

The Foreign Self in Migratory Culture:  
An Examination of Jamelie Hassan's *The Oblivion Seekers*  
and Vera Frenkel's "...from the Transit Bar"

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## Abstract

This paper explores Jamelie Hassan's *The Oblivion Seekers* (1985, 2008, 2009) and Vera Frenkel's "*...from the Transit Bar*" (1992, 2014) in the context of "migratory culture" – a term coined by Mieke Bal and Miguel Ángel Hernández-Navarro to refer to a condition of our contemporary culture as shaped by traces of global migration. I argue that the use of heterogeneous assemblage to present a multiplicity of perspectives and temporalities fosters a rethinking of the viewer's place in the world as an active participant implicated within migratory culture. Drawing on the concept of the foreigner in Julia Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), I further analyze Hassan and Frenkel's positioning of the foreigner in the context of today's unprecedented levels of global migration. I conclude by reflecting on how their works look towards the disappearance of the foreigner in contemporary migratory culture.

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# Introduction

This paper explores the multidisciplinary practices of Jamelie Hassan and Vera Frenkel in the context of contemporary “migratory culture” – a term coined by cultural theorist and video artist Mieke Bal and contemporary art historian Miguel Ángel Hernández-Navarro that refers not to a population of migrants but a condition of our contemporary culture as shaped by traces of migration.<sup>1</sup> I am drawn towards Hassan’s and Frenkel’s ability to foster a rethinking of my place in migratory culture, particularly through the two works that are the focus of this paper: Hassan’s *The Oblivion Seekers* (1985 original; 2008 and 2009 excerpts) and Frenkel’s “...from the Transit Bar” (1992 original; 2014 reconstruction). *The Oblivion Seekers*, in its original iteration, is a multimedia installation of texts, photographs, drawings, sound performances, and a two-channel video of home movies and news footage centered on transcultural encounters. Hassan digitally re-edited excerpts of the audio and moving image components for the work’s subsequent iterations. “...from the Transit Bar” is a multimedia installation of a functional piano bar within which a six-channel video montage of testimonies of migration is screened. While it has been reconstructed in major venues throughout Canada and Europe, this paper focuses on its last iteration in 2014 at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA) in Toronto.

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<sup>1</sup> Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction” in *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance, and Agency*, eds. Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 10.

Hassan and Frenkel simulate physical and psychical environments that envelop the viewer and allow for a reconsideration of the interrelationship between the self and the works. Hassan's assemblage of heterogeneous and multitemporal materials – sourced from public and private archives that traverse various locales and periods – collectively locate the viewer across times and spaces.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, “...from the Transit Bar” is an assemblage of objects and testimonies that places us in a transitory space, moving between times and spaces. I argue that the reconsideration of the viewer's place through the experience of these artworks parallels that of his/her role within migratory culture that is itself saturated with a multiplicity of voices and rhythms. As such, the works foster a rethinking of the viewer's place in the world as an active participant implicated within migratory culture.

My experience and analysis of Hassan's and Frenkel's works are informed by my place in migratory culture as a migrant of Indonesian descent in Toronto. Upon returning from my first extended visit to Indonesia in over a decade, Hassan's *The Oblivion Seekers* resonated with my discomfort in occupying the state of being neither-here-nor-there. In terms of “...from the Transit Bar”, one migrant's testimony echoed my exact experience: “I was teased for the way I spoke when I first came here. When I went back to where I

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Mireya Folch-Serra, “Geography, Diaspora and the Art of Dialogism Jamelie Hassan,” in *Jamelie Hassan: At the Far Edge of Words*, eds. Melanie Townsend and Scott Watson (London, ON: Museum London, 2009), 53-65. Originally published in *Parachute: Contemporary Art Magazine*, no. 90 (1998): 10-17; Julian Jason Haladyn, “Introduction: Working through Oblivion” in *The Films and Videos of Jamelie Hassan*, eds. Miriam Jordan and Julian Jason Haladyn (Winnipeg, MB: PLATFORM: Centre for Photographic and Digital Arts, 2010), 11-25.

was born, with the accent I got here, I was teased there because I sounded different again, so it was a double trouble.”<sup>3</sup> *The Oblivion Seekers* and “...from the Transit Bar” become significant in my questioning of one’s identity and place in the world as someone who felt foreign in both Indonesia and Canada.

The foreigner – which has become a permanent fixture in the context of today’s unprecedented levels of global migration – is a central character in both artworks. *The Oblivion Seekers* responds to mainstream representations of foreigners while “...from the Transit Bar” explores the experiences of being perceived as foreign. In relation to the figure of the foreigner, my interpretive framework is informed by Bulgarian-French psychoanalyst and literary critic Julia Kristeva’s *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991). Kristeva locates the foreigner in all of us in the form of an inherent “strangeness” from which the anxiety and fear triggered by the figure of the foreign ‘other’ emanates.<sup>4</sup> She argues that for the foreigner to disappear from modern societies, we must first “acknowledge ourselves as foreigners.”<sup>5</sup> *The Oblivion Seekers* and “...from the Transit Bar” alert us to the ways in which the notion of the foreigner originates from within and, as such, discriminatory conduct directed towards the foreigner implicates all of us in today’s migratory culture. In so doing, the artworks have the capacity to alter our perception of – and consequently our relationship with – foreigners, migrants, and ourselves.

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<sup>3</sup> Spoken by Peter Chin, one of the characters in “...from the Transit Bar.”

<sup>4</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 1.

In thinking through the works in relation to Kristeva's notion of the inherent strangeness, my inquiry on the formation of one's identity shifts from a locality towards the interpersonal relationships between self and other. My first experience of non-belonging occurred when I was living in Jakarta among blood relatives, long before my migration to Toronto. Born to parents of different ethnicities and religions – a Javanese Muslim father and a Batak Christian mother – I often felt excluded from both sides of the family. The feeling of foreignness is not simply anchored to one's geographical position, but is linked to one's relationship with both others and oneself.

As this paper examines the interrelationship between the self in migratory culture, my introduction first addresses the relationship between the artists' personal histories and *The Oblivion Seekers* and "...from the Transit Bar." I contextualize Hassan and Frenkel within their localized migratory cultures to consider how these contribute to my interpretation of the two works. Finally, I outline the theoretical framework that fundamentally informs my analysis of the two works.

The two core sections of this paper contain my close readings of the heterogeneous and multitemporal dimensions in *The Oblivion Seekers* (1985, 2008, 2009) and "...from the Transit Bar" (2014). These readings are derived from both an interpretive framework and my own subjective engagement with the two re-edits of *The Oblivion Seekers* (2008 and 2009) and the most recent

reconstruction of “...from the Transit Bar” in 2014.<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to the reviews and the analyses written about the works throughout their many iterations, with which I compare my own viewing experiences. My readings additionally contextualize the works within the present political climate in Canada, citing the newly proposed *Anti-terrorism Act*, recent amendments to the *Citizenship Act*, and regulations to Canada’s Temporary Foreign Workers Program.

I conclude the paper by bringing together the two works in relation to Julia Kristeva’s insight into the foreigner within all of us. In this psychoanalytical inquiry, I present how thinking through *The Oblivion Seekers* and “...from the Transit Bar” has fostered a reconsideration of my own place within contemporary migratory culture.

### The Artists within Migratory Culture

Jamelie Hassan is a multidisciplinary artist of Arabic descent born in London, Ontario. As a member of a family active in building a local Arabic community, Hassan grew up immersed in Arabic culture within the Canadian city. *The Oblivion Seekers* addresses “the [W]est’s perceptions of the [E]ast.”<sup>7</sup> First produced in 1985 – and later re-issued in 2008 and 2009 as digital video excerpts – it departs from Hassan’s childhood memory of her dancing at the first

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<sup>6</sup> I viewed both the 2008 and 2009 edits of *The Oblivion Seekers*: the first as screened in the retrospective *Jamelie Hassan: At the Far Edge of Words* in 2012 and the latter in 2014. I experienced “...from the Transit Bar” as part of the survey exhibition *Vera Frenkel: Ways of Telling* in 2014. Both exhibitions were held at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA) in Toronto.

<sup>7</sup> Jamelie Hassan, “The Oblivion Seekers,” original double-sided pamphlet (Toronto: Music Gallery, 1985). Reproduced in *The Films and Videos of Jamelie Hassan*, 48.

Islamic Convention in Canada, held in London in 1955. When researching for the date of the Convention, Hassan came across a newspaper article anticipating the event. Its headline reads: “1,000 Moslems [sic] Expected in City for Convention” (see Figure 1).<sup>8</sup> The significance of the headline became more pertinent following the September 11 attacks in 2001. In 2010, Hassan spoke about the “ominous” quality of the headline in post-9/11 context and while recognizing that it may have been conceived as relatively neutral in 1955, she notes her mother’s observations and personal experience of the negative stereotyping directed towards Muslims and Arabs.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, Hassan’s mother often remarked that anti-Arab sentiment had become much more visible and pervasive since her move to Canada in 1939.<sup>10</sup>

My first encounter with *The Oblivion Seekers* was in the context of the 2012 retrospective *Jamelie Hassan: At the Far Edge of Words* held at the MOCCA. In the exhibition, *The Oblivion Seekers* was placed adjacent to Hassan’s earlier work, *Common Knowledge* (1980-1981) to address the position of Arab-Canadians (see Figure 11). A sculptural assemblage, *Common Knowledge* features watercolour reproductions of rejection letters Hassan’s family received in response to numerous applications to sponsor their family members for admission into Canada from 1947 to 1955. The letters from the Department of Mines and Resources and the Department of Immigration cited

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<sup>8</sup> A snapshot of an issue of the *London Free Press* bearing this headline is prominently featured in all versions of *The Oblivion Seekers*.

<sup>9</sup> Jamelie Hassan, artist tour of the exhibition *Jamelie Hassan: At the Far Edge of Words*, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver, 2010, accessed March 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8H23Yb7URzs>.

<sup>10</sup> Jamelie Hassan, e-mail correspondence with the author, April 16, 2015.

existing Immigration Regulations that restricted the admission of “persons of Asiatic race” into Canada.<sup>11</sup> Along with these reproductions, *Common Knowledge* also included watercolour renderings of Iranian-American author Nahid Rachlin’s novel *Foreigner*, which tells the story of an Iranian attempting to assimilate into North American culture, as well as Canadian journalist Boyce Richardson’s *Strangers Devour the Land*, which chronicles the James Bay Cree conflict in 1970s against Hydro-Quebec’s hydroelectric development project along La Grande River in northwestern Quebec.

*Common Knowledge* and *The Oblivion Seekers* were produced during an early period in Hassan’s practice in which she specifically reflected on the negative stereotyping of Muslims and Arab identities that was already “prominent in certain mindsets, reflected in the media, foreign policy, education, mainstream” prior to 9/11.<sup>12</sup> *Common Knowledge* explicitly addresses a state-sanctioned fear of ‘strangers’ and ‘foreigners’ under the cloak of nationalist policy and highlights how the terms are contextually defined. *The Oblivion Seekers* further expands on the issue through its complicated relationship to the representation of the self and strangers, particularly when read within the contemporary multicultural context. If Hassan’s mother – a well-recognized human rights activist and advocate for refugees – characterized the situation of

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<sup>11</sup> “[T]he landing in Canada of any immigrant of any Asiatic race” was prohibited by a 1930 *Privy Council Order* (P.C. 1930-2115), with the exception of a limited clause on family ties. See *The Queen v. Leong Ba Chai* [1954] S.C.R. 10, [1954], 1 D.L.R. 401 (SCC) at page 11. In 1950, the Immigration Branch of the Department of Mines and Resources was reorganized as part of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration.

