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ART, ARTIVISM AND CITIZENSHIP. UTOPIAS AND IMAGINED FUTURES

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Art, artivism and citizenship. Utopias and imagined futures

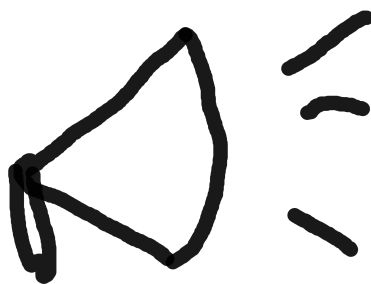# Paisagens em movimento: as fronteiras da prática artística

Landscapes in motion: the border-lands of artistic practice

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Resumo:

Este artigo aborda a produção de fronteiras a partir da autonomia da migração, e como a perspectiva autonomista sobre fronteiras, entendidas como formações de poder flexíveis e móveis, pode servir a análise de produção espacial no contexto da criação artística. Especificamente, o artigo debruça-se sobre questões de identidade e pertença e sua transmissão artística por meio de práticas de tradução. A minha proposta é que tais 'práticas artísticas de tradução' expressam uma forma corporificada de intertextualidade, atestando a importância da tradução como meio de permanecer em trânsito – entre línguas, culturas, lugares e as suas memórias – e materializando assim uma epistemologia contra-hegemónica de produção espacial. Isto é ilustrado através da análise de um vídeo da artista visual Mona Hatoum por justaposição ao controlo de mobilidade nos territórios ocupados da Palestina.
Palavras-chave: arte, produção de fronteiras, autonomia da migração, Palestina

Abstract:

This paper addresses the production of borders through the lenses of the autonomy of migration, and how the autonomist perspective on borders as flexible and mobile power formations might serve the analysis of spatial production in the context of artistic practices. Specifically, the paper focusses on questions of identity and belonging and how these are conveyed in artworks through practices of translation. I propose that 'artistic practices of translation' express an embodied form of intertextuality, attesting to the importance of translation as means to remain in transit – between languages, cultures, places, and their memories – and materialising a counter-hegemonic epistemology of spatial production. This is illustrated through a video piece by visual artist Mona Hatoum alongside mobility control in the occupied territories of Palestine.
Keywords: art, production of borders, autonomy of migration, Palestine

1. Languages in motion: the art of subjects in transit

Writes Trinh T. Minh-ha, the Vietnamese artist and filmmaker,

> living in two and many non-opposing worlds – all located in the very same place as where one is – inevitably inscribes silence [...] If those who stay tend to meet such an inability to speak with great disappointment [...] those who leave and risk in multiplicity, often tend to go on cold for a while, living life as it comes, fasting verbally and linguistically, before learning how to speak again, anew (2011: 2).

Learning how to speak again, anew. Again, learning a language –the sinuous journey of subjects in transit, of *those who leave and risk in multiplicity*, of those who inhabit a constant crossing of multiple borders, symbolic and material. Borders that succeed and overlap, intertwining and interrupting each other.

2. Subjects in transit: brief introduction to the autonomy of migration

Migrants, documented and undocumented, are subjects in permanent linguistic and cultural transit. According to political theorist Sandro Mezzadra (2012), migration conveys processes of disintegration as well as of continuous reformulation of traditional systems of belonging. Mezzadra proposes therefore to consider migrants as 'subjects in transition', without transition implying a predefined destination (telos) as is the case of the classic sociology of migration, where the idea of 'integration' is seen as an indispensable conclusion to the process of change. Following this perspective, I adopt the term 'transit' with the intent to highlight a particular aspect of the border: its endless linguistic circulation and cultural traffic (and trafficking), which not only accompanies migrants throughout their journeys, but also shapes their sense of belonging.It is crucial however to point out that the multiple material and symbolic borders crossed by migrants in their distinct trajectories materialises in the way gender and ethnicity/race as well as sexuality, class, age, disability, etc. impact differently and have a determining role in the processes of subjugation inherent to the migratory experience.In this regard, it is critical to stress the plurality (and situatedness) intrinsic to the very production of subjectivity. And it is precisely by focusing on migrants' subjective practices – desires, expectations and behaviours – that the autonomist perspective conceives migration as 'a creative force' within specific social, economic and cultural structures (Mezzadra, 2012).For the theorists of the autonomist approach, 'modern' migration is understood as multiple, multifaceted and heterogeneous practices of mobility in a field dominated by the state, empire and capital (De Genova *et al*., 2015).The focus on the (political) production of subjectivity allows, on the one hand, to recognise that migrants, regardless of their legal status of citizenship act as citizens and, on the other hand, to distinguish the importance of their practices and demands for the transformation of the legal framework of citizenship itself (Mezzadra, 2012).Accordingly, anthropologist Liliana Suárez Navaz (2007) asserts that citizenship, as a set of norms regulating belonging and ownership of rights in a particular society, is also the result of political processes of demands and struggles generated in contexts of exclusion – and thus, an incomplete political project. The question of undocumented people is indeed confirmatory of the limitations – of the incompleteness – of national citizenship, which in the era of human rights continues to deprive (political) subjects of the legal recognition of their existence (Suárez Navaz, 2007). The statutory 'irregularity' of undocumented people is considered therefore a strategic aspect of the border system – a condition produced (socially and legally) by 'mobility policies', in their management of the relation between mobility and control according to the 'interests' of the global labour market. In the context of a neoliberal and racial regime of accumulation, citizenship functions then as a mechanism of labour stratification, of hierarchisation of worker categories (Mezzadra, 2012).As such, the legal production of migrants' illegality is the most fundamental aspect of 'deferential inclusion', of the long road of subordination to labour exploitation and precarity; subordinate inclusion or "differential inclusi-

