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Between *strategic nostalgia* and *banal nomadism*: Explorations of transnational subjectivity among Arab audiences

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Abstract

This article discusses a bipolar and highly politicized set of positions adopted by Arab speakers in Europe, as they attempt to define the meanings and limits of their subjectivity, especially through their media consumption. The article draws from focus group research in three European capital cities: London, Madrid and Nicosia. Findings show that media consumption among Arabic-speaking audiences takes a political twist and contributes to blurring the boundaries between citizenship and identity. In trying to find a place between different cultural spaces and also between (or beyond) conflicting political spheres, participants adopt a number of strategic positions. This article focuses on two of the most often recurring ones, referred to as *strategic nostalgia* and *banal nomadism*. I argue that these positions represent discursive versions of a transnational strategy to manage presence and visibility within the tense and contradictory ideological environments they occupy.

Keywords

Arab identity, European identities, nomadism, nostalgia, satellite television, transnational audiences, transnational television

In 2011, France introduced the ban of the full Islamic dress in public for women. Around the same time, the British Prime Minister declared the end of multiculturalism (*Economist*, 2011). Only about a year earlier, the majority of voters in a referendum in Switzerland supported a national ban of minarets (BBC, 2009). In a number of European countries, such as the UK and the Netherlands, migrants applying for citizenship are expected to pass a test in which they not only need to declare their loyalty to the state but also their

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adoption of a specific set of cultural norms (Slade, 2010). At the same time, satellite dishes have been targeted by national and local authorities as symbols of segregation. Presumably, transnational television audiences switch into televisual worlds attached to distant and exclusive national communities (Aksoy and Robins, 2000).

Passionate debates around threats posed by satellite television to European cultural and political life sometimes reach the highest quarters of political power, as a recent proposal to ban Arabic news channels in the Danish Parliament (Reuters, 2010) demonstrates. As in the various examples mentioned above, there is an abundance of evidence illustrating the ways in which issues traditionally associated with private or community life in liberal European societies, such as dress, religious practices and television consumption, have become widely debated public affairs. This has been particularly, and often exclusively, the case with Muslim and Arab cultural practices, including the consumption of Arabic media. Given the intensity of public debates, it is unsurprising that, for Arabic speakers living in Europe, discourses of cultural identity and of citizenship merge in their attempt to locate their subjectivity in national and transnational spaces.

In focus groups conducted with Arab adult men and women in three European capital cities – London, Madrid and Nicosia – participants persistently attempted to define their subjectivity through a hybrid discourse that constantly shifted between a language associated with political life (citizenship) and a language associated with culture (identity). For some, this discourse emphasized an essentialist identity and for others a nomadic, cosmopolitan orientation. I refer to these discourses as *banal nomadism* and *strategic nostalgia*, drawing from Deleuze, Guattari and Braidotti's conceptualization of nomadism and Spivak's conceptualization of strategic essentialism respectively. These concepts have inductively emerged as analytical categories for understanding participants' attempt to articulate their multiple positions as members (or non-members) of cultural and political communities. In this article it is argued that such discourses reflect different strategies that people who occupy transnational social fields employ in trying to manage ideological contradictions associated with liberal democracy. In adopting essentialist or nomadic discourses, participants try to reconcile their highly mediated transnational life and the demands set upon them within European political systems. As will be shown below, the discourses of *banal nomadism* and *strategic nostalgia* emerge within a highly mediated and interconnected transnational field where Arabic media play a key role. They do so both in sustaining cultural particularity and in reinforcing universalistic values associated with liberal democracy.

Conceptualizing strategic essentialism and nomadism

Banal nomadism and *strategic nostalgia* are proposed as analytical categories for understanding transnational subjectivity. Their conceptualization draws from two primary intellectual pools. I refer to transnational subjectivity as the cultural and political position that participants take in their attempt to orient and locate themselves in the interconnected worlds they occupy. Transnational subjectivity refers to people's personal experiences of travel, (re-)settlement and their networked world of meaningful relations, as juxtaposed with their perceptions of systems of political and mediated representations that support or limit opportunities for participation in socio-economic, political and cultural spaces they occupy (Boehm, 2004; Werbner, 1999).

Strategic nostalgia draws from Spivak's (1987) strategic essentialism. Spivak argues that claims of an irreducible otherness are sometimes adopted by intellectuals and activists of minority backgrounds in their attempt to shape a discourse for claiming political recognition. The notion has been further articulated in addressing popular forms of a strategic essentialism, adopted by minority groups in everyday life and in their attempt to mobilize their sense of identity in specific circumstances (Noble et al., 1999). These strategic positions appear either in organized attempts to resist politics of marginalization and racism or cultural temporal tactics to construct spaces of belonging (Naficy, 1999). Spivak (1987) uses the concept of strategic essentialism as a political concept, not just as an interpretive one, to describe migrant subjectivity in postcolonial societies. At the same time, she uses it to call for minorities to adopt a temporary and conditional essentialism for the purpose of reaffirming and reinforcing group identity and group solidarity for political aims.

