

Disregard the Forms: Bouchra Khalili's *The Mapping Journey Project*

By Quinn Latimer

"I know the data on water projects I will never see."
—Joan Didion¹

"The very conditions that make the State possible...
trace creative lines of escape."
—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari²

"He stood perfectly still,
about to dip the torch in the water.
Everyone stared."
—Euripides³

To tell the story of a journey, to "relate" it, as it were, and to trace this journey on a map with one's hand, is one of the oldest images and genres of narrative, one of the most familiar forms of orality and address. What is the motivation of this act? To assign the journey some meaning, to make it known and heard, perhaps. That is to say, to give it significance beyond the personal, to describe to us the world, to reconstruct it. When this journey, by necessity, passes through borders that would impede or stop its progress, the story becomes one of resistance and perseverance—another of the most ancient and essential stories (were we to speak of the essential). When the journey is related indirectly, spoken as a monologue, within the privacy-tinged interior of the filmic frame—at once intimate and yet meant for an audience, for a public—the address becomes one of relation and, finally, of solidarity.

To trace one's own displacement and steady dispossession, to make sense of it, to find its form—and thus to disregard the forms and limits, cartographic or other, that were allotted to you by place of birth, color of skin, social class and wealth, gender or sexual orientation—is to lay claim to basic rights of agency, autonomy, desire, labor, and, most definitively, movement. And it's this traffic between the body and the body politic, and the insistence on privileging the precarious subject over the claims of the nation-state and the global economy, that is Bouchra Khalili's subject.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the artist's adroit and remarkable *Mapping Journey Project* (2008–11). This series of eight videos, presented on separate screens hung discreetly around the same room, comprises individual portraits sans the portrait's most recognizable feature: the face. Instead of using the visage as the projected map of meaning and locating affect, as in so much documentary and cinematic practice, Khalili focuses her camera—and thus the audience's gaze and attention—on an actual map and the hand of each of her subjects. With that hand her

subjects trace their illegal journeys across and around the Mediterranean and the countries and continents it links, seeking political refuge, economic possibility, and possible futures. The dark, pen-inked lines of their trajectories create strange and distinct constellations, fluid forms of statelessness that are posited against and over the more familiar colored shapes and lines they cross—that patchwork of nation-states (colonial and other) that we have all learned to recognize like some international language of signs of the hegemonic world order. *This is Europe, we say. Here is Africa. This is the Middle East.* Each pause and endstop representing a kind of border.

Yet the less familiar transnational forms and networks that Khalili's subjects trace and create—patterns of illegal migration and movement that cross and double-back, near-palindromes in their absurd and depressing circularity as they attempt to circumnavigate the arbitrariness of border control—are not unrecognizable to Khalili, nor are their narratives. Growing up in Morocco and France (she was born in Casablanca in 1975), the artist told me, such stories of illegal migration were one of the most familiar oral tales of her youth, narratives that made their way into her consciousness and stayed there, forming another kind of cartography, one of resistance. If such mass northern migration from the former colonies in the Global South is the very legacy of colonialism, it is also an equation-like reminder of our shared colonial present, and the debt that continues to accrue as neoliberal globalization and its dark continuum of capitalist restructuring, austerity measures, and environmental violence untenably condition much of the world for life and work today.



Bouchra Khalili. *The Mapping Journey Project*. 2008–11. Eight-channel video (color, sound). Installation view, *Bouchra Khalili: The Mapping Journey Project*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, April 9–August 28, 2016. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Fund for the Twenty First Century. © 2016 Bouchra Khalili. Digital image © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar

As I watched the *Mapping Journey* videos for the first time, one thing (among many) struck me: as her subjects relate their stories of migration, drawing black lines across the blue form of the Mediterranean to delineate their journeys across it, their language remains indirect and unadorned; they do not speak in metaphors of water. “I began here.... People asked me to help them.... We left from here.... We arrived.... I took a bus from here.... It was difficult.... If I could continue.... It’s an impossible journey for a human being.... I worked there everyday.... I was jailed for eight months and 20 days.... There was suffering.... It always has been my dream.” Place names are carefully recited—Algeria, Annaba, Dhaka, Gedarif, Lampedusa, Mogadishu, Moscow, Naples, Paris, Sardinia, Somalia, Sweden—in direct relationship to their order in the sequence of the journey itself. The stories and trajectories are nightmarish, absurd, and Kafkaesque—trapped as the subjects are in a complex global bureaucracy and economy of borders, prisons, people smugglers, local police, benevolent aid workers, guileless thieves, unmitigated poverty, and migrant labor. There are no watery metaphors, however, only the fact of vessels, the fact of the sea. Rickety boats, not the vessel of metaphor, are what are communicated to us.



