This article looks at the works of several artists who examine in their films the emergence of new sociocultural spaces born from immigration that cannot be configured—limited—by traditional geopolitical borders. Instead, these spaces are drafted by the experiences and stories of the people who are migrating to and from them. Because such spaces shift constantly, dynamics of adaptation and transformation are an integral part of their definitions. Cultural productions that reflect on this situation are located at the nexus of this dynamic and harbor important messages for the foreseeable future. Indeed, the displacement of populations—forced or voluntary—will increase dramatically in the decades to come, whether triggered by economic crisis, climatic catastrophes, or wars.

The crisis created by the increasing displacement of populations, trespassing over national borders, results in part of a phenomenon often described as the global North–South divide. In African countries such as Mali or Niger, which suffer from extreme climactic conditions and poverty, immigrants hoping for better lives for themselves and to support the families they leave behind brave the dangers of sea crossing from the West African coast, pay exorbitant prices to smugglers who promise to bring them safely to Paris, London, Rome, or Berlin, where they endure precarious life conditions.

Since the 1950s, reflections about postcolonial and postmigrant identities, themes examining immigration, the tension between the homeland and Europe, as well as problematic politics of development instituted in Africa by the former colonial powers, have been examined in films by well-known directors such as Muhammad Abderrahman Tazi from Morocco, Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina from Algeria, Ousmane Sembène and Djibril Diop Mambéty from Sénégal, or Souleymane Cissé from Mali. A younger generation of African filmmakers continue to bring these issues in film and video, as for example the recent film La Pirogue by Moussa Touré presented at the Cannes film festival in 2012, which told of the ordeal of thirty men on board a small fisherman boat trying to reach the Canary Islands.

The emergence of new cultural spaces and their relation to immigration have become central themes in the current discourses of the contemporary social and cultural arena. Several exhibitions have focused on these themes. “Continental Drifts: Contemporary Time-Based Works of Africa,” was an exhibition curated by Mary (Polly) Nooter Roberts at the Fowler Museum in spring of 2009 that addressed themes of memory, exile, and the experience of dislocation between the African continent and Europe in works by Yto Barrada, Berni Searle, Alfredo Jaar, Claudia Cristovao, and Georgia Papageorge. Similar themes and issues were explored in “Intense Proximité” at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in spring 2012, or in “Lines of Control,” at the Herbert H. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, also 2012, or in the recent programs of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. Most recently, in spring 2014 the New Museum in New York presented “Here and Elsewhere,” an extensive exhibition featuring the work of contemporary artists from the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe, expanding on the notion of plural identities and the political and social issues (including immigration) that define contemporary societies of the Arab world.

Here I investigate the works of Katia Kameli, Zineb Sedira, Mounir Fatmi, Mohamed Bourouissa, Yto Barrada, and Lamia Joreige who—by birth, choice, and throughout their lives—navigate in the interstitial spaces that emerged from patterns of immigration. Some of these artists were born in France to immigrant parents, others in Algeria or Morocco, countries whose long, entangled histories with the French colonial power have
been determinant in assigning the place and values of immigrants within French society (on the history of the Maghrib, see "Le Maghreb Colonial" 2006; Laroui 2008). Similar situations exist throughout the European Union, whose economic power has long been founded on the cheap labor of millions of immigrants from many countries, including sub-Saharan countries and, in the case of Germany, Turkey.

Within this context, the artists in discussed here contribute a reflection about the politics and consequences of immigration. They are witnesses as well as actors in the formation of transcultural spaces, and while their works seem extraordinarily pertinent in the current context of globalization, they also respond to the essentialist positions that have recently been gaining strength, advocated by some fundamentalist movements and some politicians in Europe and elsewhere as an answer to the increasing movements of population.

In their films, Katia Kameli, Zineb Sedira, Mounir Fatmi, Mohamed Bourouissa, Yto Barrada, and Lamia Joreige look critically at the construction of such spaces, whose histories are enmeshed with those of colonial and neocolonial powers. Ideas such as transition, transgression, and complexity help define these spaces born from forced or voluntary migrations. In their practice, these artists adopt a fluid expressive mode, which characterizes the spaces they describe, the composite quality of the narratives and the aesthetic of their films.
In various ways, their works testify to the alteration of sociocultural and geopolitical spaces once conceived as discrete and homogenous entities—if such concepts ever had relevance—and defined as nation-states. They question the relevance of national boundaries, a notion becoming more and more obsolete, which leads them to explore and map experimental cartographies. As the artists examine the process of sociocultural juncture in their videos, they also discuss critically the diversity of scenarios generated by this (dis)junction and take into question the globalization of economies and the politics of immigration that are critical to the understanding of this process.

