition that I could trace the effects of externalization. This assembled montage allows me to question the field and argue for a possible reimagination of transit, not as a linear one-dimensional journey, but as assemblages of transitions, materials, ruptures and unexpected juxtapositions.

The following section introduces the diverse landscapes, from urban neighbourhoods to arid regions, deserts and coastal areas of the four main field sites that emerged during my research and from which the three articles take their points of departure. It provides the reader with a sense of where we are and how I moved or was moved through the field. A more in-depth discussion of the methodologies used, and decisions made is provided in Chapter 4.

The Blue Sea

We start with Bhar Lazreg, literally translated 'The Blue Sea'. Its streets tell its own story. A banlieue, or *houma* as it's colloquially known, on the northern outskirts of Tunis, Bhar Lazreg was until recently largely agricultural rural land but has undergone rapid and unregulated urban expansion amidst the political vacuum in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, morphing organically into the peri-urban neighbourhood of today (Ben Mbarek 2020). The population simultaneously expanded, rapidly increasing from 10,000 residents to 60,000 in the space of a decade (ibid. 2020).

Marginalized both geographically and socioeconomically, it has become home to the urban poor, and a neighbourhood synonymous with 'Black migrants', violence and crime. Just getting to Bhar Lazreg, and also leaving, can be difficult. Despite its close proximity to downtown Tunis, the city centre, it can easily take an hour or two, if you are lucky, what with overcrowded and overheated buses that frequently break down, if they show up at all. Thus, the marginalization of Bhar Lazreg is also temporal, expressed in the time it takes to get there. The area is also socially marginalized; it has a reputation, and not a good one. Almost every time I told a taxi driver to take me to Bhar Lazreg, their initial response would be disbelief with a touch of disgust: '*Ashnu* (what)!?' 'Why are going there? You live there!?' 'Not a good place, too many Blacks!' 'Not safe for a girl like you', 'It's Congo!' 'Be careful!' *'Wollah,* my car even suffers there' and 'No, no, I'm not going there, find another stupid taxi', were just some of the comments I collected during my fieldwork. Increasingly annoyed with the blatant racism and uncomfortable questions, I eventually switched to using *El Nakel,* literally 'the mover or transporter', which refers to the pirate communal vans that the residents in Bhar Lazreg themselves used. This was much cheaper, a fixed price of 1 TND, much more dangerous (there was no seating, just plastic stools sliding around in the back), but at least without the condescending comments. But the 'bad reputation' was not just the view from the outside. Many living there, Tunisians and migrants alike, talked about the crime and insecurity, about not going outside after dark, the gangs, and lack of protection, as police never showed up, even when they were needed. As 'Monsieur Gaz' who sold smuggled Algerian petrol on the corner, told me: 'The police don't come here…. they are too scared'.

The spatial and social marginalization are also reflected in the poor infrastructure. Roads, waste management, streetlights and sewage systems are just some of the basic public infrastructure that is absent in Bhar Lazreg. Instead. Clogged streets, lack of sidewalks and deadly manholes are characteristic features of the frail public infrastructure of the *banlieue* (Ben Mbarek 2020). This marginalization in many ways imprisons and confines migrants and poor Tunisians who do not or cannot own cars or use the already ineffective and inaccessible public transportation. This puts further

constraints on access to other social infrastructure such as health facilities as was particularly evident during fieldwork in 2021 and 2022 at the height of the Covid crisis.

During the early years of independence the area was characterized by swamps, marshland and agricultural land.[4] During the 70s–90s the area started to develop into slums and poor housing areas. Starting from the main street named Rue Charles du Gaulle, where I focused my fieldwork, one can't help but notice the densely populated congregation of numerous houses and apartments. These housing projects are called *Dar el Hakem* and consist of densely packed housing units built with weak, poor quality and cheap materials. The infrastructure is often rundown or incomplete. The first inhabitants of these areas were impoverished people who migrated from the rural and geographically marginalized interior regions to the capital from all over the country; many of whom were to some extent nomads such as *El Mthelith* (Chabbi 2012). As the Tunisian urbanist Morched Chabbi argues, the urbanization process in Tunisia is shaped by a complex interplay of social, political and economic factors that guide the growth of its cities (ibid. 2012). This has also been the case for Bhar Lazreg, which had for decades remained a quiet area nestled behind the Gammarth and La Marsa mountains. In the 1960s and 1970s urbanization began to reshape the region. However, Bhar Lazreg remained largely unaffected by this transformation (Jadaliyya 2020). Over time, the area transitioned from its agricultural roots as landowners sold plots for housing developments, leading to urban expansion that integrated rural areas into the city, allowing Tunis to swallow the hinterlands. Today, Bhar Lazreg highlights Tunisia's socioeconomic shifts and inequalities in the stark contrast between its impoverished housing areas and the affluent villas and gated communities elsewhere in the municipality (UNHabitat 2021).

Bhar Lazreg belongs to the municipality of La Marsa, home to foreigners, expats, attachés and diplomats, the Bayet (the former Tunisian royal family), and the bourgeoisie. Yet, in stark contrast to its affluent neighbour, Bhar Lazreg bears the marks of what Mike Davis (2006) calls 'slum ecology'; a precarious landscape shaped by dispossession, informal urbanization and environmental vulnerability. What was once 'The Blue Sea' is now covered in mud, construction debris, garbage, and parcels of wetland inundated with rainwater, particularly during the months between November and March. Every winter, when the heavy rains arrive, poor infrastructure leads to deadly flooding (Ben Mbarek 2020). This was evident during my first round

[4] I interviewed the couple Naser and Monjia Agrebi landowners in Jaber Ibn Hayen, but in the 80's. Mr Agrebi is one of the few landowners who is still alive and living on ancestral lands in Bhar Lazreg, as many throughout the years sold their lands when faced with privatisation and financial hardships. A part of Bhar Lazreg called 'El Agreba' is still named after their family.

of fieldwork from September to January. With no sewage systems, rainwater would flood the narrow alleys, making it impossible to step out without getting soaked. Some roads would become completely submerged, and with the many uncovered manholes and open sewers, walking around was hazardous. As Davis (2006) argues, for the urban poor, infrastructure failure is not merely an inconvenience it is often deadly.

At the time of fieldwork, Bhar Lazreg could be seen as a prism for the multiple crises unfolding globally. Hyperinflation, energy shortages, food and water scarcity ran parallel to the country's political and economic unrest. The undocumented West African migrants in this poor *houma* were more exposed than ever, without rights, without formal access to the labour market and with no prospects of regularizing their status, they found themselves trapped in legal limbo, economic precarity and 'stuckness'. Echoing Davis's (2006) depiction of slums as 'warehouses of surplus humanity', Bhar Lazreg became a site of exclusion, where migrants and the urban poor navigated a system that offered neither stability nor escape.

Bhar Lazreg aka The Blue Sea, aka Little Congo, aka *Petite Afrique de l'Ouest* sits on the urban margins, but in many ways it exceeds its location to become a metaphor. It embodies both the Mediterranean Sea that some aspire to cross and an allegory of the struggle to stay afloat, to move, not to drown, not to sink. They *bouger bouger*, as the migrants often told me, trying to get unstuck, to resist being swallowed by the blue sea that is Bhar Lazreg itself. As Davis (2006) reminds us in *Planet of Slums,* the slum is never just a place it is a condition, an active process of marginalization and survival.

From my encounters with West African migrants stuck in Bhar Lazreg, I heard stories that stretched beyond the contours of this *banlieue* and the geography of the capital. There were stories of scammers arriving in Bhar Lazreg, selling the illusion of the 'real Blue Sea' in Sfax. Some believed in it and never returned. There were stories of the desert, of women in Medénine rescued from Libyan captivity, and of the ever-expanding clandestine migrant cemeteries along the shores of Zarzis. These stories combined with a chance encounter in a hotel lobby in downtown Tunis that altered the trajectory of my fieldwork. I met Monsieur Abdoulaye Said, a Chadian migrant leading a local association supporting migrant women and their children in southern Medénine. After I briefly and eagerly explained my research to him, he smiled and said, 'Ahlam, everything you've seen here in the North cannot compare to what's happening in the South. Come see for yourself. I will show you'.

So, I accepted his invitation, packed the car and, together with my husband and child, set off on the 500-kilometre journey south to Medénine.

A hidden hell

At the edge of the Sahara, along the main route to Libya, lies Medénine, a town in southeastern Tunisia with a rich history as a crossroads of trade and culture. Bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, Tataouine to the south, and Libya to the east, Medénine once served as a vital trading hub in pre-colonial times. Its strategic location attracted merchants from across North Africa, and as far as the Kanem–Bornu Empire (Hodges 2005). In more recent history, Medénine has also become an iconic site in global popular culture; its distinct architecture and desert landscapes inspiring and appearing in *Star Wars* (Lemay 2008).

Today, Medénine is a medium-sized city and one of the poorest provinces in Tunisia, with most residents living below the poverty line (*Inkyfada* 2021). The region continues to struggle with economic hardship, exacerbated by structural inequalities and limited development opportunities (*Inkyfada* 2021). In contrast to the town's cinematic fame from the *Star Wars* films, where many iconic scenes were filmed depicting the childhoods of Luke and Darth Vader. The unique lunar landscape, adobe architecture, and semi-arid climate made it the perfect backdrop for Tatooine in the *Star Wars* universe (Smithsonian Magazine 2016). Mark Hamill, who portrayed Luke Skywalker, reflected on his experience filming in Tunisia, recalling, 'If you could get into your own mind, shut out the crew and look at the horizon, you really felt like you were transported to another world. I really was in a galaxy far, far away' (Sullivan 2020).

Downtown Medénine, Ksar Medénine, was featured twice in *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* as the slave quarters in Mos Eisley (Smithsonian Magazine 2016). As a *Star Wars* fan, walking around Medénine with my son I found it fascinating that these ancient Amazigh storehouses, once used for grain, became the set for the slave quarters on Queen Amidala's royal spaceship. This blurred line between the real and the fictional reflects a concept of 'hyperreality' (Baudrillard 1994), where the distinction between reality and simulation fades. The real Ksar Medénine still stands, but it now exists as part of both a *Star Wars* simulation and of the very real hardship faced by migrants.

Today, the Ksar Medénine is the centre of the weekly souk (open-air market), where streets are packed, and parking is scarce. Not far from here, I meet Monsieur Abdoulaye Said, who takes me to a hidden location. Medénine has become the city for the 'undesirables'. It houses the IOM and UNHCR shelters, along with the Croissant Rouge Reception Centre (CRT). This is where migrants rescued or captured at sea, referred to as the *rescapés,* are brought. Monsieur Abdoulaye heads a small local association called 'Enfants de la Lune' (Children of the Moon), located in a discreet part of downtown. He has become a father figure to many of the women who arrive at his doorstep, many of them calling him 'Papa Abdoulaye'. Before coming to his association, many had attempted to cross the Mediterranean from Libya, only to be

intercepted and returned to Libyan detention. After multiple failed attempts, they were eventually intercepted by the Tunisian coastguard and brought to Medénine. Others had crossed the border on foot, including many pregnant women and mothers carrying small babies conceived through sexual violence and rape during their captivity in Libya.

The association 'Enfants de la Lune' serves as a sanctuary for many women, providing them with a safe space or a 'space for breathing', away from the humanitarian shelters that suffocated them, as they often described it. Here, they could escape the rules and regulations of the shelters, allowing their children to play in a yard where a makeshift playground is set up in the corner. As well as those born as a result of rape and sexual abuse in Libyan detention centres, many of the children had crossed the sea with their mothers. Medénine, in this sense, had become a space for the unwanted, both physically and symbolically, a place in-between where migrant women felt trapped.

While I was denied access to the UNHCR, IOM and CRT, Papa Abdoulaye gave me full access to his association. Here I met women who had escaped the horrors of Libyan detention but now found themselves stuck in Tunisia, a country they had never intended to come to. They would often describe it as *'L'enfer caché'* (a hidden hell). They referred to Libya as 'hell on earth', while Tunisia, they felt, was more subtle, insidious in its violence and treatment.

The longer I stayed in Medénine and spent time with the women, the more I found it difficult to define the place. It was not a camp or a prison, yet the women often referred to it as an 'open-air prison', a place where they waited, either for asylum cases that could take years or for the right moment to escape again. It was a place of limbo, a space of waiting, poverty, and purgatory. Medénine could perhaps be best understood as a 'carceral junction' (Turner & Whyte 2022). Turner and Whyte describe 'carceral junctions' as confining spaces where people's lives are put on hold, in conditions of tension and uncertainty before being moved elsewhere. These spaces serve as sites of interface and contestation, where people stop, reflect, and decide on their next move. Medénine is just such a junction, where migrants feel stuck between Tunisia's bureaucratic limbo and the confining humanitarian structures with barbed wire fences, food stamps, and indefinite waiting. This environment strips them of their autonomy, hope and time.

The location of the shelters near a road junction, one route leading to the desert and the Libyan border and the other to the sea, mirrors the limited options available to the migrants. It is an embodied metaphor for their constrained lives and their inability to move beyond the boundaries of this 'hidden hell'.

The slave quarters of a galaxy far, far away, Medénine, too, stands as a site where reality and fiction intertwine, where the marginalized are trapped between worlds.

The city of strangers

Less than an hour's drive from Medénine, Zarzis emerges, a coastal fishing village near the Libyan border. The proximity to Libya is unmissable, evident in the steady flow of migrants crossing at Ben Guerdane and the numerous Libyan cars with their distinct plates. Many women in Medénine spoke of Zarzis. Some saw it as a place with better job opportunities, while others sought to visit the migrant cemeteries to honour lost friends and loved ones.

Originally, my visit to Zarzis was meant to be a brief escape, a chance to see the sea and take a break from Medénine. Instead, it became a critical field site, revealing complex and devastating consequences of European border externalization in ways I had not anticipated.

Despite its deep-rooted fishing culture and the now-empty and rundown five-star beach resorts, remnants of a time when tourism flourished, Zarzis has today become synonymous with tragedy. It is the largest and most important fishing port in southeastern Tunisia, yet its shores are now infamous for the bodies of shipwrecked vessels that wash up with disturbing regularity. Two cemeteries today exist 'Cimetière des Inconnus' and 'Jardin d'Afrique', both overburdened. The town receives not only bodies found along its own coast but also those transported from desert border regions and cities like Sfax, where morgues have reached full capacity. On my last visit in late 2022, over 90 bodies remained unclaimed in Sfax alone. This overwhelming burden has left Zarzis' small municipality struggling, with the mayor's calls for help from the Tunisian government and international community going unanswered (Carretero 2021). In the absence of state intervention, the responsibility for the dead has fallen to locals. Among them was Chamseddine Marzoug, known simply as 'Chams', a former fisherman turned international humanitarian figure, who also became my gatekeeper. Over the course of a month we met almost daily, drinking coffee at street cafés, visiting the fishing port, cemeteries, and the fishermen's association, and assisting migrants. It was his raison d'être. He didn't work, he just sat outside the garage where his cousin worked, waiting for me to call.

His personal life was marked by tragedy shortly before I arrived. One night, his wife and children took a boat from Zarzis without his knowledge. The next morning, he found a crumpled note on the kitchen table: 'Forgive me, this was our last chance. Pray for me and the children to arrive safely'. He shows me the crumpled note one day at his home. They are now in France with his older daughter, leaving Chams alone with his two cats, Mishu and Nisho.

Sitting at Le Relais, near a Shell gas station and the town's main roundabout, his favourite meeting point, Chams sipped his second coffee while I hesitated over my order. 'Get the orange juice', he suggested. 'It's the season'. He glanced at his cup and muttered, 'Six boats every night'. They departed around midnight, taking 12 to 24

hours to reach their destination, depending on the weather. 'You can see them from where you live', he added with a knowing smile. He had helped me find accommodation for my family at Maison d'Hôtes Dar Nesma, a guesthouse run by an old French couple on a hill overlooking the sea. That night, as he had predicted, I saw the boats passing. The sight left me uneasy.

When my husband and son arrived, I introduced them to Chams. 'Ahlam, what's the plan today?' Chams asked eagerly. 'Should we go to the new or the old cemetery?' With my son in my lap, I shrugged, signalling for him to decide. 'Okay, first the old cemetery, then. I'll make some calls', Chams responded.

Though widely recognized for his humanitarian work, I soon realized that Chams was not universally admired. For some locals, he was a divisive figure. During my fieldwork, tensions between residents and migrants surfaced repeatedly. Zarzis residents had blocked the road to Ben Guardane, demanding the removal of irregular migrants. They called them 'invaders' and 'infiltrators', using terms like *hazoum*, *aijtiah*, and *mutasalilin*. Others blamed migrants for spreading Covid-19 and other diseases, using racialized language to justify their fears.

One day Chams exclaimed 'You must meet the fishermen. They are the real heroes!' He arranged for me to visit the Fishermen's Union, where I met men whose experiences would reshape my understanding of not just Zarzis but also the Mediterranean, and the borderlands. The fishing port soon became another crucial field site. Nearby, a growing 'boat graveyard' housed wooden boats, all Libyan, that had been intercepted at sea or pushed ashore by wind and currents. It sometimes felt as if everywhere you turned in Zarzis, around a corner, or down a road, death and tragedy loomed. The people of Zarzis have given their town a new name, '*Madinat Al-Ghariba'* the City of Strangers (Chemlali 2023c; Belhadj 2022). It reflects their collective trauma, the omnipresence of death, and the town's transformation into a liminal space where life, death, and the ripple effects of European border externalization intersect. Here, questions of governance over the dead, floating bodies, responsibility and activism intertwine. Local solidarity and hostility coexist, shaping the ever-evolving dynamics of this borderland.

The frontlines

After more than two months with my family in southern Tunisia, it was time to return to Tunis and Bhar Lazreg, but not before passing through Sfax. Driving north from Zarzis, the landscape transforms before our eyes. The arid desert, with its orange-red horizons and swirling sandstorms, gradually fades into dusty plains dotted with sparse vegetation. The air remains thick with desert winds. Further along, the road leads past El Jem, a historic city that was once a thriving Roman settlement. We make a stop to eat and visit the El Jem amphitheatre, one of the largest and best-preserved in the

world, that stands as a testament to its former prosperity. However, today El Jem is often referred to as a 'contraband city', where informal trade and smuggling dominate daily life, a stark contrast to its once-glorious past. As Sfax nears, the terrain shifts again. Olive groves stretch toward the horizon, the soil grows richer, the sky seemingly clearer. Yet, as we got closer still, the city revealed a different reality.

Even from miles away the atmosphere of Sfax felt heavy, literally toxic. The bright blue sky turned a sickly grey. A pungent stench lingered in the air, forcing people in the streets to cover their faces with scarves and cloth. At the time of my visit Sfax was in the grip of an environmental crisis, its waste management system having collapsed. Trash piled up on sidewalks, uncollected for weeks, leaving rotting heaps that seeped into daily life. The pollution coated buildings in a thin layer of grime, and locals spoke of rising cases of respiratory illnesses (Middle East Institute 2022). This crisis was exacerbated by the closure of the Agareb landfill, located approximately 20 kilometres west of Sfax, in 2021. After years of protests from local residents over toxic pollution and public health risks, authorities shut down the landfill, but with no alternative solution waste quickly overwhelmed the city (Reuters 2021). Government attempts to reopen the landfill sparked violent clashes between protesters and security forces, leading to further instability (Arab Reform Initiative 2023).

But Sfax was not just the epicentre of an environmental disaster, it was also at the heart of Tunisia's migration crisis. Strategically located near the coast, with Lampedusa and Sicily just across the sea, it had become the main departure point for clandestine crossings to Europe. I had heard its name again and again from the migrant women I met in Medénine and Zarzis. Many had been intercepted at sea by the Tunisian coastguard and brought to Sfax before being 'dumped' in Medénine (*France 24* 2023).

Before arriving, I already had a list of questions. Sfax was a connection node, linking the people from all my field sites, both the living and the dead. Here, I planned to meet humanitarian organizations, a forensic specialist that Chams had connected me with, the Tunisian coastguard, and migrants themselves. Sfax's morgues were at max capacity. It was as if Sfax was slowly turning into a dead-zone, similar to the post-war Saigon that Christophe Robert (2020) described where pollution seeped in and became unbearably real and anxiety-producing when its source was identified as 'death itself '. This was Sfax in a nutshell. Toxic wastelands, pollution and death, all visible and assembled in a node called Sfax.

Many of the women in Bhar Lazreg had considered coming to Sfax to attempt the crossing; many, like Françoise, had already tried but failed. Sfax showed that the migration industry wasn't just run by Tunisian or Libyan smugglers or criminal networks, it was also fuelled from within, with migrants themselves selling the European dream to those more desperate than them. Being in Sfax felt like sitting on the edge of a volcano, waiting for it to erupt. And it did. In the summer of 2023

tensions exploded into deadly clashes between locals and migrants. The city had long been simmering with resentment. Humanitarian workers I met referred to it as 'the frontline'. 'This is where it happens', Mohamed from the Red Crescent, one of my gatekeepers in the city, told me. The hostility was palpable, migrants, particularly Black Africans, spoke of constant fear, of racist attacks, of being unable to walk the streets without harassment.

The July 2023 tensions erupted after a Tunisian man was killed in a confrontation with Cameroonian migrants, sparking mob attacks on migrant neighbourhoods and forcing many to flee (Human Rights Watch 2023). Human Rights Watch (2023) reported that police not only failed to intervene but also carried out arbitrary arrests, beatings, and expulsions of Black migrants. Amnesty International (2023) linked the violence to racist rhetoric from authorities, who accused migrants of conspiring to alter Tunisia's demographics. Many were later forcibly expelled to desert areas near Libya and Algeria, abandoned without water or shelter (Human Rights Watch 2023).

Sfax was a city at a breaking point, where the convergence of environmental decay, economic struggles and migration pressures had created an unbearable tension. It was a place that embodied the contradictions of Tunisia itself, a key transit hub for migration, yet deeply unwelcoming and dangerous to those passing through, a city of industry, yet drowning in its own waste, a place where survival meant navigating hostility, both from nature and from people.

Each of these sites, spaces and places has been pivotal in shaping the articles and empirical discussions that follow. The route of my research is reflected in the structure of the articles: Bhar Lazreg laid the groundwork for Article 1: 'Treading Water in Transit'; Medénine for Article 2: 'A Mother's Choice'; and Zarzis for Article 3: 'Rings in the Water'. Sfax, contributed to the French peer-reviewed publication[5] '*Ne rien faire et ne rien laisser faire: Les enjeux de la non-politique migratoire tunisienne'* (Do Nothing and Let Nothing Happen: The Challenges of Tunisian Non-Migratory Policy), published in Revue Tunisienne de Science Politique, in which we develop the concept of a 'non-migration policy' (El Ghali & Chemlali 2022). Beyond this dissertation, these field sites have also informed several other publications and ongoing reflections on transit, borderlands, externalization, as well as on gender, violence, and death. Collectively, they shape the broader empirical analysis, conceptual frameworks, and overall narrative that unfolds in the following chapters.

[5] This publication is not included in this dissertation because it is in French.

3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: TOWARDS A REIMAGINATION OF TRANSIT

This study engages with three key scholarly debates: transit, everyday violence, and gendered, embodied borderlands in the realm of border externalization. I approach transit as a conceptual lens to examine how violence and death operate in mundane and spectacular ways, while also exposing the gendered and embodied dimensions of mobility and confinement in borderlands. Each of my three articles follows their own conceptual and empirical logic, but all, through different angles, explore transit, violence, gender and border externalization. This chapter establishes the theoretical framework underpinning these analyses, emphasizing the need for an interdisciplinary approach that bridges existing gaps in migration and border studies.

I outline my theoretical approach, key concepts and my contributions. The chapter is divided into three sections: first I reimagine transit, offering ways to rethink it both theoretically and empirically; second, I complicate the everyday and how violence manifests within it; and finally I explore the body and the embodied, gendered borderlands. Each of these three conceptual discussions corresponds to and frames the articles.

Rethinking transit

Scholarship on border externalization, particularly in the European context, has grown significantly over the past two decades (Andreas 2003; Lahav & Guiraudon 2000). Much of this work has taken a state-centric or 'top-down' approach, examining externalization in relation to state and non-state actors (Cuttitta 2020; Dini & Giusa 2020), postcoloniality (Lemberg-Pedersen 2019; Lemberg-Pedersen et al. 2022), international relations (Lavenex 1999), extraterritorial border management (Cobarrubias et al. 2023), and the role of development aid (Boswell 2003). Another strand of research has explored the emergence of a 'migration industry' as a consequence of European border externalization (Andersson 2014; Pacciardi & Berndtsson 2022). Rather than adopting this 'top-down' perspective, my study centres on a 'bottom-up' approach that foregrounds the lived experiences of migrants and the ripple effects of European externalization policies on the ground. In doing so, it aligns with and contributes to critical scholarship on border externalization in the Global South (Stock, Üstübici & Schultz 2019) and ongoing efforts to decentre externalization research (Pallister-Wilkins 2022). Recent research has underscored how Europe's efforts to externalize borders and export border control mechanisms have resulted in the proliferation of borders, exposing individuals on the move to danger and suffering (Vammen et al. 2023; Stierl 2019). Externalization does not merely produce political

and territorial shifts; it permeates society, affecting bodies, spaces, and temporalities in ways that are deeply felt and gendered, as my articles show.

The concept of transit migration is central in migration and border control debates. This study contributes to the critical scholarship on transit as a political construction (Frowd 2020; Collyer et al. 2012; Hess 2012). Critics, like Düvel (2006), view it more as a discourse than a scientific concept, akin to what Wacquant calls a 'folk concept' (Wacquant 2000). A key criticism is its linear portrayal of migration, ignoring the complex, fragmented, and unpredictable nature of migrant journeys (Collyer et al. 2012; Schapendonk 2017). It also assumes migration is always destination-driven, overlooking evolving motivations (Schapendonk & Steel 2014). The term transit suggests migrants' lives are on hold, merely waiting for the next phase (Sampson, Gifford & Taylor 2016). My research challenges this notion, showing that migrants in transit exhibit agency, resilience, and engage in life events, resisting the reduction to 'bare life' (Agamben 1998), as my articles demonstrate.

The externalization of borders and intensified migration control have transformed transit through North Africa into a prolonged and precarious journey, leaving many migrants 'stuck' indefinitely or trapped in 'confinement in motion' (Balaguera 2018). By framing transit as confinement, this dissertation contributes to carceral geography and expands discussions on marginality, carcerality, and confinement beyond traditional prisons and camps (Jefferson, Turner & Jensen 2019). Migrants often describe their situation as an 'open-air prison', where movement is both restricted and precarious. Unlike conventional penal systems, I define the carceral broadly, emphasizing the embodied experience of stuckness and harm. Carceral spaces extend beyond prisons, encompassing streets, homes, institutions, borders, and bodies, shaping diverse forms of confinement (Moran 2015; Gill, Conlon & Moran 2013). Understanding carcerality in transit requires thinking beyond detention practices and towards carceral landscapes that blur the boundaries between mobility and captivity (Moran, Turner & Schliehe 2018). Transit could be understood as a continuum, encompassing both movement and stasis, freedom and constraint. However, it should not be understood as linear or one-dimensional, but rather like a complicated root system, akin to assemblages. Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) idea of assemblages, transit could be seen as a fluid interaction of various components, individuals, policies, spaces and material conditions, that form a constantly shifting configuration. Anna Tsing (2015) highlights how diverse interactions create new forms of life, aligning with the view that transit is more than a journey, it's a dynamic process with multiple forces at play. What we perhaps could think of as 'transit assemblages' help capture the complex, interconnected and dynamic nature of migration experiences in transit. Transit assemblages capture the entangled experiences of migrants navigating borders, external and internal policies, and everyday life. This

perspective challenges linear understandings of migration, one-dimensional policy-thinking and emphasizes the ongoing navigation and negotiation migrants experience. As Nail (2017) notes, assemblages are 'always becoming', much like transit itself. Jensen (2006) shows how spaces are reshaped by interactions, and transit, similarly, is territorialized, with spaces of movement and stuckness shifting in response to internal and external factors such as migrants' experiences and border politics. By thinking through transit assemblages, this study moves beyond the limitations of a linear or continuum model. It offers a more nuanced and analytical approach, one that accounts for the material, emotional and spatial complexities inherent in transit, something that is woven throughout all three articles, each of which addresses these complexities in different ways.

Complicating violence and the everyday

In its approach to understanding and analysing the violence in the borderlands[6], the dissertation builds on anthropological work on 'the everyday' in sites of global crisis and violence (Biehl 2005; Vigh 2009; Povinelli 2011; Richter 2019). In approaching the domain of the everyday, it draws on Michel de Certeau's notions of strategies and tactics against power and its apparatuses within everyday practices (De Certeau 1984). The focus on the everyday and attempts to 'capture the ordinary' goes against the grain of the catastrophic and spectacular that has dominated migration studies in recent years (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). The study explores the everyday in the North African borderlands and, the extent to which violence becomes routine or, in the words of Veena Das (Das & Cavell 2007), 'descends into the ordinary'. This approach enables a lens through which migration becomes part of the everyday, the mundane; what Katz refers to as the 'messy fleshy stuff of everyday life' (Katz 2001). Migration is everywhere, a fundamental part of contemporary society. It can be something radically unproblematic, part of everyday life, like being on the beach, doing nails, going to church, or watching soap operas all day, just to mention some of the everyday activities I got to experience with many of my interlocutors over time. To focus on how people live their everyday lives and to zoom in on the ordinariness as opposed to the extraordinary. I here also take a cue from another French theorist, Georges Perec, who asks in *Approaches to What?* (1989): 'How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual?' Perec (1989) introduces the term 'infra-ordinary' to describe an everyday that is neither ordinary nor extraordinary, neither banal nor exotic. Migrant lives are often

[6] I specifically use *borderlands* which emphasizes the specificities of 'borderlands milieu' rather than the territorial border itself (Anzaldúa 1987).

essentialized, sensationalized and spectacularized on the front pages and global news, whenever a new tragedy hits. Another shipwreck. Another disaster. More death. But migrant lives are also more than that. Academic and media accounts often emphasize disaster, tragedy and violence, erasing migrants' agency and resilience, casting them as passive victims. For migrant women this has been even more so, as they are often strategically essentialized and othered as 'pure' victims of oppression and/or sexual exploitation e.g. sex trafficking and sex slave victims (Sanchez 2019). Sanchez highlights that emphasizing sexual violence can fetishize migrant women of colour, overshadowing the protective strategies they use and the survival-based relationships they form during their journeys.

With this in mind, this dissertation does examine violence and death in transit, as well as the migrants' own navigation and how they are constantly re-inventing new strategies for survival. It can perhaps be viewed as a paradox to insist on focusing on the everyday and ordinary, but simultaneously also on violence and death, but this is exactly the crux of the matter. Violence and death have folded into the everyday in the borderlands. Migration has become ever more risky, dangerous, and deadly. The spectacular has become part of the everyday, I argue we should understand violence not as 'spectacular' or exceptional but rather as a form of the 'everyday' in contemporary migration management.

Anthropology has made significant contributions to critical studies of violence by examining how it shapes experiences of life, death, and the possibilities available to people. By paying close attention to how war, conflict and everyday forms of violence structure people's everyday reality and social relations (Farmer 1996; Kleinman et al. 1997; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Bourgois 2002), Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004) proposed conceptualizing violence as operating on a continuum from the physical to the symbolic and structurally embedded. While Scheper-Hughes' (1992) concept of everyday violence focuses on the individual and routinized experiences of violence, Bourgois (2003) applies the concept of structural violence and links the embodied experience of violence to local constructions of gender, race and individual morality.

Everyday violence is understood as operating at a 'capillary level', emphasizing micro interactions that inflict harm on individuals both directly and indirectly (Sabo et al. 2014). Rob Nixon's (2011) distinction between slow and fast violence highlights the same continuity. I use these conceptualizations to frame in my articles how migrant women and local fishermen in the borderlands oscillate between the fast violence of militarized borders at sea and on land and the slow violence of everyday life.

To capture this, I propose the concept 'felt externalization' to not only describe how migrants internalize and experience these border regimes psychologically and physically, but also how this collectively and spatially manifests. 'Felt externalization' captures the everyday, embodied effects of externalization such as fear, trauma and

environmental degradation (Article 3). Unlike studies focusing on policy and the political dimensions of border externalization, my research emphasizes the emotional and material impacts on daily lives. 'Felt externalization' reveals the ripple effects of border control on bodies, minds, and communities, such as in Article 3 where the fishermen in Zarzis *feel* these policies intimately in their everyday lives. Felt externalization', I argue, is when policies become intimate; lived and experienced on a granular level.

But while violence is a persistent and ordinary part of everyday life (Das 2006), experiences of violence and its effects break unevenly along the intersecting axes of race, class, gender, sexuality and other social categories as Black feminist theorists (Collins 2000; McClaurin 2001) have taught us, the 'urgency of intersectionality' (Crenshaw 1991) is palpable, now more than ever, if we are to understand how interlocking systems of power are created, maintained and reproduced under violent conditions.

The body and the borderland

In recent years, political geography has increasingly focused on the body as an analytical scale. Feminist scholarship has increasingly emphasized the body as a site through which power is exercised and space is defined (Mountz 2015; Sahraoui 2020). As Massaro and Williams (2013) note, focusing on the body as an analytical scale allows for a nuanced understanding of how geopolitical processes are experienced differently across populations. This lens also helps trace concrete manifestations of power, moving from intimate and local contexts to broader structural and global scales, in line with the feminist assertion that the personal is indeed political (Sahraoui 2020; Dixon & Marston 2011; Sharp 2007).

In critical border studies, scholars have long argued how borders should be viewed as 'fluid and dynamic', as processes rather than fixed objects (Casaglia et al. 2020). Similarly, Balibar (2002) asserted that borders would no longer be 'at the border', but rather as 'mobile, displaced, and everyday forces'. These forces transcend boundaries and bodies, manifesting ubiquitously across scales, time, and space. This perspective resonates with geographers Hyndman and Mountz (2013) concept of a 'feminist politics of location', challenging the artificial distinction between the 'local' and the 'global'. Feminist geographers view borders as sites where geopolitical power is inscribed on bodies (Mountz 2011). Embodied feminist geopolitics trace how violence operates differently at the bodily level to reveal broader power dynamics (Mountz 2004; Hyndman 2004; Massaro & Williams 2013). Employing a feminist geopolitics theoretical framework resonates well with both the everyday, and the violence and gender lens, as it also centres attention on the everyday, embodied spaces and narratives where transnational political and economic dynamics are shaped and

challenged (Hyndman 2004). Pain and Staeheli (2014) argue that emotional, affective, and intimate aspects of daily life are deeply entangled with (geo)politics, which are both reinforced and challenged globally and through embodied everyday experiences. Following this, scholars have explored how violence and (in)security intersect across scales, from national and global arenas to the bodily level (Pain 2015). This multiscalar lens brings into focus how bodies are differently exposed to harm, control, and exclusion, and how these spaces are far from neutral. As Nirmal Puwar (2004) reminds us in her seminal book, *Space Invaders*:

> 'Social spaces are not blank and open for *any body* to occupy. Over time, through processes of historical sedimentation, certain types of bodies are designated as being the 'natural' occupants of specific spaces… some bodies have the right to belong in certain locations, while others are marked out as trespassers who are in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined, politically, historically and conceptually circumscribed as being 'out of place' (p. 51).'

Pessar and Mahler's groundbreaking work in 2001 and 2003 introduced their framework of 'gendered geographies of power' to the field of transnational migration. This framework examines people's gendered social agency, considering their initiative and positioning within multiple hierarchies of power operating within and across various terrains. While gender is often associated with women, this study extends beyond a focus on women alone, understanding gender as relational, a multidimensional structure operating within a complex network of institutions (Nawyn 2010). By integrating a gendered lens, the study addresses this lacuna with both unique empirical and theoretical contributions.