Spivak's strategic essentialism is politically provocative and conceptually challenging. In her argument, minority group members or leaders can turn to essentialism as a political position, not as a primordial and ever-present condition of internalized *Otherness*. Strategic essentialism allows groups to set their own temporal boundaries when claiming recognition in political arenas whose boundaries are set by hegemonic political players (Buden, 2007). Strategic essentialism can become a useful interpretive concept for example in explaining the shared identification as 'Black' among Caribbean and Asian minorities in 1970s Britain.

The concept of *strategic nostalgia* proposed here is inspired by Spivak's proposition. As with Spivak's essentialism, the exaggeration of a nostalgic discourse is strategic and temporal. It emphasizes loss of a home, land or loved ones, while drawing from strong symbols of purity as these are captured in a morality and a value systems associated with a nostalgic (and selective reminiscence) of a distant reality. These symbols are used to define a bounded self as distinctly different from other cultural groups. *Strategic nostalgia* emphasizes the self's difference as irreducible. However, the uniqueness of a diasporic self tends to be combined with a discourse that demonstrates an ability to manage living in culturally diverse societies. Unlike Spivak's definition, which assumes the nation as the context for strategic essentialism, *strategic nostalgia* demonstrates Arabic speakers' awareness of the transnationalization of their social field. The transnationalization of Arab public spheres especially, significantly advanced in the lively and highly politicized Arabic satellite television scapes (Sakr, 2007), has played a key role in new imaginings of subjectivity across space, as will be shown below. The emphasis on the past also provides continuity to individuals in sustaining a presence in local, national and transnational spaces. As Kinnvall argues, going back to an imagined past by using reconstructed symbols and cultural reference provides a sense of security against the 'existential anxiety created by the destabilizing effects of globalization' (2004: 744).

The second concept proposed here, *banal nomadism*, aims to capture another recurring discourse among the transnational group of participants. Words that emphasize individuals' dissociation from any national community initially appear as expressions of an individualist elitist cosmopolitanism. The emphasis on positioning one's self in 'third spaces' (Bhabha, 1994), beyond national binaries and oppositions, reflects a nomadic position as the subversion of set conventions (Braidotti, 1994), which can become

associated with political action and new forms of subjectivity. Nomadism, as discussed here, draws from Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) and Braidotti's (2006, 2010) post-structuralist analysis. Deleuze and Guattari (2004) argue that the nomads do not depart, like the migrants, from a specific milieu but rather move at the same time that they remain still. The nomadic space is a space of trajectories that cannot be captured by singular locations. Nomadism is a resource through which the metaphysical fixity of representations, identities and history become unsettled (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004). As Lowe and Shaw write: 'the notion of nomadism interrupts the persistently binary schemas which tend to condition the way we read and discuss not only postcolonial literature but postcolonial situations in general' (1993: 47). As such, nomadism unsettles ideological and political frames: '[t]here are no longer any true or false ideas, there are just ideas. There is no longer any ultimate goal or direction, but merely a wandering along multiplicity of lines of flight that lead away from centres of power' (Goodchild, 1996: 2). Consequently, nomadism can disturb set boundaries and ideological frameworks associated with national citizenship and political hierarchies based on race, ethnicity and gender stratification. Deleuze and Guattari's nomadism challenges the state apparatus and its associated ideologies of fixity in a banal manner, as it is not usually reflected in organized action, but mostly on individual imaginings of the world and ordinary cultural practice. Nomadism, in its constant questioning of the authority of the nation-state, presents a threat to the state and its machinery of war. Thus, every state wants to destroy the nomad (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004).

As the nomadic subjects challenge authority, their political action is also directed away from the vision of a singular subject bounded and defined by the community of the nation. The political and ethical orientation of the nomadic subject then fosters a cosmopolitanism that can lay foundations for new interconnections and alliances (Braidotti, 2006: 78). Or, as Noyes puts it, nomadism fundamentally opposes the empire 'in precisely the same sense that it has been articulated since antiquity – as a social (dis)arrangement and a subjective (dis)order on the fringe of empire, as a regime of technological, social and conceptual innovations' (2004: 161). As Braidotti (2006) adds, the increasingly mediated world of the nomad gives rise to possibilities for imagining alternative conceptions of planetary politics against neoliberal globalization. The unitary subject, she writes, is replaced by the subject constantly in the process of becoming. Mediated and imaginary mobility between cultural and political spaces that surpass and challenge the nation-state and its apparatus machine are constitutive elements of the social field of the nomad.

