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# Hope and disillusion. The Depiction of Europe in Algerian and Tunisian Cultural Productions about Undocumented Migration

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## **Hope and Disillusion: The Representations of Europe in Algerian and Tunisian Cultural Production about Undocumented Migration**

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### *Abstract:*

Combining digital humanities, cultural studies and migration studies, this chapter analyses the depiction of Europe in Algerian and Tunisian cultural productions about undocumented migration. These cultural productions are used as gateway to imaginaries of migration and imaginative geography. Europe first appears as a fortress and a land that is especially hard to reach as well as a land where everything is possible: a land of freedom where one can succeed and be accomplished. However, Europe is not only the land of hope but also the land of disillusion. Cultural productions about undocumented migration sometimes portray the loneliness of migrants or the racism that they face. These works also speak of the economic hardships, as well as the fear of being expelled from this land that they risked so much to reach. Finally, the present chapter provides a constructive alternative to mechanistic approaches in migration and diaspora studies. We will analyze the different artistic strategies for expressing the agency of the *harragas*, that are rooted in their imagination, but still evolving in a specific political, social and economic context.

Key words: undocumented migration, *harraga*, Algeria, Tunisia, cultural production, music, imaginaries.

Borders between North Africa and Europe are increasingly difficult to cross because of the implementation of restrictive migration policies (Souiah 2012). Despite these restrictions, migrants and refugees attempt to leave their home country without passports or visas, often on boats, and usually at a great risk to their lives. The Mediterranean Sea has become the deadliest migration route in the world (IOM, Missing Migrants Project 2016). In the Maghrebi dialects, those who leave without documentation are called *harragas*, literally “those who burn”<sup>1</sup> the borders. This name reflects that fact that they do not respect the mandatory steps for legal departure. Also, they figuratively “burn” their papers to avoid deportation once in Europe.

This form of migration—*harga* (the burn)—is a source of inspiration for many artists (Peraldi et al. 2014). Songs (Salzbrunn, Souiah and Mastrangelo 2015a; Souiah 2011), films, and many forms of art have depicted *harragas* (Souiah 2014). The discourse about migration and borders in art stands in contrasts to political and media discourse mainly because it focuses on the narratives of the migrants themselves (Canut and Sow 2014). In addition, some *harragas* post content online that is related to their migratory desires and their “adventures” (Bredeloup 2008; Timera 2012; Gaibazzi 2015; Bachelet 2016). For example, they create pages dedicated to this topic on Facebook, where they also post and comment on footage shot during their journey across the Mediterranean. They also share the videos they create using images and songs they find on the web (Salzbrunn and Mastrangelo 2014). In this chapter, we purposely choose not to distinguish between “high art” and “low art,” nor between “art” and “non-art.” Therefore we will invoke the notion of “cultural productions” to refer to songs, books, paintings, videos, collages and Facebook posts about *harga*. These cultural productions, which are both digital and non-digital, are used as gateway to imaginaries of migration

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<sup>1</sup> The verb “to burn” in Arabic can mean “to free ride”, “to jump a queue” or to “run a light”.

(Martin 1989, 2003).

These imaginaries are “culturally shared and socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people’s personal imaginings and are as used as meaning-making devices and world-shaping devices” (Salazar 2014: 124). Moreover, “They are imaginary in a double sense: they exist by virtue of representation or implicit understandings, even when they acquire immense institutional force; and they are the means by which individuals understand their identities and their place in the world” (Gaonkar 2002: 4). A focus on mechanistic economic visions and macro-political approaches have dominated the study of migration (Wihtol de Wenden 2002). The study of imaginaries as an important factor in the decision to migrate is quite recent and remains rare despite the pioneering work done by Abdelmalek Sayad (1975). In his article “El ghorba: From original sin to collective lie,” he describes the mythification of migration in rural Kabilya and notably the collective misrecognition of the migrants’ life as workers in France (Sayad 2000). Various social scientists have subsequently analysed social imaginaries in relation to the decision to migrate (Barrère and Martuccelli 2007; Bredeloup 2008; Camacho 2008; Friese 2014; Karoui 2013; Lacroix 2010; Mbodji 2008; O’Reilly 2014; Poulet 2014; Ragaru 2008; Salazar 2010a, 2010b, 2014; Salzbrunn & Friese 2013; Souiah 2011; Timera 2012; Vigh 2009). Following Salazar, this article builds on the observation that “The motivations to cross boundaries are usually multiple, but they are largely linked to the capacity of migrants and their social networks to imagine other places and lives” (Salazar 2011: 577).

Analysing images and representations is even more crucial in a postcolonial migratory context. As Edward Said argues, “Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.” (Said 1993: 7) Inspired by Said’s concept of imaginative

geography, we study the images of Europe in Algeria and Tunisia as rooted in a specific power relation. However, this article breaks with a focus on the images of the dominant and how they perceive and construct the “others” and “otherness”. Rather, it focuses on the imaginative geography of those who are socially, politically and geographically at the margins: the subaltern.