Building on this, this dissertation draws on feminist geopolitics to examine the ripple effects of border externalization on migrant bodies and lives in transit spaces, thereby linking the intimate, and embodied with local, national and global processes. By doing so I aim to contribute to an embodied feminist geopolitics placing bodies at the heart of the analysis.

Bringing together literature on everyday violence, gender and intersectionality, borders and transit, and drawing from anthropology, political and carceral geography, and feminist geopolitics, this dissertation employs the body as an analytical lens to explore the gendered effects of bordering. It approaches this by examining the everyday, micro encounters that generate and enforce violence, both overtly and subtly. This focus further enables the study to trace and frame the dynamic and evolving interplay between broader policy structures and the localized, everyday expressions of violence in the Tunisian borderlands.

In conclusion, this chapter establishes the theoretical and conceptual foundation for the dissertation and articles. Rather than relying on linear, policy-driven or one-dimensional understandings of transit, the study explores how migrants navigate the intertwined realms of movement and stuckness, everyday violence, fast and slow, and gendered, embodied experiences in the borderlands. One way to think about these complex and non-linear forms of transit is through the lens of assemblages, highlighting how diverse experiences, spaces and temporalities come together in unpredictable and shifting ways. Moreover, the concept of felt externalization deepens this analysis by capturing how migrants internalize border control regimes, experiencing their impacts on the body, emotions and mind. Together, these frameworks interrogate the ripple effects of border externalization and confinement while foregrounding the lived, embodied realities in the borderlands.

Zarzis beachfront, photo by Ahlam Chemlali, 2021

4 METHODOLOGY: CAPTURING A TRANSIENT FIELD

It is necessary to become travellers to decipher the reasons that led so many to leave and so many others to go to their deaths.
Because only another a traveller can understand the weight of the words they will pronounce, all the others always remain a few meters away, on the mainland, unable to grasp the meaning of what is being said.
Instead, you must sit on the ground around a fire and listen to the stories from those who want to tell them, as other travellers have done since the dawn of time.
Listening to the voice of those who have crossed borders, how they are made. How cities and rivers are made, walls and their guardians, prisons and their keepers, armies and their generals, marauders, and their lairs. What are travel companions like, and why – at a certain point – they are called companions.
How boats are made.
How sea waves are made.
How the darkness of the night is made.
How the lights that turn on in the dark are made.
Those voices shaped and filled with anger and utopia, desire and fear, mercy and fury. Voices that often get excited and then the eyes widen and the mouths twist to compose the syllables of that word from which all the others descend.
It is the frontier.
- Alessandro Leogrande, *La Frontiera*, 2015.

The poem above by Alessandro Leogrande in many ways encapsulates my fieldwork approach. Wanting to understand or grasp the 'who, what and where' I found it necessary to go there, to sit down and to listen. Not just in one place but several. Not only to those who had crossed borders, the migrants and their companions, but also to the broader network of actors shaping the borderland. The fishermen, boat makers and boat takers, gravediggers and forensic doctors, captains and coast guards, humanitarian players, diplomats and locals. All of these 'voices' as Leogrande puts it, make up the 'montage' of a field in motion.

This chapter explores the complexities of conducting ethnographic research in a transient and crisis-ridden field. It reflects on the challenges of doing fieldwork during times of global crisis and within an increasingly authoritarian state, where navigating access and ethical dilemmas requires constant adaptation. I discuss the decisions I made in the field, the disruptions and negotiations that came with having my family with me, and the experience of conducting research from afar. Additionally, I present my methodological approach, considerations across different field sites, and my positionality, embracing the messiness, the blurry edges and the fragmented nature of

fieldwork itself. Importantly, this chapter also illustrates my process from data collection to analysis, working through the themes and concepts I have identified to produce a transparent and reflexive account. In doing so, it not only grounds the empirical evidence in real-world challenges but also demonstrates how these insights have shaped the analytical frameworks presented in the articles.

Ethnography in times of crisis

Inspired by an 'anthropology of transit' as Wendy Vogt (2018) frames it, I seek to not only focus on the lived experiences of migrant women but also the 'complex social worlds that emerge in transit' (Vogt 2018). In her influential book 'Lives in Transit' Vogt (2018) argues that ethnographic research and engagement with people in transit often raises more questions than answers, ultimately pushing the boundaries of conventional fieldwork practices. Vogt asks: '*Where, exactly, is 'there' when we are talking about such fluid, transient populations and spaces?'*

Shortly after starting my PhD, the global Covid-19 pandemic triggered lockdowns across Denmark and much of the world. This unprecedented disruption forced me to reevaluate my fieldwork plan and reconsider the very nature of research. As the pandemic reshaped borders and movement, fundamental questions emerged: Can fieldwork be conducted from home? Where do the boundaries of the 'field' and 'home' lie in this shifting landscape?

After some delay, I received approval to embark on my first round of fieldwork in early September 2021. I arrived in Tunis, a city in turmoil following the coup d'état on 25 July 2021. The coup had sparked nationwide protests, particularly along Avenue Habib Bourguiba, as Tunisia faced not only a deepening political crisis but also the highest Covid-19 death toll in Africa, rampant inflation, and its worst financial crisis since independence. Tunisia, once a beacon of hope after igniting the Arab Spring with its 2011 Jasmine Revolution, had undergone a stark transformation (Boum & Daadaoui 2020). A decade later, during my fieldwork, that hopeful narrative had collapsed. The country was slipping into authoritarianism, with an emerging police state replacing the optimism of its revolutionary past.

My second round of fieldwork in the autumn of 2022 unfolded amid post-pandemic food shortages, exacerbated by the economic fallout of the Ukraine war, tense IMF negotiations, and the increasingly authoritarian and unpredictable rule of President Saied. Adapting to these shifting circumstances, I embraced a 'go with the flow' approach that responded to the instability around me.

By 2023, I had planned a third field visit for follow-up research. However, returning was deemed too risky. My Tunisian friends and colleagues strongly advised against it, warning that my recent publications and international media appearances criticizing

Tunisia's deteriorating human rights situation had made me a potential target. At the time, journalists, government critics, human rights lawyers, and NGO leaders were being arrested (Migreurop 2024). Several of my friends, close informants and gatekeepers had been arbitrarily detained, including Papa Abdoulaye Said,[7] president of the 'Association Enfants de la Lune' in Medénine, I also knew of at least three international PhD researchers who had been detained for interviewing migrants in Sfax. Given the risks, and the fact that I was pregnant, I reluctantly decided not to return. Instead, I continued my research remotely, staying closely connected with my informants, migrants, Tunisian friends and activists through WhatsApp and social media, monitoring developments from afar.

Due to the multiple crises and ongoing uncertainties at local, national and global levels, my fieldwork and data collection align with what Günel, Varma & Watanabe (2020) describe as 'patchwork ethnography'. Rather than representing a compromised or botched version of fieldwork, this approach is a pragmatic adaptation to real-world challenges. It acknowledges that fieldwork rarely unfolds in an ideal, linear manner. Instead, it adapts to shifting circumstances in both the research environment and the researcher's personal life. By engaging in short-term field visits and gathering fragmented data, patchwork ethnography creates unconventional pathways to understanding, allowing for the emergence of new insights and perspectives within the field (ibid.) In my own ethnographic research, this fragmented, 'patchy' montage-style approach became central. I supplemented interviews with detailed observations, spatial mapping through photographic images, filming, and photovoice techniques, providing disposable cameras to selected key interlocutors. Additionally, my data collection extended to voice messages and WhatsApp communications when I was not 'in the field', enabling richer and more immediate forms of engagement. In this way, what might at first appear to be a disjointed method is, in fact, an honest and pragmatic response to the messy realities of conducting fieldwork today. This realization also led me to abandon the notion that one must study a phenomenon from a single vantage point and for an extended, uninterrupted period of time to be legitimate.

Adopting a 'going with the flow' approach brings undeniable advantages, it captures the dynamic, unpredictable nature of fieldwork in crisis and transit contexts, but it is

[7] The Committee for Justice (CFJ) regards Abdoulaye Said's detention as part of a broader pattern of actions they refer to as 'criminalization of solidarity'. The committee also highlighted that Said had previously been targeted by hate speech and racist campaigns on social media because of his humanitarian work, underscoring a wider climate of repression aimed at civil society and human rights organizations (CFJ 2024). See https://www.cfjustice.org/tunisia-cfj-highlights-detention-of-activist-abdallah-al-saeed-for-supporting-refugee-and-migrant-children/ See also: https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20241116-tunisie-arrestation-de-plusieurs-membres-d-une-ong-d-aide-aux-migrants

not without costs. This fluidity blurs fixed boundaries, making it harder to delineate where one field ends, and another begins. For instance, when I was back home in Copenhagen unable to return, incoming pictures and voice messages from the women made me question whether this was data. Was I doing fieldwork from afar, challenging the idea that the separation between field and desk is anything but an illusion? Moreover, this adaptive strategy demands high reflexivity and transparency. Constantly adjusting to shifting circumstances makes the research process reliant on moment-to-moment decisions, which can be criticized as opportunistic or lacking coherence. Ultimately, the price we pay is accounting for the challenge of balancing real-world complexities with the demands for methodological consistency and rigor.

In the following sections, I reflect on the relationships and interactions I developed with those who became my interlocutors and gatekeepers in the field, as well as the spaces they navigated. First, I introduce my approach and understanding of and in the field. I then introduce the four field sites: Bhar Lazreg, Sfax, Medénine, and Zarzis. Next, I outline the methods and materials used in the research. The subsequent sections address positionalities, ethics, and the emotions that emerged throughout the fieldwork.

Ethnography of transit

To investigate the everyday life and embodied experiences of migrant women in Tunisia, staying in one place was not enough. I quickly realized that the answers depended heavily on where you were in Tunisia. Spatiality played a significant role. Were you living in an urban banlieue of Tunis or in a humanitarian shelter in Medénine? Were you scraping funds together in Sfax to cross the sea, or wandering aimlessly by the shores of Zarzis, contemplating a return to Libya? Space and place greatly impacted women's navigation and daily lives. Furthermore, focusing on just one ethnic or national group wouldn't suffice. Where a person came from and how they arrived also significantly affected their status and opportunities in transit. Were you from Francophone Cameroon or Anglophone Nigeria? Did you cross from Libya or Algeria, fly in from the Ivory Coast, or were you captured at sea? I realized that to understand Tunisia as a space of transit and to capture the embodied experiences of the people on the move, I would need to go to different spaces and meet them where they were. What were their strategies? What risks did they face? How were these experiences different? What spaces did they navigate in?

Surprisingly, or perhaps not, similarities emerged despite their different points of departure. The women in Bhar Lazreg spoke of '*prison à ciel ouvert*' (open-air prison), while those in the South described it as *l'enfer caché* (hidden hell). The migrant mothers all worried about their children's future, even while being immobilized by them.

Violence was felt by all, though it oscillated along a continuum, from slow violence to fast violence, from the ordinary to the spectacular.

The two maps below illustrate the initial, simplified overview of how I envisioned these different spaces before entering the field: Tunis as the point of arrival, Sfax as the point of departure, Medénine as the place of waiting, and Zarzis as the place where people die. Of course, the reality was far more complex, as the arrows going back and forth show. People did not just arrive in Tunis; some came from the sea, or border crossings. People also died in Medénine, waited in Tunis, arrived in Sfax, and were stuck in Zarzis. There was constant movement between these spaces.

This fluidity made me question whether I was conducting multi-sited fieldwork, or if it was all just one site with moving objects. As Ghassan Hage (2005) argues, multi-sited ethnography has become a buzzword, and it is often 'less helpful than a notion of a single geographically discontinuous site'. Moving between these spaces, I intuitively decided to treat these locations as a single site, or as different instantiations of the same field, a shared space of transit, a shared borderland.

This thinking may seem at odds with popular anthropologists and celebrated ethnographies in migration research, which emphasize multi-sited fieldwork and 'following migrants'. For instance, Seth Holmes' *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* (2013) who followed Triqui migrant farmworkers between rural Oaxaca and Washington State, and joined their border crossing; Ruben Andersson's *Illegality, Inc.* (2014) follows clandestine migrants across the Euro-African borderlands, focusing on what he terms

the 'illegality industry'; and Jason De León, in *The Land of Open Graves* (2015) and *Soldiers and Kings* (2024), explore the effects of U.S. border policy by traveling with migrants and smugglers. All four ethnographies are rich and important, but they are all written by men about men, and personify what Günel, Varma and Watanabe (2020) point to as 'the gendered (masculinist) assumptions of the always available and up-for-anything fieldworker'. This is also what others have called the 'Indiana Jones syndrome', which valorizes masculine Western explorer/adventurer tropes (Nyberg-Sørensen 2021). As a counterpoint Wendy Vogt (2018), in *Lives in Transit,* argues that studying migration doesn't require constant movement but can instead benefit from observing migration dynamics in fixed locations, such as shelters, to gain deeper insights into transit flows. Vogt's approach resonates with my own. I chose Tunis, specifically La Marsa, as my base for practical and safety reasons, primarily because my family was with me. After immersing myself in certain social relations in Bhar Lazreg, and it got 'trickier and stickier', as Hage (2005) describes, I felt ready to explore the 'leads' provided by my interlocutors, such as traveling to the South. There, I established temporary bases in Medénine and Zarzis, a pragmatic decision that allowed me to continue my fieldwork while being with my husband and two-year-old son. Going back and forth alone or 'following the people' around, as Holmes, Andersson or De León did, was neither possible nor necessary for my situation. Instead, my research followed a more intuitive and iterative approach. I listened carefully to what people shared and, crucially, trusted and took my interlocutors seriously. 'Sister, you have to talk to Papa Abdoulaye', some women told me in Tunis. These leads from gatekeepers and interlocutors were central in shaping my fieldwork, guiding me to key individuals and locations I might not have otherwise discovered. This approach also meant there were things I didn't see. My movement was shaped by access, trust and family responsibilities, which limited spontaneous or prolonged engagements in certain spaces. I did decline many meetings and encounters due to logistical and practical issues. I might have missed deeper insights from following individuals across longer trajectories or witnessing the slower, more invisible aspects of daily survival. My understanding was shaped by what was shared with me, but also by what remained unsaid or unseen, acknowledging that no fieldwork approach is without its blind spots.

This approach of focusing on specific sites for extended periods before moving to the next, in my case shifting between the North and South, was essential in shaping key aspects of my analysis. Moving back and forth allowed me to 'compare, contrast, reflect, and rethink', much like Menjívar (2011), who alternated her research among Ladina women between two towns in Guatemala. This process deepened my understanding of the narratives I encountered. For instance, in the north, I engaged with mainly French-speaking Ivorian women who had arrived by plane from Abidjan

to Tunis, navigating urban marginality and informality, and in the south I spent time with mainly English-speaking West African[8] women who had fled war-torn Libya, many of whom had survived systematic sexual violence in detention, escaping pregnant or with children across the Mediterranean. The goal was not to compare suffering or establish a hierarchy of trauma, but rather to understand, to see how violence, survival and space shaped their lives in different ways. Moving between these sites helped me ground emerging themes more deeply, allowing patterns and distinctions to organically unfold.

The decision to work across four main field sites derives its strength from a methodology of 'layering' (Cohn 2006), where each geographic site is viewed as a unique, yet complementary connection across the country. Inspired by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967), themes in my research emerged organically through conversations and interactions rather than being predetermined. I engaged in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006), using colour coding in my notebooks to visually map recurring themes. For instance, I marked blue for violence, green for motherhood and children, and yellow for everyday life. This process allowed me to identify patterns as certain themes became increasingly prevalent, pages filled with green notes on motherhood, while blue, representing violence, spread across my field notes. As my notes filled with more and more green and blue, it became clear that motherhood and violence were dominant themes. Notably, although I never explicitly asked about violence or death, these topics surfaced naturally in casual settings, at hair salons, restaurants and playgrounds. They were omnipresent in the narratives of the women I spoke with. Similarly, motherhood, pregnancy and childbirth emerged as recurring and central themes, not because I directed the conversation toward them, but because they were deeply embedded in the lived experiences of migrant women in Tunisia. Death also became a dominant theme. Nearly everyone I spoke to knew someone who had died, crossing the sea, stranded in the desert, or from freak accidents or untreated medical conditions. As I reviewed my notes, the themes of death, violence, motherhood and everyday life, stood out as essential. Curiously, transit never emerged as a theme. None of my interlocutors described themselves as 'in transit' or even used the word at all. Instead, they would say, '*On est là*', we are here. This absence itself became analytically significant: if no one spoke of transit, was it truly a meaningful category in their experience? This realization led me to question whether transit is a subjective or objective classification of space and movement. As I reflected on my empirical material, it became clear that this 'non-theme' was, in fact, a crucial theme in its own right.

The thematic coding and analysis revealed a two-way inquiry that complements,

[8] Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Ghana, Anglophone Cameroon

converges, and intertwines. One strand explores the gendered, embodied experiences of West African migrant women, while the other examines local and spatial effects, including environmental impacts. This led me to interview both migrant women and men, as well as local actors who are not immediate subjects of border externalization.

To capture the lifeworlds of the women and men, my approach was to follow a narrative ethnography (Lucht 2015; Schmoll 2014; Gubrium & Holstein 2008) where the stories and subjective narratives are the foundations upon which theory and concepts are developed. In the same vein Michael Jackson (2012) argues for the importance of emic terms, vernacular expression, the use of music and images rather than complicated theory. Jackson uses the term 'writing intersubjectivity' to refer to the process of conveying and understanding the subjective experiences, perspectives, and emotions of individuals within ethnographic and anthropological writing. This approach underscores the importance of capturing lived experiences and inner worlds rather than presenting a detached, objective account of people's lives. 'Writing intersubjectivity' fosters an empathetic and nuanced portrayal of researched communities. Jackson (2012) poses two key questions: When do we fully acknowledge interlocutors' voices without overshadowing them? And when do we assert, show, or remain silent? Intersubjectivity highlights the shared meaning-making between anthropologist and subject. Applying this approach, I centre the people's subjective, embodied experiences and agency, foregrounding their voices in the following pages and my articles.

Fields and methods

This dissertation is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted throughout 2021 and late 2022.[9] The research draws on hundreds of interviews and comprehensive participant observation across various settings with a diverse range of participants and actors. I engaged with more than one hundred and fifty migrants, including over seventy consisting of repeated, in-depth conversations over extensive periods of time. Around thirty became key informants across different field sites, many of whom I remain in close contact with today. I also conducted dozens of interviews with representatives from humanitarian organizations, UN agencies, NGOs, and local associations working on migration. Interviews extended to border agencies such as ICMPD, Tunisian border officials, and the Tunisian Coastguard in Sfax and the Kerkennah Islands. Additionally, I interviewed EU diplomats, local politicians, the mayor of Zarzis, and participated in municipal meetings and gatherings at the Fishermen's College and Fishermen Union. Local actors connected to migrant

[9] I continued having conversations and staying in touch with my key informants after fieldwork as well, throughout the whole research period 2021–2025.

cemeteries, including activists, artists, gravediggers and forensic doctors, also formed an important part of this research, as well as smugglers and migration facilitators. Beyond formal interviews, I engaged in even more informal conversations, often facilitated through close relationships with key informants and gatekeepers.

For a comprehensive overview of the study participants, key actors, and organizations across the four research sites, see Appendix 1. Detailed breakdowns for each location can be found in: Table 1 for Bhar Lazreg, Table 2 for Medénine, Table 3 for Sfax, and Table 4 for a list with other actors and agencies.

Participant observation was central to this research. Encounters with migrants ranged from brief street interactions to entire days spent together in hair salons, homes or shared social spaces. These included attending parties, Sunday church ceremonies, cooking and watching soap operas. Invitations to such spaces were frequent and became crucial to understanding daily life and survival strategies.

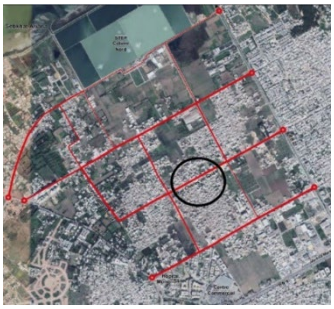
In line with ethical considerations, I refrained from recording most encounters. Instead, I took notes when appropriate and, when permitted, captured photographs to remember key details. To retain the immediacy of experiences, I recorded voice memos after meetings or observations. These were often made during quiet moments, walking between meetings, sitting in a taxi, or outside my home before 're-entering' family life. Evenings, after my son was put to bed, were dedicated to listening to these voice memos and writing detailed notes in a digital logbook. This logbook served as a crucial tool for reflection, helping to identify emerging themes, note significant observations, and formulate questions for follow-up. Regular reviews of the logbook ensured a structured and evolving approach to data collection and analysis.

Each field site required a different approach, not only due to their spatial and geographical differences, ranging from urban to desert, north to south, but also because access to people varied. Some lived in their own apartments or rented rooms, while others resided in humanitarian shelters.

I began my fieldwork in Bhar Lazreg, an urban neighbourhood on the fringes of La Marsa where me and my family found a place to live. I had heard it referred to as 'Little Congo' or 'Petite Afrique de l'Ouest', piquing my curiosity. I first approach the field spatially. To gain an overview of the neighbourhood and its infrastructure I conducted an urban mapping exercise. Map 1 illustrates a satellite image of Bhar Lazreg, with a circle indicating the area of my concentrated fieldwork, centred around Rue Charles de Gaulle and the 'Philosophers Corner'.[10] After completing the mapping, I chose to focus on this specific area, as it formed the heart of Bhar Lazreg and was home to

[10] This is what I called it, because all the neighbouring streets are named after philosophers, e.g. Rue Kant, Rue Platon, Rue Nietzsche, etc.'

many street vendors and small shops, primarily run by West Africans. Before approaching people and conducting interviews, I sought formal approval and authorization to carry out research in Bhar Lazreg. Like many informal neighbourhoods, it may seem counterintuitive, but everyone knows everyone, so if you are new, you stand out. I quickly became aware of this and wanted to secure some form of backing. Since I was not affiliated with a local organization or university, I felt that having official approval would provide a sense of security, particularly because I also planned to take photographs for my spatial mapping. My previous fieldwork experience in urban slum areas in Dhaka, Monrovia and Nairobi had already taught me that securing either formal or informal authorization is crucial for access and uninterrupted research. Based on recommendations from Tunisian friends, I first reached out to La Marsa Municipality, where I met with Madame Rawda Rasqallah. She was very helpful and advised me to contact Madame Grira Zouhir, the political representative in Bhar Lazreg, commonly referred to as the Chef de Bhar Lazreg. As a native of the neighbourhood, she was highly respected and possessed in-depth local knowledge. After explaining my project and its objectives, I received full authorization from both offices, allowing me to proceed with my fieldwork.



Map 1 Satellite picture of Bhar Lazreg illustrates my mapping exercise. Black circle demarcates concentrated fieldwork.

My urban mapping required an infrastructural analysis of Bhar Lazreg to understand its spatial dynamics, the daily movements of migrants, the spaces they frequented, and those they avoided. Focusing on the concentrated area around Rue Charles de Gaulle I mapped key landmarks, including a local municipality office, a drugstore, a primary school, the Aziza supermarket, three main roads, a souk, a centrally-located market rented by the municipality, and Monji Slim Hospital.

Public transport was severely lacking for a community of 60,000 residents. The area had only two bus stops, one by the primary school and another near the local mosque, El Tawba, served by bus lines 20A and 52B, which connected to downtown Tunis. In response to this inadequate public transport system informal communal cabs, known as *El Nakel*, provided an alternative. These unregulated taxis operated fixed routes between the central market and La Marsa for a set fare of 1 Tunisian Dinar. For many migrants *El Nakel* was sometimes the only available means of transportation.

Informal micro-businesses were thriving in Bhar Lazreg, many of them migrant-led. These included beauty services, hair and nail salons, food carts, 'frips' (second-hand stores), cafés, street vendors, underground daycares, handyman services, dry cleaners, storage businesses, hardware stores and local auto repair shops. Most of these businesses operated outside formal registration or regulation, largely due to the area's

anarchic urban development and the absence of regular inspections by authorities or police. One of these informal businesses was Mama Nathalie's restaurant simply named 'Votre Restaurent Africain', which became the focal point of my fieldwork in Bhar Lazreg. Mama Nathalie herself emerged as my primary gatekeeper within the community. From her restaurant, where she served me spicy Ivorian dishes while managing her various side hustles, she introduced me to other women she referred to as *sœurs* (sisters), such as sœur Joelle and sœur Nadege down the road. Through a process of organic snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf 1981) my sample and presence got deeper and deeper in the West African community. Simply by being present in the restaurant, resting from the scorching sun, listening to Ivorian gospel or Afrobeats, depending on Nathalie's mood, as the music played from a speaker perched on the fridge, I encountered people who were curious about my presence. Many found it unusual to see someone like me, not West African but possibly Tunisian, sparking both confusion and conversation. Nathalie seemed to appreciate my presence. Perhaps having a 'foreigner' around lent the restaurant a certain status. In the beginning, I paid what she jokingly called 'White prices', but over the weeks and months, I gradually transitioned to paying 'Black prices', a shift I understood as a mark of trust and acceptance. The restaurant became the heart of my fieldwork in Bhar Lazreg, a space from which my research unfolded. It was not only where I learned about Ivorian fish specialties but also where I came to understand the intricate and intimate negotiations and strategies required for Black women to navigate and survive in Bhar Lazreg.

In Bhar Lazreg (n=40) the majority of the women had arrived in a regular manner, flying from home countries like Cote d'Ivoire or Cameroon directly to Tunis through a free visa agreement. I also encountered a small, very different, group. They were all Nigerians who had recently crossed clandestinely from the Algerian border into Tabarka in northern Tunisia and through Nigerian networks in Bhar Lazreg had arrived there. This was somewhat an irregularity and a new migration corridor, opening due to the Algerian authorities' increased restrictions and violence towards irregular sub-Saharan migrants, imposing crackdowns and forced deportations to the desert that increased during the pandemic and pushed more to flee to neighbouring Tunisia. For the vast majority, however, Tunisia was a destination, they were not in transit to Europe. This was particularly true for the Ivorians, who had tried to settle, have children, open businesses, restaurants and beauty salons; albeit all informally due to the Kafkaesque bureaucratic system in Tunisia. Many had spent years trying to make a life for themselves and their families in Tunis. Europe was not part of their trajectory.

Medénine was a very different story. In this desert town in the south, my interlocutors (n=30), all West African migrant women, most of whom were mothers or pregnant, resided mainly in two *foyers*, UNHCR and IOM. All of them had fled Libya. Three arrived in Tunisia close to their due dates and most of the pregnancies

were the outcome of rape and systematic sexual violence in Libyan detention centres. Only two of the women had travelled with a partner, one partner having died at sea and the other having arrived in Italy. The women's ages ranged between 16 and 42 and their countries of origin included Congo, Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea and Sierra Leone. The vast majority were Anglophone, as opposed to Bhar Lazreg where almost all were Francophone. The language barrier posed additional marginality and precarity for the women. Some had been there for years, like Cynthia, waiting for an asylum decision, whom I write about in 'A Mother's Choice' (Article 2). I conducted participant observation and interviews in English and French at the *Association Enfants de la Lune*, run by Papa Abdoulaye. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews at the association, we spent hours talking every day, often sitting on plastic chairs in the makeshift playground in the courtyard. It became clear that the women here were far more stuck and much more eager to escape, embodying a sense of urgency and temporariness all at once. I sometimes found myself wondering, before walking into the association, who I would see that day, and who might have left in the dusk of dawn. Who had followed through with their plan and left? This dynamic was reflected in my data: some of the women I only saw or spoke to once before they disappeared, while others I had the chance to follow more closely, build rapport with, and stay in touch with, even as I write this passage.

In Zarzis I focused my attention on local actors, who are not the usual immediate subjects of European border policies, namely the local fishermen and actors involved in the two migrant cemeteries. I still met and spoke with several migrant women and men through them. Through snowballing and local connections I was able to engage with three key individuals involved with the cemeteries: Chamsedine (Chams) Marzoug, who was associated with the *Cimitiere des Inconnus*; Rachid Koraichi, who had inaugurated *Jardin d'Afrique*; and Mohsin Lihidhib, who ran the *Sea Memory Museum* in Zarzis. Focusing on and foregrounding the perspectives of the locals illuminated how border policies affect not only migrants but also the broader community. Visits to the fishing ports, the beaches where bodies washed ashore, and the fields transformed into clandestine cemeteries all vividly underscored the environmental and spatial impacts of border externalization. While the Tunisian fishermen and local actors are not in transit like the migrants, they all share the same fate of being on the receiving end of how borders regulate, impact and shape their everyday lives. They, along with their communities and environment, are all affected by these ripple effects in different ways. The long shadow of the border touches them all.

In Sfax I shifted my focus to humanitarian actors and agencies working on the frontlines. In addition to conducting formal interviews at headquarters and institutional offices, I also engaged in short ethnographic observations across diverse settings. Much of my data emerged from unstructured conversations that took place

in informal and often transient spaces, such as taxis, cafés, and street corners as well as at the cemeteries, forensics department and morgue at Sfax Hospital. I still met with and interviewed (n=10) migrants living in Sfax, mostly university students except for two women, who were irregular migrants I had previously met with in Zarzis. These two women had moved to Sfax to find work and save money for their sea crossing.

To fully grasp the humanitarian landscape, I prioritized interviewing and participating in multiple meetings and events organized by NGOs, civil society groups, and international humanitarian agencies, many of which I had already initiated contact with while I was in Tunis. I had several meetings with IOM Sfax, where Joseph, an IOM migration officer, became a key informant and gatekeeper. We met multiple times, both formally and informally. I also engaged with various staff from the Tunisian Red Crescent, including Mohamed Jeddar, who was responsible for Restoring Family Links (RLF) and repatriation of bodies, as well as Yousra from Terre d'Asile. Joseph, Mohamed and Yousra played pivotal roles as informants and gatekeepers within the humanitarian community. Our conversations revealed the daily challenges they faced of operating in a context with minimal humanitarian infrastructure. In the absence of a national framework, they were often left to "put out fires," managing urgent needs on the ground while navigating the gaps and contradictions of internal and external migration policy. Chams from Zarzis had also facilitated a meeting with Dr Samir Maatoug, the chief forensic doctor at the forensic department and morgue of Sfax hospital, who was in charge of handling bodies recovered from the sea. I also had dinners with Tunisian human rights lawyers and interviewed the Tunisian coastguard, particularly Captain Hannafi, with whom I sailed from Sfax to the Kerkenneh Islands to observe the coastguard's work firsthand. My approach in Sfax was to encapsulate the meso-level of agencies and organizations in the humanitarian–border nexus.

While perhaps initially appearing confusing, messy and 'patchy', these meetings, observations and formal and informal interactions with very different actors provided invaluable insights into the complexities of migration, the humanitarian response, the absence of the state, European border policies and the interconnectedness of various actors within this space. They were essential in shaping my understanding of the *assemblages* at play, like a montage, where fragmented pieces come together to form a coherent whole. This form of 'patchwork ethnography' (Günel, Varma & Watanabe 2020) deepened my analysis of how actors navigate and how borders and migration policies affect both individuals, agencies and communities on the frontlines.

Through my back-and-forth approach, a stark contrast became evident between the migrants residing in the North and those in the South. This disparity stemmed from multiple factors. First, many West African migrants, particularly from Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon, arrived in Tunisia through regular channels, either via free visa

agreements or student visas, and typically landed at Tunis-Carthage airport. The South, however, presented a different reality. Migrants here arrived clandestinely, often crossing the Libyan border after enduring the horrors of Libyan detention camps, navigating the Algerian desert, or being intercepted at sea by the Tunisian coastguard. A broad observation suggests that migrants in Tunis and Sfax tended to demonstrate greater resourcefulness, while those in the South faced heightened precarity. However, this is a simplification of a far more complex and fluid reality shaped by immobility, violence and marginalization in Tunisia's borderlands. As the tables in Annex 1 illustrate, both the sociodemographic profiles and mobility trajectories of study participants varied significantly across different sites.

Despite their differences in background, arrival method and legal status, my empirical findings revealed that migrants across all sites experienced a shared condition of immobility and confinement. Many described their situation as being trapped in an 'open-air prison', a recurring sentiment that emerged throughout my fieldwork. Strikingly, this feeling of entrapment was not exclusive to migrants but was also echoed by many Tunisians, who similarly felt blocked and restricted within their own country. This pervasive sense of confinement became a central theme in my research, leading me to critically re-examine the notion of transit.

Having previously worked in the country as a programme manager for a Danish human rights organization, I had the privilege of gaining an insightful overview of the relevant stakeholders and actors on the ground. This facilitated open doors for my research. I also swiftly grasped the ever-evolving landscape of civil society and the intricate migration dynamics that unfolded in the absence of a formal state and national framework. Nonetheless, my true interest has always been in delving into the lived experiences of those involved, those on the receiving end of the policies.

During my fieldwork, I engaged with multiple local and international organizations, such as UNHCR, IOM, Médecins du Monde and EU diplomats, both in person and online. These interactions, often repeated to build rapport with specific individuals across various organizations, were driven by my aim to understand the operational dynamics within Tunisia's limited humanitarian infrastructure. This included exploring how these organizations navigated in the absence of state migration governance, or what I have co-conceptualized with a Tunisian colleague as Tunisia's *'non-migration policy*' (El-Ghali & Chemlali 2022).

Getting an idea of this 'ping-pong' between the organizations, as one UNHCR official said in relation to how migrants were 'batted' back and forth between the humanitarian organizations due to the lack of legal framework or how 'they are building the road while running' another migration officer in IOM told me. This gave a clear picture of the state vacuum and ad hoc approach organizational actors navigated in. These relationships and conversations provided essential context for understanding

the transit space. For instance, many humanitarian agencies concentrated their efforts in Sfax due to its self-declared 'state of emergency' and designation as a 'hot-spot'. These interactions offered insights into the meso-level dynamics, bridging the micro-level experiences of migrants and local actors with the macro-level framework of the Tunisian state and EU policies.

Although my research prioritizes a bottom-up perspective centred on migrants' lived experiences, understanding the role of these agencies was necessary to grasp the broader power structures and policy paradoxes shaping those experiences. My interest was less about analysing organizations as institutions and more about understanding the personal dynamics and tensions within them. I focused on building connections with individuals beyond institutional frameworks, such as Joseph from IOM, Mohamed from Red Crescent and Claus from the EU migration office. Through these personal relationships I gained deeper insights into how these actors navigated the complexities of Tunisia's political landscape, the inherent tensions they faced, and the ways in which their roles intersected with broader systems of power and control.

Ultimately, these formal and informal conversations contributed to my analysis of the fragmented realities of transit, the sense of stuckness, and the manifestations of violence within these spaces. This approach helped me construct a more nuanced analysis of the intricate interplay between policy, power and lived experience in the borderlands

On positionality and being '*Maghrebia*'[11]

As migration researchers, our positionalities shape fieldwork. For those of us with migrant backgrounds this influence is even more pronounced, not only because our positions are often problematized in an increasingly politicized research field but also because they expose the complex power dynamics present in the field.Drawing from my field experiences, I will illustrate how my ethnicity, nationality, language skills, experiences with racialization, and insider–outsider status were challenged. These factors shaped both the research process, and the knowledge produced. Engaging in self-conscious reflexivity was essential and will be explored in the following pages.

In the beginning of my fieldwork in Bhar Lazreg, I quickly realized how my own multilayered identity, as a researcher from the so-called Global North, a woman of colour, a mother, with a migrant background and North African roots, but not Tunisian, were positionalities I couldn't hide from, on the contrary they had to be seriously considered.