Kameli, Sedira, Fatmi, Bourouissa, Barrada, and Joreige also dismantle a number of categories that are routinely used to characterize the Maghrib and some Middle Eastern cultures, promoted by news media and conservative politicians alike. Since 2001, Arab countries have been put on the map of the war on terror, where they are categorized as allies or enemies. This binary opposition has contributed to fuel pervasive and irrational fears about Islam that in turn have served the ideology and means of the war on terror. Such essentialist reduction helps generate the political discourses used to regroup as many countries and cultures as possible into disposable targets.

The critical strategies adopted by these artists resist also the myth of a free and open global system, imposed via the neoliberal agendas of the larger world economies and fostered by the news media and the mass usage of new technologies of communication. While these help develop an illusion of equality as they promote the vision of an open world, they erase, in many cases, the growing number of geopolitical crisis and emergency situations. The tendency to level up the diversity of geopolitical histories further accelerates the process of their erasure through a constant and rapid fire of news, video clips, and soon-forgotten bits of information.

**WAR: FORCED DISPLACEMENTS**

In *A Journey*, a film-essay from 2006, the filmmaker Lamia Joreige explores the issues of the forced displacement of her family from Palestine to Lebanon and that of war and memory (Figs. 1–2). The film remembers the journey of Joreige’s grandmother, who, in 1930—she was then 20—moved from Palestine to Lebanon to get married. After the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and the ensuing war, her entire family was forced into exile and joined her in Lebanon, as did a large part of the Palestinian population.
The opening sequence of the film speaks of a time, before the war, when the borders in the region were open and shows images of workers, as a voice-over recalls: “They travelled far away for months, to Egypt, Iraq, Iran, not worrying about borders, it was all one territory to them . . .”

Nostalgia and the memory of a world that no longer exists are central elements of the film as A Journey reflects on the fragmentation of the physical and political space and its effect on memory and history. The film triggers questions about the war, political engagement, and the difficulty of representing the history of a country and of multiple partisan wars that have destroyed it.6

The war in Lebanon and the partition of the country ended with the division of Beirut into various fighting enclaves and of the country into regions held by different factions (Palestinian, Syrian, and Christian forces). This is echoed in the memories of the population and is central in the history of Joreige family’s journey. Joreige says, “Alternating documents, Super 8mm films, photographs, interviews, landscapes and voice over, I trigger a reflection on history and the conflicts in the region, as well as a reflection on time, disappearance and loss.”7

As Lamia Joreige films the coastline between the border of Israel and Lebanon, she retraces the steps taken by her family going into exile, while at the same time she recalls the 2006 war that destroyed Southern Lebanon: “The South is no longer liberated. It has been destroyed. The similarity between the present situation and events decades ago … shakes my understanding of history, as well as my relationship to it” (Joreige 2006:241).

An acute sense of fragmentation is also present in another project: Objects of War, started in 2000 and still in progress, in which the filmmaker asks different persons to select an object that bears a relation to the Lebanese civil war, based on their memory of it, and to describe this relation on film (Figs. 3–6).

The interviews reveal the difficulty—at times the impossibility—and the poignancy of comprehending the war and retelling its story. The testimonies expose the tension between history and memory, between forgetfulness and remembrance, and between individual and collective memory. The attempt to remember the past rests on a process of collage that brings together different views and versions of the war, comparable to the fragmentation of the diverse political bodies that occupied Lebanon for fifteen years and similar to the breakdown of the geopolitical space—the land—of the region.

