

# **Identity and Positioning in Algerian and Franco-Algerian Contemporary Art**

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## **Abstract**

Identity and belonging increasingly feature as themes in the work of contemporary artists, a focus that seems particularly felt by those artists who either personally or through their families have experienced dispersal and migration. The thesis explores how fourteen Algerian and Franco-Algerian artists position themselves and are positioned by others to identity and community. The difficult intertwined histories of Algeria and France fraught with the consequences of colonisation, the impact of migration, and, in Algeria, civil war, provides a rich terrain for the exploration of identity formation. Positionality theory is used to analyse the process of identity formation in the artists and how this developed over the course of their careers and in their art. An important part of the analysis is concerned with how the artists positioned themselves consciously or inadvertently to fixed or fluid conceptions of identity and how this was reflected in their artworks. The thesis examines the complex politics of identity and belonging that extends beyond nationality and diaspora and implicates a range of other identifications including that of class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and career choice. The research addresses a gap in contemporary art scholarship by targeting a specific group of artists and their work and examining how they negotiate, in an increasingly globalised world, their relationship to identity including nationality and diaspora. The thesis foregrounds the ways in which this negotiation interacts with their careers, their art and the art market.

The thesis begins with an outline of the methodological approach. Positioning to identity is then examined in the background, education, professional development and art of three international artists, Kader Attia, Adel Abdessemed and Saâdane Afif. Analysis then focuses on the artwork of the eleven remaining artists through the themes of history and memory, journey and narrative and gendered space.

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## **Chapter One: Identity and Positioning in Algerian and Franco-Algerian Contemporary Art.**

### **Introduction**

The thesis arose from the writer's long standing passion for contemporary art and an interest in how questions of identity and belonging increasingly feature in the work of contemporary artists. It was observed that this focus on identity seemed particularly felt by those artists who either personally or through their families have experienced dispersal and migration. The phenomenon appeared to reflect important changes occurring in a globalised world in which movement and displacement offer themselves as important signifiers related to identity and community. As Sheila Croucher notes '(t)he literature on globalization points to a world in flux and the politics of belonging is a central part of that flux'.<sup>1</sup> The thesis approaches questions of identity and community as part of a wider phenomenon of a complex politics of identity and belonging that includes nationality and diaspora whilst implicating a range of other identifications including that of class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and career choice.

The original suggestion that the thesis should be concerned with Algerian contemporary art was that of Dr. Amanda Crawley-Jackson who felt that it was an under-researched area. Initial examination of contemporary Algerian art confirmed that it was under-researched, and of great interest and relevance to the theme of identity and community. However, for reasons specific to Algerian culture and history outlined below, it was decided to extend the artists considered to include Franco-Algerian artists.

### **Selection of artists**

It rapidly became apparent that there was no clear rationale for considering only artists born in Algeria. The contemporary art infrastructure of Algeria, both public and private, is very limited and there is a strong historic tendency for artists to leave the country and develop their art education and their careers outside its borders. As a result, it was important to represent the diversity of those born, living or working in Algeria and in France. The artists

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<sup>1</sup> Sheila Croucher, *Globalization and Belonging: The Politics of Identity in a Changing World*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield: 2018), p. 36.

selected are consequently a broad mix of both Algerians and Franco-Algerians and feature men and women currently living in a range of locations including Algeria, France, Germany and the UK.

In total 14 artists were selected although not all are treated in the same depth. Three artists (Kader Attia, Adel Abdessemed, and Saâdane Afif) were chosen because of their international reputation in order to facilitate the study in Chapter Two of the role of identity and community in the route to career success in the art world and its markets. In addition, a number of artists were selected because of their engagement with key themes emerging as possible subjects for chapters: history and memory, the journey and movement and the female body and gendered space. These included well-established artists such as Mohamed Bourouissa, Zoulikha Bouabdellah, Zineb Sedira, Bruno Boudjellal, Katia Kameli, Ammar Bouras, Samta Benyahia and Amina Menia. Houria Niati was added because she had played a role in developing the movement of British black women artists in the 1980s and 1990s and had made a particularly relevant, influential and historically significant artwork *No to Torture* (1982). Two younger artists, still in the early stages of their career but who had made significant work, were also included: Amina Zoubir and Zineddine Bessaï. Reluctantly there were some exclusions, for example, of Neïl Beloufa, this was partly due to scoping constraints and timings but also because of his situation as an ‘outlier’ in the USA and the inclusion of three other major international artists in Attia, Abdessemed and Afif.

The artists selected vary in their formal approaches although to a great extent they rely on the dominant global contemporary forms of delivery and media with video, photography and installation well represented. A number of the artists, for example Katia Kameli and Samta Benyahia, use song and voice in their work drawing on traditional music or Algerian writers such as Kateb Yacine. The artists deal with a variety of themes including gender, inequality, migration, history, politics and displacement. Cross-cultural issues are frequently important. The term ‘cross cultural’ is used here in the sense in which art works at the intersections between cultures and draw sources, themes and approaches from a variety of cultures. Such art reflects the current conditions of a global society as well as engaging with how those issues emerge within the ‘local’ (national, diasporic), thus reflecting a theme of the thesis that there is a dynamic between the local and the global evident in both the positioning of the artists and the nature of the artworks.

Three of the fourteen artists were born between 1948 and 1951, two in the 1960s and the remainder in the 1970s and 1980s. Age matters for a number of reasons including the ‘fit’ with contemporary art as opposed to modernist and neo-modernist art. The different ages of the artists also subtly affect their relation to the War of Independence, the events of the 1990s and present day Algeria and its political regime. For many young people in Algeria the heroic struggles of the War of Independence have become less important than the corruption of society and politics, the high levels of unemployment and the lack of opportunity in the country. Amongst women across all ages there is in Algeria, particularly in urban areas, an increasing concern with gender-related issues particularly regarding male violence and gendered space both of which feature prominently in some of the artworks. The works examined, except for Niati’s 1982 painting mentioned above, have been produced between the early 1990s and the present day. Amongst the artists there is a range of ‘success levels’ (in conventional terms) with some, such as those discussed in Chapter Two, near the top of the art market ladder, others not quite at those lofty heights and a sprinkling of emerging artists. This is important partly because of the question of overall career trajectories but also in understanding how artists may respond at different levels of success.

### **Research questions**

There are two central and related research questions which address the ways in which artists position themselves and are positioned by others in relation to identity and community. The first research question explores the importance of this positioning in terms of the cultural capital of personal background and how identity formation changes and develops as the artists move through their education, professional development and careers. This question is examined in detail in Chapter Two by reference to three artists and informs the subsequent chapters. The second research question is concerned with how this positionality operates within and is illustrated by the artworks. This question is introduced in Chapter Two and developed in detail in Chapters Three to Five. An important aspect of adopting this approach and structure is that it provides a framework which brings together analysis of the influence of the personal background, education and career development of the artists on identity formation and, in addition, detailed analysis of how these are configured and illustrated in their artworks. Existing approaches, where emphasis is predominantly on the artwork and its reception, frequently neglect the career trajectories and positioning of the artists in considering issues of identity.



The key aim of this thesis is to examine, through the approaches of positioning theory, the many and often conflicting forces acting upon the artists and influencing their identity formation. However, the effect of culture, family, ethnicity and other structural influences are not regarded as determining but limited in varying degrees by the intentions and agency of the artists. This produces a complementarity between the forces of structure and agency but within an active and intentional frame not dissimilar to Giddens's notion of the self-identity of the contemporary individual as a reflexive project.<sup>2</sup>

In writing about contemporary art the researcher must frequently draw upon a range of material about recent exhibitions and the lives and careers of relatively young artists, some of which is not peer-reviewed. The thesis draws on articles in art journals such as *Frieze*, exhibition catalogues, newspaper articles on exhibitions and interviews with artists from a variety of sources. Clearly these need to be treated with care but they remain an immensely helpful source of material about what the artists say about themselves and how they are regarded in the influential discourses of the art world that are constructed by critics, collectors, and gallerists. The peer-reviewed sources that are used to develop the relation of the artists and the artworks to 'positioning' and identity in the thesis are therefore at times cited alongside gallery catalogues or interviews. This does not imply equal standing and statements by the artists themselves are regarded as requiring a critical treatment. However, as is noted below in the section on methodology, academic approaches are not neutral, for example in respect of the term 'hybridity', and all views can be seen to represent a political positioning. A careful critical approach to all sources is therefore required.

### **Historical and cultural contexts of the thesis**

The research questions set out above are applied to the present situation and contexts of the artists and their art in Algeria and France and also, through historical and cultural contextualisation, to their relations to the past. As will be demonstrated, the past and the present intertwine inextricably in the lives and work of the artists. McGonagle and Welch have suggested with justification that the relationship between France and Algeria has become more not less complex as time passes 'not least because France's Algerian past and the Franco-Algerian relationship remain caught between history, memory and lived

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the joint chapter by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, 'Risk and Reflexive Modernity' in Ross Abbinnett, (Ed.), *Culture and Identity: Critical Theories*, (London: Sage, 2003), pp. 25-34.

experience'.<sup>3</sup> A detailed account of the histories and cultures of Algeria and France and the complex relations between them are beyond the scope of this thesis. However, the provision of an overview of events, contexts and key figures remains essential to an understanding of the positioning of the artists to identity and community but additional information on culture and history is provided in individual chapters as necessary.

There are several areas of particular relevance. The first is the impact of history and culture on the developing complexity of plural and unitary configurations of Algerian and Franco-Algerian identity. Inclusive and exclusive ideas of identity and community bedevil the positioning to belonging in both Algeria and France and have helped shape the contradictions and fragmentations apparent in what the artists say about themselves and their art. The long and difficult relationship between the two countries has been particularly influenced by the impact of migration and exile, which is explored in the work of Zineddine Bessaï, Bruno Boudjelal and Zineb Sedira. In addition, the cultural conflicts emerging as a result of clashes between modernity and tradition, for example in respect of gender, are evident in much of the work of the artists and are examined throughout the analysis, particularly in Chapter Five. The ways in which artists challenge conceptions of the past in response to the problems of the present in France and Algeria is analysed in Chapter Three. Finally, the situation of artists and art institutions in Algeria is briefly considered to demonstrate why so many artists feel the need to leave Algeria to develop a career elsewhere, exemplified in the career of Adel Abdessemed analysed in Chapter Two.

A key reference point is the French invasion and occupation of Algeria in 1830 and the fierce and persistent resistance of Algerians.<sup>4</sup> The French repeatedly resorted to extreme violence in their conquest and rule but also attempted to impose their culture on Algerians, who were predominantly Muslim, in their efforts to legitimise colonisation in terms of France's 'civilising mission' (mission civilisatrice).<sup>5</sup> This 'civilising mission' had racist and cultural aspects. Ladjal and Bensaid have noted how the colonisers of Algeria were frequently imbued with widely held French attitudes linked to negative stereotypes of Muslims in general and of

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<sup>3</sup> See Joseph McGonagle and Edward Welch, 'Untying the knot? France and Algeria in Contemporary Visual Culture', *Modern and Contemporary France*, Vol 19, No 2, May 2011, pp. 123-128, p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> For a good overview see Martin Evans, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War*, (Oxford: OUP, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Tony Chafer, 'Teaching Africans to be French?: France's "Civilising Mission" and the Establishment of a Public Education System in French West Africa, 1903-30', *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale Di Studi e Documentazione Dell'Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2001, pp. 190-209.

Algerians in particular.<sup>6</sup> These negative attitudes were embedded in political discourse and action. In 1865, the French Senate defined Muslims as voteless French citizens, a status which shut them out from the governance of French Algeria. This was reinforced in 1881 by the 'Native Code' (Code de l'indigénat), a set of very repressive laws that applied only to Muslims.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries successive French Governments of the Right and Left legitimised colonisation by reference to the civilising mission but denied Algerians the same rights as the colonial settlers.<sup>8</sup> The French made efforts to assimilate Algerians through education and the imposition of the French language but never built enough schools to educate more than a small minority of school-age Algerian boys, not girls, with basic skills. The curriculum was entirely in French and allowed no place for other languages such as Arabic or Berber. This limited access to French education was largely resisted early on by Algerians who, in the face of French cultural imperialism, withdrew into Muslim family life, which remained virtually untouched by colonization.<sup>9</sup>

This cultural imposition was soon reinforced by colonisation, which was accompanied by a plundering of the Algerian economy. The French introduced settlers to Algeria and by 1848 the population included 109,400 Europeans. Only 42,274 of these were French, the remainder being of diverse European origin and given the general name of 'Pieds-Noirs' or 'black feet' because of their initial poverty.<sup>10</sup> The French seized Algerian tribal land to provide and then expand the holdings of the colonists. According to John Ruedy, the systematic expropriation of land was the most important single factor in the destructuring of traditional society.<sup>11</sup> Settlers rapidly took control of the bulk of Algeria's wealth in manufacturing, mining, and agriculture and they largely controlled trade. Little effort was made to industrialise the country and upskill Algerians and, as a result, exports tended to be crude products and raw materials while manufactured goods were imported. In effect, there was a general seizure of

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<sup>6</sup> Tarek Ladjal and Bennouda Bensaid, 'The French colonial occupation and the Algerian national identity: alienation or assimilation?' *International Journal of Arab Culture, Management and Sustainable Development*, Vol. X, January 2012.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263698551\\_The\\_French\\_colonial\\_occupation\\_and\\_the\\_Algerian\\_national\\_identity\\_alienation\\_or\\_assimilation](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263698551_The_French_colonial_occupation_and_the_Algerian_national_identity_alienation_or_assimilation). Accessed 12/12/2019.

<sup>7</sup> For both the 1865 law and the Code of 1881 see Martin Evans as cited 2012, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Rebecca Rogers, 'Teaching morality and religion in nineteenth-century colonial Algeria: gender and the civilising mission', *History of Education, Journal of the History of Education Society*, Vol. 40, issue 6, 2011, pp. 741-759.

<sup>9</sup> Alf Andrew Heggoy, 'Education in French Algeria: An Essay on Cultural Conflict', *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1973, pp. 180-197, in particular the changes in provision over time outlined at pp. 185-187.

<sup>10</sup> John Ruedy, *Modern Algeria: The Origins and Development of a Nation*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), pp. 70-71.

<sup>11</sup> John Ruedy as cited 2005, pp. 70-71.

major sectors of the economy by Europeans and an impoverishment of many Muslim Algerians who were also burdened with paying over 70% of all direct taxes.<sup>12</sup> In 1848 the French Government ended Algeria's status as a colony and divided it into three French Departments under a civilian government but with no change in the status of Algerians who remained largely excluded from the government of the country.<sup>13</sup>

James McDougall gives a convincing account of how this brutal, avaricious, and exclusive regime created the conditions for continued Algerian resistance.<sup>14</sup> The brutality of the French regime and its refusal to treat Algerians as equal citizens had an effect on the future histories of both Algeria and France, creating bitterness and anger amongst Algerians and a refusal by the French, at least until recently, to acknowledge the reality of its colonial past. The persistent resistance by the French to reform undermined the efforts of Algerian reformers, such as Ferhat Abbas, who argued that Algerians should be admitted to citizenship on an equal status. Abbas subsequently became a revolutionary nationalist in the face of the persistent exclusion and repression of Algerians.<sup>15</sup> Failure to reform also fuelled the development of the idea of an alternative Muslim Algeria antithetical to French rule and closely associated with the growing salafiyya movement, a reformist trend in Islam.<sup>16</sup> Algerian religious leaders, such as Sheik Ben Badis, challenged the idea of French Algeria and of Western ideas in general and asserted a return to an alleged pure form of Islam.<sup>17</sup> This was later to have profound effects on the post-independence history of Algeria. It also strengthened the position of a more directly political nationalism put forward by activists such as Messali Hadj.<sup>18</sup> These divisions within the anti-colonial forces and the struggles for power it encouraged developed apace during and after the war of independence and eventually led to the dominance of one party rule in Algerian politics. The divisions were compounded after independence by economic crisis, inequality and unemployment and exploded in the civil conflict of the 1990s.

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<sup>12</sup> See Tony Smith, 'The French Economic Stake in Colonial Algeria', *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Spring, 1975, pp. 184-189.

<sup>13</sup> A département is an administrative division of France.

<sup>14</sup> See James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Martin Evans, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 57.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Evans as cited 2012, p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> For Ben Badis see Hugh Roberts, *The Battlefield: Algeria 1988-2002: Studies in a Broken Polity*, (London: Verso, 2017), p. 6-8.

<sup>18</sup> For Messali Hadj see Geoffroy de Laforcade, 'Messali Hadj, (1898–1974) and Algerian Nationalism', published online 1 April 2010, *International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest*. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781405198073>. Accessed 14/3/2020.

Movement and migration has played and continues to play an important part in the relationship between Algeria and France and population movements between Algeria and continental France fuelled the growth of militant nationalism. Between 1915 and 1918, tens of thousands of Muslims were drafted into the French army and a further 78,000 Algerians found non-military employment in continental France. After the war, French post-war reconstruction programmes demanded cheap labour and hundreds of thousands of Algerians were involved in a vast migration of men to France.<sup>19</sup> The experience of travel during the war and then of emigration gave Algerians first-hand experience of how important education was in a developed society and how inequitably Algerians were treated despite having fought for France.<sup>20</sup>

Algerians also served France during the Second World War and the injustice of their situation post-war was deeply resented and resulted in more and more frequent protests. During a demonstration in the town of Sétif in 1945 police fired on demonstrators and in retaliation Algerians attacked French settlers in the surrounding countryside resulting in 102 deaths. Indiscriminate attacks by French colonial authorities and Pieds-Noirs settler militias on the Muslim population followed with deaths estimated at between 1,020 (French claim) and 45,000 (subsequent Radio Cairo claim).<sup>21</sup> This was a major turning point leading to the bloody and divisive Algerian war of independence between 1954 and 1962, convincing many Algerian nationalists that compromise was impossible and war was inevitable.

Atrocities by both sides were frequent during the war of independence.<sup>22</sup> In the war's aftermath, there was a mass emigration of the French and Pied-Noir settlers and the flight or killing of many Algerians who had supported French rule called the harkis or collaborators. Even amongst the nationalist victors there were bloody feuds and divisions.<sup>23</sup> During the war of independence, the FLN or Front de libération nationale, which was the major, although not the only, political movement fighting the French, had attempted to impose a unitary Algerian identity linked to Arabism and nationalism. With independence, the FLN became the party of government and the single dominant political party.<sup>24</sup> The FLN's intolerance of dissenting

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<sup>19</sup> Heggoy as cited 1973, p. 185.

<sup>20</sup> Heggoy as cited 1973, p. 184.

<sup>21</sup> See Martin Evans as cited 2012, pp. 85-91, for a good account of the massacre. Figures are taken from Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> For estimates of the death toll, see Alistair Horne as cited 1978, p. 358.

<sup>23</sup> See the section on 'The war carries on' in chapter 8 of Martin Evans as cited 2012, pp. 230-231.

<sup>24</sup> See McDougal as cited 2009, particularly the end section on 'The invention of authenticity' at pp. 225-229. But also Martin Evans' excellent piece in *History Today* in which he examines the shift of the FLN from legendary status to a universal target of hatred amongst Algerians, 'Martin Evans looks at the rise and fall of

voices within the nationalist movement reasserted itself after independence with some savagery. As a result sections of Algerian society began to feel excluded, marginalised or betrayed including the Berber minority, the Salafists and those elements who wanted a more democratic and liberal state and society.<sup>25</sup> The increasing corruption of many figures within the FLN, their ineffective management of the economy and their failure to resolve the deep divisions in the country contributed significantly to the violence of the 1990s.

The French influence on Algerian artistic culture is mixed and had relatively little impact in moving Algerian cultural workers from a traditional craft focus to a more European form of art, the major exception being the miniaturist Mohammed Racim.<sup>26</sup> From the French conquest of Algeria in 1830, French orientalist painting introduced the then current European aesthetic based on easel painting.<sup>27</sup> Much of this painting, for example that of Horace Vernet, was pure propaganda and illustrated scenes of the French military defeating the indigenous population after difficult battles against courageous if savage warriors, for example his *Duke of Aumale Taking the Smalah of Abd-el-Kader* (1843).<sup>28</sup> Later, Fromentin's work portrayed a tribal and aristocratic society whose males spent most of their time on horseback hunting with falcons. Both fitted well with the idea of the civilising mission and both distracted from the brutality of the French occupation. During the early twentieth century the French started to install in Algeria a range of cultural institutions such as the École des Beaux-Arts and also sponsored exhibitions and awarded artistic prizes. Pouillon has described this as the establishment of an 'autonomous artistic life in the territory', however it was largely for the benefit of its European population.<sup>29</sup> This came to an abrupt end with independence. Under the Evian accords of March 1962 both the French and the FLN agreed that the artworks in the

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Algeria's national liberation movement as the country marks thirty years of independence', *History Today*, Vol. 42, 1992: 4, pp. 4-6.

<sup>25</sup> The Berber population of Algeria has a variety of elements: kabyle, chaouia, tamazight, hassaniyya, tumzabt, taznatit. The Berbers make up about 30 per cent of Algeria's population.

<sup>26</sup> The importance of traditional crafts in Algeria under French rule is examined by Hamid Irbouh, *Art in the Service of Colonialism: French Art Education in Morocco 1912-1956*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), p. 35. On Racim, see François Pouillon and Amy Jacobs-Colas, '150 Years of Algerian Painting: Relevance for Understanding the Postcolonial Situation', *French Politics, Culture & Society*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Special Issue: Regards croisés: Transatlantic Perspectives on the Colonial Situation, 2002, pp. 141-158, pp. 151-152. Even Racim adopted a non-western form, that of the miniature, which he derived from Arab and Persian art.

<sup>27</sup> See Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880-1930*, (Oakland: University of California, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> François Pouillon and Amy Jacobs-Colas, as cited 2002, p. 145.

<sup>29</sup> François Pouillon and Amy Jacobs-Colas, as cited 2002, p. 144.

museums and galleries were to remain in Algeria. However, the French pillaged the museums and galleries and removed the artworks to France, only returning them in 1970.<sup>30</sup>

After independence, the FLN encouraged artists to support the new state through a mixture of art influenced by forms of Soviet realism and recuperated elements of Islamic and African arts. This was a genuine attempt to create a sense of unity in the new state through the creation of a popular culture but based on an underlying attempt to corral all Algerians within a unitary Arab nationalism in combination with a loosely defined populist socialism which featured Islam as an important element of the national consciousness. This approach was reinforced by the FLN's propagation, in popular culture and in education, of its dominant role during the revolutionary war against France and its purging of opposition groups and banning of political parties. This self-glorification of the FLN became a major endeavour by which it attempted to legitimise its dominance and exclusivity. It did not go entirely unchallenged, for example by the Aouchem movement, a Berber-led group of artists.<sup>31</sup> Aouchem challenged the idea of a unitary Algerian national identity and a patriotic realism in art that it regarded as 'no more than a bogus corporatist nationalist narrative fabricated by the state'.<sup>32</sup> Benyahia, an artist considered in Chapter Five, is sometimes associated with Aouchem.

Women played an important role in the war of independence and made gains in the 1962 constitution. However, the regime steadily retreated from this in response to the pressures exerted by a fundamentalist Salafism. This retreat culminated in the 1984 Family Law and the imposition of minority status on women.<sup>33</sup> The struggle of women to regain the ground lost to them after 1962 and to engage more widely and dynamically in society is frequently reflected in the work of both male and female artists in the thesis, for example, Amina Menia in Chapter Three, Bruno Boudjelal in Chapter Four, and the work of the artists discussed in Chapter Five.

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<sup>30</sup> Andrew Bellisari, 'The Art of Decolonization: The Battle for Algeria's French Art, 1962–70', *The Journal of Contemporary History*, Volume 52, issue 3, 2017, pp. 625-645.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0022009416652715> . Accessed 11/3/20120.

<sup>31</sup> *The Aouchem Manifesto* (1967). <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19301944.2009.10781371> . Accessed 12/12/2019. A very different manifesto to that published by the government for the Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers in 1969. See Maria Moreno, 'Manifesto of the Pan-African Cultural Festival, Algiers (1969)', *Critical Interventions*, 3:1, 2009, pp. 179-187. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/19301944.2009.10781370?needAccess=true> . Accessed 12/12/2019.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East*, (Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 285.

<sup>33</sup> Zahia Smail Salhi, 'Algerian women, citizenship, and the "Family Code"', *Gender & Development*, 11:3, 2003, pp. 27-35.

The FLN government struggled with a range of problems in the 1960s and 1970s including a population explosion, a stagnant economy, a collapse in oil prices, large-scale corruption in government and widespread youth unemployment. In October 1988 a series of mass demonstrations of largely young men, led by Islamist leaders such as Ali Benhadj and Abbassi Madani, resulted in hundreds being killed by security forces.<sup>34</sup> The FLN government responded to the riots by amending the Algerian Constitution on 3 November 1988 to allow parties other than the ruling FLN to operate legally. The regime's hope was that this would defuse the situation and that it would be re-elected with a majority because of its role in the war of independence. However, in 1990 the Islamist parties won significant gains in the local elections with the Islamic Salvation Front or Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) winning 54% of the votes cast.<sup>35</sup> Following this the military elements of the FLN took control of the government and cancelled the planned national elections.<sup>36</sup> A civil conflict broke out that lasted throughout the 1990s resulting in around 200,000 deaths including the mutilation and murder of many women and the wholesale killing of cultural workers such as artists, writers and journalists. Adel Abdessemed, considered in Chapter Two, was among many who left their art studies in Algeria and fled to France for this reason.

Even before the civil conflict artists struggled to flourish and develop in Algeria and this problem was accentuated by the violence. Amina Zoubir's monograph on Algerian and Franco-Algerian video gives a sombre description of the difficulties of artists in Algeria in terms of lack of facilities and education in contemporary techniques.<sup>37</sup> Yasmine Zidane's essay on contemporary cultural infrastructure in Algeria also underlines the problems for artists who wanted to live and work in the country. These problems are related not just to the difficulty in gaining the skills and approaches needed for contemporary art but also the lack of understanding and interest in it in the population and the very few galleries, collectors and other art infrastructure.<sup>38</sup> There is also a significant degree of censorship on art and artists

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<sup>34</sup> For an account for the rise of Islamism in the lead up to the 1990 election see Yahia Zoubir, 'The Algerian political crisis: origins and prospects for the future of democracy', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 3:1, 1998, pp. 74-100.

<sup>35</sup> The *Front Islamique du Salut* was a major Algerian Islamist political party founded in 1989 by Ali Belhadj and Abbasi al-Madani in preparation for the elections.

<sup>36</sup> Some of the complexities surrounding the cancellation of the elections are covered by Steven Cook, *Ruling But Not Governing: The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), p. 32 in particular.

<sup>37</sup> Amina Zoubir, *Relation de l'image et du son dans la vidéo contemporaine algérienne: une expérience en temps réel*, (Saarbruecken: Editions universitaires européennes, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Yasmine Zidane, 'In the Absence of Institutions, Contemporary Cultural Practices in Algeria', in Anthony Downey, *Future Imperfect, Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East*, (Berlin: Sternberg, 2016).



which is a problem often resulting in self-censorship by artists in the face of the political situation, cultural tradition and religious orthodoxy.<sup>39</sup> Mohammed Djehiche, a former Director of the Musée national d'art moderne et contemporain d'Alger, has remarked that:

'We have a right to be different. We have the right to our own vision of contemporary art. Mimicking things from the West can destroy us...we would degrade ourselves to a Sub-Occidentalism, and we have had enough dictates, especially in the arts'.<sup>40</sup>

Djehiche makes an important point but there is a problematic use of 'we' in his comment. Works by the artists considered in this thesis have been shown widely in many different parts of the world but have not been exhibited in Algeria because the themes are regarded as controversial particularly when related to gender or when focusing on the 1990s and the current regime.

Finally, the situation of young Algerians and Franco-Algerians in France and Algeria has influenced the art of artists in both countries. In France, inequalities, unemployment and cultural differences have fuelled both racism and discontent notably in the 2005 riots. The experience in France of young Algerian men finds expression in the art of both Mohamed Bourouissa and of Zoulikha Bouabdellah in Chapter Three. In Algeria, the widespread unemployment of young men drives a desire to leave the country for France and their efforts to leave have been captured in artwork by Zineddine Bessaï discussed in Chapter Four. The intertwined history of the two countries repeatedly emerges in the art in each chapter of the thesis.

### **Methodology: positioning theory and the discourses of identity and community**

The central research questions relate to how artists position themselves and are positioned to identity and community. Positionality theory enables one to examine and analyse identity and community as positions adopted by or framing artists, art, and the art market as well as constituting the social and discursive construction of reality.<sup>41</sup> The theory recognises that

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<sup>39</sup> This is of course not just a problem for artists in Algeria but a widespread global problem, see the article by Ole Reitov, 'Five challenges to artistic freedom', on the UNESCO website. <https://en.unesco.org/Artistic-Expression>. Accessed 20/3/2020. See also Anthony Downey, (Ed.), *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East*, (Sternberg Press: Berlin, 2017). Downey's book contains a country-by-country analysis of the situation of cultural workers and institutions in the MENA.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted by Knut Ebeling, 'In the Garden of the Arts', online article, *Universes in Universes*, NAFAS, June 2005. <http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2005/esba>. Accessed 12/3/2020.

<sup>41</sup> Adrianna Kezar and Jaime Lester, 'Breaking the Barriers of Essentialism in Leadership Research: Positionality as a Promising Approach', *Feminist Formations*, Volume 22, Issue 1, Spring 2010, pp. 163-185, p. 166.

individuals may have multiple perspectives by means of which they create meaning and respond diversely to phenomenon such as nationality, ethnicity, or gender. Positioning is therefore about the individual within a social landscape and is defined within a space in which structure and agency intersect. It is a useful way of approaching the complex space of social contexts and positions in which people live, work, interact and engage discursively.

The approach to positioning adopted was derived initially from a reading of Stuart Hall's work on cultural identity and diaspora.<sup>42</sup> As Hall notes, there is no enunciation without positionality: 'You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all'.<sup>43</sup> Hall set out an influential binary of 'fixed' and 'becoming' perspectives on identity and treated 'identity' and 'community' as forms of positioning in a particular place and time and in the context of a culture and history that is specific to the individual. This issue of 'specificity' is a key finding from the theoretical research and is used where possible to examine the individual positioning of the artists and their works. This is consistent with Moghaddam and Harré's description of positioning theory as concerned with 'how people use words (and discourse of all types) to locate themselves and others'.<sup>44</sup> Hall's approach was regarded as particularly relevant to the study of art because it highlighted the significance of representation as a form of discourse and asserted that the '(p)ractices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write – the positions of enunciation'.<sup>45</sup>

Hall was writing about how cultural identity was manufactured and the representational forms it took in the new Caribbean cinema emerging at the time he was writing in the 1990s. However, positioning has a relevance to the visual arts and culture in general because of this focus on representation and because it takes identity and community out of the realm of being narrowly concerned with fixed positions of nationality or ethnicity. This enables representations of 'Algerian' and 'Franco-Algerian' to be regarded as unstable forms of identity or belonging and a greater play is permitted for the way in which identity is cross cut by a range of intersectional issues. This seems to align more closely with the reality of how

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<sup>42</sup> Hall produced a mass of work in this area including Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in Jonathan Rutherford, (Ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1992), pp. 222–237. Also his 'The Question of Cultural Identity,' Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew, (Eds.), *Modernity and Its Futures*, (London: Polity Press, 1996) pp. 596–633; and 'Introduction: Who Needs Identity?' in Stuart Hall, and Paul du Gay, (Eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 1–17.

<sup>43</sup> Stuart Hall quoted in Henry A. Giroux, Peter L. McLaren, Peter McLaren, (Eds.), *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 202.

<sup>44</sup> F.M. Moghaddam and R. Harre, as cited 2010, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Stuart Hall, 1992 as cited, p. 222.

increasingly identity and community are regarded in the contemporary world with gender, religion, sexuality, class and status, including professional status, frequently appearing as significant vectors of identity alongside nationality and ethnicity. Hall's notion of positioning can therefore be used to encompass a range of views of oneself, or 'us' in relation to others, and raise questions of difference and rupture as well as origin. Understanding positioning in this way acknowledges that it has significant political dimensions and this assists engagement with the artists and their art as they explore a range of issues including gender, postcolonialism, nationalism and globalism.

Hall's perspective is that positioning is a form of statement or representation in space and time separated by a gap from what we think and feel. The subject or 'I' of the statement is the subject that appears in the different forms of expressions that we use in daily life. But that 'I' is only provided with meaning within the form of the statement and its predicates and the context within which its signifiers are used. The statements thus made provide a discourse within which a 'subject of the enunciation' emerges which offers a view of the 'subject', 'self', 'unconscious', 'person' or however else one might refer to it.<sup>46</sup> Knowledge of the subject of the enunciation is restricted by what can be derived from discourse, thus any representation of the self is limited and made ambiguous by the reductive and partial nature of discourse in relation to the 'self'. This ambiguity is then doubled because discourse is imbedded in language, which is not a fixed code of mechanical translation but contains many open and ambiguous signifiers which, in turn, are subject to interpretation. As a result, how we represent ourselves, which is always situated at a particular moment in time/space, never coincides exactly with the 'subject' who represents themselves. Identity is thus never fixed but always changing or becoming.

Hall sets out the first element of his binary in terms of a unitary and shared culture linked to a collective 'one true self' which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common or towards which they position themselves.<sup>47</sup> This model is a constructed imaginary of a history that is relatively stable and continuous but which erases from the frame of reference and meaning many of the diversities, ruptures, discontinuities and traumas of the past. The model is essentialist and reductive but it can be an act of imaginative rediscovery and of political

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<sup>46</sup> See Owen Hewitson's, *lacanonline* particularly his article 'Three ways to understand the subject of the statement and the subject of the enunciation'. <https://www.lacanonline.com/2011/05/three-ways-to-understand-the-subject-of-the-statement-and-the-subject-of-the-enunciation/>. Accessed 6/5/2019.

<sup>47</sup> Stuart Hall, 1992 as cited, pp. 223-224.

resistance, for example, the assertion of a 'Black' or 'African' identity.<sup>48</sup> Gayatri Spivak, with perhaps more critical ambivalence, acknowledges similarly the political importance at particular times of affirming an essentialist identity by reference to race and gender.<sup>49</sup> Fixed forms of identity are challenged in the work of many of the artists examined in the thesis in their representations of contradictions, inequities and omissions in political systems and historiography. These can relate to notions of 'the nation' in both French Republicanism and Algerian nationalism and to the problematic approaches of artists in relation to, for example, the dynamics within and between definitions of 'Berber' and 'Arab'. This challenge to fixed identity configurations is also significant in problematizing issues of gender and gendered space since it can be used to critique a gendered view of 'the one true self'.<sup>50</sup>

Hall's second model puts to the forefront the ruptures and discontinuities inherent in cultural identity and characterises it as a 'becoming' that transcends place, time, history and culture. From this perspective cultural identity is not something already established which is then reproduced in forms of representation but a production within representation that implicates how the producer is positioned and contributes through representation to the formation of social reality. Identity is configured as a dynamic relationship between an unstable and developing site of enunciation (the 'self') and representations constructed in particular contexts. This is not to deny that cultural identities have histories and are enunciated or represented in particular ways at particular times but signals the way they undergo constant transformation.

This offers a rich terrain for artists who, by virtue of their practice, have a finely attuned cultural awareness that amplifies their appreciation of ambivalence and difference. Moreover, the artists in the thesis have a background of migration, displacement or dispersal which contributes to this ambivalence and which they describe frequently as being 'in-between' which is a form of positioning that echos many aspects of, for example, Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity and its relation to the 'indeterminate temporality of the in-between'.<sup>51</sup> An

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<sup>48</sup> See Stuart Hall, 1992 as cited, p. 228 where he discusses the difficulties of 'a common origin' in relation to another problematic of a 'common history' but at the same time acknowledges the importance of both in the negotiation of identity.

<sup>49</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Rosalind C. Morris, (Ed.), *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 21-80. See also the references to Spivak's carefully ambiguous positioning in Jane Hiddleston, *Assia Djebar: Out of Algeria*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), pp. 18-19.

<sup>50</sup> See Butler's introduction to Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>51</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge Classics, 2006), p. 227.

important part of the analysis is concerned with how the artists position themselves consciously or inadvertently to these frames of fixed and fluid identities and how this is reflected in their artworks.<sup>52</sup> The aim is not to label a particular stance as more or less ‘correct’, or as inherently ‘progressive’ or ‘regressive’, although positioning is taken to be frequently political in nature. Rather, the aim is to understand the significance of specific forms of positioning in the careers and art of the artists.

This does not mean that apparent contradictions in how the artists frame identity and community are overlooked. On the contrary, contradiction in positioning is open to analysis and contextualisation. Khanna has delineated, following Derrida and using a photograph of the young Derrida to demonstrate the point, the complexity of the frames of artworks.<sup>53</sup> Artworks are highly permeable and provide traces or residues of memory, history, or other features which offer, and at times even encourage, competing interpretations of the work. The ‘frame’ itself – or how artworks can be positioned by both the artist and others, for example by critics or spectators - can be constructed in ways that the artist may not be fully aware of or indeed agree with. An obvious example is the way an artwork displayed in one space or time can resonate differently in another. An artist may frame an artwork in a particular way, but, as Khanna indicates, the frame may ‘leak’, and even, in the context of a traumatic history such as that of Algeria, ‘bleed’ in a complex metaphor relating to the ‘cuts’ and ‘cutting’ of violence, abuse and editing and in the process develop a volatile, shifting and unstable positionality.<sup>54</sup>

As noted above, the way subjectivity is understood and employed is complex and, in cultural and postcolonial studies, theorists have tended to position themselves politically. Hiddleston has noted how the question of affirming or repudiating subject positions can be controversial with some arguing that affirming a particular subject position is the only means of resisting colonial domination and others that the dissolution of identitarian categories is essential for a critique of hierarchical structures and relations of power.<sup>55</sup> The critical positioning of Benita Parry in her *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* to the discursive approaches of Derrida, Stuart Hall, and Homi Bhabha illustrates some of the controversies surrounding use

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<sup>52</sup> Framing in art is examined extensively in for example Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, as cited 1987 and Ranjana Khanna, *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>53</sup> Khanna, as cited 2008, pp. 44-45.

<sup>54</sup> The metaphor of ‘cuts’ and ‘cutting’ is derived from Khanna, as cited 2008, in particular pp. 31-67.

<sup>55</sup> Hiddleston, as cited 2006, p. 14.

of the terms.<sup>56</sup> The approach adopted in the thesis is that Parry's criticisms are overstated but that her analysis provides a useful corrective to aspects of the discursive approach that underplay the interaction of discourse with the material aspects of the world.

Positioning to notions of community is closely linked to those of identity. Benedict Anderson has noted the nation is 'imagined as a community because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship'.<sup>57</sup> However, the reading of the artworks suggested that the 'nation' frequently does not appear as an example of deep comradeship and was often a source of contestation. Keightley and Pickering have illustrated that mnemonic imagination can provide a variety of ways of imagining 'community' in both one's personal life and at the collective level.<sup>58</sup> The artists in the thesis frequently challenge nostalgic imaginaries of 'community' in both France and Algeria as attempts to defend exclusion and inequity in the body politic. Imagination can also conceive of other communal groupings than that of the nation with forms of comradeship just as meaningful. Paul Kennedy and Victor Roudometof identify five types of identity/communities, two of which relate to ties of blood, race, ethnicity and nationality. The other three relate to lifestyle orientation linked to aesthetic or affective bonds; political, moral or ethical perceptions of local or global injustices or problems; and groups bonded by a shared professionalism or occupational ethos.<sup>59</sup> Alistair Noon's analysis of anglophone poetry and globalisation also provides food for thought, in particular his argument against framing artists in terms of national identity and his assertion that cultural identity is not and never has been subsumable to the nation state.<sup>60</sup> The engagement with the past and present by some of the women artists, particularly in relation to traditional crafts and the ambiguous status of gendered spaces, also suggested that 'gender solidarity' as a form of community was

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<sup>56</sup> Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>57</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>58</sup> Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, *The Mnemonic Imagination: remembering as creative practice*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>59</sup> Paul Kennedy & Victor Roudometof, *Communities Across Borders under Globalising Conditions: New Immigrants and Transnational Cultures*, (London: Routledge, 2002), particularly Chapter One the section on 'Towards a tentative typology of globalised communities', pp. 20-22. The typology is developed in more detail in their undated paper published on line 'Communities Across Borders under Globalising Conditions: New Immigrants and Transnational Cultures', pp. 31-33. The paper is accessible at <http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/working%20papers/WPTC-01-17%20Kennedy.pdf>. Accessed 16/5/2019.

<sup>60</sup> Alistair Noon, 'Translocal Underground: Anglophone Poetry and Globalization', published online by Longbarrow Press. <http://longbarrowpress.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/translocal-underground-by-alistair-noon.pdf>. Accessed 16/5/2019.

a meaningful approach.<sup>61</sup> Overall, no single approach to community seemed entirely satisfactory because of the range of intersectional positioning implied by the diverse situations of the artists. As a result, key aspects of the various approaches above were used at different times as ways of understanding positioning to ‘community’ and are applied where they help to illuminate analysis.

Any discussion of positionality must also include consideration of how a reflexive approach is adopted by the writer. Positionality, in addition to its use as a tool for considerations of power and representation, is also helpful in exploring insider/outsider dynamics in research. Early discussions of insider/outsider status assumed that the researcher was predominately an insider or an outsider to the group studied and that each status carried with it advantages and disadvantages.<sup>62</sup> However, the boundaries between the two positions are not clearly delineated. The author’s interest and familiarity with contemporary art and his own art practice makes him an ‘insider’ of the contemporary art world. However, this is predominantly from the perspective of an English, middle-class, white, male art writer and artist largely working within a Eurocentric frame and therefore in a number of respects an ‘outsider’ to many of the frames within which the artists discussed here might position themselves. The demands of reflexivity involve questioning one’s own assumptions and therefore reviewing one’s self-positioning regularly. Abdelkebir Khatibi’s approach to ‘double critique’ in his work *Plural Maghreb*, examined below, was used in the research as a means of self-interrogation and *pensée-autre* (a thought of difference and thinking differently).

### *Hybridity*

‘Hybridity’ is a key term in the discourses of identity and community and is concerned with how cultural authority is constructed in conditions of political antagonism or inequity.<sup>63</sup> It is regarded within the thesis as a form of positioning as it is a term that has become a ‘floating signifier’ with a regular presence within the discourse of identity but associated with a

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<sup>61</sup> This is not to suggest that identification with a particular gender is either right or wrong, as Judith Butler has noted in an interview: ‘I think we have to accept a wide variety of positions on gender. Some want to be gender-free, but others want to be free really to be a gender that is crucial to who they are’. See Cristan Williams blog post on the Verso website at <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2009-judith-butler-on-gender-and-the-trans-experience-one-should-be-free-to-determine-the-course-of-one-s-gendered-life> . Accessed 4 September 2019.

<sup>62</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, et al., ‘Power and positionality: negotiating insider/outsider status within and across cultures’, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 20:5, 2001, pp. 405-416, p. 405.

<sup>63</sup> An interesting example of the complex interaction of hybridity, power and mimicry is given in Bronwyn T. Williams, ‘Speak for Yourself? Power and Hybridity in the Cross-Cultural Classroom’, *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2003, pp. 586–609.

complex set of meanings that render the concept highly unstable.<sup>64</sup> The term is familiar to and used by many of the artists in the thesis who have a considerable knowledge of postcolonial literature and critical theory related to Fanon, Bhabha, Glissant, Derrida, and Hall and often, as noted above, they associate hybridity with the notion of the ‘inbetween’. This conceptual diversity creates forms of positioning representing a wide range of relations including antagonism, agonism, and/or complicity. The debate surrounding the term extends to whether it refers to an exchange, a mixing, or a holding in tension of diverse elements, and whether it is a specific result of colonialism or symptomatic of culture in general. On the latter point, despite his focus on the effects of colonialism, Bhabha observes that cultural hybridities can emerge more generally ‘in moments of historical transformation’.<sup>65</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy considers that ‘every culture is in itself “multicultural” in the sense there is no prior acculturation or pure provenance and because culture is “a gesture of mêlée”’.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, it is not a neutral term. Robert Young draws attention to the way in which, in one historical context, the term was rooted in a set of racist assumptions while Siobhán Shilton is critical of it because she believes that hybridity is often used to imply the resolution of antagonism.<sup>67</sup> Whenever ‘hybridity’ and ‘in-between’ are used in the thesis it is not meant to imply stasis or a fixed position but a dynamic and fluid space.

Bhabha’s version of ‘hybridity’ is important in the thesis methodology in part because it is a useful paradigm for the way the artists frequently appropriate colonial and other images and then reconstruct them or re-position them in critical or parodic ways. This mode of artistic engagement mirrors Bhabha’s conception of ‘hybridity’ as a strategic reversal of colonial domination through a complex process of ‘disavowal’ (a term derived from Freud) in which ‘discriminatory identities’, or the unequal and exploitative relations and day-to-day

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<sup>64</sup> The definition in Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), is ‘A signifier without a specific signified. Also known as an “empty signifier”, it is a signifier that absorbs rather than emits meaning. For example, Fredric Jameson suggests that the shark in the *Jaws* series of films is an empty signifier because it is susceptible to multiple and even contradictory interpretations, suggesting that it does not have a specific meaning itself, but functions primarily as a vehicle for absorbing meanings that viewers want to impose upon it’. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199532919.001.0001/acref.9780199532919-e-254>. Accessed 11/6/2019.

<sup>65</sup> Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, as cited 2004, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> J-L Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 283. ‘Mêlée’ is used here rather than ‘mixture’ because culture, identity, and community are seen as about action, or what Hall would describe as on-going processes of becoming rather than substances and not about ‘fusion’ or some ‘achieved disorder’.

<sup>67</sup> R.J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism. A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003). Siobhán Shilton, *Transcultural Encounters: Visualising France and the Maghreb in Contemporary Art*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).



interactions in colonial society, are formed.<sup>68</sup> Bhabha argues that this results from an ‘anxious’ colonial regime creating a form of camouflage to mask its own brutality. ‘Hybridity’ creates through this process ambivalence and a conscience forming anxiety that disturbs and disrupts the representations and presence of an authority and power based on race.<sup>69</sup> This offers a ‘third space’ for the colonial subject to position themselves within from which subversive resistance is possible.<sup>70</sup> Bhabha argues that this process can result in ‘the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other’ which alienates political expectations, and changes the relationship.<sup>71</sup> It is important to note that Bhabha presents this not as simply mixing or exchange but as a complex political process of antagonism, mimicry and engagement that may or may not result in the resolution. This is a useful way of looking at how ‘inbetweenness’ operates in the lives, careers and art of the artists. In addition, this type of critical and parodic reiteration may also be used to challenge gender power relations and authority within gendered spaces as will be seen in the work of, for example, Houria Niati and Amina Zoubir.

Not all theorists regard the concept of hybridity, even as articulated by Bhabha, as more than a process of conflict resolution. For example, Shilton argues that Franco-Maghrebi artwork holds ‘disparate formal and cultural elements in tension, rather than hybridising or fusing them’.<sup>72</sup> In this Shilton follows Benita Parry in regarding the concept as concerned with the resolution of conflict.<sup>73</sup> Françoise Lionnet on the other hand defends ‘hybridity’ and ‘*métissage*’ by arguing they are ‘rooted in an understanding of dialectic that does not entail the resolution of all contradictions’.<sup>74</sup> Glissant also makes the connection between *métissage*,

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<sup>68</sup> Homi Bhabha, as cited 2004, p. 128.

<sup>69</sup> The anxiety created in the coloniser by the very nature of colonial dominance is mentioned repeatedly in *The Location of Culture*. For example, Bhabha notes in relation to stereotypes how the racist masculine gaze of the coloniser is subverted by the very presence of the migrant woman creating an ‘anxious absence’, *Location of Culture*, as cited 2004, p. 67.

<sup>70</sup> ‘The trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something *different*—a mutation, a hybrid’. Bhabha, as cited 2004, p. 111.

<sup>71</sup> Bhabha, as cited 2004, p. 49.

<sup>72</sup> Siobhán Shilton, *Transcultural Encounters* as cited 2013, p. 8.

<sup>73</sup> See Benita Parry as cited 2004. Parry’s position can be criticised, in the view of the writer, as flawed because she arguably takes her particular view of Marxist theory and applies it to postcolonial relations. In the process she reifies the absolute, abstract relations between capitalist and proletariat into an abstracted view of the relationship between coloniser and colonised without regard to the particular complexities of alliances, allegiances and relations in specific contexts. This is something Marx did not do, for example in his analyses of the revolutions in France.

<sup>74</sup> Emmanuel Bruno Jean-François, ‘An Interview with Françoise Lionnet. Crossing Boundaries, Thinking Intersectionally: Pedagogy, Methodology, and the Challenges of Relationality’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 22:2, 2018, pp. 131-141.  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/17409292.2018.1473083?needAccess=true>. Accessed 19/8/2019.

the poetics of 'Relation' and hybridity in ways that acknowledge the on-going ambiguities of both dialogue and conflict.

### *Opacity*

Another important term is that of Édouard Glissant's 'opacity' which is treated in the thesis as a form of positioning.<sup>75</sup> Opacity is used by Glissant to mean having respect for the Other's difference and resisting attempts to assimilate or objectify it. Glissant sees opacity as not just about how the Other is treated but also as an act of resistance by the Other:

'The more the Other resists in his thickness or his fluidity (without restricting himself to this) the more expressive his reality becomes, and the more fruitful the relation becomes'.<sup>76</sup>

This very dense statement implies a set of complex positioning that seems at times to encourage interaction, as a form of relation without restriction and highly expressive, yet puts limits on that relation (opacity, thickness, resistance). Glissant therefore presents 'opacity' as an antinomy with, on the one hand, a form of resistance that involves creating an 'unreadable' visibility but, on the other, is in some way expressive and open as Glissant frequently makes the point that opacity is an integral aspect of relation. Glissant asserts that 'truths' do not apply universally or permanently and in this opacity acts as an epistemological defence against 'understanding' which in Western thinking, he believes, acts as a form of aggression that constructs the Other as an object of knowledge. As Britton points out, Glissant plays on the French verb 'com-prendre' in which understanding is seen as a form of enclosure and appropriation.<sup>77</sup> This is similar to what Spivak calls the 'epistemic violence' that prevents the subaltern from speaking within the dominant social discourse.<sup>78</sup> Spivak sees this as a position of disempowerment while Glissant sees it as a locus of resistance.

Glissant's idea of 'Relation' clearly has a strong ethical dimension and involves an association of equality and respect for the Other as different from oneself whether applied to individuals, cultures or societies.<sup>79</sup> It involves seeing and understanding the Other at an appropriate level of complexity and difference. Glissant is arguing for respect for the

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<sup>75</sup> See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relations*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), the chapter on 'Transparency and Opacity', pp. 111-120.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Celia Britton, *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory, Strategies of Language and Resistance*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1999), p. 18.

<sup>77</sup> Britton, as cited, pp. 19-20.

<sup>78</sup> 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, (Eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, (New York: Columbia University Press: 1994), pp. 66-111, p. 76.

<sup>79</sup> Celia Britton, *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory* as cited 1999, p. 11.

particular qualities of the specific community in question in a process that he calls ‘degeneralisation’.<sup>80</sup> The concept of ‘degeneralisation’ seems for him to involve a sincere and deep engagement of imagination radically different from the abusive imaginaries of, for example, those of Western colonialism. This has the possibility of opening the way to a defence of closed societies or, to use Stuart Hall’s phrasing, ‘thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact’.<sup>81</sup> However, this is the reverse of Glissant’s intentions and, as Britton notes, ‘particularity’ is seen by him as useful only in so far as it is outward-looking and related to other cultures and values.<sup>82</sup>

Positioning is used in the following chapters in a variety of contexts including analysing how artists respond to gender, for example, in Eurocentric stereotyping or in the patriarchal tradition. In combatting stereotypical representations the forms of mimicry used by the artists may risk re-presenting or citing the past in ways that re-assert inadvertently forms of oppression. In seeking to reinsert women into history by reference to the past, for example to female solidarity within the home or in traditional crafts, the artist may risk neglecting the gendered oppression of such spaces by romanticising them. Alternatively, in seeking to assert cultural values in one area, for example, the glories of Arab history and culture, the artist may gloss over problematic issues.<sup>83</sup> There may also be great uncertainty, given the form of the artwork or the lack of a statement by the artist on the issue, about the intention of the artist. In this regard, respect should be given to the opacity and irreducibility of the artist’s intention and the artwork. This does not mean that the work becomes so intractable that commentary is impossible or invalid. Using Glissant’s terms, there is a place for respecting the poetics of the artwork within the analysis in which part of the value and depth of the artwork is seen to be its ambiguity and complexity as well as the immediacy of its offered insight.<sup>84</sup>

Glissant’s perspective has implications for the question of intentionality in art and how the positionality surrounding an artwork can be complex and to some extent untranslatable or irreducible. The artist’s intentions may be available in statements in journals or in interviews with the art press or they may be available in brochures about specific exhibitions or in

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<sup>80</sup> For the term see Édouard Glissant, as cited, 2010, p. 62 where Glissant uses it to describe the West’s use of equivalence to create a hierarchical order of things.

<sup>81</sup> Hall, 1992 as cited p. 222.

<sup>82</sup> Britton, 1999, as cited, p. 11.

<sup>83</sup> See section below on ‘Double Critique’, for example, Khatibi’s criticism of the formulation of the Arab past as an imposition of false ‘tradition’ configured in terms of ‘an obsession with origin, celestial identity and servile morality’, exemplified by contemporary Salafism.

<sup>84</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, as cited 2010, for example p. 85: ‘The poetic axiom, like the mathematical axiom, is illuminating because it is fragile and inescapable, obscure and revealing’.

notices in exhibitions associated with the art. However, once the artwork is ‘out there’ and exhibited it becomes a thing in itself and open to interpretation by spectators, critics and a range of others. Galleries often give their own spin on an exhibition or artwork and their intentions like those of critics may be very different from the artist. This provides a wide field of positionality and intentionality for analysis but great care must be taken in considering this network of commentary to respect the artist’s intentions.

Much of the above commentary on the instability surrounding the concepts of ‘identity’ and ‘community’ suggest the relevance of the idea of ‘sous rature’ initiated by Heidegger and adapted by Derrida. ‘Sous rature’, usually translated as ‘under erasure’ although *raturer* literally means to scratch out, was a strategy used by Heidegger to indicate that he considered the meaning of ‘Being’ as contested and he crossed through the word but let it remain legible when he wished to indicate in a text its problematic nature. Derrida used it, often in relation to the idea of ‘trace’, to indicate a word that was not adequate to its task but remained necessary because of the constraints of language.<sup>85</sup> Both identity and community are treated in the thesis as words *sous rature* but the term can also be applied in relation to the changing intentionality of the artist and the opacity of the artwork in different contexts.

### *Framing the art work and the artist*

At different times and where appropriate four ideas or frames are applied to the way the artists configure identity and community in art. The first and broadest frame is that we are all engaged with identity, culture and community through our daily lived experience. This is such a dense and complicated terrain that it is not surprising that many artists frequently examine how we are what we are, and how we relate to each other and our interactions with our environments. In their work artists thus ‘construct a sense of who we are as individuals, as a society and as a nation’.<sup>86</sup> The second is that many artists in the world are, as individuals and as artists, faced with perceived existential threats to their identities and communities. They may perceive themselves as having particular responsibilities or duties in relation to other citizens or to a country’s constitution or legal arrangements that are perceived as unjust or threatening. Whether in the ‘homeland’ or in the ‘diaspora’, there may be varying levels of

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<sup>85</sup> See Spivak’s commentary in her introduction to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, (Trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. xv. The idea of *sous rature* is also used in J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, as cited 2001, primarily as a key strategy of deconstruction, see for example p. 416.

<sup>86</sup> Tate Modern, *Cultural Identity*. <http://www.tate.org.uk/artist-rooms/collection/themes/cultural-identity>. Accessed 12/11/2019.

pressure placed upon individuals to confront or represent in their art issues arising from these situations.

The third frame is rather different. ‘Soft power’ is a term that is often used interchangeably with ‘cultural diplomacy’ and both are a source of why artists may feel under pressure to explore identity and community in certain ways. Joseph Nye saw ‘soft power’ as the ‘ability to persuade through culture, values and ideas’.<sup>87</sup> The streams of funding associated with cultural diplomacy can be seen as a form of influence on both artists and art institutions. Cultural diplomacy does not only work from ‘West’ to ‘East’. In Doha, for example, Mathaf or the ‘Arab Museum of Modern Art’, is highly influential and has a huge annual acquisition budget.<sup>88</sup> The Al Thani family have collected a considerable number of works by Adel Abdessemed who is considered in Chapter Two.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, the Emirate of Sharjah has established the Sharjah Art Foundation which can be seen as an attempt to put a cultural gloss on the appalling human rights abuses in the Emirates.

The final frame is closely related to the third and concerns the influence of the international art market on the way in which artists configure themselves in relation to identity and community. Many art fairs and biennials are curated in terms of geographical areas – the Middle East, the MENA, Africa, South Asia, to name a few - or sometimes by individual country. This form of essentialism neglects the diversity of these regions and can result in an artist being stereotyped as ‘ethnic’ or ‘periphery’. Sussan Babaie has noted the partly humorous comments of the Iranian curator Tirdad Zolghadr that non-Western artists should take advantage of the West’s desiring of ‘otherness’ and its xenophiliac tendency to make art that is ethnically ‘othered’.<sup>90</sup> Babaie also makes a different point about stereotyping when she points to the risk of, for example, typecasting women artists from the MENA in terms of anticipated subject matters such as the veil despite the weight of their output being related to other questions.

### *Double Critique*

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<sup>87</sup> Joseph S. Nye, ‘Soft Power’, *Foreign Policy*, no. 80, 1990, pp. 153–171.

<sup>88</sup> Robin Pogrebin, ‘Qatari Riches Are Buying Art World Influence’, *New York Times*, 22/7/2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/23/arts/design/qatar-uses-its-riches-to-buy-art-treasures.html> . Accessed 12/6/2019.

<sup>89</sup> Karen Exel, ‘Desiring the past and reimagining the present: contemporary collecting in Qatar’, *Museum & Society*, July 2016, 14 (2), pp. 259-274.

<sup>90</sup> Sussan Babaie, ‘Voices of authority: locating the “modern” in “Islamic” arts’, *Getty Research Journal*, 3, 2011, pp. 133-149.

Abdelkebir Khatibi's work *Plural Maghreb* was read late in the research but has been influential. Khatibi's concept of 'double critique' problematizes the notion of the binary and allows the possibility of an array of diverse voices to be heard.<sup>91</sup> As Khalid Amine notes, Khatibi's approach 'disrupts all sorts of binary definitions of Self and Other, East and West'.<sup>92</sup> 'Double critique' is linked to Khatibi's idea of *pensée-autre* (a thought of difference and thinking differently) and attempts a double subversion. On the one hand to 'uproot Western knowledge from its central place within ourselves, to decentre ourselves with respect to this center, to this origin claimed by the West'.<sup>93</sup> This is not to reject Western thinking outright but to remove it from its centrality and set it within a frame that encompasses other perspectives. On the other hand, Khatibi rejects a traditionalism involving a return to unthinking allegiance to 'an archaic patrimony' and the influence of a Salafistic Islam in which, in his view, metaphysics has become reduced to theology or doctrine.<sup>94</sup> Khatibi argues instead for a plural Maghreb that is not dominated by the search for roots but tries to engage with the multiple forms of thought and development that are continuously present in North Africa.<sup>95</sup>

Hamil views Khatibi's notion of double critique as shifting the postcolonial subject's fixation on the Other/West 'to an inward interrogation of his political and ideological self-colonization and self-victimization' thus demystifying Arabo-Islamic metaphysical logocentrism and deconstructing the imperialist, ethnocentric Western episteme.<sup>96</sup> This approach assists analysis of monolithic Western perceptions of Algerian women as well as the Algerian Nationalist attempts to position women as embodiments of the nation and enables one to respect the irreducible otherness or opacity of subjects and resist the double objectification of

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<sup>91</sup> A Khatibi, *Plural Maghreb*, as cited 2019.

<sup>92</sup> Khalid Amine, 'Double Critique: Disrupting Monolithic Thrusts', *Textures*, online publication platform for the interweaving of cultures platform, posted 27 March 2013. <http://www.textures-platform.com/?p=2800>. Accessed 16/5/2019.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Amine as cited 2013.

<sup>94</sup> Jane Hiddleston, *Understanding Postcolonialism*, (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 129.

<sup>95</sup> For Khatibi this involves a subversion or undermining of the 'whole history of theology, charisma and patriarchy' of the Arab world. See *Plural Maghreb* as cited 2019, p. 27. Khatibi's chapter on 'Other Thought' should be read alongside the chapter on 'Double Critique' as both are integral aspects of his thinking and complement each other.

<sup>96</sup> Mustapha Hamil, 'Interrogating Identity: Abdelkebir Khatibi and the Postcolonial Prerogative', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 22, The Language of the Self: Autobiographies and Testimonies, 2002, pp. 72-86. <http://www.jstor.org.eresources.shef.ac.uk/stable/pdf/1350050.pdf>. Accessed 5/3/2017.

both patriarchal and colonial discourses.<sup>97</sup> The thesis aims to maintain this self-reflexivity of critique but also looks to see if it is evidenced in the work of the artists.

## **The chapters**

The positionality of the artists to identity and community in their careers and art is addressed thematically by chapter. In Chapter Two, the key moments in the lives of three artists, Adel Abdessemed, Kader Attia and Saâdane Afif, are explored in terms of their positioning to issues of identity and community as they progressed through their careers. This involves drawing out the key moments as they develop their lives and careers and how this is related to the multiple and at times conflicting forces acting upon them and the effects on identity formation. The analysis will demonstrate how structural factors interact with the agency and intentions of the artists. The artwork of the artists will be selectively referred to in order to illustrate the dynamic relation between the lives and careers of the artists and the semiology of their art in the development of identity and a sense of community.<sup>98</sup> A number of additional theorists are drawn upon in the Chapter Two analysis and Hall's ideas are built on by adopting Bourriaud's elaboration of the nature of the contemporary artist as both 'radicant' and 'semionaut'. This is supplemented by Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' in relation to professional and career development and by the work of Alain Quemin on 'visibility' in the contemporary art world and the movement this requires of artists.

Chapter Three takes forward themes related to history, memory and transmission and their close connections to how a number of artists on both sides of the Mediterranean position themselves to identity and community: Mohamed Bourouissa and Zoulikha Bouabdellah in France and Ammar Bouras and Amina Menia in Algeria. The focus of the artists in France is related to continuing notions of the unicity of the French nation and the failure to address diversity, differences of culture and inequality of treatment. In Algeria, the artists question the country's problematic past and present in particular the failure to come to terms with the tragic civil strife of the 1990s and the diversity of Algerian identity. Bhabha's reiterative

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<sup>97</sup> See Abdelkébir Khatibi, 'The language of the Other: Testimonial Exercises', *PMLA*, Volume 125, Number 4, October 2010, pp. 1002–1019, Felisa V. Reynolds, 'Khatibi as Derrida's foil: Undermining the last defender of the French language', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 18:2, 2014, pp. 199-206 and Mustapha Hamil, 2002 as cited. On multidirectionalism in terms of memory, see Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonisation*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), in which he argues for non-zero-sum spaces in which multiple voices have a place.

<sup>98</sup> Framing in art is examined in detail in, for example, Derrida's *The Truth in Painting*, as cited 1987 and Khanna, *Algeria Cuts*, as cited 2008.

process of 'hybridity' is used to examine questions of unicity, exclusion and repression in the way the artists reconstruct political imaginaries in critical and parodic ways.

Chapter Four explores the journey, in both its metaphoric and physical forms, and the way it elucidates positioning to identity and community in the work of Bruno Boudjelal, Zineb Sedira and Zineddine Bessaï. The focus is on travel, migration and belonging in relation to narrating identity and community. Theories of narrativity drawn from literature are adapted and applied to the artworks. The journeys and the visual and written narratives of the artists are analysed from the perspective of how they problematize beginning or origin; how they make apparent denouements ambiguous; and how they create a terrain of the in-between that offers insights into identity and belonging. Attention is drawn to issues of 'return' or 'detour' and imaginative constructions of belonging and estrangement. Note is made, in analysing the art, of how different experiences of the past can raise issues of ownership of belonging between different groups who regard Algeria as a point of reference for identity. The chapter also examines issues of inbetweenness and hybridity in relation to location and between the global and the local. Attention is given to the use of anachronism and citation in the artwork and the ambivalence of fact and fiction in the construction of identity and the relation of this to 'opacity'.

Chapter Five concentrates on the work of four women artists: Houria Niati, Samta Benyahia, Katia Kameli and Amina Zoubir. The focus is on how the artists position themselves to issues of identity and community through representations of Algerian and Arab women and through their challenge to gendered spaces. The chapter starts with a theoretical exploration of the nature of the body and of gendered space and then analyses the different treatments by the artists of the harem, the mashrabiyya, the spaces of public protest and the continuing 'sexual apartheid' in public and private space in Algeria. The idea of double critique is of importance in the analysis of the works and the challenge these make to stereotypical characterisations. The approach relates the artworks where appropriate to literary sources which resonate with them including the work of Assia Djebar, Albert Camus and Yacine Kateb. Bhabha's notion of critical hybridity and Glissant's ideas of opacity and irreducibility are applied to the work of the artists.

The final chapter brings together the conclusions drawn from the preceding chapters and summarises the complex, diverse and often contradictory nature of identity formation amongst the artists and how this is articulated in their art.



## Chapter Two: Stars in the firmament

### *Introduction*

This chapter is an initial exploration of the terrain of the thesis in which the experiences of three artists of Algerian or Franco-Algerian origin, Adel Abdessemed, Kader Attia and Saâdane Afif, are examined and analysed in terms of how they position themselves and their identity in relation to Algeria, to France, and to the global art world. The focus will first be on how, through a reflexive, personal agency, the artists position and reposition themselves to their cultural and social background. It is then demonstrated how this agency and its influence on identity is further developed during their education, travels and careers. The chapter describes the artists' responses to the complex and often contradictory forces acting on them and how this drives identity formation in their careers and art. The artwork of the three artists will be used to illustrate this changing positioning to identity and community.

The three artists considered in the chapter have all achieved a level of star status within the art market that places them in the upper echelons of contemporary artists. This ranking is asserted in terms of generally recognised criteria: their representation by top galleries, the presence of their work at international art fairs and biennials, the collectability of their work by the global art world's wealthy collectors and the attention that they are afforded in art media.<sup>99</sup> The initial assumption of this research was that there would be considerable similarity between the three artists in their positioning to issues of belonging and in their thematic concerns. The evidence, as will be demonstrated, was that, despite similarities in their career trajectories, significant differences in relation to positioning to identity were revealed.

The chapter begins with a general consideration of the ways in which the artist is an interactive agent in the social order building on the positioning theory outlined in Chapter One.<sup>100</sup> Bourdieu notes that one positions oneself within a social field by means of 'habitus',

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<sup>99</sup> This is not to say that they are amongst the megastars of contemporary art, they are not for example in the *Art Review Power 100*, [https://artreview.com/power\\_100/](https://artreview.com/power_100/). Accessed 2/8/2018. However, they are towards the upper end of the market and two, Afif and Attia, have won the Marcel Duchamp prize and all three have been represented at the Venice Biennale.

<sup>100</sup> For a useful approach to positioning theory as a discursive analysis of interaction, see Francisco Tirado and Ana Galvez, 'Positioning Theory and Discourse Analysis: Some Tools for Social Interaction Analysis'. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, [S.l.], v. 8, no. 2, May 2007. <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/issue/view/7>. Accessed 5/12/2018.

which is the frame through which agent/structure interactions are constructed. Bourdieu characterizes this frame, within which the individual both acts upon and is acted upon, as a duality between natural, familial, domestic, or traditional culture on the one hand and artificial, acquired, constructed or public culture on the other, a duality he felt was reinforced by institutions.<sup>101</sup> Bourdieu specifically references the impact of high levels of educational experience and of social background in the development of cultural capital and how that helps develop the capacity of the individual for success as an artist.<sup>102</sup> The approach adopted makes links between the development of identity in its multiple aspects and the success of the artist. This conception of individuals as both positioned and positioning themselves to identity and community is maintained throughout the chapter with reference to the ways in which the artists develop ‘cultural capital’ and achieve success and recognition in the art world.<sup>103</sup>

### **Radicants and Semionauts**

The model selected to engage with the situation of the artist in the contemporary world is that offered by Nicolas Bourriaud’s conception of the ‘radicant’. Bourriaud argues that ‘radicancy’ is an essential quality of contemporary artists and that radicant movement is a key contributor to the development of their art. The term is chosen carefully to distinguish it from ‘radical’ with its connotations of a leftist avant-garde within the modernist movement.<sup>104</sup> This, Bourriaud argues, is because since 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall there is, arguably, no master narrative with which a radical art can associate itself. Bourriaud connects this with Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ claim but also references Jean-Hubert Martin’s curation in May 1989 of *Les Magiciens de la Terre* (Magicians of the Earth), which claimed to be the first world exhibition of contemporary art and thus provided a degree of recognition

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<sup>101</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993) and his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1984). The ideas of ‘field’, ‘habitus’, ‘disposition’ and ‘social capital’ are used in this chapter but, because of the way understandings of social relations have developed, his understanding of how ideology ‘misguides’ people has not been employed. For this latter point see D. Robbins, ‘Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Rancière on art/aesthetics and politics: the origins of disagreement, 1963-1985’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 66(4), December 2015, pp. 738-58.

<sup>102</sup> See Randal Johnson’s introduction to Bourdieu, 1993 as cited, p. 22.

<sup>103</sup> For the development of the notion of ‘cultural capital’ see D. Robbins, ‘The origins, early development and status of Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital”’, *The British Journal of Sociology*, Volume 56, Issue 1, March 2005, pp. 13–30.

<sup>104</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, (New York: Lukas & Steinberg, 2009), p. 44. The classic text on modernism and modernity is Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde, Theory and History of Literature, Volume 4*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). There is now a version online: [https://monoskop.org/images/d/d0/Buerger\\_Peter\\_The\\_Theory\\_of\\_the\\_Avant-Garde.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/d/d0/Buerger_Peter_The_Theory_of_the_Avant-Garde.pdf). Accessed 20 December 2016.

to the ‘peripheral’ in contemporary art.<sup>105</sup> The value of Bourriaud’s concept of radicancy for the approach adopted in the thesis is that it involves not just physical travel but also movement linked to a search for meaning and an engagement with, in Eurocentric contemporary art terms, the centre and the periphery of the global art landscape.<sup>106</sup> Attia, Abdessemed and Afif, in different ways related to their background and their developing positioning to identity, engage with the legacy of modernism, modernity and colonialism in their search for meaning, identity and a place in the art world.<sup>107</sup>

Bourriaud’s ‘radicant’ artist lives and works within a world perceived as politically, socially and culturally fragmented and populated by people and objects which leave the ‘beds of their original cultures and disperse across the planet’.<sup>108</sup> This is similar to Alain Badiou’s argument that the social space in which we live is increasingly experienced as ‘worldless’ and in which the only form radical protest can take is meaningless violence, a theme which emerges in aspects of Abdessemed’s work.<sup>109</sup> Each of the artists responds to this vacuity in different ways by reflexively translating their personal experiences into their positioning to identity and community in order to challenge what Žižek has identified as an ‘ideological constellation in which people are deprived of their ways of locating meaning’.<sup>110</sup>

As the term implies, Bourriaud’s view of the radicant artist is modelled on the cultural equivalent of the botanical family radicant, with the moveable and exploratory rootedness of ivy, couch grass or strawberry plants rather than the fixity of root vegetables.<sup>111</sup> Bourriaud differentiates radicancy from the rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari (‘a multiplicity’ that ‘has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions’) and the rooted

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<sup>105</sup> Bourriaud, *The Radicant* as cited, p. 11. On the ‘end of history’ see Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’, *The National Interest*, no. 16, 1989, pp. 3–18 and his later *The End of History and the Last Man*, (New York: Free Press: 1992). On Martin’s important if flawed exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* see Julia Friede, ‘Exhibition Histories: Magiciens de la Terre’, *Contemporaryand (C&) Magazine*, 12/8/2016. <https://www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/magiciens-de-la-terre/>. Accessed 29/7/2018.

<sup>106</sup> A perceptive, if savage, attack on the contemporary art world’s complacent view of itself as a ‘multiple, diverse, rainbow-hued, fractally complex proliferation of practices and discourses’ is given in Julian Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art, A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: OUP, 2004), ‘The New World Order’ (Chapter Three, pp. 50-69) in particular.

<sup>107</sup> There is a large literature on both modernity and modernism. One of the three themes of *Documenta 12* (2007) concerned ‘Is modernity our antiquity?’ which attempted to explore the relationship between modernity and ‘post-modernity’. See Roger Bruergel, ‘Is modernity our antiquity?’, *Documenta 12 Magazine Project*, March 2006. <https://christophebruno.com/2007/07/17/documenta-12-magazine-project-is-modernity-our-antiquity/>. Accessed 11/1/2017.

<sup>108</sup> Bourriaud, *Radicant* as cited 2009, p. 102.

<sup>109</sup> Badiou is quoted in Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, (London: Profile Books, 2008), p. 67.

<sup>110</sup> Slavoj Žižek, ‘Shoplifters of the World Unite’, *London Review of Books*, August 2011.

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-zizek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite>. Accessed 30/7/2018.

<sup>111</sup> Bourriaud, *Radicant* as cited 2009, p. 53.

‘modernist tree’.<sup>112</sup> The idea of the radican is conceived around the individual artist’s trajectory and artistic agency linked to a singular project in which diverse cultural pathways and signs are selected and utilised in art.<sup>113</sup> Bourriaud argues that, without a master narrative and faced with a diversity of competing cultures, the contemporary artist is forced to organise the forms available by means of creative, appropriative postproduction.<sup>114</sup> This echoes Fredric Jameson’s description of the increasingly appropriative role of art as a form of ‘renarrativization’ of earlier narratives, symbols, and networks of meaning into novel, hybrid ‘textualities’.<sup>115</sup> The radican artist is like a ‘hunter gatherer’ foraging across a plethora of cultures for material to ‘invent pathways among signs’.<sup>116</sup> This leads Bourriaud to describe the radican artist as a ‘semionaut’ who journeys through the diverse spaces of the contemporary world elaborating his own subjectivity and setting new forms in motion.<sup>117</sup> Paul Crowther also notes this close correlation between the structure of the embodied subject as artist and that of ‘the world’.<sup>118</sup> Artists construct a representation of the world in their art that is closely associated with their developing positioning to identity, a process that is in part about finding through reflection a unique voice to express one’s own experiences and views but also about developing a way – an art practice – to communicate that voice. This process and its relation to identity and community is a product of agency rather than simply given and is subject to change. Identity itself, the ‘world’ and art interact and create shifts within ‘a “production” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation’.<sup>119</sup> This not a question of the jet setting stereotype of artists criss-crossing the world to art fairs, biennials and international exhibitions but about selective engagement with diverse and distributed cultural sites which reflect and drive in multiple and often contradictory ways identity formation in the artist.

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<sup>112</sup> Bourriaud, *Radicant* as cited 2009, p. 55.

<sup>113</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (Trans. Brian Massumi), (London: Continuum, 2007), particularly the introduction on the rhizome, pp. 3-28.

<sup>114</sup> See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, (New York: Sternberg, 2002).

<http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Bourriaud-Postproduction2.pdf>. Accessed 9/1/2017. Bourriaud describes the term thus: ‘Postproduction is a technical term from the audiovisual vocabulary used in television, film, and video. It refers to the set of processes applied to recorded material: montage, the inclusion of other visual or audio sources, subtitling, voice-overs, and special effects. As a set of activities linked to the service industry and recycling, postproduction belongs to the tertiary sector, as opposed to the industrial or agricultural sector, i.e., the production of raw materials’.

<sup>115</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 96.

<sup>116</sup> Bourriaud, *Radicant* as cited 2009, p. 102.

<sup>117</sup> Bourriaud, *Radicant* as cited 2009, pp. 53-54.

<sup>118</sup> Paul Crowther, *Art and Embodiment*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 2.

<sup>119</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, in J. Rutherford, (Ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1992), p. 392.

