



Humanitarianism and black female bodies: violence and intimacy at the Moroccan–Spanish border

Elsa Tyszler

To cite this article: Elsa Tyszler (2020): Humanitarianism and black female bodies: violence and intimacy at the Moroccan–Spanish border, The Journal of North African Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13629387.2020.1800211](https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2020.1800211)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2020.1800211>



Published online: 03 Aug 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 10



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)



Humanitarianism and black female bodies: violence and intimacy at the Moroccan–Spanish border

Elsa Tyszler

Centre for Sociological and Political Research in Paris (CRESPPA), Gender, Work and Mobility (GTM) Team, Paris, France

ABSTRACT

Around Ceuta and Melilla, progressive Moroccan migration policies implemented since 2013 have not produced much positive change, as political, diplomatic and economic issues take over, producing a violent game of borders, both material and symbolic, racialised and gendered. Through an ethnographic approach, this article addresses the issue of violence experienced by migrants from Central and West Africa on the Moroccan–Spanish border, emanating from humanitarian and religious actors. Based on two and a half years of field research in Morocco (mainly in Rabat and in the North) and the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, with a special attention to embodied experiences of the border, this contribution shows that the humanitarianism practiced in a border town in Northern Morocco is also a space for updating relations of race and gender, which can, contrary to its claims, lead to even greater constraints on the mobility of people, notably women, being ‘helped’, and can reproduce a racialised and gendered order at the border. This contribution also proposes to reconnect this contemporary violence to history and underline the coloniality of such humanitarianism.

KEYWORDS Borders; gender; humanitarianism; migration control; race

Introduction

Since early 2000s, migration control policies implemented at the Moroccan–Spanish border have targeted Central and West African nationals in a particularly violent way (Migreurop 2007; MSF 2013; HWR 2014; GADEM 2015, 2018). The new Moroccan migration policy launched in 2013 has hardly altered the situation at the border (Alioua and Ferrié 2017), maintaining or even reinforcing a necropolitical (Mbembe 2006) system of deadly violence against them, produced in cooperation between Morocco, Spain and the European Union (EU) (Ferrer-Gallardo 2008; El Qadim 2015). At this border, Central and West African nationals are made particularly visible – politically and in the media

CONTACT Elsa Tyszler  elsa.tyszler@gmail.com  Centre for Sociological and Political Research in Paris (CRESPPA), Gender, Work and Mobility (GTM) Team, 6 Avenue Beauséjour, Nogent sur Marne, Paris 94130, France

© 2020 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

– among the plurality of populations trying to enter Spain. The expression ‘Sub-Saharan migrants’ reveals the construction of a racialised category of undesirables at the border associating black skin colour with a status of illegality (Tyszler 2019c). In previous articles (Tyszler 2018, 2019a, 2019b), I have shown that the racialised and gendered repression of West and Central African migrants shapes practices of control and produces specific vulnerabilities – as well as resistances – on both the Spanish and Moroccan sides of the border. Examples of the materialisation of processes of racialisation at play are: the existence, for years, of self-built camps located in the forests where only West and Central African migrants can be found, bestialised – according to their own words –; regular military raids that target them and regularly destroyed the shelters; or the necessity to jump the fence surrounding the Spanish enclaves because of the impossibility for Black-skinned people to approach the ‘normal’ enclaves gates. People from Syria or Algeria, for instance, manage (with more or less ease/difficulty) to use the same roads as Moroccans in the region to access the enclaves through border posts, because they can ‘look’ like them. Skin colour is a factor facilitating or blocking access to the border crossings of Ceuta and Melilla. I have also argued that the externalisation of EU borders in Africa aggravates violence against women by creating a continuum of spaces in which irregularised women must resist and/or negotiate asymmetry in gender, race and class relations in order to cross militarised borders. From the case study of a Christian NGO operating in a border town, in this article, I explore the humanitarian-religious dimension of the regime of border violence, in particular with regard to migrant women from West and Central Africa.

The impact of NGOisation of the ‘migrant cause’ in Morocco has only recently begun to be discussed (Gazzotti 2019). I am referring here to the consequences of including migration issues in the repertoire of action of NGOs, and of delegating public services or even sovereign responsibilities to these organisations. From ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2017 within an organisation intervening at the border and working exclusively with ‘Sub-Saharans’, I was able to observe the close link between migration control and humanitarian interventions, or, in Didier Fassin’s (2005) conception, the relationship between repression and compassion. The article explores the contribution of a particular NGO to the ‘humanitarian borderscape’ (Pallister-Wilkins 2017) at the local level. Border scholars have been very interested in this issue in recent years. Because ‘border crossing has become [for some] a matter of life and death’, William Walters (2011, 138) emphasised the ‘reinvention of the border as a space of humanitarian government’ (Walters 2011, 138). Studying US and EU border police respectively, Jill M. Williams (2015) and Polly Pallister-Wilkins (2015a, 2015b) showed how humanitarian logics constructing people as ‘at risk’ have intertwined with border police practices that more traditionally treat migrants ‘as a risk’, resulting in complementary

care and control practices that extend the possibilities and types of border practices. The humanitarian border 're-oriens border practices around the provisions for particular forms of life and introduces explicitly humanitarian actors into the borderwork assemblage' (Reece et al. 2017, 6). As Ruben Andersson (2017) argued in relation with the Spanish-African frontier, there is a need to understand certain humanitarian measures as part of a broader set of mobility and border controls. Focusing on the past work of Doctors Without Borders in the Spanish-Moroccan context, Lorena Gazzotti (2019, 18) wrote that, 'Operating in the interstices of border containment, humanitarianism therefore becomes a tool to protect a life that has become structurally degraded', pointing the bestialisation of Black lives. Following these analyses, I consider humanitarian interventions at the border not as a sideline, but as central to border processes (Cuttitta 2015). Using a sociological and ethnographic approach, I show that the religious-humanitarianism practiced in a border town in Northern Morocco is also a space for updating relations of race and gender, which can, contrary to what it claims, lead to even greater constraints on the mobility of people supposed to be 'helped', and can reproduce a racialised and gendered order at the border. The aim here is to deepen the study of the dynamics of social relations crystallised in the (border) regime of violence in place, to reveal the multiplicity of actors, and re-connect it to history.

