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Title	Porous privacies: Gender, migration, and precarious homes in early twenty-first century narrative films from the French Mediterranean
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Publication date	2023-11-01
Original Citation	Haenni, S. (2024) 'Porous privacies: Gender, migration, and precarious homes in early twenty-first century narrative films from the French Mediterranean', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 26, pp. 39-57. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.26.03
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.26.03
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Download date	2026-11-01 08:39:27
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/15514

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Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 26, 2023, pp. 39–57
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.26.03

alphaville
JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

Porous Privacies: Gender, Migration, and Precarious Homes in Early Twenty-First Century Narrative Films from the French Mediterranean

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Abstract: *A prominent trope in so-called* banlieue *cinema—French cinema focused on housing projects on the outskirts of large French cities largely inhabited by migrants and their descendants—represents precarious migrant homes, and by extension entire neighborhoods, as dysfunctional and cut off from social life. This essay explores representations of precarious migrant homes that resist such polarising media images, and that insist on a porous privacy as a precondition for narrative and subjective development—for the ability to thrive—while pointing out the often gendered and precarious nature of such porosity. The natural and built specificities of the Mediterranean coast have often provided a productively rich set for such revisions, including for auteurs such as Claire Denis and Abdellatif Kechiche to develop their distinctive styles. Lesser-known filmmakers, such as Bania Medjbar and Hafsia Herzi, emerge in the wake of earlier revisionist films. Less focused on developing distinctive styles, they are invested in character-driven stories, and on stories that feature a range of characters and thus narrative options, while pointing out the gendered complexities of precariously porous homes.*

This essay understands immigrant domestic space as intersectional, as affected not only by external power structures, but also by the various frames of reference inhabitants bring to it, multiplied by the number of residents in any home. Such intersectionality is facilitated by the porosity of private space, a porosity that I will argue is connected both to precarity and to possibility. Last but not least, it argues that the French Mediterranean coast has provided an ideal environment to explore porous immigrant homes for a group of filmmakers, from auteurs such as Claire Denis and Abdellatif Kechiche, to lesser-known figures such as Karim Dridi, Bania Medjbar, and Hafsia Herzi who share a socio-political commitment to render lower-class homes in complex ways.

Thus, insisting on the complexity and porosity of immigrant homes, this essay complicates a common trope in Maghrebi-French representations that opposes private and public space. As second-generation Maghrebi-French residents became more visible and more active behind the camera in the 1980s, the difficulty, even impossibility, of establishing a productive relationship between inside and outside, private and public space became a topic.[1] For instance, in the often-noted early film, *Tea in the Harem* (*Le Thé au harem d'Archimède*, Mehdi Charef, 1985), a son notes how an overwhelmed mother "always yells" as she takes care of a father who can no longer take care of himself.[2] *Tea in the Harem* may be particularly notable because the tension between public and private leads to a spectacular suicide attempt from an apartment window, but other

films, such as *Wesh, Wesh, What's Happening?* (*Wesh wesh qu'est-ce qui se passe,* Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, 2001), *Hexagone* (Malik Chibane, 1994), *The Magnet* (*Comme un aimant,* Akhetanon and Kamel Saleh, 2000), likewise struggle with this tension, which early on expressed the second-generation's rage toward both their parents and the host culture. While Maghrebi-French filmmaking has since diversified a lot (Higbee), to the extent that it leads into what has been called *banlieue* filmmaking (the French film genre focusing on housing estates on the outskirts of cities), it became a cliché: the isolated, dysfunctional home space becomes a melodramatic trope, a space of pathology that ultimately justifies elimination.[3]

As a reiterable stereotype, which, as Richard Dyer has argued, can invite consensus and, in Mireille Rosello's extension, function as a "form of contamination" (Rosello 37), the space of pathology can easily be extended to the urban scale. Mame-Fatou Niang has analysed the language of media accounts across key events in 1981, 2005, and 2015 in order to show how French media characterise lower-class suburbs as increasingly extra-legal, connected to Islamist terrorism, outside the nation (28–79). For many films, even as they chronicle modes of resistance and contestation, the towers and blocks of housing projects on many cities' outskirts have provided inspiration for cinematography that emphasises how "[the films'] protagonists are blocked in and fenced in by their surroundings," how "shots of anonymous high-rise flats and graffiti-covered walls block their horizon and imprison them in spaces of socio-economic deprivation, alienation and isolation," and how they are "subject to police and other forms of surveillance" (Tarr 20–21). More recent developments have emphasised how neighbourhoods are cut off from the rest of the city. Thus, in Netflix's ill-fated series *Marseille* (2016–18), the housing project first appears as the mayor's daughter approaches as a passenger in a car and is stopped at a checkpoint organised by a local gang. Such representations are very much inspired by media coverage of such neighbourhoods' underground economy that developed in the absence of legal jobs and often focuses on drug trafficking. In recent years, investigative journalists have decried the media's propensity to superficially connect the contemporary underground drug economy with a storied history of the crime film and of the mafia, writing more nuanced accounts but changing little about news media reporting (Samson; Pujol). Likewise, today's more socially conscious filmmakers quite often call out mainstream media representations in their films as they confront not only the visual trope of the dysfunctional, isolated, and isolating home, but also the trope of the dysfunctional, isolated, and isolating neighbourhood—for instance, *Chouf* (Karim Dridi, 2016) and *Le Crime des anges* (Bania Medjbar, 2018).