The banality and ordinariness of the nomadic ideological and mediated mobility becomes a counterpoint to the fixity of banal nationalism (and its reaffirmation through the national apparatus of power, including the media) (Billig, 1995). In Billig's analysis, solidarity and belonging become nationally defined through the reproduction of images of national fixity and ever-presence, such as those reproduced in media representations of 'our' country, 'our' football team, 'our' political leaders (Billig, 1995). Nomadic ideological spaces emerge alongside – or inside – the highly diverse and transnational media environments. Mediated representations of a certain *we-ness* and one nation's ideological righteousness are always contested by representations of other sets of *we-ness-es* and other ideological righteousness parading in different media. As a result, ideological fixity and commitment to a singular truth becomes more and more difficult to sustain.

Arab transnationalism and the media

While the relations between Europe and the Arabic-speaking world have a long and complex history, it is the postcolonial migration from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe since the mid 20th century that provides the primary reference in analyses of Arab cultural and political life in contemporary Europe. There is no doubt that the long historical relation between Islam and European Judeo-Christian traditions, as well as between competing colonial powers, has marked ideological boundaries between Islam and Europe (El Kenz and Amin, 2005; Navarro, 2008). However, the vast majority of Arabic speakers in Europe have migrated in the 20th and 21st century (Fargues, 2004). The Arab world has marked its cultural presence in Europe in new ways during the last few decades, especially through satellite television (Kraidy, 2010; Matar, 2007; Sakr, 2007).

Having become a topic of vivid public debates across Europe, especially after 9/11 (Gillespie, 2006), Arabic transnational television has become a political affair. In terms of production, Arabic transnational television has been enormously successful and has expanded in recent years. In an inventory of transnational television, Albizu (2007) recorded 13,570 television broadcasts by satellite throughout the world with Arabic-language channels occupying the sixth place, perhaps the most significant place after the globally hegemonic languages (e.g. English predominates and represents 40% of broadcasts). Historically, transnational television has emerged and developed around geolinguistic regions (Chalaby, 2004; Sinclair et al., 1998; Volkmer, 2008), which have expanded with the spread of satellite technologies to reach large numbers of dispersed diasporic and migrant populations.

In a cross-national survey conducted for the larger project this article draws from, the vast majority of participants across six European capital cities confirmed that television represents their most significant source of news and information.¹ Satellite television has played a key role in the diversification of television viewing and consequently of spaces of belonging. Matar (2007) writes that Palestinian audiences in Britain have access to a variety of broadcast channels with different orientations and claims on their audiences. The variety of media available to these audiences challenges polarizing discourses of 'us' and 'them' (Matar, 2007). While the disruption of singular and clearly bounded spaces though access to a variety of television channels has been confirmed in our study, essentialist discourses have not been absent. While present and persistent – as recorded in the discussion of *strategic nostalgia* below – essentialist discourses are fragmented and situational, indeed reaffirming the complexity and the contradictory nature of the transnational Arabic mediascapes.

Methodology

The present discussion draws from 18 focus groups conducted with Arabic speakers in three European capital cities in the summer of 2009. The focus groups represent a major element of a cross-European research project that investigates the relation between transnational media consumption and Arabic speakers' experiences of citizenship across Europe. Six focus groups were conducted in each city, forming two sets of single-gendered groups across three generations, aged 18–25, 26–45 and 46–65. Participants

were selected on the basis of their self-identification as Arabic speakers, a relatively neutral category that surpasses the tensions associated with identification on the basis of ethnicity, nationality or religion. Almost all participants were Muslim, but small minorities of Christians and atheists/agnostics were also included.

Men and women were equally represented in the sample. Single-gendered focus groups were organized and run by bilingual interviewers of the same gender as the participants. Participants were recruited using the snowball technique and each focus group included between six and eight participants. Class and generation are variables that are not equally represented in the sample as it was not possible to measure and equally represent people of all different classes, generations and ethnic groups in each of the 18 focus groups. However, in the analysis, available data about class or educational background has been taken into account when analysing the two sets of discourses.¹ Overall, the discourse of *banal nomadism* was most often adopted by younger participants of higher educational and middle-class background, though, importantly, this is not exclusively a middle-class discourse. *Strategic nostalgia*, on the other hand, was most often recorded among first-generation migrants though, again, this is far from being exclusively a migrant discourse. As *strategic nostalgia* is an ideological position rather than a descriptive category, class and generation are only two of the indicators that are associated with it. Political and religious beliefs also play a role in people's adoption of this discourse, as it appears that participants with more conservative religious and political views across generations tended to ascribe to it.