This article also treats Algeria and Tunisia together rather than employing a comparative perspective, since the representations of Europe in cultural production in Algeria and Tunisia contain similar themes<sup>2</sup>. In both cases, the images of Europe are neither homogeneous nor consistent. Europe first appears as a fortress and a land that is especially hard to reach. The cultural productions about *harga* also evoke Europe as the land where everything is possible: a land where one can succeed and be accomplished. Some of these works depict a picturesque Europe, while others focus on material gain such as money and cars. Europe also appears as the land where one can free oneself from social pressure and where one can for example, drink and flirt openly. However, Europe is not only the land of hope but also the land of disillusion. Cultural productions about *harga* sometimes portray the loneliness of migrants or the racism they experience on the other side of the Mediterranean. They also speak of the economic hardships they face, as well as the fear of being expelled from this land that they risked so much to reach. Finally, the present chapter provides a constructive alternative to mechanistic approaches in migration and diaspora studies. We will analyse the different artistic strategies employed to express the agency of the *harragas*, which is rooted in the force of their

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<sup>2</sup> This chapter is based on data collected for a Ph.D. thesis about *harga* and contestation in Algeria (Souiah, 2014) and on data collected as part of a project directed by Prof. Monika Salzbrunn and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation entitled “Undocumented Mobility and Digital-Cultural Resources after the ‘Arab Spring’”. Simon Mastrangelo is completing his Ph.D. as part of this project and Farida Souiah is a postdoctoral fellow. As part of her dissertation, Souiah interviewed 30 *harragas* and their family members in Oran and Mostaganem. She analyzed Algerian artistic productions such as songs, movies, novels, paintings, political cartoons, etc.) during eight months of fieldwork in 2011. The results of the “Undocumented Mobility and Digital-Cultural Resources after the ‘Arab Spring’” project are based on three years of ethnographic fieldwork in Tunisia, Europe and in the digital space: we notably analyzed a corpus of 54 Tunisian songs and 20 private and public pages on Facebook.

imagination, but also draws on a specific political, social and economic context.

## **Europe as Fortress**

Cultural productions about *harga* often depict restrictive migration policies and visa restrictions. Mobility constraints are notoriously more difficult for the citizens of the Global South, as all passports do not have the same “power”: they do not grant the same rights to their holders. For instance, in 2016, German and French passports allow their holders to visit 158 and 156 countries respectively. That is, their holders were allowed on foreign soil without a visa (or by getting a visa directly at the border), whereas an Algerian can visit only 48 countries and a Tunisian 61 countries in similar conditions. The right to mobility is fragile and highly unequal (Barry and Goodin 1992; Corradi 2009; Golash-Boza and Menjívar 2012; Miaille 2009; Pécoud & Guchteneire 2006; Wihtol de Wenden 2009, 2013). While some are denied the right of entry in the Global North because they are perceived as potentially “undesirable” migrants (Agier 2008), borders are less constraining for other subjects—even if their passport does not grant them the right to mobility—who have resources such as money, qualifications, or networks.

Social scientists have documented the closing of borders and the restrictive migration policies that comprise the basis of unequal mobility, noting that migration policies shifted in the 1970’s (Massey et al. 2005). This “historical moment” marked the entry in a “new migration world” where migration policies were primarily understood as tools of control (Guiraudon and Joppke 2001). Indeed, since the 1970’s, migration has been perceived mainly as a problem since migratory flows are generally unplanned (Cvajner and Sciortino 2010). This negative perception of migration directly impacted the mobility regime. Those who claim to stay for a

short period of time are now suspected of presenting false motives and secretly harbouring a desire for a more permanent migration. According to Paolo Cuttitta, the imposition of visas is the primary instrument of migration control policies (Cuttitta 2007). Moreover, individuals are systematically suspected if they belong to a country of emigration or that is politically unstable. As Didier Bigo notes, this suspicion makes “the granting of a visa (...) an exception to the exclusion” and “obeys a logic of rarity “in the minds of those who deliver them” (Bigo 2010: 254).

Due to the restrictive and unequal nature of migration policies, cultural production on *harga* predominantly represents Europe as a land that is hard to reach or even as a fortress. Seen from the *harragas*’ point of view, Europe is a place of rejection and exclusion, where one is deemed unworthy of a visa. *Harragas* are on the “wrong” side of both the geographical and social divide; because they are mainly young urban men without professional qualifications, getting a visa for Europe is almost impossible. For the European consulates, they are a “migratory risk” if not a “security threat.” How does this system of (im)mobility shape the representations of Europe in Tunisian and Algerian cultural productions?