Within these larger concerns, not enough attention has been paid to how lower-class private space is gendered. Quite often, in the housing project film, city streets and public spaces have allowed for transgressive characters, while private spaces, by contrast, have been understood as "contain[ing] the victims of the oppressive patriarchal Arabo-Islamic sex/gender regime" (Tarr 112). Yet as early as 1968, Colette Pétonnet, in an observational study of transitory housing meant for inhabitants trying to move from shantytowns to public housing, insisted on what she called the matriarchal and matrilinear arrangements of living conditions, in which women run households while male companions move in and out (49). In a much more recent linguistic study of *banlieue* films focusing on language, Cristina Johnston has argued that even earlier housing project films complicated facile notions of traditional and dysfunctional family structures, revealing instead what she calls, borrowing from Azous Begag and Abdellatif Chaouite, "intersecting *foyers de référence*" (if you will, intersecting home spaces of reference) among both parental and younger

generations, even if the intersections and their implicit power differ from person to person and get mobilised for varying reasons. The use of the term "intersecting" in this context is intriguing because it differs from but also resonates with the concept of intersectionality in critical race studies, where it is more specifically used to identify intersecting forces of oppression and privilege. In the context here, domestic intersectionality considers how each person brings different frames of reference (from the past, from the present) into a home, and how different persons in the same home create even more intersecting frames of reference through their interactions, with questions of oppression and privilege in terms of ethnicity, generation, and gender ever-present.[4] Conceptualising the working-class immigrant home as a space of changing intersectionality thus begins to do justice to the complexity of the space, even though we do not understand it well because working-class domestic life—and working-class privacy—has been neglected in studies of working-class sociability, which has also often been studied in more public spaces (Gilbert 8n25). As middle-class housing improvements have expanded to lower-income homes, the extent to which working-class domestic life is affected by middle-class expectations and norms, or the extent to which it remains "relatively sheltered from relations of domination and confrontation between social classes" remains an open question (Hubka xiii-xvii, xxii-xxiv; Gilbert 6).

In order to add to our understanding of working-class immigrant homes, this essay turns to recent fiction films set on France's Mediterranean coast, not least because the Mediterranean has often been associated with a form of porosity countering the segregation and melodramatic polarisation so often implied in the *banlieue* film and critical writing about it.[5] Questions of spatial porosity were theorised in 1924 by Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, in an essay about the Southern Italian city of Naples published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1925. Benjamin and Lacis (the concept seems to have mostly been Lacis's) were interested in how caves, cellars, courtyards, arcades, staircases, windows, gateways, and balconies all undid the house as the building block of the urban, nurturing instead the ephemeral and the theatrical in ways that allowed for "new, unforeseen constellations" (166). For them, spatial porosity connects the built environment with the social as well as with nature; its impermanence suggests a tension with order and with planning; and it plays an important role in questions of social inequality, for the poor mobilise the porous so that "opportunity be at any price preserved" (167).[6] Porosity is thus connected to both precarity and possibility, is both dystopian and utopian. Given its connection to inequality, informality, and agency of the disenfranchised, it is not surprising that it has more recently been taken up by architects and urban planners who often understand it as providing solutions to the more oppressive aspects of contemporary urbanity as well as to social inequality more generally (Wolfrum). In this essay, I understand porosity as having both the potential for integration and as a possible symptom of precarity.

