

# RESIDING IN THE BORDERLANDS: A MONTHLY FILM SERIES AT SAVVY CONTEMPORARY

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**SAVVY CONTEMPORARY**  
**THE LABORATORY OF FORM-IDEAS**



In this age and time, one's native land (and the other's) is always crumbling; crumbling within a capacity of vision which rediscovers the process to be not foul and destructive but actually the constructive secret of all creation wherever one happens to be.<sup>1</sup>

Wilson Harris

I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—una cultura mestiza—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.<sup>2</sup>

Gloria Anzaldúa

## INTRODUCTION: WHO OWNS THE CITY?

As Berlin becomes more cosmopolitan, questions of language and displacement are increasingly relevant, with both diasporic communities and ethnically German ones feeling vulnerable as the city changes. At S A V V Y Contemporary, for example, we have had a number of visitors communicate that they felt excluded from our discourse and what the space embodies. One visitor's comment, "I thought we live in Germany, and not on an island," best reflects the position from which this particular audience wished to engage with our content: they expected to enter a multicultural space, but one in which they had linguistic and cultural dominance.

We decided to use these questions creatively, taking them as a challenge to reimagine the cartography of the city from a diasporic perspective and to ask: Who owns the city after all?<sup>3</sup>

In order to address the context of Berlin, a rapidly changing city affected by an increasing cost of living and new waves of migration, we find Wilson Harris' concept of "crumbling" and Max Czollek's call for "disintegration" to be useful tools towards deconstructing the "fantasy of ethnic homogeneity

and cultural dominance" that characterize the concept of *Leitkultur*.<sup>4</sup> While there are those of various political persuasions who fear the collapse of German identity and thus seek to return to a nostalgic, or create a new, Heimat, we seek to divorce ourselves from a construction that is so inherently tied to colonialism and toxic nationalism. By embracing the vulnerable nature of our Berlin and envisioning it as a place characterized by a diasporic polyphony, we will attempt to fill out the map of what the city is through watching films collectively.

To achieve this, we will first move through the city, with three incarnations of the diasporic subject as our guides, and then we will push ourselves beyond the very limitations of our aural and visual perceptions, challenging our own way of perceiving films. Czollek asserts that "we haven't yet grown the ears needed to [listen to] this [social] diversity"<sup>5</sup> and that we must recognize that the social identities of minorities have largely been examined from a hegemonic position that has so far been "un-named" and thus "un-seen".<sup>6</sup> We aim to counter this by giving the podium to different speakers from various diasporic backgrounds to choose a film that somehow reflects their own experiences of moving through the city, and by exploring varied ways of watching films as a means of thinking with a spirit of conviviality. Beyond celebration, we will acknowledge our own contributions to shaping the city, moving from seeing our communities as islands and towards inhabiting a common borderlands. A borderlands in which films provide fertile ground to redraw our maps and redefine our relationships to each other and our city.

## SECTION I: "THE ACROBATIC MIGRANT," "LA MESTIZA," AND "THE RESIDENT CITIZEN": GLIMPSES OF THE DIASPORIC SUBJECT IN THE CITY

Within the mission of place-making and of filling-out our understanding of what Berlin is, it is important to think of the diasporic subject as not just an abstract concept, but as a character, or sort of ghost who can move through time and space

1 Wilson Harris, *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, (Lon.don: Faber and Faber, 1965), 102

2 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*, (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1978), 22.

3 This question originally came from another disgruntled visitor.

4 Max Czollek, *Desintegriert Euch!*, (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2018), 15; "die Phantasien von ethnischer Homogenität und kultureller Dominanz." Authors' translation. Leitkultur can be roughly translate to mean leading, or dominant, culture. Other translations include common, or core, culture.

5 Czollek, *Desintegriert Euch!*, 9: "Uns allen sind für diese Vielfalt noch keine Ohren gewachsen."

6 Czollek, *Desintegriert Euch!*, 10: "...wird die Minderheitenrolle von einer Position aus befragt, die unbenannt, und darum unsichtbar bleibt."