The project focused on capital European cities as these are locations of intense and significant presence of Arabic-speaking communities. While we make no claims for representativity, we did aim to represent in each city's sample the ethnic diversity within the Arabic-speaking communities living in the particular location. For example, in the case of London, participants came from all over the Arab world – from Sudan to Syria. In the case of the Madrid sample, Moroccans predominated as they do in the city and the country in general. In the case of Nicosia, the focus groups reflected the predominance of Lebanese and Palestinian communities in Cyprus.

The transnational focus of the present analysis corresponds to the significance that participants' put on their transnational connections. Participants' transnational orientation was expressed in the different ways they spoke about their media consumption, their meaningful relations and their engagement in identity projects. The study did not start by assuming continuity of a transnational Arab space or between cities. However, and importantly, similar patterns of transnational orientation were recorded in all three cities. These are largely sustained in transnational systems of communication. While the transnational Arab space is fractured and made sense of from within the specific spatial, political, ethnic, class, gender and generational position participants occupy, the transnational recurrence of nomadic and nostalgic discourses reaffirms the need to study subjectivity in its transnationality. Discontinuities were also recorded, mostly in association with historical particularities in the countries where participants live and with the ethnic composition of the sample in each location. These became more significant when national systems of citizenship and national media were discussed. These are separate though important findings discussed elsewhere (Slade, 2010).

Between strategic nostalgia and banal nomadism

The two predominant discourses participants develop when they try to articulate their sense of self reveal two diverging imaginings. As the discussion below illustrates, for a number of participants the 'here and now' is counter-posed to an idealized past history and a distant location, often associated with direct experience or collective memory of distant places and past times. To the other extreme, a significant number of participants develop a rational discourse of detachment from national communities, identifying instead as cosmopolitans and nomads, regularly moving between imaginative and ideological temporal and spatial contexts. Neither of the two discourses is ever present. While many people construct a sense of a transnational self by emphasizing either the nomadic or the nostalgic position, both positions are discursively constructed and contextual. Diverging imaginings sometimes merge, especially when it comes to moments of crisis. Both nostalgia and nomadism reveal centrifugal tendencies distancing participants from the established European systems of citizenship. In fact, often these discourses represent a direct challenge to the limits of European citizenship and national identities and participants' attempt to juggle what appear as contradictory universalistic and particularistic ideologies.

Strategic nostalgia

The concept of *strategic nostalgia* is both an analytical and an interpretive tool. It aims to grasp the meanings of a recurring ideological position taken by many participants across the three cities. In attempting to locate their subjectivity in time and space, participants construct a sense of self that depends on past experiences, or on collective memory of past experiences, and on a culture that resists temporal and spatial change. This position emphasizes uprooting, loss and pain caused by leaving meaningful people and places behind. As these symbols can only exist as idealized material for imagining the self, reproducing memories associated with them is crucial for sustaining transnational continuity. The reproduction of the most 'pure' and persistent aspects of a culture or a place – this being about moral codes, a country's natural beauty, or relations of love and care – takes place through everyday systems of representation of the self. Transnational television plays a key role in reproducing ideologies of a bounded particularity, as the words of a woman in London demonstrate:

Even if I'm born here, I still, if anyone English, Japanese or anything else, asks me 'where you're from?', I say I'm Iraqi. ... At home, we listen to Arabic music, watch Arabic TV and eat Arabic food and I myself still plan to cook Arabic food and have Arabic satellite television when I move to my own home. (London, Females, 18–25)

In many participants' words, transnational media represent institutional and symbolic systems for reaffirming the boundaries of a community and for reproducing essential connections. Transnational media support a projected subjectivity that goes beyond the temporality and boundedness of national citizenship.

No matter where you are born or which dual nationality you acquired in later life, you always refer to your home country. I would say most Arabs are like that. I think that our attachment to

our mother countries is greater than any other citizenship or passport gained later. (London, Males, 26–45)

The construction of subjectivities and of a community that crosses spatial and temporal boundaries becomes a narrative of transnational relevance. In the case of the man below, the narrative of a distinct self associated with an essentialist Sudanese identity is both internalized but also becomes a projected discourse, aiming at audiences across national and transnational locations.

When my children are asked where they come from they know they are Sudanese even though they are born here. I started recently to tell them about these things and the tribe they come from. They belong there, not here. We lived in the UK since I was born. I have lived in Sudan for less than a third of my life. However because of the social connections and the technology we use to stay in touch, not a single person thinks that I have been outside Sudan for even a day. (London, Males 26–45)

Unlike this man's claim to a stable and bounded identity there is an underlying assumption that such representations of the self have emerged and can be sustained in mediated networks. The symbols of continuity are constructed in mediated transnational connections, not merely reinforced in them. They allow this participant to project an imagined unchanged self, but also to construct an ideological space where those in close proximity are reaffirmed as culturally distant. The construction of an essentialist discourse thus is strategic but not temporary in this case. The strategic discourse adopted above shows a permanence of cultural boundedness but one that is sustained through spatial mobility and flexibility. As such it demonstrates a closed, essentialist internalized *Otherness* towards the nation and the city, which captures a specific form of mediated transnational subjectivity.