The narrative in A Journey echoes the recent wars and political developments in northern parts of Africa and the Middle East that have triggered important displacements of populations.8 Early on, the 2011 revolution in Tunisia sparked the immigration of thousands of Tunisians to Italy, in the hope to escape the violent armed conflicts.9 The situation was dire. As the Italian government overtly panicked, the French government threatened to close France’s borders with Italy in fear of an influx of refugees.10

This recent crisis provoked massive movements of populations throughout the region and towards Europe that superseded de facto the concept of nation-state and borders. In response, however, the countries involved—in this case, Italy and France—attempted to defend their borders by blocking access to the refugees and invoking the principle of sovereignty. Their discourse raised the double specter of unemployment and insecurity in order to justify the refusal to receive the members of displaced communities.11 During the last decade, France’s discourse on immigration has also taken a radical turn, and immigrants are routinely portrayed as threats to the idea of national identity and “cultural integrity” as well as to the economy. It has allowed the strengthening of the extreme right political wing, a development that is witnessed throughout the European Union.12

These positions illustrate the inability of nation-states to redefine and reinvent themselves and their refusal to acknowledge the crucial contributions made by immigrants to the very construction of European economies and societies.
Katia Kameli’s *Dissolution* (2009) depicts a maritime landscape (Fig. 7). The film is sequenced in four looped sections and focuses on one boat, possibly a ferry boat, slowly entering a port, followed by its docking by a tugboat. The filmed space stands almost immobile and yet is subtly transformed by the slow coming and going of the boat. As it progresses through the frame, it leaves behind still images of other boats anchored in the distance, the only other movement being created by the smoke of two chimneystacks. The slow-paced images and diffused light give a contemplative quality to *Dissolution*.

The theme of the maritime passage from Algeria and Morocco to France and the image of a boat are parts of Zineb Sedira’s film *Middle Sea* (2008). On the waters of the Mediterranean, aboard a passenger boat, we look at the wake traced by the engine in the water and follow a lone passenger walking through the ferry during the night passage, the length of which it usually takes to go from one shore to the other (Fig. 8).

Both *Dissolution* and *Middle Sea* use the boat as a metaphor for the immigrants’ journey from the north shores of Africa to those of southern Europe. The trace of the engine in the water writes the stories of millions who, for several decades, have crossed the Mediterranean and continue to do so. Both films share a poetic language that uses the symbolism of water and time to describe the experience of transition for generations of workers from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, who left their home and families and boarded ferries in search of an often-illusory better life. While providing dependably cheap labor to France, they suffered economic hardship, isolation, and racism. In response, North African immigrants created shelters within the sociocultural system of their host country—through language, music, and other cultural markers—that became islands of resistance, protecting beliefs and fragmented notions of identity.

Fundamental to the various immigrant narratives, including those from the Maghrib, are the notions of in-betweeness (see Babha 1994) and plural identity, articulated through notions of in/out, belonging/not belonging, and shaped by a desire for—or resistance to—adopting or rejecting the cultural signs of a successful integration. Conveying a sense of in-betweeness is fundamental to Kameli: “Being in between and every kind of hybridization are central motifs in my work. This is because of my own history. I have always traveled back and forth between many different countries” (Schmickl 2008).

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha pointedly underlined the conflicts inherent to this situation:

> It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed “in-between,” or in excess of, the sum of the “parts” of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable? (Babha 1994:2)

Kameli further expands on this notion in *Bledi, A Possible Scenario* (2005), in which she attempts to trace her own journey back to Algeria and follows the trail leading to the town where her father was born. Interspersed are interviews with young Algerian men and women who discuss how they see their future and the difficulty they face in attempting to change what they call the “old mentalities” and who reflect on their own existences between two cultures, different generations, and the conflicts they experience.

The film address the in/ability to return, the im/possibility of being home again, and describes a situation where nothing can ever be the same, mixed with the memories of something that cannot exist anymore, a complex experience harnessed by a large number of immigrants that at times is used by sociologists and politicians as the illustration of an unsuccessful integration. Indeed, one main argument of those who describe immigra-
tion as a danger posed to the integrity of the host society is that immigrants do not make enough effort, if any, to adapt to its culture; in other words, they refuse to integrate. As Okwui Enwezor pointed out on the occasion of the exhibition “Intense Proximité”: “The political and cultural elites will say, ‘the problem with immigrants is they are not integrated enough.’ But no one asks what it means for the immigrant to forego his or her previous historical coordinates, that is to unlearn their own cultural formations” (Enwezor 2012:50).

True enough, the process of losing one’s identity and becoming invisible through the exclusion of one’s history and culture describes the experience of many immigrants and characterizes a deterministic relationship between cultures, based on imposed power and the conflicts resulting from this situation. Artists who work to elucidate this relation create a resistance to the process of exclusion as they describe a sociocultural and political space—taking often a transgressive quality—in which immigrants establish the reality of their experience and help revise the criteria of this power relation.