To answer this question, we looked at several pieces of art and at the artistic production published on various Facebook pages. The first of these cultural productions is a work by Zineddine Bessaï, a graphic designer and a visual artist born in Algiers in 1985. He graduated from the Graduate School of Fine Arts in Algiers in 2010 and his work is often tinged with humour. In this piece, he takes inspiration from the urban environment of Algeria, notably from daily life in popular neighbourhoods and the language used on the street. One of his pieces about *harga* is entitled “H-Out: the guide to immigration. The “H” stands for *harragas* and the title implies that *harragas* are kept out of Europe. Moreover, “*Hûr*” is a transliteration of the plural of the word “fish” into dialect. This play on words allows the artist to reference to a popular expression among the *harragas* who say they would rather be eaten by fish than by





Contemporary Art in Algiers and at the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations in Marseille. It was also shown at Corner House gallery in Manchester. Ironically, Zineddine Bessaï could not go to England for the opening of the exhibition because his visa was denied (Sheerin 2011). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Bessaï deals extensively with the topic of visas. He links the restrictive visa policy to *harga*. In “H-out,” the body of the three *harragas* is made of a Schengen short stay visa application form - those applications that often lead to a visa refusal or which are never even completed by the would-be migrants who are convinced that getting a visa is impossible.

In this depiction, the artist has drawn a cross in the place where the *harragas* heart would be. This pictogram usually indicates something that is harmful or irritating. In Bessaï’s work, this image is associated with the need to obtain a visa. It is also present in the map that composes “The Immigration Guide H-out.” This map represents space as it is experienced by *harragas*. For example, Europe is called “Schengen Oropa.” In Europe and North America, there are numerous white crosses on a red background. The green places - indicating that Algerians can travel to the country without a visa application - are rare on this map. The artist also chooses to physically represent the boundaries by a double barbed wire that cuts the map in half and separates the South from the North. The border runs to the south of the United States, Spain, France of Italy and Australia. Yet in order to indicate that the boundary remains porous, and to express his opposition to the limits placed on mobility, the artist draws pairs of scissors at various points near the border to indicate that it could be “cut off”, in other words, crossed.

Another body of work that deals with *harga* is found in Algerian and Tunisian literature. In his novel, “He Will Have Mercy on Us” (*Il aura pitié de nous*), published in 2004, Roshd Djigouadi, evokes the visa issue and mobility constraints in a very subtle manner. The story is

set in the early 2000s. The hero narrator, Adel, is an Algerian *hittiste*<sup>4</sup> who lives on petty crimes and small jobs. He recounts his boredom, his unhappiness, his sexual frustration and his desire to leave Algeria. The novel opens when Adel meets Omarou, a Malian migrant who is travelling through Algeria to try to reach Europe. The reader follows a few months of the life of Omarou, Adel and his friends in a popular neighbourhood (*houma*), of Algiers. Adel dreams of migrating, but does not take any action to leave Algeria, while Omarou works hard, mainly doing construction work to collect the money he needs to get to Europe. Adel wishes he was born a few years earlier, when it was still possible to migrate. In fact, he is able to use the mobility system as a means of income; at dawn he wakes, gets in line at the French consulate in Algiers, and charges those who are applying for a visa in order to take his place in line. When one of his friends asks why Adel why he never bothers to ask for a visa himself despite his frequent visits to the consulate he answers: “I am a free man; I don’t need a visa. A little bit of salty water is not going to bother me” (Djigouadi 2004: 31). However, despite these flippant comments, the narrator compares Europe to a fortress and the Mediterranean Sea to a cemetery. Here, he expressed a vision of Europe similar to that found in Bessaï’s work. Yet the notable difference is that Adel clearly decides to ignore the reconstruction of borderlines and the introduction of visa (which was not foreseen in the French-Algerian Evian treaty of 1962 and which was introduced in 1986 by the French government).

Algerian (Souiah 2011) and Tunisian (Salzbrunn, Souiah & Mastrangelo 2015a) music both invoke the theme of constraints on mobility. In terms of musical genre, this phenomenon is seen mainly in Algerian *raï*<sup>5</sup> and Tunisian *mizwed*<sup>6</sup>, while both countries have a tradition of

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<sup>4</sup> “Untranslatable term, a mix of French and Arabic, connotes the young Algerians who hang out, leaning against the walls (*heit*), whose ‘task’ is to support the walls. Because schools are overcrowded and unemployment runs high, many young Algerians are forced into the street” (‘Abd al-Haq, Verges and Hiltermann 1995: 14).

<sup>5</sup> *Raï* (the word literally means “opinion” in North African dialects) is an Algerian popular musical genre that originally arose in the city of Oran (Virolle-Soubiès, 1993). Because of its topics - among which feature alcohol, love and sex - and the music scene that it emerged in - cabarets, *raï* has a subversive dimension. *Raï* is also known internationally as part of the “word music” genre (Nooshin, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> *Mizwed* “is a type of popular ‘folk’ song which takes its name from the main instrument used to accompany

politicized rap. For example, the Algerian rapper Lotfi Double Kanon describes a world where borders are closed. Cheb Belkheir sings that he is tired of “regrets” and begs for “Schengen”. In Algerian street language “regrets” refers to visa denials (in reference to the formula of politeness “We regret to inform you...”) while “Schengen” refers to the short-stay visa common to the Schengen Area. Abdelkader Boukabouss repeats that he has neither a passport nor visa. He accuses European countries (that he does not name) of “cherishing” visas while *harragas* risk their lives. For the singer Reda Taliani, if young Algerians risk their lives while trying to reach Europe, it is because they cannot get a visa to travel legally.