The repeatedly recorded resistance to systems of national citizenship across the transnational sample is associated with the emergence of a strategic, mediated and closed essentialism. The reasons for the critical take towards national systems of citizenship are complex. They reflect the critical distance many participants take towards anti-migrant and Islamophobic political discourses in Europe, but they also reflect inherent qualities of transnational subjectivity, as this spreads across (mediated) cultural and political spaces. For many participants, national systems of citizenship represent the most tangible limitation of the nation, against more meaningful and emotional forms of identification:

I have a British passport at home but that is the last thing I'll ever be. I will never be British, it is just a piece of paper nothing more. (London, Males, 18–25)

Referring to national citizenship as a mere set of documents is something many participants do. The binary opposition between national citizenship and identity, which is often projected when referring to European states, becomes blurred when it comes to political citizenship of the country of origin. National citizenship of the country of origin is associated with distant and past experiences and as such it becomes a more nuanced and complex reference. But in both cases, the limitations of national citizenship are

acknowledged by participants adopting a nostalgic discourse. In a few cases, religious transnationalism replaces national citizenship, which is seen as limited in its relevance to participants' transnational subjectivities:

I'm Arab and I belong to the Islamic nation. I do not differentiate, for instance, between Moroccan and Syrian. I get upset so much when they tell me that you are originally Moroccan. (Madrid, Female, 26–45)

While full rejection of national identity is extremely rare among participants, religious identification appears as the singularly most prominent alternative system of imagining the self outside the nation. Another participant from the same focus group refers to Islam as an unspoilt reference of cultural particularity, explaining that she chooses to wear the hijab to demonstrate her distinct religious identity. However, when it comes to the nation, she becomes more reflexive – and perhaps more strategic in her take – unlike the case of her religious affiliation:

I know that Arabs are lacking a lot of things which the Spanish have. So I'm not against being like the Spanish in these things such as order, freedom of speech and expression. The latter I may not be able to have as Syrian but as Spanish I could. (Madrid, Female, 26–45)

The ambivalence associated with the often contradictory representations of particularistic and universalistic projects this woman subscribes to reveal a strategic temporal and conditional character of the projected discourse of essentialism and nostalgia. This ambivalence is reflected in media consumption. While most participants consistently refer to Arabic media as invaluable cultural and information sources, some also expressed their anxiety in relation to the cultural particularity these media reproduce:

I think the vast majority of the community is not integrated – 70–80% – and the problem for them [the British] and us as people settled here are the satellite channels which occupy 90% of people's time. Even for me, in my house, apart from the kids watching some cartoons, it is 90% Arabic. (London, Male, 46–65)

This is an interesting example of the internalized ambivalence associated with *strategic nostalgia*. While often reflexive about the role of transnational Arabic media, a number of participants explain that these same media provide a balance against exclusionary systems of representation in the countries where they live, especially at moments of crises. A male participant in the London 26–45 focus group, who describes his regularly diverse media consumption, notes that when the 2008 bombing in Gaza took place, he would turn to Arabic media, and watch much less western media: 'The best coverage during [the Gaza bombing] was on Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera. The BBC and the others did not cover the news with truthfulness and neutrality.' Turning to a particularistic and closed cultural sphere is for many a temporal choice. It is often associated with their sense of alienation from western broadcasters who they see as biased against Arabs when it comes to coverage of events in the Middle East.

Some participants also turn their back on western media because they feel that these media reproduce representations of Arabs as political and cultural *Others* in Europe.

Feeling an *Other* was an emotion often recorded across the transnational sample, though more so in the case of Spain. In the words of two participants in Madrid, the retreat to a cultural community becomes a way to manage this exclusion: 'I have lived in Spain for 33 years and I still feel like a stranger. I have been living only with Muslims ...' (Males, 46–65), and 'I came here trying to integrate with great enthusiasm. I spoke the Spanish language even before deciding to come to Spain, but I now feel rejected. I share the flat with a Moroccan family because Spaniards refused to rent me a house' (Males, 26–45).

The particular geo-political context is no doubt important, though it is also important to note the transnational continuities in the ways participants manage social exclusion. The projection of a narrative of primordiality and a strong sense of belonging to an *Other* place provides a sense of equilibrium within unbalanced representational systems that reflect European political and cultural hierarchies. For some, European media are not only vehicles but also systems of reproduction of hegemonic ideologies of Eurocentrism and of *Othering*.

