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# Crossing and Passing: Discursive Borders in Off Shoring

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*As a term in popular discourse, globalisation marks a celebrated openness of global spaces. Critics of globalisation argue that a global economy creates borders that are more discursive than territorial. A current challenge to globalisation scholars is reaching an understanding of how the many configurations of context, space, time and place created by globalisation result in new ways of organizing space and identity. Based on rich ethnographic data from an off shore call centre in Morocco and informed by interdisciplinary research on space, this paper bridges the links between territorial and discursive borders in the global social network of off shoring. Metaphorical spaces come about when dynamic configurations of contexts at territorial borders relate or are made to relate. Call centre agents use metaphorical spaces to fix the meaning of space. In this article, I identify two different metaphorical spaces: crossing and passing that help agents organize and negotiate their spaces and subsequently their identities and power relations. I suggest that agents negotiate place through space. This crossing takes place as they imbricate the Moroccan context of "L'hrig" within the continuum of the call centre. I also suggest that agents negotiate space through place. This passing occurs via the imbrication of metaphorical space of polyvalence. Crossing and passing inscribe not only a literal meaning of "movement" and "disembodiment", but also the nuanced meaning of "movement and staying" and "disembodiment and re-embodiment" in a place where conjunctions of space, time, place and context collide. The creation of metaphorical spaces of crossing and passing suggests modification of our understanding of diaspora: attaining the diasporic space can no longer depend on physical borders alone; it must also rely on discursive borders.*

## **Introduction**

Globalisation involves many ongoing cultural, social, and organizational transformations in both developed and emergent countries. Mapping these transformations entails critically engaging with newfound challenges, not least: how is meaning fixed given the proliferation of borders in globalisation and their fluid articulation across time and space? Drawing upon ethnographic data collected in a Moroccan off shore call centre,

FezShore, this article challenges widespread theoretical assumptions about crossing and passing by revealing some of the diverse and creative ways that members, forced by the collapsing borders of globalisation, negotiate their spaces and hence their identities. Crossing and passing should not be seen only in relation to the celebratory tone of borderline fluidity (Anzaldúa, 1988, Kearney 1998). Shome (2006, p. 119) writes that in the “usual discussions of racial passing in postcolonial studies, the focus is often on the re-embodiment of the body -- that is, how the body is reconstructed or seen in the phenomenon of passing, for it is ultimately the body that passes.” Crossing alternatively tends to be associated with physical displacement of the body or ideas from one physical place to another. In this article, I explore the bridging of discursive and physical borders with the same determination that global communication theorists like Shome (2003, 2006) and Hegde (2005) undertake the complexities of contextual space in globalisation. I suggest that the bridges of passing and crossing in FezShore contain within them all the social struggles of *movement* and *immobility*.

By empirically and theoretically investigating FezShore employees (agents), who through their daily work transcend the limited contours of their physical borders, I build upon global studies' important contributions, by stressing how a deeper connection to communication studies can help nuance our understanding of open spatial borders within globalisation. To this end, I explore how *metaphorical spaces* are created as bridges between territorial borders and discursive borders as call centre members negotiate movement and immobility related social struggle. The story of FezShore suggests that metaphorical spaces constitute responses to situations that are polysemic and might be infused with contradictions. Drawing on a long tradition of geographical and communication thought that conceptualises space as multiple, dynamic (Massey, 1994, 2006), and contextual (Shome, 2003), I argue that, in the organizational globalisation of off shoring, metaphorical spaces are actively created when configurations of spatial contexts are made to relate to a territorial border. Call centre members use metaphorical spaces to fix the meaning of space. Finally, I argue that any attempt to understand how people negotiate space and identity when between territorial borders and within discursive globalisation configurations of borders must take into account active creation of metaphorical spaces by agents.

My ethnographic study of FezShore, from which this article is derived, began in December 2006 and lasted for 9 months. To understand how agents negotiate the multi-spatial contexts they encountered in their pursuit of perceived benefits of globalisation, I conducted 700 hours of participant observation alongside 60 semi-structured interviews of agents and their families. The interviews ranged from half-an-hour with agents (time was limited to lunch breaks) or 45 minutes to one hour per family member. I started dialogue by assuring the anonymity of the agents and then I asked a general question regarding their work. This was followed by focused questions about tensions between the various spaces in their lives, like: “*Is going back and forth*

*between work life and personal life difficult or challenging at all?"* Because this ethnographical research was completed in a country where Muslims represent 98.7% of the population (CIA fact book, 2006) in an industry that capitalizes on women who represent 70% of the call centre workforce (Richardson & Belt, 2001; Callcentres.net, 2003), the research incorporates an engendering approach (Nageeb, 2005). In this way, I attempt to highlight and disturb the segregated domestic/public spaces (see Ennaji, 2005; Rosen, 1984) associated with Muslim countries. I coded the data through artefact discovery, labelling matching artefacts, and explaining the code relationships (Glaser & Straus, 1967; Lindolf & Taylor, 2004).

This paper will proceed as follows. After introducing metaphorical spaces in the first section, I describe the FezShore setting (company name, participants, and products are all disguised for anonymity purposes). Next, I present findings in the form of two vignettes that describe the agents' daily work and provide subsequent analysis. Following Laurel Richardson's (1990) suggestions of 'creative analytical practice', the choice of vignettes is used to "be faithful to the lived experiences of people" for if we wish to use our privileges and skills to empower the people we study, then we need to foreground, not suppress, the narrative within the human sciences" (1990, p. 65). They serve as an invitation to readers to experience participants' work by exploring their daily digital manipulation of time and discursive negotiation of space. I illustrate the value of this conceptualisation by elaborating upon the meanings imputed to negotiation of space. I conclude by discussing the implications of the study for furthering the understanding of borders and strengthening the importance of globalisation studies.

The crossing and passing as discussed here have been documented in global studies literature, and in particular global communication studies (see Shome, 2006). However, a spatial contextual lens placed over off shoring call center work in Fez, Morocco elucidates a nuanced understanding of both crossing and passing.. Fez means the preserving of medieval and Islamic essence safeguarded by walls of the 11th century medina (old city). But, Fez also signifies the passage to the *la ville nouvelle* (built during and after colonization) presenting a new spatial logic of malls, larger streets, and flashy cars (Ennaji, 2005; Obdeijn, 2006; Sadiqi, 2006).