**Transgressive Journeys: Transgressive Spaces**

The Moroccan artist Yto Barrada did make the journey back home. After living and studying in Paris and New York, she came back to Tangiers after a sixteen-year-long absence. In a 2006 interview (Barrada and Collins 2006), she stresses the difference between her own situation, which she considers to be privileged because of the dual citizenship that allows her to move back and forth between France and Morocco; in comparison, she explains the difficulties faced by Moroccans who want to go work in Europe and are faced with stricter and stricter immigration policies, especially since the signature of the Schengen Agreement in the early 1990s. These measures have failed, however, to significantly diminish the numbers of immigrants, but rather have made their journey more perilous. One regularly hears on the news tragic stories of rafts and overloaded boats sinking in the Straits or the nearby ocean (see Khachani 2006).

Barrada’s work engages with the particular geographical position of the city of Tangiers, located just across the Strait of
Gibraltar from Spain, separating Africa and Europe. The Strait has been and continues to be one of the three largest ports of entry of illegal immigrants to Europe, along with the Turkey-Greece border and the coasts of Italy (Khachani 2006:8). In The Strait Project: A Life Full of Holes (1998–2004), the artist addresses the situation of Tangiers as a place of transit in series of photographs depicting people and places and emphasizes the stark reality of their situation, as they go by their daily occupations or endlessly wait for passage.

Tangiers’ economy is driven by tourism, and the disparity between the life of most of its inhabitants and that of the visitors is glaring. Tangiers is the third largest city in Morocco, and although its government advertises the existence of sizable urban development funds, there are no film houses, concert halls, or public libraries for the local population. (In response to the situation, Yto Barrada co-founded the Cinémathèque de Tanger in 2006). Instead, the local government uses these funds, along with foreign investments, to fuel the rapid growth of the tourism industry and develop luxury hotels and seaside resorts meant to attract Westerners who are free to travel, as opposed to the Moroccans living near the Strait.

The Smuggler, a silent video from 2006, features an older woman, T.M., who makes regular trips to Ceuta, a Spanish enclave in northern Morocco, from Tangiers to smuggle fabric, clothing and brand-name goods. Because of her age and appearance, T.M. does not get stopped and searched at the border with Spain. The film shows her meticulously adding layers over layers of fabric around her waist and shoulders, tied with ropes (Figs. 9–10). When she is done, she covers herself with a djellaba. The Smuggler is filmed in an undefined space, stagelike, on which T.M. appears to perform for the viewer. It looks like a daring act of magic. In the second part of the video, T.M. is shown slowly and methodically taking off the layers of cloth. In the end, she stands, hands folded, watching the camera. The silence and her gestures make the process look like a ritual. The Smuggler can be interpreted as a commentary on illegal immigration and the invisibility that is often a characteristic of immigrants’ life, although here invisibility is seen as an advantage, a strategy of dissimulation that can be interpreted as a form of resilience and resistance.

The Magician (2005) casts Abdelouahid El Hamri as “Sinbad of the Straits,” performing magic tricks in front of the camera (Fig. 11). In what seems to be a counterpoint to The Smuggler and the trick performed with the fabrics, Barrada filmed actual acts of magic. The Magician resolves symbolically the difficulty of moving from one point to another, of circulating and travelling, as the performer allows objects to transform from one state to another and to go from one place to another. During the performance, the magician fails a few of his tricks, which can be interpreted as a reflection on the uncertainty of his life and a metaphor for the difficulties to immigrate.

Themes of resilience and reinvention resound historically throughout the communities of immigrants in France. In Paris, the neighborhoods of Barbès and La Goutte d’Or in the 18th arrondissement served as havens where the first generations of immigrants from Algeria and Morocco reconstituted their communities, with shops, restaurants, and cafes lining the streets of this northern Parisian neighborhood, alongside Malian and Senegalese stores.

Today, this early sense of community has been shrinking as a large number of immigrants have relocated—often forced by eviction—to the suburbs, away from the city, living in cheap lodging often poorly maintained or not at all, where poverty, a sense of purposelessness and inequality, coupled at times with illegal activities, fill the life of many unemployed young people. Police units organizing “security operations” that allegedly protect the habitants of these ghettoized neighborhoods patrol the suburbs in the north and east of Paris. In many instances the police are met by groups of young men and women who respond to their presence and to numerous cases of brutality with opposition, street demonstrations, and fights, which have turned in several instances to riots.

