

Representing the Algerian Civil War: Literature, History, and the State

By

Neil Grant Landers

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Committee in charge:

Professor Debarati Sanyal, Co-Chair

Professor Soraya Tlatli, Co-Chair

Professor Karl Britto

Professor Stefania Pandolfo

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Representing the Algerian Civil War: Literature, History, and the State addresses the way the Algerian civil war has been portrayed in 1990s novelistic literature. In the words of one literary critic, "The Algerian war has been, in a sense, one big murder mystery."¹ This may be true, but literary accounts portray the "mystery" of the civil war—and propose to solve it—in sharply divergent ways. The primary aim of this study is to examine how three of the most celebrated 1990s novels depict—organize, analyze, interpret, and "solve"—the civil war. I analyze and interpret these novels—by Assia Djebar, Yasmina Khadra, and Boualem Sansal—through a deep contextualization, both in terms of Algerian history and in the novels' contemporary setting. This is particularly important in this case, since the civil war is so contested, and is poorly understood. Using the novels' thematic content as a cue for deeper understanding, I engage through them and with them a number of elements crucial to understanding the civil war: Algeria's troubled nationalist legacy; its stagnant one-party regime; a fear, distrust, and poor understanding of the Islamist movement and the insurgency that erupted in 1992; and the unending, horrifically bloody violence that piled on throughout the 1990s. Alternating close readings with deep contextualization, I examine how the novels conceptualize the civil war within Algerian history, then propose a reading of the novels themselves by drawing out their positions in relation to each other and to the civil war.

After a general presentation in the first chapter, Chapter 2 offers a reading of Boualem Sansal's *Le serment des barbares*, a novel that presents the larger themes of the dissertation: the distortion of public memory; the difficulty in narrating the civil war; the mythification of history; and the role of the state in contributing to violence in Algerian society. Chapter 3 follows the paths proposed in Sansal's novel by considering the novel's claim that the popular understanding of the war of independence is largely a myth, and that insidious but important episodes of that struggle were deleted from history. Chapter 4 examines the treatment of the civil war in Yasmina Khadra's *Les agneaux du Seigneur*, an enormous commercial success that frames the civil war as

¹ Adam Shatz, *London Review of Books*, 2004.

a *noir* genre fiction of terror and crime in a village outside Algiers. Chapter 5 examines the discourse used to discuss the civil war, and focuses specifically on the rhetoric of state discourse. Chapter 6 reviews the basic political context of the civil war and what is known about the violence itself. Chapter 7 examines the role of political Islam in Algeria, since this is a crucial element of the civil war and its treatment in the novels. Chapter 8 considers the civil war in the depiction of Assia Djebar's *Le blanc de l'Algérie* and synthesizes the dissertation's major themes.

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Note on Translations

Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine. I attempt to provide English translations for all important textual citations, especially if they are directly relevant to my argument. Occasionally, citations, mostly in the footnotes, are left in the French.

Chapter 1

This study confronts the representation of the Algerian civil war in works of literature published between 1995 and 1999, while the conflict was ongoing. The chapters that follow consider how three major Algerian literary works are positioned, in their depiction and conceptualization of the civil war, as interventions in the ongoing production of public memory. Deeply anchoring the works within the context of the civil war, this dissertation asks how they should be interpreted.

If the commonplace that newspapers write the first pages of history is true, then throughout the 1990s, the history of the Algerian civil war, seen through the mass media, was largely composed of anonymous atrocities and question marks. Massacres and assassinations were described as effects without known causes, a spectacle of bloody corpses without explanation. Reuters dubbed December 1996 "The Month of Horrors," though atrocities would continue to multiply in the years that followed. Often, media accounts were reduced to a list of that week's atrocities. While some accounts repeated the regime's vague explanations about angry Islamists, in the international and domestic press, unanswered questions often echoed through the columns. A glance through the international press archives regarding Algeria reveals a parade of open-ended questions such as "Who killed X?" "Why did Y happen?" "What is behind these events?" The British newspaper *The Observer* observed in 1997 that "The rest of the world is beginning to ask the same sinister question that Algerians have been asking themselves for years: who is behind these atrocities?"

Mainly, we find that the public, including the press, had little access to information and, suspicious of the state narrative, was largely left to speculate about the atrocities. Theories, rumors, and gossip abounded, while each week brought new stories of violence. The international press however, increasingly exiled from the country, was largely content to repeat the accounts of the Algerian state or the press it largely controlled. Without journalists on the ground to investigate, the international press was forced to rely on state accounts of the violence, often becoming stenographers for the Algerian state's account of the civil war. *The New York Times* for example reported in 1996 that "Islamic militants sealed off a village today and killed 28 people during a two-hour period, slashing and hacking them to death, *the Government said*" (emphasis added).¹ Citing state-controlled newspapers a year later, the *Times* records that "Islamist militants killed 75 or more civilians" today, to which the Algerian president responded that "rebels would be hunted down" and punished; elsewhere that the president "pledged to eradicate the 'unequaled terror.'"² Without any alternate perspectives, what "the Government said" monopolized public perception, while anomalies and inconsistencies in the state's account, lacking alternate narratives, simply left everyone guessing. But many were suspicious of the hegemonic narrative about an Algerian military protecting the people from a ruthless and cruel insurgency of religious fanatics. A member of the Algerian Catholic clergy declared in 1995 in

¹ December 30, 1996, "Islamic Militants in Algeria Kill 28 in Village Massacre."

² "75 Reported Killed in Algerian Attacks," August 6, 1997; "Dozens More Slain After Algerian's Speech," January 26, 1997.

an open letter that "Personne, évidemment, n'est plus sûr de rien ni de personne. Et c'est dans ce brouillard que l'on tue et que l'on est tué" 'nobody, apparently, is any longer certain of anything or anyone. And it is in this fog that people kill and are killed.'³

The sense of pervasive horror and the inexplicability of the violence is starkly portrayed in a series of political cartoons by Hocine Boukella, who signs his work under the pen-name Elho.⁴ The cartoons offer a compelling glimpse into the atmosphere of the civil war, mostly depicted as violent effects of anonymous or unknowable origins. A selection of four is presented below.⁵ In the first image, a man seated at a table strives unsuccessfully to pry open a large tome; his fingers are stuck between the pages and what we assume to be blood pours out from between them. Because of the blood, the book seems to contain either the story of violence or perhaps the knowledge of its origins, but its contents remain inscrutable: the image shows only the attempt to open it, without apparent success. The desire to acquire this knowledge, to learn the contents of the book, appears to produce the new violence of the man's potentially mangled fingers.

A climate of pervasive violence, death, and terror is portrayed in three further images. In one of them (figure 1.3), this is figured by a dreamscape of gun barrels protruding massively into intimate space, with human life reduced to tiny, anonymous spectral or insect-like figures scampering about on and among the gun barrels, crawling around the available spaces trying to survive. They slip out of presence, several of them seem on the verge of falling off, or falling away, and when they do there will be nothing left of this reality but the gun barrels. In another image (figure 1.2), a man fearfully clings to the wall of his room while massive gun barrels protrude forth, like sniffing dogs hunting for him. The gun barrels are so large and central to the image they minimize all else; the man appears almost as an afterthought to them, a two-dimensional shadow on the wall while the barrels draw the viewer's gaze as the only fully-textured, "real" element in the image. Next to the imposing "realness" of the guns, the man is more specter than flesh, his "realness" dissipating before the massiveness of the guns' presence. In both images, it is notable that the threat of violent death appears as an anonymous reality, as the causes and agents, those wielding the guns, remain inscrutable and insignificant to the situation. A final image (figure 1.4) depicts a woman's face frozen in horror and terror before some kind of extreme trauma. Her facial features are grotesquely distorted by her look of horror and her pupils have become question marks: what she perceives cannot be understood.

³ Patrick Denaud, *Le FIS: sa direction parle*, 2000, 130-131.

⁴ A selection of Elho's work can be viewed online at <http://www.louzine.net/galleries/elho/index.htm>.

⁵ The selection and order of presentation of the images is my own.

Figure 1.1

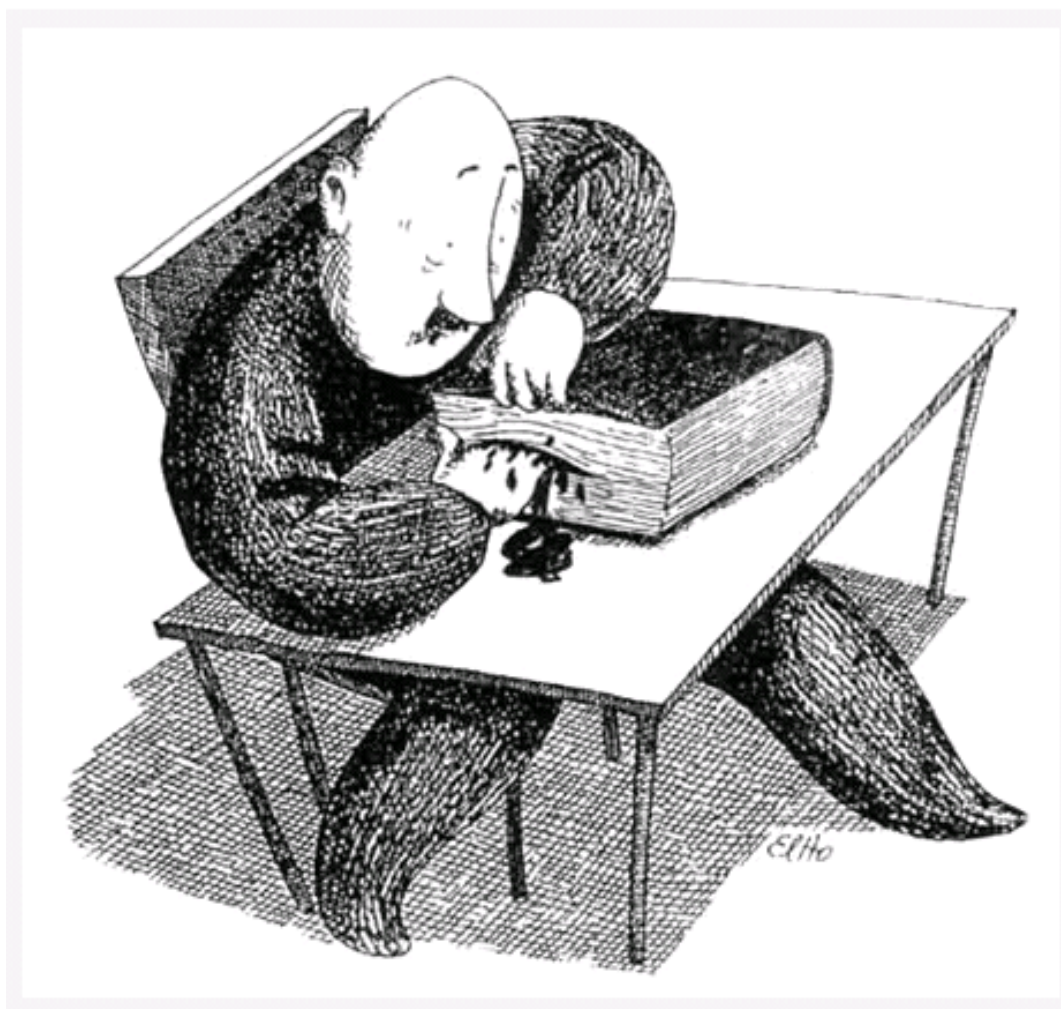


Figure 1.2

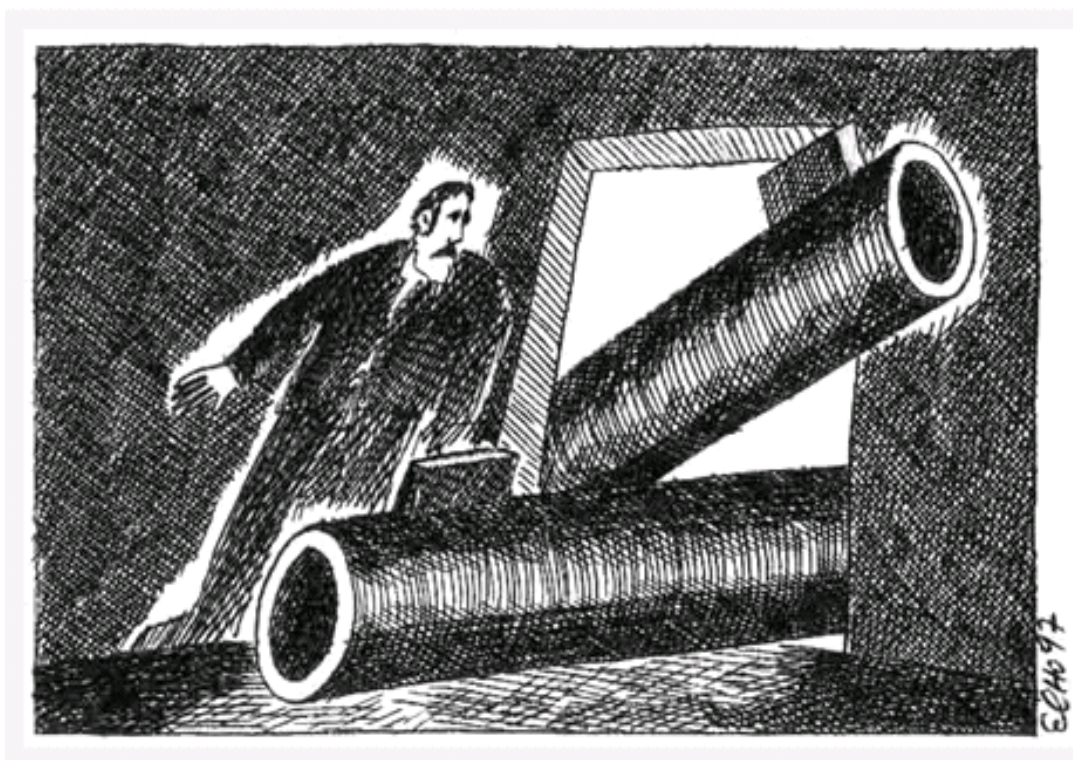


Figure 1.3

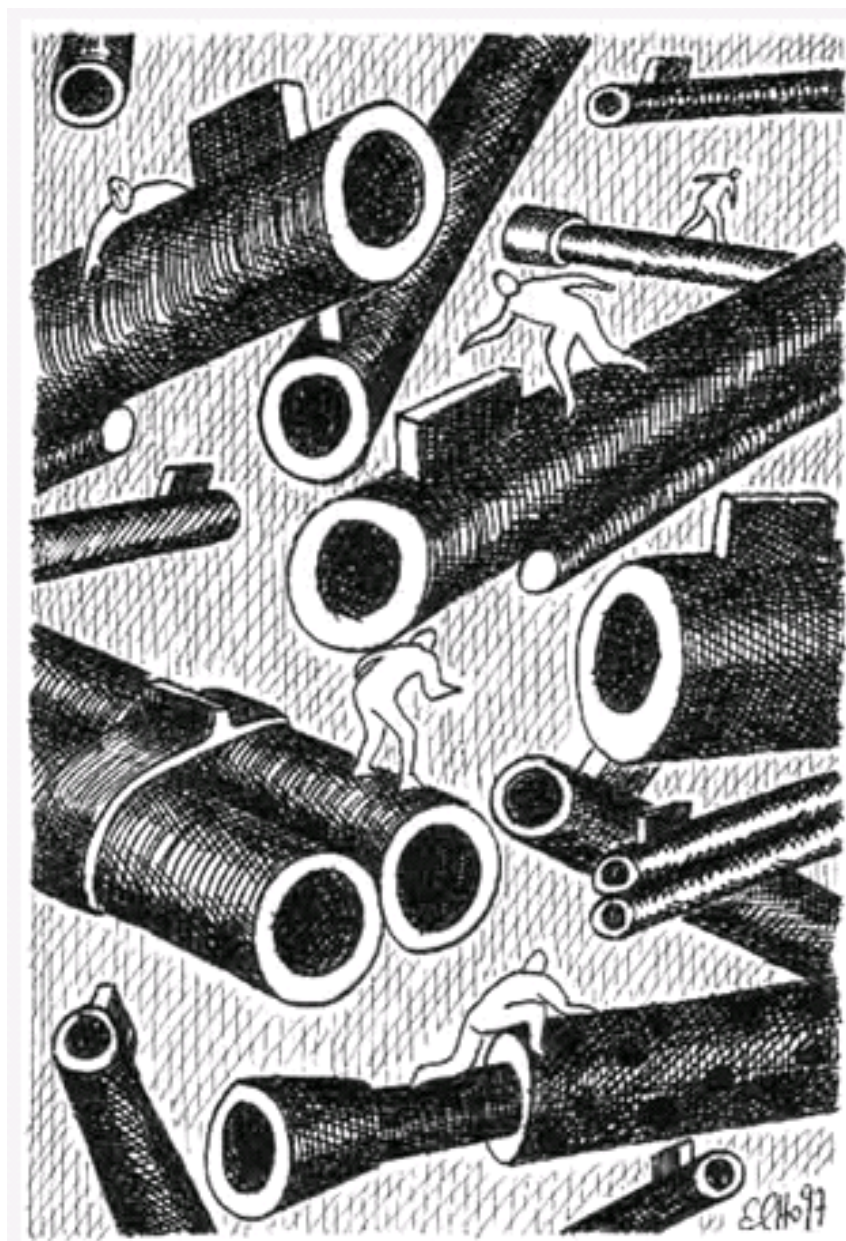


Figure 1.4



The images portray the civil war as an atmosphere where the threat of violent death is pervasive, horror and terror ubiquitous, and understanding absent. The guns protruding into the images suggest the intrusion of violence into everyday life, but only the end of the gun barrel is visible; knowledge of who wields it and why is patently unavailable. Violence thus appears as an effect whose cause or source is inaccessible; life appears as crushed by a situation without explanation. No story, or narrative, seems available—only the consequences and effects of violence.

The civil war is often portrayed, even in academic contexts, as a murky period of whispered conspiracies, obscure events and unknown causes. The civil war is described by a leading French historian of Algeria, Benjamin Stora, as "wars nested within other wars, plots within plots."⁶ The same author elsewhere presents the civil war through tropes of the unknowable and the ineffable, as inexplicable violence:

The motives of the actors supposedly confronting each other vanish behind each new abominable crime. The killers who come forward, smoking gun or blood-soaked knife in hand, within a country plunged into fire and violence, look like demoniacal phantoms emerging from a dark night of madness, specters held in the grip of darkness. The sharp, well-defined lines that divided the two principal protagonists (the regime and the Islamists) and the clear circles within which the acts of war took place have decomposed over the years into dark corridors, into inextricable mazes.⁷

Stora's account is perhaps hyperbolic, but all accounts agree that, for most people living during the 1990s, "Algeria had become a murky place with no dividing line between truth and untruth" where it seemed "impossible to impose a pattern on the violence."⁸ This resulted from an absence of basic information about the violence, since the traditional media were shut down or taken over by the state. "With no dates, no battles, no chronology, the dirty war on terror was shapeless, inchoate and never-ending." Without a solid basis for knowing or comprehending, gossip, myth, and speculation became the *modus operandi*. "In this confused atmosphere Algeria became mired in a series of mysteries," as with the Boudiaf assassination, such stories and speculations constantly raised "one key question: who was killing whom and why?"

The absence of a stable narrative of the present is indicative of a more general perception that Algerian history is distorted, occulted, or unwritten. This anxiety about history is captured well by a 1996 political cartoon (Figure 2) showing an Algerian father explaining the Algerian national flag to his son. The son asks about the flag's three colors: "if green is for Islam, and red

⁶ See Benjamin Stora's suggestively titled *La guerre invisible*, 2001 (cited hereafter as Stora, 2001[a]). See also the revised edition, presented as a chapter in Stora's English volume *Algeria, 1830-2000: A Short History*, 2001 (cited hereafter as Stora 2001[b]).

⁷ Stora, 2001(b), 234-235.

⁸ This and following from Martin Evans and John Phillips, *Algeria, Anger of the Dispossessed*, Yale University Press, 2007, 225.

is for the blood of the nation's martyrs, what is the white for?" The father's reply: "For the pages of our history!"

Figure 2⁹



⁹ Gyps, *FIS End Love*, 1996, 6.

As we see from the examples above, the public representation of the civil war dovetails problematically with public memory of Algerian history.¹⁰

The struggle to represent the past—and how it relates to the historical present—is doubtless a conflicted, fraught process in all societies, especially national polities.¹¹ This situation is especially acute in Algeria. According to Omar Carlier,

Rares sont . . . les sociétés qui entretiennent avec leurs récits d'identité et d'origine une relation aussi problématique que celle de la société algérienne avec les siens, aux limites mêmes de sa durée, qu'il s'agisse du passé le plus lointain ou du plus proche hier. Rares sont celles où l'histoire politique nationale est aussi paradoxalement présente et absente, mobilisée dans la conscience immédiate et coupée de sa genèse.

¹⁰ Two of the concepts framing this work are the notion of public (also: collective, popular) memory and official or state history. Public memory is distinguished from private or personal memory and from academic historiography: it is how the general population understands itself and the events, as perceived, that shaped their collective and national history. Official history is simply the state-produced narrative of the nation, as found in constitutional preambles, state proclamations, and official statements.

I follow and adapt the conception of public memory from two sources. One is Pierre Nora's conception of "collective memory." According Lawrence Kritzman, Nora's concept refers to elements of public space— "memory places"— that constitute "the result of an imaginary process that codifies and represents the historical consciousness" or the nation. Nora, Vol. 1, x. It is obviously distinct from academic historiography, which strives to use a consistent, politically and socially neutral methodology to establish consensus about what is factually true about the past (see, for example, the description of "the historian's task" offered by von Humboldt, in Budd, ed., *The Modern Historiography Reader*, 167-169).

The second source is the Popular Memory Group's concept of "public representation," aptly summarized by Martin Evans as: "the public theatre of history, that is, something which involves a public stage and a public audience for the enacting of dramas concerning the national history," with various institutions within society offering or imposing themselves to "construct this public historical sphere and control access to the means of publication." Evans, *The Memory of Resistance*, 1997, 10-11. This includes everything from state institutions to all forms of public media, including cultural productions such as novels. It is "[t]he disparate range of public versions of the past" —and, I should add, the historical present—that "these different agencies produce [that] is called the field of public representations." For the Popular Memory Group, the sphere of public representation or public memory is a site of contest and struggle, with the hegemonic or dominant memory being variously challenged by non-dominant or oppositional memory formations. In this view, "The field is crossed by competing constructions of the past, often at war with each other, some of which achieve centrality, whilst others are marginalized or excluded or reworked" (Evans).

Turning to the words of the Group itself, "memory is . . . a term which directs our attention not [to] the past but to the past-present relation." In sum, the "social production of memory," which I refer to in its resultant form as public memory, " includes all the ways in which a sense of the past is constructed in our society." For my purposes, a crucial point is that "Political domination involves historical definition." Thus "history," including public memory, "is at stake in the constant struggle for hegemony." Popular Memory Group, "Popular memory: Theory, politics, method," in Perks, et al., eds., *The Oral History Reader*, 1998, 78, 76, 79.

¹¹ See Paul Ricoeur's discussion of "Manipulated Memory" in "The Exercise of Memory," in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 80-86; and Marc Ferro, *The Use and Abuse of History: Or How the Past is Taught to Children*, 1981.

Rare are ... those societies maintaining such a problematic a relationship with their identity and origin narratives as Algerian society has maintained with its own, from the very limits of its lifespan, whether concerning the most distant past or the most recent past. Rare are those whose national political history is as paradoxically present and absent, both mobilized in immediate consciousness and cut off from its origins.¹²

This anxiety about history emerges in recent times with special acuity in Algeria, and has long haunted postwar society. This is partly because the civil war exposes realities about the Algerian state and its origins that are incompatible with the popular understanding of the Algerian nation and its leaders. Explaining why violence erupted in 1988 and then with a vengeance in 1992, and why the state responded the way it did, has challenged and disturbed those who had internalized the glorious story of origins, like that found in the preamble to the 1963 Algerian Constitution. While the official doctrines have attempted to consolidate a moral-political vision of Algeria's independence movement and postwar nationhood, in reality these were always fiercely contested. To take just the early nationalist and war-time context, compare the perspectives of Kateb Yacine, Mouloud Feraoun, Messali Hadj, Ferhat Abbas, Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, Daniel Guérin, and Albert Camus, to mention at random only a few renowned figures of the colonial and war-time periods. Such comparisons reveal the contentious, often bitter struggles over the interpretation of Algerian history, which continue unabated today.¹³

The novels considered in the chapters below¹⁴ take up this problem. The interpretation of national history is the major stakes of any attempt to represent the civil war, both explicitly, in the depiction of the conflict, and implicitly, given its significance within the broader context. Broadly speaking, the novels propose three main alternatives for explaining the conflict, hinging on how they represent the military state and the Islamist insurgency, with their conception of postwar Algerian history serving as the major backdrop. The vein represented by Yasmina Khadra largely accepts the state explanation: that a sector of the population was driven—though class resentment, historical tensions, and mere opportunism—to criminal fanaticism, articulated within the perspective of a religious extremism, and took it upon themselves to take over the state at all costs.¹⁵ The proposed solution is the use of state violence to restore order and justice within society by purging the community of its criminal elements. A second explanation,

¹² "Mémoire, Mythe, et Doxa de l'État en Algérie," in Raphaëlle Branche, ed., 2009, 19.

¹³ This dissertation only considers some aspects of these struggles, focusing on how they pertain to the civil war of the 1990s. For a superb account of the a number of these "intellectual" struggles during the period of the war of independence, see James Le Sueur's *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics During the Decolonization of Algeria*, 2001; as well as Martin Evans's *The Memory of Resistance*, 1997, and *Algeria: France's Undeclared War*, 2012.

¹⁴ One of the works considered here, Assia Djebar's *Le blanc de l'Algérie*, has interesting and unusual generic features that arguably challenge its classification as a novel. Notwithstanding, I occasionally refer to it in this study as a novel, for reasons explained in Chapter 8.

¹⁵ Other Algerian novelists accepting this line in their literary work include Rachid Boudjedra, Rachid Mimouni, and Mohamed Dib.

accounted for by Assia Djebar, puts some of the blame on the state, which is taken to have reacted excessively and to be largely corrupt, but this view adheres to the basic narrative of criminal fanaticism: an unfathomable evil has crept over the land and elicited an almost cosmic struggle within the nation between the forces of enlightened heroism and the dark forces of an obscurantist violence. The third line of explanation, that of Boualem Sansal, suggests that more complicated and insidious forces are behind the civil war, with various actors, including the Islamists, being manipulated from behind the scenes by entrenched interests (whose origins date to the now-mystified beginnings of the Algerian nation-state) and from within the patronage networks, mafia, and old-guard military barons who, in effect, control the regime. While some of the explanations above are sympathetic to both state and secular elite intellectual interests, it is worth pointing out here that none of them takes up a further possible perspective, one sympathetic to Islamist intellectuals and which places maximum blame on the state—though Sansal's novel is at least highly suggestive on this point.

Whatever their explanations of the forces at work behind the civil war, all three novels make one thing clear: the project of the Algerian nation has faltered, perhaps fatally, and history requires a rethinking. Each of the novels is ready to criticize the mythology of national origins to some extent, either chipping away at the popular memory of the Algerian nation, especially at its origins, or offering a frontal attack. In Khadra's *Les agneaux du Seigneur* (hereafter *Les agneaux*), such criticisms are merely gestured to in a few scattered paragraphs. With Djebar's *Le blanc de l'Algérie* (hereafter *Le blanc*), the subject elicits serious discussion and a substantial contribution to adjusting the narrative, but only up to a point, as I argue in Chapter 8. However, with Sansal's *Le serment des barbares* (hereafter *Le serment*), the subject lurks in the shadows of every page. In the portrayal of *Le serment*, the major force behind the civil war is precisely a misunderstanding or falsification of history. Hiding unwittingly behind myths of a simplified, glorious past and the distortions of state memory, the Algerian nation is falling victim to a serious misunderstanding of the forces shaping it and the fiery contradictions that produced it in the crucible of war. Hence each of the novels, produced in the midst of the civil war, represents an intervention in an important public discussion about Algerian history and the violent events wracking the national narrative.

The novels themselves—*Le blanc*, *Les agneaux*, and *Le serment*—were chosen for their prominence as representative and well-regarded novels, as well as their content as contributions to the public memory of the civil war. Their authors are considered leading Algerian writers whose books are translated into many languages and celebrated in the international press, and have won plenty of international prizes and distinctions. However, discussion of these titles in literary scholarship has been limited thus far, and mostly avoided any serious confrontation with the civil war itself, something I attempt to redress here. This is understandable, however, since the civil war is poorly understood, especially outside of the journals of academic historiography. The involvement of Islamism in the conflict has often been a source of further confusion, especially in the context of the post-September 11 hysteria about political Islam, with the surge

of sensationalist claims, superficial popular and sometimes even academic understandings, and generalized lack of caution or skepticism on the subject.¹⁶

This study approaches civil war-era Algerian literature with contextualist commitments. It is assumed here as given that cultural works, such as novels, are irretrievably immersed in historical contexts, the networks of the social and political life from which they emerged. The implication for cultural criticism and scholarship is that a primary task is to understand and articulate these relationships. The understanding here is that it is ultimately in discovering and discussing how cultural works relate to society—theirs and ours—that cultural texts are meaningful and worthy of discussion. It is from this vantage point that this dissertation attempts to describe the relationship between works of recent Algerian literature and society.¹⁷

A major aim of the dissertation is to provide a solid contextual basis for interpreting Algerian literary treatments of the civil war. Close readings are ungrounded if the text is not understood as initially produced within an implicit context with which it initially engages. This is even more true for works like the novels considered here, which self-consciously engage with the thick of history, positioning themselves explicitly within a fraught partisan context amid complicated historical relationships. Unfortunately, the Algerian civil war is poorly understood, including in scholarship on civil war literature. Literary scholars writing on this topic have often been so focused on the literary texts that their relation to the historical context can be often misunderstood.¹⁸ The approach taken here is therefore not only to understand and analyze the works internally, but also to situate and interpret them within the relevant broader context.

The dissertation alternates close readings of literary texts and discussion of the civil war context. In this way, the literary works are reinserted in a context that positions us to develop a coherent argument about how they should be interpreted. Chapter two presents a reading of Boualem Sansal's *Le serment des barbares*, a novel presenting the larger themes of the dissertation: the distortion of public memory; the difficulty in narrating the civil war; the mythification of history; and the role of the state in contributing to violence in Algerian society. Chapter 3 follows the

¹⁶ For a pertinent discussion of this topic, see for example the discussion by Saba Mahmood, "Retooling Democracy and Feminism in the Service of the New Empire," in *Qui Parle*, 2006, 117-143. Mahmood considers a host of examples, especially in the literary-biographical genre, in this case of Muslim women complaining of mistreatment and misogyny within patriarchal Islamic societies, but which are often fashioned to "perform an age-old genre of Orientalist (if not outrightly racist) tropes, texts and testimonials that "have been successful in reaching an audience that right-wing political pundits such as Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami cannot." 118. The phenomenon Mahmood discusses is only the recent chapter of a long-standing form of ethnocentrism and cultural superiority using Muslim societies as a foil within American and European intellectual institutions. For a sophisticated expert overview, see Edward Said, *Covering Islam*, 1997.

¹⁷ These points are further elaborated in the introduction to Chapter 6.

¹⁸ To take one example among many, Patrick Corcoran's otherwise informative and insightful article on recent Maghribi literature is typical in this respect. Commenting on the Algerian civil war, Corcoran asserts that it is "primarily a cultural rather than a political conflict," an assertion that would come as a surprise, for example, to those members of the FIS party jailed or thrown into exile when the elections were cancelled in 1992, effectively the opening event, and an overtly political one, of the civil war. 37. In whatever sense Corcoran may have intended to inflect the word "cultural," the assertion is plainly false before a basic understanding of the facts of the civil war.

paths proposed in Sansal's novel by considering the novel's claim that the popular understanding of the war of independence is largely a myth, and that insidious but important episodes of that struggle were deleted from history. Chapter 4 examines the treatment of the civil war in Yasmina Khadra's *Les agneaux du Seigneur*, an enormous commercial success that frames the civil war as a *noir* genre fiction of terror and crime in a village outside Algiers. Chapter 5 examines the discourse used to discuss the civil war, and focuses specifically on the rhetoric of state discourse. Chapter 6 reviews the basic political context of the civil war and reviews what is known about the violence itself. Chapter 7 examines the role of political Islam in Algeria, since this is a crucial element of the civil war and its treatment in the novels examined here. Chapter 8 considers the civil war in the depiction of Assia Djebar's *Le blanc de l'Algérie* and synthesizes the dissertation's major themes.

Chapter 2

Denationalizing history: Le serment des barbares

Je dis que pour combattre contre la barbarie, on ne peut pas user des mêmes armes que la barbarie.

I will say that in the fight against barbarity, you cannot use the means of barbarity.

–Algerian victim of state torture¹

... [Il faut] essayer de sortir de cette guerre civile larvée qui avait commencé déjà au lendemain de l'Indépendance.

...[We must] try to get out of this latent civil war that had already begun in the wake of Independence.

–Hocine Aït-Ahmed²

L'Algérie doit repenser son passé si elle ne veut pas s'enliser dans les affrontements culturels.

Algeria needs to rethink its past if it wants to avoid being dragged down into cultural conflicts.

–Mohammed Harbi³

Le serment des barbares was published by Boualem Sansal in 1999, and is arguably the most sustained literary attempt to grapple with the civil war to appear in the 1990s. Sansal had published nothing previously, and had long worked as a technocrat within the Algerian government. The novel was immediately hailed as a work of Rabelaisian virtuosity, winning important literary prizes in France, with many of Algeria's major authors signaling a major intervention in Algeria's literary trajectory.⁴ The novel's genre can be described as faux-noir, using crime fiction plot structures and tropes as a pretense for a sophisticated exploration of the

¹ *Le procès*, 366.

² *Ibid.*, 369.

³ Harbi, 1992, 30.

⁴ See, for example, the comments of Rachid Boudjedra in an interview, "La littérature algérienne," *Le café littéraire*, <http://coinnlitteraire.unblog.fr/la-litterature-algerienne-par-rachid-boudjedra/>, retrieved 9/10/2009. Since the appearance of *Le serment*, Sansal has produced several more novels which met with considerable commercial success, the most celebrated being his 2008 novel *Le village de l'Allemand*.

lifeworld of an aging police detective, a veteran of the Franco-Algerian war who is watching his country in 1993 descend once again into chaos and violence.

This chapter explores how *Le serment* depicts and diagnoses the Algerian civil war. The overarching themes examined are the distortions of history, the loss of memory, and the foreclosure of mourning. Section 1 argues that *Le serment* posits the civil war as a problem of knowledge. In the novel's portrayal, the civil war cannot be comprehended because its essential contours remain hidden. The apparent actors are merely pawns of larger unseen forces and trends; the actual historical conflicts and tensions that erupted into bloody civil conflict have been whitewashed and papered over—essentially removed from history—thus blocking insight into the origins and causes of the bloodshed.

Section 2 focuses on a notable formal element of the novel: the interesting and innovative narrative style. I argue that the ample display of social pluralism evident in the novel's narrative stylistics is a function of the novel's general theme of destabilizing hegemonic national narratives.

Section 3 argues that *Le serment* figures the civil war as a symptom of societal contradictions that are collectively repressed. This is portrayed as mostly a consequence of state power, but also a collective unwillingness to understand the complexities and originary crimes that served as the basis of political independence and nationhood. The solution the novel gestures toward, through a story about mourning, is a collective recognition of the war's human consequences, the traumas, losses, and great crimes at the heart of Algeria's national independence story.

Section 4 argues that *Le serment* diagnoses the civil war as a symptom of "missing" history. Crucial contradictions in Algerian society were intensified during the rise of nationalism and crystallized during the war of independence. They have since been the site of suppression and erasure in favor of a contrived national identity whose political imaginary dehumanizes essential portions of the population. The ensuing political exclusion and concomitant state repression ensures that deep-seated resentments will continue to rise to the surface and erupt, a continuing process of which the civil war is but an episode. The novel is thus pessimistic on the two major questions it puts forth: first, whether an honest public discussion of Algerian history can occur in a present-day Algeria subject to censorship and violence; second, whether the public has the will and stomach for this crucial gazing into the mirror and at the origins of Algerian independence.