### **Discursive and Physical Borders within Globalisation**

Recently, at a globalisation conference, a participant told me that globalisation is passé because it means "everything and nothing." The sum-zero understanding is even-handed, for global studies literature is filled with an overabundance of claims regarding economic, political and cultural globalisation. Yet, the once promising appeal of the 'global village,' (McLuhan, 1962) seems to have become lost in occurrences such as the Asian economic crisis of 1997-1999, the Seattle anti-WTO demonstration, anti globalisation world protests, and, most recently, the discourse of anti-globalisation

within the US 2008 presidential election. Though the time of globalisation's historical origin is debatable - ranging from 1500 to only 20 years ago (Robertson, 2003) - many consider the recent upsurge in communication technologies a primary driver. According to its basic definition, globalisation is the expanding, deepening and speeding up of world interactions through opening global spaces and collapsing borders (Castells, 1996; Friedman, 2005, Giddens 1991; Robertson 1992, Scholte, 1996).

Following a new trend regarding this much overused word (see Held & McGrew, 2007 for reviews on the demise of globalisation views), a great deal of academic scholarship doubts the effectiveness of globalisation as a tool for conceptualising current social struggles. The answer, however, is not simply to counter the discourse of globalisation with one that undermines its assertions. Globalisation is a term that was coined to understand actual observations of processes and its very makeup reorganizes and impacts our social order. Avoiding the term is "to ignore the changes that gave rise to it, and give substance to its appeals" (Dirlik, 2000, p.6). Rather, we need to ask new questions that extend our knowledge about our current situation critically, best spelled out by global communication scholars Radha Hegde and Rhaka Shome (2002, p. 187): "Ultimately, the goal of critical scholarship ... is to make sense of the complexity of individual lives struggling in the cultures of global (dis)connections." These scholars, among a newer generation of global scholars (Ghemawat, 2007; Massey, 2007; Parameswaran, 2008; Tsing, 2000) challenge us to rethink globalisation scholarship critically by remapping boundaries between local politics and global interactions. Following this trend, globalisation is understood here as a set of discourses and processes that are changing the world and that need to be interrogated constantly in order to unveil the unbalanced blueprints of global processes.

Since the debut of globalisation terminology, theorists have defined, critiqued, and analyzed increases in the connectivity of people across time and space. Processes of globalisation are commonly expressed through two opposite streams. Conceptualisations of flows stretching horizontally across space erect and remake (spatial) discursive borders while demarcating (territorial) physical<sup>1</sup> borders (Castells 1996; Lash & Urry, 1994, Ohamae, 1995). Yet, physical borders are a principal factor in resistance, renovation, and remaking of globalisation (Delaney, 2005; Gille & O'Riain, 2002; Lugo, 2000; Massey, 1994, 2007; Sheppard, 2002; Shome, 2003, 2006). In many ways, the irrelevancy of physical borders within globalisation is analyzed in terms of space and time. Such emphasis may date back to Don Janelle's (1969) "time-space convergence" and David Harvey's (1989) "time-space compression," (see Sheppard, 2003), that indicates that the globalising world can be "characterized by speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us" (Harvey, 1989, cited in Sheppard, 2003, p. 242). Whatever term one favours, 'time-space distention' (Giddens, 1991) reflects the changing ways we understand

borders where space is dynamic and socially produced (Massey, 2007; Lefebvre 1991) and time is accelerated (Castells, 1996; Virilio, 1995).

Weighing in on the digital era's spatial and temporal changes, studies of flows have furthered thought on changes of territorial borders. One famous example is the 'global village' (McLuhan, 1962), which represents the *flow* of ideas globally through communication technologies. Similarly, a newer version lies in the proclamation that "the world is flat" by Thomas Friedman (2005). And for Scott Lash & John Urry (1994) flows of capital, people, information, and images are incapable of recognizing territorial borders. Moreover, these flows collapse global boundaries as a result of their speedy circulation, such as with Manuel Castells' (1996, 2005) "spaces of flows." Castells argues that spaces of flows exist between physical positions that lack continuity. They are a series of recurring and programmable interactions connected by economic, political, and symbolic structures of society. Spaces of flows, in this thinking, annihilates the logic of territorial borders because: "the dominant tendency is toward a horizon of networked, ahistorical spaces of flows, aiming at imposing its logic over scattered, segmented places, increasingly unrelated to each other less and less, able to share cultural codes" (Castells 1996, reprinted with Ida Susser in 2002, p.359).

Conceiving spaces of flows implies that the constitutive relation between borders and space is impossible. That is, a space of flows dooms territorial borders to the role of damming a flow. More so, it implies that, as Gille and O'Rian (2003) and others have pointedly argued, flows within networks underscore spatial power relations and ignore actors' sense-making in their shaping (Massey, 1994). Such assumptions imply that physical borders and agents within them occupy the same levels in spatial hierarchical powers. And while Castells recognizes, as pointed out by Sheppard (2002), the social inequalities embedded in spaces of flows within networks, he stresses the emergent spatiality of networks, disregarding the multiple ways that network participants are implicated within borders at the network (for details on Castells networks analysis and exclusions, see Sheppard, 2002, Massey, 1994). This speaks to situating the context of spatiality as a backdrop rather than an internal part of space. More attention needs to be paid, therefore, to spatialities of powers where context is not marginalized at the periphery, but rather understood as a relational dynamic force within such spatialities.