The French Mediterranean has thus provided a location that is particularly productive for exploring porosity and has allowed a group of filmmakers to develop fictional stories that significantly add to the diversification of stories about immigrant homes. The coast, with its Southern light and its port cities with less affluent urban centres, defies the typical mise en scène of the *banlieue* film. Marseille, in particular, has a rich filmmaking tradition going back to at least the 1920s that is often not easily subsumed under national filmmaking trends.[7] This group of filmmakers seizing upon the Mediterranean coast to complicate our understanding of immigrant homes includes well-known auteurs, such as Claire Denis and Abdellatif Kechiche, whom the

porosity of the Mediterranean coast allowed to develop their signature styles; and lesser-known figures such as Karim Dridi, Bania Medjbar, and Hafsia Herzi, who stylise social porosity less but remain equally committed to diversifying the filmic stories about working-class homes.

The first part of this essay provides a brief survey of films by Dridi, Denis, and Kechiche. The latter part focuses a bit more extensively on the recent films by Medjbar and Herzi, paying particular attention to how they understand the intersection of gender and migration. Medjbar, a documentary filmmaker and casting director who had made two short fiction films before her feature debut, *Le Crime des anges*, grew up in the kinds of housing projects her film chronicles; she describes *Le Crime des anges* as a form of "guerrilla filmmaking", since the film was not financed by any national, regional, or local institution (Castelly). Herzi also grew up in Marseille, but is better known as an accomplished actress who came to prominence in *The Secret of the Grain* (*La Graine et le mulet*, Abdellatif Kechiche, 2007), which garnered her a César for "most promising actress". Medjbar's film tells the story of Akim (Youcef Agal) and his family, which includes a single, immigrant mother (Ourdia Belarbi), his older sister Nadia (Ysmahane Yaqini) who went to law school and returned to work in the housing project's social centre, and the present absence of the older son and brother killed while working with a local crime boss; more specifically, it tells the story of a young adult, critical of the system but not yet fully mature, whose precarious but hopeful life is sent into a downward spiral because of an adolescent scheme that gets out of control. Herzi's film, *Good Mother* (*Bonne mère*, 2021), refers to the city's Basilica Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde, locally known as the "good mother" where locals go to pray for protection and advice (famously filmed in Marcel Pagnol's 1932 film *Fanny*), and to the titular character, a single, immigrant mother, Nora (Halima Benhamed), who works as a cleaner at the airport, and who heads the household comprised of her daughter Sabah (Sabrina Benhamed) and Sabah's young child Maria (Maria Benhamed), her adolescent son Amir (Malik Bouchenaf), her daughter-in-law Muriel (Justine Grégory) and her and her son's teenage son Jawed (Jawed Hannachi Herzi) while her oldest son, Ellyes (Mourad Tahar Boussatha) is in jail for a drug-related offense. Both of these films complicate intergenerational and gender dynamics in immigrant homes. They explore precarity but also insist on the connectivity produced by what I call porous privacy: a domestic space that is connected internally and to the outside world in complex ways, but that can also be invaded. By foregrounding the roles of mothers, daughters, and sisters in creating and maintaining porous homes and by attending to the different trajectories children take as they negotiate their environments, these films counter generational, urban, and social divides, creating "a mediating interface between interior worlds and social spaces," even as they attend to the gendered and precarious dynamics with which the characters have to contend (McNeill 15). My larger point in this article is that we need to consider these different films together in order to get a fuller sense of the range of narrative options films can provide for inhabitants of housing projects.

Porous Locations

Location inspires the filmic imagination, whether it takes the shape of imperial fantasy (as often the case in Hollywood) or topophilia (Gleich and Webb; Rhodes and Gorfinkel). In the 1990s, when the *banlieue* film was at its height, the Southern city of Marseille, where poor neighbourhoods have long been present in the centre, provided an alternative scenography for

imagining social interactions. Thus, in Karim Dridi's *Bye-Bye* (1995), two second-generation brothers arrive in a beat-up yellow Citroën 2CV in a centrally located, old neighbourhood known as "Le Panier" to stay with their uncle and aunt's family temporarily ("Le Panier" has since undergone significant gentrification and became the imagined site of one of France's longest-running TV series, *Plus belle la vie,* 2004–2022). The neighbourhood is a great example of precisely the kind of Mediterranean urban porosity that Benjamin and Lacis had theorised: an inner courtyard becomes a porous medium where stability and precarity cohabit, which allows for both tense and fortuitous encounters. For instance, upon arrival, the brothers witness an eviction even as they are warmly received by their own family; later, they converse on a windowsill, which they can get to from both inside and outside. The location inspires such use, but only if a filmmaker chooses it. Thus, the Passage de la Lorette, where this home was filmed, has often been used in gangster films, not least because unexpected passages and small, labyrinthian streets can equally be used for chases. The point is not to romanticise the function of such old housing structures, but to recognise how they provided the inspiration for open-ended narrative drama, for a range of encounters, and thus for a range of potential stories, with characters literally and figuratively inhabiting a threshold. By the twenty-first century, Dridi films further away from the urban core, but a film like *Khamsa* (2008) makes use of some of the housing projects' proximity to the spectacular Mediterranean coast as well as the Southern light that had inspired painters in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (*Grand Atelier*) to energise his characters, who often struggle with narrowing options (Ollé-Laprune).