[11] A colloquial term in Maghrebi Arabic meaning 'native from the Maghreb' in a feminine noun. The Maghreb region comprising Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauretania.

I realized early on that some migrant women kept quiet in my presence, until Mama Nathalie or Joelle would yell out in the salon 'She is not Tunisian, you can speak!'. 'Eeeh eh…. Vous êtes pas Tunisian?' And the whole atmosphere and space changed instantly. I realized that when I was perceived as a Tunisian woman it created fear and tensions as many of the women had bad experiences with Tunisian women, especially working as maids in their homes, but also in the streets, as hostility between the communities was growing. To navigate this, I actively started using my Danish–Moroccan position up-front. 'Don't worry I am not Tunisian; you can talk to me' I would increasingly find myself saying. This also meant they became much more open and less reluctant to voice criticism towards Tunisian society when they knew I would not take it personally. The relation with the women changed over time, I was perceived as an insider, as a migrant, born in Europe, to a mother who had done what some of them aspired to; she left her home country, looking for a better life, so that her children would have a better future. Suddenly my own family's mobility history was driving my field research.

This window or 'access' was not obvious from the get-go. As a mother, 'during my free time', if such a thing ever existed in the field and with family, I would bring my son to the playgrounds in La Marsa, where occasionally other migrant mothers would come. The women would approach me, which opened a whole new space. Some of them worked as nannies for wealthy Tunisian families or European expats. We would talk about motherhood, about the struggles and insecurities as a parent, about the dreams and fears for our children. Serendipitous encounters and unexpected conversations that otherwise wouldn't have taken place. In these instances, I was not perceived as a researcher, but a mother, first.

On a typical day in the field, I often found myself navigating the insider–outsider continuum, which shifted depending on who I was speaking with, both intentionally and unintentionally. With local NGOs, I was welcomed as a *Maghrebia*, while with UN or EU officials, I was perceived as a Danish PhD student with access, power, and privileges that were inaccessible to local researchers. Some of these positional advantages were beneficial, but others, at times, posed challenges. These power imbalances, hierarchies, and issues of positionality must be carefully considered and discussed, rather than simply accepted (Krause 2021).

Being *Maghrebia* and navigating my own family history was somewhat unexpected and particularly challenging. It all felt so terribly foreign and yet so familiar. My own family's migration story started to intertwine with my field. Thoughts and memories I had suppressed for years, came bubbling up to the surface. In Bhar Lazreg, the local street food guy Ali, who made me my favourite lunch, '*Ojja bel merguez'*, a Tunisian form of shakshuka with spicy sausages, was curious about what 'a Moroccan girl' was doing there, walking around talking to people all day. After learning I 'talked to people

about migration' he laughed and said *'haja 3adi'* meaning 'something very normal', as if he was expecting something extraordinary. '*El Harga?*[12] *3adi 3adi'* and continued telling me how he knew so many who wanted to, or had already, crossed. I smiled and nodded and tried to focus on my sausage, when he then casually said *'yakul el hoot, ma ikulus dood'* something that stopped the food from going into my mouth and immediately sent me back to my childhood summers in Morocco with my cousins, who were dreaming of crossing the sea. *'Yakul el hoot, ma ikulus dood'*, is an expression in Maghrebi darija which literally translates to '[to be] eaten by fish, [rather] than eaten by worms', morbidly referring to dying at sea rather than dying on land or simply put rather die trying than die without. As a kid or teenager, I didn't think much of it. My cousins the same age as me and my younger siblings, would joke and laugh about taking *'el flouka'* meaning the boat to 'our place', meaning Europe/Denmark. We would lay down on our backs on the rooftop at night and sing at the top of our lungs to the skies and stars *'Yal babour, ya mon amour',* in a mix of Darija and French, the chorus goes like this*:*

Yal babour, ya mon amour
Kharejni mel la misère (partir loin)
Fi bladi rani mahgoure
3yit 3yit tout, j'en ai marre
Man ratich l'occasion (la la)
Fideli ça fait longtemps
Hada nessetni qui je suis
Nkhdem 3liha jour et nuit
Yal babour, ya mon amour
Kharejni mel la misère

oh boat, my love
take me out of misery (going far away)
in my country I feel humiliated
I'm tired and I'm fed up
this time I won't miss the chance (no no)
it's been long time in my mind
migration has made me forget who I am
I work on it day and night
Oh boat, my love
take me out of misery
(113*,* chorus from *'Partir Loin',* 2005. Translated by author.)

[12] Referring to '*Harraga',* the burning of borders, or clandestinely crossing borders, symbolically burning one's documents/papers (see M'charek 2020)

Over time it didn't sit well with me or my cousins[13]. We would eventually grow apart with age. The differences in opportunity and education, resources and wealth became more and more visible. The unfairness unbearable. Joking about crossing the sea in a rickety boat was no longer fun, for any of us.

All these ambivalent feelings came up again in the field, especially when confronted with local Tunisians' sentiments of why me and not you? Feelings of privilege and guilt. This was brought even more to the fore when some Tunisians I engaged with were angry with me for not asking *them* about migration and *their* struggle but only being interested in the West Africans. That I needed to understand *they* were also suffering, *they* were also dying at sea.

Even away from the field, looking at my notes or transcribing interviews, or listening to stories again, I found myself increasingly thinking about my own family's migration, my mother's experience, my father's. My cousins, still struggling in the Motherland. It happened almost automatically.

Being *Maghrebia* was not just all bad of course, I was also welcomed back 'home' in a sense too. A sense of belonging many in the diaspora long for. In Zarzis for instance, the local fishermen were particularly warm and welcoming of me and my family. They referred to me as '*Bent El Bled*' meaning 'daughter of the land' a gesture that evoked a sense of kinship and familiarity. They told me anecdotes of their trips to Morocco as young men, working with Moroccan fishermen and spoke warmly of the mutual respect and shared humour. I also told them about my uncles and cousins who worked as fishermen and fish merchants in the south. Some would also tell me how proud they were of me, for 'making it'. Many of the fishermen had children who had migrated to Europe, for studies or work, and it was clear they somehow saw my 'accomplishments' as an academic, with my husband and son, as a positive thing, something they wanted for their children too. A personification of the opportunities available *there* and not available for them *here*.

The fishermen preferred speaking Darija, which I was comfortable with, though my slightly Oujda-aligned dialect often led them to assume I was Algerian.[14] This confusion became an amusing conversation starter (because of the longstanding Moroccan/Algerian conflict). They frequently used words I recognized but struggled

[13] The song is titled '*Partir loin'* by 113, a French hip-hop group, including African and Caribbean roots originating in North and West Africa and the island of Guadeloupe. The song '*Partir loin'* came out in 2005 and was particularly popular in North Africa, France and West Africa, a dance song that dealt with migration, inequality and border regimes.

[14] Oujda a city, located in far northeastern Morocco near the Moroccan–Algerian border, where my father is from and my dialect.

to translate into English or Danish. One such word, central to our conversations about shipwrecks and the bodies they frequently found at sea, was قهر (qahr). They would say, '*It is* قهر, often followed with *'wollahi qahr hadshi'* – I swear to God, this is قهر', placing their hands over their hearts.

In my notes, قهر appears many times, always in Arabic, as I found no suitable translation. A quick search revealed meanings ranging from suffering to grief to fury. Khadijah Muhaisen Dajani's description[15] resonated most:

> 'There is no English equivalent to the Arabic word *qahr*. The dictionary says 'anger' but it's not. It is when you take anger, place it on a low fire, add injustice, oppression, racism, dehumanisation to it, and leave it to cook slowly for a century. And then you try to say it but no one hears you. So it sits in your heart. And settles in your cells. And it becomes your genetic imprint. And then moves through generations. And one day, you find yourself unable to breathe. It washes over you and demands to break out of you. You weep. And the cycle repeats.'

This depiction, I felt, framed what the fishermen embodied. Without Darija, my mother tongue, I might have missed the depth of this word and how it related and felt to them. Similarly, with the migrants, who mostly spoke French, my lack of perfect fluency initially made me nervous. In Bhar Lazreg at first, I even hired Mariam, a young Tunisian translator who was fluent in French, but in one of the first interviews, she was completely lost when the Ivorian women were speaking. Even whispering to me baffled 'I don't understand what they are saying, this is not French!' Ironically, I did. It was simply 'broken' French, something I was an expert in myself. In time, I realized that my imperfect French eased our conversations. Free from the constraints of perfect grammar, our exchanges felt more genuine and relaxed. My imperfect French positioned me as someone not superior, and often the women were far more articulate, teased my French, and this allowed them to express themselves more comfortably.

The abovementioned examples illustrate the inherent advantages and challenges associated with different research positions in the field of migration. My engagement with multiple languages was not simply a methodological choice but a reflection of my own situated identity. My familiarity with Arabic, Maghrebi Darija, French, English and Danish inevitably shaped how I perceived, interpreted, and conveyed meaning. Translation, in this light, is far from a neutral exercise; it is an active negotiation where my own cultural and linguistic background both enables and limits

[15] See NYX (2024). A Conversation with Monia Ben Hamouda, Maude Léonard-Contant, and Gioia Dal Molin. Flash Art.

what I can capture. Positionality here played a vital role in shaping research subject matter (Carling et al. 2014). So, I was curious about what my positionality was. My name and appearance reveal a migrant background and thus provided a common ground with the West African community, despite not being Black or West African myself. But being neither of West African origin nor Tunisian implied that I fitted neither 'classical' category. Not the archetypal outsider researcher nor the insider. This placed me in an 'explicit third-party position' (Carling et al. 2014) because my identity is neither part of the migrant group (West African) nor of the majority population (Tunisian). Having worked and travelled in West Africa for several years, and gained a modest understanding of the region, I would sometimes jokingly say to street vendors, 'Eh sister, I'm hungry, do you have some fufu?' This would often stun them, and they would burst out laughing. They would then start asking me how I know about this and that, which would open a door to conversation and helped create a relation. I quickly learned that even slight cultural competence could facilitate access. '*Vous êtes Ivoirien! Vous êtes pas Arabe*!' (You're Ivorian, not Arab!) they would jokingly say to me, which according to Carling et al. could make me an 'honorary insider' (2014). Additionally, in migration research, there is the position of 'insider by proxy' (Carling et al. 2014), where the researcher has a migrant background, but from a different migrant group than the one being studied, as in my case. This often occurred when I met with migrants who had settled in Tunisia, like my humanitarian gatekeeper Joseph who worked at IOM, who had been living in Tunisia for 17 years after arriving as a student from Congo. Or Papa Abdoulaye, who ran the Association de la Lune and had lived in Tunisia for 25 years. Originally from N'Djamena in Chad and married to a Tunisian, Papa Abdoulaye was in his late fifties. Both spoke to me as a clear insider, acknowledging our shared experiences. I was a migrant in Denmark, just as they were migrants in Tunisia. They would say things like, 'You know how it is' or 'This is not our home country, no matter what', and use 'we' to describe our shared struggles and experiences. '*Mettre ton vécu, mettre ton vécu',* Joseph would tell me, referring to how 'our' understanding of migration differed from that of 'White researchers' because, as they put it, 'we' understood it differently, as we were the same.

Through these diverse experiences, it became clear that positionalities extend beyond the field and methodology. They are dynamic, operating along a continuum with political and ethical dimensions that shape the research process and relationships. As Rosaldo (1984) notes, 'The notion of position also refers to how life experiences both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight'. Recognizing this, I became more attentive to how my own positionality influenced what I could see, hear, and understand, and what remained obscured. This awareness shaped not only my methodological choices but also my analytical lens, encouraging me to remain reflexive about the partial and situated nature of my knowledge. It also required constant

negotiation of ethical responsibilities, particularly regarding representation, and accountability to those who shared their stories with me.

On engagement, emotions and ethics

While the political landscape and crisis evolved during my fieldwork, significant events unfolded both during and after my time in the field. A particularly pivotal moment occurred in February 2023 when President Kais Saied delivered a speech invoking the 'great replacement' theory, which led to a surge of violent xenophobic attacks targeting migrants. Many were forcibly evicted from their homes and faced increasing hostility. Throughout this period, I remained in constant contact with those I had met during fieldwork, receiving updates and firsthand accounts. This raised the question: Was this still fieldwork?

At the height of the political and human rights crisis, I was sent information almost daily by my informants across Tunisia, pictures, videos and voice messages directly from the eye of the storm. 'Please speak up sis, tell the world what is happening to us', one text said. I turned to X (formerly Twitter) and found myself thrown into the international media scene, CNN, Al Jazeera, AfricaNews, Radio France, BBC and more. When I shared on Facebook that I had spoken with these outlets about the worsening situation and the harsh realities migrants were facing, my informants would write: 'Thank you, sis! Keep talking! Tunisia is not safe!'

What became clear in those moments was that the separation between the field and home was an illusion. And it also highlighted the dilemmas faced by engaged academics trying to navigate research and communication in times of crisis. I felt compelled to go beyond academic boundaries, moving into public engagement. Yet it was a delicate balance between maintaining analytical distance and becoming actively involved, especially as violence escalated across Tunisia in 2023 and made global news. Some might call it an 'activist role', and engaging through social media, leveraging my informants to provide updates, certainly placed me far outside traditional academia. It underscored the complexities and ethical dilemmas when research collides with real-world crises. But I couldn't shake the feeling that something didn't sit right with me. Was I actually helping them? Sure, raising awareness was important to a global audience, but what difference did it make? Happiness and Françoise were still kicked out of their homes, fearing for their lives. People were still drowning. The only immediate result was that I, as an academic, was being recognized and used as a so-called 'international expert'. I felt deeply ambivalent.

This experience underscored the ethical dilemmas inherent in fieldwork, a tension encapsulated by Michael Jackson's question in *'Between One and One Another'* (2012): 'How, in brief, can we strike a balance between doing justice to the people who accept us into their communities, sharing their life experiences and scarce resources, and

satisfy the demands of the profession to which we belong and from which we make our living?'

This question lingered with me throughout, surfacing most acutely in moments where the boundaries between professional obligation and personal involvement blurred. One such moment arose when I was invited by the gravediggers to attend the burial of a woman whose body had been found on the beach in Zarzis. Although I had previously navigated similar settings, having visited cemeteries and morgues several times, I felt an unexpected, visceral resistance that day. I worried that my presence might reduce the experience to mere voyeurism, detached from the profound human suffering unfolding before me. Additionally, the long drive and family commitments deepened my hesitation, highlighting the challenge of balancing personal responsibilities with the demands of field research. Ultimately, I was left questioning the ethics of both attending and declining: how does one navigate the fine line between empathetic engagement and the potential exploitation of tragedy and grief?

This internal conflict mirrors the broader ethical challenge articulated by Bourgois and Jeff in *Righteous Dopefiend* (2009), who caution against becoming mere 'intellectual voyeurs' confined to abstract theories. Fred Hampton (1969) captured this ethos succinctly when he declared, 'Theory is cool, but theory with no practice ain't shit!', a sentiment that reinforces the need for tangible, compassionate engagement[16]. Balancing the demands of rigorous research with the moral imperative to alleviate suffering remains a persistent negotiation, one that reflects not only the complexities of our scholarly endeavours but also the profound responsibilities we bear toward those who share their lives with us. I took on the need to be practical and of assistance unconsciously, perhaps shaped by my past in a human rights organization. Vogt (2018) writes about becoming a volunteer in a shelter, helping the migrants with daily practical things. In my encounters and engagement, I also found it natural to offer help, leveraging my networks and access to other NGOs. For instance, I assisted some of the women in Bhar Lazreg to access services they hadn't been aware of existed. They got free Covid-19 vaccines; I connected Happiness and Joelle, who were pregnant at the time, with Médecins du Monde, a local association that could provide them with prenatal health services. I also helped with daily chores at home, such as hanging clothes to dry with Françoise or looking after the babies while the mothers ran errands. Between fieldwork trips I organized a small 'clothes collection' for babies and children among my friends, returning with two big suitcases of clothes for the migrant mothers.

[16] Fred Hampton (1948–1969) was a Black revolutionary and abolitionist, and a leader in the Black Panther Party, see Haas, J. (2009). *The assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago police murdered a Black Panther*. Chicago Review Press.

These acts, though small, deepened the relationship with the women and undoubtedly shaped how they viewed me. Getting so close also brought challenges and dilemmas. Naturally, over time, it became increasingly difficult to navigate the researcher/interlocutor/friend zone. An entry in my field diary illustrates the grey zone between emotions and ethics in the field:

> Mongi, Mariama's son, is sitting on my lap. Wael his twin brother is on her lap. We sit opposite each other on two plastic chairs. Dr Slim has given us the back office to talk, in his pharmacy. Drugs and pharmaceuticals are all over the shelves and on the floor. The room is cold. I look down, Mongi is sleeping and drooling on my chest. I first smile. Then I am instantly reminded of my son, same age, same size and weight. I start sobbing and crying unexpectedly and uncontrollably. I apologize in between my weeping. Mariam is equally startled as I am. 'Why are you crying sis?' she says with a smile, trying to comfort me. Which only makes me cry harder. My snot and tears mix with Mongi's drooling on my neck and chest. 'Don't cry sis, please be strong', she says, reaching out to hold my hand.

Looking back, I can rationalize what happened. This took place at the end of my first round of fieldwork in January 2022. After five intense months in the field, I was raw and tender. The two weeks prior had been especially intense, as my husband and son flew back to Copenhagen so I could focus on 'closing the field' properly. My husband probably imagined this meant me relaxing, taking walks on the beach, and writing thoughtful notes. Instead, I tried to make up for all the lost time I felt I had accumulated due to my family obligations. So, I rented a car and drove frantically around Tunisia for a final follow-up and to say goodbye to people, many of whom I feared I would never see again. Not because I wouldn't return to the field, but because of their precarious lives. One of them was Mariama, who I had got particularly close to over the months. I drove 500 km south to Medénine to see her and many of the other women. I felt bad, even guilty, and ashamed of crying in front of Mariama. Knowing Mariama's horrific story, and all the other stories I kept thinking to myself 'I shouldn't be crying. You should!' and then on top of it her comforting me, was too much. This was not the first time I felt guilty, nor that I was hit by an emotional avalanche. Several times during the fieldwork I felt deep grief, even rage, when someone I knew died. I found writing these emotions down helpful and used field diaries as a cathartic tool (Browne 2013). I kept these diaries, almost as a logbook of my days, encounters, and emotions. To my surprise, I also started to write and actively reflect beyond the field, on my own family history.

The entanglement of emotions and methods in anthropology is not new (Nyberg

Sørensen 2022;). Emotions are crucial to gaining insights and fuelling reflexivity during fieldwork (Abdallah 2020). However, they are still often considered illegitimate, with a 'fear of being emotional' overriding being 'objective' or worse, risking being seen as 'political' or 'activistic'. Emotional aspects of research remain rarely discussed. Over the years, during my work and studies, I've attended several compulsory security courses, always with names that sounded more like military blockbusters than field preparation, such as 'Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT) and 'Conduct after Capture' (CAC) I and II, to handle physical risks, but what about emotional security?

There was also an assumption early in my PhD, before even going into the field, that as a mother, working on gender and speaking to other migrant women, spending time in playgrounds etc. would be 'nice'. The undertone was that it would be easy. A Danish colleague even said, 'oh it will be *hygge*'.[17] But my time spent in the field with migrant mothers was far from *hyggelig*. It was about the pains of motherhood, about sexual violence, mothers who lost their children, home abortions gone wrong, mothers who had left their children back home. It was about sheer exhaustion and stories that are the stuff of nightmares. And yes, some of them were told at playgrounds. It reminded me of a friend once saying that after working on gender and violence, they needed a break and chose to study cocaine trade and drug cartels instead. I found it amusing but also accurate. After nearly a decade of working with torture documentation, I found exploring motherhood and dying babies more traumatizing. Yet, these topics are often undervalued, seen as neither 'sexy' nor dangerous compared to the hyper-violent, high-adrenaline subjects favoured by researchers with 'Indiana Jones syndrome' (Nyberg Sørensen 2022). There's no street cred in crying at a playground or wiping the snot off your face in a rundown pharmacy with a two-year-old on your lap.

In *Grief and a Headhunter's Rage* (1989) Renato Rosaldo examines how grief can fuel rage, urging us to acknowledge and act on our emotions. I believe we, as migration researchers, should write more about our anger and sadness, because what's taking place is not normal, and it is important to be reminded of that. As Antonio Gramsci (1971) said, how can an intellectual '*know*' without '*understanding*', and '*understand*' without '*feeling*'?

This chapter has highlighted the challenges of conducting ethnographic research in a transient, crisis-driven field. Such fieldwork requires constant adaptation, negotiation, and an acute awareness of one's positionality. Each field site demanded

[17] 'Hygge' is a noun and cultural concept that refers to a sense of coziness and relaxed togetherness, often associated with warmth, comfort, and a feeling of well-being. It is widely seen as a defining feature of Danish culture.

different methods and approaches and for me this was often shaped by an intuitive connection with the people and environment. Along the way, ethical dilemmas, emotional complexities, and personal questions of belonging and identity emerged. Embracing the messiness and uncertainty of the process was key, alongside a commitment to self-conscious reflexivity. Reflecting on the emotional and ethical aspects of research, and allowing oneself to *feel*, is not just necessary but vital. Without this, the work risks becoming meaningless, disconnected from the realities it seeks to engage with. Maintaining ethical sensitivity was central to my approach. Building trust, ensuring informed consent and respecting participants' privacy guided my interactions. The decision to avoid recording most interviews reflected this sensitivity, aiming to minimize discomfort and maintain rapport. Reflexivity was integral throughout, not only in considering how my positionality shaped the research but also in navigating the emotional complexities of witnessing and documenting experiences of violence, loss and survival. This methodology reflects an approach grounded in attentiveness, flexibility, and deep respect for the participants and the complex realities they navigate. The process was as much about building relationships and understanding lived experiences as it was about collecting data.

Inspired by Gilberto Rosas' 'Border-crossing rage' (2021) I too grieve. I grieve for Rhoda with the pink braids who lost her life at sea. I grieve for Mariam who had to bury her daughter Malika in the desert alone. I grieve for the two mothers who lost their boys at sea. I grieve for the father whose son fell from the roof and who had to return to Libya with no child. I grieve for Moussa. I grieve for Ben, Amina and their unborn child at the bottom of the sea. I grieve for all those I met and for the thousands I never knew, who died, disappeared, and sought life only to be lost.

5 THE BACKDROP: TUNISIA EMERGING

Joy, a young Nigerian women tried to leave Libya three times. The first two times ended in capture and pushback by the Libyan coastguard. 'Every time we are brought back to prison, each time, and start all over again, abuse all over again'. She tells me when I meet her in Medénine, southern Tunisia in 2021. 'The third time we pushed the boat at night. We push and push but the third time the engine refused to start. We were 54 people in this small wooden boat, with only one engine, in the middle of the big sea. Here watch, [she takes out her phone and looks for a video] 'I have a video' she mumbles, 'aaah here it is' and hands me the phone. I start the video, which shows a cramped boat where one of the engines refuses to start. Screaming and crying is heard in the background, I can hear Joy's voice screaming to God. 'That's me she says'. I nod. She starts laughing, 'see here, this stupid man, our Gambian captain begins to yell, see, look how stupid he is!' I watch the video; a man is yelling 'we are safe' to the big cheers of the people in the boat. He has spotted a boat on the horizon. Thinking it is the Italian coastguard, they all start to yell, screams of joy, until the boat comes closer and instead of the green, white and red striped flag they all anticipated, the red Tunisian flag is waving in the wind, almost as a cautionary symbol. They all start screaming and crying. The video stops as panic is spread in the small rocky boat.

I hand her the phone. Her laughter has vanished. Stiffness in her face appears instead. '[It was] very painful to be in that situation' [she tears up]. The Tunisian coastguard intercepted the boat and brought them to Sfax on the Tunisian mainland. From there they were bussed down south to a hotel in Zarzis and later transferred to the IOM *foyer* in the city of Medénine. That was in July 2021. 'They say they rescue us, ha! [scoffs] Life in Tunisia, no easy here. No help here. No work here. I need to leave this place!' Joy tells me she is trying to save up, to cross again, but with the living conditions at the shelter, her only resort is begging in the streets, which can be dangerous for young women like Joy. 'Eh, look at this stupid room' she shows me a video of her room, a dark leaking roof with visible mould and no windows. 'They took me from the sea, they can put me back there. I didn't ask for this. Take me back to the sea!'

This chapter explores Tunisia's emerging role as European Union's (EU) migration management partner. Joy's story, her attempted flight, the interceptions by both the Libyan and the Tunisian coastguard, and the subsequent dispersal and containment within Tunisia, illustrates the tangible consequences of externalization policies.

Zooming out, this chapter situates Tunisia's role in migration governance within broader regional and historical frameworks. It examines the intersections between domestic policy and European border externalization strategies, not by tracing a full

genealogy, but by focusing on the post-independence period. From Tunisia's two autocratic regimes through the Arab Spring and the return to authoritarian rule, this chapter unpacks the evolution of migration policies and Tunisia's shifting relationship with the EU. It lays the groundwork for understanding how Tunisia became framed as a 'transit state', and why this framing demands critical scrutiny.

The chapter is structured in three parts. The first section explores Tunisia's post-colonial role within the region, examining its position in EU migration governance and the historical factors that have shaped its policies. The second section critically unpacks the concept of 'transit', not as a neutral term, but as a top-down policy term that serves to justify containment strategies and externalization efforts. Finally, the third section analyses how Tunisia's present backsliding democracy and return to authoritarianism intersects with its deepening entanglement in EU securitization and border control policies.

Drawing on policy briefs, legal documents, EU and UN reports, and interviews with EU diplomats, migration officers and the Tunisian coastguard, this chapter provides a macro-perspective on how policy frameworks on transit and externalization are designed and enforced. It traces the institutional mechanisms, geopolitical interests, and legal instruments that shape Tunisia's emerging role as Europe's outsourced border guard.

Policies are not just bureaucratic constructs, they produce material realities that are lived, contested and resisted. The following chapter moves from macro to micro, focusing on the human consequences of externalization. It foregrounds the lived experiences of those trapped in Tunisia. Together, this and the following Chapter 6 are interconnected, bridging the macro with the micro and making visible what is often rendered invisible.

Trails of externalization

Under the dictatorship of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who ruled Tunisia from 1987 to 2011, the country was often referred to as the 'Cerberus of European Borders' (Ben Jémia 2007), guarding the gates of the Underworld to prevent the dead from leaving. Latterly, Tunisia has been described as an 'important laboratory' for EU externalization policies, where border enforcement activities and technologies on land and at sea are tested (Garelli & Tazziolli 2017). The externalization of migration control to third countries such as Tunisia has become a central pillar of the European Union's migration policy (De Genova 2017).

Tunisia gained global attention in 2010–2011 when widespread protests, known as the Jasmine Revolution, erupted in response to socioeconomic inequality. These protests, led by Tunisians of all ages, culminated in the Ben Ali's flight after three weeks of unrest (Boubekeur 2011). Known as the 'wonder child' of the Arab uprisings,

Tunisia has undergone significant political and migration shifts. Historically overshadowed by Libya and Morocco as primary departure points to Europe, Tunisia's role changed dramatically in the mid-2010s (Garelli & Tazziolli 2017; De Genova 2017). Regional instability in the Maghreb and Sahel, globalization, and multiple crises have transformed Tunisia into the main departure country to Europe, placing it at the heart of European migration policies (UNHCR 2025; De Genova 2017). Since the late 1990s the EU has sought to outsource 'migration management' to third countries to prevent irregular migrants, including asylum seekers, from reaching EU territory (Boswell 2003). One of the key North African countries the EU included in its plan to create an effective pre-frontier 'buffer zone' against irregular migration was Tunisia, particularly through the 2003 Tunisia–EU Association Agreement and the 2004 Mobility Partnership Agreement. These agreements, part of the broader framework of the 1995 Barcelona Process, marked the beginning of formalized cooperation on migration control. The Barcelona Process aimed to strengthen political, economic and social ties between the EU and Mediterranean countries, with a particular focus on managing migration, border security and combating illegal immigration (Natter 2021).

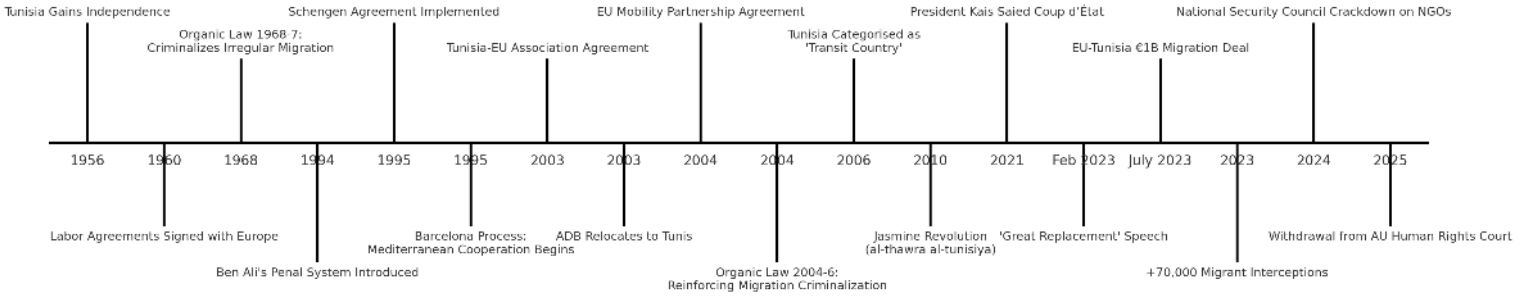
Post-independence Tunisia endured nearly six decades of authoritarian rule, first under Habib Bourguiba and then under Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, followed by a brief democratic transition in 2011 (Natter 2021). During the first authoritarian era (1956–2010), migration policies were tightly linked to securitization. Under Ben Ali, these policies served to bolster the regime, enhance state surveillance, and align with European demands, helping to consolidate his international legitimacy (Natter 2021). Today, Tunisia is once again under authoritarian rule with Kais Saeed. Over the past six years, Tunisia's 'Freedom in the World' scores from Freedom House have experienced a notable decline, reflecting increasing concerns about political rights and civil liberties in the country (Freedom House 2025). The latest score[18] is the lowest since the revolution.

Following the implementation of the Schengen Agreement in 1995, Tunisia emerged as a key partner in European efforts to externalize border control (Jung, 2022). Strengthened collaboration between Italy, the EU, and the Ben Ali regime throughout the 1990s laid the groundwork for the adoption of Law 2004–6 (Loi Organique 2004) which broadly criminalizes acts associated with irregular migration including facilitation, transportation, and sheltering of migrants, rather than targeting the migrants themselves outright (Jung, 2022). Critics warned that the law would transform Tunisia into a 'vast prison', trapping Tunisians, especially the youth (Jémia Monia 2007). Securitization has been a driving factor in both pre- and post-

[18] Since 2021, following President Kaïs Saïed's power grab, the country's score has steadily dropped, hitting 44/100 in 2025. The lowest it has been since the revolution.

revolutionary Tunisia. This perspective was reinforced by key policy measures, particularly the criminalization of irregular migration through Organic Laws 1968-7, 1975-40, and 2004-6, which shaped the discourse on migration and the externalization of EU migration policies in Tunisia (Garelli & Tazziolli 2017). Such an approach fitted perfectly with an EU anti-migration strategy that viewed the criminalization of irregular migration as a cornerstone of the fight against irregular migration both within and beyond EU borders (Badalič 2019).

While EU externalization agreements with Tunisia are no secret, it is critical to note that Tunisia and the other North African states are far from passive actors. Tunisia's 'non-migration policy', a concept I have co-developed (El Ghali & Chemlali 2022), argues that by seeing Tunisia's domestic migration policies or lack thereof within the broader EU externalizing migration controls, it becomes clear that the EU and Tunisia as 'migration partners' work in tandem, simultaneously benefitting and leveraging each other. Taking this approach, as opposed to only looking at the EU as the 'big bad wolf', allows for a decentring of European perspectives. This highlights the need to examine the role of the 'Southern' state as an active agent in shaping migration governance, pushing discussions on North African migration policies beyond the prevailing narrative that views them merely as outcomes of European externalization efforts (Natter, 2021; Cassarino, 2014). This argument underscores that migration dynamics in Tunisia are shaped not only by external actors such as the EU but also by internal factors, primarily Tunisian domestic policies. The migration policies in Tunisia should be understood as a combination of externalization and outsourcing by European powers, alongside internalization and insourcing of border controls by the Tunisian state. These two tracks are fundamentally driven by the securitization of migration (Menjivar 2014). For example, Tunisia's penal system, introduced by dictator Ben Ali in 1994, remains in place today. It imposes daily fines on individuals overstaying their 90-day visa. For many migrants this penal system creates a cycle of debt, vulnerability, and confinement as my article 'treading water in transit' shows, further exacerbating their precarity and limiting access to basic rights and services (Chemlali 2024). The 'non-migration policy', alongside Tunisia's reluctance to become a European hotspot, has resulted in migration policies that are both draconian and largely unchanged from the authoritarian era. Therefore, it is essential to view both Tunisia's domestic migration policies and the EU's externalization strategies as twin processes, interconnected and mutually reinforcing.


1956
Tunisia Gains Independence
1960
Labor Agreements Signed with Europe
1968
Organic Law 1968-7:
Criminalizes Irregular Migration
1994
Ben Ali's Penal System Introduced
1995
Schengen Agreement Implemented
1995
Barcelona Process:
Mediterranean Cooperation Begins
2003
Tunisia-EU Association Agreement
2003
ADB Relocates to Tunis
2004
EU Mobility Partnership Agreement
2004
Organic Law 2004-6:
Reinforcing Migration Criminalization
2006
Tunisia Categorised as
'Transit Country'
2010
Jasmine Revolution
(al-thawra al-tunisiya)
2021
President Kais Saied Coup d'État
Feb 2023
'Great Replacement' Speech
July 2023
EU-Tunisia €1B Migration Deal
2023
+70,000 Migrant Interceptions
2024
National Security Council Crackdown on NGOs
2025
Withdrawal from AU Human Rights Court

Tracing transit

Historically, Tunisia's migration patterns were shaped by its colonial past, with labour agreements signed in the 1960s between Tunisia and France, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands (De Bel-Air 2018). By the 1980s, as legal labour migration to France declined, destinations and migrant profiles diversified. Libya, an oil-producing country, became a key destination for low-skilled workers across the Maghreb through informal channels (De Bel-Air 2018). In the 1990s, as Europe tightened visa systems and border controls, irregular migration from Tunisia increased, particularly among disenfranchised youth attempting to cross the Mediterranean. This era saw the rise of the term *harraga*, symbolizing the 'burning of borders' across the region (Cassarino 2014). The legacy of this generational migration persists to this day, especially in regions like Zarzis (Zagaria 2019; M'charek 2020).