A major intervention by communication scholars in globalisation debates has been to demonstrate the importance of spatial contexts in globalisation flows. Raka Shome (2003) emphasizes the contextuality of space at the border, claiming that an acontextual spatial focus "risks rendering invisible the situated practices of space" (p.43). Revisiting the much researched US-Mexico border studies (Brown, 1996; Gonzalez, 1996; Martinez, 1997; Parenti, 1998), Shome highlights the complexities of transnational identity when spatial contexts are factored into the discussion. Localizing global spatial flows in jet-setting and transitory immigrants, Shome compares both jet-setting transnationals and transitory ("legal") Mexican immigrants' spatial relations. 'Free' and

'open' for jet-setting immigrants are a far cry from what they mean for transitory immigrants in the same space and context. The way in which the US-Mexican border is positioned materially, Shome claims, produces territorial control that traps Mexican immigrants in the transnational relations of space. She insists, for example, that the label of 'illegal' for immigrant spaces at the Mexican/US borders renders the bodies and the individual at this territorial place "out of place" - neither belonging to a diasporic space nor to a transnational one. The spatial context is central in constructing, communicating, and practicing "illegality" (Shome, 2003). Such understandings call into question the conceptualisation of spatial contexts within borders as static backdrop rather than an essential element in the continuous production of the border. It thus fails to take into account the fixing of space given multiple configurations of spatial contexts at territorial and discursive borders of globalisation.

A first step towards understanding how configurations of space and context are negotiated is to use the term *metaphorical spaces* to represent how configurations of context, dynamic in space and time, relate or are made to relate in order to fix meanings at borders. These meanings are fixed by actors who *shape* and are *shaped by* spaces of flows and the proliferation of borders. My use of metaphorical spaces is influenced by interdisciplinary work on space. I understand space to be both dynamic and multiple (Massey, 2006) and spatial contexts are central components (Shome, 2003). I further assume that since our bodies are located in space and are bound to and by borders as well as time, there also exists a distribution of meaning within a border.

I am aware of the fixture of metaphorical space made by geographers (see Duncan, 1996 for an in-depth analysis). Smith and Katz (1993) conceive of metaphorical space as a fixed and absolute space for the embedded grammatical use of metaphor. But what if we acknowledge that the contextual relational powers are already themselves a spatial process (Brown, 2000 albeit in a different sense)? If we start with spatial contexts at the centre, then I am interested in the fixing of space given multiple configurations of spaces and contexts at borders. Katz's and Smith's (1993) conceptualisation of metaphorical spaces highlight a number of aspects of metaphor that are important to my point. A metaphor, they note, compares one unfamiliar meaning system with another in order to reintroduce the newer event as utterly known. The idea of metaphorical spaces here works to continually enact in a similar way to metaphor. Metaphorical spaces come about when dynamic configurations of context at territorial borders relate or are made to relate. That is to say, they are created as a way to fix meanings of such configurations at globalisation borders. Therefore, as responses to situations that are polysemic and might be infused with contradictions, it is suggested here that metaphorical spaces bridge between territorial (physical) and discursive (spatial contextual) borders in the global social network of off shoring. In the following section I draw upon rich ethnographic data of FezShore, an off shore call centre in Morocco, to illustrate in tangible ways how this process occurs.

## Setting

To a large degree, off shore organisations are at the epicentre of globalisation's fluid flows and border stoppage (for discussions on off shoring/call centres and globalisation, see Friedman, 2005; Nicholson & Sahay, 2001; Hegde, 2005; Shome, 2006; Taylor & Bain, 2004). Off shoring to emergent countries and the keen interest of these governments to attract call centres to their countries (Saber, Holland, & Teicher, 2004), has only recently ignited academic interest in the implication of this type of work (Pal & Buzzanell, 2008; Perez, 2003; Van Den Broek, 2004). A rosy picture focuses on the new employment opportunities, technical infrastructure, and human resource developments. A more pessimistic view of this global industry highlights cheap labour and workforce exploitation. Many off shore call centre agents are subjected to voice neutralization and cultural indoctrination (Perez, 2003; Prayag, 2001) designed to polish their American or European accents and knowledge of culture so as to better sell to, lend technical support to, or provide customer service for their Western consumers.

FezShore, a Moroccan owned off shore call centre, is representative of the off shore industry. As a local midsize call centre it was founded in 2004 in a moderate flat in Fez's *ville nouvelle* (postcolonial modern city), with only 10 employees to pioneer its debut. With its expansion to more than 60 people, by the time of this study, FezShore utilises one flat for training and product sales and a second flat (about 50 ft x 60 ft) holds marguerites (daisy like flower seating configurations each equipped with 6 computers and phones) seating 60 people at a time. FezShore has many familiar off shore work characteristics. Its 60 agents 'Anglicise' or 'Frenchify' their names, neutralise their accents, and acculturate the social norms of customers. Off shore organisation agents are immersed in worlds. Servicing different Western countries (including Canada, US, France, Spain, Belgium, among others) through technical support or sales assistance, typically via telephone, agents are diverse locally (different races), nationally (different cities), and globally (different nationalities), and so bridge many spaces in the centre.

Among the sixty people working at the centre, there are Russians, Belgians, French, Germans, and sub-Saharan Africans. The Moroccan participants were either raised in Morocco or born and raised overseas and migrated back to Morocco. This distinction is important to mention for reasons that will be illustrated below. According to the work statistics, 70% of employees are female, and this is reflected at FezShore, with 58% of employees female and 42% male. And, like observations made elsewhere (Richardson & Belt, 2001; Cameron, 2000; Thompson, 2003), FezShore agents average 150 calls per day, though only 50 of which are actual customer-agents discussions.

Many of the economic pros associated with off shoring - new employment, managerial, and technical opportunities - are present at FezShore. However, the cons are also visible, such as the use and exploitation of cheap labour. Yet, a certain aspect of

the centre is unique: employees, and particularly returnee Moroccans, enjoyed their work and considered it a career rather than just a dead end job. Unlike many call centres where men hold positions of authority (Richardson & Belt, 2001), the CEO is a woman. Moreover, aside from a few scripted codes, agents are able to use whatever works when providing services to western customers. This “creative self” is unique in the sense that it gives agents leeway to negotiate many of their spaces discursively, as will be illustrated next.