Figure 1: A porous old home in *Bye-Bye*. Directed by Karim Dridi.
ADR Productions, 1995. Screenshot.



Figure 2: Filming characters on the Mediterranean coast in *Khamsa*. Directed by Karim Dridi. Mirak Films, 2008. Screenshot.

Claire Denis, whose long-time co-writer Jean-Pol Fargeau is from Marseille, is a filmmaker who may well have taken this old, urban-core setting the furthest in terms of what stories it enables, while also using it to elaborate her style. *Nenette and Boni* (1996) focuses on a pregnant teenager and her brother as they try to figure out the next steps in a fluid domestic space where old and new cohabit. If we pay close attention, we note that they are coded as white, but that has not prevented reviewers and critics alike from understanding them as immigrants, a reading encouraged by the large and diverse cast that places them in a neighbourhood with a significant immigrant population (Tranchant; Mayne 29). Nenette's and Boni's old urban house can be penetrated, does not provide easy solutions, and is marked by patriarchal structures, but harbours narrative possibilities for its protagonists. Here, connections take the shape of brief gestures of touch, fantasy, and intrusions, in ways that connect private space in complex and unpredictable ways to larger social issues, including a plot line about a phone card scam targeting Vietnamese immigrants. The film helped Denis develop her corporeal cinematic style; a "spread out, fragmented, roaming, elliptical" camera carefully manipulates light and colour, resulting in a haptic style that is ephemeral rather than assertive (David et al. 125).



Figure 3: Nenette enters Boni's home. *Nenette and Boni*. Directed by Claire Denis. Dacia Films, 1996. Screenshot.



Figure 4: A room by the canal in *The Secret of the Grain* (*La Graine et le mulet*). Directed by Abdellatif Kechiche. Pathé Renn Productions, 2008. Screenshot.

Likewise, the smaller port city of Sète, built between a salt-water lake and the sea and known for its canals, provided a crucial setting for *The Secret of the Grain*, a film that helped Abdellatif Kechiche develop his style. Revolving around the adult children of an older divorced couple and the daughter of a new female partner, the film uses the built landscape—a housing project on a landfill surrounded by a seawater lake where various family members live—particularly well. In the beginning, the main character Slimane (Habib Boufares) rides from home to home to drop off freshly caught fish, visiting his ex-wife Souad (Bouraouïa Marzouk), his daughter Karima (Farida Benkhetache), and then returns to his current home, a small, shabby "Bar-Hôtel de l'Orient" on a canal closer to the city's older centre. From the beginning, the film thus stages a complex choreography of distinctly inflected home spaces that are porous and complexly related, and precarious, not least because they are threatened by structural racism and sexist inequality. Noting how the Maghrebi-French children are married to partners of different ethnic origins, James Williams reads the film's plot allegorically as an (ultimately failed) attempt to extend multi-ethnic private space into a multi-ethnic public national space (187–232). While this project fails, the film successfully choreographs the private and political intersections in domestic space. When Slimane brings fish to his daughter's apartment, we get five people from three generations in a tiny kitchen, which makes for a certain amount of chaos. Filmed with two fast-moving cameras and quickly edited, the resulting discussion interspaces (migrant and native) labour politics, activism, potty-training, and the son's delight in the fish brought by the grandfather, in ways that allow the characters to move across spheres, and to assert themselves, to be connected to local and global issues. Kechiche likes to work with two small cameras, often one stationary and the other portable so that the camera can enter small spaces, produce much and varied footage, and enter into a complicity with the actors ("Abdellatif"). Kechiche here begins to

develop a haptic filming style that serves to assert the agency of his characters in an interconnected, porous, yet precarious world.

