

## **CHAPTER 11**

### **THE BORDER MADE CITY: SIX VIGNETTES FROM, AND A RUN IN, CHELAS, LISBON**

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**Abstract**

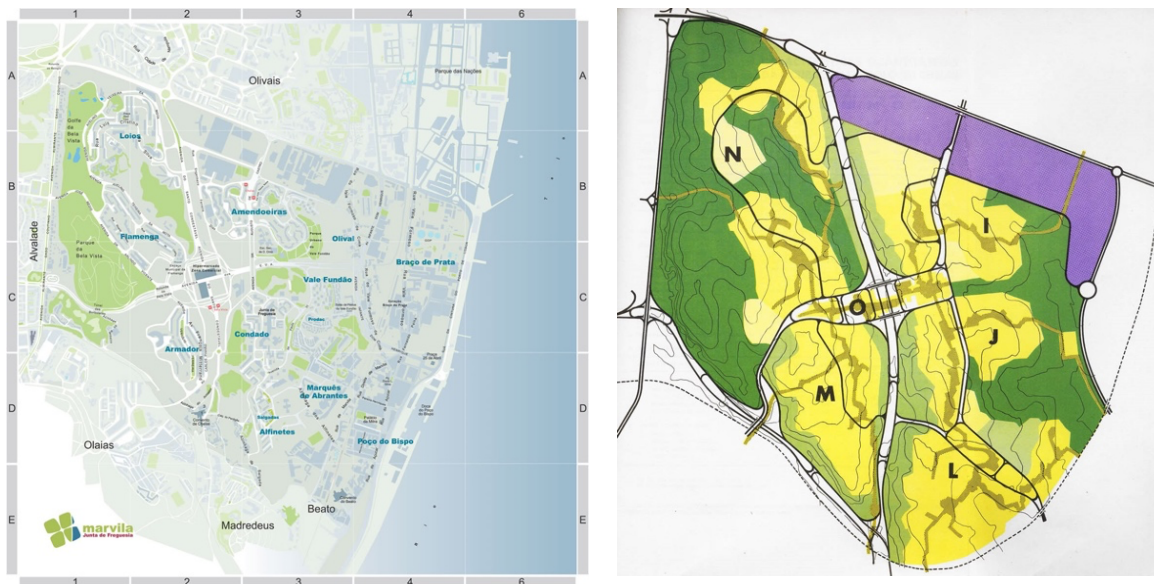
The aim of this article is to capture the idea of the urban border by painting a tour of Chelas — a geographically central district but mentally located by Lisboners in a peripheral space made up of representations of poverty, decay, danger and deviance. For that purpose, the piece is crafted with data from 2011, in the form of notes and photos collected at the time, but also with a different type of “data”, that is, collected through another, less common, form of (participant) observation: running. Through running, I have kept experiencing Chelas, observing its change in time and feeling its complex topography. By reflecting on my experience as runner in Chelas as a flow connecting the six vignettes that follow, I will try to think urban running as a way through, and beyond, the border.

**Keywords:** marginality, centre, fieldwork methods, running ethnography

## Enter Chelas

I arrived in Lisbon in April 2011 to carry out a second case study for my doctoral research about the relationship between fear of crime, rhetoric about security and urban planning (Tulumello, 2017). For purposes of comparison with my first case, the city of Palermo and particularly the district of the Zen (see Fava, 2007), I needed to explore the planning history of a district made up predominantly of public housing, one that would have experienced the cycles of investment, disinvestment, marginalisation and re-investment typical of many social housing districts around Europe. My local supervisor suggested the case of Chelas perfectly fitted my needs. The history of Chelas, a district hosting around 20 thousand inhabitants in the parish of Marvila, in a relatively central area in eastern Lisbon, indeed exemplifies dynamics that many similar places have experienced (see Tulumello, 2017, chapter 5).