<sup>12</sup> Hassan, e-mail correspondence with the author, April 16, 2015.

living as an Arab woman in multicultural Canada as being “more difficult”<sup>13</sup> than during a period when receiving racist letters from the government was official policy, then discriminatory behaviour directed towards the foreigner has continued to escalate as migration between nations becomes increasingly prevalent.

Vera Frenkel is a multidisciplinary artist based in Toronto. Born in Bratislava, Frenkel and her family escaped the Nazi-occupation of Czechoslovakia by moving to London in 1939, England, and after the war moved to Montreal, Canada in 1950. “...from the Transit Bar” was first produced for the exhibition documenta IX in Kassel, a city that is equidistant from both Bratislava and London. documenta, which occurs every five years, began in 1955, ten years following the end of the Second World War and was mandated to “confront [Germany] with its own failed Enlightenment” following the Nazi regime.<sup>14</sup> It was also conceived in the context of the Cold War – a period in which the world was ideologically polarized by two superpowers, communist Soviet Union and capitalist America – with the aim of “[reconciling] German public life with international modernity.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Hassan, artist tour. Among other honours, Hassan’s mother, Ayshi Hassan, was on the Mayor’s Honour List, recognized by the Canadian Council of Muslim Women and a winner of a Queen’s Diamond Jubilee medal. See Jane Sims, “The woman who helped establish the London Mosque and with her husband raised 11 successful children has died at age 92,” *The London Free Press*, February 17, 2014, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.lfpress.com/2014/02/17/the-woman-who-helped-establish-the-london-mosque-and-with-her-husband-raised-11-successful-children-has-died-at-age-92>.

<sup>14</sup> “About documenta,” *documenta 12*, accessed February 25, 2015, <http://www.documenta12.de/geschichte010.html?&L=1>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

The ninth iteration of documenta – the context for which Vera Frenkel's "*...from the Transit Bar*" was produced in 1992 – was its first following the fall of the Berlin wall, the reunification of Germany, and the end of the Cold War, which ushered in a new phase of migration across previously closed borders. Kassel was no longer a West German city that was situated next to the Eastern bloc, while other West German cities such as Rostock, Mölln, and Solingen saw significant xenophobic attacks targeting asylum seekers and Turkish immigrant workers.<sup>16</sup> In the context of these shifting geopolitics, "*...from the Transit Bar*" aptly addresses the implications of exile, migration and displacement within the framework of an exhibition series whose theme called for a "cosmopolitan openness" at a time when xenophobia was on the rise.<sup>17</sup> The installation examines "the experience of being foreign or being perceived" as foreign in Germany, Canada, and beyond.<sup>18</sup>

To do so, Frenkel videotaped 14 migrants that she knew in Canada to tell their stories. The testimonies were staged and manipulated to situate these characters in a moving train car. The videos were then screened throughout the

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<sup>16</sup> Molotov cocktails were thrown at a hostel for asylum seekers in Hoyerswerda in 1991. A refugee centre was burned down in the Rostock-Lichtenhagen riots in 1992. Later that year, three people were killed when the home of a Turkish family was set on fire in Mölln. In May 1993, an arson attack on the home of Turkish immigrant workers in Solingen killed two adults and three children. See Fiona Ehlers, "Hospital of Hope: City Marred By Xenophobia Seeks to Reinvent Itself," *Spiegel Online*, January 14, 2015, accessed April 5, 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-city-that-forced-foreigners-out-now-courts-them-a-1011671.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Matthias Winzen, "A Bar in Kassel," in *Vera Frenkel: Raincoats Suitcases Palms/The Bar Report* (Toronto, ON: Art Gallery of York University, 1993), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Vera Frenkel, "Revisiting the Power of Absence: Silences, Shadows, and Remembering" (presented at the Memory and Archive Symposium, Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal, 2000), accessed April 10, 2015, [http://www.verafrenkel.com/speeches/5\\_memory\\_and\\_archive.pdf](http://www.verafrenkel.com/speeches/5_memory_and_archive.pdf).

installation space, which art historian Elizabeth Legge describes as having “the structure of an airport bar with the crudeness of a school play production of *Casablanca*” (1942, dir. Michael Curtiz).<sup>19</sup> Art historian Griselda Pollock notes Legge’s apt reference to the film, which tells the story of two “displaced ... escapees from Nazism.”<sup>20</sup>

The setting of both the video and physical installation brings to mind Frenkel’s own escape from Bratislava with her mother in 1939, a story that later surfaced in her most recent work, *The Blue Train* (2012) – a multi-channel installation of photographs, texts, and video. Here, Frenkel recalls a bedtime story her mother used to tell about a train ride they may or may not have shared with SS officers. The young officers, in their blind faith in the stereotypical representation of the Jewish body, were unsuspecting of the blonde-haired mother and her blue-eyed infant that was Vera Frenkel. The artist recalls in *The Blue Train*: “I, the child, am held tight, raised high, clucked at, sung to. The woman ... is complimented on her round, healthy, clearly Aryan baby.”<sup>21</sup> As a migrant and daughter of refugee parents, Frenkel had a personal stake in providing a space for stories of migration in “...from the Transit Bar.”

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Legge, “Of Loss and Leaving,” *Canadian Art* (Winter 1996), 61.

<sup>20</sup> Griselda Pollock, “Fictions of fact: memory in transit in Vera Frenkel’s video installation works *Transit Bar* (1992) and *Body Missing* (1994),” in *After-Affects/After-Images: Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Feminist Museum* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013), 254.

<sup>21</sup> Vera Frenkel, *The Blue Train*, voice-over, Toronto, ON, 2012. Published in *Vera Frenkel*, ed. Sigrid Schade (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013), 276-7.

## Theoretical Framework

My analysis of *The Oblivion Seekers* and “...from the Transit Bar” is influenced by art historian and cultural critic T.J. Demos’ examination of heterogeneous assemblage in relation to video art that explores the topic of migration. Expanding upon the theme of migration discussed by Demos, I examine the ways in which heterogeneous assemblage makes visible what Mieke Bal and Miguel Ángel Hernández-Navarro’s termed migratory culture and its central condition of multitemporality. As already noted, I also draw on Julia Kristeva’s analysis of the foreigner and our inherent strangeness. These concepts of heterogeneous assemblage, migratory culture, multitemporality, and the foreigner are central in my exploration of how *The Oblivion Seekers* and “...from the Transit Bar” foster a reconsideration of one’s position in relation to others within migratory culture. I argue that the heterogeneous and multitemporal assemblage embedded within *The Oblivion Seekers* and “from the Transit Bar” is integral to an apprehension of my inherent strangeness and the external environment of migratory culture that surrounds me.

In his book *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis*, Demos identifies recent reinventions of the documentary genre by artists who address the figure of the migrant, the “central figure of our political history.”<sup>22</sup> These reinventions ultimately abandon the illusions of

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<sup>22</sup> T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2013), 96. These artists include Ursula Biemann, Steve McQueen, the Otolith Group, Hito Steyerl, Emily Jacir, Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri.

authority of documentary objectivity in favour of ambiguities, uncertainties, and a multiplicity of perspectives. The alternative techniques that emerge in relation to these reinventions include a heterogeneous assemblage of mixed-media platforms and sources, a lack of a narrative arc or clear organizing principle, multi-perspectival voices, fragmentations, ellipses, lacunae, and/or an opaque representation of the subject. These alternative modes of address are often juxtaposed with the conventional style of authoritative documentary reportage, blending fact and fiction to promote disorientation and uncertainty.

Demos takes as an example of the reinvention of the documentary genre a video by writer and video essayist Ursula Biemann, *Sahara Chronicle* (2006-7). The work is a compilation of short segments documenting clandestine sub-Saharan migrations towards Europe. Demos analyzes the video as an amalgamation of “different regimes of signs into a heterogeneous assemblage.”<sup>23</sup> He specifically refers to the layering and cutting together of diverse audio and visual fragments within one video work, thus juxtaposing multiple perspectives to bring attention to the connections between daily lives, legacies of colonialism, economic realities, and so forth.<sup>24</sup> Viewers accustomed to traditional documentary films would notice the absence of a voice-over narration that would conveniently and authoritatively string the diverse stories together. In its absence, Biemann commands an active viewing experience in which meaning has to be extracted by the viewer, with Demos arguing that

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 206.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

“*Sahara Chronicle*’s complex installation maps a heterogeneous site [that] allow[s] the viewer to enter at any point and create his or her own linkages between the diverse elements.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, I argue that *The Oblivion Seekers* and “...from the Transit Bar” are “heterogeneous sites” that allow the viewer to insert his/her own frames of references.

This reliance on a cognitive engagement with heterogeneity has been central to art historical analyses of assemblage since the early 1900s. The term ‘assemblage’ is used in this paper to reflect Hassan’s and Frenkel’s incorporation of a wide range of materials and sources to present composite installations. This follows curator William C. Seitz’s usage of the term for the 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York). Seitz’s broad definition of ‘assemblage’ refers to “the fitting together of parts and pieces” in both two-dimensional collage and three-dimensional sculpture.<sup>26</sup> The term ‘collage’ itself was first used in relation to Cubism in 1912 to refer to the creation of an artwork by incorporating found objects.<sup>27</sup> Theorist of the avant-garde Peter Bürger described these objects as “material that has been left unchanged by the artist”, which he termed “reality fragments.”<sup>28</sup> The inclusion of reality fragments “[deconstructs] the unity of the painting as a whole.”<sup>29</sup> The heterogeneous materials and the incongruent ways in which they are assembled thereby communicate a plurality of possible meanings, rather than a sense of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 207.

<sup>26</sup> William Chapin Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), 150 n5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Manchester University Press, 1984), 77.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 77.

coherence and stability. As Bürger explains, “[i]t is no longer the harmony of the individual parts that constitutes the whole; it is the contradictory relationship of heterogeneous elements.”<sup>30</sup>

In this paper, ‘assemblage’ is also understood in the context of the moving image to consider the breaking down of spatial and temporal continuity in relation to the genealogy of the abstract editing structure of Soviet montage. Soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein’s use of montage is of an experimental editing structure that is alternative to the linear and continuity editing found in Western cinema.<sup>31</sup> Eisenstein’s montage is concerned with an editing structure that breaks away from the confines of space and time, as opposed to a structure that is aimed to aid a viewer’s understanding of how space and time are progressively laid out. Shots of unrelated places with an ambiguous relationship to time are juxtaposed to convey an idea rather than to establish a linear narrative. The images are strung together on the basis of symbolic content rather than to illustrate a continuous sequence of events.<sup>32</sup> The experimental sequencing of montage can similarly generate a plurality of possible meanings depending on the linkages that viewer independently insert between the disparate shots.

The importance of this cognitive engagement in collage and montage establishes these compositional structures as art historical precursors to T.J.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>31</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), 81-3.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 251-5.

Demos' analysis of heterogeneous assemblage in recent moving image art on migration. Demos argues that artists responding to the figure of the migrant reveal the diminishing relevance of traditional documentary techniques in addressing the complex and disorienting nature of contemporary transnational condition. Heterogeneous assemblage rejects the notion of naïve objectivity and transcendental truth. Similar to collage and montage, gaps between incongruent materials exist to allow the viewer to enter into the work through shifts in meanings and connections, opening up the transformative capacity of interpretation. Demos' analysis of structural assemblage – one that strings together not only heterogeneous materials but also multi-perspectival voices, fragments, ellipses, lacunae, opaque representations through the blending of fact and fiction, as well as stimulated disorientation – highlights the strategies that are central to *The Oblivion Seekers* and “...from the Transit Bar.”