on describes how inclusion in a sphere, society or realm can involve various degrees of subordination, rule, discrimination, racism, disenfranchisement, exploitation and segmentation" (De Genova *et al.*, 2015, p. 79). This intersection between mobility/control, citizenship, labour domination/subordination, and racialisation produce a permanent tension between inclusion and exclusion manifested in the production of borders.

3. Separation and connection: the production of borders

As a set of socio-political relations and activities in which multiple actors, movements and discourses are involved, borders constitute flexible and mobile power formations, what De Genova calls 'border regime' (Álvarez Velasco, 2017). In this sense, migration is a constituent element of the border as a political field – a place of constant encounter, tension, conflict and contestation (De Genova *et al.*, 2015). Borders then not only exclude but also, in equally violent ways, select, filter and subordinately include. Separation and connection are both constitutive practices of borders' production. Not even the 8-meter-high annexation and apartheid wall built in the occupied West Bank (and which traverses a tortuous path that compresses and cuts Palestinian territory into laminar segregations) is inert in terms of the separation it produces[70.]. Again, Trinh T. Minh-ha:

> What's so alluring in a wall that inevitably drives people to breaching and surmounting it? No matter how impenetrable it promises to be with its sophisticated system of remote surveillance, as soon as those on one side put it up, those on the other side are propelled to risk their lives crossing over and under it. You close down, we walk around. You erect, we dig. You dig, we dig and dig further (2011, p. 3).

The territorial nature of the dispute between Israel and Palestine creates some of the most pervasive expressions of the conflict – a colonial spatial planning that transforms the whole of the occupied Palestinian territory into a border zone. It is useful noting though that Israel's control over the movement of Palestinians includes land confiscation, house demolitions, military and settler violence, expansion of settlements, systematic arrests including of minors, appropriation of natural resources such as water, stone, etc. There are many ways through which the authority of domination produces its cartography. In addition to the annexation wall, there is a complex bureaucratic travel permit system, permanent and so-called flying checkpoints (where Palestinians wait for an indeterminate amount of time), a network of bypass roads that exclusively serve Israeli citizens and that link settlements with each other and with Israel, and several other physical obstacles like blocked roads, trenches, etc. This versatility of means and strategies of control of mobility reveals the dynamic (and mobile) nature of the border and the importance of analysing it in its spatial and temporal dimensions[71.]. Such a relational approach to the study of borders involves practices of translation (literal and metaphorical) due to the proliferation of borders (associated with new mechanisms of dispossession and exploitation), and to struggles against borders (including daily practices of evasion and overcoming their discriminatory effects). For Mezzadra and Nielson (2013)

[70.] I will not dwell on the complexity of the political conflict between Israel and Palestine – see White (2014) and Chomsky & Pappe (2015); however, it is pertinent to mention the image of the wall as paradigmatic icon of exclusion and promoter of 'border spectacle' (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), concealing the hundreds of Palestinians who daily cross the border to work in construction and agriculture in Israel – an example of selective inclusion where border violence prevails, and seems to always accompany the migrant-worker.

[71.] Importantly, the focus on the subjectivity of migrants highlights the temporality of border spaces; for Mezzadra and Nielson (2013), the concept of temporal borders concerns the experiences of acceleration/deceleration, interception, and blocking of passage, involved in border regimes.

practices of translation are seen as fundamental for articulating different struggles, and for the elaboration of a politics of the commons. My interest and approach to translation within the context of this text however is on the multiplicity of meanings – related to experiences of migration – that the border entails, and on the importance of translation as means to remain in transit, between languages, cultures, places, and their memories.