Sub-Saharan African migration to Tunisia was almost non-existent until the late 1990s, when private universities expanded in Sfax and the African Development Bank relocated to Tunis in 2003 from Abidjdan, attracting migrants from Francophone West Africa and especially Ivory Coast (Boubakri & Mazzella 2005; Natter 2021; Chemlali 2024). In 2004, only about 1,000 Sub-Saharan Africans resided legally in Tunisia (Baldwin-Edwards 2006). Today, an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 sub-Saharan Africans live in Tunisia, with approximately 60,000 residing there irregularly (ACAPS 2024; Agence DH 2024). This new and accelerated development has redefined Tunisia as a country of destination, transit and departure for migrants, asylum seekers, and Tunisian nationals. This change is reflected in a 94% rise in the population of concern registered by UNHCR (UNHCR 2021; Giuffré et al. 2022). Today, Tunisia is unequivocally recognized as a 'transit country' by various entities, including the EU, policymakers, humanitarian actors, academia, the media, and itself. The classification of states as 'transit countries' emerged in the 1990s with the rise of overland and maritime migrations at Europe's periphery, becoming central to discussions of the 'new migration' (Koser & Lutz 1999). The term 'transit migration' was introduced to describe evolving migration patterns near European borders, influenced by the end of the Cold War (Wallace et al. 1996; Düvell, Collyer et al. 2012). Governments, particularly in Europe, increasingly adopted this concept to manage migration beyond their borders (Düvell 2012; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008). The term gained prominence following a UN conference in the early 1990s (UN/ECE 1993) and was integrated into European migration policy by the Austrian presidency in 1998. This included action plans for countries like Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iraq and Morocco, marking the beginning of its application in both policy and academic discussions (High-Level Working Group on Asylum and Migration 1999; Düvell 2012). By the early 2000s academic studies started exploring transit migration in Morocco (Barros et

al. 2002), Tunisia (Boubakri 2006) and other Maghreb states. By 2006 all North African countries were categorized as 'transit countries' (Baldwin-Edwards 2006).

Despite its widespread use, becoming almost what Wacquant refers to a 'folk term' (1996), 'transit migration' lacks a universally agreed-upon definition and remains 'blurred and politicized' (Düvell 2012). Critics argue that the term is inherently Eurocentric as it suggests that all migrants in countries on Europe's periphery are merely 'in transit' to Europe (Timera 2009). This ignores the reality that several North African countries, such as Libya[19] (de Haas 2008; Chemlali 2022) and Tunisia (Cassarini 2020), have also served as destination countries. For example, I demonstrate in my article 'treading water in transit' that Ivorian migration to Tunisia has predominantly been intra-African (Chemlali 2024). Some scholars argue that the concept of transit is a political construct (Frowd 2020), or even a 'political fiction' (Peraldi 2011). While the term has been mainly applied 'from above', none of the hundreds of migrants I have met have ever referred to themselves as 'in transit'. Instead, many describe Tunisia as their destination, with some even calling it an 'open-air prison', complicating the notion of 'transit'.

Tunisia's categorization as a 'transit country' reveals the complex entanglement of regional dynamics, migration policies, historical social mobility and political leverage. This label allows Tunisia and other so-called 'transit countries' to leverage migration in their negotiations with the EU, turning it into a strategic tool for political and economic bargaining, a strategy rooted in the authoritarian regimes of Ben Ali's Tunisia and Gaddafi's Libya (Andersson 2014). Migrants and asylum seekers are often treated as geopolitical pawns in the EU's dealings with these countries, highlighting migration as the EU's Achilles heel. Both sides leverage this issue diplomatically, with the EU internalizing the political agendas of its partners through externalization.

By examining Tunisia and the Maghreb region, I argue that the label 'transit state' should not be accepted uncritically, nor reduced to new migration dynamics or geographical factors. It is essential to understand the creation of this policy label and its political consequences, as it reconfigures the region and grants North African states new leverage in their dealings with Europe.

Age of authoritarianism

In the decade following Tunisia's popular uprising migration policy was not a priority for successive governments. Their focus remained on political transition, drafting a

[19] For many decades Libya served as the preferred destination of migrants from North Africa and beyond to seek employment. I have heard anecdotes of my uncles leaving Morocco to work in Libya during the 80s and 90s, at oil refineries or in hotel management. However, this dynamic underwent a significant shift after the fall of Gaddafi (see Chemlali 2022).

new constitution and managing ongoing crises. However, from 2015 onward the rising number of Tunisian youths departing for Italy triggered renewed EU pressure, pushing Tunisia to move beyond human rights concerns in its migration governance (Boubakri 2021). While the 2014 constitution guarantees the right to seek asylum, no national or legal framework exists, leaving migrants in a state of protection limbo, socially and legally excluded, simultaneously visible and invisible, a defining feature of Tunisia's 'non-migration policy' (El Ghali & Chemlali 2022). In this legal vacuum, the UNHCR has assumed de facto responsibility, acting as a 'surrogate state' (Miller 2017). The EU's externalization policies follow a broader trend that create what Gibney (2004) describes as 'a thousand little Guantanamo's', where states and non-state actors operate beyond legal and humanitarian accountability. This concept is particularly relevant in North Africa, a region that has become an 'open-air prison' where people, both migrants and residents, are trapped between increasingly restrictive border policies and the EU's efforts to contain movement. Through externalization the EU has created spaces of containment where the idea of 'transit' becomes elusive, even as 'transitness' remains a lived reality in Tunisia and the region.

Tunisia is currently experiencing its worst economic crisis since independence in 1956, with bailouts from the IMF and EU tied to concerns over a potential migration crisis. The EU has strategically exploited Tunisia's economic vulnerability to impose stricter migration controls by linking financial aid to 'effective migration management' (Mazzoleni 2016). This leverage was instrumental in securing Tunisia's commitment to the 2014 Mobility Partnership Agreement, a declaration aligning the country with EU migration priorities. Similarly, in 2023 the EU and Tunisia signed a memorandum of understanding, often referred to as the 'Team Europe' deal, which includes a pledge of €1 billion in aid to support Tunisia's economy and address migration challenges (Bialasiewicz & Maessen 2024; Chemlali 2023a).

Despite this economic leverage and EU pressure, Tunisia has not been a passive actor. It has employed strategies such as policy stalling, delaying implementation while maintaining a façade of cooperation. As Jean-Pierre, a French EU diplomat and migration officer I interviewed in Tunis noted in an interview:

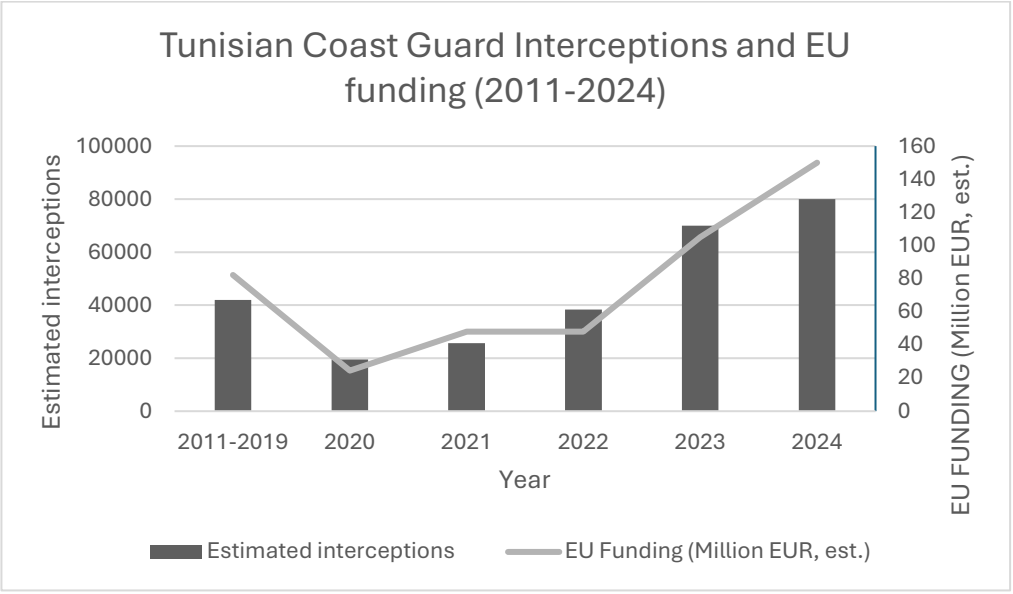
> 'It's one step forward, two steps back. Working on migration here is beyond frustrating. You have a government, actually no, you have constantly changing governments, with no political will. They are only interested in the money and equipment being sent to their coastguards and border guards, but policy-wise it's a dead end.'

This frustration was echoed by many EU diplomats I interviewed, including Claes, a Danish diplomat, who expressed uncertainty and confusion following his recent

transfer from Senegal: 'There is no coordination, and the only sub-committee that Tunisia doesn't want to join is the one on social affairs and migration. It makes you wonder?' He shows me the documents, going back to 2018, confirming the resistance and non-attendance, and growing irritation among EU migration officers. 'If they don't show up, we can't discuss domestic migration policies. So, nothing happens'. A French officer, who had previously worked for five years in the border police in France said: 'They've created a bureaucratic monster. I'm French you know, I know bureaucracy. But here it's a mess, and it's on purpose. They really took the bad from us [referring to colonialism] and made it worse'. This form of everyday resistance among state actors, illustrates how recipient states strategically navigate external pressure, maintaining control over migration governance while resisting deeper policy alignment with European objectives. Tunisia's selective engagement and deliberate bureaucratic inefficiencies serve as a means of negotiating power in an otherwise asymmetrical relationship, reflecting broader patterns observed in other externalized migration governance settings (Cold-Ravnkilde 2021).

One of the EU's central strategies has been bolstering Tunisia's coastguard, a key element of its externalization policy (Badalič 2019). This has happened through increased financial and logistical support, training, equipment and capacity building (Chemlali 2023). Since 2019, EU-backed efforts have dramatically increased interceptions at sea, with the number of migrants intercepted rising from just over 4,000 in 2019 to nearly 70,000 in 2023 and reaching 80,000 in 2024. The graph below illustrates the development of interceptions and EU funding for border management in Tunisia, starting from 2011. Following the Arab Spring, EU policy interventions in Tunisia has clearly intensified revealing a clear correlation between increased funding and the rise in interceptions[20]. This escalation was also evident in my interviews with the Tunisian coastguards in Sfax and the Kerkennah Islands in 2022, where Captain Hannafi remarked: "We are working non-stop. In my 23 years in the coastguard, I have never experienced this much pressure. Sometimes it's 15–20 boats [intercepted] a day, it's hard." As the graph illustrates, it has only escalated.

[20] Reading the table, it is important to consider data gaps and limited overview of interceptions. Blending of interceptions and Search and Rescue operations (SAR) in official reports and overviews can create infrequency and a lack of clarity in available data across official reports and NGOs (ASILE 2022: 21). For consistency the estimated interceptions above are drawn from FTDES (Forum Tunisien Pour Les Droits Economiques et Sociaux).



Over the years the EU has also pressured Tunisia on multiple fronts, including pushing for cooperation with Frontex, advocating for stricter laws criminalizing migration-related activities such as smuggling and human trafficking (Badalič 2019), and pressuring Tunisia to accept deported nationals. A bilateral agreement with Italy now facilitates the return of Tunisian migrants, with weekly repatriation flights from Rome to Tunis, as Claes explained: 'Right now there are two weekly flights departing from Rome. It works really well, a smooth operation, there are approximately 40 Tunisian nationals on board each flight. These kinds of easy bilateral agreements are fine, because that's what they [Tunisia] prefer, not with the whole EU'. EU member states, particularly Italy, want the Tunisian coastguard to intercept more boats that embark on their journey from Libyan territory. Yet Tunisia's lack of any national framework or asylum law means that intercepted migrants often have no legal status or access to formal protections. Without a national framework or structured system for housing, labour, healthcare or protection from abuse, they are left in a precarious and ad hoc existence. My fieldwork sheds light on these realities, particularly in article 2, 'A mother's choice', where I analyse how these policies shape the lives of those trapped in this Kafkaesque system.

To summarize, migration governance in Tunisia has historically been securitized while simultaneously deprioritized and depoliticized (Natter 2021), overshadowed by political transitions and economic challenges. However, I argue that this changed dramatically in 2023. Once a secondary issue, migration suddenly moved to the

forefront of national politics and global news in ways few had anticipated. As described earlier in the methodology chapter, just weeks before my fieldwork began, on 25 July 2021, Tunisian President Kais Saied suspended parliament and consolidated power through a *coup d'etat*. Saied had been elected in December 2019 in a fair and transparent process, yet his rise came amid an economic depression, ongoing instability following the 2011 uprising, and a political system paralyzed by inaction. The situation was further exacerbated by food shortages during the pandemic. This had tangible effects on daily life, which I experienced firsthand during my fieldwork. Supermarket shelves stood empty, streets were eerily quiet and a tense atmosphere settled over the capital, reinforced by an increased military presence, including tanks on the main square. The political turmoil reshaped not only governance but also the treatment of migration. After implementing sweeping political reforms, Saied took an aggressive stance on migration, culminating in his now infamous February 2023 speech, where he placed migration at the centre of national and global discourse. Adopting Europe's far-right rhetoric, Saied invoked the 'great replacement theory', portraying sub-Saharan migrants as an existential threat to Tunisia. This abrupt shift not only altered Tunisia's domestic policies but also reshaped its relationship with the EU, which had been seeking greater cooperation on border control. This shift coincided with growing EU pressure, particularly from Italy's new right-wing government led by Giorgia Meloni, to curb migration. The result was the 'Team Europe' €1 billion EU–Tunisia deal signed on 16 July 2023 (Chemlali 2023a), tying financial aid to migration control. While the agreement provided funding for Tunisia's border enforcement and coastguard, much of the economic support was conditional on compliance with EU migration policies.

President Saied's increasingly authoritarian rule has intensified state control over migration while fostering a climate of hostility. His rhetoric has scapegoated migrants for Tunisia's economic struggles, emboldening xenophobic violence and legitimizing harsh crackdowns (Amnesty International 2024). These policies have also spread fear among those assisting migrants, effectively 'criminalizing solidarity', leading to the arbitrary arrests of several NGO leaders. Among them is my friend Papa Abdoulaye Said (Abdallah Al-Saeed) (Committee for Justice 2024). Following the National Security Council meeting in May 2024, Tunisia's authorities launched a wave of arrests targeting activists, human rights lawyers and humanitarian workers, marking an escalation in repression (Human Rights Watch 2024). These developments have profoundly reshaped Tunisia's migration landscape, transforming it into a hostile terrain and a key battleground for EU externalization policies. The consequences are tangible, not only for migrants but also for a wider range of actors, revealing how such policies extend beyond border control, threatening civil society and reinforcing authoritarian tendencies. As Anne Applebaum (2024) argues in *Autocracy, Inc.*, modern authoritarian regimes no longer operate in isolation but form collaborative systems of

mutual support and power preservation. In this light, the EU's migration arrangements with regimes like Kais Saied's Tunisia or Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's Egypt are not anomalies but expressions of a transnational logic in which repression, border control, and international funding become interlinked. The EU is not an external actor reluctantly working with flawed regimes, it is an active participant in a broader system where authoritarianism and migration control are co-constitutive. I argue this is a deliberate pattern, not a policy glitch.

This chapter is essential as it lays the historical and political foundation for understanding Tunisia's current role in migration governance, offering a necessary contextualization for understanding the broader political dynamics that serve as the backdrop for the articles. This sets the stage for the next chapter, which will focus on the lived experiences and tangible impacts of these policies on the ground. In this way, these chapters are interlinked, offering a comprehensive view that connects macro-level policy frameworks with micro-level lived experiences, ultimately making visible the often-invisible consequences of externalization policies.

6 THE FOREGROUND: BEARING WITNESS

The previous chapter contextualizes Tunisia's emerging role in migration governance through a macro-lens, exploring regional policies, historical frameworks and the entanglement of domestic and European border strategies. However, without including the tangible realities of everyday life, such an analysis risks rendering externalization abstract and disembodied. These policies have real life consequences on the ground and, like a stone cast into water, create ripple effects that extend well beyond their immediate targets.

To understand these ripple effects this chapter shifts focus to a micro-perspective by presenting three ethnographic vignettes from my fieldwork. These vignettes not only trace lived experiences of migration on bodies, flesh and bones, but also bridge the gap between large-scale policy narratives and on-the-ground realities. They provide an up-close, personal window into Tunisia, capturing the mundane alongside the spectacular, and revealing how migration governance is experienced, resisted and reconfigured daily.

By letting the field speak from below, I aim to reintroduce the richness, thickness and complexities often trimmed from academic articles by supervisors and editors. These stories illustrate how themes and dynamics of externalization have emerged directly from the ground, influencing my analysis and my subsequent three articles. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that a comprehensive understanding of migration governance requires both macro-level contextualization and micro-level empirical insights. It also illustrates how themes emerged, some literally from the ground, and took shape.

An editor once described my writing as 'too literary' for an academic journal, another 'too political'. I think all writing is political. As readers may have already noticed I tend to adopt an essayistic, reportage-style. This is my style of writing. Often in the field words didn't come easily; writing felt like a cathartic process of journaling, a way of bearing witness.

This process has taught me the importance of staying true to my voice and writing style by honouring the people I write about while also rising to the academic criteria of rigour and theory. But it also made me wary of theory and its potential to stifle the ethnography.

The three vignettes that follow each introduce different aspects of life in the borderlands, which in many ways interweave with the articles. The first highlights the gendered strategies and challenges migrant women face and deploy when navigating hostile terrain and the constant potentiality of violence. At the same time it illustrates the soft moments of joy, laughter and excitement juxtaposed with everyday insecurity

and precarity. The second is an account of a day spent in Zarzis, where serendipitous encounters capture the unpredictable nature of fieldwork. The third vignette exposes the discomfort and unpleasantness inherently present in this field of research and the complexities that arise at some moments, alongside the constant navigation of how to tread carefully, avoiding sensationalism while striving to humanize the experiences. Together, these narratives serve as a collective ethnographic bearing of witness, offering a profound insight into the lived realities of life in the borderlands.

Women in the hood

> I cried. I cried hard when I found out. I told myself, let me go and remove it. I went to the pharmacy here in Bhar Lazreg, hoping for a solution. A woman behind the counter scribbled the name of a clinic on a piece of paper and slid it across the counter. But at the clinic, they asked for documents. Papers. The name of my landlord. My entry stamps. I had none of that. The landlord refused any involvement. So, I was stuck. Weeks passed. It was already too late. You can see my belly now; I just left it to God…if I had known earlier… [she snaps her fingers]… 'I would have flushed it out. Lime. Coffee. Ginger. Grind it, squeeze out the water, make it hot hot! Drink it on an empty stomach, early in the morning, for two to three days. You'll fall sick. Then it's gone. Flushed out. I know many girls who did it back home.

Home is Anambra State in Nigeria, a long way from here. Happiness continues:

> At first, I hid it at work, but then the vomiting started. They let me go and gave me no pay for the month. Just *go*. I'm looking for a way out, I can't see a future here. Everyday I'm struggling to survive. I don't know what I'll do when the baby arrives… [her jaw tightens. She looks up at the ceiling].

I am sitting with Happiness in her small, rented room in Bhar Lazreg. A hard mattress on the cold marble floor. Sunlight filters through the window, but the air inside is still. It's early morning. The room is empty. Black mould spreads across the ceiling and walls. A damp, stale smell lingers, I can't place it. She shifts slightly, her belly stretching the fabric of her too-small shirt. Her bellybutton peeks out. I've arranged a prenatal screening for her through some contacts of mine. She doesn't know how far along she is nor the gender, but she hopes for a girl. 'Let's go', I say, standing. 'So you're not late for the appointment'.

We step into the narrow alleys. I check my phone for the time. Happiness slaps my hand. Her eyes widen. 'Stop using your phone in the streets! Everyone is pressured. Thieves everywhere'. Just the other day, two guys came at her in an alley. A big stick

in their hands. She ended up on her back, fighting them off. 'Give us your phone. Your money'. She screamed. Chika heard. He ran. They ran. 'Even in my condition they attacked me! But I'm an Igbo woman; I don't give up easily'. she laughs. I slip my phone back into my pocket and look around. We reach the main road, rue de Charles de Gaulle, and find a taxi. I give the driver the address, pay him upfront. She smiles. 'Okay, thank you, sis'. She waves, excitement across her face.

I check the time again. I had promised to meet Françoise at her 'underground church', Église Missionnaire Maison de la Grâce de l'Éternel (EMGE). The church is hidden, tucked inside an abandoned and inconspicuous building in Bhar Lazreg, no signs marking it as a place of worship. Every Sunday Francophones gather here, mostly Ivorians. I call Françoise to come down so we can walk there together. She appears moments later, hopping down the stairs, Mirac half-asleep on her back. They are dressed up. '*Waouh! Très jolie*!' I say, smiling. We hug.

As we turn a corner, suddenly, from behind, '*Aicha ma vie! Aicha ma viiieee*!' A young handsome man calls out, his voice teasing. Aicha is what Françoise tells Tunisians her name is. She rolls her eyes, smiling. 'Eeh Amin, are you making a lot of *flous*?' He laughs: '*Aaah beaucoup de flous*?' and continues '*Beaucoup, beaucoup*… I am a millionaire, Aicha'. I am stunned. After weeks in the field, this is the first time I witness a friendly, almost flirtatious, encounter between Tunisians and sub-Saharans. The young man, Amin, is dressed in jeans, a black fake Gucci t-shirt, black sunglasses, and has a cigarette tucked behind his left ear. He turns to me, eyes me up and down. 'Are you Algerian?' He asks in French. 'I haven't seen you around'. I reply in Darija. 'No, I'm Moroccan'. 'From the south?' 'Yes'. He smirks. 'Ah yes… women from the south. Dark eyes'. He pulls down his sunglasses, locking eyes with me. 'If you need anything, you tell me'. He blinks, then pushes his glasses back up. Françoise grabs my arm and walks, '*C'est ma soeur*!' As we pass, he nods. Before I can ask, Françoise whispers, '*Un grand gangster'*. I was stunned, a young mother, a churchgoer, why would she be friendly with a gangster?

Later that day, while cooking in her tiny kitchen, still baffled with the encounter earlier, I ask 'Who was that guy?'. His name is Amin, a Tunisian gang leader from the neighbourhood. He was deported from Italy after crossing irregularly. A *harraga*. 'Everybody in the neighbourhood was so happy when he left for Europe. Then he came back. The trouble started again. He is dangerous, everybody is scared of him'. As she stirs the pot, 'he even brought a big knife, a machete to a fight'. She suddenly raises her cooking spoon and mimics swinging a machete, 'Like the one in action movies!'

I burst out laughing. 'Okay he is crazy, and you are friends with him?' '*Oui, oui'* she says, '*bien sur'*. Her strategy was simple: 'Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer'. By staying friendly with him, she ensures her own safety. No one touches his friends. 'He even asks me for a dinar once in a while', she laughs. Sometimes, when

there's 'trouble with *les Blacks'*, he sends people to her: 'Are these your people?' 'Yes'. 'Okay. We'll let them go'.

Women like Françoise and Happiness must daily navigate a violent, unpredictable terrain, abandoned by the state to fend for themselves. Strategies for survival and protection-from-below are forged through unusual relationships and constant negotiation.

I walk home. Amin stands at the same corner where we first saw him. He nods at me, smiling. I smile back and nod. My phone rings. It's Happiness. 'It's a girl! It's a girl! I'm so happy!'

Salt and bones

We are driving in our rented car, I'm in the back with our son, my husband is driving, Chams sits in front and gives directions. The sun is sharp in Zarzis today. They speak German together, and when Chams turns to me he speaks French or Tunisian. He never went to school but taught himself several languages by working in the tourist business as young man, a taxi-driver and later as a fisherman, before starting to work for ICRC as a driver for their international staff.

We pass the fishing port and the ship graveyard, all boats from Libya. Chams mentions that the Libyan coastguard, which he refers to as 'the mafia', has begun to enter Tunisian waters and bother the Tunisian fishermen, taking their fish and provoking them. The authorities will not do anything 'they are dangerous, so now we just fish somewhere else'.

We are going to the '*Cimetière des Inconnus'*, Cemetery for the Unknown, located in a plot on the outskirts of town. The land belongs to the municipality of Zarzis and was previously a waste landfill. Chams initiated the cemetery, an act that put him and Zarzis into the spotlight. After we turn off the asphalt road, the terrain completely changes to desert-like, red sand. I am taken aback by how deserted and isolated it is. We drive past heaps of junk, plastic and rubbish along a winding road surrounded by olive trees.

We eventually arrive and I'm surprised at how small it is. It is fenced in and Chams says the fence is new. 'It's the municipality' he says angrily, 'what are they afraid of? That they would flee?' Why was the cemetery suddenly fenced and closed off? And Chams didn't even have the keys to it. Chams was clearly holding things back, obviously disappointed to no longer have access to his raison d'être.

I would later understand that this involved the Mayor of Zarzis and a new player in town, Rachid Koraichi, an Algerian artist who had just inaugurated a new (competing) cemetery called '*Jardin d'Afrique'*, Garden of Africa. This was a very different cemetery to the *Cimetière des Inconnus.* While in the latter, bones were sticking up, and the smell of death omnipresent, Rachid's new cemetery, 'Garden of Africa', featured tiled floors of hand painted *zelij,* alongside pomegranate and orange trees and the scent of jasmine

flowers. But Chams was not impressed; in fact the two men did not see eye to eye. Chams had not been invited to the inauguration of *Jardin d'Afrique* and felt in many ways ignored and overlooked by media, researchers and humanitarian actors who shifted their focus to the new cemetery and the new guy. 'He is just an artist looking for fame' he told me, 'but me, Im always here, I will always be here.'

Back at the 'Cemetery for the Unknown' the smell slowly starts to set in. Rotten. Moisty. Iron-ish. The smell of death. Suddenly bones begin to appear, sticking up from the leaky ground, as if the smell somehow made my eyes sharper. Chams has, according to him, buried more than 400 migrants washed ashore here, many by hand. He points to one grave in the middle, the only grave with a flower, a red plastic rose swaying in the wind. 'That's Rose-Marie' he says and smiles. Chams put it there a long time ago. The red colour is slowly fading away. We walk back to the car in silence.

I climb in and check on my son, still occupied by his tablet, watching cartoons, luckily oblivious to his surroundings and the absolute sheer calamity we have just witnessed. I immediately feel sick to my stomach to have brought him to such a place and look away, out of the window.

Driving back, not far from the cemetery, near the commercial port, we pass huge salt mountains and salt trucks. Chams turns to me in the car, points at the salt and says 'Look we got all this, but we benefit from nothing, heh [scoffs]. Only Europe, not us!' He points at the salt and the sea. He explains how the salt is still being sold and exported to France for the same pricing under colonial rule. 'They are laughing at us!' he says frustrated and continues:

> 'We have all this but no options for the youth. Ahlam, have you noticed? Did you see any kids? There are no more young people in Zarzis, all the young people have left or gone. No young men in my neighbourhood anymore. Even children down to the age of 10–12 years old dream of taking away. No opportunities, no work, no school.'

No country for young men. 'Last week we found two brothers from Zarzis. They drowned', Chams tells me while pointing from the car at a group of 8–10 confused-looking, young Bangladeshi men, as if their presence interrupted his train of thoughts. 'More and more of them [Bangladeshis] are coming. It's sad, they don't have anyone'. A dozen bodies were recently buried in *Jardin d'Afrique*. They had all suffocated below deck. They were all Bangladeshis who left from Libya and ended up buried in Tunisia. Imagine the distance. Imagine the horror. I look at my son again.

We drop Chams off at the garage. 'You can always find me here' he says with a big smile and waves, signalling 'call me' with his right hand, 'Ciao, ciao' he blows kisses to my son through the window. I can't help but feel that maybe I am, or more precisely

my fieldwork is, his highlight; that his relevance depends on me. Otherwise, he is just sitting and drinking beer in front of his cousin's garage. I call him in the evening, to meet again the next day.

No dignity

Because I had met so many who had survived shipwrecks and who knew many who drowned, I had questions about the bodies that end up stuck in the overfilled morgues. I met with two migrant mothers who had survived a shipwreck outside Sfax. Their small boys did not survive. I was shown a video of the boys, playing together, filmed not so long before they left. They were playing and laughing in a room, jumping on the beds. Not more than 3–5 years old. I met the women in Zarzis, but their children were stuck in a morgue in Sfax. The bereaved mothers were completely traumatized, couldn't hold eye contact or sit still, and were desperate to find out how they could get their children's bodies so they could bury them. The video of the two boys, haunted me for weeks.

The first thing I did in Sfax was contact Dr Samir Maatoug. He was the leading forensic specialist and the expert in the region on migrants' death. Over the phone he agreed to meet in his office at the hospital.

The next day I arrive. My husband drops me off at the gate to the hospital. I kiss my son and say joyfully 'I'm probably done in an hour's time; let's have lunch by the sea' My husband nods and drives off. After getting lost in the hospital, I finally locate the forensic department and Dr Samir's office. The door is open, I knock carefully. The office is big and messy. Paper pallets all over. On the floor and on the office desk. He is almost hidden behind them. In a very low calm voice he invites me in. After some brief initial introductions, he gets right into it. He turns his giant apple screen so it's facing us both. Without any warning he opens a folder filled with huge gory unimaginable images. The first thing that comes to my mind is sea monsters. Non-humans. I want to look away but I can't. Creatures with seaweed wrapped around their swollen heads. A white, enlarged tongue coming out of a mouth. Eyes wide open that have been bleached by the salt and sun. Bodies that look burned. The skin has peeled off. Instead, they are wrapped in algae and other sea plants, as if they had become symbiotic parts of these creatures. He clicks on his mouse, next picture, next picture, next picture. He talks over the pictures and explains the decomposition process: the bloating and decay, the difficulty in identification and DNA tracing. Next picture, next picture, next picture. 'See sometimes, there is no head, or limbs; this is the rotten state we receive the bodies in. See like this one'. Next picture, next picture, next picture.

While he's talking, a nurse comes in with a document, it's an x-ray of an arm. He turns his chair and takes it up to the window so he can see. 'It is broken', he says and some technical terms. He gives it back to her and she leaves. He gets back to the

abnormally huge apple screen and continues undisturbed. In his low gentle voice, so low I have to lean in over the desk sometimes, he explains that in his many years, this past year has been the worst. That they have now categorized migrants' deaths as '*Catastrophe de masse'*, a mass disaster as one would with natural disasters or terror when major casualties are involved. 'Let me show you something' He looks through his folders opens a wrong PowerPoint about terror attacks. But eventually he says it is the same identification process. I scribble down in my notebook, 'Is this in fact terror? Are they terror victims? Victims of border regimes? What Foucault called 'governing through atrocity'?'

What about the storage I ask? The overfilled morgues? He tells me the maximum capacity is 70. Currently there are 90 and they have just received an extra fridge where 30–40 can be stored. But this is not sustainable because there will only be more and more. It's wintertime now, so this is not even 'peak season'. He explains how difficult it can be to identify bodies when they look like this. For example, clothes are not a good marker, they can be someone else's. Or ID, someone can have three IDs on them. Two hours later I leave his office and walk over to the car. Sulejman is already parked waiting for me. 'How did it go?' I don't know what to say. We drive to the seafront to grab lunch, but I have no appetite.

The next day I meet up with Sihem, a human rights lawyer I knew through my previous work at DIGNITY. After grabbing lunch we are driving to one of Sfax's growing cemeteries, on the outskirts of Sidi Mansour, from where migrants depart.

A find it eerie to have both a cemetery and the place from where you depart so close to each other. We drive back and forth, 'it's right here, it's right here' she keeps saying as she frantically looks to all sides. 'I was just here the other day' she says to herself. We drive in to a deserted place between the highway and olive groves, between plastic and rubbish, between wasteland and the cemetery. There is no signage and, unlike Zarzis, in Sfax they are buried in a local cemetery with Tunisians. We finally find it, and had indeed twice passed it but due to the piles of trash and unspecified structures it was almost undetectable.

When you first enter, the graves are Tunisian ones; the migrant or 'unknown' graves are at the back. I am struck by the big difference from the Tunisian graves. The dimensions are oddly small, do they fold the bodies together? The pictures Dr Samir had shown me were of big, bloated bodies. How could they fit into these little holes unless they were all curled up? Even if they are decomposed and dissolved by salt water and sun, they wouldn't fit. My head can't reconcile what I saw in the hospital with what I'm looking at right now in the cemetery. It isn't just the dimensions that are wrong, but also the quality. They are two blocks of cement bricks in height, and three wide. What happens when it rains? I look over at Sihem stunned. As if she can read my mind,

Sihem looks at me and sighs deeply: *'Pas de dignité dans la vie et pas de dignité dans la mort'* (no dignity in life and no dignity in death).

I recall the meeting with Dr Samir Maatoug, the day before, who said that right now there were over ninety in the morgue, but nowhere to bury them There is no room for ninety more I think to myself. Ninety? Looking around, it's not here. There is no room. It stinks. Not only the smell of burning rubbish that lies like a heavy blanket over the whole city, but also because it rained last night. Moist soil, end of November, bright sun and dry air. It stinks of death. If you first have tasted the smell of death; you will never forget it. Years ago, as an aspiring forensic science student, I had briefly worked in a morgue and assisted with autopsies and post-mortem examinations. I later changed career path, but I never forgot the smell of death.

From the cemetery we drive back towards Sidi Mansour. A famous and important Sufi saint is buried there.[21] It is also famous for a folkloric Tunisian song. I know the song very well; I and everyone with North African roots sang along to it as a child. An uplifting joyous song, I had always thought, when I heard the song Sidi Mansour or *'Ya Baba'* as it was also called. Not anymore. As I stand here, Sidi Mansour, has become a dead zone.

We drive out to the shipping port from where the migrants depart. Sihem says some get tricked into paying 1000 TND, only to be dropped off in Kerkennah, but told its Lampedusa. It costs 1 dinar to take the ferry to Kerkennah. It is the sub-Saharans who are being cheated by the local Sfaxians. 'No Sfaxian would be scammed like that', she says confidently. Imagine paying 1000 dinars for something that costs the locals 1 dinar? It takes approximately 1.5 hours to sail from here to the Kerkennah Islands, and from Kerkennah to Lampedusa is under 100km. Tunisians know that there are fixed prices, as Sihem cheerfully notes with a salesman's jargon: 'Tunisian tariff, fixed price, 4000 TND for you *habibi*'. We both laugh. We turn the corner, there are two young sub-Saharan men looking out at the water. We look at each other without saying anything, and drive past them. Sihem is herself a native Kerkenniya but moved to Sfax (mainland) when she started law school. She says angrily,

> 'Migration control starts here in Sfax. No one can just go to the Kerkennah Islands anymore. Even if it is our own country. I'm not going to Lampedusa, I'm just going to visit my family. But now you must document everything

[21] The song pays tribute to the Tunisian Sufi saint Sidi Mansour, originally named Mansour Ghulam, who lived during the 14th century. He was from the city of Sfax, where his tomb remains to this day, and a neighborhood in the city also bears his name.

possible and have a legitimate reason, it's become a bureaucratic nightmare. Even when you have a sick grandmother over there you must prove it.'

We drive back, and she drops me off at my hotel. I think about how borders move, how they cast shadows in the borderland, shadows that separate, inflict pain and shape suffering. It's an invisible force, unseen but deeply *felt*. It cuts across land and sea, touching the dead and the living, locals and strangers, women and men. It doesn't distinguish, no one is exempt.

Unknown migrant graves in Sfax, Tunisia.

7 ARTICLE I

Treading water in transit: understanding gendered stuckness and movement in Tunisia

Abstract

EU containment and Tunisian domestic policies have produced a new, Black migrant, urban underclass. Based on in-depth ethnographic fieldwork among Ivorian migrant women in Bhar Lazreg, a Tunis banlieue, this paper explores how the women navigate and negotiate everyday life. On the urban margins of society, forgotten and far from the border, migrants reinvent ways to keep moving. The paper suggests that their stuckness is still all about movement as encapsulated in the emic term *bouger* – akin to treading water, involving a constant motion to stay afloat, but without ever getting anywhere. Tension operates across many levels, between the physical, the temporal–spatial, and the existential. Embedded in this tension is a second emic term, *prison à ciel ouvert* (open-air prison). Juxtaposing a space that feels carceral and limiting while simultaneously bursting with potential for movement, the paper contributes to the literature on immobility within mobility. But beyond that, the empirical findings show a far more complex reality, complicating the notion of transit. By exploring the tensions and entanglements between the emic terms it becomes clear that to understand spaces of transit it is essential to understand stuckness and movement as fundamentally intertwined, overlapping, and co-constitutive.