In relation to Demos' analysis of structural assemblage, I consider how heterogeneity in temporalities relates to the condition, rather than simply the theme, of migration. My understanding of this expanded field of heterogeneity draws on both Mieke Bal and Miguel Ángel Hernández-Navarro's notion of migratory culture and Mieke Bal's concept on the experience of heterochrony.<sup>33</sup> Bal states that “video is the medium of our time. ... Migration is the situation of

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<sup>33</sup> Bal also provides an analysis of Ursula Biemann's work in analyzing heterochrony in video art, pointing specifically to the non-linear and anti-narrative qualities of her video essays. See Mieke Bal, “Double Movement,” in *2move: Video, Art, Migration*, eds. Mieke Bal and Miguel Hernández-Navarro (Murcia: CENDEAC, 2008), 42-5.

our time.”<sup>34</sup> She argues that video and migration are the medium and experience of time – though not necessarily as a universal linear chronology, but as multiple and heterogeneous.<sup>35</sup> The migratory condition – which does not account for the “actual experiences of migrants”, but rather refers to the affective “traces ... of the movements of migration that characterize contemporary culture” – exposes us to the subjective experiences of time,<sup>36</sup> as well as, I would add, to the various ways in which different cultures relate to time.

The phenomenon of multitemporality has become a characteristic of our migratory culture.<sup>37</sup> The different rhythms and tempos that charge one’s personal experience of time include the temporality of delay or instantaneity, of waiting or haste, of movement or stagnation.<sup>38</sup> Multitemporality also points to the destabilization of the notion of time as a chronological ordering of the past, present, and future. Alerted to our subjective experiences of time, we become more aware of the way in which time is subjected to the linear logic of chronology.<sup>39</sup> Through this forceful process, tension arises between the internal experiences of time and the imposed logic.

For Bal, the video medium has a distinct ability to disclose the tension between the multiple temporalities of migratory culture. Beyond its durational character, video can, for example, contrive, manipulate, and layer multiple

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Mieke Bal, “Heterochrony in the Act: The Migratory Politics of Time,” in *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture*, 212-3.

<sup>36</sup> Bal, “Double Movement,” 19, 35.

<sup>37</sup> Bal, “Heterochrony,” 218.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 213.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 224.

rhythms and times. By demonstrating multitemporality, video subjects the viewer to the experience of heterochrony. This opens up the viewer's perception of heterochrony in real life as an experience common in migratory culture at large.<sup>40</sup> In other words, "a complex, often confusing, challenging multitemporality" is a characteristic of migratory culture that can be introduced into the medium of video.<sup>41</sup> The video medium can thereby be utilized to contribute to a better understanding of migratory culture and vice versa.<sup>42</sup> Video works that demonstrate the experience of heterochrony serve as a reminder that people experience time differently, that "time is not an objective phenomenon."<sup>43</sup>

Mieke Bal's interest in multitemporality is significant in its relation to the politics of time. The tension between multitemporal elements within a moving image work is productive in its ability to make visible the realm of the political within migratory culture. In their introduction to *Art and Visibility*, Bal and Hernández-Navarro draw on political theorist Chantal Mouffe's distinction between politics and the political to criticize the current culture of consensus.<sup>44</sup> Mouffe defines the political as "the dimension of antagonism ... constitutive of human societies" in contradistinction to politics as an exclusivist mechanism to "organiz[e] human coexistence" in midst of conflict.<sup>45</sup> Politics is, as Mouffe argues, "the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created,"

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 212-3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 213.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>44</sup> Bal and Hernández-Navarro, "Introduction," in *Art and Visibility*, 9.

<sup>45</sup> Chantal Mouffe quoted in Ibid. Originally published in Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 9.

and hence, the notion of complete resolution of political conflict is fictitious.<sup>46</sup> Attempts to smooth out tension are ultimately acts of concealment. Instead, Bal and Hernández-Navarro propose for the need for global citizens to live in a “productive tension” with one another through which difference and distinctions are legitimized in an engaged process of debate.<sup>47</sup> The political resists politics by creating a space where tension – as an essential dimension of social organization – can exist. The authors argue that art provides us with the political space to “experience tension differently.”<sup>48</sup> Art brings tension – such as the experience of heterochrony – into visibility such that we can learn to see and experience it differently: art can thereby “[enable] the spectator to experience and participate in the tension of a nonconsensual society.”<sup>49</sup> This paper examines how *The Oblivion Seekers* and “...from the Transit Bar” enable us to reassess our experience and participation in migratory culture.

Bal’s analysis of multitemporality is largely contained within the video medium, which corresponds to my analysis of the moving image component of *The Oblivion Seekers*.<sup>50</sup> In the case of “...from the Transit Bar,” I explore the condition of multitemporality within an expanded field of installation art that revolves around a central moving image work. Based on my experience of “...from the Transit Bar” as it was most recently installed in 2014, I build upon Bal’s observation of the “affective and empowering quality” of video art that

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>50</sup> While the original 1985 version existed as a spatial installation, my personal encounter with the work involves the 2008 and 2009 moving image excerpts.

“[makes] visible” the multitemporal condition of contemporary culture by proposing for the increased impact of such strategy when applied in an immersive installation that contains both videographic and tactile dimensions.

This affective quality is central to the viewer’s engagement with both *The Oblivion Seekers* and “...from the Transit Bar.” Hassan and Frenkel present the viewer with heterogeneous and multitemporal assemblages that – through their demand for active viewing – implicate the viewer within a simulation of migratory culture, bringing awareness to the tensions inherent in our contemporary situation. As cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa suggests, “awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society.”<sup>51</sup> By exposing the viewer to the multitemporalities of migratory culture, the works’ productive capacity relies upon the viewer’s self-reflexivity.

In relation to this productive capacity for self-awareness, Kristeva’s psychoanalytical insight into our inherent strangeness is crucial in understanding the inner and societal changes that may follow. In her book *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva traces the figure of the foreigner over the course of Western history to examine how the concept can “disappear from modern societies.”<sup>52</sup> Kristeva asks, “as we confront an economic and political integration on the scale of the planet: shall we be, intimately and subjectively, able to live with the

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<sup>51</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 2nd ed (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 109.

<sup>52</sup> Kristeva, 1.

others, to live as others, without ostracism but also without leveling?”<sup>53</sup> From the perspective of 1980s France, the book follows the journey of the foreigner from Ancient Greece to the Enlightenment and concludes with an analysis of the Freudian notion of the ‘uncanny.’

Kristeva argues that the notion of the ‘uncanny’ – which in French translates to *l’inquiétante étrangeté* or “uncanny strangeness”<sup>54</sup> – provides us with both an explanation of our instinctual need to conceive the notion of the stranger or the foreigner. More importantly, the uncanny also presents a strategy for its disappearance. Kristeva argues that the concept allows us to “detect foreignness in ourselves.”<sup>55</sup> Once we discover our inherent “incoherences ... abysses ... strangenesses” and “[recognize the foreigner] within ourselves,” the foreigner ultimately disappears.<sup>56</sup> The concluding section of this paper explores the ways in which *The Oblivion Seekers* and “...from the Transit Bar” address the figure of the foreigner to promote its disappearance in migratory culture.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 1-2.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, translator’s note, 214 n19.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 191.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 1-2.

## I. Jamelie Hassan, *The Oblivion Seekers* (1985, 2008, 2009)

*The Oblivion Seekers* originates in Jamelie Hassan's childhood memory of the first Islamic Convention in North America, taking place in London, Ontario in 1955. That day, a 7-year-old Jamelie Hassan danced during the Convention and made the local news broadcast (see Figures 6 and 12). Hassan's fascination with and memory of her dancing served as the point of convergence for the various video, audio, textual, and photographic fragments that composed the original "performance/installation" of *The Oblivion Seekers*, exhibited in 1985 at the Music Gallery in Toronto.<sup>57</sup> Characteristic of Hassan's oeuvre, *The Oblivion Seekers* was an assemblage that "join[ed] together times and spaces."<sup>58</sup> The various fragments of that "performance/installation" related to and commented on the histories of dance and musical entertainment in Islamic culture. The multimedia assemblage combined materials sourced from Switzerland, Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Canada, and the United States of America circa 1890s to 1980s as well as objects produced by the artist for the installation itself.

As a performance/installation, the original *The Oblivion Seekers* involved a one-night-only performative reading and live music. Photographs, ink drawings, texts, and a moving image projection filled the walls of the installation space, delineating a central space in which the audience gathered. On the

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<sup>57</sup> Hassan, "The Oblivion Seekers," pamphlet.

<sup>58</sup> Folch-Serra, 53.

opening night, a recording by celebrated mid-century Egyptian singer Umm Kalthoum played in the background, along with sounds of static radio and a commissioned electronic musical composition by London-based musician Gerry Collins. Jamaican-Canadian dub poet and spoken word performer Lillian Allen joined Hassan in a dynamic recorded and live reading of excerpts from Kalthoum's biography as well as Swiss explorer Isabelle Eberhardt's collected writings.<sup>59</sup>

The moving image component of the original *The Oblivion Seekers*, which became the basis of its re-edited versions in 2008 and 2009, consisted of a montage of home movies and news footage. The former were shot by Hassan's uncle, Hanny Shousher, and depicted personal moments during and around the time of the 1955 Islamic Convention. His dynamic and colourful documentation of his family and friends was juxtaposed with an edited compilation of black and white news footage and newspaper clippings of and around the time of the Convention – including the clip of young Hassan dancing. The newspaper clipping featured the front-page headline: “1,000 Moslems [sic] Expected in City for Convention.” These two moving image archives were screened one above the other in the 1985 performance/installation.

The multitemporal dimension in the original *The Oblivion Seekers* is evident through Hassan's anachronic exploration of time. The central moving image component is dated to Hassan's childhood in 1950s London. The Umm

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<sup>59</sup> Published as Isabelle Eberhardt, *The Oblivion Seekers*, translated by Paul Bowles (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1975).

Kalthoum recording is a direct reference to those days, when Hassan's family would gather in her grandmother's living room in London to listen to a radio broadcast of Kalthoum's legendary singing from Cairo.<sup>60</sup> Through the spoken word performance, Kalthoum's stories of her life are interspersed with excerpts from the collected writings by Isabelle Eberhardt, a fin-de-siècle Swiss traveller and writer who converted to Islam and lived in Algeria, Tunisia, and France. Live performances by Hassan, Allen, and Gerry Collins brought the lives of Kalthoum, Eberhardt, and Hassan herself from the past into the present, which together with the moving image component served as materials for new iterations of the work in 2008 and 2009.

It is through my experience of these later iterations of *The Oblivion Seekers* that I was able to access the work's intricate a play of rhythms. I begin my analysis with the 2009 version, as it more closely resembles the original performance/installation. For this version, the moving image and sound components of the 20-minute 1985 performance/installation were digitally re-mastered and edited into a 12-minute movie in which the public and private archives are presented separately in a split screen format that follows the structure of the original projection. This juxtaposition invites for a comparison between the content of the two archives, drawing attention to a stark contrast between the dark, indoor shots from the news footage and the bright outdoor scenes of the home movie. As Hassan's and Allen's voices deliver different temporalities, the resulting flow of words oscillates between the speech pattern

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<sup>60</sup> Jamelie Hassan, "Women and the State," *Canadian Women Studies* 11.1 (1990): 26.

and cadence of a storyteller and those of a dub poet. This flow is at times interrupted as their voices meet in a joint chant.