### **Vignette One: “Hrighi w rja’ti”**

It is 8 am (10 am European computer time) on a cold Friday morning. Life is set in motion at FezShore. Throughout the open space of the the call centre production plateau, French phrases adorn the walls. Posted wall expressions such as “la réussite ne vient avant le travail quand dans le dictionnaire” - success comes before work only in the dictionary and “Ce n'est pas l'employeur qui vous paie, c'est le client (It is not the employer who pays you, it is the [European] client),” – remind agents how during the simple calls between local employees and global customers, lines between cultural, geographical, and organizational spaces become blurred.

Leaving the noise of donkeys transferring merchandise, reminiscent of medieval Fez, and the honking of European, American, and Asian cars, the actuality of Fez ville nouvelle at the border of their call centre, members sit in their marguerites. Smiles “across the phones” are penetrating the homes of Europeans. In the production plateau, the humming of agents across phones is echoed everywhere. Another day full of risking “racial humiliation”, hoping to “*l'hrig en Europe* (cross sneakily to Europe),” feeling “trapped in jammed small places, a prison,” dredging ways to escape “la routine de ce job.” Yet, at the same time, a day that provides a “passport, un bateau, une bouée de sauvetage (a boat, a life jacket),” a day that grants a “fenêtre sur la mondialisation (a window on globalisation)”, begins.

“When I started this job, I said to myself what is this world of pseudonyms?” says Cécile, one of my scheduled interviewees for today who has worked here for 3 months. When it was Jessica’s turn, she informs me “I told myself, what is this place, is it a theatre?” Darko explains “You know, sometimes I get someone on the phone that detects my accent; S(he) scorns me for being located in North Africa. I say I am in France, French of Arab descent. Are you a racist sir/madam? That usually shuts them up.” Darko stops for a second and then he reflects “we are like immigrants in France you know.” Anton stresses that his job is about acting “A pharmacist needs to put on a white coat at work and takes it off afterwards. Similarly we wear our Belgian names and personality. We leave them at work when we go home.” Emphasizing the same point, Daniel, a 19 year old student-call centre agent thinks the use of pseudonyms is useful because “it is only in having your pseudo that you can enter the skin of another.”

Indeed, “talking to Europeans, we have to pass as them in order to sell to them” concludes Amélie during her interview. “You see the French are really racist when you get to know them, look how they treat Arabs in France. Why should I tell them my real name,” says Adèle. “After all” insists Leo, “with white little lies you sell, you pass. It is legal, it is offshoring.”

It is 11 am (the computer shows 1 pm), Anton introduces me to Samir and Ahmed at a coffee shop during his brief morning work break. One of his non-colleague friends, Ahmed, is late. When Anton asks him why, the friend responds jokingly “*Shmo S’hablik Mazal Fi Fransa, Rak Fi Lmaghrib daba. Hragti w rja’ti*” (Do you think you are still in France? Now, you are back in Morocco. You snuck into France and came back!). Everyone laughs. Talking straight to me now, Samir, Anton’s friend from a French owned call centre says “But even if my name does not change, I am something else. You see, [in the call centre] there is the physical distance from Morocco and from France,” when I inquired about his feelings of keeping his name at his centre. He continues “Here in Morocco, we long to meet the French. Now after working with them I really think they are closed minded. Look, we are helping them with cutting edge technology.” Pensively smiling, he adds, “Why leave the sun of Fez, of Morocco. I want to go visit Europe, but never live there. *Pourquoi, je vais ‘hrag’* (Why illegally cross) *pendant longtemps quand je peux ‘hrig’ chaque jour* (when I can cross legally everyday). People who leave now are those who do not look hard enough or who cannot cut it in Morocco.”

### **Vignette Two: On est polyvalent**

It is lunch time.<sup>2</sup> Natalia invites me to her house for a Friday couscous meal at her apartment. We take a taxi and arrive just in time for lunch straight out of the oven. We are joined by her siblings and family. Natalia’s brother inquires about my research. Before I can answer, he says, “You know, it is like their personality is erased. During the day it’s like they are in France. You know they have new Christian names.” Natalia, with a higher pitch in her voice than usual responds, “Well, well, come on now, erasure of personality, that is a bit too much, don’t you think? Let’s just say that our personality changes a bit.” Turning towards me, the husband says, smiling, “Not to worry, because even if they are in Europe during the day. At night for sure then they know they are back in Morocco.” He ends his sentence with a laugh. “Well, you know what it is really” insists Natalia with an even higher pitch to her voice this time, “*c’est juste qu’on est polyvalent*, (it is just that we are polyvalent), that’s all.” The conversation comes to an abrupt end.

Computers show 6:00 pm (4:00 pm Moroccan time). It is time for Europeans to re-enter their homes. Time to make the most sales; it is time for new energy. It is time for Moroccan tea and pastries. All humming stops for 10 minutes and everyone follows the smell of mint tea coming from the kitchen. I join my 4 pm scheduled interviewee, Pénélope, one of the pioneers of FezShore. “This morning, I was on phone contract

sales. The database called someone in Belgium. I asked if I could speak to the person in charge. He said my 'conjoint' (my partner) and put a person with a softer voice on the phone. I begin with my usual salutation 'Bonjour Madame,' I say, while the person is saying 'oh ha ha'. I hear laughter, I ask why? The customer says, 'Because I am a man.' I stopped talking. He said, 'How does it make you feel? Does it shock you?'" Pénélope answers after a second of reflection "Well, Mister, you see, it is nothing to me. No! 'Chez nous' in Europe, we are used to this sort of things' I told him." Now talking to me, "I told him 'chez nous' because we are supposed to be in France you see. Then he said, 'Ok, thank you. One second, let me get my credit card...'" I mentioned that she made a sale. Pénélope responded, "Of course, you have to have du tac-au-tac (quick and judicious replies). I am flexible. I am polyvalent. You know in Morocco, we can adapt to everything. Besides, I see all these things on French channels at home."

It is 7 pm; Christine's computer shows that it is 9 pm. "Well," she shouts, "See you tomorrow!" Her screen saver, with Marilyn Monroe and other American sex icons and verses of the Qur'an and images of Mecca, keeps on scrolling. I am fascinated by this screen saver that belongs to Christine, a veiled, strong-headed woman. I am thinking of how to approach her for an interview when Dalia, in a neighbouring marguerite sighs, "It is 9 pm, time to go home." She continues "this type of work is like a prison, but the money is comparable to an entry level engineers' salary." Dalia, a married agent, tells me her husband supports their family, but she likes being independent. I pack my stuff and leave looking forward to another day of discoveries at this discursive and physical border, referred to by Natalia as a "curse and a blessing", where spatial distance is bridged through digital manipulation of time.