4. (Artistic) practices of translation: the enunciation of the untranslatable

Throughout their trajectories, migrants move across various borders (geographical, social, cultural, etc.) and establish various, at times contradictory, relations of belonging (social, cultural, sexual, political, etc.) with communities of origin and of choice, nearby and distant. This continuous transit between cultural zones – between positions of enunciation – is a place of epistemic production, a place of intercultural transit, whose implications extend far beyond idiomatic mixtures and plastic linguistic constructions. To this 'place' of multiple belonging and diverse cultural references, anthropologist Ángeles Castaño Madroñal (2018) calls a state of 'transcultural trance', akin to being in the threshold, somewhere in the borderlands of different imaginaries. For Castaño Madroñal, in her analysis of cultural productions by migrants, the transcultural is situated at the semiotic border – in the contact zone between cultures, in the expression of 'places of diverse meaning'[72]. Crucial to the analysis that follows is the idea that such artistic practices – outcome of complex processes of identity formation and belonging, and (dis-)encounter between different places and their memories – constitute, themselves, practices of translation.They are, I propose, 'artistic practices of translation' – a translation made by accretion, multi-directional and translocal. They are also expressions of the untranslatable, of that which is lost in the movement of translation, in the displacement of symbols and signs.Through fragments uniting different parts, artistic practices of translation present a counter-hegemonic epistemology of spatial production – an intertextual enunciation of imaginaries and feelings of subjects in transit.

5. 'Measures of Distance'

What follows is a brief description of one of the works by Palestinian visual artist Mona Hatoum, born in Beirut and living in London. Daughter of Palestinian refugees, Hatoum accumulates different experiences of migration[73]. In an interview to artist Janine Antoni, Hatoum clarifies:

> I grew up in Beirut in a family that had suffered a tremendous loss and existed with a sense of dislocation. When I went to London in 1975 for what was meant to be a brief visit, I got stranded there because the war broke out in Lebanon, and that created another kind of dislocation. How that manifests itself in my work is as a sense of disjunction (1998, n/p).

This sense of disjunction (of a double exile) manifests itself, I suggest, in the way Hatoum employs translation – destabilising the synchronism of the relationship between image and text and displacing the idea of a fixed and singular identity and belonging.

[72] Sociologist Marco Martiniello and political theorist Jean-Michel Lafleur also look at migrants' cultural and artistic practices, and the ways in which these might provide 'individuals with a sense of belonging to society as a whole and/or to a specific group' (2008, p. 1199). Further, Martiniello and Lafleur (2008) consider links between cultural production and political participation, specifically how music as a means of political expression can help providing/ascribing identities and a sense of place.

[73] Like most Palestinians living in Lebanon since 1948, Hatoum does not hold Lebanese citizenship, representative of the abovementioned 'integration' policies.
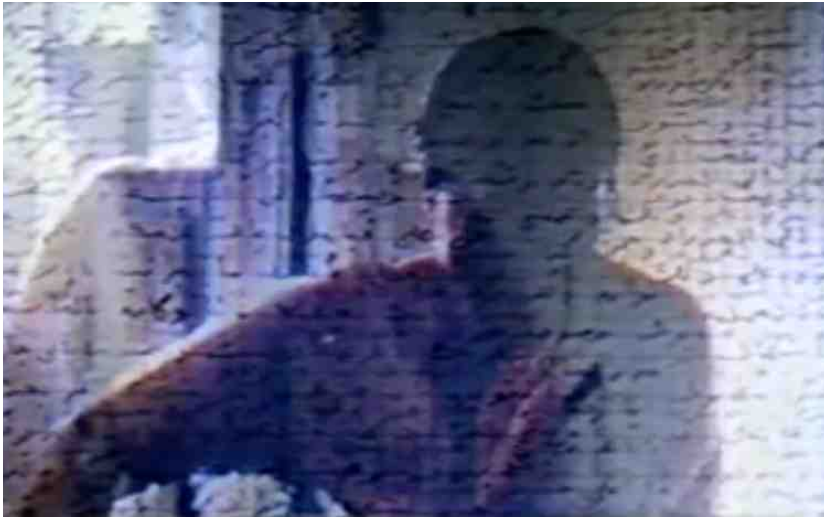
Figure 1 Measures of Distance (video still), Mona Hatoum, 1988
Source: https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x31gw4

