

Bouchra Khalili

— Nick Aikens

The complex relationship between narrative, speech and the agency imparted on those who tell their story are central to Bouchra Khalili's practice. Pier Paolo Pasolini is a significant reference point for the artist with the notion of 'free indirect speech' where the narrators, subjects and filmmakers positions are deliberately blurred.

Such layered modes of story telling are put forward in the first film in her *Speeches Trilogy* (2012–13), entitled *Mother Tongue* (2012). Here, five subjects in Paris deliver excerpts of texts or political speeches. The words are committed to memory and recited back to the to camera in the speaker's mother tongue. The precision of the film's methodology is disarming. When you hear Malcolm X's founding address to the Organisation of Afro-American Unity in 1964, spoken in Malinke (a Malian dialect) we not only understand the significance of these words for contemporary Europe but they are filtered through the language and history of a country colonized by the French. The speeches we hear and the mode of delivery in *Mother Tongue* is, like in many of Khalili's films, trans-historical – its meaning reverberating between its original source and the present context in which the words are spoken. History is thus revealed as something subjective and malleable. Walter Benjamin famously said that history should never be articulated for 'what it really was'. Rather, we need to 'seize hold of it as it flashes up in a moment of danger'. For the protagonists of *Mother Tongue* that moment of danger is the reality of the contemporary migrant within an increasingly nationalist and xenophobic Europe.

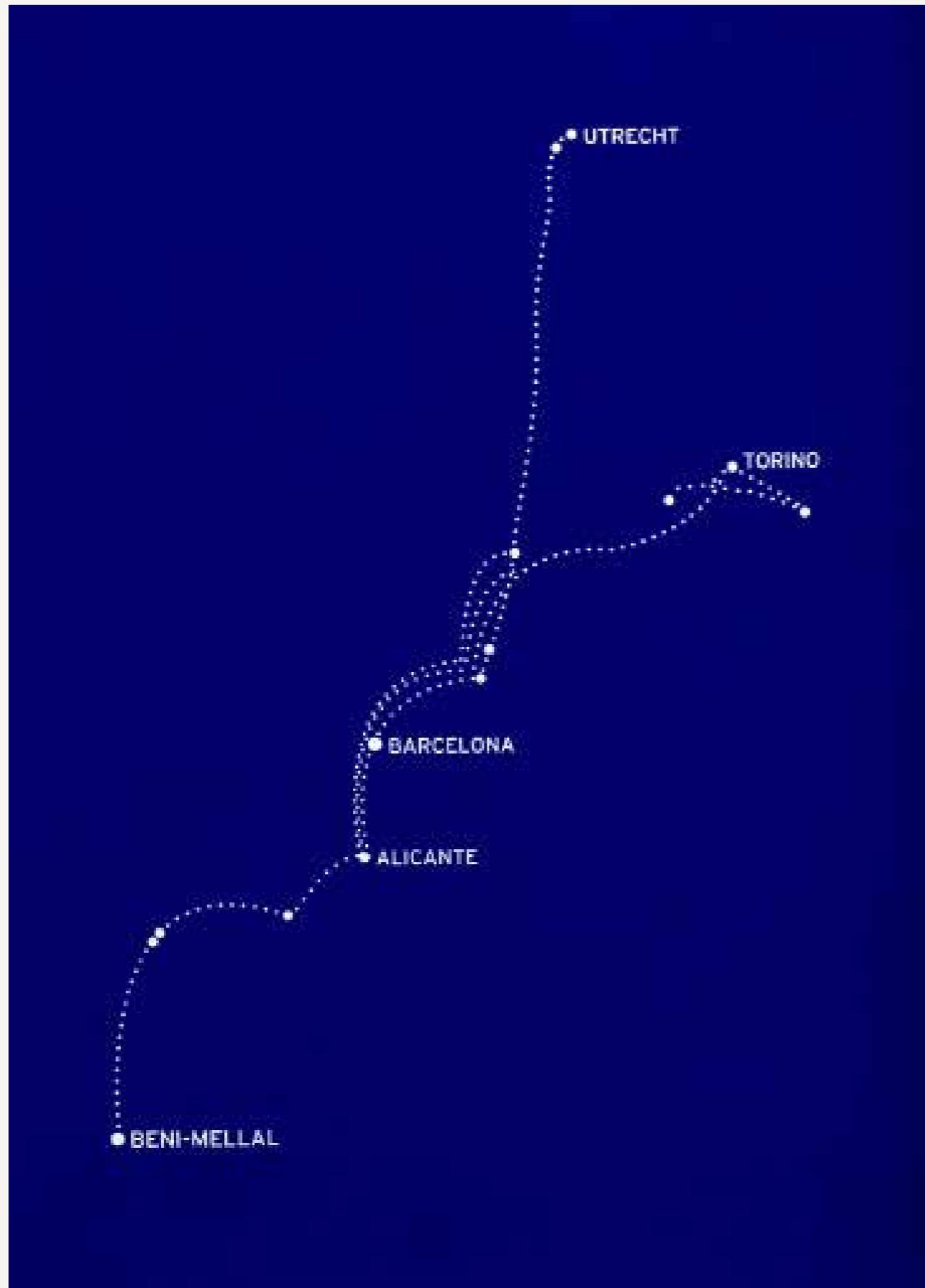
Cultural theorist Stuart Hall eloquently wrote 'identity is ultimately a question of producing in the future an account of the past, [...] it is always about narrative, the stories cultures tell themselves about who they are and where they came from.' The stories we hear in Khalili's extraordinary eight-channel installation *The Mapping Journey Project* (2008–11) are, literally, about where people came from. Each of the short films includes the anonymous subject, out of camera, telling the story of how they arrived at their present location. These tales of almost mythic journeys include hunger, incarceration, low paid work, deceit and violence. At times these journeys are vast – from Bangladesh to Europe via Russia and then northern Africa. At others the distances are modest, from Ramallah to Jerusalem in occupied Palestine for example. The narrators mark their journey on a map, which forms the frame for the film, crudely with a pen as they talk, meaning one's sense of scale is