The Catholic Church needs to be taken seriously as a major actor in the migration/border regime. Christian organisations, while demonstrating their own dynamics, are fully integrated into the humanitarian borderscape: on the field they can remain while more militant NGOs leave or cannot establish themselves, because it is easier for them to reach agreement with local authorities and are thus tolerated as long as their repertoire of action remains humanitarian, biological, and not political (Fassin 2005; Ticktin 2011). The literature has vastly overlooked the study of the role of religious organisations in the management of the border. The ethnography conducted reveals forms of violence, notably against Black migrant women, and suggests a link between humanitarian-religious interventions and previous colonial projects regulating personal identity, race, gender and sexuality. In her work on colonial history, Ann Laura Stoler ([2002] 2013) writes that all empires are obsessed with the policing of intimacy. Christian missions were part of European colonial enterprises (Prudhomme 2004), and sometimes collaborated or instigated the control of the bodies and sexuality of the colonised (see for instance Álvarez Chillida 2014 on Spanish colonisation and Claretian missions in Equatorial Guinea). Other historical and philosophical works have shown how the colonial period in Africa and the Americas has led to the emergence of racist stereotypes about Black populations, particularly about Black women, whose bodies are sexualised and bestialised (Dorlin 2006). Feminist studies have pointed out that racist stereotypes constructed during colonial times still

permeate pejorative representations of Black sexuality today (Hill Collins 2005; Pourette 2010). Through the study of the treatment of migrants from Central and West Africa, this investigation illustrates that gender and sexuality issues of racialised migrants are trapped in neo-colonial logic (Gabriell 2016). I will develop the idea that several members of the organisation, and in particular the most influential – the nuns in this case – constitute a ‘police of morals and intimacy’ that guarantees a certain racialised and gendered order. If the issues raised are found in humanitarian violence, beyond Christian organisations alone, I analyse that the coloniality of power (Quijano 2007) in which migration control policies pursued around Ceuta and Melilla are anchored (Tyszler 2019b, 2019c), is also operating in the practices of missionaries, who continue to have power over some populations of the Souths. By coloniality of power, Anibal Quijano means the enterprise of racialisation of the world and the hierarchisation of humanity by the West since 1492 and the first conquests of ‘America’ up to contemporary forms of capitalism’s hold on globalisation. The instrument of this racialised coloniality is the institution of a double standard that applies to the various populations in the world, in the societies of the North and the South, depending on whether they belong – to quote Frantz Fanon (1952) – to zones of ‘being’ (with rights, expectations, norms) and zones of ‘non-being’ (without rights, without places, without names). As I demonstrate, the nuns in this study can have a significant impact on the experience of the people they attend, although the latter have (sometimes very small) margins of agency. Far from accusing the Catholic Church as such of not helping migrants, I reckon that the violence emanating from this organisation – supposed to be the only ‘refuge’ in this border area – must be studied and problematised as part of the regime of racist and sexist violence maintained at this border.

After explaining my methodology, I will talk about Catholic organisations as an unavoidable part of migration paths and borderscapes between Africa and Europe and contextualise the case chosen. The second section will give ethnographic examples illustrating the (attempts at) policing Black women bodies and lives by the organisation under consideration. In a third section, I will show how a sexist and racist grid of interpretation allows humanitarian-religious actors to normalise violence experienced by Black migrant women at the border, and in particular how nuns (try to) extricate themselves from the regime of violence in which they participate. I will end by mentioning the resistances, in spite of everything, of the women I met at the border.

Investigation methodology

This article emerges from a dissertation fieldwork carried out between 2015 and 2017 mainly in Morocco, and in Ceuta and Melilla. I used observant participation in several NGOs working with migrants from Central and West

Africa. In addition, I conducted about 160 interviews with a plurality of actors around the border: about 80 with migrant women and men mostly from Central and West Africa; the rest with NGOs workers, activists; staff of governmental and international organisations and institutions. The data used for this article is the result of ethnography conducted within one humanitarian-religious organisation working at the border that I joined as a volunteer – with explicit purpose of research – in summer 2017. All of the people quoted in this article were aware of my research project and knowingly agreed to participate. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Catholic Church organisations in the humanitarian borderscape: a case in northern Morocco

Migration has long been a concern of the Catholic Church. But it was from the nineteenth century onwards that migratory pastoral care was established (Rossi, Marin, and Vianna 2012), becoming a major papal concern in the years 2010 (Geisser 2018). Studies have already shown, in contexts other than Morocco, a ‘Christian monopoly of assistance’ to ‘Sub-Saharan’ who try to reach Europe (see Étienne and Picard 2012 on Egypt). My fieldwork indicates that the Catholic Church is an obligatory way-station on the clandestine roads leading to Europe. Religious organisations, especially Catholic ones, are often present where other actors are not. Due to a tight and very extensive network through the planting of churches all over the world, they are present where NGOs cannot be due to sensitive security conditions. Thus, from Gao to Tangier via Tamanrasset, the Catholic Church sees and assists African trying to reach Europe.

Christian churches in Morocco,¹ have had a pioneering role in addressing the situation of ‘Sub-Saharan migrants’ trying to cross the Moroccan–Spanish border. Since the end of the 1990s, they have been setting up humanitarian activities in Morocco for these people considered ‘extremely vulnerable’, and since the 2000s, they have been joined, albeit in different ways, by Moroccan and West and Central African migrant collectives themselves. The Catholic Church has developed activities around its parishes or by creating NGO-type structures, some of which are almost exclusively focused on helping ‘Sub-Saharan migrants’. However, as I learnt doing participant observation in several of them, these organisations are required to be discreet and not to engage in advocacy activities, at the risk of being closed by Moroccan authorities. Some pass on the information collected to other advocacy organisations. In many discussions with migrants and NGO staff, I learnt that the border security forces often refer the migrant people they have repressed to the churches. Thus, these organisations can be seen as permanent ‘band-aids’ to border violence and are useful to the Moroccan authorities as humanitarian guarantees. But they are also useful to other actors such as

international cooperation agencies, particularly from European countries, that finance them. Between 2015 and 2017, the largest funders of Catholic Church organisations with 'migrant projects' in Morocco are Swiss and German international cooperation agencies. These agencies have evident political goals even if they officially legitimate their presence and actions as necessitating humanitarian intervention on the migration issue. This is one way of controlling migration through joint work with NGOs. These elements lead us to think about the place of religious actors in the humanitarian borderscape. It is interesting to note that for researchers, too, the Catholic Church is often an obligatory passage. Not deviating from this rule, I volunteered with a religious organisation in a border town because I knew it was the only one that would enable me to research in this border zone without (or with less) interference from Moroccan authorities.