## **Results: Crossing and Passing**

Meanings are ambiguous and contradictory at FezShore, but analysis evidenced claims that metaphorical spaces were discursively created by FezShore members for two major space negotiations. First, I will discuss crossing, the negotiation of territorial borders through spatial contexts and, second, passing, the negotiation of spatial contexts through territorial borders. It should be noted that both of these negotiations are complex and in many ways incomplete. Nevertheless, such observations yield to understanding ways members negotiate the multitude of spaces to fix meanings at borders. Such a formulation is important if we assume that the proliferation and dispersal of borders (De Genova, 1998 cited in Delany 2005) are produced socially through the power relations that maintain their physicality (Lugo, 2000; Gill & O'Rian, 2002).

### **Crossing: Negotiating Physical Borders through Spatial Contexts**

Global studies research indicates that collapsing borders inspire the preservation of territorial borders as a way to resist or renovate globalisation (Gille & 'O Riain, 2002, Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney, 2005; Sheppard, 2002; Souday & Kunda, 2003). At FezShore, spatial context borders, in the form of metaphorical spaces, are injected in order to make sense of the multiple configurations of space, time, and contexts faced by the employees. As I discuss below, the findings suggest that the context of *l'hrig* or *il(legal) crossing* across time and space is used to describe work at the centre. It is created as a response to contradictory meanings associated with the call centre to bridge between the territorial and the discursive borders in FezShore.

At the onset of the vignette, members leave the medieval and postcolonial modern city of Fez to enter the borders of FezShore. Making sense of off shoring at these borders, members stress words such as “burn”, “risky”, “prison”, “daring”, “escaping”, “immigration” and “traversing.” This understanding is illustrated both by Cécile “When I started this job, I said to myself what is this world of pseudonyms?” and Jessica’s expression “I told myself, is this a sort of theatre?” Participants unprepared for a world that collapses borders through virtual communication, media, and organisational interactions face situations where meanings are many, multi-faceted and maybe contradictory.

Cécile answers her question saying “I feel that the centre is a bridge to Europe.” Consider, for example, references to “passport”, a “boat”, a “life jacket” all indicative of the discursive bridging of borders Cécile captures. Contrary to Cécile, who “chooses” to stay in the call centre and enjoys “the bridge,” Jessica leaves. Faced with a similar situation of collapsing temporalities and spatialities, she seeks to answer a different question. She gears her attention to the stationary spatial aspects of FezShore. By asking if “this place is a sort of a theatre,” she focuses on the closed aspect of such a space. Eventually, she leaves this place, for it is a “prison.” Fixing the meaning of off shoring as such, Jessica is able to leave for a different future. Many however, trapped by the perceived economic benefits of globalisation stay through fixing meaning of off shoring in a similar way to Jessica.

How are the meanings of FezShore fixed differently for/by Cécile and Jessica? They both start with a situation where the meanings of FezShore are multiple and infused with contradictions. Some participants emphasize its *stationary* aspects “prison,” “curse,” others articulate its nuanced particularities of *movement* the “passport” a “boat,” as “a bridge,” or “daring.” All are associations that coalesce in the word *l'hrig*, referenced by people inside and outside the call centre.

This term originally meant burning in Moroccan Arabic (*daraja*). During the seventies, its meaning in Morocco was associated with crossing against a red traffic light. During the eighties when clandestine immigration became a part of the solution to high unemployment in Morocco and the closing borders of Europe, the term came to refer to ‘the 14 kilometres’: to do *l'hrig* meant to traverse the Mediterranean Sea to reach

Europe. This *act* is achieved by crushing bodies into small boats. The journey success is unpredictable, yet once they cross, financial prosperity is perceived as guaranteed. The link made to traffic red lights is clear. Immigrants are denied (red light) entry to customs because they don't have the visa (green light); they decide to "burn" the red light, hence *l'hrig*. This feat is not only daring, since it defies Spanish and French custom authorities; it is also a perilous act that denotes either real courage, profound despair, or both.

Associations with "daring", "risk", and "hope" are clear at the border of the call centre. Though tacitly, Darko makes sense of off shore work through *l'hrig*: "You know in a way we are like immigrants in Europe". Darko is one of the many at the centre who was denied access to Europe. He tried to leave Morocco at some point, but was denied a visa. He makes sense of off shoring in Morocco by referring to the daring of this act whereby he *sneakily* crosses territorial borders, in essence discursively emigrating (see Shome (2006) for other documented evidence of the existence of discursive immigration within off shore work termed as "virtual immigration"). A clearer and more concise example of associations to the context of *l'hrig* is the emphasis on the technological equality of Arabs and Europeans from vignette one, which demonstrates how FezShore members draw on its "daring" concept. That is if the "*harraga*" (those who commit this act) "cross" to the other side, he or she can return economically equal to the Moroccan immigrant middle class.

A more pointed example is that of Samir at the end of vignette one, who uses the word explicitly. Samir insists "*Pourquoi, je vais 'hrig'* (Why illegally cross) *pendant longtemps quand je peux l'hrig chaque jour* (when I can cross legally everyday). People who leave now are those who do not look hard enough or who cannot cut it in Morocco." Defying the temptation of crossing physically to the West, Samir chooses to stay and cross discursively. The association to *l'hrig* is clear, the risk of being trapped and the hope for reaching a local el-dorado are evident. At FezShore, this discursive crossing is used to emphasize ability and differentiate oneself from others who cannot make it to the call centre because of lack of excellence in French or lack of endurance in keeping up with the work load. But it can also mean "the trapping" as is the case of Dalia's reference to the enclosed space of the prison. Outside of the centre borders, the meaning of the word shifts. It is more about the shame associated with the crossing. Consider what Ahmed tells Anton at the coffee shop, "You already, *hragti* and came back." He insinuates that Ahmed is still on the French hours of FezShore. Such associations are reminiscent of the risk associated with *l'hrig* during the 14 kilometres to Europe, as crossing the Mediterranean is associated with loss of dignity, violence and death.