Introduction: 'On va bouger, bouger'

Smoke from cooking pots fills the narrow hallway that gives onto the small, barely lit kitchen. Françoise and Antoinette,[22] unfazed by the fumes, are dancing and Vivi turns up the volume. I lean on the doorframe smiling. 'Ma sœur, eh pourquoi tu restes là?'[23] Antoinette yells, and pulls me into their sweaty, three-person, swaying circle. Trammeled between the whirring fridge and the big gas cannisters, I awkwardly start to move when, suddenly transported back to teenage years of being dragged to Moroccan wedding parties in Denmark by my mother, I realize I know the song; it was an instant dancefloor banger. Françoise starts twirling around me, yelling *bouger bouger*! Soon we're all laughing and singing, our earlier conversation about the open-air prison they inhabit forgotten.

[22] All names are pseudonymized.

[23] 'Sister, why are you standing there?'

Bouger, bouger
Il faut bouger, Eh, eh, eh, ehh
Ça va bouger, bouger, bouger, bouger On veut entendre tout le monde
On a tout fait, on a parlé oh yéé On a tout fait, on a crié oh yéé
Mais vraiment rien n'a changé oh yéé En tous cas rien a changé oh yéé
On va bouger, bouger
Tant que y'a la vie on dit toujours y'a espoir Si y'a espoir, tu dois bouger oh yéé
On va bouger, bouger
Bouger, bouger, ah ah, On va bouger, bouger

(Magic System.[24] Excerpt from 'Bouger Bouger'. From the album Petit Pompier 2003).

Move move
We have to move, hey hey
It will move, move, move, move We want to hear from everyone
We did everything we talked about yé We did everything, we shouted
yeey But really nothing has changed yé
In any case nothing has changed o yé
[Chorus:]
We will move, move,
As long as there is life, we always say there is hope If there is hope
you must move, yé
We move

This paper explores how undocumented Ivorian migrant women in a Tunisian urban space navigate and negotiate everyday life, dangling between movement and stuckness. On the margins of society, forgotten and far from the border, migrants live and survive, and reinvent ways to keep moving. Embedded in this tension are the emic terms *bouger* and 'open-air prison'. While the French verb *bouger* directly translates to 'move', in the context of Tunisia, a so-called space of transit, it captures the struggle and tension between movement and stuckness. This entails that the term *bouger* (as I will refer to it) contains a constant fear of stuckness, that stuckness is in fact a constitutive element, and that *bouger* becomes the antidote to stuckness. Akin to

[24] Magic System is an Ivorian coupé-décalé band. They have featured in the charts throughout Africa and in France, where the band became very popular. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fnD1VnbBY4

treading water, a constant motion to stay afloat, but without really ever getting anywhere. I investigate the question, 'How do Ivorian migrant women in transit '*bouge*', and how does this relate to an increasingly violent and carceral landscape that they themselves refer to as a '*prison à ciel ouvert*?' Asking this allows an opportunity to explore questions of transit, stuckness, movement and gender.

Gender as a system of power is central to the migration experience and demands further analysis (Nawyn 2010). Foregrounding the experience of women permits a deeper understanding of the gendered complexities and paradoxes of spaces of transit. Integrating a gender lens also contributes to the less explored area of gendered containment. Building on the work of Gross-Wyrtzen (2020) on containment and survival in Moroccan urban space, I present gendered narratives from a Tunisian urban space. Portraits of migrant women in transit often adopt a victim perspective, without agency (for an exception see Freedman et al. 2023). Although the women are struggling and to some extent stuck, they are still finding ways or, in their own words *bouge*r, for money, safety and survival. While *bouger* and open-air prison[25] are terms specific to migrants in Tunisia and the Maghreb, their analysis helps us understand broader processes of urban marginalization and carcerality, gendered responses to it, and how these inform the production of time and space at both intimate and global scale.

The article also adds to growing critical scholarship on transit as a political construction (Collyer et al. 2012; Frowd 2020; Hess 2012) by exploring how migrants navigate across time and space and negotiate the stuckness created in these spaces. Critics have highlighted several weaknesses in the concept of transit migration, as Düvel (2006) argued 'it is as much a discourse as it is a scientific concept'. Inherent in the word 'transit' itself is an idea that it entails a short duration between departure and arrival, reinforcing the assumption that migrants are not invested in their current locations and that their lives are put on hold, or merely waiting for the next phase of their journey (Sampson, Gifford & Taylor 2016). As my empirical findings will show, the Ivorian women did not perceive themselves as in transit, instead Tunisia was their destination, complicating the notion of transit. The article further contributes to scholarly debates on 'stuckness in motion' (Balaguera 2018; Conlon 2011; Frank-Vitale 2020) as well as the urban and the carceral (Jensen 2020; Wacquant 2000). While carcerality and confinement in the camp have been explored (Turner & Whyte 2022) this paper goes beyond camps and carceral institutions and conceptualizes confinement as an integral element of transit spaces in contemporary migration management. This enables us to move away from a dominant binary of people either being mobile or (im)mobile, and to push this thinking beyond the notion of 'trapped

[25] 'Open-air prison' is a term also found in other transit spaces, such as Lampedusa, Manus Island and Nauru, and Tapachula in Mexico (e.g. see García, Georgina & Call 2020).

populations' that risks erasing agency (Ayeb-Karlsson, Smith & Kniveton 2018). As this paper will show, there are different forms of movement in stuckness. In doing so, this article contrasts a space that exudes a carceral and limiting atmosphere while also brimming with potential for movement, contributing to the existing literature on immobility within mobility. However, beyond this juxtaposition, as I will illustrate, Ivorian women reveal a more intricate reality – a segmented migration experience. Here, individuals initially anticipate reaching their final destination but later find themselves dissatisfied, disillusioned, or feeling 'stuck' due to political, economic, or administrative issues. This distinction holds particular significance when compared to transit migration literature, which predominantly focuses on individuals facing prolonged delays or obstacles in locations they never intended to stay in initially.

Terms like bouger and prison à ciel ouvert rely on temporal and spatial modalities. While bouger has a temporal and spatial dimension, contesting as it does stuckness in time, open-air prison can be understood as a spatial dimension, stuckness in space. How the temporal and spatial are articulated in and through each other became evident when looking at the practices and strategies of migrant women in Bhar Lazreg, a neighbourhood on the northern periphery of Tunis where I conducted five months of in-depth ethnographic fieldwork between 2021 and 2022. The majority of women interviewed (n = 35) in Bhar Lazreg were from Ivory Coast. Interviews were conducted in French and later transcribed to English by the author. My hybrid positionality helped me get an intimate access to the women, as I was perceived as an 'insider', a migrant, born in Europe, to a mother who had done what some of them aspired to; she left her home country, looking for a better life, so that her children would have a better future. In my investigation of these emic terms, I take my cue from Michael Jackson:

> It is imperative that one allows one's empirical material to determine any interpretative response. This means paying meticulous attention to vernacular expressions, local figures of speech, and ontological metaphors. These, rather than any theory one has acquired, provide the window through which one may glimpse the inner workings of another life-world. (Jackson 2012: 179–180).

In *Between One and One Another*, from which this quote is taken, Jackson argues for the importance of listening attentively to what informants are telling you, rather than simply applying theory or sophisticated concepts to the work of ethnography. In my fieldwork with West African migrants in Tunisia, I noticed the frequent use of the word *bouger*, especially among Ivorians. Over time I realized that the word had more to it than just the obvious translation to 'move'. When I asked migrants how things were, considering the tumultuous and deteriorating situation in Tunisia, they would often reply: '*On est là, on va bouger, peu à peu!*' (we are here, we will *bouger* little by little!).

This has an existen-tial ring to it, but other times it was used when things got difficult: '*pas de bouge, pas de flous'* (no *bouge*, no money), as in nothing is happening, or will happen.

Bhar Lazreg is a *banlieue/houma*[26] on the outskirts of Tunis. Multiple political and economic crises in Tunisia, including post-pandemic food shortages and hyperinflation, and an unprecedented increase in irregular migration across the Mediterranean have created an intense pressure cooker situation (Blaise et al. 2023). For a long time, the irregular migration to Europe has mainly been driven by Tunisian nationals, recently however non-Tunisian migration, mostly West African, has also surged, declaring Tunisia the 'new transit country'. I argue this recent increase needs to be understood, not just nationally but regionally. It is both a result of increased police violence, raids, and mass deportations in Algeria and the deteriorating situation in Libya pushing more people to cross into Tunisia. This has come together with underlying anti-Black racism in Tunisian society, incited by President Saïed in a now infamous speech on 21 February 2023, where he embraced the 'Great Replacement Theory' (Chemlali 2023a). In the aftermath, migrants were fired from their jobs, expelled from their homes, and targeted in violent xenophobic attacks, pushing more toward Europe (Amnesty 2023; HRW 2023). Despite high numbers trying to reach Italian shores, the majority, however, are unable to leave. Because of their social marginality this group are increasingly 'stuck in transit' on the fringes of society. Exacerbated by the EU–Tunisia migration agreements, containment policies have produced a new, Black, urban underclass. EU externalization policies pack and trap thousands of undocumented migrants at the bottom of the spatial order of the polarizing city. As one of the women, Brigitte, a young mother, pregnant again, told me:

> It's hot, hot now! Too hard here! When I came last year, oil was 15 TND,[27] now 38 TND. No more milk, you only find smelly, bad milk made from dusty powder and water. My baby gets sick drinking it. Every day more money. Rent is up! Electricity bill, eh! At times you don't find anything: no water, no rice, no bread. You can't blame people who leave Tunisia. Everyday it's getting worse! If I have the money I will cross, but I can't even feed my baby. I came to work in Tunisia. I wanted to stay here, but it is impossible. No job, no money. How will you survive? I am stuck here. I can't go back home. I can't move forward. I am living in an open-air prison.

[26] A poor informal neighbourhood/suburb.

[27] US$1 = 3 TND.

The open-air-prison referred to is Tunisia, paradoxically labelled a 'space of transit' by policymakers, humanitarian actors, the media, and in public debates. Meanwhile the country, indeed the entire Maghreb region, has increasingly become a space of confinement.

At the heart of this article is a presentation of the tensions between gendered stuckness and movement, between *bouger* and open-air prison in all their contradictions and complexities. My data suggests that stuckness is also still about movement, albeit without gaining much ground, akin to treading water. The women still *bouge*, even as they decry their open-air prison. The paper permits us to go beyond 'dualistic binaries' and to reflect on a 'dialectics of movement and stasis' (Lems & Tošić 2020). The ambition here is to enrich the conceptual discussion on gendered stuckness and movement in transit. I structure my paper into four parts. First, I provide a brief background on Ivorian migration to Tunisia before presenting the space that is Bhar Lazreg. Secondly, I introduce three empirical cases that illustrate the everyday tension between stuckness and movement and how women contest and resist the open-air-prison through strategies of *bouger* through (case 1) everyday hustling and informal engagement within the Tunisian shadow economy; (case 2) running underground daycare; and (case 3) navigating and negotiating violence. Thirdly, I explore the emic term*bouger* in more detail and, finally, I consider how women characterize their migration experience as shaped by both *bouger* and the open-air prison, disrupting the analytical separation often imposed in migration research and (im)mobility studies between stuckness, movement and transit.

The space and the people

Tunisia, a country in political and economic turmoil, has transformed into an emerging 'transit country' in North Africa, surpassing Libya.[28] Unlike Morocco, where pathways to integration have been offered (Gross-Wyrtzen 2020), in Tunisia no integration or regularization programs exist. In an asymmetric power relation with the EU, Tunisia has been hesitant to reform its draconian migration and asylum systems for fear of becoming an extraterritorial European hotspot. At the same time, it has not shied away from receiving millions of Euros to strengthen and fortify its land and sea borders with training, logistics and equipment for border- and coastguards, consequently hermetically sealing all borders and trapping and confining thousands of migrants and Tunisians on Tunisian territory (Chemlali 2023a). This containment, I argue, is best understood as a 'carceral landscape' rather than a space of transit.

[28] https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-08-11/tunisia-overtakes-libya-as-the-top-migrant-launch-point-for-europe.html

Arrivals into Tunisia occur through both irregular and regular means. Many West African countries have free visa agreements with Tunisia, which is why all the Ivorians I met in Bhar Lazreg could fly directly from Abidjan to Tunis.[29] Since 2011, the Tunisian flight company Tunisair has had direct flights between Abidjan and Tunis (Boubakri & Mazzella 2005). Thanks to this special visa arrangement Ivorian nationals are allowed to stay in the country for up to 90 days. However, after 90 days they must acquire a *carte de séjour* (residence permit) if they want to remain legally. A daily fine called *la pénalité* kicks in, accumulating with each 'illegal' day in the country. Equivalent to 20 TND a week (US$7) and 80 TND a month (US$28) they find themselves in an even more vulnerable and precarious situation, and migrants who have stayed in the country irregularly for multiple years end up with hefty fines.[30] Currently a cap of 3000 TND (US$1059) has been set, which has to be paid to leave the country legally. Many of the women, therefore, find themselves stuck in involuntary immobility in a country facing multiple political and economic crises. Unable to find work, earn a living and make savings, migrant women end up contemplating to cross the Mediterranean, even if Tunisia was initially their end destination. Transport by boat from Sfax to Italy costs around 2000–3000 TND (US$ 646–970), which makes it cheaper than going home. As Antoinette says:

> Look, instead of me saving up to pay *la pénalité*, and then on top pay a plane ticket home for TND 1,500–2,000, I can just pay for a zodiac [boat] to take me to Europe. It's cheaper. I know it is dangerous, but life here is no life.

Like Antoinette, all the Ivorian women I met in Bhar Lazreg had arrived legally, flying directly from Abidjan. They usually start working as maids for wealthy Tunisian families, an arrangement often made before arriving through Ivorian middlemen. The lack of a migration policy in Tunisia and the Kafkaesque bureaucratic system, make it impossible to get a residence permit. This then situates the migrants in a precarious situation, where they can't access the formal labour market, are not allowed to open a bank account, risk detention and are fined *la pénalité* daily. This growing debt to the state and the inability to leave create the sense of living in an open-air prison. Unable to leave the country without paying the debt, or to plan for the future, they essentially become stuck in time and space. As Ghassan Hage writes '… migrants like all human beings need to feel that 'they are going places in life', and if they can't obtain that sense

[29] In the south of the country, it is a different story, as West African migrants have usually travelled to Libya clandestinely first, before ending up in Tunisia (see Chemlali 2023b).

[30] The penalty was first introduced in 1994. In 2013 it was doubled to 20 TND per week (Natter 2022).

of existential mobility, they will travel to obtain it' (Hage 2005: 470). The last resort for many becomes aspiring to cross the sea clandestinely.

It is important to note that Ivorian migration to Tunisia is not new. There is a long social history of mobility between Ivory Coast and Tunisia that has shaped the trajectories and networks between the countries for decades. This shows in the statistics too, with Ivorians making up approximately 75% of sub-Saharan migration to Tunisia.[31] Besides both being former French colonies, there has also been international cooperation between the two countries born out of a strong alliance between Habib Bourguiba, first president of independent Tunisia, and Félix Houphouët-Boigny, first president of Cote D'Ivoire (Cassarini 2020). In this post-colonial phase, cooperation between the countries flourished and enabled diplomatic and economic exchange. It was within this framework of multilateral regional cooperation agreements that Tunisia and Cote d'Ivoire signed the free movement agreements (Cassarini 2020). The early migration waves of the 80s and 90s, were predominantly 'elite'; Ivorian businessmen, CEOs and professors came to work and teach in Tunisia. Then, following the escalation of violence in Abidjan in 2003, the UN moved the African Development Bank (ADF) to Tunis, along with all its staff and families. Later, in 2011 following the Ivorian post-election crisis, there was a new wave of migration. Strong ties and networks exist in Tunisia because of this. For many Ivorians I met, Tunisia was never intended as a transit country. 'Tunisia is our Europe', some would say. But despite this, for many of the Ivorian women the recent years of protracted political and economic collapse and subsequent rise in xenophobic violence have pushed them to consider moving.

Welcome to 'The Blue Sea'

Historically, Bhar Lazreg literally 'The Blue Sea', has always been home to the poor and the less privileged: small landowners and farmers, blue-collar workers, and now undocumented West African migrants, all looking for ways to improve their living conditions. Its marshy land gave the area its name. Wealthy citizens living on the highlands of Gammarth, looking down from their villas onto the swamps below, saw an illusionary ocean because of the sun's reflections and blue sky. The area would shimmer and thus the name Bhar Lazreg, 'The Blue Sea', was born. Today the name also conjures up both the Mediterranean Sea some seek to cross and the struggle to *bouger*, treading water, to stay afloat, alive, and to navigate the sea they live in.

Bhar Lazreg lies on the outskirts of the otherwise extremely wealthy municipality of La Marsa, home to expats, attachés, diplomats, and the bourgeoisie. It is categorized

[31] It is estimated that there are somewhere between 50–70,000 sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia. https://ins.tn/sites/default/files/publication/pdf/Rapport%20de%20l%27enqu%C3%

as unsafe with a multitude of hazards and protection abuses (MMC 2020) and recently it has also become a hub for undocumented sub-Saharan migrants. Françoise, Antoinette, Vivi, Mama Nathalie, Joelle, Djeni and the other Ivorian migrant women I met during my fieldwork live here. Surrounded by rundown houses, burned-out cars, and local gangs, they look for work as maids, street vendors or in beauty and hair salons, hustling and scraping dinars together in the Tunisian shadow economy, while negotiating and navigating a violent everyday life.

Today, Bhar Lazreg is a peri-urban residential area of 60,000 inhabitants that has experienced significant and anarchic urban development since 2011.[32] It is marginalized both geographically and socioeconomically. The cheap rent and proximity to the city and the well-off surrounding quarters of La Marsa, Soukra and Gammarth with their 5-star hotels, restaurants and country clubs have attracted migrants and poor Tunisians as they offer possibilities for informal work. The people here live hand-to-mouth doing various 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) such as collecting plastic, cleaning, street vending, selling fufu and plantain imported from Abidjan, construction labour, etc. Unlike the migrants in the south of the country, who are often dependent on humanitarian foyers (Chemlali 2023b) the migrants in Bhar Lazreg are left to themselves.

Residents of Bhar Lazreg, Tunisians and migrants alike, spoke of violence, crime, insecurity, and growing hostility between residents. As Françoise often said, 'the streets are not safe'. To mitigate this, Françoise began a new side-hustle from her room. She started doing nails, first on herself, then the other women she shares the apartment with, and her neighbours started to come too. Pink, diamonds, pearls. This way she could safely earn some dinars while being close to her baby, sleeping on the same pink bed she works on. '*Comme ça on bouge un peu'*. (This way we *bouge* a little.)

The feminine materiality of *bouger*

On Rue de Charles de Gaulle, the main road at the heart of Bhar Lazreg, you find the vegetable market and '*frip*' (selling of second-hand clothes) and if you go further down and take a hard right after Aziza, the only shop in the area, you get to 'Philosophers' Corner'. Here you find Rue Kant, Rue Platon, Rue Nietzsche, Rue Socrate and Rue Einstein among others. It was also where I found all the Ivorian women, I ended up spending most time with. This was where they lived and had their small businesses. It was here I first met Mama Nathalie. She had a restaurant on Rue Hannibal, where she was known for the best Ivorian *attieke*, a cassava couscous and spicy smoked fish dish. Her small but popular West African restaurant located in the heart of the neighbourhood was a gathering point for the Francophone West African community

[32] Bhar Lazreg had 10,000 residents until the last decade when the number jumped to 60,000.

in Bhar Lazreg and surrounding areas who, especially around noon, would fill the place. Occasionally it would also get busy in the evening, but if it ever became too rowdy or loud, she would bang one of the plastic tables in front of the counter and yell: '*Eh eeh! Calme-toi, ce pas un maquis! Walai*!' (Calm down, this is not a maquis![33] I swear!).

Mama Nathalie, as everyone called her, was a matriarch who knew her way around, and she was clearly a respected figure in the community. This was partly because she had been in Bhar Lazreg for more than 11 years. 'Here is not easy, but it is possible' she would say. Nathalie first came to Tunisia after the second Ivorian Civil War broke out in March 2011. She came looking for a safe and better future. 'I was among the first black women in the neighbourhood' Nathalie says and mentions how Tunisians would look at her as if she came from a different planet. People would try to touch her hair, she says laughing. Despite running a successful small business, Nathalie was still applying for the Tunisian *carte de séjour* (residence permit). 'It is impossible to get …' she said, '… because they don't want you to get it!' 'We are stressed by the fees and the penalties'. For Nathalie the fines were overwhelming after 11 years in the country. 'I started my business to make a living independently and to convince Tunisians and the authorities that we are trustworthy and respectable, but still we are looked down upon, and not respected as equals'.
As we sit in her baby blue-painted restaurant, she points to the glass façade:

> Look how many times I fixed the windows. They throw stones at us and the shop, or sometimes try to steal from us. It was extra hard during the Covid crisis. We did not make enough money to pay the bills, and we did not get any help, we had to help each other in the Ivorian community ourselves.

But Nathalie nevertheless sees some change in Tunisian society: 'Earlier they did not hire Black people. Now we are working in the service sector, as house cleaners, hairdressers, gardeners, and construction workers. Even though we don't have papers, we still do the work'.

Of course, it's for lower pay with no contracts or insurance and carries the obvious risk of exploitation. In Abidjan Nathalie used to work as a nurse assistant. She left her small daughter behind with her mother; she is now 18 years old. After some years in Tunis Nathalie met a man and became pregnant. Her son, now eight years old, was often in the restaurant doing his homework, which I occasionally helped with, or just annoying his mother. He was born in Mongi Slim hospital in Bhar Lazreg. 'He speaks fluent Tunisian', Nathalie proudly says. Although she misses her daughter, they talk

[33] *Maquis* is the colloquial Ivorian word for a working-class, streetside African eatery where alcohol is served and loud music plays.

often. Bringing her here would require money and resources, and what could her daughter do here? 'If you don't work you will not eat'. Finding work, especially in the socioeconomic crisis Tunisia is facing, and especially as an irregular migrant is difficult. She preferred to keep her daughter in Abidjan to finish school, which she paid for with the money from the restaurant and her side hustles. These included selling whitening creams, body buttercreams, aphrodisiacs, and other herbal mixtures (good for sex), as well as homemade drink mixtures (good for the immune system) which she also tried to sell me, because 'you Arabs get easily sick'. The products stood on the counter and quickly sold out. People would come in to order lunch and end up buying a cream or some spices too. *'Il n'y a pas beaucoup d'argent ici. Tu peux faire un peu comme ça, et un peu comme ça [she points to the kitchen and to the products] et c'est comme ça que tu peux avancer, bouger bouger un peu, tu comprends?'* (There's no big money here. You can do a little here and a little there like this, and that's how you can get ahead, *bouger* a little, you understand?). The side hustling was a livelihood strategy to survive in a precarious economy and a way to keep moving.

Mama Nathalie introduced me to her 'sister' Joelle, who ran a beauty salon, also on Rue Hannibal. Unexpectedly, the salon slowly became my second main field site. I could sit for hours, watching women coming in with afros and leaving with cornrows, a new pink wig or blue box braids, and listen to accounts of mistreatment, violence within the community, encounters with Tunisians (who they called '*les blancs*', the whites); their struggles with motherhood, the economy, the deaths at sea, and also gossip, rumours and their hopes for the future. The salon became an intimate window on the everyday lives of women in Bhar Lazreg.

Besides doing hair, Joelle also sold diapers on the informal market, beauty and hair products, bouillon cubes, spices and what she called 'pleasure products'. These included drinks like the very popular 'AK-47 Bazouka' syrup for her male customers that would give 'a six-hour-long hard-on', and female buttock-, hip-, and breast-enhancing creams. All the products were directly imported from Abidjan, which is known for its booming 'pleasure market' (Diabate 2022). Joelle was a single mother; her four-year-old, Kenza, born in Tunis, was always there. When I met Joelle she was three months pregnant again and the father had left her. '*Je suis une femme abandonnée*'. She was also mother to three girls back in Abidjan and was paying their school fees. Fake lashes, extensions, wigs of all shapes and colours and acrylic nails were all done here. '*Comme ça on fait bouger les choses*', she would say (This way we make things *bouge*). The salon was a safe space for rowdy talk where no topic was off the table. The talking would be in French or *dyla* ('broken French') which Joelle called '*la langue des affaires*'.

Ahlam: You have new products?

[I take one of the 'pleasure products' down from the shelf, AK47 Bazooka].

Ahlam: I've never seen this before.

Joelle: [Yells] You never seen a *bangala*?

She starts laughing out loud while hitting her thighs. She pulls up her skirt and goes to pee in a bucket in the back corner behind a curtain. '*Bangala*?' I say confused to the great amusement of the other women in the salon.

Joelle: I thought you were a mother!

She emerges from behind the curtain laughing and illustrates a penis with her hands.

Joelle: Relax its just for the men, for *ploco-placa* (sex)'.

She winks at me before going back to the woman waiting for her hair to be braided.

Ahlam: Do you think people will buy it?

Joelle: Of course. Why would I have it if it wasn't to get *flous, floouuuus, flouuuss*? [money in Tunisian Derija].

She sings this out, while working on the woman's hair, half of it now in braids.

Although the salon was run by women, Michel, a young Ivorian man, began coming some evenings to use one of the workstations. He had negotiated a good price with Joelle for a chair and mirror at the back of the salon, where men from the neighbourhood could come in to get a new fade, tighten their dreads or fix their stubble. Joelle quickly identified this new, male, clientele, and introduced the AK47 Bazooka product. It worked: the next week only two bottles remained. It seemed Joelle could sell sand in the Sahara, and she was quick to find new side-hustles in the informal shadow economy. When Corona passports were introduced during my fieldwork, she quickly made a deal with a Tunisian man who worked at a diaper factory to buy directly from him and sell them individually, ten diapers for 5 TND. She stacked them in front of the salon, and they sold like hot cakes. Even Tunisians bought them, as most did not have access to vaccine passports and were unable to enter supermarkets without one. Although Joelle was successful in her small side hustles, it only gave enough to stay afloat, never enough to move out of the swamp of Bhar Lazreg. Despite her light-

hearted demeanour, there were also rare glimpses of a serious Joelle, frustrated about the present and future.

> We work all the time, but nothing happens, nothing changes. They [Tunisians] don't like us. They don't want us here. I don't even want to be here, but after four years now, where should I go? Four years and nothing has improved. I can't go back like this. I don't want to cross the sea. No never. So we are here. *On est là. Toujours on est là.*

In this case *bouger* takes the form of everyday hustling. By engaging in informal entrepreneurial activities Joelle and the other migrant women with children stay afloat. The hair and beauty salons were an intimate women's space where they could have honest conversations about life, love, sex and the struggles and tribulations of life in Tunis. But despite her creative ways of navigating precarity, and innovative ability to adapt to changing environments, Joelle was treading water and felt stuck in time and space.

The underground networks of *bouger*

'We are taking over!' says Mama Nathalie, laughing and pointing out the window as three women pass by with babies on their backs.

> There are a lot of black babies in Tunisia and especially here! Sometimes the Tunisian daycares mistreat the black babies, and if the baby is with you all the time, how will you find work? Few are lucky, like if the house-owner or the employer is kind, she can accept the mother bringing the baby to work, but it is rare. So, we arrange it ourselves to help the mothers. We Ivorians need to stick together.

A new, women-run business was underground crèches. Even in places like Bhar Lazreg, where migrants are left to themselves, a universal conundrum is faced, the essential need for mothers to find childcare, to release time to work to make ends meet.

When I visited Françoise again in October 2022, she had bought a semi-automatic washing machine, the ones where you still must use your hands. It had cost her 300 TND.[34] The two other women she lived with did not want to chip in, but she had put money aside for months because, as she said, 'when you have a child, it is a lot of washing, takes too much time, with this I save time'. Françoise had several side hustles, cleaning once or twice a week for a Tunisian family, working in the hair salons, doing nails in her room. '*On va bouger bouger*!' she told me. It seemed she enjoyed it: working,

[34] Approximately US$100.

getting money. She looked happier, and it was largely thanks to the 'underground crèche', an informal daycare run by other Ivorian women in the neighbourhood. 'If this wasn't here, I wouldn't be able to do anything'.

One early Wednesday morning, I am sitting on her bed in her tiny room with a clear view to Françoise in the hallway who is setting up the washer. While it is running, she quickly gives Miracle, her now one-year-old, a quick bath in a small yellow tub on the marble floor. She rolls her up in a towel and sings while dressing her. Meanwhile, I hang the white clothes to dry. Then she adds a coloured batch. 'See how quick it is', she says enthusiastically to me.

There is noise and banging upstairs. The Tunisian *bailleur* (landlord) is building an extra floor. 'He benefits from us', she whispers to me. She tells me there has been an increase in prices. Electricity, water, food. 'We always pay extra'. If the bill is 100 TND, he tells us pay 200 TND. That's the way it is. That's why I'm still here. Stuck'.

She prepares a small, pink, Mickey Mouse bag. In it she puts diapers, wet wipes, spare clothes and food in a plastic box. She adds a pink water bottle. 'She loves pink'. In a childish voice Françoise squeezes her face into Miracle's and says, 'Are we ready for crèche? Yes we are. Is Mirac ready for crèche? Yes she is', and kisses her repeatedly before we hit the road.

'Eh, Salam baba!' she says and nods to an elderly man sitting on a chair. We walk through narrow alleys. 'It's just over here' she says to me, smiling. The sun is getting bright. She carries Mirac in her arms and kisses her. She is a fast walker and I struggle to keep up. She tells me the woman who takes care of the children is very sweet, and good with kids. She pays 60 TND a month, but only because she knows the woman and sometimes does her hair. 'The Tunisian crèche is not good,[35] they don't care about our children', she says. 'Is it only Ivorian children?' I ask. 'No, no – all different nationalities, Guineans, Malians. Everybody is welcome. And all ages too. There are babies from two months even!' We arrive in front of a small, inconspicuous house with no indication of it being a place for children. Françoise knocks and a petite lady with a baby in her arms opens carefully. 'Bonjouuuur!' Behind her babies and small children appear, some crawling others running around. The screaming, laughing and crying become louder and louder as we walk into the room. The walls are painted in bright rainbow colours, and part of the floor is covered with a few mattresses. Françoise hands over Mirac and quickly says goodbye. Once the door closes Françoise sighs, 'Oooufff, I don't know how she can handle it!' I am equally flabbergasted.

The creation of underground daycares is a gendered strategy to solve a gendered problem. The women are often single mothers and are unable to move freely or work

[35] The Tunisian crèches are usually private and expensive, making them inaccessible, not just to migrant women, but also many Tunisians.

with their children. It's an additional hurdle migrant women in transit face, making it even more difficult to move. For Françoise, the underground daycare buys her child-free time to work, so she can *bouge*.

The violent negotiations of bouger

Almost four years ago, Djeni flew from Cote d'Ivoire to Tunis. Her uncle had paid a middleman for the ticket and arranged work for her. She had to repay him once she started working as a maid in a Tunisian household. After paying back her airplane ticket, Djeni was debt-free but not for long, as she was scammed out of 7000 dinars (US$2,300), almost three years of savings, when one of her Ivorian 'brothers' from the neighbourhood convinced her to make him her 'mobile bank',[36] to protect her money.

He lied to me and made me believe that the family I was working for would rob me of my money or accuse me of stealing it and I was naïve enough to believe him. Every month I would give him my salary. If I needed to buy something I would ask him to prepare the amount beforehand. But one day I left my old job and I wanted to have my savings back only to find out that he had spent all my money on girls, drugs and alcohol. He hurt me, I worked for months and months and got nothing. He took it all and broke my heart.

But Djeni's heart was not to be broken lightly. She started to plot her revenge. In her rage, she contacted one of the Ivorian gangs in the neighbourhood to hunt down the thief and beat him until he returned her money. 'We Blacks have stubborn heads. He has to be hit real good so he knows I'm not playing, I want my money, it's mine!'

The gang Djeni hired was a notorious underground group of Ivorian 'brothers' called Tablo et ses Frères. 'Instead of going to the police, we have our own people', Djeni explained. One day they captured him, beat him senseless before Djeni arrived, and threatened to pour acid on him, yelling 'You made her lose her savings, we will make you lose your eyes'.

Despite this, Djeni never got her money back and she became more frustrated with her situation. Feeling increasingly blocked from all angles, she decided to cross the sea from Sfax and found a smuggler in the neighbourhood who would help her.

We sit in her apartment on the margins of Bhar Lazreg, on the only furniture left, a small soft brown couch. Everything else is gone as she has been selling all her belongings to get money for the crossing. Her place is, as always, squeaky clean. She works as a maid, and it shows.

[36] You can't have a bank account in Tunisia without a residence permit. Many sub-Saharans use trustworthy members of the community as their 'mobile banks', to safeguard their money and for protection, a common practice in West/Central Africa.

Djeni: *Tu veux boire quelque chose?* [Want to drink something?]

Ahlam: *Non merci, merci.* [I look around and gesticulate with my hands. What's all this?]

Djeni: [sighing deeply] *Tu sais que je ne peux pas rester ici* [you know I can't stay here].

Ahlam: *Je comprends mais c'est risqué* [I understand but it's risky].

Djeni: *Ici c'est risqué!* [She says angrily]. *C'est pas la mer qui tue les gens. C'est la Tunisie. C'est le système. C'est la pénalité qui tue le gens!* [It's not the sea that kills people. It's Tunisia. It's the system. It's *la pénalité* that kills people.]

Ahlam: *Comment?*[how?]

Djeni: *C'est la mort des rêves! Tuer l'espoir! C'est la pénalité qui bloque!* [It's the death of dreams. The killing of hope. It's the *pénalité* that blocks me].

Ahlam: *La solution ç'est l'Europe?* [The solution is Europe?]

Djeni: [Growing frustrated] *Ç'est mieux que cette prison à ciel ouvert!* [she pauses and inhales a long breath] *C'est stressé, c'est fatigue, c'est violence! Quatre ans ici! Rien à faire! Rien! Pas de bouge! La vie c'est pas comme ça, non, non, c'est pas la vie! Je veux bouger! Je veux avancer! Je veux vivre!* [It's better than this open-air prison! It's stressing, it's exhausting, it's violence! Four years here. Nothing to do! Nothing [happening]. No *bouge*. Life is not like that, no, no, it's not life! I want to *bouger*! I want to move forward! I want to live!]

Ahlam: Mmmm … [I nod my head. I don't know what to say]

Djeni: *Ici, tu es bloqué. La Tunisie, c'est un cauchemar!* [Here, you are stuck. Tunisia is a nightmare!]

Ahlam: *Comment tu vas bouger*? [How are you gonna *bouger*?]

Djeni: [She starts smiling] *Je vais en France!*

Ahlam: *Pourquoi France?* [Why France?]

Djeni: *Pourquoi?* [she laughs] *C'est nous les Ivoiriens qui nourrit les Français.* [She smacks her right hand into her left palm] *Rends-moi mon cacao et mon café,* [smacks again] *rends-moi mes diamants et mes minéraux* [smacks again and rises to her feet]. *C'est mon tour maintenant!*[37] [Why? It's us, Ivorians, who fed the French. Give me back my cocoa, my coffee. Give me back my diamonds and my minerals. My turn now!]