*Figura 1 – Chelas in the Marvila parish (left) and in the 1964 masterplan. Sources: Junta de Freguesia de Marvila and Gabinete Técnico de Habitação, Câmara Municipal de Lisboa*



The masterplan for Chelas, part and parcel of a wider program for building public housing in Lisbon metro, was approved in 1964. The masterplan, which envisaged a population of 54 thousand inhabitants, was typical of a modernist conception of urban planning and of an age of large public investment in urban development: Concentrated high-rise housing made space for large open and green spaces, with road infrastructures as the connecting system.

As often happens with such huge developments, the problems—and, progressively, public disinvestment—came with the implementation of the plan: The construction was much slower than expected and it took 30 years for most housing to be built; the priority given to building housing rather than providing overall urban quality caused even bigger delays in the construction of services, facilities, infrastructures and public space. Moreover, Chelas became a place of concentrated poverty: Due to the overall scarce provision of public housing, a typical feature of the Portuguese welfare system, only the poorest sectors of the society have had access to public housing in time.<sup>1</sup> Like in many other places, poverty came to be associated with social problems; and the latter with marginalisation. In particular, the “Zona J”<sup>2</sup> started to be associated with the drug dealing trade;<sup>3</sup> which was indeed practiced in what came to be nicknamed the *corridor da morte* (death corridor), a sheltered public street that had been conceived as the most important public space of the neighborhood but became the perfect shelter for illegal activities. Zona J became “synonymous with the dangerous and marginal area that all big cities ‘must’ have” (Alves, Brasil & Seixas, 2001, p. 24). In time, the image of marginality spread to the entire district, geographically central but mentally located by Lisboners in a peripheral space made up of representations of poverty, decay, danger and deviance. The only contact the average Lisboner would have with Chelas was—and for most still is—through the massive road system that crisscrosses the district connecting the central residential and business districts with the airport, the bridge Vasco de Gama (which connects the city the southern bank of the river Tejo) and the Parque das Nações (the wealthy district at the north-eastern corner of Lisbon built for the Expo of 1998). For the average Lisboner, Chelas is beyond the limits of the city; and yet something that needs be crossed to move within the city, a buffer zone of sort.

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<sup>1</sup> As of 2011, public housing accounted for a mere 3 percent of the Portuguese housing stock (Pinto, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> In the original toponymy of the district, the neighborhoods of which Chelas is made up were identified as zonas (zones), labelled with letters (I, J, L, M, N1, N2, O).

<sup>3</sup> A search for ‘Zona J de Chelas’ in the most popular newspaper in Portugal, the *Correio da Manhã*, gives a picture of the image associated with the neighborhood. See [www.cmjornal.pt/pesquisa?q=Zona%20J%20de%20Chelas](http://www.cmjornal.pt/pesquisa?q=Zona%20J%20de%20Chelas).

*Figure 2 – Roads crossing Zona O. Source: author.*



When I carried out the fieldwork for my PhD, during the summer of 2011, some processes had already started to point toward a new direction for Chelas. A municipal office, *Viver Marvila*, had just been put in charge of refurbishing the built environment and public spaces. In the early 2010s, the municipality also decided to rename the *Zonas*, in most cases with the names of the former agricultural estates.<sup>4</sup> Lately, the southern part of Chelas—and particularly the area of *Marquês de Abrantes*, in former *Zona L*—has become a - of attention of the municipality, that has invested in artistic interventions<sup>5</sup> and included the area in the wider regeneration strategy for the eastern waterfront. In “after crisis” Lisbon, suddenly become a hub of global flows of tourism, real estate investment and knowledge intensive economy (see Rossi & Tulumello, 2018)—which are boosting processes of gentrification, touristification and financialisation (Cocola-Gant, 2018)—Chelas seems to be in the eye of the storm, an urban frontier for reinvestment, regeneration, and possibly gentrification, to be.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Amendoeiras (former *Zona I*), *Condado (J)*, *Marquês de Abrantes* and *Alfinetes (L)*, *Armador (M)*, *Flamenga (N1)*, *Lóios (N2)*, *Baixa de Chelas (O)*.