The representation of passports and visas are a recurring theme on the Facebook pages about *harga*. The administrators and the members post pictures of EU passports, often with euros, highlighting the resources they embody. The administrator posted a picture of two passports laying on coins. On the image, it is written in dialect, using a mix of Arabic and Latin alphabet, “Give me a visa and leave me”. Few weeks later, the administrator posted a collage made of several images among which many refer to the mobility constraints, notably passports with the inscription “denied” in French, Arabic and English and migrants in detention centers. It is interesting to note that this *collage* does not focus only on the Mediterranean but evokes the Mexican-US border case —testifying to the existence of a global space where people endure similar circumstances. The road to “Paradise” or to “Italy” is also a common image used by artists on Facebook, even though the authors are aware of the fact that the living conditions are extremely difficult on the other shore of the Mediterranean Sea.

Cultural productions and Facebook pages about *harga* reflect the frustration of those who are marginalised by the visa system. They are both a reflection of migratory imaginaries even while they also influence these expectations. Therefore, it is not surprising that we found

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the singing, a type of bagpipe(...). Mizwid is a music which looks to rural, ‘popular’ song types for its roots, yet developed in Tunisia’s capital city. Thus it is an urban ‘popular’ music, which uses rural instruments, rhythms and musical modes, in complete contrast to its ‘classical’ counterpart” (Stapley, 2006, p. 244). This genre of music has long been associated with marginalized groups.

a very similar discourse among the *harragas* that were interviewed and observed as part of our fieldwork. For example, Sofiane was 30 years old in 2011, when he tried to leave Algeria on a small boat that was arrested at the Spanish shores, near Almeria. When asked about visas he said “I did not ask for a visa. They will not give me a visa. They give visas to people with money, merchants and businessmen. They give visas to old people, married people and retired people. They don’t give visas to people like me. Why would I bother asking for a visa?” (Sofiane, 30 years old, Oran, 2011). Ali, who tried to leave Tunisia in 2011 when he was 17 years old, considers visa constraints to be inhuman. He implicitly evokes mobility as a right and denounces this regime inequality: “Explain something to me. You are a human being and I am a human being. You are French and I am Tunisian. You can come here and have a coffee with me with only your ID card (...). Why do I need a visa if I want to visit you? Are you better than me? Why can you come to my country and visit it with your ID card? (...) How are you better than me? It took 9 months to conceive you and it took 9 months to conceive me” (Ali, 21, Tunis, 2015). The argument of social (in) justice is frequently expressed by Tunisians who desire equal treatment between themselves and the Europeans who visit their country.

Mobility is a discriminating factor both at an international level (between the Global North and the Global South) as well as within Algeria and Tunisia where those who have economic and cultural resources have facilitated access to obtaining a visa. In cultural productions and online forums “Burning” the borders and discrediting the visa system is a form of resistance to the unequal access to international mobility. It is a form of agency. Especially since migration is also a way to escape the hardship of daily life and experience a land where one may encounter new opportunities.

## **Europe as a Land of Opportunity**

Media and political discourses about migration, especially undocumented migration, often emphasize the naïveté of the migrants, pointing to their gullibility and belief in an “Eldorado”. Originally, this expression referred to a legendary lost city with abundant wealth, and it has been a persistent myth since the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century and the conquest of the New World. Today, the Eldorado is a metaphor for a place where one can become wealthy quickly, notably in a migratory context. The belief that migrants are misled by their own imaginaries is so strong that the International Organization for Migration (IOM) set up a program named Salemm (Solidarity with Children of the Maghreb and the Mashreq) in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt. The goal of the program is to depict the lives of undocumented migrants in Europe. The IOM finances cultural activities, notably plays, music and film workshops to try to contradict the depiction of Europe as an Eldorado<sup>7</sup>.

Cultural productions about *harga* often evoke Europe as an abstraction, a place that is “over there,” or a region that is beyond the Mediterranean Sea. Some North Africans also use colloquial expressions such “*Bled el-ghir*” which means the country of the others, or “*Bled el-gaouri*” and “*Bled el-roum*” (Western country) to refer to European countries. The places that are the most depicted in cultural production by Algerians and Tunisians are: France (especially Paris), Italy (either as a country, in terms of specific cities such Milan and Rome, or islands such as Lampedusa), and Spain (particularly Barcelona, Malaga and Almeria). Artists depict these locations as picturesque, invoking monuments, landmarks, sunrises and sunsets. As Noel Salazar has argued (2011), the use of these symbols suggests a link between touristic imaginaries and migratory imaginaries. One of the few differences between Algerian and Tunisian cultural production is found in which countries the artists choose to invoke. While France is a common reference in both bodies of work, Tunisian cultural production tends to