The first humanitarian organisation to operate in this border town in Northern Morocco was Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF). The Spanish branch of MSF started working in Morocco in 1997. From 2003, the organisation aimed to 'help Sub-Saharan migrants, a vulnerable population with specific medical and humanitarian needs, due to their precarious living conditions and irregular administrative situation'.² MSF had two projects in the country. In Rabat, the teams provided medical and psychological care to 'migrant women victims of sexual violence'. In the eastern region, on the border with Algeria and in northern Morocco, they worked to ensure 'migrants' access to public health services'. In one border town in Morocco, MSF provided 'primary health care and psychological support for Sub-Saharan migrants'. But the work could not always be carried out. In 2011, the NGO was not allowed to work all year round. In 2012 work resumed, but after one year and the publication of a report (MSF 2013) described by the national and international press as 'shocking', and 'overwhelming', the organisation announced its departure. 'In fact, last year, MSF teams witnessed an increase in violence by Moroccan and Spanish security forces',³ an MSF representative told journalists at the time. The NGO rephrased the problem of the border situation in a different way and increasingly questioned its humanitarian role in a context that does not change: 'Even if migrants need health care, their situation is first and foremost linked to acts of violence. They are the cause of everything. It is a question of fighting for the respect of migrants' rights and this work is beyond MSF's competence'.⁴ MSF left Morocco, delegating certain responsibilities for its projects to other agencies: in Rabat, they made a contract with an Moroccan association. For the border region, they contacted the Catholic Church to try to ensure the continuation of their work.

The organisation I investigated is an entity of the north diocese.⁵ Its 'migrant project' was initiated at the end of 2012 following, on the one hand, the proposal to resume the activities of MSF in the border region

and, on the other hand, intensified involvement of the Catholic Church and its various branches in migration issues and in particular in direct assistance to 'refugees'. A Spanish priest assigned to the Catholic Church of the city made an appeal to different congregations of missionary sisters who would send people to work on the project. An annex to the church was built over time to house the offices and some facilities for temporary accommodation; several people were hired to compose the staff of the organisation (some of which were former MSF staff). In summer 2017, my days as a volunteer there followed the – frantic – rhythm of the team composed of several missionaries (mainly Spanish but also South-American), two young Spanish humanitarian workers in positions of waged responsibility, a few local Moroccan workers (a social worker, two drivers, a cook/housekeeper for the residence and a security guard) and finally two West-African workers hired as 'mediators' with 'Sub-Saharan migrants'. The staff carries out different types of interventions including 'medical' interventions in the forest camps, which consist of visiting the people who call the organisation's emergency number early in the morning for health problems and possibly bringing them to the hospital. In addition, 'social/humanitarian' interventions are deployed in the same camps but to do 'mapping'⁶ – i.e. to see where migrants are, who they are, in what proportions – to visit, to survey needs, and/or to distribute clothes or food once in a while. Follow-up visits to the hospital are carried out, as well as activities with persons housed at the (small) residence, which include the seriously injured, women who have just given birth, or very sick persons who cannot remain in hospital. In June 2017, the Organisation – as I will call it in the rest of the article – estimated that several thousand 'Sub-Saharan migrants' were present in the region, with arrivals and departures every day. Many cases of pregnant women were identified in the forest camps.

'Police of morals and intimacy': gendered, sexual and racial reordering at the border

Today, at the team meeting, the nun Filomena reports on the people she visited at the hospital yesterday. She tells us that one of the pregnant women who was brought to the hospital to give birth, the young Malian woman Aya, has HIV, and that her child probably has it too. I observe fright in the room, but this is apparently far from being the first case encountered. I ask the sister if she has already told Aya, whom I know a little bit about having visited her in the maternity ward. She immediately replied: *'Of course I told her! I told her: what did you expect if you prostitute yourself in the forest?'* A few days later, we learned that the hospital had made a mistake, that Aya was not HIV-positive, that another woman was infected. (Field notes, border town in Northern Morocco, June 2017)

As this excerpt from my field notebook illustrates, the sexuality of migrant women at the border is under the moral control of some members of the

Organisation, particularly missionary sisters, and the 'whore stigma' (Pheterson 1993) hangs over them. Gail Pheterson questions the stereotype of the prostitute, by analysing the whore stigma as something that is not limited to a definition of prostitution as a transaction in which sexual services are exchanged for money, but also as a tool for the social and political control of women in general. The discourse of the nun contributes to produce women's vulnerability and define the contours of shameful femininity among migrant women. During my fieldwork, two combined themes emerged particularly in this regard: the supposed wrongness of abortion and the rightness of motherhood.