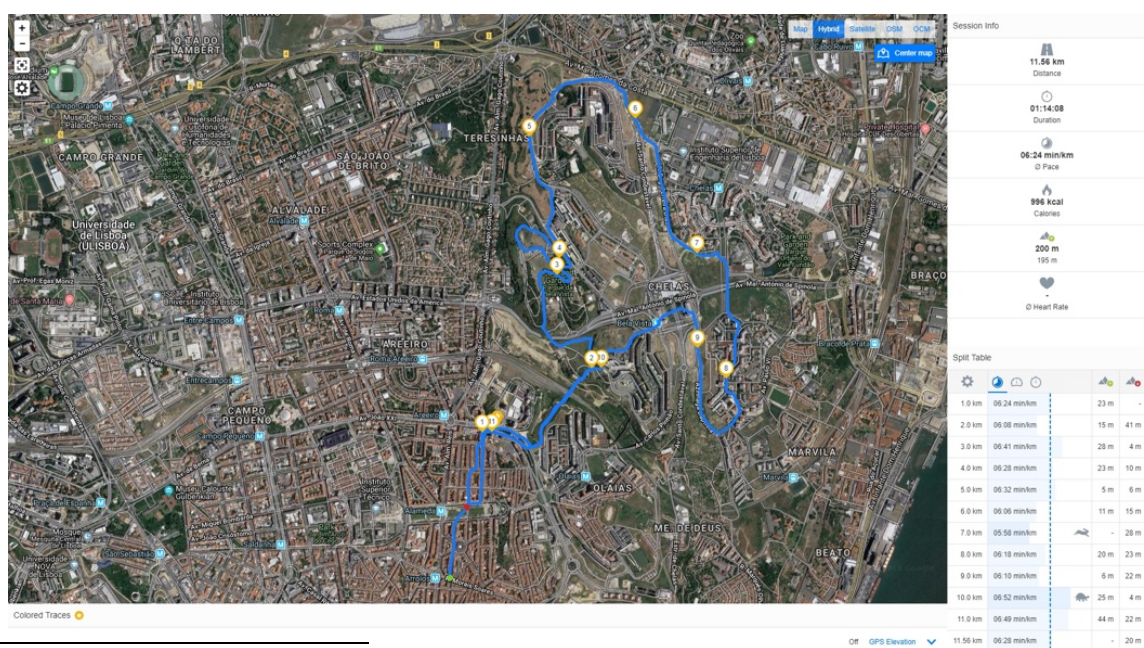
<sup>5</sup> Here was organised, for instance, the 2017 edition of the street art festival *Muro*.

<sup>6</sup> The metaphor about the “new urban frontier” was developed by Neil Smith (1996) in his classic work on gentrification in US cities. Smith has discussed the importance of the discursive production of “inner city” areas—that had been abandoned by public and private investment during the decades suburbanisation—as places to be regenerated and saved from decay for the promotion of a new cycle of accumulation through gentrification.