The isolation of immigrant communities, common within the largest cities (Paris, Lyon, Marseille), has led to the creation of a system through which immigrants from the second or third generation establish and affirm their own culture, through language—notably le Beur—music, and other cultural markers that constitute responses to segregation. In turn, the emergence of this parallel culture is characterized by the dominant system as the
failure to integrate and reinforces the xenophobia and fear that pervade the French social and political landscapes and have their roots in French history.18

Mohamed Bourouissa tackles the subjects of cultural innovation and of transgression with photography and video. One of his photography projects, *Périphéries* (2005–2008), consists of large-scale images infused with the tension and violence experienced by young people in the Parisian suburbs (Fig. 12).19 The portrayal of the young men and women reveals the latent and powerful feelings of anger and frustration among those who are part of multigeneration immigrant families who were, and still are, denied access to middle-class values and status. Presented as part of an implicit contract between France and its immigrant workers during the 1960s and ‘70s and framed as the reward to a successful integration, this contract was seldom honored.

The sense of a profound betrayal experienced by the previous generations has been transformed for the younger post-migrant generations into a strong sentiment of oppression and injustice related to the denial of basic rights. These are revealed through the faces, looks, and gestures of the protagonists in *Périphéries*. The photographs, meticulously staged, could be parts of imagined scenarios. The images could be construed as film stills, letting the viewer imagine possible narratives.

The use of fragmented information to create a narrative is used in a particularly effective way in the video *Temps Mort* (2009), literally “dead time,” a phrase referring to a time when nothing happens, a suspended moment in time (Figs. 13–15). For this project, Mohamed Bourouissa asked a friend detained in a French prison to share and reflect about his incarceration via cell phone images and texts (more than 300 text messages were exchanged). *Temps Mort* records the conversation between Bourouissa and the man named J.C with juxtaposed stills of dilapidated interiors, drawings, and fragments of text messages.

In return for the views of the jail life and text messages sent by J.C., Bourouissa sent mirror images of life outside the walls taken with his cell phone (for example, a series of shots show the inmate walking in a corridor fading into Bourouissa steps in the snow outside). The images consist mostly of low-res photographs.20 Cell-phone use is banned in French jails and the act of smuggling a phone, images, and texts constitute acts of transgression, part of a dynamic of political resistance.

The communication took place over a period of six months and was built on the implicit trust between both men. It draws an intimate portrait of the inmate as we discover the shots of everyday life and text messages written in the Beur language. Used by young Maghrebis in Paris and other cities, this language establishes the difference between them and the generations of their parents and grandparents and resists the French language and cultural markers. Les Beurs speak this coded language together, as a form of transgression and as a way to establish their specific cultural territory. “… Beur writing is, above all things, about identity formation and identity politics: about what it means to French and not French, Arab and not Arab. What it means, in short, to be Beur.”21

*Temps Mort* was realized around the time when the degraded prison system in France had been brought up in the French press and criticized by the Human Rights Commission of the Council of Europe, exposing the conditions of life in overcrowded jails and the high level of suicides committed by inmates (Agence France Presse 2008). In contrast to that situation, the dialogue in *Temps Mort* reintroduces a sense of humanity and dignity in a dehumanized environment. In doing so, Bourouissa and J.C. reappropriate the stereotype of the social enemy and the film creates a form of “documentation” in which the power and intimacy of images and words are aimed at reversing the spectacle given by reality shows and news media, in an attempt at retaking control of the spectacle.
COMPOSITE SPACES

Mounir Fatmi examines the composite quality that characterized the lives of immigrants in colonial societies, and continues to be a critical element in postmigrant life. In videos such as The Angel’s Black Leg or Modern Times, A History of the Machine, the artist analyzes the historical processes of cultural encounters and exchanges. In other works, he deconstructs the way cultures of the Maghrib and the Middle East are represented and debunks essentialist notions regarding the definition of Islamic societies and cultures by addressing pre-conceptions and stereotypes. For example, Manipulations (2004) appropriates images used routinely in the media as markers of an Arab identity and mixes them with that of one of the world’s bestselling toys. Two hands manipulating a Rubik’s cube become slowly covered with a black greasy substance—oil—while the image of the Ka’aba is superimposed over that of the cube, as if the multiplicity of the Arab-speaking world could be reduced to a symbol for oil and another for religion (Figs. 16–18).