2.1 Inexplicable violence

The civil war is figured in *Le serment* primarily as a series of unsolved enigmas and a process of disrupted mourning. The central enigma is the unstoppable death of the civil war itself, a conflict whose causes remain inscrutable. This is symbolized at the outset of the novel by a massive, dysfunctional cemetery. The normal functions of a cemetery include both the disposal of the material remains of the dead and to serve as a site of grieving for individuals and

communities mourning those they have lost. However, in this cemetery, each of these functions is disabled. Mourning, grieving, and the restoration of meaning after loss have given way to a mechanical cacophony, a parade of senseless death:

Le cimetière n'a plus cette sérénité qui savait recevoir le respect, apaiser les douleurs, exhorter à une vie meilleure. Il est une plaie béante, un charivari irrémédiable; on excave à la pelle mécanique, on enfourne à la chaîne, on s'agglutine à perte de vue. Les hommes meurent comme des mouches, la terre les gobe, rien n'a de sens.⁵

The cemetery carries no longer that serenity inviting respect, which pacifies grief and exhorts you to a better life. It's an open wound, an irremediable cacophony; excavation is done with the tractor, it all gets stuffed in with assembly-line efficiency, people clumped together as far as the eye can see. Men are dying like flies, the earth swallows them up, nothing has any meaning.

The whole of *Le serment* can be described as the quest for explanations as to the origins and meaning of the violence metonymized by the cemetery scene. A detective, the novel's protagonist, begins at this scene of an open wound, an absence of meaning, and a foreclosure of mourning, a place where "rien n'a de sens." The novel's plot is this man's attempt to restore meaning, comprehend this mass death, and enable mourning.

The confusion and senselessness portrayed in the novel mirrors historical accounts and testimonial documents. The massacres in Algeria reached their highest point in 1998, the year before *Le serment* was published. Throughout the 1990s, according to French historian Benjamin Stora, Algeria "lived in step with a violence that never ceased to augment," to the point that "le terrorisme, les représailles, les tueries prendront une telle ampleur qu'il sera possible d'évoquer une sorte d'enfer, devenu presque abstrait à force d'incroyables scènes de barbarie" 'terrorism, reprisals, and killings became so great one could evoke a kind of hell, which became nearly abstract by measure of unbelievable scenes of barbarism.'⁶ Amnesty International's 1998 report on the country concludes that in the prior year alone "Thousands of civilians, including hundreds of women and children, were killed in large-scale massacres committed in rural areas by armed groups. Thousands of people were killed by the security forces and state-armed militias Hundreds of civilians were killed by armed groups which define themselves as 'Islamic groups.' " The report also notes how this political violence was the site of a contested narrative, with each side blaming the other for the killing. "The authorities blamed all the massacres on 'terrorist groups,' but there were allegations that some of the massacres had been committed by armed groups acting on instructions, or with the consent, of certain army and security forces and paramilitary groups." But even basic information on the conflict was lacking, since "Government restrictions on the news media and on the activities of human rights organizations . . . severely restricted reporting." The confusion was also a result of a difficulty in clearly identifying

⁵ Sansal, 1999, 9. This is the novel's first paragraph.

⁶ Stora, 2001, 18.

conflicting parties or distinguishing between the tactics employed. According to Amnesty, responsibility for the violence "was often difficult to verify, as security forces, militias armed by the state and armed groups defining themselves as 'Islamic groups' often adopted similar patterns of conduct."⁷ A year later, Human Rights Watch would conclude in its 1999 report that "the questions surrounding the massacres [have] received no conclusive answers."⁸

The civil war's violence is portrayed in *Le serment* as enigmatic traces whose origins are mysterious, effects with unknown causes. As death and killing continue unabated, the agents and actors remain elusive, anonymous and faceless. This is exemplified by the detective's investigation into two murder cases. At the cemetery, Larbi contemplates one of the civil war's apparent victims. He wonders "Comment interpréter" 'how to interpret' the many wounds on the victim: a body riddled with machine gun bullets, then pistol shots, with his heart sliced apart by knife wounds. "Il y avait tant d'hypothèses et tant d'infamie. Quelle signification donner à ces coups?" 'There were so many hypotheses and so much infamy. What meaning could be given to these wounds?' The victim's wounds function as a synecdoche for the broader conflict and its incomprehensible atrocities. Confronted with these traces of violence and death, the detective's investigation represents the quest to comprehend the conflict's motives, causes, and origins. But the task is impossible in the present situation: "Il lui manquait trop d'informations pour trier ses hypothèses" 'Too much information was missing for him to test his hypotheses.'⁹ Larbi decides to investigate, to search for answers, but the quest seems foreclosed from the start.

The novel develops a constant parallel between Larbi's investigation and his understanding of the civil war. If the victims he investigates were murdered for reasons unknown, the civil war itself is like the scene of a giant murder mystery. Even the proper name for its violence is unclear. The narrator vacillates between describing it as an anonymous rage, a civil conflict, and a dirty war. "Cette animosité n'a pas de nom, à vrai dire. C'est une guerre si on veut; une fureur lointaine et proche à la fois" 'This animosity has no name, truth be told. It's a war if you like; a rage far-off and near at the same time'; "Nous l'appellerions génocide, n'était le refus des acteurs" 'We'd call it a genocide except for the refusal of its participants'; "la guerre civile; une sale guerre en vérité" 'the civil war; a dirty war in truth.'¹⁰

As Larbi investigates the murders, his ideas waver, brittle hypotheses emerge and collapse. He assembles circumstantial evidence, a series of disparate clues, doing his best to attribute a context and motive to the killings. As he searches for the deeper meaning behind the murders, his quest becomes an investigation of the civil war itself. The novel transforms Larbi from a detective into a historian: "Il manque à leurs investigations un facteur clé, la dimension historique qui assemble les faits est leur donne empennage et motricité" 'What their

⁷ "Amnesty International Report 1998 – Algeria."

⁸ "Human Rights Watch World Report 1999 – Algeria."

⁹ 81-82.

¹⁰ 9, 10, 434.

investigations are missing is the key part, the historical dimension that brings together the facts and provides them with rudder and motor.¹¹

Larbi's investigation mirrors the classical problem of the modern historiographer: through empirical investigation, the use of disparate and insufficient clues in the search to develop an idea of the unity behind the elements of an event's appearance. According to Wilhelm von Humboldt, one of the founders of modern historiography,¹² "The historian can only reveal the truth of an event . . . by filling in and connecting the disjointed fragments." In this task, the historian functions "like the poet" through the use of the imagination to restore unity to disparate traces, only reversing the emphasis, subordinating his imagination "to experience and the investigation of reality." He achieves this "by intuition, inference, and guesswork," searching to establish the "inner nexus," "active forces," and "trends" inhering within the specific traces and circumstances of an event.¹³ The major theme of the *Le serment* is the difficulty in penetrating the civil war's nature and causes. *Le serment* represents the civil war as a problem of history, both a problem of knowledge and testimony. Larbi serves alternately as historian and witness; but the novel dooms him to fail at both enterprises.

What is missing for Larbi is the underlying motives, the logic of the processes causing violence and conflict. Like the historian, Detective Larbi tries throughout *Le serment* to overcome the "scattered, disjointed, isolated" traces of the civil war violence and locate its inner causes. In his quest, he traipses through the Algiers universe searching for answers:

Le policier avait traîné ses soupçons partout, sur les sentiers battus, aux abords des palais des bazaris, dans les cimetières, les cafés et les bars louches, les chantiers et les commerces où la dissimulation est la règle, à la Casbah qui est un monde inquiet et fragile, et posé mille questions gênantes.

The detective dragged his suspicions everywhere, on the beaten paths, outside the bazaars, into cemeteries, cafés, dive bars, to construction sites and businesses where secrecy is the rule, to the Kasbah, a worried and fragile world, and he asked a thousand bothersome questions.¹⁴

It is finally an ancient veteran who supplies the missing kernel, the absent center of Larbi's investigation. But he predicts the ultimate failure of historical understanding because the "inner nexus" of the events cannot be contemplated. The Algerian imaginary of the civil war is stuck, according to the veteran, in a vicious circle of denial that undermines the public's capacity to comprehend its predicament. "Quand on ne connaît pas sa situation ou qu'on refuse de la regarder, où peut-on trouver la force de la corriger? Quand on a accepté le mensonge pour vérité,

¹¹ 450.

¹² Budd, *The Modern Historiography Reader: Western Sources*, 2009, 159-160.

¹³ "The Historian's Task," in Budd, ed., 167-168.

¹⁴ 450.

ne sommes-nous pas déjà morts?" "When you don't understand the situation you're in or refuse to look at it, where will you find the strength to correct it? When we accept lies for truth, aren't we already dead?"¹⁵

Le serment presents the dominant narrative of the civil war as a false lead from the beginning. The public understanding of the conflict is a mélange of incoherent conspiracies, stereotypes, and theories. The apparent aspects of the civil war, such as religious fanaticism, the swings of state power, and the struggles between mafia groups, according to the narrator, "n'en sont que les plus apparantes [des turbulences du pays] . . . [l]a partie visible de l'iceberg, qui plonge sa masse dans une mer de doutes ténébreux, de remises en cause sporadiques" 'are only the most visible of the country's troubles . . . [t]he visible part of the an iceberg whose mass plunges into an ocean of tenebrous doubts and sporadic interrogations.'¹⁶ The truth has been dissimulated from the Algerian public, as a function of parceling out Algeria's wealth by a powerful elite that secretly dominates society and benefits from sowing confusion and creating diversions within the political scene. The narrator claims, for example, that "La vérité est qu'après avoir épongé les pépettes du pétrole, les défroqués du parti unique, soi-disant libérés de leurs vœux mais toujours missionnaires secrets des grands maîtres du Clan, s'appliquent à jouer la division et à faire du chambard pour annihiler l'effort de vérité. Le rideau de fumée est une ruse de guerre intarissable" 'The truth is that after having soaked up the cash from oil, defrocked members of the one-party system, supposedly freed of their vows but still secret missionaries of the Clan's grandmasters, strive to sow division make a racket to destroy the efforts of truth. The smokescreen is an ageless strategy of war.'¹⁷

In explaining the death of one of the victims, Bakour, Larbi is pressured to fill out investigative reports to reflect the officially sanctioned version of the civil war violence. But Larbi refuses to go along, interested instead in pursuing the evidence and finding the truth. He is especially suspicious of simplistic official explanations for the civil war violence, such as the tendency to ascribe all the violence against civilians to anonymous Islamist fanatics. In the following passage, for example, skepticism of the official narrative is made unmistakable by the narrator's ironizing account of Larbi's police colleagues' attempt to reproduce this narrative:

"[L]es collègues racontèrent la suite sans lésiner: des ombres surgies du ventre de la terre... des djinns peinturlurés, sautillant sur le sentier de la guerre... on ne voyait que leurs yeux bardés de khôl et leurs barbes amarénées au pire... l'odeur même n'était pas celle d'un animal... Les islamistes? Ouah, c'était eux, au nombre d'eueuh... six... ou dix... ou une trentaine à peu près (la presse ira jusqu'à trois cents pour apporter sa pierre à la campagne d'intox contre l'aile droite de l'état-major), armés de haches et de bazookas, la tête roulée dans un chèche..."

¹⁵ 360.

¹⁶ 32.

¹⁷ 33.

The colleagues continued the story without skimping on the details: shadows erupted from the belly of the earth... there were djinns with painted faces, hopping down the warpath... all you could make out was their eyes caked with khol and their beards well-adapted to evil... their smell was not of the animal world... Islamists? Ya, it was them, um... six of 'em... or ten... about thirty actually (the press would go all the way up to three hundred to bring its contribution to the disinformation campaign of the right wing of the high command), armed with hatchets and bazookas, their heads rolled up in turbans...¹⁸

Heaping together stereotypes and clichés, the narrator's account of the policemen's story apes the official explanations behind every episode of massacre and violence in Algeria. The source of the irony is the constant use of these tropes to explain the civil war in officially sanctioned discourse. Compare, for example, with the claims delivered in the late 1990s by one of Algeria's most powerful generals, interviewed by the European press. Asked about the civil war, he explained that "the Algerian state defends the public order," while "the criminals who founded the GIA," the fanatical group on which the regime blamed most of the civil war atrocities, gained experience in Afghanistan and elsewhere and then arrived in Algeria to "import their supposed jihad." Algeria, according to the general, "is a democratic state"; but the problem is that it has been infiltrated by "a sick ideology that must be refuted" so that Algeria can "reinvent its nation-state destiny." He insisted that "those who tried to plunge Algeria into darkness have failed," since the military was "in its third and . . . final phase of the eradication campaign." The first stage had been a defensive posture; the second was "the expulsion of the terrorists" from territory, and the third and final phase "aims to destroy the last nests of terrorists." The terrorist themselves had "infiltrated society and its institutions" for a decade or more, and could be identified through their habits: they "let their beards grow out, wear the qamis [loose robe]," and "some of them, the most militant, even shave their eyebrows."¹⁹

Undermining such official accounts through irony and skepticism, *Le serment* presents a situation of instability and uncertainty. Knowledge about the civil war is absent, and the ability to comprehend the violence is unattainable. Appearances are deceiving, a diversion or a smokescreen, a function of unseen operations of power. Until the "inner nexus" of these apparent events is identified and understood, the cemetery remains a scene of senseless death and foreclosed mourning.

2.2 Narrative Tapestries

One of the ways *Le serment* showcases a disruption of official history is through an emphasis on an unstable narrative voice constantly tending toward a sense of social pluralism. In this regard, the novel develops an interesting and noteworthy narrative style, deploying an extremely ample narrative space to force the reader into constantly shifting encounters with plural social

¹⁸ 87.

¹⁹ Taheri, Amir. "Algerie: Les Grands Cimeterres Sous La Lune," 1998. The general in question was later revealed to be Mohamed Lamari.

formations. It is arguable how successful the novel is in truly injecting a sense of alterity or pluralism in the narration. One could point out, for example, that the novel retains in the final analysis a narrative voice that is from clearly identifiable social perspective. But since the narrative style is one of the most striking aspects of the novel, and one that dovetails thematically with the points developed in this chapter, I will briefly consider a few telling examples.

The narration in *Le serment* is striking. In places, the novel reads like a collage of editorial pages; elsewhere it is like a cocktail party where voices compete for the reader's attention. Broadly speaking, we observe three kinds of narrative spaces in the novel.²⁰ By using the loose term "narrative space," I am attempting to distinguish between moments of narration that are not objectively differentiated in the text, but which have a clearly different feel to them in tone, style, and subject matter. Some, for example, address the reader, appear entirely removed from the plot, and comment profusely on recent news stories about the Algerian president. Others describe an Algerian universe, such as one passage offering exquisite, systemized detail on the Kasbah, down to its insects and odors. Others still are close to the plot, often following Larbi's thoughts or actions or recounting his backstory, but sometimes meandering for pages in dense paratactic chains of free association, roaming through what appears to be Larbi's memories, recollections, and daydreams, the psychological geography of his universe. A notable feature of all three of these more or less distinct narrative voices is that they offer a contextual stuffing, a kind of implicit commentary and horizon-broadening around the events of the plot. At the same time, they often have the effect, accomplished through copious use of idiomatizations, regionalisms, and obscure political references, of unequivocally informing the non-Algerian reader that she/he is not an "insider" to the novel's cosmopolitan francophone Algerian perspective.

The following passage is a typical example. A long, meandering passage, which I shorten significantly here, is inserted into a diegetic²¹ encounter between Larbi, who recalls growing up in the colonial era, and a young Arabized judge who grew up in the postwar period. Note the range of topics and themes tightly jammed into the prose, and the breathless alacrity of the narrator's hopscotch through Larbi's recollections, offering sarcasm and ironic commentary as he proceeds.²²

Si Larbi se considérait de la bonne vieille école, alias l'école coloniale; Jules Ferry 1832-1893. C'est loin, c'était une époque. [. . .] Comme ses pairs rendus oiseux par l'âge et l'éloignement des repères, Larbi aurait été bien en peine de distinguer les tenants des aboutissants de cette école et de la dépeindre avec succès. "Liberté – Égalité – Fraternité," ça avait l'air simple au frontispice de l'école mais en bas

²⁰ I avoid a overly technical analysis of the novel's narrative structure, since my purposes are aimed mainly at thematic issues. Notwithstanding, my discussion is informed by the summary presentation of narration studies in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction*, though I do not always follow her terminology.

²¹ Following general usage of this term in narratology, I take diegetic to refer to the action of the novel's story, the primary plot that is narrated; and extradiegetic to refer to higher levels of narration, the secondary and tertiary levels of telling and intervention by the narrator and potentially the (implicit) author.

²² 145-152.

c'était plus compliqué que tout. [. . .] Tout cela sonne faux et appelle le reproche. Un: cette école, sourcilleuse sur le chapitre de la ponctuation, leur a inculqué des références sans rapport avec l'économie rurale et les constructions orales; ce fut bon à prendre en son temps, quand ça ouvrait du chemin sur la ville, soit, mais pour faire quoi au juste maintenant que les vents ont tourné? Deux: elle leur a donné pour ancêtres des Gaulois, des barbares, des païens paillards et pouilleux, eux qui n'ont plié que devant les Arabes! Pourquoi ce détour? Crénom! En vérité, que sont-ils? Ne leur cachons pas la vérité, elle fait mal mais guérit du mensonge; de simples et pauvres Berbères, ils sont, voilà; des rejetons des barbares non identifiés à ce jour, autrement dit des bâtards que tous les riverains de la mer Blanche sont en droit de reconnaître en filiation; [...] qui se livraient avec la conviction du possédé à un maraboutisme décadent venu du fond des âges; se nourrissaient d'un islam allégé qui faisait la part belle à l'excès, qui firent le djihad aux colons en prêchant le paradis du dieu Plan; [...] et... bon Dieu, quelle mouche les a piqués?... contre toute attente et sans que personne les ait sonnés, ils inventèrent la Nouvelle École, dans la hâte et la fièvre, le cœur plein de remords de repentis et la tête bourrée de schémas enchevêtrés, et la baptisèrent Fondamentale quand elle n'était que le début d'un crime contre l'humanité. Emportés pas l'élan, ils s'enfoncèrent dans un chemin qui les a conduit au...Yémen! Ils étaient fourvoyés, mais plus que jamais remontés contre le Gaulois, cet usurpateur de peuplades qui s'est multiplié en nos terres sans même recourir à la complicité de nos filles; elles n'étaient pas belles ou quoi? Là, dans un désert en fusions, pris d'une lubie soudaine ou dégoûtés de leurs desseins oiseux, ils prirent sur eux d'adopter pour ancêtre un homme de cru: un brave Bédouin qui mâchouillait béatement son gât à l'ombre du soleil. [...] Il n'avait rien demandé, ne comprenait rien, ne revendiquait rien, encore moins pour ses aïeux dont il sait l'histoire vierge de tout crime. Retournée dans tous les sens, on n'y trouve ni trace, ni ombre, ni témoignage de quelconques errements en dehors de leurs limites territoriales. Dans cette fournaise, à part les criquets pèlerins, qui songerait à aller se refaire à l'autre bout de la corne, dans un autre désert dont le seul nom, Sahara, fauche les pieds? L'esprit de contradictions a ceci d'affreux: à force, le forcené se prend à la gorge; le séparer revient à le tuer et le tuer c'est éliminer deux fous dont l'un est peut-être le vrai. Conclusion: un Berbère est un Berbère et le Berbère ce qu'on voudra sauf un étranger dans son pays."

Si Larbi considered himself from the good old school, aka the colonial school; Jules Ferry 1832-1893. It's far away; that was an age ago. [...] Like his colleagues who'd been made lazy with age and the lack of reliable references, Larbi, would have had great difficulty distinguishing the ins from the outs of this school or portraying it with any success. "Liberté – Égalité – Fraternité," it looked simple on the school frontispiece but down below it was more complicated than anything. [...] All of this has a false sound and calls for redress. One: this school, punctilious on the chapter about punctuation, inculcated references unrelated to rural economy or oral constructions; that was okay in its day, when it opened up a way to the city, fine, but what good does it do now that the winds have changed?

Two: it gave them Gauls for ancestors, those barbarians, those bawdy and flea-bitten pagans, they who hadn't bent a knee for anyone but the Arabs! Why this detour? Crénom! In truth, what are they? Let's not hide the truth from them, it hurts but heals the lies; some simple and poor Berbers, they are, there it is; the offspring of barbarians still unidentified today, in other words cross-breeds of whom all residents bordering the White Sea have the right to claim filiation; [...] who dedicated themselves with a madman's conviction to a decadent maraboutisme preserved from the beginning of time; nourished on a simplified Islam that gave pride of place to excess, declaring jihad on the colonists while preaching the paradise of the god Plan; [...] and... good God, what fly must have bitten them?... against all expectation and without anyone having called them to it, they invented the New School, in haste and fever, hearts full of a penitent's remorse, heads stuffed with complicated schemes, and baptized it Fundamental when it was still only the gleam of a crime against humanity. Carried on with the momentum, they threw themselves on a course that led to... Yemen! They were lost, but more than ever up in arms against the Gaul, that usurper of peoples who multiplied in our lands without even having recourse to the complicity of our women; they weren't pretty or what? There, in a desert in fusion, caught in a sudden whim or just tired of pointless schemes, they took it upon themselves to adopt as their ancestor a man of substance: a nice Bedouin chewing contentedly gaat in the shade. [...] He had asked for nothing, understood nothing, and claimed nothing, even less for his forebears whose history he knows is pure of any crime. In every way you consider it, there is no trace, nor shadow, nor testimony of any kind regarding any wandering outside of the territorial limits. In this furnace, excepting the occasional cricket on pilgrimage, who would dream of going to remake themselves on the other side of the horn, in a desert whose very name, Sahara, knocks you off your feet? Such a spirit of contradiction is awful for this reason: violently, the deranged one seizes himself at the throat; to separate him comes down to killing him and killing him means eliminating two crazies of whom one is perhaps the real one. Conclusion: a Berber is a Berber and a Berber is anything you like except a foreigner in his own country.

With passages like these rampant throughout the novel, one occasionally senses that the plot serves partly as a peg for the long authorial intersessions, offering quasi-surrealist meditations on various subjects related to the Algerian lifeworld. One feat of such passages is to pull the reader rapidly through an extremely broad field of experience. A concomitant feature is to inject a strong sense of pluralism, instability, and multiplicity into the novel. The style of *Le serment* thus reflects the theme of narrative instability discussed at the end of section 2.1. Knowledge is not reliable; identities shift as the story unfolds; history is presented as a tapestry of fictions woven together in configurations that threaten to unravel. The density of the "thick" narration pulls together disparate elements of an Algerian experience, especially political experience, that systematically undermines the sense of moral satisfaction that might emerge from such coherent, finished political narratives of Algerian experience, such as those found in preambles to successive Algerian constitutions, or from the reassuring clarity delivered by the state-controlled news agencies. With its paratactic virtuosity, the constant shifts in narrative filter, and

the collage of perspectives, modes, and styles, *Le serment*—clearly influenced by modernist narration—offers a compelling and potentially unsettling counterpoint, through use of innovative stylistic techniques, to such "finished" political and moral narratives.

Passages such as the one quoted above leave the reader with a strong impression of narrative pluralism, or, to use Bakhtin's phrase (discussed below), heteroglossia. In place of a coherent realist perspective or an experience of settled unity, the reader is forced to travel in a space of competing, jostling, conspiratorial, gossipy, brittle, emergent explanations, often tenuous and fleeting, sometimes offering dramatic snippets or evasive allusions, but constantly moving, shifting the perspective around, pushing the reader through a kind of kaleidoscope of (apparently) Algerian experience.

The passage quoted below offers a glimpse at another kind of narrative space in *Le serment*. Here is a space of anonymous comment and collective narration, for sifting through impressions and ideas, airing theories, and exercising popular suspicions, circulating outside of any dominant, univocal perspective. Instead, we find a narrative space swarming with disparate judgments, ideas, voices. The ensuing passage opens onto the scene of a cocktail party, delivered by a third person narrator, but the narrative space is quickly invaded by the voices of the participants, crowding in on top of each other. The result is a narrative tumult, a cacophony of voices endlessly overlapping, competing, and completing each other. The passage begins with the telling announcements that the reception hall is "packed," before playfully declaring that the "filter" at the entrance is "no longer functioning."²³ At this point the narrative text, in parallel to the reception hall, is no longer filtered either; the voices collide and swarm within it. The narrator quips: "Comment refouler la populace quand elle afflue en masse?" "How can you keep the people down when the masses are flooding in?"

Les gens s'éneraient. . . . Alors, ils se posaient des questions sans réponses. L'État ne fait rien pour résoudre la crise qui a engendré le terrorisme. Il l'a lui-même machinée, ô gens désarmants de crédulité. Quelle naïveté que d'espérer de lui qu'il démonte ses pièges avant qu'on y tombe! Il veut notre mort! [...]

Dans le groupuscule voisin, fait de clercs et de broc, reconnaissable à leur mine insignifiante et à leurs pattes d'éléphant râpées, on était engagé dans un grand discours; on se voulait circonspect et naturellement plus élevé.

Chaque mot est catégorique et exclut la liaison. L'État ne peut rien, autant l'oublier. Tout se décide à Washington, à Paris, à Bruxelles, sans omettre Tokyo et Tel-Aviv qu'il faut consulter car l'internationale juive est partout. C'est là qu'on tire les ficelles et qu'on compte à rebours les jours, les heures, et les minutes des peuples condamnés. Alger est sur la liste, les grands de ce monde ne dorment plus de lui en vouloir de les avoir cherchés. [...]

— C'est le poids de la dette qui nous enfonce; la solution est de quitter la spirale, affirma un spécimen rare qui ne pousse que dans le désert des Tatars, avec le

²³ "La salle des fêtes était bondée. Le filtre à l'entrée ne marchait plus."

sentiment d'avoir tout dit. [...]

– Je ne suis pas d'accord! Il faut rééchelonner à parité égale, c'est plus sage pour préserver l'avenir, protesta un énergumène qui paraissait s'être fait une religion des questions financières internationales mais qui ignorait tout des pièges de la conversation.

– L'avenir appartient aux riches. Le peuple est mort, annonça un vaurien qui tenait à passer pour l'inoffensif.

– Vous n'y êtes pas, cousins! Votre crasse est cependant excusable car la questions est difficile; ce qu'il faut, je vais le dire et vous garderez ça pour vous: contraindre la France à nous payer un loyer pour les cent trente années d'occupation. C'est ainsi que gnagnani, gnagnana..., expliqua un renégat de ce ton voilé propre aux déçus de Hizb França qui ont vainement bataillé pour obtenir un visa pour la mère patrie.²⁴

People were getting angry. . . .So they asked questions with no answer. The State is doing nothing to resolve the crisis that produced the terrorism. They created it themselves, you disarmingly gullible people! How naive you are to hope that they will dismantle the trap before you've fallen in! They want us to die!

[. . .] In a nearby group of big-shot nobodies, recognizable by those insignificant faces and the well-worn leg flares of their trousers, they were caught up in great speeches; they held a pretentious look of circumspection and natural loftiness. Every word categorical and logic fully excluded. The State can do nothing, so we might as well forget about it. Everything gets decided in Washington, Paris, Brussels, not to forget Tokyo and Tel Aviv which has to be consulted since the Jewish international is everywhere. That's where they pull strings and countdown the days, hours, and minutes of condemned peoples. Algiers is on their hit-list, the higher-ups of this world lose sleep from resentment from when we put it to them.

[. . .]– It's the weight of the debt that keeps us down; the solution is to get out of the spiral, affirmed a rare specimen that grows only in the Tartar desert, with an air of having said it all.

– I don't agree! It has to be readjusted in terms of parity, more prudent for preserving the future, protested a strange one who seemed to have made a religion of international finance issues but was clueless about the pitfalls of conversation.

– The future is for the rich. The masses are dead, announced a rascal trying to look harmless.

– You're way off the mark, cousins! Your sludge is excusable though since the question is a hard one; what must be done, I'll tell you but you've gotta keep it to yourselves: make France pay us interest for the hundred and thirty years of occupation. And that's how yadda yadda yadda... explained a renegade with the veiled tone of one of those disappointed members of Hizb França who fought in vain for a visa to the mother country.

²⁴ 310-12.

Such passages—which occur throughout the novel—build a cascade of dialogue into the narrative space. They emphasize a space of dissensus, one where different visions of Algeria's past and present emerge in vignettes and snippets. A plural social experience floods onto the page, into the narration, repopulating the narrative perspective.

This phenomenon, the sense of an irrepressible pluralism emerging from the multiple voices within a text, brings to mind Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the phenomenon he termed "dialogism" or "heteroglossia." This notion of social multiplicity expressed within narrative texts has been seen by him and others as a major stylistic feature of the novelistic genre itself. According to this view, the novel is an ideal space for capturing the liveliness of a stirring mass of social conversation that takes place naturally within organic spaces of language. Novelistic prose is reputedly marked by a proximity to the everyday world, and is thus closer to natural discourse than the epic form or the poem, for example. The novelistic text is thus seen as populated with the disparate elements of the uncontrolled multitude. For Bakhtin, the novelist "does not strip away the intentions of others from the heteroglot language of his works, he does not violate those socio-ideological cultural horizons . . . rather, he welcomes them into his work." The plurality of culture, society, and the past are thus better captured in the prose novel than in other genres since the novel offers a broader generic space of organization. Novelistic narration offers a space where everyday contexts can be treated within an expansive artistic vision, but without the reduction to a the more narrowly controlled authorial voice, as in other genres. Hence, a "[d]iversity of voices and heteroglossia enter the novel and organize themselves within it into a structured artistic system."²⁵ This articulation, while its broadest claims about the novel and other genres are arguable, nonetheless offers a compelling description of some striking narrative features in *Le serment*. This novel can be said to offer, following Bakhtin's formulation, an inclusive and diverse "artistic vision" structuring the political experience of contemporary Algeria from the vantage point of the civil war. The narrative pluralism that runs throughout the text marks an overturning of the sort of authorial clarity sought in overly politicized historical memory. History, memory, and experience here resist and are set against the condensing, centripetal urges of official political discourse. In place of this, the reader is instead presented with a highly textured, dispersed experience. A challenge to the narrative authority of sanctioned history, and a step, perhaps, toward a more inclusive public narration of Algerian memory.

2.3 Mourning A Missing Past

In *Le serment*, the civil war is conceptualized as a symptom of long-repressed contradictions at the heart of Algerian nationalism, emerging from the operations of the war with France and the development of political power within the nationalist movement. On one hand, during and after the war, local societies were uprooted, dismantled, and destroyed, in the name of a more just

²⁵ Moreover, for Bakhtin, "[t]he social and historical voices populating language, all its words and all its forms, which provide language with its particular concrete conceptualizations, are organized in the novel into a structured stylistic system that expresses the differentiated socio-ideological position of the author amid the heteroglossia of his epoch." Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogical Imagination*, Michael Holquist, ed., 1981, 299-300.

arrangement that not all parties agree was ever achieved. On the other hand, the nationalist movement was the scene of extreme fratricidal tendencies, with one faction successfully crushing the others. In the novel's depiction, this translated in the postwar setting to entrenched resentment and domination, and contributed to the animosity that erupted into the open in 1988, becoming outright civil war in 1992. Finally, in the novel's portrayal, the civil war is operated from behind the scenes by powerful groups, linked through their war-time alliances, common enemies, or profitable black-market networks. The actors of the civil war are largely instrumentalized by these forces, and the bloodshed is a consequence of refusing to understand the contradictions that developed and ossified within Algerian society and especially its political elite.

Such contradictions are adroitly displayed in a recent documentary, *Algérie: Histoires à ne pas dire*.²⁶ The contradictions of memory, loyalty, and history in present-day Algeria are exposed by aging Algerian woman when she is asked about her past. A youth during the war with France, Katiba recounts a childhood in which members of the *settler class* were considered part of the family:

En plein cœur de Bab El-Oued; j'ai joué avec les petits, les petits Français, ça s'appelait pas des pieds-noirs à l'époque. La personne qui me gardait quand mes parents travaillaient [...] c'était Tante Angèle. C'était Angéla Codina. Et moi à deux ans, j'étais persuadée... [que] je m'appelais... parce qu'elle m'appelait affectueusement "ma mie [?] Codina de Pagnol."

At the heart of Bab El-Oued I used to play with the little ones, the French kids, we didn't call them *pied-noir* back then. The person who used to watch me when my parents worked [. . .] was Aunt Angèle. It was Angéla Codina. And me, when I was two, I was convinced. . . [that] my name was. . . since she affectionately used to call me "ma mie [?] Codina de Pagnol."²⁷

However, as the interview continues, one gets the strong impression that two potentially incompatible elements identity are in play. One, evoked above, involves Katiba's memories of intimate relationships and cherished experiences living in colonial Algeria, including living with Tante Angèle. Another narrative, however, which emerges as soon as the question of nationalist struggle is raised, a narrative with which Katiba strongly identifies, seems almost in competition. That is the narrative of nationalist struggle, including, among other things, an at-any-cost willingness to deploy violence in service of this cause and without regard for the suffering of innocents. Asked if she would place a bomb near settler civilians, including people she knew personally, she responds readily: "Ah oui. Sans états d'âme. Je suis désolée." Asked further if she would even have followed orders to place a bomb in the home of "Tante Angèle," Katiba appears to wrestle briefly with her response before offering a hesitant affirmative:

²⁶ *Algérie, histoires à ne pas dire*, 2007, directed by Jean-Pierre Lledo.

Pourquoi tu veux qu'on me dise de mettre une bombe dans la maison de Tante Angèle? Parce que... Qu'est-ce qu'il y a chez Tante Angèle? Il y avait une vieille femme estropiée et son frère malade... Non mais, peut-être qu'on m'aurait dit, je l'aurais mise... Tu sais. . .

Why would you think anyone would have told me to put a bomb in Tante Angèle's house? Because. . . What was there even at Tante Angèle's place? There was an ancient, infirm woman and her diseased brother. . . But no, maybe if they'd told me to, I'd have put one there. . . You know. . .²⁸

Katiba's vision of familial warmth with members of the settler class contrasts sharply with her sense of loyalty to the cause of Algerian independence. The tension between the two self-narratives is exposed when the interviewer jumps quickly from one subject to the other, eliciting apparent contradictions. Nevertheless, she insists there is no contradiction, although, tellingly, she explains this synthesis only through an equivocal ellipsis: "Tu sais. . . ."

Similar contradictions operate at the heart of *Le serment*. A central character, Bakour, like Katiba, demonstrates an affective world that is politically illegible in postwar Algeria. Bakour is the murder victim whose investigation serves as the central plot device of the novel. Larbi eventually learns that Bakour spent his final days caring for the settler's cemetery. In essence, he mourns a set of relationships brushed out of the pages of history—an affective universe inscrutable within the state-nationalist worldview. As Larbi investigates Bakour's past, he receives an account from Bakour's settler friends, with whom he lived much of his life:

Lorsque, âgé et fatigué, il a décidé de rentrer au pays, les Villatta lui ont demandé, moyennant une rétribution qu'il a refusée, de veiller sur leur caveau à Rouiba. Vous avez dit qu'il s'en acquittait avec soin, les deux frères ont été émus d'apprendre qu'il y a mis surtout du cœur. La situation des cimetières français en Algérie est, vous le savez, un lourd contentieux entre les deux pays. Entre le devoir et les priorités, il y a place pour un débat sans fin sur les moyens. Pour les ex-Français d'Algérie, c'est un drame qu'ils vivent encore aujourd'hui avec beaucoup de douleur.²⁹

When, elderly and exhausted, he decided to return to his country, the Villatta family asked him, in return for compensation, which he refused, to look after the family burial vault in Rouiba. You stated that he performed the task with heartfelt care, and the two [Villatta] brothers were moved to learn that he had put his heart in the task. The situation of the French cemeteries in Algeria is, as you know, a serious issue between the two countries. Between one's duty and one's priority, there is space for an endless debate on the means. For the former French

²⁸ 1:01:00. Sequence starting at 50:46.

²⁹ 230.

Algerians, it's a drama that they are still living today with much pain.

Bakour's attempt to recognize this former, now defunct world as 'grievable,' recognizing the human experience of the colonial lifeworld, implicitly dismantles the official narrative that excludes it from political life. Bakour dedicated himself to restoring the settler cemetery. This was a means of expressing his human connection to a destroyed world that now lived only in his and others' private memories, incompatible with the dominant public memory of Algeria's history. By maintaining the material apparatus of a repressed historical memory, he was mourning the unmournable.

He practiced, through his mourning, an adjudication of the forms of life properly considered "human." His act of mourning at the settlers' cemetery acknowledges a form of human experience banished from Algerian public memory. What is at stake is the political legibility, or one might say admissibility, of certain forms of human life. "[A]cts of permissible and celebrated public grieving", according to philosopher Judith Butler, can establish norms "governing who will be a grievable human," sometimes operating "in tandem with a prohibition on the public grieving of others' lives." A human, in her terms, can be located in its public or officially recognized formation as one "circumscribed and produced" through public, sanctioned acts of mourning.³⁰

Bakour's actions were in this sense antithetical to state-sanctioned public memory; he cared for a suppressed and officially forgotten affective universe, now reduced within the nationalist narrative to a series of stereotypes and symbols. The memory of the destruction of Algeria's settler community is supposed perhaps to evoke celebration and glory, for an Algerian, but never sadness or grief. Thus, Bakour's mourning was unauthorized, but his gesture stages an implicit critique of normative humanity as produced by Algerian official memory. The narrator offers an interpretation of Bakour's attempts to mourn his missing past:

En entretenant le caveau des Villatta [Abdallah Bakour] posait une pierre sur cette route qu'il nous faudra bien construire un jour [...]: le respect des morts et de leurs sépultures, la compassion pour qui pleure ses disparus; car la mort et ses larmes, c'est bien le seul drame qui soit commun à tous les hommes de la terre. C'est ainsi qu'il entendait son geste et le pratiquait au quotidien, sobrement, discrètement, et l'avait étendu au cimetière parce que cela lui avait paru naturel et juste.³¹

By caring for the Villatta family vault, [Abdallah Bakour] was placing a stone on that path we will have to construct someday [...]: respect for the dead and their graves, compassion for people grieving their lost ones; because death and tears are the only drama common to all people on earth. That is how [Bakour] meant

³⁰ Butler, 37.

