



What Exiles Form the Memories?

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What Exiles Form the Memories?

Because Abraham, sixty years later...

‘Who would have thought that one day we would leave Algeria?’ Abraham, a former bailiff and local bigwig from Constantine would ask aloud at Shabbat meals in Marseille. This question came up point-blank, again and again. It left us speechless, with no answer that could extract Abraham from this in-between time of departure, in a present that always brought him back to the unimaginable—an Algeria where he was no longer, but where he was still living through his memories.

I associate this in-between time and space with Abraham and the displaced people¹ of the colonial worlds and with an expression that has remained enigmatic for a long time in my mind: ‘To have a broken tongue’. I grew up among displaced people before growing up to study them: Françoise who left Egypt in 1967 and her ‘broken Arabic’; Yves, who ‘broke’ in a continuous stream French, Hebrew, English and Arabic, all spoken fluently but always with errors and a hesitation that never left him; Jacob, who avoided using words that contained letters like ‘r’, unpronounceable for him, because they ‘broke’ his language and revealed his

¹ This term was discussed by many scholars in different countries that experienced massive fluxes of populations due to decolonisation, as evidenced by Pamela Ballinger, Michele Baussant, Jasna Čapo Žmegač and Andrea Smith. Such people’s departure was often portrayed as inevitable (a consequence of decolonisation, their alleged lack of attachment to Algeria, or, for Jews, their association with the colonial power), not forced, and as a quasi-internal displacement. See Ballinger Pamela, ‘Entangled or “Extruded” Histories? Displacement, National Refugees, and Repatriation after the Second World War’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 25 (2012), pp. 366–86; Michèle Baussant, *Pieds-noirs: Mémoires d’exils* (Paris: Stock, 2002); Čapo Žmegač Jasna, ‘Refugees, Co-Ethnic Migrants, and Diasporas: Blurring the Categories’, in Čapo Žmegač Jasna, Christian Voß and Klaus Roth (eds), *Co-Ethnic Migrations Compared: Central and Eastern European Contexts* (Munich/Berlin: Otto Sagner, 2010), pp. 177–94; Andrea Smith (ed.), *Europe’s Invisible Migrants* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003); and Andrea Smith, ‘Coerced or Free? Considering Post-Colonial Returns’, in Richard Bessel and Claudia Haake (eds), *Removing Peoples: Forced Removal in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 395–414.

foreignness; Carole who broke the thread of our exchanges by mixing languages because such and such object could only be said in Arabic, and such and such food could only be said in French. Not that they were all the same. Not that she could not translate them in either language, but simply that each thing had its own language.

Several languages melded into one, mainly French, always insufficient, and those that were the most used were sometimes also the most mute, breaking into exchanges, marking gaps. To have a broken tongue covered several meanings: to speak different languages without feeling that one knew any one of them ‘correctly’; to break, to damage the language through incomplete knowledge of it; to mark a language used in everyday life with syntaxes, pronunciations, turns of phrase which revealed other languages, sometimes silent, sometimes resurgent; to not be able to produce a well-crafted narrative in a language one had mastered; to consistently fail to speak about something and to say at the same time that which was unspeakable; to carry in the body the mark of a difference, of a rupture, of an absence.

This broken language, drawing sometimes unpredictable trajectories of meaning and interrupted histories, spaces and journeys, leads me to question the place of absence in the present and in memory. By definition ‘invisible’, as non-presence and lack, absence takes a substantial place, sometimes expanded, sometimes constricted. It always seems to be greater than the possibilities of memory itself without being reduced to oblivion and silence.

In the social housing estates of the grey suburb of eastern Paris where I was born, disintegrated colonial worlds constituted the background of most of the inhabitants: Algerian Jews, Algerians transformed into ‘foreigners’ once Algeria was independent,² as well as Europeans of Algeria. The latter formed a rather heterogeneous mix of ‘settlers’ and ‘arriving’

² After independence, Algerians with civil status under local law lost their French nationality, except for those who subscribed to the declaration of recognition of French nationality before 22 March 1967 (order of 21 July 1962).

populations,³ particularly from the European shores of the Mediterranean, labelled ‘*pieds-noirs*’ during the Algerian War—‘invisible migrants’⁴—with whom Algeria no longer wanted to deal and whom France had to integrate while imagining that their history was not entirely its history.