The three artists in this chapter began their professional lives in the 1990s following the institutional critique of the 1960s and 1970s, which enabled other perspectives to enter the field of art from the ‘periphery’, inaugurating what Nav Haq has called ‘an institutionalised sort of multiculturalism’.<sup>120</sup> The different ways in which each of the artists entered the field of art, and the ways in which their art and careers developed within it, is indicative of the strides made in inclusivity in the art system as well as its limitations.<sup>121</sup> Haq quotes approvingly Danto’s statement about the artist that ‘(w)e cannot help him until he has mastered the is of artistic identification and so constitutes it a work of art’.<sup>122</sup> The development of personal artistic identity thus has to embrace a complex codification surrounding the contemporary artwork which anyone who has aspirations in the art world must master. Nav Haq draws attention to the extent that there is still differential access to codification and Hodges and Yousefi show that, while in principle contemporary artists can hail from anywhere, in practice they usually have to go through certain geographical hubs.<sup>123</sup> This is because of the continuing disparities in institutional and educational access but also the peculiarity of contemporary art’s aesthetics, which can often prosper only in the very specific educational environment offered by Western art schools. There is therefore a great migration of contemporary artists from across the world to participate in this educational environment in order to enhance their chances to be, as Hodges and Yousefi express it, amongst the few ‘beamed up’ into the international circuit.<sup>124</sup>

Bourriaud’s approach does not cover directly an important contemporary phenomenon related to a collapse between the ‘global’ and the ‘local’ in the contemporary world. Okwui Enwesor has characterised both the positive and conflictual relationship between the local and the global as ‘intense proximities’ or ‘zones of contact’ and ‘disjunctions within a post-colonial world’.<sup>125</sup> Enwesor elaborates how this creates a ‘fine reticulum of contemporary cultural

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<sup>120</sup> Nav Haq, ‘The Invisible and the Visible, Identity Politics and the Economy of Reproduction in Art’, *Internationale Online*, Sep 2015.

[http://www.internationaleonline.org/research/decolonising\\_practices/31\\_the\\_invisible\\_and\\_the\\_visible\\_identity\\_politics\\_and\\_the\\_economy\\_of\\_reproduction\\_in\\_art](http://www.internationaleonline.org/research/decolonising_practices/31_the_invisible_and_the_visible_identity_politics_and_the_economy_of_reproduction_in_art) . Accessed 29/7/2018.

<sup>121</sup> Although this can easily be overestimated, see Stallabrass, 2004 as cited, p. 23.

<sup>122</sup> The quote comes from Arthur Danto, ‘The Art World’, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 61, No. 19, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting, (Oct. 15, 1964), pp. 571-584.

<sup>123</sup> David Hodges and Hamed Yousefi, ‘Provincialism Perfected: Global Contemporary Art and Uneven Development’, *E-Flux Journal*, #65, *Supercommunity*, May/August 2015. <http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/provincialism-perfected-global-contemporary-art-and-uneven-development/> . Accessed 12 January 2016.

<sup>124</sup> Hodges and Yousefi, as cited 2015.

<sup>125</sup> Okwui Enwesor was curator of the 12th Triennial in Paris in 2012: ‘Intense Proximities’. <http://www.exponaute.com/expositions/5603-la-triennale-2012/>. See Vivian Sky Rehberg, ‘La Triennale 2012’, *Frieze*, 1/9/2012. <https://frieze.com/article/la-triennale-2012> . Accessed 30/7/2018. The *Frieze* review of the

identities'.<sup>126</sup> Like Bourriaud, Enwesor draws attention to the forest of signs that 'define the landscape of contemporary art' but he is also concerned with 'which artistic positions gain pre-eminence and which signs carry discursive power above all others'.<sup>127</sup> Enwesor's concept of 'intense proximities' provides an important insight and reference will be made to it at times in the thesis.

The three artists, like most artists, sought to succeed within the highly competitive world of art production, distribution and exchange. In this arena national states, artists, curators, gallerists, dealers, collectors, critics and various other stakeholders struggle for positions of dominance and profit.<sup>128</sup> Alain Quemin has shown the importance for artists of 'visibility' in the art world in the struggle to succeed. Quemin observes that the annual ranking of artists by *Kunstkompass* is based on three indicators of 'visibility': solo exhibitions in museums and contemporary art centres, participation in biennials or collective shows in museums or art centres and reviews in influential contemporary art magazines.<sup>129</sup> For each of the indicators the more prestigious the institution or magazine, the more points are accrued. Achieving this 'visibility' is the result of the combined efforts of the artist and the artist's dealer or gallery. Certain dealers are more visible than others and it is important for an artist to move through the 'hierarchy' of dealers, the most visible being those in the Power 100, such as David Zwirner who was for a time Abdessemed's dealer. Quemin demonstrates that 'visibility' requires that artists exhibit in art institutions and be written about in publications in the US, the UK and Germany, something that can disadvantage artists in other parts of the world, including France. Achieving recognition and 'visibility' in a topology of a still Western dominated world of art requires of many artists a radicancy or repeated temporary settlement and re-settlement of roots in order to achieve success. It is argued that this radicancy,

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exhibition is largely positive and set in the context of 'La Force de l'art'. Interestingly, *Frieze* is mostly critical of the efforts of the French state to 'vitalize' the French art scene.

<sup>126</sup> Okwui Enwesor, 'Introduction' to *La Triennale 2012, Intense Proximities: guide to the exhibition*, (Paris: Palais de Tokyo, 2012), p. 17.

<sup>127</sup> Enwesor, as cited 2012, p. 15.

<sup>128</sup> See for example Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* as cited 1993 and his *Distinction* as cited 1984.

<sup>129</sup> See Alain Quemin, 'The Impact of Nationality on the Contemporary Art Market', *Sociologia & Anthropologia*, Rio de Janeiro, v.05.03, December 2015, pp. 825-856. Also, a more general survey (based on a report by the French Foreign Ministry in which Quemin was involved) is his *L'art contemporain international: entre les institutions et le marché (le rapport disparu)*, (Nîmes: Editions Jacqueline Chambon, Artprice, 2002). The ground is covered slightly differently by Raymonde Moulin in *L'artiste, l'institution et le marché*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2009). Quemin, in his article (pp. 847-8) uses statistical analysis to dispute Moulin's theory that value results from the convergence of the art market and institutions since, he argues, she takes little account of the strength of Chinese art in the markets and its weak showing in institutional settings.

demonstrated by all three artists, helped them to achieve visibility and in the process develop a complex network of positioning to identity.

A key argument of the chapter is that the three artists engaged with their individual social landscapes with passionate reflexive agency, but this is not to deny that early life, in terms of its location and cultural context, had an important influence on them and their positioning to identity and community. Bourdieu draws attention to the fiercely competitive art economy in which the artist must not just be talented artistically but also acquire skills, dispositions, and approaches which aid recognition and successful positioning. Bourdieu uses the term ‘cultural capital’ to refer to non-financial social assets that promote social mobility including education, intellect and cultural and social context.<sup>130</sup> The term ‘cultural capital’ is particularly useful in the context of understanding artists because Bourdieu connects the term closely with the acquisition of a ‘code’ accumulated through the ‘pedagogical action’ of the family or group members (family education), educated members of the social formation (diffuse education), and social institutions (institutionalised education) where ‘taste’ is often linked to social location.<sup>131</sup> The term encompasses a range of community aspects including family, social status, nation, and diaspora. Cultural capital is important because it assists the development of ‘habitus’ or the frame through which agent/structure interactions are constructed and therefore the positions that artists adopt and incorporate into their art.

This approach is not without its dangers. There is a risk of reifying the situation of the Algerian artist in terms of his or her alleged ‘difference’ without taking account of how the aesthetic codes and practices of Western contemporary art, for example video, performance, framing by reference to Duchamp, can be incorporated and manipulated within an art practice that consciously maintains a relation to modernisms and modernities linked to different local or regional realities. This is a difficult conceptual and practical problem that requires attention to the specificity of difference rather than to a generalised ‘otherness’. Throughout the chapter emphasis is given to the reflexive agency of the individual artists in developing their positioning to identity and community. However, an artist frequently uses in his art what

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<sup>130</sup> See Bourdieu, *Distinction*, as cited 2010, especially from an art perspective Part 1, ‘A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste’.

<sup>131</sup> Randal Johnson’s Introduction to Bourdieu, as cited 1993, p. 7.

is familiar and it would be remarkable if there were not some reference, even implicit, to family and cultural background.<sup>132</sup>

### *Kader Attia*

Kader Attia's positioning to identity, which he frequently refers to as related to the 'inbetween', is complex, fragmented and often contradictory. The argument presented here is that the artist's configuration of his identity as 'inbetween' is not a static conception but develops over time in relation to a range of binaries that the artist attempts to reconcile such as modernity and tradition, religion and consumerism, and borders and migration. From an early exploration of identity as related to becoming and transition, Attia develops a set of changing positions to identity related to sequentially overlapping engagements with the concepts of 'appropriation', 'reappropriation' and, more recently, that of 'repair'. By means of these conceptualisations Attia developed a 'voice' and an art practice as a postcolonial artist by critiquing notions of identity, culture and history in ways that challenged their constructions, through deconstructions and reconstructions within his artwork. Attia's positioning operates at two interrelated levels: in terms of his personal identity and background and in terms of his aesthetic development as an artist. The artist explores this positioning in his art by means of various themes including sexuality and transvestism, the relationship between mind and body and between the body and architecture.<sup>133</sup> The artist engages with a world distorted by the effects of colonialism and at the same time grapples with the antinomies of his identity linked to his Algerian and French affiliations and attempts to set his sense of inbetweenness within the context of a network of wider relations.

Deeply influenced by his early background and driven by a desire to escape its poverty and cultural limitations, the artist's career is marked by a radicancy that involved movement from the banlieues of Paris to peripatetic travel in Africa, South America and Europe. As noted earlier, the habitus is the physical embodiment of cultural capital and is manifested in the ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that people possess as a result of their life experiences. The artist's nomadic journeys, comparable with those of Bourriaud's radicant

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<sup>132</sup> There are some interesting references to this issue by Bourriaud (particularly in relation to his critique of 'multiculturalism') in his article 'Notes on Globalisation, National Identities and the Production of Signs', in K. Boullata, *Belonging and Globalisation: critical essays in contemporary art and culture*, (Beirut: SAQL, 2008), pp. 101-108.

<sup>133</sup> Attia notes in interview that he read Kant's essay on the mind and the body at seventeen and this transformed his view of the relationship between the two and their inseparability. See Ellen Blumenstein, 'Kader Attia: Repair 5 Acts, four questions of the curator to the artist', *Nafas Art Magazine*, July 2013. <https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2013/kader-attia-kw>. Accessed 8/5/2020.



cultural hunter-gather, enriched his habitus with a range of cultural capital providing a broader post-colonial and anti-capitalist positioning to his sense of identity. As indicated in Chapter One the space of the in-between is not understood here as a fixed zone or a binary between two cultures but as something more dynamic and provisional offering possibilities of change. The chapter demonstrates that Attia's habitus is profoundly influenced by the social capital of his youth but also by the influence of his own radicancy and reflexive, intentional agency that results in a creative self-positioning in which identity, as suggested by Bauman, becomes something to be invented rather than discovered.<sup>134</sup>

This is not to underestimate the influence of childhood and adolescence on Kader Attia's positioning to identity. Attia's parents migrated to France from Algeria before his birth in search of employment and a better life. The artist was born in Dugny in 1970 and grew up in the banlieues of Paris.<sup>135</sup> Dugny is in the department of Seine-Saint-Denis, which has the highest proportion of immigrants (21.7% at the 1999 census) in France and with large Muslim and Jewish communities. His parents later moved to a large social housing block in Garges-lès-Gonesse in the northern suburbs of Paris in the Val-d'Oise department where he grew up. At seventeen the artist went to live with his sister in a small flat in Sarcelles.<sup>136</sup> The banlieues where he lived were very diverse culturally and ethnically and included a rich mix of Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities. As an adolescent he worked in the multicultural markets to earn pocket money to buy trainers and the trendy clothes that teenagers of his age desired. Attia notes that the youth culture of which he was a part was 'a culture built of graffiti, street fashion, rap, and street dancing...everyone eats Pizza Hut or Macdonald's, everyone consumes brands...but every day is a struggle to survive'.<sup>137</sup> The poverty, which his family shared, made a lasting impression on him alongside the vibrancy and creativity of these deprived communities.

Attia's school holidays, spent in Algeria, provided a different strand of belonging. The artist became aware of being between two worlds with very different cultures. In Algeria he stayed with his extended family in Bab El Oued, a poor area of Algiers, which impressed on him the difficulties of young Algerians. Attia describes Bab El Oued as a place where 'young people

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<sup>134</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 15.

<sup>135</sup> Tami Katz-Freiman, 'The Road to Happiness, On Cultural Conflict, Desire and Illusion in the work of Kader Attia', in Jean-Louis Pradel, (Ed.), *Kader Attia*, (Lyon: Musee d'Art Contemporain, 2006), p. 19.

<sup>136</sup> Léa Gauthier, (Ed.), *Kader Attia – Repair*, (Paris: Black Jack Editions, 2014), p. 139.

<sup>137</sup> Katz-Freiman, Kader Attia as cited 2006, p. 19.

go to hang out, smoke, fish and sometimes prostitute themselves'.<sup>138</sup> The artist notes that youths sat on the huge stone blocks on the beach watching the ships coming from and going to Europe as if hypnotised, a state of dream and fantasy. Memories of these early experiences will later be transformed into artwork exploring the dreams and aspirations of Algerian and Franco-Algerian youth on both sides of the Mediterranean. Attia's sense of identity as a Frenchman of Algerian extraction born in the banlieues began its gradual shift to that of an Algerian artist who lives in France. Attia identified early the same lack of hope in the future amongst Algerian youth as that experienced by many young people in Paris and carries this forward both aesthetically and ethically in his career.<sup>139</sup> Later in life, and with hindsight, the artist acknowledges that moving between Algeria and France was not just a physical experience but a troubling and painful one and confessed that '(t)he time I have spent, since I was born, between France and Algeria has always been psychologically tough'.<sup>140</sup>

The above provides some evidence of the provisional nature of Attia's sense of identity linked to his experience of both the culture of the banlieues and his visits to Algiers. Attia found that these divergent experiences raised questions about who and what he was and this made identity an issue and opened up the possibility of becoming someone different. Attia became aware of a world of high culture located a relatively short distance away in central Paris. In an interview with Robert Klein, the artist indicated that, when young, he discovered that entry to the Louvre was free on Sundays.<sup>141</sup> Exploring the Louvre and discovering its art, Attia said, was 'more than venturing inside Ali Baba's cave, this place was like another world'. This can be seen as Attia's first steps to becoming a radical artist and moving from the periphery to the visibility of the centre. Attia had become acutely aware how important it was for him to escape the poverty and the cultural limitations of life in the banlieue.<sup>142</sup> Yet the artist would retain a loyalty to the cultures and people of the impoverished suburbs where he was born and a desire to represent their plight.

There was nothing passive in Attia's critical interaction with his background. His engagement with experiences in France and Algeria was highly reflexive and, moreover, modified by his engagement with art and the wider world. Attia, even at this early stage of his life, was

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<sup>138</sup> Kader Attia, *Rochers Carrés*, 2008, document written by the artist and displayed on his website. <http://kaderattia.de/rochers-carres-2/>. Accessed 8/4/2020.

<sup>139</sup> Kader Attia, *Rochers Carrés*, 2008, as cited.

<sup>140</sup> 'Interview with Kobena Mercer', Gauthier, (Ed.), as cited 2014, p. 22.

<sup>141</sup> Richard Klein, 'Skyline', Gauthier, (Ed.) as cited 2014, p. 139.

<sup>142</sup> Richard Klein, Gauthier, (Ed.) as cited 2014, p. 139.

beginning to think of the possibility of becoming an artist which he, at least in part, linked with escaping from a sense of belonging narrowly defined in terms of the cultures of the banlieues. This inspired Attia to travel extensively as a young man and, through this radicancy, draw on his encounters with cultures and histories of many countries. Overall, Attia conforms to Bourriaud's model of the radican artist but also approximates Glissant's conviction that 'the poet's word leads from periphery to periphery ...it makes every periphery into a center, furthermore it abolishes every notion of center and periphery'.<sup>143</sup> Attia retained the memories of his youthful experiences and incorporated them in his art with the material derived from his diverse travels. In the process Attia began a renegotiation of his positioning to identity within in a wider poetic relation to the world.

Bourdieu, as noted earlier, refers to how high levels of educational experience and social background help to develop the capacity of the individual for success as an artist through the development of cultural capital. Bourdieu is predominantly interested in the class basis of the development of different types of 'taste'. However, the example of Attia demonstrates that, even without the advantages of a wealthy background, an artist's active and reflexive engagement with his background can provide a level of social capital and taste to enable a springboard to success. Attia, who showed artistic talent while at school, attended prominent art schools, a pattern shared with Abdessemed and Afif. The artist studied first in Paris at the École Supérieure des Arts Appliqués Duperré where he specialised in graphic design. This is an art school with a strong interest in the applied arts, which trains students for careers in fashion, textiles, ceramics and graphic design as well as in fine art. This was ideally suited to Attia's natural talent as a 'maker' subsequently evident in his hands-on approach to the creation of his installations. Attia followed this with a year at the Massana School of Applied Arts in Barcelona, which has an underlying philosophy of the importance of the creative interaction of the various disciplines of art and design. It was here that Attia began to explore in more detail the possibilities of photography and develop links between graphics, print and photography.<sup>144</sup>

Attia travelled extensively in his twenties in South America then, during his national service, worked in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Attia's debut solo exhibition 'Humanistes au Congo' ('Humanists in the Congo') was held in 1996 in the Democratic Republic of Congo at

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<sup>143</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2010), p. 29.

<sup>144</sup> See the Eshola Massana, Art and Design Centre website. [https://www.escolamassana.cat/en/the-school\\_2858](https://www.escolamassana.cat/en/the-school_2858). Accessed 9/4/2020.

the Centre Culturel Français de Brazzaville.<sup>145</sup> The theme and location of the exhibition laid the basis for positioning the artist's 'brand' as connected to the postcolonial. Much of Attia's early work was about the diasporic experience of Algerians in Paris frequently using metaphors of transition related to culture, religion, consumerism, gender and sexuality, however this early contact with Africa and South America provided artefacts and research material for his future work. The artist subsequently attended the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris from 1996 and graduated in 1998.<sup>146</sup> The school had an international reputation in photography as well as boasting of famous alumni such as Annette Messager and Pierre Huyghe. It was here that Attia deepened his competence in photography, a key element of his early work.

Attendance at these prestigious art schools provided skills in photography, an awareness of new trends in contemporary art, access to a dynamic Parisian art milieu and funding from the local government. In the process of gaining an art education, Attia's cultural capital was enriched by his experience of a diverse range of cultures, many of which had experienced colonialism, and this fostered in the artist a strong post-colonial positioning which drove the wide-ranging research and extensive reading that influenced his later art practice. Attia's radicancy also enabled him to collect the large quantities of artefacts, books on colonialism and boxes of collected documentation that still fill his studio and often figure in his exhibitions.<sup>147</sup>

The analysis will now examine the development of Attia's career, discuss examples of how his work engaged with the key trajectories identified above and illustrate how his positioning to identity and community was articulated over time, for example, in relation to his childhood experiences and to his travels. Attia's early work draws on his childhood and adolescence in the banlieues of Paris and his holidays in Algeria as a child and as an adult. The focus is on victims of oppression and the dreams of the young to better themselves. Attia's work is tempered by a critical positioning across cultures shaped by his exploration of different countries, many of which had suffered under colonial oppression. The artist from the beginning of his career develops an ethnological focus in his work based on his researches

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<sup>145</sup> Hannah Gregory, 'Archival Impulse: an interview with Kader Attia', *Apollo, the International Arts magazine*, April 2015. <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/archival-impulse-an-interview-with-kader-attia/> . Accessed 27/4/2020.

<sup>146</sup> See Attia's biography on his website. <http://kaderattia.de/biography/> . Accessed 4/5/2018.

<sup>147</sup> Hannah Gregory, 'Archival Impulse: an interview with Kader Attia', *Apollo, The International Art Magazine*, 10 April 2015. <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/archival-impulse-an-interview-with-kader-attia/> . Accessed 3/1/2017.

into diverse cultures and following a strong trend in art at that time particularly in contemporary photography.<sup>148</sup>

Attia's first important critical success came with *La piste d'atterrissage* (1999), (*The Landing Strip*, see image 1, Appendix One: Images, Chapter Two). This artwork, based on a two-year study documenting the lives of transsexual prostitutes in Paris, was exhibited at the Atelier of the Centre National de la Photographie in Paris in 2000.<sup>149</sup> Attia's subject and ethnological treatment generated a lot of interest from galleries and the art media. The study of transvestites explored the idea of transition and 'inbetweenness' with a focus on changing positioning to sexuality and gender and how this became enmeshed in a problematic relationship between tradition and modernity in the Algerian diasporic community. The time Attia spent with the women convinced him of a connection between the difficulties of identity and belonging amongst the transvestites and his own developing quest to understand his own personal identity which was also framed by the clash between modernity and tradition. The issue of gender and sexuality became a repeated theme in the artist's positioning to identity. Later examples include Attia's hundred life size sculptures individually sculpted in aluminium foil of women at prayer entitled *Ghost* (2007) and a video of transsexuals living in Paris, Algiers and Bombay, *Collages* (2012). For Attia, these works illustrated metaphorically how the rigid insistence on adherence to cultural, social and religious norms could solidify identity into something fixed and oppressive rather than a multiple, fluid and self-expressive phenomenon.

Attia does not find his positioning to identity unproblematic. In an interview with H el ene Haz era, the artist admitted that '... as an artist, I'm tired of being constantly associated to a given community, and I have transsexual friends who feel exactly the same'.<sup>150</sup> This frustration with national or diasporic stereotyping might appear as a contradiction given Attia's frequent use of positioning to Algerianness and the Algerian diaspora as a frame for his early artwork and the way his relation to Algeria remained a part of his 'brand' as an artist in the art market and figured significantly in his future art. However, the artist is clearly resentful that critics and audiences of his work often overdetermined his positioning to

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<sup>148</sup> The issue of ethnology and art was topical at the time and figured for example in Nan Goldin's work which was an influence on Attia's approach and oeuvre. See Hal Foster, *Return of the Real: The Avante-Garde at the End of the Century*, (Massachusetts: MIT, 1996), particularly Chapter Six on the 'ethnological turn' in art.

<sup>149</sup> See Nagel-Draxler Gallery website, 'Kader Attia, biography and bibliography'. <http://nagel-draxler.de/artists/kader-attia/>. Accessed 31/7/2018.

<sup>150</sup> Hazara interview, as cited, 2014.

identity in terms of national and diasporic belonging when he attempted in his work to represent a range of issues and frame identity as a complex and diverse phenomenon. Even at this early stage Attia's positioning to belonging is complicated and beginning to be conditioned by his extensive reading of, for example, Glissant and the rupturing and displacing effects of difference, otherness and origin. The early study of transvestites hints at Attia's future political direction encompassing a trenchant critique of restrictive traditional and religious values and the 'othering' imposed by Western society that he regards as 'the last stone of its secular hegemony'.<sup>151</sup> The artist will increasingly speak from a range of positions in respect of identity and community in his art including ethnicity, culture, nationalism, gender and sexuality creating over time a powerful and well-researched visual discourse challenging the idea of unitary and fixed identity.

Attia soon had an opportunity to explore his perspectives on identity on a bigger stage. Attia was becoming 'visible' on the art scene and was recruited in 2002 by the upmarket gallery of Kamel Mennour, an important figure in Parisian art and an Algerian.<sup>152</sup> Kamel Mennour was of great help to Attia in his early career, as the gallerist was later to Abdessemed who is discussed below. Mennour immediately celebrated the acquisition of Attia to his stable of artists with the exhibition *Alter Ego* (2002) in which Attia presented a series of photographs of characters in different garbs and situations reflecting different aspects of Attia's 'other self' with the emphasis on the clash between modernity and tradition. A full description of the photographs of the exhibition is no longer available. However, three of the photographs can still be found on-line or on the artist's Facebook page. The first is a photograph of, or perhaps someone dressed as, the famous Congolese cabaret singer Mère Malou, portrayed in George Amponsah and Cosima Spender's 2006 film the *The Importance of Being Elegant*. Mère Malou was a larger than life figure who dressed extravagantly on and off stage. The second photograph is of a young man in high camp clothes and wearing female shoes. The final photograph is of a middle-aged Algerian man dressed as a rocker with heavily greased slicked-back hair.<sup>153</sup> The mixture of positioning to identity in *Alter Ego* is connected with his interest in African music, jazz and the cultural exchanges between Africa and the Americas

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<sup>151</sup> See Kader Attia's article 'There is no Hierarchy in Art (Andre Malraux)', originally written for the Beilefelder Kunstverein, now available on the artist's website. <http://kaderattia.de/there-is-no-hierarchy-in-art-andre-malraux/>. Accessed 31/7/2018.

<sup>152</sup> On Kamel Mennour and his background and success see Hili Perlson, 'Kamel Mennour Cements Blue Chip Potential by Opening Third Space in Paris', *Artnet news*, 22/10/2015. <https://news.artnet.com/market/kamel-mennour-third-paris-space-344591>. Accessed 31/7/2018.

<sup>153</sup> This last photograph seems of particular importance to the artist as he frequently uses it as his temporary profile photograph on Facebook on his birthday.

but maintains the connection with sexuality and transition. Attia is clearly staking out his positioning to identity as something non-traditional, hybrid and dynamic and his poetics as an artist takes on many aspects of Glissant's notion of 'Relation' in which there is a freeing of the sense of belonging beyond origin.<sup>154</sup>

A mixture of agency and response to the demands of the art market can be seen in these developments in Attia's positioning to identity. Michael Tomlinson has drawn attention to how the identity of knowledge workers is shaped by a dynamic and socially mediated interaction with the labour market linked to a range of factors including the discourses and practices of particular industries.<sup>155</sup> Experience of the wider context of the art world influences significantly Attia's thinking about identity and the extended orientations of the themes and semiology of his art. Attia engages in an intense study of major areas that are becoming of significance on the art scene including the effects of globalisation, consumerism and the homogenisation of cultures on the psychology of migrants and would-be migrants. This is not a simple response to generic issues but an active renegotiation of his background and past experiences to take account of his growing sense of purpose as a postcolonial artist in the art world. Attia always retains his positioning to the cultural specificity of Algerian and Franco-Algerian youth in both Algeria and France but his critique broadens to include a much wider range of targets.

This development in ideas can be seen in *Dream Machine*, (2002-2003), (see image 2 at *Appendix One: Images, Chapter Two*), in which Attia mimics and satirises the false romanticism and unrealistic expectations of young Algerian males. The installation consists of a vending machine in which a mannequin, dressed as a young man and wearing a sweatshirt with a 'Hallal' brand, gazes at a range of desirable and fashionable 'Western' goods transformed into 'permissible' items. Attia is positioning identity to a range of global factors influencing the psychology, desires and aspirations of young people caught like the artist between modernity and tradition. For the 'Hittists' of Algiers migration to France and other European countries appeared to offer work, success, meaning and buying power in contrast to the poverty and hopelessness offered by high youth unemployment in Algeria.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics Of Relation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010). Glissant's idea of 'Relation' advocates a rhizomatic way of thinking open to the unknown and resistant to colonialist thinking, territoriality and cultural determinism.

<sup>155</sup> Michael Tomlinson, 'Investing in the self: structure, agency and identity in graduates' employability', *Education, Knowledge and Economy*, 4 (2), 2010, pp. 73-88.

<sup>156</sup> 'Hittists' is a term used to describe young Algerian males who lounge at street corners and other public places and because of the difficulties of obtaining employment frequently engage in the black market, drugs and

The vision of France presented on the internet and the media is one of conspicuous consumption and is metonymically configured by Attia by a vending machine that offers ‘Hallal’ certified whisky, cigarettes and other desirable products. For Attia this signifies the way capitalism attempts to overcome cultural contradictions by creating a dubious bridge between cultures based on consumerism. Attia is commenting on the overlap of fantasy and desire exemplified by the notion of ‘Mecca-Cola’.<sup>157</sup>

Attia’s visibility in the art world increased significantly when he exhibited *Dream Machine* at the 50th Venice Biennale (2003). The artist’s status as a French-Algerian enabled him to participate in the zone ‘Faultlines’ curated by Gilane Tawadros who aimed to bring together artists from Africa and the African Diaspora.<sup>158</sup> The association with Africa will become an increasingly important element of Attia’s extended framing of his identity and work. At Kamel Menour’s gallery Attia’s positioning took an increasingly political turn fuelled by his reading of Proudhon, Fanon and the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade. Religion, exploitation and consumerism were prime targets in works such as *The Sweatshop* (2004), (see image 3 at Appendix One: Images, Chapter Two), in which he created a space within the Galerie Kamel Mennour where Hispanic women worked on sewing machines in cramped conditions producing fashionable clothes and caps marked ‘Hallal’. The idea was developed further in the linked artwork ‘Hallal’ (2004), (see image 4 at Appendix One: Images, Chapter Two), in which tee-shirts and hats were sold as religiously compliant and the gallery was transformed into an exclusive fashion boutique. Mennour secured Attia’s entry in the prestigious Art Basle Fair with the dramatic *The Loop* (2005) which explored the clash between traditional Islamic culture and Muslim youth in an installation of a vast tent packed with whirling dervishes and spinning breakdancers.<sup>159</sup> Attia’s visibility on the art market had

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petty crime. See Michael Mewshaw, *Between Terror and Tourism: An Over Land Journey Across North Africa*, (Berkeley, C. A: Counterpoint, 2010), p. 339.

[https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=JAT8tLY\\_9vYC&pg=PA339&lpg=PA339&dq=%E2%80%98Hittists%E2%80%99&source=bl&ots=13LJmhtoXk&sig=WB-4ZqWK3oPCYm3c8NWzVbS0t2E&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjvbpvkz-DfAhUIrxoKHe7iCCAQ6AEwAnoECAQQAQ#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%98Hittists%E2%80%99&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=JAT8tLY_9vYC&pg=PA339&lpg=PA339&dq=%E2%80%98Hittists%E2%80%99&source=bl&ots=13LJmhtoXk&sig=WB-4ZqWK3oPCYm3c8NWzVbS0t2E&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjvbpvkz-DfAhUIrxoKHe7iCCAQ6AEwAnoECAQQAQ#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%98Hittists%E2%80%99&f=false) . Accessed 9/1/2019.

<sup>157</sup> Mecca-Cola was launched in France in November 2002 by Tawfik Mathlouthi as a means of aiding Palestinians by tapping into demand for alternative products in European countries.

<sup>158</sup> See Universes in Universe’s report of the Biennale at <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien50/fault-lines/e-attia.htm> . Accessed 8/5/2020.

<sup>159</sup> See the review of Gareth Harris, ‘A dance for Darwinism’, *Independent*, 13/9/2019. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/a-dance-for-darwinism-1786773.html> . Accessed 31/7/2018.



become significant and his work was becoming recognised as a powerful commentary on identity and its complex and diverse nature in contemporary society.

Attia's positioning to the complexity of belonging was explored further in a series of 2005 works linked to the rioting in France that year. The topicality of the work and its dramatic nature resulted in a major exhibition in 2006 at the prestigious Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon in which Attia mapped a nightmare vision of the banlieues of French cities.<sup>160</sup> The installations marked the development of a darker side of the artist's work influenced by the recent rioting but also by the law voted on by the French National assembly in February 2005 that affirmed the positive aspects of French colonialism.<sup>161</sup> Installations such as *Flying Rats* (2005), *Childhood* (2005) and *Fridges* (2005) used a range of symbolism to describe the situation of minorities isolated in the banlieues such as live pigeons devouring lifesize dolls of children made of birdseed, a playground with swings and sliders covered in razors and other blades, and hundreds of tiny mirrors glued to fridges to represent tall tower blocks. Attia positioned the works in the exhibition to identity by means of an implicit comparison between the way French colonialism treated the colonies as peripheral objects and the current treatment of North Africans in the deprived suburbs of Paris. Welch and McGonagle make a perceptive comparison of the status of the 'Black Atlantic' described by Gilroy with the Mediterranean with the latter seen as a key space for imagining different forms of identity and belonging in French and Algerian postcolonial society.<sup>162</sup> Attia's vision provided a chilling perspective on the continuing inequalities and injustices of in-betweenness for many located in the suburbs and challenged the racial aspects of the way the discourse of cultural value and identity was still constructed.

In 2007 Attia demonstrated his radicancy and his understanding of the importance of visibility by changing gallery and moving from Kamel Mennour in Paris to the important Berlin-based Christian Nagel gallery.<sup>163</sup> Germany, and Berlin in particular, is a key centre of contemporary art and offered significantly greater art world visibility than France. Christian Nagel was instrumental in enabling Attia's work to make further ground in the USA in 2008 with the organisation of *Signs of Reappropriation* (Savannah College of Art and Design,

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<sup>160</sup> The brochure and exhibition were funded jointly by Magasin in Grenoble and the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, *Kader Attia* as cited 2007.

<sup>161</sup> See Edward Welch and Joseph McGonagle, *Contesting Views: The Visual Economy of France and Algeria*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 21. The term 'Black Atlantic' is a reference to Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (London: Verso, 1993).

<sup>162</sup> Welch and McGonagle, 2013 as cited, p. 9.

<sup>163</sup> The year of the change is based on a comparison of the biographies of galleries associated with Kader Attia.

Atlanta) and *'Kader Attia – New Works'* (Henry Art Gallery, Faye G. Allen Center for the Visual Arts, University of Washington).<sup>164</sup> Attia's stature increased further through solo exhibitions in Spain: *Black & white: signs of times*'; the Centro de Arte Contemporaneo, in Huarte; in Vienna *Po(l)etical*, at the Krinzinger gallery; *Kasbah*, at the Centre de Création Contemporaine de Tours, and with *Failure* at the Noga gallery, Tel Aviv. The year ends with an exhibition in Berlin *'As a fold, Horizon is not a space'*.<sup>165</sup> The themes of all of these exhibitions are driven by Attia's growing sense of identity as a post-colonial artist challenging what he considers 'western mind', a mindset he sees as rooted in colonialism.<sup>166</sup>

*Fridges*, shown at the Lyons exhibition, was the starting point for Attia's long-term research project into architecture and the unacknowledged appropriation of culture from Africa and other areas of the world by the European modernist movement. This was a very personal project as the artist's father was a master mason who had worked on social housing in both Algeria and France and because the Attia family lived in the tower blocks of Sarcelles. The project revealed Attia's developing positioning to identity and community through the cultural exchanges between Algeria and France linked to architecture. At its most simple level the artist's concern is that the tall tower blocks of the banlieues in which he lived as a youth 'take away your identity...The people adapt themselves to their houses'.<sup>167</sup> In effect, Attia is using an ethics of identity to challenge the social housing policies both sides of the Mediterranean during the colonial period and after.

A major target of this project was the architect Le Corbusier and his failure to acknowledge the debt his ideas owed to the Arab/Berber architecture of the Mزاب, particularly that of the Algerian city of Ghardaïa. However, Attia's positioning to Le Corbusier was one of open engagement rather than just criticism as he acknowledged the architect's efforts to connect habitation, identity and ethics through the conceptual framework of 'the Modular' which attempted to link the human body to harmonious forms of architecture. Attia explored modernist architecture's relation to cultural identity in a number of works but *Untitled*

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<sup>164</sup> The events and dates are taken from a variety of sources including artist CVs and gallery websites.

<sup>165</sup> See 'Kader Attia, As a fold, Horizon is not a space', Nagel-Draxler gallery press release at: <http://nagel-draxler.de/exhibitions/as-a-fold-horizon-is-not-a-space/>. Also Luigi Fassi at al., 'Time out of joint: recall and evocation in recent art', *Time out of joint Exhibition catalogue*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art 2009). <https://archive.org/details/timeoutofjointrel1whit>. Accessed 31/7/2018.

<sup>166</sup> 'Western mind' is a frequently used term of Attia, see for example, Christian Viveros-Fauné, 'Why Artist Kader Attia Is Having an Art World Moment', *Artnet News*, January 27, 2017. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/kader-attia-reparations-repair-834059>. Accessed 9/1/2019.

<sup>167</sup> Attia quoted in Rebecca Dimling Cochran, 'The Space In Between, a conversation with Kader Attia', *Sculpture*, January/February 2010, pp. 29-35, p. 30.

(*Ghardaia*) (2009) in particular exemplifies the artist's positioning to identity. *Untitled (Ghardaia)* is an installation model of the ancient city of Ghardaïa composed of simple geometric forms made to scale from couscous, a staple food of North Africa and itself an indicator of identity. On the walls around the model are photographs of Le Corbusier and of the French architect Fernand Pouillon who designed social housing projects in both Algeria and France. There is also a print out of the UNESCO Advisory Body Evaluation of the M'zab Valley as a world heritage site. By bringing these elements together Kader Attia highlights a moment of unacknowledged cultural exchange between France and Algeria, between the architects and the city that was their inspiration, and at the same time the artist draws parallels with his own personal history and that of his family.

Amanda Crawley-Jackson rightly sees this development as Attia wishing to set up an antinomy between, on the one hand, architecture which the artist uses as metaphor for the ideological edifice of modernity, signifying order, stability and reason and, on the other, art which he sees as critical, disruptive, and interrogative. The installation acts as a metonym for colonial power because, as Zeynep Çelik notes, architecture and urbanism in the colonial context are among the practices that contribute to colonial discourse more generally.<sup>168</sup> From this perspective the artist is challenging Le Corbusier's view that culture and identity are autonomous, self-sufficient and hierarchical, ideas that exemplify the intertwined relationship of modernism and colonialism. Attia rejects this conception of identities and cultures in favour of a perspective that recognises the inherent hybridity of belonging and culture resulting from exchange and cross-fertilisation across porous national boundaries. Attia's charge against Le Corbusier, Pouillon and other French architects is not only one of appropriation but that they failed to take account of how Mzab architecture reflected local conditions of community and identity. As a result of this failure, the human values inherent in the Mzab architecture are not translated by modernist architecture into human values of identity and belonging in the housing estates built in France and Algeria. Attia regards the tower blocks of the Parisian banlieues as 'sky jails' but is equally scathing of the Cité Pouillon of Algiers whose tower blocks oppress 'by their austerity and their lack of

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<sup>168</sup> Zeynep Çelik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 6. Çelik elsewhere points out that Le Corbusier's projects for Algiers, developed between 1931 and 1942, attempted to 'establish an ambitious dialogue with Islamic culture, albeit within a confrontational colonial framework'. She points out that: 'He now used the veil as a shorthand to denote the local culture. He included veiled women in his sketches to highlight the poetry and the duality of the city. But more, he also consistently represented the casbah as a veil in his diagrams, thus visually feminizing the colonized Muslim society'. Zeynep Çelik, *Assemblage*, No. 17, (April 1992), pp. 58-77, p. 72.

identity'.<sup>169</sup> As with many of Picasso's works, the design element was abstracted by Le Corbusier yet the architect failed to transfer the humanity and sense of community.<sup>170</sup>

In 2012 Attia participated for the first time in *(d)OCUMENTA 13*, a debut which represented a breakthrough into a major prestigious event held every five years in Kassel. The artist created an installation entitled *The Repair: From Occidental to Extra-Occidental Culture* which aimed to present the artist's latest positioning to otherness and a perspective on how the damage of colonialism could be repaired by drawing on non-Western alternatives to the concepts of progress and perfection. 'Repair' as a concept incorporated previous political positions Attia had adopted such as re-appropriation but also established connections with ideas such as natural selection, re-enactment, natural selection, translation and transformation.<sup>171</sup> The artist offered the theory of natural selection of Darwin and Wallace as potentially a way of modelling a new understanding of the relation of culture to nature and tradition to contemporaneity. Attia was in effect attempting to establish a new relationship to understanding the nature of change and development drawing on ideas of hybridity.

One of the most important elements of *Repair* consisted of 42 slides projected on a loop in diptychs juxtaposing medical photographs of soldiers from the First World War with severe facial injuries that had been surgically reconstructed, with traditional African artefacts that had been damaged and subsequently repaired by recycling materials to hand. The room was also filled with archival shelves, display cases, artefacts and books mimicking the Cabinet of Curiosities.<sup>172</sup> The installation has since gone through a series of different iterations, the most recent being at the Whitechapel Gallery and entitled *Continuum of Repair: The Light of Jacob's Ladder* (2014-2015). The concept of repair and what it reveals about Attia's changing

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<sup>169</sup> Kader Attia, article 'Kader Attia', *Creative Africa Network*, 2009.

<http://www.creativeafricanetwork.com/person/8623> . Accessed 11/2/2013.

<sup>170</sup> A nostalgic admiration for modernist architecture even in its brutalist form is still current and frequently fails to acknowledge its debt to North African culture or its intimate connection with colonial power. See for example, Owen Hatherley, *Militant Modernism*, (Ropley, UK: Zero Books, 2009).

<sup>171</sup> See Attia's discussion of repair in 'In Conversation: Kader Attia and Magnus af Petersens', Emily Butler and Magnus af Petersens, (Eds.), *Continuum of Repair: The Light of Jacob's Ladder*, (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2014), p. 16.

<sup>172</sup> The Cabinet of Curiosities was usually a room rather than a piece of furniture and emerged in the sixteenth century. It was filled with drawers and shelves which contained objects acquired often related to distant countries that were beginning to be explored. During the eighteenth century, the development of science as a discipline resulted in the Cabinet being used as a way of shaping an understanding of the world. See Giovanni Aloi's article 'Cabinets of Curiosities and The Origin of Collecting', *Sotheby's Institute of Art online website*. <https://www.sothebysinstitute.com/news-and-events/news/cabinets-of-curiosities-and-the-origin-of-collecting> . Accessed 12/5/2020.

positioning to identity formation will be analysed largely in terms of the (d)OCUMENTA 13 installation for reasons of space.

In his installation Attia defines ‘repair’ as a fundamental underlying dynamic of history and culture through a series of images and artefacts displaying forms of mending and drawing on material from across cultures. The artist attempts to demonstrate that there is an amnesia regarding the past and present contributions of many cultures to the development of European society and culture that is obscured by the belief in progress and the invention of the new.<sup>173</sup> Attia uses the many broken and mended masks and other artefacts collected in his national civil service in Brazzaville in the Congo and from his travels in South America, thus linking his own developing sense of personal identity and belonging with wider histories and the critique of colonial oppression. The artist also makes connections with the sacrifices made by France’s colonial subjects in the Great War and the terrible injuries suffered by WWI soldiers: the Gueules cassées or broken faces. Mantia Diawara has suggested with justice that Attia addresses what Glissant called ‘la complexité-monde’, a term that encompasses our relation to the Other as subject and object, and the difficulties that result from the encounter.<sup>174</sup>

*Repair* explores the cultural and identity differences that through hybridity make and hold together the complex threads of the world but avoids the trap of creating a totalizing oneness. Attia’s starting point is a binary view of the two opposing mind-sets within modernity. ‘Western mind’ is considered as dominated by a view of progress and a return to perfection which the artist regards as an aesthetic of control. In opposition to this, Attia sees a different aesthetic, a ‘non-western view’ not geographically defined but presented as a view held by the rest of the world in its untainted non-Western aspects. This aesthetic recognises the limits of rationality, views progress as a form of adaptation and damage as a site of creative possibilities. The theme of repair is consistent with the thread of appropriation and re-appropriation that runs throughout Attia’s earlier work and connects with his status as an artist with a mission to help understand and make good the divisions in the world facilitated by his own sense of being ‘in-between’. It is significant that the chapters of the exhibition brochure trace the stages of the positioning Attia adopts to identity formation from his early career through re-appropriation, to his work on the architecture of the banlieue, then to his

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<sup>173</sup> Kader Attia, *Continuum of Repair*, as cited 2014, p. 13.

<sup>174</sup> Mantia Diawara, ‘All the Difference in the World’, *Artforum*, February 2014.

critique of Le Corbusier in the chapter on Ghardaia and finally to the chapter on *Repair* itself. The remaining chapters are about the situation of the sans-papiers and about self-making and self-detachment. In *Repair*, Attia outlines a view of history and the development of humanity that undermines the binaries of East and West, North and South and critiques dominant/subaltern power relations. Gilroy's idea of the Black Atlantic is thus supplemented by the idea of the Mediterranean as a source of in-betweenness and exchange and both are taken forward by Attia as ways of repairing the damage of colonialism, the destruction and oppression of communities and the fragmentation of identities.

### **Adel Abdessemed**

Adel Abdessemed, unlike the other two artists examined in this chapter, was born in Algeria, and location proves to be just as significant for him as for Attia and Afif. In a similar way to Attia, Abdessemed's complex positioning to Algeria, France and European culture evolves as he engages with the problematic aspects of identity and belonging over time. However, whereas Attia frequently positions his sense of belonging to Algeria despite being born in France, Abdessemed reverses this positioning and locates himself within a composite frame of France, his Berber origins and a strong identification with European culture.

Abdessemed's passionate antagonism to Algeria derives from what he regards as its government's imposition of a univocal 'Arab-Islamic' sense of national identity that he regards as oppressive of minorities, women and society.<sup>175</sup> Abdessemed considers that artists 'spend our time constructing and reconstructing our world, our identity' but the particular difficulties that the artist experienced in Algeria created a particularly painful relation to identity and that subsequently became a major theme in his art frequently through highly conceptual forms of self-portraiture.<sup>176</sup> The trauma of the artist's experiences of Algeria in early life and in the 1990s results, he acknowledges, in art in which can be found 'different interpretations, even contradictory ones'.<sup>177</sup> An example of this is Abdessemed's understanding of his sense of agency in terms what he calls 'the act' or forms of often dramatic behaviour or performance which are then recorded as photographs or in short

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<sup>175</sup> Adel Abdessemed and Pier Luigi Tazzi, *Adel Abdessemed, Conversation with Pier Luigi Tazzi*, (Arles: Actes Sud, 2012), p. 12 (henceforth referred to as *Tazzi Conversation*, 2012). Pier Luigi Tazzi became an important and influential figure in Abdessemed's life and curated his 'L'âge d'or' at the Mathaf Gallery in Doha.

<sup>176</sup> Tazzi, *Conversation*, 2012 as cited, p. 39.

<sup>177</sup> Alexandra Cohen, 'Adel Abdessemed, Practice Zero Tolerance' *Bidoun*, Winter 2007. <https://www.bidoun.org/articles/practice-zero-tolerance> . Accessed 19/4/2020.

films.<sup>178</sup> The contradiction lies in the apparent inconsistency between the artist's critique of violent extremes and his aesthetic acts which often demonstrate a violence reflecting his experiences of the violence of 1990s. Attia's move from the banlieues was driven by a desire to better himself, however, Abdessemed's radicancy commences with his departure from Algeria in fear of his life. Both however share a peripatetic movement across the globe and engagement with the issues and cultures they encounter and draw on in their art.

Adel Abdessemed was born in 1971 to a modest but cultured family of Kabyle descent in Constantine, Algeria in the heartland of Berber heritage. Early in life, Abdessemed's family moved to Batna, some 60 miles from Constantine, and it is Batna that the artist regards as 'the crucible of my life'.<sup>179</sup> It was in Batna that Abdessemed became interested in art as a child and where he held his first exhibition when 14 years old. The Berber artist Chérif Merzouki was a close family friend whose shared love of Rembrandt can be seen in Abdessemed's later conscious emulation of the Dutch artist's self-portraits.<sup>180</sup> An important aspect of Abdessemed's cultural capital from this period is derived from his fierce pride in his Berber heritage and anger at its marginalisation by the Algerian FLN regime, which tried to impose on the country after 1962 an 'Algerianness' characterised by the artist as 'Arabo-Islamism' and repressive.<sup>181</sup> When asked about his childhood, Abdessemed recalls the Aurès mountains that he describes as 'the land of the Berber Numidians' but also how the curriculum in his school was changed: 'At school teachers were called in from Egypt to teach us Arabic, a language that felt foreign to me at the time; the language of the invaders'.<sup>182</sup>

Abdessemed regarded the political regime in Algeria and the growing tide of Saudi-inspired Islamism as deeply degrading of the position of woman. The artist reveals in interviews his indignation when his father, out of fear of reprisal after the introduction of the 'Arabisation' programme, told his mother to stop speaking Berber and when his elder brother told her to stop wearing western clothes and wear the djellaba 'because his friends made fun of him'.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Interview with Elizabeth Lebovici, Larys Froguer et al, *Adel Abdessemed, À l'attaque*, (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2007), pp. 125-127.

<sup>179</sup> Tazzi, *Conversation*, 2012 as cited, p. 10.

<sup>180</sup> Interview with Elizabeth Lebovici, as cited 2007, pp. 79-80. Chérif Merzouki was an Algerian realist painter (1951-1991) born in the Batna wilaya and a militant 'amazigh'. He was deeply influenced by both Rembrandt and Étienne Dinet. See 'Chérif Merzouki' in [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ch%C3%A9rif\\_Merzougui](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ch%C3%A9rif_Merzougui). Accessed 23/6/2014.

<sup>181</sup> Adel Abdessemed and Pier Luigi Tazzi, *Adel Abdessemed, Conversation with Pier Luigi Tazzi*, (Arles: Acts Sud, 2012), p 12, (henceforth referred to as Tazzi, *Conversation*, 2012). Pier Luigi Tazzi became an important and influential figure in Abdessemed's life and curated his 'L'âge d'or' at the Mathaf Gallery in Doha.

<sup>182</sup> Tazzi, *Conversation*, 2012 as cited, p. 11.

<sup>183</sup> Described in Tazzi, *Conversation*, 2012 as cited, p. 16.

However, Abdessemed's 'Berberness' is never narrow and he gives a sense of the rich cultural mix in his early life when he proudly notes that he was born to 'a Muslim mother in a Jewish house and with Christian nuns as midwives', a juncture of monotheistic belief systems that he later explored creatively in his art practice.<sup>184</sup> Berber culture, devotion to his mother and an interest in cultural diversity and freedom remain important influences in his later art practice. Abdessemed also retains a strong antipathy to the political regime in Algeria and an aversion to Salafism and religious fundamentalism. Abdessemed demonstrated not only an early selective affinity with his background but also a reflective, vigorous agency that features in his later work illustrated by his frequent brushes with authority at school where he notes that 'I constructed myself through fierceness: in disputes I never hesitated to give headbutts'.<sup>185</sup>

As noted earlier, increasing appropriate cultural capital through education is essential to success as an artist. Abdessemed's early art training and education at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Algiers offered limited training in the techniques of contemporary art and was mainly concerned with painting and drawing. The lack of facilities and infrastructure severely restricted opportunities to develop contemporary practices such as video and installation. Moreover, the prevailing local conception of art was remote from developments in contemporary art in Europe and the USA. Abdessemed attempted to compensate for this by reading extensively on Beuys and Duchamp, Kandinsky, Kateb Yacine, Camus, Malraux, Sartre, Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche.<sup>186</sup> The influence of Nietzsche was of particular importance, and Abdessemed notes that he read the philosopher's works 'after curfew – his works were back then forbidden in Algeria – and it had a strong effect on me'.<sup>187</sup> Nietzsche's attacks on religion as a life-denying force, his critical positioning to morality and established values and his view of the will as an assertion or agency of difference, all chimed well with Abdessemed's dynamic and often explosive temperament.<sup>188</sup> Abdessemed was already demonstrating a reflexive personal agency even in the restricted circumstances of Algiers. The enthusiastic commitment to reading and research marked the beginning of what the artist

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<sup>184</sup> Tazzi, *Conversation*, 2012 as cited, p. 9.

<sup>185</sup> Tazzi, *Conversation*, 2012 as cited, p. 10.

<sup>186</sup> Many of the limitations in terms of contemporary art persist, as can be seen in Luciano Benetton, *Algeria: more or less. Contemporary artists from Algeria*, (Grafiche Antiga Spa, Italy: Fabbrica, 2015). The book is dominated by painting, with installation, photography and video absent.

<sup>187</sup> Tazzi, *Conversation*, 2012 as cited, p. 14.

<sup>188</sup> A good summary of Nietzsche's philosophy can be read in Chapter One 'The Tragic', Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, (London: Continuum, 1986).



called his ‘intellectual marathon’ which played an important role in his later positioning to identity and was exemplified in many of his future artworks, including his self-portraits.<sup>189</sup>

In the early 1990s political violence in Algeria spiralled out of control with the daily killing of intellectuals, the murder and mutilation of women and a series of bloody massacres.<sup>190</sup> In March 1994, the art school director Ahmed Asselah and his son Rabah were murdered by GIA fundamentalists in the confines of the Art School.<sup>191</sup> This targeted violence precipitated Abdessemed’s decision to leave for France. Abdessemed explains his departure by reference to Duchamp who ‘aussi est parti aux Etats-Unis pendant la seconde guerre mondiale, pour sortir d’une impasse...quand on n’a pas la paix chez soi, il faut aller ailleurs’.<sup>192</sup> In 2012, the artist looking back on his early life commented ‘I spent my entire youth in terror and violence’.<sup>193</sup> The experience of the horrors of the 1990s in Algeria deeply marked the artist and this can be seen in his later work, for example, in the violence involving animals in some of the videos used in installations.

After fleeing to Lyon, Abdessemed successfully applied to the Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts de Lyon to avoid becoming an illegal immigrant.<sup>194</sup> Elizabeth Lebovici notes that Lyon’s art school was very dynamic and experimental at that time.<sup>195</sup> The school was so contemporary in its approach that Abdessemed considered that he was one of the few ‘à arriver avec un passé en arts plastiques’, a reference to the focus in Algerian schools and art colleges on developing a strong sense of line and a proficiency in naturalistic painting.<sup>196</sup> Abdessemed acknowledges that the move from Algeria to Lyon greatly accelerated his

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<sup>189</sup> Tazza *Conversation*, 2012 as cited, p. 18.

<sup>190</sup> For an account see Hugh Roberts, *The Battlefield Algeria*, as cited 2003, particularly part 2: ‘The Descent into Violence’.

<sup>191</sup> Khalida Messaoudi, *Unbowed: An Algerian Woman Confronts Islamic Fundamentalism*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 15.

<sup>192</sup> Duchamp who ‘also left, for the United States, during the Second World War, in order to escape a dead-end situation...When you have no peace at home you have to go elsewhere’. From Guy Tortusa, ‘Interview d’Adel Abdessemed par Guy Tortusa’, Adel Abdessemed and Jean Marc Ballee, *Adel Abdessemed: Global*, (Paris: Paris musées, 2006). Subsequent references to ‘*Tortusa Interview 2003*’.

<sup>193</sup> Tazza *Conversation*, 2012 as cited, p. 47.

<sup>194</sup> Interview with Elizabeth Lebovici, as cited 2007, p. 99.

<sup>195</sup> Interview with Elizabeth Lebovici, as cited 2007, p. 106. ‘L’école des Beaux-Arts de Lyon était alors assez expérimentale. Les Professeurs artistes, comme Patrick Tosani, Bernard Frize, Nick Van de Steeg, Jacques Vieille, puis Melanie Counsell, et Joel Bartolomeo, avaient établi un programme précis, qui n’était pas vraiment dans le moule de l’enseignement artistique en France’.

<sup>196</sup> Interview with Elizabeth Lebovici, as cited 2007, p. 106, ‘to come with a background in the visual arts’.

development as an artist particularly in video and performance in ways that would have been impossible in Algeria.<sup>197</sup>

The influence of the social and cultural landscape Abdessemed left behind in Algeria are apparent in his early period. The artist's developing and often antagonistic relationship to an imposed Algerian identity and to particular forms of Islam, particularly in its Salafist form, are present in the semiotics of his art. The veil, for example, becomes for Abdessemed a signifier of oppression linked to tradition, religion and the Arabisation of Algeria. This positioning by Abdessemed was controversial given the debate that raged in France at the time over the ban on the wearing the veil by Muslim schoolgirls.<sup>198</sup> One of his first works created in Lyon was *Ombre et Lumière* (1994) in which a young Algerian woman was filmed unveiling herself, her features appearing to express release as the hijab falls and she stood clear of it. There is unfortunately no media commentary on the work available but Abdessemed appears to be responding both to his mother's experiences in Kabyle and more generally to forms of doctrinaire and ideological repression.

Music and dance are important ways in which the Berbers of Kabyle resisted the oppression of the FLN regime in Algeria.<sup>199</sup> Abdessemed regarded music and dance as acts of agency in which people take control of their lives and his use of it in his art is illustrative of his complex positioning to identity both in his revocation of Algerianness and rejection of its Arab Salafist form of Islam. Instead, Abdessemed locates an important aspect of his sense of belonging within his Berber heritage and an aesthetic identity linked to creativity and freedom of expression. *Joueur de flute*, (1996), (see image 5 at Appendix One: Images Chapter Two), for example, is a video in which Abdessemed persuaded a local Imam in Lyon to play the flute naked for moral and aesthetic reasons linked to persecution of singers and artists in Algeria. In preparatory drawings Abdessemed portrayed the Imam as St Sebastian and made links to his reading of Nietzsche and the latter's view that that joy (Lust) is

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<sup>197</sup> See Tazza, *Conversation*, as cited 2012, p. 15. Concerning the slow take-up of video in Algeria see Amina Zoubir, *Relation de l'image et du son*, as cited 2010.

<sup>198</sup> There is useful background to the controversy in Caitlin Killian, 'The Other Side of the Veil: North African Women in France Respond to the Headscarf Affair', *Gender and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 4, (Aug., 2003), pp. 567-590.

<sup>199</sup> Kabyle artists, for example, stopped using Arabic in their songs and refused to associate with Arab performers and after 1973 the content of the songs gained a distinctly political edge with songwriters directing attacks at the Algerian government and calling for a Pan-Berber awareness across North Africa. See, for example, Christopher C. Orr, *Songs of Discontent: the Kabyle voice in post-colonial Algeria*, MA Thesis, Pennsylvania State University, School of Music, May 2013. [https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/files/final\\_submissions/8441](https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/files/final_submissions/8441) . Accessed 19/5/2020.

profoundly linked to loss (Verlust) and suffering.<sup>200</sup> The artist later acknowledged that the figure of the Imam was ‘an authoritarian image’ but that the Imam playing the flute naked was charged with an anti-authoritarian meaning. Abdessemed viewed the transgression as indicating that the Imam had ‘offered his body to thought’ and in his act ‘the figure of the father collapsed’.<sup>201</sup> The theme of transgression also appears in *Exit* (1996), (see image 6 at *Appendix One: Images, Chapter Two*), in which the neon sign ‘exit’ is changed to ‘exil’ (French for ‘exile’). The work references his own exile but also the importance of transgressing borders within and between cultures, diasporas and nationalities.<sup>202</sup> The work indicates the artist’s positioning to identity, the revocation of his imposed Algerian identity and its reconstruction by the artist. The theme is continued into the 1990s culminating with *MohamedKarlpolpot*, (1999), (see image 7 at *Appendix One: Images, Chapter Two*), a critique of religion, ideology and mass murder through the conflation of the names of Mohammed, Karl Marx, and Pol Pot. The work is also autobiographical as the date in the artwork marks the day, October 20, 1999, that Abdessemed became (‘was born’ – la naissance) a French citizen in Paris. Implicitly Abdessemed is acknowledging that in adding French citizenship to Algerian nationality and his affiliation to his Berber roots he is creating a monster, but that this diversity of identification fits neatly with an aesthetic identity traversing the art world and critiquing all forms of hypocrisy and oppression.

This evolving positioning to identity seems to have been advantageous professionally as the same year that Abdessemed became a French citizen he gained a place at the Cité Internationale des Arts, a Paris mayoral foundation providing residencies for both French and foreign professional artists in 325 residential workshops.<sup>203</sup> This Paris initiative was part of the French Ministry of Culture’s effort to attract and appropriate foreign artists, particularly from former colonies. Following his residency in Paris, Abdessemed successfully applied for a place on the prestigious International Studio Programme at the PS1 Contemporary Art Centre in New York (an affiliate of MOMA). This enabled the artist to participate in its world-class and internationally famous exhibition programme and its National and

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<sup>200</sup> Nietzsche’s classic statement of this is in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, PDF available at: <https://nationalvanguard.org/books/Thus-Spoke-Zarathustra-by-F.-Nietzsche.pdf>. But also see *The Gay Science*, available in PDF at <https://philoslugs.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/the-gay-science-friedrich-nietzsche.pdf>. Accessed 11/9/2019.

<sup>201</sup> Abdessemed: ‘Je ne crois pas que mon “Joueur de Flute” ait trahi sa religion: il offert son corps à la pensée’. Tortosa, *Global* as cited, 2006, p. 122.

<sup>202</sup> Abdessemed says of the work that by placing the sign above the entrance doors and transforming the term he emphasised that exile for him was positive and provided the ‘real way out’. Tazza, *Conversation*, as cited, 2012, p. 40.

<sup>203</sup> Interview with Elizabeth Lebovici, as cited 2007, p. 113.

International Artist Studio Programme, a major achievement propelling him to a higher level of visibility.<sup>204</sup> Abdessemed thus became not only a significant French contemporary art 'asset' but also an established figure on the global art stage. The artist had moved out of the restrictions and dangers of Algeria, explored the possibilities of France, including the support and funding of the French art system, and was now exploring the opportunities in the biggest centre for art in the world.

At PSI Abdessemed used every opportunity to meet and make friends with important curators, artists and writers. He impressed Alanna Heiss, founder and first director of PSI, Chomsky, Joan Jonas (an important American visual artist and a pioneer of video and performance art), Jane Farver (curator of the MIT Visual Arts Centre), Lawrence Weiner (a major conceptual artist), and Ute Meta Bauer (later to be the founding Director of the Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore).<sup>205</sup> Abdessemed begins to form a relational community focused around him and his art. This is the beginning of his creation of and engagement with a dense network of critical and legitimating support for his work and an example of what Doreen Massey has called 'networks of communication of common interest, of similarity along selected dimensions' and 'non-contiguous space-times of commonality'.<sup>206</sup> However, the events of 9/11 and the ensuing Islamophobia and racism in the US traumatised Abdessemed and led to his return to Europe.<sup>207</sup>

Abdessemed took a decision on future location in relation to what he saw as the relative decline of the French art scene: 'la France risque de ne pas renouveler sa situation artistique comme elle a pu le faire dans le passé'.<sup>208</sup> In order to increase his profile in the art world Abdessemed moved with his family to Berlin in 2003 which was attractive because rents were low, the cultural scene was vibrant and the city itself was becoming an increasingly international area of 'visibility' in the art world. This displacement once again focused the artist on identity and migration resulting in the theme of exile featuring prominently in his work and fusing his sense of being a nomad with the precarious situation of migrants in general. In a series of videos entitled *Happiness in Mitte*, Abdessemed used stray cats as symbolic of migrants. The fallout from 9/11 and his hurried return to Europe from the USA

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<sup>204</sup> Tazzi, *Conversation*, 2012 as cited, p. 20.

<sup>205</sup> Tazzi, *Conversation*, 2012 as cited, p. 22.

<sup>206</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space*, (London: Sage, 2005), p. 94.

<sup>207</sup> Tazzi *Conversation*, 2012 as cited, p. 20.

<sup>208</sup> 'France risks not being able to maintain its artistic prominence as in the past'. Adel Abdessemed, *Global*, 2005 as cited, p. 117.

may have contributed to both his own feelings of vulnerability and his sympathy for the homeless and displaced in Berlin. The use of animals becomes part of his stock aesthetic vocabulary and an explicit criticism of the representation of refugees and the homeless as ‘feral’ by the right wing media. The relation between animals, migrants and the street is repeated later when Abdessemed lets loose seven wild boars without legal permission, mimicking the status of illegal immigrants, on a Paris street to produce a photograph entitled *Sept frères* (2007).

Abdessemed’s insistence that ‘a work does not exist if it is not autobiographical’ closely connects his identity with both his art and his status as artist.<sup>209</sup> From the move to Berlin onwards the artist commenced a series of self-portraits using the metaphor of the skeleton. The most striking of which is *Habibi* (2004), (see image 8 at Appendix One: Images, Chapter Two), in which a huge skeleton is suspended in a gallery linked to a jet engine. Abdessemed says that *Habibi*, the term is the masculine form of ‘Beloved’ in Arabic, is an image of himself.<sup>210</sup> The artist, stripped of the apparent subjectivity provided by flesh, traverses the world and engages with its problems – ‘a flight into space between life and death’.<sup>211</sup> The work is also a metaphor for migration and the precarity of the migrant suggested by Agamben’s ‘bare life’.<sup>212</sup> To slightly misuse the language of Derrida regarding trait, trace and tract: the trait, a personal feature, is traced within a local space, becoming a tract or discourse on the issues bearing on the personal, the local and the global with all three correlated to Abdessemed’s developing sense of aesthetic identity.<sup>213</sup>

The move to Berlin was not a great success and Abdessemed complained about the exploitation of the dealers.<sup>214</sup> Part of the problem may be that, despite his increasing profile, Abdessemed still had not been taken up by a major gallery and thus did not benefit from the promotion and patronage this afforded. The Paris Mairie, the local city administration, offered him a studio in 17th, rue Lemercier in order to attract the artist back.<sup>215</sup> This

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<sup>209</sup> Tazzi, *Conversation*, as cited 2012, p. 116.

<sup>210</sup> See MIT Visual Arts *Center Review of exhibition Situation and Practice* October 2008. <https://listart.mit.edu/exhibitions/adel-abdessemed-situation-and-practice> . Accessed 9/1/2019.

<sup>211</sup> Tazzi, *Conversation*, as cited 2012, p. 34.

<sup>212</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998).

<sup>213</sup> The trait, trace, portrait etc. are explored by Derrida in many works but particularly relevant here are his *The Truth in Painting*, as cited 1987; and *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-portrait and Other Ruins*, (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>214</sup> This issue of exploitation by dealers in Berlin seems to persist, evidenced at least anecdotally by the writer’s conversations with a number of artists living and working in Berlin in 2010.

<sup>215</sup> Tazza Interview, 2012, as cited, p. 21.

illustrates how at this stage of the artist's career, despite his increased visibility and growing reputation, the patronage of the French state remained important. Particularly helpful was the assistance of regional French galleries with their FRAC funding which enabled them to purchase the work of young contemporary artists working in France, to mount group and solo exhibitions and, important from a marketing perspective with critics and art journals, fund high quality brochures.<sup>216</sup> *Magazin*, the Centre National d'Art Contemporain at Grenoble was particularly helpful and Abdessemed in gratitude later auctioned *Mappemonde* (2014) at Sotheby's raising €35,000 net to benefit the centre.<sup>217</sup> Abdessemed's work also appeared in the Milan Galleria Laura Pecci and the Berlin Christine König Galerie in these early years although it is doubtful whether either had the artist formally on their books.

In 2005 Abdessemed joined the important Kamel Mennour Gallery in Paris with its stable of artists which as noted earlier included Kader Attia at one stage. Harry Bellet of *Le Monde* indicates that Mennour, an Algerian gallerist and dealer, played a very significant role in the development of Abdessemed's career.<sup>218</sup> It is worth noting that Algerian gallerists in Paris and Berlin were a significant help to all three artists at different stages of their careers, although this should not be taken as characteristic of Mennour's artists as the gallerist had a large range of prominent contemporary artists on his books. Mennour helped establish Abdessemed's reputation through an important series of solo exhibitions but also by arranging the artist's steadily growing visibility at international fairs and biennials. Marie-Sophie Eiche, a director of the Kamel Mennour Gallery, points particularly to their success in partnering Abdessemed with Daniel Buren at the prestigious Basle Art Fair in June 2007.<sup>219</sup> Linking Abdessemed's work with an artist of the stature of Buren was a coup but equally the exhibition of his work at Basle was a significant step on his road to success. By now Abdessemed had established an international reputation and exhibited regularly at art fairs

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<sup>216</sup> 'The Fonds régionaux d'art contemporain (Regional collections of contemporary art – FRAC) are public collections of contemporary art created in 1982 as part of the policy of devolution of power set by the government via regional councils in order for art to be present in each and every one of France's regions'. See the on-line platform funded by the French Ministry of Culture:

<http://www.lescollectionsdesfrac.fr/index.en.html>. Accessed 16/5/2019.

<sup>217</sup> Sotheby's, Press Release, November 2014.

<http://files.shareholder.com/downloads/BID/3372745496x0x795341/7B030DD3-03B1-4004-9082-D380272FBFAF/795341.pdf>. Accessed 29/7/2018.

<sup>218</sup> Harry Bellet, 10 May 2013, *Le Monde*. [http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2008/02/29/adel-abdessemed-l-enfant-terrible-de-l-art\\_1017311\\_3246.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2008/02/29/adel-abdessemed-l-enfant-terrible-de-l-art_1017311_3246.html). Accessed 20/7/2018.

<sup>219</sup> See Pierre-Evariste Douaire, 'Art Basel. Marie-Sophie Eiche, (Kamel Mennour)', *Paris Art*, Undated. <http://www.paris-art.com/interview-artiste/art-basel-marie-sophie-eiche-kamel-mennour/abdessemed-adel/190.html>. Accessed 31/7/2018.

and biennials including the 2003 and 2007 Venice Biennales, the 2005 Tirana Biennial, and the 2006 Dak'art Biennial.<sup>220</sup>

It is in this period that Abdessemed began to explore in greater depth his positioning to issues of identity and belonging. His earlier artwork *MohammedKarlpolpot*, which merged the three ideologues: Mohammed, Karl Marx, and Pol Pot into monstrous form, created an initial alter ego linked to his perception of a brutal and hypocritical world. A further series of works linked the artist to his Berber background and his family. Abdessemed's wife is photographed helping a skeleton (a frequent alter ego of the artist in his work) to walk down the Rue Lemerancier in *Mes Amis* (2005), (see image 9 at Appendix One: Images, Chapter Two). The artist used Berber food and images of aeroplanes as signifiers of his complex relationship with his origins and his global status as an artist. Thus a telephone call between the artist and his mother was translated into *Bourek* (2005), a life size jet aeroplane wrapped around its own wings and *Brik* (2005) in which the artist kneads dough, bourek and brik are forms of pastry, into the shape of an aeroplane which breaks up and disappears.<sup>221</sup>

Abdessemed frequently adopted the role of a mythological or religious hero, for example, as Hercules in *Separation* (2006), (see image 10 at Appendix One: Images, Chapter Two). The violence of early traumas was also mirrored in Abdessemed's self-portraits related to his status as an artist. Abdessemed asserts that 'I am an artist of acts'.<sup>222</sup> Action, resistance and creation are for him part of the same activity: 'the most important thing is to act, to resist, and to create in order to change the world'.<sup>223</sup> At times the artist appears as a visual pugilist and Alfred Pacquement draws attention to Abdessemed's fondness for ending conversations with the phrase 'À l'attaque'.<sup>224</sup> Posing in photographs and videos, the artist crushes lemons and cans to suggest that that the artist squeezes and at times explodes meaning from objects and events. In *Trust Me*, (2007), the artist uses the singer David Moss, a frequent alter ego used by Abdessemed, dressed bizarrely as a clownish vampire to scream through a mixed up medley of national anthems including those of Germany, France, Algeria, Brazil, Britain and Russia, as well as The Internationale (Marx refers to capitalism as a vampire). The video is

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<sup>220</sup> All referred to at MOMA, 'Adel Abdessemed: Dead or Alive', notification of exhibition: October 21, 2007 to January 21, 2008. MOMA PS1 Contemporary Art Centre website.

<http://www.momaps1.org/exhibitions/view/152> . Accessed 31/7/2018.

<sup>221</sup> Interview with Elizabeth Lebovici, as cited 2007, p. 33.

<sup>222</sup> Interview with Elizabeth Lebovici, as cited 2007, pp. 125-127.

<sup>223</sup> See the anonymous piece on 'Abdessemed, Algeria' at exhibition Utopian Days – Freedom (2014) on the Public Delivery website. <https://publicdelivery.org/adel-abdessemed/> . Accessed 4/3/2014.

<sup>224</sup> Forward to Adel Abdessemed and Philippe-Alain Michaud, as cited 2012, p. 7.

cyclical, running on a loop and filmed against the background of a no-man's land of derelict urban space.<sup>225</sup>

An aspect of Abdessemed's positioning to identity and derived from his life-long interest in the works of Nietzsche, is the artist's passion, volatility and strong sense of the importance and mission of the artist. As noted above, this is frequently referenced in Abdessemed's self-portraits as a mythological hero. The artist's volatility at times spilled over into conflicts with his gallerists. Abdessemed switched to the gallerist David Zwirner from Kamel Mennour in 2008 after a very public and bitter dispute in which he accused Mennour of being a greengrocer rather than a gallery owner.<sup>226</sup> Zwirner owned one of the most prestigious Manhattan galleries but also had prominent galleries in Berlin and London. Whatever the reason for the dispute with Mennour, the switch represented a significant step up in profile on the global art market. Yet in 2015 Abdessemed breaks with Zwirner. The reason for the disagreement remains obscure but in such a high profile gallery dealing with so many artists, Abdessemed may not have felt he was getting sufficient attention and promotion. The artist may also have been influenced by his feeling that 'the art world could sometimes look like a castle, but in fact it is a prison'.<sup>227</sup> After leaving Zwirner, Abdessemed joins the small but increasingly important Dvir Gallery whose main gallery was in Israel but which also had an influential outlet in Brussels. Abdessemed may have felt that a relatively small but influential gallery would be more attentive to his needs.

Violence remains in this later period a frequent theme in Abdessemed's work. Slavoj Žižek in his book *Violence* distinguishes between subjective violence that he frequently associates with globalisation and a systemic violence that is so commonplace we do not even see it.<sup>228</sup> This is a rich terrain for Abdessemed and his use of animals is frequently controversial and often shows them being killed and killing each other as a metaphor for the similarity between the treatment of animals and the treatment of migrants and of global violence in general. In works such as *Usine* (2009), 'usine' translates as 'factory', (see image 11 at Appendix One: *Images, Chapter Two*), the artist highlights the parallel between the mass killing of animals

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<sup>225</sup> Katrina Brown, 'Adel Abdessemed 11 April 2008-7 June 2008', undated, *The Graphical House*. <https://graphicalhouse-gras.s3-cu-west-1.amazonaws.com/02-adel-abdessemed-tcg-lhnr.pdf>. Accessed 29/7/2018.

<sup>226</sup> Abdessemed calls Mennour's gallery 'Une épicerie', 'C'est un petit club. J'ai quitté une épicerie, et deux magazines prennent position pour l'épicière. Je n'ai jamais vu ça'. Harry Bellet, 'Adel Abdessemed, l'enfant terrible de l'art', *Le Monde*, 10 May 2013. [http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2008/02/29/adel-abdessemed-l-enfant-terrible-de-l-art\\_1017311\\_3246.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2008/02/29/adel-abdessemed-l-enfant-terrible-de-l-art_1017311_3246.html). Accessed 29/7/2018.

<sup>227</sup> Tazzi, *Conversation*, as cited 2012, p. 38.

<sup>228</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, as cited 2009, see Chapter Five in particular 'Violence as an Ideological Category'.



and the mass production of death for human beings through machines for killing. Abdessemed challenges the political correctness of societies that can accommodate mass killing of humans and animals yet be deeply upset by animals fighting each other. These works provoked a storm of criticism. Abdessemed, stung by the criticism, made *The Sea* (2008), (see image 12 at Appendix One: Images, Chapter Two). The artwork shows Abdessemed trying to write 'Politically Correct' while kneeling on a board bobbing on the ocean and illustrated the difficult position of the artist as a critical force in society.

In recent years, Abdessemed's visibility and reputation as an artist has increased noticeably. In particular, the artist's work has been collected and exhibited by two important collectors. The first is Francois Pinault, one of the world's top collectors of art, with a particular interest in contemporary art.<sup>229</sup> Pinault also collects Hirst, Takashi Murakami and Urs Fischer, owns both Christie's and Gucci and is France's second richest man. Pinault bought a black marble version of Abdessemed's massive sculpture of Zinedine Zidane, *Coup de Tête* (2012), which is now exhibited at Pinault's private museum in Venice.<sup>230</sup> The second collector is the ruling family of Qatar, the House of Thani, which is deeply involved in art, including contemporary art, in its efforts to build a knowledge-based economy and, arguably, provide a respectable cultural cover for its autocratic and repressive rule.<sup>231</sup> The Thani family, the distinction between the family's personal fortune and that of State funds is blurred, house Abdessemed's work in Doha's Arab Museum of Modern Art (Mathaf). At barely forty years of age, Abdessemed's career development has been stellar.

In conclusion, Abdessemed's semiotics demonstrate in a disturbing way the influences of his early life and adolescence in Algeria particularly the impact of the increasing Arabisation of the country and its culture, the deterioration of the position of women and minorities and the outright violence of the 1990s. The psychological effect was such that Abdessemed still

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<sup>229</sup> See 'Francois Pinault & family', The Forbes index. <https://www.forbes.com/profile/francois-pinault/#712885944d20> . Accessed 29/7/2018.