In the 2008 excerpt, lasting approximately six minutes, the two screens are spliced together into a single-screen montage. The spoken word performance by Hassan and Allen is no longer included, though the music of Kalthoum and Collins remains. In this version – more restrained in its inclusion of heterogeneous and multitemporal elements – the irregular sequence of alternating colour and black-and-white footage creates a pronounced rhythmic tension. Interlaced with one another, the single-screen format specifically highlights the contradictory ways in which the cameras are handled. The black and white news footage frames its subject through a stationary camera, a fixed lens. Each take is brief and edited together in relatively short bursts; the segment has the rhythm of a successive list in the form of a moving image. In contrast, the home movie is shot with a hand-held camera that lingers on its subjects, as if holding on to record and preserve the nuances of certain fleeting moments.

In her analysis of video works that “make visible” the phenomenon of multitemporality in migratory culture, Bal points to the tension between temporalities in the videos in relation to the viewer’s own temporality, noting that “while the viewer is physically aware of the external temporality of his or her body” – one that is more or less echoed in the movements of the people in both archives despite the differences in editing rhythm – other “temporalit[ies reach]

out.”<sup>61</sup> In the 2008 single-channel excerpt, the viewer is left to negotiate between the fast pacing of “ordinary haste” as embedded in the news archive and the slow lingers of the home movie, which also “insinuates slowness into the sensation of looking.”<sup>62</sup> The fast and slow are “over-layer[ed]”; here, “[t]emporalities that are ordinarily distinct mingle uneasily.”<sup>63</sup> *The Oblivion Seekers* overlaps with migratory culture in its ability to “make visible” what Bal refers to as the “[sensate] traces of the movements of migration that characterize contemporary culture.”<sup>64</sup>

By bridging the here and there and intersecting the past with the present, Hassan’s work locates the viewer within the heterogeneous matrix of migratory culture that is marked by spatial and temporal movement. The sensorial experience of heterochrony operates to immerse the viewer in the moving image. Here, the viewer is implicated within a montage that blurs two ways of seeing. The public and personal visual archives appear to share no similarity despite both being representations of largely the same Muslim community in 1950s London. The lack of a sustained relationship between the heterogeneous and multitemporal elements initiates a curiosity that leads to a cognitive engagement on the part of the viewer. As London-based writer, artist and curator Julian Jason Haladyn – who also co-edited the 2008 excerpt of *The Oblivion Seekers* – writes:

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<sup>61</sup> Bal, “Double Movement,” 17.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 19.

[t]he exact relation of these events pictured is distinctly not determined by the film, which instead leaves us with a palpable gap that we must fill through our own experience of the work. Through such absences Hassan's work becomes a space of dialogue in which viewers complete the experience of the work through their active engagement.<sup>65</sup>

The viewer thereby becomes embedded within the work, inserting his/her own personal memories, temporalities, and knowledges to activate the work in the present tense.

I experienced the 2008 excerpt of *The Oblivion Seekers* in the context of the retrospective *Jamelie Hassan: At the Far Edge of Words*. In this version, the home movie and news footage are presented in a single-screen montage. The contrast between the incongruent representations of Muslims as well as between the visual and temporal characteristics of the archives is further emphasized by their unnatural merge into one frame. This montage of varying 'reality fragments' thereby denies the work a sense of unity and coherence. Consequently, the boundaries of the work are opened up to its immediate context. In my attempt to determine for myself the relationship between the newspaper headline, home movies, and images of Hassan dancing, I become influenced by my surroundings, creating a connection between *The Oblivion Seekers* and the aforementioned installation *Common Knowledge* with which it shared a space. The news footage and letters from the Department of Mines and Resources and Department of Immigration together with *The Oblivion Seekers* highlight the relationship between official policies of immigration and mass media representation of foreigners.

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<sup>65</sup> Haladyn, "Introduction," 12.

All iterations of *The Oblivion Seekers* collectively explore the way in which Eastern culture is perceived in the West, while simultaneously presenting “elements and personalities” that offer “an alternative to Orientalism.”<sup>66</sup> The moving images illustrate various ways of seeing, perceiving, and representing Islamic culture. News coverage of the Convention illustrates how “[W]estern encounter and response to [E]astern culture”<sup>67</sup> emphasize difference, creating news through a process of othering. The *London Free Press* published three images of the Convention that include markers of difference: a sign bearing the word “Islamic”, two men preparing an area for prayers, and a group of men praying (see Figure 2). These are reproduced in the CFPL news footage (Figure 3 illustrates one example), which framed the Convention with authority, composing an image of an official congregation of “Moslems.” These images feature numerous traditional garbs and foreign flags, despite the Convention’s “cosmopolitan” audience (see Figures 3-7).<sup>68</sup> In the home videos, fashionably dressed men and women gather and dance together. The hand-held camera moves freely, casually scanning those who link arms and dance in merriment, echoing the Eastern European kolo, the Jewish horah, or other similar circle

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<sup>66</sup> Hassan, “The Oblivion Seekers,” pamphlet.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Hassan, e-mail correspondence with the author, April 30, 2015. The cosmopolitan demographic is also evident in a black-and-white group photo taken during the event and published in Hanny Shousher, *Now and Then: An Historical Overview of the Muslim and Arab Communities of London, Ontario* (Printed by London: Creation Signs & Printing, 2013), 36-7. The convention was hosted by the Federation of Islamic Associations of the United States and Canada (FIA), which held a primarily social, rather than religious, function to establish a community of Muslims in North America. It was often criticized by more conservative Muslims for having assimilationist tendencies. See Sarah F. Howell, “Inventing the American Mosque: Early Muslims and Their Institutions in Detroit, 1910-1980” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009), 194.

dances performed in various cultures (see Figures 6-7). Friends and family smile, wave, or otherwise perform for a familiar eye behind the camera.

The juxtaposition of these two systems of seeing immediately raises questions of stereotype and representation of difference.<sup>69</sup> The news footage serves to alert its audience to the distinguishing aspects of a people. It evokes the public image of the Muslim community that emphasizes the unfamiliar. In contrast, the home movie filmed by Hassan's uncle, Hanny Shousher, offers an alternative view of "Oriental" culture that emphasizes normalcy by embracing everyday, personal moments. Suggesting something intimate and familiar, it draws a personal connection with the viewer through images of ordinary familial gatherings beyond cultural difference. The viewer can identify with Shousher's family, which then negates the authority of the news footage. This reading is productive in its potential to negate the viewer's expectations and preconceptions of Islamic culture as advertised in mainstream media. It has the capacity to foster a sense of cultural solidarity and a cosmopolitan attitude.

However, the juxtaposition of the two archives does not simply represent a binary of attitudes. One can also consider the possible influences behind Shousher's representation of his community. Hanny Shousher – one of the refused immigration applicants to Canada discussed in the *Common Knowledge* letters – immigrated to London in 1949, following Hassan's parents' persistent attempts to sponsor their family members' entry into Canada. After arriving in London, Shousher came to play a key role in the founding of what is now a

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<sup>69</sup> "The Oblivion Seekers" in *Films and Videos*, 63.

“unified and active” Muslim community and recently published a book around a dedicated practice of documenting and archiving various ephemeras relating to this history.<sup>70</sup> The footage in *The Oblivion Seekers* dates from 1955 to 1959 – within the first decade of Shousher’s life in Canada – and includes clips of a young boy riding a bike and a man driving a classic 1955 Buick Century in a North American residential area.

Informing my analysis of Shousher’s home movie is the work of video artist and cultural critic Richard Fung. A Chinese-Trinidadian who immigrated to Toronto via Ireland, Fung’s practice explores personal and national histories and identities, often situated within the context of global migration and colonialism. Videos such as *The Way to My Father's Village* (1988), *My Mother's Place* (1990), *Sea in the Blood* (2000) revolve around his parents, sister, and lover and incorporate family memories and home videos. With Shousher’s footage in mind, consider Fung’s perplexity upon first viewing his family’s home movies from 1960s Port of Spain:

The images on the screen did not sync up with the recollections in my head. ... [These images of the “right family”] contradicted everything I remembered of the tone and texture of my childhood. ... [T]he movies cast our first-generation, middle-class Chinese Trinidadian family living on the outskirts of the empire according to template of suburban America.<sup>71</sup>

Fung attributed these images of his childhood to the 1950s home-movie camera

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<sup>70</sup> Amna Wasty, “Ontario’s first mosque, here in London, laid a foundation,” *The London Free Press*, June 28, 2013, accessed March 9, 2015, <http://www.lfpress.com/2013/06/28/ontarios-first-mosque-here-in-london-laid-a-foundation>. The book is Shousher, *Now and Then*.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Fung, “Remaking Home Movies,” in *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*, eds. Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 29, 32-3.

advertisements, which utilized the nuclear family ideal as a selling point. As sociologist Don Slater points out in his study of Kodak's marketing strategies, advertisements for "the snapshot camera [promised to] reproduce the right family."<sup>72</sup> Is this the kind of image that Shousher wanted to project of his extended family, perhaps as a response to a long history of Orientalism?

Both sets of imagery in *The Oblivion Seekers* bring attention to the ideological or subjective forces that are always at play in the production of representation. The subjective viewer is thereby tasked with the responsibility to decide what he/she does and does not believe as well as to interpret what is represented in the work through his/her own positionality. This task seems to be suggested in the ending of the 2009 split-screen version of *The Oblivion Seekers*, when suddenly the home movie occupies the entire screen. In a short clip of a family gathering outside, two gentlemen point at the camera to direct a young girl's gaze, instantaneously making me aware of my presence as a viewer (see Figure 9). The subsequent and final clip is a long shot of large crowd of people in midst of an outdoor wedding in Lebanon. In this segment, lasting for over a minute, most of the people stare at and wave into the camera (see Figure 10). In this prolonged return of my gaze as a viewer, they establish a connection between their world and mine.

Through this ending, Hassan invokes a self-awareness of one's position and perspective in that the self is located in relation to the work itself. This effect

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<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Ibid, 32. Originally published in Don Slater, "Consuming Kodak," in *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*, eds. Jo Spence and Patricia Holland (London: Virago, 1991), 49.

is additionally facilitated by Hassan's incorporation of her personal archives in relation to public memory in a way that underscores the permeability of the boundary between the two. Through the changes in the presentation of the public and private archives in iterations of the work, the distinction between the personal and the public is increasingly erased: from two separate moving image projections in 1985 (and its 2009 split-screen excerpt) to the 2008 re-edit in the form of a single-screen montage. Regardless, the relationship between the two separate archives has always been made visible through Hassan's own prominent appearance in the news footage instead of the home movie.<sup>73</sup> The clip of Hassan dancing breaks down the seemingly neat compartmentalization between private and public.

Hassan's attempt to interrelate the public and private realms functions as a central logic behind the heterogeneity in *The Oblivion Seekers* and is a characteristic of Hassan's larger practice.<sup>74</sup> As she herself states, her work "[reflects] on the complicated nature of family history and official histories."<sup>75</sup> It is first and foremost a decolonial strategy in that it "counter[s] ... official texts [within the colonial context of history] with fragmentary texts, parables, and

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<sup>73</sup> Hassan does briefly appear in the home movie; however, this presence is not emphasized in the work. In comparison, the news footage of her dancing is highlighted through repetition and an added vignette in the 2008 excerpt (see Figure 12). Jamelie Hassan, e-mail correspondence with the author, April 30, 2015.

<sup>74</sup> This traversal between the boundaries of the public and the private apply to remaining source materials in *The Oblivion Seekers*, considering for example how Eberhardt's writings was private until posthumously published or how Kalthoum's biography began as a personal experience that became cultural history following her fame.