None of these films are particularly progressive in terms of gender, and thus it seems fair to frame Medjbar and Herzi as both having learned from these films while focusing more on the double-edged effects of gender in such home spaces. Medjbar not only shares the city of Marseille as the place where both she and Dridi work, she served as the third assistant director on *Bye-Bye.* Herzi, like Kechiche, plays with the different trajectories of the children of immigrant parents; while Kechiche was invested in telling a father's story, she remains focused on the mother's role. Neither Herzi nor Medjbar have developed their own auteurist style in the ways Denis and Kechiche have; however, they can nonetheless be understood in this larger context of immigrants and their descendants, particularly in what scholars have called the "feminisation" of the *banlieue* genre (Niang 214–15) that *Nenette and Boni* and *Secret of the Grain* already gesture towards, and which features young female protagonists in search of self-determination. Herzi especially works to include older women more centrally. They can also be understood in the context of fictional and documentary contributions by other female filmmakers, such as Houda Benyamina's *Divines* (2016), Maïmouna Doucouré's *Cuties* (*Mignonnes*, 2020), and Alice Diop's *Clichy for Example* (*Clichy pour l'exemple*, 2006), *On Call* (*La Permanence*, 2016, and *Towards Tenderness* (*Vers la tendresse*, 2016). Herzi and Medjbar help revise and diversify the *banlieue* genre by telling home stories from the perspective of adult daughters and mothers.

Precarity and Possibility in Porous but Gendered Homes

To put Medjbar and Herzi into this larger context, to not divide these filmmakers into *auteurs* (Denis, Kechiche) and lesser-known directors (Dridi, Medjbar, and Herzi) amounts to asserting the importance of the social context for the development of these auteur's styles, and to recognising all of these films' will to resist common images of migratory homes not only in the media but also in the often Paris-based *banlieue* film while attending to the new knowledge they generate about immigrants and their descendants. Maybe the most important aspect of Medjbar's and Herzi's films, especially when considered together, is their unwillingness to simplify things and attend to generational and gendered conflicts while not letting them become neatly defined binaries. They attend to precarity and conflict, but also to possibilities, even as these often become short-circuited. While Herzi's filmmaking can be understood as an homage to immigrant mothers, Medjbar insists more on the second generation, but both remain invested in telling multigenerational stories. Both films' stories are framed by an older son's misfortune (jail time in *Good Mother* and violent death in *Le Crime des anges*), and the financial and emotional hardship it creates. Both are held together by mothers: the number of children and their partners, including those killed or jailed, amount to the number of possible (often non-linear) paths taken by the children of low-wage immigrants. It is thus not surprising that Youcef Agal, the actor playing Akim in *Le Crime des anges*, specifically underscores the range of paths taken by children growing up in housing projects, emphasising that a good number, including many of the individuals involved in these film projects, enjoy successful careers ("Le Crime"). I consider the films together precisely because what is at stake is the diversity of images and narrative options for the inhabitants of these homes, which thus increase and insist on varied forms of intersectionality and complexity in the working-class, immigrant home. Remembering that Henri Lefebvre asserted a "right to the

city" that resists the exclusive power of market forces, we might understand these films as asserting a "right to a home" that resists being severed from public life, that remains porous, multi-layered, and complex, that resists precarity, and in which diverse protagonists can live together and feel "at home in the world" (McNeill 14).

While the mother is not the central character in *Le Crime des anges*, mothers as homemakers are very much present, and the film insists on the multiplicity and fungibility of their cultural references. Mothers seem to be better entrepreneurs than youngsters, as we see when a group of older women is not duped by marked-up irons the youngsters are trying to sell them. The main mother in the film is framed as being fairly traditional, yet over five scenes she receives a distinct character arc that shows the ways in which she lets in new ways of being and of thinking: she easily accepts her son's choice of a white, single-mother girlfriend, engages in a local economy, and in the penultimate scene hosts her daughter and her white boyfriend. And yet, there cannot be any easy sense of progression, for the killing of her second son amounts to a terrifying repetition of what we are told transpired before the film starts, which at the very least challenges any home-building efforts on her part. She lives with multiple domestic frameworks and is part of an older generation of maternal immigrant homemakers, neither vilified nor sacralised, but savvy *and* precarious as she pursues her life in a complex and changing web of cultural references.