Arjun Appadurai's "acrobatic migrant,"<sup>7</sup> Gloria Arjun Appadurai's "acrobatic migrant,"<sup>8</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa's "mestiza,"<sup>9</sup> and Rosi Braidotti's "resident citizen"<sup>10</sup> are three such figures. We do not mean to present these as the exclusive identities of the diasporic subject; instead they are three introductory subjectivities within the city, which will be complicated and built upon over the course of the twelve sessions of the series throughout the year.

In his keynote speech for S A V V Y Contemporary's public program *Caressing the Phantom Limb*. "Heimat" – Progression, Regression, Stagnation, theorist and anthropologist Arjun Appadurai introduces the figure of the "acrobatic migrant," who is forced to perform heroism in order to be granted citizenship. He demonstrates this point with the "Spiderman of Paris," Mamadou Gassama, a Malian immigrant who was granted citizenship after footage of him saving a child went viral.<sup>11</sup> In him Appadurai sees traces of an archetype, that of "the acrobatic migrant" who, "risking death in oceans, tunnels, borders, tall buildings, and airless trucks, performs the heroism of the soldier, patriot, commando, acting in the service of the nation."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in Gregory Nava's essential film *El Norte* (1983), Guatemalan immigrants Enrique and Rosa continuously risk life and limb whether in crossing the Mexican–United States border through rat-filled sewage tunnels or when Enrique is forced to scramble over rooftops to evade immigration police in Los Angeles. Both in this film and in real life, one is confronted with the fact that although locals expect migrants to speak their language and to integrate themselves, they simultaneously push migrants into low-paid and demanding jobs that isolate them from larger society and force their continued performance of precarity.

Gloria Anzaldúa defies mono-nationalist frameworks when she positions herself as mestiza (mixed) within the borderlands. She is careful to clarify that being mestiza means being more than the sum of one's parts: she is not just White, or Mexican, or Indian; but she is also not just White, Mexican, and Indian.<sup>13</sup> While this can be a

confusing position, the polyphony of voices gives the mestiza a unique opportunity to use her precarious position to imagine her surroundings and society beyond binaries of native/foreigner or man/woman. She does not feel the need to commit to one identity, and also refuses to partition herself, not allowing people to sever her Chicana-ness from her identity as a queer woman.<sup>14</sup> Instead, she commits to "making a new culture—una cultura mestiza—with [her] own lumber, [her] own bricks and mortar and [her] own feminist architecture."<sup>15</sup> La mestiza embraces the contradicting geographies of her borderland, a space within and between cultures, languages, and genders. She, in the words of Édouard Glissant, "consents not to be a single being,"<sup>16</sup> allowing herself to understand her identity not as something linear and determined by progress towards a single truth, but rather as a palimpsest where she is perpetually in conversation with her past and her future. In constant movement, she erases, reads, and rewrites her narrative at will. Her disorientation does not imply a lack of direction and, in the words of Seloua Luste Boulbina, "should not be understood as a failure or absence but as an action and a gesture."<sup>17</sup> Like a jazz improvisation, la mestiza's choreography is erratic, yet controlled by an intuitive command of the signs and rhythms of her being. Her movement through the world is a dance in which she defies boundaries of ethnicity, nationality, and belonging.

The third character that we think with is that of the "resident citizen," who allows us to step out of our individual identities and speak across communities in order to better understand the city we share. In her 2013 address to the European Parliament, "Enacting Citizenship," Rosa Braidotti reminded her audience that "citizens are subjects: political, ethical, affective, subjects," and that the project of the European Union relies on their collective "social imaginary"<sup>18</sup>. It is equally true that constructing a new cartography of Berlin would rely on diasporic subjects imagining that such an endeavor is possible and worthwhile. We cannot be contented with having our favorite corners, holes-in-the wall, basement art spaces etc., which we always visit and revisit. We must, instead, gather, and map our "locations: where [do I] come in, what memory do you bring into it, what

7 Arjun Appadurai, "Phantom Heimat," Lecture, *Caressing the Phantom Limb*. "Heimat" – Progression, Regression, Stagnation. SAVVY Contemporary, June 1, 2018. Video documentation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ym9LVYeVM>. (Accessed March 15, 2019.)