<sup>75</sup> Jamelie Hassan quoted in Monika Kin Gagnon, "Unraveling the Everyday: The Art Installations of Jamelie Hassan," *Governor General's 2001 Awards in Visual and Media Arts* (Ottawa: Canada Council for the Arts, 2001), 34.

personal archives.”<sup>76</sup> More remarkable is Hassan’s use of assemblage to feature a relationship between official history and family history, between the public and the private, between the collective and the individual. Consequently, the viewer is no longer able to easily compartmentalize the two. Through heterogeneous assemblage, the separation between the personal and the larger social and political context is actively dismantled.<sup>77</sup> As writer and critic Monika Kin Gagnon describes:

[Hassan’s] capacity to interweave the personal, social, and political domains through an orchestration of discourses and material forms ... facilitate a kind of proximity and familiarity by their use of snapshots and home movie footage, yet they are images of the familiar that become indelibly situated in their social and political contexts.<sup>78</sup>

In *The Oblivion Seekers*, the individual – the artist and the viewer alike – exists as social and political beings.

This emphasis on the interrelationship between the individual and the collective in *The Oblivion Seekers* further permeates of the boundary of the self. Geographer Mireya Folch-Serra argues that Hassan brings our attention to a relational understanding of one’s identity with respect to another’s.<sup>79</sup> Specifically, this understanding follows Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the self as one that is incomplete and always in the process of negotiation through social interaction. Miriam Jordan – writer, artist and co-editor of the 2008 excerpt of *The Oblivion Seekers* and *The Films and Videos of Jamelie Hassan* – writes that Hassan makes visible “the manner in which we are constantly in the process of

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> See Ibid, 41, 48-49.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>79</sup> Folch-Serra, 61.

forming our identities in conjunction with our discursive exchanges” within the social, collective environments.<sup>80</sup> It allows for the “individual spectator [to engage] in an intersubjective exchange between the self and a socially constructed other.”<sup>81</sup>

The political dimension of this socially constructed other is embedded in *The Oblivion Seekers* through the relationship between dance and revolutionary action. A significant influence for Hassan in the making of the work was a 1981 interview of Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida in which he responds to a quote by feminist writer and activist Emma Goldman: “If I can’t dance I don’t want to be part of your revolution.”<sup>82</sup> Asked to describe his idea of a woman’s place, Derrida argues that such act would only serve to put revolutionary steps “under house arrest.”<sup>83</sup> Instead, he emphasizes the need to challenge the notion of the “locus” or “place” itself, attributing to “the most innocent of dances” the capacity to “thwart the *assignation à résidence*.”<sup>84</sup>

Hassan found in the lives of Kalthoum and Eberhardt such innocent dances that brought about “a certain risky turbulence in the assigning of places.”<sup>85</sup> Kalthoum was simultaneously a cultural and political icon, associated with Arab Nationalist politics and independent movements. As narrated by

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<sup>80</sup> Miriam Jordan, “Chronotopic Bodies and the *We* of Aesthetic Discourse,” in *The Films and Videos of Jamelie Hassan*, 28.

<sup>81</sup> Jordan, 32.

<sup>82</sup> Derrida in Christie V. McDonald and Jacques Derrida, “Interview: Choreographies: Jacques Derrida and Christie V. McDonald,” *Diacritics* 12, no. 2 (July 1, 1982): 66. I thank Jamelie Hassan for pointing me to this interview.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 68-9.

<sup>85</sup> Derrida quoted in Hassan, e-mail correspondence. Originally published in Ibid, 69.

Hassan in *The Oblivion Seekers*, Kalthoum describes the beginnings of her career as follows: “when I began to sing in Cairo, I still belonged to the category of those who entertained ordinary folk ... I had a long struggle before me, and this struggle was made greater, if you bear in mind the great disdain in which Egyptian society held all entertainers, particularly female ones.”<sup>86</sup> In the 1955 Convention, the female singer who is prominently featured in the CFPL News footage as well as the female musician leading the dance captured by Shousher’s camera also embodies such innocent dance (see Figures 7-8).<sup>87</sup>

Isabelle Eberhardt, with her patterns of migration within the Arab world and movements between Muslim circles, outraged the French authorities in Algeria.<sup>88</sup> The French made numerous attempts to assign a place for Eberhardt outside of the colonies – succeeding at times, but ultimately thwarted. Interestingly, both Kalthoum and Eberhardt at one point or another dressed as Arab males to make their way as, respectively, an entertainer and writer in Egyptian and Algerian societies. In *The Oblivion Seekers*, Hassan presents evidence of revolutionary dance in the daily lives of Kalthoum and Eberhardt. As Miriam Jordan argues, by emphasizing “the politics inherent in [the seemingly mundane acts of] everyday life” Hassan points to “our willingness to disregard the corresponding power dynamics that are part of all cultural relationships.”<sup>89</sup> Invoking in the viewer a sense of answerability, responsibility, and complicity,

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<sup>86</sup> As spoken by Jamelie Hassan in the 1985 and 2009 versions of *The Oblivion Seekers*.

<sup>87</sup> Hassan, e-mail correspondence, April 30, 2015.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. Also see Paul Bowles, “Preface,” in *The Oblivion Seekers*, 9-12.

<sup>89</sup> Jordan, 30-1.

Hassan urges us “to account for our deepest beliefs.”<sup>90</sup>

*The Oblivion Seekers* calls upon me to reconsider my position and responsibility in the migratory culture that surrounds me. At the present time, the migratory culture in Canada is being framed by Bill C-51, controversial anti-terrorism legislation first proposed in January 2015 under the cloak of national security. Aimed to combat possible “threat[s] to the security of Canada,”<sup>91</sup> the proposed *Anti-terrorism Act* enshrined by Bill C-51 has been widely criticized “for sacrificing individual liberties and democratic safeguards.”<sup>92</sup> A recent report produced by the Canadian Bar Association (CBA) argues that this *Act* empowers the Federal Court to authorize measures that infringe upon Canadians’ constitutional rights under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* as well the *Privacy Act* without clearly outlining the limits of the law.<sup>93</sup> These measures include “extraordinary powers of surveillance, intelligence gathering and sharing, [and] preventive arrest and detention.”<sup>94</sup> Further, the *Act’s* broad definition of a “threat to the security of Canada” has in the past “been interpreted to include environmental activists, indigenous groups, and other social or political activists.”<sup>95</sup>

*The Oblivion Seekers* is pertinent in this context as it brings attention to how an individual’s perception and resulting actions may actively impact society at large. Bill C-51 grants new powers to the Canada Border Services Agency

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Canada, Bill C-51, *Anti-terrorism Act*, 2d sess., 41st Parliament, 2015, Summary.

<sup>92</sup> The Canadian Bar Association, “Bill C-51, *Anti-terrorism Act*, 2015,” March 2015, 1.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 12, 30.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 2.

(CBSA), allowing for “warrantless seizure and detention” upon discovery of any “terrorist propaganda”<sup>96</sup> with “propaganda” ambiguously defined. As a result, Bill C-51 presents the risk of a misuse of power on the part of the CBSA, an agency that is “not subject to any independent review body.”<sup>97</sup> Consider Jamelie Hassan's installation “Is this Pornography?” (*Shame* from *The Trilogy*, 1990), which tells the story of her encounter with a U.S. Customs officer. The officer appears to find a cause for suspicion in the disparity between her Arabic name and his perception of a Canadian citizen. The officer proceeded to search her belongings and discovered pre-Columbian Mexican figurines.<sup>98</sup> He asked, “Is this pornography?” The new “extraordinary powers” that would be granted to an individual government agents is worrisome, especially given the state of relations between Western and Arab worlds. Indeed, the CBA begins its report by highlighting the fact that Canada’s anti-terrorism measures since 2001 have undoubtedly had discriminatory effects.<sup>99</sup>

Canada’s (and my own) migratory culture also has been affected by the recent passing of Bill C-24, which is aimed at strengthening government control over the *Canadian Citizenship Act*. During the parliamentary process Bill C-24 was criticized in Parliament for “put[ting] significant new powers in the hands of the Minister that will allow [the conservative government] to politicize the

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Inscriptions of Truth to Size,” in *Inscription: Jamelie Hassan* (Regina: Dunlop Art Gallery, 1990), 18.

<sup>99</sup> The Canadian Bar Association, “Bill C-51,” 1.

granting of Canadian citizenship.”<sup>100</sup> The CBA argued that the proposed amendments appear to be primarily concerned with “loyalty to Canada or certain Canadian ideals.”<sup>101</sup> The passing of Bill C-24 has delegated the authority to grant and revoke citizenship to individual officers rather than a Federal judge, with the exception of special cases involving security and human rights issues. The decision to grant or revoke citizenship is now contingent upon whether the subject has “engaged in certain actions contrary to the national interest of Canada.”<sup>102</sup>

Bill C-24 and Bill C-51 reveal the possibility that the conservative government equates the value of a Canadian citizenship and the safety of the Canadian people with the preservation of “certain ideals.” While the *Multiculturalism Act* “recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion,”<sup>103</sup> it appears that the government’s fundamental concern is to keep the integrity of an ideologically cohesive national community. The proposed powers granted to individual officers may open the door for grave discriminatory conduct that is below the threshold of detectability and accountability. If an individual officer is given the power to decide what constitutes “terrorist propaganda,” a “threat to the security of Canada,” or an “action contrary to the national interest of Canada,” and if his/her decision can result in an individual being imprisoned or stateless, then

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<sup>100</sup> Canada, House of Commons, *Journals*, 41st Parliament, 2nd Session, No 92 (29 May 2014) at 1097.

<sup>101</sup> The Canadian Bar Association, “Bill C-24, *Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act*,” April 2014, 4.

<sup>102</sup> *Strengthening Canadian Citizenship*, *Statutes Of Canada* 2014, c. 22, paras (b), (j).

<sup>103</sup> *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, RSC 1985, c. 24 (4th Supp.), Preamble.

we must take seriously the problem of sustained and normalized bias that results from misrepresentation. Regardless of the strong procedural safeguards that have been enshrined in Canadian jurisprudence and administrative law, the system will be rendered meaningless if the key actors in the system are unaware of their own bias as a result of misrepresentation. Through the final moments of *The Oblivion Seekers* (2009), in which a crowd of people reflect the viewer's gaze, Hassan gestures towards the import of self-reflexivity, placing the onus on us to reconsider our participation within migratory culture and our relationship to recent passing of parliamentary bills that circumscribe our rights within it.

## II. Vera Frenkel, “...from the Transit Bar” (1992, 2014)

In turning from Hassan’s *The Oblivion Seekers* to my reading of “...from the Transit Bar” by Vera Frenkel, I expand upon Bal’s notion of heterochrony beyond the medium of video to also consider its effects in an immersive art installation. “...from the Transit Bar” exemplifies such expanded notion of heterochrony as its central moving image component exists as a fragmented, six-channel video within an installation space. My analysis focuses on how the installation’s heterogeneous and multitemporal assemblage can function to deepen our understanding of migratory culture. Similar to *The Oblivion Seekers*, “... from the Transit Bar” locates the viewer across geographical and temporal boundaries to focus his/her attention on the interrelations between self and other, the self and the foreign. Central to the viewer’s experience of “...from the Transit Bar” is how the viewer is placed in a physical heterogeneous and multitemporal installation that represents a space that is temporally located in the narrative of a journey, thus simulating not only migratory culture but also the movement of peoples in the act of migrating. In so doing, “...from the Transit Bar” anchors the introspective process of reception in the apprehension of the self as a foreigner. This strategy effectively disorients and shifts the viewer’s frame of thinking to facilitate the reconsideration of his/her participation in migratory culture.