³¹ 441.

his gesture and its daily practice, sober and discrete, and he spread it throughout the cemetery because this appeared to him both natural and just.

The emphasis is on expressing and conceiving a humanity not narrowly constrained by political needs, a respect for the actual contents of all Algeria's cemeteries, not merely those glorious ones storing the nation's martyrs and those housing officially accepted forms of human life.

But the struggle with dominant forms of national memory goes deeper. When the war with France had begun, Bakour had rejected the FLN's position, whose ideology and tactics he did not agree with.³² He fought instead within a contingent of Messalists operating under the banner of the MNA.³³ When his group was annihilated by the FLN, he fled into exile in France, leaving an Algeria that considered him traitor in 1962, and finally returning in 1990. Others who had fought with him quietly switched sides, becoming FLN figures, then, after the war, businessmen and mafia barons. Still others joined an underground movement and bided their time until rebellion.³⁴

For the characters in *Le serment*, these and numerous other trends within Algeria have been subordinated to a sclerotic regime and an ossified narrative of nationalist glory, used opportunistically to legitimate state power. Bakour's nationalism, which the novel depicts as a more tolerant and reasonable form than that which prevailed under the FLN, was banished from Algeria. Bakour escaped to exile in France when the FLN emerged victorious in 1962. At the end of his life, he returned to Algeria, attempting to provide closure for a historical period whose episodes still remain as living wounds underneath a thick layer of scars. But, the novel tells us, until his actions can be understood in their moral and political dimensions, they will remain without meaning, and wounds will presumably remain unhealed, symbolizing the continued exclusion of those elements of Algeria's national life that do not recognize themselves within the official identity narrative.

2.4 False memories, Entangled History

In *Le serment*, history is depicted as missing, and possibly unavailable. Some stories are not allowed to be publicly told. On one hand, many powerful forces have much to hide, and they deliver a white-washed version of national history, brushing out large crimes that still affect society. And while people who know the truth are kept from uttering it, the general public would prefer the simpler version anyway. This double bind means that deep societal contradictions, the

³² 352-359.

³³ See next chapter for an explanation of the FLN-MNA conflict.

³⁴ In the novel's depiction, a shadowy business mafia network the "political-financial mafia," connects each of these elements to its apparent opposite. The underground connections form a network of interests and collaborations among the former settler class, now exiled in France, Harkis, the radical wing of the Islamist movement, and the business elite. With the civil war, however, these relations come into the open: "Le cercle est fermé." 448, 449.

result of internal splits and unacknowledged repression, will continue to produce violent eruptions.

Larbi stands in for an average Algerian when he learns about portions of history that have been deleted from public knowledge. After Larbi listens to an MNA veteran's story, he comes away astonished and disturbed. The narrator admits that Larbi "had kept a vision of history a bit less lousy, a bit more heroic." Larbi, ever since Algerian independence, "had spent his life hearing the same old hymn."³⁵ Missing history is depicted as a central cause of Algeria's problems. "When we don't understand the situation we're in or we refuse to look at it," Larbi's interlocutor queries, "where will we find the strength to fix it? When we accept lies for the truth, aren't we already dead? Isn't that what's happening to you all?"³⁶

By trenchantly criticizing official Algerian history and addressing the problem of identity in Algeria, *Le serment* violates a major taboo. History in Algeria has been described as "a dimension of the sacred" operating "on the order of myth."³⁷ "Official history, in Algeria, is history written by the conquerors, that is, by the party in power since independence. It is thus no surprise that the FLN has produced a history valorizing its own position during the conflict, to the detriment of competing political forces."³⁸ Still broader conclusions are drawn by a leading Algerian historian. The manner in which the anticolonial struggle was carried out had important consequences for the development of postwar Algeria. "The problem of national identity and the nation," according to Harbi, was imagined "in an extremely simplistic fashion" for reasons of "political effectiveness," "thus excluding the diversity of origins and cultures that are at the base of Algerian identity." The long-term consequences, for Harbi, were quite serious, resulting in "a massive dimension of recent Algerian history: the absence of the conditions necessary for a social pact."³⁹

The novel presents the reader with suppressed memory, or missing history, when Larbi encounters an MNA veteran. The margins of history suddenly spring to the fore; the veteran's story sharply contrasts with the popular memory of the war of independence, the founding story of a people spontaneously rising up in unison to overthrow oppression and claim independence. Behind the FLN façade—the state-nationalist narrative—are suppressed memories, pages deleted from the chapters of history, such as the story of the MNA. For Larbi, hearing the veteran's startling account of the war, history becomes a source of bewilderment. The detective has uncovered this veteran from an Algerian war he never knew existed: a former Algerian patriot who fought *against* the FLN—not for the French, but for a different Algeria. In the eyes of the

³⁵ "Il avait en tête une vision de l'histoire un peu moins dégueulasse, un peu plus héroïque. [...] Depuis l'indépendance . . . il avait passé sa vie à écouter un seul son de cloche."

³⁶ "Quand on ne connaît pas sa situation ou qu'on refuse de la regarder, où peut-on trouver la force de la corriger? Quand on a accepté le mensonge pour vérité, ne sommes-nous pas déjà morts? N'est-ce pas ce qui vous arrive?" 360.

³⁷ Omar Carlier, in Branche, ed., 29.

³⁸ Malika Rahal, in Branche, ed., 74.

³⁹ Harbi, 1992, 28-29.

veteran, the FLN represents not glory, but a species of treachery. In his view, the FLN was mad with power and prepared to sacrifice anything to control the nationalist movement. "The FLN put weapons in the arms of our youth only to throw them into the sacrificial fire. The situation required a maximum number of deaths in order to amplify its message and let the FLN emerge as master." For the veteran, the FLN was needlessly fanatical, cruel, and self-serving. "The FLN confronted an enemy it sought to eject out of the country at any price. The MNA faced an adversary it sought to overcome through reason and faith and only as a last resort through violence." The veteran was horrified by the exterminationist tactics used by the FLN to oust rival nationalists from the field. "You remember Melouza... God, what an atrocities! They cut the throats of every last one of them, even the animals." The veteran explains: "When it saw our resolve, [the FLN] feared people would turn away from it; it attacked us with the same weapons it's always used: lies and murder. Fate was against us, we were defeated."⁴⁰

Le serment thus suggests a double bind: the solution begins with knowing the truth, but the truth cannot be publicly uttered. The central question of the novel is placed in the mouth of the aged MNA veteran. "When we don't understand the situation or refuse to look at it," he asks Larbi, the decent policeman and unsuspecting pupil of state power, "where will we find the strength to fix it?" "If you, a policeman," he explains, "are horrified by what I am telling you, what will the zaouali [youth] think, those who were always told, on drumbeat: 'Rest easy, ya khô, the Front, which freed you from the colonizer's yoke, is looking after you[.]'"⁴¹ For the veteran, official memory and indoctrination has produced generations unable or unwilling to contemplate the problems of state nationalist identity and origin narratives. The truth is too discomfiting to be taken seriously by the national public, unwilling to give up certain cherished ideas.

But the novel casts doubt on whether the truth shall even be allowed to surface. The best the detective can do is convince himself that the official narratives are false, and that much remains unaccounted for. Larbi's investigation remains unfinished, suggesting that the pages of history will remain empty. The truth is stifled, at every instance in the novel. By the conclusion, Larbi only has half-truths and fishy hypotheses to explain the violence. But he is now more aware of the duplicity of state power, and sees that it is coextensive with the networks of power and criminality operating behind the scenes of the civil war. Even his fumbling investigation proves intolerable for the powerful. Attempting to rendezvous with a historian, to pass on his findings, Larbi is slaughtered before the historian's gaze. The message seems to be: history shall remain unwritten.

Le serment reveals a deep pessimism concerning the capacity of Algerian society to recover from the ills diagnosed in the novel. Until the contradictions animating the conflict can be understood and addressed, they will continue to produce resentment, animosity, and violence. Without a more open, tolerant regime, honest discussion of such problems remains largely out of reach. Unwilling to embrace the humanity of history's marginalized, Algerian society, in the novel's portrayal, risks congealing around exclusionary identities and only further narrowing the political

⁴⁰ 356-357.

⁴¹ 359.

opportunities to resolve the internal tensions remaining from the difficult and contradictory way in which the nation-state was formed. In the final analysis then, Larbi's project fails. Even when he finds an explanation for the events ("maintenant il sait, les preuves viendront plus tard"), he is assassinated, and the truth with him. History will remain unavailable. The final sentences are emphatic in this respect, offering the novel's strongest denunciation: "L'histoire n'est pas l'histoire quand les criminels fabriquent son encre et se passent la plume. Elle est la chronique de leurs alibis."

Le serment portrays the civil war as a symptom of contradictions within Algerian society that were never resolved through understanding and political inclusion, but repressed through violence. But what to make of the stories told by the MNA veteran? His assertions about Algerian history rattle Larbi's ideas about his past and present, and disturb Larbi's sense of himself as part of a national story he was comfortable with. The narrative he was familiar with is deeply questioned by his encounter with the veteran, and brings him to new insights about the civil war and its deeper causes within Algerian society. The veteran can thus be seen as a plot device inviting a reassessment of Algerian national history. In this respect, the novel thus pushes forth a number of important questions. What was the nature of the FLN during the war vis-à-vis the other nationalist factions? If there was internal repression on the Algerian side, how intense was it really, and what contexts were used to justify it? Finally, to what extent was the FLN's domination a tactical judgment, as opposed to opportunism or simple tyranny? The next chapter continues with these questions and examines what answers can be supplied.

Chapter 3

The First Civil War and Its Children

Obviously the violence channeled into the liberation struggle does not vanish as if by magic after hoisting the national colors.

–Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*

In light of the idea that the nation is a fundamental and indivisible entity, socio-political struggles that classes fought amongst each other were reduced to a story of minor significance.

–Mohammed Harbi, *Aux origines du FLN*

A major subject of the dissertation is *how* the novels take up and represent history. This section considers briefly the historical record on a subject brought up in all three novels in relation to the Franco-Algerian War: inter-Algerian violence. Since many readers will be unfamiliar with this history, as I was when I first read these novels, it is worth reviewing. But there is a deeper reason: the novels offer different accounts of such violence, in places even incompatible ones.

All the literary accounts are sensitive to the position of Harkis, whose treatment is invariably portrayed as unjust. The portrayals diverge however in their readiness to portray internal splits within the Algerian nationalist movement: on one hand within the FLN itself, and, on the other (if they even exist in the accounts), groups such as the Messalists. Section 1 considers the ubiquitous call within the novels to reconsider Algerian history. Section 2 shows that the FLN was far more incoherent, and the confrontations between nationalist groups far more violent, than what is generally admitted, even by revisionist-minded literary accounts. At stake in these questions are the dimensions of the social pluralism that is in some respects at the core of *Le serment*, present throughout *Le blanc*, and alluded to in *Les agneaux*.

3.1 Mythologies of War and State History

Each of the civil war novels include passages harking back to violent past that, unacknowledged, haunts and disturbs Algerian society. As we saw above, an old-timer in *Le serment* informs the shocked protagonist that his understanding of the Algerian liberation movement was largely a myth:

The FLN put weapons in the arms of our youth only to throw them into the sacrificial fire. The situation required a maximum number of deaths in order to

amplify its message and let the FLN emerge as master. [. . .] The FLN confronted an enemy it sought to eject out of the country at any price. The MNA faced an adversary it sought to overcome through reason and faith and only as a last resort through violence. The difference is evident; the leaders of the FLN tear each other apart for the leftovers and the youth it had fooled are now monsters who kill for the pleasure. [. . .] When it saw our determination, [the FLN] was scared that people would turn away from it; it took us on with the same weapons it always used: lies and murder. Destiny was against us, we were defeated. [. . .] The evil was done and the FLN fueled it with the blood of innocents. You can see, my friend, how madness attracts us like sounds attract children. You remember Melouza... God, what an atrocity! They cut the throats of every last one of them, even the animals (long silence).¹

This revisionist historian tells his story to a patriotic detective trying to learn the truth about the civil war. The message of the old-timer is that the roots of the civil war go back to the war of independence.

Le blanc presents further details, outlining the purges under Bellounis, the assassination of Abbane Ramdane, and mentions briefly the figure of Messali Hadj. The public memory of the Franco-Algerian War has been a site of contestation. Struggle over that memory has played out during the civil war. The 1980s saw a loosening of the hegemony of the FLN version of the war, culminating with the 1988 riots. The claim of the state to carry the glory of independence, and therein derive its legitimacy, no longer carried the weight it once did.² *Le blanc* comments directly on this point when one of its characters comments that "quelque chose était pourri dans notre révolution." The legacy of hope and the achievement of independence is shown to have become a stage-managed ceremony produced by the state: "Trois héros; parmi quelques autres; devant chacun et devant tous à la fois, les gouvernants qui se succèdent à Alger viennent s'incliner chaque 1^{er} novembre et renouvellent 'le Serment de novembre.'" Another character exclaims: "Si l'idéal de novembre a pu être usurpé aussi effrontément, qu'en est-il du reste?" The connection with the civil war is made explicit by the narrator, who asks "Comment s'étonner que la révolte, que la colère, même déviée, même dévoyée, des 'fous de Dieu' d'aujourd'hui se soit attaquée dès le début aux cimetières, aux tombes des *chahids*, les sacrifiés d'hier?" And in a more resolute tone, the narrator develops a bitter denunciation of shameless manipulation of memory in the service of state power:

Que dire surtout de ceux qui continuèrent à officier dans la confusion de ce théâtre politique si creux: dans leurs discours, ils convoqueront à tout propos les morts—à force de répéter "un million de morts," ils ne prêtent attention qu'au quantitatif, eux, les survivants, les bien-portants, s'installant année après année, prenant du ventre, de la suffisance, de l'espace, augmentant leurs comptes en banque, versant pour certains dans une religiosité bien-pensante, ostentatoire et

¹ Sansal, 356.

² 54-55.

confortable, et pour d'autres dans une déliquescence morale qui ne deviendra forcément que plus hypocrite... Ainsi s'amplifia la caricature d'un passé où indistinctement se mêlaient héros sublimes et meurtriers fratricides.

Comment dès lors chasser de tels miasmes [. . .]? La seule question qui aurait dû s'installer au cœur d'une culture algérienne vivante resta trou béant, œil mort [. . .].³

What to think especially of those who continued to officiate in the confusion of such hollow political theatre: in their speeches, they have evoked the dead at every opportunity —by continually repeated "a million dead," they paid attention only to the quantitative, yet they themselves were the survivors, alive and kicking, taking their places year after year, putting on weight, and self-importance, taking up space, growing their bank accounts, some of them slipping into a right-minded religiosity, ostentatious and comfortable, others into moral decay and inevitably ever more hypocritical... Thus developed the caricature of a past mixing indiscriminately sublime heroes and fratricidal murders.

How then can such miasmas be exorcised [. . .]? The sole question that should have resided at the heart of a living Algerian culture remained a gaping hole, a dead eye [. . .].

While the memory of the war has been dominated by state power, the latter has transformed into a "caricature of the past", a tool for the powerful, interested only in self-promotion. The question of "une telle amnésie" thus remains in Algeria like a "spectre" haunting the landscape of memory.⁴ The passage builds toward its central question: "Comment dès lors chasser de telles miasmes?" A more literal translation: "how can these stench" of hypocrisy, manipulation, and willed amnesia be "dispelled?" *Le blanc* chips away at this amnesia by discussing subjects banished from official memory, events such as the purges of thousands during the war by Amirouche, or the murder of Abbane by FLN cadres.⁵ The major specter that *Le blanc* does not take up however is the relation of the FLN to the Messalist nationalist movement, from which it emerged and which it violently usurped.

Both novels strongly suggest the need for the public memory of the Algerian war of independence to be reconsidered, its complications and contradictions acknowledged. They suggest that the monolithic official memory of the war has fed into state-worship and assisted the consolidation of power. They cry out for a reevaluation—"comment chasser de tels miasmes?"—and a de-mythification of Algerian history.

³ 134, 135, 136-137.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ 207-212, 119-135.

3.2 The Untold History of the FLN's War

The war of liberation was not only the uncompromising demand for an immediate withdrawal of the French state; it was also the occasion of a fierce clash between alternate visions of the Algerian community and the domination of the nationalist movement by one of its factions. Popular memory, however, has tended to remember a single people rising up against their oppressors and emerging unified, victorious, and hopeful. The classic reference for this version is Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*. However, image and reality differ. As a leading historian notes, there is a

gulf between November 1st [1954, date of the FLN's revolutionary declaration] and its subsequent mythologization. Although within post-independence Algeria the image of a single Algerian people responding as one to the FLN's call became the cornerstone of the new country's national identity, at the time it was a confused event. . . . It was only in retrospect . . . that 1 November was elevated into *the* starting point for the war of liberation. At first the conflict was a disaggregated phenomenon begun by a tiny vanguard minority.⁶

Far from the impression of political coherence and revolutionary inevitability it would later claim, the FLN was "born in an atmosphere of improvisation" that "had no direction or program." Far from a spontaneous emancipatory outcry by the energized and unified masses, as it came to be ubiquitously represented, the reality for the first years of conflict was that, except within Algiers, "the FLN did not exist outside of the militarized forces."⁷ Eschewing any vision of democratic inclusiveness or parliamentary power-sharing, "the nation" as the FLN envisioned it was conceived from within a narrow ideology and strictly imposed. This vision coalesced around limiting identities (Muslim, Arab-speaking).⁸ Moreover, the decision to take up armed insurgency in November 1954 was neither democratic nor inclusive: the FLN, initially a radical split-off group from the nationalist Messalist party, considered itself the vanguard of the revolution and thus the Algerian nation. Unwilling to strategize or compromise about any long-term, popular-based approach to addressing French colonial discrimination, the split-off group was adamant about immediate, violent direct action as a deliberate means to provoke an anti-French war, whether the Algerian population itself was prepared for such a war or not.⁹

In its early phase, the FLN, military operations aside, was a singular political entity in rhetoric alone. On the ground, it was a complex formation of actors and relations that were constantly shifting. Not only was "The national liberation movement . . . not monolithic," as Harbi argues,

⁶ Evans, 2012, 117.

⁷ Harbi, 2004, 18. See also Harbi, 1980, 182.

⁸ For discussion of the identitarian aspect to the national movement, see chapter 7, note 23 and surrounding discussion.

⁹ Harbi, 1980, 178; Jean-Louis Planche, "De la solidarité militante à l'affrontement armé: MNA et FLN à Alger, 1954-1955," 2001.

but, reflecting local antagonisms between various social groups, "the political families that formed it" themselves "bore relations of conflict." An image of a coherent, unified political organization during this period was certainly publicized, but it was a fiction imposed by a small coterie.¹⁰ Thus, at the onset of war, the FLN was an ad hoc organization consistently wracked by internal conflict and only barely succeeding in portraying itself as politically coherent. This situation continued into the early years of the war. "From November 1954 to August 1956 . . . the FLN-ALN appears as a constellation of decentralized functional agencies acting without reference to any common strategy," a context where, according to one of the major actors "It was possible to find six different political orientations [*politiques différentes*], six different strategies, and moreover six different peoples [*peuples différents*] just as there were six different wilayas."¹¹ Recent analyses consistently emphasize the disparate nature of the tendencies hastily and forcefully regrouped within the new revolutionary party. Under the banner of the early FLN, according to Meynier, "each brought his own conceptions With the FLN grouping everyone together, there was a bit of everything in the FLN."¹²

Prior to the war, there had been a variety of political practices that competed or allied in offering a vision of the way forward out of colonial tutelage toward some form of self-government. But instead of giving rise to a pluralistic political project, as the political term "front" might imply (as in, Front de Libération Nationale), this plurality of voice and vision were on the contrary ideologically straight-jacketed, according to analysts, within an exceedingly hierarchical, militaristic organization that successfully imposed, on all national groups, an unyielding and largely self-serving vision of immediate revolution.¹³ This intensely vanguardist praxis regularly translated into violence and terrorism as strategies of intimidation and control over events. The participation of the indigenous masses was ensured by use of the most ruthless methods. The following, culled from an endless list of examples, make clear the systematic nature of the terror methods employed by the FLN-ALN:

[Fixed to the corpse of an executed 'traitor':]

This is the fate reserved for anyone who obeys or loves France. Deserved [*sic*] death. He has no faith in our movement. He is not Muslim. Along with colonialism, he deserves [*sic*] death like a dog. He ignored the benefits of our

¹⁰ Harbi, 1984, 7. Harbi relates in addition that "Their absorption or interdiction by a team of men emerging out of the PPA did not make the social antagonisms and political conflicts disappear. Imprisoned social forces were merely forced to disguise their acts."

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹² "Le PPA-MTLD et el FLN-ALN," in Harbi and Stora, ed., 2004, 426.

¹³ Harbi 1980, 178. For the war-period FLN, "Society's leadership comes down not to a particular class, but a collective leadership composed of men who are clean, honest, incorruptible, courageous, unaffected by danger, prison, or threat of death." However, "the original populist core imposed its hegemony upon all factions, using all possible means, including terror Driven by the logic of its formation, this [military] apparatus controlled bit by bit the entirety of Muslim society and prepared itself to become its managers [*gestionnaire*] The FLN appeared as beyond political parties. . . . The initiators of the uprising sought to become its exclusive leaders." 170-171.

ALN [National Liberation Army] and we cut his throat. Receive the price [or reward: *jâ-iza*] of betrayal, you dog!

La *wilâya*,

Armée de Libération National Algérienne [1958]

*

[. . .] Certain group leaders remain loyal to Messali [Hadj]. Orders already being executed have been delivered: any conscious follower of Messali must be shot without trial. [1955]

*

Messali and his group are producing confusion. . . . Messali is capable of anything. He has become the enemy n. 1 of Algeria. . . . We have decided to take out Messali if the French government authorizes him to return to Algeria. [. . .]

Abbane Ramdane [September 1955]¹⁴

*

[Form letter]

[. . .] Is it conceivable that in this irresistible movement, in this tide of liberation, Muslims of our land can be indifferent? Distant from or hostile to our cause? Are there still Algerians so unaware as not to realize that Algerian sovereignty is virtually acquired and that they will have to answer tomorrow before the Nation regarding their present attitude? To collaborate with the FLN and the ALN is to have a certificate of patriotism; it is to prepare a life in honor for family and self [. . .] Given your material situation, we have fixed your contribution to . . . Francs. Any refusal on your part would have heavy significance and would lead to grave measures on our part for which you alone would be responsible [. . .]. Receive, our Algerian brother, our patriotic salutations. [Probably 1956.]

*

[Directives regarding the 1957 Eight-Day Strike:]

Anyone not participating [*qui ne se pliera pas*] in the strike will be killed on the spot without judgment or explanation. We must strive to inculcate in everyone the purpose of this strike and what we expect from it. Each individual who holds a responsibility and does not use it seriously, risks grave punishment. [. . .] [1957]

*

Dear Compatriot,

¹⁴ "Messali et sa clique jouent la confusion. [. . .] Messali est capable de tout. Il est devenu l'ennemi n. 1 de l'Algérie. [. . .] [N]ous avons aussi décidé d'abattre Messali si le gouvernement français l'autorise à rentrer en Algérie. [. . .]"

For seven years the *Armée de Libération Nationale* has fought an enormous, gigantic and victorious struggle against one of the mightiest armies on earth. [. . .]

We are a hair's breadth from conquering our liberty and in this final phase of the struggle, each Algerian must take up his responsibilities before God and accomplish his duty towards his country and you Si M. . . , what have you done, while you could have offered great assistance in equipping our prodigious National Liberation Army by offering it your Colt 1 weapon.

We have solicited you and you should not back away from our call, forcing us to take grave sanctions on your behalf. [. . .] [1961]¹⁵

It is through methods like these that “during the first two and one-half years of the war, the FLN killed only one European for every six Muslims it liquidated.”¹⁶ These tactics dramatically shifted the radical nationalist movement in Algeria away from mass-based organizing towards immediate, violent, rigidly organized confrontation with colonial French forces. Such tactics also occasioned the sudden galvanizing of Algerian society into pro- and anti-FLN blocs—“with us” or “against us”—with attempted neutrality being assigned by the FLN the category “against us,” as the examples above make clear.

While for Messali Hadj and his coterie, strongly influenced by labor movement strategies, “the ballot box had always been the route to independence,” with the actions of the emergent FLN, “the November 1st declaration placed armed struggle at the center of the liberation struggle.” Violence took priority over other forms of organized opposition. Elections of any sort were no longer relevant. “Guns alone gave the FLN the right to speak for the nation. Violence was the essence of the revolution and those who had placed their hopes into a gradualist solution were denounced. . . . This violence was keyed into absolutes. There was no third way. People could only be with or against the FLN.”¹⁷

The hegemony of a pro-FLN representation of Algeria's past has given to popular memory the impression of a high level of unity on the Algerian side. In reality there were plural tendencies, intense discord and factionalism, as well as serious internecine battles—in short, a living and often bloody struggle over how to imagine self, community, and nation, and how to practice the battle for liberation. Harbi traces the early phases of struggle over who and what was “Algerian,” an identity consolidated in the 1930s by two nationalist tendencies, one intensely vanguardist and purist, the other resolutely populist, though somewhat elitist, and strongly tied to labor struggles. “Conceptualized in the 1930s by the *‘ulamâ-* and the Messalist movement,” Harbi writes, “the

¹⁵Harbi and Meynier, ed., 2004, 203, 206, 207-208, 194, 198. See also the important documentation in Boussad Azni, *Harkis, crime d'Etat*, 2002, especially pp. 68-82.

¹⁶ Ruedy, 2005, 164.

¹⁷ Evans, 2012, 117. See also Jacques Valette, *La guerre d'Algérie des Messalistes: 1954-1962*, 2001. Harbi described the conflict as a “war within the war.” Harbi, 1980, 143-162. Meynier updates the documentation on this first civil war in “La guerre algéro-algérienne et l’éradication du messalisme,” in Meynier, 2002, 445-458.

notion of an Arab-Muslim Algeria came to dominate the country and eclipsed the notion of an Algerianness [*algérianité*] that intrinsically surpassed racial and religious barriers,” narrowing the parameters of the official identity of the nation's citizens. “The sole movements preoccupied in the 1930s and afterward with reconstructing under new conditions a community identity [were] the religious reformers and the Messalists.” These two major nationalist tendencies had “more or less” a shared ideology while disagreeing “on the political goals and modes of action.” Crucially, both groups “instrumentalized for apologetical ends the Algerian past and the Islamic imaginary even while they idealized them.”¹⁸ The nationalist symbols of Algerian identity, such as Islam and Arabness, served as useful propaganda instruments for the revolution, part of what Harbi calls “des mythes mobilisateurs.”

Propaganda, “mobilizing myths,” and militant popular activism gave way to intimidation and violence. After the war had begun, unity was no longer “founded on belief and a community of purpose, but imposed by the blackmail of division, manipulation, or violence.”¹⁹ Once events had escalated, the internal leadership was anything but democratic. There were numerous internal executions of leadership figures as allegiances shifted or new coalitions emerged, the most famous example being the execution of Abbane Ramdane, and internal purges of the rank-and-file numbering in the thousands.²⁰ In addition to the internal terror, there was also a pattern of consistent use of violence and terror against the masses to induce them to join or support the FLN. Once it had been decided within the (exclusively male)²¹ vanguard that Muslim symbols, such as the wearing of hijab and the refusal of alcohol, made for effective propaganda, adherence to the protocol was strictly enforced. Acid attacks and the maiming of the face were common methods used to enforce such policies upon the population.²² Crucially, such tactics reified and consecrated a vision of Algerian identity formulated in the first instance as anti-European.²³ By choosing and imposing such a narrow framework for the expression of Algerian nationalism, the leadership of the FLN effectively locked out other, more inclusive possibilities. The consequence

¹⁸ Harbi, 2004, 16.

¹⁹ Harbi, 1984, 49. See also Evans 2012, 125-126.

²⁰ According to Ageron, purges and executions from 1954 to 1958 “étaient justifiées . . . par les motifs les plus divers: refus d’obéissance, faute dans l’exécution des devoirs, défaitisme, dissidence, viol, affaire d’homosexualité” as well as “achat de cigarettes, de tabac, ou de vin.” “Complots et purges dans l’Armée de Libération Algérienne,” 2009, 109. The purges between 1958 and 1961, often including extreme torture, numbered in the “several thousands” according to Meynier. The worst of them, called “la bleuite,” occurred in 1958 under the commander Amirouche, who “n’hésita . . . pas à faire subir, au nom de la terreur sacrée, les pires souffrances à des compatriotes innocents et à en liquider sans doute un ou deux milliers, peut-être plus.” “Les Purges: 1958-1962,” in Meynier, 2002, 430-444.

²¹ Harbi: “Le conservatisme social du FLN se fait jour à propos de l’émancipation de la femme et de ses droits dans la société The FLN’s gendered discourse evoked “le moral sublime qui anime les Algériennes,” but was addressed “en fait aux hommes. On leur dit en substance : si vous ne voulez pas être méprisés par les femmes, soyez des militants. La femme, elle, reste un enjeu. L’exercice des responsabilités politiques est fermé aux femmes” whose role reduced to the “soutien moral” of the fighters, along with tasks such as transporting items or caring for children, the wounded. 1980, 179. See also Meynier, 2004, 225, 227.

²² Harbi, 1980, 310; Crapanzano, Vincent, *The Harkis. The Wound that Never Heals*, 2011, 51; Meynier, 2004, 217-218.

²³ Meynier, in Harbi and Stora, 2004, 439.

of the FLN's narrow vision of Algerian identity and the decision to impose it through terror and intimidation meant the exclusion of whole segments of the population living in Algeria who could never recognize themselves within it—most egregiously, the Berber population and the settler community, as well as elements of the population that did not share the ideological vision of the FLN. The hasty mass exodus to Europe of a panic-stricken settler population—around 800,000 people—spoke volumes about the climate of violence and the exclusion of difference that would replace the old order. It is thus quite ironic that the postwar Algerian regime institutionalized definitions of citizenship, similar to the despised colonial ones, based on race and religious identity.²⁴ Instead of instituting policies of integration, the FLN activists “reactivated centrifugal tendencies, favoring the withdrawal of individuals toward particularist groups (tribe, lineage, region, linguistic group, etc.) and politicized primordial allegiances.”²⁵ The price of this approach was the loss of political pluralism and the imposition of a narrow frame of reference for Algerian identity.

Harbi, who personally participated in some of the FLN's earliest political actions before finding himself in exile, has since become one of Algeria's most attentive historians. Writing in retrospect, he observes the negative consequences of the vision that was pushed onto the Algerian nationalist movement and which intensified during the war-period internal power struggles:

Il est difficile d'écarter l'hypothèse suivant laquelle l'unité du peuple algérien était possible dans d'autres formes que celles qui ont prévalu. La conviction des leaders du FLN qu'ils étaient les seuls à pouvoir faire la révolution fut à l'origine des conséquences néfastes qu'entraîna le monopole politique sur le devenir de la société algérienne. [. . .] L'unité ne sera pas fondée sur la foi et la communauté des buts, mais sera imposée par le chantage à la division, la ruse ou la violence.

It is difficult not to consider the hypothesis that the unity of the Algerian people was possible in other forms than those that won out. The conviction of the FLN leaders that they were the only ones who could make the revolution was at the origin of nefarious consequences that brought about a political monopoly over the creation of Algerian society. [. . .] Unity would not be founded on belief and

²⁴ The postwar constitution (1963) included for example the assertion that "Islam and the Arabic language have been a force of effective resistance against the attempted depersonalisation of Algerians undertaken by the colonial regime," and that "It is proper to affirm in Algeria that the Arabic language is the official language and that the country receives her essential spiritual force from Islam."

²⁵ Olivier Roy, "Clientélisme et groupes de solidarité ; survivance et recomposition, » in *Démocratie sans démocrates*, Paris, 1994, 400-401, cited in Harbi, 2004, 19. Harbi offers a crucial nuance : "la société traditionnelle est morte. Toutefois, les vieilles solidarités poursuivent leur œuvre dans le champ social en se combinant à de nouveaux axes de regroupement, la nation, la classe [. . .] C'est donc moins la rémanences des sociétés traditionnelles [. . .] que la recomposition des réseaux de solidarité dans de nouvelles catégories sociales et politiques empruntées à la tradition. . ."

common purpose, but would be imposed by the blackmail of division, manipulation, or violence.²⁶

Reading these words in the context of the 1990s civil war, it is difficult not to note the Harbi's prescience in his 1984 comments. The civil war has seen an unraveling of this "unity founded on violence," with the FLN's political monopoly challenged from below.

²⁶ Harbi, 1984, 49.

Chapter 4

Framing history in Les agneaux du Seigneur

Have they considered for a moment that their violence will engender more violence, will legitimize it, and will hasten its terrible manifestation?

–Mouloud Feraoun, *Journal*¹

That we can be injured, that others can be injured, that we are subject to death at the whim of another, are all reasons for both fear and grief. What is less certain, however, is whether the experiences of vulnerability and loss have to lead straightaway to military violence and retribution. There are other passages. If we are interested in arresting cycles of violence to produce less violent outcomes, it is no doubt important to ask what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war.

–Judith Butler, *Precarious Lives*

Les agneaux du Seigneur was published in 1998,² under the pseudonym Yasmina Khadra, by Mohammed Moulessehoul, a high-ranking officer in the Algerian military. Moulessehoul had been publishing noir detective novels since the early 1990s, with titles like *Le dingue au bistouri* and *La foire des enfoirés*, winning several awards in *noir* and *policier* genre categories. By the late 1990s, his novels had become a huge commercial success and he began publishing with Julliard. The commercial success of his novels continued enormously throughout the 2000s, with world-wide distribution, cinematic adaptations, and some titles selling over 750,000 copies. Moulessehoul came out from behind the pseudonym in 2001, when he published an autobiographical text, *L'écrivain*. He was subsequently accused of opportunism for his use of a feminine pen-name, especially since parts of his readership evoked the "feminine" quality of the novels. Moulessehoul claimed that he had only been protecting himself since he was publishing within a censorship regime and did not want to be exposed as a member of the military if his novels were perceived to be subversive. In 2011, Moulessehoul received literary prizes from the French Academy, topping a long list of a decade's worth of French and American awards and prizes celebrating his work.

This chapter considers the portrayal of the Algerian civil war in *Les agneaux*, one of its most stark depictions to come out of the 1990s, and one of the most celebrated.³ *Les agneaux* can be

¹ Feraoun, 2000, 84-85.

² Though the author claims he wrote it in 1994.

³ This novel was the first of Khadra's to be published in the US in translation.

interpreted as a response or artistic solution to the civil war's revisionist slogan *qui tue qui*? If the civil war is an enigma, *Les agneaux* dramatically solves it, showing us the civil war's causes, its actors, and their motives. Sections 1 and 2 show how *Les agneaux* uses the trope of social reversal, in the context of the war of independence and its consequences, to explain the origins of the civil war. The sections then argue that *Les agneaux* uses scenes of violence rhetorically to produce political conclusions in the reader. Section three considers how the novel encodes civil war history as a crime fiction genre, coding the state as the agent of justice and the FIS as the agent of evil.

4.1 Interpreting Violence

In *Les agneaux du Seigneur*, a taxicab driver delivers the following report to a group of villagers anxious to hear news of the climactic events:

"Algiers is a bloodbath!" "What? Have the Moroccans dared attack?" "The people are revolting," explains the taxicab driver. "Thousands of youths are in the streets. Shops and administrative buildings were lit on fire. The cops don't know where to turn. They fired into the crowd. People are talking deaths by the dozen. [...]" "Algiers is a war zone. Hundreds have been killed. The people are in rebellion against the regime." [...] "It's not the French. It's the people rising up against the dogs that subjugated them."⁴

The "Black October" 1988 Algiers riots the passage is referring to represented a turning point in the intensification of the tensions between the state and the popular protest movements in Algeria. Frustration and dissent had morphed into open calls for regime change. A brief experiment in democratic reforms ended with a lurch into civil war.