I accuse the European media for not catering for people like me. They don't talk about Arabs or about Egypt. They only talk about Muslims. I genuinely believe that, at some point, I was part of this society. Now I feel that this society doesn't want me. It's not that I ever felt that I was English, but I felt I had a lot in common with them. Now I feel that I am indirectly accused of being a terrorist, of being a problem that they have to tolerate. (London, Male, 46–65)

These words reflect a form of nostalgia different from the one associated with distant places. In this case, the temporal context is in the past, but the location is the same, that is, Britain and Europe. Comparing past and present experience and political ideologies within Europe of the past and the present reflects the ways in which zones of particularism have turned into systems of retreat from exclusionary systems of representation in European societies. This position has important political implications of at least two kinds. First, an emergent powerful system of reaffirming bounded cultural particularism – with media playing a key role – becomes a communal position of reclaiming an uncompromised and re-appropriated *Otherness* against an excluding politics of majoritarianism (Appadurai, 2006). In addition, emphasizing the significance of cultural life in its particularity becomes a balancing act against the backdrop of a system of political organization and representation often seen as restrictive and marginalizing.

In this context, emphasizing nostalgia rather than longing for something that is attainable (i.e. migration to the country of origin), reaffirms the incomparability between the idealized cultural purity and the real 'here and now'. The incomparability between past and present and between the distant and the proximate reflects the significant limitations of *strategic nostalgia* as a discourse for advancing Arabic speakers' recognition within multicultural European public spheres. In reaffirming *Otherness* this discourse fails to challenge the hegemonic hierarchies reproduced in European media and politics. While *strategic nostalgia* supports a space of representation outside exclusionary political and media systems, it remains introverted and largely unreflexive. Essentialism thus sits on a delicate balance between a temporal strategy for recognition and a long-standing tactic of withdrawal.

Banal nomadism

The second discourse repeatedly recorded among participants emphasizes cross-national imagination and mobility. While post-structuralist analyses of nomadism note that geographical mobility is not a requirement for nomadic subjectivity, the case of Arabic speakers in Europe reflects a version of nomadism associated with migration, diasporization and transnational mediated communication. For the Arabic-speaking participants, everyday life tends to be highly mediated, as confirmed in this study. The richer and more diverse the media world of participants is, the more they tend to resist rooting. It is no coincidence that most of those adopting the nomadic discourse regularly use different media – as these are defined in terms of technology, language and level of interactivity. A highly mediated everyday is associated with the recurrence of participants' unease with defining their subjectivity within singular and bounded cultural and political spaces. Against fixity, participants adopting the nomadic position project a complex, unstable and multi-positioned subjectivity.

I say I'm Lebanese Palestinian living in London but not I'm Lebanese and not Palestinian or not from London. Nowadays, a person can be million things at the same time, million citizenships, have more than one job, no more this or that. (London, Females, 18–24)

Locating the self across space and within a range of systems of identification, nomadic subjects appear as reflexively aware of unstable subjectivities conditioned to temporal, spatial, political and social change.

I introduce myself according to where I am and with whom I am. (Madrid, Females 18–25)

My culture has so many ingredients: Spanish, European not Spanish, Arabic not Islamic, Islamic not Arabic, Syrian and human. ... I can't say that I'm from one place only otherwise I'll be lying. I have to say everything: I have to include all Spanish, Arabic, European, Syrian, and Islamic identities. If I say only one identity then I feel I didn't reflect the whole reality. (Madrid, Females, 18–25)

Nomadic imagination does not turn against but it incorporates the migratory experience. This includes a reflexive awareness of the global political and economic systems, which define limits of subjectivity:

My country is where I can gain enough money to eat. (Cyprus, Males, 46–65)

The nomadic discourse is both reflected and shaped in media nomadism. The participants who adopt the nomadic discourse are the ones who are most often engaging with a range of different media. As these media represent various cultural and ideological positions and linguistic environments, nomadic subjects also casually and regularly move between media environments. With mobility between different media being constant, banal and ordinary, they not only use the media for information and entertainment but also as tools for organizing their transnational life. A participant, identifying as 'a citizen of the world' explains his nomadic media use:

I try to watch as many Arabic channels, plus Al-Jazeera English and BBC, and also Algerian channels. I also watch French television because my family lives there [in France]. (Nicosia, Males, 46–65)

Even if I like Al-Jazeera, I need to collect my own opinion based on flicking. (Nicosia, Females, 26–45)

Participants' regular mobility between media outlets not only reflects their nomadic position but also shapes it, especially as it becomes associated with a reflexive individualization (Giddens, 1991). Reflexive individualization is expressed when participants try to navigate and make sense of a complex interconnected world. Then, their diverse and complex media consumption turns into a strategy for taking control over and filtering the abundance of information (and ideological systems) available to them.