As an installation about migratory culture and comprised of a heterogeneous assemblage, “...from the Transit Bar” takes the form of a

functional bar with a piano that is always playing – with or without a pianist. The bar serves vodka and whisky, representing the two dominant ideologies throughout the Cold War. Among the diverse selection of found objects in the bar are palm trees, trench coats, suitcases, and a variety of recent newspapers as well as the *Transit Bar* tabloid produced by the artist to respond to the different sites of exhibition as well as to document the reconstruction of the installation. Six monitors are scattered throughout, each screening a different montage of fourteen testimonies of migration. Through this video component, “...from the *Transit Bar*” dynamically presents a heterogeneous collection of voices, stories, and languages (see Figure 13). The multiple screens deliver six simultaneous voices that speak to personal experiences of displacement, discrimination, non-belonging and vulnerability. These stories are abstracted: cut into ambiguous fragments, edited nonlinearly, and dubbed and subtitled in an amalgamation of five different languages – Yiddish, Polish, German, French, and English.

In its incorporation of multiple languages, “...from the *Transit Bar*” alludes to not only different modes of communicating, but also to a multiplicity of points of origins and positionalities. These include the artist’s own history, whose lineage is embedded in the Yiddish and Polish voiceovers, the languages of Frenkel’s grandparents that were among the many languages silenced by the Nazi regime. On the other hand, subtitles in German, French and English represent languages of authority that carry a personal significance for someone who has escaped from the Nazi regime and since lived in London, Leeds,

Montreal and Toronto. Seeing that these languages are also those of commerce, diplomacy, and colonization,<sup>104</sup> the significance they have to Frenkel's personal history is particularly telling of the relationship between the legacies of colonialism and patterns of global migration.

Similar to *The Oblivion Seekers*, the heterogeneity in "*...from the Transit Bar*" is layered with a multitemporality that responds both to the destabilization of the chronological notion of time as well as a play of rhythms that interrupts the viewer's personal experience of time. Mieke Bal argues that video art demonstrates multitemporality by layering different ways of perceiving time and rhythms, thus putting the viewer in the position of experiencing the phenomenon of multitemporality.<sup>105</sup> In the case of "*...from the Transit Bar*", this multitemporality is successfully extended to the installation as a whole, enabling the viewer to experience it in an immersive environment in which he/she roams within a space of reality fragments.

Beginning from the moving image component, the viewer's perception of time as linear and chronological is positioned in relation to non-linear narratives. The montage of testimonies rejects the linear logic by adopting nonlinear editing techniques. The sequence of takes disrupts the forward movement of time, and with that, notions of progress and future-oriented thinking that is tied to Western linear conceptions. The installation components of "*...from the Transit Bar*"

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<sup>104</sup> Irit Rogoff, "Moving On: Migration and the Intertextuality of Trauma," in *Vera Frenkel: ...from the Transit Bar / ...du Transitbar*, ed. Jean Gagnon and Vera Frenkel (Toronto: Power Plant; Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1994), 39.

<sup>105</sup> Bal, "Double Movement," 21.

incorporate an anachronistic view of the past and the present. In 1992, when the work was made, the characters recalled their near and distant pasts. The xenophobic riots in German towns in 1992 become interrelated to the discriminatory acts experienced by immigrants in Canada, as well as by the local visitors of the installation throughout its many iterations in Kassel, Ottawa, Toronto, and more. These testimonies are also positioned in the present in relation to the viewers who share their own stories to each other, to the bartender, or on the guestbook. Some of the testimonies from 1992 were later incorporated into the 1994 website extension of the work, *Body Missing*, as well as a publication by the Art Gallery of York University, *The Bar Report*.<sup>106</sup> “...from the *Transit Bar*” is an art object – one that is part of the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Canada – that changes and transforms over time, serving to collapse the past, present, and future.<sup>107</sup>

A second temporality generated by this art object relates to the rhythm in one’s experience of time in the installation, which only becomes evident during a durational engagement with the installation as a whole. To speak to this temporality, I am relying upon my own experience – as a migrant and participant of migratory culture – of the most recent iteration of “...from the *Transit Bar*” within Frenkel’s 2014 survey exhibition *Vera Frenkel: Ways of Telling* (MOCCA, Toronto, see Figures 15-20). In one of my many visits to the installation, I was once taken aback by an unusual silence within the space. Rather than

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<sup>106</sup> See Vera Frenkel et al., *Raincoats, Suitcases, Palms* (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 1993).

<sup>107</sup> For the original iteration of “...from the *Transit Bar*”, see Figure 14.

encountering a “cacophony” of voices – as Irit Rogoff once described her experience of the work in its original iteration in Kassel<sup>108</sup> – I was greeted by a visual glitch on the first monitor in my line of sight. There also was a lack of sound coming from all of the monitors. Only one out of the six monitors was playing smoothly, though still without sound. These missing multilingual voices brought to light the slower rhythms of the installation, which was empty except for the bartender, who stood still as she stared into the one working monitor. The speaking subjects on the other monitors moved slowly, if at all. These instances of stillness were layered with the faint melodies coming from the player piano. The lack of sound in the one working monitor led me to pay attention to the differences in each character’s rhythms as articulated through their gestures. In my subsequent visits to “...from the Transit Bar” within the same exhibition, the usual “cacophony” of voices contrasted with the slowness that I experienced that one time, thus adding to the heterochronic experience of the installation’s temporalities.

The heterogeneity of “...from the Transit Bar” mirrors both the material and temporal diversity of migratory culture by incorporating and subsequently disclosing the tensions produced by the multitemporalities of this migratory culture. As Mieke Bal argues, a complex and challenging multitemporality characterizes both video and migration. Accordingly, video art can contribute to a better understanding of migratory culture, and vice versa.<sup>109</sup> I argue that

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<sup>108</sup> Rogoff, 27.

<sup>109</sup> Bal, “Heterochrony,” 213.

*“...from the Transit Bar”* goes deeper than simply disclosing these tensions; the installation as a whole establishes the phenomenological experience of heterochrony, which the viewer has to corporeally navigate. This serves as a reminder that people experience time differently, that “time is not an objective phenomenon.”<sup>110</sup> This exposure opens up one’s perception of multitemporality in real life as a condition of migratory culture at large.

By making the material and sensorial particularities of migratory culture visible and perceptible, *“...from the Transit Bar”* positions the viewer in the place of the migrant. This is achieved through the incorporation of familiar tropes and objects that serve to subvert our expectations, thus mimicking the experience of a foreigner navigating through an unfamiliar space and exposing the viewer to the phenomenological experience of heterogeneity and multitemporality that is specifically familiar to a migrant. Frenkel’s incorporation of the monitors within the space, for example, is far from an intention to provide escapist, narrative entertainment – the kind one would find in transit bars in which travellers pass the time. The moving image is abstracted, spliced, fragmented. The multiple narratives of migrants are broken down to deny the viewer any possibility of knowing the full story. Each of these migrants only shares a maximum of three sentences at a time before being interrupted by another storyteller, telling another part of yet another story. Segments from different interviews are edited nonlinearly and none of these confessions appear to start from the beginning. The viewer is thereby denied access to each person’s full narrative, because,

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 218.

indeed, such expectations are not realistic. As Frenkel continues to remind us, the “story is always partial.”<sup>111</sup> To compensate, art historian Sigrid Schade – who recently produced the most comprehensive monograph on Vera Frenkel to date – argues that viewers would “[catch] themselves anticipating the ends of stories according to internalized patterns.”<sup>112</sup> For example, Schade states that one could assume the plot of a heteronormative romantic relationship before the character reveals that the sexual identity of his lover is male.<sup>113</sup>

This narrative disorientation extends to the installation as a whole. Frenkel designed the installation space not only to position the viewer inside a demarcated space within the gallery, but also to emulate the experience of being in a foreign space. Constructed at a subtle angle from the gallery walls, the bar’s axes are shifted from those of the gallery such that the act of entering the space may trigger a slight spatial disorientation.<sup>114</sup> And what are we supposed to do in a temporary bar that is set up inside an art gallery? For although I had read and researched the work extensively prior to accessing it, I was still unsure about ordering a drink at this bar. This uncertainty is familiar to me; it calls my memory to my arrival in Canada, when it took me one year before I worked up the courage to place an order at Second Cup in Toronto. My hesitancy was caused by the intimidation of having to decipher their ordering system. “...from the Transit Bar” has that same effect as a real – but certainly

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<sup>111</sup> As embedded in the video component of “...from the Transit Bar.”

<sup>112</sup> Sigrid Schade, “Migration, Language and Memory in ‘...from the Transit Bar’ at DOCUMENTA IX,” in *Vera Frenkel*, ed. Sigrid Schade, 155–82.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

<sup>114</sup> Dot Tuer and Vera Frenkel, “Interview,” in *Raincoats Suitcases Palms* (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 1993), 47.

odd – bar. As such, it invokes in the viewer the feeling of being foreign.

Disoriented, we rethink our positionality and frames of reference.

Linguistic as well as temporal disorientation is also central to the workings of “...from the Transit Bar.” The language barriers embedded in the video testimonies profoundly limited my interaction with my surroundings. My experience is punctuated by short bursts of understanding and longer moments of waiting and unknowing. When the subtitles are in French or German, I am made to wait until the next time the subtitle changes to the only language I understand. It is these shifts in language and abrupt fragmentations that provide the monolingual viewer with the time to speculate on how the stories continue. Bal asserts that a temporal multiplicity is a condition of migratory culture, but is especially familiar to those who are “on the move.”<sup>115</sup> The negotiation between bursts of understanding and moments of waiting for the next set of familiar words is a disorienting pace to which migrants are particularly accustomed.

Bal’s theory that migratory culture’s experience of heterochrony can be disclosed through video is applicable to this installation because it is a uniquely disorienting space that purposefully distinguishes itself from reality. As an installation within an art gallery, “...from the Transit Bar” has the capacity to create an imagined world in which the peculiarities of migratory culture can be represented. By representing them in a fictive environment and in an unfamiliar manner, the viewer as a foreigner is reintroduced to these tensions that have become imperceptible in their everyday reality. As Rogoff argues, Vera Frenkel’s

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<sup>115</sup> Bal, “Heterochrony,” 218.

deliberate efforts to disorient her audience result in the viewer first losing his/her frame of reference.<sup>116</sup> Consequently, the viewer instinctively has to reorient him/herself with the interplay of multitemporalities and heterogeneous materials. The process of interacting and engaging with the installation becomes a process of recalibration in which the viewer re-negotiates her position in this nonconsensual realm.

The video component of “...from the *Transit Bar*” highlights the constructed nature of the moving image. This is evident in the non-linear editing, which highlights every cut and thus points to the assembling that occurs behind the construction of a moving image. The post-production stage is also emphasized in the dubbing, which does not synch with the movements of the characters’ lips, thus pointing to an editor’s ability to splice unrelated audio and visual materials. At times, Frenkel explicitly points to the artificiality of the image by leaving the blue screen intact behind the characters. Such intentional intervention draws my attention to the use of Chromakey, providing context for the relationship between truth and fiction that is at the center of this work.

Based on my experience of “...from the *Transit Bar*” in the exhibition *Vera Frenkel: Ways of Telling* (2014), it becomes clear that the installation as a whole prominently draws attention to its own modes of construction. To walk towards the installation, I had to circle around its outside walls, as “...from the *Transit Bar*” is contained within two layers of drywall that are punctured in several places, allowing the viewer to see through and in between them. These

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<sup>116</sup> Rogoff, 37.

seemingly unfinished walls and the protrusions that reveal the wooden framework of the space introduce the viewer to the installation (see Figure 20), reminding me of a movie set. In fact, for this exhibition, the MOCCA space resembled a soundstage more than it did a gallery space. The walls of the gallery that demarcated my path towards the installation were lined with Frenkel's early collages, *The Big Book: About Intentions and Executions* (1975), which led to the sculptural assemblage *The Storyteller's Device*, installed just prior to the entrance into "*...from the Transit Bar*." Made of fragments of chairs, stairs, gloves, masks, wood pieces and wooden crates, *The Storyteller's Device* first appeared like an accumulation of props, adding to the aesthetic of a film set. However, this collection of seemingly random objects created a play of shadows that suggests something of a different nature. The assemblage foreshadowed precisely the storyteller's many devices that are prominently featured in the videos. Through the ways in which the installation is presented in this exhibition, *...from the Transit Bar* declares itself as fictive space.