Many pages later, the *Les agneaux* presents the following account of the civil war:

Sur l'affiche de droite, après un verset coranique griffonné d'une écriture malhabile, s'étale la liste des personnes assassinées par les intégristes et les raisons qui ont motivé leur exécution. À côté des noms, on a souligné *taghout*, *renégat*, *harki*, *hostile*. La tuerie dure depuis deux ans déjà. Après les "sbires" du Pouvoir, leurs collaborateurs et les récalcitrants, la barbarie déploie ses tentacules un peu partout. Des fellahs, des instituteurs, des bergers, des veilleurs de nuit, des enfants sont exécutés avec une rare bestialité. Les gens commencent à trouver de moins en moins de témérité rocambolesque aux agissements des islamistes. On s'aperçoit que ce sont toujours les misérables que l'on tue, que plus personne n'est vraiment à l'abri. Des fillettes sont enlevées, violées et dépecées dans les bois. Des garçons sont recrutés par la force, endoctrinés. Les boutiquiers sont rackettés. Les oisifs sont enrôlés à leur insu. Ils deviennent d'abord guetteurs, puis receleurs,

⁴ 51.

enfin sans crier gare, ils se réveillent avec un fusil dans les bras. Le temps de réaliser ce qui leur arrive, trop tard: leur doigt a déjà appuyé sur la détente.⁵

Les agneaux was published in 1998, a year before the government finally acknowledged the massive scale of civil war deaths, estimated at 100,000.⁶ A spate of massacres had left the public asking *Qui tue qui?*—a way of suggesting that there seemed to be more than met the eye, but with no answers readily available. Who had committed such massacres and for what motive? This was a question on everybody's mind—one which *Les agneaux* sets out to answer, with a vengeance.

Benjamin Stora evokes the Algerian experience of the 1990s violence as an "invisible war," its actors anonymous and "faceless." "Une guerre non montrée peut-elle exister?" Stora asks. "Les soldats des deux camps demeurent invisible d'un bout à l'autre du conflit."⁷ When it comes to *Les agneaux*, however, one of the most striking dimensions of the novel's treatment of the civil war is the visibility of violence: Coetzee describes Khadra as a writer "who makes violence into art;" for Adam Shatz, Khadra's works are "pornographically violent."⁸ This is true; *Les agneaux* includes scenes of sadistic torture, sexual violence, and gratuitous murder. The civil war's "facelessness" is dissolved, replaced, as we will see below, with scenes providing sharp moral clarity, a function common to the crime fiction genre's typical focus on restoring the community and resolving the appearance of evil within it.

4.2 Civil War Causes in *Les agneaux*

Les agneaux depicts the civil war as a matter of class resentment and social reversal, itself a legacy of Algeria's past. During the war of independence, fates were reversed, hierarchies subverted. Economic stagnation and criminality are at the heart of the novel's conceptualization of the conflict. The stagnation and corruption has killed the hopes of the youth, resentment smolders under the surface of their quotidian misery and predetermined mediocrity. When opportunity presents itself, the underclass is ready to adopt any slogan to justify a pogrom of the wealthier classes, a confiscation of their wealth, and a relentless vengeance. The only feasible solution to the wanton criminality is to rally behind the state, which, acting as a *deus ex machina*, saves Algeria from a bloody fate.

The character of Issa displays one of the forms of class reversal foregrounded in *Les agneaux*. The narrator summarizes Issa's fate as a Harki:

⁵ 135.

⁶ Prior to this admission by the president, the regime had long maintained that the figure was 30,000 dead, or even less. In fact, the figure of 100,000 is substantially lower than credible estimates by analysts, which range from 150,000 to 250,000. See Aït-Larbi, et al., 19.

⁷ Stora, 2001(a), 8, 10, 40; Stora, 2001(b), 236.

⁸ "One Big Murder Mystery," London Review of Books, October 7, 2004.

Issa a collaboré avec la SAS pendant la guerre. Il était alors le seul Arabe à fréquenter le réfectoire des soldats français. Certes, il ne mouchardait pas, ne brutalisait pas les siens, cependant, il péchait à cultiver son embonpoint à l'heure où les autres crevaient de faim et de fiel. À la fin de la guerre, les maquisards lui avaient confisqué ses biens et avaient décidé de le crucifier sur la place. Sans l'intervention de Sidi Saïm le vénéré, son cadavre aurait pourri sur la berge de la rivière. À Ghachimat, la rancune est la principale pourvoyeuse de la mémoire collective. Aujourd'hui, Issa paie. Ses habits sont malodorants. Il mange rarement à sa faim. Lorsqu'il rase les murs, semblable à une ombre chinoise, il garde la tête basse et se fait tout petit . . . À Ghachimat, lorsqu'un homme désespère au point de friser l'apostasie, il va voir ramper le *traître* et, d'un coup, il reprend goût à la vie.⁹

Issa had collaborated with the SAS during the war, when he was the only Arab to frequent the French soldiers' mess. True, he hadn't squealed on anyone or roughed people up, but he committed the sin of attending to his belly at a time when the others were dying of hunger and gall. At the end of the war, guerillas confiscated his things and were on the verge of crucifying him in the public square. Without the intervention of Sidi Saïm the Venerated, his corpse would have rotted on the riverbank. At Ghachimat, resentment is the main purveyor of collective memory. Today, Issa is still pays. His clothes are rank, he rarely eats his fill. He hugs the walls like a shadow puppet, keeping his head low and making himself as small as possible . . . In Ghachimat when a man despairs to the point of losing all faith, he'll see the *traitor* groveling along and his taste for life will suddenly return.

The two sides of Issa's destiny seem to balance each other. If his crime in a former life was to "attend to his belly," now he "rarely eats his fill." When his public crucifixion was called off, he was reborn: but as a member of the underclass, a pariah with no rights, constantly abused by villagers of higher class status. His destiny was completely reversed.

The situation is similar with the Hilal family, who represent a different sort of social reversal during the war:

Le patio des Hilal a connu de grands moments de gloire. Construit par l'arrière-grand-père, qui avait pour le faste et l'ostentation une adoration mystique, il se déployait plus bas, orné d'arcades et de dalles. Le jour de l'aïd, on y recevait des dizaines de notables, et les méchouis s'alignaient tout au long de l'esplanade. Sur les photos que conservent les albums de famille et que la mère s'empresse de dérouler devant les amis, on peut contempler les vergers qui n'en finissaient pas d'offrir abricotiers, cerisiers, amandiers dans de magnifiques noces; la valetaille sanglée dans ses gilets brodés, le chèche luisant d'apprêts et le séréal bouffant; le

⁹ 19-20.

grand-père tel un pacha au milieu de ses courtisans; les grands dattiers qui balisaient somptueusement la propriété; l'écurie où, raconte-t-on encore, on élevait les plus fabuleux pur-sang du pays... Plus rien ne subsiste de cette féerie sinon la maison vieillissante, un empan de l'esplanade et quelques arbres rachitiques. Le reste a été confisqué par la Révolution agraire et livré aux taudis des "roturiers." Dans les anciens jardins, ces derniers ont tracé, qui des carrés d'oignons, qui des parterres grotesques que sillonnent en permanence des rigoles grouillantes de larves et de moustiques.¹⁰

The Hilal patio had had its moments of glory. Built by Kada's great-grandfather, who had a mystical adoration for pomp and ostentation, it spread out below, adorned with arches and flagstones. At Eid, they would welcome dozens of notable personalities, and whole spit-roasted sheep would line the length of the esplanade. In photos, preserved by his mother in albums she eagerly showed their friends, you could see endless orchards of apricot, cherry, and almond trees in a carnival of blossoms, with flunkies decked out in embroidered waistcoats, glittering turbans and wide, baggy trousers. The grandfather was like a pasha surrounded by his courtesans; magnificent date palms marked the estate boundary; there was a stable where, as they still say, the best pure-breds in the country were reared... Nothing of this fairy-land survived except the aging house, a bit of the esplanade, and a few scrawny trees. The rest had been confiscated by the Agrarian Revolution and given over to the "commoners." In the former gardens, the latter had marked out plots of onions and grotesque beds that were forever crisscrossed by ditches and now swarmed with larvae and mosquitoes.

The imagery of decay and lost beauty in the final lines of the passage evokes the loss of social wealth and prestige suffered by some members of the elite after war and the sense of degradation experienced by the wealthy class when it was dispossessed. This pattern of social reversal, and its consequences for human relationships, is repeated throughout the first sections of the novel, developing the context and background of the village's class tensions.

In the case of Kada, his ambitions are cut short when he is refused the hand of the mayor's daughter, Sarah. The mayor's family, before the war, had been part of the lower class. Kada's mother remembers treating them like servants. So when the proud mother presents the mayoral family with the traditional offer of her son's marriage, a generosity in her eyes, given the family's legacy of social prestige, the family's rejection is difficult to bear. The narrator explains further:

Arrière petit-fils d'un caïd tyrannique, [Kada] a été élevé dans l'austérité et le mépris des nouveaux gouvernants dont la boulimie lui a confisqué une bonne partie de son héritage. Rabaisé au rang des "roturiers," il ne pardonne pas à la promiscuité de l'avilir chaque jour un peu plus, lui qui rêvait, depuis sa plus

¹⁰ Ibid., 40-41.

tendre enfance, de reconquérir sa dignité et ses privilèges dans un bled en perpétuelle régression.¹¹

The great-grandson of a tyrannical caid, [Kada] was brought up in the austerity and disdain of the new ruling classes whose greed had swallowed up the greater part of his inheritance. Reduced to the rank of "commoner," he could find no forgiving this class mixing [*promiscuité*] for its daily degradation, he who had dreamt since his earliest days of reclaiming his dignity and privilege in a village that was in perpetual decline.

Unable to cope with such chagrin, and now keenly aware that his social mobility is null, his family's former prestige irretrievably lost, Kada finally joins the insurgency to exact revenge on the society that quashed his aspirations and hopes.

A further character epitomizes the novel's theme of class revenge. Zane, a dwarf who is constantly picked on, symbolizes degradation, dispossession, and resentment. He feels powerless before the scorn of the village's more powerful classes. When the violence and terrorism starts, Zane is quick to join and becomes one of the most sadistic participants in a series of barbaric scenes. He is less interested in material wealth than revenge on a society that has persistently denied him dignity and material comfort. While the life stories of the other characters have backgrounds intertwined with Algeria's history, Zane seems to stand in as a general symbol for class resentment, degradation, and desire for revenge. The narrator presents no biography, no past, no complex story for Zane; he appears from the start as a symbol of nascent resentment and latent predation, as we see clearly in this early description of Zane:

Perché sur un mur, Zane le nain fait l'oiseau de nuit. Ses prunelles éclatées luisent d'un feu terrifiant. Il *sait* que sa revanche est proche, que le temps travaille déjà pour lui.¹²

Perched on a wall, Zane looks like a bird of prey. His dilated pupils glow with a terrifying light. He *knows* his revenge is near, and time is already on his side.

Zane's character acts as a cueing device in the novel, signaling a rapid shift in the other "underclass" or resentful characters, whose resentments channels quickly into psychopathic impulses. The novel is not subtle on this point. This set of characters transition, as the opportunity for revenge presents itself, into morally uninhibited, self-serving, sometimes almost demon-possessed figures, as in this example, where the character's transition to following criminal impulses is crystallized with a sudden glow in his eyes:

¹¹ Ibid., 13.

¹² 58.

Tej hoche la tête d'un air entendu. Avant de se retirer, il contemple le patio inondé de lumière, le jardin soigneusement entretenu, et son regard s'éclaire d'une curieuse flammèche.¹³

Tej nods his head obligingly. As he heads out, he contemplates the patio, bathed in light, and the carefully maintained garden, and a strange glint comes into his eyes.

Thus, *Les agneaux* conceptualizes the civil war as a product of class resentments and economic stagnation. Afforded the opportunity for revenge, the characters representing these groups give way to pathological urges and criminal actions to seize the wealth and social status symbols that had long been denied these categories of society, from sons of Harkis to miserable laborers with no chance of a better future. As we will see in examples below, Islamist discourse is presented as a mere device for opportunism, a manner of channeling hatred and frustration into action. None of the participants in the terrorism featured in the novel is a strong believer in Islamist ideas; they merely use them when convenient to justify intimidation, robbery, and murder. While the novel begins with the historically situated characters and motivations set out above, once the violence begins, the novel, as we will see in the next section, hands the plot over to generic devices, and the action takes the familiar features of the *policier*, with the civil war condensed and retold as a stock crime fiction.

¹³ 61.

4.3 History in Fiction

This section considers the implications of *Les agneaux*'s treatment of the civil war as initially embedded in a degree of historical complexity then handed over to generic cliché and plot structures. As the following passages make plain, the novel is clearly embedding its plot in the historical episodes of the civil war. These passages make clear that the plot is set contemporary to the 1988 Algiers riots and the conflict arising afterward:

"Alger est à feu et à sang!" "Quoi? Les Marocains ont osé nous attaquer?" "Le peuple se révolte," explique le taxieur. "Des milliers de jeunes sont descendus dans la rue. Des magasins et des blocs administratifs ont été incendiés. Les flics ne savent où donner de la tête. Ils ont tiré sur la foule. On déplore des dizaines de morts. [...]" "Alger est en guerre. Des centaines de morts. Le peuple s'insurge contre le Pouvoir." [...] "C'est le peuple qui se soulève contre les chiens qui l'ont assujetti."¹⁴

"Algiers is a bloodbath!" "What? Have the Moroccans dared attack?" "The people in revolt," explains the taxicab driver. "Thousands of youths in the streets. Shops and administrative buildings set fire. The cops don't know where to turn. They fired into the crowd. People are talking deaths by the dozen. [...]" "Algiers is a war zone. Hundreds killed. The people are rebelling against the regime." [...] "It's the people rising up against the dogs that subjugated them."

*

Depuis octobre 88, qui a vu Alger s'insurger contre les ogres du régime, les Frères musulmans émergent inexorablement de la clandestinité.¹⁵

Since October of '88, which saw Algiers rise up against the regime's ogres, the Muslim Brotherhood has been inexorably emerging from hiding.

Dropping dates and proper names refers the reader to the historical events of the civil war as the backdrop for its story. This can be called the "history effect," since the reader is led to anchor the novel's story in history, or even interpret it as history. The novel could have left its setting ambiguous, but instead it is carefully specific. These events, this story, they are portraying post-1988 Algeria, the events of the civil war.

Moreover, the village in which the novel is set serves a metonymic function, telescoping the entire civil war, as the narrator emphasizes. The reader is to understand that the novel speaks to the whole of the civil war, as passages like the following make clear. If the above passages

¹⁴ 51.

¹⁵ 57.

announce the opening of the civil war, passages such as the one below track its course as the village events of Ghachimat unfold:

La tuerie dure depuis deux ans déjà. Après les "sbires" du Pouvoir, leurs collaborateurs et les récalcitrants, la barbarie déploie ses tentacules un peu partout. Des fellahs, des instituteurs, des bergers, des veilleurs de nuit, des enfants sont exécutés avec une rare bestialité.¹⁶

The killing has continued now for two years. After the "henchmen" of Le Pouvoir, their collaborators and recalcitrants, the barbarity spreads its tentacles a bit in all directions. Fellahin, schoolteachers, shepherds, night watchmen, and children are executed with a rare level of savagery.

Thus, the novel's episodes are integrated into the full story of the civil war; they are understood as part of "la tuerie" and "la barbarie," of which the Ghachimat events are presented as a sampling.

To press the point further, the novel also makes clear that it is specifically portraying members of the FIS, Algeria's Islamist opposition party in the 1990-1991 elections, driven underground thereafter. For example, here are two passages referencing the FIS:

La barbe embroussaillée et les sourcils bas, Smaïl Ich est assis sur une caisse et regarde ses louveteaux peindre les initiales du Front Islamique du Salut sur la façade de l'école. [. . .] Après les murailles de l'école, il ira tracer ses arabesques sur les murs de toutes les maisons. [. . .] "Nous graverons le nom du Seigneur où bon nous semble[.]"¹⁷

With his shaggy beard and heavy eyebrows, Smaïl Ich is sitting on a crate and watching his protégés paint the initials of the Islamic Salvation Front on the school façade. [. . .] Once finished with the school walls, he'll go sketch the ornate letters on the side of all the houses. [. . .] "We write the name of the Lord where we see fit."

"Nous, partisans du FIS, avons été corrects. Nous avons travaillé et prouvé ce dont nous étions capables. Le peuple a opté pour nos principes et notre idéologie. Mais le Pouvoir voyoucratique refuse de se rendre à l'évidence. Il a délibérément choisi de jouer avec le feu. C'est pourquoi nous lui proposons, aujourd'hui, celui de l'enfer."¹⁸

¹⁶ 135.

¹⁷ 75.

¹⁸ 125.

"We, the members of the FIS, have played a decent part. We have worked hard and shown what we could accomplish. The people voted for our principles and our ideology. But the regime's thugs just wouldn't face the facts. They deliberately decided to play with fire. And that is why now we're offering them the flames of hell."

These examples are compelling. If Smaïl Ich is a stand-in for the FIS membership, the reader plainly is to conclude that the FIS are obscurantist, authoritarian, opportunistic, and thuggish. This is born out in the rest of the novel. The proper name FIS, once established, soon dissolves into a vaguer category of terrorism and barbarism, interchangeably synonymous with "les Islamistes," "les intégristes," "Les Frères [Musulman]," or "les terroristes."¹⁹

The plot mirrors this process where historically specific details fade into genre fiction. After setting up the characters and plot in the manner outlined above, the reader is quickly ejected into scenes of cliché violence, where members of this vague criminal group torture and murder villagers at random. The characters themselves, whose specific identities recede as the violence occurs, soon blend into each other as fellow sadists who torture out of amusement and speak about passing around the bloody heads of other villagers on a platter.²⁰ The reader is clearly shown to be in the familiar territory of crime fiction. Passages such as this one assure us that we are following a typically programmed suspense plot:

La nuit est peuplée de stridulations. [Le village de] Ghachimat retient son souffle. Ghachimat retient toujours son souffle quand ses réverbères s'éteignent. Cela signifie que quelqu'un va mourir. Derrière les fenêtres, le coeur s'affole. Pas un bruit dans les ruelles, pas une silhouette...²¹

The night is filled with a chirring. [The village of] Ghachimat is holding its breath. Ghachimat always holds its breath when the street lights go out. That means someone is about to die. Behind windows, hearts are stricken. Not a sound in the streets, not a shadow...

By drawing the action within such a frame of familiar cliché, the novel's embeds its episodes within an over-arching framework of anticipation, reducing their specificity to familiar generic structures.

But if the novel transforms history into a straightforward, morally simplified story-line, what about the scenes of gratuitous violence? One of the novel's featured sadists gloats as one of his victims dies, gleefully exclaiming: "Visez-moi ce sang!"²² Characters devolve into stock agents

¹⁹ 153, 58, 115, 103, 161.

²⁰ 133-134.

²¹ 153.

²² 155.

of patterned violence. Such scenes are seemingly focused on eliciting shock and disgust, as well as moral outrage. An elderly woman is butchered while the murderers mock her; brutal torture is described in detail; scenes of appalling sexual violence have the predictable effect of heightening the reader's emotional response.

This is of course part-and-parcel of the genre: "The thriller unsettles the reader less by the magnitude of the terrors it imagines than by the *intensity* of the experience it delivers." This intensity is produced by a reading experience including "assaults upon the fictional body, a constant awareness of the physicality of danger, sado-masochistic scenarios of torture or persecution, a descent into pathological extremes of consciousness."²³ But one of the *effects* of such "intensity of experience" and the repeated, bloody, "assaults upon the body" is a form of moral clarity provided by shock and disgust. By presenting the civil war as a crime fiction, *Les agneaux* fixes it within a morally legible setting: there is no doubt about who is good and who is evil. When justice finally arrives the reader finds relief. History has thus been encoded into the moral binaries of genre fiction: the Islamist-intégriste-terrorist appears as a trope of criminality or barbarity, and Algerian state agents will appear as the agents of justice.

While there is not sufficient historical distance from the 1990s to have authoritative factual knowledge of the civil war, one point that has been consistently made by analysts is that the *way the civil war was represented* was from the start a function of warfare, both within Algeria and in the international arena. This was made especially obvious by the regime's handling the media:

La guerre se déroule sur trois fronts : les maquis, l'économie, les médias. En maîtrisant les médias nationaux et en contrôlant l'information à destination de l'étranger, les autorités croient avoir remporté la victoire sur les deux autres fronts. . . . Faute de la moindre liberté de la presse, les médias entérinent la version fournie par les autorités.²⁴

Crucial for purposes here is Addi's point that there are different "versions" of the civil war, but only one of them saw the light of day, and that this was a form of warfare, an element in controlling outcomes. The next chapter will consider this point in further detail.

²³ David Glover, "The thriller," in Martin Priestman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, 2003, 138.

²⁴ Addi, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Feb. 1998.

Chapter 5

State Propaganda and the Rhetoric of Terrorism

During the entire electoral campaign, we were simply prohibited from publishing at all: . . . week after week, gun-toting men came and took away the copy. . . . [Once] [w]hen [the printing press manager] queried the three armed men who came to take away the pages, one of the men raised up his Kalashnikov and said “Is this a good enough argument ?” [The press manager] answered, “Yes, that’s a good enough argument.”

—Salima Ghezali, 2002

You cannot understand what is going on in Algeria if you do not take stock of the fact that in Algeria there is no information. They started by winning the battle of information, of communication, denying Algerians any information, cutting off Algeria from international communication, which meant they could say just about anything. Which meant that many countries fell for the trick of the “fight against Islamism.”

—Hocine Aït Ahmed, 2002

At the end of *Le serment des barbares*, the narrator concludes that "History is not history when criminals produce its ink and possess the plume. It is only the chronicle of their excuses. And those who read it without feeling their hearts burn are false witnesses." Such a sentiment is shared by leading Algerian historian Mohammed Harbi, for whom "History is the servant of power. It has the role of forging the myths that power demands and getting rid of anything that contests it."¹ Both of these speakers echo the quotidian reality of the civil war suggested in the epigraphs. For Salima Ghezali and Hocine Aït Ahmed, the struggle over the public representation of the civil war is ultimately a struggle over the interpretation of history.

Analysts describe the civil war as two parallel operations: the deployment of violence and a struggle over its public representation, the topic explored in this chapter. In both instances, the struggle was resolutely won by the regime. In addressing the broader issues of the civil war's representation, the chapter specifically describes and analyzes the regime's use and imposition of the discourse of "eradicationism," which functioned semantically to dehumanize and criminalize the political opposition, through tropes such as the terrorist or the religious fanatic.

¹ *Aux origines du FLN*, 1975.

5.1 Representation and the Civil War

Both domestically and in the international arena, the conflict in Algeria extended beyond physical violence to include a “war of representation.” From January 1992 onward, after the “sofa coup d’état,” in which Algeria’s military leadership cancelled the democratic process, the means of public representation were placed under strict controls; media information and public discourse quickly came squarely within the aegis of state censorship. But this was a startling about-face; since the 1989 constitutional revisions had begun to democratize Algerian political structures, “the Algerian media enjoyed a freedom and vibrancy unparalleled in the Arab world.” Journalists had for the first time gained freedom to deploy “caustic criticism of public officials and government policy” and engage “a broad spectrum of political, economic, and social issues.”² Now, however, in the wake of an Islamist opposition party victory in the 1990 and 1991 elections, the movement toward free speech was radically reversed; the sources of public information now subject to mechanisms of state control. Martinez summarizes the situation succinctly: “Control over information [was] a weapon of war that remained in government hands.”³

The distribution of information, images, and descriptions was a state-controlled field where, according to Salima Ghezali, “La télévision, encore plus que la presse écrite, sert de véritable machine de guerre, créant l’événement ou l’escamotant complètement conformément aux injonctions du pouvoir.”⁴ It follows that the domestic and international understanding of the civil war, insofar as these relied on access to the basic facts, were strongly influenced by the regime's efforts to control them, a point we will return to. Given this, it is worth considering the extent to which many public sphere portrayals of the civil war, both informational, intellectual, and cultural, were subject to such influence, and became willing or unwitting participants in the “machine de guerre” (Ghezali) and “weapon of war” (Martinez) constituted by and in public discourse.

The censorship regime emerged in force after the cancelation of elections. In the months following the January 1992 coup d’état, a state of emergency was declared along with the immediate suspension of civil liberties. By September, the military junta declared that any act connected with “terrorism,” including such things as “frightening the population,” was punishable by prison. The injunction specifically included “disseminating documents, images, or recordings” found offensive, as well as any attempt at “defending such acts.”⁵ A further decree authorized the state to close down any private or public sphere institutions or establishments it deemed threatening to the national interest:

² Committee to Protect Journalists, 1999.

³ Luis Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War*, 2000, 197.

⁴ *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Feb. 1998.

⁵ *Décret législatif no. 92-03 du 30 septembre 1992 relatif à la lutte contre la subversion et le terrorisme*, 30 September 1992, chapter 1, Articles 1, 4, 5.

"[D]es mesures de suspension d'activité, ou de fermeture peuvent être prononcées à l'encontre de toute société, organe, établissement ou entreprise, quelque'en soit la nature ou la vocation lorsque lesdites activités mettent en danger l'ordre public, la sécurité publique, le fonctionnement normal des institutions ou les intérêts supérieurs du pays."⁶

But the censorship was not only negative, a set of imposed omissions—the state also organized a protracted propaganda campaign, mainly through the mass media, in its attempt to control the image and narrative of the civil war. While basic information throughout the 1990s was extremely limited, “un huis clos quasi total,”⁷ the regime sought to represent the military coup as an effort to “save democracy.” For example, one of the central figures of the junta declares in his memoirs that “In order to guarantee the democratic process, the republican character of the state, the national sovereignty and independence, and the unity of the country, it is vital for the nation to deny political access [*accès au pouvoir*] to a totalitarian theocratic regime.”⁸ According to this “official” version of the civil war, the political opposition was little more than a group of criminals: “diabolical” and fanatical barbarians who deserved only excommunication from the Algerian nation.⁹ Such assertions of the pervasive criminal character of the political opposition and its incurable commitment to monstrous principles justified the regime's position of cancelling elections and repressing the opposition party.

5.2 Eradicationist Discourse: The Tropes Of Terrorism

In a secret censorship decree, the regime outlined specific guidelines on the manner in which civil war would be represented in the media. These were set out in an *Inter-ministerial Decree Relative to the Treatment of Security Information*,¹⁰ sent in secret to all major media producers, who were prohibited from mentioning them publically.¹¹ The media were given specific rhetorical tasks in their new function. Editorial content would henceforth be monitored by “an Information Unit established at the Ministry of Interior” whose role was to take “charge of relations with the media regarding information” about the civil war. Independent reporting or editorial perspectives would not be tolerated. “As regards terrorism and subversion news items, all media of every kind are required to broadcast nothing apart from the official communiqués . . . and the content of public briefings made at press conferences,” while “any violation of this

⁶ *Décret présidentiel no. 92-320 du 11 août 1992 portant sur l'instauration de l'état d'urgence*, August 11, 1992. For discussion, see Ghania Mouffok, “Attentats contre la liberté de presse,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, March 1996.

⁷ Lahouari Addi, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Feb. 1998.

⁸ Nezzar, *Mémoires du général*, 1999, 225.

⁹ Martinez, 158-159.

¹⁰ *Arrêté interministériel relative au traitement de l'information à caractère sécuritaire*. In *Algérie : Le Livre Noir*, 1997, 52-57; English translation from Bedjaoui, 678-684. Hereafter “Decree”.

¹¹ Latif, 652.

ban is punished under the current law and regulations.” Moreover, the fact of censorship itself would be censored since “the present decree will not be published.”

There were important rhetorical considerations outlined by the decree, which included a list of “Recommendations to the National Media,” an itemized summary of pre-scripted narrative frameworks, the appropriate semantic elements and rhetorical goals. The decree specified that the state would not tolerate “a lack of collective discipline in this domain by a given media organ.” The media, it specifies, are a crucial weapon in the war on the terrorist enemy, essential instruments to “prevent, counter, and defeat enemy rumors and propaganda.” The media should exclusively employ an “appropriate terminology” made available “by the Information Unit”; equally crucial was a demand that the media “avoid any unconscious use of a terminology which might serve the enemy’s ideology and propaganda.” Instead, the media were specifically tasked with cultivating anti-Islamist sentiment in the public mind, which could be accomplished by “publicizing atrocities committed by Islamist regimes” such as “Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan,” and “highlighting the duplicity and fraudulence of those who evoke religion” only to “perpetrate criminal acts.” Islamists, the decree specifies, are merely gangs of ruthless criminals, the regime on the contrary should be seen as a savior of democracy and an irresistible force against barbarism. The media should “reduce the psychological impact sought” by the official enemy, which can be accomplished by “trivializing and minimizing” information about enemy actions or successes while “seeking above all to contribute to the eradication of so-called political violence” and “preserving the Nation’s morale.”¹²

The decree includes an extensive list of attributes to use in describing the official enemy, whose members “need to understand that they will never achieve their goals.” They should be portrayed as “using drugs while committing terrorist actions,” and forcibly conscripting the nation’s youth and sending them to their deaths. The decree specifies how the Islamist opposition must be depicted: “Highlight the inhuman nature of the barbaric practices of the terrorists,” including “the slitting of throats,” “the killing and maiming of children,” and “the assassination of parents . . . in front of their young children,” “etc.”; the ultimate goal being “to get the public mind to reject” this official enemy. In sum, one should “hammer home the slogan: ‘the terrorist will never prevail’ ” against the state.

The regime’s demands were quite well-heeded, as any glance through the press archives makes clear. The editor of *El Watan*, for example, speaking to the European press, insisted that “il ne faut pas se tromper d’ennemis. En Algérie, ce sont les islamistes qui massacrent, éventrent, violent les femmes et égorgent les bébés.”¹³ Elsewhere, he warned that “children are being

¹² This and following paragraph are citing the Decree.

¹³ “Ce sont les islamistes qui tuent.” Omar Belhouchet, éditorialiste algérien. “*Le Parisien*, Feb. 12 2001. Belhouchet is an interesting case. Before founding *El Watan*, Belhouchet worked for the state newspaper, *El Moudjahid*. While *El Watan* has been described as taking the regime’s side in the civil war, part of what has been called the “eradicationist press” (*Inquiry*, 1999, 631ff; Charef, 1998, 97), Belhouchet also been seen as standing up to the regime, and was eventually imprisoned after giving a speech in which he suggested the regime’s culpability for the assassination of intellectuals. However, many editorial statements from *El Watan*, including editorials signed by Belhouchet, showed a willingness to uncritically reproduce state propaganda, as in the above citation. For a

slaughtered and decapitated in the name of Islam."¹⁴ Another *El Watan* article reported that for Islamists, "violence is embedded in their politico-religious beliefs."¹⁵ These examples are typical of the perspective applied pervasively throughout the Algerian media (*El Moudjahid*, *Le Matin*, etc.), with dissenting journals systematically shut down by the state. A contemporary observer reported that "One false step can lead to a ban, whether legal or financial. Thus practically all the newspapers with an editorial line advocating reconciliation and dialogue between protagonists and political parties have been banned. To date the latest are *El Hourriya* and *Nation*."¹⁶

The same tropes and narratives we saw above, required by the decree, were often reproduced uncritically in the international media,¹⁷ producing the desired effect on international observers. Here is a well-known French intellectual: "I support dialogue between the government and the democratic forces. Asking democrats to have a dialogue with the Islamists is to ask the victims to embrace their executioners before they cut their throats."¹⁸ The international perception, as reflected in this view, was convinced by the accounts coming out of Algeria that the regime was the victim; the Islamist opposition merely thugs, terrorists, and fanatics, not worthy of the political process.

But the tendency to represent an official enemy as subhuman is a commonplace of history.¹⁹ The regime's preference for a discourse of terrorism, and readiness to impose it, had clear strategic

typical example, Belhouchet wrote in 1997 that "The armed Islamic groups, most of whose members have come from the FIS, have declared war on the Algerian people. They want to establish the Islamic republic by means of 'jihad', by massacring thousands of Algerians," a statement which can be fruitfully compared to contemporaneous ones by figures like editor Salima Ghezali, who was not willing to make such unqualified, blanket assertions, instead publicizing state crimes, and was quickly shut down. Latif, 673, 676.

¹⁴ *Libération*, Jan. 23, 1998. Cited in *Inquiry*, 631.

¹⁵ Cited by Latif, 676.

¹⁶ Latif, 653.

¹⁷ A reading through *New York Times* coverage evinces consistent uncritical replications of the regime's perspective. There were exceptions to the uncritical equation of Islamism in Algeria with terrorism, such as those in *Irish Times*, *The Independent*, *Observer*, *Libération*, and *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

¹⁸ Pascale Bruckner, in 1997, cited in Latif, 664. Many French intellectuals made similar statements, the most vocal probably being Bernard Henri-Lévy.

¹⁹ For the representation of the other as subhuman in the colonial context, Fanon's 1952 *Black Skin, White Masks* is a seminal contribution, as is his 1961 essay "On Violence." The continuity of Fanon's analysis with the modern discourse of terrorism is plain in Judith Butler's recent *Prekarious Lives*, as well as Edward Said's essays, whose focus alternated between colonial and postcolonial instances of a cultural form of power that he called the discourse of "orientalism," of which "terrorism" in the present sense—as an ideological construction by the powerful—is a special case. See *Orientalism*, 1978, 45-46, 205, 347. Said's reviews of Bernard Lewis (*The Politics of Dispossession*, 1994, 337-340) and Thomas Friedman (360-365) are a case in point. Said explicitly addresses terrorism as concept and discourse in "Identity, Negation, Violence (341-359); "Permission to Narrate" (247-269) and "The Essential Terrorist" (Said and Hitchens, eds., 149-158). From a political economy angle and in reference to contemporary global power formations, the work of Edward Herman and Gerry O'Sullivan on the discourse of terrorism is highly relevant (*The "Terrorism" Industry*, 1989), as are the case studies of Noam Chomsky in the case of the contemporary Middle East. See, for example, his "Middle East Terrorism and the American Ideological System," in Said and Hitchens, 1988.

motives. The propensity for communities to describe perceived outsiders as less than “full” or “complete” humans is probably universal; the implications however are especially acute when institutionalized. Not only is the terminology of terrorism specifically dehumanizing, it activates a sister-discourse of counter-violence, paternalistically framed as a gift of good-will to civilized society—supposedly protecting the innocent from the horrors introduced into the world by monstrous entities described, even by Algerian intellectuals, as “des infra-humains.”²⁰

Analysts have described terrorism discourse as a state-deployed means of psychically destroying an official enemy's right to be recognized as human. Richard Falk suggests that the “rhetorical dehumanization of the dissident group makes their destruction seem morally acceptable,” while “adversarial challenges [by official enemies] are presented and filtered through a self-righteous, one-way moral/legal screen.” According to Falk, “the main [problem] remains the unchallenged use of political language to frame issues of choice in such a way as to associate an identification of 'terrorist' practice with the foreign other, and correspondingly to endow the self (and allies) with the identity of a victim of terrorism.”²¹ Edward Said reaches similar conclusions. For him, the modern political parlance of “terrorism” is “a whole new signifying system” dividing the world into politically-motivated binaries used “to justify everything 'we' do and to delegitimize as well as dehumanize everything 'they' do.” Part of this process is to mentally remove the actors designated terrorists from the world of historical events and, crucially, to remove all comprehensible motivation from their choices. This is because, for Said, terrorism’s “tautological and circular character is antinarrative. Sequence, the logic of cause and effect as between oppressors and victims . . . all these vanish inside an enveloping cloud called 'terrorism'.”²²

With these points in mind, we return to the words of General Nezzar, architect of the junta’s political strategy. He announced in 1992 that “to those who have soiled their hands with the blood of these defenders of order, I shall say that the most pitiless war will be waged against them until their complete eradication.”²³ Eradication is a proper solution for an entity that is by definition an affront to civilized humanity—and thus afforded none of the protections offered to actual humans or legal citizens, proper only to be extinguished in the effort to sanitize society. Echoing Said, Latif describes the Algerian regime's deployment of terrorist discourse as “so vague and yet so heavily fraught with consequences” that, losing referential function, “it is above all an ideological and psychological weapon against any enemy.” He concludes that

the notion of terrorist is a convenient catch-all making little demand on intellectual precision and integrity. The terrorist is the other—the enemy. He is the rejection of everything to do with morality, culture, science, historical will, social

²⁰ “Appel des intellectuels algériens contre la confusion et le défaitisme,” *Le Monde*, March 30, 2001, 13. Signed by 279 self-proclaimed “intellectuels nationaux,” including well-known novelists Mohamed Dib and Rachid Boudjedra.

²¹ Falk, in George, ed., *Western State Terrorism*, 1991, 108, 109.

²² “Permission to Narrate,” in Said, 1994, 257.