These buildings of the housing estate, most people said, had been built for them. They formed a landscape without a past where Algeria was rarely mentioned. With little or no reference made to it, perhaps most of their inhabitants had come to believe that they had never been in Algeria at all. Colonisation was an officially closed history, relegated to a past ‘irrelevant to the present’.⁵ It had, however, sealed their destinies and expectations. And it persisted, despite its selective and generalised disavowal, in France, in the society in which they had been transposed. Sometimes a remnant, a faint trace, or a tenacious ‘presence’,⁶ in the negative, its complex experience translated into a living, multiform presence, a something that is and yet is not.⁷

Nevertheless, Algeria was present always, in the exchanges and expressions, inhabiting the memories and shaping the memories of inhabiting. What we saw was doubled by what we did not see: from the outside, buildings of identical design and appearance and streets named after famous French places or people, with discreet markers (shops, synagogues or prayer halls); inside the buildings, markers based on family names, religious, local and sometimes national references, and multiple ritual temporalities. This marking reshaped borders, hierarchies and encounter zones. All at once palimpsest and heteroglossia,⁸ sedimentations of time and places

³ Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

⁴ Andrea Smith, ‘Coerced or Free?’.

⁵⁵ John Barnes, *Models and Interpretation: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 228.

⁶ Ann Laura Stoler and Cooper Frederick, *Repenser le colonialisme* (Paris: Payot, 2013).

⁷ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995).

⁸ Mikhael Bakhtine, *Les Problèmes de la poétique de Dostoïevski* (Lausanne: l’Âge d’Homme, 1970 [1929,1963]).

were revealed there, symbols and images, separate and dispersed pieces, lacunar, mourning memory, ‘where the part is worth the whole and more than the whole that it exceeds’.⁹

This space was never for putting down roots, even less so for all those who lived there with a sense of not being where they should be. It was ‘a doubt’,¹⁰ a place from which the other places of these ‘interrupted’ lives were reflected, ‘cracks’, ‘friction points’, a ‘hiatus’. In discovering France, they realised that Algeria, imagined and lived as a contiguous extension of the ‘French nation’, was, in fact, another land. It was enough to walk a few hundred metres in the old historic district of this suburb to feel that ‘*que ça se coince quelque part, ou que ça éclate, ou que ça se cogne* (that it sticks somewhere, that it bursts, or that it knocks)’.¹¹ This doubt allowed neither blindness nor the anaesthesia of daily life: between the walls of the apartments, other strata of consciousness took shape¹² without real spatial attachment in the here and now. Few or no images fed the imagination, only names, objects that engaged the senses, encapsulated spaces engraved with the memory of the intimacy of homes, daily exchanges, shared places and dichotomous environments, ‘white spots’ on the physical and mental maps of the colonial lived space. Next to the copper tray, the street of Dr Trolard; from the living room table, the street Michelet; from the stove, the street of Bab Azoun. Near the painting of the great-uncle, Bab el Oued; in the bathroom, La Marine; and with the smell of oranges, La Redoute. More rarely, to evoke a distant expedition, in the sand garden just in front of the building, Tizi Ouzou, Foun Tataouine.

Voices and Third Spaces?

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), p. 54.

¹⁰ Georges Perec, *Espèces d’espaces* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1974).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Meron Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscapes: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