A similar strategy is used by Mounir in The Colors of Deportation (2009). The images feature triangles of changing color pasted onto a slowly emerging background representing a line of prisoners. Each time the triangle changes color, a new inscription appears bearing words such as: prisoner, stateless, political, until the last one, where two triangles form the Star of David and bear the word Jewish. Fatmi exposes the implied significance of stereotypes and their far-reaching and political implications.

In The Angel’s Black Leg, (2011), the artist chose a painting by Fra Angelico as subject and looks at it through a lens alternatively enlarging or shrinking the painting. As Fatmi slowly focuses on different parts of the iconography, a darker image—the angel’s black leg—in which strangeness and oddity seem inexplicable, eventually appears. The seemingly incongruous image sparks a sense of the uncanny, and provokes an unsettling cognitive dissonance between the image, its meaning, and its history. In The Angel’s Black Leg, the artist retells the story of the healing of Justinian by the twin Arab physicians Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian, who saved Justinian by grafting the leg of an Ethiopian man in place of his own, and Fatmi not only reminds us that Christianity was born in the Near East but also that it has been constituted through continuous cultural contacts and exchanges between different parts of the Mediterranean basin since its very beginning. More generally, the figure lying on the bed with a limb grafted on the body suggests a possible comment on the grafting process present in cultural constructs.

In Modern Times, A History of the Machine (2010), the artist alludes to Charlie Chaplin’s brilliant and funny critique of the
Machine Age in *Modern Times* (1936). In his film, Fatmi uses the images of gears and machines that were icons of the Industrial Age and served as symbols of modernity and progress (Figs. 19–20). Similar images in *Technologia* (2010) are playfully appropriated from Marcel Duchamp’s kinetic work, notably the *Roto-Reliefs* and *Anémic Cinéma.* In his film, Fatmi replaces the modernist gears and parts with wheels covered with Arab calligraphies that rotate in a gigantic machinelike structure performing random and endless movements to a score of mechanical noises. The operation of substitution transforms the reading: Fatmi refers to the early Islamic sciences of astronomy and mathematics while also suggesting immigrants’ labor force and triggers a reflection about the diverse sources.

Fatmi’s multireferential films reveal the composite narratives that are an integral part of historical and cultural constructions, through a process that stresses the political dimensions of representation and reveals the intimate proximity of cultures usually seen as discrete or opposed. In doing so, he is also critical of the essentialist political and religious positions that form the basis of right-wing politics in Europe and exist also in forms of religious fundamentalism in the Arab-speaking world today. His work also escapes a form of localism often used to identify Otherness and contributes to the mapping of postcolonial cartographies rich with complex relations and cultural constructs.

In the period also defined as the “post migration condition”, it was apparent that artists of the “Third World” were no longer making traditional art to reflect the local culture of their country, but rather pursuing a double-sided critical strategy in which instead of opposing the West, they were utilizing matching technologies and ways of thinking to produce alternative strategies … This sensibility is a new formation different from the earlier anti-western, Third World nationalism and traditionalism. These artists have started producing work outside the boundaries of traditional left wing discourse and nationalist bearings (Akay 2011).

**A NEW PUBLIC SPACE?**

Katia Kameli, Zineb Sedira, Mounir Fatmi, Mohammed Bourrouissa, Yto Barrada, and Lamia Joreige describe sociocultural spaces outside traditional boundaries—frontier spaces—and, in their films, address the pluridimensional experiences of their subjects. The narratives show the critical relevance of multireferential and hyphenated cultures in shaping contemporary societies.
While distinct in aesthetic and content, their works converge within a critique—in some cases radical—of the dystopia of equality founded on the premise of integration, a promise that instead translated into political and economic oppression. They also respond to the social and cultural prejudices carried by a growing Islamophobia that helps implement and justify politics of surveillance and repression in Europe and the United States and paralyzes the expression of social dynamics based on transformation.

Islamophobia, however, is not just a problem for Muslims. Though it affects them in particularly unpleasant ways, it has devastating implications for all of humanity. Pervasive and irrational fears about Islam have served as the ideological basis of the War on Terror, which has in turn provided states as diverse as Israel, Russia, Britain and China with a justification to fulfill prior strategic objectives and curb all manner of civil liberties and potential sources of dissidence within (and in Israel’s case beyond) their borders (Ahmad 2010:3).

The works of these artists attempt to critique such situations; through their practice, they advocate the necessity of a multidimensional approach to understand new sociocultural patterns. In doing so, they contribute to the emergence of a new public space, in which social and cultural identities integrate a fundamentally humanist quality.