²³ *El Moudjahid*, December 28, 1992, cited in Martinez, 2001, 167.

emancipation, etc., in short, of humanity. He is the antithesis. He is only a beast, a 'killing-machine'.²⁴

Throughout the 1990s and up through today, "eradicationist" discourse has been a prevalent genre in Algeria. It was pervasive in the Algerian press and in speeches by top regime officials. A leading general, for example, described the insurgent opposition as "des gangsters terroristes" who

avaient été recrutés par d'autres puissances pour mener la guerre en Afghanistan avant qu'ils décident d'importer leur prétendu djihad. Certains sont allés en Iran et ou Soudan. . . . Pour notre part, nous essayons de débarrasser non seulement l'Algérie mais l'ensemble de l'humanité de tels monstres. Tout homme civilisé doit être convaincu que nous combattons aussi pour lui.²⁵

More recent statements by regime officials still display this attitude. President Bouteflika in 2004 warned "to those who claim we are extending our hand to terrorists, I swear by God we will exterminate them all."²⁶

5.3 Propaganda: Power over Symbol and Thought

It has long been recognized that the representation of reality has a potent influence on the perception of reality. Consequently, the capacity to control public representation delivers influence over the psychic content of people's minds. The point was first analyzed in the context of World War I, considered the beginning of the modern propaganda era.²⁷ Writing in this connection, Bertrand Russell discussed thought control as a major danger in modern society. "[O]pinion," he argued, is probably "the ultimate power in social affairs."²⁸ Equally impressed by the power of propaganda was Freud's nephew Edward Bernays, the paragon of American propaganda. He described propaganda as "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized . . . opinions of the masses." Propaganda operates as an "unseen mechanism" in society, constituting a "true ruling power" and a form of "invisible government."²⁹ Discourse analysts discussed the power inherent in language and discursive representation along similar lines. Control over representation translates into "the capacity to intervene in the course of events, to influence the actions of others and indeed create events, through the means of the

²⁴ Latif, 657.

²⁵ "Algérie : les grands cimenterres sous la lune," *Politique internationale*, numéro 79, Spring 1998, 11.

²⁶ *El Watan*, 25 March 2004, quoted in *Quelle réconciliation pour l'Algérie?* 2005, 7.

²⁷ Alex Carey, *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy*, 1995, 22.

²⁸ Bertrand Russell, *Power*, 1938, 96-97.

²⁹ *Propaganda*, 1927, 61-63.

production and transmission of symbolic forms.”³⁰ The power implicit in such control over representation and thought is immense. "The power to frame communicative events," constitutes "the broadest domain in which power is exercised," for the simple reason that "within this power is the power to position participants in relation to each other."³¹

Returning to the Algerian civil war, we see how the discourse of terrorism dovetailed with a policy of state violence.³² Eradicationist discourse mirrored regime policy, giving rise to a situation that some analysts have described as a special case of genocide. François Aubenais reported in *Libération* that

the strategy of demonization of the opponent leads us straight into electoral genocide or electoral cleansing, besides providing justification for the worst violations of human rights and other denials of justice. In the face of the spread of the Islamist insurgency, the most radical faction of the regime advocates massive distribution of arms and attempts to set part of the population against the other using manipulation of the media and war propaganda.³³

Aubenais cites a regime official in 1998 who described how “the security forces adopted a strictly repressive policy, a pure theory of subtraction” accomplished “by eliminating all the Islamists.” Thus, according to the regime figure's logic, “the problem is eliminated.”³⁴ Aubenais's conclusions are shared by several analysts. For example, Senhadji argues that:

The supporters of the military regime advocate a military solution to the political crisis through the physical elimination of their political opponents and sympathizers. Their policy has been termed "political" or "electoral" cleansing Their struggle is presented to the world as a struggle between good and evil, modernity against obscurantism, democracy against fundamentalism. Eradicationism views the political opponent as a demon, a terrorist, an infra-human beyond reform, education, or reconstruction.³⁵

³⁰ Thompson, J.B., 1995, *The Media and Modernity, A Social Theory of the Media*, 17. Cited in the unpublished dissertation by Taoufik ben Ammar, *The Language of Terrorism: Al-Jazeera and the Framing of Terrorist Discourse*, Georgetown University, 2009, 40.

³¹ Scollon, Ron, *Mediated Discourse: the Nexus of Practice* (Routledge, 2001), 37. Cited in Ben Ammar, 2009, 30.

³² State repression during the civil war is reviewed in the next chapter.

³³ Florence Aubenais, *Libération*, Feb. 4 1998. Cited in *Inquiry*, 647. On the notion of electoral genocide, see also Chapter 6, note 73.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ J.T. Senhadji, “National Reactions,” in *An Inquiry*, 617.

These terms give us occasion to return to Khadra's *Les agneaux du Seigneur*. It is perhaps worth noting that Khadra was a career military officer, who in his autobiography refers to the military as his family.³⁶ Indeed, the autobiography is dedicated to Algeria's military cadets "with all my affection." It is therefore not surprising to observe the regime's eradicationist discourse, along the lines of the decree described above, faithfully reproduced in *Les agneaux*. In Khadra's portrayal, the civil war reduces to a struggle between corrupt, sadistic Islamist criminals and the just forces of the state.

Reviewer Adam Shatz has mentioned an impression of pro-regime partisanship in Khadra's novels. Khadra's vision of the civil war, he observes, makes the military into the hero of the story. For Shatz, "the failure to reckon with the army's troubling behavior is, as Althusser might have put it, the 'structuring absence' of Khadra's work." Moreover,

Khadra's work obfuscates the military's handsome contribution to the country's nightmare. Reading his work one would never know that the Algerian army disappeared several thousand citizens (most of whom, as the government now admits, 'had nothing to do with armed violence'), or that it detained tens of thousands of suspects in open-air camps in the Sahara, or that — according to Souaïdia's *La Sale Guerre* — it infiltrated radical Islamic groups and encouraged them to carry out terrorist attacks in Algeria and France to discredit the FIS in the eyes of the population and, more important, those of the old colonial master.

This probably explains why, according to Shatz, "Khadra's books are prominently displayed in every Algerian bookshop, while *La sale guerre* . . . is banned."³⁷ If Shatz is correct about this fact, the implication is that *Les agneaux*, like Khadra's other novels, passes the state's censorship test, presumably because its depiction of the civil war falls well within the approved range of perspectives. Souaïdia's testimonial work, on the other hand, which casts the state as the primary agent in a war against the dissident population, is a form of proscribed representation because it does not conform to the appropriate perspective. This raises an important question: What was the relationship of the state to the people during the 1990s? Was the civil war actually an attempt by the state, as in Khadra's novel, to protect ordinary Algerians from a militant fanaticism? To what extent was the threat of terrorism and religious fanaticism a serious concern? The next chapter places these questions in historical context, and considers the implications of the civil war for Algerians.

³⁶ *L'écrivain*, Paris: Julliard, 2001.

³⁷ Adam Shatz, "One Big Murder Mystery," *London Review of Books*, Oct. 7, 2004.

Chapter 6

Democracy, State Violence and Popular Uprising in 1992 Algeria

One of the starting points for this study is the observation that Algerian novels portraying the civil war provide divergent, and sometimes mutually exclusive accounts of the civil war, its nature and causes, and its place in Algerian history. In a passage already cited from *Les agneaux* a character exclaims that "The people are rising up against the dogs that subjugated them." However, *Les agneaux* ultimately rejects this thesis as an interpretation of the civil war, opting instead for a portrait of the conflict as class resentment, opportunistic criminality, and legitimate state repression. *Le blanc*, as we see in chapter 8, offers a sweeping, often idealized portrait of the civil war, depicting violence as an invading obscurantism strangely taking over the country. The civil war is depicted as an existential confrontation between enlightened heroes and naïve barbarians, a frame summarized by the narrator's query: "qui redira, au terme de ces années déjà trop lourdes de cadavres, en ces années 93 et 94, qui fera écho à Camus" in his call for justice and reason within an implacable atmosphere of resentment, revenge, and violence. *Le serment des barbares* opens a sweeping interrogation of an Algerian history whose pages are portrayed as either unwritten or suppressed, a gigantic secret: "Si le contenu en était révélé, le pays volerait en éclats" 'If its contents were ever revealed, the country would burst into pieces.' This, even when the country already is in pieces. The civil war is part of a process in which the "rescapés de l'histoire" 'the survivors of history,' erased from politics and memory after Stalinist fashion, are now emerging to demand a their place in the story, and to take revenge on those who sought their erasure, their historical non-being.¹

This chapter explores crucial aspects of the civil war's context, an understanding of which is essential to any interpretive claims regarding its depiction in Algerian literature. To interpret the novels like *Le blanc* or *Les agneaux*, it is indispensable to have an idea of what they are referring and often only alluding to, and what they sometimes glaringly ignore. The literary works constitute interventions in the construction of public memory, forming part of society's conversation about the civil war. Furthermore, it is trivial to point out that any novel makes use of an extensive framework of inherited contextual references. Without a substantive understanding of this context, including the choices not made by the novels, such as what is left out, readers will risk ignoring crucial dimensions of the novel's particular engagement. This is especially true when, as in this case, literary works provide sharply divergent accounts of history, its deeper causes, and its best interpretation. The second reason for a substantial understanding of the civil war context, especially relevant for novels, is to develop a space outside of the works, from which we as readers can develop an informed and critical interpretation of the works. For an event like the civil war, without some attempt to sketch out an independent account, this is impossible to do; we would be reliant exclusively on the depiction of the civil war within the novels, and since the latter provide contradictory portrayals, this would be even more confusing.

¹ Sansal, 275, 271. Sansal elaborates this point in a lengthy dialogue at the novel's center between a detective and a historian about the causes and nature of the civil war, 260-284.

This chapter seeks to develop a substantive understanding of the civil war. If the events were well known, far in the past, and their basic contours relatively uncontroversial, such as the French Revolution or the Spanish Civil War, a brief synopsis of the authoritative account would be sufficient to supply context. But for events as recent, controversial, and poorly understood as the Algerian civil war, a more detailed and nuanced consideration is merited. As Rosemary Hill observes, "The period that is always most difficult of access is the one that is just within living memory. Not yet written down, its primary sources often still inaccessible, it is at the disposal of fallible memory and prejudice."² A more substantial effort is therefore in order to contextualize Algeria's civil war literature.

Section one below describes how the riots of 1988 and the state's brutal response marked a major shift in perceptions among ordinary Algerians, with Islamist groups emerging as a major opposition force to the regime. Sections two and three briefly describe the FIS emergence in 1989 as the major opposition party. As long as the regime thought it could control the outcome, it supported some form of electoral process. Once it became clear that the opposition party would win, however, the military took control of the state and initiated a campaign of systematic repression of districts that had voted against the FLN.

Sections four and five turn to the civil war violence itself. With no independent investigation into the civil war and state archives still sealed, it is impossible to establish the details of the civil war with certainty. Serious analysts, however, have presented substantial evidence demonstrating that in its broadest dimensions, the civil war was driven by state repression and state terror operations, including the massive, systematic torture of suspects, state-operated death squads, false-flag militias pretending to be Islamists, and a culture of impunity for state security forces.

² "Impervious to Draughts," book review, *London Review of Books*, May 22, 2008, 23, cited in Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis*, 2009, 1.

6.1 Riots, Repression, and Islamist Activism

The infamous events of 1988's "Black October" riots marked a turning point in Algerian history and initiated the visible beginning of trends that would determine the next decade. Evans and Phillips offer a compelling account of one of the crucial developments.

[T]he violence took on a new dimension when, after Friday prayers, eight thousand Islamist sympathizers fought a pitched battle with the police in the Belcourt neighborhood, shouting "Allahu Akbar" and "Islamic Republic" along with "Chadli murderer." . . . On Monday 10 October the fiery Islamist preacher Ali Belhadj organized a demonstration of twenty thousand people which marched down Hassia ben Bouali Street . . . until the demonstrators were stopped in their tracks by a military barricade. . . . The army reacted by firing indiscriminately into the crowd. . . .³

These riots, and the dramatic violence of the state's brutal response, were a pivotal moment "in which," according to Entelis, "thousands of young people took to the streets to protest against the state's chronic failure to satisfy socioeconomic needs—basic education, adequate health care, employment opportunities, available housing, sufficient food supplies."⁴

The rioting and the state response to it—the culmination of a decade of political stagnation and popular frustration—marked a major shift in perceptions among ordinary Algerians, as well as the emergence of Islamism as the major opposition force. The October 1988 rioting came at the climax of a month of constant strikes that had spread throughout the country, bringing Algiers to a standstill, with many of the youth rioting through the streets, ransacking businesses and degrading state symbols, while denouncing the FLN regime's leadership and legitimacy. When the army came into the streets to turn back a third day of general strikes and "restore order," it provoked a major confrontation with the dissident population, with Islamist groups fast emerging as the most effective leadership force for confronting the state and organizing opposition.

The mosque-based groups had done much work over the course of the previous decade to build cultural infrastructure and an active support base of engaged participants. The efforts had produced "a new breed of politically active Islamists—bent on reforming state and society not just by social action and education but through direct involvement in the political process."⁵ But the brutality of the state response to the strike, the popular assemblies, and the rioting did much to change people's perception of the regime and its relation to Algerians. A recent account by Le Sueur conveys the popular reaction to state brutality:

³ Evans and Phillips, *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 2007, 104-105.

⁴ Entelis, "Political Islam in the Maghreb. The nonviolent dimension," in *Islam, Democracy, and the State in North Africa*. 1997, 59.

⁵ Entelis, 59.

Harboring no illusions about the state, Algeria's Islamists were nevertheless shocked when the military opened fire and killed approximately 50 marchers. . . . Because the Islamists were the first among the groups of protesters to be killed, they won broad sympathy from the general population outraged by the state's excessive use of force. . . . The slaughter of religious protesters galvanized a wide array of political Islamists, and helped mold them into a more unified and aggressive front. As the process unfolded . . . the stature of the Islamists increased. . . . As an overall result of the fortnight's unrest, an estimated 500 demonstrators . . . had been killed, and thousands were injured and arrested.⁶

For many, these riots for many were the equivalent of a “Sétif moment.”⁷ They had the effect of politicizing an entire generation of youths fed up with the status quo. Children had been taught in school that the army was the friend of the people. This had remained a dominant national narrative since the war with France. But here, with tanks corralling the protesters and commandos firing tank-mounted machine guns straight into the crowds,⁸ this was the most intense violence since that war. Only here, the FLN-state's enemy was internal. A major shift had occurred, or at least been made visible. Police repression in the weeks that followed was massive and severe.⁹

For the first time in post-independence Algeria, the army had fired into the crowds. Khalida Messaoudi describes her sentiments:

At school . . . I'd been taught in great detail that the army serves the people, not repression. So, when I saw the tanks, the armored cars, and the uniformed soldiers on the street, I was immediately reminded of [the French generals] Bigeard and Massu. . . . I realized that the army of my country was just like the one it had fought, the colonial army. . . . I couldn't accept that they would strip us so suddenly

⁶ Le Sueur, *Algeria since 1989 : Between Terror and Democracy*, 2010, 35.

⁷ The 1945 riots at Sétif, killing around 100 settlers, were followed by a month-long retaliatory "pacification" exercise with between 6,000 and 45,000 Algerian Muslim casualties. This had an enormous impact on the indigenous population. For example, Kateb Yacine reported, "my sense of humanity was affronted for the first time by the most atrocious sights. I was sixteen years old. The shock which I felt at the pitiless butchery that caused the deaths of thousands of Muslims, I have never forgotten. From that moment my nationalism took definite form."

⁸ Aggoun and Rivoire, *Françalgérie: crimes et mensonges d'états*, 2004 (hereafter: Aggoun), supply a documentary synopsis of the dramatic events, 116-118.

⁹ It is clear that the security forces had instructions to treat Islamist dissidents as an internal enemy, and that this occurred in a climate of total impunity. Mass police sweeps in Islamist districts picked up people at random and brought them to detention centers, where they were severely tortured until they provided a list of names of local leaders and activists, from 10 to 40 depending on the case. Those individuals were then sought out and tortured in turn. Aggoun provides riveting documentation, 120-127. Luis Martinez records a sample of contemporary testimony: "The paratroopers came [in the detention centers] in waves to beat people up. At night, torture recommenced. There were two rooms, one including a tub and rags. The tub was in fact a saucepan full of liquid waste and vomit in which people were drenched. There was a room where people (young people especially) were sodomised with stakes and bottles. Some were directly raped by the paratroopers. Toenails were torn off with bayonets." 46. See also footnotes and sources cited in section 4 of this chapter.

of our remaining source of pride in being Algerians. The war of liberation was the only thing that held us together as a nation, and during those days, these criminals killed us twice.¹⁰

Salima Ghezali, a high school teacher and later a journalist, recalls similar impressions:

Never had I, with all I had read, all I had believed in, never had I thought these people would shoot us. Never had I thought that they would go so far as to stir up our historical trauma by performing the same actions our parents had told us about regarding what they had lived through under colonization, during the war of independence Never had I thought the day would come when, between them and us, there was such a difference . . . such a huge gap.¹¹

While for the older generation there was something traumatic about the events, for the younger generation, especially males, it was cathartic: "the release of pent-up anger against a system which many people . . . felt was humiliating them." Banners denounced the regime and called for the Algerian youth to "rise up" as the Palestinian youth were then doing in their intifada. The old myths were being torn down, the narratives of glorious war and symbols of former heroism no longer held power. When rioters ransacked a furniture shop in central Algiers, "Boudaoud, a former leader of the FLN in France, intervened, brandishing his veteran's card," but was ignored by the youths who carried on trashing his shop. Much of the violence was symbolic, directed at objects connected with the wealthy classes and the regime. "The rioters targeted the symbols of authority and wealth with relentless determination," including trendy boutiques and the nightclubs of the elite (the so-called *chi-chis*), along with government offices and FLN property. A national flag was taken down in one instance and replaced with a couscous sack. Law courts were torched; hotels ransacked. Local authority figures, such as police chiefs, were "ritualistically humiliated," in Bab el-Oued some were forced to stroll the streets shouting "I am a braggart, I am a betrayer;" mock trials were held "satirizing the Algerian justice system." Throughout the scenes, "there was a strong sense of carnival . . . a world turned upside down, a moment of inversion which, no matter how transitory, no matter how fleeting, allowed the young male rioters to recover a sense of honour, dignity, and manhood."¹²

6.2 Democracy, Islamism, and the FIS

This is the national context within which the FIS party *Front Islamique du Salut*—"a coalition of organized and informal Islamist groups"—emerged.¹³ As a viable political party, the FIS's destiny was over-taken by dramatic state violence and political drama—and short-lived. (Created

¹⁰ Khalida Moussaoui, *Unbowed*, 1998, 89. Quoted in Evans and Phillips, 142.

¹¹ *Le procès de "La sale guerre" Algérie: Le général-major Khaled Nezzar contre le lieutenant Habib Souaïdia*, (hereafter: *Le procès*), ed., François Gèze and Salima Mellah, 2003, 346.

¹² Evans and Phillips, 102-103, 142.

¹³ Ruedy, *Modern Algeria*, 2005, 251. The party was officially declared on February 18, 1989.

in 1989, the party was officially banned after the coup d'état in 1992, its leadership imprisoned and its membership severely persecuted, with thousands detained in concentration camps in the Sahara. Those leaders who escaped the state crackdown sought political asylum abroad, and the party continued throughout the 1990s to remain the major center of opposition activism against the state.)

Despite the dramatic violence of October 1988, there was still an atmosphere of self-empowerment through organized activism and the hope for serious political reforms. If anything, pressure on the FLN regime to reform became more intense than ever after the October riots. In the words of Hocine Aït-Ahmed, founding leader of the war-time FLN and subsequent long-time leader of the leftist opposition based in Kabylia, there was finally “an opening” in a state system that had long seemed hopelessly closed and impenetrable.¹⁴ The wave of “spectacular liberalization”¹⁵ of the late 1980s had paved the way for political pluralism for the first time in Algerian history. In early 1989, a newly-written constitution allowed for the creation of opposition parties, and new elections were scheduled for 1990 (municipal and regional) and 1991 (national). These would be the first contested elections since Algerian independence, and would have probably had the effect of definitively asserting civilian authority of the presidency over military power.¹⁶

For the younger generation especially, the FLN was less associated with war heroism or revolutionary glory than with state incompetence and corruption. Particularly frustrating to them was the daily misery and grinding poverty that fueled animosity toward the single-party state leadership.

Mass unemployment . . . created a deep-seated psychological malaise. In the teeming slums of the casbah and Bab el-Oued, where families frequently slept fifteen to a room, or in the hastily constructed shanty towns made from cardboard and corrugated iron, whose inhabitants had to pick their way through rubbish-strewn neighborhoods with no electricity and lakes of open sewage, huge numbers of young people felt that they were living in limbo. Too old for school, yet too young for military service, too poor to think of marriage, with nowhere to meet apart from the mosque, young people were left feeling that it was impossible to become a fully grown adult. Abandoned by the regime, with no means of support, they felt trapped.¹⁷

A young Algerian, asked why he supported the FIS, replied: "In this country, if you are a young man . . . you have only four choices: you can remain unemployed and celibate because there are no jobs and no apartments to live in; you can work in the black market and risk being arrested;

¹⁴ *Le procès*, 370.

¹⁵ Ruedy, 244.

¹⁶ Ruedy, 250.

¹⁷ Evans and Phillips, 109.

you can try to emigrate to France to sweep the streets of Paris or Marseilles; or you can join the FIS and vote for Islam."¹⁸ With unemployment higher than ever and the IMF-imposed economic austerity measures putting ordinary people through difficult times,¹⁹ any alternative to the status quo seemed attractive to large numbers of people.

The Berberist-centered socialist party FFS (Front de Forces Socialistes) and other secular-leftist opposition parties emerged, but it was the Islamist coalition party, FIS (Front Islamique du Salut), that would garner by far the most appeal.²⁰ There is substantial evidence—including statements by top regime officials—that the FLN, certain of an electoral victory, intentionally bolstered the Islamist party. This had been a clear strategy throughout the 1980s,²¹ and in 1990-91 it was again seen as a means of consolidating power while checking leftist activism, then viewed as the greater threat to the establishment elite.²²

In the 1990 elections, the FIS emerged as the main opposition party, winning by a landslide. With the FFS and the RCD abstaining in protest of the unfair election policies, the FIS received 54% of the vote, next to the FLN's 12% (with abstention at 35%). At the municipal level (the regional *wilaya* assemblies), the FIS party won an absolute majority in 31 out of 48 cases, and a

¹⁸ Mark Tessler, "The Origins of Popular Support for Islamist Movements: A Political Economy Analysis," in Entelis, ed., 1997, 93.

¹⁹ By 1988 inflation was over 10%, and unemployment over 25%; for the youth population it was 50%. There was an economic crisis throughout the mid-1980s, with \$14 billion in foreign debt by 1984, a spike in cost of living, a dramatic drop in the price of oil, and a sudden fall of the dollar, which negatively affected Algeria's position in the market. Algeria also fell victim to the dictates of international finance. IMF-imposed policies dismantled state planning while "structural adjustments" imposed a slash in public sector spending and left Algeria struggling to repay its loan debt, which reached a debt-service ration above 70% from 1988-1993. Needless to say, the effects of all of this on the lower classes in Algeria were devastating. See Ruedy, 244-246; the detailed account of Algeria's economic policies and their social consequences in Dillman, *State and Private Sector in Algeria: The Politics of Rent-seeking and Failed Development*, 2000, 16, 24-26, 31-33, 70-71, 78-84; and Aïssaoui, *Algeria: The Political Economy of Oil and Gas*, 2001, 237-243.

²⁰ Over 60 political parties emerged after the political system was reformed to allow new parties, though most were negligible paper entities. Besides those mentioned, Ahmed Ben Bella led the MDA (Mouvement pour la Démocratie en Algérie) with a moderate Islamic message, the RCD (Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie) had a liberal reformist agenda, and there were additional competitors to the FIS's fundamentalist ideology, including the an-Nahda party led by Sheikh Djaballah and the Hamas party led by Sheikh Mahfoud Nahnah.

²¹ The Chadli regime had constantly tried to play the Islamist factions off against each other, and the Islamists against the secular Left. See Al-Ahnaf, Botiveau, and Frégosi, eds., *L'Algérie par ses islamistes*, 1991 (hereafter: Al-Ahnaf), 60-76; Evans and Phillips, 126-127.

²² The prime minister during the early 1990s, Sid Ahmed Ghazali, has admitted in interviews to having instrumentalized the Islamist movement, intentionally bolstering the FIS's electoral chances in order to weaken his then opponents within the FLN-military regime. Policies that would have permitted a stronger plurality of groups to organize were rejected, deliberately placing the FIS as the only viable electoral alternative to the FLN. *Le procès* 89-113, 233, 372. For further details corroborating this point, see Sifaoui, *Histoire secrète de l'Algérie indépendante: L'État-DRS*, 2012, 230-231; Ruedy, 252; Willis, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb*, 2012, 170; Aggoun 126-127.

simple majority in 45 of them, a stunning triumph.²³ For a number of reasons, Islamism had become the condition of possibility for political change in Algeria.²⁴

6.3 Democracy Thrown in Reverse

After the stunning results of the June 1990 municipal elections, the national elections were approaching. The FLN reacted by trying to control the outcome, manipulating electoral policies and instituting a blatant gerrymandering law. The regime was betting that in an outright FLN-FIS contest for the highest national offices, many would prefer an FLN victory, if only to avert an Islamist-controlled parliament, perceived by some as regressive and hopelessly patriarchal, and therefore illegitimate candidates for a democratic system.²⁵ (The ferociously polemical diatribes by intellectuals such as Rachid Boudjedra and Rachid Mimouni are typical of this latter perspective.²⁶) But the regime leadership bet wrong: given a choice in a contested election, the voters overwhelmingly opted to eject the FLN and install the FIS. At the regional level, the FIS gained 188 out of 231 contested seats outright in the 430-seat National Assembly, an enormous victory, with another 199 seats still remaining to be decided in a second round of elections.²⁷

The results stunned the FLN leadership and much of the political class. For both the regime and some liberal-left coalitions, both, though for different reasons, unhappy with the results, it was a moment for emergency maneuvers. Liberal feminists groups, as well as some intellectuals and labor unions called openly for the cancellation of the election results and for military intervention to prevent what they described as the coming Islamic state. Thousands of women protested on the streets of Algiers against the FIS's conservative and antifeminist social values and the aggressive patriarchy preached by leaders like Madani. Other leftist groups however were not ready to throw their support behind the military. At an emergency rally, Aït-Ahmed, leader of the FFS party, asserted that the electoral process had to be respected, even if the outcome seemed unpleasant to some parties. In January 1992, he chanted alongside 300,000 supporters: “neither police state, nor Islamic state, but a democratic state.”²⁸

²³ Evans and Phillips, 157.

²⁴ Islamism can be described as a politically-oriented social movement based on mosque-centered activism and an interpretation of Islamic traditions. Further details regarding Islamism in Algeria can be found in chapter 6.

²⁵ Evans and Phillips explain that “after the municipal elections, Algerian society began to polarize. Berber culture was pitted against Arab culture, secular society against the Islamist movement, Arabist sentiment against the francophone tradition. [. . .] [In the eyes of some elites,] the FIS were just like the Nazis in 1933, cynically exploiting parliamentary democracy to come to power; once there they would use the state’s levers to impose their will on the rest of society.” Evans and Phillips, 158.

²⁶ Boudjedra, *FIS de la haine*, 1992; and Mimouni, *De la barbarie en général et de l'intégrisme en particulier*, 1992.

²⁷ Figures from Evans and Phillips, 169.

²⁸ Evans and Phillips, 170.

One point, however, had been clear since 1988: "The FIS could flood the streets with demonstrators, but the military had the tanks."²⁹ The FIS leadership soon came under heavy persecution, with Abassi Madani and Ali Benhadj, along with huge numbers of FIS members, summarily thrown into prison. The national elections, after being postponed several times throughout 1991, in part because of the US invasion of Iraq, were finally scheduled for December 15, 1991 (first round) and January 16, 1992 (second round). Many waited with bated breath. Would the elections proceed? Would the military intervene instead? Would the "experiment" in democracy, as it was often called by Western analysts, be allowed to continue? Would there be an FLN-FIS coalition government, dismantling military control over the political apparatus and forcing the FIS into policy compromises under a parliamentary system and a secular constitution?

The answer came—as soon as it became inevitable that the FIS would win massively—in the form of a military putsch and the outright cancelation of the elections. The generals stepped in, declared a state of emergency, and suspended the constitution. The remaining FIS leadership was arrested and thrown into prison; the party itself declared illegal.

The constitutional crisis was manufactured by forcing the president's resignation, thereby providing a pretext for a military junta to take power. On January 11, President Chadli suddenly appeared on national television to announce his immediate resignation, allowing the Supreme Court to step in and hand the executive function to a "High Security Council" (HSC). This was popularly labeled the "sofa" coup d'état,³⁰ since Chadli had famously sat on a divan as he rather nervously delivered his televised resignation speech. The FLN-military regime had been willing to implement democratic reforms as long as it could find ways to ensure its own victory. The HSC was soon reshuffled into a "High State Committee" to be led by Mohamed Boudiaf. For much of the population, the reaction was: Boudiaf *who*? The aging revolutionary war veteran, once a founder and leading figure in the war-time FLN, now long in exile in Morocco, was retrieved from historical oblivion to provide a semblance of legitimacy to the coup.³¹

²⁹ Quandt, *Between Ballots and Bullets: Algeria's Transition from Authoritarianism*, 1998, 63.

³⁰ Evans and Phillips, 171-172.

³¹ Mohamed Boudiaf, like Aït-Ahmed, had been a founding member (and in fact the leading figure) of the 1954 FLN. One of the several figures arrested in 1956 when the French commandeered an FLN plane flight, he was later ousted by the Ben Bella-Boumediene coalition that took power after the war, and lived thereafter as a businessman in Morocco, completely estranged from Algerian politics. The military leadership was apparently hoping Boudiaf's untarnished legacy and war-veteran prestige would restore a sense of legitimacy to the junta's takeover. Boudiaf, however, refused to be a mere puppet. He spoke out ardently about the need for serious reforms and led an anticorruption charge. Unwilling to allow the patronage system to continue under his watch, he compiled lists of corrupt officials and soon ordered the arrest of a senior military officer, General Mustapha Belloucif, for allegedly embezzling tens of millions of French francs into off-shore accounts and real-estate. This was apparently more than the military leadership had bargained for. Only months into his term, Boudiaf was assassinated. His trial was widely regarded as a fraud and a whitewash, with even Boudiaf's widow publicly pardoning the man convicted of the assassination, describing him as a mere instrument of a larger conspiracy within the junta, and calling for an independent investigation. Evans and Phillips, 176.

In the meantime, state violence was deployed on a massive scale in an attempt to control the negative reaction from the now disenfranchised and outraged segments of the dissident population. Regions that had supported the FIS were now subjected to regular police-military sweeps that often picked up male "suspects" simply for having a beard or merely for standing in the street near a suspected Islamist.³² Reform and change had seemed imminent; now state power was in military hands and the crisis was being resolved through military tactics. The FIS's main leaders had nearly all been jailed or fled to exile, while at least eight thousand FIS sympathizers and Islamist activists were rounded up by the army and interned in the Sahara in make-shift camps.³³ Driven out of the political process and severely persecuted by state security forces, the Islamist coalition splintered and went underground. Some of the more radical elements, with an air of "I told you so" toward moderates who had sought to participate in the political process, immediately declared an armed insurgency against the military state.

6.4 State Terror and Civil War: "Terrorize the Terrorist"

Violence, you say, has reached an intolerable level. That is true. But to condemn violence in general is not enough, let alone condemning that of armed groups while overlooking that of the State, forgetting that the first act of violence was that of the January 11, 1992 coup d'état and the cancellation of the electoral process.

—Jacques Vergès, *Lettre ouverte à des amis algériens devenus tortionnaires*, 1993

It was absolute insanity. On one side, terrorists posed as members of the security forces and on the other side troops dressed up as Islamic guerrillas to carry out atrocities that would be blamed on the terrorists.

—Habib Souaïdia, *La sale guerre*, 2001

They are fighting against terrorism by using terrorist methods.

—Mohamed Samraoui, 2002

³² In Paris court testimony, one former detainee exclaimed: "All those youths swept up by the police raids, whether they were for or against the Islamists! . . . I know a communist who was with me in the concentration camp, who had been imprisoned because they hadn't found his Islamist brother. I know people taken just like that, because they were in the crowd and there had been one or two bearded faces. . . . Everyone was affected. Those neighborhoods, like Bab-el-Oued, Les Eucalyptus, poor neighborhoods, suffered a lot, because they just arrested and arrested. . . . It was these neighborhoods that had voted massively for the FIS," *Le procès*, 362. For activist Nesralah Yous, the military saw all citizens of a FIS-district, such as his own, as worthy of arrest: "Ils ont mis tout le monde dans le même sac—c'était tous des salauds!" Rivoire and Billault, dir., *Bentalha, autopsie d'une massacre*, 6:00ff.

³³ Evans and Phillips, 164.

According to one chronology of the civil war, the year 1993 marks the opening act of “The Terror” of the Algerian civil war.³⁴ As we saw in the last chapter, terror and terrorism were high-frequency words in most accounts of the civil war. But who was terrorizing whom, and why?

A FIS partisan in *Les agneaux du Seigneur* offers a chilling explanation:

"We members of the FIS have acted decently. We have worked and shown what we were capable of. The people voted for our principles and our ideology. But the thugs of the regime have refused to face up to the facts. They deliberately chose to play with fire. That is why we're offering them today the fires of hell."³⁵

The passage offers some interesting tensions. It demonstrates a certain sympathy for the Islamist perspective by pointing out that the activists saw themselves as "acting decently" and carrying out a democratic mandate to clean up the corrupt practices of the regime. However it is much less sympathetic to the Islamists when it seems to describe the movement's ascendancy as "playing with fire." And it is openly denunciatory when it casts the Islamists as vindictively determined to bring "the fires of hell" to those who oppose them.

In contrast to the common representation of the civil war as a confrontation between Islamist dissident groups and state forces, there is substantial evidence of what Martinez describes as "a policy of terror against the people"—a generalized state-run terror campaign against the dissident Algerian population.³⁶ The military leadership appears to have opted to destroy, literally "eradicate," the political opposition. Le Sueur summarizes:

Having negated the Islamists' electoral victories, the [Algerian] government gambled on the belief that the population would soon come to its side, and that the Islamists' political base would erode once the FIS's leaders and followers were behind bars. . . . The military establishment thus set out immediately to bleach Algeria of its political Islamists and to silence both secular and religious opponents who dared criticize a state "under siege." This repression involved the use of force, propaganda, and coercion.³⁷

When we recall that the FIS coalition had received a strong majority of the vote, the notion of “bleaching Algeria of its political Islamists” suggests a war against the majority of the population itself.³⁸ The methods of such "bleaching" of the political opposition and the terrorizing of its

³⁴ Roberts, *The Battlefield Algeria, 1988-2003*, 2003.

³⁵ 125.

³⁶ Martinez, 22.

³⁷ Le Sueur, 55.

³⁸ The FIS's electoral popularity was at least partly driven by disgust at the corruption of the FLN and a desire for change. Thus at least a portion of FIS votes represented anti-FLN votes more than a wholesale agreement with

population base resulted in thousands of "disappeared" peoples, an institutionalization of torture, and the use of paramilitary terror strategies to maintain control. In this respect, the 1990s Algerian regime joins a long list of "dirty war" campaigns waged by states against their dissident populations.³⁹ This section briefly reviews the widely-shared claims regarding a systematic state terror policy. The evidence supporting this understanding suggests the civil war was primarily a consequence of state violence, rather than Islamist fanaticism.

The campaign against the Islamist movement was extensive. "The military and security forces," according to Le Sueur, "undertook elaborate schemes to create whole cadres of double agents and *agents provocateurs* who infiltrated a variety of Islamist movements." Part of its "modus operandi" was to use such agents "to discredit and subvert" the Islamist opposition. Thus, "while the military seized the reins of power, it also laid out the conditions for the 'dirty war' that was to characterize Algeria throughout the 1990s."⁴⁰ Ruedy describes a context where "security operations in suspicious neighborhoods often pursued the totally innocent, a tactic which generated still more opposition." He notes that the tactics used by the security forces "caused thousands of casualties," tactics including the "indiscriminate targeting of young males in communes supportive of the FIS as well as arrests, torture aimed at extracting information, and summary executions." Moreover, "widespread evidence exists that soldiers dressed as civilians would carry out village massacres that could then be blamed on terrorists."⁴¹ Addi summarized the situation in 1998 in the following terms: "les services secrets de l'armée se sont lancés dans une stratégie de terreur visant à mettre à genoux le FIS et à lui imposer ainsi leurs conditions dans l'hypothèse d'une négociation concédée par le régime."⁴² A former member of the military, after having fled the country, related in 1994 that

the [military] hierarchy decided to give an eye for an eye, and to implement the slogan, "terrorize the terrorists." That was when the atrocities became systematic:

Islamist ideas. This becomes obvious once one considers the extremely varied demographics of the pro-FIS voters alongside the fact that the FIS was the only large, viable alternative to the FLN. See Evans and Phillips, 158; Ruedy 253; Martinez, 35, 118, and Willis, *The Islamist Challenge in Algeria*, 1997, 194-196.