Women know very well what to take and what not to take. They are experts at stopping the bleeding with the pills.⁷ Also, because there's the myth that if they travel while bleeding, the patera [boat to cross to Spain] will sink ... well, that's their myth stuff. So, they know very well how to do an abortion, they know well how to stop their periods ... Between them, they give each other information. And you know, when they tell you, 'Look, I'm bleeding, I don't know what's happening to me'. When it's that, it's typically an induced abortion, that's how they do it. (Interview with Rosalia, missionary, June 2017, border town in Northern Morocco)

During a visit to the hospital today, a migrant woman seemed lost in the reception hall of the maternity ward. As a volunteer for the Organisation, wearing my white vest, I asked her if she needed help. She was holding a baby in her arms. Sister Filomena saw me and made me understand that this woman should not be helped. Later, I was told that this woman tried to have an abortion and that her baby was born with 1% brain because of the substances she ingested at the time. I then learned that this woman, Solange, had been 'blacklisted' by the nuns. The logic was therefore as follows: a woman who tried to have an abortion equals a woman who will no longer be helped. However, the organisation claims to operate on the basis of 'vulnerability' criteria to provide humanitarian aid to migrants. (Field notes, border town in Northern Morocco, June 2017)

The action of missionaries exemplifies in a quite striking way a biopolitical governance of migrant bodies in the Foucauldian sense. Sovereign power operates through making people die or letting them live, according to Foucault (1976). In contrast, biopolitical power to make people live or let them die stands out in this case. During my investigation within the Organisation, the issue of abortion appeared prominent in the screening of women's requests for assistance at the border. It is interesting to see the speeches made by the sisters on this subject because, if it is not official, it is they who – tacitly – grant access to help or not, even if it can be renegotiated by other actors (migrants or other members of the team can use their agency to confront/persuade the nuns). This shows how biopower, supposedly operating on the side of 'life', can quickly show its other dimension, that of letting people die, not through the arm of securitisation/militarisation but through the (in)action of humanitarian workers. Before considering the sisters' narratives on the subject of abortion, a point of context is necessary:

the possibilities of abortion in Morocco are very restrictive.⁸ As a result, as in many countries, some women have 'clandestine' abortions, in different ways, depending on their financial means and contacts. In addition, the Catholic Church's doctrine opposes this practice in the name of defending life from its beginning to its end. The current Pope has spoken several times on the issue of abortion, most often within a broader reflection on the defence of 'the weakest'. The Catholic missionaries of the Organisation, not surprisingly, align with this position. Despite this, women want or attempt to abort at the border for a variety of reasons, most often related to their own difficulties in surviving: undernourishment, little access to hygiene and health facilities, promiscuity or sexual violence in the camps, lack of security, risks taken to try to cross the border, among other issues illustrating their inability to access fundamental needs and rights. Interviews show that, if one of the nuns believes that women seek their own abortions (see excerpt above), another nun asserts that it is the chairmen – leaders of the migrant camps⁹ – who decides to have the women abort because women's prostitution rates would be affected by pregnancy and a dependent child.

-The researcher: In the camps, have you met women who want to have an abortion?

-Sister Anita: They don't want to; they are forced to! If the chief says so, it is the chief who decides: 'you, you get pregnant; you, don't; you, don't; I don't want this child' ... He tells them to take medication, and he makes them abort. (...)

-But according to you, what is the purpose of the chief doing this?

-Let them go to Spain and continue with prostitution, of course. With a child, you can't continue with prostitution. (...) Very few of them decide to have an abortion. Generally, they are forced by the camp chief...

-Okay ... I also heard that women were able to get drugs to have an abortion.

-Yes, at the pharmacy, it's a basic medicine, but when you're pregnant it causes you to have an abortion. (...) But it can also produce malformations on the child. Malformed children are born, look at this woman's case, Solange! With her child, that's what happened! (...) So here we have seen things you know ... Women are afraid, especially young ones, they mistreat them (...). (Interview with Anita, missionary, June 2017, border town in Northern Morocco)

Sister Anita's comments demonstrate the complexity of the situations of migrant women at the border, but I consider they also amalgamate and homogenise a plurality of situations. What comes out of my fieldwork is that some women who are not involved in sex work sometimes wish to have an abortion, regardless of the camp leader's directive, for various reasons, especially if the pregnancy was the result of rape. Similarly, some women who practice sex work or use economic-sexual arrangements in the camps wish to have an abortion, without being part of transnational prostitution networks. The

generalisation of cases of forced abortion by a third party probably allows the sisters to better legitimise their fight against these acts. During a discussion with a Spanish humanitarian worker who worked for a year on the administrative and financial coordination of the Organisation, the latter told me with horror that the sisters took photographs of babies who had died or been deformed as a result of attempted abortions and made albums of them. If the issue of abortion and in particular the suspicion of abortion is a significant one in the relations between nuns and women living in the forest of the border region, so is the issue of motherhood.

The norming around motherhood is particularly observable among women housed at the residence of the Organisation. The case of the young Malian Aya is convincing in this respect.

-Sister Anita: Look at Aya's case, I asked her yesterday: 'What is the problem Aya?' She says to me: 'My mother doesn't know I have a baby'. I said to her: 'And what problem does that cause you?', she said to me: 'No, it's not to be done in my country'. I answer her: 'And so what? You got pregnant. You were brave to keep it to the end, and now you're going to abandon it? What will your mother tell you? Is your mommy going to come here and hurt you? Hit you? Will she come to kill the child? What's your mom going to do? She's going to yell at you on the phone and that's it. But if you don't tell her you have a baby, she's not going to realize it. And she doesn't have to know that. Aya told me: 'No it's that the traditions in my village ... a woman like that is frowned upon ... after I can't get married ...' I told her: 'Do you think you'll go back to your country? No! So, what's the problem? If you are not going to go back to your country: either you stay in Morocco because you don't have the money to pay for a zodiac, or you go to Spain and there, life will be different. There you can marry anyone, if there is a man you meet there, it doesn't matter, you can be quiet with your son. (...) You're facing a very beautiful reality.' I told her, 'Look me in the eye and tell me you don't love your son.' She didn't dare. I said to her, 'Look me in the eye, Aya, do you love your son or not?' She said to me, 'Yes, but I have no milk, I have no money. I told her that you don't have to worry about it, we'll help you.' (Interview with Anita, missionary, June 2017, border town in Northern Morocco)

The sister's remarks above illustrate another aspect of the policing of morals and intimacy performed by the nuns of the Organisation, particularly among those they encounter in moments of distress or great social, physical and psychological vulnerability. In this excerpt, we can see how the nun tries to decide the direction of the young woman's life project, operating on reductive schemes to solve her situation and resorting to techniques of guilt about the child. I hypothesise that the giving birth and motherhood is symbolically important for these missionaries in their quest to defend the 'right to life', but also to enforce 'right femininity'. The right to life could also be protected through adoption, but it seems they considered shameful that a mother abandons her child. Special attention is therefore paid to assistance to pregnant women. In 2017, I observed a negotiation between Sister Filomena and the

caid – a local Moroccan official – of a specific area. The subject was access to pregnant women in one of the biggest migrant camp of the region, blocked for some time to members of the Organisation.

