

# Bouchra Khalili's 'The Speeches Series': A Reflection from Europe

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Bouchra Khalili's video trilogy *The Speeches Series* (2012–13) is carefully loaded with historical and political purpose. The attention it pays to the specificity of site and language calls one's own context into question, meaning I should acknowledge at the outset that my reading of the work comes from the vantage point of mainland Europe. This currently seems to be a territory whose sense of identity and political union is unable to articulate itself under a din of nationalist voices – with a growing band of listeners. The scope of Khalili's films, however, allows the artist a means with which to formulate a position that – although given from a particular context – opens up a space for different forms of political and subjective identification to take shape.



Bouchra Khalili, *Speeches – Chapter 1: Mother Tongue*, 2012, digital film, 23min, from *The Speeches Series*, video trilogy, 2012–13. Installation view, 'Intense Proximity: La Triennale 2012', Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2012. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Polaris, Paris

As with each in the trilogy, the first video, *Mother Tongue* (2012), is comprised of five speeches. The protagonists, migrants living in Paris, deliver passages from different political, literary or poetic texts by Aimé Césaire, Abdelkrim Al Khattabi, Malcolm X, Mahmoud Darwish, Édouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau. They are recited from memory, performed to the camera in the speakers' mother tongues – oral languages such as Moroccan Arabic, Dari, Kabyle, Malinke and Wolof – all of which, except for Dari, have no written script. Those involved were, Khalili explains, found through a combination of research and chance encounters with no casting, just a desire to be part of the film. This calls into question the status of the films (and

those involved), which hovers but never settles somewhere between performance, documentary disclosure and collaboration.

The first of the speeches, 'Discourse on Colonialism', which Césaire, a founder of the Paris-based Négritude movement, wrote in 1950 and published five years later, is perhaps the most compelling and sets the tone for the trilogy. Delivered by a woman named Naoual in Moroccan Arabic, the text speaks most explicitly to conditions still shaping Europe today. 'Europe', Naoual quotes, 'is incapable of solving the two major problems to which its existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem.' These two issues – so vast in their scope – pervade, in different guises, the whole of *The Speeches Series*. Naoual goes on: 'So unless Europe undertakes on its own initiative a new policy founded on respect for peoples and cultures, Europe will have deprived itself of its last chance with its own hands drawn up over itself to lift the pall of mortal darkness.' Speaking from her home in 2012, Naoual gives the speech coolly and calmly – not recited from a sheet but translated from the original, committed to memory, internalised and then performed to the camera in her own language. Spoken from within the suburbs of Paris by a Moroccan, two months before the presidential election in which Marine Le Pen's Front National came third with eighteen percent of the national vote and two years before the party would top the French polls in the European elections with their wish 'stopper l'immigration, renforcer l'identité française', Césaire's words resonate not only with a sense of foreboding but also regression.<sup>1</sup> Le Pen's sentiment is echoed now across Europe with the rise and recent success of populist

right wing nationalist parties (the UK Independence Party, Italian Northern League, Belgian Flemish Interest, Slovak National Party and Austrian Freedom Party, to name a few). Such brooding nationalist rhetoric has racism at its core, and is the backlash of Europe's colonial exploits and its historical amnesia towards questions of migration and so-called national identity – a point made clear by Césaire even in 1950.

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As the speeches move to that by Abdelkrim Al Khattabi, the Riffian political and military leader who defeated the Spanish in 1921 in North Morocco, the historical distance between speaker and words spoken extends, but their relevance to those delivering them and their listeners grows stronger. Sadija says in Dari (a Persian dialect spoken in Afghanistan): ‘Is there any prejudice that forces Europe to close the doors of its political circles to those who suffer?’ The setting – of a modest kitchen table in a dimly lit room – reinforces the sense of the chasm that exists between Europe's political elite, particularly the

newly elected nationalist parties, and the minority groups and immigrants they target for political gain.