³⁹ The parallels with cases such as Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua are striking, as analysts have pointed out. The major element linking these historical cases, from Indochina to Latin America, is the set of methods and tactics known as counter-insurgency, or COIN, described in some contexts as state terror. Ironically, a number of these methods were developed by the French during the Franco-Algerian war: the use of rapid "counter-intelligence" tactics to dismantle guerilla networks; effective torture techniques; the creation and support of splinter groups and militias (such as Bellounis's MNA group); the creation of indigenous paramilitary forces (the Harkis) and false-flag "counter-maquis" (Force K). These tactics were quickly exported to places like Rhodesia and Latin America. In this connection, it is worth noting that the generals running Algeria were all former French officers, and that during the civil war, French military intelligence cooperated closely with its Algerian analog. See the closely argued analysis in "What is the GIA?", in Bedjaoui, 1999, 373-453; also Abbas, "Reading Notes on French Colonial Massacres in Algeria," in Bedjaoui, 1015-1140.

⁴⁰ Le Sueur, 56.

⁴¹ Ruedy, 261, 265.

⁴² Addi, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Feb. 1998.

combing a district after an outrage had been committed, summary executions of three, four, or five young people chosen at random⁴³

The notion that the Algerian state might opt for an "eradication" of the opposition is less surprising when one considers that real decision-making power was in the hands of a hardened, secretive military elite. According to Harbi, postcolonial Algeria had always been "an army with a State at its service."⁴⁴ Former prime minister Ahmed Ghazali (1991-1992) offered a candid assessment in 2002:

In Algeria there is a visible power and a hidden one. . . . All of our institutions are fictions. There is only the military institution that actually exists. . . . When they talk about the military institution, it's a handful of people who, in the name of the army, controls all of Algeria and not only the institution that they represent.⁴⁵

The regime was widely seen from 1992 on as regressing toward totalitarianism. Berber human rights lawyer Abdennour Ali Yahia described the Algerian state as a dictatorship existing only through Stalinist police procedures and implacable repression. "Un totalitarisme masqué . . . Le pouvoir est incapable de se réformer, encore moins de se transformer, incapable de marcher au rythme de la société. Il investit l'Etat, se prend pour la nation entière et considère, selon cette logique, tout opposant comme traître à la nation. . . ."⁴⁶ Pierre Vidal-Naquet describes the Algerian state since independence as firmly controlled by a military hierarchy: a "clan" that "confiscated Algeria for its own profit."⁴⁷

With the 1991 voting record in the hands of military intelligence, pro-FIS districts were subject to harsh reprisals. With the FIS banned in March 1992 and its leadership jailed or in exile, the political opposition was now considered illegitimate and "traitors to the nation" by regime hardliners. Using a variety of tactics, from at least 1991 onward, the military leadership was unwaveringly set on "keeping the FIS far from the reins of power,"⁴⁸ a strategy that had the tacit

⁴³ *Le Monde*, Sept. 16, 1994. Cited in Martinez, 150.

⁴⁴ *Le procès*, 144. Similar statements are pervasive among analysts and insiders. For Habib Souaïdia, "power was confiscated by some in the military who have ruled the country with an iron fist, hiding themselves behind the civilians." According to Hocine Aït-Ahmed, "the regime, which was born in the Independence, was already a usurping power because, having drawn up the Constitution after its own fashion, it did not have any solid democratic foundation." *Le procès*, 375, 9.

⁴⁵ *Le procès*, 93. Footnote. José Garçon echoed this point in Paris court testimony: "Un pouvoir civil en Algérie me paraît une fiction. Pour son image de marque, le pouvoir . . . aime donner l'apparence de la légalité. C'est aussi plus confortable pour le futur de s'abriter derrière des civils que l'on "jette" quand ils ne sont plus utiles. Cela permet de préserver l'institution militaire, c'est-à-dire la haute hiérarchie de l'armée. . . . Le fonctionnement du pouvoir est un théâtre d'ombres fait d'une façade civile et de militaires qui prennent les grandes décisions." *Le procès*, 217-218.

⁴⁶ *Raisons et déraison d'une guerre*, 1996, 5.

⁴⁷ *Le procès*, 496.

⁴⁸ Martinez, 147.

and sometimes active support of France and the US.⁴⁹ One major strategy was simply to leave residents in pro-FIS districts without the support of normal state functions, including security functions, thus leaving them exposed to attack and manipulation by armed groups of thugs or religious fanatics, and creating a kind of free-fire zone. Thus, according to Martinez, "The regime 'abandoned' the local people to their fate." The population was introduced to an "apprenticeship in daily terror," falling prey to the "many actors using violence," ranging from ordinary social crime to local strongman warlords and their gangs, as well as to the predatory instincts of the security agents themselves.⁵⁰ The purpose was presumably to sufficiently terrorize the population that it "would end up turning to the regime and begging for help," a tactic once perfected by the French.⁵¹ Thus "the army deliberately decided to abandon the people" in FIS-supporting districts of greater Algiers, "transforming those areas into ghettos" where "people lived under a double state of siege," with criminal gangs on one hand and state security forces on the other, both operating in a climate of absolute impunity. In many areas, criminal gangs and local mafia warlords controlled the streets, while the security forces entered at will to arrest, harass, kidnap, and extort the residents with total impunity.⁵² These were state-imposed "crime ghettos", where "political crimes, social violence, economic crimes became part of daily life," and which were "encircled by the army stationed a few kilometers away and checking everyone entering or leaving."⁵³

Besides the risk to life there were other ordeals such as the ubiquity of criminals. . . [Criminals] began to be used by the regime following the [deliberate] release [by the regime] of numerous common-law prisoners. That release was supposed to spread a feeling of insecurity among the people, so that they would see the need to back the security forces as the only ones capable of restoring

⁴⁹ Fawaz Gerges, *America and Political Islam*, 1999, 154-162.

⁵⁰ Martinez, 73, 77.

⁵¹ This ironic parallel has not been lost on all. See for example Aroua, "French Colonial Massacres," 1013ff. Quote is from Harbi, 1998, 155.

⁵² The climate of fear and insecurity was intense and pervasive. Martinez, reporting on impressive field work, offers numerous examples like the following from field interviews: "Believing that they were in enemy territory, the soldiers made the people pay . . . by direct extortion of goods: 'every week an officer came with his men, he asked me for three, four or five kilos of meat. And watch out if you answer him back at all, he will take more.' (Butcher, Algiers suburbs, 1993)," 73. "[F]rom the interruption of the elections in January 1992 onwards the [FIS-supporting Algiers] districts were visited during the day by strangers who were immediately suspected of working with the security forces. Fear of arrest kept people's movements to a strict minimum. . . . Convinced that Military Security had its men everywhere, the people withdrew behind the walls . . . for fear of informers. . . . The supposed presence of security agents prevented any discussion of political events in public. The large number of 'new bearded men' in the district . . . confused signs of political affiliation; those policemen disguised as Islamists tried to make contact with the local people. Real and fake Islamists sowed confusion and increased suspicion." 75, 77.

⁵³ Martinez, 67, 147, 150; see also 197.

order. By leaving criminals to act as they liked the regime hoped to encourage the people of the Islamist communes to start collaborating with it.⁵⁴

To justify such repression, as we saw in chapter 5, the regime from 1992 on began systematically referring to the Islamist opposition and the FIS as “terrorists,” thus demonizing them propagandistically both to the Algerian public and to the international community through a narrative that fit seamlessly into Western stereotypes and narratives about Arab world terrorism.⁵⁵

While there was a budding Islamist insurgency, with episodes of criminal violence perpetrated by guerilla groups and fanatics, this hardly characterized the Islamist movement as a whole, which was largely nonviolent, and overwhelmingly so prior to the cancellation of elections in 1992. Not only was the FIS part of a larger Islamist movement in Algeria, but the FIS itself was an internally differentiated coalition, a fact lost to many observers, and was officially committed to moderate tactics.⁵⁶ The jihadi elements of the Islamist movement did not represent the majoritarian position, but were “fringe” and “peripheral to the main movement,” and major FIS leaders had long made “public disavowals of the use of armed struggle.”⁵⁷ Moreover, the discussions of jihad in the late 1980s and election-period 1990s explicitly framed it as an act of self-defense against a tyrannical state.⁵⁸ But throughout the 1990s, the majority of the Islamist activists were reformist-oriented and nonviolent, and according to Entelis were “particularly concerned with social and economic issues” which they conceptualized and articulated “in religious and moral terms.” According to Entelis, only about one percent of the Algerian Islamist movement actually favored a solution of radical violence: “despite the publicity militant Islam has received, the principal Muslim opposition movements in the Maghreb [including the FIS] subscribe to a *nonviolent* transfer of national power.”⁵⁹

⁵⁴ 75. Martinez adds that “The thieves, gangs of adolescents in the urban underworld, were seen as real parasites on daily life,” but “the certainty that criminals were acting under the protection of the security forces inhibited any resistance to their attacks.” 74.

⁵⁵ Herman and O’Sullivan, *The “Terrorism” Industry: The Experts and Institutions that Shape Our View of Terror*, 1989; Carol Winkler, “Origins of Terrorism as an American Ideograph: The Reagan Era,” *In the Name of Terrorism*, 2006.

⁵⁶ For a description of the various positions under the FIS umbrella, whose leaders were “extremely diverse ideologically, including radicals and moderates, young and old, and representing many regions of the country,” see Ruedy, 251-252; Willis, 2012, 168-169, 173. See also the excellent presentation of the major currents of Islamist thought in Al-Ahnaf, especially 60-70, 85ff.

⁵⁷ Willis, 1997, 143. Abassi Madani, leading the djazarist bloc within the FIS, was ready in 1989 to condemn violence “from wherever it came,” proclaiming that “our doctrine is moderate and centrist because Islam is a religion of moderation.” 146. Madani was consistent as well in his support for democracy, vowing many times that the FIS would respect minority positions within a democratic system. This discourse of moderation sometimes contrasted with that of another major leader, Benhadj, whose position was often more radical, more denunciatory, and sometimes did espouse the use of violence as a legitimate means.

⁵⁸ Ali Benhadj, “Qui est responsable de la violence?” in Al-Ahnaf, 1991, 132-141.

⁵⁹ Entelis, 1997, 43. Emphasis added.

It is crucial to note that the jihadist fringe of the Islamist movement was hugely bolstered and further radicalized by the state response of systematic repression. If Islamists had harbored questions about whether the political process was available to them, the answer was now clear. For some, especially those who had been skeptical of the regime's intentions from the start, this sent the message that taking up arms was the only way to change the political system. The state repression during the election season also saw the genesis of the so-called *Groupes Islamiques du Salut*, which emerged in 1991-2—these groups were prepared to use violence to achieve their aims, while the FIS was then explicitly aiming at non-violent political processes. As late as 1996, Entelis informs us that still only a small fraction of the broader Islamist movement was actually in favor a radical solution, ready to push incumbents out of power “by any means, political or military, including violence, terrorism, and assassination.”⁶⁰

If this is true, it stands in stark contrast to how the Islamist movement and the FIS were generally portrayed in the state-dominated media and elsewhere. In the eyes of the regime and much of the domestic and international press, there was no distinction to make between the relatively small, violent minority and the more moderate majority; nonviolent Islamist reformists and mosque-based activists were seen alongside fanatics and jihadi radicals as a single bloc. Even farther from consideration were the arguments of the violent faction that they were defending themselves against a violent authoritarian state that refused them access to the political process. The demonization of the FIS was highly effective, as we have seen. What is difficult to refute, however, is the proposition that the FIS party's connection to violence, if it is demonstrable at all, pales in comparison to the institutionalized terror and violence wielded by the state during the same period.⁶¹

The focus on the FIS's puritanical social values was often used by pro-regime propagandists to divert attention from the anti-corruption message. For example, when asked about rumors of FIS-supporters prohibiting swimwear and shorts on the Tipasa beaches, the FIS figure-head, Madani, replied that “The story of the shorts is not the problem. The things that count are the problems of housing, unemployment and money.” Even the representative of the more radical salafi faction, Ali Benhadj, pointed out that Islamist social values were being used as an excuse to sideline badly needed reforms: “In Oran there is no drinking water, but we hear talk of rai [music]. Water and housing comes before rai.”⁶² This is not to say that the FIS leadership as a bloc was consistent on this point. The inverse is true, which is what one might expect from a political coalition. Statements from the FIS leadership were often inconsistent, and some leaders were guilty of advocating violence through the idiom of jihad.⁶³ But their program certainly did

⁶⁰ Entelis, 1997, 44, xiv.

⁶¹ It is crucial, furthermore, to point out that while the most radical factions, such as the GIA, were guilty of targeting civilians, the FIS consistently declared that violence, if it was legitimate at all, could only be used against state targets, not civilians. Patrick Denaud, among others, documents the FIS's responses to terrorism and the GIA in particular, in *Le FIS: Sa direction parle*, 1991.

⁶² Willis, 1997, 159.

⁶³ See, for example. Al-Ahnaf, 73.

not reduce to these points. On many, if not most points, the FIS was explicitly allied with Leftist groups in a common "struggle for justice and human rights."⁶⁴

The reduction of all forms of Islamist-based political opposition to the rubric of "Terrorism" served as rhetorical justification for full-scale state terror. Islamist activists and militants were systematically demonized by "an information strategy . . . consisting in giving a biased, distorted view of the conflict in which the Islamists appeared not as a political opposition but as criminals slitting children's throats and raping women."⁶⁵ The "eradicationist" approach stood in contrast to the more moderate regime faction, the "reconciliators," which opposed a strategy of outright war and sought at minimum to open negotiations with the insurgents.

The junta's decision to cancel the elections, remove political options, and persecute the opposition created a climate of violence drove the militant opposition toward a situation of underground insurgency. While the civil war was sometimes described as two sides fighting for power, many analysts point out that the causal framework for the civil war was the regime's decision to annul elections and transition to full military rule. For a person subject, due to political or religious associations, to arbitrary arrest, detainment, torture, and "disappearance," it is perhaps difficult to attribute the fault of resisting or resorting to violence. Moreover, the regime's human rights record during the 1990s quickly became among the worst on the planet, if human rights organizations are to be believed.⁶⁶ Entelis concludes that "the radicalization of elements of the [Islamist] reformist group is a direct result of the regime's refusal to allow the FIS the fruits of its presumptive 1991 electoral victory."⁶⁷ The state refused to differentiate in its response between armed insurgents and mosque-based nonviolent political activism. "For its part," according to Le Sueur, "the state used blunt force" not only to "crush armed resistance" but also, simultaneously, "what remained of Islamic activism." But in doing this, the regime helped create the very thing it claimed to be fighting, since state brutality "pushed many young men into the arms of guerrilla groupings."⁶⁸

A significant number of Islamist activists thus held the perception that joining the underground insurgency was their only remaining option. In districts that had voted strongly for the FIS in 1990 and 1991, young men faced high chances of being picked up by security forces and

⁶⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁶⁵ Lahouari Addi, "Information biaisée et démocratie en devenir: Entretien avec Lahouari Addi," in *Confluences*, 1998, 165.

⁶⁶ For example, Patrick Baudouin, Honorary president of the Human Rights League, insisted that of all of the human rights missions he had participated in, with the single exception of Ceausescu's Romania, Algeria stood out as by far the worst. Baudouin describes a "disaster and atrocities that I will summarize thus: arbitrary mass arrests, detention camps labeled secret . . . a perfectly systematic use of torture and abuse, extrajudiciary executions. . . . We collected dozens and dozens of testimonials, all in agreement and all implicated the security forces or the police, the military or the Algerian state." *Le procès*, 153, 155.

⁶⁷ Entelis, 64.

⁶⁸ Le Sueur, 58.

imprisoned, tortured, and potentially executed.⁶⁹ Such circumstances drove many into the mountains to avoid persecution.⁷⁰ If the conclusions of Le Sueur, Vergès, Entelis, Bedjaoui, Ali Yahia, and others cited here are correct, and their evidence accepted, then a substantial portion of the blame for the civil war violence, the lion's share, rests with the regime. This is not to say that the state was the only purveyor of criminal violence; there are plenty of credible reports of atrocious violence by thuggish gangs and fanatical militia groups. But what has sometimes been lost is the larger perspective on the conditions under which the violence arose, and a willingness to apply consistent standards in denouncing the use of violence.

6.5 Eradicationist Violence, the GIA, and "Electoral Cleansing"

The regime's "eradicationist" policy is summarized by Martinez:

Faced with a situation that was getting steadily out of its control, the regime embarked from April 1993 on a policy of military reconquest of the Islamist communes of Greater Algiers. . . . In a parallel action it implemented a policy of terror against the people to dissuade them from supporting the armed struggle groups. The practice of torture, humiliations and deadly reprisals carried out by the security forces provoked an outburst of violence in the communes⁷¹

For Patrick Denaud, writing in 1997, "le pouvoir se livre à un véritable nettoyage électoral."⁷² Following this logic, the regime's eradicationist policy has been described by some as a special case of genocide.⁷³ Addi and Harbi echo this point in a 1998 open letter to the pro-regime intelligentsia in France, to whom they put the following question: "doit-on pour régler le problème éradiquer à terme l'électorat islamiste, c'est-à-dire prôner ce que l'on appelle en Algérie le génocide électoral ou encore la purification électorale?"⁷⁴ By the late 1990s, there was in Algeria a generalized "atmosphere of terror, intimidation and insecurity pervading" everyday life. One of the most serious accusations is that the regime was the primary agent in the

⁶⁹ For substantial documentation, see Jacques Vergès, 1993; as well as *Livre blanc sur la répression en Algérie*, 1995. The number of "disappeared" persons in Algeria is staggering, and its legacy remains a problem today, with the state refusing to release records or supply information about what happened to the thousands of young people who were picked up by security forces and never seen again. The numbers given range from 7,000 to 12,000. See "Neither among the Living Nor the Dead": State-Sponsored 'Disappearances' in Algeria," Human Rights Watch, 1998; Addi, "Le destin de la réconciliation est entre les mains des familles de disparus," 2005.

⁷⁰ For example, an Algerian, severely tortured by state security forces, relates that many of his acquaintances, after having been arbitrarily arrested and tortured, joined the insurgency in the mountains in order to escape a repeat experience. *Le procès*, 360-367.

⁷¹ Martinez, 22.

⁷² Denaud, 243.

⁷³ An alternate rubric that is put forth by some in place of genocide is "politicide." This argument is closely analyzed and extensive documentation provided in Taha, "Qualification des massacres dans le droit international," in *An Inquiry*, 1233-1314.

⁷⁴ "Lettre ouverte aux éradicateurs français," *Libération*, Feb. 3, 1998.

numerous massacres that occurred throughout the 1990s, culminating in 1997-1998. Ahmed Ben Bella has made this point bluntly: "most Algerians believe that the army as well as the secret service organize the massacres The government and the GIA are the only ones responsible for the massacres. The FIS is not responsible."⁷⁵ Former prime minister Abdelhamid Brahimi echoed this conclusion: "The Algerian Junta is killing Islamists and blaming it on them. It's Machiavellian."⁷⁶ Citing substantial evidence, Aggoun and Rivoire conclude that the regime's

consistent strategy has been to create bloodbaths and maintain terror as a means to consolidate power. And each time their power was under threat, they intensified the violence, using it as a "message" directed to their opponents, to the international public, and as a means of breaking the will of a population in revolt, especially the Islamist elements.⁷⁷

Following these conclusions, we can read in *Le Monde Diplomatique* that "By manipulating the GIA through Zitouni, the *éradicateurs* in the Algerian military leadership achieved their aims of discrediting the Islamists, consolidating support from Paris, and scuppering any prospect of political compromise in Algeria."⁷⁸ Debunking the notion of a proper civil war, Brunno Etienne pointed out in 1997 that between the state-armed militia groups and the security forces, the disproportionateness in possession of the means to violence was staggering.

We have made a typology of the terrorist movements. There are approximately 300 cells of 7 to 14 members, and about 15 *maquis* of 18 to 80 people. This means that 400,000 men armed to the teeth cannot neutralize less than one thousand men. And where does the equipment—explosives and weapons—come from in a country whose borders are sealed and controlled by an enormous army? There is another hypothesis: the Algerian regime is spinning yarn.⁷⁹

A further piece of evidence supporting the claim that the regime was the primary agent of the civil war is that an analysis of the political geography of the massacres shows that the victims of massacre "appears to be overwhelmingly the social base of the FIS and the armed insurgent movement." In fact, the detailed quantitative analysis presented by Aït Larbi shows that "the stronger a constituency's allegiance to the FIS, the greater the degree of its victimization."⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Agence France Press, January 7, 1997. Cited in Bedjaoui, 632.

⁷⁶ Interview in *Observer*, May 25, 1997.

⁷⁷ Aggoun, 502.

⁷⁸ Salima Mellah and Jean-Baptiste Rivoire, "El Para, the Maghreb's Bin Laden," February 2005.

⁷⁹ "Ce sont les généraux qui se déchirent," *Le Figaro*, August 30-31, 1997, cited in Bedjaoui, 140.

⁸⁰ The inverse correlation also holds: "the degree of victimization of a zone is proportional to the strength of the allegiance of its constituencies to the FIS and inversely proportional to the strength of their allegiance to the FLN." Aït Larbi, et al., "An Anatomy of the Massacres," in Bedjaoui, 56-58, 80-83, 116.

While there has yet to be a definitive, independent inquiry to establish the precise contours of the state's "invisible war," voluminous and substantial evidence comes from a wide variety of important sources, and has been thoroughly surveyed by established analysts in France, Algeria, Britain, and the US. While precise accounts vary, all serious historians that I am aware of who have written on the subject concur that the civil war was in part a state-directed "dirty war" against the dissident population, though all the details are not yet clear, and evidence continues to emerge. Important evidence has continued to emerge from military commanders and police fleeing the situation,⁸¹ human rights activists, and reporters on the ground who have attempted to break through the journalistic "huis clos."⁸²

Much of the violence appears to have been perpetuated by infiltrating and manipulating fanatical groups, of which the GIA, actually a loose coalition of miniature groups, was the most notorious. A former top commander of the highly secretive Algerian intelligence service, the Département du renseignement et sécurité (DRS) has claimed that "from 1991 on, the DRS was creating Islamist militias . . . with the active help of Islamists who had been flipped [by the intelligence services]."⁸³ Moreover, a secretly-controlled GIA is alleged to have issued communiqués that were actually ghost-written by the DRS, designed to confirm the worst stereotypes about an fanatical jihadist militia. One journalist explained in 1997:

For us journalists, at the beginning of the conflict, it was clear that the Islamists were the perpetrators of abominable assassinations, killing innocent people, young school girls with scarves, etc. But le petit-peuple were saying loudly that the [DRS] was behind the attacks attributed to the Islamists. For us, it was typical of le petit-peuple—loving rumors, doubting the official account. But as the attacks went on, doubt entrenched itself and spread to an increasing number of people. The official accounts were becoming more and more implausible: judicial investigations were never opened. The course of events was confirming daily the rumor of the petit-peuple that the army organized counter-maquis and set up the GIA, the aim being to discredit the Islamists by sending faxes claiming responsibility for killing journalists, intellectuals, foreigners, etc. It was about presenting them as bloodthirsty fanatics and extremist criminals, rapists fearing

⁸¹ See, among others, Habib Saoudia, *La sale guerre*, 2001 ; François Gèze, and Salima Mellah, eds., *Le procès de "La sale guerre,"* 2002 ; Mohamed Samraoui, *Chronique des années de sang : Algérie. Comment les services secrets ont manipulé les groupes islamistes*, 2003 ; and Abdelkader Tigha, *Contre-espionnage algérien : notre guerre contre les islamistes*, 2008.

⁸² See for example the work of Salima Ghezali; the account of massacre survivor Nesralah Yous, *Qui a tué à Benthalha? Chronique d'un massacre annoncé*, 2000; the France 2 documentary on the same subject by Rivoire; findings cited in Human Rights Watch, "Human Rights Watch World Report 1998—Algeria"; journalist John Sweeney's reports for *The Observer*; and Robert Fisk, " 'Anything to Wipe Out a Devil. . .'," in *The Great War for Civilization*, 2005, 513-585.

⁸³ Samraoui, *Chronique des années de sang*, 2003, 95. Samraoui had been third in command at the DRS.

neither God nor man. This propaganda was effective in France where it resonated with the myth of the Arab slaughterer.⁸⁴

The former DRS commander, having since fled the country, provides a more detailed portrait:

Other groups were created under the initiative of the DRS. So many that from early 1993 onward, the GIA were constituted by a small cluster of groups, some autonomous, some infiltrated, and others directly controlled by the DRS. Attracting only a few fighters at first, the GIA quickly benefited from the propaganda and the media frenzy organized by the DRS. The GIA was able to bring together a number of Islamists committing terrorist acts, especially in the center [of Algeria], not suspecting that some of their "emirs" were being manipulated and were receiving orders directly from the [intelligence forces] in Blida. The infiltration, control, and manipulation of the GIA and other groups reflected three goals: discredit the Islamic resistance to the January 1992 coup d'état (by terrorizing the population), liquidate the authentic opposition and their supporters, and obtain the political, military, and economic support of the West. The generals' strategy at the time was to show public opinion that the FIS had been over-taken by its radical fringe elements who were attacking the people and thus, as a result, to isolate the actual Islamist opposition from its base.⁸⁵

Samraoui's testimony substantiated claims that had seen increasing currency throughout the 1990s, the most famous being that of the a former military officer, Habib Souaïdia, who was promptly sued in a Paris court by an Algerian general claiming defamation. The ensuing trial became something of a truth and reconciliation hearing, with each side lining up extensive expert

⁸⁴ Ait-Hanlouta, L., "L'opacité du drame Algérien," *Le Monde Libertaire*, No. 1098, October 30-November 5, 1997. Cited in Bedjaoui, 377.

⁸⁵ Samraoui, 215. His testimony joins that of a number of ex-officers fled to London, France, and Germany, interviewed in *The Observer* by John Sweeney and *The Independent* by Robert Fisk. Samraoui further claims that the "national emir" of the GIA, " Djamel Zitouni est devenu célèbre grâce à des exploits retentissants. . . . La presse (via le service information du DRS) a énormément contribué à rehausser son statut d' "émir national". . . . Le GIA de Djamel Zitouni revendiquera ensuite de nombreuses actions spectaculaires conduites à l'initiative du DRS, dont le détournement de l'Airbus d'Air France le 24 décembre 1994, les attentats de Paris en 1995 et l'enlèvement puis l'exécution des sept moines de Tibéhirine au printemps 1996. . . . Surtout, plusieurs milliers d'Algériens seront horriblement massacrés par le GIA, en majorité des civils ou des islamistes membres de l'AIS. . . . Le DRS fabriquera d'ailleurs de nombreux communiqués du GIA signés de lui, s'attaquant aux deux leaders du FIS, Abbassi Madani et Ali Benhadj. . . ." 219. On the same subject, see Martinez, 215. Samraoui elaborates further in an interview: "J'ai assisté à la naissance du GIA. Il a été créé pendant l'été 1991 par le commandant Guettouchi Amar. . . . Il était secondé par le capitaine Djaâfar chargé d'éditer les communiqués et de les transmettre aux journalistes." The initial reason for its inception: "Afin de justifier les assassinats qu'ils commettaient pour se débarrasser notamment de certains officiers, comme le colonel Salah, le commandant Boumerdès Farouk dit Rabah, le commandant Djaber, le commandant Hicham (assassiné à Blida). . ." But according to Samraoui, the GIA inspired copy-cat groups that were not controlled by the security forces. Interview on Al Jazeera, August 2001. Cited by Nasreddine Yacine, 'L'autre version de la république', *Algeria Watch*, August 6, 2001.

witnesses and testimonials, offering, now that its transcripts have been collected, an impressive sourcebook for understanding the civil war.⁸⁶

Much evidence converges to support the claim that the GIA appears to have been used as a terror militia, largely manipulated by state forces, but also attracting young militants and copy-cat groups unaware of the manipulation. Even before the impressive testimony of Souaidia (in 2001), Samraoui (2002, 2003), and others, numerous analysts had already reached this conclusion. François Gèze summarized this view in 1998 for example: "much evidence indicates that the GIA have been largely infiltrated by the DRS. . . . In any case, it is clear that the actions of the GIA go in the direction of the DRS's wishes—such is the case notably in the massacre of entire families of guerillas from the AIS [armed affiliate of the post-1992 FIS], for which the GIA claimed responsibility."⁸⁷

By using the GIA to conduct spectacular atrocities and indiscriminate terrorist operations, the regime was largely successful in demonizing and discrediting the FIS, which by 1995 had signed the Rome Platform—while the regime refused even to attend the talks. Signed by figureheads and representatives of a broad range of groups including the FIS, the FLN, the FFS, as well as well-respected figures such as Ben Bella, Ali Yahia, Louisa Hanoune of the Trotskyist party, and other prominent leaders, the Platform's twelve points were widely considered "a model of democratic governance and political reconciliation." They unanimously called for the immediate cessation of violence on all fronts, respect for constitutional liberties, the rule of law, universal suffrage, and a multiparty democratic political system.⁸⁸ The regime however rejected it flatly, it "simply turned [its] back on Sant'Egidio without ever providing a convincing explanation."⁸⁹ When one considers that, based on the 1990-1991 election results, the signatory parties represented over 82% of the Algerian electorate, the contrast between state and civil society in Algeria rises sharply into focus. But while the FIS was signing pledges of nonviolence and respect for democratic processes, the GIA was moving in the opposite direction, horrifically intensifying its terror operations and putting out increasingly fanatical communiqués.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ The general who brought defamation charges against Souaïdia is Khaled Nezzar. Witnesses offering testimony in support of Souaïdia's defense included Mohammed Harbi, Hocine Aït Ahmed, Salima Mellah, and journalist for *Libération* José Garçon. Historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet had been scheduled to offer testimony, but was prevented for reasons of health, and instead sent a letter supporting Souaidia. *Le procès*, 496.

⁸⁷ François Gèze, *Politique autrement*, No. 13, June 1998. Gèze is the director of the Paris publishing house *La Découverte*.

⁸⁸ Entelis, 1997, 68-69. See also "Algeria: Elections in the Shadow of Violence and Repression," by Human Rights Watch, 1997; and Ahmed, "Algeria and the Paradox of Democracy," 2000.

⁸⁹ Quandt, 71.

⁹⁰ These were widely suspected to be inauthentic anti-Islamist propaganda. Besides the evidence of Samraoui's testimony, there are further reasons put forth for the claim that the intelligence services were in fact penning the GIA communiqués signed by Djamel Zitouni. The most compelling is the simple fact that Zitouni, a former chicken merchant, was known to have been uneducated and probably illiterate or barely literate, whereas the communiqués employed a highly stylized Arabic and displayed impressive erudition. Moreover, they were so hopelessly fanatical (issuing sensationalist fatwas against intellectuals, FIS leaders abroad, all non-GIA groups, civil servants,

Westerners, etc.) that they were denounced by the FIS leadership and international Islamist groups as contrary to Islam, which, they pointed out, does not tolerate violence against civilians. See Denaud, 96, 221-222, 239, and Martinez, 203. On the FIS denunciation of the GIA terror campaign and specifically the massacres, see the systematic presentation of FIS and other Islamist responses in Bedjaoui, 138-139, 600-605; Willis, 2012, 174, and Denaud, 1997.

Chapter 7

Islamism in the Algerian context

One should be wary of arbitrarily unifying various Islamists, making them actors in an orchestrated plot. Societies are diverse, and Islamism does not have the same function everywhere.

–Mohammed Harbi, *L'islamisme dans tous ses états*, 1991

The novels considered here devote considerable space to Islamists and their role in the civil war. However, it is probably fair to suggest they leave the reader largely ignorant of what Islamism has meant in Algeria. The various works portray Islamists in four different ways: as confused children; as ferocious and demented thugs; as outlets for resentment; and as pawns in a game they don't understand. In one novel's portrayal, Islamists are likened to "ténèbres mouvantes" 'moving shadows,' they seek to "prendre le pouvoir coûte que coûte" 'seize power at any cost.' Either they are misguided and foolish killers: "A quoi bon lire? Il parle de liberté cet intellectuel? Et la foi en islam, cela ne lui suffit pas?" 'Why read? This intellectual talks of liberty? And faith in Islam, that's not enough for him?'; or they are children: "quel adolescent, au bout de sa course de folie libérée, a tué Tahar? . . . quel jeune guerrier est allé jusqu'aux frontières du Pakistan, a frêmi, prié puis tué pour les frères d'Afghanistan, est revenu dans son quartier d'Alger, éclairé d'une auréole, se donnant par jeu, par ivresse, le titre d' 'émir' " 'what adolescent, finishing his pursuit of liberated madness, killed Tahar? . . . what young warrior went up to the borders of Pakistan, shivered, prayed, then killed for his Afghan brothers, returned to his neighborhood in Algiers, illuminated by a halo, giving himself, playfully, drunkenly, the title of "emir"?¹ A second novel portrays Islamists as rank criminals, self-glorifying opportunists, and dim-witted thugs. Here they are mainly depicted as sadists, torturers, rapists, and killers. They have "reptilian" eyes, and enjoy violence and blood. They are not authentic believers, but adopt a fanatical creed as a means to revenge or material gain.² By the end of this novel, the terms Islamism/Islamist and terrorism/terrorist are synonymous.³ A third novel casts ample suspicion on such perspectives, but offers little insight on the matter: "Les islamistes? Ouah, c'était eux, au nombre d'eueuh... six... ou dix... une trentaine à peu près (la presse ira jusqu'à trois cents pour apporter sa pierre à la campagne d'intox contre l'aile droite de l'état-major), armés de haches et de bazookas, la tête roulée dans un chèche... [.]" 'The Islamists? Ya sure, it was them, numbering. . . um. . . six. . . or ten. . . thirty or so, give or take (the media went up to three

¹ *Le blanc*, 231, 241, 202, 201.

² *Les agneaux*, 78, 101, 113, 116, 120, 130-131, 133-135, 151, 155, 162-163, 185, 186.

³ 180-193.

hundred, making its contribution to the propaganda campaign against the right wing of the high command), armed with hatchets and bazookas, their heads rolled up in turbans. . . [.]'⁴

In such treatments of the civil war, Islamism stands as a kind of specter given to distortion and misunderstanding. The trajectory of Islam and nationalism in Algeria provides the crucial backdrop of the civil war. Moreover, it explains and foreshadows the events leading up to a civil war, events ostensibly pitting vague "Islamist" forces against a secular authoritarian statism. Section one below explains how state nationalism and religion were integrated from the start in Algeria. The slogans and symbols of the orthodox Muslim revival movement in the 1920s were absorbed into the populist nationalism of Messali Hadj, from which the FLN emerged. National unity was projected through a the narrow identity construct of an Arab Muslim Algeria, an approach that had major ramifications for Algerian society. The second section describes how the newly independent state attempted immediately to incorporate religion as a state-managed sphere, a strategy that was initially successful, but eroded from the late 1970s onward. The section argues that Islamic activism has been an important site in Algeria for dissidence, protest, and revolt against state injustices. Calls for violent resistance by the radical wing of the Islamist movement in the 1980s onward can be seen as symptomatic of a state unresponsive to significant numbers of its citizens. It is telling then that all such situations in Algeria have been resolved through the massive deployment of state violence. The third section argues that the public representation of Islamists in Algeria has been highly distorted, at best: the FIS, at the level of both its leadership and its membership, was far more diverse in ideology and practice than is commonly acknowledged. While a minority of FIS members and leaders preached or practiced violent revolt, the majority was moderate, non-violent, and concerned with pragmatic goals having to do with local social problems.

7.1 Political Islam and Algerian Nationalism

Clifford Geertz wrote that "The distinction between ruler and ruled [in the colonial Maghrib] became more than a difference in power, status or situation, it became a difference in cultural identity. [. . .] Before, men had been Muslims as a matter of circumstance; now they were, increasingly, Muslims as a matter of policy."⁵ This is explained in part because "The conquest of Algeria occurred in such a way that religion remained the only collective sentiment linking, beyond particular distinctions, the entirety of the colonized people."⁶

A major emphasis of the early nationalist movement in Algeria was to challenge French narratives and attitudes about colonial domination through pride in Muslim identity.⁷ The link between Islam and an emerging national identity was consolidated in the interwar period by

⁴ *Le serment*, 87.

⁵ Geertz, *Islam Observed*, 1968, 64-65.

⁶ Entelis, 1997, 57.