Today I drove Filomena and Nadia to a *caid*'s office. There was talk of negotiating access to [name of the camp], territory under his control, on the grounds that many pregnant women are there. It was the priest who was supposed to go there but, in the end, it was Sister Filomena who took the lead (the priest was very relieved that it was her who was going, he does not like to mess with the Moroccan authorities). The three of us were received by the *caid* and his second (...). Filomena asked the *caid* to let her go to the camp at least once a week to check on pregnant women. In the end, it was Nadia, who was largely involved in the talks, with the *caid* speaking in Arabic to her (...). After expressing reservations and criticizing the behaviour of one of the Organisation's 'Sub-Saharan' mediators (known to be a 'loudmouth' even in front of the authorities), the *caid* finally accepted Filomena's request on the condition that she goes alone to the said camp and only once a week. (...) Deal accepted. (...) once back at the church, Filomena and Nadia were congratulated on their successful negotiations. (Field notes, border town in Northern Morocco, June 2017)

This negotiation is interesting to analyse in several respects. As Gazzotti (2019, 11) argued: '(...) humanitarians have to adapt to the schemes of migrant immobility imposed by sovereign authorities, limiting their action to a form of assistance which does not challenge the existing order (...)'. Not only nuns are interested in 'preserving life' through antiabortion action in line with church doctrine, but also to align with Moroccan norms and thus to stay on the state's good side. This scene also points the way in which the question of childbirth, and its corollary the figure of the pregnant woman, serve as an ideal alibi or even a strategic expedient, both on the side of the Organisation and on the side of the authorities, each one being able to perform both its mission of control and its humanitarianism with regard to Black migrants. Furthermore, this humanitarianism on behalf of pregnant women and their future offspring illustrate the Organisation's position as a self-imposed mediator between migrants and the State, confiscating speech and widening the gap between the local Moroccan population and Black migrants, as also observed in the public hospital (Tyszler 2019c). This 'othering' of the illegalised migrants contributes to a reinforcement of what Lisa Malkki has described as their status as 'speechless emissaries', as a result of which 'refugees stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general' (Malkki 1996, 378). The Organisation's precarious arrangements with local authorities, which allows them access to camps in the forest, preclude calling into question the necropolicies that create and perpetuate humanitarian chaos for Central and West African nationals at the border. As Ticktin (2011) argues, humanitarian claims may allow access, but such access is generally limited to those who are 'worthy' of assistance, usually those constructed as victims. In an article

on the British volunteers who came to assist migrants in Calais, Jane Freedman (2018, 103), writes,

Volunteers see refugees not as fellow citizens with rights to be defended, but as the 'other' to be rescued or saved. Furthermore, this notion encourages volunteers to expect refugees to behave in a certain way in order to conform to this status of 'victim', with resultant disappointment if this is not perceived to be the case, if for example, refugees actively demand their rights.

In the Organisation, people who do not comply with the explicit or implicit rules of the established humanitarian order are excluded from assistance. The policing of morals and intimacy performed by the missionaries is based on racist and sexist logics, which tend to minimise the violence experienced by women from Central and West Africa at the border, reactivating colonial stereotypes and modes of relation.

Coloniality of violence through missionaries' interventions alongside racialised migrants

My research field allowed me to capture scenes of interactions between missionaries and migrant women and discourses revealing the coloniality of violence that can emanate from humanitarian-religious interventions. Colonial genealogies and patriarchal roots shape border humanitarianism. As Quijano elaborates, the racialised coloniality of our world also involves the coloniality of knowledge, i.e. the hegemony of Western actors and categories in the production and recognition of legitimate forms of knowledge and the disqualification/occultation of forms of knowledge that are considered non-legitimate, non-universal.

In one interview, a nun explained how they were recruited to work on the project in the border town: 'They don't send African sisters, because otherwise they risk becoming part of the clan of victims, together with the migrants. The wounds of colonization must be healed.' Without claiming to study missionary dynamics, this statement suggests a form of ethnic or racial selection in sending sisters to this project. There is the fear that Black nuns might overly identify with Black migrants (putting themselves in their position) and get too familiar (losing any sense of distance and neutrality) – which would make it difficult for them to carry out their religious/humanitarian work. The Black African sisters are thus, essentially, considered not competent for the missionary work on the Moroccan–Spanish border, because they wouldn't have healed from the 'wounds of colonization' yet, suggesting that the white missionaries would have moved on. White nuns consider themselves/are considered to be more 'neutral' towards Black migrants, a precondition for working in this context as is implied. The interview excerpts that follow illustrate the racialisation of Central and West African women's gender and sexuality at the border. The racist speeches and practices surrounding the

bodies of these women are constantly (re)producing social relations of gender and race.

-The researcher: Have you heard about cases of sexual violence in the camps?