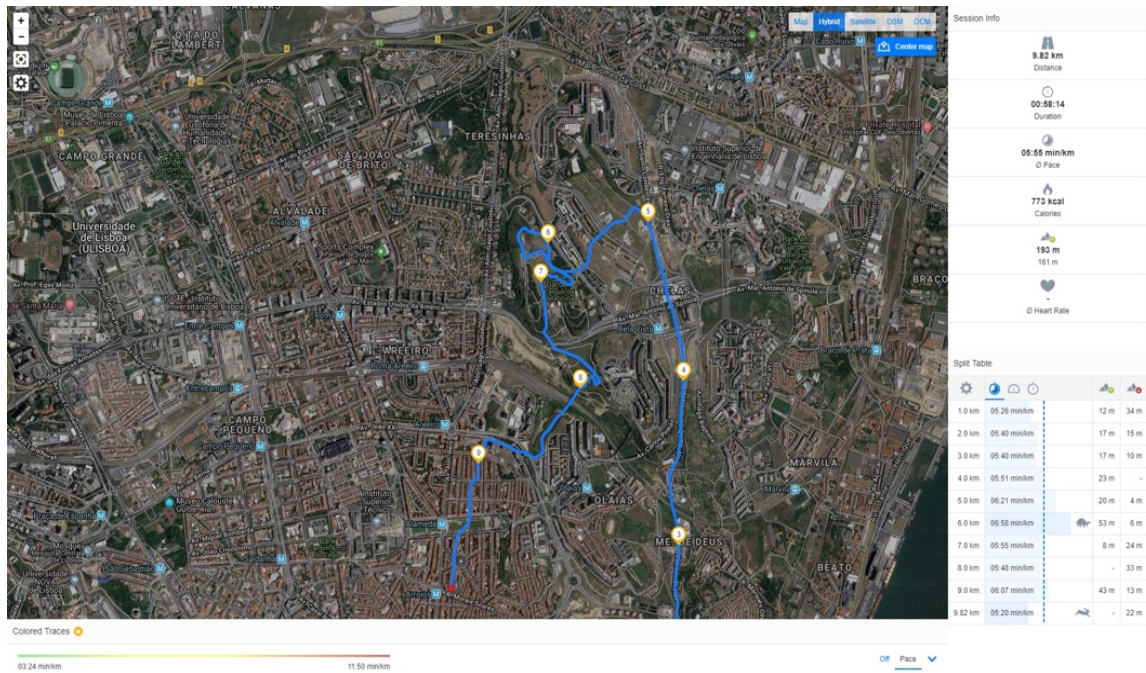
Margin, frontier, limit, buffer. This brief history has been pinpointed by terms that, in a way or another, recall the space of the border: Chelas as a border made (urban) space. Indeed, starting from the 1990s, several strands of urban, social and humanistic research have been conceptualising the border as something more complex than a line separating two polities, and depicting a proliferation of border space within cities and metropolises increasingly complex, porous and diverse (see, from different theoretical perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds, de Spuches, 1995; Muschamp, 1995; Soja, 1996; Zanini, 1997; Clement, 2004). In the decade that followed the abdication of the socialist block and the triumph of capitalist globalisation, amid increasing mobility of persons, goods and capitals, as well as accelerating paces of urbanisation and urban transformation, the concept of the “border within the city” was considered particularly apt to capture the turbulent transformations of, and increasing diversity, polarisation and inequalities within, urban spaces worldwide.

My purpose, in what follows, is to capture the idea of the urban border by painting a tour of Chelas, based on six vignettes from meetings during my PhD fieldwork in the spring of 2011—I make mostly use of the notes I had collected and photos I had taken at the time. However, I will also use of a different type of “data”, so to speak, collected through another, less common, form of (participant) observation: During the last three years, I have run hundreds of kilometers throughout the district, at virtually all times of the day and days of the week.<sup>7</sup>

*Figure 3 – Running in/through Chelas, two examples of running activities (February 2018 and May 2018).*



<sup>7</sup> For instance, in 2017 I have run a more than 400 kilometers (tracked through a GPS-app) in Chelas.



Running, Kay Syng Tan argued (2015), is a technology allowing to engage creatively with our everyday reality. Running is “an emergent process of sense-making, drawing an intimate geography of a city” (Barnfield, 2017, p. 372), in a state of increased alertness and clearer thinking boosted by the physical effort. However, examples of the use of running as ethnographical method are quite scarce, possibly also because of the difficulty to translate movement, and bodily experiences, into written language (Markula & Denison, 2000). Through running, I have kept experiencing Chelas after my fieldwork, observing its change in time and feeling its complex topography. By reflecting on my experience as runner in Chelas as a flow connecting the six vignettes that follow, I will try to think urban running as a way through, and beyond, the border.