Situated in the imagined world of a transit bar, the viewer – who is now a foreigner in a strange world – forms new relationships with the materials presented. However, within this imaginary world are 'reality fragments' that ground the viewer to the present moment of their local environment beyond the installation. Much like Jamelie Hassan's inclusion of the pages from the *London Free Press* in *The Oblivion Seekers*, Vera Frenkel has incorporated newspapers that mark the temporal and geographical context of each iteration of "*...from the Transit Bar*" and specifically cater to the local refugee and immigrant

populations. As Griselda Pollock argues in her recent essay on “...from the *Transit Bar*,” these newspapers “function as ports, forms of connection and communication” between the viewer and “the [local] marginal communities.”<sup>117</sup> They situate the stories of economic migrants from “...from the *Transit Bar*” as well as the xenophobic riots in the 1990s within the urgency of local tensions. Pollock continues, “Frenkel remembers that each time the installation was created with these elements, the local anxieties featured strongly in the debates it aroused around immigration.”<sup>118</sup>

In the 2014 iteration in Toronto, local tensions were linked to the looming fate of Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) in Canada. The Department of Citizenship and Immigration had proposed a number of amendments to the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations*, targeting sections relating to Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP). They provided two main reasons for the proposed amendments: the “rising concerns for the fair treatment of TFWs” and an “unprecedented growth in demand for TFWs ... despite a higher national unemployment rate.”<sup>119</sup> To address the latter, the regulation underlined the “temporary nature” of employment through the Program by establishing a maximum limit of the duration in which a TFW may work in Canada.<sup>120</sup> Since its implementation in April 1, 2011, Temporary Foreign Workers are only allowed to work in Canada for a cumulative duration of four years and will not be allowed to

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<sup>117</sup> Pollock, 255.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Canada, *Regulations Amending the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations (Temporary Foreign Workers)*, *Canada Gazette*, October 10, 2009, I, 3052 – 3053.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 3058.

reapply to the Program for four additional years. As such, at least 70,000 Temporary Foreign Workers are instructed to leave Canada as of April 1, 2015.<sup>121</sup>

It is the lower-skilled TFWs who are most negatively affected by this new regulation. The *Proposed Regulation* itself indicated that

[w]hile there are a number of avenues for higher-skilled workers to achieve permanent residence, there are limited avenues for lower-skilled workers to do so. ... [The Government of Canada wished to] encourage the use of appropriate programs and pathways to permanent residence where available.<sup>122</sup>

The problem lies in provisions that render these pathways unavailable. Many of the Temporary Foreign Workers hold lower-skilled jobs that deem them ineligible for permanent residency. For example, in 2014, only 100 cooks across Canada were allowed to apply for permanent residency.<sup>123</sup> Lower-skilled Temporary Foreign Workers are also more likely to face economic barriers that affect their ability to gain legal representation, cover travel costs, and regain TFW status.<sup>124</sup>

While the official cause behind these amendments is the need to protect Temporary Foreign Workers from exploitation, it appears that such efforts are attached to regulations that ultimately abuse the most economically disadvantaged of these workers.

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<sup>121</sup> Les Whittington and Nicholas Keung, "Temporary foreign workers warned to leave Canada as required," Toronto Star, April 1, 2015, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2015/04/01/foreign-workers-warned-not-to-dodge-deportation.html>.

<sup>122</sup> Department of Citizenship and Immigration, 3058.

<sup>123</sup> Elizabeth Wozniak interviewed in "The Effects of Forcing Temporary Foreign Workers to Leave the Country," hosted by Louise Renault, Information Morning from CBC Radio Nova Scotia (Highlights), *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/player/News/Canada/NS/Audio/ID/2661963866/>.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

These new regulations also contradict their second stated objective: to ensure that Canadians are given priority for jobs that have typically been filled by TFWs. The reality is that employers are often unable to find local Canadians that are interested in filling these lower-skilled positions.<sup>125</sup> As a result, the same jobs will be taken by an influx of new TFWs, who in turn will again be replaced in four years. The Temporary Foreign Worker Program is thereby a state-sanctioned program of precarious employment in which labourers fill permanent job needs but are denied the security of permanent employment. Common in the past few decades of deregulated neoliberal economy, precarious workers are seen as readily disposable and thereby subject to lower wages and limited contracts, often without access to benefits or unions. In the case of lower-skilled Temporary Foreign Workers, the termination of their contract subjects them to deportation. These regulations imply that an influx of foreigners is tolerable and even desired when it is valuable to the advancement of Canada's economy; however, significant roadblocks are put in place to prevent the disposable members of these migrant workers from being able to call Canada home. In other words, changes to the Temporary Foreign Workers Program, coupled with the recent five-fold increase of Canadian citizenship application fees,<sup>126</sup> are effective means to keep select classes of foreigners as foreigners.

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> In February 2014, the cost of Citizenship applications increased from \$100 to \$300, and then further to \$530 in January 2015. See Stephanie Levitz, "Why Canadian citizenship fees have gone up, again," *CTV News*, January 1, 2015, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/why-canadian-citizenship-fees-have-gone-up-again-1.2168877>.

As an echo of the xenophobic riots in Germany that framed the first iteration of “...from the Transit Bar,” Canada’s management of the Temporary Foreign Workers Program illustrates how foreigners remain as designated scapegoats during tough economic times. This was also the case during the rise of precarious employment as propelled by the neoliberal economy. In his book *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* – an examination of the predominantly invisible nature of creative labour – artist and writer Gregory Sholette argues that industry deregulation and privatization were conservative measures that responded to late 1960s protests by well-educated baby boomers rejecting the post-war economic order typified by the hierarchical, Fordist model.<sup>127</sup> State and local barriers that had been in place to protect workers were lowered, making way for a free market and enterprise economy. Corporations looked elsewhere for a labour force that was not as demanding. Sholette argues that this was a “calculated” increase in unemployment as “emerging neoliberal political regime reduced the once elite economic status of America’s white workers.”<sup>128</sup>

Finding themselves readily disposable, the white working class had to cling to the precariousness of their employment. Most relevant to this paper is the way in which blame was directed towards immigrants and minorities.

Sholette argues that

the wave of manufacturing layoffs beginning in the late 1970s in the

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<sup>127</sup> Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 108.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 109.

United States, Britain, and other industrial nations was not perceived as a top-down, structural adjustment in class relations brought about by the financial needs of capital. ... The resulting mix of humiliation and rancor was directed down the economic ladder, like a poisonous gift, towards unskilled workers, immigrants, and inner-city Blacks and Latinos.<sup>129</sup>

Despite having filled a need, the contribution of migrant workers in a nation's economy often goes unrecognized. Temporary Foreign Workers have been contributing to Canada's economy through both hard labour and taxes only to face deportation.<sup>130</sup>

Fragments of testimonies by migrants in "*...from the Transit Bar*" remind the viewer of the fates of Canada's Temporary Foreign Workers. The characters speak of anxiety at the thought of home or simply the economic and political impossibility of returning home. One gentleman in "*...from the Transit Bar*" describes his immigration from Pakistan to Liverpool following the waves of immigration that began immediately after the war, "when Britain needed a gigantic third world cheap labour force."<sup>131</sup> Another man describes the fear he faces living as an illegal: "I was walking along the sidewalk and I was aware of a police car speeding in the opposite direction when suddenly it swerved across the street and pulled right in front of me. My immediate response was panic – they've come for me. I'm illegal, I shouldn't be here."<sup>132</sup> Yet another recounts, "I

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>130</sup> Lee Cohen interviewed in "The Effects of Forcing Temporary Foreign Workers to Leave the Country," hosted by Louise Renault, Information Morning from CBC Radio Nova Scotia (Highlights), *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/player/News/Canada/NS/Audio/ID/2661963866/>.

<sup>131</sup> Spoken by Julian Samuel, one of the characters in "*...from the Transit Bar*."

<sup>132</sup> Spoken by Iain Robertson, one of the characters in "*...from the Transit Bar*."

have no place to go back to but here.”<sup>133</sup>

Returning home is also a complex matter for Temporary Foreign Workers. Implemented roughly four decades after the start of the Program, the changes to the program affect migrants who became TFWs well over four years ago, many of whom came to Canada with a long-term purpose in mind. Some have children who grew up in Canada or are Canadian citizens.<sup>134</sup> There are challenges in gaining employment at home after years of being away. Vancouver-based immigration lawyer Zool Suleman argues that many Temporary Foreign Workers will illegally remain in Canada and become part of the underground economy and thus will have no protection from exploitation.<sup>135</sup>

In the context of current issues raised by TFWs, “...from the Transit Bar” functions to expose its viewers to narratives of migration, the experience of being foreign, and the temporal and political tensions that condition contemporary migratory culture. Through the immersive and interactive experience within the installation space, the viewer reorients his/herself in relation to these tensions. Through the presence of reality fragments that anchor the installation within its immediate locality, the viewer is also urged to resituate their position as an agent within the larger migratory culture. In the case of my interaction with the 2014 iteration of “...from the Transit Bar,” this migratory

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<sup>133</sup> Spoken by Bernie Schiff, one of the characters in “...from the Transit Bar.”

<sup>134</sup> Cohen in “The Effects.”

<sup>135</sup> Zool Suleman interviewed in “MARCH 31, 2015 Temporary foreign workers deadline. French immersion,” hosted by Gloria Macarenko, B.C. Almanac from CBC Radio British Columbia, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, March 31, 2015, <https://itunes.apple.com/ca/podcast/march-31-2015-temporary-foreign/id352379198?i=338862131&mt=2>.

culture is marked by the specter of economic inequality and the lack of security facing TFWs.

## Conclusion: The Foreigner in Migratory Culture

Shall we be, intimately and subjectively, able to live with the others,  
to live as others, without ostracism but also without leveling?

- Julia Kristeva<sup>136</sup>

This paper has explored the multidisciplinary practices of Jamelie Hassan and Vera Frenkel in the context of contemporary migratory culture. By analyzing the heterogeneous and multitemporal aspects of *The Oblivion Seekers* and “...from the Transit Bar,” I have highlighted central characteristics of migratory culture: the multiplicity of perspectives and temporalities. I have examined how the works place the viewer across geographical and temporal boundaries, while simultaneously positioning the viewer within psychical and physical spaces in which subjective experiences of time are experienced as tensions. Through their incorporation of heterogeneous and multitemporal materials, Hassan and Frenkel induce distrust in representation and a spatial and temporal disorientation, which prompt the viewer to reorient him/herself in relation to the works.

Further, Hassan and Frenkel both establish a material relationship between their works and the migratory culture at large. They do so by incorporating reality fragments that are activated in different ways. Hassan uses archival fragments to bridge the personal and the public, emphasizing the role of individual agency in the larger community. Frenkel uses local newspapers and

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<sup>136</sup> Kristeva, 1-2.

the space of the bar to emphasize the relationship between her fictive world and the migratory culture that immediately awaits the viewer just outside of the gallery. Both *The Oblivion Seekers* and “...from the Transit Bar” urge the viewer to reconsider his and her role as a participant of migratory culture at large.