-Sister Rosalia: Yes, but what happens is that ... this kind of case you don't hear about it openly ... between them they keep a lot of what happens in the forest. (...) But also, sometimes I think, I wonder because even if a woman has been raped, if she has been abused, what will I do? Because sometimes they put their own lives in danger ... Even if it's a little hard to say, sometimes it's as if they're so used to it, that they don't experience it like we, Westerners, who experience rape in another way. It may sound a little silly to say that, but I mean ... you understand me? For us, a rape is something so serious, so delicate, so intimate ... Them, as they have suffered so much ... from the family, from the road they have taken, it is like assuming that they had to go through this and that's all. That's the risk I took and here's the cost. For us as women, it's hard to accept, isn't it? But they have a very great strength. (Interview with Rosalia, missionary, border town in Northern Morocco, June 2017)

Sister Rosalia's comments echo the colonial figure of the African woman as naturally strong and resistant, linked to an animalistic conception of the body of Black women (Dorlin 2006; Pourette 2010). In this sense, they illustrate the coloniality of gender highlighted by Maria Lugones (2008), in which non-white women continue to be seen as incapable of the same emotions as white women, minimising sexual violence against them. During the interview, the missionary draws a clear boundary between 'us', the Westerners, and 'them' African women. In this way, she minimises the impact of sexual violence on African women by being victims. Her culturalist-racist discourse tends to naturalise the sexual violence experienced by these women, typical to the African woman whose life is inevitably punctuated by this type of violence, 'from the family' to 'the road they have taken'. If I met women who considered sexual violence the price to pay to go to Europe, they all testified to the extreme suffering in relation to the rape(s) they experienced, always considering them as serious events in their lives, contrary to what the missionary affirms saying frequently that those women are used to it. It is interesting to see how, in some cases, the nuns use the observation of patriarchal violence perceived as 'cultural' and the context of the border as a means of encouraging women to return to their countries of origin.

Of the girls I had here and who gave birth here, only one, a Cameroonian, I managed to convince her to go home with her baby. And now she's very happy! She's over there, she calls me all the time. But at the beginning she didn't want to go home at all. Same as for Aya, she told me 'it's that my mother, what is she going to say', and blah, blah, blah, blah ... but face it! Tell her, 'Look, Mom, it's not my fault, they raped me', it's not her fault! Even if the custom ... listen, is that the African custom? And it is the same Africans who rape them. I tell her: 'If it doesn't get out, if nobody knows, how it's going to end?' So, she talked to her mom and she called too, she talked to me. I told

her 'Yes, ma'am, see, it's not just that your daughter is deviant, not at all, it's rape, that's what happened'. And she understood it, and she said: 'let her come, let her come, I will take care of her'. The girl didn't want to go back at all at first, she wanted to go to Spain! And then she finally convinced herself that ... it was difficult, to go to Spain with a child ... and finally she returned to Cameroon. We helped her with a little savings, (...) she set up a small restaurant, and now she lives off it! IOM repatriated her. (...) But ... they are rare those who dare to take a step like that! (Interview with Anita, missionary, border town in Northern Morocco, June 2017)

Beyond performing the role of police of a model and pious femininity, the sisters may encourage women to return because of the saturation the missionaries may feel in the face of the situations of extreme distress that they observe on a daily basis in the border town. But the nuns never seem to consider the violence that they themselves generate. During the research I noted that the sisters never went very far (also perhaps because their level of French was quite low) in discussions with migrant women, quickly deciding on their situations, as if they knew better what is good or bad for them anyway. However, these considerations should not obscure the (even meagre) margins of agency migrant women have in the face of the humanitarianism that targets them at this border.

Resistance in the face of border humanitarianism

Despite the total asymmetry of power relations in which these women find themselves in the border town, they are constantly developing tactics to make their mobility possible and resist to the imbrication of relations of power and domination that affect them (Tyszler 2019a, 2019c). During fieldwork, I was able to observe how women dealt with the racist and sexist behaviours of the nuns, as shown by the case of Aya. One evening, Aya reiterated her desire to entrust the child for adoption. In addition of being afraid of what her family would say if they'd find out that she had had a child out of wedlock, Aya also explained to me that she was afraid not to be able to cross the border with the child, that she had already 'lasted too long' in Morocco, that she could not stand life in the forest anymore. She said she couldn't take care of the baby, as her milk was cut off because of the misdiagnosis of HIV. Aya stated that if she had known soon enough that she was pregnant she would have had an abortion, and that she did not know who the father was because she had been raped. She asked me to talk to the sisters about her case, because she couldn't communicate well with them. If one of the nuns seemed understanding, another one did everything to dissuade her, arguing to Aya that since the baby was a Black, he would be mistreated there in Morocco, 'This is your first child, it's a grace from God, you have to take care of it'. Despite all the pressure that the missionary would put on her every day, Aya did not change her mind. After a while, her decision was taken, and

the Organisation's social worker began the process of having the child put in an orphanage. Aya's example shows that despite an extremely constrained situation, the women assert their right to make decisions about their bodies and their lives. Her case and those of many other women encountered at the border illustrate how vulnerability – understood as relational and social – can be the fuel for resistance (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016). On many occasions at the Organisation residence, I observed migrant women laughing with each other and discreetly avoiding the maternity lessons given by the sisters that seemed irrelevant to them. I have also witnessed scenes of women turning down help from the Organisation when the rules seemed too rigid and inappropriate to them. In other words, far from passive subjects, Black migrant women obviously defend themselves (Dorlin 2017), despite a highly hostile (post)colonial context. They can be seen as 'vulnerable fighters' as some of them state.

Conclusion: the humanitarian-religious borderwork as part of the violence regime

Although recognising the work and commitment of many religious/humanitarian people on the ground, this article describes how religious–humanitarian intervention can contribute to the (re)production of a racialised, gendered and sexual order at the Spanish-Moroccan border, strengthening the continuum of violence against Black women in search of mobility. As Tom Scott-Smith (2016, 3) writes,

The key issue in contemporary humanitarianism ... is not that humanitarian solutions are insufficient. It is that humanitarian problems are insufficient. Framing an issue as a distinctly humanitarian one necessarily limits the responses available. Seeing inescapably political issues as humanitarian ones, in other words, can seriously curtail the possibilities for reducing suffering, and nowhere is this more evident than in the recent migration crisis.

But this is not just a question of skill or sector. Reflecting on refugee politics in Europe, Ida Danewid (2017, 10) argues:

The focus on the ontological condition of vulnerability (...) leads to (...) erasure of history, because it substitutes abstract humanity for historical humanity. In the context of the European migrant crisis, such a framing has led to an ethics based on mourning and welcoming migrants as universal humans – rather than as victims of a shared, global present built on colonialism, racism, and white supremacy. This choice is not innocent because, as Bhambra¹⁰ reminds us, 'addressing particular sets of connections leads to particular understandings', and as such it is imperative to consider 'why certain connections were initially chosen and why choosing others could lead to more adequate explanations'.