Something was broken definitively in Algeria and continued at the same time in France over there. Everyone left Algeria, and Algeria left everyone. And through this double movement, all of them found themselves in the middle of the Mediterranean, leaving and seeing themselves left. The Mediterranean became an elastic space, the point from which my interlocutors moved and connected their Algeria to Marseille, Carnoux, La Ciotat, Créteil, Lyon or Alicante, transformed into synecdotal places:¹³ here, in Nîmes, a shrine dedicated to the Virgin of Santa Cruz symbolised Oran, Oranie and Algeria, a Saint Michael's Day procession in the streets of La Ciotat 'revived' the village of Mers el Kebir. In so doing, they also reinscribed alternative histories and multiple topographies produced by and within the colonial framework, going beyond the single metropole-colony axis. By moving to Algeria and back in trans-colonial and trans-imperial spaces during the colonial period, these populations had imagined there substitute lands for Spain, Italy, Malta and their sometimes completely displaced villages: in Oran, the tutelary figure of Nuestra Señora d'El Salud, better known as Our Lady of Santa Cruz, symbolised an 'eternal' portion of Toledo¹⁴ and Spain at the same time as it became a relay point with French shrines such as Notre Dame de la Garde in Marseille. In Aïn-Tedelès, a village in Oranie, a new plantation of a grove of Aleppo pines became a Bois de Boulogne, while in Mers el Kebir, the villagers of Procida 'gathered' around the statue of Saint Michael.

Multiple strata, therefore, linking long and short temporalities, distinct places, people and objects, landscapes, values and heterogeneous resources: Procida recomposed in Mers el Kebir, then Mers el Kebir and Procida in La Ciotat, and Mers el Kebir and La Ciotat in Procida. Material artefacts brought back from Spain, Italy and Malta to Algeria, then from Algeria to France, Spain, Italy or Malta, duplicated, recreated, taking root, circulating, linking transposed

¹³ Baussant, *Pieds-noirs*.

¹⁴ In 1509, the Cardinal of Toledo, Ximénès de Cisneros, acquired the spiritual administration of the city of Oran and its territory, which were attached in perpetuity to the archiepiscopal see of Toledo.

landscapes, extraterritorial,¹⁵ duplicated, sedimented. The practices transmitted make them live in the heart of memory environments; places and their names symbolise districts, then cities that appear themselves to be regions that then refer to countries, which are enlarged to metropolises and former colonial spaces, operating unequally between the different territories. This strange topography, in which the multiple echoes of these places resonate, also reflects how settlement colonialism forced people to invest themselves in different spaces¹⁶ and to compete for the status of indigenous people in Algeria—which, for some people, has become a site of inclusion in France: the space of the Other on their native soil for the colonised populations, the space of the colonised populations for the colonists and later ‘arrivals’.

Neither Winners nor Victims: Dull Narratives

These different strata of consciousness and their multidimensional spaces have taught me to question the evidence of a shared time, of a past with fixed and assured content, of stable, intangible places. Instead, I consider the past as a position from the present and the reference to a ‘there’ as always established from a fragmented ‘here’ for dispersed and often divided populations.

But how to grasp this past and its territories in the multiplication of fragmented presents and places? What do these places, landscapes and material goods ‘in transit’¹⁷ represent, shaped by the colonial and then post-colonial context, and in turn transformed by them? A heritage that, notwithstanding its negative charge, divides and shares like any heritage?¹⁸ And who are its heirs?

¹⁵ Like the castle of Julhans in Roquefort la Bédoule, which would symbolise an extraterritorial past Algeria.

¹⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*.

¹⁸ Baussant, *Pieds-noirs*.

We can hardly answer these questions using an approach that reifies ‘a colonial moment of binary oppositions in order to bolster our postcolonial conviction of living today in a world that is infinitely more complex, fragmented, and indistinct’.¹⁹ They are flattened by an approach that, from spaces and histories now divided though indistinguishable,²⁰ France and Algeria, tends to rely on the magnifying lens of the Algerian War as the acme, epicentre and dislocation of the relationship to the colonial. They are set aside in a simplifying analysis that sees in these traces and evocations a cacophony of counter-memories, where the ‘war of memories’²¹ often boils down to ‘memories of the war’, against an official narrative, especially in France, itself portrayed as pierced by an overt and hidden silence,²² amnesia and an amnesty.