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<sup>7</sup> IOM, Salemm project, <http://www.salemm.org/fr/fr-projet> (accessed on 22 December 2016).

focus mainly on Italy, whereas Algerian representations often look to Spain. This point can be easily explained by an analysis of the migratory flows. Algerian and Tunisian migrations are postcolonial migrations (Nair, 2013) and France remains the main country of residence for the Algerians and Tunisians living abroad (MPC Team, 2013). Italy and Spain have become coveted destinations—largely but not exclusively—for undocumented migrants. For obvious geographical reasons these countries are also transit countries for migrants who come by boat. Migrants leaving from the western Algerian shores go to Spain, whereas Migrants leaving from East Algeria and Tunisia tend to have Italy as their destination, or at least a transit country in their migratory journey. The other European locations that are often depicted—though less as a destination than a space of transit—is Lampedusa. This island is featured most prominently in Tunisian cultural production. In his song “Harka”, Mr Mustapha describes the itinerary of a young man who wants to leave Tunisia, he sings about him:

“He has only one thing on his mind, it’s the sea  
His brain is tired. He wants to rest  
He has only one way on his mind, it’s Lampedusa’s way”.

Lampedusa is seen as the door to Europe. Many Facebook pages names mention the island in their title and many collages and photographs explicitly mention Lampedusa. In his very stimulating work on Lampedusa, Paolo Cuttitta documents the “borderization” of the island and defines it as the “theatre of the border play” (Cuttitta 2007).

One of the most recurring images in music videos and Facebook posts about *harga* stages a young man who is looking away at the sea. A sentence is often written on the picture in order to explain the hopes of the young man who embodies all *harraga*. For example, in the picture below, we can see a shirtless young man wearing a cap who looks at the sea. Over the image, in red capital letters is written, “*L’avenir ray mor Lebhoor*”. This sentence, which is a

mix of French and North African dialect means “Future is only behind the sea.”

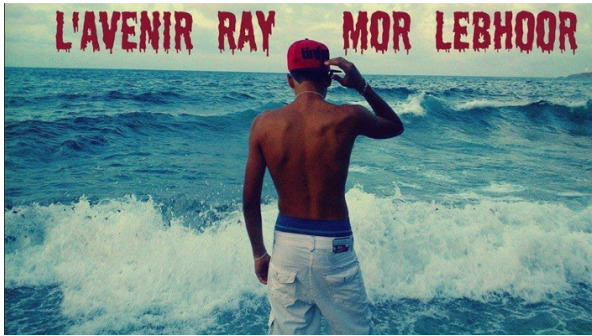


Figure 2: Facebook Page “7ar9a هجرة غير شرعية, harraga”, 7 February 2014

The belief in an Eldorado also represents the possibility of dreaming. Djigouadi’s novel, *He Will Have Mercy on Us* (Il aura pitié de nous), also evokes this Eldorado. Adel and his two friends, Kamel and Ali, tell stories about emigrants. Although those stories are not plausible, the three young men allow themselves to believe in certain tall tales about migration. Ali tells his two friends a story so implausible that they initially doubt him. However, Adel and Kamel end up being carried away by the story: “But, without daring to confess to each other, one wants to believe in it; We end up believing. It is such a pleasant ‘hope of elsewhere’” (Djigouadi 2004: 109). Adel compares these tales to a kind of addiction. The same representation can also be found in popular music, always in link to this state of waiting. In the song “*Ya babor*” (Oh boat) by Liberta, the singer who embodies a migrant says:

“I sit by the sea.

Lost in my thoughts.

I look at the boats.

The image of Paris comes to me (x3)”

The posture of this young man, sitting in front of the sea, allowing himself to dream of



emigration resonates with one of the images mentioned earlier.

The notion of an Eldorado is omnipresent in the Bessaï's artwork discussed earlier. His map is an anamorphic map or a cartogram; in other words, it is not an accurate depiction of geographical space, but rather corresponds to the imaginary cartographies of the *harragas*. As such, the size and location of the countries are distorted. For example, sub-Saharan Africa conspicuously absent while Spain and Italy (especially Sardinia and Sicily) occupy most of the map. France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States also appear prominently. In addition, this map evokes the notion of an Eldorado through two main elements: first, images of women's silhouettes and second, the inscription of western currencies. The legend of the map indicates that the silhouettes of young women correspond to "E'zels/Blondates," which the artist translates as "Western beauty/blondes" in the French version of map key. "E'zels" actually means "gazelle," the animal, which also designates a woman in Arabic dialect and is used to emphasize her beauty and her grace. According to the map key in the dialect version, the monetary signs (dollars, euros and pounds) correspond to "El Khedma w'deviz", which literally means "Work and foreign currencies." In the map key in French, the artist chooses to translate this by "Zone de puissance économique" which is roughly equivalent to the English phrase, "Zone of Economic Influence." In any case, Bessaï's imagined geography reflects the image of the Western Eldorado, a place where one can meet women and earn money.