For Djeni life is running through her fingers. It becomes more attractive and desirable to do something than to wait, to push life toward an intersection; preferable to have

[37] Ivory Coast is the world's largest exporter of cocoa beans, raw cashew nuts and a net exporter of oil. https://oec.world/en/profile/country/civ

cards on the table, rather than a slow, everyday life where there is no movement or moving forward.

The *penalité* system placed her in a vulnerable position, and she lost years of savings, trapping her in an open-air prison with more debt and shrinking opportunities. The combination of EU pressure to manage migration and Tunisia's fear of becoming Europe's hotspot, has resulted in a reluctance to reform policies and implement a national framework on migration (El Ghali & Chemlali 2022). Migrants are left to fend for themselves in a legal, administrative, and existential limbo, with no prospect of regularizing their status. This abandonment, as Gross-Wyrtzen (2020) argues, obscures the violence of the state. As Djeni points out, this is what is killing people, literally in some cases. It pushes people into the streets and onto the boats. Risking their lives to *bouge*, to feel like life is going somewhere and contest the stuckness produced in the carceral open-air prison.

A further dive into *bouger*

Considering these empirical cases, it is clearly worth taking a closer look at the word *bouger*, as it appears more ambiguous than expected. The dictionary definition is:[38] 'to put in motion or set in motion'. It can also translate into the verb 'manoeuvre' or 'manoeuvring', a physical act, often linked to military exercises and tactics. It can be used as *faire bouger (les choses),* meaning 'to make things happen' or be translated as 'to budge'. While mostly used as a verb, it can also be used as an adjective, *sans bouger,* meaning 'motionless', or *pas de bouge*, 'no movement' as some of the women put it. The frequent use of the double *bouger bouger,* felt as an emphasis, when trying to get ahead, an aspirational 'I need to move'; loaded with anxiety, uncertainty, and hope. Like the vernacular term *dubria* and *dubriagem* from Bissau (Vigh 2010) it is directly linked to movement and to strategy. *Bouger* like *dubria* also has a temporal dimension, being not just confined to the present, but also to both 'the near and the distant future' (Vigh 2009). In a North African context *harraga* or *harga* a term used to describe 'the burning' of borders by young men, and a form of resistance is similar (Souiah, Salzbrunn & Mastrangelo 2018). Other emic terms like *buryong* (Jensen 2014) loosely translated to 'boredom' among young men in the Philippines, also rely on temporal modalities and notions of broken time and 'stunted futures' (Jensen 2014). In Cape Town *skarreling* (lit. 'scurrying') meaning to find means of survival and *chica-chica* in rural South Africa means a way to achieve one's goals, like a wriggling snake (Jensen 2020). The concept of hustling comes to mind, which has been central in urban studies, especially in the US. Wacquant defines hustling in inner-city Chicago as the 'mastery of a particular kind of symbolic capital' a kind of social art that 'covers a peculiar semantic and social space'

[38] https://m.interglot.com/fr/en/bouger

(Wacquant 1998, 3). It is a concept often framed as a 'deceitful practice entangled in modes of tricksterism and classified as illegal or extra-legal' (Thieme, Ference & Van Stapele 2021) in often hyper-masculine and hyper-violent settings. While I don't consider *bouger* as having negative or harmful connotations, there are elements of the everyday hustle in finding ways to survive and navigate, like *dubria* or *skarelling*, like Mama Nathalie in the restaurant and Joelle in the salon with all their side-hustles. It is also worth noting that hustling definitions often lack gender aspects and strategies. As my case studies show, the strategies of *bouger* are highly gendered, as are the social spaces they operate within. *Bouger* appears as both a movement and a tactic. As both spatial and temporal. Treading water, constant motion to stay afloat, but without really ever getting anywhere. A way to contest and resist the stuckness, the immobility, the containment. A means to navigate and get unstuck from the gendered temporal and spatial immobility migrant women experience in Bhar Lazreg. It is an everyday movement or 'motion in motion', a rhythm to escape the tar and quicksand of Bhar Lazreg, and more generally Tunisia and the Maghreb, that clings to undocumented migrants on the margins of society.

Conclusion: understanding gendered stuckness and movement

Drawing on unique ethnographic research, this paper dives into everyday life on the urban margins of Tunisian society, focusing on gendered navigation and negotiation from below among undocumented Ivorian migrant women. *Bouger* is neither free movement nor (im)mobility. The women's ability to move and the tension between movement and stuckness becomes part of everyday life. This tension operates across many levels and scales, between the physical, the temporal–spatial and the existential; the everyday tension within the spatial boundary of Bhar Lazreg and the larger existential boundary of life not moving or going anywhere. It becomes clear that stuckness and mobility intertwine in complex and at times paradoxical ways and should not be understood as opposites.

Through three empirical cases, different forms of *bouger* materialize and are instrumentalized as strategies for survival and resistance, for treading water and staying afloat in 'The Blue Sea'. The cases show how the women, stuck in different ways, are constantly creating and (re)inventing new strategies, carving out time and space to *bouge* and to survive through informal protective and livelihood strategies from below.

I have sought to juxtapose a space which feels carceral and limiting while simultaneously bursting with potential for movement, thereby adding to the existing literature on immobility within mobility. But beyond that the Ivorian women show a far more complex reality, a kind of segmented migration experience, where individuals initially anticipate reaching their final destination, but later find themselves dissatisfied, disillusioned, or feeling 'stuck'. This distinction is significant compared to transit

migration literature which mainly addresses individuals encountering prolonged delays or obstacles in places they never intended to stay in to begin with.

The paper thereby contributes new insights into Europe's expanding borders into North Africa, far away from the physical borders, into cities and urban spaces and how new (counter)strategies for survival arise and are negotiated. By exploring the relation between the terms *bouger* and open-air prison, it becomes clear that to understand spaces of transit it is essential to understand stuckness and movement as they are fundamentally intertwined with each other. The term *bouger* captures this effort. As the song lyrics go: *'Tant que y'a la vie on dit toujours y'a espoir, Si y'a espoir, tu dois bouger oh yéé'*.[39]

[39] 'As long as there is life, we always say there is hope / If there is hope, you have to move oh yeah'. Translated by author.

Francoise in the kitchen, Bhar Lazreg. Photo by Ahlam Chemlali 2021

8 ARTICLE II

A mother's choice: undocumented motherhood, waiting and smuggling in the Tunisian–Libyan borderlands

Abstract

Anecdotal evidence suggests growing numbers of migrants intercepted at sea – referred to by the Tunisian coastguard as *les rescapés* (the rescued) – return to Libya via smuggling. In this article I empirically document the experiences of 'rescued' migrant mothers who consider and/or purposely re-engage in irregular, high risk returns involving crossing the Tunisian border back into Libya. Employing a feminist ethnographic approach, this paper explores how undocumented motherhood is experienced and shaped in the context of EU-sponsored counter-smuggling and border enforcement. Building on fieldwork in Medénine, in southern Tunisia, I also examine the considerations of migrant mothers 'stuck on the move' concerning clandestine navigation and redirection in the complicated temporal and spatial context created by international organizations and EU-sponsored forms of 'protection'. I argue that border enforcement and counter-smuggling policies not only impact everyday life and mobility for undocumented mothers and their children but, as gendered practices, also trap and confine migrant mothers and their children in a cycle of protracted vulnerability, indefinite waiting, and uncertainty in which opting to travel with smugglers becomes the best bet and last resort.

Keywords:
Motherhood; Migrant smuggling; transit; border enforcement; waiting; Tunisia; Libya; migrant women.

Introduction: 'I can't stay here anymore'

In the yard of the Association Enfants de la Lune, a playground built for the children of migrants in the city of Medénine in south-eastern Tunisia, time seems to be at a standstill. The December sun is sharp and bright. Kids are jumping on a mini trampoline placed in a corner of the small makeshift play area. The background chatter of the mothers intertwines with the children's laughter; it all seems so calm and serene. But this couldn't be farther from the truth.

Cynthia[40] has just told me she is planning to leave. Sitting on a frail plastic chair under the shade of a swaying palm tree she leans in with a stillness to her face and

[40] All the names used here are pseudonyms.

discreetly tells me: 'I have decided to go back to Libya'. She wants to return and take her four children with her. She sits back and continues:

> I can't stay here anymore. The conditions here are not liveable. We are waiting blindly, just waiting and waiting. The kids are growing up with no future. The twins are not finding it easy, but I don't have a choice. I just [have to] make them understand I don't have a choice. We are stuck here. Life is not easy here. We can't be here begging in the streets always… [Looking at the kids] …they should be in school, not in the streets.

'Here' is Medénine, the medium-size city, gate to the Sahara Desert near the Libyan border, where Cynthia and her children were brought following their interception at sea by the Tunisian coastguard in 2019. Medénine, with rampant poverty and widespread unemployment, is one of the poorest provinces of Tunisia. The majority of the population live below the poverty line, or five Tunisian dinars (TND) a day – less than 2€. In recent years the city has also become a major hub for what Agier (2011) refers to as the undesirables of both sides of the Mediterranean: the thousands of so-called 'sub-Saharan' migrants and refugees intercepted at sea by the EU-sponsored Tunisian coastguard while attempting to reach Europe from Libya, the result of the measures to contain irregular migration into Europe (Fekih 2019).

For years, the public has heard about the horrific conditions to which migrants and refugees are subjected in Libya in connection with EU-funded border externalization projects. There is an overabundance of reports from academia, international organizations and media documenting the horrors of migrants being forcibly returned to Libyan ports, tortured, arrested, kidnapped, and even sold at auctions (Chemlali 2022; Kirby 2020; UNODC 2020). Civil society has attested to the stories of African women and children serving as sex and domestic slaves (HRW 2019, 2020, 2021; AI 2020, 2021) and in October 2022 there were even reports of migrants being burned alive by competing smuggling gangs (Al-Jazeera 2022). The situation in neighbouring Tunisia has to some extent been overlooked by comparison, despite the historical linkages between both countries, and the thousands of migrants either fleeing from Libya across the land border or 'rescued' at sea and brought to Tunisia's shores.

While migrants continue to arrive in Tunisia – either by choice, as a result of failed smuggling journeys, or through EU-sponsored counter-smuggling interceptions off the Tunisian coast – a lack of humanitarian infrastructure and worsening living conditions have forced many of them to consider or to actually be smuggled back into Libya, rather than remaining in a place where they can barely escape their circumstances (Sanchez et al. 2021).

The practice by migrants previously intercepted at sea – referred to as *les rescapés* (the 'rescued') by the Tunisian coastguard – of retuning to Libya via smugglers has not been fully investigated. I address this gap by documenting empirically the experiences of so-called 'rescued' migrant mothers who purposely seek to re-engage in high-risk, irregular journeys, crossing the Tunisian border back into Libya with the assistance of smugglers. I show the intricate processes of navigation and redirection present in transit by examining the complex temporal and spatial dimensions of the decision-making process of migrant women stuck on the move. I focus on the life story of Cynthia, a Nigerian mother of four, to ethnographically explore how undocumented motherhood is experienced in and shaped by EU-sponsored counter-smuggling and border enforcement.

I organize the article into four parts. First, I locate this contribution within the broader literature on gender, migration, and smuggling and examine how the EU's increasing externalization and outsourcing of border control to North African nations has gendered implications, focusing on the Tunisian case. Second, I describe the experiences of Cynthia and other 'rescued' undocumented migrant mothers, and how the conditions and confining structures constraining their everyday lives in Medénine are felt and acted upon. In the third section, I dive into Cynthia's life story and empirically flesh out how the Tunisian smuggling industry becomes intertwined in everyday life as a rational choice, to demonstrate how smuggling is a gendered practice, its inbuilt inequality impacting women, particularly mothers, in specific ways. I conclude by showing how the smuggling experience of undocumented migrant mothers in the Tunisian–Libyan borderlands is shaped by forms of temporal and spatial confinement, which force women to live their lives suspended between the border and the sea.

Motherhood in the smuggling landscape

As a point of departure, I rely on migrants' micro-level, everyday assessments of prospects and risk, which foreground their own navigation and strategies while stuck on the move. This resonates with earlier anthropological work on risk and mobility. Several scholars have demonstrated how increased border enforcement is corelated to risk and violence on the Mexico–US border (Slack et al. 2016; De León 2015; Cornelius & Salehyan 2007). Vigh (2006) has examined how young men from Guinea-Bissau navigate 'social death' in the African–European corridor; Lucht (2015) sheds light on high-risk migration and the broader existential questions that shape migrant journeys by following Guan fishermen's risky journeys across the Sahara and the Mediterranean to Italy; while Richter (2019) illustrates how liminality and 'waithood' permeate the everyday lives of Malian migrant men on the fringes of Europe.

While seminal and rich, most empirical cases and ethnographies concerning risk and migration, especially regarding the Africa–Europe migration pathway, primarily feature the experiences and life worlds of young, single men. I build on these important insights and extend the field to include migrant women's navigation and im/mobility experiences in the violent transitory terrain of the Tunisian–Libyan borderland by foregrounding motherhood, which both informs and shapes their individual experiences.

Despite calls to mainstream it, gender, and in particular the experience of parenting through a gender lens, has hardly been analyzed in the context of the smuggling process, despite the documented reliance of parents on the services of smugglers. Even less attention has been paid to how mothers traveling clandestinely with children base their mobility decisions on their roles or identities. Not only are mothers marginalized in smuggling research: the migration discourse in general systematically and implicitly judges women's decisions to travel with their children as irresponsible or irrational. Meanwhile, instances of fathers accompanying or supporting the journeys of their children are often portrayed as heroic.[41] There is a tendency to condemn mother's decisions, especially in the tragic instances when their children become separated from them, are injured or die.

But although the narrative of clandestine migration is gendered, there is scant knowledge of how irregular journeys are experienced by mothers. This gap is especially visible in the context of North African migration research, where scholars have shown migrant women's experiences tend to be reduced to their racialized characterizations as 'sub-Saharan Africans' (Gross-Wyrtzen 2020) and as naïve yet hyper-sexual victims of sex trafficking in need of rescue and protection (Plambech et al. 2022). A growing body of scholarship has shed light on the experiences of migrant women, particularly in the Moroccan–Spanish borderland (Stock 2012; Tyszler 2019; Sahraoui 2020; Gross-Wyrtzen 2020), with emphasis on women's bodily experiences and vulnerabilities in connection with increased European border control. However, the intersection between gender and smuggling has not been examined much. Similarly, while critical trafficking studies have emphasized the intersection between enforcement and gendered forms of vulnerability (Kook 2018; Petrozziello & Wooding 2013; Plambech 2014; Rizzotti 2022) they are rarely in connection to motherhood and usually treated as a separate subject of analysis.

Researchers have increasingly shown that while trafficking does take place, many women rely on sex work as a mechanism to advance their journeys (Okyere & Olayiwola 2022); many purposely forging intimate relationships as paths to mobility,

[41] To mind comes the high-profile case of Alan Kurdi, whose father's grief was widely portrayed as a tragedy.

which brings about both favourable and abusive experiences (see Arrouche 2023; Vogt 2018). It is true that women traveling irregularly face heightened levels of gender-specific violence en route including sexual assault. However, many gendered vulnerabilities are specifically associated with motherhood. Women experience unwanted pregnancies, high maternal mortality, and limited access to contraception and pregnancy termination services (Plambech et al. 2022; Grotti et al. 2018). Many travel with children or form families along the way. This often leads migrant women in transit to devise and deploy harm reduction strategies to address and mitigate the gendered risks and vulnerabilities they face, including engaging in informal forms of labour (including sex work and criminalized activities), forging relationships and support mechanisms with other migrants and locals, and protesting about the failure of humanitarian responses to provide health services (Garelli & Tazzioli 2017; Vogt 2018). These harm reduction strategies, as I will show, also include identifying and securing smuggling services as mothers.

A feminist, gender-centered examination of smuggling demands a closer look at how the condition of parenthood – in this case, motherhood – becomes entangled in the critical decision to both migrating irregularly and to engage the services of smugglers. In a world where women are more likely to migrate irregularly with their children than men, there is an urgent need to address this gap.

Methods

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Medénine, Southern Tunisia, among 30 West African migrant women, most of whom were mothers or pregnant. Three arrived in Tunisia close to their due dates and the vast majority of the pregnancies were the outcome of sexual assaults in Libya. Only two of the women had travelled with a partner, one having died at sea and the other having successfully arrived in Italy. The women's ages ranged between 16 and 42, and their countries of origin included Ivory Coast, Congo, Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone. Some had arrived in recent weeks and showed signs of trauma, while others had had some time to adjust. Some had been there for years – like Cynthia (two years at the time of fieldwork) – waiting for an asylum decision. All the women lived at the shelters or foyers set up by the IOM or UNHCR in town. I was not granted access to these locations. Instead, I conducted participant observation and interviews in English and French at the NGO Association Enfants de la Lune, a small local association providing assistance and vocational training to the migrant women and their children. The women viewed the association as a safe space where they could interact while their children played in the yard.

While the women were of a mixture of ages, backgrounds, and nationalities, all of them had embarked on at least one prior journey by sea towards Europe from Libya while pregnant or traveling with babies or small children. Another common

denominator was that they did not see themselves as saved or 'rescued', but rather as captured and contained, which led them to express desire for mobility as an escape, and were considering or had made the decision to re-embark on high-risk migration after their rescue.

Contrary to public perceptions surrounding migrants and their risk awareness, which situates them as ignorant and in need of information, the women of Medénine were fully aware of the hazards inherent in clandestine migration. This goes against the dominant narrative that migrants just blindly embark on journeys or ignorantly trust smugglers, as suggested by EU-funded information and awareness raising campaigns aimed at discouraging African youths from migrating (Van Dessel 2021; Vammen 2021).

As I will argue, migrant women in transit who are mothers have reduced possibilities to engage in onward mobility due to the fact they travel with their children. This, however, does not prevent them from considering and engaging in clandestine journeys. The story of Cynthia provides unique insights into migrant mothers' constant assessing and reassessing of shrinking possibilities that are far from linear and singular but have multiple trajectories.

'Libya is hell on earth, but Tunisia is a hidden hell!': the south Tunisian migration context

'Libya is hell on earth, but Tunisia is a hidden hell!' said Fatum repeatedly, an Ivorian woman and mother rescued at sea, now stuck in Medénine. The women next to her, many of them breastfeeding or with small babies napping in their laps, silently nod in agreement. Placing their chairs in a horseshoe formation in the courtyard, the mothers are clearly agitated and frustrated by the fact that so many men are going back to Libya, leaving them behind. As Julia, a Ghanian mother says: 'The boys [young men] just take their legs and the bags on their back and hit the road to Libya. We can't do that!' She points resignedly at her sleeping daughter and sighs. 'We are just here'. Cynthia stands up, as she often does when she has an important point and, frustrated, adds: 'Now even the Sierra Leonian [men]: they just land [makes a flying sound and snaps her fingers] and they leave again. When you're by yourself it's easy. But with children it's fucking much [expensive] and fucking impossible!'

To understand these mothers' frustration and desire to leave, some context is helpful. At the time of fieldwork (Sep 2021–Jan 2022) both the IOM and UNHCR shelters in Medénine – known locally as 'foyers' – were experiencing major cuts in funding, reportedly pressuring migrant mothers to leave to make room for new 'rescued' women. Facing homelessness and refusing to leave, some mothers were punished through the cancellation of their food stamps and access to medical assistance. Even before the cuts living conditions were deplorable. Reports of

overcrowding, lack of healthcare and basic hygiene, outbreaks of scabies and dermatitis and respiratory problems due to mould and dripping ceilings were common. There were also reports of violence and suicide attempts were frequent – some mothers had tried to drink bleach or cut themselves after their asylum cases were rejected, exposing the slow violence (Nixon 2011) permeating everyday life.

These confining, 'invisible' structures that Fatum and the other mothers referred to as a 'hidden hell', were only exacerbated by the political turmoil and critical socio-economic challenges Tunisia was facing. Amid widespread post-pandemic food shortages and inflation worsened by the Ukraine conflict, political differences among parties, and an increasingly dictatorial presidential figure, the Tunisian government has continued to leave migration and asylum law on the back burner, with no prospect of introducing any changes to the conditions faced by the thousands of migrants and refugees currently stranded in the country, nor of effectively reducing the financial precarity of its own citizens that leads them to migrate in unprecedented numbers (Kubinec & Mighri 2022).

While reports concerning the departure of thousands of Tunisians dominate the international media landscape (BBC 2022; McKenzie & Balkiz 2022), the number of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants moving into and through Tunisia has surged to levels unseen since the 2011 revolution (UNHCR 2022). The EU considers Tunisia a critical country of both transit and origin (Cuttitta 2020), which has led to the signing of multiple agreements seeking to curtail the departure of both Tunisians and of the migrants from across Africa and Asia who arrive in the country seeking to reach the EU. Italy and the EU held high-level meetings with Tunisia in 2021 with the EU pledging €11 millionthat year alone to curb migration flows with the support of interception boats (EuroMed Rights 2022). The border management policies of the EU mean that migrants are increasingly being intercepted, rerouted, or returned. This has not only resulted in people taking longer, more remote, and dangerous routes, but also increased the numbers of dead and missing at sea.[42]

Traditionally a country of origin, Tunisia has increasingly become a destination and transit country, an important point of departure for clandestine journeys on to Europe for both Tunisian and non-Tunisian migrants. Despite being signatory to the Geneva Convention, Tunisia has no national framework or policy on migration or asylum. And with no prospect of implementing migration regularization or protection mechanisms, migrants and asylum seekers find themselves caught in an existential and judicial limbo (El Ghali & Chemlali 2022; Cassarini 2020).

While leaving refugee or asylum seeker conditions untouched, the Tunisian Government has vigorously supported the EU-sponsored fight against human

[42] In 2022 alone, the IOM Missing Migrants Project has recorded 1347 deaths (IOM 2022).

smuggling (El Ghali 2022; Badalič 2019). The war against smugglers has become the legitimizing argument for EU externalization and border enforcement in the Mediterranean and North Africa, through which a policy of rescue-as-confinement has been instrumentalized. This has particularly unfolded since 2017 with the support of the EU to the Libyan coastguard, with the main objective of intercepting and returning migrants back to Libya. A recent, new addition to this 'naval battle in the Mediterranean' (Tazzioli 2018) is the increasing role of the Tunisian coastguard, the Garde Nationale Maritime. Between September 2021 and January 2022 alone, the Tunisian coastguard 'rescued' and intercepted more than 23,000 migrants (EuroMed Rights 2022). This task of 'rescuing' migrants at sea and bringing them to Medénine as a new 'holding site' or 'dumping ground'– in line with Cuttitta's 'military-humanitarianism' (2014) or Tazzioli's 'humanitarian space of containment' (2018) – has only increased the spatial rerouting of migration to an already highly militarized and securitized Mediterranean Sea and adds another border enforcement hurdle for migrants. Furthermore, it exposes migrants to Tunisia's lack of humanitarian infrastructure and non-existent legal and national framework and protection mechanisms (El Ghali & Chemlali 2022).

Counter-smuggling operations in the form of interceptions and so-called rescues at sea by the Tunisian coastguard have led to increasing numbers of new migrant arrivals in Tunisia, primarily from Libya who dodged the Libyan coastguard. This has subsequently and unsurprisingly overwhelmed the humanitarian operation in Tunisia, which as mentioned not only lacked infrastructure to start with, but faces severe funding shortfalls prompting both the EU and UNHCR to restructure and reprioritize forms of migrant assistance, including those that are cash-based (UNHCR 2022). It is in this context that migrant women like Cynthia arrive in Medénine. With each rescue the foyers, already running at full capacity, push another round of 'rescued' women onto the streets. For Cynthia and the other mothers, opting for smugglers was their best bet and last resort.

'Motherhood has denied me many things': navigating smuggling with children

After first meeting Cynthia at the yard, we met several times over the course of my fieldwork, talking for hours on end, in person and by phone after I left the field. Cynthia was brought to Medénine in October 2019 following her rescue by the Tunisian coastguard while fleeing Libya with her four children on a *lapa-lapa* boat with 96 other people. For five days Cynthia and her children drifted at sea and witnessed the deaths of six migrants.

Before that harrowing experience and before arriving in Tunisia, Cynthia lived, in her own words, 'a normal life' in Libya, where she worked as a house cleaner for a

Libyan family and as a cleaning lady in Guruji Hospital in Tripoli, before she was captured by Asma Boys[43] and moved to a detention camp on the outskirts of Tripoli where she endured systematic torture and rape. At that time, she only had two children – the result of a forced marriage in Nigeria. She fled the country and crossed the desert into Libya, where her twins were born. She was held in the detention camp for almost a month before she managed to escape with two other women. While in detention, another woman gave birth to a sickly baby she entrusted to Cynthia. John, the baby, survived, but his mother did not. With a new baby in her arms, Cynthia realized she also had become pregnant. She tried to 'pull the baby out', but as it was not possible to obtain an abortion in Libya, she had no choice but to keep it.

When I met her, she was living at the UNHCR foyer in Medénine with her four children. They shared a small dark room with no windows, divided by a large blue colourful Disney curtain, with an old smelly couch and a bed made of wood. Her asylum case had been pending for two years following an appeal which was ultimately refused. As a result, she was cut off from all food stamp and cash assistance and had been 'asked' to leave the foyer, as she had become 'an individual who [did] not fall within UNHCR's mandate' and thus 'a person not of UNHCR concern'. 'But where?' she asked. 'Where should we go?'

To add to Cynthia's difficulties, she was also a lesbian and stood out very visibly. Heavy-set and tall, she had a commanding presence. She had long dreadlocks with a shaved undercut, and a nose ring. She was convinced her appearance and sexual orientation had impacted her asylum case – not to mention her everyday safety in this small, conservative desert town. She was noticeably different and because of that she had endured several violent attacks, fights, and sexual violence in the streets and at the foyer. But despite her LGBTQ+ profile, UNHCR had not recognized her as a person at risk, asylum officers in fact telling her to 'just go back to Nigeria' and questioning how she could even be a mother if she was lesbian.

Being a mother posed risks. Many said she was a bad mother because she was lesbian. Her ability to mother was also questioned because she had her children beg. A concerned citizen had even filed a complaint which led to a court case, where a Tunisian judge ordered Cynthia to stop, or else the children would be taken away from her. Cynthia's response was: 'What do you want me to do. I have to beg! Should I prostitute? Steal?'

Cynthia often reflected upon motherhood. While it had been a path forced upon her, she was, in her own words 'made for it'. However, it was also a challenge that complicated her mobility. 'Motherhood has denied me many things. My freedom, my

[43] A term many West African migrants use to designate criminal street gangs present in Tripoli.

liberty. I am stuck in all angles because of it'. She told me she was convinced, had she been on her own, she would be long gone. She wouldn't have had to wait for so long, be stuck so long, save up money for so long; she would have just left. And she would have taken a boat from Tunisia easily.

In fact, the tensions surrounding Cynthia's decision to leave were not related to fear of smugglers or connection men – the recruiting agents working with smugglers – as the literature on migration often narrates. The actual dilemma involved her children. 'You know why I can't take to the sea?' she would ask. Being a mother limited her choices. John was constantly sick: he was asthmatic, had learning disabilities and a painful hernia in his groin that impacted his ability to move. Not being able to properly care for John's health needs affected Cynthia a lot. Others told her to just leave him behind, that she wasn't his real mother anyway, but Cynthia adamantly rejected this thought. Her twins Julia and Jones still vividly remembered the horrendous and traumatic attempt to reach Europe from Libya. Cynthia had weighed all the pros and cons and she knew having her unwilling and traumatized children embark on another journey was too risky. 'They don't want to get near the water again'. On the other hand, she knew that returning to Libya via the desert border crossing at Ras Jedir would be too risky for her two youngest sons, Jack (5y) and John (6y). The treacherous terrain and unpredictability of the desert was too dangerous for them. Border enforcement – the intersections between transnational and local bordering practices (Achtnich 2021) – had brought Cynthia and all her children to Tunisia but provided few ways out.

Examining the ways in which migrant mothers engage with smuggling provides key insights into the gendered implications of counter-smuggling measures. Women like Cynthia and Fatum made their smuggling decisions not only as migrant women, but as mothers for whom departing without their children was not an option. They could not pay for the journey they found most suitable for their children, the smuggling services they could access becoming conditioned to the amounts that they could afford.

The unequal, gendered dimensions of the smuggling market

Ayalew (2018b) suggests that in the context of a restrictive migration regime that criminalizes movement and where safe or legitimate means of mobility are increasingly eroded, smuggling constitutes a 'system of [refugee] protection from below'. Seen from this perspective, it is the state-sponsored efforts to manage migration that prevent migrants from reaching Europe safely. Enforcement, not smugglers as official documents suggest, is what creates the conditions that lead migrants to opt for more dangerous and risky itineraries (Rodriguez 2019). It also plays a role in smuggling prices.

Several migrants reported the going price per person for a spot in a boat from Sfax or Zarzis to Sicily or Lampedusa in 2022 was in the 4000–5000 TND range (about €1,100–1,500). The price increased dependent on additional protective options (better boats, lifejackets, etc.) The consensus among those consulted was that the more one pays, the safer – or less risky – the journey becomes, as does the likelihood of success, since larger portions of the fee go into bribing authorities, ensuring an undisturbed passage (see Augustova & Suber 2023).

Most migration researchers have argued that border enforcement and externalization make smuggling services more expensive, and the journeys more dangerous (Karakoulaki & Tosidis 2017; Paynter 2019; Ayalew 2018b). This linear logic, however, assumes that all migrants will simply continue to pay the fees, no matter how high. This dismisses the fact that higher costs create forms of protection accessible only to those who can afford the price (Sanchez 2016), ultimately pushing the most vulnerable migrants out of the smuggling market – often women with children as well as young people and children traveling on their own.

A migrant's ability to procure smuggling services is not neutral: it is shaped by many variables, among them gender, class and race (Achilli 2018; Sanchez 2016). In the case of Cynthia, for example, crossing the Mediterranean into Europe from Tunisia by boat seemed like the most viable option. But she assessed the prices, risks, and possibilities. Had she taken the boat from Tunisia to Europe on her own, the cost would have been significantly less than the 11,000 TND (over €3,200) that she was quoted for traveling from Tunisia to Europe with her four children. After going back and forth with several smugglers, and speaking with boatmen, fishermen and other migrants, not only did she realize the option was too risky, but also that it was unaffordable.

With limited opportunities for work, many migrant women beg in the streets, send their children to beg, or sell sex. Making '10 dinars pour 'la pipe!" (€3 for a blowjob) as some of the women shared, was not cost-effective, and only provided enough money to buy baby formula or diapers, or to pay for a taxi back to the foyer. Even begging had become more difficult as the number of migrants and rejected asylum seekers in Medénine had grown. A frustrated Cynthia stated:

> Begging was profitable before. You put on your begging clothes, for Jumu'a [Friday prayers], you could make 250 TND [€70], now just 20 or 40 TND [€6 or 12] if you're lucky. Why? Because you are not the only one; so many others, women and children beg now. It's a beggar competition now!

Another factor that impacts smuggling fees is race. In Tunisia, smugglers systematically quote higher fees to non-Tunisian migrants for their clandestine journeys. In fact, data suggests few if any non-Tunisians board boats carrying migrants

from Tunisia (Fekih 2019). West Africans are often discriminated against due to the colour of their skin and nationality and are frequently the target of smuggling-related fraud and scams and are even threatened by recruiters if they complain or want to denounce abuses (Sanchez et al. 2021). Traditionally, Tunisians are the owners of the smuggling boats and are assisted by Tunisian migrant middlemen who recruit other migrants in exchange for passage, or for roles as captains or pilots (Belloni 2020). These roles, however, are highly criminalized – most of those facing smuggling charges in Italy are indeed young migrant men who took offers to pilot boats to offset their fees (see Bachiller Lopez & Morenilla 2022; Campbell & D'Agostino 2021) – and are not available or offered to women.

The Tunisian context illustrates how enforcement and its impact on migrants' ability to cover smuggling fees has both racial and gendered dimensions.[44] Not only is it harder for women to access dignified employment options, racism and discrimination, alongside the gendered tasks present in the smuggling market, translate into West African migrant women having limited options to take safer smuggling options and/or to offset their fees.

But the main reason smuggling services are unavailable to many women remains the fact that traveling with children is often unaffordable. Enforcement-dependent pricing and costly safety mechanisms, combined with limited or reduced income-generating opportunities translate into women, and in particular, mothers, having limited access to the albeit minimal levels of protection that traveling on organized, clandestine journeys provides (see Sanchez 2016). Some researchers have argued that this is why some agree to be trafficked and travel via debt (see Plambech 2017; Kook 2018). But I argue that in the Tunisian case travel through trafficking or offsetting fees is almost impossible. Borrowing money from relatives in the home country is an option only available to a few; in transit there is nothing to pawn, no one to borrow from, and no way to prove who you are. The women arriving in Medénine literally arrive with the clothes on their back and nothing to their name. Because of the spatial disconnect and isolation of transit, their access to borrow money from social networks is weakened, their options for mobility diminished.

[44] Between 2020 and 2021 at least 243 migrants died after setting off from the Tunisian coast and almost all of them were sub-Saharan (Herbert 2022). This points to another inbuilt inequality in smuggling: while the vast majority of those leaving by boat are Tunisian (67%), the vast majority of deaths involving shipwrecks and other deaths at sea are believed to involve non-Tunisian migrants, who travel in boats that may be faulty and less seaworthy, suggesting that their particular journeys are by design riskier, in addition to more expensive than those available to Tunisians (Sanchez et al. 2021).

Aside from the challenge of covering the smuggling fee, the potential for scams and the risk of enforcement masked as rescue, were important components of Cynthia's decision not to travel towards Europe.

> My biggest worry is two things right now: the Tunisian coastguard and being a victim of somebody eating my money. [If] somebody might eat my money, because if somebody eat this money, heh, I'm gone! Gone forever! It's not easy. The second part is the rescue, the Tunisian rescue in the sea. When they see you in the sea, they take you and go back to Tunisia. Those are the two things I'm worried of.

Cynthia's biggest concerns were therefore not the smugglers, nor the dangers of the sea, nor even the possibility of perishing while crossing – all risks often cited in reports by international organizations and important components of migration deterrence campaigns (Vammen 2021). Her biggest fear was her alleged saviour: the coastguard, and the potential of being returned to Tunisia if intercepted. In Tunisia mothers confront difficult decisions in the face of increasing erosion of the protection infrastructure, and the constant reproduction of vulnerability as an effect of border enforcement allegedly in place to 'protect and rescue' them from exploitative and unscrupulous smugglers and to save them from dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean. For most, pursuing a sea crossing into Europe becomes cost-prohibitive. They must 'choose' between staying in Tunisia or crossing the border back into Libya to attempt to cross the Mediterranean again – ultimately the least expensive and risky of the options. Importantly, Cynthia's answer suggests she somehow thought of scammers and the coastguard as part of the same continuum of risk: 'Of course! There is no difference between somebody eating money and somebody sending you back. They are also eating your money!'

The logic that prevails in prevention through deterrence (see Frank-Vitale 2023) supposes that faced with grave risks, irregular migrants will take the 'rational choice', which would be to stay put. However, prospects of danger and risk have not been shown to deter migrants from embarking on clandestine journeys (Bakewell & Sturridge 2021; Frank-Vitale 2023). Instead, people consciously engage in risk given that they lack other options in the absence of legal paths to mobility.

For some migrants, the hardships of the journey and the possibility of failing are risks worth taking rather than the much greater personal risk of being unable to live a full life due to immobility. For Cynthia and the other mothers this made the risk of returning to conflict-ridden Libya worth taking. Returning to Libya on foot via the border crossing was the only path available to some to re-attempt the crossing into Europe. This made the journey longer and more dangerous, but far more affordable.