The various discursive and material practices analysed show, on the one hand, how the Organisation studied contributes to making Black African

women (even more) vulnerable and to defining the contours of a shameful femininity of migrant women at the border. At the same time as they enforce gendered and racialised norms around sexuality and motherhood, the missionaries of the Organisation also define the contours of model, white and pious femininity, reactivating colonial modes of relations. Nevertheless, nuances must be maintained in order not to essentialise the figures of nuns whose positions remain plural, dynamic and ambivalent. Nuns are not the focus of what is problematic in the humanitarian border, but they are indicative of problems inherent in humanitarianism in the context of border enforcement. While I have described violent practices emanating from those I met, I also point to the politicised speeches they can make, denouncing deadly migration policies and the hypocrisy of governments allying themselves in the massacre they can observe, in part, daily at the border. The problem that remains is that these actors/actresses – that never question the legitimacy of their presence – often simplify the understanding of the border situation of the many people (journalists, researchers, students, activists, politicians) and organisations (NGOs, churches, international cooperation agencies) who regularly visit and invite them to public events, because it is one of the very few humanitarian organisation operating on this border, and is in daily contact with the migrants present in the forest camps. There is a necessity to highlight the partial and biased vision given by these missionaries – who also act as guardians of this field – and which is often reflected in the media or political positions, especially on the Spanish side, that depoliticises the violence experienced by Black migrant women and men. We must also continue to problematise the aid provided because it is not only a tacit participation in repressive systems – here the migration and border regimes – but also, as I have shown, it reinforces the exercise of biopower by churches/humanitarian over people on the move from the global South. Further, church involvement in humanitarian aid to illegalised migrants seems to breathe new life into missionary congregations. Their activities can be thought as part of the ‘imperial debris’ (Stoler 2008) that litter and clutter the present, and that need more attention to be able to understand current border situations and the plural construction of racialised and gendered ‘border bodies’ (Guénif-Souillamas 2010).

Notes

1. The social action of the church is permitted by a royal decree dating from 1983.
2. Translation by the author of excerpts from the institutional page in Spanish: <https://www.msf.es/actualidad/msf-atiende-alto-numero-victimas-violencia-marruecos>.
3. See Yabiladi (2013).

4. Yabiladi (2013).
5. The divisions of the Catholic dioceses in follow the colonial-era divisions between Spanish and French protectorates. Thus, in North there are mainly Spanish clergy (as well as in the Sahara) and French clergy in the rest of Morocco.
6. The 'mapping' activity is justified by the staff as a way of having estimations of the number of people present in the forests, and the profiles (nationalities, gender, pregnancies, children, sick people), to adapt the interventions. This activity also helps the organisation to fulfil the reports meant to be sent to their donor (the Swiss cooperation agency at the time).
7. On this practice in the frame of the attempts to cross the border by sea, see Tyszler (2018, 2019a).
8. Abortion is prohibited after 40 days, except in cases of compelling necessity, which must be the subject of a debate.
9. About the migrant camps' organisation at the border and the figure of the chairman, see Tyszler (2019a, 2019b).
10. See Bhambra (2015).

Acknowledgements

I thank the participants of this research and particularly the people who shared their stories and points of view with me. I am grateful for useful comments on earlier version of this text provided by Jane Freedman, Nina Sahraoui, Lorena Gazzotti and Leslie Gross-Wyrtzen.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no quantitative datasets were generated during the study. The qualitative datasets are not publicly available for the respect and protection of the research subjects.