<sup>230</sup> See 'The Pinault Collection', the *Palazzo Grassi website*. <https://www.palazzograssi.it/en/about/collection/>. Accessed 29/7/2018.

<sup>231</sup> See Barbara Pollack, 'The Arab Modern', *Artnet*, 23/12/2010. <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/pollack/mathaf-arab-museum-of-modern-art-in-doha12-23-10.asp>. Accessed 29/7/2010. On the role of Sheik Hassan bin Mohammed bin Ali Al-Thani, the founder of Mathaf or the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha and his wife (the current Director) see Sara Hamdan, 'An Emirate Filling Up With Artwork', *New York Times*, 29/2/2012. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/01/world/middleeast/in-qatar-artists-and-collectors-find-a-new-market.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/01/world/middleeast/in-qatar-artists-and-collectors-find-a-new-market.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1) . Accessed 29/7/2018.

refuses to acknowledge that he is Algerian, the only artist considered in the thesis that has publically revoked his identity as an Algerian.

Abdessemed states vehemently that he is not a ‘postcolonial artist’ and that he ‘is not trying to heal any scar’.<sup>232</sup> The artist rejects the idea that his stylized acts of public defiance paint him as a post-colonial outsider trying to right wrongs done to him and he implicitly rejects Attia’s approach to identity and to the colonial past. On the contrary, the artist insists that he is ‘not mending anything. I am just a detector. I plunge into the void’.<sup>233</sup> Abdessemed states that his Kabylia, Algerian and North African roots are irrelevant because issues of minority cultures distract from the real struggle, although what that is he never clearly defines.<sup>234</sup> Nevertheless, Abdessemed affirms that ‘I’m a Berber – Amizigh – French citizen’ and regards Arabic, not French, as the language of the invaders.<sup>235</sup> This appears contradictory but seems to reflect a positioning to identity by Abdessemed that refuses to be fixed and specific but is continually adjusted to reflect the complex and changing enunciations he wishes to make in his art. Despite his protestations regarding minority cultures, it is hard not to see the impact of his youthful experiences of Algeria on his art, its themes and the forms it takes particularly in respect of the ‘global madhouse’.<sup>236</sup> Abdessemed’s sense of identity and belonging shifts between the variety of positions he adopts as Berber, as French, as a European and lover of European culture and as a family man.

Abdessemed orchestrates and evolves his positioning to identity and belonging within his art. The artist is right to assert that his work does not make ‘political assumptions’ but reacts to what is around him in ways that challenge taboos and social norms whether related to organised religion or ideology.<sup>237</sup> The artist’s targets are multiple and do not fit a particular political agenda, instead the artist even-handedly satirises and critiques a wide range of targets including religious fundamentalism and the ‘political correctness’ of the West. In this

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<sup>232</sup> Interview with Elisabeth Lebovici, *À l’attaque*, ‘I do not live between two cultures. I am not a postcolonial artist. I am not working on the scar and am not mending anything. I am just a detector... In the public sphere, I use passion and rage. Nothing else. I don’t do illusions’.

<sup>233</sup> Peter Goddard, ‘Adel Abdessemed live at the Ocadu’, *The Star*, 18 November 2010.

[https://www.google.com/search?q=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thestar.com%2Fentertainment%2F2010%2F11%2F18%2Fadel+abdessemed+live+at+ocadu.html+.&rlz=1C1EODB\\_enGB532GB613&oq=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thestar.com%2Fentertainment%2F2010%2F11%2F18%2Fadel+abdessemed+live+at+ocadu.html+.&aqs=chrome..69i58j69i57.3535j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thestar.com%2Fentertainment%2F2010%2F11%2F18%2Fadel+abdessemed+live+at+ocadu.html+.&rlz=1C1EODB_enGB532GB613&oq=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thestar.com%2Fentertainment%2F2010%2F11%2F18%2Fadel+abdessemed+live+at+ocadu.html+.&aqs=chrome..69i58j69i57.3535j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8) . Accessed 24/4/2020.

<sup>234</sup> Tortosa, *Global 2005* as cited 2005 p. 119.

<sup>235</sup> Tazza, *Conversation*, as cited 2012, pp. 12-13.

<sup>236</sup> ‘Je suis dans le bordel global’, in ‘Interview with Guy Tortosa’, 2005 as cited, p. 117.

<sup>237</sup> Karen Munoz, ‘Adel Abdessemed’s Organic Works’, *Sunday Art’s* archive, 5/1/2009.

<http://www.thirteen.org/sundayarts/blog/interview/adel-abdessemeds-organic-works/703/> . Accessed 6/1/2017.

Abdessemed considers himself ‘an artist of acts’ and his agency is deeply connected with action, resistance and creation.<sup>238</sup> The first step in Abdessemed’s radicancy was his departure from Algeria, an experience of uprooting and exile that, as Glissant suggests, offers through errantry possibilities of renegotiating identity that the artist took full advantage of through the medium of his art.<sup>239</sup>

### ***Saâdane Afif***

Saâdane Afif has a unique relationship to identity and community, which he has negotiated over time as an aesthetic project formed within a network of positioning to art, art history and the art world. The artist’s positioning to identity relates less to issues of ethnicity, nationality and family background and more to an identity linked to communities that are, to use Siegfried Kracauer’s words, ‘welded together solely by ideas and principles’.<sup>240</sup> This is similar to Kennedy and Roudometof’s description of a type of identity linked to lifestyle orientation and often connected with aesthetic or affective bonds.<sup>241</sup> This does not elide other frames of identity yet, while there are some references to issues of nationality in his work and a few to his Algerian background, these factors are set much lower in Afif’s hierarchy of positions to belonging. Indicative of his approach to identity and community, Afif decided early in his career to make his home in Berlin and the city acts as his locality or neighbourhood with its dense cosmopolitan network of artists, writers, musicians, cultural activities and institutions.

Saâdane Afif had a very different background and early life from either Attia or Abdessemed. He was born in 1970 to Algerian parents in Vendôme, a town with barely 18,000 inhabitants, where he spent his childhood and adolescence.<sup>242</sup> Vendome is a quiet, historic town classified as a ‘Ville d’Art et d’Histoire’ and very different from the multicultural banlieues or the city of Constantine in which Attia and Abdessemed grew up. From an early age Afif was interested in art, although he also played the guitar and had a keen interest in rock music, which featured frequently in his later art practice. The young Afif regularly travelled to Paris where he stayed at his aunt’s house. As noted above, Attia had sought out the Louvre for its

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<sup>238</sup> Interview with Elizabeth Lebovici, *À l’attaque*, as cited, pp. 125-127.

<sup>239</sup> Glissant, as cited 2010, p. 18.

<sup>240</sup> Quoted in Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 11.

<sup>241</sup> Paul Kennedy & Victor Roudometof, *Communities Across Borders under Globalising Conditions: New Immigrants and Transnational Cultures*, (London: Routledge, 2002). Of particular interest is Chapter One ‘Towards a tentative typology of globalised communities’, pp. 20-22.

<sup>242</sup> See Afif’s CV and brief biographical details at the Mehdi Chouakri Gallery website. [http://www.mehdi-chouakri.com/kuenstler/safif/Biographie\\_SA.pdf](http://www.mehdi-chouakri.com/kuenstler/safif/Biographie_SA.pdf). Accessed 23/6/2014.

free entry on Sundays and it acted as a spur to his desire to be an artist and move out of the banlieues. As a teenager Afif discovered art at the Pompidou Centre, an institution dedicated to twentieth-century art, and he records that he soon knew the collection by heart.<sup>243</sup> In particular the artist became interested in early twentieth-century avant-garde artists enthused by the way they ‘announced the death of everything, of painting, beauty, specificity, then of artists and museums’.<sup>244</sup> Above all, Afif developed a deep interest in the works and art practice of Duchamp. There is insufficient information available to gauge Afif’s level of contact with Algeria or with the Algerian diaspora in Paris, although this absence of reference is perhaps indicative of no close connection with either. In two or three of the artist’s works one can construe a diasporic or Algerian reference but the major cultural capital Afif develops in this period is a profound understanding and in-depth knowledge of modern and contemporary art, which becomes the key to his later art practice in particular his lifelong interest in the work of Duchamp.

Saâdane Afif’s education is different in terms of cultural capital from the two other artists. He graduated from the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts de Bourges in 1995 and took his Master’s degree at the École des Beaux Arts de Nantes in 1998. Although Bourges is in the same department as Vendôme and therefore the obvious place for him to study, Afif’s choice of art schools is important as it placed him within two art schools dedicated to the production of contemporary artists.<sup>245</sup> The choice of Nantes was particularly significant as it had, since the 1960s, been progressive in its teaching methods and aimed to produce artists and designers intent on extending the boundaries of contemporary art. In terms of cultural capital it helped define Afif’s positioning as a semionaut within contemporary art and his art practice as thoroughly ‘conceptual’ from the beginning. Afif not only developed a deep understanding of modern and contemporary art and culture but also clearly situated himself within a predominantly French modernist and post-modernist tradition. It is this almost obsessive immersion in contemporary art that lead him subsequently to engage reflexively with a set of positions to identity and belonging that are framed predominantly and explicitly in terms of aesthetics and the art world.

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<sup>243</sup> Selina Ting, ‘Interview: Saâdane Afif’, *InitiArt Magazine*, July 2010. <http://www.initiartmagazine.com/interview.php?IVarchive=25> . Accessed 29/7/2018

<sup>244</sup> Selina Ting, as cited, July 2010.

<sup>245</sup> See ‘The Art College of Nantes-Métropole’. <https://en.beauxartsnantes.fr/art-college-nantes-metropole> . Accessed 2/8/2018.

Afif's career had a slightly less steep start than either Abdessemed or Attia. Although regularly exhibiting between his graduation in 1995 and 2002, the exhibitions were almost exclusively in France and this initial lack of radicancy limited his visibility in the global art world.<sup>246</sup> However, an important career step was his success in gaining prestigious residencies. In 2001 Afif won a residency at the 'Villa Arson' at the International Art School of Nice and another in 2002 at the Villa Médicis in Glasgow.<sup>247</sup> Afif's work in this early period was often textual in character and frequently related to music, his beloved rock music in particular. The artwork *Silence is Sexy, isn't it* (2001) was based on the title of a 2000 album by Berlin noise music band Einstürzende Neubauten and involved the ironical translation of a musical art form that revelled in extreme volume into a silent visual art form thus incorporating his twin loves of art and music. The influence of Duchamp is clear in the ironical humour and the connection between the textual and the visual and there are references to past modernist art forms in which a noise aesthetic was important, such as Futurism, Dadaism and Fluxus.<sup>248</sup> The cultural capital that Afif takes from his childhood and which shapes his sense of identity and the semiosis of his art mainly derives from his great interest in the nature and direction of contemporary art and his adolescent passion for hard rock.

Afif's visibility in the art world began to increase with his participation in the group exhibition *Any Where Out of the World* in New York in 2001 and Los Angeles in 2002. Afif's work also began to appear more widely on the European scene and in China at the Festival of Jinan. The artwork *A.A - conversation* (2002) contains one of the very few references to Algeria. The work was inspired by a drawing made by his father in an Algerian sanatorium. Despite the reference to both Algeria and Afif's father, Tom Morton has suggested that the piece is more concerned with loss: the decay of memory, and the decay of an artwork's aura through the process of reproduction.<sup>249</sup> Although Morton's interpretation is more consistent with Afif's general approach to his work, both interpretations may be valid, since both in different ways relate to translation, movement and transition. In 2002, Afif produced *National (Glasgow)*, (2002), consisting of two casual shirts and one football shirt, (*see image*

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<sup>246</sup> This gradual change in the distribution of events involving Afif is derived from a compilation and comparison of gallery profiles and CVs.

<sup>247</sup> See the detailed Xavier Hufkens Gallery biography. <http://www.xavierhufkens.com/artists/saadane-afif/download/artist-file-AFIF-BIO.pdf> . Accessed 7/1/2017.

<sup>248</sup> An example being the Antisymphony concert performed on April 30, 1919 in Berlin, see *The Dadacide Magazine*. <https://dadacide-magazine.com/tag/situationist-international/> . Accessed 20/5/2019.

<sup>249</sup> Tom Morton Bidoun, Issue 13 as cited.

13 at Appendix One: Images, Chapter Two).<sup>250</sup> This work and the similar *National Shake (Linz)*, (2004) appear to have an identity-related connection to France because the clothing strung on a washing line echoes the colours of the French flag. However, the treatment of national identity is deliberately reductive with the use of used clothes and an apparently hastily constructed washing line. The symbolism of the work may indicate a dismissive attitude by the artist to national identity of any kind. Moreover, the later version is complicated by a red shirt bearing the insignia of the *Naturfreunde*, an organisation dedicated to international understanding and banned by the Nazis in 1933, which again is suggestive of the artist's attitude to nationalism.<sup>251</sup> At this early stage Afif's sense of belonging is uninhibited by national identity and very different from Attia's sense of 'inbetween' or Abdessemed's virtual revocation of Algerian identity.

In 2003, Afif moved to Berlin where he currently lives and works. The artist joined Galerie Esther Schipper who organised his first solo show outside of France in 2004 in Essen. Most of his solo shows subsequently have been in Germany, punctuated by high profile solo shows elsewhere.<sup>252</sup> 2004 was a significant year in terms of Afif's construction of a uniquely aesthetic sense of community. Afif appeared in the *Playlist* exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo curated by Nicolas Bourriaud and this can be seen as marking the start of Afif's interest in relational aesthetics, a key theory of Bourriaud.<sup>253</sup> Afif's description of his connection with Bourriaud's relational aesthetics is informative:

'Many people regard the idea of relational aesthetics as a recipe, but it's a basic observation of something that existed before and will exist afterwards. During the 90s a group of artists agreed to share ideas, they are still doing that... I was not part of that group. I arrived later, but I was deeply uneasy with the idea that you're alone in

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<sup>250</sup> See the description and interpretation at <http://nadour.org/collection/saadane-afif-national-glasgow/>. The current owner of the work is Nadour, the collectors Rüdiger K Weng and Diana Wieggersma, in a collection of 'contemporary art from the Arab world and Iran'.

<sup>251</sup> See their website at: <https://www.naturfreunde.de/>. On the politics of the movement (essentially Social Democratic) see John Alexander Williams, *Turning to Nature in Germany: Hiking, Nudism, and Conservation, 1900-1940*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 71-72.

<sup>252</sup> This data is taken from a variety of sources including the comprehensive CV on the website of Mehdi-Chouakri. [http://www.mehdi-chouakri.com/kuenstler/safif/Biographie\\_SA.pdf](http://www.mehdi-chouakri.com/kuenstler/safif/Biographie_SA.pdf). For a detailed description of the Pompidou 2010 exhibition see the ADIEF website. [http://www.adiaf.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/UK\\_201010\\_PrixMarcelDuchamp2009\\_S\\_AfifauCentrePompidou.pdf](http://www.adiaf.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/UK_201010_PrixMarcelDuchamp2009_S_AfifauCentrePompidou.pdf)

<sup>253</sup> Playlist and Afif are briefly mentioned in the following BBC discussion on his curatorial practice: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbetwo>. Accessed 7/1/2017.

relation to the museum, to the gallery. I realised if I can share some ideas, I won't be alone in my ivory tower.'<sup>254</sup>

In this approach to his art Afif comes close to Bourriaud's understanding of artworks as 'models of sociability' which involves a process of dialogue and human interaction that goes beyond discourse. Bourriaud considers this approach as democratic in form because 'the forms produced by the art of totalitarian regimes are peremptory and closed in on themselves...they do not give the viewer a chance to complement them'.<sup>255</sup> One of the key elements of Afif's art is the large space given to both his collaborators and to the spectator although he never gives up his role in these artworks of what Huttenlauch calls 'the choirmaster'.<sup>256</sup> Afif is orchestrating his identity and sense of community in terms of his positioning to art and aesthetics.

Afif's engagement with the idea of a democratic non-national form of identity and community appears in another early work. *Pirates who's who* (2000-2004), (see image 15 at Appendix One: Images, Chapter Two), was inspired by Peter Lamborn Wilson's book on pirate utopias which described the pirate Bou Regreg Republic, established in 1627 in present-day Morocco, as the world's first truly democratic settlement.<sup>257</sup> The work is a shelf by designer Ron Arad on which there is a collection of books on piracy, dried paint has dripped from the shelf onto the wall to which it is fixed. Morton links the work to issues of ownership and copyright in art because the meaning of the piece is complicated by the artist's legal contract with the purchaser about how the piece can be used.<sup>258</sup> However, we can also read the piece as concerned with modernism – the re-exploration of its utopias and its radical views of democracy. The linking to piracy can be interpreted in terms of a variety of appropriations and re-appropriations including the hijacking of avant-garde radicalism by totalitarian regimes and the appropriation by artists such as Duchamp of the 'readymade' object. In a slightly later work, *Power Chords* (2005), (see image 16 at Appendix One: Images Chapter Two), Afif further explored the positioning of the artist to community and sociability through referencing André Cadere's 1970s colour-coded stick sculptures. Afif

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<sup>254</sup> Interview with Andreas Schaegele, 'Saâdane Afif, Process in Motion', *Catalogue*, Issue 3, 2010.

<http://www.cataloguemagazine.net/contemporary-art/magazine/article/saadane-afif/>. Accessed 7/1/2017.

<sup>255</sup> Bourriaud 2002 as cited p. 109.

<sup>256</sup> Eva Huttenlauch, 'Everything must be scandalous (Andre Breton to Louis Aragon)', Eva Huttenlauch et al, *Saadane Afif: Another Anthology of Black Humour*, (Frankfurt: MMK, 2012), pp. 78-81.

<sup>257</sup> Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Pirate Utopias: Moorish Corsairs & European Renegades*, (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2003).

<sup>258</sup> Tom Morton, *Bidoun*, Issue 13 as cited.

translated the colour coded stick sculptures into guitar chords made by eleven white electric guitars propped up on stands that, with the aid of a computer program and rotating Perspex discs placed across their strings, seemed to be strumming themselves.<sup>259</sup> In this work Afif paid homage to the variety of ‘translations’ occurring in the work of Cadere and the enigmatic system of creating art the latter used as a form of subversive game-playing so close to Afif’s own approach. However, Afif was also identifying with the way Cadere prefigured the model of sociability of relational aesthetics by presenting his ‘sticks’ in public spaces such as subways and engaging passers-by in discussions about his work.

In 2006 Afif transferred to the fashionable Mehdi Chouakri Galerie. Mehdi Chouakri, of Algerian descent and previously based in Paris, started in Berlin in 1995 and quickly formed a collection of major artists and developed a reputation for taking on new young artists showing promise.<sup>260</sup> What is of particular importance is the way issues of radicancy and translation are intertwined in both Afif’s move to Berlin and the change in direction of his art practice as a ‘model of sociability’. Berlin became a form of retreat from nationality for Afif, a nest where he was surrounded by friends, potential collaborators and a highly contemporary and vibrant cultural scene in an informal aesthetic community.<sup>261</sup> The move to Berlin and his adoption by a top gallery changed Afif’s international visibility and, in the following years, his career takes off through participation in group shows and biennials in Russia, Belgium, Italy, Switzerland, Albania, Austria, Slovenia, the UK, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Japan, Morocco and New York. From 2008 onwards his participation in group exhibitions in Germany was much more frequent than in France.

Afif’s exhibition *Technical Specifications* (2008) at the Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art demonstrated the complex layers of meaning present in his approach to art and identity formation. *Untitled (Montana Blues)*, (2005), (*see image 17 at Appendix One: Images, Chapter Two*), is based on the original 2004 work entitled ‘*Montana Blues*’ which has been scrambled into the anagram ‘Untamable “son”’. The ambiguity of this depends on whether the accent is on the French or English meaning of ‘son’. ‘Untamable’ is wall mounted like an advertising hoarding while ‘son’ is presented on the floor by its three letters

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<sup>259</sup> See Tom Morton, *Bidoun*, issue 13 as cited.

<sup>260</sup> See the catalogue at <https://www.artbasel.com/catalog/gallery/>, and the Kimberly Bradley interview with Chouakri, ‘The Art Dealers: Mehdi Chouakri’, *Artnet: Art Systems*, undated. <http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/bradley/bradley5-30-00.asp>. Accessed 2/8/2018. Bradley describes Chouakri as one of the ‘hottest dealers’ in Berlin.

<sup>261</sup> Similar to that described in Kennedy and Roudometof as cited, 2002, p. 20.



constructed of neon lights piled on top of each other with the light fading and returning as if in imitation of breath. One of the most autobiographical works is *Untitled (Intro.)* (2005) which takes small pieces from an earlier work entitled *Intro* to form a necklace suspended in a glass cube on top of which is a felt magician's hat all of which are placed on a three legged wooden stool. The references are myriad: the use of readymades which are not readymades, the stool as plinth signifying the frame of the gallery/museum, the use of felt referencing Beuys, the glass cube representing a transparent White Cube, the self-portrait of the artist as magician. These references are by no means exhaustive and seem to suggest a deliberately ordered yet fantastical presentation. The recurrent focus in these works is on Afif's sense of identity set out in a format that is both anarchic in its combinations and yet obsessively ordered.

Afif's engagement with modernism is also indicated in his complex and subtle institutional critiques. A post-colonial element to be discerned in, for example, his *Another Anthology of Black Humour* (2011/12) a work closely linked to modernism and to André Breton.<sup>262</sup> The work can also be read as a commentary on the relationship between European art institutions and the art of Africa. The work was first performed at the Pompidou Centre in 2011 following Afif's award of the Marcel Duchamp Prize in 2009, an annual award given to a young artist by the Association pour la Diffusion Internationale de l'Art Français (ADIAF). The centrepiece of *Another Anthology of Black Humour* was a coffin constructed mainly from wood in Ghana in the form of a miniature Centre Pompidou. The casket was made by the Ghanaian coffin artist Kudjoe Affutu and was itself given the title *L'Humour noir* (2010), (see image 18 at Appendix One: Images, Chapter Two), which is an ironic pun referencing Breton on the relationship of African art to European art institutions. Ghanaian coffins had featured in the 1989 Pompidou exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* and Afif searched Ghana to find Affutu who was trained by one of the Ghanaian artists involved. One of Afif's aims was to reveal and highlight the African influences on modern French art and literature. He asserts:

‘...the very history of the Pompidou, the history of its architecture, and the death of a certain internationalist Utopia it promoted with "Magiciens de la terre," which was highly important,

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<sup>262</sup> The title encompasses a great range of interpretations including sick humour, dark humour and the humour of black Africa. For a detailed analysis of interpretations of Breton's phrase see Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Surrealist Black Humour: Masculine/Feminine', *Papers of Surrealism*, Issue 1 winter, 2003. [http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal1/acrobat\\_files/Suleiman.pdf](http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal1/acrobat_files/Suleiman.pdf). Accessed 2/2017.

although the experience of that show seems to have faded from the memory of the Pompidou quickly, as if it had been of no consequence at all'.<sup>263</sup>

In this Afif was adopting a similar stance regarding the unacknowledged influence of African culture on Europe to that of Attia. However, the title of the exhibition *Another Anthology of Black Humour* derives from the book and famous phrase of André Breton.<sup>264</sup> Afif notes that for him *The Anthologie de l'humour noir* '... is itself a kind of casket for Dadaism, a sort of retrospective of the foundations of this movement'.

Afif is conjuring up the layers of meaning in the history of the relationships between modern art and African art involving Derain, Matisse and Picasso. The work has an autobiographical dimension since important elements of modernism related to, for example, Duchamp were incorporated into Afif's aesthetic identity. Another autobiographical element is acknowledged by Afif in relation to his visits as a teenager to the Pompidou and which he remembered as an open space in which the intentions of the architects Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers's original concept fully functioned: 'I could enter the galleries for free, I felt at home in this museum'.<sup>265</sup> *Another Anthology of Black Humour* becomes a biographical statement in which Afif's personal history is intertwined with that of the Pompidou in which the 'death' of the artist is celebrated or mourned alongside that of the institution in the shape of the Ghanaian coffin.<sup>266</sup> The work demonstrates another aspect of Afif's sense of identity and community as an artist since for him the nature of art is not the artwork rather it is the artist's extended conversation across time through which Afif's model of sociability embraces art and artists from the past as well as those of the present. Afif's aim is to create a new art that reflects the modern world and, despite its engagement with modernism, aims also to make a radical break with the past and search for new forms of expression. The artist's collaborative artworks bring together the community of which he is a part through formal techniques that engage with the 'white cube' of contemporary art but draw on diverse cultural material across space and time.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> François Piron, '1000 words: Saâdane Afif', *Artforum*, January 2011.

<https://www.artforum.com/print/201101/1000-words-saadane-afif-27052> . Accessed 9/1/2019.

<sup>264</sup> See A Breton, *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, (Paris: Pauvert, 1977).

<sup>265</sup> François Piron, *Artforum*, January 2011, as cited.

<sup>266</sup> François Piron, as cited, January 2011.

<sup>267</sup> For an excellent analysis of the significance and spread of the concept of the 'white cube' see Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999). It can be found and read with some difficulty at: [https://monoskop.org/images/8/8e/ODoherty\\_Brian\\_Inside\\_the\\_White\\_Cube\\_The\\_Ideology\\_of\\_the\\_Gallery\\_Space.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/8/8e/ODoherty_Brian_Inside_the_White_Cube_The_Ideology_of_the_Gallery_Space.pdf) . Accessed 1/1/2017.

This approach to identity and community is not without its contradictions since Afif's emphasis on the death of the artist precludes his attendance at his exhibitions, even its openings. Afif's use of Bourriaud's model of sociability and community operates through his collaborations prior to the exhibitions and forms, for him, the most important element of the artwork in which art becomes a process of orchestrated but collaborative making and what occurs in the exhibition is just a secondary derivative. The exhibition then takes place in an art gallery that becomes for the artist a mausoleum, his identity as an artist deriving from the process of thinking and making that is art, while the outcome in the exhibition is something dead.

As indicated above, Afif's work reflects a persistent dialogue with the oeuvre of Duchamp, an engagement that began when he was young and has continued to the present day. So close and subtle is the aesthetic relationship that it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Afif regards Duchamp as an alter ego pivotal to his positioning to identity. Afif has collected and archived every article and commentary he could identify on Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), an icon of twentieth-century art, tearing them out but carefully framing them. The original of Duchamp's work no longer exists but consisted of a standard urinal, presented on its back for exhibition purposes, and was signed and dated 'R. Mutt 1917'. All that remains of the artwork is a photograph. The result was the *Fountain Archives*, (see image 19 at Appendix One: *Images, Chapter Two*).<sup>268</sup> In January 2017, the hundredth anniversary of the 'making' of the *Fountain* and when it was signed and dated 'R. Mutt 1917', the collection began a circulation of major art institutions starting at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.<sup>269</sup> Ting notes that Afif deliberately chose the nature of the documentation of his work and framed and poeticized its form so that the texts were no longer commentaries about the object but about something else, an art in their own right.<sup>270</sup> By collecting Duchamp's work Afif is mimicking the former's documentation of his own work, which began with the *Green Book* (1934).<sup>271</sup> Duchamp, using his alter ego of 'Rose Sélavy', had published, in green felt covered boxes,

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<sup>268</sup> See <http://thefountainarchives.net/about/> . Accessed 9/1/2019.

<sup>269</sup> For the origin of 'R Mutt' see the extract from William A Camfield's article 'Marcel Duchamp's Fountain: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917', provided by Michigan State University. <https://msu.edu/course/ha/121/duchampfountain.pdf> . Accessed 2/1/2017. For sight of the exhibition at the Pompidou see <http://enfr.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1824153/saadane-afif-the-fountain-archives-at-the-centre-pompidou> . Accessed 9/1/2019.

<sup>270</sup> Ting interview 16 April 2016 as cited.

<sup>271</sup> Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors Even (The Green Box)*, (1934). See Paul Thirkell's 'From the *Green Box* to Typo/Topography: Duchamp and Hamilton's Dialogue in Print', at *Tate Papers*, *The Tate website*. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/03/from-green-box-to-typo-topography-duchamp-and-hamiltons-dialogue-in-print> . Accessed 9/1/2019.

ninety-four loose notes relating to the development and function of his *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors Even* (1915-1923). Duchamp acts as an alter ego for Afif, not dissimilar to Duchamp's 'Rose Sélavy' and Afif's *Fountain Archives* can be seen as a form of autobiography.

In conclusion, identity is at the heart of Afif's work and it is in his approach to art, in particular by reference to Duchamp, that Afif creates or invents his identity. As a result, 'the artist Afif' becomes the most important creation of Afif as artist. Eva Huttenlauch describes this process as a reconstruction of 'himself as a model artist figure in order to experiment, in his person, with the invention of a new world'.<sup>272</sup> There is a similarity with Abdessemed's sense of aesthetic identity, but for Afif and his art the 'semionaut' of Bourriaud ascends to an altogether different level. Within this context the idea of 'community' takes a different configuration and relates in a much more significant way than with the other two artists to the art world itself, its communities and Bourriaud's notion of a 'model of sociability' incorporating a relational aesthetic.<sup>273</sup>

### ***Conclusion: Identity and Community***

The above analysis of the biographical contexts and careers of Adel Abdessemed, Kader Attia and Saâdane Afif, demonstrates that the positioning of the artists to identity and community is subject to multiple, at times conflicting and painful, forces that influence the development of habitus. Location, background, culture and upbringing are all factors that contribute to the individuals the artists become and to their approach to art. However, this is not a simple, one-way, deterministic process and these factors are influences with which the artists interact thoughtfully and creatively as reflexive agents. This agency, articulated through positioning in the careers and the artwork of the artists, indicates a conscious, purposeful intentionality driving an identity formation which is framed by aesthetic endeavour.

The three artists demonstrate a variability and uniqueness in their relation to France, the Algerian diaspora in France and to Algeria. In relation to their art practices this is to be expected because one key aim of an artist is to evolve a practice that, intellectually and

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<sup>272</sup> Eva Huttenlauch et al, (Eds.), *Saadane Afif: Another Anthology of Black Humour*, (Nurnberg: Verlag fur moderne Kunst, 2012), p. 79.

<sup>273</sup> N Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* as cited 2002.

emotionally, reflects the artist's singular understanding of himself in relation to the world.<sup>274</sup> There are close similarities in the trajectory of their careers, which demonstrate the relentless movement or 'radicancy' required of artists by the contemporary art world in order that they become 'visible' on the art markets. It was noted that this art world and its markets had become only relatively more inclusive as it still remained important to be educated in a Western art institution and to be visible in Western art circles especially in the USA, the UK or Germany. Part of the peripatetic of the artists relates to acquiring both this visibility and this education as cultural capital.

Despite the emphasis given to agency in the chapter it is important to recognise the significance of location, background, education and career in the development of the artists and the contribution this makes to their particular positions to identity and community. Each of the artists interacts with their very different backgrounds in a unique and individual way. There are, on the other hand, many similarities in their educational experiences and their career paths and trajectories. Location, displacement and movement are important choices made by the artists that help them renegotiate aspects of their positioning to identity and community over time. The chapter demonstrates that, although complex and often contradictory forces act on the artists, identity formation in their careers and art is driven by agency, intention and choice.

Afif, as far as can be judged, has no relationship with an Algerian diasporic community, and his relationship to Algeria and France is not something that features broadly in interviews. The artist appears very comfortable with his situation in Berlin displaced from diaspora and nationality. When Afif speaks about his 'self' it is concerning his identity as an artist and his sense of belonging appears to be to an aesthetic community of the culturally contemporary. Attia positions himself very differently to Algeria, describing himself as 'an Algerian born in France'.<sup>275</sup> Despite the artist indicating that he is tired of being constantly associated with a given community, Attia has inscribed his work throughout his career with his Algerian background and his association with the Franco-Algerian diaspora in Paris. This may be because, as he admits, artists always talk about what they know.<sup>276</sup> Attia's relation to Algeria and to the Algerian community in France is fundamental to his postcolonial credentials and

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<sup>274</sup> In Heidegger's sense of *aletheia* or 'unconcealment', in other words, the work of an artist (art practice) as well as the artwork itself becomes revelatory. See Martin Heidegger's essay, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in David Farrell Krell, (Ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>275</sup> See Hazera interview, as cited 2014.

<sup>276</sup> See Hazera interview, as cited 2014.

his brand as an artist. Indicative of this is Attia's recent establishment in Paris of an exhibition, events and restaurant space called 'La Colonie' focused on creating a space of postcolonial critique. It was launched 'in tribute to those who died demonstrating for an independent Algeria in Paris on this day in 1961'.<sup>277</sup>

Adel Abdessemed dissociates himself from his Algerian nationality entirely and is vociferous in his denunciation of the imposed 'Arabo-Islamist' culture in Algeria. Although the press often refer to him as Algerian, he has never referred to himself as such. It is his affiliation to his Berber heritage that figures at times within his artwork, for example in *Bourek*, and *Telle Mere, Tel Fils*. Abdessemed's memory of Algeria, where his parents still live, remains painful. 2002 was the 40th anniversary of Algerian independence and Abdessemed bitterly commented that he came from a country where books, cinema and artists are suspect and censored.<sup>278</sup> Abdessemed has stated that he refuses to be a 'Maghrebin de Service', which translates roughly as someone who is on call or duty as a North African, and insists that his situation is not limited by territorial identity: '...on n'est pas attaché exclusivement à une ville ou à un territoire. C'est ça l'hybridisation'.<sup>279</sup> His sense of 'l'hybridisation' appears to be about freedom and choice in the construction of identity and belonging and whilst he touches on postcolonial issues in his work he is more concerned with the violence that appears endemic in what he has described as the global madhouse.

The chapter demonstrates that the signs and symbolism used by the artists in their art relate closely to their reflexive interaction with background, education and career development. Each develops in their art a complex semiotic structure that resonates with their personal and aesthetic positioning to identity. The artists engage in different ways with the political, cultural, religious and ethnic struggles fought out within a world of diverse modernities. The semiotics of the artists, particularly of Abdessemed and Attia, frequently mirrors the contradictions and complexities of Enwesor's 'intense proximities'.

The relation of all three artists with Berlin is significant in that the city provides a kind of 'glocal', or combination of local and global, 'nest' disconnected from nationality and

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<sup>277</sup> See Alyssa Buffenstein, 'Kader Attia Opens Hybrid Restaurant and Art Space in Paris: It's called "La Colonie"', *Artnet*, October 18, 2016. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/kader-attia-la-colonie-paris-705002> . Accessed 20/10/2016.

<sup>278</sup> 'Today Algeria is ruined... today the powers that be have rendered my people crazy and sterile. It's tyranny! And to top it all off in France they are going to celebrate the Year of Algeria. Celebrate what? Celebrate the misery of an entire people? Celebrate the exodus of artists?' Tortusa interview, *Global* as cited, p. 117.

<sup>279</sup> Tortusa interview, *Global* as cited 2005, p. 118.

diaspora. For contemporary artists the draw is the freedom of expression, excellent galleries and dense cultural networks within which the flighted birds of migratory aesthetics can roost. Berlin is a contradiction: a cultural 'locality' that boasts a global contemporariness that extends beyond the European. It is a possible answer to the question of where to find a place for your art when conventional national identities and institutions seem to make less and less sense.<sup>280</sup> What is clear is that these three artists do not work solely within a single national or diasporic framework and that their sense of identity and belonging is complex, diverse and individual.

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<sup>280</sup> See J J Charlesworth, 'Art Dubai: the global unreal', *Art Review*, May Issue, 2013.

## Chapter Three: Re-imagining identity, past, present and future imperfect.

### Introduction

The previous chapter examined the positioning of three artists of Algerian or Franco-Algerian origin in relation to Algeria, France, and the global art world as they moved through their careers and developed their art. This chapter takes as its focus the way artists on both sides of the Mediterranean engage with history and memory and in doing so position themselves to identity and community. Mohamed Bourouissa and Zoulikha Bouabdellah, both of whom have lived in France since their teens, interrogate how continuing notions of the unicity of the French nation rub up against the diversity and inequalities of its population and the reverberations of a colonial past. In Algeria, Ammar Bouras and Amina Menia question Algeria's past providing insights into that country's problematic relation with unicity, diversity and community.

Memory, history and identity are closely related. Halbwachs, in pioneering research in the 1950s, showed how remembering the past contributed to the formation of identity within the 'cadres sociaux de la mémoire' or the public context that provides the framework for 'socially and culturally formed individual memory'.<sup>281</sup> Assmann later drew attention to how memory was 'identity usable' at the individual and collective level and part of a 'stored memory' that is not currently embodied in collective or individual narratives for 'neutral' reasons.<sup>282</sup> However, as will be argued, those reasons may also be political and result in deliberate omissions. More recently, Keightley and Pickering have stressed how 'mnemonic imagination' contributes to the formation of social and individual identities, indicating that although our memories are not imaginary 'they are acted upon imaginatively'.<sup>283</sup> It is argued that the artists examined in this chapter from both sides of the Mediterranean engage with identity and community through their imaginative deconstruction and reconstruction of the past's presence in the present.

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<sup>281</sup> See Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, (London: Palgrave, 2011), p. 97.

<sup>282</sup> See Erll as cited 2011, p. 106.

<sup>283</sup> See Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, *The Mnemonic Imagination: remembering as creative practice*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 5. For a specific example see Hall's engagement with Caribbean cinema in Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', J. Rutherford, (Ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990).

<http://sites.middlebury.edu/nydiasporaworkshop/files/2011/04/D-OA-HallStuart-CulturalIdentityandDiaspora.pdf>. Accessed 16/2/2014.



Fran Lloyd notes how memory helps us locate ourselves as social beings.<sup>284</sup> However, art can dislocate the frames within which memory shapes evolving forms of identity and community. The artists in this chapter confront occlusions and regressive imaginings of memory and history in both France and Algeria in ways that constructively reimagine the narratives inscribed in them. From this perspective, history and memory are two symbolic forms of reference to the past amongst a range that includes religion, myth and literature all of which contribute to the production of individual and collective identity.<sup>285</sup> It is argued that art provides points of reference to the past and, at times, a form of prosthetic memory but has an ability to challenge the dominant narratives of the present derived from the past.<sup>286</sup>

Duncan Bell, noting the mutability and historicity of identity formation, nuances the notion of collective memory. He suggests the idea of ‘mythscape’ to describe the situation where the dominant collective memory or narrative becomes a powerful governing myth. Bell proposes that this dominant mythscape coexists with a variety of subaltern myths related to alternative imaginaries that form a ‘temporally and spatially extended discursive realm’ and act as a site of struggle for control of memory and history.<sup>287</sup> The proposition of this chapter is that art can act to support the governing narrative but it can also reinforce or help create subaltern narratives voiced by social groups at the margins of a society as will be demonstrated in the analysis of artworks produced in both France and Algeria. This approach acknowledges however that the idea of a subaltern narrative can be problematic in a number of contexts particularly in cross cultural and intersectional analyses.

This perspective envisages art as standing with both history and memory as active processes of on-going reconstruction and rearrangement of conceptions of identity and community within the frame of ‘what gives meaning and significance to experience’.<sup>288</sup> These processes are forms of translation to the extent to which they involve re-presentations of another, the ‘Other’ or of the self. Susan Gal has described ‘translation’ as a family of semiotic processes

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<sup>284</sup> Fran Lloyd, *Displacement & difference: contemporary Arab visual culture in the diaspora*, (London: Saffron Books, 2001), p. 139.

<sup>285</sup> Erl as cited, 2011, p. 45.

<sup>286</sup> The term ‘prosthetic memory’ is Landsberg’s and describes how engagement with the past (even that of others) is used ‘to take on memories of events through which one did not live, memories that, despite their mediated quality, have the capacity to transform one’s subjectivity, politics and ethical engagements’. See Alison Landsberg, ‘Memory, Empathy, and the Politics of Identification’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2009, pp. 221–229, pp. 221–222.

<sup>287</sup> Duncan Bell, ‘Mythscape: memory, mythology and national identity’, *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. No. 54, Issue No. 1, March 2003, pp. 63–81, p. 73 and p. 79.

<sup>288</sup> Keightley and Pickering as cited 2013, p. 25 but also see pp. 43–52 on ‘Reconciling Memory and Imagination’.

and a metasemiotic activity in which what is said, written and done in one semiotic system – the text – is expressed in another.<sup>289</sup> This view supports implicitly Bourriaud’s notion of the artist as ‘semionaut’ and translator of cultures. The argument proposed is that visual representations can be viewed as important mediators between semiotic systems acting within a set of ‘interdiscursive practices’ (i.e. are practices that relate to a number of discourses) that can generate and produce new objects, practices, person-types and knowledge.<sup>290</sup> However, it is proposed additionally that there is an inherent instability in representation over time that provides apertures through which artists and others can pass light linking one set of representations with the production of new images and new knowledge.

The problematic nature of knowledge production is illustrated by the difficulties experienced by historians such as Benjamin Stora in their revisions of Franco-Algerian history and the place of that past in collective memory and official history in both France and Algeria.<sup>291</sup> Knowledge production is an important aspect of art and literature and these can perform a role when other more ‘scientific’ approaches, for example in historiography, fail. For example, Michael Haneke’s film *Caché* (2005) engaged critically with the still not fully acknowledged Paris massacre of 1961 during the Algerian War when French police attacked a demonstration of some 30,000 Algerians killing between 100 and 300. A key driver of his film was the law enacted on 23 February 2005 which imposed on high-school (lycée) teachers a requirement to teach the ‘positive values’ of colonialism to their students (Article 4, Paragraph 2).<sup>292</sup> His disturbing filmic metaphors of trauma and representations of repressed guilt brought to the surface knowledge occluded in official histories. The historical events are not shown in the film which instead shows their presence in the present.

Historiography itself is frequently ideological. James McDougall has explored the hidden histories and multiple memories submerged under a narrow univocal nationalist ideology in

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<sup>289</sup> Susan Gal, ‘Politics of Translation’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 44, 2015, pp. 225–40.

<sup>290</sup> There are similarities in Gal’s arguments with Derrida ‘Des Tours de Babel’, in J Graham, (Ed.), *Difference in translation*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 169-209, where he makes the argument that translation is related to colonial power and the creation of subaltern subjectivities – a point later taken up by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in relation to Marxism in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (New York: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313.

<sup>291</sup> Stora has played a leading role in revising Algerian and Franco-Algerian history despite the limitations of access to official archives in, for example, Algeria. See, Benjamin Stora, *Histoire de l’Algérie coloniale (1830–1954)*, (Paris: La Découverte, 2004) ; Benjamin Stora, *La gangrène et l’oubli: La mémoire de la guerre d’Algérie*, (Paris: La Découverte, 2005) ; Benjamin Stora and Mohammed Harbi, *La Guerre d’Algérie, 1934–2004, La fin de l’amnésie*, (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2004).

<sup>292</sup> See ‘La loi du 23 février 2005: texte et réactions’, *Cahiers d’histoire. Revue d’histoire critique* [En ligne], 2005, pp. 94-95. <http://journals.openedition.org/chrhc/1077> . Accessed 21/3/2019.

Algeria.<sup>293</sup> Malika Rahal has written about the constraints on historical research and the narrowly ideological way history is taught in Algerian schools and universities ignoring the plurality of the country's history in favour of a false unity.<sup>294</sup> A problematic history before and after Algerian independence remains substantially unexplored and unchallenged in both France and Algeria. On both sides of the Mediterranean, art finds a role re-imagining the national narratives and collective memories populating public space and translating them into alternative visions of community and identity. In this way new 'mythscape' are formed to challenge the 'governing myth'.

## France

One important mythscape has been constructed in French historiography by the French historian Pierre Nora. Nora attempted to construct a 'symbolic' France that ignored France's actual diversity and its colonial past.<sup>295</sup> Nora's intention was to: 'define France in symbolic terms, to define France as a reality that is entirely symbolic, and thus to reject any definition that would reduce it to phenomena of another order'.<sup>296</sup> Nora regarded *milieux de mémoire* as social environments in which memory is a fundamental part of culture as in, for example, peasant agrarian society but argued that we are cut off forever from those memory environments because of the changes that have occurred in the contemporary world.<sup>297</sup> Nora translated *milieux de mémoire* into *lieux de mémoire* or sites or places of memory as an alternative semiotic system and the concept, first used in his three-volume collection *Les Lieux de Mémoire* published in part in English as *Realms of Memory*, has since become influential.<sup>298</sup> For Nora the concept may refer to any place, object or concept vested with historical significance in the popular collective memory although he considered that, to be meaningful, the point of reference should have material, functional and symbolic dimensions

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<sup>293</sup> James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>294</sup> Malika Rahal, 'Fused Together and Torn Apart: Stories and Violence in Contemporary Algeria', *History and Memory*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Spring/Summer 2012, pp. 118-151.

<sup>295</sup> Pierre Nora, (Ed). *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 3 volumes, (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman, (Eds.), *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, (Arthur Goldhammer, Trs.), (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). For a description and analysis see Erl 2011 as cited, pp. 22-27. Incidentally, 'Nora' is a reversal of his original Jewish surname of Aron which he changed in response to his and his family's traumatic wartime experiences.

<sup>296</sup> *Realms of Memory*, (1996) as cited, p. xxiv.

<sup>297</sup> *Realms of Memory*, (1996) as cited, pp. xxxi-xxxii.

<sup>298</sup> On its influence see Michael Rothberg, 'Introduction: Between Memory and Memory: From *Lieux de mémoire* to *Noeuds de mémoire*', *Yale French Studies*, No. 118/119, *Noeuds de mémoire: Multidirectional Memory in Post-war French and Francophone Culture*, (2010), pp. 3-12.

and be linked to the will or drive to remember.<sup>299</sup> The concept includes artworks and Nora specifically mentions the work of Corot and Cezanne's works related to Mont Sainte-Victoire.<sup>300</sup>

Nora's project to make, or perhaps more accurately reinstate, memory as the unifying principle of the national idea was, from the beginning, a flawed and troubled monument to a perceived crisis in national identity but it illustrates the instability referred to earlier of the translation or interpretation of representations of memory or history.<sup>301</sup> Nora portrays France of the *lieux des mémoires* as stretching from Vercingétorix to De Gaulle but then becoming lost in the recession of the early 1970s; the decline of the peasantry; the disappearance of Gaullism; and the faltering of the ideological traditions of the French revolution.<sup>302</sup> The political intentions behind this historiographical manoeuvre were not lost on people at the time. Christiane Taubira noted that:

‘Ainsi, dans cette somme remarquable sur les Lieux de mémoire, la longue histoire coloniale de la France est totalement absente. Même l'article sur le café, de plus d'une vingtaine de pages, ne fait aucune allusion aux plantations coloniales! Comment comprendre dès lors les sources et les ressorts de la diversité du peuple français? La vision de Pierre Nora reste eurocentrée, alors que le monde est polycentré’.<sup>303</sup>

One of the most famous of *lieux des mémoires* is Delacroix's painting *La Liberté guidant le peuple*, (1830), (See image 20 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Three), an iconic representation of French republicanism. Two artists in the chapter, Bouabdellah and Bourouissa, rework this painting although as will be demonstrated the intentionality is different for each artist. Their efforts were not the first time the painting had been re-mediated. Michael Rothberg draws attention to Boris Taslitzky's work *Riposte* (1951), (see image 21 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Three), in which the artist, in a colonial rather than a postcolonial contextualisation,

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<sup>299</sup> For a detailed description and analysis see Erll 2011 as cited, pp. 22-27.

<sup>300</sup> P Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire’, *Representations*, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory, Spring, 1989, pp. 7-24, p. 22.

<sup>301</sup> See Ben Mercer, ‘The Moral Rearmament of France: Pierre Nora, Memory, and the Crises of Republicanism’, *French Politics, Culture & Society*, Vol. 31, No. 2, Summer 2013, pp. 102-116.

<sup>302</sup> Mercer, 2015 as cited p. 107.

<sup>303</sup> ‘Thus, in this remarkable account of the *Lieux de mémoire*, the long colonial history of France is totally absent. Even the article about coffee, of more than 20 pages, makes no reference to the colonial plantations. How can one understand therefore the sources and springs of the diversity of the French people? Pierre Nora's vision remains Eurocentric, while the world is polycentric’. Christiane Taubira, *La Croix*, 24/10/2010. [https://www.la-croix.com/Archives/2010-04-24/Renconte.-Pierre-Nora-une-memoire-d-historien-La-vision-de-Pierre-Nora-reste-eurocentree.-Christiane-Taubira-deputee-de-Guyane-apparentee-socialiste-1-NP\\_-2010-04-24-369356](https://www.la-croix.com/Archives/2010-04-24/Renconte.-Pierre-Nora-une-memoire-d-historien-La-vision-de-Pierre-Nora-reste-eurocentree.-Christiane-Taubira-deputee-de-Guyane-apparentee-socialiste-1-NP_-2010-04-24-369356). Accessed 12/8/2012.

borrowed from both Géricault's *Le Radeau de la Méduse* and Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple*.<sup>304</sup> Rothberg considers that *Riposte* is an example of what Hannah Arendt described as the boomerang effect in which the colonies return to Europe as genocidal antisemitism.<sup>305</sup> A slightly different boomerang effect is in operation in the work of Bouabdellah and Bourouissa linked to the consequences of France's invasion and rule of Algeria returning to haunt contemporary French culture and politics. The next two sections of the chapter examine the responses of two artists living in France to issues of history and memory.

### *Zoulikha Bouabdellah*

Zoulikha Bouabdellah was born in 1977 of Algerian parents in Moscow where her mother and father were graduate students in documentary film and art history. Her father is the writer Hassen Bouabdellah and, after the family returned to Algiers, her mother became curator and then director of the Musée National des Beaux-Arts d'Alger until 1993 when the civil war forced them to leave Algeria and to settle in Paris.<sup>306</sup> This flight into exile in the context of the massacres, the murder and mutilation of women, and the killing of artists and writers must have had a significant impact on the artist, as it did on Abdessemed. Mohammed Djehiche, former director of Algeria's National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MAMA), has said that: 'Culture was targeted [by the Islamists] because it represented, in a way, the hope of life and therefore had to be destroyed'.<sup>307</sup> Although Bouabdellah does not document her reactions as a young and impressionable teenager to the events of the civil war she must have asked questions of her liberal parents. It is reasonable to assume that this influenced her developing critique of religious and cultural traditionalism particularly in relation to its positions on women. This is significant in that it enabled the artist to exercise in her work a form of 'double critique' that encompassed the impact of Western heritage including orientalism and of an archaic patrimony that is highly gendered and patriarchal.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory, Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonisation*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 67-69. Taslitzky's work documented the Parti Communiste Français's efforts to lead strikes to prevent the supply of French troops and arms to Indochina. Taslitzky references Géricault's painting by the shape of the figure group and Delacroix's painting in the angle at which the flag is held by the man, incidentally a re-gendered figure of Liberty.

<sup>305</sup> The Arendt reference is in Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, as cited, p. 69.

<sup>306</sup> Her parents are both important figures in contemporary Algerian culture. Some of Hassen Bouabdellah's writings are listed at: <http://hoggar.org/category/tribune-libre/bouabdellah-hassen/>. Accessed 2/2/2019.

<sup>307</sup> Tom Pfeiffer, 'New museum brings art to war-weary Algerians', *Reuters, Lifestyle*, 18 February, 2009. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-algeria-art/new-museum-brings-art-to-war-weary-algerians-idUSTRE51H4IY20090218>. Accessed 23/5/2019.

<sup>308</sup> For Khatibi's perspective on this see *Plural Maghreb*, as cited 2019, Chapter Two for 'double critique' and Chapter Four on sexuality for the position of women in the Quran.

Bouabdellah subsequently trained as an artist at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Arts at Cergy-Pontoise (ENSAPC).<sup>309</sup> ENSAPC offered training in a wide spectrum of disciplines in the visual arts, writing, film, and performance.<sup>310</sup> Orlan, an artist who challenged in radical ways the fixity of views of the female body, was a professor at ENSAPC.<sup>311</sup> This exploration of agency and the female body emerged as a key ingredient of Bouabdellah's oeuvre. The artist also acknowledges the influence of what she refers to as the 'ART-FEMME debate' and of Louise Bourgeois and Gina Pane.<sup>312</sup> Pane was one of the few female artists of the 1970s to use her body in extreme ways, including self-inflicted injuries.<sup>313</sup> Bouabdellah's early life and her development as an artist is not dissimilar to that of the artists in Chapter Two in particular that of Abdessemed.

Bouabdellah is forthright in connecting her art with a sense of the complexity of identity and community:

'With regard to my Arab-Muslim origins and the fact of being a woman, I cannot dissociate my work from the question of feminism and cultural belonging. I claim to be a "second sex", a free-thinker on sex. One who knows how to claim and to defy codes and rules of its time and who is constantly balanced between being dominant and being dominated, thus creating a perpetual outlet for new meanings'.<sup>314</sup>

Bouabdellah's commitment to expressing feminism in her work has attracted controversy from patriarchal elements within the Franco-Algerian Muslim diaspora. For example, *Silence*, (2008), (see image 22 at Appendix One: Images, Chapter Three), exhibited at the Pavillon Vendôme in Clichy, was taken down following protests from the local Muslim association who claimed that it was blasphemous. The work was an installation composed of 24 prayer mats with a pair of high-heeled shoes in the centre of each. Bouabdellah explained that by

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<sup>309</sup> 'Zoulikha Bouabdellah (biography)'. <http://nadour.org/artists/zoulikha-bouabdellah/>. Accessed 14/1/2019.

<sup>310</sup> See details of the history of the school at its website. <http://www.ensapc.fr/en/school/the-school>. Assessed 14/1/2019.

<sup>311</sup> On Orlan's controversial relation to feminism see Erin Striff, 'Bodies of Evidence: Feminist Performance Art', *Critical Survey*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1997, pp. 1–18.

<sup>312</sup> See the description of Pane's work in the review of the Venice Performance Art Week at: <http://www.veniceperformanceart.org/index.php?page=223&lang=en>. Accessed 14/1/2019. On the art/women debate see Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013).

<sup>313</sup> See the Venice International Art Week description of the work of Gina Pane at <http://www.veniceperformanceart.org/index.php?page=223&lang=en>. Accessed 21/3/2019.

<sup>314</sup> Anonymous ('admin') description of the artist's work '*Silence, 2009*, Zoulikha Bouabdellah', *Arena for Contemporary African, African-American and Caribbean Art*, at <https://africanah.org/zoulikha-bouabdellah/>. Accessed 14/1/2019.

placing women's shoes on the mats she was making the statement that women have a right to be in 'the sacred space' and that attempts to push them out should be resisted.<sup>315</sup>

Bouabdellah commented:

'I am of Muslim heritage; my intention is not to shock, nor provoke but rather to propose a vision that will lead to dialogue. This vision concerns the connections between profane and sacred spaces, sacred as it concerns the place of women on the threshold of two worlds – because here the modernity of women is reconcilable with Islam, under the condition that the latter is not perverted to become an instrument of domination'.<sup>316</sup>

The artist agreed to the withdrawal of the work in the interest of avoiding further protests, which can also be regarded as a strategic gesture since it allowed the rest of her exhibits to remain.

As noted, Bouabdellah's approach in her work has conceptual similarities to Abdelkebir Khatibi's 'double critique' and the problematising of the binary in his writings. Khatibi aimed to allow a polyphony of voices including gendered ones.<sup>317</sup> As Hamil notes, for Khatibi 'postcolonial reality requires a double resistance to all the Occidents and Orientals that alienate and subjugate the postcolonial subject'.<sup>318</sup> In effect, Khatibi argues for a perspective that looks all ways and attempts to identify multiple voices, an identity that, figuratively, has space and freedom to turn round inside itself. It is argued that Bouabdellah seeks to elucidate and expand this space of multiplicity.

Bouabdellah's *Dansons* (2003), (*see image 23 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Three*), interrogates two sets of lieux de mémoire, those of France but also of Algeria and the wider Arab world. The work had its origin in Bouabdellah's dismay at the behaviour of males of Algerian or black African origin at a football match between France and Algeria in Paris in 2001. Following loud and continuous jeering of French players, a number of whom were of Algerian or black African origin, during the singing of the Marseillaise there was a pitch

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<sup>315</sup> Anna Seaman, 'Zoulikha Bouabdellah: pointed depictions of women and religion', *The National, Arts and Culture*, June 20, 2015. <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/zoulikha-bouabdellah-pointed-depictions-of-women-and-religion-1.95317>. Accessed 23/1/2029.

<sup>316</sup> Jean-Jacques Naudet, 28/1/2015, 'Clichy: Zoulikha Bouabdellah's Silence taken down, when fear becomes censorship', *The Eye of Photography* website. <https://loeiladelphographie.com/en/clichy-zoulikha-bouabdellah-s-silence-taken-down-when-fear-becomes-censorship/>. Accessed 14/1/2019.

<sup>317</sup> See Mustapha Hamil, 'Interrogating Identity: Abdelkebir Khatibi and the Postcolonial Prerogative', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 22, *The Language of the Self: Autobiographies and Testimonies*, (2002), pp. 72-86. Accessed 5/3/2017.

<sup>318</sup> Hamil as cited 2002, pp. 74-75.

invasion and the match was abandoned. Lilian Thuram, a French defender of French Guadeloupe origin, commented at the time:

‘When we realised that the Stade was booing La Marseillaise, we could not believe our ears... We all looked at each other and wondered: ‘What is happening? What are they doing? I was not expecting that at all, the Algerian hymn was not booed, there was respect for Algeria. Why did these young people, most of whom were born in France, boo their country’s anthem?’<sup>319</sup>

Bouabdellah, despite awareness of the problems of youth in the banlieue, was also horrified: ‘On a dit ensuite: les Algériens ont hué la Marseillaise. J’en étais complètement affectée car ceux qui l’ont sifflée, ce sont des Français!’<sup>320</sup> Bouabdellah’s positioning on this is interesting since she clearly disapproves of the insulting behaviour of the fans whilst she recognises the deep malaise it reflects in French society. Bouabdellah’s family had fled the violence and oppression of Algeria and found security and work in France and her feeling about the country in which she now lived was very different from that of male football fans. This is not simply about national identity but extends to issues of class and gender.

The following analysis explores how an artist with a strong feminist perspective on identity and community and an understanding of ‘belonging’ and ‘self’ as a polyphonic phenomenon represents and challenges apparently binary views of identity and community configured by history, memory and the ‘intense proximities’ of the present. In developing this analysis, the argument will refer to and contrast other critical perspectives on *Dansons* by Siobhán Shilton and Alice Planel.<sup>321</sup>

Bouabdellah’s video begins with the appearance of the title *dansons* in lower case white letters on a black screen emphasising the collective act that will be implied and invoked by her singular performance.<sup>322</sup> The title increases in significance later when music is played. A

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<sup>319</sup> Anonymous article, ‘Fans force abandonment of watershed France v Algeria match’. *Guardian*, 8/10/2001. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2001/oct/08/newsstory.sport16>. Accessed 14/1/2019.

<sup>320</sup> ‘It was said afterwards: the Algerians have booed the Marseillaise. I was deeply affected because those who were whistling were French!’ Quoted by Delphine Calmettes in ‘Quel avenir pour l’art contemporain en Afrique après l’exposition Africa Remix?’. [https://www.memoireonline.com/10/12/6188/m\\_Quel-avenir-pour-l-art-contemporain-en-Afrique-apres-lexposition-Africa-Remix15.html](https://www.memoireonline.com/10/12/6188/m_Quel-avenir-pour-l-art-contemporain-en-Afrique-apres-lexposition-Africa-Remix15.html). Accessed 15/1/2019.

<sup>321</sup> Siobhán Shilton, ‘Belly Dancing to the Marseillaise: Zoulikha Bouabdellah’s *Dansons*’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 12:4, (2008), pp. 437-444. Alice Planel, *Dancing Memory. In what ways and to what extent can Dansons by Zoulikha Bouabdellah be considered an expression of Franco-Algerian cultural memory?* MA in Cultural Memory, 17 August 2009, Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies, School of Advanced Studies, University of London. <https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/2430/1/Planel%20-%20Dancing%20Memory%20-%202009.pdf>. Accessed 15/1/2019.

<sup>322</sup> ‘*Dansons*’ is the plural of both the indicative and imperative form of the French verb ‘*danser*’, to dance.



female form enters the frame of the video wearing what seems to be traditional salwar trousers or possibly 'harem' trousers. Only the bare and noticeably 'brown' midriff and the top of the salwar can be seen. The top and bottom two thirds of the body are not in the frame. The woman ties one by one around her midriff silk blue, white and red scarves from which hang small but jangly gold medals. She does so carefully, smoothing out the fabric on her hips.

The relative silence of the video is interrupted by the playing of the Marseillaise to which she belly dances in a jerky almost ritual way. The artist is drawing from a number of pools of memory from across cultures. The playing of the French anthem with its 'Marchons! Marchons!' gives added significance to the title of the video which mimics its verb form. 'Marchons!' recalls the violence of revolution, of colonial history, of gender oppression, and the violence implied by and arising from the inequalities within France. But the 'nous' form also implies inclusivity and a shared positioning despite its problematic aspects. The use of the verb *dansons* suggests from this perspective that there is scope for what Planel refers to as 'dancing memory' in which traditions from both cultures can be employed in a positive way.<sup>323</sup> To dance memory may have collective aspects but it also allows scope for the individual and for different elements of the collective to extemporise both identity and a sense of belonging. To dance is to play, to enjoy and to share an experience. The satirical play on the words *marchons* and *dansons* complements the playful use of national symbols within the narrative of the video. Bhabha has noted how the 'nation' is a form of narration and Bouabdellah's mix of symbols, their treatment and the additional meaning provided by the colour of her skin implies a mimicry and restatement of the official narratives particularly of France but also of Algeria.<sup>324</sup>

A number of lieux de mémoire are referenced: the scarves are recognisable as part of a belly dancing costume; their colour and the order in which she dons them signify the French 'Tricolour' while the music of the Marseillaise is a highly resonant symbol of France. Nora's vision of France as a symbolic entity is mimicked and gently mocked by Bouabdellah's dance. The combination of the obvious brownness or 'beur-ness' of her skin enveloped in the

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<sup>323</sup> See Planel 2009 as cited, p. 31.

<sup>324</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), chapter on 'DissemiNation', p. 204.

colours of the French flag and the sound of the French anthem point to what is concealed by Nora's version of French society and history.<sup>325</sup>

Bouabdellah is referencing in *Dansons* not, as in Houria Niati's *No to Torture* examined later in Chapter Five, *Les Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1834) but another lieux de mémoire in the art of Delacroix, an earlier work, *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (1830). Both of the works involve portrayals of women but the 1830 work celebrating the 'bourgeois revolution' of the house of Orléans also retrospectively acts as a signifier of the invasion of Algeria by French troops in the same year.<sup>326</sup> Shilton suggests that Bouabdellah avoids in her work Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* because of its dominating orientalist associations but then makes those orientalist associations a key part of her argument by suggesting that *Dansons* can be located in an emerging tradition of counter-Orientalist representation.<sup>327</sup>

The position adopted here is that, despite her useful analysis of the video's relationship to France's colonial past, there are reductive aspects of Shilton's analysis which underplay the artist's intentions. The argument of this chapter is that Bouabdellah's work involves a critical engagement with the patriarchal and oppressive aspects of Islam as well as with the problematic post-colonial aspects of French society. It is contended that Bouabdellah is in effect positioning her work within the frame of 'double critique'. This will be supported by drawing on Planel's suggestion that a narrowly 'post-colonial' perspective on Bouabdellah's work can obscure important aspects of her work.

Planel sees Bouabdellah's choice of *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (1830) as enabling an ironic parody that questions the rationale behind national narratives.<sup>328</sup> Planel concentrates on how memory in its collective form translates the past into historical narratives that configure idealised versions of the nation.<sup>329</sup> She draws attention to the important interrelation of tradition and personal identity across cultures in *Dansons* and argues that 'tantalising but fabricated interpretations based on post-colonial discourse only obfuscates'.<sup>330</sup> Whilst

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<sup>325</sup> The word 'beur' was coined using verlan or slang playing on the French words 'arabe' (Arab) and 'beurre' (butter). The twice-verlanised term rebeu has since become prevalent although only for males indicating perhaps the male dominated nature of much of verlan. See Bruno Della Chiesa, Jessica Scott, and Christina Hinton, (Eds.), *Languages in a Global World: Learning for Better Cultural Understanding*, (Paris: OECD, 2012) p. 162.

<sup>326</sup> A standard account is Pamela M. Pilbeam, *French Revolution of 1830*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991).

<sup>327</sup> Shilton, *Belly Dancing* 2008, p. 439.

<sup>328</sup> Planel, *Dancing Memory*, 2009, as cited, p. 22.

<sup>329</sup> Planel, *Dancing Memory*, 2009, as cited, p. 10.

<sup>330</sup> Planel, *Dancing Memory*, 2009, as cited, p. 28.

acknowledging the sideswipes Bouabdellah makes at orientalism Planel argues that in *Dansons* 'it is the inability of national narratives suggested through these symbols to include her own divergent experience that Bouabdellah aims to question'.<sup>331</sup> Whilst not wanting to elide Shilton's anti-orientalist analysis it is argued that Planel's analysis seems to sit more comfortably with Bouabdellah's own statements. However, Bouabdellah's work does not sit entirely outside of postcolonial discourse as her use of parody approximates closely to Bhabha's conceptualisation of mimicry.

One should note that the particular framing Bouabdellah gives to the videoed body in her work and the absence of the Phrygian hat symbolic of Liberty suggests that she is re-enacting or performing Marianne, the female incarnation of France.<sup>332</sup> The focus of the video on the midriff avoids the complications added by a full figure shot in which distracting narratives attached to the veil might be accrued either from its presence or absence. The veil is not absent from *Dansons* – it is referenced in the scarves as part of French culture – but, like her critique of orientalism, it is not central. In this respect Bouabdellah has warned those viewers of her work who want to link it to the conflicts that have existed between Algeria and France that: 'I have no intention of championing antinomy. I prefer the idea of cohesion'.<sup>333</sup>

For Shilton, Bouabdellah's work re-appropriates the 'colonial exoticist cliché' of the Belly Dancer, which recalls colonial postcards and Orientalist photographs. She sees Bouabdellah's use of the belly dance as a re-narrativisation in a contemporary French context of representations which 'Orientalise' and 'feminise' the Other.<sup>334</sup> Ironically, it is the French flag and its associations that Bouabdellah regards as exotic: 'The principles of the French flag that are liberty, equality and fraternity are exotic for people all over the world because I think that no one respects them really'.<sup>335</sup> This comment is not explained in any detail but Bouabdellah may be making the general point that as abstract concepts they may be useful as political slogans but the complexity of the world, of identity, and of notions of community make them of limited use in themselves as agents of change.

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<sup>331</sup> Planel, *Dancing Memory*, 2009 as cited, p. 28.

<sup>332</sup> For the iconography of French republicanism see Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican imagery and symbolism in France, 1789-1880*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>333</sup> Jean Couteau, 'Zoulikha Bouabdellah: Transgressing Cultural Boundaries', *Mutual Art*, May - June 2009. <https://www.mutualart.com/Article/Zoulikha-Bouabdellah--Transgressing-Cult/0367E677E1613227> . Accessed 23/1/2019.

<sup>334</sup> Shilton, *Belly Dancing*, 2008 as cited, p. 439.

<sup>335</sup> Bouabdellah, quoted in Planel, *Dancing Memory*, 2009 as cited, pp. 24-5.

In *Dansons*, Bouabdellah responds to the disrespect offered by the football fans to French culture and deliberately conflates the archetypes of French and Algerian cultures by performing a belly dance to the tune of the Marseillaise. This approach to hybridity acknowledges both the realities and possibilities of the interaction of cultures as well as the tensions that arise in such liminal areas. The work is implicitly critical of the French government's approaches to integration and the inequalities in French society. But *Dansons* is equally critical of aspects of Algerian/Arab/Muslim culture and this is a feature not just of *Dansons* but of her work in general. Her perspective on the belly dance goes beyond its exotic and orientalist caricature. The Algerian belly dancer Amel Tafsout has drawn attention to the complex nature of the belly dance within Algerian society and culture. The roots of the dance are linked to Berber communities of the Maghreb and often associated with women of the Berber Ouled Nail tribe.<sup>336</sup> However, such dancing is widespread in the culture of Algerian women and figures in a number of videos by contemporary women artists of Algerian origin for example Katia Kameli in the video *Nouba* (see Chapter Five). It is a feature of weddings and other ceremonies in which women meet separately from men in conformity with the gendered nature of many spaces of Algerian society. Opinions on music, dance and song are not uniform within Islam either historically or today.<sup>337</sup> Folk and other forms of music and song are very popular in Algeria where the country's folk traditions related to dance are strong and this may mitigate increasingly strict religious attitudes to dance provided the men and women are separated. The belly dance is used by Bouabdellah for a variety of purposes, not only to reference orientalism but also the oppression of women in traditional patriarchal society in Algeria and France. It is also an implicit acknowledgement of how women have made efforts to transform the gendered spaces to which they have been confined into creative spaces of female solidarity. The artist's concern, mentioned earlier, is to make the case that the 'modernity of women' is reconcilable with Islam and traditional culture as long as that religion and culture is not perverted into an instrument of domination.

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<sup>336</sup> Robynne, 'Interview with Amel Tafsout'. <http://www.orientaldancer.net/star-interviews/algerian-dancer-amel-tafsout.php>. Accessed 15/1/2019.

<sup>337</sup> For a historical perspective see Amnon Shiloah, 'Music and Religion in Islam', *Acta Musicologica*, Vol. 69, Fasc. 2, (Jul.-Dec., 1997), pp. 143-155. Rachel Harris notes that an Islamic revival has provided the context amongst, for example, the Uyghurs for condemnation of song-and-dance as un-Islamic, but this is mixed with reaction to colonial oppression, see Rachel Harris, 'The New Battleground: Song-and-dance in China's Muslim Borderlands', *The World of Music*, new series, Vol. 6, No. 2, *Sounding Ethnicity: New Perspectives on Music, Identity and Place* (2017), pp. 35-55. A strict Salafist approach can be read on the Al-Islam website. <https://www.al-islam.org/a-code-of-practice-for-muslims-in-the-west-ayatullah-sistani/music-singing-dancing>. Accessed 20/11/2019.

Bouabdellah's engagement of her body in the video is demonstrative of her agency and personal commitment to renegotiating stereotypes and challenging views of identity and community that are gendered and reductive of individuals. The argument presented here is that Bouabdellah's artwork involves a critique across cultures of the problematic nature of contemporary French politics and society and of the restrictions imposed by tradition, culture and religion. Shilton helpfully notes how this signals 'the potential for French and Arab identities to be transcultural'.<sup>338</sup> The problem is how one understands the notion of 'transcultural'. Shilton rightly regards *Dansons* as a response to what the artist perceives as the malaise of French society. However, by laying stress on this aspect of Bouabdellah's artwork, Shilton risks capturing only part of the meaning of *Dansons*. Shilton acknowledges the challenge to perceptions of French and Maghrebi identities but then tends to limit this to renegotiating notions of French cultural purity or exceptionalism.<sup>339</sup> This is evident in particular in the way she narrows the conception of the nature and context of the belly dance to regarding it from the perspective of an orientalist homogenized and feminized symbol of 'Arab' culture – which is but one aspect of a complex signifier.<sup>340</sup> In this way, she distorts the artist's intentions, the range of other critiques in *Dansons* and Bouabdellah's effort to move beyond binaries.

Shilton's use of the term 'syncretism' avoids the use of 'hybridity' or 'métissage' and similar terms on the basis that such terms do not take account of the way differences are inherently held in tension.<sup>341</sup> However, in *Dansons* Bouabdellah literally embodies the meeting of French and Algerian culture with its creative actualities and possibilities as well as its tensions. Planel points to the way Bouabdellah in interviews talks of wearing the flag like a skin, 'a deeply somatic, personal and profound experience'.<sup>342</sup> In this sense the artist's cross cultural relationship with identity and community is expressed through her body not as something that is solely inherited but as related to choice and adoption. Bouabdellah asserts: 'J'ai choisi d'être les deux et je suis les deux, même si ça pose problème aux autres, qu'ils

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<sup>338</sup> Shilton, *Belly Dancing* 2008 as cited, p. 438.

<sup>339</sup> Shilton, *Belly Dancing* 2008 as cited, p. 439.

<sup>340</sup> Shilton, *Belly Dancing* 2008, p. 439. On the same page, Shilton also refers to Assia Djebar's work as within 'an emerging counter-Orientalist tradition' without referencing Djebar's critique of traditional patriarchy.

<sup>341</sup> Shilton, *Transcultural Encounters*, as cited, p. 8.

<sup>342</sup> Planel *Dancing Memory*, 2009 as cited, p. 28. The interview from which Bouabdellah is quoted is on Zoulikha Bouabdellah, (Director), *Resistance(s): Experimental Films from the Middle East and North Africa*, (Paris: Lowave (DVD), 2006). A compilation of 8 films and videos by artists (Zoulikha Bouabdellah; Taysir Batniji; Mounir Fatmi; Lamyra Gargash; Usama Alshaibi; Jayce Salloum; Frédérique Devaux; and Waël Noureddine) from the Maghreb and the Middle-East.

soient algériens ou français. Je refuse de sacrifier une partie pour une autre'.<sup>343</sup> Her work is most accurately read as a celebration of her identity as belonging to both cultures but without disregarding the oppressive aspects of both. In this sense the differences are at times held in tension but are also complementary.

Bouabdellah's work can be seen as a call for recognition of women of Algerian origin who are frequently marginalized in official narratives of both 'Algerianness' (except when called upon to be 'mothers of the nation') or 'Frenchness' (except perhaps as victims in right wing 'veil narratives'). In this she destabilises the persistent focus on men across cultures and the instrumental use of women. Bouabdellah constructs a playful dynamic between aspects of two cultures that subverts the way both can operate to marginalise women.

In *Dansons*, Bouabdellah uses humour, dance and music both to challenge *lieux de mémoire*, mocking the unicity and univocalism of them, but also pointing to how the former can be used to celebrate diversity. She challenges conceptions of France through a diverse mix of signifiers, not least through altering the ethnicity of the figure of Marianne, and defending the right of women to have control over how they represent their bodies and, through the display of her abdomen, to make their own decisions about what they wear or how they act. In this Bouabdellah encourages defiance of restrictions related to modesty imposed by tradition and religion.

The Marseillaise, the belly dance and the tricolore provide a powerful and humorous montage of sites of memory. The title of the video *Dansons* can be interpreted as a comment on the existing state of identity and community in France in all its diversity and as an entreaty to celebrate it. Bouabdellah draws on *lieux de mémoire* from different cultures and uses them as material for the project of creating a France happier with its diversity. Different pools of Franco-Algerian cultural memory and history including stereotypical and orientalist views of 'eastern' woman are configured by Bouabdellah to confront fixed identity frameworks across communities. The relation between the viewer and the video in *Dansons* is dependent on having some understanding of how Bouabdellah articulates different memory streams but the humour of the video and the almost international signifiers of the belly dance and the tricolore make it readily accessible. Bouabdellah's video offers a dance of narratives and a

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<sup>343</sup> 'I have chosen to be both and I am both even if that creates problems for other people whether Algerian or French. I refuse to sacrifice one for the other'. Shilton, *Belly Dancing*, 2008 as cited, p. 442.

personal choreography of identity, community and culture; in this, the artist offers the viewer the possibility of a transnational and cross-cultural experience.

### *Mohamed Bourouissa*

Mohamed Bourouissa was born in Blida, Algeria in 1978. The artist left Algeria with his parents when still young although it is not recorded when and whether this was due to the problems of Algeria in the late 1980s and 1990s. Bourouissa graduated from the *École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs* at Paris in 2004 and followed this up with advanced study in its photography department. Bourouissa moved to Lille in 2008 to train at Le Fresnoy or the *Studio National des Arts Contemporains* until 2010. Le Fresnoy aimed at providing high-level artistic, audiovisual and multimedia training for advanced students and Alain Fleischer was its highly innovative Director.<sup>344</sup> In this respect Bourouissa's career development profile, like Bouabdellah, has a similar pattern to that of the artists in Chapter Two.

Although Bourouissa was born in Algeria he has also intimated that he spent part of his youth living in a Parisian banlieue. This may, as with Attia, have influenced his relation to identity and community. Unlike Attia, Bourouissa does not seem to have interrelated closely with the Algerian diaspora however his early work has many references to the diverse ethnic mix of the Parisien inner city, its gang violence, and its drug and drink culture. It is possible that the artist's links to the banlieue were not strong as even in his early work he used 'fixers' to recruit and organise the youth who figure in his photography.<sup>345</sup> Bourouissa's work steps beyond the focus on Algeria and the Algerian diaspora. The young people in his work, often male and reflecting the male dominated culture of the banlieue, include a variety of ethnicities.