In fixing complex configurations of space and time, FezShore members relate the call centre to the context of *l'hrig*. This *discursive act*, then, creates a metaphorical space which represents a response to situations raised in the vignette where meaning is multiple and infused with contradiction. The overlapping of contexts of *l'hrig* across time and space spells new associations for it at FezShore's discursive borders. Members

make configurations fixed through bridging the territorial and discursive borders, drawing on its temporal and special associations. If risk is still implied in traversing, risk at borders of FezShore becomes the danger of becoming an alien in Morocco, such as the insinuation in Ahmed's joke. If there was an expectation of bodily return in *l'hrig* outside the call centre, inside the call centre the body is returned but the crossing on a daily basis might have larger implications.

### **Moving and Stationary Crossing**

FezShore had no privileged meaning when agents started their work. To fix the meanings of off shoring in the same way that a metaphor works by drawing on its relational properties between two seemingly dissimilar things to produce a clear or a new meaning, members decreased the indeterminacy of FezShore by tying it to the context of *l'hrig*. Associating its context to the call centre represents the centre on the one hand as a *motionless* border where nothing changes and on the other hand as a continuous flow where everything is fluid. "Crossing" is therefore both *movement and stationary*. Leaving and staying happen at the same time. In the call centre, crossing is both leaving Morocco and returning to Morocco simultaneously. The body is territorially located in the physical place of the call centre *and* crosses over globally, discursively, by creating metaphorical spaces. Consequently, perception of the metaphorical space of crossing, as a negotiation of situations with multiple meanings and contradictions, serves as a way to understand the production of meaning at the bridging of territorial and discursive borders. The metaphorical space of "crossing" becomes a way of negotiating borders through the many configurations of space, contexts, and times. It nuances such understanding by indicating that agents *cross* against the wishes of the West and call centre owners are also enabling such *crossing*.

Yet, this crossing is spatially and contextually manufactured through the digital manipulation of time. Computers display European time to match a temporality that exists across the Mediterranean. This bridging is also contrived through organisational interactions where symbols, images, and articulations of the West are the *de facto* model of life in the call centre. Framed expressions such as "Ce n'est pas l'employeur qui vous paie, c'est le client (It is not the employer who pays you, it is the [European] client)," or administrators and trainers insistence on speaking French in the centre are all examples of discursive borders or, better, collapsing borders. The bridging also happens outside of FezShore via the media. Like other off shore companies, Fezshore administration encourages agents to watch French news and movies for French accent amelioration and cultural neutralisation. In this way the discursive border is produced by pressure from clients as FezShore runs the risk of losing the client with each mistake.

In sum, FezShore members create a metaphorical space of crossing based on

the context of *l'hrig* to negotiate their borders through spaces provided to them. In doing so, FezShore members distinguish themselves from others in both Morocco and elsewhere. Much of the discursive bridging indicates ways off shoring flows are negotiated. In such situations the discursive work decreases indeterminacy. That is, in the same way as metaphors, they work to create a metaphorical space which transforms the call centre to a space for *moving* and *stationary* crossing. The context gives them a way to present their identities as not just distinguished from, but also as better than those on the outside. They can perform this *act* discursively, and it becomes crossing *legally* in this context contrasted against the *illegal l'hrig* of other Moroccans and despite the *illegal l'hrig* of Europeans.<sup>3</sup>

### **Passing: Negotiating Spatial Contexts through Territorial Borders**

The concept of 'passing' has received much attention in racial, postcolonial, cyberspace, and, most recently, off shoring literatures, which privilege its meaning, to a large extent, as acting (Nakamura, 2002, Perez, 2003; Shome, 2006). Typically, the term "passing" refers to an individual whose race, sex, sexual orientation, or gender is outside of the majority or mainstream yet who presents himself or herself so as to appear to belong to the majority. A classic example in the U.S. is of a person who is of mixed race (especially in the US) 'passing' as part of the white majority. Beyond race binaries, passing also highlights binaries in ethnicities (self and other). Postcolonial scholars investigating passing focus mostly on resistance and transgression (Bhabha, 1994). The focus of passing in this literature targets re-embodiment since it is the body that ultimately passes. These literatures are founded on similar grounds to that of off shoring and call centres, where the "split between visual and aural, sight and sound, voice and body" (Shome, 2006) is well practiced.

The findings at FezShore also show that *passing* in off shore speaks to the disembodiment alluded to in Shome's statement or as indicated in Nakamura's idea of (2002) "wilful disembodiment". Yet, taking passing as a metaphorical space with a privileged meaning of *acting* demonstrates that the meaning of passing is nuanced when associations of concepts shared for passing in the FezShore, among agent families, conferences, and media are made to relate.

An illustrative example of passing as disembodiment is evidenced in Anton's comparison of his job to that of a pharmacist. It is also highlighted in the pseudonyms that FezShore members "choose" to service Europeans. Anton makes it clear: "similarly we wear our Belgian names and personality and leave them at work when we go home." For many of these members, the use of pseudonyms is "great because it is only 'in having your pseudo that you can enter the skin of another.'" Some insist that since they are "talking to Europeans, we have to pass as them in order to sell to them." Such phrases are crafted in training, briefings and management meetings where the administration

insists on drawing on the past, saying things such as: “we the Fassis, Arabs, we are tradesmen, we traded with Europeans for generations.” Yet, in the same breath, they have to have a “pseudonym” or “pass as Europeans” because, as Adele says: “you see the French are really racist when you get to know them, look how they treat Arabs *in* France. Why should I tell them my real name?” The territorial border of Morocco is essential to how the French are portrayed, and “passing” becomes an extension of the Arab salesman.

Protecting one’s self in such a way is an example of the inequity Shome (2006) describes: “the very employment – and the larger unequal global economic structures that it supports – are based upon being ‘required’ to play another role – a role playing that is filled with stresses, tensions, mental health problems” (p114). Yet, to only focus on passing as a role, is to focus only on the disembodied passing that is produced. The contextual and spatial configurations at FezShore’s borders unveil not only the disembodied passing, but also a simultaneous re-embodied passing at the same time.