Many migrants have been denied refugee status. Others are there, undocumented without any papers or regularization procedure in progress. By the end of 2021 Cynthia told me UNHCR had dismissed and rejected her third and last appeal – they had 'lost' all the documentation pertaining to her second appeal and would not re-open her case. She had spent months going back and forth, filing complaints, proving her sexual orientation in the most undignified of ways. But despite being 'wasted' time, this was not 'empty time' (see Achtnich 2021), as Cynthia had been planning while waiting. She had already negotiated smuggling fees down from 300 to €250 – €750for her and the older kids to travel back to Libya through the border crossing at Ras Jedir. For the two younger children she had managed to negotiate an even lower price. 'I want to work; I need to work. I can't do that here. There is a lot of money in Libya. I used to work three jobs in Tripoli, but here nothing. No work, not even for Tunisians. How am I expected to survive?'

Conclusions: temporal bordering and uncertain futures

This paper contributes to the scholarship on gender and migration through empirical insights into motherhood while in transit and smuggling. It explores how undocumented, West African migrant mothers experience and navigate the temporal and spatial confinement of the Tunisian–Libyan borderlands, border enforcement and counter-smuggling policies confining them and their children to the limbo of indefinite waiting, danger, and uncertainty that they can, however, address through smuggling journeys.

The conditions that migrants 'rescued' as part of EU-sponsored counter-smuggling processes face in southern Tunisia, amid a lack of legal and humanitarian infrastructure, have pushed many of them to explore a return to Libya. This form of reverse mobility may seem irrational, desperate and illogical to outsiders. But for mothers like Cynthia and other migrant women in Medénine whose choices are circumscribed by a smuggling market with gendered access to mechanisms allowing for migration journeys it constitutes a conscious and sound decision. Despite all its risks and security challenges, Libya offers more opportunities to migrants like Cynthia than cities like Medénine.

Feminist scholars have challenged the representations of migrant women as victims of sex trafficking or as would-be criminals crossing European borders, arguing that they instead play active roles within a gendered experience. Building on this I examine the micro-level, everyday dynamics of migrant mothers on the Tunisian–Libyan borderlands, focusing on their explorations of the smuggling market. Motherhood shapes women's smuggling trajectories, requiring them to navigate a violent, gendered terrain, negotiating different types of risk but also of protection as they cross violent borders and deadly waters.

At the outset, it may sound irrational that Cynthia would choose imminent physical danger in Libya over staying in Tunisia. However, her lack of autonomy – subjected to constant surveillance by UNHCR, which regulated her access to housing and food and imposed restrictions on her place of residence and social interactions – created an environment of violence and surveillance: a form of confinement Cynthia and others felt they must escape from. Despite its documented risks, and in collision with the EU-centric rhetoric surrounding its geography, in the minds of migrants Libya emerges as a more manageable landscape compared to the situation of protracted vulnerability and involuntary immobilization in Tunisia. As Cynthia explained, 'In Libya there are no food stamps, but you don't have to report to anyone; you decide yourself – when to move, when to leave'.

Gendered mobility, motherhood and waiting in Medénine intersect with smuggling and the efforts to counter it. Border enforcement results in migrant mothers getting stuck with limited prospects for better futures. In many ways Cynthia's experiences crystallize the gendered vulnerabilities women, and especially mothers, experience throughout the migrant journey. Migrant mothers constantly face and navigate risk, with smuggling becoming a harm reduction strategy in a way that challenges romanticized notions of motherhood: while it showcases how mothers insist on moving with smugglers for the sake of their children, it simultaneously reflects how children can and in fact often do constrain women's ability to move (see Arrouche 2023).

Restrictive border controls lead women to make life-threatening decisions about when and how to move. They have transformed the North African borderlands into a carceral landscape where migrants are stuck in transit as confined subjects (Achtnich 2021). The fight against smuggling has been incorporated into a 'politics of migration containment' (Tazzioli 2018), instrumentalized through rescue operations at sea and border enforcement which funnel people into high-risk decision making. These findings add to the growing consensus that the demand for smuggling services emerges from systematic shrinkage of paths for legal, safe and dignified mechanisms allowing people to move (Zhang et al. 2018; Ayalew 2018a).

The findings further reveal how temporality, space, and gendered mobility intertwine. Mothers like Cynthia are trapped in 'fragmented spaces, stretched time and indefinite waiting' (Peteet 2018). Temporal rhythms of waiting lead migrants in some cases, as described here, to flee Tunisia back to Libya as way to contest the waiting time in Medénine – the life on hold, a space of limbo. Cynthia navigated her present according to possible future scenarios, begging in the streets to raise money for the crossing. She spent time gathering money and information. She was aware of the smuggling prices, the types of boats, their different sizes; the border crossing, the holes in the barbed wire, the border guards' locations, the big shallow pits in the desert; at

what time to go, to not go, 'travel now, pay later' deals; who was reliable and who was not, all information and knowledge she had garnered from networks and other migrants while waiting. All this knowledge became part of her ability to navigate and informed her decision-making process. Planning to leave while waiting is a means to resist the temporal bordering and spatial 'stuckness' the 'rescued' migrant mothers are confronted with.

Postscript

By my last fieldwork term in October 2022, things had changed again. Cynthia told me that she had to postpone her plans to leave because her son John was sick again. She had had to spend almost all her savings on medication, her journey becoming disrupted once again. 'What can you do ma, there is nothing to do; [we're] just here, waiting'.

She had also relocated from Medénine to Zarzis, a fishing village on the southeastern coast, an hour's drive away. After taking her son to Médecins du Monde for treatment in Zarzis, she returned to the foyer in Medénine to find that the staff had changed the locks. They eventually allowed her to get some clothes and whatever she could carry with her. She found a private room in Zarzis, thanks to some friends there. Here she has been in contact with a Gambian smuggler, but she disappointedly told me '[Smugglers] don't want to deal with you when you have children [because] they cry, they delay you, they can alert border guards, you know'. Some had proposed that Cynthia drug the children using sleeping pills or syrup for the crossing, but she was not sure 'I don't know ma, it's normal here, many do it, but if I do it, I also need someone who can help me carry them, so I haven't made up my mind yet, but with God's grace we will leave this place, all five, together, Insha'Allah'.

9 ARTICLE III

Rings in the water: Felt externalization and its ripple effects in the extended EU borderlands

Abstract

Ripple effects of European border externalization have transformed everyday life in the Tunisian coastal town of Zarzis. Building on ethnographic fieldwork among artisanal fishermen, and actors involved in two migrant cemeteries in Zarzis, the article provides an understanding of entangled processes and of how violence and death co-exist in the externalized borderlands of the EU. The felt and lived embeddedness and simultaneity of otherwise separately viewed policy issues is revealed through a focus on intersecting processes coming together in one place. The article analyses the ripple effects of these policies on third actors (the fishermen), the environment (marine life), and space (two migrant cemeteries) in Zarzis. The article unpacks how externalization translates into human rights abuses, environmental crisis, and death, and how these are distinctly intertwined. I propose the concept 'felt externalization' as a theoretical contribution which ties together the three core themes: the actors, the environment and the space. In doing so, the article brings together three different, yet interrelated dimensions of border externalization that are still largely understudied in the literature. By looking at externalization from a spatial and geographically situated angle the paper makes not only an empirical but also a conceptual and theoretical contribution, by seeking to expand the empirical basis but also the very meaning of externalization and its effects, in the extended EU borderland.

Introduction: 'the law of the jungle'

One sunny but cold January morning in 2022, in downtown Zarzis near the fishing port a group of around thirty fishermen are gathering at the Fishing College.[45] These loud-voiced, mostly older though a few young, fishermen slowly make their way through the open yard, into a small rectangular meeting room furnished with plastic chairs in rows, face masks and bottles of mineral water. Chamsedinne Bourassine, head of the Zarzis branch of the National Union of Fishermen, and Slaheddine Mcharek, the president of the Fishermen's Association,[46] are there. Bourassine rang me the day before to invite me to this meeting.

Wearing his usual smile and baseball cap, Mcharak quickly finds me an extra plastic chair and places it on the left side of the room facing the seated fishermen. He hands

[45] École Supérieure de Pêche Zarzis, Tunisia.

[46] Association le pêcheur pour le développement et l'environnement.

me a water bottle and gives me a thumbs up, before joining Bourassine on the main stage. There is a palpable tension in the air; quickly the room fills, and slowly it falls silent. During the three-hour long meeting, only intermittently interrupted to everyone's annoyance by the distinct sound of Nokia ringtones, one after the other the fishermen bring forward their complaints and frustrations with their practice and livelihood, for many hanging by a thread. Pollution, lack of government assistance, corruption, environmental crisis, *haraga*[47] and shrinking fishing zones are all mentioned, but one topic keeps on being brought up: 'the Mafia'. The 'Mafia' is how the fishermen refer to the Libyan coastguard. The fishermen in Zarzis have recently protested armed threats perpetrated by the Libyan coastguard inside Tunisian territorial waters (BorderlineSicilia 2021). Referring to 'the Mafia' in a mix of Tunisian Derija[48] and French, Bourrasine, clearly agitated, blasts off to the room:
'*Cartouche fi baharna! C'est le terrorisme de la mer. La loi de la jungle. La loi du plus fort. Kul yakul fi kul*!' (Firearms in our sea! It is terrorism of the sea. The law of the jungle. The law of the strongest. Everybody eats everybody!)

This paper analyses EU's border externalization's ripple effects by looking at three interconnected ways in which these effects materialize: 1) direct violent conflicts at sea between the fishermen and the Libyan coastguard; 2) environmental degradation and a crisis for fishery; and 3) a militarized, dangerous sea, resulting in an increasing number of migrant deaths and bodies washing ashore along the Tunisian coast, transforming Zarzis into a makeshift migrant cemetery. Zarzis gives us an opportunity to understand entangled processes, and how violence, life and death co-exist in the externalized borderlands of the EU. Looking at how intersecting processes come together in one place rather than looking at the issues separately enables us to understand the embeddedness and simultaneity in the lives of people of otherwise separate policy issues. Presenting new empirical data, I explore the violent everyday conflicts and environmental and human consequences of externalization through local actors, who are not the usual immediate subjects of European border policies. The case helps to connect externalization with maritime rebordering and the violent spatial and bodily consequences of these policies in the Tunisian–Libyan borderlands.

The article analyses the ripple effects of these policies on third actors (the fishermen), the environment (marine life), and space (two migrant cemeteries) in

[47] The term *haraga*, literally 'burning', is used throughout North Africa to refer to the symbolic 'burning of the border' involved in the crossing of the Mediterranean by migrants without papers. The *haraga* are 'those who burn their identification documents' – some literally, most metaphorically – and who leave for Europe with neither passports nor visas.

[48] I have used a simplified transliteration of Arabic to stay true to the pronunciation of the Tunisian dialect (*derija*) as spoken locally.

Zarzis. The article contributes to the growing body of work on border externalization in the Global South (Stock, Üstübici & Schultz 2019), to externalization and the role of the Libyan coastguard (Bialasiewicz 2012; Pacciardi & Berndtsson 2022), and externalization and fishermen (Friese 2015; Hallaire 2017). It further contributes to the literature on largely unexplored environmental harms and externalization. In doing so, it brings together three different yet interrelated dimensions of border externalization that together are still largely understudied in the literature.

By situating the article within these debates, I aim to build and advance this scholarship by contributing on three levels: 1) conceptually bringing together perspectives that are normally studied separately; 2) empirically showing the entanglements through unique original data; and 3) theoretically, develop and propose the concept of 'felt externalization'.

'Felt externalization' is when policies become intimate, and beyond the physical, become lived and experienced on a granular level. I argue the fishermen experience, live, and innately feel these policies, on their bodies, in their sea and in their town. As I will show in the following sections, the felt externalization, not only impacts their livelihoods, from which they have been excluded, but also their present and future. Felt externalization transcends the physical and visible and inhabits the mind and emotional life of its objects. The fishermen's experiences of trauma, fear and anxiety is a felt externalization. While studies on externalization usually examine the policies and processes – macrostructures from above – the concept 'felt externalization' is an attempt to turn it around and instead study it from below, the microlevel encounters and experiences. These experiences operate through what I frame as 'ripple effects' of externalization. By looking at the actors, the environment and the spaces, both on land and on sea, it becomes clear that the ripple effects of externalization work through different scales and layers. At times, it manifests as a very real corporal, felt effect, when bodies float into the hands of the fishermen. And at other times, it appears as a growing, creeping fear of going to sea because of the very real risk of violent encounters. These manifestations or rippling contributing factors, not only impact their daily lives but also make it difficult to sustain their livelihoods, further impacting their families and ultimately community. This makes the externalization a very lived and felt experience beyond the physical and observable. I further argue that this is something that is felt, both slowly and fast. I use the concept fast and slow violence (Nixon 2011) as a component of 'felt externalization' to frame the temporality of the lived and felt effects. At the extreme end of this temporal 'violence continuum' (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004) you have death, as another very visible felt and lived experience, which the fishermen both encounter at sea, and on land, in the growing cemeteries of Zarzis, comparable to what Mbembe termed 'deathworlds' (Mbembe 2003).

'Felt externalization' as a conceptual contribution ties together the three core themes: the actors, the environment, and the space. In these cases, border externalization becomes a contributing factor and, in some cases, a direct factor, as I will show in the following sections.

The research is based on five months (Sep 2021–Jan 2022) in-depth ethnographic research in Tunisia, with fieldwork among artisanal fishermen in Zarzis and with actors involved in the two cemeteries for migrants in Zarzis: '*Cimetière des Inconnus'* and the '*Jardin d'Afrique'*. Fieldwork included interviews, informal conversations and participant observation. Interviews were conducted in French and/or Maghribi *derija* and were translated/transcribed to English by the author. Using narrative ethnography (Gubrium & Holstein 2008), I explore and foreground the fishermen's accounts, their situated testimonies and lived and felt experiences, at sea and on land. Over the course of the fieldwork, we would have meetings across Zarzis; at the fishing port, the fishermen's association headquarters, the fishermen's college or at the two cemeteries, as well as informal conversations on the phone or social media post-fieldwork. Depersonalisation of data and anonymity of participants was decided according to each participant's need, which is why some are anonymised and others not.

The article unpacks how the ripple effects of externalization translate into human rights abuses, environmental crisis and death, and how all of these become distinctly intertwined in this small fishing town in the southern sphere of the Mediterranean Sea. To explore this intersection, I organize my argument into four parts. First, I describe the actors and the direct and violent encounters at sea between the Tunisian fishermen and the Libyan coastguard as a form of 'fast violence'. Secondly, I shift the focus onto the environment and marine life by engaging Rob Nixon's concept of 'slow violence' (Nixon 2011). Thirdly, I describe how the steady stream of bodies of dead migrants become visible in Zarzis and, like ghosts, haunt the EU's claim to represent morals and values. Lastly, I conclude by showing how these three different ripple effects can be best understood as 'felt externalization', with everyday life consequences for people, their livelihoods and environment. By looking at externalization from a spatial and geographically situated angle the paper makes not only an empirical but also a conceptual and theoretical contribution, by seeking to expand the empirical basis but also the very meaning of externalization and its effects, in the extended EU borderland.

Ripple effect one: the actors

'You need to talk to him', says Mcharek, pointing to a man. 'Him' is Amin,[49] a man in his late forties, big and broad-shouldered, wearing green army cargo pants and a black leather jacket. Propped against the wall in the corner of the room with a cup of mint

[49] The name has been changed to protect anonymity.

tea in his hand, he leans in and starts talking. In late June 2021 he was out on his boat in the open sea. He was pulling the net in, while smoking a cigarette when: 'From a distance I can hear a boat speeding up to me. It's the Libyan coastguard. They board my boat, and before I realise what's going on, I have a gun to my forehead. On Tunisian territory. They didn't even ask for my name', he says. They forcefully pushed him into their boat and sailed to Zawiya in Libya. No one said anything, there was only the sound of waves hitting the speeding boat. He could feel the gun pressed between his shoulders. Once they arrived in Libya, he was given an old Nokia phone and told to contact his family to pay a ransom of 14,000 TND (approximately US$5,000). In captivity at Zawiya port, waiting for the ransom to be paid, Amin was disturbed by what he witnessed. He reports seeing a container with a big chain lock that was filled with women and small children, all of them migrants. 'They eat, shit, sleep, everything, in there', he says with disgust. '*Wallahi dabana, mesh bani adam'* (I swear to God [as if they were] flies, not human beings). He stops talking, sips his tea and shakes his head. 'What I saw there', he pauses and takes a deep breath, 'the devil wouldn't do'.

Kidnapping Tunisian fishermen for extortion is an increasing trend (Bisiaux & Jonville 2020). While the kidnapping of Tunisian fishermen by various Libyan armed groups, often for ransom, is not a new phenomenon, the fishermen who work in the international waters between Italy, Tunisia and Libya have recently experienced an escalation that includes armed kidnappings, hijacking of boats and ransom demands (see statement by Slaheddine Mcharek of the fishermen's association).[50] According to fishermen from Zarzis, since the summer of 2021 the Libyan coastguard, especially the command centre in Zawiya, has been operating in the Search and Rescue area (SAR) and in Tunisian territorial waters, intercepting and returning migrants to Libya, as established in agreements with Italy and the European Union (BorderlineSicilia 2021).

According to Mcharek, while Libyan boats may enter Tunisian waters, there is no flexibility for Tunisian fishermen who venture outside the Tunisian zone (Bisiaux & Jonville 2020). The fishermen have lost count of the increasing number of violent attacks, seizures of boats and equipment, extortions and kidnappings carried out by Libyan armed groups in recent years.[51] Some, like 'Amin', claim that a number of these attacks have been carried out by the official Libyan coastguard.

[50] https://www.borderlinesicilia.it/en/news-en/tunisia-zarzis-fishermen-protest-against- the-so-called-libyan-coast-guard/

[51] In 2012 a Tunisian fisherman was killed by bullets fired from a Libyan coastguard boat, while the other 18 members of the crew were taken to Tripoli. In 2015, four Tunisian fishing boats that had entered Libyan waters were taken hostage by Libyan militias and forced to the port of Zawiya. In February 2016, thirteen Tunisian trawlers with seventy sailors on board were boarded and taken to the same port of Zawiya, where the Libyans demanded a ransom for their release. The following year, in 2017, Libyan fishermen from Zawiya threatened to kidnap all the Tunisian fishermen they met at sea in

The danger and fear at sea for the fishermen has worsened in recent years, and the Libyan coastguard is not the only actor to blame. At the main office in downtown Zarzis, Mcharek points to the map of maritime borders that hangs on a wall: 'Look, the problem is political and started when the European Union began making agreements with Italy, Malta and Libya. Dividing and making new borders in the sea. This is the problem'.

While the relationship between the Libyan coastguard and the EU has been well documented (El Zaidy 2017; Pacciardi & Berndtsson 2022) the Libyan coastguards and fishermen have been explored to a lesser extent. After the fall of Gaddafi in 2012 the coastguard was under-resourced and lacked manpower, but in late 2014 the EU launched its Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED), also known as Operation Sophia, whose goal was to 'save lives at sea and to disrupt human smuggling and trafficking networks' between Libya and Europe with a stronger and better-trained coastguard. The previously underfinanced and overlooked Libyan coastguard suddenly become the most central actor in European externalization policies and is the only institution inside Libya that has been rehabilitated since 2011 (Cooper 2022). The EU and Member States, primarily Italy, have provided the Libyan coastguard with millions of Euros in training, equipment, as well as legitimacy (Karasapan 2021; Mainwaring & DeBono 2021). The EU's effort to support the Libyan coastguard has faced difficulties with training and recruiting members, especially former members of militias or armed groups who were accustomed to receiving bribes (Gazzini 2017). Subsequently, its rise to power has, over the years, attracted many young men from local militias and armed groups who see the coastguard as a profitable business to get into. One could argue that the consequences of this are now showing with the cases of the Tunisian fishermen.

A defining moment for the Libyan coastguard was the creation in 2017 of the Search and Rescue Zone (SAR) by the International Maritime Organization (IMO). This enabled the coastguard to expand their territory and intercept boats in Malta's SAR, a hundred miles off the coast of Libya. Since August 2017, when Libya declared the extension of its SAR zone to 94 nautical[52] miles off its coast, the EU and its Member States have gradually reduced their maritime assets in the central

retaliation for the inspection of a Libyan trawler in Sfax by the Tunisian coastguard (see Bisiaux & Jonville 2020). Since then, hostage-taking has multiplied, Amin's case being the most recent at the time of fieldwork.

[52] According to the UN International Convention of the Law of the Sea signed in 1982 by all states in the European Union, states have a zone of 12 nautical miles (22.2 kilometres) around their coasts within which their own law applies. Fish stocks and mineral resources in these zones belong to them. Beyond that, there is a further 12-nautical-mile zone called a 'contiguous zone' where states can continue to enforce laws in four areas: customs, taxation, immigration, and pollution (Bathke 2019).

Mediterranean, shifting responsibility for SAR operations in international waters to the Libyan coastguard (Bathke 2019; OHCHR 2021).

While the Libyan coastguard may appear cohesive from the outside, it is far from being a unified structure, but more a 'collection of command centres answering to different authorities and local power figures, without a single chain of command acting on behalf of the state' (Statewatch 2020). This was on full display in May 2017 when the commander of the coastguard of Zawiya, Abdul Rahman Milad aka Bija, was received in Sicily as a member of the Libyan delegation at the invitation of the Italian government for a meeting with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to discuss the so-called migrant crisis. Bija was already then described as one of the world's most wanted human traffickers and shortly after, in 2018, placed under sanctions by the UN Security Council for being directly involved in the sinking of migrant boats (Tondo 2021). But it is not only migrants who have been exposed to Bija's violent attacks, as Mcharek calmly told me one day when I visited him in his office in downtown Zarzis:

> A few years back we were 70 miles north of Zarzis when the Libyan coastguard attacked us at sea and demanded money. They were armed but *hamdulillah* nothing serious happened. But I later found out that the person who attacked me was 'El Bija' and there was nothing to do because he was in a high political position in Libya and controlling the traffic. You see why we call it the Mafia?

In Amin's earlier-mentioned case, luckily for him his family was able to quickly collect money from savings, close friends and relatives to pay for his release, and he was back in Zarzis less than 72 hours later. He says himself that he was lucky, he only suffered minor bruises and injuries. But the violent kidnapping and experience in Zawyia has taken its toll on him and severely impacted his family's livelihood. 'I fear going out to the sea now, imagine that; something I have done since I was a kid'.

In addition to the fast violence at sea, the fishermen also face criminalization for rescuing people and saving lives when they come across migrants in the course of their job. Bourassine as the head of the Zarzis branch of the National Union of Fishermen, unexpectedly found himself in late 2018 as the main character in a high-profile, international, cross-border smuggling case. When Bourassine and his crew tugged a boat that was adrift towards the Italian island of Lampedusa, they were arrested and spent three weeks in custody in Sicily for allegedly 'aiding and abetting illegal immigration'.[53] He was later released after massive protests, and despite his weeks in

[53] Bourassine was incarcerated in a jail in Agrigento, in the southern part of Sicily, alongside his crew after rescuing 14 migrants some 24 miles off Lampedusa. His fishing boat was seized and Bourassine –

the Sicilian prison he continues to help migrants in distress. His most recent rescue was just a few weeks before we met in October 2021, he told me. His Italian police mugshots hang proudly in the halls of the fishermen's association headquarters as a stark reminder of the threats and tribulations they face. For Bourassine it has become a routine, part of the everyday, and he has lost track of how many he and his colleagues have come across at sea; men, women, children, some alive, some dead. There are images he will never forget like seeing a baby floating face down in the water for the first time. He even helped a migrant woman fleeing Libya give birth on his boat at sea. Stopping doing this is out of the question.

> Italy and Libya are the biggest problems for us now. Italy won't collaborate with us and the Libyan part disrespects us, so we are alone in this. But Allah said if you save a life, it is as if you save the life of the whole of humanity. Still, it is a struggle and expensive for us to do it, but we try to find the balance between our work and our principles.

In this section I have tried to show how the EU partnership with the Libyan coastguard and the rebordering of maritime zones in the Mediterranean translates into 'fast violence' at sea (Nixon 2011). This has not only direct and violent consequences in the form of kidnappings and extortion but has also led to criminalization and imprisonment by the EU, instilling fear and trauma among the fishermen and severely impacting their livelihoods. This very felt and lived experience I argue could be best understood as 'felt externalization', an externalization that no longer is just a policy or partnership, but an actual tangible felt consequence on the ground, in this case derived from how the Libyan coastguard empowered by the EU is touching, in a literal and figurative sense, the everyday lives and minds of Tunisian fishermen.

Ripple effect two: the environment

With its deep-rooted fishing culture, Zarzis is the most important and the largest fishing port in southeast Tunisia. There was often a certain mood of nostalgia and longing when the fishermen were telling me about the old days and traditions that date back centuries such as working with longlines, netting and trapping. There was also a palpable sense of grief and frustration at the current state of affairs and a feeling of fighting alone, of being abandoned by the Tunisian state and the European Union. '*Skoun wgef m'ana fil Covid? Fil hudud? Fil mout? Walou*' (Who stood up for us with Covid? With the borders? With the death? No one)', Bourassine tells me as we walk past the

along with his five-member crew – faced many years in jail for allegedly aiding and abetting illegal immigration. For more on this case see Zagaria 2018 and ANSA 2018.

fishing port. Not far from there, the Libyan 'spillover' becomes strikingly visible. The 'boat graveyard', which is filled with various Libyan boats either intercepted at sea or swept in by the strong winds and current, is growing by the day. The fishermen are under pressure from all quarters as they try to navigate threats to their safety from the Libyan coastguard, and threats to their livelihood as a result of the reduction of fishing zones due to the expanded Libyan SAR zone as well as increasing scarcity of fish reserves, environmental degradation and clandestine migration (*harga*). The latter is omnipresent and part of the social fabric of the city. For the fishermen this is all connected, as Slaheddine Mcharek the president of the association explains:

> The prices of the fish are getting more and more expensive. The sardine, the *merou* [grouper] and *loup de mer* [sea bass] are now 80 TND/kg price (US$26). We cannot fish when the national coastguard is controlling the borders because the fish get afraid and go away, for example like the *pêle-mêle*. All the boats make movements in the sea, the engines make vibrations which affect the fish. They run away. Before we were finding the fish in 30-miles radius, now we need to go much further, even near Sicily and Pantelleria, for fishing. And all this extra distance is an extra charge for us. Sometimes when its bad weather we cannot work, like today.

He looks up and points to the sky. It is foggy and a bit windy. Several other fishermen are likewise sitting around the port, with nothing to do but mend their nets or drink coffee.

> Before it was allowed that we stayed two weeks at sea to collect sea sponges but now we can't because of the Libyan armed groups attacking us. Many times, our boats and our materials have been stolen by the Libyans, and they extort us and our families. We can't work where our fathers and our grandfathers worked. They used to work with Italians, Greeks, Maltese. The sea was open and free. We can't maintain our *sayd el taglidi* [traditional fishing culture]. And you know the younger ones just want to leave, and they do, they leave. *Shabab kulha hajro!* [All youth has migrated!] I don't blame them, there is nothing for them here. The Libyans have the right to enter our borders with impunity. We want some agreements to protect our rights.

Several fishermen link the increase in motorboats and port congestion to movements and vibrations in the waters that negatively affect marine life. Combined with the restrictions on access to certain fishing grounds due to EU externalization policies, the fishermen are not only facing threats from the Libyan coastguard or armed groups but are also cut off from the most productive and valuable fishing grounds in the

Mediterranean due to the reallocation of maritime fishing zones (Bisiaux & Jonville 2020). This has, as Mcharak points out, affected many families' incomes as they live hand to mouth, and pushed more youth to *harga* (literally, 'burning borders'). The fishing industry, one of the few active businesses in Zarzis, can no longer attract young men due to the limited prospects, risks at sea, and low financial gains in an already precarious economic climate. *El Harga*[54] or clandestine migration from North Africa is a far from new phenomenon dating back decades (see Pandolfo 2007 for Morocco; Souiah 2012 for Algeria; Harris 2015 for Tunisia). With specific reference to Zarzis, Zagaria (2019b) and M'charek (2020) have written about '*harga'* or '*harraga*' as being central to life in this small fishing town. In Tunisia post-Covid there has been an unprecedented increase in numbers, on a scale not seen since the 2011 uprisings, which the fishermen say is connected to the economy and their fishery being in crisis, and not being able to offer the youth other sustainable alternatives. As one fisherman rhetorically asked me: 'Ahlam haven't you noticed? There are no more young men in Zarzis, all the *shabab* (youth) have left or gone. No young men in my neighbourhood anymore. Even children as young as ten or twelve years-old dream of going away. No opportunities, no work'.

It was inevitable that the EU's externalization policy to halt migration from North Africa by boosting the Libyan coastguard would backfire into spillover effects on neighbouring Tunisia. Not only has it severely impacted the fishing industry but also the livelihoods of many of the families, consequently pushing them, and especially the youth, to engage in other income-generating activities such working as or with *passeurs* (smugglers), or organizing *harga* crossings, which have become a lucrative business in Tunisia (Herbert 2022). As one of the fishermen told me, one or two successful crossings can bring in more than six months' or a year's worth of work income, so of course it is tempting.[55]

Back at the port Mcharak tells me how the changes in the maritime borders have severely impacted their livelihoods:

> From 2016 the Libyan part started to be harder with us and now we cannot work more than the 24 miles north of Zarzis. This means that 70% of our protected fishing zones are now in the Libyan area. But we still have the right to work in the collective zones because we are not commercial fishers, we are '*sayd el taglidi*'

[54] *harrāga, harrāg*, literally 'those who burn' is the colloquial word used in the Maghreb for undocumented migration.

[55] The prices per person to Lampedusa can range from 4000–7000 TND (approx. US$1,300–2,300).

(traditional fishers), we do what our grandfathers did. We grew up on the sea, 35 years now for me, before you were born.

Mcharek looks out at the sea and continues,

In the nineties we had 55 miles and could stay 15 days at sea, no problem. But an accord between Gaddafi, Ben Ali and Berlusconi changed that to 24 miles. But how, someone please explain me how, Malta that is so small, [he illustrates this by showing his little finger] gets an expanded territory of 74 miles and Libya 74 miles: the two Mafias.

Mcharek spits and continues,

Even the Egyptians now exploit our resources thanks to Malta's agreements. For example, shrimp we sell for 1 TND they sell for US$1.[56]12

Samy[57] jumps in,

It's not just the people who are suffering. This is causing an environmental crisis. I've seen it with my own eyes.

I met Samy several times during my fieldwork in Zarzis. He was in his fifties, short, big bearded, very polite, an expert diver and a proud sponge fisherman. For 37 years he was the go-to man for finding the national treasure, the sea sponge or *Sfinz* as they called it. But all the motorboat movement has impacted the small fish and algae systems underwater. Combined with a gradually warmer sea it has killed the sponge industry that Samy worked in for decades. He shows me pictures on his phone, of him on a boat wearing scuba diving gear and surrounded by huge sponges. 'These are old pictures', he says while he flicks through them. Sponges are one of the oldest forms of life on the planet, and as Samy points out 'they are living breathing creatures'. Sponges are suffering from global warming and have been showing signs of disease in recent years, greatly impacting the livelihoods of the families who live from collecting and selling them (Bisiaux & Jonville 2020; FTDES 2021). In 2017, following a significant increase in sea temperature, numerous sponges died due to their susceptibility to environmental changes.[58] The dumping of toxic waste by factories in Gabès Bay just

[56] US$1 is approx. 3 TND, so triple their selling price.

[57] His name has been changed to protect anonymity.

[58] The increase in water temperature is considered to be the main factor in epidemics affecting the principal commercial sponge species (*Hippospongia communis*) that lives in Tunisian waters. See: Peters 1993.

north of Zarzis is also a general problem on the Tunisian coast.[59] Samy describes how the art of sponge fishing is an activity that goes back to ancient times, passed on from one generation to the next, and how risky this business has become: requiring the divers now to sometimes go 30–50 metres down into the depths of the Mediterranean, often free diving without any safety equipment. According to the figures, sponge production in Tunisia continues to decline, from 17 tons in 2017 to only 9 tons in 2019 (FTDES 2021).

This, I argue, is an example of slow violence, a term coined by Rob Nixon (2011). Nixon's theory of slow violence has, in recent years, become increasingly influential in geographic discussions of violence (Christian & Dowler 2019). Focusing on environmental harms that accumulate slowly, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Nixon 2011), Nixon describes slow violence as 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (Nixon 2011: 2). He draws a contrast between this attritional violence and the explosive, spectacular and sensational eruptions that are immediate and highly visible of 'fast violence'. Critical scholarship on violence has produced an understanding how violence impacts life, death and the overall life outcomes available to people (Galtung 1969), paying close attention to how conflict and everyday forms of violence structure people's everyday reality and social relations (see Bourgois 2003; Farmer 1996; Kleinman, Das & Lock 1997; Scheper-Hughes 1992). Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004) have proposed conceptualizing violence as operating on a continuum from the physical to the symbolic and as structurally embedded. While Scheper-Hughes' (1992) concept of 'everyday violence' focuses on the individual and routinized experience of violence, Bourgois (2003) applies the concept of 'structural violence' and links the embodied experience of violence to local constructions of gender, race and individual morality. Nixon builds on the work of Galtung (1969), who expanded the concept of violence beyond direct physical violence between individuals to 'structural violence', thereby providing a framework to understand systemic structures enabling violence and suffering. The concept of slow violence has mainly been taken up in geographic engagements, as indeed Nixon does, centred on environmental injustice: long-term environmental contamination caused by war and military activity (Dillon 2015; Gregory 2016), pollution of water (Gorostiza & Sauri 2017), and climate change

[59] Gabès has various chemical industries, focused on the transformation of phosphate, with the production of phosphoric acid, diammonium phosphate, and dicalcium phosphate. About 10 factories are located in the Gabès region, including the Tunisian chemical group (GCT), whose main activity is to transform approximately 3.5 million tons per year of phosphate from the mining basin of the Gafsa region into phosphoric acid and fertilisers. See: Azouni 2022.

(O'Lear 2016). Recently, however, it has also been transferred to migration and border scholarship, focusing on the slow violence perpetrated against bodies in border regimes, on the abandonment of refugee camps in Europe (Davies, Isakjee & Dhesi 2017) and everyday effects on asylum seekers living on asylum welfare support in the UK (Mayblin, Wake & Kazemi 2020). By looking beyond violence that is immediate, explosive, and spectacular and calling attention to its slower almost invisible work, Nixon's (2011) distinction between slow and fast violence highlights the continuity of violence. I use this perspective to analytically frame how the fishermen of this small fishing town in the borderlands of the southern sphere of the Mediterranean Sea oscillate between fast violence at the hands of the Libyan coastguard, which can be brutal and immediate, the slow violence of the environmental crisis, and death at sea, in order to show how these are distinctly intertwined. The sponge crisis is an illustration of how slow violence appears from 'a labyrinth of forces at work' (Mbembe 2001); it is a combination of warmer seas, an excess of motorboats and the altering of maritime borders that have all jointly impacted the environment and livelihoods to produce this catastrophic effect.