A feature of all of Bourouissa's work is the careful crafting of *mise-en-scène* that are invariably dramatic with tense exchanges of gaze and gestures frozen in mid-action. The subjects are carefully cropped and strategically positioned in contexts that often suggest narrative. This approach involves a strategic mix of apparent documentary and fiction that both parodies and challenges TV and press representations of youth and the banlieue.

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<sup>344</sup> See the webpage devoted to Bourouissa at Le Fresnoy.

<https://www.lefresnoy.net/fr/Ecole/etudiant/57/mohamed-bourouissa>. Accessed 3/2/2019.

<sup>345</sup> Magali Jauffret, 'The Suburbs as Visual Objects', in M Jauffret, J Cornu and E-C Gobry-Laurenci, (Eds.), *Mohamed Bourouissa: Périphérique*, (Paris: Galerie municipal du Chateau d'Eau, 2008). Unpaginated.

Bourrouissa's approach appears to commence with an initial idea linked to an event, a place or an art reference, which is then elaborated in depth over time in his notebooks.<sup>346</sup> Once the idea is fully developed, Bourrouissa uses contacts in the banlieue to recruit young people to be part of his cast of characters and help him stage the photograph. Bourrouissa's mise-en-scène are not entirely fixed and he notes that 'I always hope that something totally unexpected will enter the photo, without warning, because of someone who will have made it happen'.<sup>347</sup> He believes this hope and its occasional serendipitous occurrence enables the fiction to maintain a documentary aspect. Bourrouissa's photographs, although focused within a single frozen frame, seem to signal a larger and uncertain narrative which can offer the viewer a sense of enigma and of incompleteness. In this the artist's work seems to illustrate Glissant's view of opacity and its relation to poetics in its beautifully constructed immediacy but its implication of a wider and not obvious meaning. Of importance to the thesis is the way his photographs stimulate the viewer to have recourse to imagination to narrativize the context and in the process calibrate the frames of personal, cultural and national identity.

Unsurprisingly given his extensive study and training at some of France's top art schools, Bourrouissa's work is complex in its ambition and its references. The influence of Cubism is significant and its aims are apparent in his philosophy and method. Bourrouissa regards Cubism as initiating 'a form of circulation, a movement between concepts'.<sup>348</sup> This acts to destabilise and eradicate fixed positions by providing 'the possibility of several surfaces at the same time'.<sup>349</sup> Bourrouissa's early works in particular are fictional but are inscribed with the appearance of a documentary veracity in the photograph and its apparent relation to a larger context or reality. This seems to reflect Didi-Huberman's suggestion that we seek too little of an image when we reduce it to mere appearance and too much when we seek from it actual reality but that it can help us to rethink these things.<sup>350</sup> The approach, themes and structures of Bourrouissa's work demands of the viewer's engagement an active historical and mnemonic imagination and careful observation of the detail of his photographs.

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<sup>346</sup> An excellent description of Bourrouissa's approach can be found in the anonymous article, 'Bourrouissa Mohamed, Carré Rouge', on the webpage of The New Art Gallery, Walsall. <https://thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk/item/carra-rouge/>. Accessed 3/2/2019.

<sup>347</sup> Quoted in Jauffret article, Megali Jauffret, et al, (Eds.), *Mohamed Bourrouissa: Périphérique*, (Toulouse: Galerie municipale du chateau d'Eau: 2008), unpaginated.

<sup>348</sup> Marie Doezema 'An "Experimental Western" captures Philadelphia's riding culture.' *City Lab* February 2017. <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/02/an-experimental-western-captures-philadelphias-riding-culture/514511/>. Accessed 25/1/2019

<sup>349</sup> Marie Doezema 'City Lab' as cited.

<sup>350</sup> Quoted in Jauffret article, *Périphérique*, 2008 as cited.



Although Bourouissa's works signal the implicit movement of a continuing wider narrative, the artist is careful to respect the nature of the photographic medium and its inherent stillness, despite allowing the unexpected blur of unintentional movement, and has said of his work that:

‘What I am after is that very fleeting tenth of a second when the tension is at its most extreme... those imperceptible moments when the tension seems more violent than the confrontation with the other... where anything could happen, or nothing.’<sup>351</sup>

A not untypical example of this is *La Rencontre* (2005), (see image 24 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Three), from the *Périphérique* series. The photograph is organised as an encounter similar to that in Caravaggio's *The Calling of St. Matthew* (1602) and, as in many of Caravaggio's works, Bourouissa orchestrates the composition around central figures within a dynamic created by the glances and gestures of the picture's participants. The division of the painting into two not quite equal halves, but also not exactly according to the harmony of the golden mean, is also frequently reproduced by Bourouissa, as by Caravaggio, to focus action for dramatic effect.

The context of the *Périphérique* series concerns the territories and issues of the Parisian working class banlieues where Bourouissa spent part of his youth.<sup>352</sup> Bourdieu notes ‘how the journalistic field reduces and imposes on the public a very particular vision of the political field’.<sup>353</sup> Bourouissa demonstrates his frustration with how French suburbs and minority communities are typically depicted in TV and press in terms of what he describes as images of ‘suffering and salvation’.<sup>354</sup> The *Périphérique* series focuses on power relations within the banlieue expressed in a variety of relationships within diverse situations and contrasted with the more openly violent and reductive images in the media.<sup>355</sup> The collective ‘Public Delivery’ perceptively notes on its website that Bourouissa's photographs target ‘the ethical fallout’ of photojournalism, its voyeuristic nature and the power relations inherent within the photographic medium.<sup>356</sup> The photographs in *Périphérique* can be viewed as mimicking the stereotypes of the media in order to challenge them and enable the viewer to position themselves in Bhabha's ‘third space’ in an imaginative leap enabling a different viewpoint.

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<sup>351</sup> Quoted in Jauffret article, *Périphérique* 2008 as cited.

<sup>352</sup> The works are collected in the original gallery brochure: Magali Jauffret et al, as cited 2008.

<sup>353</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, (Trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson), (New York: Pluto 1998), p. 2.

<sup>354</sup> Marie Doezema ‘City Lab’ as cited.

<sup>355</sup> Jauffret article, *Périphérique* 2008 as cited.

<sup>356</sup> Anonymous article, ‘Front row seat to Parisian ghetto – Mohamed Bourouissa's *Périphérique*’, *Public Delivery*. <https://publicdelivery.org/mohamed-bourouissa-peripherique/>. Accessed 25/1/2019.

The youth of the banlieue are not portrayed as victims, as angels or devils but have a more rounded, multidimensional and individually sculpted identity.

Bourouissa's work tempts an analysis at the surface level but, like Cezanne's paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire or Braque's *Violin and Candlestick*, the artist is seeking a truth both formally and thematically related to the multiple surfaces of the subject. His work engages with the shifting sands of identity and community and their relation to larger implied narratives. Formally the *Périphérique* series makes many references to European and North American art history. As noted above, Bourouissa's work is heavily influenced by Caravaggio who he claims was 'the first photographer'.<sup>357</sup> This is evident particularly in his use of dramatic staging, frozen moments, dynamic diagonals and treatment of light. But also present in Bourouissa's approach is Cartier-Bresson's notion of the photographic 'decisive moment' so for example Bourouissa's *Le Miroir*, (2006) seems to reference Cartier-Bresson's *Gare Saint Lazare or The Puddle*, (1932).<sup>358</sup>

The complexity of references can be seen in *Le Reflet*, (2007) in which a large number of gutted televisions are mounted on a raised concrete area in a park in the banlieue. The composition is in the same format as the figures in Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1818-9). This is an anachronistic cross referencing of the plight of those on the raft with those set adrift in the banlieue and the media treatment of both across time. But, as with Abdessemed's *The Sea*, it is also a visual description of his sense of self as artist and his role as re-mediator, parodist and spokesperson for people, not just in the Franco-Algerian diaspora, who are oppressed and misrepresented.

*Périphérique* examines the spectre of colonialism and the inherent contradictions in French republicanism that continue to haunt the spaces of the banlieues through the migrational and political consequences of France's imperial adventures. Ironically, the numbers 91, 92, 93, and 94 formerly stood for the French départements of Algeria but now 91 stands for Essonne which is part of the grande couronne of Paris and 92, 93 and 94 stand for the petite couronne which forms the inner ring of banlieues on the outskirts of Paris. All have significant numbers of Parisians of Algerian origin including former Pieds-Noirs making an anachronic link with the intertwined past of France and Algeria. Derrida links the spectre of the past closely to the

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<sup>357</sup> Jauffret article, *Périphérique* 2008 as cited.

<sup>358</sup> 'The Psychology of the "Decisive Moment"', in John Suler, *Photographic Psychology: Image and Psyche: A psychological exploration into how people create, share, and react to images in the age of cyberspace and digital photography*, (Pennsylvania: True Center Publishing, 2013).  
[http://truecenterpublishing.com/photopsy/decisive\\_moment.htm](http://truecenterpublishing.com/photopsy/decisive_moment.htm) . Accessed 25/1/2019.

spectre of the future and its possibilities.<sup>359</sup> This creates a spectrality effect that has inherent possibilities for undoing the opposition between presence and its other and facing up to and attempting to repair, to use Attia's term, the relationship between the past and present and open alternative futures.

Mennel and Nowotny have drawn attention to the origin of the term *banlieue*, *lieue de ban*, and the connection of 'lieue' with a measurement of distance (league) and the location of socially and economically undesirable activities outside the city.<sup>360</sup> The historical origin of the term points to the two senses of the term as 'un habitat de ville périphérique' or suburb or the more perjorative notion of a 'une zone urbaine défavorisée' or a deprived housing estate. These two aspects demonstrate the current ambiguity or 'haunting' of the values and meanings assigned to it in contemporary French discourses and media treatment. In Bourrouissa's works the *banlieue* is treated as a space of performance in which group scenes resonating with tension are played out within Paris's periphery territories reproducing the colonial relationship of centre/periphery within the paradigm of Enwesor's contemporary 'intense proximities', (see Chapter Two, section on Radicants and Semionauts). It is interesting that Bourrouissa has titled this early work as *Périphérique* echoing Attia's 1999 work on transvestite prostitutes working on a section of the Paris *Périphérique* ring road that famously creates a barrier between the centre of Paris and the *banlieues*.<sup>361</sup> This suggests a metaphor encompassing both the barrier and the possibility of transition, a marginal space in relation to the city centre and a place in and for itself.

Bourrouissa's most elaborate work in the *Périphérique* series is *La République* (2006), (see image 25 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Three), in which the artist, like Bouabdellah, re-mediate Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (1830). Like Bouabdellah, Bourrouissa is questioning the historical narratives and present context of the French Republic particularly the way in which colonialism played an important part in cementing a sense of identity within Republicanism and provided common ground between conservatives and radicals.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> For example, in Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, (New York/London: Taylor and Francis, 2006), pp. 48-49.

<sup>360</sup> Birgit Mennel and Stefan Nowotny, 'The Language of the "Banlieues"', January 2013, *EIPCP Journal*, 01, 2013. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0513/mennel-nowotny/en>. Accessed 12/8/2018.

<sup>361</sup> Justinien Tribillon, 'Dirty boulevard: why Paris's ring road is a major block on the city's grand plans', *Guardian*, 26/6/2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/jun/26/ring-road-paris-peripherique-suburbs-banlieue>. Accessed 26/1/2019.

<sup>362</sup> See William Clarence-Smith, in a review of 'Promoting the Colonial Idea: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France', *Reviews in History*, Institute of Historical Research, University of London, November 2002. <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/298>. Accessed 13/6/2015.

Delacroix's work was a response by the moderately conservative republican artist to the overthrow in July 1830 of Charles X and the transfer of power from the House of Bourbon to its cadet branch, the House of Orléans, in effect replacing the principle of hereditary right with the notion of popular sovereignty. The painting is a representation of, as Agulhon notes, 'regained liberty' in the figure of a woman and expresses the complex and at times contradictory relationship of the female figure with the abstract concept of 'liberty', also represented by the Phrygian hat, and the idea of the republic.<sup>363</sup> As noted earlier, Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple* was painted in the same year that Algeria was invaded by French troops. It is therefore appropriate that in *La République* Bourouissa reconstructs Delacroix's painting using young people from the housing estates of Paris, some of whom were of Algerian origin, as actors. Bourouissa says of the young people he photographed that they 'were just guys from those neighbourhoods'. He rejects the term 'beur' to describe them as 'too 1980s': 'I define the young people I work with as French, with different origins, different stories'. Bourouissa says he prefers the term 'banlieusard' to 'beur' because it includes everyone and yet retains the reality of the housing estates on the periphery of Paris.<sup>364</sup>

Delacroix depicted Liberty as both an allegorical figure and a robust woman of the people. She holds the tricolore aloft in one hand and carries a musket in the other in order to symbolise the people in arms. A mound of corpses acts as a kind of pedestal from which Liberty strides forth wearing a Phrygian cap, barefoot and bare-breasted, out of the canvas and towards the space occupied by the viewer beyond the picture frame. The other figures are from a mixture of social classes ranging from the bourgeoisie represented by the young man in a top hat, to a student from the prestigious *École Polytechnique* wearing the traditional bicorne, and including a revolutionary urban worker exemplified by the man brandishing a sabre. Delacroix re-asserts the identity of France and Frenchness that emerged after 1789 and was threatened by Bourbon encroachment but affirms the principles of the new republican community with its sense of inclusion. The participants appear fiercely determined and stride out of the painting as if into both the present and future. Delacroix sets the scene in central Paris as a *tricolore* can be seen flying from the towers of Notre Dame. Delacroix's involvement in revolution is, as Agulhon notes, short-lived: 'In Delacroix's work the figure of Liberty makes an appearance as brief as his enthusiasm for liberalism'.<sup>365</sup> As the class

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<sup>363</sup> Agulhon, 1981 as cited, p. 53.

<sup>364</sup> Anna Dezeuze, 'Interview with Mohamed Bourouissa: "Protocol"', *Art Monthly*, no. 357, June 2012, pp. 1-4.

<sup>365</sup> Agulhon, 1981 as cited, p. 52.

situation in France moves on republicanism passes into uncharted new political and social territory including the consequences of colonialism.

Bourrouissa's staging of the photograph for *La République* in 2006 contained elements that not only echoed Delacroix's painting but also resonated with a contemporary audience's positioning to the 2005 riots in France the year before. Like Delacroix's work, the photograph engages with the nature and politics of identity and community in France. In Delacroix's painting the action occurs in the centre of Paris. Bourrouissa moves the scene to the city's periphery within an unspecified site somewhere in the banlieues. The photograph is like a frozen image from a TV news item reinforcing Bourdieu's analysis of how television makes an automatic connection between the inner city and rioting.<sup>366</sup>

The ethnicity and colour of the revolutionaries has dramatically changed and the tableau presented by Bourrouissa looks more like a riot frozen in progress rather than a triumphant revolution. The photograph is a translation of Delacroix's work but reframed and parodied to reflect a set of very different narratives. In *La République* Bourrouissa transforms Marianne, the symbol of Liberty, into a figure with a white bobble hat standing on the roof of a single storey white building which might be a garage and therefore a reference to the 2005 riots and the mass burning of cars or through its whiteness refer to *Alger la Blanche*. The figure may be attempting to hold the tricolore aloft or alternatively seize it to take it down. The gender of the figure is uncertain although it may be a woman and if so, as in Delacroix's work, she is the only woman in the photograph. The elision of any obvious referencing of a female version of Liberty can be interpreted as part of Bourrouissa's engagement with the male dominated culture of the banlieues.<sup>367</sup> Less ambiguously male figures in the photograph wear black caps or white beanies without a bobble. The addition of a bobble to the hat of the figure holding the flag may be intended to parody the 'Phrygian hat' of Marianne in the Delacroix work. Historically, the iconography of 'Liberty' and the 'Republic' was never fixed and the two at various times overlapped but the Phrygian hat itself always stood for 'Liberty' reduced in Bourrouissa's work to a bobble on a white woollen hat.<sup>368</sup> This link with Marianne is

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<sup>366</sup> Bourdieu as cited 1998, p. 19, television 'puts an event on stage, puts it in images. In doing so, it exaggerates the importance of that event, its seriousness, and its dramatic, even tragic character. For the inner city, this means riots'.

<sup>367</sup> See Zachary R. Hagins, 'Staging masculinity for the lens: performing "les jeunes de banlieues" in Mohamed Bourrouissa's directorial photography', *Contemporary French Civilization*, Apr 2016, Vol. 41, Issue 1, pp. 69-93.

<sup>368</sup> See Agulhon 1981 as cited, in particular Chapters 1 and 2 for the fluidity of conceptions of revolutionary iconography in the period 1789 to 1848.

further hinted at by the scarf on the shoulder of the flag bearing figure which echoes the torn dress across the shoulder of Delacroix's Marianne.

Although gender as an issue is not something that is commented on by Bourouissa in reviews of his works or the brochures of his exhibitions, the artist appears to have a fascination with 'maleness' and its repressed violence. It is not clear from his work whether he is parodying this 'masculinity' or celebrating it although a slightly different view of masculinity appears in *R.I.P.*, (2011), (see image 26 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Three). However, Bourouissa, in commenting on the work, sees it as related to a football streamer he saw containing the letters RIP. He notes 'R.I.P. est l'abréviation de 'rest in peace' en langue anglaise, qui signifie «repose en paix». Le verbe to rip, quant à lui, signifie déchirer'.<sup>369</sup> The focus seems to remain that of violence and masculinity.

In Delacroix's work the figures stride out triumphantly into the future. Bourouissa poses his dramatis personae differently using Caravaggian diagonals and dramatic lighting. Delacroix's single line of figures is replaced by three: the line of figures on the grass bank; a group on the grass bank's slope, who appear to confront or throw stones at two figures; and the two figures, possibly white males, one with a red arm band and without any headwear, perhaps an authority figure or a reference to later and more communist revolutions, and another seemingly trying to pull him away. This division offers a fragmented and confused alternative to the unitary vision of Delacroix. Bourouissa's depiction is also different to that of Bouabdellah who celebrates France's diversity including that of gender whilst the former draws attention to the country's divisions and conflicts often involving men.

Didi-Huberman has noted how before an image we are brought into an anachronic confrontation with the past because within it past and present co-exist and reconfigure each other.<sup>370</sup> Bourouissa's tableau references not only the 2005 riots but also anachronistically connects and interacts with a variety of 'times' during which different forms of the subaltern in French society have emerged. This effect operates in Bourouissa's photograph in a way which exposes different points in time each concerned with the ideological manufacture of 'the distribution of the sensible' or the way social orders are reinforced.<sup>371</sup> For Rancière,

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<sup>369</sup> 'RIP is the abbreviation of 'rest in peace' in English, which means 'repose en paix'. The verb 'to rip' meanwhile means to tear up'. Anonymous article 'RIP / MOHAMED BOUROUISSA', *Le Bal*, October 2011. <https://www.le-bal.fr/2018/05/rip-mohamed-bourouissa> . Accessed 31/1/2019.

<sup>370</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps: Histoire de l'art et anachronisme de l'image*, (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2000), p. 10.

<sup>371</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

politics is enabled by the way in which the excluded or deprived assert themselves with the aim of redistributing power. But, as Holloway Sparks points out, Rancière has shown a ‘disinclination to theorize the gendered, sexual, racial, colonial, and other fields of power that dramatically shape contemporary possibilities for democratic disruptions’.<sup>372</sup> A key contention of the thesis is that the artists have a deeply intersectional approach in their art but there is perhaps a degree of reluctance in Bourouissa’s work to address issues of gender more generally and beyond that of masculinity.

In other respects, Bourouissa’s work references the subaltern in a way that is not one-dimensional and includes the storming of the barricades in the 1830 revolution; the invasion of Algeria that year and the creation of a new overseas subaltern; and the developing proletariat in the industrial cities of France. From the 1789 revolution onwards there is constantly changing class, ethnic and cultural configuration which lays great tension on the Republic and its values. As noted, the figure with the red armband may reference the 1848 revolution, and/or the ‘Communards’ of 1871 and may explain Bourouissa’s preference for the term ‘Banlieusards’ for people who live in the poorer banlieues. The work can also be seen as a highly stylised presentation of the near past of the 2005 riots framed in terms of a republicanism historically compromised by colonialism. Society, like the frozen nature of the photograph, is trapped in an indeterminate ‘present time’ in which persist similar problems of immigration, treatment of minorities, equality and the nature of the French Republic.

This suspension of the work’s content outside of any specific time problematizes temporality by compressing, extending and disrupting it to explode and proliferate meaning within the work. Bourouissa’s image is therefore not only ‘the becoming present of future events and then their becoming past’ but also a simultaneous montage of times and spaces.<sup>373</sup> The photograph provides a complex visual code linked, to use Sontag’s phrase, to ‘an ethics of seeing’.<sup>374</sup> Bourouissa’s work configures how the riots materialised in confused violent forms of expression without definite aims but reflecting the despair of young people without jobs, decent housing and prospects for the future and the gang culture to which some of them are vulnerable.

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<sup>372</sup> Holloway Sparks, ‘Quarreling with Rancière: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Democratic Disruption’, *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, Vol. 49, No. 4, Special Issue: Speech in Revolt: Rancière, Rhetoric, Politics, 2016, pp. 420-437.

<sup>373</sup> Yuval Dolev quoted in Christine Ross, ‘The Suspension of History in Contemporary Media Arts’, *Intermedialities*, No 11, Printemps, 2008, pp. 125-148.

<http://www.erudit.org/revue/im/2008/v/n11/037541ar.pdf>. Accessed 23 June 2015.

<sup>374</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 3.

There is some similarity in the media treatment of the 1830 revolution to that given to the 2005 riots. However, there are differences in terms of media allegiance, censorship and self-censorship. In 1830 there was a close connection from the beginning between the revolution and the media because Charles X had aimed to restrict the freedom of the press. The liberal press was therefore very supportive of the event. The 1830 revolution reawakened memories of 1789 and Napoleon in the press and popular imagination and reactivated the system of symbols that had developed after the first French Revolution.<sup>375</sup>

The events of 2005 illustrate Bourdieu's concern with the manipulation by television of how the world is seen.<sup>376</sup> In 2005, media reaction to and coverage of the riots was very mixed although tending to be hostile. France's interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy's public use of words such as rabble, yobs and louts ('Ce sont des voyous, des racailles') was widely disseminated.<sup>377</sup> However, after initial media coverage of the battles with the police and the torching of cars there were efforts to tone down the reporting of what was going on. Jean-Claude Dassier, director general of news at TF1, admitted to self-censoring the coverage of the riots for fear of encouraging support for far-right politicians and France 3 stopped reporting the numbers of torched cars allegedly to discourage competition between gangs.<sup>378</sup> There was also some recognition of wider causes including deprivation, high unemployment among young men and a lack of social and economic infrastructure.

Bourouissa was in Algeria when the riots took place: 'I saw them on the TV' and with great honesty, he acknowledges that he benefited as an artist from the riots.<sup>379</sup> His involvement in

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<sup>375</sup> Julia A. Schmidt-Funke, *The Revolution of 1830 as a European Media Event*, European History on Line, original in German, published on line in English 16/08/2017. <http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/european-media/european-media-events/revolution-of-1830>. Accessed 15/1/2019. But also see Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican imagery and symbolism in France, 1789–1880*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>376</sup> Bourdieu, as cited, 1998, p. 8

<sup>377</sup> Anonymous article, *Le Monde* 11/11/2005. [http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2005/11/11/nicolas-sarkozy-persiste-et-signe-contre-les-racailles\\_709112\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2005/11/11/nicolas-sarkozy-persiste-et-signe-contre-les-racailles_709112_3224.html). Accessed 15/11/2019.

<sup>378</sup> For Dassier see Claire Cozens, *The Guardian*, 10/11/2005.

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2005/nov/10/france.tvnews>. Accessed 16/1/2019. For France 3 see <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB113148782987791497>. Accessed 15/1/2019. This is a subscriber journal, the relevant quote is 'The state-owned television channels, France 2 and France 3, have stopped reporting on the number of cars torched by rioting young immigrants every night. "Do we have to exercise self-censorship, to exercise censorship? Must we show everything, explain everything? Those are the [questions] that we've faced" throughout the rioting, said Paul Nahon, the deputy director general for news at France 3'.

<sup>379</sup> Anna Dezeuze, *Art Monthly*, as cited 2012. Bourouissa notes that 'I think my early professional success was obviously related to that'. The unrest started on 27 October at Clichy-sous-Bois, where police were investigating a reported break-in at a building site, and a group of local youths scattered in order to avoid interrogation. Three of them hid in a power-station where two died from electrocution, resulting in a power blackout. (It was not established whether police had suspected these individuals or a different group, wanted on separate charges.) The incident ignited rising tensions about youth unemployment and police harassment in the poorer housing estates, and there followed three weeks of rioting throughout France. A state of emergency was declared on 8



the riots was from a ‘semi-detached’ perspective but one that connected the events, his aims as an artist, his conception of the images and their postcolonial context of ‘intense proximities’ in which the distance between the former colonizer and the postcolonial subject collapses.<sup>380</sup> Bourouissa mimics the codes and concerns of media journalism as a device for parodying and subverting it. The photographs are tableaux which embrace a facticity blurring reality and fiction. In a split second double take and with the recognition of the ‘trick’ the spectator perceives an aporia that requires detachment, reflection and a reconnection to the photo in a different mode of engagement. The deliberate curtailment or framing of the viewer’s field of vision in Bourouissa’s carefully orchestrated composition paradoxically opens the work up to the audience’s imagination.<sup>381</sup> The photos are not forms of photo-journalism but highly choreographed ‘fiction’ composed of unsettling texts that connect to the ‘real’, but frequently in a deliberately confused, uncertain and tense way, justifying the application of Glissant’s term ‘opacity’. In a sense Bourouissa’s photographs are inhabited by a ghostly hypertextual archive containing equivocal references and allusions.

Bourouissa’s work provides further evidence of the complexity and difference within the positioning of artists to issues of identity and community. The artist’s approach to identity and community is distinct from that of Bouabdellah particularly in its concentration on masculinity and there is a degree of detachment from his subjects. The artist is also open about how his engagement with the diverse communities of the banlieue particularly around 2005 contributed to his success. Bourouissa’s approach has at times an opportunistic element but appears to be based on genuine solidarity with the young men expressing grievances. Bourouissa’s description of his work as part of the legacy of cubism and its multiple shifting surfaces is also informative in the way it straddles conceptions of instability in art and identity and avoids adopting conventional codes of realism for current events.

## Algeria

The artists in this section engage with issues of national identity and community in the context of Algeria’s traumatic history and its impact on the country’s problematic present.

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November, later extended for three months, and the government announced a crackdown on immigration and fraudulent marriages.

<sup>380</sup> The term is that of Okwui Enwezor. See the introduction to the brochure for the 2012 Paris Triennial: *La Triennale 2012, Intense proximity: an anthology of the near and the far*, (Paris: Pompidou Gallery, 2012).

<sup>381</sup> In this sense perhaps evading Sontag’s dictum that ‘All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.’ Sontag, as cited 1977, p. 15.

This focus on identity and community is linked to the way the one-party regime of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale or National Liberation Front) has occluded the political plurality pre-existing the War of Independence and in the process distorted post-independence history.<sup>382</sup> The regime in Algeria has tried to control the present by controlling the understanding of the past in the hope of creating a legitimising legacy for itself.<sup>383</sup> In addition, the government's corruption, mismanagement of the economy and failure to reconcile the different elements of Algerian society contributed to the violent civil strife of the 1990s the effects of which continue to impact on the present. The failure to understand and learn lessons from the past has not been helped by the active discouragement in Algeria of the study of post-independence Algerian history in schools and universities. Moreover, any historical research written inside and outside the country has been constrained because of the inaccessibility of archival material.<sup>384</sup> Through these means and through repression the regime has tried to sustain a damaging univocal perspective on Algerian history and identity that the artists in this section examine and seek to correct.

The government of Algeria post 1962, like many postcolonial regimes resulting from national liberation movements, attempted to create an exclusive unifying narrative of the nation which neglected minority cultures such as that of the Berbers and erased the memory of the FLN's political rivals. James McDougall has attempted to disaggregate what he terms this 'totalising scheme' into its varied ethnic, religious and political voices.<sup>385</sup> McDougall traces the development of a narrow conception of Algerian identity reinforced by politics, an appeal to cultural authority and the role of a particular Salafist discourse of Islam. In particular, McDougall demonstrates the contingency of the official narrative. It is impossible to go into detail here on how this mythical, idealised historical past was constructed but it had profound consequences for the Algerian body politic after 1962 including the catastrophic events of the 1990s.

The reality of Nora's characterisation of French national identity as a form of symbolic space excluded the polyphonic approach avowed in the introduction to his *Realms of Memory: The*

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<sup>382</sup> See Malika Rahal, 'Fused Together and Torn Apart', as cited 2012.

<sup>383</sup> For a useful perspective on this see Jacob Berntson, *Stories of War: the construction of an official memory of the Algerian civil war*, MA Dissertation, King's College London, 2015.

[https://www.academia.edu/17310421/Stories\\_of\\_War\\_-\\_The\\_Construction\\_of\\_an\\_Official\\_Memory\\_of\\_the\\_Algerian\\_Civil\\_War\\_MA\\_Dissertation](https://www.academia.edu/17310421/Stories_of_War_-_The_Construction_of_an_Official_Memory_of_the_Algerian_Civil_War_MA_Dissertation) . Accessed 2/2/2019.

<sup>384</sup> Malika Rahal, 2012 as cited, p. 125.

<sup>385</sup> James McDougall, as cited 2006, p. 12.

*Construction of the French Past*. A similar form of exclusive abstraction occurs in the FLN government's attempt to create an 'Algerian' identity aided by artists and writers such as M'hamed Issiakhem and Kateb Yacine, despite the more complex positioning of the latter particularly in his works after *Nedjma*.<sup>386</sup> Both efforts can be seen as responses to perceived national crises but both resulted in distortions, exclusions, and inequities compounded in Algeria by a regime that became increasingly undemocratic, corrupt and oppressive.

Menia and Bouras seek in their different ways to engage with and uncover the erasures, concealments and consequences of the route taken in Algeria after 1962. They do this by challenging Algeria's lieux de mémoire and engaging with Algeria's past through forms of art frequently of an archival nature. The artists continue to confront the complexities and consequences underlying the official ideology of unicity of Algerian identity and community despite recent relaxations in respect of, for example, Berber culture and language.<sup>387</sup> The artists' investigations into Algerian history and identity are restricted by censorship and bureaucratic obstruction and their influence is limited by a widespread public indifference to or incomprehension of contemporary art and the few outlets for their work in Algeria.

### **Amina Menia**

The first of these artists, Amina Menia, was born in 1976 in Algiers where she still lives and works. She studied at the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Algiers and her art practice examines the relation of architectural space to history.<sup>388</sup> As noted in Chapter Two, architecture has a close correspondence with power and Menia regards her interest in architecture as a form of archaeology of the culture and history of Algiers with the city seen as the symbolic territory of men and their desire for power.<sup>389</sup> In this regard she marks the highly gendered nature of the Algerian state and its culture and society but also the occlusion of women from Algerian history, a key theme in the novels of Assia Djébar and her

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<sup>386</sup> On Nora's 'polyphonic' avowals see Michael Rothberg, 'Introduction: Between Memory and Memory: From Lieux De Mémoire to Noeuds De Mémoire', *Yale French Studies*, no. 118/119, 2010, pp. 3–12, p. 4. For more on Kateb Yacine and Algerian nationalism see Chapter Five below, the section on Samta Benyahia.

<sup>387</sup> See, for example, Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, 'Arabization and Its Discontents: The Rise of the Amazigh Movement in North Africa', *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 3:2, (2012), pp. 109-135.

<sup>388</sup> Amina Menia, CV/Bio, artist's website. <http://aminamenia.com/?browse=CV%20/%20Bio>. Accessed 26/1/2019. I draw a distinction at times between 'art' as an outcome and 'art practice' which is descriptive of the forms of engagement of an artist. The distinction is not always appropriate given the diversity and complexity of contemporary understandings of art.

<sup>389</sup> Laura Allsop, 'Looping the loop: Amina Menia in conversation with Laura Allsop', *Ibraaz*, interviews, November 2012. <https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/42>. Accessed 26/1/2012.

attempted literary alternative historiography of Algeria.<sup>390</sup> Menia aims to encourage interaction and exchange through her works which are often rooted in contesting notions of public space.

Menia's aesthetic interventions in the city of Algiers examine how history and memory are inscribed on the urban fabric. Menia's work is particularly relevant to the theme of the thesis because, she says, the city of Algiers acts as a metaphor of herself.<sup>391</sup> Often frustrated by the bureaucratic difficulties encountered in taking forward projects, she has transformed them into what she calls performative 'meta-works'. Menia feels as an artist that she 'had to struggle with the preconceived ideas of the authorities and my peers, who denied this project as an artwork'.<sup>392</sup> Menia believes that it is not just politics that restrict her interventions but the limited conception of art current in Algeria despite the efforts of curators and art critics such as Nadira Laggoune, a curator of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Algiers or MAMA.<sup>393</sup>

Menia is married to the Algerian writer and activist Mustapha Benfodil. Benfodil's writings and political actions have been described as 'an interventionist strategy, a literature-action, that connects with its society thus "becoming" Algerian'.<sup>394</sup> Despite the similarity of aim in her work, Menia tends to be less controversial than Benfodil who has been arrested a number of times for public recitations of his poetry and whose artwork has on at least one occasion been banned. Benfodil has given an insight into why visual art is such a sensitive issue in Algeria and many parts of the MENA particularly when it impinges on a public space. He suggests that the regime, crassly, is not concerned with poetry or novels as it assumes most of the population will not read them. However, publically displayed visual work or any attempt by an artist to demonstrate their views in public is immediately cracked down on because it is more accessible to a spectator. Benfodil has said that he was never arrested in Algeria when

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<sup>390</sup> See Anissa Daoudi, 'Algerian Women and the Traumatic Decade: Literary Interventions', *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies*, vol. 5 no. 1, 2016, pp. 41-63.

<sup>391</sup> Laura Allsop as cited 2012 .

<sup>392</sup> Laura Allsop as cited 2012.

<sup>393</sup> Alice Planel, 'Can Artistic Practices Negotiate the Demands of Cultural Institutions, Public Space, and Civil Society?' *Ibraaz*, Platforms for Discussion, May 2012. <https://www.ibraaz.org/platforms/3/responses/67> . See the comments on Laggoune in Caroline Hancock, 'Algerian Evolution', *Modern Painters*, March 2012. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/539a1c73e4b0a5d22d81da8c/t/53eb7412e4b00211d7b25746/1407939602354/Coline\\_TheAlgerianEvolution.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/539a1c73e4b0a5d22d81da8c/t/53eb7412e4b00211d7b25746/1407939602354/Coline_TheAlgerianEvolution.pdf) . Both Accessed 29/1/2019.

<sup>394</sup> Alexandra Gueydan-Turec, 'Figure of an Anartist: Keeping Local Francophone Literature Engaged with Mustapha Benfodil's Literature-action', Issue 1: The Contemporary Roman Maghrébin: Aesthetics, Politics, Production 2000-2015, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, Volume 20, 2016, pp. 48-57, p. 49.

he published his poems or novels but the moment he tried to read his *Ecritures sauvages* (*Savage Writings*) in a public space he was arrested immediately.<sup>395</sup>

The work of both Menia and Benfodil can be regarded as part of a struggle to develop in Algeria a broader and less restrictive view of what being an Algerian represents; how this has been distorted by an ideological view of history; but also in terms of trying, along with a number of other artists, to enable a more liberal and creative culture and democracy to emerge. Menia and Benfodil provide two similar perspectives looking forensically at the history of Algeria and engaging with the problems of its present and occasional reference will be made to the latter's poetry and art.

The analysis will focus on Menia's interest in the city, its buildings and its monuments. Her view of the relation between the city and identity is similar to Heidegger's idea of 'dwelling' in which the philosopher examines the connected origins of 'bauen' or to build, 'bin' or be, and 'buan' or dwelling. The functional and symbolic edifices that humans build are seen by Heidegger as part of the fundamental nature of humanity and it is not difficult to relate this to Menia's interest in the city as a metaphor of identity and community.<sup>396</sup>

Menia's work *Enclosed* (2012), (see image 27 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Three), engages with a prominent landmark in the cityscape of Algiers. The work takes its starting point from a commission given in the late 1970s by the mayor of Algiers to the Algerian artist M'hamed Issiakhem, one of the founders of Algerian modern art and a significant figure in the war of independence.<sup>397</sup> Médiène, in his life of Issiakhem, points to how he and Yacine Kateb, a writer significant in the work of Benyahia, (see Chapter Five), represent 'dans ces deux

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<sup>395</sup> This was part of Mr Benfodil's response to a question I posed relating to his Sharjah artwork *Maportaliche* at his talk at the Friends Meeting House in Leeds on the 7 March 2018.

<sup>396</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (Albert Hofstadter, trans.), (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971).  
[http://www.wwf.gr/images/pdfs/pe/katoikein/Filosofia\\_Building%20Dwelling%20Thinking.pdf](http://www.wwf.gr/images/pdfs/pe/katoikein/Filosofia_Building%20Dwelling%20Thinking.pdf). Accessed 29/1/2019.

<sup>397</sup> Background to the work in relation to *Enclosed* is given by Nzewi Ugochukwu-Smooth, 'Anthropology as Practice: Artists of Africa and the Ethnographical Field in Contemporary Art', in Arnd Schneider, *Alternative Art and Anthropology: Global Encounters*, unpaginated, published online 23/2/2017.  
<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=u9nWDQAAQBAJ&pg=PT42&lpg=PT42&dq=Nzewi+Ugochukwu-Smooth,+Anthropology+as+Practice:+Artists+of+Africa+and+the+Ethnographical+Field+in+Contemporary+Art&source=bl&ots=5JGCLqV3X&sig=ACfU3U0JMhEupO52v1Y0XI8nhBd7pft-Dg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjOtJOthJPgAhXyAWMBHTJJBCkQ6AEwA3oECACQAQ#v=onepage&q=Nzewi%20Ugochukwu-Smooth%2C%20Anthropology%20as%20Practice%3A%20Artists%20of%20Africa%20and%20the%20Ethnographical%20Field%20in%20Contemporary%20Art&f=false>. Accessed 29/1/2019.

existences, une extraordinaire condensation de l'histoire contemporaine de l'Algérie'.<sup>398</sup> Issiakhem's commission was to get rid of or hide the former French Monument to the Dead in central Algiers, known as *Le Pavois*, (see image 28 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Three), completed by the famous sculptor Paul Landowski in 1928. Landowski had been employed by the French colonial authorities to design and make a commemorative monument to French and Arab soldiers killed in the First World War.<sup>399</sup>

Issiakhem was, in effect, asked to occlude a monument to the binary relationship of France and Algeria which haunts the work of Djébar and Yacine. Issiakhem, who did not want to remove it or destroy another artist's work, decided to enclose it in a concrete shell to protect it and in the process create another monument, one commemorating the martyrs of the war of independence, *Monument to the Martyrs*, (image 29 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Three). The original monument was thus encased within a form of sarcophagus. The term sarcophagus or box-like funeral receptacle for a corpse comes from the Greek *sarx* meaning flesh, and *phagein* meaning to eat, hence sarcophagus means 'flesh-eating'. Issiakhem's concrete shell, in all its neo-Soviet realism, swallows Landowski's grandiose neo-imperialist monument. The unicity of French republican colonialism which made Algeria an integral part of France is replaced symbolically by a monument to the unicity of the Algerian nation within which the former would subsequently 'dwell'. This is an act of postcolonial re-appropriation transfigured by the respect offered by one artist to another which provided Menia with an opportunity to explore aspects of her own identity from a political, historical and cultural perspective.

Menia recognised that although the incarceration of Landowski's statue by Issiakhem's work acts as a protective shield it is also an erasure of an aspect of the colonial period in which, however unequally and racially divided, the French and Algerians fought together against a common enemy. The latter interpretation implies that the Monument to the War of Independence swallowed or devoured the monument to the French coloniser's wars and imperialist adventures and was in a sense a metaphorical consumption of Algeria's colonial past. It also represented a deliberate turning away from a multivocal and plural history, in

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<sup>398</sup> An excellent account of his life and work is given in Benamar Médiène, *Issiakhem*, (Algiers: Casbah Editions, 2006), p. 36.

<sup>399</sup> For a good summary of the effects of the First World War on Algeria and its troops see the article by Gilbert Meynier, (a French historian not unsympathetic to Algeria), 'Algerians and the First World War', *Orient XXI*. <https://orientxxi.info/l-orient-dans-la-guerre-1914-1918/algerians-and-the-first-world-war,0645,0645> . Accessed 19/9/2019. Landowski's best known work is the statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro.

Landowski's monument configured as a binary, which had fractured Algeria deeply and reinforced the regime's commitment to a univocal nationalism.

In following this path Algeria, like France, attempted to bury its diversity. Issiakhem's monument erased a signifier of the colonial past but in the process hid the diversity of Algerian responses to the French and its colonial regime, and the celebration of the bravery of the Algerian soldiers who fought in the Great War. Such a celebration would have been difficult given the diversity of loyalties and positions of Algerians in the war of independence and the brutality on all sides. However, the uncompromising stance adopted can be seen as the rejection of notions of reconciliation and a recourse to the systematic elimination of difference after 1962. This included, for example, the wholesale massacre of the Harkis (the term is Arabic for 'collaborator' and referred to those who fought alongside the French in the War of Independence) of whom it is estimated that the FLN or lynch mobs killed at least 30,000 and possibly as many as 150,000. However, the various estimates are, as Martin Evans notes, often ideological.<sup>400</sup>

Erasure, massacre and amnesty were as significant in 1962 as later in the 1990s. Just as the Evian Accords gave amnesty for all offenses related to aiding or preventing the Algerian rebellion committed prior to March 20, 1962 so Algeria's Charter for National Reconciliation and Peace in 2006 gave blanket amnesty and immunity for acts of murder and violence in the 1990s.<sup>401</sup> The effect of these had implications in the 1960s, for example, preventing the prosecution of the torturers of Djamilia Boupacha, see Chapter Five and Niati's *No to Torture*, and, after the events of the 1990s, the prosecution of the perpetrators of massacres and assassinations.

Over time, graves have a habit of breaking open and it is not without irony that a crack appeared in the concrete casing of the 'double monument' during the 50th anniversary of Algerian independence. Algeria's history after 1962 arguably disappeared from view shortly after its birth and was replaced by the mythology of a united struggle by a unitary Algerian people against a common foe. However, Landowski's monument poked through both as

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<sup>400</sup> Martin Evans, 'Reprisal Violence and the *Harkis* in French Algeria in 1962'. *The International History Review*, Volume 39, 2017, issue 1, pp. 89-106. For a vivid description of the treatment of the Harkis see Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, as cited 2006, p. 537.

<sup>401</sup> For the Evian Accords see Ranjana Khanna, *Algeria Cuts*, as cited; for the later amnesty see George Joffe, 'National Reconciliation and General Amnesty in Algeria', *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 2, July 2008, pp. 213-228.

revenant and as metaphor of Algeria's problematic relationship with history and memory at a highly symbolic moment.

What began for Menia as an exploration of Algeria's past soon became an exploration of the country's present. Originally, Menia had wanted to make a cast of the fissure in the skin of Issiakhem's monument that would be a metaphor of a colonial history that had deeply scarred Algeria. Menia was unable to get permission to do this from the municipal authorities despite drawing on the influence of a friend on the local council or *assemblée populaire communale*. She records in her notebook: '...il m'a bien confirmé que je ne pouvais rien faire, rien toucher et que c'est un problème qui les dépasse'.<sup>402</sup>

Menia was therefore forced to design the artwork as a project based on documentation and archive which periodically she incorporated into installation. Derrida has described the basic function of archives as both 'a memorial and a reminder'.<sup>403</sup> This configures Menia's work as an alternative memorial incorporating both that of Landowski and Issiakhem. For Hal Foster the 'archival impulse' in art practice is 'an idiosyncratic probing into particular figures, objects, and events in modern art, philosophy, and history'.<sup>404</sup> Here the idiosyncrasy arises from the personal engagement of the artist but also involves the creation of new knowledge as a result of the artist's critical examination and exhibition of the archives content.<sup>405</sup> Menia is part of what Anthony Downey describes as the way 'artists have challenged traditional institutional systems of archiving, display, and dissemination' and have been critical of the widespread instrumentalisation of culture by the regimes of the MENA.<sup>406</sup> The artist becomes a creator of her own identity and history through her archaeology, collection, analysis, and display of the identity and history of her country. Nadia Soua has described the writing of Menia's husband Benfodil as 'écriture post-traumatique' (post-traumatic writing) and there are aspects of this in Menia's own work in her forensic excavation of Algeria's past before

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<sup>402</sup> 'He has confirmed that I can do nothing, touch nothing and it's a problem that's beyond their power'. Amina Menia, *Enclosed: Landowski, Issiakhem et moi*, (Algiers: Ibda, 2014). I am extremely grateful to Yasmina Reggad, curator of the exhibition *Intervening Spaces* at the Mosaic Rooms in London, for searching for and then giving me her last copy of this beautiful little book.

<sup>403</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, (trans. Eric Prenowitz), (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 23.

<sup>404</sup> Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October*, 110, Fall 2004, p. 3.

<sup>405</sup> The highly political nature of the archive can be seen in Walid Raad's 15 year long project entitled the *The Atlas Group (1989–2004)*, in which Raad produced fictionalized photographs, videotapes, notebooks, and lectures that related to real events and authentic research in audio, film, and photographic archives in Lebanon and elsewhere. The work can be viewed at <http://www.theatlasgroup.org/>. Accessed 28/1/2019.

<sup>406</sup> Anthony Downey, 'Introduction: Future Imperfect, critical propositions and institutional realities in the Middle East', Anthony Downey, (Ed.), *Future Imperfect - Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017).



and after 1962.<sup>407</sup> In this, the artist is infected by the same affliction as her husband: 'L'Ecrivain ne jette rien/Ne jette rien/Il est atteint de ce toc appelé 'syllogomanie'.<sup>408</sup>

In default of taking a cast of the break in the monument, Menia collected extracts from Landowski's diaries, her own notebooks and commentaries by people who knew Issiakhem at the time he encased the monument. Menia treats the crack in the monument as a metaphor for a fissure in the fabric of time potentially offering a moment in which Algeria's present-past could be re-examined. Menia's archive was part of an exhibition at the Mosaic Rooms in London entitled *Intervening Space: From The Intimate To The World*, in 2014 and her installation, *Enclosed: Landowski, Issiakhem Et Moi* (2013), was recorded in a book entitled *Enclosed*.<sup>409</sup>

Menia's installation included photographs of the scaffolding surrounding the Landowski/Issiakhem monument. Menia has used scaffolding in many of her works, for example *Extra Muros (I)*, (2005), (see image 30 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Three). Menia has explained this as a form of writing:

'I use scaffolding as an alphabet to express my thoughts. They have an exceptional narrative dimension. They reflect perfectly my concerns in issues of time, space, evocation, suggestion. They are the exact metaphor of the suspended, the in-between, the vanishing ... they give me flexibility for a relational aesthetic, adapted for each situation'.<sup>410</sup>

This visual alphabet provides the armoury that Nzewi considers makes Menia's work concerned with 'the contemporary politics of meaning making'.<sup>411</sup> Menia seems to use scaffolding for at least two purposes. The first is to provide the possibility of a different vantage point for the spectator, real or imagined: 'They (the scaffolding) are not there to be looked at, but to enable us to see something'.<sup>412</sup> In effect Menia's scaffolding acts as a form of Bhabha's third space. The second purpose is to act as a metaphor for the way nostalgia and other forms of support are used to prop up and justify the present thus she says of *Enclosed*

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<sup>407</sup>Nadia Soua, 'La «forme oulipienne» de Mustapha Benfodil', El Watan 15/10/2017.

<https://www.djazairiess.com/fr/elwatan/1541719> . Accessed 28/1/2019.

<sup>408</sup> 'The writer throws away nothing/Throws away nothing/ He is afflicted by this disorder called 'compulsive hoarding'. Mustapha Benfodil, *Cocktail Kafkaine: poésie noire*, (Bristol: Hesterglockpress, 2018), p. 55-56.

<sup>409</sup> See Menia 2014 as cited.

<sup>410</sup> Laura Allsop as cited 2012.

<sup>411</sup> See Nzewi Ugochukwu-Smooth, as cited, 2017.

<sup>412</sup> Celia Coussonnet, 'Amina Menia, Stepping Into The Breach, The Polemics Of Place', interview at *Sisume Art Lab*, undated but probably 2013. [http://www.sisume.com/amina\\_menia\\_breach\\_place\\_polemics.html](http://www.sisume.com/amina_menia_breach_place_polemics.html) . Accessed 3/2/2019.

that: ‘Monuments for martyrs are justified by an incredible will to take refuge in the past and ceaselessly celebrate the same events and the same period of the Algerian war of independence’.<sup>413</sup> Nostalgia here is not a yearning for an irrecoverable past but a prosthesis used to maintain a patently undemocratic and corrupt regime.<sup>414</sup>

Svetlana Boym has made a distinction between ‘restorative nostalgia’ linked to protection of the absolute truth, which perhaps characterises the use made of it within the governing narrative or official mythscape in Algeria, and ‘reflective nostalgia’ which calls ‘truth’ into question, (which is the position adopted by Menia.<sup>415</sup> Helmut Illbruck has suggested that reflective nostalgia can be a potent agent in the struggle for power and a way of distinguishing restorative nostalgia from reality and praxis.<sup>416</sup> Menia tackles nostalgia as a site of contestation and is critical of a ‘mythologised and nostalgic Algiers’ yearned for by many who dwell in the city but which she believes never existed.<sup>417</sup> The artist’s target is the use of ‘nostalgia’, of the mujahideen and the struggle against the French, as an illegitimate form of scaffolding used by the regime to compensate for its failures and to sustain its control.

Benjamin has characterised negatively the impact of historical progress on the present and its implications for the future in his comments on Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, who he identifies as the ‘Angel of History’ who faces towards the past and away from the future, seeing only the piles of destruction.<sup>418</sup> Menia’s work addresses in *Enclosed* the way the regime attempts to disguise the debris. Rothberg has suggested that an artist in the face of catastrophe or potential catastrophe can ‘wrest a place from which to speak and act from the sedimented layers of history and memory’.<sup>419</sup> Almost as an accidental result of the default position Menia’s project was forced into by bureaucratic obstruction, the artist developed a more forensic, careful and considered handling of the past. In this way Menia believes her work offers a paradigm of the way ‘memory competition between the official History and its other sides’ can result in a positive aesthetic process of excavation, dialogue and reflection that

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<sup>413</sup> Laura Allsop, as cited 2012.

<sup>414</sup> For a summary of views of ‘nostalgia’ see Edward Welch and Joseph McGonagle, *Contesting Views: the visual economy of France and Algeria*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University press: 2013), pp. 22-23.

<sup>415</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York: Basic Books, 2001), for restorative nostalgia see pp. 41-49, for reflective nostalgia see pp. 49-55.

<sup>416</sup> Helmut Illbruck, *Nostalgia, Origins and Ends of an Unenlightened Disease*, (Evanston, Northwest University Press, 2012), p. 29.

<sup>417</sup> Laura Allsop, as cited 2012.

<sup>418</sup> Thesis ix, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Hannah Arendt, (Ed. and Trans.), *Illuminations*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), pp. 257-8.

<sup>419</sup> In commenting on the work of W. E. B. Dubois, Rothberg, as cited 2009, p. 133.

contributes to the production of new knowledge.<sup>420</sup> Menia engages in Algeria's 'mythscape' challenging the 'governing myth' through her archaeology in the process unearthing other subaltern myths and narratives.<sup>421</sup>

The Landovski monument was, to use Bachelard's terms, nested within the shell of the Issiakhem commemorative work but, as Bachelard also notes, 'the nest is a precarious thing'.<sup>422</sup> The crack appearing in the casing with which Issiakhem covered *Le Pavois* formed a 'brisure'<sup>423</sup> - (briser: ruin, break, wreck) - a break between difference and deferral, spatiality and temporality that allows meaning to be figured and represented. For Derrida the '*brisure*' was also a hinge that makes writing possible, between the not-self within the self, opening comprehension of the gap between self and other, interior and exterior, being and representation. In these terms, the brisure of the monument is connected with identity.

Menia's exploration of the history of the 'double monument' depicts the crack as a mnemonic and multidirectional space within which intertwined French and Algerian identities and histories are reconfigured. The crack becomes a metaphor of a hidden object of the present-past erupting into the celebration of a mythologised narrative of that past. Menia notes that:

'...only the official history is celebrated and illustrated. In only one direction. It is hypnotising the collective memory. In my new research, I try to highlight a memory competition between different visions of the same history'.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> See the artist's statement on *Enclosed* at <http://www.aminamenia.com/?browse=Enclosed>. Accessed 1/2/2019.

<sup>421</sup> Bell 2003 as cited, p. 73.

<sup>422</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (New York: Penguin, 2014), pp. 50-51: 'With nests, with shells at the risk of wearying the reader I have multiplied the images that seem to me to illustrate the function of inhabiting in elementary forms which may be too remotely imagined. Here one senses clearly that this is a mixed problem of imagination and observation. I have simply wanted to show that whenever life seeks to shelter, protect, cover or hide itself, the imagination sympathizes with the being that inhabits the protected space. The imagination experiences protection in all its nuances of security, from life in the most material of shells, to more subtle concealment through imitation of surfaces'. I am very grateful to curator and artist Yasmina Regged for bringing the Bachelard idea to my attention in a conversation we had in June 2014 at the Mosaic Rooms exhibition of contemporary Algerian art: 'Intervening Space: from the intimate to the world'. <http://mosaicrooms.org/event/intervening-space/>. For 'multidirectional' see Rothberg, as cited 2009, p. 133.

<sup>423</sup> The term 'hinge' is borrowed by Derrida from Roger Laporte and will, according to the former, open the possibility for 'designating difference and articulation'. Derrida quotes Laporte: 'This word is brisure [joint, break] ' - broken, cracked part. Cf. breach, crack, fracture, fault, split, fragment, [brèche, cassure, fracture, faille, fente, fragment.] -Hinged articulation of two parts of wood- or metal-work. The hinge, the brisure [folding-joint] of a shutter. Cf. joint'. See J Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press 1997), p. 65.

<sup>424</sup> Laura Allsop, as cited, 2012.

Menia says that she ‘love(d) this silent dialogue between 2 artists, this memory interlocking’.<sup>425</sup> Moreover, the artist’s research into Issiakhem's life and work convinced her that he was intimately linked with many of the transformations that had occurred in Algeria over a period of more than 40 years. A freedom fighter, as well as an artist, Menia considered that Issiakhem ‘crystallised a certain “Algeria” that still remains today, tinted with nostalgia’.<sup>426</sup> Inevitably, Issiakhem played a role in the creation of the problematic ‘Algeria’ that exists today:

‘(in)...revisiting his work, it is a whole period of our early independence and the birth of a nation that I am concentrating on. I have tried to underline discreet realities, highlight unseen details, create links where dots were left’.<sup>427</sup>

Menia’s initial interest in the poignant irony of the fissure in the monument became a project with multiple aspects: an illustration of current political problems in Algeria; an examination of French-Algerian colonial history; a reflection on the history of Algerian modern art and its relation to contemporary art; and an excavation of her own identity as an Algerian and an artist.

### **Responses to the events of the 1990s**

In 1991 the Algerian military staged a coup d’état to prevent the main opposition party, the Islamic Salvation Front, (Front Islamique du Salut or FIS), from winning the second round of what would have been the country's first democratic election. Algeria then underwent a period of armed conflict and civil disturbance that began in 1992 and lasted much of the 1990s leaving up to 200,000 Algerians dead and 15,000 to 20,000 ‘disappeared’.<sup>428</sup>

One of the major problems in discussing the artwork that follows is that all attempts to contextualise and understand the killings and atrocities of the 1990s in Algeria have a

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<sup>425</sup> ‘Enclosed’, commentary on the artist’s website. <http://www.aminamenia.com/?browse=Enclosed> . Accessed 1/2/2019.

<sup>426</sup> ‘Enclosed’, artist’s website as cited.

<sup>427</sup> ‘Enclosed’ artist’s website as cited.

<sup>428</sup> Literature on Algeria of the 1990s includes: Luis Martinez. *The Algerian Civil War, 1990-1998*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). Of interest because he was a member of the security forces who claimed to have participated in a massacre is Habib Souaidia’s, *La sale guerre*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2001). Hugh Roberts, *The Battlefield Algeria: 1998-2002*, (New York: Verso, 2003). Laetitia Bucaille, ‘The Algerian Civil War, Reminiscences of the Colonial Enemy’, *ERIS*, 3, 2014, pp. 80-93. Benjamin Stora, *Histoire de l’Algérie depuis l’indépendance*, (Paris: Poche, 1994). Interesting because he claimed to have been present at the Bentalha massacre is Nesroulah Yous, *Qui a tué a Bentalha?* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2000).

speculative element because of the lack of reliable and consistent information.<sup>429</sup> During the period, the FLN Government had total control of domestic reporting which included ownership of all paper supplies and printing presses and the placement of state employed censors at all printing presses to vet everything before publication.<sup>430</sup> Moreover, the killing of so many reporters, perhaps (or perhaps not) by the security forces, was frequently an effective intimidation of the rest. There are also issues of ideological bias in the press, for example leftist papers tended to be anti-Islamist. Foreign journalists could only move around the country with a cohort of armed security service personnel, a situation that was intimidating and tended to maximise reporting of insurgent violence and minimise that of government violence. This produced a considerable range of conflicting narratives that still cannot be resolved in any conclusive way.

Another problem is that, under the terms of the *Charte pour la paix et la réconciliation nationale*, any Algerian who spoke or wrote, in Algeria or abroad, about the responsibilities of individuals and structures during the period 1992-2006 was liable to be sentenced to prison. Any historical or other writings and any political expression regarding the events of the 1990s by Algerians in Algeria and abroad became a penal offense.<sup>431</sup> This continues to represent a profound and disturbing intimidation and curtailment of knowledge production within Algeria.

The 1990s in Algeria have also found a highly politicised place in the cartography of violence and terror in international relations.<sup>432</sup> For example the Algerian government's assertion it was engaged in the war on terror in 1990s has been used by both it and the US to legitimise policies and interventions in the Sahara/Sahel and as a 'second front' of the US 'global war on terror'. It has also contributed to providing ideological and moralised narratives of violence to establish who needs protection from whom within these interventions. It is in this context that the works of Bouras and Menia related to archives, critical engagement and

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<sup>429</sup> See Jacob Mundy, "'Wanton and Senseless' Revisited: the study of warfare in civil conflicts and the historiography of the Algerian Massacres', *African Studies Review*, Volume 56, Issue 3, 2013, pp. 25-55.

<sup>430</sup> For a view on censorship and intimidation in the period see: Hafid Gafaït, 'Power, Censorship, and the Press: The Case of Postcolonial Algeria', *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1999, pp. 51-61.

<sup>431</sup> See the Algerian Ministry of Interior website, Ordonnance n° 2006-01 du 28 Moharram 1427 correspondant au 27 février 2006 portant mise en oeuvre de la Charte pour la paix et la réconciliation nationale. <http://www.interieur.gov.dz/index.php/ft/dossiers/168-la-charte-pour-la-paix-et-la-reconciliation>. Accessed 30/9/2019.

<sup>432</sup> See for example the highly ideological understanding of the civil conflict given by the Carnegie Foundation in Mhand Berkouk, 'US-Algerian security cooperation and the war on terror'. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2009/06/17/u.s.-algerian-security-cooperation-and-war-on-terror-pub-23276%20>. Accessed 3/2/2019. Also, for the benefits of this cooperation to the Algerian regime see John Davis, (Ed.), *Africa and the War on Terrorism*, (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), p. 83.

knowledge production are so important. They raise important doubts and questions related to the nature of Algerian identity and its framing within the idea of community. In particular, they call into question the imaginary of the Algerian nation as a community conceived and united, to use Anderson's phrase, 'as a deep, horizontal comradeship'.<sup>433</sup>

### *Ammar Bouras*

The period of the 1990s, Algeria's 'décennie noire', was for Amar Bouras as for most Algerians a traumatic and incomprehensible experience. It became a central theme of the artist's art practice by means of which he attempted to reconstruct and come to terms with a painful past 'without adding to its misrepresentations'.<sup>434</sup> *Tag'hout*, (2011), (see image 31 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Three), has as its central character the figure of Mohamed Boudiaf, former President of Algeria and chairman of its High Council of State which formed in effect a collective presidency set up by the military junta in January 1992 following the cancellation of elections in December 1991. Boudiaf was assassinated by a bodyguard during a public speech on 29 June 1992. Bouras was present at the event as a journalist covering Boudiaf's speech and it deeply affected him. The video also references a close friend of Bouras, the journalist Saïd Mekbel, who was shot while eating his breakfast in a restaurant in Algiers in December 1994.<sup>435</sup> Two incomprehensible murders to which Bouras felt tied by virtue of his profession and by virtue of friendship.

Mekbel's murder was just a few months after Ahmed Asselah the Director of the École supérieure des beaux-arts of Algiers and his 22-year-old son Rabah an art student were gunned down in the school. As related in Chapter Two, this was an event that so disturbed Adel Abdessemed that he left Algiers for France. Julija Sukys gives a horrific list of some of those, of various professions, that were murdered in the period including that of Tahar Djaout who was shot leaving his apartment and described by Farida Abu-Haidar as one of the

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<sup>433</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 6–7.

<sup>434</sup> Rachda Triki has suggested that Bouras attempts '...(r)estituer les traces d'une mémoire blessée, sans ajouter au lot des trahisons qui logent dans les ruses de l'Histoire.' This chapter concentrates on his work *Tag'hout*, but other works of Bouras touching on the 1990s include the videos *Stridencies: sang/commentaries*, *Un aller simple*, and *Serment*. Triki also notes that 'les oeuvres d'Ammar Bouras sont presque toutes habitées du spectre de la guerre civile, de celui de la censure et de l'individu-citoyen'. See Rachida Triki, 'Ammar Bouras: Tagout' at the artist's website. [http://www.art19.org/ammARBouras/textes-ammARbouras/Ammar-Bouras/tag\\_out.html](http://www.art19.org/ammARBouras/textes-ammARbouras/Ammar-Bouras/tag_out.html) . Accessed 20 November 2014.

<sup>435</sup> A short but interesting article on Mekbel and his journalistic contribution in the context of the Charlie Hebdo murders is Karima Bennoune, 'Truth needs witnesses', posted 7/1/2015, *Open Democracy website*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/truth-needs-witnesses/> . Accessed 15/9/2019.

outstanding Algerian Francophone writers of his generation.<sup>436</sup> Reporters sans frontières note that 57 journalists were killed in Algeria between 1993 and 1997. Karima Bennoune characterises the murders as ‘an attempt by the radical Islamists battling the Algerian state to stamp out the North African nation’s culture and to wipe out those who shaped it’. The aim of the Islamists was, as McDougall demonstrates, to replace it with a particular form of culture linked to an ‘authentic’ and Islamic Algerian identity and nationality.<sup>437</sup> Mustapha Benfodil described what happened as an ‘intellectocide’ in which ‘never, to my knowledge, have so many intellectuals been killed in so little time’.<sup>438</sup> It is important to bear in mind that whether blame is allotted to Islamists or to the Government is dependent on one’s ideological positioning and that the boundaries between the Government and the Islamist groups such as the GIA (Groupe Islamique Armé or Armed Islamic Group and a breakaway group from the MIA, Mouvement Islamique Armé or Islamic Armed Movement) were frequently porous.

Ironically, given the labyrinthine nature of Algeria’s politics in the 1990s, *Tag’hout* was originally commissioned for the 10th edition of the Sharjah Biennial the theme of which was ‘Plot for a Biennial’. The video has never been shown in Algeria where it would be politically controversial even in the unlikely event that permission was granted.<sup>439</sup> At the same exhibition, Mohamed Benfodil showed *Maportaliche /Ecritures sauvages*, (2011), (*see image 32 at Appendix One: Images, Chapter Three*), in which he commented on the murderous brutality of the Islamists’ treatment of women in the period of the 1990s. The provocative work, which featured text from his play *Les Borgnes*, (2008), had the words ‘Allah’, ‘Prophet’ and ‘Sperm’ written in Arabic on the backs of football shirts worn by headless mannequins.

For Bouras the Sharjah commission was an opportunity to revisit the period of the 1990s in an exploration of the notion of ‘traitor’ which he says ‘was used by Islamists to describe all those “different” from them or in opposition to their ideology’.<sup>440</sup> His work therefore goes to the heart of the notion of identity and community in Algeria. Bouras has said of the project:

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<sup>436</sup> Julija Sukys, *Silence Is Death: The Life and Work of Tahar Djaout*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), p. 32. See also the obituary of Djaout in the *Independent*.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-tahar-djaout-1490353.html> . Accessed 20/11/2014.

<sup>437</sup> Quoted by Karima Bennoune, ‘Algeria twenty years on: words do not die’, *Open democracy* webpage, 24/6/2014. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/algeria-twenty-years-on-words-do-not-die/> . Accessed 1/2/2019.

<sup>438</sup>Karima Bennoune 2014 as cited.

<sup>439</sup> As far as I can judge by examining the artist’s website and articles about the work. Besides Sharjah, it has been shown in Marseille at the Museum of the Civilisations of Europe and the Mediterranean (MuCEM).

<sup>440</sup> Adlène Meddi, ‘A painful artwork on Algeria’s black decade’, *Marshallah News*, 24/2/2011.

<https://www.mashallahnews.com/a-painful-artwork-on-algerias-black-decade/>. Accessed 1/2/2019.

‘In the eyes of the Islamist terrorists I belonged to the hateful category of the “tag’hout” – a traitor to the cause of God. As an artist and journalist, I was living in a state torn between the rule of law, ‘loyalty’ to Islam and the aspirations of struggling for a free, democratic and modern Algeria’.<sup>441</sup> *Tag’hout*, is the Arabic word for ‘traitor’ but also refers to idolatry or to worship of anything except Allah, and has the connotation of having gone beyond the limits or crossed a red line. Bouras is also playing on the internet term ‘tag’ or naming or marking, thus referring to the lists that were posted of people who could be legitimately killed in the name of Allah. These ‘tags’ related to people who in some way or another had offended the Islamists and the gangs that congregated around them because of their difference in identity or from some norm arbitrarily defined in terms that were often ‘religious’. It was yet another orchestrated effort to fit the people of Algeria into the frame of a narrow definition of what being Algerian meant.

Mackay and Pagani have examined the mosaic board’s superiority over paper storyboards in terms of planning and presentation of information. They note its potential for storytelling and for ‘laying out time in a physical space’.<sup>442</sup> Bouras’s work is composed of three mosaic boards each covered by multiple squares capable of being separately programmed. The mosaic boards enabled the artist to identify and track individual narrative elements dividing and iterating them at will. This enabled both linearity in narrative and the disruption of time into fragments linked anachronically.

The early part of the video shows a constantly changing set of images of crowds, ‘watched’ from either side by an image of the artist sitting on a chair. A large black and white image of a woman in apparent pain or grief emerges from the squares and then fades back into them. A close-up of money exchanging hands appears repeatedly in the video. Images in black and white of both Boudiaf and Saïd Mekbel, the friend of Bouras murdered in Algiers in December 1994, repeatedly appear and disappear. The bare feet of what might be a woman are seen on one side panel while on the other is a man sitting on a step or bench perhaps praying, perhaps reading. The central mosaic board is then broken into ten still images of parts of bare bodies this time of men. The black and white photos of Boudiaf are at times suffused with pale greens, yellows and blues which then change to deep reds – perhaps signifying the Islamists (green) and the consequences of their actions (red). The sound of

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<sup>441</sup> Quoted in [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2012/ammam\\_bouras/img](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2012/ammam_bouras/img). Accessed 9/6/2015.

<sup>442</sup> Wendy Mackay and Danielle Pagani ‘Video Mosaic: Laying out time in physical space’, *Proceedings of Multimedia '94, San Francisco, CA: ACM*. <http://insitu.lri.fr/~mackay/pdffiles/MM94.VideoMosaic.pdf>. Accessed 15/9/2019.



chanting becomes a blurred and overpowering noise. The overall effect is of noise, strong emotions, turmoil, confusion and fragmentation. This synchronisation and at times desynchronisation of sound and image strengthens the subliminal way in which the former reinforces the illusion of representation. This use of sound sometimes reinforces and at other times abruptly disrupts the narrative content of the video.

The sound suddenly stops and video footage of Boudiaf is shown in the central screen and his voice (in Arabic) is heard, translated piecemeal either side of the central screen into French and English: 'let's observe the other nations', 'by what have they surpassed us?', 'by knowledge' 'and Islam...'. A noise is heard and the president stops speaking and turns, there are close ups in black and white of his face and shoulders and then the sounds of shots. Amongst the now silent squares of moving images a large photo of Boudiaf appears and a smaller one of Mekbel. There is then silence followed by the sound of wind. This is the only time a single voice is clearly heard in the video and it is very quickly silenced.

Images of the hall in which Boudiaf was murdered are followed by those of his corpse being taken away on a stretcher sandwiched between two large photos of the President. The images of violence and turmoil continue as does the sound of wind. The board is then turned over to the Islamist demonstrations, the chants of the crowds, and young men apparently shouting at the camera. The video ends with the chanting becoming a crescendo of confused sounds and with the board alternating images of crowd scenes, photos of Boudiaf and Bouras' friend, photos of dead women, videos of bare chested young men with the Islamist bandana throwing stones, and an image so smeared and blurred that it is difficult to interpret but which seems to show some act of army violence. This confusion of images and sound acts as a metaphor of the indecipherability and ambiguity surrounding the events of the 1990s similar, as will be shown in Chapter Four, to Boudjelal's blurring of his photos of Algeria.

Asked about his feelings concerning the revisiting of his archive of pictures and sounds, Bouras refers to the pain he felt and how he feels haunted by the 1990s. The artist notes that seeing again his photographs of Saïd Mekbel in particular was painful as it reminded him of Mekbel's smile and his kindness. At the same time, Bouras says that he found that 'working with them is a kind of therapy to me. It's a difficult and painful wound, but it also makes me wonder: What remains of all the others who have been killed?' <sup>443</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Adlène Meddi as cited 24/2/2011.

Bouras is not uncritical of the Algerian regime, indeed as a former journalist he is aware that the suspicion is that the regime orchestrated Boudiaf's murder after he started to investigate corruption and began opening a dialogue with the dissident factions in Algeria's split elite. Robert Fisk amongst others notes that Boudiaf had made powerful enemies inside Algeria and even his widow was sceptical of the idea that the Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut, or FIS) committed the crime.<sup>444</sup> The nature of the civil strife, the massacres and the mutilations are difficult to fully explore and understand without some form of crack within the carapace of 'le pouvoir'. Bouras records in his video the hypnotic spell that violent ideologies such as that of the FIS and other Islamist groups can cast over young people who feel themselves marginalised without the hope of a job or a future. The artist's concern is that little support has been given to the young to come to terms with what happened and that they are exploited by both the Islamists and the Government.

When Boudiaf, in an act of aposiopesis, turns towards the bodyguard who will kill him, he becomes a metonym of the aporia within Algerian society and politics, an image of the Angel of History looking back at the trail of destruction behind.<sup>445</sup> Bouras attempts to redeem the past, open up a dialogue about identity and community by standing in for those historians within Algeria who are denied access to historical archives. Bouras becomes a historian/artist fanning 'the spark of hope in the past' because, as Benjamin points out, otherwise '...even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious'.<sup>446</sup>

In formal terms, Bouras exploits expertly the potential of the mosaic board to disrupt time and create a different relationship between Algeria's past, present and future. *Tag'hout* can be considered as a 'hauntology' in the sense that it tackles the relationship of the past with the present by representing the past in Algeria's present as a thing neither dead nor alive. The past appears as a spectre that cannot be put to rest within Algeria without open debate and dialogue.<sup>447</sup> Mark Fisher sees the term 'hauntology' as referring to a sense of the present

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<sup>444</sup> Robert Fisk, 'New light is thrown on Boudiaf's murder: The fundamentalists may not be behind the president's death', *The Independent*, 24/7/1992. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/new-light-is-thrown-on-boudiafs-murder-the-fundamentalists-may-not-be-behind-the-presidents-death-1535096.html>. Accessed 30/1/2019.

<sup>445</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', Thesis VI: 'His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet'. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (London: Fontana Press, 1973), pp. 255-266.

<sup>446</sup> Benjamin as cited Thesis VI.

<sup>447</sup> The term 'hauntology' is Derrida's see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

being haunted by ‘lost futures’ but also a refusal to give up on the desire for the future.<sup>448</sup> By the use of media resources related to the period of the 1990s, Bouras subverts Benjamin’s dictum that ‘(t)he past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again’ through his capturing and reiteration of images. *Tag’hout* seems to configure the idea that to articulate the past does not mean to recognise it (as Benjamin says of Ranke) ‘the way it really was’ – in circumstances like those of the 1990s that may never be possible - but ‘to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger’.<sup>449</sup>

In *Tag’hout*, Bouras characterises Algeria as a fragmented community, damaged before it even came into existence by its colonial history and its struggle for independence but subsequently suffering further disability in the savagery of the 1990s. Bouras explores an aporia, deepened by the events of the late 1980s and 1990s, which has become apparently impossible to transverse. An impassable gap that is inscribed with Derrida’s gloss of a multiple haunting.<sup>450</sup> This gap is twofold: in the space of public discourse and in the occlusion of official archives. Bouras creates a tiny aperture through which a chink of light passes linking past, present and future. The question of the archive and its access is central to Bouras’s intention and he notes that ‘this work is about memory, a return to the archives and recollections of that period’. Derrida considers that the archive is not just about the past but ‘a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow’.<sup>451</sup> As Downey notes ‘art does not produce verifiable knowledge as such, rather it engages in a series of ruminative gestures that give rise to non-definitive narratives and tentative forms of suppositional knowledge’.<sup>452</sup> Bouras’s concern for the future of Algeria through his engagement with its past challenges the blockage in Algerian public discourse and provides a hopeful presumption of a dialogue in the present.

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<sup>448</sup> For his developing perspective on hauntology, see Mark Fisher, ‘What Is Hauntology?’ *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (Fall 2012), pp. 16-24 and his *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, (Aylsford: Zero Books, 2014).

<sup>449</sup> Benjamin as cited thesis VI

<sup>450</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

[https://monoskop.org/images/b/be/Derrida\\_Jacques\\_Aporias\\_1993.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/b/be/Derrida_Jacques_Aporias_1993.pdf). Accessed 29/1/2019.

<sup>451</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Archive Fever: A Freudian impression, Diacritics’, Vol. 25, No. 2, Summer, 1995, pp. 9-63, p. 36.

<sup>452</sup> Anthony Downey, ‘Contingency, dissonance and performativity: critical archives and knowledge production in contemporary art’, in Anthony Downey, (Ed.), *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, (London/New York: Touris, 2015), p. 4.

## Conclusion

The focus of this chapter was on how artists on both sides of the Mediterranean engage with history and memory and the extent to which this illustrates their positioning to identity and community. The findings show that, although artists in France adopt rather different positions compared to those in Algeria, a common feature of both groups was their determination to challenge current unitary and exclusive conceptions of national identity by contesting governing political narratives linked to a distorted imaginary of the past. The findings indicated that the diversity of positions adopted by the artists to identity formation connected closely to the specific situations experienced in France and Algeria and were at times cross cut by gender considerations.

In France, Bouabdellah and Bourouissa engaged with the collapsing spaces of a society of ‘intense proximities’, defined by Okwui Enwesor as ‘the degree of nearness in which cultural, social, and historical identities and experiences share and co-exist within the same space, while exposing the fault lines of cultural antagonism’.<sup>453</sup> Both Bouabdellah and Bourouissa targeted the lieu de mémoire represented by Delacroix’s *La Liberté guidant le peuple*. It was argued that the artists were challenging the erasure of France’s colonial past and the refusal to acknowledge its impact on the present. It was shown how the artists illustrated and critiqued this failure to confront the past and the way it limited the development of inclusive and more diverse forms of identity and community.

In *Dansons*, Bouabdellah engaged in a form of ‘double critique’ challenging the inequalities of the present and the erasures of the past in the French historical imagination but also the patriarchal and oppressive aspects of Islam and traditional Arab society. Bouabdellah’s feminist perspective on identity and community represents an understanding of ‘belonging’ and ‘self’ as a polyphonic phenomenon which goes beyond the binary views of identity and community that frequently figure in imagining of the past on both sides of the Mediterranean. This polyphony is implicit in the ‘nous’ of ‘Dansons’ and links with a conception of identity and community that is inclusive. Interestingly given the frequent emphasis on division and difference by artists such as Kader Attia and Bourouissa, Bouabdellah indicates a strong preference for social cohesion and the potential benefits of hybridity and an exploration of

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<sup>453</sup> References to ‘intense proximities’ in this chapter are derived from the brochure to the 2012 Paris Triennale: ‘Intense Proximities’, entitled *La Triennale, Intense Proximity*, with a Forward by Okwui Enwezor in which his use of the term is described.

inbetweenness. This celebration of both difference and hybridity finds expression in *Dansons* in the humour of the work and her invitation to her audience to join the dance.