### Six vignettes from the urban border<sup>8</sup>

This trip starts from Zona I, the first neighborhood to have been built during the 1970s, and the one where a better integration between residential and other activities has been accomplished. Zona I is also the neighborhood that shows least social problems and where residents are more satisfied (see Viver Marvila, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> The vignettes are more extended versions of those I have previously used in support of an article on Chelas (Tulumello, 2015).

Chelas is marked by several internal frontiers, it is a place where segregation has a multi-scalar nature (cf. Picone, 2016), as the following conversation captures.

***Zona I / Amendoeiras.** The ground floors of the dwellings surrounding the pedestrian area are pinpointed of bars. I enter one and ask for a coffee. The bartender, a middle aged woman, is talking with an acquaintance of her, complaining about the municipality and its “architects”. Hearing this, I laugh, and she asks me whether I am an architect myself. I nod and explain that I am here for a research project about Chelas. The daughter of the bartender, who is in the bar as well, suddenly intervenes with a disparaging comment about the district. The mother, annoyed by the comment, reacts, stating she prefers living in Chelas, where people have social ties, rather than in Arrentela (a neighborhood in Seixal, a city in the southern part of Lisbon metro), a “dormitory town”, in her words, where she used to live before. There, she says, “if you feel sick in the street, they would let you die”. In Chelas people know each other, she says. Still, they all agree that the Zona J is a bad neighborhood. The daughter calls Zona J “Benetton”, making fun of the architect who, during the 1990s, suggested painting the dwellings in intense colors as a way to strengthen the identity of the neighborhood.*

Zona I is the neighborhood where the social composition is more mixed and where a middle-class has germinated. Indeed, the bartender had arrived to Zona I, where she became a small entrepreneur, in a process of self-promotion. So it should not surprise that she may fall in the trap of stigmatisation—by pointing the “most problematic” neighborhood of the “problematic” district they live in. At the same time, this conversation shows another divide, the generational one. Even in the “least problematic” neighborhood of the city, youths seem to feel a particular burden. Indeed, they are most exposed to the stigmatisation of Chelas, for instance when they shop for job—it is not uncommon the practice of masking one’s residence to prospective employers.

So let us move south, and enter the famous, and “problematic”, Zona J, which is also the neighborhood where many immigrants from former Portuguese colonies settled after the 1974 democratic revolution and end of the colonial empire.

***Zona J / Condado.** I am at the western edge of the neighborhood in a widening that overlooks the Chelas Valley that cuts the district from North to South. A group of males, adults and young adults, two blacks and three whites, are grouped at the margin of the roadway.*



*A couple of them are extracting metal components from electronic wastes, another is preparing a barbeque. I am taking photos of the dwellings and the valley, and a black man from a Portuguese speaking African country (as I will understand by his accent) comes toward me, and asks what I am doing and if I am working for the municipality. After I have explained what I am doing, he starts telling me of his life in Zona J, where he moved 14 years before. A white man from the group jokes: “why don’t you go back to your country and stop stealing [referring to unemployment subsidies] from us?” The black man answers: “it’s your fault! You Portuguese came and screwed my land!” Then, speaking to me, adds: “I was used to work, I have built several dwellings, here in Portugal, in the Expo [the 1998 world exhibition], in Campo Pequeno square. When I was working, the pneumatic drill would never rest!” All white men joins the joke, but are not serious, they are making fun of the former builder and of the second black guy. I ask them about the Zona J, and they all agree on the physical decay of their neighborhood, the need for the refurbishment of the dwellings.*

Figure 4 – At the western edge of Zona J. Source: author.