Bouchra Khalili. *The Mapping Journey Project*. 2008–11. Eight-channel video (color, sound). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Fund for the Twenty-First Century. © 2016 Bouchra Khalili

Meanwhile, the ideological language and geopolitical narrative in which Khalili’s subjects are cast by Western (we might now call them Northern) politicians and in media stories of illegal migration and mass displacement is most often “channeled” through metaphors of water. In any politician’s speech on a given day, in any nationalist’s, in any American or European newspaper screed, hear or read of the “floods” of refugees “swamping” some state and its “porous” border. See that border’s “floodgates”

suddenly open, suddenly shut. “Violent conflicts and the demographic explosion in the developing world have swollen the westward-bound tide of desperate families and individuals seeking a better life,”⁴ the journalists write. So much water. But Khalili’s subjects are not a tide, not a flood, not some soaked lexicon. They are individuals with voices and bodies, through which their desire, fear, ambition, anxiety, vulnerability, strength, and autonomy is related. Hear them as they plainly describe, watch as they precisely trace their impossible journeys across our shared map.

Khalili has often noted that her interest in such indirect, oral speech—the singular voice speaking from specific experience so as to speak for the social world—can be traced back to Pier Paolo Pasolini and his model of civil poetry, which itself stemmed from Dante. Works like *The Mapping Journey Project*, Khalili notes, are “an attempt to reactivate the tradition of civil poetry as redefined by Pasolini: the right taken by an individual to address the social body from a singular perspective in order to articulate a collective voice.”⁵ Indeed, in Khalili’s reliance on indirect verbal language to represent her subjects—by which they can represent themselves—she goes against the “image regimes that mediate and even generate the reproduction of inequality,”⁶ as T. J. Demos has put it. Her work does not rely on the representation of suffering bodies, charged images, and ambient montages to create affect, but rather on spare, fixed frames and the frame of spoken language itself (suggesting a belief in its civic power). Sans rhetoric, her subjects’ voices honestly trace, just as much as their hands gripping pens do, the maps of empire, invoking the continued legacy of European colonialism (under the guise of the neoliberal global project via the IMF and the World Bank) and the myriad ways in which it is resisted and subverted.

The specific subjectivity and narrative of each account, each storyteller—each hand on the map, each voice—is turned into a collective history and consciousness (more an assembly than a chorus) by the number of videos that Khalili has made, then brought together. If her subjects do not speak from the same frame—each video is pointedly discrete and autonomous—they do create a kind of polyphony when exhibited in the same room, one that is enhanced by the severity of the focus, the serialism of the maps that constitute the videos’ ground. Thus do solidarity and history emerge—a story that is not simply singular but transnational, historical, radical, anticolonial, poetic, and pressing. *The Mapping Journey Project* offers a kind of collective map, not colonial but de-colonial, a living document that is constantly being altered, rewritten, rerouted, reflecting the long history of how geopolitical attempts to control populations, impede movement, and normalize precarity are necessarily defied.

Indeed, maps, ever that colonial project, are both Khalili's subject and ground here. And they suggest her intrinsic concerns: movement and migration as agency and resistance, language and limits as pertaining to voice and witness, the dialectical nature of origins and identity, and the global condition of transitory statelessness. "The European dream needs the Mediterranean dream,"⁷ Nicolas Sarkozy noted in a speech in 2007 that attempted to redeem, rather than provide redress for, France's violent colonial past. In doing so, he unwittingly described the continued entanglement of the Global North and South, and the steady movement—in both directions, by bodies, resources, ideology, and capital—that takes place between them.