The focus on women is related to the fact that most *harragas* are young men<sup>8</sup>. Gender norms in their home country also play a role. As argued by Benjamin Davis and Paul Winters in the case of Mexico, social and cultural norms influence the decision to migrate:

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<sup>8</sup> Even though the current share of *women* in the world's *international* migrant population is close to one half (GEMMA Gender and Migration, European Commission, FP7), some types of migration remain predominantly masculine and others feminine.

Social norms regarding gender roles play an important role in promoting or hindering migration by females and males. The patriarchal family system accepts and foments male migration, but hinders female migration. Fathers are more likely to resist the migration of daughters, and husband the accompaniment of their wives and children, even years after first leaving home (Davis & Winters 2001: 10).

The predominance of young men among *harragas* are also due to the the specific obstacles women face in embarking for Europe. The ways in which potential *harragas* obtain information on migratory strategies and the fact that they meet with one another (and with smugglers) in places of specifically male sociality also explain the small proportion of females. Women also face specific risks when departing from an isolated beach, in the middle of the night, in a group that is mostly comprised of men. In addition, if their attempt at crossing the Mediterranean fails, it is often difficult for them to go back and live under the family roof because of the social stigma of female undocumented migrants.<sup>9</sup>

In cultural productions about *harga*, femininity is mainly represented through the two symbolic figures of the mother and the western woman. In Merzak Allouache's film *Harragas* (2009), the expectations of migrants are closely associated with freedom and women. While their boat is drifting, Rachid, one of the main characters has a vision and sees a party that is taking place on a yacht. At the back of the boat, looking at Rachid, is a beautiful young woman who is wearing an evening dress and raises her glass. Later on, when they arrive in Spain, Rachid calls one of his friends to inform him that they made it and asks him to tell Agnès—whom the spectator of the film has not yet met - that he arrived and to put a beer in the fridge for him. Pictures of women soccer fans are often posted on the Facebook pages about *harga*.

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<sup>9</sup> During our fieldwork in Algeria and Tunisia, it was very challenging to identify and contact female *harragas*. There were rumors about Mrs So-and-so having left on a boat. However this data was always very difficult to verify and female *harragas* were impossible to meet. Analyzing the obstacles we faced during fieldwork is informative: It is hard to contact female *harragas* not only because there are fewer of them, but also because they encounter specific obstacles and a social stigma.

In one picture below, we see the colours of the Italian flag in the background. In the foreground is a collage of women supporters and three sentences written in different languages. In the Tunisian dialect, one can read, “I will leave and not come back. Sailor do a good deed,” referring directly to *harga*. In French, the phrase seems addressed to a loved one: “You are my life. I will cross the sea just to spend my life with you.” The last sentence, in Italian, is a message of love directed at a European country “I love you Italy”.



Figure 3: Facebook page “7ar9a”, posted on 10 December 2014

It is important, however, to put these pictures of women posted on Facebook in perspective. It is probable that other pages where mainly young men post—even if they have different interests and origins—will also have their fair share of pictures of attractive young women.

Western women are more rarely mentioned in the songs about *harga* where these individuals are often portrayed as chasing after material success. This points to the second feature of Europe indicated in Bessaï’s map (“*El Khedma w’deviz*”) since being able to afford a car is a reoccurring theme. In their song “Mchaou” (“They are gone”), the Tunisian rapper Balti says:

“He wanted to try his luck

He wanted to bring back [money] as the others did

He wanted to make his mother happy

He wanted to stuff his pockets.”

To better understand the representations of Europe, one must also study how these cultural productions portray the countries from which migrants are departing. These texts and songs deal with the daily lives of *harragas* in Tunisia and Algeria, and they focus on hardships rather than the possibility of finding an Eldorado. In this respect Tunisia and Algeria, despite their different political itineraries and economies, are depicted in a similar fashion. YouTube videos and on Facebook pages portray Algeria and Tunisia as countries where *hogra* is highly present and almost overwhelming. In dialect, the word “*hogra*”, a word which literally means “contempt” or “disdain”. It also has a broader meaning, designating an abuse of power that creates frustration and the feeling of being powerless. *Harragas* are portrayed as feeling trapped at the margins of a corrupt and unequal socio-economic system that offers them no prospects of improvement. Therefore the positive representations of Europe often serve as a foil to Tunisia and Algeria; unlike North Africa, Europe appears as a place where it is possible to achieve one’s dreams through work and resilience. Fantasizing about Europe is also way to escape the hardships of their daily lives. This is why Djigouadi’s characters allow themselves to believe the tall tales about migration. It also explains one of the main representations of *harraga* found online, which is the image of a young man turning his back and looking at Europe. We imagine that he is dreaming of economic accomplishments, but also individual and emotional freedom.