Though Chelas is not particularly “diverse” in its overall composition, Zona J is.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In Portugal, census data about racial self-perception are not collected, so there is no way to actually calculate the “racial composition” of a given place. Being most black residents originals from former Portuguese colonies, nationality data can be used as a proxy—which does not include Portuguese

It is quite obvious that its “racial” diversity is not one of the components of the production of the discourse about the “marginal” and “dangerous” Chelas. The vignette above, however, encapsulates some specific characterisations of issues linked with racialisation in Lisbon metro, that is, the absence of explicit racial conflicts (cf. Malheiros & Mendes, 2007). At the same time, we know that racialisation plays indeed a role in the social fabric, for instance being at the core of territorial marginalisation and stigmatisation (ibidem) and of police violence (see Marcelino, 2018). At the same time, this vignette shows the intersection of race with class in social (re)production in Chelas. The settlement of people with African descent was part and parcel of the concentration, in Zona J, of extremely poor populations, which is itself one of the reasons for the absent establishment of a local economic fabric and the vulnerability of the social fabric to illegal activities like drug dealing.

The Zona J has been changing much since the “rough” 80s and 90s, and new populations, together with new challenges, settled in more recently.

*Zona J / Condado. I am now on the eastern edge of the neighborhood, in an area overlooking the river Tejo toward the West and South. I am taking photos of a recently built, fortified dwelling, when an elderly woman approaches me. She keeps repeating: “The bunker! The bunker!” I ask what she means and she starts complaining with the building, for its fortress-like appearance, and with its inhabitants. She complains that the newcomers do not take part in neighborhood’s life. Moreover, the management of the bunker obtained from the municipality to move the garbage cans from their side of the street to the other, right next were the woman lives. When I ask if she feels safe in Zona J, she first says so, but then reminds once she suffered and attempted robbery and says she is considering buying a pepper spray. Then she praises long-term residents for their care of public spaces. For instance, together with other neighbors, she takes care of the flowerbeds in the courtyard of their dwelling. However, the woman complains, youths are less respectful of public spaces and throw garbage on the flowerbeds.*

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blacks. The parish of Marvila, overall, has a lower rate of foreign nationals than Lisbon, according to 2011 Census data.

Figure 5 – The “bunker”, Zona J. Source: author.



In time, the statistical composition of the local social fabric has been changing, also because of the influx of different classes. However, this did not automatically fostered an actual “social mix”. Quite the opposite, wealthier newcomers have in many cases preferred to live a separated life within the district, as exemplified by the case of the “bunker”. I afterwards found out the “bunker” is not one of the *condomínios fechados* (the Portuguese version of gated communities) that have been built in Chelas (see below). Rather, the “bunker” is a co-operative owned dwelling. Indeed, during the 1990s the municipality has supported a number of housing co-ops, in Chelas (and particularly in Zonas J and L) and elsewhere in the city. However, these new groups, arriving in a deeply stigmatised area, have tended to seclude themselves and not take part of community life, confirming the doubts about social mix, *per se*, as a panacea for urban problems—at least in absence of strong strategies and policies for local development and urban regeneration.

So let us move toward the western side of Chelas for the next vignette.

*Zona M / Armador. I am walking through the pedestrian area in between residential dwellings. The ground floors of the dwellings is pinpointed of closed shops, a butcher, a fishery, a fruit shop, a bar. The bad shape of the flooring contributes to the sense of abandonment of the area. Two women are sitting on a bench and, having seen me taking photos, they ask why. Once I have answered, they ask me to report the decay of public spaces, and especially the flooring, which have not been taken care of since the shops have been closing, that is, after the shopping mall in Zona O had been opened. I ask them why people of the neighborhood stopped buying from local shops: “In the hypermarket you can find everything in the same place”, they say. Afterwards they will complain how hard is to go shopping to the mall, walking back home for hundred meters in slope, carrying grocery bags. I ask whether the retailers had tried to associate to face the crisis but the answer is negative. One of the retailers had asked the municipal company responsible for the management of council housing and of the commercial spaces to lower rents (around 400 euros per month, at the time over 80% of national minimum wage), but was unsuccessful.*

Figure 6 – Walking uphill toward Zona O. Source: author.