Not only do the words pertinently address contemporary Europe, but the delivery hums with an understated and deeply subversive force. In the opening lines of a text by Édouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau, delivered by Naïma in Kabyl, a dialect spoken in Algeria, we are told: ‘one of the most fragile assets of identity, be it personal or collective, and also the most valuable is that it continuously develops and grows stronger’. This identity is built up on screen as Naïma speaks and takes on her own political agency through delivering Glissant's words. The use of these texts in *Mother Tongue*, lifted from other contexts, histories and struggles and brought to bear in the here and now, helps to articulate the identity of those who speak; it performs what Stuart Hall saw as ‘find[ing] in the mirror of history a point of identification or recognition for yourself’.<sup>2</sup> The dialects become invigorated through the words, histories and ideology of those who wrote the speeches that are being recited. To hear Malcolm X's founding address for the Organisation of Afro-American Unity in 1964, delivered from contemporary Paris in Malinke (a Malian dialect), not only demonstrates its bearing on Western Europe today, but also filters it through the language and history of a country that had been colonised by the French. Speaking across geographies and history the speeches perform a process of creolisation, something Glissant defined as ‘not prompted solely by the defining of [...] identities, but by their relation to everything possible as well – the mutual mutations generated by the interplay of relations’.<sup>3</sup> Such ‘mutual mutations’ embedded within Khalili's *Speeches* give it its layered yet deliberate dynamism.

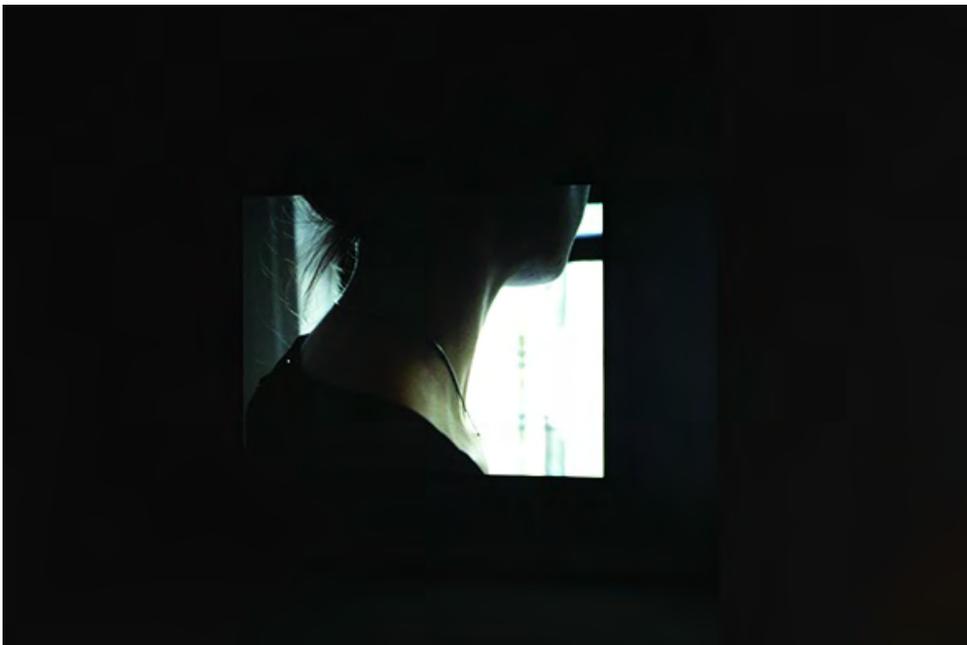
The complexity of *Mother Tongue* gives way to a more direct format in the second of the videos, *Words on Streets*, shot in Genoa in 2013. Here five migrants to Italy deliver speeches to the camera in Italian. In contrast to the domestic settings of *Mother Tongue*, here the speeches are all given in public space, recalling the Italian tradition of civil poetry famously revived by Pier Paolo Pasolini in his 1957 poem ‘The Ashes of Gramsci’. Similarly, the choice of Genoa as a location for *Words on Streets*, which was commissioned for the 55th Venice Biennale, is significant. The city has one of the largest population of migrants in Italy, and is where the country's first self-organised, autonomous group of migrants was formed (which Djilly, the last of the speakers, discusses). More recently, it hosted the infamous 2001 G8 summit, the scene of a number of human rights violations.<sup>4</sup>