Indeed, pseudonyms themselves are fascinating studies of the discursive processes that lead to the creation of metaphorical spaces at FezShore. From all the European name choices they can make, the name choice is crafted by agents to suit their *ability to pass*. I ask, “Why Christine?”, “They asked us to choose our name, so to make fun, I chose Christine.” Certainly, the mimicry informing the pseudonym is a product of resistance. When asked about their pseudonym choices many FezShore members refer to a choice of a name that can be found in the Qur’an and in the Bible at the same time. Sarah did not have to change her name because hers “passes everywhere.” Agents traverse time and space to find the right meanings that clarify their position as passers and thus strengthen their ability to pass. But the change of names is a point of conflict. Given that the entry to ‘off shoring work’ requires (forces) a pseudonym upon agents, it is doubtful that agents have a real choice. Even when pseudonyms are not mandatory, such as in Samir’s case where in his call centre agents do not Frenchify their names, they still abide by the unequal structure of off shoring that measures them through the ‘passing’ of their accents, their neutralization, their voices, and their Frenchization. As Samir in the first vignette puts it: “But even if my name does not change, I am something else. You see, [in the call centre] there is the physical distance from Morocco and from France.”

While many things pass in the centre, what becomes apparent is a certain strength in the use of “I pass” to also signify “I am versatile”, “I am valiant”, and “we are polyvalent.” This is expressed in the vignette when Natalia terminates her family’s conversation with “*on est juste polyvalent*.” I asked Natalia the meaning of the word, “*Tu sais: C’est être maniable, flexible, pouvoir passer partout* (To be multivalent, to pass everywhere, to be versatile). It was interesting to discover that associations of *polyvalence* are shared with associations of passing provided to agents by management and by off shore work only in a slightly nuanced way. FezShore management teaches agents to be

versatile (*i.e.* be *teleacteur*), to be able to inhabit someone else's skin, is as what Leo expresses as: "only white little lies to sell," for to lie this way is to "pass. It is legal. It is off shoring."

Referred to by Natalia as a "blessing", the proliferation of borders at FezShore distinguishes an agent's ability to reap the perceived benefits of globalisation. Agents can buy newer cars, technically support Europeans, speak one to two other languages fluently and smoothly, and *legally* cross to Europe despite European prejudices against off-shoring. At the same time, however, the off shore call centre is a "curse" as Natalia illustrates in the vignette. It haunts agents with the possibility that they will somehow lose their true self through the constant negotiation of global flows. This is well described by Perez (2003) in a discussion of off shore work in India: "Performing 'American' has its consequences on Indian performative bodies. It sends the damaging message that in order to participate as a global player Indians must conform and perform a constructed and narrow version of U.S. culture." In her compelling piece on the US-Mexican Border analysis, Shome (2003) discusses how the way in which the border is positioned materially produces territorial control that eradicates "the body out of place" (p.53). In a similar manner, the physicality of the call centre and its spatially abridged distances produce territorial control that erases bodies out of place in both Europe and Morocco. One important manifestation of the tension between these two characteristics is the creation of the metaphorical space of *polyvalence*. Etymologically, polyvalence signifies having more than one valence; it connotes the many in one<sup>4</sup>. The many are created and recreated through acting, yet they are connected to a core. The term *polyvalence* assumes the privileged sense of passing as acting, but unlike this privileged meaning, it accents not only the fluidity in acting, but also persistence in being. These uses identify passing as inherent within and existing beyond the borders of FezShore.

FezShore members understand polyvalence as representing a Moroccan flexibility of *being*. In the second vignette, Pénélope is faced with a situation where marriage is different from the privileged meaning of marriage as man and wife she is familiar with. Polyvalence as a metaphorical space helps her associate homosexual spaces in Morocco and Europe so that she can 'pass.' She uses what she calls *du tac-au-tac* (always having a quick and ready answer as a result of their multi-agency). The metaphorical spaces presented to her are on the continuum of homosexuality from Morocco (where unions are known of, but secretive) all the way to the US or Spain where unions are somewhat more legal. If it is solely a scripted role that she is acting, negotiation of such space might not be as effective. Agents attribute this ability to be flexible to a polyvalent disposition: unscripted responses are the key to passing as polyvalence rather than passing as acting.

But what is more interesting in my discussion with Pénélope, is that she makes sure I know she is polyvalent: "You know in Morocco, we can adapt to everything." Yet

she also uses “we in Europe.” She draws on Moroccans as people able to adapt to different situations because of their multicultural histories (see Sadiqi, 2003 for multiculturalism in Morocco). Members use this often: “We are good at languages and our culture is a mixture of everything. We have family everywhere, we can adapt to all situations,” says Adèle when asked why they think they can pass as Europeans.

At this centre, passing is not only about acting, or playing roles, passing speaks to more than just disembodiment. The “split between visual and aural, sight and sound, voice and body” is, as Shome (2006, p. 113) alludes to, only a part of call centre work. Passing at FezShore is at the same time disembodiment *and* re-embodiment, the disembodiment of the “*teleacteur*” and the re-embodiment of traditional Moroccan qualities as call centre agents. In the call centre, the new meaning of passing is relative to other meanings with discursive and territorial borders. That is, the new meaning of passing at FezShore does not stop only at the borders due to the media, digital communication, and so on. Rather, in the continuum of space and time, agents simultaneously represent the evidence of a catalyst for a new understanding of passing. Using polyvalence to negotiate their spaces, agents and administration in FezShore are able to influence and create new meaning to show who they are throughout these different spaces. Natalia, using “polyvalent” with her family, put an end to a conversation that suggested her being erased, by assuming a new meaning, that of her ability to adapt.