Catherine Bernard is Associate Professor of Art History at SUNY College at Old Westbury. Her research focuses on processes of cultural transformations. Bernardc@oldwestbury.edu.

Notes
1 This idea was the main theme of the exhibition “Here and There,” shown at the Onagh Young Gallery in Dublin from September 9—October 23, 2010 and at the Wallace Gallery at SUNY Old Westbury from February 10—March 17, 2011, co-curated by the author. It featured the work of video artists Esra Ersen, Maya Schweizer, and Katia Kameli. “Here and There” had for its premise to look at immigration in the work of these artists as a dynamic force creating new geo-political spaces.
2 Migration routes include reaching the Canary Islands by sea from points on the West coast of Africa.

19–20 Mounir Fatmi
High-definition video, 15 min.
Photo: courtesy the artist and Lombard Freid Gallery
declared the death of German multiculturalism and the failed integration of Germany's minorities to German culture and society. Around that time, German politicians of various tendencies stressed the inevitability of slowing the pace of immigration and to encourage at the same time the return of entire immigrant families who were firmly established in the German society and had participated to Germany's growth and economic success, seen by most as an exemplary model world-wide. See http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/oct/17/angela-merkel-germany-multiculturalismfailures.

12 This attitude has allowed the racist positions of the Front National to become more and more popular and the party to grow and become a significant political force. The presidential election in France in May 2012 saw the significant rise of the National Front underpinning the traditional movements. It openly used xenophobic rhetoric to rally the votes and obtained 18% of the vote in the first round of the elections.

13 The Institut National d’Études Démographiques reports the following numbers: in 1982 the population of immigrants was 4,057,036. In 2008 this number had risen to 5,426,607, of which 42.9% came from Africa (including 11.6% from Algeria and 12.9% from Morocco). These are official numbers that do not account for the significant number of illegal immigrants.

14 The Schengen Agreement was signed in June 1990 by twenty-five European countries and involves eliminating border controls with other Schengen members while simultaneously strengthening border controls with nonmember states. It implies a stricter control of the borders of countries that are not part of the Schengen zone and an extremely selective system for obtaining work permits.


16 The 2005 riots in Clichy-Sous-Bois started civil unrest and racial tensions that spread to major cities in France and was violently repressed by Nicolas Sarkozy, then Ministre de l’Intérieur.

17 “Beur” means “Arabe” reversed and designates second- or third-generation children of immigrants. The Beur language recombines words and expressions from both Arabic and French sources and mixes them with slang and reversed syllables and adapts syntax and etymology into a specific new language.

18 Dating back to the French Revolution and the Third Republic, France has had a long secular tradition of posing restrictive attitudes on the expression of religious and cultural identity in the public sphere and failed to recognize or accept the cultural differences and identities of its several populations of immigrant workers. One of the most blatant recent examples is the 2004 ruling against the display of conspicuous religious symbols in school, mainly targeted at Muslim schoolgirls who wished to wear the hijab. During the 2012 presidential campaign, several conservative candidates opposed public prayers and the addition of food suited to Muslim children to school menus.

19 The title Périphériques comes from the périphérique (or “périph”), a large boulevard that circles Paris’ inner neighborhoods and isolates the suburbs from the historical city. It is a symbol of the growing separation and absence of communication between the mostly bourgeois population of the inside and the impoverished communities outside—the majority of them immigrants—beyond the périphérique.

20 The use of low-res images deserves to be discussed further. During the recent events in North Africa and the Middle East, acts of violence or public repression were broadcast from cell phones, and low-res photography and films were identified as revolutionary and dissonant tools used against the dominant forces controlling the media. The use of cell-phone videos and videos sent during the “Arab Spring” comes inevitably to mind. However, low-res techniques speak of the rarity and difficulty of accessing means of high-tech communication, a situation that characterizes disenchanted and disempowered people who are indeed banned from access to media and the public sphere. The temptation to idealize such situations can be seen in news commentaries and should be stressed.

21 http://seacoast.sunderland.ac.uk/~os0tmc/con temps/beur.htm.

22 The Healing of Justinian by Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian is part of the predella of the San Marco Altarpiece (1426–1440) by Fra Angelico.

23 In collaboration with Man Ray and Marc Allégret, Ducloux filmed early versions of the Rotorelief and they named the film Anémic Cinéma (1926).

References cited