⁷ Indigenous Algerians self-identified as Muslims, in contradistinction to settlers and hexogonal French. Evans, 2012, xvi.

orthodox Islamic reformists, led by Cheikh Abdelhamid Ben Badis and colleagues in the Association of Algerian Ulema.⁸ “We have scrutinized the pages of history and the contemporary situation. And we have found the Algerian and Muslim nation. [. . .] She has her own culture, her own habits and customs, good or bad, like every nation of this world. What is more, this Algerian and Muslim nation is not France.”⁹ A student of the salafiyya movement, Ben Badis and his reformist colleagues

were determined to challenge the dominance of Western ideas and called upon Muslims to return to the purity of early Islam. . . . Basing his manner and dress on the Prophet Mohammed, Ben Badis cultivated a dignified image. . . . Feigning not to speak French, he expressed himself in classical Arabic. [. . .] Drawing upon concepts such as people (*sha’b*), nation (*watan*), and nationality (*qawmiyya*), the Ulema underlined the existence of a separate Algerian nation based on Muslim and Arab values and intimately connected to the world Islamic community (*umma*). . . . [T]his national identity, Ben Badis stressed, could never be assimilated into France.¹⁰

The way to resist colonial discrimination and obtain self-determination was partly through a cultural battle. The participants in this cultural revivalist movement were engaged in rewriting Algerian identity. Muslims could find reason to be proud, an identity to articulate, and a set of symbols to organize around, thus refuting the French claims of civilizational superiority that undergirded its colonial authority.¹¹ Ben Badis argued that anything associated with the *other* world of the French colonial authorities should be rejected: “C’est dans la sauvegarde de nos traditions que réside la sauvegarde de notre individualité nationale et la condition de notre bonheur moral et matériel.”¹² Ben Badis led a cultural movement that fostered popular activism, activities in Arabic, and a set of “purified” Muslim ideas and values. To this end,

⁸ Ruedy, 2005, 136. See also Harbi, 2004, 16. It is crucial to understand the significant achievements of the reformist movement for Algerian nationalist consciousness. Much of the content of the reformists' vision of Algerian identity was inherited by the Messalists and subsequently the FLN. Its legacy was so important that the reformists' slogan ("Islam is my religion; Arabic is my language; Algeria is my fatherland") became the official motto of the Algerian state. Ruedy, 135, 224. Moreover, the founders of the FIS would explicitly reference Ben Badis's movement as a precursor whose legacy, which they perceived as having been betrayed by the FLN, would be revived by the FIS. There is thus a direct line of intellectual parentage running from Ben Badis's movement through Abdellatif Soltani and Ahmed Sahnoun to Abbassi Madani and Ali Benhadj. Willis, 155, 148; Ruedy 251; Al-Ahnaf, 66-68, 69, 73.

⁹ Evans, 2012, 68.

¹⁰ Evans, 2012, 52.

¹¹ Jules Ferry would claim for example that "Les races supérieures, c'est-à-dire les sociétés occidentales parvenues à un haut degré de développement technique, scientifique et moral, ont à la fois des droits et des devoirs à l'égard des races inférieures," including the delivery to the inferior race of one's "langue, ses mœurs, son drapeau, ses armes, son génie." This was part of a "croisade civilisatrice," defined thus: "Partout doivent reculer les antiques puissances de l'ignorance, de la superstition, de la peur," constitutive of a struggle "au nom de l'esprit des Lumières, contre l'injustice, l'esclavage, la soumission aux Ténèbres." Michel Winock, *Le XXe siècle idéologique et politique*, 2009, 459.

¹² From a 1925 speech. Harbi, 1975, 67.

the Ulema established a network of schools to teach Arabic that was complemented by a hub of cultural and social associations. Including sports clubs, theatres, a scouting movement, and a thriving press, this was a vibrant, alternative society which the Ulema hoped would instill national pride in a new generation.¹³

The mass-based movement, with over 10,000 members in 1935, was a means of popular expression, political organizing, and local cultural activity. But it had strains that were also narrowly identitarian, dogmatic, and authoritarian:

Styling themselves as scrupulous orthodox, the Ulema were determined to root out what they saw as anti-Islamic practices, whether it be the *marabouts*, [. . .] inappropriate female behavior; or the drinking of alcohol. Fired up with this missionary zeal, groups, often armed with clubs, went out into the countryside to spread the Ulema message. Through argument or force they wanted to convince people that the worshipping of saints was not true Islam.¹⁴

In contrast to the cultural revivalists' approach, a rival group, rallied around Ferhat Abbas, took nearly the opposite line, focusing on secular liberal values and the constitutional system as a means to autonomy and rights. For this group, the principles enshrined in the French constitution itself—the promises of *égalité*, *liberté*, *fraternité*—would be used to obtain political rights and self-determination. Ferhat Abbas, initially close to Ben Badis, argued that Algerians should base their aspirations on the liberal principles of the French constitution. Abbas argued in 1931 that Algeria should be transformed from a French *colony* into a French *province*. The way forward was through political lobbying rather than grass-roots activity.¹⁵ However, in a context where the colonial lobby held priority over national politics, Abbas's reform agenda did not get very far. Economic interests, racism, and political dogma continued to dominate French national policy toward its Algerian colony, with a 1935 decree making dissidence punishable by imprisonment. Colonial discrimination was more entrenched than ever and showed no signs of letting up. A prescient colonial-governor warned: "The natives of Algeria, because of your errors, do not have a country. They are looking for one. They are asking to become part of the French *patrie*. Give it to them quickly or without that they will make another."¹⁶

¹³ Evans, 2012, 54.

¹⁴ Evans, 2012, 54. The reformists' zeal to attack the marabouts and brotherhoods was linked to the often correct perception that the colonial system had exploited them as proxy agents for colonial authority.

¹⁵ In *Le jeune Algérien*, Abbas went even further. He argued that Algeria did not have a coherent national base from which to build an independence movement. For him, the best hope of rights and political enfranchisement lie in working within the French system to achieve reforms. "I will not die for the Algerian nation, because the notion of Algeria as a country does not exist. I have not found it. I have examined History, I have questioned the living and the dead, I have visited cemeteries; nobody spoke to me about it. . . . One cannot build on the wind." Evans, 43.

¹⁶ Speech in 1927 by Maurice Violette. Cited in Evans, 2012, 48.

The most successful nationalist movement to emerge was a synthesis of secular principles, popular Islam, and grassroots activism. Messali Hadj emphasized Muslim-Arab identity alongside unremitting libertarian values. But Messali's position, born in the Algerian immigrant communities in France and strongly influenced by the labor movement, was more radical than Ben Badis or Ferhat Abbas.¹⁷ Messali delivered an important speech at the 1927 Brussels Congress of Oppressed Peoples, calling for the withdrawal of French colonial troops from Algeria, redistribution of land to the peasantry, and universal male suffrage.¹⁸ "My brothers," he said in 1936, at the reception for the Algerian Muslim Congress advocacy group as it returned, empty-handed, from failed negotiations in Paris: "you must not now sleep and become deaf believing that all activity is now finished, because it has only begun. You must organize yourselves, unite yourselves within your organizations, to be strong, to be respected and in order that your powerful voice can be heard on the other side of the Mediterranean."¹⁹

While Messali had been impressed by French labor organizing in association with the Communist Party, the vision he articulated had a strong connection with Algerian national identity, merging with the Ulama's vision of an Algeria cohering around Muslim Arab identity. The Ulemas slogan—"Islam is my religion; Arabic is my language; Algeria is my fatherland"—was adopted by Messali's platform. "A l'instar des Oulémas, le parti plébéien de Messali Hadj confond la nation algérienne et la communauté musulmane. Comme eux, il affirme l'antériorité de son existence par rapport au fait colonial."²⁰ The paper *el-Ouma*, launched in 1930, sought to connect Algerian issues with broader Arab struggles.

The Messali nationalist movement thus absorbed a Muslim Arab cultural revivalism as a core principle:

To achieve the community solidarity at the base of its platform, the populist party took up the ideas and themes broadcast by the reformist Ulama In parallel to this orientation, the campaigns against alcohol, prostitution, organized gangs, and pimps, campaigns pushed home by displays of force, were employed. . . . The Ulama maintained the role of society's conscience. . . . The populist party claimed to be the secular arm of the faith It sought to reinforce characteristics specific

¹⁷ Messali lived and worked in Paris, and his life partner, was the daughter of an anarchist miner and a Communist activist. He campaigned actively in the Algerian immigrant neighborhoods of Paris, and in other large cities such as Lyon and Lille. The 1926 Party he helped found, Etoile Nord-Africaine, was initially linked strongly to the French Communist Party. The particular situation of Maghribi immigrants in France explains the success of the nationalist movement there: "that a modern Algerian community, largely leveled socially and economically because of its proletarian status and pressed into tightly knit groupings by its cultural isolation from the French majority, began to develop group solidarity." In addition, there was a strong labor movement in France, as well as the material resources the French Left, as well as the fact that civil protections for radical organizing were generally far superior there to anything found in the colony. Ruedy, 138.

¹⁸ The speech propelled him onto the national stage. At the conference, he was able to mingle with important leftist and anticolonial figures such as Nehru, Henri Barbusse, and Einstein. See Evans, 2012, 57-59.

¹⁹ Evans, 2012, 69.

²⁰ Harbi, 1975, 69.

to the Algerian Muslim milieu and to halt the aspirations of elites and bourgeois categories which . . . were turning their backs on the problems of the majority.²¹

However, such a conception of identity could also be narrowing and exclusionary. "The ideas of the populist party carried with them all the essential religious constraints. By positing Algerian as something immutable," social distinctions were suppressed "to the benefit of national consciousness."²² This vision rejected historical and social differences between members of the Algerian population, who, for example, were not only Arab, but Berber; not only indigenous, but settler class.²³ Authoritarian trends intensified greatly during the war with France. In the run-up to the outbreak of violence in 1954, the Ulemas and Messalists did not hesitate to "spread fear of internal threat in order to establish their own identity perceptions, including through repression." Thus, in the opinion of Harbi, "the advocates of ethnocultural nationalism proved inadequate to the task of reckoning the nation without occulting historical and social differences among the populations in whose name they spoke."²⁴ At worst, a narrowly-framed nationalist conception of Algerian identity could become a fiction imposed on the population from the top as if it were a monolithic bloc.

7.2 Political Islam in Post-Independence Algeria

Observers have pointed out an apparent contradiction in the notion of an Islamic state that is also a secular state. But as the preamble to the 1963 Algerian Constitution makes plain, Algeria's post-independence political leaders were at pains to emphasize *both* points. According to the constitution, the Algerian state was irrevocably secular, based on constitutional laws derived outside of religion, yet also identified itself as irreducibly Islamic.²⁵ This was in some ways indicative of a gap in the views of the postwar leadership and the majority of the country's inhabitants. For the leadership, "Islam was to serve as an identity-forming instrument, not as a legal code by which to order state and society,"²⁶ a view that contrasted substantially with that

²¹ Harbi, 1975, 72.

²² Harbi, 1975, 72, 73.

²³ Harbi explains that the nationalist movement, impatient and opportunistic, discarded available options for a more plural society grounded in forms of community solidarity, and instead opted for an oppositional identity strategy upon which to predicate the movement. "S'il y a un combat politique pensé de façon extrêmement simpliste, ce fut le problème de l'identité nationale et de la nation. Dans son déroulement, l'ensemble des protagonistes vise l'efficacité politique. [. . .] Cette situation témoigne d'un fait massif qui parcourt l'histoire algérienne récente : l'inexistence des conditions nécessaires à un pacte social. Ainsi s'expliquent la volonté de réaliser la cohésion par la voie autoritaire et le jacobinisme des messalistes, la formulation exclusivement subjective de la nation, être en soi, donnée éternelle, et l'évacuation de ses composantes objectives [. . .] occultant ainsi la diversité des racines et des cultures qui sont à la base de l'identité algérienne," Harbi, 1992, 28-29.

²⁴ Harbi, *Le FLN : Documents et histoire*, 2004, 16.

²⁵ Article 4 states that "Islam is the religion of the State."

²⁶ Entelis, 1986, 81.

of the peasantry (70 percent of the population) and the ulama, who unsuccessfully demanded "the inclusion of Islam in political programs."²⁷

In the new Algerian state, Islam was subordinated to the place of an official, state-dominated religion, leaving strong tensions between state institutions and populist religious-oriented fervor. Islam was highly institutionalized and regulated under a ministry of religious affairs which had virtual "total power over religious matters, including the authority to hire and fire religious leaders, control the mosques, "and monitor the content of Friday sermons throughout the country."²⁸ The postwar leadership "devoted substantial resources to religious building." At the same time, "it moved vigorously to appropriate religious symbols." The strategy had the desired effect: "While dissident Muslim voices were heard increasingly through the 1970s, the government managed . . . to keep them from getting out of hand." But the tension was not resolved, nor were the contradictions in Algerian society that gave rise to it. Since the Algerian postwar "political systems . . . almost universally failed to institutionalize mechanisms for voicing opposition, [they] unwittingly left the mosques as the only for a for such expression."²⁹

The first move from populist Islamic quarters to openly revolt against this state of affairs came from a group associated with a popular preacher, Mustafa Bouyali, who gave voice to these tensions and denounced the illegitimacy of state authority—serving as a direct precursor to the events of 1988.³⁰ His case is worth briefly reviewing because Bouyali's story is indicative of the trajectory of political Islam in Algeria, and he was an immediate inspiration and reference to the leaders of the FIS.³¹ Bouyali had fought under the banner of the FLN. But when independence was finally won, he came to quickly resent what he perceived as a government *imposed* from the outside—referring to the 'exterior' liberation army headed by Boumediene, which took control of the political institutions, and excluded the interior *maquis* from leadership.³² Bouyali took up arms briefly with the *maquis* in 1963, but soon returned to civilian life and even held a civil position under President Ahmed Ben Bella. Boumediene's coup d'état in 1965 upset many who saw his policies as unrepresentative of the people, and a resistance movement already was burgeoning:

According to his wartime friend and colleague Sayah, Bouyali refused to send the ritual telegram of congratulations to Boumediene's new "revolutionary council."

²⁷ Ruedy, 197.

²⁸ Entelis, 81-82.

²⁹ Ruedy, 224-225 , 241.

³⁰ The importance of the Bouyali precedent for the events of 1988 and afterward is well recognized. See, for example, Willis, 2012, 173, and Willis, 1997, 143.

³¹ For example, Ali Benhadj, the second most prominent FIS leader, came directly out of Bouyali's group, and had been imprisoned from 1983-1987 for his association with Bouyali. Al-Ahnaf, et al., ed., *L'Algérie par les Islamistes*, 1991, 72-73.

³² According to Bouyali's brother, his "first dispute was over the 'exterior' men's right to decide Algeria's future. . . . He didn't want to obey the Tripoli 'charter' – he wanted a congress of the FLN *inside* Algeria." Fisk, 2005, 574.

“He said he refused to support a coup d’état.” . . . Sayah recalls how Bouyali and other old FLN comrades who objected to Boumediene’s dictatorship met secretly in private homes . . . to discuss a future Algeria and the possibility of an Islamic state. . . . “You must see that what’s happening now in Algeria is the direct result of the opposition that Bouyali started in 1965. Our opposition wanted to work for a future, a democratic future, without bloodshed. Islam was a fundamental part of our belief – even when we fought the French. In our case, our nationalist feelings were not as strong as our Islamic feelings. The French came [in 1830] and destroyed our mosques and prevented us from speaking our language freely, the language of the Koran. Now again, under Boumediene [1965-1978], we had no freedom. . . . We purposely didn’t give our movement a name because Boumediene’s military security apparatus was very strong and it would have been easier from them to arrest us if they could identify us all in one way.”³³

When Boumediene died abruptly and was replaced in 1978 with the visibly corrupt Chadli, tensions between Bouyali’s movement and the state mounted. Police regularly harassed Bouyali, finally forcing him underground in 1981. According to Bouyali’s brother,

Now he was really on the run and he started making contacts for military action He spoke to most of the scholars – to Sheikh Nannah, Ali Belhaj, Sheikh Ahmed Sahnoun, Abassi Madani. He said that he would take up military action, that they should speak in the mosques. He found his old maquis friends in the mountains, hundreds of them, and formed armed groups. Mustafa contacted the youth of Bab el-Oued and started making bombs He took to the mountains . . . in the Mitidja, in Medea, in Lakhdaria, across the country, even to Sétif. There were pitched battles, a real war.³⁴

Bouyali’s militia group of several hundred, the Mouvement Islamique Armé, was eventually infiltrated, and after several spectacular encounters with state forces, Bouyali was killed in 1987.

By then, Bouyali had come to represent something of a Robin Hood figure.

The fact that Bouyali was able to escape capture was a measure of the support he and his band enjoyed among sections of the local population. . . . In part this was because Bouyali’s language and actions tapped into deeply embedded patterns of thought, evoking memories of the bandits of honor in the mountains, paralleling the life of the Prophet and drawing on the original war of liberation. Many ordinary Algerians felt instinctively on his side.³⁵

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Fisk, 525-526.

³⁵ For this and following, Evans and Phillips, 130.

Moreover, his populist revolt against the state was integrated into Islamic themes and messages. "In calling for a holy war against the regime, Bouyali's first point of reference was the example of the Prophet going into exile."³⁶ He sought specifically "to replicate the flight from Mecca in AD 622, when Mohammed and his small band of followers, no longer able to practice their religion, withdrew to the city of Medina." Moreover, "The image of exile, struggle and victory in the face of overwhelming odds, the notion that Muslims will be tested but, if they remain true to God's will and Mohammed's teachings, will vanquish their foes: both ideas were constantly invoked by Bouyali."

His second point of reference was November 1954, and because he had fought in the fourth *wilaya*, he was able to emphasize the continuity with the original war of liberation. Then he had had a duty to take up arms and resist colonialism; now he had the self-same duty against a Godless state.

With the 1980s however came a weakening of state power and a worsening of ordinary life. As frustration with the regime reached new levels, so did a growing sense of revolt against the perceived injustice and political corruption of an entrenched status quo. Oil prices declined, while the state was under intense pressure from the IMF to implement "structural adjustments"—deep cuts in public sector spending—as a condition of Western financing. Ordinary Algerians received no benefits from the loans; unemployment and poverty continued to soar. The Algerian state had once been a star of the non-aligned bloc; now Cold War pressures had shifted and the state's status was declining sharply. Algeria's birth rate was one of the highest in the world, and with a swelling population of urban youth, grinding poverty in city and countryside, and a flagrantly corrupt political elite around President Chadli, discontent was growing quickly.

7.3 Islamism and the State

Dissident movements sought to break through the one-party system running the Algerian state. Few responses though were as extreme as Bouyali's call for a jihad against the regime. Instead, mosque-centered sites emerged as major spaces for dissident organizing and grass-roots self-empowerment, usually framed by religious concepts, narratives, and aspirations. "Algerians were drawn into the orbit of Islamism through the hundreds of unofficial street mosques that mushroomed all over the country during the late seventies and early eighties. These came to represent an alternative space beyond the control of the state."³⁷

The Islamist movement was resolutely populist in its base and its activities, with a focus on ethical behavior and social justice.³⁸ Presenting itself as a community of believers committed to

³⁶ Evans and Phillips, 129.

³⁷ Evans and Phillips, 130.

³⁸ There is a strong tradition in Islam of "defying authority that is demonstrably unjust, unresponsive, and undemocratic," by using "the power of the mosques and the streets to challenge the authority of regimes viewed as illegitimate," according to Entelis. In the context of North Africa, popular-based Islamist movements "seek, through prayer and preaching, to mobilize popular support for a political program that promotes their ideas for the just and

the moral and political rebirth of Algeria." The young and the poor constituted the vast majority of the membership. "Rebuilding from the bottom up, through welfare and charity work as well as the setting up of schools of boxing and martial arts to combat drink and drugs amongst the young, this was a society within a society, providing not only spiritual guidance, but also practical help and support for those in need."³⁹

The declared project of transforming society along to religious principles was also a way of critiquing a social system and government policies that had left the majority of them poor, unemployed, and alienated. "To talk about politics as the expression of divine will was a revelation" to many, "a new activist form of religion that combined moral purity and social action with the promise of divine grace." Symbols and practices could be appropriated by the young as "a way of rebelling against their secular elders." An example of this is the "many young women who made a conscious decision to take up the veil." In a typical case, a fifteen year old schoolgirl in Algiers "explained that she was proud to wear the hijab. For her it was not a symbol of oppression but a statement about her belief in God."⁴⁰

Mosque-based activism expanded even further in the late 1980s, in an atmosphere of increased state tolerance for political expression and organization, alongside an attempt by the regime to co-opt the movement.⁴¹

For large sections of the urban poor, attuned to cynicism about the system, such purity and dedication was impressive, and the Islamists quickly built up a large

good society as defined for them by Islamic teaching. They further influence people through debates at youth centers, pamphlets distributed in poor neighborhoods, and work in the community. They sponsor mass rallies, large demonstrations, and public assemblies that are testament to their impressive organization abilities." 1997, 44. For a more in-depth analysis, see Mark Tessler, "The Origins of Popular Support for Islamist Movements," in Entelis, ed., 1996, 109, 111-112; and Jean-Claude Vatin, "Revival in the Maghreb: Islam as an Alternative Political Language," 1982, 221, 232-238, 243. See also the excellent presentation of contemporary source documents in Al-Ahnaf et al., eds., *L'Algérie par ses islamistes*, 1991.

³⁹ Evans and Phillips, 131-132.

⁴⁰ Ibid. This is an example of how symbols and practices get put to different ends by different groups. People are in a position to reinterpret, or use the inherited culture to signify according to their needs. Signifiers are always available to be redirected, and inherited frameworks modified. "While new symbols, discourses, and narratives can emerge from critical reflection and recombination, the changes that result will always occur in dialectical relation to what has come before. This process, moreover, is multidirectional, occurring potentially at many different levels of social aggregation. Meanings are not the preserve of a single actor; hence, not just leaders but also followers will engage in the reinterpretation process. . . . These tensions/negotiations often end in the formation of unforeseen subtendencies and splinter groups. This differentiation can lead either to the emergence of a new, shared narrative through "symbolic fusion" or to the development of multiple narratives through symbolic fragmentation." Loren Lybarger, *Identity and Religion in Palestine*, 2007, 16.

⁴¹ There were two centerpiece to the Chadli regime's attempt to control the movement by courting it, playing it off against other dissident groups (such as the Kabyles) . The first was the Family Code legislation of 1984, which legalized an extremely regressive patriarchal code, a severe attack on women's rights. The second program was a large-scale mosque-building project. Six thousand new mosques were constructed over the decade. Evans and Phillips, 126-127. While these were clear attempts to bring the movement under state control, they inadvertently created spaces of dissent, and eventually revolt.

base of popular support. In the face of unending economic hardship, this vision of Islam exerted a powerful pull because, in providing an all-embracing credo, it gave people a sense of new-found purpose and dignity. Young people in particular found the movement hugely empowering. The links, friendships and social welfare provided by the street mosques gave meaning to lost lives because they offered up joy, warmth and human solidarity. Even more importantly, by casting young people as the warriors of God, proud, strong, and deserving of respect, the street mosque movement instilled self-belief. Fired up by religious indignation, its followers had nothing to be afraid of.⁴²

When constitutional reforms in 1989 opened the door to new political parties, activist groups from a broad spectrum allied sectors in society formed an Islam-centered coalition party, the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut*, or FIS). As a true political front, the variety of positions within the FIS was impressive, ranging from hard-line salafists to pragmatist conservatives to the unemployed youth. While the FIS's senior *leadership* was highly doctrinaire (though still quite divergent), much of the *membership* simply sought basic social reforms. This was especially the case for the urban youth, who saw the FIS as their best chance for real changes. While "the FIS leadership . . . sought to represent the *hittistes*⁴³," i.e., the urban unemployed youth, this was not because the youth shared an identical conception of Islam. In many ways, they "had a way of life at the opposite extreme from that of the party leaders: passionately fond of Raï music, football, girl-chasing and living by fiddles, they readily scoffed at the new "look" (beards, kamis) of their childhood mates.

For this segment of the population, the FIS appealed to them first of all because of the threat it posed to the regime. The state repression from 1988 and after left many with a strong sense of anger and revolt. In one example, "an unemployed man who was traumatized by that episode saw in the FIS a turning of the tables. The street was in the hands of the discontented again. The hatred he had borne against the regime since 1988 made him a sympathizer with all movements ready to fight against it." He complained that for the regime, "out of 26 million Algerians, only six million have the right to exist."⁴⁴ This point is echoed by Salima Ghezali: "when one lives excluded, despised, crushed in every way imaginable and possible, not only an exclusion from the political scene, nor just exclusion from the field of visibility, but also a form of exclusion that consists in taking away from you every form of humanity, every form of respect," then the appeal of Islamism, as a kind of "resource," comes into focus.⁴⁵ Hence, much of the FIS membership was not driven by ideological goals, but more pragmatic desires; the party was "a channel for resentment and hope" as well as "feelings of revenge."⁴⁶ A typical supporter from an

⁴² Evans and Phillips, 134.

⁴³ *Hit* meaning wall in Arabic, and *hittistes* referring to "those who prop up the wall" since they spend the day, for lack of better options, lining the city sidewalks and leaning up against the walls, chatting with each other and with passersby.

⁴⁴ Martinez, 46.

⁴⁵ *Le procès*, 346. Salima Ghezali was a teacher and journalist in Algeria, and edited a newspaper until it was shut down by the state.

⁴⁶ Martinez, 39.

Algiers suburb wore the tell-tale beard and kamis, yet "despite his appearance, he remained far from the political objectives of the Islamist militants and his preferred reading was sports newspapers. He was . . . ignorant of the Islamist press . . . ; he did not define himself as an 'Islamist' or a 'brother' but as a 'Muslim.'" ⁴⁷

A major reason for the FIS's wide appeal was that it represented, in both a negative and a positive sense, a real alternative to the status quo. On one hand, it was seen as "the only counterweight to the present system, and presented itself as an alternative to the regime." But it also presented a program with wide appeal. "It owed its success and its rapid implantation in country to the spiritual values it conveyed, the condemnation of . . . corruption, and the fact that it took social problems seriously." The FIS was a party that "sought to defend society's disillusioned [*déçus*], and address the concerns and frustrations of the youth."⁴⁸ This point is made repeatedly by analysts, who insist that a major appeal of the FIS was its willingness to address real social problems: "The mobilization of youth behind the FIS is not a knee-jerk reaction to Islamism but instead reflects a respect for the concrete accomplishments of the FIS in areas of daily concern for the inhabitants of poorer neighborhoods: crime, jobs, housing, sanitation, health, and law and order."⁴⁹ Field interviews bear ample evidence to this point as well.⁵⁰

It is clear that the FIS party contained a strongly plural membership. The party is described by the leading Algeria historian in the US as "a coalition of organized and informal Islamist groups" with various ideological tendencies, broadly distinguished into two groups. On one hand, a minority of *salafis*, who sought a more or less rapid transformation of state and society; on the other, a majority of *djazarists*: "imams or preachers in popular districts" whose objectives included "informing the population about the relevance of Islam to modern life" and "activism in spreading Islamic values and practices."

What has already been noted that the majority of FIS leadership, not to mention the membership, were not radical but reformist, less interested in launching a jihad than reducing corruption and addressing ordinary social problems. Such facts contrast sharply with the images of fanatics and thugs constantly announced by a regime that sought to portray them as at-all-cost holy warriors bent solely on establishing "un régime théocratique totalitaire."⁵¹ While the more radical voices

⁴⁷ Martinez, 58-59.

⁴⁸ Denaud, 1997, 217.

⁴⁹ Entelis, 66.

⁵⁰ Martinez records numerous examples. And it was not only the urban poor who appreciated the FIS's social programs. Petty merchants and low-level appreciated the FIS's effectiveness at halting state corruption and crime: "To keep their businesses going they were obliged every day to beg for "left-overs" from the state enterprises. . . ."At the depot I had sometimes to wait for hours for nothing. They said there was no flour. . . In fact, they hoarded goods for their friends or for wholesalers who resold the goods retail, without declaring it. . . But with the FIS, I swear to you, I had my yeast and my flour every day, without having to wait. . . (Trader, *Les Eucalyptus*, 1993)." Martinez, 29. See also 23-30, 34.

⁵¹ Khaled Nezzar, *Mémoires du général*, 1999, 225.

in the FIS received the lion's share of publicity, this was a significant distortion. The actual positions of the membership fell diversely "between the djazarist and neo-salafi camps" or they simply could "vary with circumstances." But the FIS's "key objectives and strategies" were aligned with "the moderate approach of the djazarists." While the FIS was often represented as a unified vision of theocrats and violent jihadists, in reality "the FIS's fifteen founding leaders . . . were extremely diverse ideologically." They included "radicals and moderates, young and old, and representing many regions of the country."⁵²

⁵² Ruedy, 252.

Chapter 8

Renationalizing history: Le blanc de l'Algérie

Ma question première demeure suspendue: comment, dans Alger, ville noire, s'est opérée la passation entre les bourreaux d'hier et ceux d'aujourd'hui?

My first question remains in suspension: how, in Algiers, black city, did a transfer take place between the torturers of yesterday to those of today?

–*Le blanc de l'Algérie*⁵³

Dites-le donc tout haut, amis: à quoi ça sert de tuer un poète?

Say it aloud, friends: what is the point of killing a poet?

–*Le blanc de l'Algérie*⁵⁴

[L]e legs révolutionnaire pèse lourdement sur la capacité des Algériens de déchiffrer leur présent et de s'imaginer un future.

The revolutionary legacy weighs heavily on the capacity of Algerians to decode their present and imagine a future for themselves.

–Mohamed Harbi

L'histoire restait donc sous surveillance, suspecte de profiter tant aux morts qu'aux vivants.

History thus remained under surveillance, suspected of benefiting the dead as much as the living.

--Omar Carlier, "Mémoire, Mythe et Doxa de l'Etat en Algérie"

Le blanc de l'Algérie, published in the mid-1990s, is an impressively multifaceted attempt to grapple with the bloody conflict and the assassinations of Algerian intellectuals. This chapter addresses the novel's complex treatment of the civil war and its approach to representing political violence within Algerian history. Following a general introduction to Djébar's oeuvre, section 2 describes how *Le blanc* stages its main character, the narrator herself, using the narrative process as a means of working through her grief at the loss of friends during the civil war. Faced with inexplicable acts of violence, the narrator uses stories from the past to set a pattern of narration,

⁵³ 197.

⁵⁴ 217.

in such a way that the recent, traumatic events can be inscribed as satisfactory repetitions of episodes in a larger story, one that is ultimately both a national and moral one.

Section 3 argues that, while *Le blanc* is willing to harshly criticize the state for its self-serving manipulation of war memory, the work fails to carry the critique further, instead adhering to the basic narrative of state nationalism. I argue in section 4 that when it comes to the civil war, *Le blanc* drops all pretense of critical or revisionist approaches to history, reproducing the state narrative to a detail. Violent crimes that in fact remain unsolved and mysterious are systematically and unreservedly portrayed as the work of Islamist fanatics, who themselves are never depicted as humans with legitimate concerns or motivations.

8.1 Introduction to Assia Djébar's work

Assia Djébar's artistic production now spans more than five decades, including film, poetry, essays, and novels. Her work has been well-received, culminating in her reception into the French Academy in 2006. Djébar is most well-known for *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980) and *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985), valued especially for their nuanced portraits of Algerian women and their deft handling of the French-Arabic-Berber cultural overlaps and conflicts that inhabit Algeria. Djébar's work is deeply historical, and three major themes run through her oeuvre. The first is the role of women in Algerian society, a theme the author addresses from historical and ethnographic, as well as autobiographical perspectives. The second arises from a sense of anguish arising from an impression of ambiguous cultural complicity with colonial society; common perhaps for an Algerian intellectual of her generation who found herself steeped in French culture on one hand, yet longing for a distinct, autonomous national culture on the other. Thirdly, most of her works are oriented toward contributing to a national imaginary, recalling, rehearsing, and retrieving Algerian experience as she perceives it.⁵⁵

Djébar's work has enjoyed overwhelmingly positive critical appraisal among popular and scholarly reviewers. Critics have welcomed her original treatment of the marginalization and historical silencing of dominated groups. On one hand, this refers to the history of the French colonization of Algeria, the public representation of which is generally dominated by French perspectives. On the other hand, the portrayal of Algerian society includes the silencing of women by a patriarchy that traditionally imposes on them illiteracy and domesticity. For example, Djébar's literary work often "combines the roles of novelist and historian by collecting oral histories through interviews with women fighters. These accounts give voices to the Algerian women whose names have been erased by history," according to Jarrod Hayes. "Writing thus becomes a way of bringing women out into the public space of the Nation."⁵⁶ Béïda Chikhi emphasizes the tendency for Djébar's works to weave together fragments of the Algerian world.

⁵⁵ *L'amour, la fantasia* is the classic example in her work of each of these themes, which are eloquently condensed in the section "La Tunique de Nessus," 239-243.

⁵⁶ *Queering the Nation*, 2000, 188, 189.

She writes that “Djebar s’engage dans la récupération des bribes d’histoires d’Algériens et d’Algériennes, perdues dans le temps, ensevelies dans l’espace, en retrait dans les mémoires et la tradition orale.”⁵⁷ Djebar is one of Algeria's most celebrated and most successful writers, and has made a forceful contribution to French and Algerian literature, both by her aesthetic originality and her uncompromising feminist spirit. She is especially important for her ability to present nuanced, suggestive, and often challenging depictions of Algerian history and society.

Djebar’s earliest work in this vein was her 1962 novel *Les enfants du nouveau monde*, which recounts episodes of women’s lives during the Franco-Algerian war.⁵⁸ Much of her subsequent work continued after this pattern while honing an innovative style of literary writing, both at the level of her prose and in the way her works are structured. One part of her 1985 novel *L’amour, la fantasia*, for example, is presented according to a symphony-like structure, with movements and subsections labeled after states of vocalized sound such as “whispers,” “voice,” and “soliloquy,” with the repeated refrain of “embraces.” Works such as this and the 1995 novel *Vaste est la prison* are presented like sprawling tapestries that weave together collective, often feminine experience in the cultural geography of Algeria, drawn typically from archival material or oral history, and ranging from suggestive letters and diary entries to the personal experiences of Djebar herself growing up in colonial Algeria. The manner in which Djebar embeds various documents in her works while reinvesting or reinterpreting their contents has been described through the metaphor of the palimpsest, a document with chronologically successive layers of inscription or editorial intervention, such that the received document can be seen as a composite or multiple author production. For Mireille Rosello, “Djebar changes the . . . matrix of stereotypical historical narratives,” since in works like *L’amour, la fantasia* “History remains a palimpsest and is not treated like a repossessed object. Djebar allows layers of writing to accumulate.”⁵⁹ For Thiel, this approach still provides for a strong space of agency. Djebar’s narrator “va non seulement s’appropriier la position de l’instance responsable du discours aux dépens des auteurs des documents, mais elle va également devoir transformer et manipuler la représentation des événements historiques véhiculée par les documents, la corriger, modaliser, réécrire, bref écrire par-dessus l’inscription existante.”⁶⁰

According to Hayes, the autobiographical dimension of Djebar's work carries a strongly allegorical dimension, correlating in a significant sense with Algeria as a nation.⁶¹ Djebar’s work has been seen as elaborating, while updating, nation-based historical memory, often loosely in

⁵⁷ Assia Djebar: *Histoires et fantaisies*, 2007, 39.

⁵⁸ In the 1950s and 1960s, in addition to *Les enfants du nouveau monde*, Djebar also wrote works of a very different style, often compared to that of Françoise Sagan, including *La soif* and *Les alouettes naïves*.

⁵⁹ Mireille Rosello, *Declining the Stereotype*, 1998, 159. Cited in Licops, “The Interruptive Dynamics of History and Autobiography in *L’amour, la fantasia*,” in Salhi, *Francophone Postcolonial Cultures*, 2003, 49. See also Donadey, “The Multilingual Strategies of Postcolonial Literature: Assia Djebar's Algerian Palimpsest,” *World Literature Today*, 2000.

⁶⁰ Thiel, “La Querelle des discours: Techniques formelles de la réécriture de l'histoire dans *L'Amour, la fantasia*,” *L'Esprit Créateur*, 2008.

⁶¹ Hayes, 190, 196, 15.

the idiom of mythological or epic history. Her works are often obsessed with ancestors, origins, precursors, and the larger contours of an identity and history seen as *Algerian*, the latter understood almost as a supra-historical signifier. The author's personal memories are typically interspersed with testimonies, historical episodes from North Africa going back centuries and even millennia, and a poetic narrative presence that sews this all together.

Her oeuvre is seen by Hayes and others as shifting the meaning of identity attributes within the larger, national frame of Algerian identity. Works like *Vaste est la prison* offer an assemblage experience that is presented to the reader as *Algerian* experience, though it is also feminist, human, and existential. Hence, there is an interesting tension in her work between the simultaneous de-centering of national identity attributes (male-female, Arab-Berber, Arabic-French, for example) even while the larger framework of *nation* is preserved and even reinforced, especially in episodes that read *back* into history to retrieve and integrate prenational figures as part of Algeria's panoply of national mythological heroes.⁶² Since *Algeria* serves as a more or less stable construct denoting a collective identity, a community, a territory, and a political-historical existence, Djebbar can be seen as deeply involved, in a broad sense, in engaging and reconfiguring nationalist discourse. Her work occupies a contradictory position of simultaneously affirming while subverting or dispersing nation-centered forms of identity. For example, although Hayes indicates that “both colonial and male nationalist accounts of history” have a tendency to leave out women’s existence, perspectives, participation, and experience, he argues that Djebbar’s work resists this trend while still participating in a coherent nation-centered literary discourse. “Djebbar envisions ways of writing women into the Nation in feminist ways. She rewrites male writings of national identity, not by rejecting the Nation, but by making it feminist.”