Khalili met most of her *Mapping Journey Project* subjects in sites of transit in North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. After an initial meeting and series of preliminary conversations, she filmed her subjects as they told the story of their journey across land and water while marking it, indelibly, on a map of the region. Such work recalls the documentary practices of many of the artist's peers, and yet her work remains distinctly apart. If contemporary artists' recent investment in the documentary, and their reimagining of it, is notable, Khalili's sober employment of the mode still feels singular, if only for its strict adherence to the field's ethical responsibilities, as well as its aesthetic concerns, both of which are and are not tied to the field's longstanding conventions. Khalili's documentary practice, in its incisive and exacting seriousness, can seem at once oddly traditional and, because of this, unique amid the aesthetically experimental and sometimes emotionally manipulative work that can befall the politically motivated documentary impulse.

With precision and subtlety, *The Mapping Journey Project* challenges hegemonic narratives about migration and statelessness, as well as the violence they engender and normalize, while also pressing contemporary documentary practice forward, both ethically and aesthetically. She subverts the ways in which her subjects are most often represented; instead of seen and voiceless, her subjects are articulate and decisively heard, but not seen (visibility being linked to surveillance, not agency). Finally, by being exhibited in museums around the world, the project forms a counterhegemonic cartography of transnational forms of movement and resistance, one that reflects the realities and necessities of our patently unjust global order.

The sea is "constant narrative,"⁸ writes Etel Adnan. The stories of how we come to a place, how we leave and how we arrive, are our oldest stories—they are the long social project. And they often begin or end on the water. The center of so many stories, epic and otherwise, the Mediterranean, as it connects what we

sometimes call the East, West, South, and North—and the ideologies and realities of privilege and place that go along with them—is also the center of much of that movement. Susan Sontag wrote that "[m]ost serious thought in our time struggles with the feeling of homelessness,"⁹ yet it is not the feeling of but the *fact* of statelessness that has long defined the lives of those born in what we might call the Global South, born into specific conditions of precarity and periphery. How to tell this story? How to represent it? What is mobility, what is responsibility, what is narrative, what is history? Here, Khalili's occluded, articulate subjects, just outside the frame, seem to tell us, their hands on the map: *Let us show you.*

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Quinn Latimer is a poet, critic, and editor-in-chief of publications for documenta 14. She is the author of Rumored Animals (Dream Horse Press, 2012), which won the American Poetry Journal Book Prize; Sarah Lucas: Describe This Distance (Mousse Publishing, 2013); Film as a Form of Writing: Quinn Latimer Talks to Akram Zaatari (Wiels/Motto Books, 2014); and, with Pedro Barateiro, Live from the West (Mousse Publishing, 2016). Her writings and readings have been presented widely, including at REDCAT, Los Angeles; Chisenhale Gallery, London; Kunsthalle Zürich; Qalandiya International, Ramallah/Jerusalem; and the Venice Biennale of Architecture.

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- 1 Joan Didion, "Holy Water," in *The White Album* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979).
- 2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine* (MIT Press, 1986).
- 3 Euripides, "Herakles," translated by Anne Carson in *Grief Lessons* (NYRB, 2006).
- 4 Prokopis Pavlopoulos, "The migration front line," in *The Guardian*, January 21, 2009.
- 5 Bouchra Khalili quoted in Misal Adnan Yıldız and Myrna Ayad, "Profile: Bouchra Khalili," in *Canvas Magazine* (Spring 2014).
- 6 T. J. Demos, *Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (Sternberg Press, 2013).
- 7 Nicolas Sarkozy, speeches in Toulon, February 2007, and Dakar, July 2007. Cited in Achille Mbembe, "Provincializing France?," in *Public Culture* 23, no. 1 (2011). Bouchra Khalili herself reminded me that Sarkozy was recently quoted as saying, in 2016: "La Méditerranée, c'est un peu notre banlieue."
- 8 Etel Adnan, *To Look at the Sea Is to Become What One Is: An Etel Adnan Reader*, edited by Thom Donovan and Brandon Shimoda (Nightboat Books, 2014).
- 9 Susan Sontag, "The anthropologist as hero," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Penguin Books, 1961, 2009).