How can we understand the persistence of the past without reintroducing the heterogeneity of trajectories into and out of Algeria and the actors involved? The modalities of belonging and disaffiliation created by the colonial and post-colonial contexts and the meaning of the forms of inclusion and exclusion they engendered? What does this national reading tell us about phenomena and history within and beyond this framework? Beyond the relegation of a past that is not a resource from which these displaced persons could derive any glory, nor elicit empathy to establish their status as victims? Between these two modalities of identification, there is no third way other than that of nostalgia and resentment, nothing but sometimes dreary, unwanted narratives that we must understand not as a story apart, but as a shared story, ‘deeply relevant’ to everyone.²³

¹⁹ Stoler and Cooper, *Repenser le colonialisme*; Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

²⁰ Etienne Balibar, *Droit de cité: Culture et politique en démocratie* (Paris : L’Aube, 1998).

²¹ Benjamin Stora, ‘La guerre des mémoires’, in *Maghreb-Machrek*, Vol. 3 (2008) pp. 13–18.

²² Jan Jansen, ‘Politics of Remembrance, Colonialism and the Algerian War of Independence in France’, in Pakier Małgorzata *et al.* (eds), *A European Memory? Contested Histories and Politics of Remembrance* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), pp. 275–93.

²³ Elizabeth Edwards and Matt Mead, ‘Absent Histories and Absent Images: Photographs, Museums and the Colonial Past’, in *Museum & Society*, Vol. 11, no. 1 (2013), pp. 19–39.

Ma'alesh...

Whoever walked around the Mas de Mingue in Nîmes at the end of the 1990s, especially during the pilgrimage to the Virgin of Santa Cruz, saw there sometimes a nostalgic and irenic reconstitution of French Algeria, a place of reunion and mourning, a space of devotion or a third space linking divided and hierarchical times, places and identifications. The sedimentation, superimposition, discordance of the traces of memory, and the evocations and groups that carried them created a breach, opening in the now and the here in different places and times, beyond even Algeria and France. The curious walker or pilgrim was struck, caught by this apparent disorder of voices, practices, references and objects.

Such a cacophony emerges here and there, in French cities where steles and commemorative monuments celebrate the memory of the European and/or Harki populations, the fight of or against French Algeria, the disputed dates of the end of the war, in places where hundreds of objects and monuments repatriated to France are stranded, and where street names draw other geographies, often not very legible. It is also apparent in Algeria through the sedimentations, the erasures and the ghostly presence of monuments, old street names and villages,²⁴ in a troubled landscape with several dimensions: the Algerian space, the space of colonisation, the spaces prior to it.²⁵

Today, the old Marine district in Oran, where the Spaniards who went up to Santa Cruz had settled, is disappearing, along with Oranîmes in the Mas de Mingue, and its landscape, shrinking to the limits of the sanctuary. And yet, even in their erasure, these traces call out to us. They reflect multiple interpretations of spatialities and historicities that are not part of a

²⁴ Zeynep Çelik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers under French Rule* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); Fethi Benslama, *La mémoire: Un passé en devenir* (Paris: Autrement, 54: 1999), pp. 219–23.

²⁵ As in Oran, including the traces of the Spanish presence, prior to the French presence, or those of the Ottoman past, among others.

fixed and unchanging legacy, but reveal dense and loose points of identification²⁶ and relationships, even conflictual ones, to different territories, beyond Algeria and France. They enjoin us to face what we share in the present and for which we can take responsibility: a legacy of which we are not just ‘passive receivers’,²⁷ nor totally a vestige of the past nor solely a resource of the present to demand its impossible reparation (or healing of the present?).

As for Abraham the Algerian, he has not sat at the Shabbat table for some years now. He no longer asks his question, a stunning observation, which always caught us off guard even though we all expected it. But I can easily imagine what Joe the Egyptian, who recently died and joined him, finally replies, placid and somewhat fatalistic, in his broken language: ‘It does nothing’ (*ma’alesh*). A ‘nothing’ that is worth the whole and more than the whole that perhaps it exceeds.

²⁶ Piera Rossetto, ‘Dwelling in Contradictions: Deep Maps and the Memories of Jews from Libya’, in *Ethnologies*, Vol. 39, no. 2 (2018), pp. 167–87.

²⁷ Benoit de L’Estoile, ‘The Past as It Lives Now: An Anthropology of Colonial Legacies’, in *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, Vol. 16, no. 3 (2008), pp. 267–79.