Bourouissa appropriates aspects of Delacroix's painting and transforms the dress, ethnicity and possibly the gender of Liberty amongst the participants in his recreation of Delacroix's work. The photograph indicates a changed politics in which divisions are drawn along ethnic and cultural lines as well as class. By moving the location of the work from the centre of Paris to the banlieues the artist inserts into the picture the colonial and postcolonial dimension of French history and the changing nature of the claims of equity and democracy. The community Bourouissa portrays is dominated by young males often in a state of tension. There is a large overlap between the young men, criticised by Bouabdellah, who booed the national anthem at the 2001 football match and the characters portrayed in Bourouissa's *Périphérique* series. Bourouissa's work offers a fragmented and confused alternative to the unitary vision of Delacroix of the French Republic reflecting the conditions of injustice and inequality in France. The artist provides a parody of the connection made between riots and the inner city by the French media and draws attention to the current limitations of the French Republic. Unlike Bouabdellah, Bourouissa at times obscures issues of gender through his concentration on the young black male.

In Algeria, the approach of the two artists to identity and belonging was nuanced by the time period on which they focused. However, the work of Menia and Bouras contained at least implicitly a critique of the current regime and both challenged the problematic nature of an imposed unitary Algerian identity. The form of the art of both artists acted as metaphors of the fractured nature of both identity formation and community in Algerian society and politics.

Menia's focus was on an occluded history related to the political uses made by the Algerian regime of the Algerian revolution and the restrictions this placed on attempts to renegotiate a identity and belonging in post-colonial Algeria. The artist's aesthetic engagement with the city of Algiers is illustrative of her view that the city was the symbolic territory of men and their desire for power. By making the city of Algiers a metaphor of her own identity, Menia challenged a flawed political hegemony but also the strong patriarchal aspects of contemporary Algeria. In *Enclosed*, Menia rejects a restrictive view of what being an Algerian represents and shows how this distorted perspective on identity is linked to a failure to confront both the past and the present. Menia's treatment of the double monument built by

Landowski and adapted by Issiakhem acts as a metaphor to challenge the occlusions that the current regime uses to maintain a fictional representation of national identity in order to justify its existence.

The work of Bouras is concerned with how history is represented and raises important doubts and questions related to the nature of Algerian identity and its framing within the idea of community solidarity. Bouras questions the imaginary of the Algerian nation as a community conceived and united, to use Anderson's phrase, 'as a deep, horizontal comradeship'.<sup>454</sup> Bouras' work conceives of the civil strife of the 1990s as an effort to distort Algeria's culture and replace it with an 'authentic' Islamic Algerian identity that would be inimitable to, for example, Khatibi. In a formal sense the moving and fragmented images of the three mosaic boards of *Tag'hout* represent a metaphoric dislocation of the effort to fit the people of Algeria into a politically constructed and distorted framing of identity. Overall, Algeria appears to be presented in his work as a fragmented community, damaged before it even came into existence by its colonial history, afflicted by its struggle for independence, and subsequently suffering further disability in the 1990s.

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<sup>454</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, as cited 2006, pp. 6–7.

## Chapter Four: roots and routes in journeys, borders, and crossings.

### *Introduction*

This chapter examines the interconnections between conceptualisations of ‘routes’ and ‘roots’ in works by Bruno Boudjelal, *Jours Intranquilles* (2009), Zineb Sedira, *Saphir* (2006) and Zineddine Bessaï, *H-OUT* (2010). Stuart Hall has characterised travel as having an important bearing on identity, proposing that rather than focusing on roots we should instead look at the routes taken by people. Hall perceived these routes as marking for people ‘the different points by which they come to be now’ and a fruitful way of envisaging them as the sum of those differences.<sup>455</sup> These routes, which in their diversity may be linear or circular or returns or detours, offer a reticulation of connected meaning with an important and complex relation to identity. Journeys, however configured, occur in space. This point is significant within the chapter because, as Homi Bhabha underlines, it connects with ‘hybridity’ which is a form of ‘becoming’ and a ‘metonymy of presence’ that opens metaphorical space for the construction of colonizer and Other as political objects.<sup>456</sup> Bill Ashcroft also interprets ‘hybridity’ and its role in the construction of identity as a privileging of ‘space’ over ‘history, ancestry and the past’.<sup>457</sup> The travel these routes involve may be a form of superficial tourism but can be a way to make connections with perceived roots and to delve into the soil of identity and community to explore beneath the surface in a search for personal nourishment.

Bhabha regarded culture in general and therefore also art as intrinsically linked to the problematic of location and space.<sup>458</sup> The argument of this chapter is that the framing of identity and community within the artworks discussed is closely linked, through space, location and travel, to the intertwined history of Algeria and France and its involvement at various times with incorporation, migration, expulsion and exile. Form and content in the artworks are shown to be mutually supportive of the portrayal of fragmentary identities, of displacements often linked to tragedy, and to the traversing of routes within the context of unresolved narratives. In this respect, it is argued that the artwork itself, in its relation to

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<sup>455</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘A conversation with Stuart Hall’, *Staff*, Volume 7, Issue 1, Fall, 1999.

<sup>456</sup> Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 128.

<sup>457</sup> Bill Ashcroft, *The Empire Strikes Back*, (Oxford: Routledge, 1989), p. 34.

<sup>458</sup> Homi Bhabha, as cited, 1994. Although often treated metaphorically, the discursive spaces with which Bhabha engages relate to real material conditions.

journeys, borders and crossings, becomes migratory to the extent that it imitates, at the level of form, the displacements it aims to represent.<sup>459</sup>

In the works considered, journeys, crossings and borders are seen in both their negative and positive aspects. McLeod notes that migration can disrupt 'belonging' and produce feelings of 'inbetweenness' which may be experienced as painful but can also provide 'excitement, new possibilities and even privilege'.<sup>460</sup> In both its negative and positive aspects, travel, migration, and crossing borders can be transformative and offer the artist possibilities of experiencing and seeing the world and themselves differently. This can result in an aesthetics of movement, linked for example to migration, but also a movement of aesthetics in which cultures and identities are traversed and translated.

Travel and narrative are closely connected. Michel de Certeau considered that 'every story is a travel story – a spatial practice' and the three artworks examined in the chapter offer narratives that represent travel stories.<sup>461</sup> Janis Stout identified in literature five basic patterns of the 'journey narrative': exploration and escape; homeseeking; return; heroic quest; and wandering. These patterns are based on her consideration of the direction of the journey, its motivation, and reference to historical precedents. Stout sees the journey as providing complex and interwoven patterns of narrative but tends to consider content rather than the form of the literary works she examines.<sup>462</sup> It will be argued that the form of the artwork as well as its content is important for understanding the nature of the journeys undertaken by the artists. Furthermore, it is suggested that although the idea of a 'migratory aesthetics' links closely to 'nomadic' conceptions of the nature of the artist in contemporary art such as the 'globalist' (Rex Butler) or as the 'radicant' (Bourriaud), the reality is more diverse and at times subject to limitations.<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>459</sup> The notion of migratory aesthetics is developed from a variety of perspectives in Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord, (Eds.), *Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices between Migration and Art-making*, (New York: Rodolpi, 2007).

<sup>460</sup> John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2010), p. 248. McLeod draws particularly on the writings and experiences of Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureshi.

<sup>461</sup> Michel De Certeau, 'Spatial Stories', in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 115.

<sup>462</sup> Janis P. Stout, *The journey narrative in American literature: patterns and departures*, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983). She argues that her taxonomy 'derive[s] more from content than from form in that they are based on such matters as direction of journey, motivation for journeying, and reference to actual historic precedents', Introduction p. x.

<sup>463</sup> See John Potts, 'The Theme of Displacement in Contemporary Art', *E-rea*, 9.2, 2012, unpaginated. <http://erea.revues.org/2475>. Accessed 6/2/2016. For 'globalism' see, for example, Rex Butler and A.D.S Donaldson, 'Surrealism and Australia: towards a world history of Surrealism', *Journal of Art Historiography*, Number 9, December 2013. For 'semionaut' see Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, (New York: Sternberg Press, 2009), p. 102.



Space and spatiality are not here understood only in terms of Cartesian space or space in extensio, strictly speaking Cartesian coordinates within Euclidean conceptions of space.<sup>464</sup> Space is instead frequently conceived as ‘worldhood’, a term used by Heidegger, and a social creation into which we are born or ‘thrown’ and in which we live and discover through our involvement in it.<sup>465</sup> As Massey notes, correcting what she perceives as a lack of relationality in Heidegger’s conception, this space is a relational dimension which unfolds as social interaction.<sup>466</sup> The space of ‘worldhood’ therefore links closely with notions of identity, belonging and language enabling Derrida to connect language to dwelling and ‘worldhood’: ‘(m)y monolingualism dwells and I call it my dwelling; it feels like one to me, and I remain in it and inhabit it. It inhabits me’.<sup>467</sup> Our understanding of ‘worldhood’ is subject to change, as Mitchell Dean points out, through the processes of globalisation and its alleged ‘overcoming of space and time in a great frictionless circulation of things, information and people’.<sup>468</sup> However it will be argued that, in the experiences of the artists and the works considered in the chapter, ‘worldhood’ is a disputed terrain and the work of the artists frequently reflects not a lack of friction but the disordering and disrupting effects of global change.

### ***Bruno Boudjelal: Jours intranquilles***

In the period 1993-2003 Bruno Boudjelal, the son of a French mother and an Algerian father, made eight trips to Algeria ostensibly to connect with his father’s Algerian family but also to develop a career as a photographer through the exploration of a country in the middle of a civil war. The photographs resulting from the trips were exhibited as a looped slide show at the Rencontres d’Arles photography festival in 2003. Boudjelal, in collaboration with Autograph ABP, later made a book, *Disquiet Days/Jours intranquilles*, (2009) in which he documented his trips to Algeria, supplementing his photographs with personal materials including autobiographical text.<sup>469</sup> It is argued that Boudjelal demonstrates in his book a ‘migratory subjectivity’, not the ‘subject on hold’ of Negri’s migrant, but a ‘subject in

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<sup>464</sup> See René Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*, (Trans. by Paul J. Oscamp), (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001).

<sup>465</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (Albany: NY State University Press, 1996).

<sup>466</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space*, (London: Sage, 2005), p. 183.

<sup>467</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>468</sup> Quoted in Potts, as cited, paragraph 10.

<sup>469</sup> Bruno Boudjelal, *Disquiet Days/Jours Intranquilles*, (London: Autograph ABP, 2009), unpaginated. Subsequently cited as *Ji* (2009). Autograph’s mission is to enable the public to explore identity, representation, human rights and social justice through work produced by artists who use photography and film.

aesthetic process' with subjectivity imagined as movement, transition and 'becoming'.<sup>470</sup> Boudjelal's artwork, it is argued, became a form of aesthetic production that is itself migratory moving between cultures and between modernity and tradition. The analysis points to Boudjelal's opposition to the Algerian regime, derived directly from his experiences outlined in the book, and his reluctance to cooperate with its efforts to develop Algeria's cultural and artistic profile. Boudjelal's engagement with the camera and photography will be linked to his negotiation of his relationship to his family and Algeria and his exploration of autobiography within the context of autofiction will be highlighted as an important aspect of agency in his art practice and his construction of identity.

Boudjelal's book is divided into two main parts. The second part, 'Algeria, Act 2', consists of an essay by Salima Ghezali on issues of Algerian identity in the context of the 'dark decade' and an extract from the artist's notebook reflecting on his childhood and his early confusion about what 'being Algerian' meant. The first part, which is untitled but which by implication could be considered 'Algeria, Part 1' is in two rough parts. The first refers predominantly to issues of origin and family and his growing politicisation through his experiences of Algeria. The second seems to represent an attempt to place the identity problems of his early childhood in relation to the complexity of the identity crisis of contemporary Algeria.

For Genette the paratext is about how a text makes itself into a book and 'proposes itself as such to its readers and more generally to the public'.<sup>471</sup> The paratext thus provides a threshold rather than a boundary and that of *Jours intranquilles* (2009), (*see image 33 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Four*), has two important aspects: the cover and the title. The cover is of cream cardboard with a motif of blue concentric diamonds interspersed with thin blue lines (in some editions pink) suggesting barbed wire or cracked glass. The cover designs are taken from the school exercise books Boudjelal purchased on a trip to Ghana in 2007 and in which he retrospectively constructed a 'diary' of his trips to Algeria. Boudjelal says:

'Everyone thinks it was compiled when I went back to Algeria. Not at all! I started working on it four years after my last trip, in 2007. The idea for this diary came to me much later. It

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<sup>470</sup> On migration, migratory subjects and migratory aesthetics see Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord. *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-making*, (Leeds: Rodopi, 2007); for Negri see Antonio Negri, and Michael Hardt. *Empire*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>471</sup> Gérard Genette, 'Introduction to the Paratext, Probing: Art, Criticism, Genre', *New Literary History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Spring, 1991, pp. 261-272.

was only when I bought three notebooks in Ghana that I decided to do these Algerian logs'.<sup>472</sup>

A diary, according to the Collins dictionary, is 'a daily written record especially of personal experiences and thoughts'.<sup>473</sup> Amanda Crawley-Jackson rightly considers that Boudjelal's construction of the notebooks 'reflects the artist's reworking of the raw data of his experience'.<sup>474</sup> *Jours Intranquilles* has many of the hallmarks of autobiography which is more concerned with the plot lines or patterns that bind moments of personal experience together. A construction of a diary after an elapse of time involves the selection of images, scenes and events that best fit the intentions of the writer, (see a photograph of a page of the original diary: *image 34 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Four*). However, even a daily diary involves selection and shaping. The past is never simple and factual but, as Hall notes, 'always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth'.<sup>475</sup> *Jours Intranquilles* is not a diary as such but a form of autobiography which, by definition, involves retrospective narrative and a personal reconstruction of history through selection. In this Boudjelal demonstrates his right to artistic agency in which the authorial 'I' of his book is problematized deliberately through occlusion, omission, creative highlighting, selective remembering and forgetting. In this process Boudjelal's book becomes a parallel personal narrative to that of the shadowy and blurred one of Algeria during this period. There are echoes in this of Kateb Yacine's character Nedjma in the novel of the same name, explored in more depth in Chapter Five in relation to the work of Samta Benyahia, who is also portrayed as born of an Algerian father and a French mother and acts as a symbol of the complex and fragmented nature of Algerian identity and its past and present.<sup>476</sup>

The subject of *Jours Intranquilles* is similar to Genon's autofictional subject: 'un sujet fragmenté et fragmentaire, déconstruit dans sa construction même, s'affirmant et se mettant en pièces dans un même mouvement'.<sup>477</sup> Boudjelal's work is not a fictional narrative

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<sup>472</sup> Leica Internet Team, 'Bruno Boudjelal: Algeria, troubling proximities', *Leica Camera Blog*, 26/2/2013 available at: <http://blog.leica-camera.com/2013/02/26/bruno-boudjelal-algeria-troubling-proximities/>. Accessed 4/8/2018.

<sup>473</sup> Collins English Dictionary, <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/diary>.

<sup>474</sup> Amanda Crawley-Jackson, 'Retour/détour: Bruno Boudjelal's *Jours intranquilles*', *Nottingham French Studies*. Volume 53, Issue 2, 2014, pp. 201-215, p. 213.

<sup>475</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in J. Rutherford, (Ed.), as cited 1990, p. 226.

<sup>476</sup> Kateb Yacine, *Nedjma: a novel*, (trans. Richard Howard), (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991).

<sup>477</sup> 'A fragmented and piecemeal subject, deconstructed even in its construction, asserting and pulling itself to pieces/smashing in pieces in one movement'. Arnaud Genon, 'Note sur l'autofiction et la question du sujet', *La revue des ressources*, 18 janvier 2007. <http://www.larevuedesressources.org/note-sur-l-autofiction-et-la-question-du-sujet.686.html>. Accessed 31/01/2016.

although it shares with autofiction the elaboration of an autobiographical journey within which the artist maintains a tight occlusive focus on a limited number of contexts and in which the narrative structure is fragmented and montaged.<sup>478</sup> Boudjelal acknowledges that ‘I play with this sometimes, I play the Algerian guy’.<sup>479</sup> Boudjelal notes how shocked students were when he mentioned in discussion that a self-portrait introduced into his Bentalha series of photos had been taken in France. Boudjelal said that the students saw it as a falsification and he responded by quoting François Maspero: ‘What’s the point of writing books if one doesn’t invent reality’.<sup>480</sup> Another example is the inclusion of an alleged photograph of his grandfather, Amar, which was given him in Algeria but was not of his grandfather, just sufficiently like the photo he had of his grandfather to complement it.<sup>481</sup>

This playful relationship to autofiction demonstrates Boudjelal’s fearlessness in transgressing the barriers between creator and created, and moving from subject to ‘self-conscious’ object. He becomes in a self-conscious way an artistic agent moulding a subjectivity objectified within the book and offered to the reader as something to reflect upon. In this way Boudjelal’s work exhibits a strange metalepsis in which he crosses and recrosses: ‘a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells’.<sup>482</sup> This approach has a serious intent and demonstrates the possibility of manipulating reality and truth, for which the artist criticises the Algerian regime. The montage of the book depicts not a static entity whether person, narrative or nation but enactments of affective and existential processes, necessarily mixed, confused, contradictory and in motion.<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> Autofiction is a word coined by Serge Doubrovsky to describe his novel *Fils*, (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1977). See Shirley Jordan, ‘Autofiction in the Feminine’, *French Studies*, Volume 67, Issue 1, 1 January 2013, pp. 76–84, with an interesting and relevant perspective on Sophie Calle; Annie Richard, ‘Plagiat Psychique’, *Autofiction(s)*, Presses.univ-lyon2.fr, online PDF version: [http://presses.univ-lyon2.fr/content.php?article\\_id=17](http://presses.univ-lyon2.fr/content.php?article_id=17), accessed 4/8/2018; Joel Zufferey, ‘Qu’est-ce que l’autofiction’, *Colloque ‘L’autofiction’*, July 2008, online version: <http://www.fabula.org/atelier.php?L%27autofiction>, accessed 4/8/2018 and Candace Bacon ‘The Genre of Autobiography: Definition and Characteristics’, *Owlcation Blog website*, at <http://hubpages.com/literature/TheGenreofAutobiography>, accessed 4/8/2018 which deals with the relation between autobiography and autofiction.

<sup>479</sup> Skype conversation between the artist, Amanda Crawley-Jackson and the writer in January 2016.

<sup>480</sup> Interview by the Leica Internet team of Bruno Boudjelal, as cited 26/2/2013.

<sup>481</sup> There are two photos in *Jl* (2009) that purport to be photos of his grandfather. It was only when M. Boudjelal mentioned to me in conversation that one of them was not actually of his grandfather that I went back to the book and noticed the facial differences between the two photos.

<sup>482</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1972), p. 236.

<sup>483</sup> See Andre Verlon, ‘Montage-Painting’, *Leonardo*, Vol 1, No 4, Oct. 1968, pp. 383-392. The artist discusses in detail the different techniques of montage in art and how his own work was influenced by cinematic montage as well the Futurist collages. It is interesting that, although Boudjelal noted in conversation with the writer that he had no training in art or photography, he said that he was a fanatical filmgoer.

The title of the book is also important and helps explain Boudjelal's attitude to constructing narrative. The title derives from Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet*, a profound influence on the artist.<sup>484</sup> Pessoa's works are configured around multiple alter egos of which seventy-two are used in different works and involve a questioning of the location of the self, confusions about points of departure, an openness to reappraisal and thus require active participation by the reader. Key to Pessoa's œuvre is how the writer believed that 'inch by inch I conquered the inner terrain I was born with'.<sup>485</sup> Boudjelal's work is not the 'factless autobiography' that Pessoa wanted to construct because Boudjelal rarely manufactures facts except for specific artistic and personal reasons but, like Pessoa, he manufactures realities: making worlds rather than, in any simplistic way, representing them. In this he shares Pessoa's view that 'the only true art is the art of construction'.<sup>486</sup>

The title also performs other functions. Larousse notes that 'intranquilles' can mean 'qui manifeste ou révèle de l'inquiétude, de l'insatisfaction'. The word connotes uncertainty, fear, and apprehension but also dissatisfaction. In English 'disquiet' is synonymous with unease, distress and concern, the last carrying the connotation of duty and responsibility. One translation of 'jours intranquilles' is 'anxious days' but 'disquiet' enhances the paratext and, with the cover, multiplies the sides of the frame suggesting dissimulation/illusion, bars, barbed wire, cracked glass or mirrors, as well as implying unease, dissatisfaction and concern. However, the author has mentioned to the writer his doubts about the use of 'disquiet' as an equivalent to 'intranquilles'.<sup>487</sup>

### *Algeria Act 1*

Boudjelal's putative 'Act 1' begins with a 20 line notebook extract dated 18 May 1993 setting the scene succinctly but poignantly and providing a hinge linking France and Algeria. It describes the seduction, impregnation and abandonment of Boudjelal's pregnant mother Danielle Sombret by his father, Lemaouche Boudjelal; his pregnant mother's subsequent

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<sup>484</sup> Fernando Pessoa's, *The Book of Disquiet*, (London: Penguin, 2015). The book was mentioned by M. Boudjelal in a conversation with the writer on 16 February 2016. As far as I know its significance is not mentioned by any other commentator on Boudjelal and his work. Alda, his Portuguese wife, although largely absent from the book, is an important influence and introduced him to the works of Fanon and Pessoa. The work of both writers strongly influenced Boudjelal and the construction of *Jours Intranquilles*. The significance of Pessoa as a writer is considered by various in D G Frier, (Ed.), *Pessoa in an Intertextual Web: Influence and Innovation*, (Oxford: Legenda, 2012).

<sup>485</sup> Pessoa, as cited p. 23.

<sup>486</sup> Pessoa, as cited p. 217.

<sup>487</sup> Conversation with the writer in Sheffield, 16 February 2016, despite his doubts Boudjelal was uncertain about how he would prefer the term to be translated.

ejection from the family home by her father; his birth in 1961 in Montreuil (Seine-Saint-Denis, Paris); and his consignment to a home for illegitimate children the day after. Two different points of departure are offered for Boudjelal's narrative journey: his first trip to Algeria in 1993 but also his birth, 32 years previously in 1961 and also incidentally the year of the massacre of Algerian demonstrators by the police in Paris noted in Chapter Three. Boudjelal frames the subsequent narrative in relation to that beginning providing throughout the book a dynamic interrelationship between past and present. This initial configuration of the artist's past provides a *mise en abîme* within the overall narrative, encompassing both engagement and estrangement, which Boudjelal constructs through postmemory using text, documents and photographs. The term 'postmemory' is used here in the general sense in which a second generation deals with powerful and often painful experiences that preceded their birth, and, in Boudjelal's case, also immediately after birth. There is much literature on the subject, often relating to the Holocaust, the originator of the term Marianne Hirsch has noted how the concept relates to 'imaginative investment, projection, and creation' which is consistent with Boudjelal's construction of identity and his positioning towards France and Algeria in terms of community.<sup>488</sup>

Hall notes that, despite all framing, representation 'always implicates the positions from which we speak or write – the positions of enunciation'.<sup>489</sup> In terms of the book, there are two implications. The first is that Boudjelal is compelled to speak from his 'Frenchness' and in the French language – for example there is confusion when he first meets his Algerian family as they speak to him in Arabic which he does not understand. This sets up a form of cultural dualism within his narrative, something Derrida referred to as a 'disorder of identity' (*trouble d'identité*) on the terrain of 'modes of belonging'.<sup>490</sup> The second is that the 'position of enunciation' sets up another dualism in which, as Hall suggests, 'who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place'. In this latter sense representation and enunciation frame Boudjelal's quest dialogically with 'identity as a "production" which is never complete, always in progress, and always constituted within, not outside, representation'.<sup>491</sup> There is always a gap between the complexity of Boudjelal as artist and individual and how he represents himself in his art.

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<sup>488</sup> Hirsch, article 'Postmemory' at her website, (<http://www.postmemory.net/>) but also see her more in-depth treatment in Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today*, 29 (1), 2008, pp. 103-128.

<sup>489</sup> Hall as cited 1999, p 222.

<sup>490</sup> J. Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 1998 as cited, pp. 14-15.

<sup>491</sup> Stuart Hall in J. Rutherford, (Ed.), 1990 as cited, quotations from p. 222.

Boudjelal was given, in the absence of his father, the French forename Bruno and the family name of his mother, Sombret, perhaps only for a year, until his father had returned, although the facsimile of a page of the Livret de Famille seems to indicate that his name may not have changed officially until 1982, the same time Lemaouche changed his forename officially to Jean-Claude, an erasure of his Algerian forename.<sup>492</sup> The book therefore starts with ‘naming’, and ‘Bruno’ can be seen as an imposition of ‘Frenchness’ and an attempt at containment within the ‘habitus’ of French language and society.<sup>493</sup> The naming theme and the ambiguity it raises regarding identity includes Boudjelal’s father, Lemaouche, who he had always known as ‘Jean-Claude’ Boudjelal, part of his father’s efforts to suggest an Italian rather than an Algerian connection. Boudjelal only discovered his father’s first name was Lemaouche when seeing his birth certificate for the first time, possibly in 1982 although the date is uncertain.<sup>494</sup> Named initially Sombret and then partially re-inscribed with an Algerian surname by a father who pretends to his friends that he is Italian, situated Boudjelal within a confusing indexicality of naming.

This is not a neutral opening but full of resentment and accusation: ‘J’étais à peine né et je venais d’être abandonné deux fois, par mon père et par ma mère et sa famille qui ne pouvaient m’accepter chez eux’.<sup>495</sup> It provides a framework for a narrative incorporating the whole gamut of Janis Stout’s taxonomy of travel: exploration and escape; home seeking; return; heroic quest; and wandering.<sup>496</sup> This literary taxonomy becomes available to Boudjelal largely because of his deliberate decision to supplement his photographs with text – a decision that took his publishers, Autograph ABP, by surprise. The text in this way frames the frames of the photographs. Mieke Bal has noted that ‘a traveller in narrative is in a sense always an allegory of the travel that narrative is’.<sup>497</sup> In Boudjelal’s book the physical journey is framed allegorically within the larger narrative describing his life path, a narrative strategy that is reinforced by the use of metaphor and metonym in photographs and the artist’s decorative/defacing inscriptions on texts and photographs. Boudjelal has described

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<sup>492</sup> A Livret de Famille is an official French document containing, amongst other things, marriage certificate, and birth certificates of any children.

<sup>493</sup> ‘Habitus’ (Bourdieu) is discussed in Rey Chow, ‘Reading Derrida on Being Monolingual’, *New Literary History*, Volume 39, Number 2, Spring 2008, pp. 217-231. [https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/new\\_literary\\_history/v039/39.2.chow.pdf](https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/new_literary_history/v039/39.2.chow.pdf). Accessed 13 February 2016.

<sup>494</sup> Entry 18 May 1993 JI (2009) ‘Même tout jeune, je n’avais jamais entendu le vrai prénom de mon père.’

<sup>495</sup> Entry 18 May 1993 JI (2009): ‘I had hardly been born and I’d already been abandoned twice: by my father and then by my mother and her family who could not accept me as one of them’.

<sup>496</sup> See the introduction to Janis P. Stout, as cited 1983.

<sup>497</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology, Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 137.

this larger frame as: ‘La quête identitaire que j’ai entreprise depuis longtemps’.<sup>498</sup> But Boudjelal’s book also represents an engagement of personal biography with the intertwined history of France and Algeria.

Forty-six pages follow, of photos and texts relating to his French childhood, his children, his Algerian family and of his first trip to Algeria, a ‘family album’. Sontag closely connects photography with family: ‘like a rite of family life – a symbolic restatement’.<sup>499</sup> From this perspective the camera is acquisitive and photos are ‘captured experiences’, and ‘give people an imaginary possession of a past’ enabling them to take possession of spaces ‘in which they are insecure’.<sup>500</sup> Boudjelal captures in these photos and facsimiles an impression of his childhood world, a past reclaimed, reconfigured and connected to the present by their relation to photos of his daughter and his Algerian family. There are also important elements of control because a ‘photo appropriates the thing photographed’ putting one in relation to things in a way ‘that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power’.<sup>501</sup>

Barthes has intimated that we tend to either code family photos as ‘a group of immediate allegiances or else we make it into a knot of conflicts and repressions’.<sup>502</sup> Here Boudjelal creates a family of inclusions, exclusions, and deletions. Three generations of Boudjelal males and two sets of difficult father/son relationships are shown in a double page montage of photos of his Algerian grandfather mounted alongside two of Boudjelal and his father. A further eight photos taken between 1963 and 1969 with, variously, father, French grandmother, and friends hint at – perhaps deceptively - a happy childhood. There is a single photo of Bruno sitting with his grandmother on a park bench. At least two of the photos might have been taken by his mother, Danielle. The complete absence of his mother from these montages suggests a hidden and painful narrative and for the last twenty years of Danielle’s life there was to be no contact between them.<sup>503</sup> Pointing forward to the future, there is a self-portrait in colour, painted around in black so only the head is seen, and inscribed with ‘Alger, la pointe 3h avant mon départ pour la France’.<sup>504</sup> It is framed as if Boudjelal is looking out of the window of a prison cell.

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<sup>498</sup> ‘The quest for identity that I have followed for a long time’, B Boudjelal, *Algérie, Clos comme on ferme un livre?* (Marseille : Le bec en l’air, 2015), Unpaginated.

<sup>499</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 3.

<sup>500</sup> Sontag, as cited 1977, p. 9.

<sup>501</sup> Sontag, as cited 1977, p. 3.

<sup>502</sup> R Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (London: Vintage Classics, 2000), p. 74.

<sup>503</sup> Mentioned by M. Boudjelal in a conversation between artist and writer, 16 February 2016.

<sup>504</sup> ‘Algiers, three hours before my departure to France.’ JI (2009), first group of photographs, unpaginated.



Four photographs of Boudjelal's baby daughter and three of him with her are significant because Boudjelal strongly connects the birth of his daughter with his discovery of Algeria.<sup>505</sup> One of the most striking black and white photos is of Lemaouche whose face has been painted over in white. This offers a dominating thread within the first half of the narrative. A powerful father/son theme develops up to the end of 1997 as both Bruno and Lemaouche try unsuccessfully to establish better relations. Their efforts are frustrated by the intrusion of the past, very different temperaments, and specific acts by Lemaouche that appear as betrayals. Lemaouche repeatedly fails to act as protector and on a number of occasions he deserts his son and signally fails to help Bruno negotiate his fragile 'in-betweenness' in terms of family, culture and nationality.

Boudjelal's overpainting of the Lemaouche photo is clearly a reference to *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Fanon's study of the psychology of the racism and dehumanization inherent in situations of colonial domination.<sup>506</sup> Amanda Crawley-Jackson rightly describes this mutilation as a 'violent gesture of dis-identification and erasure' and a repudiation of the father.<sup>507</sup> Boudjelal's anger and sense of betrayal by his father are clear and his text and the photographs, particularly of the visits up to the end of 1997, often seem to take on the form of a literary parricide – reminding us that 'the camera assassinates'.<sup>508</sup> Yet Lemaouche and Bruno are both victims of their postcolonial situation. Fanon is not condemning those psychologically as well as materially damaged by colonialism, the solidarity is in the title, the blackness of skin provides a common ground – the 'masks of white' are individually different in their plurality. Yet the frequency of Lemaouche's betrayals of his son and his son's bitterness towards him support Crawley-Jackson's interpretation. The photo also offers metonymically a more general context for the traumatic relationships unfolding in the narrative: the consequences of a violent colonial past.

Some potential narrative elements are occluded from Boudjelal's account, for example his relation to his first wife and his mother, and these point to submerged tributaries to his main story. We are presented with a parergon that constantly leaks out of the main frame of the narrative in tributary narratives related to family and national history. This is, with hindsight, partly acknowledged by Boudjelal when he notes that it is possible that all his trips to Algeria

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<sup>505</sup> Entry 11 April 1999 JI (2009) 'Je vais être papa. Je ne sais pas bien me l'expliquer, mais je suis intimement convaincu que l'arrivée de cet enfant est liée au fait d'avoir retrouvé les miens en Algérie.'

<sup>506</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952).

<sup>507</sup> See Amanda Crawley-Jackson, 2014 as cited, p. 204.

<sup>508</sup> Sontag, as cited 1977, p. 13.

may just have been detours from his relation with France: ‘Tous mes voyages en Algérie depuis vingt ans n’avaient-ils finalement pas été de multiples détours pour mieux m’en retourner ici?’<sup>509</sup> A relationship with France but not necessarily with his French family including his mother with whom, as Boudjelal acknowledges, he steadily lost contact over the years.<sup>510</sup>

Boudjelal’s eight trips to Algeria are described chronologically in five pieces of text interspersed with 138 pages of photographs. The context to the first trip to Algeria was Boudjelal breaking his wrist and being temporarily unable to pursue his job as a travel guide with Terres d’aventure in Burma. This seems to be the catalyst for his decision to visit Algeria and to make contact with his father’s family. At this stage the photography was secondary as he felt that presenting himself to his Algerian relatives as a professional photographer would give him substance.<sup>511</sup> Sontag notes ‘(t)ravel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs’, it is travellers who are the most fervent picture-takers and the camera acts as a device for experiencing things.<sup>512</sup> However, to start this projected career as a photographer and make the transition from tourist guide to a photographer of journeys, Boudjelal had to borrow a camera from a friend who also offered him the choice of rolls of black and white film or colour. Boudjelal decided arbitrarily, but in hindsight with great significance, on black and white, and a type of film that produced dark and grainy photographs.

Boudjelal is let down by his father who, true to type, had agreed to brief his son on his Algerian family but failed to turn up.<sup>513</sup> Boudjelal takes the ferry from Marseille and, in Algiers, stays at the flat of a friend of a Parisian friend. He wanders round the city sightseeing, using a *Guide-Bleu* of Algeria displaced in its cartography by the seismic effect of civil war, taking photos of all and sundry, blithely unaware of the dangers of the civil war in progress. Boudjelal notes that he attracts the attention of two ‘ninjas’ or members of the

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<sup>509</sup> ‘Had all my journeys to Algeria over twenty years been just so many detours, the better to be able to return here?’ B Boudjelal, *Algérie clos comme un livre*, as cited 2015, unpaginated, section entitled ‘Détours –Retour’. This thought may have derived from Boudjelal’s reading of Amanda Crawley-Jackson’s ‘Retour/détour’ article as cited 2014, which was based on a series of Skype conversations with M. Boudjelal before the publication of the book.

<sup>510</sup> The statement about losing touch with his French family but particularly his mother was made during the writer’s conversation with the artist 16 February 2016.

<sup>511</sup> See Boudjelal, 2015 as cited, ‘Bien sûr, je disais que je venais voir la famille mais je disais aussi que je venais photographeur l’Algérie alors que je n’avais jamais encore réalisé de reportage’.

<sup>512</sup> Sontag, as cited 1977, pp. 9-10.

<sup>513</sup> Entry 1 May 1993 JI (2009), ‘Ce matin, J’avais rendez-vous avec mon père pour qu’il me donne des informations sur notre famille afin que je puisse la retrouver, il n’est pas venu’.

GIS (Groupe d'Intervention Spécial, a special forces group specifically created to target the Islamists) who pushed him down and searched him. They are amused when they find the *Guide-Bleu* and tease him: 'On n'a jamais vu personne avec un guide touristique ici, tu dois être vraiment fou!', and they let him go.<sup>514</sup> The next day, either still ignorant of or ignoring the dangers, Boudjelal wanders around Bab El-Oued. In 1993 this was the stronghold of the Front Islamique du Salut or Islamic Salvation Front and therefore a very dangerous place.<sup>515</sup> He is beaten up by youths but clings desperately to his camera. Boudjelal writes of his relief when two traffic police, again after quite reasonably questioning his sanity for taking these risks, take him to a police barracks for his own safety where he hears screaming: 'Mon sang se glace..... ils sont en train de torturer quelqu'un! Je n'ai qu'une seule idée en tête: fuir, partir, quitter ce lieu, cette ville, ce pays maudit'.<sup>516</sup>

Eventually Boudjelal arrives at the home of his aunt Nouara near Sétif where he is warmly welcomed. Sétif is significant as a centre for exploring a country torn apart by violence given that it was the site of a series of massacres prior to the War of Independence.<sup>517</sup> Meeting the family, Boudjelal is struck by the differences in language and begins to understand both the linguistic and cultural gap that his inscription with 'Frenchness' created for him. Derrida observes that the politics of language and culture has a colonising role and, as noted above, 'naming' is a significant aspect of this.<sup>518</sup> Boudjelal's mother tongue is his mother's tongue, the language of the culture by which, from one perspective, he has been colonised.<sup>519</sup> The issue of language emerges in the questioning of the Frenchness of Bruno's names in *Jours Intranquilles*, for example, his father, in a later visit, is embarrassed when Aunt Nouara asks

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<sup>514</sup> 'We have never seen anyone with a tourist guide here you must be completely mad'. JI (2009), entry 3 May 1993.

<sup>515</sup> The Islamic Salvation Front or Front Islamique du Salut was a Salafist Islamist political party in Algeria. The party had two major leaders representing its two main bases of support: Abbassi Madani appealed to small businessmen and Ali Belhadj appealed to disaffected, unemployed youth. It became a legal political party in September 1989 and received more than half the votes cast in the 1990 local government elections. Its spectacular success in the 1992 general election precipitated the subsequent military coup and the banning of the FIS. The FIS developed an armed wing called the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS). See for example Ray Takeyh, 'Islamism in Algeria: A struggle between hope and agony', *Middle East Policy*, Summer 2003, No 2. <http://www.cfr.org/world/islamism-algeria-struggle-between-hope-agony/p7335>. Accessed 4/8/2018.

<sup>516</sup> 'My blood runs cold...they're torturing someone. I've now have only one idea in my head: to run, escape, leave this place, this town, this damned country'. Entry 3 May 1993 JI (2009).

<sup>517</sup> A massacre of 103 Europeans, mostly civilians, resulted in reprisals which far exceeded in scale the killings that had provoked them. Estimates of those killed vary between 1,020 (the official French figure given in the Tubert Report shortly after the massacre) and 45,000 people (as claimed by Radio Cairo at the time). Alistair Horne notes that 6,000 was the figure finally settled on by moderate historians but acknowledges that this remains only an estimate. An account of the Sétif massacre can be found in Horne's *A Savage War of Peace*, as cited 1977, p. 26.

<sup>518</sup> J Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 1998 as cited, p. 39.

<sup>519</sup> See in particular the latter part of Chapter Five and Chapter Six of Derrida's *Monolingualism*, 1998 as cited, on the problematic of 'mother tongue'.

Lemaouche: ““Mais pourquoi donc ce nom de Bruno? N’étais-tu donc pas fier d’avoir un fils?” Mon père blêmit’.<sup>520</sup> Moreover, Lemaouche never acknowledges in Algeria that he calls himself ‘Jean-Claude’ in France; configuring his identity differently in France and Algeria.

Boudjelal is taken to the family’s ruined farm at Anini. Perhaps to give him insight into Lemaouche’s situation, Nouara mentions that Boudjelal’s grandfather Amar was ‘un homme austère et sévère’, (‘a stern and strict man’), who tried to stop him going to school. She says that Boudjelal’s father spent his time looking after the animals in the fields and ‘Il a eu sa première paire de chaussures seulement à 17 ans. Quand ton grand-père est mort, il n’avait plus qu’une idée en tête, partir’.<sup>521</sup> Boudjelal writes that she gives him an envelope with two photographs of his grandfather Amar but, as mentioned earlier, this is not exactly the case. He decides to continue his exploration of Algeria although his aunt Nouara does not want him to leave: ““Mais pour quoi faire?” me dit-elle à chaque fois. “Que cherches-tu? Tu nous as trouvés et nous sommes à nouveau réunis!””<sup>522</sup> Disregarding this entreaty, Boudjelal leaves for eight days, presumably taking photographs in the surrounding country. After celebrating Eid, Boudjelal returns to France convinced that: ‘Ce voyage a été trop difficile pour moi, il m’a obligé de plonger beaucoup trop profondément en moi-même pour trouver l’énergie de surmonter toute cette adversité. Je pensais en allant en Algérie trouver des réponses, ce sont toutes mes certitudes qui ont volé en éclats’.<sup>523</sup> Boudjelal’s journeys appear to fragment further his understanding of who he is rather than consolidating a sense of his identity.

Boudjelal’s photographs, it is often noted, metonymically reflect the situation of the ‘dirty war’ in Algeria in the 1990s.<sup>524</sup> This is true but it is also important to note that the way the photographs turned out was due more to chance than to intent. On his return to France, after the development of the rolls of film, Boudjelal felt that the photographs had failed (*ratée*) given their blurriness (*flou*) and were ‘uncentred’ or not obvious in their compositional

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<sup>520</sup> ‘But where did this name of Bruno come from? Weren’t you proud to have a son? My father blushed’. Entry 8 November 1997 JI (2009).

<sup>521</sup> ‘He didn’t get his first pair of shoes until he was 17. He’d only one idea in his head when your grandfather died - to get away’. Entry 6 June 1993 JI (2009).

<sup>522</sup> ““To do what?” she says to me each time. “What are you looking for? You’ve found us and we’re all together again””. Entry 28 May 1993 JI (2009).

<sup>523</sup> ‘I’ll never come back to Algeria... This trip has been too difficult for me, it’s forced me to delve too deeply into myself to find the energy to overcome this adversity I thought I was coming to Algeria to find answers but all my certainties have been smashed to pieces’. Entry 8 June 1993 JI (2009).

<sup>524</sup> See for example A Crawley-Jackson, as cited 2014 and Katarzyna Fałęcka, ‘In and Out of Algeria: Bruno Boudjelal’s Documentary of Affect’, *Ibraaz, Contemporary Visual Culture in North Africa and the Middle East*, 29 January 2016. <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/137> . Accessed 4/8/2018.

arrangement (décadré).<sup>525</sup> This was due to his photographic inexperience, the nature of the film used and because of the surreptitious way in which he was obliged to take the photographs. Boudjelal, after reflecting on the films, began to recognise that, far from failing photographically, he had established a distinctive style and a potentially metonymic relationship between his use of the camera and the situation of the Algerian people in the civil war. The blurred, dark, grainy photos and their depiction of claustrophobic interiors and gloomy landscapes act to reflect the Algeria he is experiencing and its impact on the daily life of Algerians, (*see image 35 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Four*).

Although the distinctive style of Boudjelal is accidental in origin it became subsequently metonymic for, not so much the ‘dirty war’, but rather the situation of the Algerian people themselves living in the conditions of the civil war. Interestingly, the style does not fundamentally change when used in other later and non-Algerian contexts. This seems to imply that while reflecting the situation of the Algerian ‘dirty war’ it is not restricted to it. It becomes a feature of his work – his ‘brand’ - running through all his photographic exhibitions with a more general metonymic value in relation to the instability of identity and community as such and the ambiguity of traces of past histories and memory.<sup>526</sup>

After consulting with friends experienced in photography, Boudjelal makes contact with potential publishers. The magazine *Libé* published two photos, *L'événement du jeudi* published others, and, after a visit to London, the *Observer supplement* did a spread. The Ile-de-Paris DRAC (Directions régionales des affaires culturelles) concerned with regional initiatives funded by the French Ministry of Culture and Communication also commissioned him to do a photographic study of the Turkish community which resulted in a small exhibition in Paris.<sup>527</sup> For someone who has just begun to make a photographic career this is extraordinary progress. In part it may be that his work appeared at the right time. The Algerian massacres were in the headlines and terrorism and fundamentalism were news.<sup>528</sup> Boudjelal then worked for Sipa Press for six months but left because of his dissatisfaction

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<sup>525</sup> These are terms used by the artist about these first photographs at a talk on 18 February 2016 at the University of Sheffield.

<sup>526</sup> For example, his works such as: *Gurbet: Turc d'ici*, (Paris: Les éditions de l'Imprimeur, 1996); *Algérie clos comme un livre*, (Paris: Le Bec en l'Air, 2015); and *Who knows tomorrow, Ghana*, (Paris: Editions de l'Oeil, 2008).

<sup>527</sup> See Ministère de la Culture website, ‘Régions’. <http://www.culturecommunication.gouv.fr/Regions> . Accessed 5/2/2019.

<sup>528</sup> For example, in 1993 the World Trade Centre was bombed in New York, there were horrendous bombings in Bombay, there were widespread protests by Muslims regarding *The Satanic Verses* and in the UK there were the Warrington bomb attacks.

with the assignments he was offered.<sup>529</sup> In summary, after a promising start, Boudjelal's career as a photographer began to stall and from 1995 to mid-1997 he returned to working as a tour guide.

In June 1997 Boudjelal returned to Algeria with his father despite his doubts of the wisdom of the trip, in part because of his father, but also: 'L'Algérie semble en plein chaos, c'est la première fois que je voyage avec mon père et puis personnellement je ne sais pas trop où j'en suis. Vais-je là-bas juste pour rendre visite à la famille ou bien est-ce la suite du travail photographique commence en 1993?'<sup>530</sup> The dangers were very real as in the first half of 1997 the massacres started to occur more regularly in a terrible rhythm of violence.<sup>531</sup> In effect Boudjelal was making photographs within a war zone. Later in 2006 Boudjelal says 'I did not have any photographic style but for me, photography was tied to the tradition of conflict zone photography. At that time, accidentally or not, Algeria was driven by war'.<sup>532</sup>

In November 1997 father and son visit Algeria together again, a journey punctuated by road blocks and police searches. At Nouara's house a family row erupts when Lemaouche refuses to contribute 5000 francs to a cousin's wedding, Boudjelal is disgusted since his father is supposed to be head of the family now. Lemaouche holds a big party, held in two houses to allow separation of the men and women. Both spend more time with the women and Bruno begins to develop an insight into the difficult and restricted lives faced by women in a country where they were legally, and in many respects culturally, 'minors'.<sup>533</sup> There are photos of the women dancing in traditional dress without men and seeming to have fun. The significance of this sexual apartheid is developed in more detail in Chapter Five in relation to public and private space but also in relation to marriage in the work of Zoubir and Kameli.

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<sup>529</sup> Sipa Press was founded in Paris in 1973 by Turkish photojournalist Gökşin Sipahioğlu (1926 – 2011), one of the father figures of photojournalism. Boudjelal was unhappy with assignments such as photographing daily life at Roissy Airport.

<sup>530</sup> 'Algeria is in the middle of chaos...I'm not sure what I am up to – am I just going over to revisit the family or is it a continuation of the photographic project I'd started in 1993?' Entry 30 June 1997 JI (2009).

<sup>531</sup> In April 1997 there were massacres in Haouch Khemisi, Thalit, and Omana and in Dairet Labguer in June 1997. See Algeria-Watch, 'Chronologie des massacres en Algérie (1992 – 2004)', *Algeria-Watch: Informations sur la situation des droits humains en Algérie*, décembre 18, 2015, Algeria-Watch website. <https://algeria-watch.org/?p=52909>. Accessed 4/8/2018.

<sup>532</sup> Quoted in Katarzyna Fałęcka, January 2016 as cited.

<sup>533</sup> The 1984 family code was designed to appeal to Islamic fundamentalists by meeting a few of their basic priorities, women in effect were treated as legal 'minors'. See for example Boutheina Cheriet, 'Islamism and Feminism: Algeria's Rites of Passage to Democracy', in John P. Entelis and Phillip C. Naylor, (Eds.), *State and Society in Algeria*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 171–215 and Nadia Marzouki, 'Algeria', in Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin, (Eds.), *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress Amid Resistance*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), pp. 29–58.

Returning to France, Boudjelal is stopped by Algerian immigration because he did not have his military service document. His father deserts him in terror after being accused as a traitor by the border police for travelling on a French passport and having changed his name to Jean-Claude. The military papers are actually in Paris and Boudjelal had to contact a friend who sent them to his hotel. Hakim, a cousin, retrieved the military service papers and commented sourly that for Bruno it was just a matter of patience to leave Algeria while those who live here were here for the rest of their life.<sup>534</sup>

On his return to France, Boudjelal's career takes off as his work on Algeria is recognised and finds a market in France and internationally. There are spreads in *Geo* ('L'Algérie au coeur'), the *New York Times Magazine* and *Stern*.<sup>535</sup> As a result Boudjelal's fourth trip in April 1999 involves a changed relation to the country and an evolved understanding of his personal and artistic identity: 'the quest for an identity was supplemented by a documentary examination of an Algeria that I was starting to discover and to photograph'.<sup>536</sup> Boudjelal records, in the sole mention of his Portuguese wife, that Alda is pregnant and, as noted above, he is convinced that the arrival of the child is linked to discovering his family in Algeria.<sup>537</sup>

By Boudjelal's fifth trip in July 1999, the aesthetic and critical connections he is making in his work reinforce his determination to explore Algeria from an increasingly political perspective. This connection the artist makes between art and politics changed something within him and he recounts that he felt relaxed for the first time about going to Algeria.<sup>538</sup> He had a growing circle of politically active friends, in particular Hamida, who persuaded him to travel beyond the familial confines, (*see image 36 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Four*).

For the first time in Algeria Boudjelal ate a meal sharing a table with a woman. Through Hamida and another friend Dahmane, he began to understand the disturbing nature of society and politics in Algeria. He visited both poor urban Algiers and the rich resort called the 'Pine Tree Club' and is struck by the extremes of wealth in Algeria and the cultural separations resulting from them: of language (rural Arabic and urban French) and of sex (amongst the

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<sup>534</sup> Entries 15 and 16 November 1997 JI (2009) and a conversation with M. Boudjelal, 16 February 2016.

<sup>535</sup> See Marien Nur Goni, 'Bruno Boudjelal: De la photographie en mouvement, entretien de Marien Nur Goni avec Bruno Boudjelal', *Africultures*, 06/07/2010. <http://www.africultures.com/php/?nav=article&no=9578> . Accessed 20/12/2015.

<sup>536</sup> Quoted on Autograph website, <http://www.autograph-abp-shop.co.uk/books/disquiet-days> . Accessed 16/12/2015.

<sup>537</sup> Entry 11 April 1999 JI (2009).

<sup>538</sup> Entry 17 July 1999 JI (2009).

poor a separation of sexes, but a middle class environment in which sexes mix, although not necessarily on an equal basis).<sup>539</sup>

Between August 2001 and May 2003 Boudjelal visits Algeria a further three times. The 2001 trip related to a commission on the alleged success story of Algerian youth after the experiences of the 1990s.<sup>540</sup> However, his meetings with Algerian youth reveal that they all just want to leave the country.<sup>541</sup> Boudjelal spends time with his friend, Hamida, who is closely involved with SOS Disparus and he is shocked by the stories of those who have lost loved ones in the ‘dirty war’.<sup>542</sup> Boudjelal visits Beni-Messous, the site of a massacre, where he met Mourad who lost his entire family. That evening they visit the nightspots of Algiers together taking in bars, cabarets, private clubs, and brothels.<sup>543</sup> The photos of bars and brothels are sometimes in colour but frequently remain blurred and out of focus. There is much talk of the corruption of the regime and Boudjelal is appalled by the situation of the women.

This represented an epiphany for Bruno who now believed that he had previously hidden from reality. He was beginning to share the experiences of other Algerians:

‘Peur de sortir seul, peur de parler aux gens, peur d’être suivi dans la rue, peur de me faire arrêter par la police, peur d’aller au Collectif des disparus, peur de ne plus rentrer en France. Bref, tout simplement peur d’être confronté à toutes ces horreurs’.<sup>544</sup>

Nevertheless, his friend Dahmane takes him to visit Bentalha, the site of another massacre where Boudjelal takes 15 hurried photos before fleeing on the approach of police.<sup>545</sup> The

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<sup>539</sup> Entry 29 July 1999 JI (2009).

<sup>540</sup> Entry 28 August 2001 JI (2009).

<sup>541</sup> Entry 29 August 2001 JI (2009).

<sup>542</sup> Entry 1 September 2001 JI. The Facebook page of SOS Disparu describes itself as ‘une association de droits de l’Homme cherchant vérité, justice et mémoire pour les victimes de disparition forcées des années 90 en Algérie’ (A Human Rights Association seeking truth, justice and remembrance of the victims of forced disappearances in Algeria in the 1990s).

<sup>543</sup> Entry 4 September 2001 JI (2009).

<sup>544</sup> ‘(f)rightened of going out alone; frightened to speak to people; frightened of being followed in the street; frightened of being picked up by the police; frightened of going to the Association of the Disappeared; frightened of never being able to return to France. Finally, simply a fear of being here and of being faced with all this horror’, Entry 2 September 2001 JI (2009).

<sup>545</sup> On 27 September 1997 some two hundred armed men attacked Bentalha, a suburb of Algiers and tortured, mutilated and killed as many as 400 men, women and children. See Nesroulah Yous, *Qui a tué à Bentalha?*, as cited 2000. On the ‘Dirty War’ in general see Martin Evans and John Phillips, *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), Benjamin Stora, *Algeria, 1830-2000: A Short History*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001) and Benjamin Stora and Mohammed Harbi, *La guerre d’Algérie: 1954-2004, la fin de l’amnésie*, (Paris :Robert Laffont, 2004). Of particular interest, given his involvement in the Algerian Special Forces, is Habib Souaïdia, *La sale guerre: Le témoignage d’un ancien officier des forces spéciales de l’armée algérienne*, (Paris: Découverte, 2001). Luis Martinez, *The Algerian Civil*



Bentalha experience and the evidence he has seen of the corruption of the regime and the oppression of woman affects Boudjelal deeply who returned to France ruminating:

‘Du retour de France, pendant longtemps je me demandais si le sentiment d’avoir été “au cœur de ténèbres” était le fruit de mon imagination ou non. Et c’est bien plus tard, en développant le film de Bentalha que j’ai compris que les choses que j’avais ressenties existaient bel et bien’.<sup>546</sup>

As usual Boudjelal had left the rolls of film for some time before developing them and was disturbed emotionally when he examined them. Boudjelal felt that it was only through the visual evidence of his photos, however blurred and ambiguous, that he was able to grasp the reality of the scenes that he had photographed at Bentalha. The photographs appeared to him more real than that of which they were photographs, as if in some way they communicated the horror of Bentalha as a massacre more effectively than Bentalha itself. The photographs aroused in Boudjelal a deepening understanding of the brutality of the conflict and the corruption and failings of the regime which fed into his growing hostility towards it.

### *Algeria Act 2*

Act 2 of *Jours Intranquilles* is composed of two elements: an essay by Selima Ghezali, an Algerian woman activist, magazine editor and teacher, who examines the divisions that fragment Algerian society by exploring the range of differing conceptions of what it is to be Algerian in relation to the events of the 1990s. She describes modernisers who remained silent when the regime began its assassinations; nationalists who defended the state against any ‘enemy’ it identified; Islamists or ‘bastards in beards’ who justified rape and murder of women and those who changed their ‘identity’ depending on the situation either through fear or for the sake of personal advantage. Crucially in relation to the argument concerning the form and content of Boudjelal’s work she writes:

‘Le monde redevenu flou. Comme avant l’indépendance.

Irrémédiatement flou.

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*War, 1990-98*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), is interesting in that Martinez points to the historical consistency of aspects of the civil war with earlier Algerian history. A very personal insight into the period by a woman who received many death threats from the FIS and others is Khalida Messaoudi, *Unbowed: An Algerian Woman Confronts Islamic Fundamentalism*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1995).

<sup>546</sup> ‘Whether the feeling of having been in the “heart of darkness” was simply the fruit of my imagination. It was only much later, when I had developed the film from Bentalha, that I understood that what I imagined did really exist in reality’. Undated entry JI (2009) headed ‘Bentalha: the site of a massacre’.

Et il restera jusqu'à l'élaboration d'un nouveau paradigme politique, social, et culturel capable de rendre –après ce désastre – encore possible de vivre son 'algérianité'.<sup>547</sup>

Boudjelal, reflecting on his experience of Bentalha, referred to Algeria as a 'heart of darkness' and therefore surely to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe considers that 'the Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as "the other world", the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality'.<sup>548</sup> The reference may be ironic but it may also illustrate the profound shock that Boudjelal is experiencing in his travels across Algeria. For Boudjelal this marks the demolition of his early hopes and idealisation of Algeria.

Benjamin Stora considers that the absence of images of the violence in the 1990s created a crisis of representation in which it was impossible to depict the civil war because of how it was conducted.<sup>549</sup> The Algerian government strictly controlled access to massacre sites and frequently excluded foreign journalists as Algerian journalists were easier to intimidate and control. The photos that were permitted tended to be of the sort taken after the massacre at Rais in the Sidi Moussa region of Algeria in August 1997 with long lines of shrouded bodies with anxious relatives seeking to identify their loved ones.<sup>550</sup> There is no interrogation of the reasons for the massacre or who its perpetrators might be, simply a photo of its victims. Very occasionally, an Algerian journalist managed to produce and smuggle out a different type of photo such as that by Hocine Zaourar of a photo of a woman grieving outside Zmirli Hospital, where the dead and wounded had been taken after the massacre at Bentalha. This photo was subsequently enfolded, by careful editing, in the trappings of Christian iconography and made famous as the Madonna of Bentalha.<sup>551</sup> The 'Madonna photograph' gave an aura or notoriety to the Bentalha massacre that the others, such as that at Beni-Messous, did not attain.

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<sup>547</sup> Ghezali's 'Act 2' essay, JI (2009). 'The world again became blurred. Like before Independence. Irremediably blurred. And it will remain like that until a new cultural, social and political paradigm capable of making it possible again – after this disaster – to live one's "algérianité"'.  
<sup>548</sup> Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"', *Massachusetts Review*, 18(4), 1977, pp. 782-794. <http://kirbyk.net/hod/image.of.africa.html>. Accessed 6/8/2018.

<sup>549</sup> Quoted in A Crawley-Jackson, *Retour/Détour* as cited 2014, pp. 211-213.

<sup>550</sup> See article Craig R. Whitney, '98 Die in One of Algerian Civil War's Worst Massacres', *New York Times*, 30 August 1997. <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/08/30/world/98-die-in-one-of-algerian-civil-war-s-worst-massacres.html>. Accessed 6/8/2018.

<sup>551</sup> There is something of an academic and artistic industry built around the image. See Juliette Hanrot, *La Madone de Bentalha: Histoire d'une photographie*, (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012) and Pierre-Alban Delannoy, *La piété de Bentalha: Etude du processus interprétatif d'une photo de presse*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005). The photo has also been used as a referent for sculpture by Pascal Convert, a video of the sculpture can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATyiTrCvXFk>. Accessed 6/7/2018.

The style and obliquity of Boudjelal's photographs, in part a result of the speedy and covert way in which the artist was often compelled to take them, resulted in surreptitious shots of darkened streets and blurred interiors in which he constructed the daily threat of violence immersing the people of Algeria. This is perhaps the most significant way Boudjelal constructs meaning in his art but it is supplemented by the oblique way he suggests violence and fear in his choice of frequently mundane subjects. Judith Butler, accepting that images cannot provide us with an understanding of what we see because they lack narrative coherence, disputes Sontag's claim that the photo can only affect us. Butler appears to argue that although photographs need captions and analysis they also *in themselves* offer a form of interpretation that moves beyond affect: 'it is not just that the photographer and/or the viewer actively and deliberately interpret, but that the photograph itself becomes a structuring scene of interpretation—and one that may unsettle both maker and viewer in turn'.<sup>552</sup> The metonymic impact of Boudjelal's photos does seem to have some of this quality as well as being affective. Walter Benjamin says of Atget's photographs that 'he photographed them like scenes of crime' and at times Boudjelal's photos have that quality.<sup>553</sup> However, Boudjelal is clearly uncertain about whether the photographs stand on their own which is why he decided to supplement his photos in the book with text. Butler is right, photographs do have an evidential element in addition to their affective quality but not to the degree that captions and other forms of text can be completely dispensed with. The dialogue and play between text and photographs enables Boudjelal to draw attention to the complexity of the personal and political points he makes in the artwork's overall construction. All of Boudjelal's exhibitions of photographs are accompanied by texts explaining their contexts, each in this way supplements the other.<sup>554</sup> What is interesting is how the inherently fragmented status of the photographs – each an object that relates to a moment in time – is supplemented by a textual narrative that is also fragmentary and at times occlusive, reflecting displacements at a personal, national and transnational level.

*Jours Intranquilles* depicts not a static entity whether person, narrative or nation but enactments of affective and existential processes, necessarily mixed, confused, contradictory and in motion. It is through this complexity and fragmentation that Boudjelal's work

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<sup>552</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), p. 67.

<sup>553</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, (London: Penguin, 2008), see section VI.

<sup>554</sup> This was mentioned by M. Boudjelal in response to a question by the writer about the relation of text to image in his work. Interview with M Boudjelal 16 March 2016.

demonstrates *différance* - Derrida's play on the French word *différer* which means both 'to defer' and 'to differ' – and the uniqueness of his identity and its instability. The fragmented elements of family, community and nation reflect Boudjelal's construction of his simulacrum which has no origin as 'one true self' but is located in a space of becoming. The artist Linda Benedict-Jones has explained her relationship to photography as initially a way of framing the world but which developed over time as something much more about engaging with identity with the photographs becoming mirrors reflecting herself whatever the subject.<sup>555</sup> Something similar occurs with Boudjelal although in more traumatic circumstances and more swiftly. Boudjelal engages with his confusion and resentment regarding the circumstances of his birth and early life by working episodically, in his trips to Algeria, through necessarily fragmented and ultimately unresolved processes of *différance* and becoming. The repeated - broken – journeys to Algeria and his Algerian family do not resolve his problems. However, a new dimension to his sense of himself and an increasingly political perspective to his work is added through his interaction with a growing number of political and artistic friends inside and outside of Algeria. Nevertheless, the fragmented cultural binary of being French and Algerian is not resolved. As Boudjelal recently remarked 'I am between but what it is to be between I don't know'.<sup>556</sup> This sense of being between and his confusion and ambivalence regarding this is reflected in the dynamic relationship between form and theme in his work.

Developing right through the narrative is his talent and potential as a photographer and, despite all the unresolved issues related to family and nationality, this is what grounds and provides the logic of connection in his developing sense of himself. It provides distance and perspective on his relations with family, nationality, and diaspora and enables him to have a position from which to negotiate his critical relation to Algerian politics and society. The one constant is the steady progress of his sense of himself as an artist, the effectiveness and distinctiveness of his art practice and the gradual recognition by others of his importance as an artist and photographer. This last was most recently recognised by the award of the 60<sup>th</sup> Prix Nadar for his work *Algérie, Clos comme on ferme un livre?* (2015).

Bruno Boudjelal's commitment to 'discovering' his identity and his conflictual entanglements with communities both sides of the Mediterranean arose out of his fraught early life and his engagement with its consequences. The artist's journeys developed out of

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<sup>555</sup> The Benedict-Jones comment was noticed in her handwritten note on a sheet of paper at an exhibition of her work at the Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield on 18/10/2018.

<sup>556</sup> Skype interview between Amanda Crawley-Jackson, Martin Elms and Bruno Boudjelal, January 2016.

this conflicted lived experience and find expression in Boudjelal's exploration of identity and his relationship with community through his art. His childhood experiences gave his art a traumatic existential focus that is more acute than many other artists examined in this study.

Boudjelal appears to feel a personal obligation to voice his concern for the people of Algeria as a result of his engagement with a critical period in the country's history. To regard him as an aesthetic or artistic 'professional Algerian' would underestimate the complexity of his journey as an individual and artist and is anyway a claim he has never made. It would be just as simplistic to regard him as a 'professional Franco-Algerian' although in his more recent work he has explored in some depth the people and conditions of the French banlieues where he was brought up and still lives. In his recent work *Le voyage improbable*, a photographic exploration of the Paris banlieues, Boudjelal writes that the 'voyage est lié à l'aventure, une aventure humaine où se mêlent découverte de soi et rencontre de gens inconnus, et bien souvent d'une autre culture'.<sup>557</sup> Boudjelal has commented before on the transformative aspect of travel. He commenced his working life as a travel guide and he developed a career as a photographer. As an artist Boudjelal resembles Bourriaud's 'semionaut' travelling the world engaging with the signs and signifiers of the countries that he traverses.

It is useful to recall Boudjelal's statement mentioned earlier that 'sometimes I play the Algerian guy' and his fascination with Pessoa's multiple egos in *The Book of Disquiet*. To expect such a complicated individual to present himself in simple terms without contradictions or imaginings would be unrealistic and would miss the underlying issues related to a mythology of origins and the pains and frustrations of 'becoming'. Boudjelal's life and work is an attempt to negotiate his relationships with family, nationality and personal identity. In this journey the artist developed a growing understanding of how his art also helped him to configure his relation to the wider world but always within the terms of the uncertainties contained within the blur of his photographs, which metonymically indicate both movement and multiplicity. In these journeys the point of return is always Paris despite his traumatic childhood experiences.

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<sup>557</sup> 'The trip is about adventure, a human adventure which blends self-discovery and meeting strangers often from another culture'. See his statement regarding this work on the website of the 2017 Photo-reporter Festival St. Brieuc France. <http://www.festival-photoreporter.fr/fr/bruno-boudjelal/>. Accessed 12/4/2018.

Boudjelal's work is situated within the postcolonial in the sense of its being related to the aftermath of colonialism and its fracturing effects on identity and community.<sup>558</sup> It can also be linked to the strands of Western soft power and cultural diplomacy. The artist's work benefits from its topicality and its engagement with the intense proximities of contemporary society referred to in Chapter One. In particular, as an artist Boudjelal has benefitted from Western concerns to create the 'bridges of understanding' mentioned in Chapter One with the 'Other'. This started early in his career with the above mentioned newspaper and magazine spreads in *Geo*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and *Stern*.<sup>559</sup> His biggest breakthrough was with *Jours Intranquilles* after his photographs attracted the attentions of Autograph ABP because of the way his work 'endlessly questions his own identity and confronts us with our own'.<sup>560</sup> The attraction of Boudjelal's photographs to Autograph ABP was the way the themes of the photographs were in conformity to its mission of:

'advocating the inclusion of historically marginalised photographic practices, Autograph ABP is a charity that works internationally in photography and film, cultural identity, race, representation and human rights'.

In this respect the connection of Boudjelal's photos with Algeria's disappeared, its poor record on human rights, its civil conflicts and lack of democracy fitted Autograph ABP's agenda very precisely. Autograph ABP has continued to commission works by Boudjelal related to Pan-Africanism and African identity including the series on the Democratic Republic of Congo (with an interest in Lumumba), Egypt (Nasser) and Burkina Faso (Thomas Sankara). Boudjelal has also produced work as a result of his residency in the Drill Hall neighbourhood of Johannesburg. It is important to reiterate that this is not a criticism of either Boudjelal's work or the political positioning of Autograph ABP. The difficulty is in the risk that this may define and inscribe the 'other' and its art in terms that link conditions of conflict, violence and conflicted identity to stereotypical views. In this sense Boudjelal's key 'selling point' within the terms of the international art market could be argued to relate to the way in which his work confirms rather than challenges the way the art market and its spectators, collectors and galleries configure the identity and communities of the 'other'. But

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<sup>558</sup> A good explanation of the aftermath of colonialism and its effects is in Robert J.C. Young, 'What is the Postcolonial?' *Ariel on-line*, University of Calgary Press, Vol. 40, No. 1, January 2009. <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/ariel/article/download/33560/27604> . Accessed 6/8/2018.

<sup>559</sup> See Marien Nur Goni as cited 06/07/2010.

<sup>560</sup> Autograph ABP website, Section on Bruno Boudjelal. <https://www.agencevu.com/photographers/photographer.php?id=10> . Accessed 6/8/2018.

it can also rightly be configured as a raw realism which draws attention to issues of social justice and inequality.

Aspects of ‘soft power’ and ‘cultural diplomacy’ from which Boudjelal has distanced himself are the attempts by the Algerian regime, in the form of the Ministry of Culture, to legitimise itself by making links with artists, including those of Algerian origin, who live and work outside of Algeria. Boudjelal’s work has been critical of the Algerian regime and aspects of Algerian society particularly in relation to the position of women. His own relationship with the Ministry of Culture has therefore been very distant in comparison with that of Zineb Sedira whose work is considered below. However, recently Boudjelal has worked closely with young Algerian photographers in an effort to mentor them. In 2015, Boudjelal led a two-week photography workshop in Algiers with 15 young photographers from different regions of Algeria. This subsequently resulted in their work appearing in a joint exhibition as part of the Bamako Biennial in 2015.<sup>561</sup> This in turn resulted in an exhibition at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris curated by Boudjelal, and organised jointly by the Ville de Paris, the Agence Algérienne Pour le Rayonnement Culturel (AARC), and the Institut Français in Algiers. This may signal a change in Boudjelal’s relationship, not to the regime, but to his relationship with art and artists in Algeria.

### **Zineb Sedira: *Saphir***<sup>562</sup>

Zineb Sedira was born in Paris in 1963 of Algerian parents, but moved to London to study art. She attended Central Saint Martin’s School of Art where she obtained a first degree in Critical Fine Art Practice in 1995. She subsequently studied at the Slade School of Art (Master of Fine Art in Media, 1995 to 1997) and then researched photography at the Royal College of Art from 1998 to 2003. Sedira describes her art as an attempt to enrich the debate around the concepts of modernism, modernity and its manifestations often through work with a strong post-colonial dimension. Initially her art focused on her identity as a woman ‘with a singular personal geography’ but has gradually moved from autobiographical concerns to an interest in mobility, memory and transmission including the way these have affected her family. Sedira’s more recent work has addressed themes around negotiating the past and

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<sup>561</sup> Samuel Sidibé, ‘Les rencontres de Bamako’, *Biennale africaine de la photographie*, Exhibition Brochure, 2015. [http://2015.rencontres-bamako.com/IMG/pdf/if\\_dp\\_bamako\\_2015\\_180x260\\_version\\_valide\\_e\\_bd.pdf](http://2015.rencontres-bamako.com/IMG/pdf/if_dp_bamako_2015_180x260_version_valide_e_bd.pdf). Accessed 16/9/2019.

<sup>562</sup> I am grateful to Zineb Sedira and to the Kamel Mennour Gallery in Paris for providing me with unrestricted access to the complete video of *Saphir* for 6 weeks.

future linked to issues of the provision of an aesthetic legacy.<sup>563</sup> Sedira began making photography, film and video from 1997 and these media, often framed in installation, form the core of her art practice.

As a result of her strong academic background, Sedira is widely read, particularly in feminism and post-colonial theory and literature and this has had an important influence on her work. She acknowledges that by emigrating to London:

‘I discovered the writing of Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous, among others.....I realised that the “Algeria” that they were talking about was not just the Algeria of the war and migration: there were other stories – sometimes contradictory – between France and Algeria’.<sup>564</sup>

Sedira’s work is presented in this chapter as a migratory aesthetic encompassing displacement and disconnection related to identity, belonging and cultural exchange as well as having aspects of the ‘free floating aesthetics’ associated with the ‘semionautic’ and ‘radicant’ artist of Bourriaud. The artist’s concerns with landscape in *Saphir* are portrayed as closely connected to issues of identity and belonging but also conditioned by her aspiration to build bridges between contemporary art and artists in Algeria and the wider contemporary art scene. This has resulted in Sedira having a more extensive engagement than Boudjelal with the current regime in Algeria which invests massively in art and culture.<sup>565</sup>

### *Background to the film*

The idea for *Saphir* came from Sedira’s return to Algeria in 2002 following 10 years of absence and her encounter with groups of Pieds-Noirs also revisiting their roots as tourists.<sup>566</sup> The film is named after the Hotel Saphir in Algiers, a hotel rich in historical associations. Sedira explains that in *Saphir*: ‘I wanted to explore the notion of return: the migrant’s return,

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<sup>563</sup> This framing of Sedira’s art practice is taken from the artist’s statement at <http://www.zinebsedira.com/sites/default/files/Z.S%20Statement.pdf>. Accessed 30 March 2016.

<sup>564</sup> Christine Van Assche, ‘Zineb Sedira in conversation with Christine Van Assche’, in Zineb Sedira, *Saphir* (Exhibition catalogue), (London and Paris: The Photographers’ Gallery, 2006) p. 58, hereafter referred to as ‘Van Assche, Saphir’.

<sup>565</sup> The budget of the Algerian Ministry of Culture in 2012 was \$561 million (which included an exceptional \$300 million allowance), see Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, ‘Beyond the Odalisque: A Perspective on Algeria’s Cultural Scene’, *Ibraaz*, Essays, 006, 31 March 2014. <https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/85>. Accessed 7/8/2018.

<sup>566</sup> The Pieds-Noirs are former French settlers in Algeria who left in 1962 after independence. The term ‘black feet’ was given them because many were poor and without shoes when they arrived in Algeria and many remained poor later. See BBC article of 2006 in which Pieds-Noirs returners to Algeria are interviewed and give some details of their background and feelings on their return, John Laurenson, ‘Former settlers return to Algeria’, *BBC News Channel Website*, 29/7/2006. Accessed 7/8/2018.



the return of the French, and my own homecoming. Obviously the idea of departure was explored too'.<sup>567</sup> She considers that: 'It was inevitable that I should set up this historical and contemporary relationship between France and Algeria, as I was born in France to Algerian immigrant parents'.<sup>568</sup> However, another consideration was that '... it seemed to me important to show an Algeria that's little known in the West, free of the "politics" and exoticism so often attached to it here in the UK, while emphasising some of my impressions and interests'.<sup>569</sup> This apparent attempt to show an Algeria with a highly political colonial and post-colonial context as somehow 'free of politics' is, it is argued, an important dimension of the film and of Sedira's relationship to Algeria.

*Saphir*, (2006) is a two screen video projection lasting 19 minutes, 26 seconds co-commissioned by the Photographer's Gallery and the Film and Video Umbrella.<sup>570</sup> The commission was sufficiently valuable to enable Sedira to film in high-definition video as well as work with a professional team of cameraman, editor, sound engineer, mixer, and to employ two actors. Sedira saw *Saphir* as an opportunity to move to a more professional level, work with a larger team and with a bigger budget.<sup>571</sup> The commission also provided her with the opportunity to move her art in a new direction and explore the relationship between space, time and architecture including her fascination with the Art Deco hotel Saphir and the colonial architecture of Algiers.

### *The return*

Sedira's artwork, like Boudjelal's, points in the direction of 'the return'. As a child she had spent holidays in Petite Kabylie, or Kabylie des Babors around the Gulf of Bejaïa but the events in the 1990s made visits unsafe and her return in 2002 was after 'the political situation had calmed down'.<sup>572</sup> She regards herself as a daughter of Algerian immigrants who is returning to the homeland.<sup>573</sup> In the exhibition catalogue of *Saphir*, Sedira notes the apparent

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<sup>567</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'Conversation with Zineb Sedira', in Zineb Sedira, *Beneath the Surface*, exhibition catalogue, (Paris: Kemel Menour, 2011), p. 9. Henceforth referred to as Obrist, Sedira 2011.

<sup>568</sup> Van Assche, *Saphir* as cited p. 58

<sup>569</sup> Van Assche Interview, *Saphir* as cited p. 60.

<sup>570</sup> The Photographers' Gallery is the largest public gallery in London dedicated to photography. It commissions film and video, curates, produces and presents artists' moving-image works working in collaboration with galleries and other cultural partners across the UK.

<sup>571</sup> Van Assche, *Saphir*, as cited p. 62.

<sup>572</sup> Van Assche, *Saphir*, as cited p. 58.

<sup>573</sup> Van Assche, *Saphir*, as cited p. 59.

contradiction of, on the one hand, people like herself and Pieds-Noirs tourists interested in rediscovering Algeria and, on the other hand, young Algerians who just want to leave.

Migration from Algeria after 1962 encompassed a wide variety of groups and not just economic migrants like Sedira's parents. The groups, who left in their hundreds of thousands, consisted of those who constituted the colonial regime in Algeria including descendants of immigrants to Algeria such as the Pieds-Noirs and those Algerians who had supported the French such as the 'Harkis'. In addition, these were joined by Algerian political activists who had fought for independence but whose politics, either too moderate or too radical, was unacceptable to the one-party regime of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN).