deliberately skewed. The camera's frame can be tens or thousands of kilometers: a day's journey or five years' travel.

Understanding *The Mapping Journey Project* solely in terms of its relevance to contemporary debates on how borders are controlled and the harrowing, uncertain fate of the contemporary migrant is to overlook the manner in which the films are delivered. This reading is by no means insignificant, whether viewed from Europe, Australia or the many countries through which these narrators pass. Yet the real resonance of *The Mapping Journey Project* lies in the manner in which these tales are told. For the map is one of the primary tools for colonisers to mark and subsequently occupy space. On these terms, it is an oppressive device through which power over people's lands and rights have been exerted. Scrawled over and onto the maps in Khalili's work are the journeys of those who speak. Articulating these journeys – through lines on a map and the spoken word – thus becomes an act of defiant resistance to what Khalili has called 'arbitrary forms of power'. That the voices in *The Mapping Journey Project* are both nameless and faceless means they speak to and for a multitude beyond the identity of the narrator. Here, like in *Mother Tongue* and elsewhere in Khalili's work, the political potential of narrative lies in its ability to mutate beyond the timeframe and geography of individual stories and evoke multiple histories and positions.

Nick Aikens



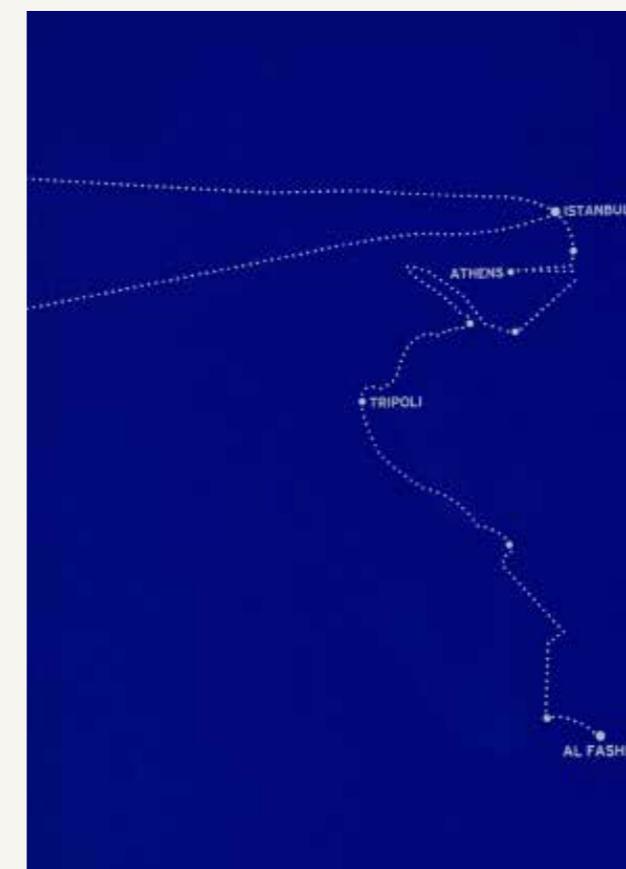


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Previous page
The Constellations, Fig. 3 2011

Left to right
The Constellations, Fig. 7 2011;
The Constellations, Fig. 8 2011;
The Constellations, Fig. 6 2011

From *The Constellations Series*,
 Silkscreen on BFK Rives paper
 60 x 40 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Galerie
 Polaris © the artist





Bouchra Khalili

The Mapping Journey Project
 2008–11
 Eight-single channel video
 installation, sound
 Dimensions variable
 Courtesy the artist and Galerie
 Polaris © the artist
 Photo: Benoit Pailley.