References

- Alioua, Mehdi, and Jean-Noël Ferrié, eds. 2017. *La nouvelle politique migratoire marocaine*. Maroc: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.
- Álvarez Chillida, Gonzalo. 2014. "Les Missions clarétaines et l'administration coloniale en Guinée espagnole." *Histoire, monde et cultures religieuses* 31 (3): 113–131.
- Andersson, Ruben. 2017. "Rescued and Caught: The Humanitarian-Security Nexus at Europe's Frontiers." In *The Borders of 'Europe': Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering*, edited by N. De Genova, 64–94. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bhambra, G. K. 2015. "Europe Won't Resolve the 'Migrant Crisis' until It Faces Its Own past." *The Conversation*, September 1.
- Butler, Judith, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, eds. 2016. *Vulnerability in Resistance*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Cuttitta, Paolo. 2015. "La frontière Lampedusa. Mises en intrigue du sécuritaire et de l'humanitaire." *Cultures & Conflits* 99–100: 99–115.
- Danewid, Ida. 2017. "White Innocence in the Black Mediterranean: Hospitality and the Erasure of History." *Third World Quarterly* 38 (7): 1674–1689.
- Dorlin, Elsa. 2006. *La matrice de la race. Généalogie sexuelle et coloniale de la nation française*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Dorlin, Elsa. 2017. *Se défendre*. Paris: La Découverte.
- El Qadim, Nora. 2015. *Le gouvernement asymétrique des migrations. Maroc/Union européenne*. Paris: Dalloz.
- Étienne, Agathe, and Julie Picard. 2012. "Réfugiés et migrants subsahariens 'en transit' au Caire: Le monopole chrétien de l'assistance ?" *A contrario* 18 (2): 61–77.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1952. *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Paris: Seuil.
- Fassin, Didier. 2005. "Compassion and Repression: The Moral Economy of Immigration Policies in France." *Cultural Anthropology* 20: 362–387.
- Ferrer-Gallardo, Xavier. 2008. "The Spanish-Moroccan Border Complex: Processes of Geopolitical, Functional and Symbolic Rebordering." *Political Geography* 27 (3): 301–321.
- Foucault, Michel. 1976. *Histoire de la sexualité, t. I: La volonté de savoir*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Freedman, Jane. 2018. "Amateur Humanitarianism, Social Solidarity and 'Volunteer Tourism' in the EU Refugee 'Crisis'." In *Humanitarian Action and Ethics*, edited by A. Ahmad and J. Smith, 94–112. London: Zed Books.
- Gabriell, João. 2016. "Combattre la racialisation des questions de genre et de sexualité à la racine." *Le blog de João*.
- GADEM. 2015. *Ceuta et Melilla: Centres de tri à ciel ouvert aux portes de l'Afrique*. Report. http://www.migreurop.org/IMG/pdf/fr_rapportconjoint_ceutamelilla_decembre2015.pdf.
- GADEM. 2018. *Coûts et blessures*. Report. https://www.lacimade.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/20180927_GADEM_Couts_et_blessures.pdf.
- Gazzotti, Lorena. 2019. "Deaths, Borders, and the Exception: Humanitarianism at the Spanish-Moroccan Border." *American Behavioral Scientist* 64 (4): 408–435.
- Geisser, Vincent. 2018. "L'Église et les catholiques de France face à la question migratoire: Le grand malentendu ?" *Migrations Société* 173 (3): 3–13.
- Guénif-Souilamas, Nacira. 2010. "Le corps-frontière, traces et trajets postcoloniaux." In *Ruptures postcoloniales*, edited by Nicolas Bancel, Florence Bernault, Ahmed Boubeker, Achille Mbembe, and Françoise Vergès, 217–229. Paris: La Découverte.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. 2005. *Black Sexual Politics. African Americans, Gender, and the new Racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Human Rights Watch. 2014. *Abused and Expelled III-Treatment of Sub-Saharan African Migrants in Morocco*. Report. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/02/10/abused-and-expelled/ill-treatment-sub-saharan-african-migrants-morocco>.
- Lugones, Maria. 2008. "The Coloniality of Gender." *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise* 2: 1–17.
- Malkki, Lisa. 1996. "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism and Dehistoricization." *Cultural Anthropology* 11 (3): 377–404.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2006. "Nécropolitique." *Raisons politiques* 21 (1): 29–60.
- Médecins Sans Frontières. 2013. *Violences, vulnérabilités et migration: bloqués aux portes de l'Europe. Un rapport sur les migrants subsahariens en situation irrégulière au Maroc*. Report. https://www.msf.fr/sites/default/files/informemarruecos2013_fr_0.pdf.
- Migreurop. 2007. *Guerre aux migrants. Le livre noir de Ceuta et Melilla*. Paris: Syllepse.
- Pallister-Wilkins, Polly. 2015a. "The Humanitarian Politics of European Border Policing: Frontex and Border Police in Evros." *International Political Sociology* 9 (1): 53–69.

- Pallister-Wilkins, Polly. 2015b. "The Politics of Illegality in the Humanitarian Borderwork of Médecins Sans Frontières." *Border Criminologies*.
- Pallister-Wilkins, Polly. 2017. "Médecins Avec Frontières and the Making of a Humanitarian Borderscape." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36 (1): 114–138.
- Pheterson, Gail. 1993. "The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness." *Social Text* 37: 39–64.
- Pourette, Dolores. 2010. "Maternité et sexualité des femmes africaines vivant avec le VIH en France: Préjugés et expériences." *L'Autre* 11 (3): 301–311.
- Prudhomme, Claude. 2004. *Missions chrétiennes et colonisation xvie-xviii siècles*. Paris: Le Cerf.
- Quijano, Anibal. 2007. "'Race' et colonialité du pouvoir." *Mouvements* 51 (3): 111–118.
- Reece, Jones, Corey Johnston, Wendy Brown, Gabriel Popescu, Polly Pallister-Wilkins, Alison Mountz, and Emily Gilbert. 2017. "Interventions on the State of Sovereignty at the Border." *Political Geography* 59: 1–10. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.02.006.
- Rossi, Beniamino, Luca Marin, and Pedro Vianna. 2012. "Les migrations: Un "signe des temps" qui interpelle l'Église catholique." *Migrations Société* 139 (1): 57–100.
- Scott-Smith, Tom. 2016. "Humanitarian Dilemmas in a Mobile World." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 35 (2): 1–21.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. (2002) 2013. *La chair de l'empire. Savoirs intimes et pouvoirs raciaux en régime colonial*. Paris: La Découverte. French translation of *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*. University of California Press.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2008. "Imperial Debris. Reflections on Ruins and Ruinations." *Cultural Anthropology* 23 (2): 191–219.
- Ticktin, Miriam. 2011. "How Biology Travels: A Humanitarian Trip." *Body & Society* 17 (2–3): 139–158.
- Tyszler, Elsa. 2018. "Sécurisation des frontières et violences contre les femmes en quête de mobilité." *Migrations Société* 173: 143–158.
- Tyszler, Elsa. 2019a. "From Controlling Mobilities to Control Over Women's Bodies: Gendered Effects of EU Border Externalization in Morocco." *Comparative Migration Studies* 7 (25).
- Tyszler, Elsa. 2019b. "The Performative Effects of the European War on Migrants. Masculinities and Femininities at the Moroccan-Spanish Border." *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research* 20 (1): 40–66.
- Tyszler, Elsa. 2019c. "Derrière les barrières de Ceuta & Melilla. Rapports sociaux de sexe, de race et colonialité du contrôle migratoire à la frontière maroco-espagnole [Behind the fence of Ceuta & Melilla. Social relations of gender, race and coloniality of migration control on the Moroccan-Spanish border]." PhD diss., University of Paris 8.
- Walters, William. 2011. "Foucault and Frontiers: Notes on the Birth of the Humanitarian Border." In *Governmentality: Current Issues and Future Challenges*, edited by U. Brockling, S. Krassman, and T. Lemke, 138–164. London: Routledge.
- Williams, Jill M. 2015. "From Humanitarian Exceptionalism to Contingent Care: Care and Enforcement at the Humanitarian Border." *Political Geography* 47 (1): 11–20.
- Yabiladi. 2013. "Migrants subsahariens: MSF quitte le Maroc et dénonce la recrudescence des violences [Sub-Saharan Migrants: MSF Leaves Morocco and Denounces the Resurgence of Violence]." March 13.