8 Arjun Appadurai, "Phantom Heimat," Lecture, *Caressing the Phantom Limb*. "Heimat" – Progression, Regression, Stagnation. SAVVY Contemporary, June 1, 2018. Video documentation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ym9LVYeVM>. (Accessed March 15, 2019.)

9 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*.

10 Rosa Braidotti, "Enacting Citizenship," Session at the European Parliament March 27, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTNFD1v7zXU>. (Accessed July 2, 2018.)

11 Roland Hughes, *The Spiderman of Paris: What Happened Next?*, BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46538253>. (Accessed March 7, 2019.)

12 Appadurai, *Phantom Heimat*, 35:09–35:23.

13 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*.

14 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 22.

15 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 22.

16 Édouard Glissant and Manthia Diawara, *Conversation with Édouard Glissant aboard the Queen Mary II (August 2009)*, *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic*, 58–63.

17 Boulbina, Seloua Luste, *Losing One's Bearings: In Praise of Disorientation, on the Necessity to Decolonize Knowledge, in The Incantation of the Disquieting Muse: On Divinity, Supra-Realities or the Exorcism of Witchery*, eds. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung and Federica Buetti, (Berlin: The Greenbox, 2017).

18 Braidotti, *Enacting Citizenship*

forms of ignorance do [I] bring into this, and how can we help each other complete the picture” of a city in flux, perpetually changing to accommodate the needs of its residents.<sup>19</sup> By collectively locating ourselves, we escape the habit of moving from home to work to safehaven and, instead, start to examine the space in between the three points.

Through this practice we can begin to form the alliances necessary to negotiate with the state and the ethnic majority from a position of power rather than one of supplicancy.

Within this mission to map diasporic communities in Berlin, and thus gain a better understanding of how and with whom we live, we cannot only rely on statistics or census. Instead we must gather immaterial traces as we form a collective cartography of the city. There are a number of ways one could approach this, but the medium that we believe to be most apt is that of film. For example in Ingemo Engström’s *Dark Spring* (1970) and Judy Smith/the San Francisco Newsreel’s *The Woman’s Film* (1971), both produced during a period of political and social uncertainty, women of various classes and backgrounds interrogate each other towards new practices of love-making and community-building. One might also think through Suliman Elinour’s *Wa lakim alardh tadur* (But Still It Rotates, 1978) or Yugantar’s film *Tambaku Chaakila Oob Ali* (Tobacco Embers, 1982), both of which creatively use documentary forms to capture, and in the latter case also enact, political change in marginalized communities in Yemen and India, respectively.

Film exists between written, visual, and auditory modes of storytelling. It has the power to capture the smells (cherry-blossomed avenues of Pankow), tastes (pungent durian from Dong Xuan), and textures (root-knotted bike-paths) of the world it portrays. Furthermore, within a context where we are speaking across different class, ethnic, and language boundaries, watching something together is not only a shared experience but it also gives us a common context from which to approach potentially unfamiliar topics.

## SECTION II: FUTURE MINDS: MOVING THROUGH THE CITY BY MEANS OF FILM

“I consider film to be an art of movement”<sup>20</sup>

19 Braidotti, *Enacting Citizenship*, 19:08  
20 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Filmsophy*, conversation between Jean-Luc Nancy, Ayreen Canastas, and René Gabri, Arsenal-Institut für Film und Videokunst e.V., <https://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/berlinale-forum/archive/program-archive/2018/magazine/filmsophy.html>. (Accessed March 14,

claimed Jean-Luc Nancy in a conversation with Ayreen Canastas on the possibilities of cinema to create its own meanings. But here Nancy does not just refer to movement as a set of signs, but rather he thinks of film as “un mode de présence,” a way of being present, that is “not an art of movement as in displacing things, but...as in approaching, moving towards.”<sup>21</sup> With *Residing in the Borderlands* we hope to achieve an analogous movement towards, and beyond, the existing confines of reality as we conceive of it. In her essay *Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality*, Maya Deren sees film as making possible the “manipulation of time and space” wherein “[s]eparate and distant places not only can be related but can be made continuous by a continuity of identity, as when a person begins a gesture in one setting” and finishes it in another environment in the following shot.<sup>22</sup> Whether in the hallucinatory montages of Peter Strickland’s *Duke of Burgundy* (2015) or the frenetic pace of Djibril Diop Mambéty’s *Touki Bouki* (1973), great cinema is characterized by its use of movement to join ideas and form a vision of the world. Similarly, this series is intended to both represent a means of relocating ourselves by moving through the city and a means of following the gesture of diasporic place-making through the various contexts we inhabit.