Herzi, who understands her film as "rendering homage to mothers' love," places an immigrant mother at the centre of her narrative: Nora circulates through a variety of spaces, actively and expertly weaving them together into a social network (Billon). *Good Mother* opens and ends with the mother standing at a window looking over the housing project, and while Herzi meant it to frame her subjective pensiveness, she literally becomes the interface between inside and outside (Billon). She goes to work at the airport, cleaning planes and chatting with co-workers; she sees a dentist about dentures for which she has been saving for fifteen years; visits and helps with the hygienic and domestic chores of an older neighbour, Madame Allouche (Lila Allouche), who we later learn helped Nora's family when the children were younger; and she comes across her teenage grandson who is chatting up a girl outside their housing block. The mother's labour, her work-related, socially engaged, and family-oriented travels on foot and in public transportation literally weave these different spaces together, positioning her as a key agent not only interfacing with the public but helping create complex social spaces. Far from being associated with the domestic only, she is the figure who labours to connect and collect, not only bringing all this experience with her into her domestic space, but maintaining a domestic space through this work.

Beyond weaving these spaces into a network, workers provide physical, emotional, and mental labor that makes the dividing line between home and work porous. Nora is part of a plane cleaning crew at the airport, work that involves passing through rather dehumanising daily security check lines. Nonetheless, she and her co-worker counter that regime by working to transform the locker room into a quasi-domestic space of intimacy, into a less committed and hence less stressful version of a home space, where they share homemade food, advice about pregnancies, and pop culture crushes. One of the workers, Atou (Waga Kodjinon Marthe Lobé), is also a singer who performs the 1987 hit song by the Algerian Jewish Brothers Nacash, who immigrated to France in the wake of Algerian independence. Originally conceived as a tribute to the brothers' sister, "Elle imagine" ("She imagines"), which includes lines such as "in her black eyes she has an entire history that is not hers" and "she knows she comes from the South by way of amnesia", acquires

a different kind of valence when sung by a Black female cleaner in work clothes. As it often does, the film cuts to a pensive Nora looking into the distance, so that the moment becomes about what she and Atou imagine. Beyond transforming difficult work into a different kind of rhythm, beyond resisting the regime work wants, beyond transposing the song from the fashionable young woman featured in the original music video to Atou and Nora, the film puts a particular emphasis on the appropriative capacity of the immigrant working-class imagination. In what might be the clearest example of what Suzanne McNeill has called a "virtual home" or a "memory edifice" constructed through images and sounds in which films participate, and into which spectators are invited, *Good Mother* claims a home for the mind (McNeill 22, 20).

Against this focus on imaginative possibility, there is always the threat of conflictual precarity, particularly at home. Both films focus on small apartments that accommodate multiple generations so that the home becomes the space of a domestic intersectionality where different lives clash, all precarious in their own ways. This home space is strikingly dynamic, a site of discussions, crossings, and conflicts. It becomes the space of a neighbourhood birthday party where everybody is invited and where the little girl's mother learns about the possibility of working at the neighbour's BDSM business; the space where Nora bakes bread with her little granddaughter to bring it to a homeless man; the space where Sabah tells her brother that he "takes up too much space"; the space where the sons play videogames and do not help their mother clean up. Domestic space can quickly become a space of conflict rather than connectivity, for the home is easily intruded on by people, government forms, economic discussions, and gender debates, in ways that show just how quickly domestic porosity can become precarity.

Maybe in a cue taken from Kechiche's *Secret*, the presence of multiple adult children in these homes allows these films, especially *Good Mother*, to insist on the range of paths taken by the younger generation. And both films, through specific characters, articulate discontent about how gender roles are connected to precarity. While each (near) adult child is dissatisfied with the labour and social system they are supposed to enter, it is no coincidence that the storytelling backdrop is a murdered son in *Le Crime des anges* and a jailed son in *Good Mother*, both of whom presumably got involved in illegal economic activity because of limitations imposed on their abilities to earn a living wage. (Another film that frames its entire story around that issue is *Chouf*, where one brother returns from studying economics, and gets drawn back into housing project economics and drug trafficking, after his brother gets killed in a drive-by shooting.) Such dynamics of masculinity, however, have complex ramifications for younger women, who, as Nadia points out, "also suffer", a suffering she implies tends not to get recognised. Her social worker boyfriend does not disagree but also responds, "people like you girls better", referring to the ways in which women connect more easily to the rest of the city, including jobs outside the housing projects. No matter what path they take, children thus struggle with gender dynamics, not of their own making.