Balibar has suggested that although France and Algeria have been two separate states since 1962 in reality they constitute one-and-a-half nations.<sup>574</sup> This relationship between the two countries and their different cultures is a key thread within Sedira's work but, in *Saphir*, it is the relationship between the Pied-Noir returners and the return of the daughter of Algerian immigrants that provided the initial impulse for the film's theme. *Saphir's* central characters are portrayed by two actors, an Algerian man and a Pied-Noir woman, both in early middle age. The man, Samir El Hakim is an actor who lives and works in Algiers and, Sedira indicates, has no desire to return to France where he once worked although he understands the reasons why young people might want to leave. The actress, Caroline Lena Olssen, is the daughter of a Pied-Noir who, Sedira says, has rediscovered through her participation in the film an Algeria that she only knew from family accounts and photographs.<sup>575</sup> The origin of the actors is clearly stated in all installations of the film and is therefore an important paratext to the film, framing its reception and interpretation.<sup>576</sup> As with Boudjelal's textual supplement to his photographs, this paratext can be considered a Derridean supplement indicating an absence or 'lack', and at the same time an ancillary representation of the presence in the film of the specificities of French/Algerian history.<sup>577</sup>

The film implies that we assume a link between the man and the woman despite the narrative of the film providing little evidence of any personal connection. The path threaded by each actor can be read as two distinct stories or as an intertwined narrative. This in turn can be

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<sup>574</sup> Etienne Balibar, 'Algérie, France: une ou deux nations?', in E Balibar, (Ed.), *Droit de Cité: Culture et politique en démocratie*, (Paris: Éditions de l'Aube, 1998), pp. 73-88.

<sup>575</sup> Van Assche, *Saphir*, p. 61.

<sup>576</sup> See Gérard Genette, *Paratexts. Thresholds of interpretation*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1997).

<sup>577</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, (Trs. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 144-145. 'The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence'. By implication it implies a lack within the 'presence'.

read as a *mise en abîme* in which the relationship between the two actors mirror the connections, divergences and separations historically and in the present between the two communities they represent or between Algeria and France. The play of signifiers within the film renders the narrative unstable, reflecting not just the fragmented and painful relations past and present between two communities but also the problematic negotiation of an on-going process of developing and enunciating a cross-cultural sense of identity.

This ambiguity with its implication of a narrative relation between the man and woman is crucial to the meaning of *Saphir* in that it appears to open up possibilities for communities and personal identity to evolve but demonstrates the fragile and difficult nature of the terrain on which these possibilities must be negotiated. The connections made in the film are heightened by the artist's frequent transversal treatment of the two screens. The gap between the two screens as well as the implied connections suggest Derrida's notion of 'brisure' in its two antithetical senses of 'break' and 'hinge'. The screens act as a diptych which, taking the Greek derivation *diptakhos* or 'folded in two', hinges together the two screens and creates a fold within which is hidden any solution to the enigma of the narrative as the two actors move from one screen to the other. The hints given by the artist of a personal relation between the two actors are important for the success of the film because it takes the two figures from mere impersonal historical avatars to the more human level at which relationships and reconciliation between communities becomes possible despite history. But these hints also play a role in demonstrating the dis-locations and dis-placements of 'inbetweenness' of both characters.

Sedira has said that 'I wanted the video to be poetic and full of imagery, so that it could be read in an open, universal way; I wanted it situated at the opposite pole to documentary, which provides concrete historical facts'.<sup>578</sup> It is therefore tempting to consider the film predominantly in terms of aesthetic form. McGonagle, noting Richard Dyer's framing of the work as predominantly poetic and aesthetic, rightly stresses that:

'One should not underplay the purely aesthetic significance of *Saphir's* rhythms, echoes, and textures. Viewers may nevertheless choose to trace a political subtext within the images, or imagine one that underpins them'.<sup>579</sup>

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<sup>578</sup> Van Assche, *Saphir*, as cited, p. 61.

<sup>579</sup> Joseph McGonagle, 'Travelling in Circles: Postcolonial Algiers in Zineb Sedira's *Saphir*', *L'Esprit Créateur*, Vol 51, No 1, 2011, pp. 26-37, p. 30. Richard Dyer's article '*Saphir*', is in *Saphir*, as cited, p. 12.

Dyer's emphasis on the video's aesthetics detracts somewhat from the way in which form and politics are in dialogue throughout and underplays its relationship to the colonial past and to the politics of present-day Algeria. The juxtaposition within the film of two actors, one a French woman of Pied-Noir extraction, the other an Algerian man, is political by virtue of the background of the actors alone. The artist thus problematizes the way the video can be viewed even before it is filmed by means of the selection of the actors. As with Boudjelal and Bessaï in their respective works, it is this close connection between form and content that reinforces the political by means of the aesthetic.

*Saphir*'s exploration of 'the return', rich in connotations of a promised land, resonates and counterpoints across two centuries the histories and politics of the two communities represented by the actors. Despite Sedira's acknowledgement that she does not closely plan her work, her skilful editing and montage tells a fractured, nonlinear narrative of displacement that baffles the spectator expecting a straightforward narrative. But as Sedira acknowledges: 'There is a germ of a narrative, with the presence of two characters: a man and a woman strolling through a hotel or port, waiting and looking into the distance. We never really know what they are doing or what they are hoping for. This incipient narrative makes visible my point of view regarding the contemporary, very real situation I am faced with when I visit Algeria'.<sup>580</sup>

Stephen Heath considers that 'narrative space' in film is about spectatorship and the way movement is controlled to provide a story. Narrative space is portrayed in relation to how the reader is induced to interpret events within a specific landscape. Heath argues that movement and pattern within a film create the space for the action to take place and argues that camera placement in relation to the characters largely organises the narrative. In this sort of narrative space events are situated in within an environment in which the spectator is a more or less passive follower of the action.<sup>581</sup> However, in *Saphir* the narrative space does not conform to Heath's understanding. The combination of enigmatic form and content together with a deliberate refusal to provide resolution offers active participation by the spectator with the film as it unfolds. Even if the spectator does not read the historical paratext, the film's Escher-like aspects challenge the spectator's narrative interpretation: do the man and the

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<sup>580</sup> Van Assche, *Saphir* as cited, p. 60.

<sup>581</sup> Stephen Heath, 'Narrative Space', *Screen*, Volume 17, Issue 3, 1 October 1976, pp. 68–112. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/17.3.68>. Accessed 30 March 2016.

woman meet, for example? Although if the spectator can make the historical connections another set of fragmentations opens.

There is apparent in Sedira's film a significant influence of the equally enigmatic narratives explored by Alain Resnais in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961) and many aspects of the form and content of *Saphir* invite intertextual comparison with Resnais' film. These similarities include the location in an hotel; the issue of whether two people did or did not meet; the continual playing with time and location; the tracking shots; the ambiguous voice overs (paralleled in *Saphir* with sounds of music and engines); the spectator's uncertainty about causal relationships; the sudden movements of actors and their abrupt pauses; and the challenge of whether there is or is not a 'story' as such. Moreover, the date of Resnais' film is highly significant, it is the year of the 17 October 1961 massacre of Algerians in Paris, just a year before Algerian Independence and at a time when both Pieds-Noirs and Algerians shared, however unequally and violently, Algeria. Resnais acknowledged: 'Et faire ce film au moment où je crois, justement, qu'on ne peut faire de film, en France, sans parler de la guerre d'Algérie. D'ailleurs, je me demande si l'atmosphère close et étouffante de *l'Année* ne résulte pas de ces contradictions'.<sup>582</sup>

As in the Resnais film, the actors in *Saphir* maintain a generally inexpressive demeanour and do not seem 'to act' as such, much less so than in the Resnais film. Instead they, as noted above, 'act as' important signifiers within the film because of the significance of their personal background and appearance which provides a direct link to the colonial past; the War of Independence; the departure in 1962 of the Pieds-Noirs; and the expulsion or migration of a variety of social and ethnic groups for diverse reasons. They also provide a parallel exploration of identity and belonging at the personal level. The Algerian actor acts as a signifier for the hopes, dreams and, perhaps, fears of the Algerian migrant to the North across the Mediterranean linking historically to the waves of Algerian migration to Europe of which Sedira's parents were a part. In this respect the age of the actor is significant. Samir El Hakim is older than the typical Harragas but is significant because of his role, as a sinister and ambiguous figure, in the film *Harragas* (2009) directed by Merzak Allouache – a film not without its own ambiguities in its questioning of the motives of the Harragas. This

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<sup>582</sup> 'And to make this film at the time when I think rightly that one could not make a film in France without talking about the Algerian War. Moreover, I wonder if the enclosed and stifling atmosphere of *'l'Année'* resulted from these contradictions'. Quoted in Emma Wilson, *Alain Resnais*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 84.

touches on a migratory aesthetics with both downsides of oppression, conquest and exploitation as well as upsides of hope, material betterment and cultural exchange.

An assumption that can be too easily made is that *Saphir* marks a break in Sedira's work, moving beyond the family and personal identity. However, it is not a decisive or clean break. She says that:

'Many people asked me why I stopped doing video about the family to make work about landscapes, cityscapes and seascapes. My answer to them is that the family was still present and landscape becomes a metaphor for the family'.<sup>583</sup>

The landscape operates as a metonym of the complexity of cultural identity. The convoluted, obscure, and fragmented narrative of the film is anchored for large parts of its 19 minutes within the narrow confines of the hotel and its immediate surroundings. Landscape's associations, memories and symbolic meanings assist the development of personal and cultural identity and belonging.<sup>584</sup> In *Saphir* the questions of cultural identity and belonging fragment within a disputed historical terrain of violence and oppression. Sedira rejects understanding collective identity and memory as a competitive struggle, a zero sum space in which the suffering of one social group leaves no room for understanding that of another. Instead the film offers a view more akin to Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory 'as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative'.<sup>585</sup> This may be connected to the artist's developing understanding of her own cultural identity. In an interview with Hans Obrist she speaks of her fascination with discovering through her reading of Cixous and Derrida, both with complicated views on their relation to Algeria and France in relation to being Jewish.<sup>586</sup> She notes that: 'It was exciting to discover that Algeria connected us through its colonial past'.<sup>587</sup> There is in the film a

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<sup>583</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'Zineb Sedira in Conversation' as cited 2011, unpaginated.

<sup>584</sup> See for example Derk Jan Stobbelaar & Bas Pedroli, 'Perspectives on Landscape Identity: A Conceptual Challenge', *Landscape Research*, 36:3, pp. 321-339, Volume 36, Issue 3, 2011.

<sup>585</sup> M Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonisation*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>586</sup> See their discussion in their joint interview with Aliette Armel in Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Aliette Armel and Ashley Thompson, 'From the Word to Life: A Dialogue between Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous', *New Literary History*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Hélène Cixous: When the Word Is a Stage, (Winter, 2006), pp. 1-13.

<sup>587</sup> Obrist interview, *Beneath the Surface*, p. 4.

challenge to the assertion of fixed notions of origin in favour of a sense of ‘becoming Algerian’ that acknowledges its diversity, fragmentation and richness.<sup>588</sup>

The multi-layered nature of landscape is evidenced in the frequent references to architecture in *Saphir*. For Zeynep Çelik, Algiers was ‘the colonial city par excellence, the terrain of many battles—cultural, political, military, urban, architectural’.<sup>589</sup> Sedira believes that: ‘(t)he relationship between France and Algeria shows up in the architecture. There’s still a very obvious influence....So when I’m out walking in Algiers, I have the impression of being in certain parts of Paris, but in dazzling light’.<sup>590</sup> She connects this to cultural identity: ‘what I like is that it represents two cultures I identify with’.<sup>591</sup>

The hotel Saphir, to which the film owes its title, provides an historical and identity axis around which the film revolves. The hotel, under French occupation, was called the Aletti, and was built and owned by Joseph Aletti, a hotel and hospitality magnate with a string of prominent hotels on the French Riviera and in Vichy, (*see image 37a and b at Appendix: Images, Chapter Four*).

The Aletti opened in 1930, the same year France celebrated the 100th anniversary of the French occupation of Algeria.<sup>592</sup> This was a significant event and the hotel was opened by Charlie Chaplin. Sedira says: ‘I was fascinated by the Art Deco Es Safir hotel – once the Hôtel Aletti, and the Algiers casino – which was built in 1930 by the French architects Auguste Blusen and Joachim Richard. It’s on the seafront, facing onto the port where the ferries from Spain and France come in’.<sup>593</sup>

But the fascination is not straightforward as she notes that ‘(a)t first glance the building looks “authentic” or in original condition, but as you get closer you see that it hasn’t been looked after and it’s rundown’.<sup>594</sup> This discrepancy between appearance and reality is reinforced by metonymic references to, for example, peeling paintwork and torn sunshades. Not just a

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<sup>588</sup> There is a clear link here is to Stuart Hall’s rejection of identity as an unproblematic, transparent and already accomplished fact in his article on ‘Cultural identity and Diaspora’, Rutherford, (Ed.), 1990 as cited.

<sup>589</sup> Zeynep Çelik, Introduction, *Urban forms and colonial confrontations: Algiers under French rule*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 1.

<sup>590</sup> Van Assche, *Saphir*, as cited, p. 58.

<sup>591</sup> Van Assche, *Saphir* as cited, p. 58.

<sup>592</sup> See the catalogue description at the *Invaluable* website, ‘Lot 44: M. Cochard (dates unknown). Alger Aletti casino municipal. Circa 1930. 34x23 inches, 87x60 cm’. Baconnier, Algiers. <https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/m.-cochard-dates-unknown-.alger-aletti-casino-m-44-c-001bed7d7d>. Accessed 18 July 2015.

<sup>593</sup> Van Assche, *Saphir*, as cited, p. 60.

<sup>594</sup> Van Assche, *Saphir*, as cited, p. 60.

metaphor about how time has passed, but also raising issues of the superficial and the occluded.

The hotel is significant in terms of its colonial associations. The hotel's architecture mimics in its covered terraces the pillars and arches of Imperial Roman architecture and this is not accidental anachronism. Napoleon had transformed his federal imperium into one modelled on the Roman Empire and his legacy and aspiration continued to feature in French ambitions in the Mediterranean after his fall, under the nineteenth-century monarchies, the republics and the Second Empire.<sup>595</sup> But the hotel is an important colonial signifier quite apart from its aesthetic aspects. Price Day has written that '(t)he Aletti in those days (Spring of 1944) was a raffish, cloak-and-daggerish place'.<sup>596</sup> Gillo Pontecorvo and Franco Solina stayed at the hotel in 1960 developing initial ideas for *The Battle of Algiers* there even before independence.<sup>597</sup> The hotel has also been the subject of a novel about the 'Algerian war' (the War for Independence) by a Pied-Noir writer and academic.<sup>598</sup> Situated in the heart of Algiers, near the harbour, the Saphir is literally surrounded by architectural forms rich in colonial and pre-colonial associations: close to Place Emir Abdelkader<sup>599</sup>, the Government Palace, and Grand Post Office, and not far from the Casbah – a notable absence from the iconography of the film which underlines its concern with a particular period of history. The blue of the sky and the sea of 'Alger La Blanche' are mirrored in the name and constitute significant elements of the video, often providing what Didi-Huberman might call 'pans', areas of colour or texture that strike the mind or emotions of the viewer.<sup>600</sup>

The hotel Saphir is an important 'character' within the iconography of the film. Sandoval-Strausz notes that the hotel, which as a signifier and architectural category only dates from the eighteenth-century, 'represents a complex set of possibilities and tensions that mark it as

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<sup>595</sup> See for example Zeynep Çelik, *Empire, Architecture and the City: French-Ottoman Encounters, 1830-1914*, (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2008).

<sup>596</sup> See Price Day, "'The Spillway'", Chapter 25', quoted at *The Firebird Association* website of former members of the 17th Troop Carrier Squadron and the 17th Tactical Airlift Squadron. <http://www.firebirds.org/menu1/cds22.htm>. Accessed 8/7/2018.

<sup>597</sup> Irene Bignardi, 'The Making of "The Battle of Algiers"', *Cinéaste*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2000), pp. 14-22.

<sup>598</sup> Eveline Caduc, *L'ex-Aletti: La Maison des chacals*, (Paris: Editions Fenberg, 2012).

<sup>599</sup> Ironically formerly named after Thomas Robert Bugeaud, marquis de la Piconnerie, duc d'Isly (15 October 1784 – 10 June 1849), a Marshal of France and Governor-General of Algeria. Bugeaud signed the Treaty of Tafna (30 May 1837), with Abd-el-Kader (the Emir who led the Algerian resistance against the French after the invasion) for which he was much criticised.

<sup>600</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images* as cited 2005, particularly the 'Appendix: The Detail and the Pan', pp. 229-307.



an archetypal kind of space' and a form of 'institutionalised hospitality'.<sup>601</sup> Hotels are multi-layered cultural artefacts and 'expressions of human relationships, exemplars of ideologies, and scenes of social conflict'.<sup>602</sup> Sandoval-Strausz refers to the strong connection between hotel and hospitality, with the former a physical manifestation of the Kantian 'cosmopolitan impulse'.<sup>603</sup> The hotel is not open to all: 'hotelkeepers regularly excluded entire groups of people on the basis of class, religion and especially of race'.<sup>604</sup> In the context of *Saphir* the hotel therefore marks a place of intrigue and a spectrum of hospitality and hostility that connects the metaphor of the hotel to the situation of the reception of the migrant or the 'colon'.

The importance of naming in postcolonial contexts, evident in both the work of Bessaï and Boudjelal, applies here because although originally named the 'Hotel Aletti', the hotel was in 1984 renamed Hôtel Es-Safir, which in Arabic means 'Ambassador' or mediator, but also 'safir' which means sapphire, the bright blue precious stone associated with wisdom, learning, and an ability to see beneath surface appearances. Sedira's decision to construct the video around the hotel and its associations signifies the transnational nature of her themes including the colour blue as a signifier of the Mediterranean. As a 'character' within the video the transition of the hotel from French to Algerian is signified, but simply renaming does not erase the past or the structure and décor of the building. As Bachelard notes in respect of the shell:

'For every form retains life, and a fossil is not merely a being that once lived, but one that is still alive, asleep in its form'.<sup>605</sup>

The exploration of the hotel in the video involves an exploration of Algeria's past, both colonial and postcolonial, and its residual impact on the present and acts as a metaphor for identity and a form of shell which is retained or persists within aspects of present day Algeria.

Dyer identifies the relationship between hotel and ferry as central to the trope of arrival and departure and emphasises the themes of movement and migration evoking a palimpsest of

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<sup>601</sup> A. K. Sandford-Strausz, *Hotel: An American History*, (Yale: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 7: 'It was only at the end of the eighteenth century and over the course of the nineteenth century that the hotel became a specific architectural category'.

<sup>602</sup> Sandoval-Strausz as cited p. 9.

<sup>603</sup> Sandoval-Strausz as cited p. 314.

<sup>604</sup> Sandoval-Strausz as cited p. 315.

<sup>605</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Trans. Maria Jolas), (New York: Penguin Classics, 2014), p. 132.

displacements.<sup>606</sup> Yet the movements within the film are not straightforward. The two characters seem encased in the hotel and its immediate environment. The hotel's location within a wider transport network only becomes apparent at the end of the film with the long panning shot across the docks, harbour, sea, carparks, and motorways of the city. In this transition Sedira seems to change the focus of the film from the claustrophobia of many of the earlier shots with their historical, political and artistic references to an apparently more open and bustling contemporary Algeria.

The film is structured as a set of sequences. In the first, projected on two screens, *Saphir* opens in darkness but with the sound of birdsong and faint street voices – intimating a deliberate gap between sound and image that is reiterated in the film often in shots from outside the hotel accompanied by sounds from within it. As noted, the two screens act as a diptych, which also links to the Greek diptukha or a 'pair of writing tablets'. The diptych suggests the eyes of the viewer, but also the eyes (and 'presence') of the artwork and artist, and a relation between the two screens in terms of narrative as a story to be unfolded. The screens reinforce references to eyes and sight within the film and are used to dramatic effect around the relationship between the human and metaphoric, for example the hotel and its windows, characters. The film develops by framing the relationship between the man and the woman in terms of a possible but indefinite connection. There is an initial flurry of appearances and disappearances of them both in which the woman appears alone 10 times in different shots, the man appears alone 11 times. They also appear, in deliberately disconnected ways, in the same shot but not together.

There follows a sequence in which the man ascends and descends a set of steps under an arch outside but adjacent to the hotel, (*see image 38 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Four*). This sequence is so carefully edited that it is logical to assume that it was particularly important to Sedira. She may be referencing Plato's allegory of the cave and the intricate relationship between fiction and fact, representation and reality but also the possibility of escaping from the prison of past or present, of opening one's eyes: of blindness and the recovery of sight.<sup>607</sup> This is particularly apposite because Plato's dialectic method demands dialogue which never really happens between the characters of the video, despite the hints of relationship. Richard Dyer draws attention in particular to the curious shot of the man who, when climbing steps

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<sup>606</sup> Richard Dyer, 'Saphir' article in *Saphir*, as cited, p. 10.

<sup>607</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, (Trans. R.E. Allen), (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), the allegory of the cave is at 514a–520a.

under the arch appears in stasis as if trapped psychologically in the same spot.<sup>608</sup> Dyer notes that it ‘is as if the man was on an invisible treadmill, always moving but always in the same place’.<sup>609</sup> This can be seen as a metaphor of Algeria’s continuing political and social impasse. This could also illustrate the risk of the return, to be so nostalgically or bitterly obsessed with the past that dialogue is always at cross-purposes and unproductive and every attempt at movement only reinforces stasis.

The frequent horizontal movement of the characters is again disrupted when the man descends and ascends the lift inside the hotel while the woman descends and ascends the stairs that surround the lift shaft. This is carefully choreographed within the same screen to ensure that the two just miss each other. Sedira is maintaining a careful balance in distancing the two whilst at the same time hinting at a relationship. For example, the woman appears on the balcony of the hotel (and therefore not precisely inside or outside it) and then the man appears below the balcony on the steps. This is the film’s ‘balcony scene’ to reference *Romeo and Juliet*. However, the two figures appear unaware of each other – although the woman at one point touches her hair which could be interpreted as a form of acknowledgement. This complex portrayal of movement up and down stairs and through passageways inside and outside the hotel is reminiscent of the works of M.C. Escher who became fascinated by the regular division of the plane after studying the Alhambra in Granada in 1922 a few years before the Aletti was built.<sup>610</sup> A complex series of displacements is enacted in which the vertical is repeatedly disrupting the horizontal, potentially opening the possibility of moving to a new and different level of relationship. All commentators miss that the man and the woman, in the sequence around the lift shaft, appear in the same shot (although not at the same time) *inside* the hotel.

This temporary displacement of the man into the hotel enables Sedira to set up a denouement to this sequence in which the woman walks away from the camera into a hotel corridor of white walls and doors lined by lights. She pauses at a door, and then knocks. After a moment one hears the door open and she enters, the sounds of music becoming more distinct. The spectator is left dangling: has the meeting at last been achieved? If it has then it has taken place in private, hidden from the camera’s eye and the gaze of the spectator. Sedira continues

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<sup>608</sup> Richard Dyer, ‘*Saphir*’ article in *Saphir* as cited, p. 11.

<sup>609</sup> Richard Dyer, ‘*Saphir*’ article in *Saphir* as cited, p. 9.

<sup>610</sup> See Eric Kersten’s article on the M C Escher museum website, ‘Wall mosaic in the Alhambra’.  
<https://www.escherinhetpaleis.nl/?lang=en> . Accessed 18/8/2019.

the playfulness and visual teasing of the video refusing to provide a resolution of the narrative.

The artist then develops a sequence in which the man and the woman are placed in relation to the sea, sky, harbour, ferry and hotel all of which have metaphor/metonym functions within the video. At one stage both screens share one scene: like eyes looking out to sea. This perhaps could signal reconciliation but equally it may simply be a continuation of dreams of the past. There are shots of the man leaning against railings overlooking the harbour wall and an extraordinary sequence when the shot of the sea in front of him fills with the shadow of a ferry and then the ferry itself while the other screen is filled with the woman's face as she stares expressionless out to sea towards France.

The film ends with a long tracking shot from the front of the hotel across the quayside and the boats docked in the harbour, across to a car park and then to a government building displaying the Algerian flag. The shot takes in the colonial architecture of Algiers and the camera moves lovingly over the buildings and their facades reflecting Sedira's comment that '(t)oday I am growing closer to Algeria'.<sup>611</sup> Fleetinglly the shot also takes in the *Maqam Echahid* or Martyrs Memorial, (see image 39 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Four), often referred to locally as the 'banana', not the Issiakhem monument discussed in Chapter Three but one constructed in 1982 by the company Lavalin with the design help of local artists such as Bashir Yelles.

The camera then pans back to the hotel and there is a shot of the arches at the front of the hotel. Sedira says that '(t)he closing shot is a 360 degree pan starting from the Es Safir hotel, taking in the seafront avenue, the railway line and the harbour, and finishing with views of the city before moving back to the hotel. For me this shot is very important, because it brings us back to reality at a moment when we are no longer expecting it'.<sup>612</sup> This long panning shot provides a 'sense of an ending' without however providing any certainty of resolution or idea of what the 'reality' consists.<sup>613</sup>

Sedira's filmic distinction between the interior and exterior of the hotel and its relation to the position of the man and the woman suggests a variety of geographical and historical

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<sup>611</sup> Van Assche, *Saphir*, as cited, p. 8.

<sup>612</sup> Van Assche, *Saphir*, as cited, p. 61.

<sup>613</sup> The phrase is used in Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction: with a New Epilogue*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Kermode's intention is to show the endemic need we have to suppress simple chronicity and provide meaning in literature through an ending, usually to a patterned sequence.

divisions, borders, and displacements. Their ‘situated identities’ whether inside or outside Algeria and their relation to different temporalities configure different trajectories in terms of their journeys. All three have a different relationship to Algeria and France configured by the space between, the Mediterranean, which appears again and again in Sedira’s work. The ‘returns’ explored in *Saphir* are therefore contextualised and experienced differently depending on the individual’s starting point as well as whether the original departures, whether personal or familial, resulted from violent expulsion, economic need, or fear of civil strife.

Svetlana Boym’s exploration of nostalgia as the ‘hypochondria of the heart’ makes a distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia which she sees as ‘ways in which we make sense of our seemingly ineffable homesickness and how we view our relationship to a collective home.’<sup>614</sup> ‘Restorative nostalgia’, Boym suggests, is an effort to ‘build the lost home and patch up the memory gaps’ while ‘reflexive nostalgia’ she sees as ‘the meditation on history and passage of time’. Boym argues that ‘(r)estorative nostalgia evokes national past and future; reflective nostalgia is more about individual and cultural memory’.<sup>615</sup> In a slightly later publication Boym notes that while ‘the story that nostalgics tell is one of local homecoming, the form of that story is hardly local. Contemporary nostalgias can be understood as a series of migrating cross cultural plots that go beyond national attachments’.<sup>616</sup> It could be argued that in *Saphir* these ‘migrating cross cultural plots’ are focused on a restorative nostalgia related to a colonial past but which blurs considerations of the politics of present-day Algeria.

*Saphir*’s iconography repeatedly uses ocular signifiers of eyes, seeing and veiling, (*see image 40 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Four*). This is a feature of Sedira’s earlier work, often connected with her interest in the ‘gaze’ and the ‘Other’, for example, in her *Silent Sight* (2001) and *Self-Portrait or the Virgin Mary* (2000).<sup>617</sup> The use of the diptych represented by the two channel screen is an ocular signifier through which the labyrinthine and enigmatic

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<sup>614</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

<sup>615</sup> Boym, 2001, as cited p. 49. Boym defines the forms of nostalgia in Chapters Four (restorative) and Five (reflective).

<sup>616</sup> S. Boym, ‘Nostalgia and its discontents’, *The Hedgehog Review*, 2001, p. 12, accessed through Scribd. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/300022225/Svetlana-Boym-Nostalgia-and-Its-Discontents-2001#scribd> . Accessed 3/4/2016.

<sup>617</sup> See the article by Joke Lambelin at <http://www.alartemag.be/en/en-art/this-is-my-body-sediras-eyes/> . The video of *Silent Sight* can be seen at: <http://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Zineb+Sedira+second+sight+video+&FORM=VIRE1#view=detail&mid=6C2EE1C9DBA37BC89C976C2EE1C9DBA37BC89C97> . Both accessed 7/2/2019.

narrative is seen – but the screens also return the gaze of the spectator. A metal railing (left-hand screen) is outlined against a misty sea/sky as a man, the Algerian, first appears (right-hand screen) in extreme close up, just a section of head, one eye and ear, sight and sound, in front of an out of focus shot of the hotel Saphir with a balconied window, a single eye. The hotel's balustraded windows emerge in two lines of three in shades of white and grey/blue. The hotel and the woman behind the hotel windows seem to watch the man configured metonymically as a flight of swallows, migratory birds flitting before the building.

The symbolic veiling of the Pied-Noir woman is repeated, behind curtains or from behind screens perhaps metaphorically linked to moucharabiya. The most complicated shot in the video involves both moucharabiya and veils when an almost abstract expressionist painting is formed around the woman by the layering of the leaves of a mass of trees, a large window with curtains half open but within which there is a square of light seen through a darker set of interior layers or screens and curtains across the space of a darkened room which itself, on the near side, has a fragmented layer of art deco décor, and, nearest to the camera, another net curtain. The complex layering of materials and shapes metonymically references the complexity of relations between France and Algeria past and present. But it also operates to position the Pied-Noir woman in a wider role, representing all women trapped within the interior, the traditional subaltern place of the woman within patriarchy. Given Sedira's strong commitment to exploring feminism within her art practice, this is not too far a jump in analysis.

Resnais is not the sole intertextual reference within the film. Sedira uses intertextual referencing to make political points throughout the video. Early on there is an extreme close up of part of the man's face outlined against a blue sky which the camera elides as it moves left leaving the face highlighted against the white hotel front. The man's face has the quality of a cubist sculpture or an African mask, a clear modernist reference, (*see image 41 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Four*), and one is reminded of Kader Attia's denunciation of the failure to credit the influence of African culture on modern art. The face of the Algerian actor is evocative of the School of Paris blending of the stylized human figure in African sculptures with painting styles derived from Cézanne and Gauguin, for example Picasso's *Bust of a Man*, (1908). Another shot of a rusted metal pole bisecting the screen in front of a portion of the hotel wall projects an almost Mondrian arrangement of squares and lines reiterating the modernist thematic and its connection with colonisation. There is also a shot of a white ceiling with a chandelier cornered on two sides by dark walls, which appears to mimic a

fragment of the Jan Van Eyck *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), a painting of a merchant and what is often thought to be his wife. A playful, romantic element that contributes to the narrative by its suggestion of a relationship between the man and the woman.

Within a series of shots of the man and woman within the hotel Sedira puts emphasis on the Art Deco style woodwork, stair lamps, and the beautiful metal frame of the lift shaft. This is not just because of the aesthetic beauty of the artefacts but also to underline their anachronistic value and a visible reminder of how a past art movement of the ‘machine age’ was used to buttress and sustain an oppressive colonialist regime.<sup>618</sup> The artwork becomes a symptom of something deeper and not at all beautiful. Throughout the film the artist uses this architectural referencing as a postcolonial marker.

Given the importance of the hotel in the film, it is easy to underestimate another signifier within the narrative. The artist puts the city and the hotel in relation to the sea and to ships, in particular the ferry Tarid Ibn Ziyad, (*see image 42 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Four*), that travels back and forth between Algiers and Marseille. The ferry superficially appears an example of Marc Augé’s ‘non-place’ or ‘a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity’ and instead a place where life is temporarily on pause.<sup>619</sup> It points to aspects of Augé’s view of ‘supermodernity’ but also to historical narratives and issues of community. Tariq ibn Ziyad was a Muslim general, who may have been Berber, or Arab or even Persian by origin, who led the Islamic Umayyad conquest of Visigothic Spain in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century and gave his name to Gibraltar.<sup>620</sup> Sedira in later films explores in depth the community aspects of this ferry, as a ‘place’ of movement, *In Middle Sea* (2008). The relationship between the land bound hotel and the sea born ferry develops throughout the film and is seen by Richard Dyer as an important trope of arrival and departure.<sup>621</sup>

Sedira’s work relates closely to questions of identity and community. Her works are often autobiographical, addressing issues of cultural identity and the personal consequences of migration. She draws extensively on the history of her family, interviewing and videoing her

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<sup>618</sup> Didi-Huberman outlines two forms of anachronism one related to montage and another to symptom in *Confronting Images* as cited but also in *L'image survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, (Paris: L'Éditions de Minuit, 2002) in which he develops and explains Warburg’s discontinuous, ‘folded’ conception of history.

<sup>619</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, (London: Verso, 1995), particularly the descriptions given at pp. 77-78.

<sup>620</sup> Roger Collins, *The Arab Conquest of Spain*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) in particular pp. 710–797.

<sup>621</sup> Richard Dyer, *Saphir* article, in *Saphir* as cited, p. 10.

parents and daughter and incorporating their experiences of identity and community into the way she configures her own. As noted earlier, even when Sedira decided to expand the frontiers of the themes she explored early in her career she still felt a need to keep a link to identity and family.

Sedira's relationship to identity, as with Boudjelal, is not a straightforward engagement with Algeria and its culture. As noted earlier, Sedira considers her relationship with Algeria and France as closely connected through architecture which she regards as a bridge between the two cultures that contribute to her sense of personal identity and to her positioning with regard to community.<sup>622</sup> Yet in *Saphir* it is the French colonial architecture of Algiers that is dominant and the Casbah, which despite its gentrification remains the epitome of the non-French past of Algiers, is excluded. The Casbah does not even appear in the panoramic shots at the end of the video. Similarly, the references to culture in the video are overwhelmingly to European culture.

In Arabic the word 'safir' means ambassador, a person who travels between different places, but who is also the representative of one country on the soil of another.<sup>623</sup> If Sedira is a form of spokesperson for Algeria it is perhaps in the sense of the title of the video: as an ambassador. There is an unresolved ambiguity in this since when in Paris or London she can be seen as a representative of Algeria and in Algeria a representative of France or the UK. Sedira's sense of inbetweenness is taken forward in an ambassadorial sense through her aspirations for building bridges between contemporary art and artists in Algeria and the wider contemporary art scene. She notes that: 'Since 2005, I've used my flat in Algiers as a platform to invite international artists, curators and academics. I also facilitate meetings between my guests and local artists'.<sup>624</sup> Sedira has created an arts organisation Aria that 'strives to instigate and develop cross-border dialogues as well as expanding a dynamic network across diverse international art communities within and beyond Algeria' which it does through residencies, commissions and exhibitions.<sup>625</sup> The importance of her contribution is acknowledged by Nadira Laggoune-Aklouche, a curator, critic and lecturer and significant

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<sup>622</sup> Van Assche, *Saphir*, as cited, p. 58.

<sup>623</sup> 'Saphir: Zineb Sedira', *Film and Video Umbrella*. <http://www.fvu.co.uk/projects/saphir> . Accessed 5/2/2019.

<sup>624</sup> Colline Millard, 'Zineb Sedira in Conversation', *Ibraaz* interview 1 June 2011. <https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/8> . 17/9/2019.

<sup>625</sup> Aria is funded by the UK Arts Council, Institut français (Algerie) and the Amsterdam based Prince Claus Fund. See the Aria website at [http://ariaprojects.org/?page\\_id=551](http://ariaprojects.org/?page_id=551) . Accessed 5/2/2019.



figure on the Algerian contemporary art scene.<sup>626</sup> The artist's motivation is to help assist the development of contemporary art in Algeria and provide support to young Algerian artists. In this she can be said to fit some aspects of the 'spokesperson' role describe in Chapter One.

One can also point to aspects of Sedira's positioning that relate to issues of 'soft power' and 'cultural diplomacy'. There has been a vast increase in expenditure on culture since 2003 linked to the Algerian Ministry of Culture's efforts to improve the regime's image abroad through its involvement in the international arena (for example in 'culture weeks' in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Switzerland, Syria, China, Saudi Arabia, Niger, Libya and Mali).<sup>627</sup> There has also been a restructuring of aspects of the cultural sector at home including the staging of festivals and other events. As part of this effort, the Government has spent money on the arts including contemporary art. The regime funds the biennial Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain, (FIAC) in Algiers, and has invested significantly in the creation of the MAMA (Musée d'Art Moderne d'Alger) as well as funding events involving artists of the Algerian diaspora, and part-funding residencies by internationally renowned artists such as Alfredo Jaar. Sedira is an active figure in FIAC and through Aria contributes to the development residencies. This inevitably involves Sedira in a relationship with the Algerian regime and the people closely associated with the Ministry of Culture. Other Algerian artists such as Boudjelal keep their distance and tend to be critical of those close to the regime.<sup>628</sup>

Sedira is not naive in relation to the web of soft power and cultural diplomacy that exists in relation to art and culture in Algeria but appears to regard engagement as a more positive approach if change is to occur. The artist is also acutely attuned to the needs of the international art market. Her latest commission for Sharjah, *Laughter in Hell*, examines the dark humour that emerged during Algeria's period of civil conflict during the 1990s and considers how joke telling became a way of engaging with the trauma. In a conversation with the writer at the Mosaic Rooms in June 2014, the artist acknowledged that she would need to shape the nature of the artwork depending on the audience and what she might be able to displayed in France might be very different from what was displayed in Sharjah or Algeria.<sup>629</sup>

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<sup>626</sup> See Nadira Laggoune-Aklouche, 'Algeria: an artistic spring', Memory, Place, Desire: Contemporary Art of the Maghreb and Maghrebi Diaspora exhibition, Haverford College.

<http://exhibits.haverford.edu/memoryplacedesire/essays/algeria-an-artistic-spring/> . Accessed 5/2/2019.

<sup>627</sup> An increase in spend of over \$380 million since 2003. See the table of expenditure from 2003-2011 at [http://www.alger-culture.com/readarticle.php?article\\_id=487](http://www.alger-culture.com/readarticle.php?article_id=487) . Accessed 5/2/2019.

<sup>628</sup> It is very difficult to assess how widespread this feeling is, in a limited number of conversations with Algerian artists it was voiced twice, with Bruno Boudjelal and with Mustapha Benfodil.

<sup>629</sup> The conversation was at the exhibition Intervening Space in May 2014: [Intervening Space: From The Intimate To The World](#) . Accessed 6/2/2019.

This is a different approach to that of Boudjelal who, as far as the writer is aware, has not exhibited in Algiers.

Sedira has noted the contradiction between people abroad who are rediscovering their country with real interest, and ‘some young Algerians who, for the reasons I’ve already mentioned [unemployment, lack of housing], want to go away, go somewhere else’.<sup>630</sup> This significantly underplays the deep dissatisfaction within Algeria amongst not just the youth but more generally which is documented in Boudjelal’s book and is implicit in Bessaï’s *H-OUT*. *Saphir* seems to involve a nostalgia that romanticises Algeria and that hints at and yet avoids a direct treatment of its traumatic history. The unresolved elements of the film mirror the unresolved tensions in the artist’s relation with the country, as well as the complexity of her artistic and personal identity.

### **Zineddine Bessaï: H-OUT**

Zineddine Bessaï was born in Athens in 1985. He is of Algerian nationality and lives and works in Algiers. Bessaï was educated at the École supérieure des beaux-arts in Algiers and practices as a graphic designer, illustrator and artist, with a special interest in sculpture. His art centres on an examination of everyday life in contemporary Algerian society, with a particular focus on the mixing of cultures and travel, and the cultural exchanges that travel can create. Bessaï, despite being born in Athens, presents himself as comfortable with his ‘Algerianness’ although his work reflects his frustration with the difficulties of engaging in a contemporary art practice within a space of restricted movement.<sup>631</sup>

*H-OUT: Le Guide de la migration*, (2010), (see image 43 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Four), is an artwork by Bessaï that offers itself as a map, a Guide (a text that offers guidance to migrants), and as an art installation. Inscribed with a grim humour, H-OUT uses the migrants’ own words and codes to illustrate a geopolitical reality with many tragic consequences. The work consists of a large-scale map reconfiguring the globe with the Mediterranean and its surrounds in its centre. The map is criss-crossed with the routes used by migrants for exiting Algeria.

Welch and McGonagle provide an excellent analysis of the linguistic play on French and Djarba, the Algerian dialect of Arabic, within the work and their translation of Djarba words used in the map is relied upon in this chapter. They point to the playful symbolism of

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<sup>630</sup> Van Assche, *Saphir*, as cited, p. 59.

<sup>631</sup> ‘ZINEDDINE BESSAÏ’ artist’s website. <http://zineddinebessai.com/bio/>. 5/2/2019.

Bessaï's imagery and the 'dense array of text and image which presents a distinctly Algerian vision' of the themes surrounding migration.<sup>632</sup> However, one has to note that this vision is a largely male version of the world linked to the dissatisfaction of the hittistes examined in one of Zoubir's videos in Chapter Five. It is a vision generated by the mass unemployment amongst Algerian young men and their dreams of opportunity in Europe, often unrealistic, satirised by Kader Attia in works such as *Dream Machine* (2002-2003) referred to in Chapter Two. The text and images in *H-OUT* portray a world divided in two by barbed wire: above the barbed wire, Europe, and below the barbed wire a world of people on the move.

In this binary world border zones are not marginal and the Mediterranean appears as a space of both containment and of penetration, a *frontière-monde* which Balibar, following Carl Schmitt, portrays as a place of suspended legal order and of preventative counter violence.<sup>633</sup> As noted the main language used in the guide is neither French nor standard Arabic but Djarba, the Algerian Arabic dialect, not recognised by the state and therefore not existing officially.<sup>634</sup> 'Houdoud' is used by Bessaï to describe barbed wire and is related to 'hudud' or a dividing curtain and perhaps hijab or a screen. The word suggests a fortified curtain. 'H-OUT' is derived from the Djarba 'hout' or fish, and suggests both the whale of Jonah and of Moby-Dick, but it also plays on the English 'out' and perhaps 'hideout'.

The artwork is both sad and humorous. Destinations are marked with 'x' for target cities around the world, but 'x' is also a signifier of treasure and reflects the expectations of migrants. On the other hand, 'x' also marks negation and the unrealistic nature of those expectations. Drownings are marked by the skull and crossbones the universal symbols of death and of piracy. Paper boats appear on the map suggesting the flimsy nature of the craft used by the Harraga or North African migrants who attempt to enter Europe illegally. The name Harraga comes from the migrants' practice of burning their immigration papers if about to be captured.<sup>635</sup>

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<sup>632</sup> Edward Welch and Joseph McGonagle, *Contesting Views: The Visual Economy of France and Algeria*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 138.

<sup>633</sup> See Balibar's essay 'Qu'est-ce qu'une frontière?' at: [http://exil-ciph.com/htdocs/ressources\\_dwnld/textes/B/BalibarFrontiere.pdf](http://exil-ciph.com/htdocs/ressources_dwnld/textes/B/BalibarFrontiere.pdf). Accessed 12/7/2015.

<sup>634</sup> Darja or darija shares most of its vocabulary with standard Arabic, but it also includes borrowings from Berber as well as French, and to a lesser extent Spanish and Italian (in Libya). It is therefore mixed with the languages of the colonial occupiers of the Maghreb. Darija is spoken and to various extents mutually understood in the Maghreb countries, especially Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. It can be virtually unintelligible to speakers of other Arabic dialects.

<sup>635</sup> Harragas, from Arabic حارقة, ḥarrāga, ḥarrāg, 'those who burn' (their immigration papers). <http://www.encyclo.co.uk/meaning-of-Harraga>. Accessed 8/7/2015.

The images of paper planes inscribed on the map are ironic as air travel is an unlikely form of travel for the Harraga but may refer to the temporary nature of visas of those with an unacceptable profile. In this respect, Bessaï himself failed to obtain a visa when he applied to visit England to attend an exhibition at the Manchester Cornerhouse which included *H-OUT*. The curator wrote: ‘Despite strong support from the exhibition venue and appropriate credentials, the artist Zineddine Bessaï’s application for a visa was turned down by the UK Border Agency. Reading the letter he was sent, it is hard not to conclude that the main reason for rejecting his application is that Zineddine is young, male, unattached and Algerian’.<sup>636</sup>

Mapping is not a neutral activity. It involves the production of space, its places, its territories, and the political identities of its inhabitants. John Pickles notes the ‘ways in which mapping and the cartographic gaze have coded subjects and produced identities’.<sup>637</sup> In many respects power and dominance are inscribed cartographically on the world and its global political structures. Bessaï’s singularly Algerian cartography of the world can be seen as a counter map against these hegemonic power structures. *H-OUT* is a subversive cartography re-presenting the Mediterranean as the centre of the North African migrants’ world with all its dreams, aspirations, dangers and difficulties. This is reminiscent of Félix Guattari’s term ‘schizoanalytic cartography’ and the passage from a ‘subjected group’, alienated by social forces, to a ‘subject group’, capable of formulating its own statements.<sup>638</sup> Bessaï’s map describes how alternative existential modes are configured by migrants to challenge dominant representations and power structures.

Bessaï’s guide contrasts an imaginary of mobility with one of ‘fixity’ and overlapping competing geographies of borderlessness and border discipline. These imaginaries have been explored in depth by Doreen Massey who sees mobility as linked to the discursive strategies of the free market and a putative right to global mobility on the one hand and, on the other, a concomitant re-negotiation of this into a second order imaginary of defensible places: the rights of the ‘local’.<sup>639</sup> Bessaï questions the contemporary relationship of notions of ‘North’ and ‘South’ in an increasingly globalised world.

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<sup>636</sup> Quoted in Lindsey Moore ‘Glocal Imaginaries Preface’, *Postcolonial Text*, Vol 6, No 2, 2011, pp. 1-7. A copy of the letter from the UK border Agency can be seen at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/cornerhousemanchester/5594983307/in/set-72157626317138835/>. Accessed 5/2/2019.

<sup>637</sup> J Pickles, *A History of Spaces: Cartographic Reason, Mapping, and the Geo-coded World*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 12.

<sup>638</sup> Félix Guattari, *Cartographies schizoanalytiques*, (Paris: Galilée, 1989), p. 57.

<sup>639</sup> See Massey, *For Space* as cited, p. 87.

There are questions to be asked of the work including, who is it intended for? Ostensibly a guide for migrants unlikely ever to see the work, the intended audience is necessarily a contemporary art audience. It is a guide to migration from Algeria mainly for people unlikely to need it. The spectre of colonialism is traced in the map, the migrants travel from former colonies to the lands of former colonisers, drawn by the phantasms of conspicuous consumption and a northern El Dorado. The spectre of what Derrida described as the ‘persistence of the present past’ haunts the trails of perilous routes, marked by the graves of those who died in the crossings: real skulls and bones.<sup>640</sup> Counter-mapping originated as a tool for indigenous identity-building and for bolstering the legitimacy of resource claims.<sup>641</sup> Implicit in Bessaï’s map is a claim on the resources of the wealthier nations of the world whose wealth was augmented by colonialism. The remapping involves re-naming. Formerly the colonial powers imposed their own naming on the colonial places. Here the language of the migrants reappropriates cartographical descriptions whilst the migrants themselves destroy their identities, their ‘names’, by burning their papers. By becoming sans-papiers they seek the shelter of anonymity in the marginal spaces of the cities of Europe.

Bessaï’s work is not just a map of signs and connections, it is present as a meditation on subjectivity, of the relationship to the ‘other’. On the one hand there is the magnet of a ‘metropolis’ where, whatever the reality of the situation for particular individuals, subjectivity is largely defined in the material terms of consumerism and work, something Kader Attia develops in depth in his work on the attractions of the West and its branded products.<sup>642</sup> The situation of the migrant appears contained within an almost stereotypical subjectivity perceived within the limitations of unemployment and a flight from the perceived limited opportunities of a country that offers little in the way of a future. This is a stereotype given some credence by the experiences of Bruno Boudjelal in Algeria’s ‘heart of darkness’. In reality the migrant subjectivity is much more differentiated and stratified, varying by gender, politics, sexuality and a range of other factors.<sup>643</sup> As indicated in Bessaï’s map, it is a subjectivity transformed through the process of migration and its often traumatic experiences.

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<sup>640</sup> *Spectres of Marx*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1994), p. 126.

<sup>641</sup> The term ‘counter-mapping’ was first used by N L Peluso in precisely this context of defence of resources by indigenous people, see: ‘Whose Woods are These? Counter-Mapping Forest Territories in Kalimantan, Indonesia’, *Antipode*, 4, 27, 1995, pp. 383–406.

<sup>642</sup> See Kader Attia, *Kader Attia*, (Lyon: Musée d’Art Contemporain de Lyon & le Magasin, CNAC Grenoble, 2006).

<sup>643</sup> See Rutvica Andrijasevica and Bridget Anderson, ‘Conflicts of mobility: Migration, labour and political subjectivities’, *Subjectivity*, (2009), 29, pp. 363–366. <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/sub/journal/v29/n1/full/sub200928a.html> . Accessed 4/10/2015.

The map points to the contradiction between ‘host’ and ‘hostile’, both of which derive from the same root, in respect of the metropolises marked in Bessaï’s map. The cities marked on the map, its destinations, reach out beyond themselves to include and represent the figure of ‘the Other’. This is the khôra or the territory of the Ancient Greek polis outside the city proper and a term used by Plato in *Timaeus* to designate a receptacle but also as the interval between being and non-being in which the ‘forms’ were held that constituted the ‘real’.<sup>644</sup> Derrida develops the notion in depth as a radical otherness that points to inbetweenness, growth, change and development.<sup>645</sup> The khôra operates as the split heart of urbanism and consists of both Tower, which guards the patrimony, and Labyrinth, in which the migrant can hide, or even find a degree of toleration. It also contains the notion of the ‘inbetweenness’ of the migrant and the changes in subjectivity demanded both by the anonymity of a migrant without papers and the potential and hoped for transformation to ‘citizen’.

Puspa Damai has suggested that, in *Destination*, Derrida is arguing that the city is not only the embodiment of the other (its incarnation) but also its hostage as the schizophrenic polis oscillates as threshold between City, with its welcoming aspect of unconditioned hospitality, and State, providing the conditions of hospitality, hostility.<sup>646</sup> In this sense, the counter map presented by Bessaï is a representation of the way in which the idea of ‘the migrant’ dictates a remapping of the world and an expression of the profound changes occurring in global politics and economics.

The spectre, as Derrida notes, is a projection on to an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see.<sup>647</sup> Bessaï’s map is a screen on which the spectre of mass migration watches us submerged beneath its surface. The map is not for migrants; it is aimed at us. The line of sight provided by the Guide acts as a mask: ostensibly focused on the migrant, it conceals its true intention, which is its action on the consciousness and conscience of the observer on the other side of the border.

The map provides us with traces of many stories – a textual imagination of space as a thing to be crossed just as the conquistadors of old crossed the Atlantic in search of gold in the

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<sup>644</sup> See Plato, *Timaeus*, 48e 4, there is an on-line version.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0180%3Atext%3DTim.%3Asection%3D48e> . Accessed 18/9/2019.

<sup>645</sup> There is a good exposition of Derrida’s view of the khôra in Julian Wolfreys, *Derrida: a guide for the perplexed*, (London: Continuum, 2007.), pp. 71-76.

<sup>646</sup> Puspa Damai, ‘Messianic-City: Ruins, Refuge and Hospitality in Derrida’, *Discourse*, 27, 2 and 3, 2005, pp. 68-94.

<sup>647</sup> *Spectres of Marx*, as cited, p. 125.

West.<sup>648</sup> It is a representation of different moments in time through its traces of colonialism, a history of hospitality and hostility and the attempts, hardly successful, to manage and control flows. The map has two sides, even if the Guide is ostensibly, although not ‘really’, intended for those on one side. In this way, the artwork becomes a site of supplementary function, a space of liminality, moving between interpretations. The ambiguity of the nature of the supplement both reinforces the solidity of what is present, the reality of the situation of the migrant, whilst at the same time suggesting a lack of solidity: the potential of the migrant to be an agent of transformation and change. The supplement links in Derrida’s thought to distance, and ways of overcoming distance.<sup>649</sup>

Bessaï has indicated that he is content to live and work in Algeria despite its limitations in terms of opportunities, infrastructure and censorship. However, in his work he often focuses on the plight of young Algerians who experience Algeria as a place of containment, unemployment, and limited opportunities. There is overlap in this focus with the artist’s own frustrations in building a career since, despite wanting to live in Algeria, he needs to travel outside it on occasion to develop his profile as an artist, to attend biennials or exhibitions, and to take up residency opportunities. Although in the past one of the problems Algerian artists had was obtaining visas from the Algerian authorities to visit abroad the problem now tends to be the many restrictions on obtaining visas imposed from outside through controls on entry and stay. For Bessaï, as noted above, this resulted in being refused entry to the UK to attend the exhibition of Algerian art at the Cornerhouse, Manchester in 2011. Ironically, on show as part of his exhibition was his *Harragas*, (2010), composed of a circle of candles and small model figures as well as *H-OUT*.<sup>650</sup>

There is here an overlap between the four frames of identity and community offered in Chapter One. The first draws on the lived experience of the artist. The second is the artist acting as a form of spokesperson for the plight of young Algerians in his representations. However, one can also see how Bessaï’s work can be construed as a response to ‘cultural diplomacy’. The initiative of the Manchester University School of Arts, Languages and Cultures in collaboration with the Cornerhouse Gallery was intended to building bridges of

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<sup>648</sup> So Massey sees distance as such as the space of the conqueror, *For Space*, 2005, as cited, particularly Opening Propositions, pp. 1-6. For Derrida the trace does not appear as such, only the logic of its path, *Of Grammatology*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 65.

<sup>649</sup> See *Of Grammatology*, as cited, p. 200.

<sup>650</sup> *Harragas* has the double meaning of burning ID documents to make identification and return of individuals to their point of origin difficult and also ‘hitting the road’ or in other words, to migrate.

understanding. Cultural diplomacy is not just about the power agendas of the US or the nation states of the European Community. *H-OUT* can be regarded in part as a product of what Dima Hamadeh has described as a web composed of ‘bridges, hearts, cash’: a form of amorous relationship between Western ‘cultural bridging’ in which a liberal multiculturalism embraces the ‘other’ through supportive networks of funding, institutions and practitioners.<sup>651</sup> Identity here is often required to fit generic constructs related to ‘transgression’, ‘dissident’, and ‘victim’. This is not to decry the good intentions of such sponsors but simply to draw attention how an artist outside the West may feel the need to shape his or her art in order to attract sympathetic funding and exhibition offers in the West in order to advance a career.

Bessaï’s work could also be seen as responding to a fashionable and stereotyping trope related to migration and globalisation within the repertory of the art market’s cursus of biennials and fairs. It is interesting to note that *Harragas* and *H-OUT* are the only works of Bessaï that have been exhibited at an international art fair: The Dakar Biennial. There is no imputation here of deliberate exploitation by the artist but simply to make connections and suggest how artistic choices are not simple particularly in respect of identity and community and are influenced by a number of factors external to the artist.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis demonstrates how Bruno Boudjelal, Zineb Sedira and Zineddine Bessaï through aesthetic productions that are migratory, challenge both the idea of ‘journey as narrative’ and ‘narrative as journey’. It was argued that they present us with fragmented, unresolved, and disrupted journeys and narratives that reflect the negotiation of on-going identities. Attention was drawn to how space and time were layered anachronistically through collage and montage resulting in fragmentation and displacement and a dynamic relation between form and content. It was argued that this relation between form and content was important for understanding the nature of the physical and psychological journeys undertaken by the artists. The artwork itself, like the artist, in its relation to journeys, borders and crossings, became migratory to the extent that it imitated in its form the displacements it aimed to represent.

The analysis pointed to the way vertical and horizontal movement in the works frequently contradicted each other challenging notions of linearity, spatiality and temporal progression.

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<sup>651</sup> Dima Hamadeh, ‘Bridges, Hearts, Cash: Neoliberal markets of cultural understanding’, *The Contemporary Journal*, Nottingham Contemporary Gallery, Issue 1, 2018. <https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/>. Accessed 20/1/2019



In this the artworks demonstrated a key theme of the thesis that artistic and personal identity is a relational and positional process of *différance* and becoming and not about fixed notions of origin or arrival.<sup>652</sup> It was argued that this inscription of instability within the work of the artists is connected in part to the artist's location and that this 'situated identity' (whether London, Paris or Algiers) creates differential conceptions of 'Algeria' and a 'positionality' with political consequences.<sup>653</sup> The analysis supported the idea that the artists move beyond mimesis in their work, not just representing Algeria, but actively creating worlds (art as 'world making') that span the Mediterranean and encompass the intertwined history of France and Algeria as well as the reality of the present day.

An important finding was that the form of the artwork, montaged, fragmented, and displaced, as well as its content is important for understanding the nature of the journeys undertaken by the artists. Boudjelal's representation and deliberate problematizing of his fragmented sense of self through occlusion, omission, creative highlighting, selective remembering and forgetting is an imaginative yet brutally honest construction that he develops into a parallel narrative to the shadowy and blurred narrative of Algeria. As demonstrated there is a playful relationship to autofiction in his work that demonstrates Boudjelal's fearlessness in transgressing the barriers between creator and created, and moving from subject to 'self-conscious' object demonstrating apparent openness and yet maintaining opacity. Boudjelal's engagement with his identity has something in common with Glissant's description of his own: 'As far as my identity is concerned, I will take care of it myself. That is, I shall not allow it to become cornered in any essence'.<sup>654</sup>

Sedira's relation to identity in her work tends to take the form of a complex cross-referencing of histories and cultures symptomatic of her view that she is located between two cultures both of which are important to her. In *Saphir* the two characters appear never to meet and this disjuncture is mirrored in her relation to the culture and history of Algeria and France as a fracture that is aesthetically creative. This fracture finds expression in her work through her exploration of the difficulties that both France and Algeria have in coming to terms with their

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<sup>652</sup> On Derrida's concept of *différance* see Michael Marder, 'Différance of the "real"', *Parrhesia*, Number 4, 2008, pp. 49-61. A PDF can be read at [https://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia04/parrhesia04\\_marder.pdf](https://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia04/parrhesia04_marder.pdf). Accessed 4/8/2018.

<sup>653</sup> I am using the term 'Situated identity' here in a very general sense in terms of the dispositional attributes that flow from the perspectives (or 'positionings') of given perceivers in an event field that is physically located. Social reality is perceived as 'the complex of situated identities generated from all the perspectives that are relevant to the events in a social field'. See Alexander, C. Norman, and Gordon W. Knight. 'Situated Identities and Social Psychological Experimentation.' *Sociometry*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1971.

<sup>654</sup> Edouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997), p. 192.

colonial past. In this sense her engagement with inbetweenness is a transformative on-going negotiation of her identity within her art. This engagement may not be as dramatic and painful as that of Boudjelal but it is no less significant for that.

Bessaï's situation is different to both Boudjelal and Sedira and no matter that he himself is content to live in Algeria his situation is closer to the migrant. In terms of Bessaï's access to the wider world as an artist, essential to his career progression, his identity is restricted by being 'young, male, unattached and Algerian'. In this he shares some of the frustrations of the *hittistes* of Algiers of which *Djarba*, the Algerian Arabic dialect, acts as a metaphor. In exploring the lives and careers of the artists in this thesis it is easy to forget that for many artists a 'radicant' identity is difficult to attain. As an artist Bessaï is contained within the locus of Algeria and with limited access to the frames of cultural diplomacy and the global art cursus of institutions, funding and markets.

Despite the diversity of the backgrounds of the artists and of their approaches to art, their art is frequently focused on Algeria. Yet the art practice of all three participates within a contemporary art system that has unfolded globally from its European and North American origins and practices incorporating for example, installation, site specificity, video, a visual and textual intertextuality, photography, postmodernist discourse and an aestheticisation of everyday objects, the readymade. They participate within a shared aesthetic agenda, often drawing on its tropes but with an engagement with 'localities' reflecting their backgrounds and personal experiences. In this, despite their differential 'radicancy' as far as movement is concerned, they deserve the description of 'semionaut' through their exploration of 'pathways of signs'. As noted in Chapter One, artists engage with what they know and what is important to them. Even Bessaï's *H-OUT*, while engaging with the trope of Western postcolonialism of political cartography, is rooted in his experience of the youth of Algeria. His work however is not intended for the audience of migrants of the type inscribed within its frame but an art market situated in Europe and the wider circuit of the MENA. 'Worldhood' in the work of the artists is a disputed terrain and the work of the artists frequently reflect not the alleged lack of friction of globalisation but its disordering and disrupting.

The work of the artists reflects the complexity of the nature of the 'local'. Hall noted as early as 1999 that there was a problem with prevalent discourse in which increasingly '(t)here isn't

any local that isn't written, re-written through and through by the global'.<sup>655</sup> He pointed instead to the acceleration of the rate at which the uneven interdependencies of the world were experienced in ways that intensified local differentiation. Part of his interest in globalization was precisely because of the potential of 'the local'. Hall saw 'localism' as the only point of intervention against 'the hegemonic, universalizing thrust of globalization'. The artists examined here have an ambiguous relationship with the local (whether Paris, London, or Algiers) which modifies their position as 'the nomadic agents of global culture' (Medina<sup>656</sup>), and is closer to the uprooting, movement and setting down of roots of the 'radicants' or 'semionauts' of contemporary art (Bourriaud<sup>657</sup>). But there are differences regarding the extent this is possible, Bessaï is contained within the locality of Algeria in ways the other two are not.

The approach to politics seems to be differentiated by the positioning and location of the artists. Boudjelal's *Jours Intranquilles* is replete with open criticism of Algerian politics and society. In his triple movement from utopian expectation, to dystopia and back to utopian aspiration, he moves from wanting to be changed by, to wanting to change Algeria which he expresses in an uncompromising opposition to a regime that he sees as corrupt, deeply undemocratic and irredeemable.<sup>658</sup> Sedira's position is different. She sees possibilities in building bridges between artists in Algeria and opportunities outside it by working with the Ministry of Culture in Algeria and through developing initiatives of her own: opportunities that might improve the situation of young Algerian artists such as Bessaï. These differences cut across conceptions of both aesthetic and national/diasporic community and relate closely to how identity and community are read into the political situation in Algeria and how it might be changed.

Sedira's view is arguably close to that offered by Chantal Mouffe who is critical of those who claim that art cannot retain its critical position within art institutions and that these provide a

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<sup>655</sup> Stuart Hall, 'A Conversation with Stuart Hall', *The Journal of the International Institute*, Volume 7, Issue 1, Fall, 1999. Hall says: 'If you talk globalization too much you really believe it is happening. That is why I want to interrogate the discourse of globalization itself. I think that there are discourses of what I would call "hyper-globalization." *Everything* is transformed; *everything* is an outcast in the same way by the global processes. There isn't any local that isn't written, re-written through and through by the global. That just doesn't seem to me to be true. It doesn't ring true; I think it's a myth'.

<sup>656</sup> Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses', Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle, (Eds.), *What Is Contemporary Art?* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), pp. 10-21, p. 16.

<sup>657</sup> See N Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, (New York, Sternberg, 2009), chapter on 'Radicant Aesthetics', pp. 79-148.

<sup>658</sup> In his conversation with the writer 16 February 2016 Boudjelal spoke repeatedly of the violence of the 1990s and the continuing violence in Algerian politics and society. In this he is close to the position of his friend Omar Daoud as reflected in the latter's work on the 'disappeared' in Algeria at <http://www.autograph-abp-shop.co.uk/books/devoir-de-memoire-a-biography-of-disappearance> . Accessed 4/8/2018.

site for political counter-hegemonic intervention through exploiting tensions and subverting official articulations.<sup>659</sup> It does open Sedira up to criticisms that she is implicated by her positioning with the regime's attempts to cloak its repressive nature by its involvement with culture. On the other hand, the weakness of Boudjelal's position of opposition leaves him somewhat adrift from critical involvement with the cultural politics of Algeria.

For Bessaï the choice is often between keeping one's head down or risking reprisal. Bessaï must take care regarding the topics and approaches adopted in his art practice both for his own safety, even in the current 'thaw' the danger is real, and for the sake of potentially benefiting from state funding and opportunities. As in other aspects of these works the local and the global also converge in politics reflecting issues of containment, movement and inequality.

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<sup>659</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: thinking the world politically*, (London: Verso, 2013), especially Chapter Five 'Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practices', pp. 85-106.

## Chapter Five: The female body and gendered spaces in contemporary Franco-Algerian art

### Introduction

Sally Reilly has noted that the body has become the principal arena for the politics of identity and acts as a facilitator and marker of belonging.<sup>660</sup> The ‘body’ in this sense is not just a physical entity but also a socially constructed idea and a sign requiring a symbolic understanding.<sup>661</sup> This approach conceives of the body in terms of an embodied subjectivity frequently gendered and susceptible to social and cultural influences. The artists in the chapter are all female artists with a particular focus in their work on representations of women and constructions of femininity, but this is not by implication to conflate gender and sex, see for example Chapter Two and Kader Attia’s treatment of transsexual prostitutes in *La Piste d’atterrissage*. As Janet Holland et al. note, the material, biological body and its social meaning are so entwined in complex and contradictory ways that they are extremely difficult to disentangle.<sup>662</sup> The result is that the body acts, as Reilly notes, as our interface with the world and a signifier of lived experience.<sup>663</sup> Treating the body in this way contributes to how it and gendered space are analysed in the work of the artists considered in the chapter.<sup>664</sup>

Embodied subjectivity is part of the social and frequently gendered hierarchies, divisions and inequalities across cultures. The focus on embodiment as lived experience highlights how the ‘otherness’ of femininity and masculinity is shown or performed as part of a hierarchy of otherness within and across cultures. Space and the complexity of the subject prevents analysis here of the ‘other’ of Arab male bodies. Instead the focus in this chapter is on how

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<sup>660</sup> Sally Reilly, *The Body in Contemporary Art*, (London: Thames and Hudson 2009), p. 8.

<sup>661</sup> See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (London, Routledge, 2007), p. 25. Gender is seen by Butler as something that is culturally inscribed and what one does (through repeated performative acts) rather than what one is. This approach has more recently been criticised for making too strong a distinction between society and nature, see Raewyn Connell and Rebecca Pearse, *Gender in World Perspective*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), p. 66.

<sup>662</sup> Janet Holland, et al., ‘Power and Desire: The Embodiment of Female Sexuality,’ *Feminist Review*, no. 46, 1994, pp. 21–38, pp. 21-22.

<sup>663</sup> Sally Reilly, 2009 as cited, p. 8.

<sup>664</sup> This chapter, as with the other chapters, broadly follows Stuart Hall’s view that ‘cultural identity’ is always something that is emerging and not fixed and that, to use his words, identity is ‘poised, in transition, between different positions’ and draws on diverse cultural traditions at the same time. See Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew, (Eds.), *Modernity and Its Futures*, (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1992), p. 310.

the artists, who are all women, engage with how the ‘othering’ and ‘otherness’ of Arab or Algerian women and their bodies is performed, portrayed and culturally located. In this engagement, the artists negotiate ‘difference’ in their transcultural explorations of traditions, histories and practices. There is in this, as will be seen, a risk for the artists who may, in asserting their right to be different, reattach themselves and their art to forms of identity that are as reductive as those they seek to challenge. ‘Positioning’ in this context provides a useful trope for analysing the different models of identity and belonging used by the artists.

The treatment by the artists of the female body and gendered space will be examined in part by reference to the idea of irreducibility and Glissant’s notion of the opaque.<sup>665</sup>

‘Irreducibility’ is used here in the straightforward sense of the impossibility of understanding any entity except at a certain level of complexity. ‘Opacity’ is used, as by Glissant, as not about the obscure but about that which is resistant to Western forms of appropriation through ‘understanding’ and ‘making transparent’ and therefore about resisting assimilation and objectification.<sup>666</sup> Siobhán Shilton has argued that the way female Maghrebi artists combine diverse media generates ‘experiences of intractable “otherness”’ that gives rise to a ‘transcultural encounter’.<sup>667</sup> The chapter examines whether and how the artists attempt to generate this transcultural encounter.

Gendered spaces are important because it is the body in space that experiences, challenges and resists efforts at reduction. Raewyn Connell has drawn attention to the way that personal and gender relations are structured by institutions, economies, ideologies and governments and in everyday personal experience.<sup>668</sup> This gendering of private and public spaces across cultures has significance for how men and women behave and are treated including how they occupy space and their visibility or otherwise within it. The works considered here explore a variety of gendered spaces which provide contexts within which people act out or challenge, in the sense of Butler’s ‘performativity’, culturally defined conceptions of gender.<sup>669</sup>

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<sup>665</sup> See Edouard Glissant, ‘For Opacity’, *The Poetics of Relation*, (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1997), pp. 189-194. <http://sideroom.org/o/wp-content/uploads/edouard-glissant-poetics-of-relation-1.pdf>. Accessed 2/2/2017.

<sup>666</sup> See Chapter One of Celia Britton, *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory, Strategies of Language and Resistance*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), pp. 11-34.

<sup>667</sup> Siobhán Shilton, *Transcultural Encounters: gender and genre in Franco-Maghreb art*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 215.

<sup>668</sup> Raewyn Connell, and Rebecca Pearse, *Gender in World Perspective*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), p. 130.

<sup>669</sup> See Sarah Salih and Judith Butler, (Eds.), *The Judith Butler reader*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2004). In particular, the section on ‘Sex, Gender Performativity, and the Matter of Bodies’.

Religion figures frequently in the works as part of the exploration by the artists of time, space and culture. Fatema Mernissa noted that ‘Muslim sexuality’, the phrase is hers, is territorialised by regulatory mechanisms that allocate space on a gendered basis.<sup>670</sup> This regulation of the spaces occupied by the female body in Islam is important for understanding aspects of the artworks because the artists often challenge the ‘double othering’ of the female body in terms of Western stereotyping and of patriarchal forms linked to tradition or religion. Niati, for example, critiques the use made of the harem by orientalist artists and Benyahia explores various aspects of the mashrabiyya, an artefact that, amongst other uses, often frames the harem. El Said, Meari and Pratt have pointed out the importance of occupying and re-signifying space in recent women activism in the ‘Arab World’, for example Egypt, a theme that is taken up in Kameli’s video *Untitled*.<sup>671</sup> It is argued that the body acts as a site of flux in which gender is constructed and contested but also that space itself is a frequently gendered terrain of struggle. Zoubir’s *Prends ta place* in particular is focused on how the female body manifests itself in urban spaces in Algiers. Many of these artworks seem at times to be shadowed by a systemic violence, which Žižek has compared to the ‘dark matter’ of physics, embedded within political and cultural systems.<sup>672</sup>

The works examined are roughly framed in terms of sequential periods of Algerian history. Niati’s *No to Torture* (1982) targets French oppression of Algerian women in the colonial period and the War of Independence. Benyahia’s appropriation of the ‘Fatima’ design, a key motif in her installations, was initially a reaction to attacks on women by the Islamists in the 1990s. Zoubir’s work focuses on the persistence of sexual apartheid in contemporary Algeria and Kameli’s artwork *Untitled* (2011) provides a complex engagement with the ‘Arab Spring’ although it is set and performed in Algiers.<sup>673</sup> Other factors influenced the selection of artists. Niati’s engagement with orientalist art provides the chapter with an initial historical and transnational frame but she is also of interest as a significant figure amongst British female black artists. Benyahia’s use of references in her work to Arab and Algerian culture in order to provide a counterbalance to the violence of the 1990s is interesting but, it will be

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<sup>670</sup> Fatima Mernissa, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female dynamics in Muslim Society*, (London: SAQI Books, 2011), p. 151. The problematic term ‘Muslim sexuality’ is used by Mernissa.

<sup>671</sup> Maha El Said, Lena Meari and Nichola Pratt, *Rethinking Gender in Revolutions and Resistance: Lessons from the Arab World*, (London: Zed Books, 2015), pp. 237-238.

<sup>672</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, (London: Profile Books: 2008), pp. 1-2.

<sup>673</sup> The works can be viewed at: <http://katiakameli.com/videos/untitled/> ; <http://hourianiati.com/gallery.php?c=0> ; [http://samtabenyahia.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/OliviaQusaibatyBenyahia\\_mar07.pdf](http://samtabenyahia.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/OliviaQusaibatyBenyahia_mar07.pdf) ; <http://www.aminazoubir.com/> . All accessed 1/8/2018.

argued, at times problematic. The work of Zoubir and Kameli is important because it demonstrates the leading role of women artists in developing Algerian and Franco-Algerian video art. Kameli's artwork attempts a deliberate and subtle de-territorialisation while at the same time locating the production of her video in Algiers. The artists together offer a diverse range of theme and form with which to consider some of the interconnections between the female body, identity and community.

The initial work examined is by Houria Niati for three reasons: it is chronologically the earliest, it provides useful historical background because of its engagement with the events of the War of Independence and it has significance in targeting orientalist art. Edward Said noted that 'orientalism' implied a basic distinction between East and West acting as 'the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny and so on'.<sup>674</sup> Said made the important proposition that '(o)rientalism is after all a system for citing works and authors'.<sup>675</sup> Citation is the intertextual or transtextual glue supporting not only past and existing forms of orientalism but also, more generally, creating the forms of discourse in which oppression, including gender oppression, is justified and maintained.<sup>676</sup> It is a complicated issue since, as Khanna indicates, a naive response is to 'send back' images, texts, and discourse whilst reciting them differently but this can merely set up a 'simplistic dualism' opposing colonial citation with a postcolonial respondent.<sup>677</sup> Mieke Bal points out that this can result in a reproduction of the power structure under critique.<sup>678</sup> This cautionary note reinforces the need to examine how the artists respond to the dynamics of reductive essentialism.

As a corrective to potential risks of essentialism Abdelkebir Khatibi's concept of 'double critique', see Chapter One, is invoked because it aims to permit multiple voices to be heard. Sound, or just as significantly in Kameli's case its absence, figure prominently in the works of all the artists often providing formal disruption to the visuality of the artworks as well as acting metaphorically, in the case of voice, as a signifier of agency. Hamil views Khatibi's

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<sup>674</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penguin Classic, 2003), pp. 2-3.

<sup>675</sup> Said as cited 2003, p. 23.

<sup>676</sup> Bakhtin and Kristeva originated the concept of intertextuality (the relation of a text to all other texts), Gerard Genette later attempted to redefine it more reductively and proposed 'transtextuality' as the wider term. See for example Gerard Genette, *The architext: an introduction*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 83-84.

<sup>677</sup> Ranjana Khanna, *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 147.

<sup>678</sup> See the review of, amongst others, Malek Alloula's book *The Colonial Harem* in Mieke Bal, 'The Politics of Citation', *Diacritics*, Volume 21, Issue 1, Spring 1991.



'double critique' as shifting the postcolonial subject's fixation on the Other/West 'to an inward interrogation of his political and ideological self-colonization and self-victimization' demystifying Arabo-Islamic metaphysical logocentrism and deconstructing the imperialist, ethnocentric Western episteme.<sup>679</sup> This contrapuntal thinking assists analysis of, for example, monolithic Western perceptions of Algerian women versus the Algerian Nationalist attempts to position women as embodiments of the nation and enables one to respect the irreducible otherness or opacity of subjects and thus resist the double objectification of both patriarchal and colonial discourses.<sup>680</sup> The analysis attempts to maintain this self-reflexivity of critique but looks to see if there is also evidence of it in the work of the artists.

### Houria Niati

Houria Niati's quintych *No to Torture* (1982) is the work for which she is most well-known. The work deconstructs Delacroix's iconic masterpiece *Les Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1834) and is inspired by the brutal treatment of women's bodies under French rule and by how Delacroix's work is implicated in this colonial violence. Part of the painting's importance links to Niati's positioning within British Black Art and her participation in a network of Black female artists asserting their place within mainstream art and challenging what they perceived as the gendered, racialized canons of Western art. Niati's background and the paintings of both artists are described. The analysis then considers Niati's work as an intervention in an art historical debate about the depiction of the female body within a sexualised, racialized art discourse and practice that persisted into the twentieth century. Attention is drawn to Niati's work as an attempted reversal of the process of 'citation' that Said considered central to orientalism, but it is also a denunciation of the brutality of the French colonisation of Algeria and the French art that helped to justify it ideologically. The starting point for this critique is the gap Niati perceived between what Delacroix's 'realist' painting portrays and the actuality of French colonialism in Algeria.<sup>681</sup>

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<sup>679</sup> Mustapha Hamil, 'Interrogating Identity: Abdelkebir Khatibi and the Postcolonial Prerogative', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 22, The Language of the Self: Autobiographies and Testimonies, 2002, pp. 72-86, p. 75. <http://www.jstor.org/eresources/shef.ac.uk/stable/pdf/1350050.pdf>. Accessed 5/3/2017.