Migratory culture places the onus on all of us – as active participants – to reacquaint ourselves with the tensions that arise from migratory movement. It shifts the focus from the separation between those who have and have not migrated to a migratory culture in which we are all implicated. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva similarly advocates for the responsibility for all of us to work towards the disappearance of the concept of the foreigner. She argues that our ability to “intimately and subjectively ... live with the others, ... live as others” depends on an individual, introspective journey to understand our inherent psyche.<sup>137</sup> For the foreigner to disappear, we need to recognize the psychic reasons that prompted the formation of the concept of the foreigner in the first place. Our complicity with this formation underlines the conceptual depth of *The Oblivion Seekers* and “...from the Transit Bar.”

For Kristeva, the formation of the notion of the stranger originates in our unconscious and is linked to the Freudian concept of the uncanny. In the German language, the uncanny – *unheimlich* – appears to stand in opposition to *heimlich*, primarily defined as “belonging to the house, not strange, familiar,

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 1-2.

intimate, friendly, ... [and] tame.”<sup>138</sup> *Heimlich* also has a second meaning:

“concealed, ... withheld from others ... something hidden and dangerous.”<sup>139</sup>

This second meaning is contradictory to the first and thus becomes closer to the unfamiliar rather than the familiar. Freud’s essay on the uncanny begins with his exploration of how *heimlich* came to encompass the meaning typically attributed to *unheimlich*. Going beyond the understanding of *unheimlich* as something unfamiliar or a fearful unknown, Freud argues that the uncanny “is really nothing new.”<sup>140</sup> Rather, the uncanny involves something that was familiar.<sup>141</sup> The uncanny refers to the feeling triggered by the reemergence of something that had once been known but was then “alienated from [the conscious mind]” by way of repression.<sup>142</sup>

Encounters with certain circumstances and narratives can prompt the feeling of the uncanny, that is, an anxiety that is unconsciously motivated by the fear that something that had been repressed will reveal itself. Kristeva argues that an encounter with the ‘Other’ is one such prompt. It reminds us of our own repressed uncertainties about ourselves: “the clash with the other ... transgresses the fragile boundaries of the uncertain self, [and becomes] the source of an uncanny strangeness.”<sup>143</sup> The encounter is uncanny as it triggers

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<sup>138</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955), 222.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*, 223-6.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, 219-221.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, 241.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>143</sup> Kristeva, 188.

our repressed fear of our split subjectivity, our inherent strangeness, our unconscious. As Kristeva describes it, “the other leaves us separate, incoherent, ... [as we] lose [our] boundaries [and] composure.”<sup>144</sup> We feel “‘lost,’ ‘indistinct,’ ‘hazy.’”<sup>145</sup> As a defense mechanism, we revert to another mode of repression through the use of “language as a symbolic barrier” and name the other ‘the foreigner.’<sup>146</sup> Subsequent encounters with the foreigner remain as a trigger for the feeling of uncanny as it stands for the fragility of both our repression and symbolic barrier.<sup>147</sup>

Kristeva points to at least two main responses to an encounter with the foreigner. In one possibility, the uncanny strangeness may be “evacuated” and displaced further into repression.<sup>148</sup> We pretend that it does not bother us: “‘I laugh ... I go away, I shut my eyes, I strike, I command’.”<sup>149</sup> This route could result in the “elimination of the psyche ... at the cost of mental impoverishment”, which in turn may lead to “paranoia and murder” as we act out our frustrations.<sup>150</sup> In another possibility, an encounter with the foreigner serves as an “opening toward the new, as an attempt to tally with the incongruous.”<sup>151</sup> It takes the form of a “destruction of the self” and “depersonalization.”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 187.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 184-7.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 187.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 188.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

Depersonalization refers to a sense of shock caused by a new environment.<sup>153</sup> It relates to a “[feeling] of strangeness” or a “transient perceptual disorientation” triggered upon entering a new country, which often requires one to adjust by relocating the self within the new setting.<sup>154</sup> Similarly, an encounter with the foreigner affects the boundaries of the self. Instead of blocking our fear of our repressed inherent strangeness, this encounter can serve as an opportunity to redraw our contours based on the rediscovery of the foreignness in ourselves. Once we discover our inherent strangenesses and “[recognize the foreigner] within ourselves”, the concept of the foreigner ultimately disappears.<sup>155</sup>

This process of depersonalization echoes the moments of disorientation evoked in my interaction with “...from the Transit Bar” and *The Oblivion Seekers*. In my experience of the “...from the Transit Bar,” I became disoriented upon entering the space and encountering the vaguely familiar, but still unfamiliar environment. I immediately felt like a foreigner upon entering the space, and momentarily relived the anxiety prompted by the feeling of being in a foreign space. Vera Frenkel writes that through “...from the Transit Bar” she aimed to explore “the experience of being foreign or being *perceived* so [emphasis added].”<sup>156</sup> In fact, my experience of ‘foreignness’ – that is, the anxiety

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<sup>153</sup> Julian L. Stamm, “The Problems of Depersonalization in Freud’s ‘Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis,’” *American Imago* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1969), 369.

<sup>154</sup> Peter Glauber quoted in Stamm, 369.

<sup>155</sup> Kristeva, 1-2.

<sup>156</sup> Vera Frenkel, “Revisiting the Power of Absence: Silences, Shadows, and Remembering,” transcript of a lecture given at the Memory and Archive Symposium, Musée d’art contemporain, Montréal, March 23-25, 2000. Later published in *Mémoire et Archive*, Musée d’art contemporain, Montréal, from Definitions of Visual Culture IV: Memory and Archive Symposium, 2000.

associated with being in a foreign space – resulted from my own perception of myself as a foreigner in foreign space.

This led me to differentiate between the physicality of being in a foreign space and the anxiety triggered by the feeling of foreignness, and by extension the fear triggered by the ‘Other.’ As Kristeva argues, the notion of the foreigner comes from within as a projection of our own repressed unconscious.

Accordingly, my perception of others as ‘Others’ must also be the product of my own repressed unconscious and independent of the identity of those others.

Once we acknowledge our inherent strangeness – which unconsciously projects the fears associated with the idea of the foreigner onto others – the notion of the foreigner disappears.

In *The Oblivion Seekers*, I became disoriented upon encountering two representations of the same community. While the news projects them as strangers partaking in strange behaviours, the home video presents nothing of the sort. Miriam Jordan writes that “Hassan’s videos call attention to the way we learn and interact with the world aesthetically – a way of seeing that necessarily includes questions of politics and ideology. She calls the spectators to account for ... the way in which their opinions are formed.”<sup>157</sup> The disparity between the two ways of seeing presented in *The Oblivion Seekers* specifically points to how we come to believe what we believe. Following Kristeva’s theory, the news footage effortlessly gains the viewer’s trust because it aligns with one’s unconscious desires to project otherness. In our blind trust, the uncanny

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<sup>157</sup> Jordan, 41.

strangeness is readily displaced further into repression. An acknowledgment of this process, however, would trigger the viewer to negate his/her fear of the stranger, thus disappearing the notion of the foreigner.

Such acknowledgment consequently invokes the feeling of complicity on the part of the viewer. Hassan “calls the spectators to account for [how their opinions impact their] interactions with the world.”<sup>158</sup> If the anxiety triggered by the foreigner comes from within and is independent of the realities of those who we perceive as foreign, then this explains – for example – why foreigners are quick to be blamed in tough economic times, while the actual factors remain overlooked.

In the context of this relationship between the foreigner and the other, “...from the Transit Bar” and *The Oblivion Seekers* demand of the viewer a recognition of our inherent strangeness. In turn, this self-recognition enables us to consider the ways in which we may be complicit in the conditions of global inequality that drive migration in the first place. By encouraging us to look within ourselves, “...from the Transit Bar” and *The Oblivion Seekers* foster a new approach to our social and political participation in migratory culture, offering a cosmopolitan vision in which solidarity between cultures is built upon everyone being a foreigner, and in so doing, having the foreigner disappear.

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

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## Appendix A: Images



Figure 1. Jamelie Hassan, still from *The Oblivion Seekers*, 1985/2009, digital video, 12 minutes and 12 seconds. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. Jamelie Hassan, still from *The Oblivion Seekers*, 1985/2009, digital video, 12 minutes and 12 seconds. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3. Jamelie Hassan, still from *The Oblivion Seekers*, 1985/2009, digital video, 12 minutes and 12 seconds. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4. Jamelie Hassan, still from *The Oblivion Seekers*, 1985/2009, digital video, 12 minutes and 12 seconds. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5. Jamelie Hassan, still from *The Oblivion Seekers*, 1985/2009, digital video, 12 minutes and 12 seconds. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6. Jamelie Hassan, still from *The Oblivion Seekers*, 1985/2009, digital video, 12 minutes and 12 seconds. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7. Jamelie Hassan, still from *The Oblivion Seekers*, 1985/2009, digital video, 12 minutes and 12 seconds. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 8. Jamelie Hassan, still from *The Oblivion Seekers*, 1985/2009, digital video, 12 minutes and 12 seconds. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 9. Jamelie Hassan, still from *The Oblivion Seekers*, 1985/2009, digital video, 12 minutes and 12 seconds. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 10. Jamelie Hassan, still from *The Oblivion Seekers*, 1985/2009, digital video, 12 minutes and 12 seconds. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 11. Installation view of *Jamelie Hassan: At the Far Edge of Words*, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, 2012. Left: Jamelie Hassan, *The Oblivion Seekers*, 1985/2008, digital video, 6 minutes and 11 seconds. Right: Jamelie Hassan, *Common Knowledge*, 1980-81, mixed media installation. Photo by MOCCA. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 12. Jamelie Hassan, still from *The Oblivion Seekers*, 1985/2008, digital video, 6 minutes and 11 seconds. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 13. Vera Frenkel, “...from the *Transit Bar*”, 1992, editing composite of five of the participants from the six-channel video monitors.

[http://www.verafrenkel.com/artworks/transit\\_bar/images/narrators/slides/editing.html](http://www.verafrenkel.com/artworks/transit_bar/images/narrators/slides/editing.html)



Figure 14. Vera Frenkel, "*...from the Transit Bar*", 1992, six-channel video installation and functional piano bar, documenta IX, Fridericianum, Kassel. © CARCC 2015.



Figure 15. Vera Frenkel, “...from the Transit Bar”, six-channel video installation and functional piano bar, documenta IX, 1992; this reconstruction, 2014, in survey exhibition *Vera Frenkel: Ways of Telling*, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto, 2014. © CARCC 2015.



Figure 16. Vera Frenkel, “...from the Transit Bar”, six-channel video installation and functional piano bar, documenta IX, 1992; this reconstruction, 2014, in survey exhibition *Vera Frenkel: Ways of Telling*, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto, 2014. © CARCC 2015.



Figure 17. Vera Frenkel, “...from the Transit Bar”, six-channel video installation and functional piano bar, documenta IX, 1992; this reconstruction, 2014, in survey exhibition *Vera Frenkel: Ways of Telling*, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto, 2014. © CARCC 2015.



Figure 18. Vera Frenkel, “...from the Transit Bar”, six-channel video installation and functional piano bar, documenta IX, 1992; this reconstruction, 2014, in survey exhibition *Vera Frenkel: Ways of Telling*, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto, 2014. © CARCC 2015.



Figure 19. Vera Frenkel, “...from the Transit Bar”, six-channel video installation and functional piano bar, documenta IX, 1992; this reconstruction, 2014, in survey exhibition *Vera Frenkel: Ways of Telling*, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto, 2014. © CARCC 2015.



Figure 20. Vera Frenkel, “...from the Transit Bar”, six-channel video installation and functional piano bar, documenta IX, 1992; this reconstruction, 2014, in survey exhibition *Vera Frenkel: Ways of Telling*, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto, 2014. © CARCC 2015.