The three younger women we encounter across both films begin to gesture towards the range of possible female trajectories in the next generation, and the obstacles they face as they attempt to build homes that resist some of the economic regime as well as media narratives connected to housing projects. Muriel in *Good Mother*, whose husband is imprisoned and has a teenage son, works a low-paying job as a cashier and helps make ends meet by illicitly bringing home products from the store where she works. Nadia in *Le Crime des anges* escaped via education and returned as a social worker. She easily circulates in a car rather than public transportation

between the housing project where she grew up and her own apartment in an old building with an inner courtyard, a tree, and a turtle. Her home becomes a refuge for herself and her family members: when her mother shows up to reconcile, she appreciatively takes in the old courtyard structure as if it was evidence of her own daughter's rootedness and connection to old ways of doing things; when her wounded younger brother shows up, he finds care and respite. The film rejects any facile opposition between the housing project and the daughter's apartment, focusing on how Nadia, in a next-generation version of Nora in *Good Mother*, creates a network across spaces, but also insists on how easily that home gets penetrated by trouble from elsewhere. Such trouble and precarity are much more pronounced in the case of Sabah in *Good Mother*, who does not want to enter either an exploitative labour market or an exploitative heterosexual relationship. That resistance leads her to accept work for a friend's aunt's prostitution business focused on carefully framed BDSM practices. Not only would that allow her to make more money, but as she says, "for once it is woman who dominates man." But after a mishap with a client, Sabah gets fired quite violently from her well-paying shadow economy job, and she ends the film where she started, smoking a cigarette on her family's apartment's small balcony with her friend and her sister-in-law. She has not quite managed to enter even the informal labour economy, and remains confined to her mother's apartment. These three women both show a range of resisting and negotiating the gendered, economic conditions under which they grew up, but their lives show how the ripple effects of domestic precarity—the economic pressures of single-motherhood when a husband is in jail, the legal and emotional pressures when a brother gets into trouble, the unprotected nature of much informal work—keeps each vulnerable in different ways.



Figure 5: A mother in a daughter's courtyard. *Le Crime des anges*. Directed by Banja Medjbar. Les Films du Goeland, 2018. Screenshot.



Figure 6: Painting a birdcage and building a home. *Le Crime des anges*. Screenshot.

As the deaths and prison sentences of the older brothers indicate, boys' attempts to resist local regimes are often more harshly punished. As in the case of female characters, the films feature a range of adolescent boys on the cusp of adulthood in order to explore narrative options. Among them, Akim in *Le Crime des anges*, arguably the film's main character, becomes an in-depth study about how an attempt to resist gender and economic regimes easily turns into a precarious, even deadly situation. Early on, he makes clear that he does not want to work for the local dump like his friend because the business exploits workers. He has domestic aspirations: we see him paint a birdcage for his girlfriend's daughter on a rental apartment's small terrace in a different neighbourhood; when his friends hatch an economic scheme around a fake ironing service, he asks "What if we really did it [start a home ironing service]?", a suggestion a more macho friend immediately dismisses. When the gang's plan goes wrong, Akim assumes responsibility, but his attempt to rectify things gets him indebted to a local crime lord, and into a more predictable crime film narrative, leading to his death. Long ago, Robert Warshow understood the American gangster as expressing the dark underbelly of (in his essay, US) capitalism, and a similar critique of capitalism is at work here, except that it comes from the character himself, and that it intersects with gender regimes in order to doom a self-conscious character. Akim assumes he has a right to the city (to use Lefebvre's term) and a right to create a home within the city, as the film amply makes clear when we follow him driving around the city and actually building things. However, the film chronicles how a complex combination of (immature) resistance and agency, along with a lack of options and preconceived cultural notions, can easily turn such assumptions of rights into precarity, even death.

Coda

Over the course of this article, I have argued that there is a group of filmmakers who have mobilised the natural and architectural environment of the Mediterranean coast to diversify our understanding of working-class, immigrant homes, to insist on the porosity and intersectionality of such homes, with Medjbar and Herzi attending in particular to how gender plays out in particularly complex ways. In their films, mothers evolve and labour to sustain and connect different spaces to feel at home. Daughters and sisters face options and seem simultaneously privileged and vulnerable, in the economic and kinship systems they cannot escape. Even as they visualise and narrativise the economic and social structures that so negatively affect their homes, even as they show how the porosity of homes provides not only possibilities but also remains precarious—thus performing a double critique—overall they nonetheless de-pathologise these home spaces. By representing these homes as porous and intersectional, by focusing on the "banal" (which Niang has notably argued we need) rather than on the spectacular, they counter social and urban polarisation, inviting the viewer in as a "guest" (as Suzanne McNeill has argued), thus labouring to create a social fabric capable of recognising both the precarity and the possibility of such homes. As much as I appreciate these accomplishments, I want to conclude by pushing such a double critique further and ask whether the films' intervention is limited and whether the intersectional home spaces they represent strive to exclude certain forms of gender identity.



Figure 7: Saaphyra performing in *Le Crime des anges*. Screenshot.