Personally I don't have loyalty to any channel. You use more than one source but it's not like if something is reported in one channel I think this must be true. (London, Males, 46–65)

I don't trust western nor Arabic media 100%. Every channel wants me to see events as it is considered by its agenda, every channel is reflecting its own politics. (London, Females, 26–45)

As suggested by Deleuze and Guattari (2004), within nomadic imagination there are not singularly defined true or false ideas; there are just ideas. As the nomadic participants reject unquestioned loyalties towards single ideological systems and institutions, they wander along multiple spaces that, according to Deleuze and Guattari (2004), can potentially lead them away from centres of concentrated power. There is evidence that new possibilities for affiliation (though not always politically progressive) open up through the diverse mediascapes participants occupy:

I do affiliate with this concept of the global Ummah, through the media. I never used to have that type of affiliation or association. I think that has developed recently. (London, Males, 18–25)

What *banal nomadism* appears to confirm in most cases is the critical distance participants take from both the nation of residence and the nation of origin. Importantly, as participants critically distance themselves from binary systems of political and cultural affiliation, they do not adopt an escapist irrational discourse. Instead they reflect on the possibilities of new politics of (self-)representation.

I feel I am Lebanese and Palestinian but only in a part of me. I am Cypriot but only in a part of me also. I don't feel I completely belong to one place. I belong to a certain community of people: like-minded people. Young people like me who travelled, have the same values. I don't feel I have to belong to a certain place. (Nicosia, Females, 26–45)

I don't consider myself immigrant, I don't like this feeling. I feel I am an international citizen. (Nicosia, Males, 46–65)

The words of the two Nicosia participants reflect a cosmopolitan imagination and a political orientation towards a cosmopolitan humanism (Chouliaraki, 2008; Stevenson, 2003).

This orientation shows an organic association between deterritorialized transnational subjectivity and cosmopolitanism (Hollinger, 1995; Werbner, 1999) shaped primarily in transnational mediated spaces. Delanty (2008) argues that the cultural dimension of cosmopolitanism is revealed in the creation and articulation of communicative models of world openness through processes of self-transformation. Perhaps the way participants above think of themselves and of their place in the world is exactly that. In self-transformation, he argues, new cultural forms take shape 'where new spaces of discourse open up leading to a transformation of the social world' (2008: 222).

The link between self-transformation and changes of a social world is best captured in the association observed between the nomadic discourse and participants' resistance to media stereotypes and social marginalization. There is a sense that Arabs (Muslims especially) are a priori excluded from a Eurocentric universalism:

Before 9/11 the Arab/Muslim, represented by the Moroccan, was just a simple worker who immigrated looking for a job opportunity, but after 9/11 and the Madrid attacks (in 2004) he has become something else in the eyes of the Spanish society: he's now rather considered as a danger to the public. And now the Arab/Muslim feels like a persona non grata. (Madrid, Male, 26–45)

In these words, versions of which are observed in all cities, participants express their sense of alienation fuelled by dominant public and mediated representations of Arabs and Muslims. This often takes the form of anxiety, as they feel unable to do anything that could manage a contradiction they have to live with. On the one hand, there is a sense that cultural symbols associated with being an Arab or a Muslim are rejected by the European mainstream. On the other hand, they are aware that these same values are the ones that promote equality beyond religious and ethnic affiliation. One of the ways nomads manage this contradiction is by selectively engaging with European and national systems of representation:

For me the idea of citizenship, media, identity, is fluid and constantly negotiated on a day to day basis. I share your enthusiasm for Britain, I wouldn't say love. I consider myself British but I consider myself many things and I have multiple identities. (London, Males, 18–25)

Many women especially feel that a divide between Eurocentric universalism and Arab particularism has been used to support their gendered and ethnic exclusion. Stereotypical images of Muslim women as voiceless and repressed reaffirm the process of *Othering*:

They would say that any problem I have is because I'm a Muslim ... to them, I have problems because I'm a Muslim, wearing the hijab and that when I leave my religion and take off my veil then for sure I will not have any more problems. (Madrid, Females, 18–25)

Women's resistance to their stereotyping presents a powerful case of blurring the boundaries between narratives of nomadism and nostalgia. The choice of a religious life is projected by some as evidence of their agency and in other cases references to multiple and nomadic identities become reflections of what individuals see as their empowered gendered subjectivity.