Film may be understood as a mode of generating discourse as each film creates its own film-world and film-thought through which we can perceive our own world in different, unprecedented ways. With that, we refer to film-worlds created in works such as Agnès Varda’s *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962), Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1972), Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames* (1983), Márta Mészáros’s *Diary for My Children* (1984), Harun Farocki’s *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1989), and Jean-Luc Godard’s *Notre Musique* (2004), amongst others. These films not only shift our attention towards new possibilities of alternative futures, but they also (un)train our eyes and ears to see and listen to the world differently. The disruption of Hollywood musical tradition in the case of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Pierrot Le Fou* (1965), for example, goes beyond the rejection of narrative norms imposed by Hollywood aesthetics, constituting a sonic break from the dominant audio-visual clusters. Antoine Duhamel’s music is violently interrupted, muted or disappears beneath the diegetic sounds of the film, ripping us out of the pleasurable and immersive cinematic experience. In another film-world, Charles Burnett’s *Killer of*

2019).

21 Nancy, *Filmsophy*.

22 Maya Deren, *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson, (Kingston: McPherson and Company, 2005), 125.

*Sheep* (1978) invites us to become “audio-spectators”<sup>23</sup> and listen to African-American works of music in (dis)junction with images of quotidian life in South Los Angeles. The director himself has mentioned that this film, which includes Paul Robeson’s lyrical singing, Alan Booth’s soulful melodies, Dinah Washington and Faye Adam’s crooning ballads, and William Grant Still’s symphonic poem, among others, constitutes a “history lesson” in African-American music.<sup>24</sup> Through its rich and varied soundtrack the film challenges viewers’ stereotypes of what “Black Music” could sound like, as well as highlighting the grace and resilience of his protagonists.<sup>25</sup> In both these cases, the films might lead viewers to question the way in which they locate themselves in relation to the film-watching experience, encouraging them to think about other contexts of place-making as well.

With *Residing in the Borderlands*, our aspirations exceed the aims of a ciné-club, as we will not only watch films, but we will also try to use them as tools for alternative place-making. By inviting a different speaker each session to select a film that relates to his/her experience of moving through the city, we will become part of others’ narratives and see their locations as ours as well. In this sense, a space that may be just a facade at the edge of our peripheral vision, becomes a concrete place embodied by the experience of the individuals who inhabit it. Our broader hope is to attain a common ground for dialogues and discussions that raise issues related to the quotidian, and to build up stronger discursive connections between different diasporic communities and perspectives in Berlin.

## CONCLUSION: CURTAIN RISING

The crumbling of national identities, while threatening to some, is a hope for others who seek to “disintegrate” a monolithic approach to culture and replace it with a polyphony of voices. In our monthly, year-long, film series, we will invite speakers from different diasporic backgrounds and disciplines to screen and discuss films that relate to their movement through the city we share. Having explored the notions of the “acrobatic migrant,” “la mestiza,” and “the resident citizen,” we will complicate what being a diasporic subject entails. The repeated ritual of gathering to view a

film will become a sort of gesture that, in the spirit of Maya Deren’s instructions on cinematography, will unite the disparate experiences of our film-watching community. As part of our mission of diasporic place-making and the construction of a new cartography of Berlin we will explore different film-worlds, considering both the visual and the auditory. The cinematic experience, itself, will offer us a new “mode de présence,” a way of being present, which can also propel us into previously unthought of futures.

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Advised by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung and  
Elena Agudio.

<sup>23</sup> This term is borrowed by Michel Chion and his “Audio-Vision” concept. See Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Charles Burnett in Morgan Woosley, *Re/soundings*, eds. Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema*, (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 181.

<sup>25</sup> Woosley, *Re/soundings*, 171-195.

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