These representations resonate with the discourses of the *harragas* that we met during our fieldwork. Talking about his perspectives in Europe, Ali, whom we met earlier, argued that “Out there in Europe, you can find a job. Their lives are better than ours. I swear, their lives are better than ours” (Ali, 21, Tunis, 2015). He goes so far as to say that being jailed in Europe is better than being free in Tunisia. We interviewed Mohammed, a 23 year-old Algerian from

Mostaganem who worked as a street vendor, in 2011. At that time, he had already tried to leave Algeria by boat. Although he did not succeed the first time<sup>10</sup>, he was still determined to migrate. When we asked him about how he imagined his life in Europe, he replied:

“I cannot tell you. I will see when I get there. It is not easy there either. It’s hard but I have friends, *harraga*, who made it, they are accomplished now: they are married, they have kids, they are no longer undocumented, they have a car ... They are doing well and they left by boat. I have seen them leave” (Mohammed, Mostaganem, 2011).

Mohammed’s position allows us to nuance the representation of Europe as an Eldorado. While he communicated his belief that it was possible to succeed in Europe, he clearly did not want to appear naive or gullible. Consequently, he distanced himself from the myth of Eldorado and acknowledged that it might be hard to make it on the other side of the Mediterranean.

Cultural productions about *harga*, especially songs, deal with the life’s of those who want to migrate and what they hope to leave behind in North Africa such as their marginality, their boredom and their lack of prospects, more than they focus on with what Europe has to offer (Salzbrunn, Souiah and Mastrangelo 2015a; Souiah 2011). Even when they do evoke the European Eldorado it seems to be in opposition to their country. Cultural production in North Africa is full of actors who seek to transcend borders in order to physically or psychologically escape their social condition.

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<sup>10</sup> Two small boats left that day full of young men from the same neighborhood in Mostaganem. Mohammed was maneuvering one of the two boats. He had the skills to do so because his father was a fisherman and he had worked with him for a few years. The other boat was steered by one of his neighbors, Hicham. Hicham’s boat overturned and the Algerian coast guard intervened and rescued the *harraga*, but one of them died. During this rescue mission, the coast guards arrested the migrants on Mohammed’s boat and the survivors on Hicham’s boat. They were convicted for attempting to “exit the country illegally” (Algerian Penal Code, Article 175bis), for which they were dealt a six-month suspended prison terms and a fine of 60,000.

## A Land of Tragedy and Disillusion

Along with these positive representations of Europe as an Eldorado or at least as a place where one can become accomplished, there are also negative representations of Europe that circulate in cultural production about *harga*. Many of these works highlight the economic difficulties and racism that undocumented migrants may face in Europe, giving them a sober tone. The disillusion seems to strike the migrants as soon as they step foot in Europe or even earlier, when Europe remains a distant hope. In his political cartoons about *harga*, Dilem highlights humorously the difficult economic situation of some European countries. In his cartoon “Greece; a new destination for *harragas*” he goes against the myth of the Eldorado. The drawing represents a group of *harragas* on a boat that is close to reaching its destination. On the horizon, the migrants can already see Greece, including an archaeological site and a sign that reads “ruins” The caricaturist associates Greece’s archaeological sites—the ruins—with the catastrophic situation of Greek economy. Moreover, confronted with the social and economic situation of Greece, the *harragas* are under the impression that they never left Algeria. One of them says, “Damn... We went back to Algeria” Humorously, this caricature deals with the economic crises that shook Europe through the emblematic example of Greece.

The island of Lampedusa serves as a gateway to Europe that portends ambiguous or even tragic consequences. In his song “El-harga,” DJ Danger asks: “Oh Lampedusa, are you the problem or the solution?”. In his mizwed song Ahmed El-Amri blames the island directly as he sings, “I was not expecting that, oh Lampedusa, you made us wanderers and you made our mothers cry.” He says that the island turned them into a spectacle, a sinister joke for the Italians. On Facebook pages about *harga*, the internet users do not only share music videos and collages, they also share documentaries or television coverage of the issue of *harga*. One clip that is most frequently shared is an extract of report broadcasted in 2011 on the French TV

channel France 2 from the show called *Envoyée spécial*<sup>11</sup>. The ten minutes extract (taken from a longer, 45 minute report) deals with the migrants' living conditions in Lampedusa. It shows that some prefer to sleep outside rather than in the crowded facilities that are supposed to welcome the migrants. In an interview with a reporter, one of the young man simply says "Lampadusa sucks." The reporter asks him: "Are you disappointed"? His answer is again to the point: "Yes." The images of migrants trapped in poorly managed and crowded "reception" centres have durably marked the imaginaries of migration. Indeed, Lampedusa has become the symbol of Europe's failed migration policy.