The Zona O, also known as Baixa de Chelas, had been imagined, in the original masterplan, as the hearth of the district, its “ - ”, where most public facilities and amenities would have been concentrated. However, when it was built (as late as the 1990s), Zona O became a privatised development made up of four introverted residential towers for the middle class<sup>10</sup> and a shopping mall with hypermarket.

<sup>10</sup>Once I met a young woman living in one of the towers, who admitted she has never in her life got out of the Zona O in Chelas, and that she would just move to and from other areas in the city by metro during the day (a station is located right in Zona O) and cab during the night.

Inevitably, the mall restructured the shopping habits of large portions of the district, offering a particularly stark example of the capacity of malls to harm local economic fabrics, bringing decay and abandonment in the process. At the same time, the Zona O is not really well connected to the surrounding neighborhoods. Most people would move by car throughout Chelas, but who has not access to one—including many housewives—ends up being forced walking steep slopes to buy the groceries.

So let us move slightly north, toward Zona N1, and particularly the so-called Malha H, an award-winning block of public housing made up of two belts of dwellings enclosing a semi-sheltered pedestrian area.

*Zona N1 / Flamengo. I am walking in the pedestrian area. A group youths is chatting and relaxing next to the stairs that give access to the upper floors. While I am taking some photos, one of them asks me what I am doing. Once I have answered, he replies that I should figure out how to make their neighborhood better. In the meanwhile, he and some other guys get up and approach me. The boy who first talked to me – he looks like the leader of the group – makes more questions, he seems to want to be sure I am really not working for the municipality. For the first time in Chelas, I feel uncomfortable and even slightly unsafe, like I had entered a space I am not desired into: I go away, refraining from taking any more photos.*

Figure 7 – Malha H, Zona N1. Source: author.



In its simplicity, this vignette encapsulates many issues. First, the dislike of the “municipality” - I have lost count of the times I had to declare I did not work for any municipal service, in Chelas - is quite telling of the distrust toward institutions in places like Chelas. Second, Malha H is among the developments where the architectural design completely adhered to the idea of the masterplan to organize the entire districts around linear belts of dwellings enclosing pedestrian areas. This has created a dichotomy between the spaces used by visitors and passers-by (vehicular streets surrounding the residential areas) and those used by residents, and particularly youths (the inner pedestrian areas). Indeed, my feeling of being an intruder was multiplied by this architectural configuration; and had this same event happened in an area with passers-by, I would probably had felt differently.

It takes less than 100 meters to cross the nth “frontier” within Chelas and get to DueDomani, one of the *condomínios fechados* that have recently been built in Chelas.

*Zona N1 / Flamenga. The condominium is not walled but surrounded by a 1-meter-tall fence, which seems to mark a boundary, a no-trespassing sign of sort, more than guarantee any sort of “security”, which is rather provided by CCTV and private security guards. Indeed, I could get into the development, walk around the parking and then go out without been stopped. I am next to one of the “gates”, when I met an elderly couple getting out to the street. They look askance at me. I approach and explain I am a researcher. The woman keeps gazing me as a danger, the man says they are in a rush. When they are out, she asks him “aren’t you going to lock the gate?” He answers he is not and they walk away arm by arm, an umbrella protecting them from Lisbon’s May sun.*

Figure 8 – Next to DueDomani, Zona N1. Source: author.



Though being advertised as a gated community, Due Domani is clearly not a hyper-securitised compound. This is a particularly explicit version of what seems however to be a defining feature of *condomínios fechados* in Portugal (see Tulumello & Colombo, 2018).

*Condomínios fechados* have long been more often about social (re)production than actual “security”, that is, an advertising strategy to appeal certain classes, interested in acquiring a status as “middle” or “middle-high” classes, but without the means to access luxury property tenure. In this sense, the 1-meter-tall fence is more about emphasising a frontier than actually protecting—after all, Lisbon is one of the safest cities in the world. This is further evident in the advertising of DueDomani, which never referred to “Chelas”, but to the “central” location, the accessibility via road infrastructures, or other toponymies such Bela Vista.