Within the nomadic discourse, binaries of origin and destination, or of western versus Arabic media are directly contested, as are oppositional binaries between a western

universalism against an Arab particularism. The gendered appropriation of values of modernity and universalism within an Arab value system (Kraidy, 2010) discussed above reflects the tensions associated with cosmopolitan imagination (Beck, 2006) and alternative conceptions of planetary politics (Braidotti, 2006). *Banal nomadism* demonstrates the possibility for constructing a reflexive space for multiple trajectories, largely enabled through mediated communication. The numerous, diverse and conflicting systems of representation that open up with transnational television and other media challenge meanings of belonging as territorial and as dependent on the nation-state and its Eurocentric ideologies. It is in this messy and anarchic space of communication that the nomadic discourse can become a strategy for claiming recognition beyond essentializing hierarchies associated with culture, race and religion.

As shown above, there are significant expressive and ideological differences between the nomadic and the nostalgic discourses that inform the ways participants articulate their sense of self in a transnational mediated world. There is however a position that overrides the differences between the two discourses. This has to do with overwhelmingly embracing values associated with liberal democracy. A set of values that has to do with a strong sense of individuality, freedom of speech and free movement cuts across difference. Either individuals project an essentialist nostalgic identity or a fragmented and changing self, they all express their appreciation of democratic values. Praising freedom of speech is informed and juxtaposed with other democratic values:

Citizenship is the respect of human dignity by consulting people politically when it comes to major decisions affecting their lives and the respect of their rights and humanity. (Madrid, Males, 26–45)

Such examples are characteristic of a discourse that honours equality, order and individuality. This is perhaps the most significant commonality observed across the transnational sample, alongside the articulation of an imagined shared Arabness. The particularistic imagining of the self as a member of a transnational Arab community is juxtaposed with a universalistic commitment to a democratic project of humanism. This juxtaposition reveals a transnational subjectivity as articulated within a particularism–universalism continuum (Robertson, 1993) against Eurocentric hegemonic discourses where Arab particularism opposes European universalism. At the same time, references to democracy as a project that surpasses the limitations of state politics and as compatible with cultural particularism reaffirm participants' desire to gain recognition while sustaining particularities associated with their transnational lives. Their commitment to transnational television, consumed regularly and alongside national television, represents one of the ways in which the ordinariness of transnational mobility between different social fields is revealed.

Conclusions

The merging of cultural and political discourses partly responds to and partly reproduces hegemonic ideologies about the limits and meanings of identity, citizenship and

difference in Europe. But it also reveals a strategic appropriation of these hegemonic discourses. While *strategic nostalgia* and *banal nomadism* are very different in their ideological orientation, they both represent the realities of transnational life, perhaps even of transnational self-transformations (Delanty, 2008) within highly mediated and politically tense environments. *Strategic nostalgia* and *banal nomadism* both reflect a merging of political and cultural discourses that challenge the limits of national imagination. This merging is the outcome of participants' constant efforts to take some control over the fragmented and complex world they occupy.

While similar in their transnational orientation, the implications of the two discourses are quite different. *Banal nomadism* promotes a new territoriality where recognition is claimed *across* political and temporal boundaries. This discourse appropriates the rationality associated with liberal democratic politics (and the Habermasian traditions of the public sphere), where cultural particularity becomes relevant when expressed by individuals who act as individual(-istic) citizens. This is in part a privileged position, which can only be associated with privileged cosmopolitan subjects (in terms of their class status and control of mobility). However, the present case demonstrates that it is more than that. It can also be a position associated with Hannerz's (1996) involuntary cosmopolitanism and an inescapable nomadism. The described nomads are not the beautified nomads of post-modernity; they are the transnational subjects who cannot but be nomads; as they seek a space of representation they also seek a space of recognition (Morley, 2001).

In contrast, as the nostalgic discourse positions itself outside territoriality it projects a sense of belonging *beyond* spatial and temporal boundaries. While it can temporarily offer a safe mental place against exclusion, it can make little sustainable contribution to politics of fair and inclusive representation in and across European societies. As it remains dependent on a culturalist discourse, it does not challenge the ideologically hegemonic cultural hierarchies in Europe. *Banal nomadism* on the other hand reflects a possibility for new forms of citizenship, such as those articulated within the growing cosmopolitan citizenship literature (cf. Delanty, 2008; Stevenson, 2003). In reflexively challenging the nation-state and the associated systems of representation, nomadism becomes a political discourse of resistance against culturalist hierarchies and exclusionary Eurocentric nationalist politics. Often individualistic and at times elitist, the nomadic discourse also represents a space of reflection, not only about the way subjectivity, community and the nation are but also about how they could be.

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Notes

- 1 Each participant was asked to fill in a questionnaire providing basic demographic information about themselves and some information about their media use. The questionnaire was filled in at the end of each focus group.

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