In Algerian popular music, the songs depicting Europe negatively are mainly written from the perspective of a parent or someone who tries to persuade a loved one not to leave. For example, the raï singer El Hindi tries to dissuade young people from migrating by boat, insisting on the economic precariousness that they will find in Europe. He warns the *harragas*: "You pay 150,000 dinars in order to sleep on card boxes in the street." In the same vein, Houari Benchenet embodies an undocumented migrant who bitterly regrets leaving Algeria. He is homeless, works on the black market, and is mistreated by his employer. Moreover, he lives in constant fear that the authorities will ask to see his papers. A second song by Houari Benchenet aims to destroy the myth of the Eldorado and is written from the perspective of someone who wants to dissuade young people from leaving by boat. The narrator recounts: "Rome, London, Paris and Malaga are not a paradise". This theme is not limited to Algerian songs but can also be found in Tunisian music.

Sabrina, the only female rapper we studied, writes songs from the perspective of someone who migrated and then returned. She explains that she left full of hope but did not find anything positive on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. She raps: "It's not true. *Ghorba* is not a good life. Open your eyes. It's not paradise. Lose your illusions." Some

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<sup>11</sup> "Les naufragés de la révolution", *Envoyé spécial* (2011), [TV programme] France 2.

passages in Djigouadi's novel, *He Will Have Mercy on Us (Il aura pitié de nous)*, also refute the Eldorado myth. He points out to the racism that the *harragas* confront. When Omarou attacks Adel's passivity and the fact that he does not do anything to try to leave Algeria, Adel responds by mocking the young Malian's desire for Europe: "You're annoying me Omarou, I am already fed up with you. If God is willing, I will get married here, I will live here, and I will die here. I leave this shitty West and its consumerist society to them."<sup>12</sup> For him, the West is contemptuous and unreachable. Mocking Omarou's expectations, he asks, "Do you think that they will be waiting for you with a coffee and a residence permit?" Migrants potentially face not only economic hardship, but also the loneliness that results from the absence of their families and their friends. Thus, many works evoke those left behind, especially their mothers, and how they have suffered due to their son's absence. In the songs written from the perspective of the *harraga* who left, the singers often directly address their mothers, apologizing and telling them how much they miss them.

Migrants who have not yet left North Africa, such as Brahim, express their awareness that it can be very difficult to find a job in Europe and that newcomers can face precarious living conditions. He says: "There is misery. There is despair. You can end up sleeping outside" (Brahim, 24, Oran, 2011). Malek even mentions racism as a violence that he is ready to face: "I would rather be called 'filthy Arab'. I would rather live abroad, anywhere, not only in France and I will let them insult me: 'filthy Arab'" (Malek, 23, Oran, 2011). Hadj, another young man that we interviewed, sarcastically jokes that undocumented migrants are a godsend for European employers because they accept low salaries free of charge (Hadj, 26, Oran, 2011). This last representation of Europe as a place of suffering and loneliness resonates with Abdelmalek Sayad's work, which nevertheless recognizes the agency of migrants (Sayad, 2004). Indeed, if they are ready to endure the hardships of migration, this is because it still

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<sup>12</sup> "Tu m'emmerdes Omarou, tu me fatigues d'avance. Si Dieu veut, je me marierai ici, je vivrai ici et je crèverai ici. Je leur laisse leur Occident de merde avec leur société de consommation (...)."



seems to be a better outcome than suffocating back home, where there are no no prospects. The focus on the hardships undocumented migrants face in Europe reflects the power structure and the rejection of migration in Europe. This rejection is even stronger when the migrants are undocumented young men without a university degree, and who are perceived as Muslims. The negative representations of Europe thus do not dissuade migrants from crossing the Mediterranean. This should perhaps lead us to re-evaluate programs such as IOM's Salemm, as well as policies that aim to deter migrations by reducing so-called "incentives" and making the conditions of migration even more difficult<sup>13</sup>.

### **Conclusion: Europe, at the crossroads of hope and disillusion**

This chapter has analysed the varied representations of Europe in the art and digital images relating to *harragas*. Indeed, these works point to the agency of migrants who continue to search for Eldorado or land of opportunities. Europe appears as the promise for a normal life with employment, marriage and material security (which would allow for the migrant to help family members left behind). Yet Europe is also depicted as a destructive destination since the *harragas* realise that they may pay a high price and risk their lives only to arrive on a no-man's land like Lampedusa. The spectre of bad living conditions, loneliness and racism are always present. Nevertheless, *harragas* who are aware of these possible consequences still pursue their emigration plans so that cultural production in North Africa is replete with examples of actors who cross borders and seek to escape their social conditions. The ways in which individuals navigate the tension between hope and disillusion underscores their agency and their capacity to search for a "good life" (Salzbrunn & Friese 2013). Thus, focusing on the representations

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<sup>13</sup> For example, in March 2017, the mayor of Calais in France forbade the distribution of free meals in his city because he thought that it was an incentive for migrants to come.

by individuals offered us a vision of undocumented migration that is considerably more nuanced than the mechanistic models prevailing in Europe, that are based on the figure of homo oeconomicus and a narrow form of economic determinism.

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