<sup>680</sup> For Glissant, see 'For Opacity' in *The Poetics of Relation*, 1997 as cited. For Khatibi, see Abdelkébir Khatibi. 'The language of the Other: Testimonial Exercises', (Translation: Catherine Porter), *PMLA*, Volume 125, Number 4, October 2010, pp. 1002-1019; Felisa V. Reynolds, 'Khatibi as Derrida's foil: Undermining the last defender of the French language', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 18:2, 2014, pp. 199-206; and Mustapha Hamil, 2002 as cited. On multidirectionality in terms of memory, see Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonisation*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) in which he argues for non-zero-sum spaces in which multiple voices have a place.

<sup>681</sup> Delacroix's relation to romanticism and nineteenth-century realism is not straightforward. For Courbet (who would regard Delacroix as an 'idealist') realism was not an attempt at a slavish imitation of the real but taking

Niati's art demonstrates an assertion of agency responding to her difficult personal history within the context of her evolving sense of identity and belonging exemplified by her active engagement in the cultural life of London.<sup>682</sup>

Houria Niati is a London based artist born in Algeria at Khemis-Miliana, in 1943 to an Arab father and a Berber mother.<sup>683</sup> Niati draws extensively in her art on the métissage of her diverse cultural background. She describes her art as an 'interaction of ideas in space and time' and an attempt to bring coherence to past, present and future in a 'struggle to come to terms with the dichotomy between eastern and western identities'.<sup>684</sup> Niati's work is predominantly in oil and pastel but frequently installation based and often includes her live performances of Arab-Andalusian songs. Singing is an important aspect of the artist's life and a way of earning a living as she acknowledges that she cannot live on the money she earns from her art.<sup>685</sup>

Niati acknowledges the fragmented nature of 'Algerian' identity and considers that Algeria 'has serious difficulties in defining a clear identity for itself'.<sup>686</sup> The artist believes that the faultlines and fractures of her sense of identity were compounded by her education in which 'we were brainwashed we were French'. School enacted a form of symbolic cultural violence and enmeshed her in the trap, described by Derrida, of the way the French language colonised

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the reality of the world around him as his subject. Delacroix is on the cusp of romanticism and realism but in this work related to Algeria he asserts his engagement with its 'reality' based on his first-hand experience of the French occupation. See, for example, the analysis of realism on the Musée d'Orsay website. <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/courbet-dossier/realism.html#c19305> . Accessed 25/2/2019. What Delacroix is engaging with is both what he chose to see in Algeria and an idealist and romantic view of an orientalist signifier. For contrast across the range of his work see for example his *A Mad Woman* and the florid idealism of his Saint-Sulpice murals. Some of the issues are touched on in Jack J. Spector, *The Murals of Eugene Delacroix at Saint-Sulpice*, (New York: The College Art Association of America, 1967). <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=Rcttt2IUlKc&pg=PA169&lpg=PA169&dq=Delacroix+and+realism&source=bl&ots=O8SZWjRHfF&sig=ACfU3U1xijkSRhDBWMoLcf13iptnp61ULg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewi2j9eT29bgAhWkSxUIHfnTAE44ChDoATAIegQIChAB#v=onepage&q=Delacroix%20and%20realism&f=false> . Accessed 25/2/2019.

<sup>682</sup> It was in this engagement by Niati in London's cultural life that the writer met her 'by accident' at a cultural event in Camden.

<sup>683</sup> Khemis-Miliana is a town of around 90,000 people. The city was a site of early opposition to the French invasion. In 1840, Abd al-Qadir, who led the Arab/Berber resistance to the French invasion after the fall of Algiers, ordered Miliana to be burned down instead of surrendering it to the French. The town eventually fell under French control in 1842 and was rebuilt in the French Colonial architectural style. The remains of the city walls show evidence of Berber architecture and around 25% of the city's inhabitants currently speak Berber. <https://archive.fo/20130412050323/http://www.world-gazetteer.com/wg.php?x=&men=gcis&lng=en&des=wg&srt=npan&col=abcdefghijklno&msz=1500&geo=-66> . Accessed 24/7/2018.

<sup>684</sup> See the 'Introduction' on Niati's website. <http://hourianiati.com/introduction.php> .

<sup>685</sup> Much of the biographical material here is taken from the artist's website.

<sup>686</sup> Juliet Highet, 'Houria Niati: Identity Search', English Edition of *Asharq-Al-Awasat*, 16 September 2013. <http://english.aawsat.com/2013/09/article55316808/houria-niati-identity-search> . Accessed 7/2/2017.

the Algerian mind.<sup>687</sup> Both Derrida and Abdelkébir Khatibi acknowledge the way in which language colonises the mind – Khatibi stressing Arabic and Derrida French. Khatibi’s ‘double critique’ approach is not restricted to French and points to how other languages, he stresses Arabic, can be used to colonise the mind with religion and tradition. Niati experienced the imposition of the French language at the same time as Berber folk culture was passed down to her by grandmothers and aunts and she was subject to the Islamic education offered by the local masjid. Each of these languages and associated cultures provided very different forms – particularly in regard to their relative status and violence - of influence and colonisation. There was and perhaps remains in her art an unresolved tension between the access to European culture and its modernism provided by European culture and French and tradition and history linked to Berber culture and Arabic such that, as with Khatibi, while ‘the child’s mind was being colonised, his heart was playing instead with the talismans’.<sup>688</sup> The heroes, heroines and saints of Algerian and Islamic culture, ‘les ancêtres’ referred to in the works of both Assia Djebar and Kateb Yacine, were preserved and transmitted to Niati by older females within her family whilst at school this past and culture were denigrated and denied. This provided a conflicted but creative mix of different languages, genealogies and cultural values in Niati’s work.

Aged 12, Niati was arrested, mistreated and briefly imprisoned in atrocious conditions for protesting against French colonialism with anti-colonial graffiti.<sup>689</sup> This traumatic experience stayed with her and found expression in her BA dissertation at art school in England entitled ‘The art which is committed’ which she explains means ‘committed to a cause, ideas or society, and not just art for yourself – I wrote that because of Algeria and its experience under French rule’.<sup>690</sup> *No to Torture* can be seen as an example of this commitment linked to a process of re-appropriation of identity and culture in the face of her personal experience of the brutality of colonialism.

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<sup>687</sup> ‘Je n’ai qu’une langue, ce n’est pas la mienne’, (‘I have only one language and it is not my own’) in Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 1. This is not the only theme implied by Derrida’s sentence but his various positions are too complex to elaborate here.

<sup>688</sup> Quoted in Hamil, 2002 as cited, p. 77.

<sup>689</sup> Hightet, as cited, 16 September 2013. ‘She was beaten and shoved into a cell, where she was repulsed by the excrement on the floor, and terrified of torture. Because she attended a French school, she was not tortured, but the French head teacher beat her after her release and return to school’.

<sup>690</sup> ‘STM’, ‘In Conversation with the Painter, Houria Niati’, *The Art Ministry*, 2006. <https://theartministry.wordpress.com/art-design-zone/art-design-zone/interviews/houria-niati/>. Accessed 23/7/2018.

Niati left Algeria to move to London in 1977 where she worked and saved until she could afford to study art full time. She took art classes at Camden Art Centre and then attended Croydon College of Art to take her Diploma in Fine Art.<sup>691</sup> Niati's experience of art school further complicated the question of her relationship to identity as, although she acknowledges the help given in defining style and gaining technical confidence at art school, she also 'kept hearing this word "ethnic"... There was no chance just to be an "artist"'.<sup>692</sup> The reality of 1970s England was that it was very difficult to progress as an artist if categorised as 'Black' or 'ethnic'. In this Niati was not unique, Rasheed Araeen has related how in the early 1970s he lost 'all hope of becoming a successful artist' as a consequence of 'institutional indifference'.<sup>693</sup>

Sophie Orlando comments that in Britain 'Black' is not 'a designation of an ethnicity or colour but a political place of enunciation that is common to migrants or British people who immigrated'.<sup>694</sup> This defines the situation of Black artists in a common political space linked to movements of decolonisation. In qualification of Orlando's statement, it should be noted how 'black' as a label in the British context is not stable in meaning but subject to frequent change over time as a signifier. Niati's arrival in 1977, despite the 1976 Race Relations Act, was into a social reality framed by institutional and cultural racism and it was in this environment that Niati engaged with other black female artists concerned with an intersectional view of identity in order to challenge a gendered, racialized art system.<sup>695</sup> The network of black women artists of which Niati was a part attempted to create discursive spaces in which to voice their concerns regarding art history and the British art scene. Niati appears in Lubaina Himid's defining work, *Thin Black Line(s): Moments and Connections During the 1980s for the Women Artists* (2011), (see image 44 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five), situated between Himid and Jennifer Comrie.

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<sup>691</sup> Both institutions were at the time dynamic, with Camden Art Centre a major focus for artists in the area and Croydon College of Art producing artists of the calibre of Helen Chadwick, Jamie Reid, and Juan Muñoz, as well as John Rocha and Malcolm McLaren, former manager of The Sex Pistols.

<sup>692</sup> The quotations by Niati are taken from the Highet article 2013 as cited. A good analysis of the complex and fragmented nature of Algerian identity including the divide between Berber and Arab and how it is still resonant today is given in Marisa Fois, 'Identity, Politics and Nation: Algerian Nationalism and the "Berberist Crisis" of 1949', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 43:2, 2016, pp. 206-218.

<sup>693</sup> Rasheed Araeen, 'Rethinking History and Some Other Things', *Third Text* 54, Spring 2001, p. 95.

<sup>694</sup> Sophie Orlando, *British Black Art: Debates on Western Art History*, (Paris: Dis Voir, 2016), p. 9.

<sup>695</sup> On the canons of art and their frequently racialized and gendered basis, see Griselda Pollack, *Differencing the Canon, Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's History*, (London: Routledge, 1999). For a more recent treatment see Ruth E. Iskin, (Ed.), *Re-envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon: Perspectives in a Global World*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2017). The latter work (see Editor's introduction) is interesting for its assertion of the persistence of the traditional art canon but the potential developing from 'counter-canons'.

Black male artists were also subject to criticism when they appeared to be complicit with a view of art and identity that was oppressively gendered whilst critiquing its racial aspects. In the same year that Niati painted *No to Torture*, Sonia Boyce organised a walkout from the main conference hall at the First National Black Convention at Wolverhampton Polytechnic after male participants questioned Claudette Johnson's explanation of her own art practice in terms of an interrogation and critique of the representation of the female body by Picasso. Boyce comments that they were angered by the way 'a black woman representing herself and speaking about sexuality independent of man' was being treated.<sup>696</sup> The critique of the gendered and racialized treatment of the female body by modernist artists in Johnson's art practice, is reflected in Niati's formal treatment of *No to Torture*.

The five paintings of *No to Torture* were initially exhibited in the 1983 exhibition 'Five Black Women' at the Africa Centre in Covent Garden alongside work by Himid, Sonia Boyce, Veronica Ryan, and Claudette Johnson. Himid has described herself as more 'a political strategist using visual language' than 'a painter in the strictest sense' and the work of all five appears consciously political.<sup>697</sup> Himid recalls that Niati's work attracted much attention:

'Houria Niati exhibited her extraordinary re-imaginings of Delacroix paintings in which using every colour imaginable, she questioned and argued with his interpretation of how North African women think and feel, look and behave. They were bold, active and rude paintings which refused to unnecessarily respect the masterworks yet acknowledged their significance. They could hold the distance and were able to shout loudly at you from across the massive airiness of the space'.<sup>698</sup>

Niati's work emerged within an intense debate amongst British black artists, in which she participated, about Western art history, the marginalisation of Black Art, gender relations and the contemporary racialized political scene under Thatcherism.<sup>699</sup> Like *No to Torture* the work of these artists also involved a thorough-going critique of modernism as well as orientalism and its role in marginalising 'the Other' in art history. Just a year after Niati

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<sup>696</sup> Quoted in Orlando, 2016 as cited, p. 45.

<sup>697</sup> In article by Laura Cumming, 'Lubaina Himid: Invisible Strategies; Tschabalala Self review – history and mystery', *Guardian*, 22/1/2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/jan/22/lubaina-himid-invisible-strategies-review-tschabalala-self-modern-art-oxford-parasol-unit> . Accessed 23/7/2018.

<sup>698</sup> See Lubaina Himid, *Thin Black Lines*, Tate Britain exhibition catalogue, (London: Tate, 2011/2012), in which Himid includes her 'Letters to Susan' and her views about art and the exhibition.

<sup>699</sup> See Orlando as cited 2016 in particular from p. 43 in Chapter Two, 'Deconstructing and Rethinking the Positions of Twentieth-Century Western Art'.

showed *No to Torture*, with its implicit critique of Matisse and Picasso, Himid's *Freedom and Change*, (see image 45 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five), transformed Picasso's bare-breasted and white female figures in *Two Women Running On A Beach* (1922), (see image 46 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five), into black women. Himid later made the point that 'Picasso, like many modernists, felt completely at ease ... appropriating from multiple African cultures' and that she was appropriating the images with equal ease.<sup>700</sup>

Niati's *No to Torture* takes as its starting point Delacroix's painting of, superficially, a representation of a charming domestic scene in the harem of a middle-class household in 1830s Algeria.<sup>701</sup> Niati's approach was to deconstruct Delacroix's masterpiece *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1834), (see image 47 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five), by re-working it into a large semi-abstract expressionist central canvas with separate individual representations of the four women depicted in the central painting. The individual works are untitled and *No to Torture* (1982), (see images 48 (a) to (e) at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five), refers to the five works as a whole.

Niati extracts the lower section of Delacroix's original from the shoulder of the black slave down and from the slave's left shoulder across to the right hand frame of the canvas, in the process decapitating her. The extract can be seen as a 'blow-up' since Niati's canvas is larger than that of Delacroix's original, 188 x 270cm compared to Delacroix's original which was 180 x 229cm.<sup>702</sup> Niati was 'quoting' from Delacroix in her painting with all the implications that had in terms of how Said regarded citation as a key means of maintaining orientalism. She stripped away the surface adornment that hide a colonial reality, removing the walls and spaces of the harem which not only provided fuel for Western stereotyping but acted as an implicit metaphor for the constraints imposed on women in traditional society which Touria Nakkouch argues engenders the 'double othering' of the Algerian woman.<sup>703</sup> Niati is

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<sup>700</sup> Quoted in Imelda Barnard, 'I used to think art could change the world', *Apollo International Art Magazine*, 10/1/2017. <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/libaina-himid-retrospective-spike-island/>. Accessed 22/8/2018.

<sup>701</sup> Harem comes from the Arabic *ḥarīm*, which can mean 'a sacred inviolable place', the word is connected with *haram* (forbidden) For an extensive exploration of male-female relations in Muslim society see Fatema Mernissa as cited, 2011. The logic or otherwise of female seclusion is discussed at p. 41 but the chapter on the 'Regulation of Female Sexuality in the Muslim Social Order' is also relevant. Also see Malek Alloula, *Le harem colonial: images d'un sous-érotisme*, (Paris: Garance, 1981).

<sup>702</sup> The 'blow-up' in Antonioni's film also involved a body.

<sup>703</sup> 'First as the "other" of the Western Voyeur's stolen gaze, and second as the "other" of the Algerian male gaze'. See Touria Nakkouch, 'Gendered Othering in the Plastic Arts: Delacroix's "Femmes d'Alger" and De la Tour's "Magdalene of Two Flames"', Conference paper, 6th Global Conference: Visual Literacies: Exploring Critical Issues, Volume: 6th edition. PDF available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235735188\\_Gendered\\_Othering\\_in\\_the\\_Plastic\\_Arts\\_Delacroix'\\_Femmes\\_d'Alger](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235735188_Gendered_Othering_in_the_Plastic_Arts_Delacroix'_Femmes_d'Alger)

involved not only in a radical reframing of the bodies of the Algerian women but also of the gendered spaces within which they were contained.

Niati, unlike for example Assia Djebar, does not regard the slave as a 'personnage presque accessoire'.<sup>704</sup> Emer O'Beirne notes that the slave is an important feature in Delacroix's painting: upright and mobile rather than seated or lying as if the slave was more free than the Algerian women.<sup>705</sup> Niati subtly alters the position of the black slave suggesting that she is leaving the canvas and no longer serving the needs of her Algerian mistresses. Her head is missing and along with the images of the defaced Algerian women she is no longer implicated in the play of looks within Delacroix's canvas.

It can be argued, that Niati's image does not subvert the 'male gaze' and re-creates images portraying women that are subjects rather than objects of male pleasure.<sup>706</sup> Both the main painting and the further deconstruction that occurs with the making of the four 'individual' canvases show the breasts of the Algerian women the latter canvases show the Algerian women and the slave kneeling naked with breasts and genitals exposed, if anything more eroticised than in the Delacroix. However, a more accurate assessment is that Niati is engaging complexly with Delacroix's work by bridging the gap between his romantic fantasy and brutal reality. Niati does this by stripping the women of clothes and adornment except for a shining band on their ankles signifying the enslavement of women in general but also the surface ornament that masks this condition. At the same time, Niati asserts the individual identity of each woman and therefore their irreducibility by painting each woman respectively red, green, blue and yellow. Niati is asserting in the paintings the common oppressed condition of the four women but also their individuality by symbolically reversing and dismantling the process of citation that Said considers maintains the system of colonial oppression. Niati is expunging a univocal model of female corporeality imposed on women

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[mes d'Alger' and De la Tour's 'Magdalene of Two Flames'](http://www.winter-disciplinary.net/at-the-interface/education/visual-literacies/project-archives6th) <http://www.winter-disciplinary.net/at-the-interface/education/visual-literacies/project-archives6th> . Accessed 1/8/2018.

<sup>704</sup> Assia Djebar, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002), p. 170.

<sup>705</sup> Emer O'Beirne, 'Veiled Vision: Assia Djebar on Delacroix, Picasso, and the Femmes D'Alger', *Romance Studies*, 21:1, 2003, pp. 39-51.

<sup>706</sup> 'The 'male gaze' was first theorised by Mulvey and continues to be invoked to reference the patriarchal surveillance of women's bodies. See an early view in Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, (Eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), pp. 833-44. For a good overview of responses to the idea of the male gaze see D. Ponterotto, 'Resisting the male gaze: Feminist responses to the "normalization" of the female body in western culture', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 17(1), 2016, pp. 133-151.

by a process of parody and abstraction revealing their true situation which is not that of a cosy domestic environment.<sup>707</sup>

Fran Lloyd rightly sees this as a performative act by the artist because it gives presence and self-image to ‘the doubly “othered” body in the western world’ which she perceives as ‘the non-normative Arab body’.<sup>708</sup> In drawing attention to this non-standard doubly ‘othered’ body Niati creates a transcultural encounter for the spectator that avoids a reproduction of the power structure under critique by unveiling the reality of French colonialism using modernist methods at the same time as stripping the work of the trappings that ‘other’ the women.

Why select Delacroix and his 1834 painting as a target rather than other orientalist painters and paintings? The initial idea for the work sprang from her friendship with Simone de Beauvoir with whom she corresponded concerning the case of Djamila Boupacha, a young Algerian woman arrested in 1960 and accused of attempting to bomb a cafe in Algiers.<sup>709</sup> Boupacha ‘confessed’ after being brutally tortured and raped. Simone de Beauvoir had been deeply involved in supporting Boupacha and, jointly with Boupacha’s lawyer Gisèle Halimi, wrote a book about the treatment of the young Algerian woman which shocked French public opinion.<sup>710</sup> De Beauvoir suggested that Niati go to see Delacroix’s painting, the 1834 version, at the Louvre. Niati’s subsequent reworking of the French painter’s artwork and the ascription of the title ‘*No to Torture*’ references Boupacha’s abusive treatment.

De Beauvoir’s suggestion was grounded on the importance of Delacroix and his works as lieux de mémoires. ‘Lieux de mémoires’ is a term used by Pierre Nora to mark what he believed to be a significant change in the relationship between memory and history. Nora regarded this change as: ‘the reflexive turning of history upon itself, the other a movement that is, properly speaking, historical: the end of a tradition of memory’.<sup>711</sup> Lieux de mémoires

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<sup>707</sup> On the imposed model of female corporeality see Ponterotto, as cited 2016, p. 134, ‘The invisibility of women has been accompanied in an extraordinarily inversely proportionate manner by the visual display of her physical appearance, of her body as material object, to be observed, judged, valued, appreciated, rejected, modified and essentially commodified, for socially-constructed purposes’.

<sup>708</sup> Fran Lloyd, ‘Embodiment and Performing the “Self” in contemporary Algerian Art: Houria Niati and Zineb Sedira’, *The Journal of Algerian Studies*, Vols. 4 and 5, 1999/2000, pp. 59-78, p. 59.

<sup>709</sup> Salah M. Hassan, ‘The Installations of Houria Niati’, *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Duke University Press, Number 3, Fall/Winter 1995, pp. 50-55.

<sup>710</sup> Simone de Beauvoir and Gisèle Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha: The Story of the Torture of a Young Algerian Girl Which Shocked Liberal French Opinion*, (London: Andrew Deutsch, 1962).

<sup>711</sup> See Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire’, *Representations*, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory, (Spring, 1989), pp. 7-24. For an acknowledgement of the importance of Nora’s views and a critique of them see: Michael Rothberg, ‘Introduction: Between Memory and Memory: From Lieux de mémoire to noeuds de mémoire’, *Yale French Studies*, No. 118/119, *Noeuds de mémoire*:



have three dimensions: they are material, symbolic, and functional and include a great variety of things including monuments, buildings, artworks and people. Nora regards them as taking the place of *milieux de mémoire* or the organic settings or environments of both individual and collective memory. By challenging Delacroix's work and implicitly Delacroix himself as an icon of French art and history, Niati challenged the whole tradition of orientalist painting that cited his work and, arguably, lasted to the 1950s in French culture.

Niati's reasons for critiquing Delacroix and his work relate closely to the intertwined history of France and Algeria. Delacroix's painting of the harem was lauded at the time as a realistic representation of a middle-class domestic scene in 1830s Algiers. However, the fantasy of the eastern harem and the Arab woman looms large in orientalist painting which provided part of the ideological support for colonialism and its violent and repressive apparatus in Algeria. Isra Ali has noted that nineteenth-century visual representations of Muslim societies are a rich site of Orientalist production, 'drawing thematically from earlier medieval representations, but in the context of a new power differential, Western imperialism'.<sup>712</sup> In particular she argues that the harem is 'the primary site in which the eroticism of the Orient is depicted in the realm of Orientalist visual art'.<sup>713</sup> Laurel Ma has argued that women's bodies became the metaphoric battlegrounds for European domination of North Africa.<sup>714</sup> Orientalist notions of a masculine coloniser and a feminine colonial subject were used to legitimise colonial rule by virtue of the way male superiority in society was seen as 'natural'.<sup>715</sup> Power, cultural intrusion, and the way colonisation impacted on the position of Algerian women and their relations with men were all implicit in Delacroix's painting, the reception it received and its subsequent iconic status as a *lieux de mémoire* in French politics and society.<sup>716</sup> From Niati's perspective, Delacroix's intrusion into the harem becomes a metaphor for the 'rape' of an 'Algeria' identified as the body of a women, a metaphor that also figures in Benyahia's work (see below) through her referencing of Kateb Yacine. The painting functions at the

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*Multidirectional Memory in Postwar French and Francophone Culture* (2010), pp. 3-12. Nora's volume one of *Les Lieux de Mémoire - la République*, had on its cover the image of Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple*.

<sup>712</sup> Isra Ali, 'The Harem fantasy in 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist paintings', *Dialect Anthropology*, 39, 2015, pp. 33-46. <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10624-015-9372-7>. Accessed 7 February 2017.

<sup>713</sup> Isra Ali, 2015 as cited, p. 40.

<sup>714</sup> Laurel Ma. 'The Real and the Imaginary Harem: Assessing Delacroix's Women of Algiers as an Imperialist Apparatus', *Penn History Review*, Penn University, Vol 19, Issue 1, Article 2, pp. 9-26.

<http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=phr>. Accessed 7 February 2017.

<sup>715</sup> See Tamara Hunt, and Micheline Lessard, *Women and the Colonial Gaze*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

<sup>716</sup> Both Djebbar and Khanna refer to the way in which colonisation forced more and more Algerian women into spaces of seclusion and not just the middle and upper class women of the 'harem'.

ideological level as a mystification of the oppression of women in Algeria and an icon symbolic of Boupacha's humiliation, torture and rape.

Lloyd's verdict is that Delacroix eroticises the women of the harem in the same way as other French orientalist painters, however there is much in the painting that is not typical.<sup>717</sup> Laurel Ma considers the title of the work as respectful of the women and 'de-eroticised' in that it acknowledges to a degree their 'possession' of space.<sup>718</sup> The Delacroix painting certainly contains elements of the orientalist harem including hookah, glass vases, rugs, a curtain, the black slave and heavy brightly coloured clothing but there are no naked or half-clothed odalisques, the women are covered, and the gaze of the women seems inward and self-reflective. It is very different from the odalisques of, for example, Ingres, (*see image 49 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five*), and reflects Delacroix's admiration of Arab and Berber civilisation and society which he experienced at first hand and also his respectful treatment of his host's hospitality. Nevertheless, the limitations of this portrayal of space are palpable and the ambiguous self-reflexivity of the women, subject to the voyeuristic gazes of artist and spectator, can be viewed as signalling self-absorption, passivity or objectification.

'Facts' were an important ideological aspect of the cultural and scientific milieu of nineteenth-century European society. Flaubert for example was to remark that the 'lasting characteristic of our century is its historical sense that is why we look to confine ourselves to the facts'.<sup>719</sup> At the time there was the beginning of a changing emphasis from romanticism to realism and the development of new sets of conventions and constructs to represent the real. Delacroix's painting was applauded by many for its 'realism', an emphasis on facts and the perceived relation to reality, although criticised by others because it was 'impoverished by its reality', an emphasis on romanticism.<sup>720</sup> Niati's critique targets Delacroix's 'facts' in the sense of drawing attention to the contradiction between the alleged realism of his painting and what it shows, or rather what it does not show, about the reality of the French presence in Algeria.

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<sup>717</sup> Fran Lloyd, cited 1999/2000, p. 62.

<sup>718</sup> Laurel Ma, as cited 2012, p. 19.

<sup>719</sup> Quoted in Julian Bell, *What is Painting? Representation and Modern Art*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 88. The quotations are rendered slightly differently but to the same effect in Clayton Koelb, *Legendary Figures: Ancient History in Modern Novels*, (Lincoln, USA: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), p. xi.

<sup>720</sup> Todd Porterfield, *The Allure of Empire: art in the service of French Imperialism, 1789-1836*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 130.

The reality in Algeria at the time of the exhibition of Delacroix's painting was grim. From the beginning of the invasion French troops began plundering Algiers, arresting and killing people for arbitrary reasons, seizing property, and desecrating religious sites. A French commission in 1833 wrote of the treatment of Algerians that 'we have sent to their deaths on simple suspicion and without trial people whose guilt was always doubtful ... we massacred people carrying safe conducts ... we have outdone in barbarity the barbarians'.<sup>721</sup> Assia Djebar documents some of the brutality in her novel *L'Amour, La Fantasia* where she provides spaces for the recognition of women's participation in the struggle for national independence from the start of the French invasion. Delacroix's painting of women in the harem disconnects Algeria from the suffering imposed on it by the French and ignores both the rape of the country and of its women.

Yet interpretations of the portrayal by Delacroix of the harem vary. Niati's dissolution or elision of the walls of the harem can be seen in terms of freeing Arab or Algerian woman from the double oppression of colonialism and of gendered confinement implicit in the French painter's work. Lloyd sees the space of the harem and its portrayal in much the same way as Niati. However, Khanna attempts to reconstruct France's relation to Algeria in terms of Delacroix's two renditions of the scene. Khanna perceives Delacroix's construction of the harem in 1834 as 'an interior but not an area of confinement', and considers that the painting is open and places the viewer in the scene. She sees this openness of the 1834 version of the painting as a representation of Algeria's unresolved status in which 'sameness' as well as 'difference' is recognised.<sup>722</sup> In her view the possibilities of a genuine assimilation of Algeria into the French Republic on a fair and equal basis are still open and 'introjection' rather than 'incorporation' is not rejected.<sup>723</sup> Khanna regards the 1834 painting as very different from the 1849 version by Delacroix: the first she sees as an interior, the second as interiority.<sup>724</sup> The second version represents a fundamental change in the mood and policy of both Delacroix and the French state in which the issue of assimilation has given way to a policy of differential incorporation and dominance. The two paintings indicate a shifting emphasis in aesthetic appreciation in the nineteenth century from 'what' was represented to the 'how' of

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<sup>721</sup> Quoted in John Douglas Ruedy, *Modern Algeria: The Origins and Development of a Nation*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 50.

<sup>722</sup> Khanna as cited p. 140 and pp. 152-153.

<sup>723</sup> Khanna relies on Sandro Ferenczi's distinction between 'introjection' – which allows a 'kind of psychic assimilation' after mourning – and 'incorporation' – in which 'introjection' is blocked and assimilation is unsuccessful and mourning is incomplete. See Khanna as cited pp. 147-149.

<sup>724</sup> Incidentally and ironically the 1849 version is held at a public art gallery in Montpellier, a city which remains a political stronghold for descendants of former Pied-Noir refugees from Algeria after the War of Independence.

its representation although clearly the ‘what’ remains of great importance.<sup>725</sup> Khanna’s analysis is perceptive but both versions are framed by the brutal invasion of Algeria and the continuing violent suppression of its people and culture by the French.

Niati’s erasures and crossings out stretch back in time to a twelve-year-old girl using graffiti as a personal protest against the French coloniser. In making the painting she asserts her right of protest, the significance of the resistance of Algerian women and her own identity in the face of French efforts to colonise her mind and restrict her body. She also alters the dynamic between the four figures by the defacement of the women and the decapitation of the black slave. This destroys the convivial relationships of the women in the Delacroix original because without faces the women cannot look at each other or the male gaze of the painter and spectator and thus imply a relation. They become dehumanised, depersonalised and inaccessible to the colonising gaze. Delacroix’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* is framed of the fantasy of the eastern harem and the Arab woman and orientalism’s system of citation and fails to show the reality of the French occupation of Algeria. Instead, the painting acts as an implicit defence of a French Republic that increasingly refuses an assimilation consistent with the French Republic’s constitution and instead follows a policy of exclusion and dominance.

Niati’s painting is a response not just to Delacroix, but also to how modern art became implicated in orientalism. The series of odalisques painted in Nice in the 1920s by Matisse were studio constructions often citing nineteenth-century French orientalist art but drawing on his experiences in Morocco a decade previously. His odalisques were Frenchwomen dressed up as ‘orientals’, with the usual stereotypical trappings, and in stereotypical poses often directly referencing nineteenth-century orientalist masters such as Delacroix and Ingres.<sup>726</sup> This persistent citation and reworking of nineteenth-century orientalist art is consciously taken forward by Picasso to whom Matisse left his odalisques. Picasso felt that he was responding to Matisse’s legacy by means of ‘my idea of the Orient though I have never been there’.<sup>727</sup> In a series of works entitled *Women of Algiers* Picasso engaged in a prolonged dialogue with the work of Matisse, Ingres and Delacroix translated into cubist abstraction but frequently retaining the orientalist trappings including the objectification and erotic treatment of the female figures. Picasso’s work is seen by Roger Benjamin as a bridge

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<sup>725</sup> For discussion of this shift see the chapter on ‘Representation and Presence’ in Sally O’Reilly, as cited 2009, pp. 16-47.

<sup>726</sup> Roger Benjamin notes that the modernist Matisse had to a great extent ‘a traditional conception of the Oriental subject’. In *Orientalism: Delacroix to Klee*, (Sidney: University of New South Wales, 1997), p. 185.

<sup>727</sup> Quoted in Elizabeth Cowling, *Interpreting Matisse, Picasso*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), p. 73.

between the School of Paris of the 1920s and the exoticism of the emerging 'l'art colonial'.<sup>728</sup> What is important is that this exploration of form is made within a continuous citation of orientalist ideas and stereotypes.

The exploitation in orientalist portrayals continues into the twentieth century. Rogers sees Niati's work as '(s)urrounding her figures in an environment of loose, visible brushstrokes and abrupt color transitions, Niati conceives of the background in a manner parallel to that of late Modernist artists, such as Henri Matisse'.<sup>729</sup> She argues correctly that Niati unites abstract and representational strategies within her work in a critique of both nineteenth-century and modernist orientalism. Certain aspects of Niati's painting echo features of Picasso's efforts particularly the 'Canvas O'. Niati, through her involvement with the black women artists' networks, would be conscious of these orientalist tendencies within modern European art. The relevance of this is that, as Khanna notes, '(c)itation, when it is recognisable, enacts the very difficulty of assimilation'.<sup>730</sup> The traces, extracts, references, quotes, and intertextuality that are inscribed in orientalism and its works, including the works of Delacroix, Matisse, and Picasso, can be seen as related to this issue of assimilation or rather its failure and, Khanna would argue, still has profound implications for both France and Algeria.

This question of assimilation or integration in relation to identity and community is visible in the succession of titles of Niati's exhibitions over 30 years. The exhibitions have been variously titled but all link in some way or other to Niati's exploration of her sense of identity and community: 'No to Torture', 'Haunted – Self-portrait with a difference', 'Identity search', 'ID /Entité', 'Genealogist Tree', 'Out of the ashes', 'What If?'.<sup>731</sup> Her work is an exploration of identity in which 'origin' has an importance both emotionally and artistically but which recognises the difference, multiplicity and movement across continents and across cultures.

Niati has worked to combat a reductive characterisation of her work as overdetermined by her background through her exploration of the formal approaches of European art but without losing contact with the diversity and difference of her identity and personal experience. In

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<sup>728</sup> Roger Benjamin, as cited 2000, p. 186.

<sup>729</sup> Sarah Rogers, 'Houria Niati's "No to Torture": a modernist reconfiguration of Delacroix's "Women of Algiers in their Apartment"'. *Thresholds*, no. 24, 2002, pp. 36–41, p. 39.

<sup>730</sup> Khanna as cited p. 147.

<sup>731</sup> For commentary and photos of the exhibitions see the artist's website at <http://www.hourianiati.com/gallery.php?c=11>. Accessed 27/6/2017.

combatting this reductive characterisation of her work she participated in the efforts of a group of black female artists who asserted the right of their work to greater recognition. *No to Torture* is an early visual challenge by a black artist to a European art historical and ideological colonial narrative. The importance of her work is signalled by her participation in important exhibitions by black artists in the early 1980s. Niati remains significant as an early example of a post-colonial artist challenging French colonialism and its abusive, reductive and ideological treatment of the female body. Niati's use of Delacroix as a target because of his status as an iconic figure of French orientalist painting was later continued by artists such as Bouabdellah and Bourrouissa (see Chapter Three). She transforms the homely and charming bodies depicted in Delacroix's painting into stripped and abstracted figures of an embodied subjectivity that challenge the space in which they are situated and assert their agency.

### **Samta Benyahia**

Born in Constantine, Algeria in 1949, Samta Benyahia studied first at the École des Beaux-Arts d'Alger, then the École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, Paris from 1974 to 1980, and subsequently taught at the École Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Algiers from 1980 to 1988. Benyahia emigrated to France in 1988 and received her Diplôme d'études approfondies, a doctoral programme degree delivered in France from 1964 to 2005, in Arts Plastiques from the University of Paris, VIII. Like Niati, Samta Benyahia was inspired to engage with the condition of women and the female body by events in Algerian history, specifically her dismay and horror at the treatment of women by Islamists and others during the 1990s.<sup>732</sup> In response Benyahia drew on elements from her cultural background in particular the *mashrabiyya*, (see image 50 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five), an enclosed private area often associated with women and also functioning as a screening element within Islamic and Arabic architecture but also ID card photographs of the women of her family and and the 'Fatima' motif that has come to signify for her a transcultural metaphor of the situation of women.

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<sup>732</sup> The question of 'qui tue qui?' or 'who is killing whom?' is not straightforward, see Benjamin Stora, *La guerre invisible. Algérie, années 90*, (Paris: Broché, 2001) and Hugh Roberts, *The Battlefield Algeria 1988-2002: studies in a broken polity*, (London: Verso, 2003). For a first-hand account by an eye witness of a massacre and a view of the complexities of who was responsible, see Nesroulah Youss, *Qui a tué à Bentatla? Algérie: chronique d'un massacre annoncé*, (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2000).

A 2014 Amnesty International Report documents that thousands of women were raped or subjected to sexual violence during the conflict, others were mutilated or killed, or abducted and forced to service in a variety of ways the members of the armed groups simply because they went about without the veil, or dressed in western clothes or because they had jobs.<sup>733</sup>

Benyahia's installations do not portray the attacks on the bodies of women, rather her strategy is to 'reconstitute the space of [North African] women' and in doing so to 'integrate a female presence in the installations'.<sup>734</sup>

This aspiration is not unproblematic. It is hard to relate the beauty of Benyahia's installations to the horrific injuries and deaths inflicted on Algerian women. It is only in the statements on plaques on the walls, in the exhibition brochures or through press statements that this connection can be made. Moreover, the mashrabiyya is an indicator of class or status and was used in the houses of the wealthy to create an airflow pattern to modify house temperature, to shade the alley below and to maintain the privacy of the interior spaces.<sup>735</sup> The Algerian feminist and former Minister of Culture, Khalida Toumi has spoken of the violence against women in the 1990s as a 'war against women as part of the sexual apartheid in Algeria'.<sup>736</sup> One assumes that Benyahia gives a central place to the mashrabiyya in order to imply this gendered 'apartheid' but the clarity of connection between space, gender and violence is not made as clearly as in Niati's work.

El Guindi notes that mashrabiyya embody the essence of traditional notions of Arab privacy, in particular who has the 'right to see whom', who has the 'right not to be seen by whom' and 'who chooses not to "see" whom'. She distinguishes between veiling and the mashrabiyya: 'whereas mashrabiyya is stationary, veiling is mobile, carrying women's privacy to public spaces'. She writes that the function of the mashrabiyya is to guard the right of the family and 'its women' to privacy and not about seclusion or invisibility.<sup>737</sup> The mashrabiyya expresses in its architectural role the gendered power relations which separate out the politically, culturally and legally defined spaces of men and women in certain societies including the

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<sup>733</sup> See the 2014 Amnesty International Report, *Algeria: Comprehensive Reforms required to End gender based Violence against Women and Girls*. <file:///U:/ManW10/Downloads/mde280102014en.pdf>. Accessed 1/8/2018.

<sup>734</sup> Quoted in Olivia Ousaibaty, 'Mashrabiyya: Architecture of the Veil', *North African Times*, 27/4/2008. <http://samtabenyahia.com/exhibitions/fowler-museum-los-angeles-2007/>. Accessed 25/7/2018.

<sup>735</sup> Hisham Mortada, *Traditional Islamic Principles of Built Environment*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 103.

<sup>736</sup> Khaleda Messoudi quoted in R. S. Grozelle, 'Mob Violence Against Women in Algeria: A Historical Case Analysis', *Inquiries Journal/Student Pulse*, 7(03), 2014. <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1016>. Accessed 25/7/2018.

<sup>737</sup> The quotations are from Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*, (Oxford: Berg, 1999), pp. 94-5.

Islamic orientated societies of North Africa. Benyahia's installations can therefore be seen as an implicit critique of this apartheid although the mashrabiyya can equally be taken from a reading of her installations as a beautiful site in which women, of a certain class status, can enjoy a degree of security and mutual solidarity linked to child care and engagement in traditional crafts. She clearly aims to configure a different and positive perspective of Arab women: 'There is not only violence, there is also culture... It is only in this way, through my art, that I can show it'.<sup>738</sup> Culture and the beauty of her installations are posed against the violence meted out to women. She is perhaps refusing to represent the bodies of women because this would define them by suffering, as devoid of agency and reduced to victimhood although she does not anywhere make this claim. This positioning of Benyahia can be seen as 'double critique' but the perception of an imbalance between beauty and violence can also undermine her stated intention of challenging the violence of the 1990s. The intention of the artist 'to engage in dialogue, and communicate with the visitor who, in turn, appropriates for him or herself the story and experience' has value and is an important aspect of the transcultural encounter but she remains ambivalent about what is communicated.<sup>739</sup> There appears to be a dissonance between stated intention and form.

Benyahia adopted the Fatima motif, (*see image 51 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five*), after the artist's mother gave her a black and white enlargement of a passport photograph of herself in 1990. The artist says that use of the design relates to her alarm and dismay at the attacks on women in the 1990s and its adoption signals 'taking a position to say no to violence against women'.<sup>740</sup> In the photo, the rosette pattern on her mother's dress was, Benyahia subsequently discovered, called 'Fatima' and figured prominently in Arab-Andalusian art and she decided to appropriate it as 'the guiding thread' in her work which she closely associated with the treatment of women in the 1990s.<sup>741</sup>

There is no obvious reason why the design should be linked to the situation of women in the 1990s except in the context in which she received the photo and discovered the design. It would appear that the design was adopted because of its feminine and cross cultural associations. Fatima was the youngest daughter of Muhammad and named 'al-Zahra' or 'the

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<sup>738</sup> Ousaibaty 2008 as cited.

<sup>739</sup> Valerie Behiery, 'Silent Synchrony', *Islamic Arts Magazine*, 28/1/2014. [http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/silent\\_synchrony/](http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/silent_synchrony/). Accessed 19/6/2018.

<sup>740</sup> Behiery as cited 2014.

<sup>741</sup> Behiery as cited 2014.



shining one'.<sup>742</sup> 'Fatima' is also linked to Mary, the mother of Jesus, based on a quote attributed to Muhammad that lists the outstanding women of all time as Mary, Asiya (the wife of Pharaoh), and Khadija (Mohammad's first wife).<sup>743</sup> The colour of the Fatima design has a number of cultural associations. The Mediterranean blue is evocative, as Shilton writes, of 'this sea between cultures' and the possibilities of exchange and dialogue.<sup>744</sup> Blue also relates to the female body transculturally and historically as the colour of traditional female Berber (Amazigh) tattoos. Blue also marks an important aspect of Benyahia's background as a Berber as it provides a bar of colour in the Berber flag and is frequently used in pottery, fabrics and the painting of houses in Berber culture. Benyahia regards this reference to Amazigh women as a 'vital symbol' since, as she says in her interview with Valerie Behiery, the word means 'free man', (it can also be interpreted in a non-gendered way as 'free people').<sup>745</sup> Benyahia closely associates the signs and symbols of Amazigh traditional arts with gender, history and memory:

'I realized that the motifs related to the female arts transmitted by women through art, décor, cooking and music were part of this memory... I've always sought to engage with the life of Berber women belonging to the generation of my mother and give life to the beauty and creativity of these women often hidden behind the *mashrabiyyas*'.<sup>746</sup>

Benyahia shared this interest in Berber culture with Aouchem, which means 'tattoo'. Aouchem was an influential Algerian art movement with which Benyahia is sometimes associated that posed itself against the efforts of the Algerian Government to impose a form of socialist realism on art and an Arab identity.<sup>747</sup> Aouchem was closely linked to Berber culture and associated with peaceful opposition to the Algerian Government's repression of Amazigh society and culture.<sup>748</sup> According to its manifesto:

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<sup>742</sup> See Amr Khalid, Fatima, Daughter of the Prophet of Allah. [http://www.sunnah.org/history/Life-of-Prophet/Life\\_Story\\_of\\_Fatima\\_bint\\_Muhammad.htm](http://www.sunnah.org/history/Life-of-Prophet/Life_Story_of_Fatima_bint_Muhammad.htm). Accessed 27/7/2018.

<sup>743</sup> Wiki cites the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, section on Fatima. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fatimah#cite\\_note-EoQ-45](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fatimah#cite_note-EoQ-45). 28/7/2018.

<sup>744</sup> Shilton as cited 2013 p. 114.

<sup>745</sup> Behiery as cited 2014.

<sup>746</sup> Behiery as cited 2014.

<sup>747</sup> Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 285-286.

<sup>748</sup> For a detailed discussion of Aouchem and its significance see Charles Tripp, as cited 2013 in particular the chapter on 'Symbolic Forms of Resistance: Art and Power', pp. 256-305. It is interesting that the Algerian Government's official guide book now acknowledges the significance of the movement and is one of the publications which associates it with Benyahia, although in a certain sense, given the importance of the Benyahia family in both Algerian politics and culture, there is an element of co-option in this, see the section on culture in [http://al-djazair.com/articles/algeria\\_guide\\_book.pdf](http://al-djazair.com/articles/algeria_guide_book.pdf). Accessed 27/7/2018.

‘Aouchem was born centuries ago, on the walls of a cave in Tassili. It continued its existence until today, sometimes secretly, sometimes openly, according to fluctuations of history... We want to show that, always magical, the sign is stronger than bombs’.<sup>749</sup>

There is perhaps a connection here between the Aouchem manifesto and Benyahia’s emphasis on beauty and signs rather than violence. But the ambiguity or opacity remains in Benyahia’s commentary on her art. On the one hand, there appears to be a nostalgia for a traditional and highly gendered past rooted in the work of women yet at the same time a strong assertion of the value of both the women and the work they performed. This can be seen as a reinsertion of the occluded role of women into history, a similar project to aspects of the project of Assia Djebar. However, the approach can also be seen to fall into the trap of which Mieke Bal warned and, at least at the symbolic level, reproduce the power structure under critique.

The Fatima motif and the mashrabiyya were combined with photography, particularly identity card photos, for the first time in the *Force Sight* exhibition in 1992, (*see image 52 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five*).<sup>750</sup> The work is subtitled ‘Inside Memory’ and connections can be made to Arab/Islamic history and the French occupation through the presence of a combination of signifiers: the mashrabiyya, the Arab/Islamic patterns on wall hangings and the identity card photos taken of her mother and other women in French occupied Algeria. The references to the terrible events occurring in Algeria at the time are less obvious except in the overall title of the exhibition of ‘Force sight’ which one assumes is a reference to the force used in the violence against women. The title ‘Force sight’ was not a translation from French or German and appears to have been deliberately chosen to emphasise the violence and at the same time be a play on the term ‘foresight’ and in some way to make ambivalent the issue of memory in the ‘Inside memory’ aspect of the title. ‘Foresight’ has various connotations including premonition, prudence and insight and it may be that Benyahia is making connections between Algeria’s past, present and future but this can only be speculation. There is also an implied suggestion that Benyahia’s work is ‘forcing’ visibility and enabling women to be seen. The work remains to some extent, as it has a right to be, opaque.

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<sup>749</sup> The Aouchem manifesto can be read at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19301944.2009.10781371>. Accessed 25/7/2018.

<sup>750</sup> At the Brigitte March Gallery in Stuttgart. <https://www.artfacts.net/index.php/pageType/catalogInfo/catalog/380>. Accessed 2/5/2020.

Benyahia later said this use of the Fatima motif was a visual metaphor for ‘women everywhere around the world—and not just North African women’.<sup>751</sup> There is therefore both connection and disconnection with the events in Algeria and a movement, as in Kameli’s work, between territorialisation and de-territorialisation. However, by presenting the installation in this way as a thing of beauty and culture, she takes the risk that as well as lifting the veil of the mashrabiyya and revealing its beauty she is simultaneously veiling the brutality and systemic violence of the system. In defence of Benyahia’s approach, a direct engagement in France with the atrocities occurring in Algeria might merely have confirmed stereotypical views of what was happening in the French press in terms of some perceived inherent violence in the Algerian character.<sup>752</sup>

For the 2003 Venice Biennial, Benyahia created a small beautiful space entitled *Le Polygone et le Dédale*, (see image 53 (a) and (b) at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five). The title is a reference to Yacine’s 1966 novel *Le Polygone étoilé*. As Marla Berns has suggested, the installation represented a sanctuary from the bustle and noise of the Biennial with the latter representing the difficult political and social landscape the artist left behind in Algeria.<sup>753</sup>

Recordings of Aurès Berber songs performed by Hourla Aïchi, related to the oral traditions passed from mother to daughter, were played on a loop as well as recorded readings from the work of Yacine.<sup>754</sup> There is an obvious intertextual link derived from the Fatima motif both to *Le Polygone étoilé* and Kateb Yacine’s earlier novel *Nedjma*. The motif is named ‘Fatima’ or ‘al-Zahra’ or ‘star’ and links with Yacine’s female character Nedjma (‘star’) who represents in his novel a metaphorical embodiment of Algeria. The term polygone is a reference to the shape of Algeria on the map and is used by Yacine as a counterweight to France’s hexagone. Dédale refers, amongst other things, to Yacine’s conception and portrayal of the labyrinthine and tangled nature of Algerian history, culture and identity. In this complex set of metaphors and references, Benyahia is asserting the place of women in Algerian history and their role in fighting the French documented in the Assia Djebar novels,

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<sup>751</sup> Behiery as cited 2014.

<sup>752</sup> For an analysis of persisting clichés of alleged ‘Algerian savagery’ see James McDougall, ‘Savage Wars? Codes of Violence in Algeria, 1830s-1990s’, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1, The Politics of Naming: Rebels, Terrorists, Criminals, Bandits and Subversives, 2005, pp. 117-131.

<sup>753</sup> See Marla C. Berns, ‘Africa at the Venice Biennale,’ *African Arts*, Vol. 36, No. 3, Autumn, 2003, p. 92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3337939.pdf?refreqid=excelsior:e18b81d8d993a4014785aa14d44d639> . Accessed 25/7/2018.

<sup>754</sup> Sylvie Couderc, ‘Le Polygone et le Dédale’, *50e Biennale de Venise*. <http://samtabenyahia.com/exhibitions/50e-biennale-de-venise-2003/>. Accessed 27/7/2018.

for example, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, (1980) and *L'Amour, la Fantasia*, (1985).

The use of Aïchi's voice acts as a metaphor of past Algerian women and is similar to the excavation of the voices of Algerian women in Djébar's novels. Metaphors about the voice are so pervasive that it is easy to forget the concrete physicality and power of the voice on which the metaphor is based. Here the songs 'sound' powerfully a female presence and echo Benyahia's deep interest in how female traditions are passed down through the generations. The voice permeates the small space and asserts powerfully the agency of Algerian women. The voice acts to disrupt the visuality of the abstract patterning that configures the space and signal the presence and struggles of past generations of Algerian women.

Benyahia makes a different set of cultural references in her 2005 work '*Dans la lumière des matins et le luxe naturel des nuits, la joie est sans douceur*', a quote from Albert Camus' *L'Été*.<sup>755</sup> Camus' *L'Été* was first published in 1954, the first year of the War of Independence. Benyahia's work was exhibited in 2005 at the *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* in Berlin in an exhibition entitled *About Beauty* (2005), (see image 54 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five).

Camus is a Pied-Noir author whose work *L'Étranger* remains both a canonical and a controversial French text, and the quotation is perhaps indicative of a perspective of reconciliation.<sup>756</sup> Camus had condemned both FLN and French violence, very different from Sartre, and this did not endear him to those Algerians who regarded the two violences as

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<sup>755</sup> 'In the morning light and the natural luxury of night, joy is without sweetness'. Albert Camus, *L'Été*, (Paris: Gallimard, collection Blanche, 1954), The book was published the same year that on 1 November, 1954, FLN maquisards attacked military and civilian targets throughout Algeria in what became known as the Toussaint Rouge (Red All-Saints' Day). The full passage can be read at: <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=siVQ7G0zeaAC&pg=PT30&lpg=PT30&dq=Dans+la+lumi%C3%A8re+des+matins+et+le+luxe+naturel+des+nuits,+la+joie+est+sans+douceur&source=bl&ots=rb4UHI4uE8&sig=Jrs58YoCo1A8XQD7Mhc6qRJtjq4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiHv9vUo9nVAhVMBBoKHbakDAIQ6AEIKjAB#v=onepage&q=Dans%20la%20lumi%C3%A8re%20des%20matins%20et%20le%20luxe%20naturel%20des%20nuits%20C%20la%20joie%20est%20sans%20douceur&f=false>.

<sup>756</sup> For its controversial aspects see for example Kamel Daoud's novel, *The Meursault Investigation*, (London: Oneworld, 2015). The Guardian review of it (19/7/2015) is a good summary of the background. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/19/the-meursault-investigation-review>. Accessed 1/8/2018. On Camus's position on the War of Independence see David Drake, 'Camus and the Algerian War', *Sartre Studies International*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1999, pp. 16-32. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/23512792.pdf?refreqid=excelsior:bl1d2a23ad906ea9e3084f2945d7eedaa>. Accessed 1/8/2018. When he received the Nobel Prize for Literature, Camus said that when faced with a radical choice he would eventually support his community, although there is some ambiguity about what he meant by 'his community'. However, in response to a question he said: 'I must also condemn the blind terrorism that can be seen in the streets of Algiers, for example, which someday might strike my mother or family. I believe in justice, but I will defend my mother before justice'. See Barry Lenser, 'The Problems of the Human Conscious in Albert Camus' "Algerian Chronicles"', *Pop Matters*, 2/6/2013. <http://www.popmatters.com/review/171858-algerian-chronicles-by-albert-camus-2/>. Accessed 1/8/2018.

different morally and politically. The referencing of Camus may be an expression of need and reconciliation demonstrating Benyahia's own cultural positioning: 'I live in both countries, I straddle both countries, I need both countries'.<sup>757</sup> But it may also be an iteration of the artist's belief that the positive aspects of culture can overcome negativity and engender understanding.

In 2007, Benyahia had her first US exhibition at UCLA's Fowler Museum in Los Angeles. The exhibition was entitled *Architecture of the Veil* and was site-specific in its design making use of the neo-Arabic architectural features of the museum. It took as its theme the masharabiyya and incorporated openwork screens to cover windows and balconies. The exhibition was described by the Islamic Culture Foundation as an 'exploration of gender as well as the dialectic between interior and exterior, light and shadow, concealment and revelation, and private versus public space'.<sup>758</sup> Benyahia combined her usual mix of elements: the Fatima motif combined with photography in the shape of eight large-scale black-and-white photographs of early 20th-century Algerian women, including the artist's mother and aunt. However, there is in this exhibition a use of terminology that suggests a more direct relationship to violence against women since as Kader Attia notes architecture has first to do with politics, the political order.<sup>759</sup>

In Benyahia's photos the 'threatened return of the look', to use Bhabha's phrase, lies in the character and self-containment of the embodied subjectivity in the features, eyes and stances of the women, (*see image 55 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five*).<sup>760</sup> The women in Benyahia's photos return the gaze of the spectator asserting themselves as subjects and thus challenge objectifications imposed by the image and metonymically challenge the double oppression of Algerian women in terms of the French violation of their bodies and in terms of the restrictions of traditional culture.

Benyahia's installation in the Fowler Museum *Architecture of the Veil* (2006), (*see image 56 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five*), maintained her transmedia approach by incorporating

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<sup>757</sup> Olivia Hampton, 'Samta Benyahia, The Architecture of the Veil', *Nafas Art Magazine*, March 2007. <http://u-in-u.com/nafas/articles/2007/samta-benyahia-architecture-of-the-veil/>. Accessed 1/8/2018.

<sup>758</sup> A brief description of the Fowler exhibition is on the *Islamic Cultural Foundation Website*, 'An Installation by Samta Benyahia', posted 3/6/2018. <https://funci.org/an-installation-by-samta-benyahia/?lang=en>. Accessed 1/8/2018.

<sup>759</sup> See Laurie Anne Farrell, 'Kader Attia's History of a myth: the small dome of the rock', *Nafas Art Magazine*, March 2010. <https://universes.art/nafas/articles/2010/kader-attia/>. Accessed 18/7/2018.

<sup>760</sup> The phrase is Homi Bhabha's. For discussion of Bhabha's perspective on the gaze see David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), p. 30.

Arab Andalusian music and the poetry, recited in both French and Arabic, of Yacine. The photographs Benyahia used are 'ready-mades' of ID card photos gifted by family or friends becoming works of art by virtue of her selection and modification of them. However, they retain a documentary function by virtue of their historical associations with darker aspects of Algerian history and can be taken as a critical postcolonial positioning. The French enforced ID cards on the mountain villagers of Kabylia and in the process forced women to remove their veils and be photographed by Marc Garanger, a draftee and photographer.<sup>761</sup> This unveiling of the female Algerian body is seen by Karina Eileraas as operating within a broader discursive network to deny Algerians rights through second rate citizenship and violation of traditional customs regarding the 'honour' of women. Eileraas notes that Garanger's work testifies to the unintended consequences of photographic images through the forceful and defiant gaze of the women in his photos.<sup>762</sup> The women of Benyahia's photos are similarly not one-dimensional or passive and stare back at the viewer with a very direct gaze and an apparent sense of selfhood that questions both the gaze of the colonial camera and our own assumptions about their passivity.

Erotic images of Algerian women figured significantly in the orientalist art of Ingres and Delacroix. Photographers also made similar use of such images. Malek Alloula's book *Le harem colonial: images d'un sous-érotisme* analyses postcards displaying images of Algerian women in which the Arab/Algerian female body is depicted as an 'exotic' testament to the complex fantasy of the unveiled Algerian woman in the French orientalist imaginary. According to Alloula, this was done as a sign of conquest and he asserts that the postcards visually represent power relations between colonized and colonizer.<sup>763</sup> The female body, as noted in respect of Niati's critique, becomes within the Western colonial view a metonym of Algeria as subservient by association with the subaltern situation of women. Laura Mulvey, amongst others, has emphasized the importance of the 'gaze' in the construction and

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<sup>761</sup> See Patricia Ramos, 'Algerian Women: Portraits of Women During the 1960s', *Exposure Guide*, April 30, 2013. <https://www.exposureguide.com/femme-algerienne-1960-4/>. Accessed 1/8/2019. It contains a good discussion of the contradictions and ambiguities of Garanger's situation as a 'leftist', conscript and photographer. Also see the section on 'Marc Garanger, Conscription and Photographic Agency' in Edward Welch and Joseph McGonagle, *Contesting Views: The Visual Economy of France and Algeria*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 54-59.

<sup>762</sup> Karina Eileraas, *Between Image and Identity: Transnational Fantasy, Symbolic Violence, and Feminist Misrecognition*, (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007), p. 55.

<sup>763</sup> Malek Alloula, *Le harem colonial: images d'un sous-érotisme*, (Paris: Séguier, 2001). Alloula's analysis of the postcard pictures is partly undermined, as Mieke Bal has pointed out, by his problematic reproducing or 'quoting' of exotic colonial images. See Mieke Bal, 'The Politics of Citation', *Diacritics*, Spring, 1991.

theorisation of modern forms of subjectivity.<sup>764</sup> In ID card photographs that Benyahia uses the women wear a variety of dress forms, come from a wide generational cross section and are both veiled and unveiled. The artist shows images that are not readily susceptible to an erotic gaze or reducible to easy stereotypes whether of women or of Algeria.

Benyahia provides a structure or architecture which simulates the regulation of space by Islamic law in the interest of cultural dialogue and enables the spectator to reflect upon who can see whom and who cannot be seen by whom and how this relates to the cultural, political and economic structures of society. Mulvey points out that such acts of seeing, although constitutive of visual art, are inherently subjective and conditioned. Benyahia can enable for the spectator a reconfiguration of historically determined codes and conventions of seeing women by organising aspects of what and how visitors see but her sovereignty as an artist has limits and she cannot, in microcosm, regulate the 'distribution of the sensible'.<sup>765</sup> It is important to note that the photos are located both inside and outside of the space of the mashrabiyya implicitly impugning its restrictive purpose. The varied interpretations possible with regard to the installations can perhaps be seen as a metaphor for the difficulty of seeing the world except through the screen of social and cultural assumptions.

This re-construction of the gaze within the installation reveals the ambiguous architectural frame of the mashrabiyya. The mashrabiyya operates as a metaphor at two opposing levels: the historic containment of women from the male gaze, except those male gazes regarded as legitimate, within a gilded culturally created cage, the gilt of which often wore thin or was non-existent, and as a space for dialogue, exchange and solidarity between women. In addition, the strong gaze of the women in the photographs stare back at the spectators providing a parallax effect challenging stereotypical views of the passivity of the 'Eastern' woman. Benyahia says this 'provides a different image of what we can think of the woman, of the Arab woman'.<sup>766</sup> The function of the mashrabiyya as a meeting place within the household becomes reconstituted in the installation as a place of intimacy for the spectator but also a symbolic space of dialogue and exchange between cultures. Benyahia sees an

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<sup>764</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Unmasking the gaze: Some thoughts on New Feminist Film Theory and History,' *Lectora: Revista de dones i textualitat*, 7, 2001: 5. <file:///U:/ManW10/Downloads/7014-11342-1-PB.pdf>. Accessed 26/7/2018.

<sup>765</sup> The concept is Rancière's and relates to his notion of a 'police order' which regulates what is visible and invisible, sayable and unsayable, audible and inaudible and thus determines what can be thought, made or done. As Slavoj Žižek's end-piece notes, Rancière focuses almost exclusively on the cultural sphere and on questions of literary and artistic form. See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>766</sup> Behiery, as cited 28/1/2014.

analogy between her work and a kaleidoscope: ‘This visual abundance created by the transposition of images, colours, techniques and light and shadow also brings me back to my childhood and the countless hours I spent observing the magical world created through the eye of a kaleidoscope’.<sup>767</sup> The architectural space of her installations becomes for the period of the exhibition a theatre stage where mediums and cultures intersect for the visitor who appropriates for him or herself the experience.

Benyahia considers her work a form of *écriture féminine*.<sup>768</sup> When Benyahia returned to France in 1988 to study at Paris VIII, then the University of Paris, Hélène Cixous was establishing her experimental doctoral programme *Etudes féminines* and it was probably during this period that Benyahia started to frame her work in this way. Benyahia does not explain in any depth why she considers her work a form of *écriture féminine* and tends when rarely asked to place it in the context of Berber traditional female arts and motifs.

Hélène Cixous used the term *écriture féminine* in ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ but refused to define it as she felt it would be trapped within the logic of Western phallogocentrism, a term used by Derrida to refer to the privileging of the masculine in the construction of meaning.<sup>769</sup> Carole Dely quotes Derrida, in an interview in *Le Monde de l'éducation*, as saying ‘(b)efore any feminist politicalization, it is important to recognize this strong phallogocentric underpinning that conditions just about all of our cultural heritage’.<sup>770</sup> Dely points out that, by means of this appeal to ‘the voice of the other’, Derrida enables a reorientation of discourse, history and tradition by recognising the dominating masculinity of culture, society, philosophy and art.<sup>771</sup> Cixous takes this further by asserting, referring to Lacan, that ‘woman’ and the ‘feminine’ are less strictly controlled by the Phallus because they are on the margins of the Symbolic and a ‘dark continent’, according to Freud. This very marginality of women enables changes to their position and facilitates a reclamation through metaphor and symbolic force of the female body and a positive and assertive way of thinking about ‘women’.<sup>772</sup>

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<sup>767</sup> Behiery, as cited 28/1/2014.

<sup>768</sup> Behiery, as cited 28/1/2014. ‘My work is feminine writing or what the French call an *écriture féminine*’.

<sup>769</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, (Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen), *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4. Summer, 1976, pp. 875-893.

<sup>770</sup> Carole Dely, ‘Jacques Derrida: the “perchance of a coming of the other woman, the deconstruction of phallogocentrism” from duel to duo’, *Sens Public, Essais*, October 2007. [http://www.sens-public.org/article.php3?id\\_article=312&lang=fr](http://www.sens-public.org/article.php3?id_article=312&lang=fr). Accessed 25/7/2018.

<sup>771</sup> Dely as cited October 2007.

<sup>772</sup> See Cixous as cited 1976 and also the commentary by Jenny Tighe, ‘L’*écriture féminine*’, *Bloomsbury Literary Studies*, March 2012. <http://bloomsburyliterarystudies.typepad.com/continuum-literary-studie/2012/03/lecriture-feminine.html>. Accessed 20/9/2019.



Benyahia shares with Cixous and Djébar a commitment to an exploration of historical and contemporary occlusions of ‘woman’ and putting back into the ‘text’ that which was and is marginalised, oppressed, and abused.<sup>773</sup> Benyahia inscribes into her installations an extended embodied subjectivity represented by the photographs and traditional female craft forms that haunts the gendered spaces of the mashrabiyya. As an artist she engages with Cixous’ ‘universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history’.<sup>774</sup> As urged by Cixous, Benyahia through her art ‘write(s) woman: women must write women’, in the process ‘(r)epainting her half of the world’.<sup>775</sup> Mulvey has pointed to how feminism has drawn attention to the way that women have been presented negatively with regard to creativity and artistic practices through an association of men with ‘high culture’ and women with ‘low culture’ and how this contributes to portraying women’s oppression as an eternal idea.<sup>776</sup> This gives a possible clue as to why the theme of domestic crafts is so important to Benyahia’s work and why she emulates its skills and uses its signifiers. Benyahia relates her understanding of her work as a form of *écriture féminine* to ‘memories of womanhood in which I bathed as a child’.<sup>777</sup> The artist appears to be asserting in her work the traces of a maternal genealogy. The arts of Berber women of the Aurès and Kabylia regions that were familiar to her as a child – pottery, décor, cooking, music, tattooing, weaving and mural painting – were obscured from view both by history and the masharabiyya. These arts are instrumental to her efforts to create an art form that would reinstate women into history and the present. The importance of these female traditions links the work of both Benyahia and Niati. Each of the artists performs a balancing act or positioning between the assertion of women’s role, creativity and place in history and a critique or separation from the frequently subaltern position given women socially and culturally in tradition. Both use music and song within their works asserting the voice and presence of past and present women. It can be argued that Benyahia’s use of music and song is part of her disruption of what she calls, in the title of the Fowler exhibition, the ‘architecture of the veil’ and which sits alongside other disruptions she organises in her installations in terms of movement and position.

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<sup>773</sup> Cixous as cited 1976, p. 880.

<sup>774</sup> Cixous as cited 1976, p. 875.

<sup>775</sup> Cixous as cited 1976, p. 877.

<sup>776</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, (Eds.), (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), pp. 833-44.

<sup>777</sup> Behiery, as cited 28/1/2014.

As noted above, Benyahia makes extensive literary references in her work particularly to texts by Kateb Yacine and Camus.<sup>778</sup> The artist's installations also draw frequently on the voices of women to sing traditional Arab-Andalusian songs but do not reference any female Algerian writers. The rationale for the intertextual inclusion of Kateb Yacine may seem obvious. He is revered by Algerians for fighting the French and for his literary contributions to the development of Algerian nationalism. Yacine attempted in his novels and poetry to develop distinctive signifiers of the 'nation' and the national struggle against the French. The central character in Yacine's most famous novel *Nedjma*, Arabic for 'star', is an idealized woman who is alternately mother, sister, lover and Algeria. *Nedjma* represents 'la femme-patrie', the women-homeland or motherland, a personification of Algeria itself and, maintaining the metonym, is described in Yacine's novel as the daughter of an Algerian man and French woman. Like the reference to Camus, *Nedjma* in her physical embodiment is a manifestation of the inextricable link between the history of France and Algeria, of the colonial past and of possibilities of reconciliation.

There is insufficient space here to examine Yacine's work in detail but it is important to describe some of the ambiguities surrounding his character *Nedjma*. Winifred Woodhull has suggested that '(i)f Kateb successfully stages some of the processes by which women are constituted as actors in history (or are limited in their ability to act), he nonetheless presents women as a homogeneous class which finds its embodiment in a single figure, *Nedjma*'.<sup>779</sup> In the novel, *Nedjma* frequently appears passive although, according to Salhi, her very passivity provokes men 'puisque'ils m'aiment, je les garde dans ma prison...A la longue, c'est la prisonnière qui décide'.<sup>780</sup> This can be seen as a form of power but it is the power of a woman constrained and confined.

Hiddleston also notes that *Nedjma*, although she is the axis around which Yacine's novel revolves, rarely speaks, and never participates in dialogue with the other protagonists. Hiddleston sees *Nedjma* as the object of desire of the male protagonists but with her own voice largely excluded from the narrative, and in this sense, she complies with Lacanian

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<sup>778</sup> Kateb is his surname and means 'writer' but he chose to name himself Kateb Yacine ('the writer Yacine').

<sup>779</sup> Winifred Woodhull, 'Rereading "Nedjma": Feminist Scholarship and North African Women', *SubStance*, Vol. 21, No. 3, Issue 69: Special Issue: Translations of the Orient: Writing the Maghreb, (1992), pp. 46-63, p. 58.

<sup>780</sup> Quoted in Kamal Salhi, 'Narrating the Algerian Nation', *Bulletin of Francophone Africa*, No. 14, Winter, 1999, p. 41-68. The translation is 'Since they love me, I keep them in my prison...In the long run, it's the prisoner who makes the decisions.'

conceptions of femininity as lack and excluded from the symbolic order.<sup>781</sup> Hiddleston notes the complex relationship between Nedjma as woman and as symbol of Algeria but that ultimately 'she turns out not to fulfil the characters', or the author's, putative dream of a hybridized but liberated new community'.<sup>782</sup> The commentaries of Woodhall and Hiddleston tend to underline the somewhat eccentric choice of Yacine as the disruptive voice of her installations rather than, say, that of Assia Djébar.

Yacine's work, like the figure of Nedjma, was appropriated by all sides in Algeria, by both right and left, by feminist and non-feminist. Djébar wrote at the time of the writer's funeral that: 'the process of coming into being: the writer once dead, his texts not yet opened, it is around his buried body that several different Algerias are being sketched out'.<sup>783</sup> It is perplexing that Benyahia cites Yacine and Camus but ignores female Algerian writers such as Djébar. There is no obvious explanation for this and neither the artist nor her commentators ever mention it. A possible reason may be that Yacine was seen as a family friend, a Berber, and a male writer who at least attempts to present women in an unstereotyped way. Benyahia may also have been drawn to Yacine's texts because the imagery he uses in *Nedjma* links to that of the Fatima design. However, the use of Yacine as a key vocal element within the installations is somewhat bizarre given the ambiguous nature of women within his writings and his confusion, in ways that seem to reiterate that of the FLN government and the Islamists, of the relation between the position of women and nation. Benyahia thus makes, perhaps inadvertently, a connection between the maternal genealogy of women and their role as markers of the nation, a trope repeatedly used in Algerian politics and history to maintain their subaltern place.

The absence of any reference to Djébar, aka Fatima-Zohra Imalayen, is striking since her work is often seen as central to understanding the position of Algerian women and whose forename, 'Fatima' - captivating, and 'Zohra' – bright, shining, exemplifies the iconography that Benyahia uses extensively in her work. Djébar spent most of the war of independence years outside Algeria, but afterward taught history at the University of Algiers, was head of

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<sup>781</sup> Jane Hiddleston, 'That Obscure Subject of Desire: France, Algeria, and the Circumscription of the Feminine in Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma*', *French Forum*, Volume 38, Number 3, Fall 2013, pp. 133-145.

<sup>782</sup> Hiddleston as cited p. 134.

<sup>783</sup> Assia Djébar, 'The burial of Kateb Yacine', *Parallax*, 4:2, 1998, pp. 61-65. Djébar herself is controversial even today. At a conference attended by the writer on Algerian culture at Leicester University in 2012 an Algerian woman delivering a paper on Djébar was accused by a (male) Algerian scholar of defending a traitor who scorns the language of Algeria and traded her independence by becoming a member of L'Académie française in order to get free parking in Paris. No matter that the author he offered as an alternative paragon (Mohammed Dib) also wrote in French.

French at the university, and became an early and powerful Algerian woman filmmaker. Her work in film and her novellas and short stories specifically aimed to draw attention to the disparities between the treatment of men and women following Algeria's decolonization. Her absence is an extraordinary omission given that both Djébar and Benyahia lived and worked in France and both claimed to be exploring the occluded and repressed voices of women in Algeria. Benyahia makes little attempt outside of the photos of friends and family to reconstruct and portray the situation of women in Algeria except in terms of the ambiguous *mashrabiyya*. This is very different from Djébar's positioning within which she asserts the rights of women and questions the rigidity of Algeria's borders in terms of geography, language and culture. Djébar challenged the perspectives on women and nation of both the FLN government and that of the Islamists but this challenge is muted within the work of Benyahia.

In conclusion, Benyahia takes the *mashrabiyya*, an ambiguous golden prison of the Algerian female body and, incorporating it with photos and the Fatima design, develops a commentary on violence and the female body. The *mashrabiyya* with its associations with private and public space, with the confinement of the female body, and its way of signalling the subaltern place of women within society, acts as a metaphor for exploring Algerian female identities and the place of women within the community. There are apparent contradictions in the way Benyahia traces elements of her installations to the treatment of women in the 1990s. This seems to be linked to the artist's desire to portray an alternative picture of the situation in Algeria and place it and Algerian women within a frame that acknowledges their extensive cultural history which is offered as an apparent counterbalance to the violence. The inclusion of the materiality and metaphors of traditional female crafts seems intended to express what Benyahia considers as the convivial and solidarity aspects of the gendered spaces of their lives and is closely linked to her understanding of her work as a form of *écriture féminine* and the undervaluing of craftwork in art. Challenging the occluded genealogy associated with these crafts and using them extensively in her art figures as an important aspect of Benyahia's personal identity formation. The female solidarity associated with the *mashrabiyya*, despite the ambiguous power relations of the space, seem an important aspect of Benyahia's sense of community. Benyahia's installations offer sites within which transcultural encounters and exchange can enable audiences to see with different eyes another culture. Like Niati, Benyahia adopts a multiplicity of positioning within a nexus of connections to identity and

community including her Berber heritage, Islamic and Arab history and culture and French feminist theory in the process exploring the ambiguities, tensions and possibilities these offer.

### **Amina Zoubir**

Amina Zoubir was born in Algiers in 1983 to a family closely linked to the cultural elite of Algeria.<sup>784</sup> After graduating in graphic art from the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Algiers, Zoubir became interested first in photography and then video.<sup>785</sup> Like her father and many other Algerian artists before her, Zoubir left Algeria to study in France. Zoubir acknowledges that she found it easy to adjust to living in France because of her family's immersion in French culture and art and the many French customs she had encountered in Algeria as a result of the influence of France colonisation.<sup>786</sup> Zoubir obtained a Master's degree in the Theory and Practice of Contemporary Art and New Media at the University of Paris 8 and then a successful doctoral thesis about image and sound in contemporary Algerian video.<sup>787</sup> The University of Paris 8, which is where Benyahia studied and developed her interest in 'écriture féminine', contains the only University based Centre for Women's and Gender Studies in France established by Hélène Cixous. The Centre remains an important influence on the university as a whole with close relations between it and other faculties and departments and this, as with Benyahia, may have contributed to Zoubir's strong interest in the relation between gender and art.<sup>788</sup>

Zoubir connects her engagement with the medium of video in part to its rarity in Algeria where it is regarded as very avant-garde, but also because of her interest in its connections with postmodernism, Pop Art, Fluxus and New Realism.<sup>789</sup> The attractions of video are that it appears 'live', has an ambivalent and questioning relationship with TV and documentary and is also relatively cheap and easy to make. It not only allows artists to create artworks that are

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<sup>784</sup> Her father is Hellal Zoubir, an innovative artist who with others in the 1970s and 80s broke with the academic art then current in Algeria. Zoubir's father taught design at the Ecole supérieure des beaux-arts in Algiers between 1977 and 2010 becoming Director of Studies and then Director of Academic Affairs. Zoubir has received the President's Award of the Republic of Algeria; a Silver Award from the Review of Contemporary Art in Dallas; the National Picasso Award in Madrid and a Medal from the Asselah Foundation in Algiers (Asselah was the murdered School Director of the Ecole supérieure des beaux-arts in Algiers). <http://www.algeria.com/blog/accomplished-algerian-artist-zoubir-hellal>. Accessed 24/8/2018.

<sup>785</sup> Zoubir says on her website that 'J'ai eu une formation de graphiste mais il me manquait quelque chose'.

<sup>786</sup> Zoubir refers to her familiarity to 'habitudes françaises', see Amina Zoubir, *Relation de l'image et du son dans la vidéo contemporaine algérienne: une expérience en temps réel*, (Saarbruecken: Editions universitaires européennes, 2010) p. 5.

<sup>787</sup> See Amina Zoubir, as cited, 2010.

<sup>788</sup> See the description of the Centre at its university website. <http://www2.univ-paris8.fr/ef/spip.php?article2> . Accessed 24/8/2018.