One could say that 'slow' and 'fast' violence as defined by Nixon converge, overlap, and take form in different ways in Zarzis. On one hand the fishermen experience immediate and highly visible fast violence at the hands of Libyan armed groups at sea; while at the same time they witness the everyday, unspectacular but nevertheless damaging slow violence of environmental degradation. This not only impacts the marine life, ecosystems and consequently the livelihoods that depend upon it, but also contributes to an uprooting and disruption of a deep-rooted fishing culture, handed down from father to son. Far beyond the physical loss of boats, equipment and crew, also comes the loss of the youths who migrate, of generational knowledge, and of culture across generations. In a sense a loss of both the past and the future is taking place at once. In instances such as this I would argue that Nixon's binary division is dissolved and the continuum of slow and fast violence is reinforced as a liminality the fishermen oscillate within. The complexity of this phenomenon and the multiple factors involved, including the European externalization policies, the violent actions at sea, environmental changes, and the intersection between *harga* and labour are all embodied by the fishermen as 'felt externalization'.

Ripple effect three: the space

Death hovers over Zarzis. Driven by the Ghibli wind from the interior highlands of Libya and prevailing sea currents, the forgotten bodies of the drowned migrants wash up on the beaches of this town. With winds blowing from east to west the bodies of migrants leaving from the Libyan coast are pushed towards the Tunisian coastline and are often washed ashore or retrieved by fishermen while floating in the sea. At first

bodies sink but later, as they decompose, gases are released causing the corpses to become buoyant and rise back to the surface. After a while, the surfaced body releases the built-up gas and sinks to the bottom once again. Decomposition continues underwater, more gas accumulates, and the body may become a 'refloat' which are in an even more advanced state of decay.[60] 'Bodies are sometimes found in our fishing nets. Sometimes you only get an arm, the limbs fall apart when you try to pull, sometimes it is only a head', as one of the fishermen told me. Bodies sink again and are swallowed by the sea. In Zarzis, however, the wind-driven undercurrents insist on bringing these forgotten bodies to the shore, calling into plain sight what has been made invisible. The bodies become evidence, and bear witness to European border externalization. For the fishermen this has become predictable: when they hear of boats leaving Tunisia or Libya or reports of shipwrecks in the Libyan SAR zone, they know that it is only a matter of time before they will witness the consequences. Sometimes it is weeks or months, but they know the bodies will arrive and when this happens, the forgotten bodies, the invisible deaths, Europe's unwanted, become visible on the shores of Tunisia.

For the fishermen, dealing with death has almost become part of the everyday to the extent that finding decomposed and decayed bodies has become routine. The spectacular has become ordinary. It has become so engraved in their everyday work that how to deal with bodies, has been integrated into the curriculum at Zarzis Fishing College. Mcharak shows me pictures from a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) training course[61] on rescue and dead body management back in 2014 and 2015, when the fishermen were given satellite phones, body bags, disinfectant and gloves (Zagaria 2018). 'But in 2018, Italy and Libya were complaining about this arrangement, they started criminalizing us, and so we found ourselves alone again', he tells me. Since then, deaths at sea and the numbers of bodies washing ashore have only increased.

A central characteristic of necropolitics (Mbembe 2019) is to produce death on a large scale. This has become visible in the case of Zarzis, which has in recent years been overburdened by bodies of migrants. From 2014 onwards the central Mediterranean Sea has been identified as the deadliest border crossing in the world (Ferrer-Gallardo & van Houtum 2014). Critical border studies debates have shown that these deaths reflect the heightened securitisation and structural violence of border regimes (Cuttitta & Last 2019; Davies, Isakjee & Dhesi 2017; Isakjee et al. 2020; Spijkerboer 2007). Data also shows that the EU's deal with the Libyan coastguard has

[60] From interviews with forensics doctor in Sfax, Tunisia, November 2021.

[61] MSF has long been carrying out activities related to migration (mainly consisting of medical assistance to migrants) in both European (e.g. Italy and Greece) and North African countries (e.g. Tunisia, Libya and Egypt).

increased the risk of death on the Central Mediterranean route. Delays and failures to launch search and rescue operations led to a 249% increase in the number of deaths at sea in the first half of 2021, compared to the same period in 2020 (CIHRS 2021). Instead of saving lives and protecting migrants at sea, externalization policies prioritize interception and deterrence, transforming the Mediterranean into a 'complex web of joint, overlapping and clashing assertions of authority' (Aalberts & Gammeltoft-Hansen 2014: 445). This 'Water Wild West' or 'lawless jungle' as Bourassine mentions to me, has turned into the fastest growing liquid graveyard and a 'carceral seascape' (Stierl 2021), trapping not only migrants but also fishermen who feel confined in this vast sea.

Today, two very different cemeteries for migrants exist in Zarzis and they are both overstretched. Zarzis takes care of most of the bodies of migrants that wash up on various beaches, as well as bodies from the desert border regions to Algeria and Libya and other cities that have currently reached their full capacity in the morgues, e.g. Sfax, with more than 90 bodies stuck when I last visited. This unimaginable task has burdened the small municipality, which lacks resources and has prompted the mayor to call on the Tunisian Government and the international community for help, so far to no avail (Carretero 2021).

Drowning migrants and floating bodies along the coast is however not a new issue for Tunisia. Long before the Arab Spring and throughout Ben Ali's dictatorship, fishermen and other locals would find human remains at sea or on the shore. Subsequently this became part of a chain of procedures, together with municipal employees and a range of other actors, that later led to the creation of '*Le Cimetière des Inconnus'* a migrant cemetery built on a dump landfill on the outskirts of town (Zagaria 2019a). Lack of proper burial sites for migrants and bureaucracy is one side of Tunisia's reality regarding migrant deaths, lack of political will is the other.

This came recently on full display with the infamous '18/18' case, when 18 Tunisians went missing after boarding a boat from Zarzis headed for Italy in September 2023.[62] On 18 October 2023, weeks later it was the fishermen who spotted remains at sea and the fishermen again took on a pivotal and central role, both in the search and rescue, and in mobilizing crowds and protest (Tabbabi 2022). A symbolic visual act of protest was when the French town signs 'Zarzis Ville' were sprayed over in Arabic with graffiti into '*Madinat Al-Ghariba'* (City of Strangers) as a painful

[62] In October 2022, while I was on a short fieldtrip to Tunis, news broke out that a boat carrying 18 Tunisians had shipwrecked weeks ago. Since the day of the shipwreck, families and citizens had been staging demonstrations in Zarzis, and a strike on October 18, blaming authorities for mismanagement, including delays in search operations, intentionally misleading the families as well as their alleged burial without identification in the migrant cemeteries. For more on this case see Tabbabi 2022.

wordplay on the local migrant cemetery *Le Cimetière des Inconnus* named '*Maqbara Al-Ghariba'* (Cemetery of Strangers) in Arabic. Thus, symbolically marking and embodying the whole city as a cemetery, a city of death akin to what Mbembe terms the creation of 'deathworlds' where inhabitants are constantly exposed to death and destruction, becoming a kind of 'living dead' (Mbembe 2003) or as I argue, subjects of felt externalization.

Besides the *Le Cimetière des Inconnus* a new cemetery was created, almost as a reaction to the former. The Algerian artist named Rachid Koraichi,[63] tells me, he was first made aware of the *Le Cimetière des Inconnus* when his daughter, who is Tunisian born, had told him about the problems with the burying of non-Muslim corpses in the local cemetery in Zarzis. They were collected by a bin lorry and thrown into a wasteyard. After visiting *Le Cimetière des Inconnus*, he was outraged. He explained seeing piles of garbage and trash, scattered with fragments of bones and skulls poking out of the soil. 'It was haunting', he says. The bodies would usually be dumped there by an excavator at night. 'It was a mass grave dump, I was shocked'. He decided to take matters into his own hands and create a cemetery that would be dignified and respectful. In 2018 he bought a plot of land and in the summer of 2021 the *Jardin d'Afrique* was inaugurated in Zarzis, in the presence of international media and UN officials (Diop 2021). Hailed by some and criticized by others, the business of migrant cemeteries is clearly a contested one in this small town, entrenched in local politics and power play.[64]

Driving south on '*Drig Ben Guardane*'[65] one comes across the Stade Jlidi football stadium where the local team *Espérance Sportive de Zarzis* play. On the right-hand side a dirt road about 500 metres behind the stadium appears. At the end of the dusty road is the *Jardin d'Afrique* (Garden of Africa). Although near each other, only minutes away by car, this was a very different cemetery to the *Cimetière des Inconnus* (Cemetery of Strangers) with its location on a landfill surrounded by trash, waste, rotten smells and bones, which makes the experience of death, abandonment, and lack of dignity highly visceral. The *Jardin d'Afrique*, by contrast, is a calm, museum-like, almost out of place

[63] Koraichi was born in Ain Beida, Algeria. An acclaimed artist who travels between Paris, Berlin and New York, his work has been exhibited widely, including at the Venice Biennale, MOMA, in the collection of the National Museum of African Art, Washington DC and the Guggenheim in Bilbao. 'Everywhere, except Algeria, my home country', he tells me laughing.

[64] It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the local actors and politics of death concerning the cemeteries. See Zagaria (2019a, 2020) for more on *Le Cimetière des Inconnus* and former fisherman Chamsedinne Marzoug. There have also been extensive international news article publications, documentaries, and crowdfunding campaigns particularly concerning *Le Cimetière des Inconnus* and Chamsedinne Marzoug.

[65] Main road to Libya.

construction, with pomegranate and olive trees, scented flowers, sculptures dotted around and colourful handcrafted *zelij*, North African ceramic tiles on the floor.

I met up with the creator Koraichi several times during my fieldwork in Zarzis. The first time was in front of the *Jardin d'Afrique*. He is followed by two French journalists who are interviewing him. He interrupts the interview and greets me. He walks around the compound and after a while comes back. Koraichi is prepared, he has brought cake, the very popular *mille-feuille*, a classic French–North African pastry, and mint tea in a thermos. We sit inside the cemetery and eat. 'You find this strange? No right. Because this is a garden not a graveyard', he tells me and smiles, then even jokes about having reserved a spot for himself because it is 'so peaceful and beautiful'. We talk for hours, and when I ask why he, a 75-year-old accomplished artist, would involve himself in building a migrant cemetery in southern Tunisia, the mood changes instantly. He looks away before talking. 'I myself lost my brother to the sea'. His brother was only a year and a half older than him and when they were young in Algeria, playing on the beach, he would swim out, jump under the waves, and appear again. But one day, he didn't resurface. He got swept under and disappeared in the sea. His body was never found. Koraichi stops talking for a while.

> I remember vividly, right before my mother passed away her last words were, 'I will finally see my son again'. Imagine, he died in the sixties right after Algeria gained its independence. So many years after, these were her final words. It means a lot for the grieving families to know where their loved ones are buried.

He tells how his mother got sick after the death of his brother and how it affected the whole family, not being able to bury his body. 'My brother, like many other young men full of promise and potential, died in the same sea, so this is also personal for me', he says.

Although distinct, a common denominator for both cemeteries, is that they have reached saturation point. At the time of fieldwork, only a few months after the inauguration in 2021, Koraichi was already looking for possibilities to extend the property. As for the *Cimetière des Inconnus*, Chamsedinne Marzoug, also a former fishermen turned gravedigger, tells me that bodies have been buried on top of each other, having already reached the maximum capacity long ago. But the flow of migrant bodies washing ashore is not stopping. The deaths at sea and this slow but steady flow of bodies washing up on the shores is not a highly visible or spectacular killing but rather a slower, stealthier and less obvious form of cruelty. Border deaths in the extended borderlands of Tunisia and Libya render migrants disposable and ungrievable

(Butler 2010), but people like Chamsedinne and Koraichi insist on visibilizing this tragedy and bringing dignity to what Koraichi calls '*Les Damnés de la Mer*' evoking Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Fanon 1976). Zarzis lacks the resources and space to deal with the dead. In the absence of state responsibility, it is the fishermen, an artist and the locals who step in to fill the gap. They rescue, in this absence. They grieve, in this absence. They act, in this absence. By filling the voids of care and responsibility by politicizing, intentionally or unintentionally, the bodies and the remains of the dead migrants, they challenge the boundaries of grievability and issue an appeal to visibilize what has been made invisible.

In the absence of political responsibility, one could resort to blaming the natural elements of the terrain: to blaming the desert for the dying; blaming the sea for the dying; blaming the strong, wind-driven, undercurrents; blaming the environmental degradation and thereby erasing evidence and political accountability. But as Jason de León (2015) states, these deaths are not unintended consequences. These deaths take place because of policies, because of delegation and outsourcing of responsibility and accountability and of externalization aimed at pushing people away, so they don't die in Europe's proximity but are absent and distant. Externalization is at its core a means to keep away the undesirable and superfluous, dead or alive, at any cost. It creates infrastructures in which border deaths can take place; borders thus become disappearance machines.

The entanglement of death, violence, fishery in crisis and border externalization policies becomes clear in Zarzis. In this section I have tried to illustrate how the ripple effects of externalization have transformed the space into a 'deathworld' (Mbembe 2003). The town itself, has been renamed by the residents to '*Madinat Al-Ghariba*' (Town of Strangers) in the wake of yet another calamity, invoking not just the local cemetery, but the felt externalization which works through a collectively felt trauma and the omnipresence of death.

Conclusion: 'felt externalization' as a way to go beyond

In Zarzis human rights abuses, the slow violence of environmental crisis, and death at sea intersect and come together as ripple effects of externalization, embodied by the fisherman and by their town and its graveyards. In this article I have sought to empirically explore the everyday felt consequences of European externalization policies, in which I propose the concept of 'felt externalization'. This I see manifest as a ripple effect that directly and indirectly impacts fishermen, their livelihoods, families, environment, and their spaces in Zarzis. I use the ripple effect as an analogy for how an externalization policy, in this case the EU partnership with the Libyan coastguard, acts like a stone dropped in water, as an event which produces effects, like rings in the water, in different directions, with different effects acting on different scales and levels.

In the case of Zarzis, the effects are not only felt by the Tunisian fishermen, but also in the environment, and the space itself.

In the extended borderlands the fast violence inflicted on the Tunisian fishermen – in the form of sudden, unexpected and violent kidnappings, runs in parallel to fishery in crisis, being cut off from productive fishing zones, maritime rebordering and slow environmental degradation where fishing traditions and hope slowly disappear. I argue that both the environment and the fishermen experience slow violence of livelihood attrition and environmental degradation alongside fast violence in the form of violent encounters with the Libyan coastguard. Meanwhile the trauma and 'ungrievable' death generated by streams of bodies floating in the sea, 'fished' up by the fishermen and made visible through the growing cemeteries all come together in one place, as a form of 'felt externalization'.

The forms of violence, both slow and fast, outlined in this article are derived from and linked to European externalization whereby Tunisian fishermen are allowed to suffer from violence, trauma and environmental crisis, and are subjected to a necropolitical space by the steady flow of migrant bodies washing ashore and overstretched migrant cemeteries in waste landfills and marine graveyards. I propose the concept 'felt externalization' as a way to go beyond the policies, the visible and spectacular, and instead capture the everyday, granular and felt experience of border externalization, be it fear, collective trauma, or the smell of death. With this conceptual and theoretical contribution, I seek not only to expand the empirical basis but also the very meaning of externalization and its effects, in the extended EU borderland.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This dissertation has explored how European border externalization policies have transformed Tunisia into a space where violence and death are embedded in the everyday lives in the borderlands. Grounded in ethnographic, bottom-up research, it foregrounds the lived experiences of both migrants and local communities, tracing the complex entanglements of violence, confinement, movement, and survival through a gendered lens in the extended EU borderlands.

By outsourcing border control to North Africa, specifically Tunisia, to deal with European anxieties about migration, Europe has also externalized violence and death, pushing suffering far from its own borders and trapping people in the shadows. This study demonstrates how externalization policies create ripple effects that shape and endanger the lives and bodies of both migrants and local actors far from European shores.

In several ways, this dissertation makes significant empirical and conceptual contributions to migration and critical border studies, feminist geopolitics, North Africa studies, and carceral geography. It deepens our understanding of border externalization by examining how these policies materialize in everyday life, far away from the border.

One crucial contribution lies in the dissertation's focus on everyday violence, arguing that violence and death are not exceptional, but rather ordinary features of life in the Tunisian borderlands. Violence has become routine and systemic, an embedded condition of contemporary migration governance.

The dissertation introduces the theoretical concept of *felt externalization* to describe how EU border externalization policies are experienced intimately, manifesting as fear, trauma and loss, but also as affective responses and adaptive strategies in response to structural abandonment. This extends the analysis of externalization beyond policy documents and into the sensory and emotional lives of people navigating the borderlands.

Another concept born out of this research, Tunisia's *non-migration policy* (El Ghali & Chemlali 2022), argues that Tunisia operates in tandem with EU efforts to externalize borders. This reframes Tunisia not as a passive recipient but as an active player in migration governance. The study reveals how Tunisian state actors leverage bureaucratic stalling, policy inertia, and ambiguity to navigate EU pressure, creating a form of everyday resistance. However, this resistance results in unreformed, draconian domestic policies, leaving migrants in perpetual legal and existential limbo. I argue that Tunisia's relationship with EU policies is characterized by a complex interplay of

cooperation and resistance, driven by historical factors, economic leverage and domestic political agendas. The EU's focus on externalizing its borders has profoundly shaped Tunisia's role as a central node in migration management with significant consequences for the lives and wellbeing of migrants in the region.

Conceptually, the dissertation critiques the traditional notions of transit as a self-contained, linear, and a neutral term. Instead, it reveals transit as fragmented, unpredictable and increasingly marked by stuckness in time and space. By framing transit also as a space of confinement, the study contributes to carceral geography, expanding notions of carcerality beyond prisons and camps to include everyday spaces of waiting, marginality and abandonment. To further reimagine this space the study points toward the idea of *assemblages*, seeing transit not as a continuum or closed system, but as a dynamic interaction of materials, people, policies, environments and institutions: a complex root system rather than a fixed structure. While not fully developed, this suggestion offers a promising way to theorize the complexities of transit under global border regimes.

The dissertation argues that European border externalization has transformed transit through North Africa into a carceral landscape with prolonged and precarious structures. Political decisions and border regimes actively produce and sustain confinement, recasting transit not only as passage but also as protracted entrapment. This reframing contributes to a more nuanced and critical understanding of what it means to be 'in transit' under contemporary migration regimes.

Gender is central to the analysis. The study emphasizes the gendered, embodied and localized nature of border externalization, illustrating how these policies materialize on and through migrant bodies and in intimate, spatially specific ways. Adopting a feminist, bottom-up approach, the dissertation foregrounds the lived experiences while bridging the macrostructural policies with micro-level experiences, highlighting the interplay between the intimate, the local and the geopolitical.

Field sites such as Bhar Lazreg, Zarzis, Medénine, and Sfax reveal how externalization manifests unevenly across space, shaping diverse geographies of violence, marginalization and survival. These spaces show the ripple effects of border policies, extending into cities, neighbourhoods, and intimate spaces.

Methodologically, the dissertation contributes through its '*ethnography of transit'*, drawing on a '*montage-style'* approach to capture the fragmented, crisis-ridden nature of the field. It reflects critically on the emotional, ethical and positional challenges of conducting fieldwork in volatile and authoritarian contexts, offering insights into research praxis in borderlands.

The three articles that comprise the dissertation explore the multi-scalar and gendered impacts of EU externalization in Tunisia:

Article 1, '*Treading water in transit*', examines how Ivorian migrant women in Bhar Lazreg navigate urban marginality, confinement and movement through informal survival strategies. Their 'stuckness' is revealed as an active process, akin to treading water, rather than static immobility. The article demonstrates how these women employ informal strategies within the shadow economy and navigating violence, as ways to resist their confinement. These actions demonstrate a constant effort to '*bougé*', to move within spaces designed to limit their movement.

Article 2, '*A mother's choice*', focuses on undocumented mothers intercepted at sea who consider returning to Libya through smuggling. It shows how EU border enforcement, humanitarian neglect, and abandonment produce protracted waiting and risk-laden decisions that reshape motherhood in transit.

Article 3, '*Rings in the water*', introduces the concept of '*felt externalization*' through the experiences of Tunisian fishermen in Zarzis. It highlights how externalization policies ripple through local economies and ecologies, criminalizing solidarity, and transforming the coastal landscape into a space of death and environmental degradation.

Together, these three articles reveal a complex picture of how EU border externalization operates in the Tunisian borderlands. How they generate varied ripple effects, entrenching violence and stuckness while also catalysing strategies of resistance, survival and care. They highlight how gender, locality and positionality shape the ways people experience and respond to migration governance.

Importantly, the articles also uncover agency, resilience and informal resistance among both migrants and local Tunisians. Migrant mothers make strategic, if impossible, choices for their children's futures. Fishermen navigate and resist the criminalization of humanitarian acts. In the absence of state protection, communities engage in improvised networks of care, solidarity and survival.

In conclusion, this dissertation, through its summary report and three articles, offers an empirically grounded and theoretically innovative analysis of the lived realities and human consequences of European border externalization. Its contributions lie in rethinking transit, theorizing felt externalization, centring gendered and embodied experience, exploring carcerality in everyday life, and situating Tunisia as both subject and agent in global migration politics. Together, these insights contribute to more humane, nuanced and grounded approaches to studying borders and the people who must navigate them.

The broader implications of this study extend beyond the North African borderlands. As migration control and border externalization have become global trends, this dissertation offers critical insights into the consequences of restrictive border regimes. It shows how enforcement leads not only to immobility and increased risk but also to humanitarian crises and societal strain.

These findings must also be considered within a broader global context of shifting migration governance and intensifying border regimes. The recent suspension of the USAID programme, alongside the launch of an unprecedented series of anti-immigrant measures by the US government, including violent raids, mass deportations and the declaration of a full-blown crisis at the US-Mexico border, reflects a wider trend in global border politics. These developments echo and reinforce patterns examined in this dissertation: the externalization of border control, the criminalization of mobility, and the use of humanitarian language to justify increasingly violent migration management.

As with Europe's border externalization in North Africa, the American approach demonstrates how powerful states strategically displace responsibility and border enforcement beyond their own territories, often outsourcing violence while maintaining plausible deniability. These moves frequently involve the suspension or reconfiguration of international cooperation agreements, exposing the conditionality of aid and the instrumentalization of development funding as leverage in migration control.

This global convergence underscores the urgency of critically rethinking the frameworks through which we understand and govern migration. As restrictive border regimes expand and intensify, so too do the human, social and environmental costs. This dissertation contributes to a growing body of work that foregrounds the lived experiences of those caught in these systems, reminding us that behind every border policy lies a constellation of lives navigating, resisting and enduring its effects. In this light, Tunisia's borderlands offer not just a regional case but a mirror to wider global dynamics, and a call to imagine alternative futures of mobility, justice, and solidarity.

SUMMARY

This dissertation explores how life and death in transit unfold within the Tunisian borderlands through a bottom-up, gendered lens. Drawing on anthropological and geographical scholarship on violence, alongside feminist geopolitics, this study examines how border externalization materializes on migrant bodies and in transit spaces, bridging the intimate, local, national and global.

To trace violence across scales, sites and bodies, the study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted across four different sites in Tunisia: Bhar Lazreg, Medénine, Sfax and Zarzis. The fieldwork involved more than 150 in-depth interviews and participant observations with a diverse range of participants including; migrants, Tunisian fishermen, smugglers, cemetery workers, gravediggers, forensic doctors, the coastguard, EU diplomats, Tunisian civil society, politicians, and international humanitarian actors.

In conclusion, the study shows how the ripple effects of European border externalization policies extend far beyond physical borders, casting long shadows into neighbourhoods, homes and bodies in Tunisia, leading to forms of violence and suffering that are hidden. The study argues that this violence is not incidental but structurally embedded and produced, being designed into the very architecture of migration management and enforced through political and material infrastructures. It uncovers the complex entanglement of violence, gender and space in transit, as well as the intertwined processes of life and death within the EU's extended borderlands.

The study provides several contributions, both theoretical and empirical, by suggesting new understandings of transit and concepts to capture the effects of externalization, as well as new insights into Europe's expanding borders in North Africa, the human consequences and the everyday strategies of survival that emerge in response.

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The dissertation consists of three published articles and an introduction that outlines the main arguments and contributions of the thesis. The articles are:

Treading water in transit: Understanding gendered stuckness and movement in Tunisia. Published in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2024).

A mother's choice: Undocumented motherhood, waiting and smuggling in the Tunisian-Libyan borderlands. Published in *Trends in Organzied Crime* (2023).

Rings in the water: Felt externalisation and its rippling effect in the extended EU borderlands. Published in *Geopolitics* (2023).

SUMMARY DANISH

Denne afhandling undersøger, hvordan liv og død i transit udfolder sig i de tunesiske grænseområder gennem et kønnet perspektiv. Med et interdisciplinært perspektiv trækker afhandlingen på antropologi, politisk geografi og feministisk geopolitik for at kortlægge, hvordan eksternalisering af grænser materialiserer sig på migrantkroppe og i transitrum. Dermed forbinder dette studie det intime, det lokale, det nationale og det globale niveau.

For at spore voldens manifestationer på tværs af skalaer, steder og kroppe er afhandlingen baseret på dybdegående etnografisk feltarbejde fra fire forskellige steder i Tunesien: Bhar Lazreg, Medénine, Sfax og Zarzis. Afhandlingen bygger på mere end 150 dybdegående interviews og deltagerobservation med en bred vifte af deltagere; herunder migranter, smuglere, kirkegårdsarbejdere, retsmedicinere, kystvagten, fiskere, EU-diplomater, tunesiske civilsamfundsaktører, politikere og internationale humanitære organisationer.

Afhandlingen viser, hvordan de afledte konsekvenser af europæisk eksternalisering, strækker sig langt ud over de fysiske grænser og kaster lange skygger ind i Tunesien, i byer, hjem og på kroppe. Afhandlingen argumenterer for, at volden ikke er tilfældig, men strukturelt indlejret og designet som en del af selve arkitekturen for migrationskontrol, og håndhævet gennem politiske og materielle infrastrukturer. Afhandlingen afslører den komplekse sammenfiltring af vold, køn og rum i transit samt de sammenvævede processer af liv og død i EU's udvidede grænseland.

Afhandlingen fremlægger flere væsentlige teoretiske, empiriske og metodiske bidrag, som giver nye indsigter i transit og vold samt begreber, der kan indfange eksternaliseringens effekter. Ydermere præsenteres nye perspektiver på Europas ekspanderende grænser i Nordafrika, de menneskelige konsekvenser og de overlevelsesstrategier, som opstår i deres kølvand.

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Afhandlingen består af tre publiceret artikler og en kappe der fremsætter afhandlingens hovedargumenter og bidrag. Artiklerne er:

Treading water in transit: Understanding gendered stuckness and movement in Tunisia. Udgivet i *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2024).

A mother's choice: Undocumented motherhood, waiting and smuggling in the Tunisian-Libyan borderlands. Udgivet i *Trends in Organzied Crime* (2023).

Rings in the water: Felt externalisation and its rippling effect in the extended EU borderlands. Udgivet *i Geopolitics* (2023).

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APPENDIX

Table 1: List of female study participants, Bhar Lazreg, Greater Tunis (N=30)

Name	Age	Country of origin	Marital status	Children*	Travel to Tunisia (Mode, Year of arrival)**
Mama Nathalie	37	Ivory Coast	Single	2 (1 BO/1 BT)	Abidjan to Tunis (FL, 2010)
Francoise	35	Ivory Coast	Single	1 (BT)	Abidjan to Tunis (FL, 2017)
Joelle	31	Ivory Coast	Single	4 (3 BO/1 BT)	Abidjan to Tunis (FL,2016)
Julie	34	Ivory Coast	Single	2 (BT)	Abidjan to Tunis (FL, 2011)
Brigitte	38	Ivory Coast	Single	4 (BO/ 1 D)	Abidjan to Tunis (FL, 2016)
Fatim	32	Ivory Coast	Single	-	Abidjan to Tunis (FL, 2019)
Odile	33	Ivory Coast	Single	-	Abidjan to Tunis (FL, 2019)
Abigaille	31	Ivory Coast	Single	3 (2BO/ BT)	Abidjan to Tunis (FL, 2019)
Elvie	23	Ivory Coast	Single	1 (BT)	Abidjan to Tunis (FL, 2017)
Deidre	29	Ivory Coast	Single	1 (BO)	Abidjan to Tunis (FL)
Suzy	32	Ivory Coast	Single	-	Abidjan to Tunis (FL)
Nadege	34	Ivory Coast	Married	2 (BT)	Abidjan to Tunis (FL)
Antoinette	42	Ivory Coast	Single	-	Abidjan to Tunis (FL)
Rita	21	Ivory Coast	Married	-	Abidjan to Tunis (FL)
Rachel		Ivory Coast	Single	-	Abidjan to Tunis (FL)
Jenine	31	Ivory Coast	Single	-	Abidjan to Tunis (FL)
Geneviene		Ivory Coast	Single	-	Abidjan to Tunis (FL)
Pelagi	36	Ivory Coast	Single	1 (BT)	Abidjan to Tunis (FL)
Silvy		Ivory Coast	Single	1 (BT)	Abidjan to Tunis (FL)
Happiness	26	Nigeria	Partner	2 (BT)	Tabarka border crossing (F, 2021)

Goodluck	43	Nigeria	Partner	6 (BO)	Tabarka border crossing (F, 2021)
Khadija	24	Guinea	Married	2	Tabarka border crossing (F, 2021)
Diabaté	23	Mali	Married	1	Abidjan to Tunis (FL, 2014)
Aicha	22	Guinea	Married	1 (BO)	Conakry to Tunis (FL, 2019)
Prisca	25	Cameroun	Single	-	Yaoundé to Tunis (FL)
Delice	27	Cameroun	Single	1 (BO)	Yaoundé (FL, 2021)
Marie Noelle	26	Cameroun	Partner	1	Yaoundé, Student Visa (FL, 2021)
Murielle		Cameroun	Single	1 (BO)	Yaoundé, Student Visa (FL, 2021)
Clemence	24	Cameroun	Single	-	Yaoundé, Student Visa (FL, 2021)

All with irregular status in Tunisia.
* BO: Born in Country of Origin|BT: Born in Tunisia|D: Deceased
** FL: Flight|F: Foot

Table 1 continued: List of male study participants, Bhar Lazreg, Greater Tunis (N=10)

Name	Age	Country of origin	Marital status	Children *	Travel to Tunisia (Year of arrival)**
Youssef	23	Guinea	Married	1 (BO)	Conakry to Tunis (FL, 2019)
Ben	24	Nigeria	Single	-	Tabarka border crossing (F, 2021)
Kennedy	25	Nigeria	Single	-	Tabarka border crossing (F, 2021)
Chika	25	Nigeria	Partner	2 (BT)	Tabarka border crossing (F, 2020)
David	32	Nigeria	Single	3 (BO)	Tabarka border crossing (F, 2022)
Moussa	31	Ivory Coast	Single	4 (BO)	Abidjan to Tunis (FL)
Michel	29	Ivory Coast	Single	-	Abidjan to Tunis (FL)
Benny	25	Mali	Married	-	Tabarka border crossing (F, 2021)
Amadou	24	Mali	Single	-	Tabarka border crossing (F, 2021)
Demba	22	Mali	Single	-	Tabarka border crossing (F, 2021)

All with irregular status in Tunisia.
* BO: Born in Country of Origin|BT: Born in Tunisia
** FL: Flight|F: Foot

Table 2: List of study participants, Medénine, Southern Tunisia (N=30)

Name	Age	Country origin	Marital status	Children*	Legal Status in Tunisia**	Travel to Tunisia (Mode) ***
Mariama	34	Sierra Leone	Single	2 (SV/BT)	Refugee/IOM	Libyan-Tunisian border (P,F)
Divine	40	Nigeria	Single	4 (SV)	Rejected asylum/U	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Traore	23	Ivory Coast	Married	2 (1 D)	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat, Crossed the Libyan-Tunisian border
Bintou	33	Ivory Coast	Single	7 (6 BO/ SV; 1 BT)	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Awa	24	Ivory Coast	Single	1 (SV/ BT)	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Rhoda	19	Nigeria	Single	-	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Joy	16	Nigeria	Single	1 (BI)	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Amara	26	Nigeria	Married	2	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Nadege	28	Congo	Single	1 (SV/BT)	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Mina	24	Ghana	Single	-	Pending asylum (2019)/U	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Aicha	31	Guinea	Single	1 (SV/BT)	Pending asylum (2019)/U	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Sandra	32	Ivory Coast	Single	1 (SV/BT)	Pending asylum (2020)/U	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Juliet	42	Nigeria	Widow	3 (1 SV/BT)	Irregular/IOM	Libyan-Tunisian border (P, F)
Johnsina	23	Guinea		2 (1D/1 BT)	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Nana	26	Ghana	Single	1	Irregular/IOM	
Egedan	24	Congo	Single	1 (BT/SV)	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Mesoli	19	Ghana	Single	Mother	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Fatumato	24	Congo	Single	Mother	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)

Sila	18	Guinea	Single	Mother	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Kibri	31	Ghana	Single	Mother	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Sabrina	28	Congo	Single	Mother	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Odette	24	Ghana	Single	Mother	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Vivi	27	Nigeria	Single	Mother	Rejected asylum/U	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Cynthia	29	Nigeria	Single	Mother	Rejected asylum/U	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Alberta	26	Ghana	Single	Mother	Irregular/IOM	Left Libya by boat (INTCP)
Miracle	17	Congo	Single	Mother	Irregular/IOM	Libyan-Tunisian border (P, F)
Eva	28	Guinea	Single	Mother	Irregular/IOM	Libyan-Tunisian border (P, F)
Sylvia	31	Ghana	Single	Mother	Rejected asylum/U	Libyan-Tunisian border (P, F)
Hafsato	23	Guinea	Single	Mother	Rejected asylum/U	Libyan-Tunisian border (P, F)
Elly	19	Nigeria	Single	Mother	Rejected asylum/U	Libyan-Tunisian border (P, F)

*SV: Sexual Violence|D: Deceased|
BO: Born in Country of Origin|BT: Born in Tunisia|BI: Born in Italy
**IOM: Humanitarian Case|U: UNHCR
*** P: Pregnant|F: Foot|
INTCP: Intercepted at Sea by Tunisian Coast Guard

Table 3: List of Study participants in Sfax (N=10)

Name	Age	Country of origin	Legal Status in Tunisia
Fatma	30	Guinea	Irregular
Fatuma	24	Guinea	Irregular
Assa Traolé	27	Bamako, Mali	Student visa
Assitan Dembeke	23	Bamako, Mali	Student visa
Alpha Bodahalifah	23	Togo	Student visa
Elema Gemina	27	Gabon	Student visa
Ibrahim	26	Mali	Student visa
Franck Yodoje	32	Congo	Student visa
Ali	28	Mali	Student visa
Mouhamodou	24	Mali	Student visa

Table 5: List of interviews with other actors and agencies (N=70+)

Interview person(s)	**Where**
Founder of Jardin d'Afrique	Zarzis
Gravedigger at Jardin d'Afrique	Zarzis
Gravedigger at Cimetière des inconnu	Zarzis
Founder of Sea Memory Museum	Zarzis
20 Fishermen	Zarzis
5 EU Diplomats	Tunis
3 IOM staff	Tunis and Sfax
4 Red Crescent staff	Sfax
2 Terre d'Asile staff	Sfax
3 Afrique Intelligence staff	Sfax
3 Tunisian Coastguard Captain + officers	Sfax and Kerkenneh Island
Chief Forensic Doctor	Sfax
Mayor of Zarzis	Zarzis
5 Local politicians	Tunis
6 L'Association l'enfant de la lune staff staff	Medenine
3 ICMPD Border Agency officers	Tunis
1 UNPFA Tunisia staff	Tunis
1 WHO staff	Tunis
2 UNHCR staff	Tunis
1 IOM Libya staff	Tunis
3 Medecin du Monde staff	Tunis and Sfax
1 Medecin sans Frontier staff	Tunis
2 l'Association Tunisienne de la Santé de la Reproduction (ATSR) staff	Medenine