Fast forward a few years, and the name “Chelas” has disappeared from the communication about the events and the regeneration programs that the municipality has been promoting in the southern part of the district—the term used is systematically Marvila, which includes the eastern part of the parish, the former industrial waterfront at the core of recent gentrification.<sup>11</sup> After the “Zonas”, also “Chelas” may disappear: (Stigmatising) names as the new urban frontier?

### **Close: running the border**

Running is a unique way to experience the city—and this is why I have recently never travelled without running shoes in my bag. Not only does running give me direct experience of wider parts of the city than those I can walk, but the physical effort also forces me to sense the (im)material topography of space. For instance, suffering uphill and speeding downhill is an effective way to understand the hardship of having to walk hundred meters uphill to bring groceries home. Or, running in Chelas means to continuously negotiate with the dominance of car in space, forcing to feel, and understand, the way modernist urbanism has been privileging certain actors over others. More, feeling at every step the materiality of pavements, and through them the transition between built, unbuilt and green spaces, is a direct embodiment of the effects of the spatial configuration over life in Chelas.

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<sup>11</sup> This has been confirmed to me by a researcher of the local team of H2020 project Rock – Cultural Heritage Leading Urban Futures. In Lisbon, a university-municipality partnership is developing a regeneration strategy for the eastern waterfront, including Zona L of Chelas.

I prefer to run at morning, before work, and so I have more often crossed Chelas in full light. Most times I enter Chelas from its western side, crossing the pedestrian bridge that connects with the neighborhood of Olaias, and into the Bela Vista Park. The first time I got there at night, I turned back: “Thou shalt not enter parks (especially in Chelas) at night!” Later, I did.

The first times, I must admit, I have been running while keeping all senses especially aware, trying to anticipate any unexpected movement in the bushes. I may have studied Chelas for years, learning it is not any sort of “dangerous” place, and humbly tried to contribute to overcoming the stigmatising rhetoric; but this does not make a totally rational, rhetoric-immune being of me, of course. No matter the only two times I felt unsafe in Chelas, except for the episode in Malha H I just recalled, were in full day, when unleashed dogs almost attacked me while running—once in Bela Vista Park, another time in between Zona I and J. Still, night *plus* park *plus* Chelas was a quite strong affective border to cross, and it took several runs to overcome it. Urban running, as Andrea Mughi Brighenti and Adrea Pavoni have poignantly suggested for urban climbing, “is not a reckless practice, but one that highly values security” (2018, p.77)—and is hence a particularly appropriate way to understand the nexus between space and feelings of safety. Paraphrasing again Brighenti and Pavoni (*ibidem*, *idem*), running is an art of thresholds, of negotiating at the border between different conditions of materiality and affect.

The same route I have depicted in six vignettes above takes less than half a hour to a decently trained runner. Of course, while running one cannot stop and talk with people—running ethnography seems at first to be less about the *ethnos* (the people) and more about the *graphía* (the description). Still, one can join the dots, crossing the thresholds among these very episodes and seeking a wider understanding of people (including the runner) in space and place. Running in general, and running in Chelas in particular, is in way running against borders, be they more affective (“Bela Vista Park at night, really?”) or material (“Will this car really not stop?”). At the same time, running has meant, for me, progressively crossing those very borders, step after step, breath after breath. Of course, I am not advocating running is a *panacea* for stigmatised places—of, for that matter any oppositional action of sort (cf. Brighenti & Pavoni, 2018). I am perfectly aware I run taking advantage of my experience as researcher and my previous “rigorous” knowledge of Chelas. Still, it was through running that I was able to break the dichotomy between respecting the border and crossing the border: By running the border, I have eventually found myself *in* Chelas.



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