<sup>789</sup> Amina Zoubir, as cited 2010, p. 5.

complete in themselves but also to record and document their own performances illustrating, as Zoubir frequently does, processes linked to identity formation and issues of space and belonging. It is a medium which can be about narrative, for example by the artist Georgina Starr, or archive as by Susan Hillier, or even question the forms of materiality, as in works about spirituality by Viola. It involves duration, which together with movement, can involve or suggest narratives. Perhaps most important, video is a very flexible and diverse medium that Krauss described as ‘a heterogeneity of activities that could not be theorised as coherent or conceived as something like an essence or unifying core’.<sup>790</sup> Whether or not video has its own distinctive properties as suggested by Chris Townsend, it participates within a complex and diverse visual and aural syntax related to the moving image.<sup>791</sup> One of the attractions of video to women was that, as a new medium, it was not dominated by men as were many other media and provided a form open to expressing and developing new frames of identity that challenged patriarchy. From the 1960s onwards women found a form ‘free from the male-dominated canon, in much the same way that performance art provided uncharted territory for experimentation’.<sup>792</sup>

The turning point in Zoubir’s art practice came in 2006 after she participated in video workshops with Katia Kameli whose work is considered next in this chapter. Zoubir valued the ‘communicative immediacy’ she saw revealed in the real-time of video.<sup>793</sup> The artist regarded the medium a ‘communion’ transfigured by a ‘video-body’ reflecting her belief that video is fundamentally about the body.<sup>794</sup> Zoubir’s work developed a focus on the body and how it manifested itself in space.<sup>795</sup> This theme is central to her artistic endeavour in which the spectator is often engaged through poetic visual forms.<sup>796</sup> Zoubir’s artistic stance is

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<sup>790</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage in the North Sea, Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), p. 24.

<sup>791</sup> Townsend makes a brave effort to define video’s uniqueness in relation to film and other media but is not wholly convincing for the reasons indicated in the Krauss quote. See Chris Townsend, *New Art from London*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006), p. 78.

<sup>792</sup> Kat Herriman, ‘A Brief History of Women in Video Art’, *Artsy*, Jan 13, 2016.

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-why-are-there-so-many-great-women-video-artists>. Accessed 26/2/2019.

<sup>793</sup> Claire Nini, ‘Amina Zoubir: Créer des traces d’une mémoire contemporaine’, *Intense Art Magazine*, posted: 16/11/2016. <http://www.iam-africa.com/amina-zoubir-creer-des-traces-dune-memoire-contemporaine/>. Accessed 26/7/2017.

<sup>794</sup> Nini as cited 16/11/2016.

<sup>795</sup> The writer’s translation of ‘Ses vidéos et photographies questionnent les notions de langage du corps et sa projection en espace urbain’. See biographical page on her website.

<sup>796</sup> ‘Je définirais mon travail comme une intervention corporelle, textuelle et contextuelle. L’artiste peut émerveiller à travers des formes sensibles et poétiques’. ‘I would define my work as an intervention related to the body, the text and context. The artist can excite with wonder through visual [and possibly ‘sensitive’ as the French carries both meanings] and poetic forms’. Nini as cited 16/11/2016.

political: 'My artist approach is inevitably political. My works confront social phenomena that I see during my travels in Algeria and other countries... I try through my work to question these phenomena and to upset the established order and fixed positions, in order to challenge them and propose new ways of looking at them'.<sup>797</sup> Zoubir believes that the 'video-body' testifies to 'an avowed interest in corporeality' involving 'figured visual content'. Zoubir does not define in detail how this process works but duration, visibility, engagement with space, and the kinetic nature of the video appear to be important in developing social relevant and relational forms of art. The medium is also attractive because it challenged the static processes of painting that still dominate the Algerian art scene thus freeing up the 'aesthetic models of the figured body'.<sup>798</sup>

Zoubir curated an exhibition of work by Algerian artists entitled *Le corps manquant* or 'missing body' in Algiers in 2014. She wrote in the exhibition catalogue that in Algerian society the human body was codified socially and religiously in ways that condition both appearance and body language.<sup>799</sup> Zoubir linked the way the Algerian public had a strong interest in classical orientalist representations of the body as at least partly reinforced by the experiences of the 1990s and a desire to seek refuge in the past. Zoubir considers that, in challenging the void of the 'missing body', she and the other artists of the exhibition are exploring the ethical issues involved in the creation of space.

Zoubir, it is argued, is challenging the fixity of identity in Algerian society and the ways in which people envisage their relationships to each other and perform them in public spaces. At the same time the artist is expanding the space in which she can develop and express her own identity. There is in this a parallel between the fixity of identity in many aspects of Algerian society, the effects of this on gender relations and the persistence of the static nature of aesthetic representation in the country. The hybrid nature of video gives little room for fixity to hide as it makes visible how relationships between people operate within space. The artist has developed this hybridity through her interest in documentary video, the 'transversality' of

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<sup>797</sup> 'Mes œuvres se confrontent aux phénomènes sociétaux que j'observe lors de mes déplacements en Algérie ou dans d'autres pays... Je m'applique par mes œuvres à questionner ces phénomènes et à bousculer l'ordre établi et les positionnements figés, pour les remettre en question et proposer de nouvelles issues'. Nini as cited 16/11/2016.

<sup>798</sup> Amina Zoubir, 'Algerian Artists write the "Video-Body", 1995-2013', *NAFAS Art Magazine* on-line website, October 2014. <https://universes.art/nafas/articles/2014/video-body-algeria/> . Accessed 24/8/2018.

<sup>799</sup> Amina Zoubir, 'Algerian Artists write the "Video-Body", 1995-2013', as cited October 2014.

which - through engagement with TV, anthropology and a ‘documentary approach’ that includes bearing witness and making visible occluded places and practices.<sup>800</sup>

Zoubir wrote in her doctoral thesis that the crisis of the 1990s in Algeria, despite its horrors, at least resulted in a debate of ideas without precedent in its history. She acknowledges the difficulties and scope of this debate and the inherent problematic posed by the conflict between those who desired political liberalisation, the aspirations of those who wanted to build an Islamic utopia, and the questioning of the nature of Algerian identity often in respect of its Arab or Berber dimensions.<sup>801</sup> Zoubir comments on how, after the early efforts of Algerian artists like Denis Martinez to capture a specifically Algerian approach to art in movements such as Aouchem, artists like Houria Niati, Hellal Zoubir (her father) and Salah Malek freed themselves to create their own forms of expression.<sup>802</sup> Her videos and other art works engage with many of these questions but always from a perspective focused on the body, particularly the female body, and its manifestations, or forms of engagement or presence, in space. ‘Body’ is used here in the broad sense elaborated earlier of embodied subjectivity and its relation to lived experience.

The focus here will be on a series of short videos entitled *Prends ta place*.<sup>803</sup> that Zoubir contributed to Aurélie Charon and Caroline Gillet’s film *Un Été à Alger* in celebration of fifty years of Algerian independence.<sup>804</sup> The videos examine the nature and dynamic of gendered space and identity in Algeria from the perspective of the way the female body occupies space. The argument is that Zoubir is well aware of the sensitivity of the issues surrounding gendered space in Algeria and how there is a deep well of resentment amongst young men regarding the changes, however limited, in the status of women in society. The artist in her challenge to Algeria’s sexual apartheid is also conscious of the implications of her work for changing the frames of identity and community in the country. Zoubir’s challenges to the presence or absence of women from public space and its patriarchal framing are deliberately framed in ways in ways that are gently humorous because of the sensitivity of

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<sup>800</sup> The ‘documentary turn’ was identified as early as Hal Foster’s *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). For a short history of the ‘documentary turn’ see Mark Nash, ‘Reality in the Age of Aesthetics’, *Frieze*, April 2008. <https://frieze.com/article/reality-age-aesthetics>. Accessed 26/7/2017.

<sup>801</sup> Amina Zoubir, as cited 2010, pp. 7-10.

<sup>802</sup> Amina Zoubir, as cited 2010, pp. 14-15.

<sup>803</sup> All the videos (except *Café Maure* which has been removed) can be seen at You Tube: Amina Zoubir, ‘*Prends ta place*’. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xrj1nh>. Accessed 26/7/2017.

<sup>804</sup> Information about the film as a whole can be obtained at <http://www.narrative.info/portfolio/un-ete-a-alger/>. Accessed 26/7/2017.



the subject. The artist's use of parody illustrates how Bhabha's theory of mimicry has an application in respect of phallogocentrism as well colonialism.

Zoubir's *Prends ta place* can be seen as an allegorical narrative of the separation of women and men in Algerian urban public spaces which she sees as problem that is growing rather than diminishing. The title plays on the ambiguity around the expression 'prendre place' or to take place and to take one's place and the possibility of appropriating as opposed to knowing one's place in patriarchal society. Of the short films, Zoubir says that through sound and image: 'I perform actions within these spaces with my camera and impose my feminine presence into the man's world'.<sup>805</sup> *Prends ta place* is listed on her website under 'actions-performances' and therefore linked to a whole series of themes and movements in modern and contemporary art from the Futurists to Pussy Riot including Kaprow's concept of 'the happening'.<sup>806</sup> In a similar way to the work of Katia Kameli, Zoubir's work can be seen as a development of the work of pioneering female Algerian documentary film makers such as Assia Djebar.<sup>807</sup>

The first video takes as its theme street space and the unemployed young men labelled 'hittistes', (see image 57 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five), who lounge around street corners in Algiers. 'Hittisme' is a neologism derived from the Arab word 'hitt' or wall which originated in the 1990s.<sup>808</sup> Martin Evans and John Phillips have noted how the world view of the hittiste tends to be misogynist particularly with regard to the daughters of the wealthy elite, the 'chi-chis' whose spending was perceived as funded by their parents siphoning off the wealth of Algeria.<sup>809</sup> Class and exclusion are important factors in the perspective of these young men deeply affected by the high levels of unemployment in Algeria and frequently involved with drugs, alcohol, the black market and petty crime. As indicated in Chapter

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<sup>805</sup> 'Amina Zoubir, questions and answers, "Take Your Place – A Summer At Algiers"', posted by *aestheticsofprotest*, 21/03/2014. <http://aestheticsofprotest.org/take-your-place-a-summer-at-algiers/>. Accessed 26/7/2017. A number of the videos can be viewed at You Tube: Amina Zoubir, 'Prends ta place'. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xrj1nh>. Accessed 26/7/2017.

<sup>806</sup> On the 'happening' see Allan Kaprow's chapter on 'Assemblages, Environments and Happenings' in his *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*, (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1966). [http://web.mit.edu/jscheib/Public/performancemedia/kaprow\\_assemblages.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/jscheib/Public/performancemedia/kaprow_assemblages.pdf). Accessed 26/7/2019.

<sup>807</sup> On Djebar's films, see Stefanie Van de Peer, 'Assia Djebar's forgotten films', *Al Arte Magazine*, 6 March 2015. <http://www.alartemag.be/en/en-culture/assia-djebars-forgotten-films/>. Accessed 13/7/2018.

<sup>808</sup> According to Ambroise Queffélec and Yacine Derradji in *Le français en Algérie: Lexique et dynamique des langues*, (Brussels: Duculot, 2002).

<sup>809</sup> Martin Evans and John Phillips, *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 111.

Three, Bouras believed that this inner conflict and frustration in young males ensures that the conditions continue to exist that lead to the violence against women in the 1990s.

Zoubir acknowledges that one would never see a woman ‘hitting’ and sees her video as ‘challenging the eyes of those who pass’.<sup>810</sup> The two women in the video, Zoubir and a friend, perform a gentle invasion of what has become an established male space in which young men verbally abuse and eye up young women as they pass. The video starts with a young man sitting on a chair watching the world pass at a street corner at the bottom of steep steps. A stringed instrument gently overplays the start of the film in which the camera shot position never varies throughout the film. The street is in a middle class district and the people in the video wear smart casual except for three older women who wear traditional dress.<sup>811</sup> The two women who are the subject of the film, (*see image 58 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five*), attract very little attention despite their assertive occupation of the space, only an old woman in traditional dress stops to speak and pat Zoubir on the shoulder.

Jonah Westerman has noted how ‘performance is not (and never was) a medium, not something that an artwork can be but rather a set of questions and concerns about how art relates to people and the wider social world’.<sup>812</sup> The intervention in space of the women is a performance engaging directly with Algerian social reality, the specifics of its space and the politics of gendered identity. Despite the serious intention of this political statement through the occupation of traditional male space, this is a careful staged ‘happening’ and a performance with tongue firmly in cheek with visual jokes and tricks this includes playing with time as the editing puts some shots out of sequence. This use of humour runs through all the videos and is an important part of Zoubir’s approach which is gentle and sympathetic but realistic in its understanding of the difficult political dynamic of gendered space in Algeria. At the end of the video a young boy appears and sits in the unoccupied chair left by the women and pretends to read a newspaper. The young boy keeps looking towards the camera and at a probable signal folds his paper and self-consciously walks off. This makes a

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<sup>810</sup> Amina Zoubir, ‘Take Your Place – A Summer At Algiers’, *Action Intervention and Daily Deployment Website* posted by the artist 16 March 2014. <http://aestheticsofprotest.org/take-your-place-a-summer-at-algiers/> . Accessed 20/7/2018.

<sup>811</sup> The district number noted on the street wall appears to be Birtouta and googling AirBnB for the area indicates it is a quiet and ‘good’ area of Algiers with excellent views, apartments are available from 45-50 euros per night.

<sup>812</sup> Jonah Westerman, ‘The Dimensions of Performance’, *Tate blogs, Performance at Tate: Into the Space of Art*. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/performance-at-tate/dimensions-of-performance> . Accessed 26/2/2019.

connection between the legal status of women as minors and the reoccupation of the space as a male domain.

Throughout the film there is a voiceover by male hittistes whose comments give an insight into the strength of patriarchal feeling amongst men, the particular problems of Algerian young men and an indication that misogyny persists even though the killing, rape and mutilation of women no longer occur on a mass scale:

‘Moi, j’ai trois diplômés et là où je vais, on me dit qu’il n’y a plus de boulot. Mais une fille non diplômée est embauchée car elle est jolie ! Les entreprises préfèrent embaucher une jolie femme, plutôt qu’un jeune’.<sup>813</sup>

‘Les femmes algériennes sont dignes. Mais il y a un truc: elles nous ont envahis dans tous les domaines... On a donné des droits aux femmes. Elles ont même le droit de conduire le métro! Elles nous ont pris tous les boulots. Les entreprises préfèrent embaucher une femme...car elle accepte de travailler à moitié prix. Elle ne fait rien de son salaire, alors que l’homme en a besoin pour fonder un foyer’.<sup>814</sup>

‘J’ai ma mère qui me raconte...trop de choses ont changé elles sont devenues cultivées. Elles veulent travailler. Elles ne cuisinent plus, voilà! Elles ne s’occupent plus des enfants et de la personne qui les aime. Donc, c’est rare de trouver une femme sérieuse’.<sup>815</sup>

An ideal women is:

‘Une femme pieuse, instruite et cultivée... qui travaille parce que l’époque le veut mais qui reste discrète et soutient son homme’.<sup>816</sup>

The voiceover is not simultaneous with the action and takes place at a different time and in a different place. The sounds of the male voices provide a context to the narrative action taking place in the video. This sort of sound, like the brief spell of traditional music at the beginning,

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<sup>813</sup> ‘Me, I have three diplomas and where I go, I am told that there is no jobs. But a girl without a diploma is hired because she is pretty! Companies prefer to hire a pretty woman, rather than a young man’.

<sup>814</sup> ‘Algerian women are worthy. But there is one thing: they invaded all areas our domains ... We gave rights to women. They even have the right to drive the metro! They took all the jobs from us. Companies prefer to hire a woman ... because she agrees to work at half the price. She does nothing with her salary, when a man needs it to start a home’.

<sup>815</sup> ‘I have my mother telling me ... too many things have changed: they have become cultivated. They want to work. They no longer cook, that’s it! They no longer take care of children and the person who loves them. So, it is rare to find a serious woman’.

<sup>816</sup> ‘A pious, educated and cultivated woman... who works because the times demand it but who remains discreet and supports her man’.

is non-diegetic and does not emerge from the story space.<sup>817</sup> Zoubir's use of this voiceover is to lay another level of meaning which is less about the action of the video than to provide an understanding of the reason for the video itself and the dialectical relation between the challenge to male space and how men view it. It provides an insight into how many men in Algeria justify their misogyny and their resentment of the changing dynamic of gender relations.

Another invasion of space occurs in the second video, *Coiffeur pour Homme*, (see image 59 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five). Zoubir says: 'By entering a barbershop and asking for a blow dry, I was able to impose my body in such places that are meant to be for men.'<sup>818</sup> The video is again carefully staged and some form of prior agreement appears to have occurred prior to filming. This time there is no voiceover, the dialogue is in real time. The customers show unfeigned surprise when Zoubir and the camera enter and the dialogue between the barber and Zoubir is sporadic and unscripted. Both Zoubir and the barber show humour and empathy throughout the video. This points to two frequent features of Zoubir's videos: a staged situation within which the participants often are not aware of the staging but then an unscripted performance guided by her good humour and interpersonal skills.

Zoubir stands in the doorway and asks the barber if he can do her a cut and blow dry, he replies that he could but with her long hair it would take time. The barber runs his fingers through her hair which is a culturally significant act in Algeria. The significance of 'hair' is referred to in her first solo exhibition in 2014, *The passion fruit*: 'When Muslim women wear the veil, the most important element to hide after the body is the hair. Well hidden, hair becomes an entity that connotes sexual organ'.<sup>819</sup> Zoubir cheekily asks whether he knows how to cut a woman's hair? The barber replies that she will get a man's cut and, smiling, refuses to guarantee the result. After a short discussion on her hair quality, she asks for a parting like the young men and, despite insisting that partings are for men only, he agrees. The barber finds Zoubir's hair length problematic but she helps him to put in the partings and then praises him: 'that's not bad at all' (c'est pas mal ça). He grins and thanks her: 'A man's cut and blow dry! They are going to talk about this for a long time!' (Un brushing d'homme! On va en dire long sur ce brushing!). Throughout the film Zoubir is confident, directive and

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<sup>817</sup> See David Bardwell, and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An introduction*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), p. 305 for definitions and examples of diegetic and non-diegetic sound in film.

<sup>818</sup> Amina Zoubir, as cited, 16 March 2014.

<sup>819</sup> Amina Zoubir has cached the brochure write-up on her website under Installations/*The passion fruit*. <http://www.aminazoubir.com/#>. Accessed 26/2/2019.

in control of the situation again contradicting stereotypical views of female agency at the same time as transgressing gendered space.

The third video *Sirène*, (see image 60 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five), was filmed at Bab El Oued beach with Zoubir wearing a djeba, a traditional festive dress often worn by brides, rather than a bathing costume. Confirming the worsening situation of gendered space, the artist comments that the beaches used to be for everyone in Algiers but fewer women dare to wear a swimming costume on a beach where young men like to hang around and where women are not welcome: 'I ... had to dress in a djeba covering my whole body to be able to swim'. She says she dreams of swimming like a mermaid dressed in a djeba.<sup>820</sup> Zoubir challenges the mythological, cultural and religious characterisation of women as evil enchanters.<sup>821</sup> In this she follows the lead of Cixous's 'The laugh of the Medusa' and reclaims the female figures of legend.

The voiceovers are of women and of men. The women complain that the djeba is not practical for swimming but they have to wear it to avoid prohibition from the beach. One, on holiday in Algeria, regrets she cannot wear her bikini and another points out that the djeba once wet actually shows the whole body especially the butt and breasts but acknowledges that some women do not wear the swimsuit because their husbands disapprove. A man says that everyone is free to wear what they want but acknowledges that the young men relentlessly hassle the women. Another man points to the dangers of wearing djebas and how his brother nearly drowned trying unsuccessfully to save a woman in one. Despite the recognition of the dangers and restrictions imposed by this form of dress the dangers of harassment and male pressure ensure that most women conform to traditional dress. At the end of the video Zoubir again references the plight of young men whose problems she recognises and for which she has sympathy by including the voice of a man singing of his love not for a woman but for a boat that will take him out of his misery by taking him out of the country.

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<sup>820</sup> Amina Zoubir, 'Take Your Place – A Summer At Algiers', *Action Intervention and Daily Deployment* website posted by the artist 16 March 2014. <http://aestheticsofprotest.org/take-your-place-a-summer-at-algiers/>. Accessed 27/7/2018.

<sup>821</sup> Homer: 'If anyone unwarily draws in too close and hears the singing of the Sirens, his wife and children will never welcome him home again, for they sit in a green field and warble him to death with the sweetness of their song. There is a great heap of dead men's bones lying all around, with the flesh still rotting off them. Therefore pass these Sirens by, and stop your men's ears with wax that none of them may hear'. See Book XII of *The Odyssey* at the Literature Network website. <http://www.online-literature.com/homer/odyssey/12/>. Accessed 27/7/2018.

In the fourth video Zoubir, (*see image 70 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five*), sets up stall selling underwear with ‘the hope of dressing men in lace’. The artist noticed that it was usually an occupation reserved for a man with a big beard and asks:

‘What can be a conversation between a Salafist shopkeeper and a woman when they talk about lingerie? My action was to sell underwear for men trying to dress them in lace as they do with women’.<sup>822</sup>

Zoubir attempts to sell flowery boxer shorts which she tells her male customers are pretty with flowers and bemoans with them that the shorts do not have lace at the bottom like women. The stallholder next to her is adamant that men do not wear lace and prefer quality but she points out how comfortable the underwear is and he agrees and finally after haggling over price he buys a pair of grey pants (without lace), a vest and a towel with pink dolphins on it. Another customer asks after the flowery boxer shorts but in the end buys striped ones. The film ends with her looking at the camera with a smile thus breaking the ‘fourth wall’ agreement by which an invisible, imagined wall separates actors from the audience, the spectator is drawn into the joke Zoubir is performing.

In the fifth video, *Café Maure*, (*see image 71 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five*), Zoubir targets the cafes in Algiers. The space of the café maure is a traditional male bastion, an institution so gendered in its maleness that Carlier suggested in 1990 it was invisible by nature of its ordinariness in Algeria.<sup>823</sup> It represented an obvious target for Zoubir to challenge. The video begins with a young woman in western dress entering a café full of men where a man behind the counter makes coffee. There is a cut between the start of the film outside the café and the restarting of filming inside which suggests prior agreement with the café proprietor. Zoubir is stared at, regarded as an oddity, but served her coffee which she quickly drinks and then leaves. Her entry into the café is clearly not welcome.

The video then cuts to what appears to be either the same café or one very similar but populated by women talking and sharing magazines and generally having a good time. The occasional male enters the café but, although they are ignored by the women, they do not stay. There are age and class differences as well as ones of gender. The women, some veiled,

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<sup>822</sup> Amina Zoubir, as cited 16 March 2014.

<sup>823</sup> For a fascinating insight into the café maure see: Omar Carlier, ‘Le café maure. Sociabilité masculine et effervescence citoyenne’, *Annales, Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 45<sup>e</sup> année, N. 4, 1990. [https://www.persee.fr/doc/ahess\\_0395-2649\\_1990\\_num\\_45\\_4\\_278882](https://www.persee.fr/doc/ahess_0395-2649_1990_num_45_4_278882). Accessed 26/7/2018.

others not, are all in their 20s and 30s and appear to be middle-class in terms of their clothes. The men in the video are in general older. Zoubir reinvents the café maure, in a form of Bhabha reversal by means of tongue in cheek mimicry, which is not hostile to men but lays claim to a long overdue share of public space and the respect that would make that possible. As in the first video, the voiceovers of men in a café give a sense of the difficult situation of Algerian women who are not happy to play a traditional subservient role.

The voiceovers of the men reiterate many of the stereotypical views of women and the prejudices of many Algerian men expressed in video one. Women are seen as prey and men as lions who chase and devour them. Even though it is acknowledged that women are becoming more emancipated, women in cafés are not seen as normal and this is regarded as partly a religious issue but also because it is a male private space.

The female café parodies the exclusions of the male café and indicates the possibility of new relationships between genders in public space. It signals Zoubir's recognition that the problem of sexual apartheid cannot be solved simply by the occupation and disruption of gendered space by women in Algeria although that has an important role to play. In such a situation, to use Gramsci's terms, a war of position is more appropriate than a war of movement.<sup>824</sup> The difficulty and dangers of the situation, which are real, helps to explain why Zoubir's approach tends to be sensitive and frequently humorous.

In the sixth video, *Le match de foot*, Zoubir enlists the Algerian national women's football team, (see image 72 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five), to challenge the football team of a local boys' primary school to a match. The video, in fast speed, begins with the women in varied and colourful outfits changing from a variety of footwear into a variety of football boots to the music of a patriotic Algerian football anthem, (see image 73 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five). Zoubir announces herself as the commentator and welcomes those watching to this 'friendly' and draws attention to the 'blues' (a 'male' colour and also a term for the French national team) or the boys from the local primary school. Throughout the video Zoubir makes a satirical point of describing the casual and often fashionable clothes of

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<sup>824</sup> See Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*, (London: Routledge, 1971), pp. 495-6. For Perry Anderson's classic essay: Perry Anderson, 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *New Left Review*, 100, (1976- 1977): 6. For a detailed treatment, see Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, (London: Routledge, 1980). For a perspective that points to some of the problems of frequent treatments of Gramsci's analysis see Daniel Egan, 'Rethinking War of Manoeuvre/War of Position: Gramsci and the Military Metaphor', *Critical Sociology* 2014, Vol. 40(4), pp. 521-538. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0896920513480222>. Accessed 26/7/2018.

each women player. The two referees are women, again a gender reversal, and wear the red fez which is not intrinsically a male signifier although having a military origin, it also links with the fez worn by Zoubir and her husband in the next video where it symbolises mutual respect.

During the match Zoubir's commentary includes references to, for example, 'madame in the beautiful dress' when she has scored, a woman in jeans and a teeshirt with a feminist sign is described as a 'good dribbler' and a woman who makes a good tackle is referred to as 'the veiled player in the pink tee-shirt'. After the match the women are shown in the dressing room chanting together in solidarity: 'Long live Algerian women!' The video ends showing a small table covered with the Algerian flag and with an empty chair beside it.

A number of issues are explored in the video. Zoubir comments that, in Algeria, weddings are for Algerian women and football matches are reserved for men and she sees her video as symbolically reversing that because not only are the winning team female but the commentator is usually male.<sup>825</sup> Throughout she satirises the gendered nature of the game and points to the women as individuals, although individuals within the solidarity of the team. Interestingly, as in the Kameli video below, there is a police presence which we are allowed to see and which signals the security issues and dangers surrounding women who do not conform.

The video also implicitly marks the steps backward for women since 1962. After the inscription of the rights of women within the new constitution and recognition of their contribution during the War of Independence there has been gradual erosion of their position. An notable example of this was the introduction of the 1984 Family Code in Algeria in which women, despite their protests inside and outside the Algerian Assembly, were reduced legally to 'minors' with the status of children. This was in order to appease the Islamists and it helped set the stage for the murder and abuse of women in the 1990s. This is part of the symbolism of the Women's national football team engaging in a match with schoolchildren – they are of the same status legally and culturally. It symbolises the gendered and subaltern role of women as bearers of, and carers for, children.

Zoubir's final video, *Le match de foot*, (see image 74 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five), explores marriage in terms of the metaphor of a football game. In both the work of Boudjelal

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<sup>825</sup> Amina Zoubir, as cited 16 March 2014.



and Kameli the separation of men and women at wedding celebrations are noted in an event supposed to bring two people together. In reality the wedding, the events leading up to it and its celebration mark out the ground of Algeria's sexual apartheid. Throughout the video there is the sound of traditional wedding music and Zoubir and her husband are dressed in wedding garb. But here Zoubir is signalling the possibility of new types of relationship between men and women. The couple play together and they kick the ball across the goal not at it demonstrating that they are not competing with each other or trying to score points although she is clearly better at football than he is despite wearing high heels. A typically gentle and humorous film in which Zoubir makes a number of serious points about the historic and cultural distortions of the spaces occupied by men and women and of changing the values inherent in identity formation dominated by gendered roles that shape the nature of relationships.

### **Katia Kameli**

Katia Kameli's film *Untitled* (2012), (*image 75 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five*), was filmed in Algiers a few months after the 'Arab Spring' began in Tunisia in December 2010.<sup>826</sup> In the film, Kameli reflects upon the way Algerian/Arab women participated within the uprisings that swept the MENA.<sup>827</sup> The female body figures in this work as a complex irreducible signifier which Kameli deploys in silence with meaning expressed corporeally by means of movement, deportment, expression and context. As with the work of Niati and Benyahia, Kameli's film attests to the connections of the female body and gendered spaces to notions of identity and community. Like Benyahia, Kameli acknowledges and interrogates the ever changing relationship between tradition and modernity and the particular problems this poses for those with cross-cultural allegiances. Kameli's use of video also signals the growing interest by Algerian and Franco-Algerian artists in the medium and the way it can be put to narrative uses connected to identity and community.<sup>828</sup>

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<sup>826</sup> For the Arab Spring see Adam Roberts, Michael J. Willis, Rory McCarthy, and Timothy Garton-Ash, (Eds.), *Civil Resistance in the Arab Spring: Triumphs and Disasters*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198749028.001.0001/acprof-9780198749028>. Accessed 27/7/2018.

<sup>827</sup> The video can be viewed at Katia Kameli's website. <http://katiakameli.com/videos/untitled/>. Accessed 27/7/2018.

<sup>828</sup> On the difficulties of developing video and film art in Algeria see Amina Zoubir, *Relation de l'image et du son dans la vidéo contemporaine algérienne*, as cited 2010. Zoubir, following in the footsteps of Zineb Sedira, Amar Bouras, and Zoulikha Bouabdellah, has done much to assist the development of video and film art in Algeria. Kameli herself organised in 2011 a video workshop in Algiers for art students.

The analysis examines how the artist challenges the reductive ways in which women and their bodies were portrayed in the upheaval in the Arab world and how she offers alternative, more intricate, complex views of their struggles. The analysis broadens to consider how the female body and issues of identity and community feature more generally in Kameli's oeuvre through a shorter consideration of three of her other works.

The 'Arab Spring' began in Tunisia with the self-immolation by Mohamed Bouazizi in sheer desperation after his vegetable cart was confiscated and he was humiliated by a local official, an insult compounded in his eyes because the official was a woman, Faida Hamdi.<sup>829</sup> Much of the Arab world was affected although protests developed differentially, sometimes leading to revolution, sometimes to war and at times more or less contained by the regimes. The widespread unemployment amongst young men was important but women played a significant role in many countries.<sup>830</sup> In Algeria there were protests but no revolution or major upset despite youth unemployment of over 40 per cent in 2011, 130 self-immolations in 2012 and thousands of minor protests against housing shortages, food prices, and police corruption.<sup>831</sup> The relatively low-key Algerian reaction to the events in Tunisia can be related to the traumatic memories of the events of the 1990s; the granting of very modest political reform by the Bouteflika regime, the regime's unflinching use of repression and torture and the omnipresence of the DRS, Algeria's military intelligence.

Kameli is making points not just about the Arab Spring but also the situation of women in Algeria. The work is set in Algiers: both a choice and an achievement in itself given the difficulty in getting permission for public events, the subject of the video and the widespread public distrust of the camera.<sup>832</sup> The artist consciously frames the women in the video within the setting of the French colonial architecture of Algiers and allows the presence of Algerian police to be briefly glimpsed as does Zoubir in her video about the football match. As Mulvey points out in her analysis of Douglas Sirk's 1959 film *Imitation of Life* there is

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<sup>829</sup> The term seems to have been first used by Marc Lynch in 'Obama's "Arab Spring"?' *Foreign Policy*, 6/1/2011. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/06/obamas-arab-spring/>. Accessed 26/7/2018.

<sup>830</sup> See Hassan Islam and Paul Dyer, 'The State of Middle Eastern Youth', *The Muslim World*, 107 (1), 2017, pp. 3–12.

<sup>831</sup> See Caroline Pare, 'Algeria: The revolution that never was'. *Aljazeera*, 20/5/2012. <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2012/05/2012516145457232336.html>. Accessed 26/7/2018.

<sup>832</sup> See Amina Menia's complaints regarding getting official permission to make artworks in public in Chapter Four. Kameli herself has noted the fear of the camera of many Algerians in Katia Kameli, 'Developing filmmaking talent in North Africa'. <http://exposures.posterous.com/?tag=katiakameli>. Accessed 14/02/2012. Bruno Boudjelal has frequently referred to the problems of openly using a camera in Algeria and to some extent his photographic style is an adaptation to this problem.

significance in fleeting almost imperceptible images that can only be appreciated by stilling the film.<sup>833</sup> In Sirk's film the issue is race, for Kameli the issue is the repressive state apparatus in Algeria. This introduces an undercurrent about how the movement of the women of the video, in their performance of protest, is cut through by a signifier of oppression. There is a subtle further territorialisation of a film ostensibly about protest across the MENA that is evident in the prominent position given to a woman wearing the distinctive Algerian white haik. Kameli makes a variety of semantic connections between the woman's haik, the architecture of Algeria's colonial past and the oppressive nature of Algeria's current regime. It is argued that these enable her to maintain a duality in the film between the specific struggles of women in the Algerian context and their connection with a larger struggle that is diverse in its contexts and its aims but which can be understood within the frame of the silencing of women and their efforts to express a voice.

Entitling her work '*Untitled*' – and thus seeding the implications of the apparent contradiction of a title entitled '*Untitled*' – can be seen as a deliberate oxymoronic gesture by Kameli. This becomes apparent as the film unfolds and awareness dawns of the possible significance of the lack of slogans on the placards of the women and their silence. Kameli confronts the popular media characterisations in the West and in the Arab world of women's involvement in the upheaval.<sup>834</sup> There is no collusion with the tropes of protesting woman in Western media in which North African and Arab women are seen marching, chanting, and demanding human rights in, as Marta Zarzycka suggests, a very Western view of female empowerment.<sup>835</sup> The protests were frequently interpreted in the West narrowly through the perspective of a popularised view of Western feminism while in North Africa and the Middle East the women were frequently characterised either as Western pawns or as women of loose morals. Maha El Said, Lena Meari and Nichola Pratt have provided a wealth of examples of these stereotypical TV and social media representations and the abuse directed at individual women in many of them.<sup>836</sup> Kameli's video provides a different representation attesting instead to the dignity and irreducibility of the protests of the women which should be

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<sup>833</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Imitation of Life: new forms of spectatorship', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 15:4, 2017, pp. 471-480.

<sup>834</sup> For a characterisation of these see the introductory chapter of Maha El Said et al. as cited 2015, pp. 1-34. See also the perceptive article by Amna Abdullatif, 'Voices of Women in the Arab Spring', *Journal of Social Science Education*, Volume 12, Number 1, 2013. Both examine the complexity of women's involvement and the frequently politically coloured way in which they were portrayed.

<sup>835</sup> See Marta Zarzycka, *Gendered Tropes in War Photography: Mothers, Mourners, Soldiers*, (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 21.

<sup>836</sup> Maha El Said, Lena Meari and Nichola Pratt, as cited 2015.

contextualised in terms of the specific situation to which different women were responding. This is perhaps why Kameli lists *Untitled* under videos rather than video installations on her website as this choice of video form is strategic because a single channel video is closer to the conventional idea of documentary film than video installation.

*Untitled* opens with a slow pan shot from right to left along one side of a narrow street where cardboard boxes have been used to construct makeshift constructions on the pavements against the walls of the houses.<sup>837</sup> This is the start of a continuous 2 minute 20 seconds shot starting as a pan right to left and then becoming a tracking shot in front of the subject. There is no sound throughout the video, which emphasizes movement and mobility from the start. A young woman dressed in a black hooded garment emerges in silence from one of the cardboard structures which morph into cardboard shanties. She kneels to make a placard of sloganless cardboard and a length of wood before moving to the centre of the street. As she does so we have a fleeting glimpse of a police car blocking off the end of the street. A low angle shot that continues throughout makes her look bigger in the frame and by association with cinema appear heroic. Other women with similar banners and in a variety of mostly western clothes join her silently including an older woman in the traditional Algerian haik. They move forward together and the camera tracks in front of them in mid-shot emphasising their co-presence rather than their individuality. The camera pans out into a medium shot and the women lower their placards and stand as men pass by glancing at them and cars are seen moving behind them across the bottom of the street.

There is a wealth of signifiers in the video related to the female body and gendered space as the women move through the video. The women emerge from cardboard constructions on the pavement and not from within the solid stone houses that line the street perhaps a metonym that within the 'place' allocated culturally and politically to women there is only precariousness. Or alternatively the cardboard structures act as a symbolic liminal or transitional space – fragile, ephemeral – posed between the private space (of women) of the home and the public (male) space of the street. The cardboard shanties metamorphose into placards signalling agency and emergence from imposed forms or a protective covering, an historic chrysalis from which women attempt to break out. This marginal state is not just a state of powerlessness but of potential power threatening the status quo across genders, politics and cultures. To use filmic language Kameli provides a 'gutter shot' (in the sense of

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<sup>837</sup> The video can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/channels/katiakameli/29360300> . Accessed 27/7/2018.

leaving out information and entrusting your audience to fill in the gap) when she pans right to left along the gap (gutter) between the street, the cardboard and the houses offering a metaphor of the situation of the women. In more general terms the women move between different worlds, from the private to the public, from the domestic space to the political space, from enclosure to exposure, from the hidden to the unconcealed and visible. Arguably, Kameli is also prospecting a form of psychological displacement between different modes of thinking about the self and the social. There is not just a migration of bodies but of ideas produced by embodied subjectivities engaging with and crossing borders within the world they inhabit.

Berrada writing about Kameli's art practice suggests that she engages in a form of translation that navigates an 'outskirt' or a 'no man's land' between origin and destination where things become possible and in his words 'play host to beautiful things'.<sup>838</sup> Here in the artwork the 'beautiful things' are possibilities of change and growth prefigured by the performances of the women. Women are portrayed taking silently - almost in ritual procession - to the streets using their bodies as tools of protest and resistance (*see image 76 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five*). But the street itself has been silenced: there are no sounds at all. Sound can be used in many ways in the cinema and does not have to match the images shown but here the silence of the women is a deliberate expressive silence that perfectly matches the images of the women. The silence paradoxically operates as a sort of sound bridge in the sense of being carried across a visual transition in the film profoundly changing its mood and meaning. This absence of sound forces attention on the visual aspects of the video and also acts as a metaphor of the complex multiple situations and contexts in which women are trying to establish their voices in Algeria, across the wider North African and Arab world, and in the global world. It also marks the continuing attempt to silence women.

The use of placards and their 'silent' text appear to be a reference to Anna Halprin's *Blank Placard Dance* (1967) performed in 1967 in San Francisco.<sup>839</sup> San Francisco was a major site of opposition to the Vietnam War against which in April 1967 60,000 people marched in the city.<sup>840</sup> Kameli's interest in Halprin may not be the anti-war protests but Halprin's concern for the political dimension of performance and its inscription on urban space.

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<sup>838</sup> Omar Berrada can be heard at 'Artist Talk: Omar Berrada in conversation with artist Katia Kameli', *154: Contemporary African Art fair* website. <http://1-54.com/london/forum/>. Accessed 26/7/2018.

<sup>839</sup> I am very grateful to Professor Julia Dobson for pointing out the link with Halprin's work.

<sup>840</sup> See the Harvey Richards Media Archive. <http://hrmediaarchive.estuarypress.com/san-francisco-march-against-the-war-in-vietnam/>. Accessed 27/7/2018.

The film is a performance with actors, a work of fiction or theatre that subtly interrogates the meaning of revolution. It translates the media representations of the protests of the Arab Spring into something else. Berrada makes the point that part of the dynamic of translation is that it enables a deconstruction of the binary between the original and the copy or copies.<sup>841</sup> Berrada suggests that such translation ‘is not just pouring wine from one bottle into another’, but an act of ‘breaking the bottle’.<sup>842</sup> Kameli translates the women’s protests through an act of visual metalepsis that deconstructs their representation in the media and allows the emergence of a metanarrative about the situation of women that allows it an opacity that recognises the diversity of responses and the variety of its contexts.

Kameli scripts the sound of the women as silence and in her refusal to sloganize the placards makes a ‘glocal’ connection linking the situation of women in Algeria to a more global statement. Kameli has referred to this technique as ‘*verfremdungseffekt*’, a Brechtian term.<sup>843</sup> For Brecht acceptance or rejection by the audience of actions or speech was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of in the subconscious. Kameli’s use of the term seems to have an additional sense and acts as a device used predominantly for creating a sense of distance which acknowledges the local but contextualises – deterritorialises - it to allow greater perspective and challenge reduction.

*Untitled* is usually on a loop when shown in a gallery and the narrative and associated time appears circular or cyclical. The complex narrative quality of Kameli’s work is thus enhanced with the apparent impasse of the ending in this iteration providing the possibility of a range of outcomes. Alternatively, the loop can be seen as a rehearsal, recapitulation or re-telling of a story depending on how one shifts time and space: the women move at different speeds, decelerating or accelerating and, at times, in stasis, which suggests a combination of progression, difficulties and stalemate.

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<sup>841</sup> This point is made in the video ‘Interview with Omar Berrada, translator, curator and writer’ as cited.

<sup>842</sup> Quoted in Kate Playdell, ‘Blurring National Boundaries with Fables, Postcards, and Film, a review of Kameli’s exhibition at the Mosaic Rooms, London entitled “What Language Do you Speak, Stranger?”’, *Hyperallergic*, 18/11/2016. <https://hyperallergic.com/338994/blurring-national-boundaries-with-fables-postcards-and-film/>. Accessed 27/7/2018.

<sup>843</sup> Kameli uses the term in the Silke Schjmichi interview as cited at <http://u-in-u.com/nafas/articles/2008/katia-kameli/>. Accessed 27/7/2018. *Verfremdungseffekt* is a term used by Brecht and can be translated as an ‘alienation (or estrangement or distancing) effect’. Brecht said it was ‘playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play.’ Brecht’s essay ‘Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting’ including the quote can be seen at: <https://whatistheatreally.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/brecht-alienation-effects-in-chinese-acting.pdf>. Accessed 13/10/2019.

On one level *Untitled* is a commentary on the meaning of revolution and struggle for women within the upheavals of the Arab Spring. It is also an examination of the problematic aspects of revolution itself. Kameli's work considers the place of 'sectional' interests within struggles that prioritise approaches that marginalise these interests even when they concern around 50% of the population. The work also meditates on the divisions and differences within what is categorised as 'women' and how a failure to acknowledge these differences can obscure the real difficulties and problems faced by women in the diverse cultural, social and political contexts in which they find themselves.

*Untitled* is consistent with the approach of Algerian writers like Djébar, an important influence on Kameli, who have examined in their texts how the voices of women have been configured, articulated, ignored, and silenced by cultures and societies. Kameli suggests that the silence of women speaks volumes but that its articulation may vary depending on context. But the video, in ways that echo the artworks of Niati and Benyahia, portrays a commonality of interest, and a community of solidarity that can fuel protest and struggle against specific forms of oppression within a territory even though an all-encompassing feminist theoretical framework is still developing.

*Untitled* sits within Kameli's oeuvre as part of her exploration of multiplicity and the in-between, including negotiation between tradition and modernity, framed by her sense of being linked to both France and Algeria.<sup>844</sup> Her works interrogate territory subject to social and cultural change but where tradition remains important. Kameli regards this as tracking down 'the "in-between" zones where perceptions of a traditional past meet modernity, especially around what can be loosely defined as Africa, the Middle East and the Mediterranean'.<sup>845</sup> The artist does not ignore issues of integration and the negotiation of identity and community which involves for her exploration of how people react to the architectural and often gendered landscapes in which they find themselves.<sup>846</sup> Kameli does not explain why architecture takes on this importance but it may relate to its connections with power, authority and history. Kameli is a friend of Zoubir and there are similarities with Zoubir's fascination with how the female body manifests itself in public space. Her approach to the 'in-between' links to her conscious positioning of self as a hybrid within what she calls

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<sup>844</sup> See the artist's statement about her work at <http://katiakameli.com/cv/>. Accessed 27/7/2018.

<sup>845</sup> The quotation comes from her website and artist's statement. Interestingly her statement in French is very different from that given in English and is not a straight translation. <http://katiakameli.com/cv/>. Accessed 27/7/2018.

<sup>846</sup> See artist's statement. <http://katiakameli.com/cv/>. Accessed 27/7/2018.

a ‘third space’, which links to both Bhabha and Khatibi, that she believes enables other views, positions and forms to emerge.<sup>847</sup> Kameli quotes Hall in the French version of her artist’s statement:

‘According to one of the founding fathers of Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall, “cultural identity is not fixed, it is hybrid and always follows from specific historical circumstances”’.<sup>848</sup>

This approach to ‘hybridity’ is a useful analytical tool which she uses to explore emerging changes in situations related to identity and gender.

A major theme in Kameli’s work is the questioning of historical accounts and re-narrating history in a creative metalepsis in which the telling of the story contaminates or transgresses in some way the story or history that is told, something she does in *Untitled* by transgressing popular accounts of the role of women in the Arab Spring.<sup>849</sup> Another example is *The storyteller* (2012) in which the central character is a traditional storyteller working as part of Marrakech’s famous al-halqa, or storyteller's circle.<sup>850</sup> Kameli draws the narrative not from oral tradition but from the plot of Satyen Bose’s 1964 Indian black and white Hindi film *Dosti* and the narrator is Abderrahim Al Azalia, whose specialism is narrating Bollywood films. A further twist, given the importance of singing in *Dosti*, is that the work is filmed in the unfinished opera house in Marrakech. Tradition, modernity, globalism and transculturalism are investigated through a transmedial approach involving a mise en abyme that remains respectful of the traditional role of the storyteller and empathetic with marginalised people using their engagement with culture (music and song) in a struggle to survive. Reality and fiction are entangled in the interests of a metanarrative and a different view of reality. The work attests to Kameli’s interest in exploring and breaking down the boundaries between art and cinema, combining site, sound, video and photographic installation to offer the viewer a layered understanding of the complexity of the artist’s

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<sup>847</sup> See ‘Bio’ on Kameli’s website: ‘Son positionnement est donc celui de l’hybridité, le « tiers-espace » qui rend possible l’émergence d’autres visions, de positions, de formes’.

<sup>848</sup> ‘Selon l’un des pères fondateurs des Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall, « l’identité culturelle n’est pas figée, elle est hybride et découle toujours de circonstances historiques particulières ».’

<sup>849</sup> Amongst a number of references to metalepsis in Genette, see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1980), pp. 234–35 where metalepsis is described as ‘any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters) into a metadiegetic universe’. One of its uses is to create fictional narratives related to the real but which inform through insights and forms of meta-realities, frequently in a seriously playful way.

<sup>850</sup> The video can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/channels/katiakameli/51484157>. Accessed 27/7/2018.



engagement. Voice, as a positioning of both the artist and the protagonists of the video, is part of this challenge to the complex relationship between fiction and reality.

As indicated in the analysis of *Untitled* Kameli has a commitment in her work to exploring the position of women. Two of the three films she contributed to the release of *Resistances* (a CD containing work by a variety of artists) were *Aïcha* and *Nouba* that were directly concerned with providing a different view of the situation of women in the Muslim world. Kameli specifically links these films to resistance ‘and everything the word implies’.<sup>851</sup>

*Nouba* (2000) is a video of an Algerian wedding celebration. The video marks the separation of women which is part of Algeria’s gender apartheid but also the solidarity and fun it engenders in the women. Formally Kameli plays with the aesthetics of video clips posted on social media with blurred images and confused camera angles. The French term ‘clip vidéo’ which she uses to describe her video is often used to refer to pop music videos which is a further disorientation. She conjures, for Western eyes at least, a remote and exotic reality further displaced by music that is not easily identifiable as belonging to a particular territory. The word *nouba*, which refers to a form of Andalusian music in five movements, is borrowed from Maghrebi Arabic *nuba*, which in classical Arabic is *sais nawba* meaning ‘in turns’ or ‘to succeed each other’.<sup>852</sup> But the word has other associations. *nouba* entered the French language as a description of the music of Algerian infantrymen of the French colonial army. The word later became a synonym of ‘partying’. Kameli’s use of the word is also a homage to Assia Djebar who was the first woman to make an Algerian feature film, *La nouba du Mont-Chenoua* (1977), the key protagonist of which is an emancipated but conflicted Algerian woman.<sup>853</sup> This multi-layered, transcultural approach maintains a tension between territorialisation and de-territorialisation which characterises her work and acts to question reductive forms of women, their bodies and the gendered spaces frequently associated with them.

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<sup>851</sup> The quotation is from Silke Schjmicchi, ‘Interview with Katia Kameli: hybridisation as a creative process’, *Nafas Art Magazine*, June 2008. <http://u-in-u.com/nafas/articles/2008/katia-kameli/>. Accessed 27/7/2018. The three films were shown in the publication, *Marc Horchler; Thomas Lambert; Katia Kameli; Bouchra Khalili; Al Fadhil; Zineb Sedira; Joude Gorani; Mesrine Khodr; Pauline M'Barek; Jalal Toufic; Nassim Amaouche, Resistance(s). Vol. II: experimental films from the Middle East and North Africa*, (Paris: Lowave, 2007).

<sup>852</sup> See for example, Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics, and Self-Representation*, (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 96-97.

<sup>853</sup> For an examination of Djebar’s linking of space and social and psychological states, an approach that seems to have influenced Kameli, see Mani Sharpe, ‘Representations of space in Assia Djebar’s “La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua”’, *Studies in French Cinema*, 13.3, 2013, pp. 215-25.

*Nouba*, (see image 77 at Appendix: Images Chapter Five), explores the marriage ritual from the perspective of the separation of women from men and depicts the women dancing together in celebration. It links to the concerns of space and the female body that run through this chapter in the work of all the artists, Niati: harem, Benyahia: mashrabiyya and Zoubir: public space and gender relations. As noted, the reference to ‘nouba’ refers to Assia Djébar’s film *La nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua* (1977) which reads the history of Algeria through the life of its women in particular the life of its heroine and her problematic relationship with her crippled husband.<sup>854</sup> ‘Nouba’ as a musical form is used in Djébar’s as a creative disruption in which she blends a fragmented cinematic style with fragments of the music of Bela Bartok inspired by his stay in Algeria. The film has been described by Reda Bensmaïa as about the aesthetic of the fragment and was presented by French TV as ‘une histoire quotidienne des femmes (qui parlent à leurs tours)’.<sup>855</sup> Kameli de-territorializes the images in her film by stripping it of its sound which is replaced by Arab sounding electronic music. Srouf describes this as a form of ‘global music’ that enables Kameli to create an aesthetic hybrid between a popular video and an experimental video.<sup>856</sup> Kameli creates a shift from an Algerian marriage to something that is global, a ‘dis-presented’ space in which the space of the image and the space conjured by the sound are sundered and posed in relation to each other.<sup>857</sup>

Kameli transfers or translates her original ‘Super 8’ film into digitalised form retaining the low definition, grainy quality of the original and changing the frame speed to create jerky blurred moving images that verge at times on the abstract with the dancing women seeming at times to be transformed into white doves. The colour is predominantly cool with whites, blues and yellows endowing the women with a spiritual quality. Super 8mm film is a motion picture film format released in 1965 by Eastman Kodak as an improvement over the older 8 mm home movie format. The use of ‘Super 8’ film is often associated with nostalgia for example in home movies or films such as Spielberg’s *Super 8*. If such nostalgia is intended then it may relate to Kameli’s remembrance of the joy and pleasure that the women

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<sup>854</sup> Assia Djébar, *La nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua de Assia Djébar*, (1977).

<http://www.okbob.net/article-la-nouba-des-femmes-du-mont-chenoua-de-assia-djebbar-c-etait-en-1977-film-entier-120691267.html>. Accessed 27/7/2018.

<sup>855</sup> ‘An everyday story of women who speak in their turn’, quoted in Khanna as cited 2008, p. 127.

<sup>856</sup> Nemesis Srouf, ‘Deterritorialization of the Image: dissonances in the imaginary of Arab identity’, in Šarūnas Paunksnis, (Ed.), *Dislocating Globality: Deterritorialization, Difference and Resistance*, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 77-96, p. 88.

<sup>857</sup> The term ‘dis-presented’ is used by Srouf as cited 2013, p. 88.

experienced dancing and talking away from the men.<sup>858</sup> However, it is a ‘nostalgia’ that, translated into digital form, creates confusions of past and present that Kameli resolutely refuses to resolve.

In *Aïcha* (2001), (see image 78 at Appendix: Images, Chapter Five), Kameli depicts a woman at work washing clothes, a deliberate take on Vermeer’s ‘Milkmaid’. Kameli, in a way similar to that of Niati, explores the gap between representation and reality, here between idealistic conceptions of married life and its reality. The scene is shifted in time and space by the voices of the popular Raï star, Khaled, singing at a live concert in Paris in 1998 at the height of the massacres in Algeria.<sup>859</sup> In Khaled’s song a woman’s would-be lover says:

‘Voici, les perles, les bijoux/ Aussi l’or autour de ton cou/ Les fruits, biens mûr au goût de miel/ Ma vie, Aïcha si tu m’aime!’ [Here are pearls and jewels/ Also gold around your neck/ Ripe fruit with the taste of honey,/ My life Aïcha if you love me.]

But the woman, aware of the reality of the life that is offered, replies:

‘.....garde tes trésors,/Moi, je vau mieux que tout ça/Des barreaux sont des barreaux même en or...oooh!/Je veux les mêmes droits que toi/Et du respect par chaque jour,/Moi je ne veux que l’amour’. [Keep your treasures/ I am worth more than that/ Even golden bars remain bars/ I want the same rights as you/ And respect each day/ I just want love.]<sup>860</sup>

There is a wealth of cultural and temporal complexities in Kameli’s video: ‘Aïcha’ is the name of the last wife of the Prophet Mohammed; Khaled made the song in collaboration with the Jewish singer Goldman; Khaled’s performance in Paris at that time links Algerian women with the post-colonial treatment of women and the violence against women in both the war of independence and the 1990s. Aïcha is also the name of a character involved in a deeply problematic marriage in Djébar’s novel *Les femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*, (1980).

Kameli’s transcultural references to France or by transhistorical references to European culture and the place of women is part of her aesthetic strategy of de-territorialisation. Kameli makes a local statement about Algerian women and a wider statement about the global situation of women but there is also a strategy of anachronism, relating the situation of

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<sup>858</sup> An experience shared by Boudjelal when he decided to leave the men at a party given by his father and go to the separate party of the women who appeared to be having much more fun.

<sup>859</sup> Khaled’s song can be listened to at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvK19xgAxSU>. Accessed 3/2/2018.

<sup>860</sup> Khaled Hadj Ibrahim, King of Raï, also known in his youth as Cheb. Khaled is an international singer born in Oran, Algeria and now living in France. The full lyrics can be read at [http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/c/cheb\\_khaled/aïcha.html](http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/c/cheb_khaled/aïcha.html). The translation is mine.

women across time without implying reductively that the situation of women is the same whatever the context. In this she is close to Djebbar's approach in her novels for example the incorporation of European as well as Algerian women, for example in *Les femmes d'Alger* and *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, and statements about reclaiming the voices of women in general but with a careful recognition of their distinctiveness. This is consistent with Abdelkebir Khatibi's concept of 'double critique' and his references to a 'third dimension' or 'third eye' in his novel *Triptyque de Rabat*.<sup>861</sup> Her position within 'third space', given strong credibility by her experience and understanding of her hybridity, enables her, like Niati and Benyahia, to ground her critique of the gendering of space and to make statements about the situation of Algerian women and the position of women more generally.

Kameli engages with the topology of Nora's Mobius strip of the collective and the individual by stressing that new generations of women from very diverse cultural, social and political contexts are contesting in different ways their place and the spaces allocated to them across the Arab and North African territories.<sup>862</sup> Kameli makes links between women across cultures and across a range of social, political, economic and generational contexts marking the territory of a continuing struggle but refusing reductive slogans which are meaningless or even retrogressive without context. In this sense the position adopted by women in struggle is diversified by specific contexts. Her critique emphasises that which is irreducible and opaque and is poised between criticism of patriarchal societies and the notion of women as markers of the nation (with women's bodies seen as symbols of the fecundity of the nation and 'vessels' for its reproduction) and stereotypical views of Muslim women past and present. Kameli's concern for the diverse and constantly changing contexts of women's struggles contributes to opening possibilities of a more dynamic view of contemporary political engagement of women across and within cultures.

### **Conclusion: the female body, gendered space and identity and community**

The treatment by the artists of the female body and gendered space attest to their persistent sense of connection to Algeria but also of the problematic aspects of that relation evidenced by all choosing to live and work outside despite three being born there. However, the country

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<sup>861</sup> For Khatibi's 'third dimension' or 'third eye' see Elisabeth Bekers et al, (Eds.), 'Transcultural Modernities: Narrating Africa in Europe', *Matatu* series No. 36, Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York, 2009, pp. 245-6. [https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=N4\\_on188WJwC&pg=PA245&lpg=PA245&dq=third+dimension+khatibi&source=bl&ots=9IEOzFojVs&sig=2w0mrhPfyUY3JYp8rNKzCcJsnJAA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi7qM6ry5XWAhVMBsAKHbuGB2cQ6AEIOTAF#v=onepage&q=third%20dimension%20khatibi&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=N4_on188WJwC&pg=PA245&lpg=PA245&dq=third+dimension+khatibi&source=bl&ots=9IEOzFojVs&sig=2w0mrhPfyUY3JYp8rNKzCcJsnJAA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi7qM6ry5XWAhVMBsAKHbuGB2cQ6AEIOTAF#v=onepage&q=third%20dimension%20khatibi&f=false). Accessed 27/7/2018.

<sup>862</sup> Pierre Nora, 'Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire', as cited 1989, p. 19.

continues to act as an important point of reference in terms of their sense of identity and their art practice. All four artists connect their identity, even when acknowledging its fractures, in some way with a positive and creative hybridity. This relation to hybridity often helps to facilitate a critical positioning or forms of double critique in their work, for example Kameli's 'third space'. In the case of Benyahia there is a degree of ambiguity with regard to tradition and the position of women that creates a productive tension that can engage the active spectator or viewer.

None of the artists appear wedded to the idea of a unitary identity but rather emphasise the fragmentation of conceptions of self or a changing and developing hybridity that at times is celebratory and at others has elements of tension. For all of the artists, gender is a significant aspect of identity that creates tensions in other cultural areas and as with Bouabdellah in chapter three there is often an element of conditionality related to cultural identity that connects directly to the treatment of and spaces allotted to women. Personal and cultural identity emerges as considerably more complicated than identification with the discourses of nationality, religion or tradition and operates discursively and intersectionally across class, nations, cultures, gender and personal aesthetic development.

The work of the artists emphasize that which is irreducible and opaque whether in the context of patriarchal societies and the notion of 'Woman' as the marker of the nation with the female body seen as symbolic of the fecundity of the nation or in terms of stereotypical views of Muslim women past and present. Their work on the female body and gendered space implies efforts to break out of the crypt of citation and reduction through engagement and play with past and existing narratives, images and discourses. The artists negotiate the task of drawing on their cultural background and asserting their right to be different without reattaching themselves and their art to unitary identities with the possible exception of aspects of Benyahia's presentation of the space of the mashrabiyya.

There is a recognition of their sense of community as women, whether Algerian or Berber and interestingly as belonging to their current locations evidenced for example by Niati's vigorous engagement with the cultural milieu of London. There is perhaps a stronger sense of belonging to the global cursus of the art market in Kameli and Benyahia although Niati has also exhibited in countries other than London and Zoubir is still relatively early in her career. Each artist draws on diverse media and approaches which seems to confirm Shilton's view that diversity of media helps create for the spectator a transcultural encounter, although this

has to be nuanced by noting that it is the citation and mixing of diverse cultural sources in combination with forms derived from both 'East' and 'West' that creates this sense of encounter. The range of these elements is vast including sound, silence, song, literary references, architectural forms, forms of apparel, photography, video, painting, art and historical references, personal relations in different social and cultural situations, and cinematic references. These forms of media and approaches can be used provide forms of disconnection and disruption as in the territorialisation and de-territorialisation that figures at times in the work of both Kameli and Benyahia.

For all the artists of this chapter as with the female artists in the other chapters the female body in space forms an important focus of endeavour and a important aspect of identity formation. An ambition that seems to link them all is that enunciated by the artist Ann Hamilton that:

'The challenge...is to make visible those things that have become invisible to us. How to make an absence present and experienceable'.<sup>863</sup>

In particular, the artists of this chapter disturb the boundaries between the personal and the political and the private and the public in ways that resonate across cultures. In this their art becomes a form of agency creating forms of identity and community that challenge both 'world' and 'home'.<sup>864</sup>

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<sup>863</sup> Quoted in Joan Truckenbord, *The Paradoxical Object, video film sculpture*, (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2012), p. 109.

<sup>864</sup> See Bhabha's comments on Hannah Arendt and others in his description of that which is 'unhomely' and 'hidden from sight'. Bhabha, 1994 as cited, p. 14-15.

## **Chapter Six: conclusion**

The initial starting point for the research was the writer's interest in a concern for issues of identity and community in the work of contemporary artists. The analysis found that in the work of all fourteen Algerian and Franco-Algerian artists considered identity formation and issues of belonging were important themes. This small scale study suggests that personal and cultural identity in a global world are an important feature of contemporary art which plays a role in both representing and shaping understanding of present reality. However, the research goes beyond this affirmation to demonstrate the complexity of the discursive frames incorporated into the positioning of artists to identity.

As set out in Chapter One, the research was guided by two related research questions. The first examined how positioning to identity and community was influenced by personal background and its cultural capital and how identity formation evolved in the subsequent movement of the artists through education, professional development and career. In taking this forward, great attention was paid to the relationship between structure and agency and how the artists actively shaped the often contradictory and multiple influences on them. This question was examined in detail in Chapter Two by reference to three artists and the findings then informed the subsequent chapters. The second research question addressed the ways in which this positionality to identity and belonging was illustrated within the themes, semiology and forms of the artworks. This question was introduced in Chapter Two and developed in detail in Chapters Three to Five.

Chapter Two traced the early life, development and careers of Kader Attia, Adel Abdessemed and Saâdane Afif. Bourriaud's characterisation of the contemporary artist as 'radicant' and 'semionaut' was combined in the analysis with Bourdieu's notions of 'cultural capital' and 'habitus' and Quemin's statistical data and concept of 'visibility'. This original combination of approaches proved very effective in demonstrating that cultural capital, movement and visibility were linked dynamically in the identity formation of the three artists over the course of their careers. The background of the artists and the cultural capital derived from it was shown to be important but it was also found that the artists, through their agency, shaped that influence very significantly in their positioning to identity. Confirming the value of the Bourriaud model outlined in Chapter One, movement or 'radicancy' was found to be an essential requirement for an artist's participation in the cursus of the contemporary art world

particularly for those who aimed for a successful career at the international level. This movement not only enabled the artists to obtain visibility in the world of contemporary art but also contributed to their developing positioning to identity and community and the negotiation of the multiple and at times contradictory forces acting on identity formation. The radicancy of the artists enabled them to draw on materials and experiences from the diverse cultures which informed their negotiation of identity formation.

The analysis indicated a variety of positioning to identity among the three artists. Attia and Abdessemed were shown to be deeply conflicted by their background and its culture. The positioning to belonging of these two artists was shown to evolve over time though their continued engagement with the contradictions and difficulties experienced in their early life and its associated cultural capital. There were common factors in this, for example, the attempts by the artists to manage the conflicts they experienced between tradition and modernity. For Attia the main focus for this was the culture of the Parisian banlieue and its contrast with the culture he experienced in his holidays in Algeria. However, for Abdessemed problems arose from his experiences of political oppression, religious fundamentalism and violence in Algeria. Both of these artists negotiated aspects of their identity formation through their political positioning: Attia in his postcolonial stance and Abdessemed in his critique of global oppression and violence. Criticism of gender oppression featured in the early work of both Attia and Abdessemed, prefiguring the intersectional issues that recurred regularly in the works of artists examined in the later chapters. Attia in particular drew attention to the connection between the negotiation of gender identity and the way it mirrored the difficulties and contradictions of identity formation more generally. These difficulties and contradictions in identity formation were negotiated in different ways by each artist thus reflecting their personal and aesthetic agency. Attia, born in France, declared himself an Algerian artist who lived in France while Abdessemed, born in Algeria, renounced outright his Algerian identity in favour of his relationship to France, European culture and his Berber origins.

The analysis of Attia and Abdessemed pointed to how, in their different ways, both artists made a close connection between negotiating personal identity and their development of an identity as an artist. This connection is even more striking in the example of Afif who, as Eva Huttenlauch suggested, was primarily focused on a reconstruction of himself 'as a model



artist figure in order to experiment, in his person, with the invention of a new world'.<sup>865</sup>

Unlike Attia or Abdessemed, Afif's family connections with Algeria were shown to have little influence on his positioning to identity and the artist had no apparent connection to the Franco-Algerian diaspora.

It was demonstrated that the artwork of the artists illustrated closely their positioning to identity. The influence on Attia of the culture of the banlieues and his experience of Algeria during his holidays figure prominently in his early artworks. Attia's two-year photographic study of transvestites not only reflected these experiences but also, on his own admission, contributed directly to his perception of himself as 'in-between'. The artist's later work, such as *Dream Machine* (2002-2003), which examined the contradictions inherent in the aspirations of Algerian and Franco-Algerian youth also closely mirror his own difficulties and pain in negotiating his route out of the impoverishment and cultural limitations of the banlieues. The tensions within Attia's own personal life and his development as an artist can be seen in works like *Hallal* (2004) and its engagement with the contradictions between tradition and modernity. The analysis traced Attia's positioning to identity through its increasing focus on re-appropriation explored through projects on architecture in which the artist's personal and familial links with the Parisian banlieues and Algeria are mirrored in works exploring the cultural exchanges between the Mzab, Algiers and the deprived suburbs in France. In Attia's latest projects on *Repair* the artist relates his personal negotiation of the difficulties, contradictions and richness of his own hybrid identity to the possibility of mitigating and transforming the damage of colonial exploitation and destruction more generally.

Abdessemed's early work is replete with illustrations of his bitter relationship to his birthplace, Algeria. Through artworks related to women and the veil and to music and dance the artist critiques Algeria's adoption of a narrowly Arab and Salafist approach to national identity and of the damaging influence of fundamentalism more generally. Abdessemed announced his successful application for French nationality in *La Naissance de MohamedKarlPolpot* (1999) in which he illustrated his sense of conflicted hybridity and at the same time indicated the future targets of his art. Abdessemed used self-portraiture as a means of negotiating over time the contradictions and fragmentation of his own identity and as a way of critiquing a range of injustices in global society. The analysis shows how

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<sup>865</sup> Eva Huttenlauch et al, (Eds.), *Saadane Afif: Another Anthology of Black Humour*, as cited 2012, p. 79.

Abdessemed's sense of vulnerability in terms of personal and artistic identity was explored within the imagery of works as *The Sea* (2008) in which he explores and defends his difficult position as an artist and a critical force in society. The artist's exhibition at the Pompidou, *Je suis innocent* (2012), continued his self-representation in his art and his sense of being misunderstood and vulnerable. Abdessemed's is emphatic that he is not a 'postcolonial artist' and 'not trying to heal any scar' yet his work over time indicates his difficult and painful negotiation of the elements of a fragmented identity that can be traced back to the damaging effects of colonialism.<sup>866</sup>

The analysis of Afif's positioning to identity and belonging was shown to be directly related to his identity formation as a contemporary artist, which he configured over time in relation to art history (particularly Duchamp), the art world and a sense of belonging that that was influenced by Bourriaud's notion of a relational aesthetic.<sup>867</sup> Afif positioning to identity revolved around his self-creation as an artist and his artwork evolved as a project in identity formation. This is evident in the artist's early works, such as '*The world is beautiful and sad, isn't it?*' (2001) with its play on his nickname 'Saâd', but also features repeated in his later works for example in *Untitled, Intro.* (2005) in which he evokes his identity as an artist in terms of a set of objects on a pedestal including a magician's hat. Afif's ambivalence about his position in the art world, his relationship to art history and the incorporation of his work within the Pompidou is played out in the various elements of his installation *Another Anthology of Black Humour* (2011/12). Appropriately, the roots of this project of identity formation are explored in his tribute to Duchamp in the *Fountain Archives* (2017).

The life experiences of Attia and Abdessemed demonstrated the multiple and often contradictory forces to which they responded in negotiating identity formation. The analysis of the three artists indicated the persistent instability of positioning to belonging demonstrating that the sense of being inbetween or hybrid was not a static experience but one that was subject to change and evolution. Overall, the analysis of Chapter Two confirms that contemporary artists experience the world in ways that are very fluid and, although national or diasporic frameworks can provide a significant reference point, intersectional concerns play an increasingly significant role in personal and aesthetic identity formation.

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<sup>866</sup> 'Interview with Elizabeth Lebovici', Larys Frogier, Elisabeth Lebovici, and Philippe-Alain Michaud, (Eds.), *À l'attaque*, (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2007).

<sup>867</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* as cited 2002.

In Chapters Three to Five, the primary focus was on the artworks in terms of how they illustrated the positioning of the artists to identity and community. Chapter Three demonstrated the contribution of memory and history to identity formation through forms of ‘mnemonic imagination’.<sup>868</sup> Artists living and working on both sides of the Mediterranean were shown to engage with and at times challenge history and memory in their work and, in the process, shape their positioning to identity and community. It was found that artists in France varied in their approaches to those in Algeria due to different political and cultural conditions but a common feature for both groups of artists was their challenge to the way conceptions of the past were used to enforce current political, social and cultural conditions. The analysis of the work of the four artists illustrated the contingency of the dominant political and cultural narratives in France and Algeria and the need to re-imagine relationships to identity and community through a denunciation of static and regressive notions of origin.

As in the work examined in Chapter Two, positioning to identity extended beyond the bounds of a narrow nationalism and was cross cut with intersectional issues including gender, class, religion and tradition. Identity was frequently framed in the artworks in ways that suggested fragmentation and portrayed belonging and community as contested areas. In France Mohamed Bourouissa and Zoulikha Bouabdellah, both of whom have lived in France since their teens, interrogated how continuing notions of the unicity of the French nation rubbed up against the diversity and inequalities of its population and the reverberations of a colonial past. In Algeria, Amina Menia’s work *Enclosed* (2012), on monuments and nostalgia, acted as a metaphor for the failure of Algeria to move beyond fixed notions of identity and community and as a personal project of identity formation. Ammar Bouras, in *Tagh’out* (2011), interrogated the events of the 1990s which was explored as a personal response to the fragmented nature of Algerian identity and the need to construct a more open, honest and inclusive sense of community. In *Dansons*, a parody of Delacroix’s *La Liberté guidant le peuple*, (1830), Bouabdellah engaged in a form of ‘double critique’ challenging both the inequalities of the present and erasures of the past in the French mnemonic imagination and the patriarchal and oppressive aspects of Islam and traditional Arab society. Bourouissa, in *La République* (2006), also targeted the lieu de mémoire represented by Delacroix’s painting. The artist’s photograph configured however a changed politics in which divisions are drawn

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<sup>868</sup> Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, *The Mnemonic Imagination: remembering as creative practice*, as cited 2013, p. 5.

along ethnic and cultural lines as well as class. By moving the location of the work from the centre of Paris to the banlieues Bourouissa inserted into his artwork the colonial and postcolonial dimension of French history and the changing nature of the claims of equity and democracy. In both France and Algeria the artists looked beyond narrow conceptions of nationality or diasporic identity with their works imagining more diverse and plural forms of individual, national and cultural identity.

Chapter Four examined the relation of travel and narrative in the work of Bruno Boudjelal, Zineb Sedira and Zineddine Bessaï and how it revealed an on-going negotiation of fragmented, unresolved, and disrupted identities. The analysis demonstrated a dynamic relation between form and content in the artworks that provided a frame through which to understand the nature of the physical and psychological journeys undertaken or imagined by the artists and how it affected their positioning to identity.

In *Jours intranquilles*, Boudjelal deliberately problematized his identity through occlusion, omission, creative highlighting, selective remembering and forgetting in an imaginative yet brutally honest construction by which he negotiated a parallel personal narrative alongside the shadowy and blurred narrative of Algeria in the 1990s. Boudjelal's playful relationship to autofiction demonstrated the artist's fearless transgression of the barriers between creator and created. The findings suggested that, as with Afif, the artist's positioning to identity was closely bound up with becoming an artist. In *Saphir*, Sedira's exploration of personal identity was found to take the form of a complex cross-referencing of histories and cultures symptomatic of her view that she was located between two cultures each of which are important to her. Bessaï's situation is different to both Boudjelal and Sedira and closer to the migrants he portrays in *H-OUT*. Unlike the active radicancy of Boudjelal and Sedira, Bessaï's access to the wider world beyond Algeria as an artist is restricted by his identity as young, male, unattached and Algerian which resulted in him being refused a visa to travel to England to attend an exhibition at which his work was shown.

The three artists illustrated in their works through fragmented, unresolved, and disrupted journeys and narratives their negotiation of on-going personal and cultural identities. Attention was drawn to memory and history as important building blocks in the artists positioning to identity formation. The artists achieved this through layering time and space anachronistically through collage and montage in their works disrupting any sense of a unitary narrative or identity in a dynamic interaction of form and theme. In many respects the

artworks, like the artists, became migratory in the way they imitated in their form the displacements they represented.

In Chapter Five the analysis concentrated on how identity and community are configured by four women artists in works concerned with the female body and gendered spaces. It was shown how the artists negotiated the 'othering' and 'otherness' of Arab or Algerian women in a range of settings including colonialism and a traditional religious society in the painful and uneven process of change. The analysis demonstrated how the younger artists in particular engaged critically with a form of sexual apartheid in Algerian culture and society. The artists illustrated issues related to gender, identity and community by reference to a variety of spaces (harem, mashrabiyya, public space) and the role played in this by custom, tradition and religion. The analysis drew out how the artists made connections between the gendered binaries of public and private space and how these were produced by the politics of history, memory and myth and reproduced in current lived experience by social practices and a politics of patriarchy.

The analysis revealed differences of approach and perspective. Zoubir and Kameli were shown to directly challenge the contingent gendering of space and the identity stereotypes associated with them. Niati's whole oeuvre was portrayed as a struggle with identity formation linked to her experiences under French rule in Algeria. In her work *No to Torture* (1982-1983) with its emphasis on colonial violence there was a symbolic dismantlement of the containing walls of gender apartheid. Benyahia showed greater ambivalence in her work and the analysis indicated that her engagement with the historically traditional roles and spaces of Algerian women could be seen as unveiling an occluded history but it could also be regarded as romanticising gender apartheid and underplaying its effects. The analysis did not show that the artists were condemning Islamic culture as such although, as with Bouabdellah, there were powerful critiques of a Salafism that restricted and oppressed women as well as of Western stereotypical views. All the artworks challenged traditional conceptions of gender roles and the way they distorted identity formation.

The thesis reveals that the artists discussed and explored unitary and fixed framings of identity and community in their work but found them increasingly inadequate and repressive. The artists often expressed this in terms of being 'in-between', or as 'hybrid', or as a fragmentation of identity. All the artists in their different ways are involved in an effort to negotiate aesthetically as well as personally a developing and dynamic relation to identity and

community. An important effect of this engagement with identity formation was that the difference between personal and aesthetic identity was blurred or dissolved. This process of negotiation was not neutral and reflected a diverse politics of identity and community cross-cut with intersectional issues, particularly in relation to gender.

In conclusion, identity formation was shown to be not straightforward but subject to multiple and often contradictory forces which could be traced back to background and early social and cultural influences. However, the analysis demonstrated that the artists were not passive but engaged actively with these influences negotiating singular and complex positions to identity and community in the face of the forces acting on them. Background, location and the associated cultural influences are shown to be important but not determining. The artist's diverse and complex positioning to identity and community were mediated by agency, intention and choice reflecting in many respects Giddens's notion of the self-identity of the contemporary individual as a reflexive project.<sup>869</sup>

Despite the changes that have occurred in the increasing importance given to artists outside of Europe and the USA in the art world it was clearly demonstrated that movement or radicancy remained of great significance. An important finding was that location imparts different levels of difficulty for the artist in terms of access to art education, freedom of expression, access to aesthetic resources and achieving visibility and career progression as an artist. For artists born in Algeria this was particularly important given the limited scope for career development due to lack of infrastructure but also because of cultural and political restrictions on the themes and form of art. For Abdessemed this initiated a migration from Algeria that developed into a peripatetic development of art and career across the global art world but other artists born in Algeria such as Houria Niati and Amina Zoubir shared similar experiences. However, evidence was presented in Chapter Four (in relation to Bessaï) that this 'radicant' identity is difficult for some artists to attain because of limited resources or as a result of difficulties in obtaining visas.

The research demonstrated the scope for further work. The frames of belonging and their relation to conflict, climate change and social justice are likely to increase in relevance in contemporary art in the coming decades. This is for a number of reasons including the impact of climate change on the way art explores issues of identity, community, migration and social

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<sup>869</sup> Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, 'Risk and Reflexive Modernity' in Ross Abbinnett, (Ed.), *Culture and Identity: Critical Theories*, (London: 2003), pp. 25-34.

justice. The growth of the Black Lives Matter movement is also likely to increase scrutiny amongst contemporary artists of the impact of colonial history and slavery on contemporary imaginaries of identity formation.

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## **Appendix One: images**

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