Figure 8: *Good Mother* (*Bonne mère*). Directed by Hafsia Herzi. SBS Productions, 2021. Screenshot.

We can find a particularly productive protagonist with whom to consider this question in Saaphyra, a local lesbian rapper and actor who has a role in both Medjbar's and Herzi's films. In *Le Crime des anges*, she appears under her artist name (Saaphyra) and is a member of the (otherwise male) group of the four young friends who come up with the ill-fated ironing scheme. There is little that specifies her character, but her integration into a group of young male adolescents, and her performance of a rap song in front of them at the edge of the sea (even as they make fun of her) is a more radical reconfiguration of intimate but not sexualised relationships than any of the more deeply elaborated plot points in the film. In *Good Mother,* Saaphyra plays Ludivine (Saaphyra's given name), who works for her aunt's BDSM business, and who recruits Sabah and her friend. She also performs "Yemma", an ode to the work of mothers that also serves as the film's main song, in front of three female friends, on top of a hill overlooking the city during nightfall. The scene lets us know about Ludivine's musical aspirations and about her softer side, as the actor herself explains ("#59—Saaphyra"). Because of her bigger role in *Good Mother*, we also see her bring an oversized bunny to a children's birthday party, and hang out in a white dress shirt at her aunt's place. Both characters played by Saaphyra are gender-bending, yet neither is explicitly coded as lesbian; she is welcome in immigrant homes, though we never see her home or learn her backstory, an omission that can be explained by the size of her roles. Needless to say, neither film is about a lesbian wanting to become a rapper and negotiating that with both friends and family members. Instead, both films focus on single motherhood and heterosexualised home relations.

By including Saaphyra, these films gesture towards the limit of their own critique. The difference between what we may call more traditional gender roles (such as single mother or heterosexual daughter) and more multiple and more fluid conceptions of gender and sexuality appears as a somewhat porous border in these films, a border Saaphyra herself appears to have been inhabiting in her professional life. In a recent interview, she is eloquent about her own professional trajectory, from her early work as an educator of children placed in institutions, to her career in theatre and cinema, to recent collective efforts of female artists to elevate female rappers—maybe most notably via the remix "Bande organisée version féminine", a retort to the successful rap song "Bande organisée" from 2020 that had assembled a group of exclusively male

rappers and that had helped advance the careers of several previously little known folks ("#59—Saaphyra"). It seems clear from Saaphyra's tone that it is an exciting time to push gender boundaries, but that these boundaries also still need to be pushed, no matter how amicably, to create, we may say, greater porosity in the productive sense of the term.

In the end, the circumscribed inclusion of Saaphyra as a protagonist in these films points to the limits of the alternative filmic representation of immigrant homes that this article has discussed. The porous homes these films insist on portraying are open to characters such as those played by Saaphyra, and yet they also limit how visible and audible such characters are. Sociality among women, and women entering male social groups are more accessible to imagine than the home and sexual lives of more genderqueer characters. The roles Saaphyra plays remind us how much these films push to represent immigrant homes as porously connected and precarious, and they also remind us that the films themselves impose limits on just how porous such homes can be.

Notes

[1] I use the term Maghrebi-French to refer to filmmaking by the descendants of Maghrebi immigrants in France. While the term "*cinéma beur*" (backslang for "Arab") has been used by critics, the filmmakers themselves tended to dismiss the term. For more context, see Tarr; Higbee.

[2] Translations from French are mine unless otherwise noted.

[3] I am adapting the "space of pathology" from Peter Brooks's definition of the melodramatic "space of innocence" (29).

[4] See also Niang for a nuanced exploration of these issues in film and literature.

[5] I was first inspired to think about porosity when asked to introduce a roundtable on "Porousness and Cities" for the journal *Mediapolis* (2020). A special thanks to Erica Stein for instigating the roundtable.

[6] Erben points out that the term had already been in use elsewhere, and that it rarely shows up elsewhere in Benjamin, which suggests it was likely Lacis's.

[7] This is part of the argument of my nearly completed monograph, *The Location of Cinema: Mediterranean Marseille and the Stakes of Telling Film History from the Periphery*. For a brief English-language overview of Marseille cinema in the context of the city's most popular filmmaker, Marcel Pagnol, see Heath 57–79.

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Suggested Citation

Haenni, Sabine. "Porous Privacies: Gender, Migration, and Precarious Homes in Early Twenty-First Century Narrative Films from the French Mediterranean." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 26, 2023, pp. 39–57. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.26.03.

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