Bouchra Khalili, *Speeches - Chapter 2: Words on Streets*, 2013, digital film, 18min, from *The Speeches Series*, video trilogy, 2012-13. Installation view, 'The Encyclopedic Palace', 55th Venice Biennale, 2013. Photograph: Francesco Galli. Courtesy the artist and la Biennale di Venezia

Thus, as with many of the references in *Speeches*, Genoa's past lurks silently as the significant backdrop against which the protagonists deliver their speeches – articulating their relationship to the country they call home, but in which they are legally and socially seen as outsiders. In the first speech a woman called Malu says of her quest for citizenship: 'I will win this right not because I love this country or know the language or the constitution but because ten years will have passed of paying taxes and that's what the law says.' In the fourth of the speeches Simohamed, a young Moroccan, explains how, seventeen years after coming to Italy as a child, he was formally sworn in as a citizen, and told by an official: "thank you and welcome", as if I [he] had just arrived'. Alice, a self-assured nineteen-year-old, says in her speech, 'I am an Italian disguised as Chinese. What is your country when you don't feel like you belong to one or the other?'

These speeches make explicit the gap between formal citizenship and the reality of living in a country, working or studying there – what the sociologist Saskia Sassen has called 'effective nationality' or 'informal citizenship'. The notion of 'effective nationality' is a specifically contemporary condition that Sassen sees as arising from years spent in a country carrying out the life and role of a legal citizen – attending school there, holding a job, raising a family – but without formal recognition. As Sassen points out, immigrants' 'identities as members of a community of residence assume some of the features of citizenship identities', with the only difference being they were born elsewhere, or in the case of Europe, outside the EU. What emerges in the biographies of the informal citizens of *Speeches* is a far more complex notion of citizenship and identity, of people's relationship with the place they call home. *Words on Streets* particularly attests that the notion of an exclusive nationality is hard to reconcile with the contemporary, globalised world, where the flow of money runs across borders irrespective of regulation. Yet calls for national identity and a national voice continue to gain traction in Europe. And although the EU strives towards its federal aims, and prides itself on the free flow of trade across its member states, the movement of people and each different country's laws pertaining to citizenship are neither unified nor wholly understood. Navigating between her collaborators' personal narratives and those authored by others, Khalili's videos reveal the reality and contradictions born of Europe's colonial history and the subsequent migration flows that ensued, yet the responsibility for which most European countries fail to acknowledge or, worse still, neglect in legal processes.



Bouchra Khalili, *Speeches – Chapter 3: Living Labour*, 2013, digital film, 25min, from *The Speeches Series*, video trilogy, 2012–13. Installation view, 'Bouchra Khalili: solo project', Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), 2013. Commissioned by PAMM, Miami. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Polaris, Paris

By constructing the films through monologues, singular voices speak to and for a globalised mass, irrespective of the speaker's place of birth or current home, whether they are speaking in their language or that of others. The subjects of the speeches are not of one particular race, colour or history. Rather, taken together they amount to a comparative narrative of migration and political exclusion, creating what Fatima El-Tayeb has referred to as 'a non-essentialist and non-linear political strategy', whereby stories and histories feed off and become emboldened by one another.<sup>5</sup> We move from single life stories to narratives that speak to and for a faceless multitude.