Measures of Distance (1988) is a video piece of approximately fifteen minutes in which Hatoum su-
perimposes images (photographs) of her mother in the shower to the sound of a conversation
between the two[74.]. In-between the images of the mother and the sound of the conversation, Ha-
toum interposes written text – images of letters written by the mother in Beirut to the daughter in
London during the civil war in Lebanon.Distant and nearby correspondence converge in the space
of the screen. In both cases, an intimate exchange, in Arabic.Correspondence that functions like a
curtain, sometimes hiding, other times revealing the mother's body (and subjectivity). The light and
shadow effects of the curtain – of the writing – complement the variations of the soundscape, whe-
re the laughter of the two mingles with the sounds of the traffic outside. Then, Hatoum starts
reading the letters written and sent by her mother. She reads her English translation of the letters.
She reads them in English. From that moment on, it is as if a third person/perspective enters the
space of correspondence. This new language, with no visual or written presence, invites closeness
– assuming the spectator speaks the lingua franca of the international contemporary art circuit –
to listen to Hatoum's translation of her journey of (dis)encounter between different places and their
memories.Hatoum explains:

> I'm often asked the same question: What in your work comes from your own culture?
> As if I have a recipe and I can actually isolate the Arab ingredient, the woman ingredi-
> ent, the Palestinian ingredient. People often expect tidy definitions of otherness, as if
> identity is something fixed and easily definable (1998, n/p).

It is not; it is not possible to isolate the ingredients – identity (and belonging) is not fixed nor easily
definable, less so for subjects in transit.

[74.] The full video piece can be seen here: https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x31gw4

6. Art in exile: an example of art in transit

Measures of Distance is a work of translation between the distant and the near, of correspondence between measures of distance; in Hatoum's words: "I structured the work around my mother's letters, because letters imply distance yet they are dealing with very intimate questions" (1998, n/p)[75.]. It is also – *visibly* – intertextual, in the way the narrative is conveyed through different languages, voices and positions, in a dialogue between textual and aural landscapes. For cultural theorist Ana Gabriela Macedo, such dialogical intertextuality is a form of 'undisciplinarity', visible in how feminist contemporary art has been claiming a 're-localised corpography'; that is, art as ideological denunciation and insistence on a 'cultural politics' of the body, combined with a systematic questioning of the notion of identity and its modes of representation, inscribing difference and female heteroglossia in the canons of art (2019, pp. 3-4)[76.]. This re-writing of difference results from a critical and creative questioning of cultural borders, continuously transposed by subjects in transit. In her plural, feminist view of the relationship between identity and belonging, Hatoum explores an embodied form of intertextuality – a re-writing of the body scripted through the practice of translation. During the video, we hear Hatoum reading her mother's words:

> Before we ended up in Lebanon, we were living in our own land, in a village with all our family and friends around us, always ready to lend us a hand […] So when you talk about a feeling of fragmentation, and not knowing where you really belong, well, this has been the painful reality of all our people (1988, n/p).

Measures of Distance reveals the painful fragmentation which results from the social displacement and cultural dislocation involved in experiences of exile, and migration in general. The piece is a poetic materialisation of multiple imaginaries and possible translations of the idea of ungovernability – the ungovernability of freedom of movement, expressed here in its political and affective dimensions.Through an embodied form of intertextuality Hatoum puts together a narrative of insubordination:

> Although the main thing that comes across is a very close and emotional relationship between mother and daughter, it also speaks of exile, displacement, disorientation and a tremendous sense of loss as a result of the separation caused by war. In this work I was also trying to go against the fixed identity that is usually implied in the stereotype of Arab woman as passive, mother as non-sexual being. The work is constructed visually in such a way that every frame speaks of literal closeness and implied distance (2000, n/p).

Like distance and closeness, separation and connection are both constitutive practices of the borderand of processes of identity formation and belonging – always processes of excess. Excess produced by the endless cultural transit that accompanies migrants throughout their journeys. Excess created through persistence and other forms of continued resolve. Excess as the borderlands of translation – as means to remain in transit, between languages, cultures, places, and their memories. In its various resistances to various exclusions, subjectivity (and its manifestations) overflows, non-compliant, very much like freedom of movement itself. As for artistic practices of translation and their embodied forms of intertextuality, excess importantly materialises a counter-hegemonic epistemology of spatial production.

[75.] Hatoum's works are often concerned with themes such as violence and oppression, mostly in relation to the human body, by means of exploring paradoxical readings through distortions and juxtapositions of seeming opposites.

[76.] Translated by the author.

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