In sum, the metaphorical space of passing shows that the association of passing with the concept of polyvalence are made by bridging the borders of the call centre to the discursive borders of Moroccan spatial contexts. Participants understand polyvalence as representing a Moroccan flexibility of *being*. Polyvalence is created as a way for participants to negotiate spatial context through borders at FezShore. They are able to fix Morocco as a context for the call centre by creating polyvalence which allows them to be re-embodied as Moroccans and disembodied as Europeans at the same time. This is a metaphorical space at FezShore. Polyvalence thus becomes an understanding of the call centre as existing inside of Morocco as well as a new understanding of passing as *being*.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

In this article, I explored some of the ways that meaning is fixed given the proliferation of borders in globalisation and their fluid articulations across time and space. I expanded upon important contributions from global studies by stressing how a deeper connection to communication studies can help nuance our understanding of open spatial borders. Among the various drawbacks to ignoring context and emphasising the fluidity of borders and spatiality is the tendency to conceptualise spatial contexts within borders as a static backdrop rather than an essential element in the continuous production of the border. It thus fails to take into account the fixing of space given the multitude of spatial

contexts at globalisation's physical and discursive borders. Hence, it overlooks the freedom that people have in fixing their spaces when they are found at the crossroads between borders. Drawing on a long tradition of geographical and communication thought that conceptualises space as multiple, dynamic, and contextual, I addressed this shortcoming.

I have argued that metaphorical spaces constitute responses to situations that are ambiguous and contradictory. They are actively created when configurations of space, time, and contexts are made to relate at a territorial border. The empirical evidence I presented suggests that any attempt to understand how people bridge between territorial and discursive borders must take into account the way agents actively create metaphorical spaces to negotiate their identities.

I have also challenged widespread theoretical assumptions on crossing and passing by revealing some of the diverse and creative ways that members negotiate space in the context of collapsing borders. The story of FezShore suggests that *metaphorical spaces* are created when contexts and space are made to relate. *Crossing* and *passing* should not only be seen in relation to the celebratory tone of borderline fluidity (Anzaldúa, 1988, Kearney 1998). Embedded within them are also movement and immobility with all the social struggles of both. Most critically, I showed how *metaphorical spaces* created as a way of negotiating struggles between territorial borders and discursive borders. I argued they are responses to situations that are polysemic and might be infused with contradictions and created when configurations of context, dynamic in space and time at territorial borders relate. Metaphorical spaces allow individuals to fix the meaning of space.

The analysis of ethnographic data collected at FezShore yielded two major meanings associated with metaphorical space. First, the metaphorical space of *crossing* is created as a way for agents to negotiate their borders from the spatial context of *l'hrig*. Using this, members differentiate and relate to both Moroccans and Europeans simultaneously. Second, *passing* as metaphorical space is a way for agents to negotiate spatial contexts from territorial borders. Using the territorial borders of the call centre, they are able to present themselves as polyvalent in negotiating their spaces, times, and context of off shoring. The metaphorical space of *l'hrig* sedimented in crossing gives them the ability to be part of physical borders both inside and outside FezShore.

Notably, the metaphorical space of crossing destabilizes meanings of diaspora. Such literature indicates "inhabiting" a diasporic space and identity means moving away from a particular place *into* somewhere else. The linearity of time and space (where a past has been left behind for a present or future that is waiting) in such a conceptualisation is interrogated through these findings. The collision of time, space, and place through the call centre produces a meaning of diaspora that draws on older articulations of immigration, but also on newer concepts of immigration that happen discursively where meaning is fixed through spatial contexts.

Studies on diaspora show, as Shome (2006, p. 116) argues: “the diasporic subject in the immigrant land may and does continue to invoke and mythically recreate the nation left behind (the past) through cultural rituals and practices. The time of the nation (left behind) is still an imagined time that is rearticulated in the present [host nation].” The collisions of spatial contexts through the call centre produce a meaning of diaspora that draws on older articulations of immigration, but also an immigration that happens discursively where meaning is fixed through the imbricating of diaspora. Immigration is produced organisationally, regionally, nationally, and globally through associating place to a diaspora. Similar to Shome’s (2006) call to rearticulate diaspora under globalization, this article provides evidence from Morocco to unsettle its primary assumptions. The creation of metaphorical spaces of crossing and passing suggests modification to our understanding of diaspora where attaining the diasporic space can no longer depend on physical borders alone, but also on discursive borders.

Passing also problematizes an existing assumption that speaks to disembodiment. The findings maintain that it is not only about acting, or playing roles, it is about “being” disembodied and re-embodied at the same time. The nuanced meaning of “disembodiment and re-embodiment” of passing can further scholars’ understanding on how identities in globalised organisations might be (re)routed by the fluid powers of metaphorical spaces provided by such organisations and (re)rooted by the concrete powers of physical borders. Against the claim that participants are passive in shaping spaces of flows (Castells, 1996, 2005), this study shows them to be implicated in negotiating and fixing such flows. It may be added, then, that the proliferation of borders does not constitute a zero-sum of crossing or passing physical territory or discursive borders. It is staying and leaving, moving and staying, acting and being, crossing and passing. Crossing and passing inscribe not only a *literal* meaning of movement and disembodiment, but also the nuanced meaning of movement and staying and disembodiment and re-embodiment.

Since this is an exploratory ethnographic study, more research is warranted. To realise more fully the interaction of time, context, and space, complimentary studies of other times and places is necessary. More specifically, examining metaphorical spaces at other off shore sites will be beneficial. Such studies may help global theorists further the understanding of the many complex ways in which we understand the configurations of place, space, and contexts produced by globalisation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am aware of the distinction scholars make between territorial, physical, and material borders. I do not consider the distinction to be centrally relevant to this article as

- physical is a broader concept I deal with to represent concrete and tangible borders.
- <sup>2</sup>Unlike many other call centres in Morocco, FezShore allows its members to start early on Friday so they can have an hour and half for prayer time, which coincides with lunch time.
- <sup>3</sup> I would like to clarify that my aim is not to minimize the act of *l'hrig*. The literal act engages with immigrants in drastic ways, sometimes it includes their death during the crossing.
- <sup>4</sup> Lawrence (2004) analyzes polyvalence in similar ways: He defines polyvalence as a keyword to describe the religious fixity and fluidity of Islamic Asian immigrants experiences in America.

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