In the final sequence of *Words on Streets*, Djilly, a middle-aged Senegalese man, addresses the camera from a shipyard. He talks of his involvement in political movements in the 1990s that fought for immigrant workers' rights, and these movements' eventual demise. Djilly's story lays the basis for the shift into the third and final chapter of the series, *Living Labour*, shot in New York last year. In *Living Labour* the five subjects deliver speeches they wrote to camera, from memory, in English, French and Spanish – a mix of their mother tongues and adopted languages, synthesising the format of the first two chapters. The stories told focus on the conditions of undocumented workers in the US, whom Khalili positions as the contemporary working class, refuting the widely held view that in a time of globalisation we can no longer talk of such class division. In the opening speech a man called Kante sets the tone as he speaks with fierce precision in French: 'America is a prison for its immigrants. The bars of this prison are injustice, racism, lack of moral values and loneliness'. The rousing words of Malcolm X from the first chapter echo in the air; there too a call was made to fight the 'barking of the police dogs' and the injustice of a 'rotten' state 'by any means necessary'. Nearly a year before the police killings in Ferguson, Cleveland and New York that have brought the endemic nature of institutional racism into public consciousness, prompting tens of thousands to take to the streets, Kante's words wrench those of Malcolm X and the civil rights movement into the present.

In many ways what emerges in the third chapter is a coming together of the strands explored in the other two videos. In the foreground are the stories of the conditions of undocumented workers in New York, on whom Kante tells us the economy relies. He, for example, has a degree in accounting but has worked in a supermarket for years. 'Precariousness', he says, 'is the rule.' Mahoma, who although undocumented formed a union with colleagues, stresses the need for this contemporary working class to find 'strategies

and tactics that will give real victories'. Here is a narrative told from the US but whose story is echoed the world over – one of no rights, oppressive labour conditions and low wages.

The power of the spoken word and the agency imparted on and by those who formulate and articulate their own position is emphasised in these three videos. It is the ability to speak, as Jacques Rancière wrote, citing Aristotle, that distinguishes man from animal and makes us political beings, allowing us 'to discriminate between the just and the unjust'.<sup>6</sup> Yet, as Tony testifies in *Living Labour*, here it goes further: 'Language', he says, 'was a weapon.' How the fifteen people speaking in the videos draw on different histories and experiences then structure, frame and formulate a narrative parallels the way in which identities are formed. Hall eloquently wrote: 'identity is ultimately a question of producing in the future an account of the past, that is to say it is always about narrative, the stories which cultures tell themselves about who they are and what they came from'.<sup>7</sup> Khalili's videos invite us to consider how we tell stories about ourselves – what exactly is it that we want to articulate, from where and to whom? It also implies that one story must be read as part of an evolving, often conflicting series of narratives and histories. Writing from Europe, where increasingly xenophobic, nationalist narratives have taken hold, the need to acknowledge the different histories that have brought us to this point and the responsibility we must take for them, seems more urgent than ever.

## Footnotes

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1. 'Stop immigration; reinforce French identity'. See the website of the Front Nationale: <http://www.frontnational.com/le-projet-de-marine-le-pen/autorite-de-letat/immigration/> ↑
2. Stuart Hall, 'Negotiating Caribbean Identities', *New Left Review*, vol.1, no.209, January/February 1995, also available at <http://newleftreview.org/1/209/stuart-hall-negotiating-caribbean-identities>. ↑
3. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, p.89, also available at <http://caribbean.commonscs.cuny.edu/files/2011/03/Glissant-paths.pdf>. ↑
4. See, for example, Nick Davies, 'The Bloody Battle of Genoa', *Guardian*, 17 July 2008, also available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jul/17/italy.g8> ↑
5. Fatima El-Tayeb, 'Creolizing Europe', *Manifesta* journal, issue 17, February 2014, also available at <http://www.manifestajournal.org/issues/futures-cohabitation-0#page-issuescreolizingeurope0>. ↑
6. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (2004, trans. Steven Concoran), Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, pp.23–25. ↑
7. Stuart Hall, *op cit*. ↑