The feminist bent of her work has probably been the most salient for critics. Djebbar's work is seen as criticizing “the sexist blinders of both French and Algerian historiography” in the opinion of Donadey. “Her entire oeuvre highlights Algerian women’s agency and active participation in wars of liberation.”⁶³ By challenging the masculinity of national identity, Djebbar unsettles masculine-state narratives of Algerian history. According to Hayes, while “postindependence *official* discourses attempt to fix a single sources of national identity and legislate a people’s roots,” those whose experience and identity does not conform are ejected from an official

⁶² Here are representative passages in this vein: “Ainsi, plus de quatre siècles après la résistance et le dramatique échec de Yougourtha au Nord, quatre siècles également avant celui, grandiose, de la Kahina—la reine berbère qui résistera à la conquête arabe—, Tin Hinan des sables, presque effacée, nous laisse héritage—et cela, malgré ses os hélas aujourd’hui dérangés— : notre écriture la plus secrète, aussi ancienne que l’étrusque ou que celle des “runes” mais, contrairement à celles-ci, toute bruisante encore de sons et de soufflés d’aujourd’hui, est bien legs de femme, au plus profond du désert.” *Vaste est la prison*, 1995, 164. “Chaque nuit, l’effort musculaire de cet enfantement par la bouche [. . .]. Je vomis quoi, peut-être un long cri ancestral. Ma bouche ouverte expulse indéfiniment la souffrance des autres, des ensevelies avant moi [. . .]. [L]a procession blanche des aïeules-fantômes derrière moi devient armée qui me propulse[.]” 339. And the poem closing the novel, whose refrain is “Comment te nommer Algérie [.]” 347.

⁶³ Donadey, “Assia Djebbar,” *The Columbia History of Twentieth Century Thought*, 2006, 504.

history, whose function is “to consolidate the power of a new [national] elite.”⁶⁴ This process is challenged and resisted in Djébar's work, as emphasized by Mireille Calle-Gruber. Djébar's narrative style “accueille les histoires de l'Histoire, les humbles, les inaudibles, les sans-voix.”⁶⁵ Her work is seen as restituting suppressed or “lost” perspectives in Algerian historical experience, presences otherwise left unacknowledged or suppressed, and thus embodying a critique of the hegemonic formation of national history.

By asserting agency in the public process of producing history, Djébar's artistic works suggest not only a renewed awareness of historical experiences and identities that have traditionally been ignored or suppressed, such as those of women, but an emphasis on bringing this wider awareness and expanded consciousness into the present. Debra Kelly underscores this point, insisting that “there is no separation” in Djébar's writing between “autobiographical and historical discourses.” This makes Djébar's narrator at once very personal and trans-historical. For example, a “highly personal memory” of the narrator merges textually within the artistic rendering the history of Algeria's conquest to become “part of the identity of the narrator.”⁶⁶

8.2 Learning to write about loss: Barbarousse and Tahar Djaout

Like Khadra's novel reviewed in the last chapter, *Le blanc de l'Algérie*, published in 1995, displays a marked zeal to bring violent events close up, for the reader's scrutiny. In contrast to *Les agneaux*, however, *Le blanc* is less generically distinct. While *Les agneaux* is easily recognizable as *noir* detective fiction, *Le blanc* is less distinctly fictional and reads at times like a quasi-essay, quasi-diary. While I occasionally refer to it, partly for the sake of convenience, as a novel, one could argue that the work is more of like a disjointed series of personal story essays and historical reflections.⁶⁷ The question of genre might ultimately serve as the basis on which

⁶⁴ Emphasis added. 15, 104, 183-185, 196. This assessment conforms with Perry Anderson's point that “more and more ‘second-generation’ nationalists . . . learned to speak ‘for’ dead people with whom it was impossible or undesirable to establish a linguistic connection.” *Imagined Communities*, 198.

⁶⁵ Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djébar*, 2006, 23.

⁶⁶ Kelly, 261.

⁶⁷ The distinction between author/narrator and history/fiction has been consistently blurred in novels, from the first examples of the genre through today. The capacity of prose fiction to blend seamlessly with prose nonfiction in novelistic spaces has long been recognized by writers and critics alike. Norman Mailer provides a recent example in the playful title of his 1969 *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History*. Equally relevant is George Orwell's comment that Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* “is a novel in the first person, or autobiography in the form of a novel, whichever way you like to look at it.” “Inside the Whale,” 95. As a common-use term, novel has been a useful notion; but as a technical one, it is barely a coherent concept, defined more by market trends and ever-shifting cultural conventions than by any stable definition. Indeed, a primary feature of the novel, according to analysts, has been generic variability. Franco Moretti, in a recent compendium on the novel, points to this inexhaustible variability. For him, the capacious notion of the novel can be seen “as culture, then, but certainly also as form, or rather forms, plural, because in the two thousand years of its history one encounters the strangest creations . . . as the borders of literature are continuously, unpredictably expanded. At times, this endless flexibility borders on chaos.” *The Novel*, I:ix. More pointedly, as far as I am aware there is no set of significant, nonarbitrary attributes applying exclusively to “novelistic” texts but not to others, making the definition an arbitrary or

one decides how to evaluate the work, since different interpretive norms are brought to bear on a decidedly fictional work than on a non-fiction work that purports to represent society and historical events in a factual sense. However, I take it as a commonplace that texts can be analyzed in terms of their representational content without regard for the putative intentions of their authors or announced generic distinctions of their genre.

Putting aside these questions for the moment, another point of unity between both *Le blanc* and *Les agneaux* is their eagerness to shed light on historical events that are otherwise poorly understood and in an important sense not very visible⁶⁸ (and this was even more true when they were first published, in 1995 and 1998, respectively). A standard description of a major function of art holds that art crystallizes a diffuse and messy reality into intelligible form.⁶⁹ In like fashion, both of these works seem especially interested in bringing the difficult and complex experiences of the civil war into the framework of an easily digestible storyline. In *Les agneaux*, the civil war story is one of class resentment, loss of traditional values, and wanton criminality. In *Le blanc*, however, it is part of a nearly universal struggle of moral courage against repressive forces, anchored firmly within the context of the Algerian national project.

One of the most striking passages in *Le blanc* is the scene of Tahar Djaout's murder, a passage in which the narrative structure and the logic of its underlying symbolism represent a basic pattern repeated throughout the work. The narrative is built around the episode of the assassination of Algerian Berber intellectual Tahar Djaout in 1993 (a mere two years before the publication of *Le blanc*). The passage below is composed of narrative fragments carefully compiled, one upon the other, in mosaic fashion, with the narrator freely interpolating, adding to the mosaic. This method of drop-by-drop narrative "deployment", almost paratactic at times, allows for a high degree of control over the structuring of the narrative retelling.

Qui, quels adolescents ou quels garçons complices, hébétés, hésitants, enfiévrés et finalement rageurs, l'arme au poing, lesquels ont tiré, n'ont pas tiré, ont cru rendre justice en demandant tout d'abord à Tahar, installé dans sa voiture et prêt à démarrer: "C'est toi, Tahar Djaout?"

Tahar a baissé le vitre, a souri, vaguement, mais vraiment (l'un des tueurs revoit ce sourire, même pas hésitant et point de simple politesse; non, un sourire). "C'est toi Tahar Djaout?" répète l'homme.

convention-based value judgment rather than an analytically meaningful category. I refer to *Le blanc* as a novelistic text and bring to bear the same methods of textual analysis used for *Le serment* and *Les agneaux*.

⁶⁸ See Chapter 1.

⁶⁹ This idea is variously expressed from antiquity through recent centuries as "telling the truth" about human reality; or condensing it into representational forms, such as narratives, symbols, and allegories. This point deserves substantial elaboration, but that is beyond our purposes here. See Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus's Scar," *Mimesis*, esp. 3-6; Penelope Murray, "Introduction," in *Classical Literary Criticism*, xii; and Edmond Wilson, "Symbolism," in *Axel's Castle*, esp. 5, 21.

Et Tahar a commencé sa phrase: "Que me veux-tu?"

Ou, plus exactement, il a répondu: "Oui, que me veux-tu?"

*(Ainsi, il a dit "oui" avec bonne foi, avec calme, et encore ce sourire!... "Il a dit 'oui' comme il aurait pu dire: 'Oui tire!' 'Oui, tue-moi!' 'Oui, me voici pour le sacrifice!' 'Oui, je me présente à cause de mon écriture!' Il a dit: 'Oui.' ")*⁷⁰

Who, what adolescent boys, scheming, numbed, hesitant, feverish, and finally enraged, clutching their weapons, which ones pulled the trigger, didn't pull the trigger, thought they were rendering justice when they first asked Tahar, in his car, ready to drive off: "Are you Tahar Djaout?"

Tahar lowered the window, smiled vaguely but sincerely (one of the killers sees the smile again, not even a hesitant smile and not out of mere politeness at all; no, a real smile). "Are you Tahar Djaout?" the man repeats.

And Tahar begins his sentence: "What do you want from me?"

Or, to be more precise, what he answered was: "Yes, what do you want from me?"

(And so he said 'yes' in good faith, calmly, and still smiling!... He said 'yes,' and might as well have said: "Yes, shoot!" "Yes, kill me!" "Yes, I'm here to be sacrificed!" Yes, I offer myself because of my writing!" He said: "Yes.")

The scene is in a sense narratively micromanaged or overnarrated, placing the narrator in ubiquitous contact with the narrated content. This is achieved through the use of asides, parentheses, repetitions, and retakes ("or, to be more precise," it was actually like this. . .). Throughout the passage, as the narrated event unfolds, the reader is aware of the narrator's deliberative process in textually reconstructing it. Two kinds of content emerge: a skeleton of fact—Tahar Djaout is in a car, people approach, he rolls down the window, words exchange, he is shot—and the descriptive dressing, the narrative flesh on the factual skeleton. The implicit question constantly being posed is: how to tell the story *properly*. The narrator hesitates, equivocates, then decides: yes, that is it, that is how it must have happened—that is the best way, the *proper* way, for it to have happened.

Elements beyond the most basic contours of the story appear to be available for reworking. Fictional insertions, the imagined bits of realist flesh that cling to and fill out the bare bones of the story, become self-referential as they work themselves out in the mind of the narrator, whose mental processes are implicitly indicated as they unfold:

⁷⁰ 204.

Tahar a commencé sa phrase: "Que me veux-tu?"
 Ou, plus exactement, il a répondu: "Oui, que me veux-tu?"
 (Ainsi, il a dit "oui" avec bonne foi, avec calme, et encore ce sourire!... "Il a dit 'oui' comme il aurait pu dire: 'Oui tire!' 'Oui, tue-moi!' 'Oui, me voici pour le sacrifice!' 'Oui, je me présente à cause de mon écriture!' Il a dit: 'Oui.' ")

The question the passage repeatedly raises is, why does Tahar Djaout smile in front of his killers? The text appears to be emphasizing, by the repetition, that the narrative decisions are not arbitrary. Since the narrator is so careful and deliberate in working out the scene textually, the image we are left to ponder is Djaout's affirmation and his smile. The word "oui" is repeated eight times in five lines, and the word "sourire" four times throughout the passage. The passage provides a possible clue in the closing line: " 'Oui, je me présente à cause de mon écriture!' Il a dit: 'Oui.' " This line brings the reader to connect Djaout's writings not only with his assassination, but with its textual reconstruction. It is saying: this, precisely, is how it shall be depicted. Thus the narrator arrives at the exact manner in which Djaout will have reacted before his killers.

The answer comes from Djaout's writings, in which he was notoriously persistent in his willingness to denounce the corruption of the powerful and the injustices he witnessed in society. Perceiving the injustice both of the Algerian regime and of Islamist fanatics encouraging armed insurgency, Djaout was an impassioned voice of moral defiance, willing to denounce what he saw in both camps. As a Berber and a journalist, Djaout was subject to state persecution. As Islamists gained influence in the political arena and society at large in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Djaout reacted with horror to the reactionary demagoguery and facile moralism heard in the street and the at certain mosques.⁷¹ Le Sueur writes that Djaout was "known for his powerful and uncompromising criticism of both political Islamists and state corruption" and "had become renowned for his . . . articulate criticisms of the military state" whose strategy and goal, Djaout said in a 1993 interview, "was to discredit the intellectual" in Algeria. He was also "especially vocal in his criticism of the military coup, and the government's methods of combating militant Islam." For him, "it came to the integrity of the life of the mind, no concessions could be made to those who wished to smother critical thinking."⁷² In the francophone journal he co-founded, *Ruptures*, Djaout wrote:

We consider that Algeria is going through a period of decisive battles, in which every silence, every indifference, every abdication, every inch of surrendered territory can prove fatal. . . . Our hope, but also our ambition, is for *Ruptures* to become a meeting-place, a space of expression and debate for all those who are working for a democratic, open, and plural Algeria.⁷³

⁷¹ See Djaout's unfinished manuscript, published under the title *Le Dernier Été de la raison*. See also Aggoun, 319-323.

⁷² Le Sueur, 179-180.

⁷³ Cited in Le Sueur, 180.

Caught between two fires, Djaout's views and his vocal presence placed him "in the sights of both Islamists and the military junta."⁷⁴

We return to Djébar's account of the assassination. According the narrator of *Le blanc*, the reason is clearly "*à cause de mon écriture*". The qualities that make his writing grounds for assassination—it's uncompromising and fearless defiance—are attributed to him here by the narrator. By means of this shift, it is Djaout's writing that gives the narrator guidance on how to portray his death. This passage is thus the narrator's response to an implicitly foregrounded question: how to describe—to mourn and to narrate—Tahar Djaout's murder.

The opening lines of *Le blanc de l'Algérie* announce the project behind the work as an attempt to respond to the personal losses of the author. The narrator of *Le blanc* is not able to resurrect her friends from death, nor to change anything about the suffering they endured. But she does have the power to narrate the events on her own terms, to tell their stories, to thus put them into public memory, and in this sense into Algerian history (or, as we will see, to insert Algerian history into their stories). From this angle, the work can be considered a kind of mourning of the author's loss of her friends: a working out of pain and memory into textual representation and toward narrative closure. There is perhaps something to be said about the use of art as a means of responding to the world. Literary critics have occasionally evoked the idea, though perhaps it is a bit evident, that when artists can do little to act immediately upon the world, they can still produce their art—in a sense, taking out their revenge in "symbolic" fashion.⁷⁵ Whether or not we decide this is a productive way to approach this work, it is clearly the case that the narrator's desire to actively respond to violence and loss is at the core of *Le blanc de l'Algérie*. Djébar says as much in the prefatory remarks. One function of the work is to serve as a way for the author to work through her painful experiences. Considered in these terms, the underlying question is how, in a literary-artistic project, the author might respond simultaneously to the personal trauma of having her friends assassinated and the need to portray the violence of a nascent civil war. From this perspective, one notices an autodidactic quality to the work, as if in a sense the narrator is teaching herself how to mourn these losses. The whole of the work, from this angle, can be seen as an extended working out of a literary-artistic "solution" to the problem of pain and loss.

An extended sequence, beginning with the bloody 1995 Serkadji prison massacre, is representative of the way *Le blanc* closely interweaves the autobiographical, contemporary history, and a symbolic-mythological history. The massacre was a grotesque episode of state brutality, with over one hundred dead, though the gory details took months to trickle out.⁷⁶ The

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Frederic Jameson, for example, echoing Claude Lévi-Strauss, has argued that art's form can function as a symbolic expression of, or "solution" to, repressed and "unresolvable" collective trauma. *The Political Unconscious*, 79. Discourse analysts, among others, have described "the symbolic realm" of representation as a potentially powerful attempt to affect how humans relate to each other. See Scollon, *Mediated Discourse: the Nexus of Practice*, 37.

⁷⁶ Following a putative attempted mutiny, state agents rounded up hundreds of prisoners in the courtyard and in smaller cell units before opening fire and lobbing grenades, killing at least one hundred, and torturing the remaining

text of *Le blanc* uses the episode, in a Proustian fashion, as a springboard for leaping into a broader symbolism, situating the civil war violence in the context of Algerian national liberation. For the narrator, focused on "resolving" a psychic conversation with the ghosts of her dead friends, the Serkadji prison massacre provides a means of transitioning from a disturbing, traumatic, ambiguous present to a familiar, clarifying, established moral-symbolic framework, namely the struggle for Algerian independence and national unity. While the link between the prison massacre and the war-era Barbarousse sequence is historically arbitrary, it is deeply meaningful for the narrator, and allows her to couch a difficult present within a narrative "envelope" that offers comfort, a sense of moral clarity, and, since the French repressors were defeated, reason for hope.

In similar fashion to the Djaout passage above, the narrator insists on the process of *constructing* its symbolic value. This is a core dimension of how many passages in *Le blanc* operate: their symbolic import is not readily present, so it is inserted into their retelling by the narrator, either by deliberately motivating some detail, as in Djaout's smile above, or by inserting the given episode into a larger, already meaningful and interpreted framework, as in the case of the Serkadji prison massacre/Barbarousse sequence. It is as if these episodes are so recent, so historically and psychically fresh (to the narrator), that time and history have not done the work of providing narrative closure, psychic distance, or symbolic meaning to the traumatic events—one feels at risk of being overwhelmed. This is public memory in the making as well as private mental "processing" of loss and pain.⁷⁷ The writing is in a sense showcasing the process of psychic sorting, moral parsing, sense-making, learning to cope, situating pain and loss, and inserting the recent dramatic sequences into the web and tissue of memory.

It is not surprising then to witness the narrator, dealing with the difficult experience of the murder of friends and a daily supply of new horror, reach out toward a more familiar past. From a space where she appears to be reeling from pain and loss, grappling with the ghostly voices of those whose death she still mourns, the narrator seems to self-consciously activate a more solid foundation of symbolic reference—namely, the struggle for independence and the Algerian war—as a means of understanding and sorting through the contemporary violence. According to memory analysts, this is how the "processing" of both collective and private memory tends to occur in any situation: past experiences supply the references for sorting through the present, and vice-versa.⁷⁸ Thus we find the narrator performing a ready substitution, where violence in

prisoners (over 1,000) atrociously. Prisoners would later be brought onto national television to read confessions (of attempted mutiny) extracted through torture. "The Massacre of Serkadji," Bedjaoui, 269-300.

⁷⁷ In psychoanalytic discourse this process is often called "working through." See Lacapra, "Revisiting the Historians' Debate: Mourning and Genocide," in *History and Memory after Auschwitz*.

⁷⁸ The point has been well developed by analysts working on processes of public and social memory production. The Popular Memory Group (PMG) has written that "Memory is, by definition, a term which directs our attention not [to] the past but to the past-present relation." Popular Memory Group, 78. Martin Evans summarizes this notion; for him, citing PMG, collective memory and public discourse often "supply the very terms by which a private history is thought through and in this sense private memories are strangely composite forms, featuring the selective sedimentation of past traces." Evans, *The Memory of Resistance*, 1997, 11. This process mirrors the narrative process itself. For Josselson and Lieblich, "Narratives are not records of facts, of how things actually were, but of a meaning-making system that

present-day Serkadji references becomes or implies, for her, violence in colonial-era Barbarousse, the former name of the prison. Indicated by the imagined conversation between her and the ghost of M'Hamed, her murdered friend, she is transported in her mind, and the reader travels with her. We are brought into Barbarousse prison in 1955 to the scene of harrowing episodes that are, for her, symbolically meaningful, offering her a method or perhaps simply the ad hoc means to situate the violence and loss she deals with in the present. Since the text closely follows her thoughts, the reader is brought with her along the mental journey from the civil war violence of the 1990s back to the colonial era violence of the 1950s, swept from the narrator's present into a reconstruction of the past, through both public and private memories.

The passage in question begins with the evocation of the Serkadji prison massacre:

Je croise Naima, une physicienne compatriote, installée là pour au moins deux ans. Je quête auprès d'elle des nouvelles d'Alger. [...] "La répression à Barberousse annonce presque cent morts: mais c'est au moins deux cents, le chiffre plus exact!" [...] Je lui explique la force symbolique du lieu: une prison, sur les hauteurs d'Alger, où la guillotine française, en 1956, a eu ses premières victimes. Le pouvoir actuel vient de "réprimer une mutinerie:" certes, trois, quatre gardiens ont été tués—et affreusement—par les mutins; le lendemain matin, "les forces de l'ordre" sont entrées dans la prison, ont dû tirer dans le tas.

[...] "Vous le savez bien, M'Hamed, Barberousse, la prison Barberousse, c'est un lieu symbolique pour nous tous, depuis plus de trente ans! Le lieu des premiers martyrs, juste au-dessus de la Casbah, cœur de la capitale, cœur de la résistance d'hier, à la fois audacieuse et joyeuse!"⁷⁹

I come across Naima, a physicist from my own country, who has been here for at least two years. I ask her for news from Algiers. [...] "They are announcing at least one hundred dead from the repression at Barbarousse: but the real number is at least two hundred!" [...] I explain to her the symbolic power of this place: a prison, on the heights of Algiers, where in 1956 the French guillotine had its first victims. The present regime has just "suppressed a revolt": true, three or four guards were killed—and atrociously—by the rioters; the following morning the "security forces" entered the prison and fired into the crowd.

makes sense out of the chaotic mass of perceptions and experiences of life." Cited in Ritchie, ed., *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, 2011, 78. According to Paul Ricoeur, "Avec le récit, l'innovation sémantique consiste dans l'invention d'une intrigue qui, elle aussi, est une œuvre de synthèse: par la vertu de l'intrigue, des buts, des causes, des hasards sont rassemblés sous l'unité temporelle d'une action totale et complète . . . une nouvelle congruence dans l'agencement des incidents. . . . L'intrigue d'un récit est comparable à cette assimilation prédicative: elle "prend ensemble" et intègre dans une histoire entière et complète les événements multiples et dispersés et ainsi schématise la signification intelligible qui s'attache au récit pris comme un tout." 1983, 9-10 (emphasis added).

⁷⁹ 33-35.

[...] "You well know, M'Hamed, Barbarousse, the prison Barbarousse, is a symbolic place for all of us and has been now for thirty years! The place of the first martyrs, just above the Casbah, heart of the capital, heart of the yesteryear's struggle, both joyous and bold!

The passage marks the elision between past and present, between the narrator's experience and the symbolic elaboration of the prison's history, by a shift from a mental conversation with M'Hamed's ghost ("you well know, M'Hamed. . .") to a remembered conversation years before. The chain of associations: atrocities at Serkadji; recollection of colonial-era events at the same prison (Barbarousse); her recently murdered friend M'Hamed; then a prolonged elaboration of the events and their symbolism. The narrator is integrating the atrocities of the present into her memories of atrocities in the past. The passage continues:

Ce n'est plus moi, dans le demi-rêve, parlant à M'Hamed, mais dix ans auparavant, Ali, un ami, [...] qui tente, trente ans après, de ressusciter les jours de sa jeunesse [...]. Ses jours à Barberousse-Serkadji, "forteresse silencieuse, fermée au regard par un mur d'enceinte qui la sépare de la ville," écrit-il.⁸⁰

It's no longer me, in a half dream, speaking to M'Hamed, but, ten years earlier, Ali, a friend, [...] trying thirty years later, to resurrect the days of his youth [...]. His days in Barbarousse-Serkadji, "silent fortress, closed off from view by a surrounding wall that separates it from the city," he writes.

The prison of yesteryear's struggle and its martyrs thus provides the shifted *context* for relating the *content* in the narrative present of death and loss. This moral and symbolic framework, elaborated through the Barbarousse sequence, supplies what appears to be missing for the narrator in the present. Once this shift occurs, the episodes of violence and loss in the present simply become new episodes continuous in some way with the past context of the national independence struggle and its martyrs. This is the "symbolic logic" behind the narrator's attempt to come to terms with a difficult present.

As the Barbarousse sequence unfolds, the symbolic framework it proposes for "reading" the present becomes more apparent. Two figures are killed: Zabana and Ferradj. Each will become a symbol of martyrdom. Zabana will be the heroic, morally triumphant character who faces down death with calm integrity, whose moral vision transcends the agony and injustice he suffers. Ferradj, on the other hand, will be the symbol for one caught unawares, unprepared for death, who dies an undignified death because his attackers gave him no chance to accept violent death with stoic calm. These two figures emblemize the martyrdom of Algerian intellectuals, heroes before an unjust death. Sometimes they walk calmly and knowingly into their fate; at other times they are attacked by the forces of barbarism and they die in agony. But in both circumstances,

⁸⁰ 36-38.

the narrator is careful to point out, these intellectuals possess dignity and honor because they died a hero's death—the death of the martyr. This, anyway, appears to be the symbolic framework the text sets up as a rubric for reading the civil war as an episode of a larger history.

Let us proceed to the second sequence of the Barbarousse passage. The past arrives, textually, in a section set off by italics, in which the narrator recounts a 1956 encounter of her friend Ali, who, while he was in Barbarousse prison, met the resistance fighter and intellectual, Ahmed Zabana. Here is Ali's story, adapted by the narrator.

18 juin 1956. [...] S'il est gracié, Zabana vivra; sinon, il sera guillotiné dans les vingt-quatre heures...

N'arrive pas, ce jour-là, le télégramme tant attendu, qui aurait annoncé la grâce. Zabana, dans la cour, se promène [...]. Il comprend, l'air impassible, qu'il vit son dernier jour: qu' "on" viendra, dans la nuit, juste avant l'aube, le chercher pour le moment fatal.

Au milieu de l'après-midi, il donne son cours comme à l'ordinaire. [...] "Etudiez!... Le savoir c'est la vie la plus noble et l'ignorance la plus grande mort!" Les autres détenus—certains paysans, d'autres plus âgés que le maître, d'autres...—répètent, décortiquent et écrivent sous sa surveillance. [...] "Je meurs, mes amis, et l'Algérie vivra!" La voix de Zabana répéta haut deux fois, trois fois dans les couloirs cette ultime phrase d'espoir; le silence de ceux, réveillés, qui l'écoutent devient la pierre ineffaçable de cette mort!⁸¹

June 18, 1956. [...] If he is reprieved, Zabana will live; otherwise, he will be guillotined within twenty-four hours...

It never arrives, the anticipated telegram that would announce the reprieve. Zabana, in the prison yard, walks about [...]. He understands, with an impassive look, that he is seeing his last day, that "they" will come in the night, just before dawn, to fetch him for the fatal moment.

In the middle of the afternoon he gives his lesson as usual. [...] "Study!... Knowledge is the noblest life and ignorance the worst of deaths!" the other prisoners—some peasants, some older than the master, others...—repeat, dissect, and transcribe the sentence under his surveillance. [...] "I die, my friends, and Algeria will live!" In the corridor, Zabana's voice loudly repeats that last sentence of hope two, three times; the silence of those who, now awake, are listening to him becomes the tombstone honoring this death!

⁸¹ Ibid.

It is evident why Zabana's story is compelling to the narrator. Like her friends, he was violently "taken in the night;" like them, in life he was an intellectual leader, a source of light and inspiration during a violent period of struggle. Equally compelling is the sense of moral triumph that his story displays. Through knowledge and understanding he purports to a more noble existence than those who execute him. Just as importantly, he leaves others behind, such as Ali, who functions as a double for the narrator, since he narrates the death of his slain friend Zabana, just as she narrates the deaths of her friends, such as M'Hamed. Like the assassinated intellectuals the narrator has lost, Zabana also leaves behind a legacy of intellectual and moral courage before the forces of repression. But Zabana's death is only one side of the dual story the narrator retrieves from Ali's recollections, since Zabana's martyrdom is also tied to that of Ferradj.

While Zabana is a figure of calm moral triumph before certain death, Ferradj will be a figure of agony and existential suffering at the hands of unanticipated assassins. He presents a foil to Zabana by his situation and response, but the narrator insists that their symbolic value is identical. They are part of the procession of Algerian intellectual hero-martyrs. Through this, the narrator is able to create a framework for the others. She insists on this precedent and its symbolic/interpretive value for "reading" the further deaths that will be related in *Le blanc*. There are those who, in the narrator's telling, faced death with a kind of calm serenity, perhaps anticipating the blow, like Tahar Djaout whose smile signifies that he is ready to face his attackers; and others, like Mekbel or Sebti, who found an anguished, unanticipated death. In fact, the way the episode are textual constructed suggests an attempt to supply the means to interpret all the Ferradj characters as Zabanas.

The third and final sequence of the Serkadji-Barbarousse passage are almost didactic, in that they seem to be teaching us how to interpret martyrdom. This passage relates the death of Ferradj, still through the framework of the narrator's conversation with the ghost of her murdered friend, M'Hamed:

"Ahmed Zabana, le premier Algérien guillotiné et à Barberousse, murmure M'Hamed [...]." "Zabana et Ferradj!" répondis-je. "Nous associons toujours les deux guillotines de cette nuit!"

Ils sont morts, deux; ils furent guillotines, cette aube-là, tous les deux, l'un après l'autre: Zabana et Ferradj.

Mais nous avons oublié, ou plus exactement nous avons voulu oublier qu'ils sont morts différemment: le premier dans la lumière inaltérable de l'héroïsme tranquille. ("Je meurs, mes amis, et l'Algérie vivra!" La voix de Zabana répéta haut deux fois, trois fois dans les couloirs cette ultime phrase d'espoir [...])

Le deuxième, Ferradj, ah le deuxième! Soupirent parfois les chroniqueurs de cette nuit de juin, et ils ont un sourire gêné de tristesse: "Il n'a pas su mourir, hélas, le pauvre: il cria, il hurla, il s'est débattu, on l'a traîné comme le mouton de l'Aïd:

pour finir, il s'est tu lorsqu'on parvient à le faire sortir dans la cour d'honneur. Dommage!" concluent-ils; et quelquefois certains ajoutent, osent ajouter: "Il aurait dû mourir comme un 'vrai' Algérien!"

Il est mort, Ferradj, comme un homme (pourquoi je me retrouve à leur parler ainsi, à mes ombres, à M'Hamed et aussi à Mahfoud revenu?), Ferradj, quelqu'un qu'on réveille en pleine nuit du lourd sommeil, et qui, une longue minute, les yeux écarquillés, comprend lentement que tant de gardiens ainsi faisant cercle autour de sa couche, c'est donc qu'on vient le traîner pour... Il crie, il brame l'horreur du cauchemar qui s'ouvre [...].

Il est mort, Ferradj, comme un homme qui n'eut ni le temps de croire à cette mort torve, ni de la prévoir, ni même de l'imaginer [...].

Ferradj a été réveillé cette nuit du 18 juin 1956 : "Ils veulent me tuer! Je ne veux pas mourir! Non, non! Ils veulent me tuer!"

Puis plus rien. On l'a traîné.⁸²

"Ahmed Zabana, the first Algerian to be guillotined, and at Barbarousse," murmurs M'Hamed, and then he sighs [...]. "Zabana and Ferradj," I reply. "We always associate the two victims of that night's guillotine!"

They are dead, the two of them; executed by guillotine at dawn that morning, one after the other: Zabana and Ferradj.

But we have forgotten or, to be more precise, we want to forget that they died differently: the first in the fixed light of calm heroism. ("I die, my friends, and Algeria will live!" In the corridor, Zabana's voice loudly repeats two, three times that last sentence of hope [...].)

The second, Ferradj, oh the second! The chroniclers of that June night sometimes sigh with an embarrassed smile of sadness: "He didn't know how to die, alas, poor man: he screamed, he shouted, he fought, they dragged him like Eid's sheep; in the end, he fell silent when they managed to get him out into the main courtyard. What a shame!" they conclude; and sometimes some of them add, dare to add: "He should have died like a 'true' Algerian!"

Ferradj died like a man (why do I find myself talking to them thus, to my shadows, to M'Hamed and Mahfoud, now ghosts?), Ferradj, whom they wake up in the middle of the night from a deep sleep and who, taking a long moment, eyes

⁸² 38-40.

wide open, comes to understand that so many guards in a circle around his bed must mean they're going to drag him off to... He screams, bewails the horror of the nightmare before him [...].

Ferradj died like a man who had neither the time to believe in this grim death nor to anticipate it, nor even to imagine it [...] [.]

That night of June 18th, 1956, Ferradj was awakened: "They want to kill me! I don't want to die! No, no! They want to kill me!"

Then nothing more. They dragged him off.

This episode is crucial for the narrator's interpretation of the civil war violence. It puts her in a position to interpret the recent assassinations of intellectual as martyrs, dying so that "Algeria will live." Like Zabana and Ferradj, the narrator's murdered friends, M'Hamed, Kader, Mahfoud, were killed violently for their political-intellectual activity. Zabana and Ferradj thus serve as myth-symbols for the stories the narrator seeks to recount: of intellectuals and writers murdered by the forces of repression in Algeria. The Zabana-Ferradj legend forms a kind of contextualizing epic narrative able to service, as a symbolic framework, the intellectual martyrdoms during the civil war atrocities. Part of what makes the Zabana-Ferradj pair function well in this role is that they capture two distinct aspects of the assassinations of the civil war. On one hand, Ferradj, in the narrator's retelling, agonizes over death, resisting until the end. He was dragged off "like Eid's sheep," "he screamed, he shouted, he fought." Yet, the narrator informs us, this struggle and open expression of agony before death is not what should determine our interpretation of his killing, its "symbolic" value or mythico-historical meaning. Rather, the model is Zabana, who calmly, courageously, walked toward his fate, transcending it by dissolving it into the larger cause of national justice: "I die, my friends, and Algeria will live." The narrator is thus teaching us to "read" Ferradj's killing as a martyrdom, for which Zabana is the archetype.

The narrator is in this way able to connect the two sides of a tradition. The narrator's intellectual colleagues and friends from Algeria, starting with M'Hamed, Mahfoud, and Kader, are now linked in the text, at the narrator's insistence, to their forebears. Zabana and Ferradj stand as inaugurators of an epic tradition. They were the first, in the narrator's eyes, so that others could follow. M'hamed, Mahfoud, and Kader can now become simply the recent additions to an ongoing procession.

8.3 Rewriting the nation

Michelet, doyen of nationalist historiography, wrote about giving symbolic life to the dead:

Oui, chaque mort laisse un petit bien, sa mémoire, et demande qu'on la soigne. Pour celui qui n'a pas d'amis, il faut que le magistrat y supplée. . . . Cette magistrature, c'est l'Histoire. Et les morts sont, pour dire comme le Droit romain, ces *miserabiles personae* dont le magistrat doit se préoccuper. Jamais dans ma carrière je n'ai pas perdu de vue ce devoir de l'historien. J'ai donné à beaucoup de morts trop oubliés l'assistance dont moi-même j'aurai besoin. Je les ai exhumés pour une seconde vie Ils vivent maintenant avec nous qui nous sentons leurs parents, leurs amis. Ainsi se fait une famille, une cité commune entre les vivants et les morts.⁸³

Yes, each dead person leaves behind a little piece of property, his memory, and asks that it be taken care of. For the person who has no friends, the magistrate step in This magistrate is History. And the dead are, to use the language of Roman law, the *miserabiles personae* whom the magistrate takes care of. Never in my career have I lost sight of this duty of the historian. I have given many of the all-to-forgotten dead the help I will need myself. I exhumed them for a second life. . . . They live now with us who feel ourselves their kin, their friends. Thus a family is made, a common society between the living and the dead.

In important respects, *Le blanc* bears a striking resemblance to the project of Michelet. Here is the narrator: "Moi, grâce à quelques-uns de mes amis couchés là dans ce texte—et de quelques confrères . . . moi, opiniâtre, je les ressuscite, ou je m'imagine le faire" "Me, thanks to several of my friends laying down in this text—and several colleagues . . . me, stubborn, I resuscitate them, or imagine I do."⁸⁴ And Michelet once more, on the dead about whom he wrote: "Il leur faut un Œdipe qui leur explique leur propre énigme dont ils n'ont pas eu le sens" "They need an Oedipus to explain to them their own enigma whose meaning they do not possess."⁸⁵ In the section above, we saw examples of the *Le blanc's* search for ancestors, its quest to place the civil war dead—M'Hamed, Mahfoud, Kader—within a genealogy whose sources coincide with the genealogy of the nation, a function filled by Ferradj and Zabana ("the first martyrs"⁸⁶), then still others prior, reaching back in the text's final movement to "le plus grand écrivain et poète arabe d'Algérie—au siècle dernier . . . l'émir Abdelkader el-Dzazaïri," "the greatest writer and poet of Algeria—a century ago . . . the emir Abdelkader el-Dzazaïri."⁸⁷ then even further back to "Saint Augustin l'Algérien." In short, the murdered civil war intellectuals stand at the front of a procession going back to the mythical and historical origins of the Algerian nation, mimicking the movement of

⁸³ Cited in Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2006, 204-06.

⁸⁴ 233.

⁸⁵ Cited in Anderson, 198.

⁸⁶ 35.

⁸⁷ 236, 238, 243,

nationalist historiography, which establishes, for Etienne Balibar, a sense of common identity in societies "represented in the past of in the future *as if* they formed a natural community."⁸⁸

Le blanc presents an interesting commentary on falsified history. An important section of the novel is dedicated to excoriating the state's monopolizing of national history and its self-serving distortions of public memory. The narrator describes how state figures pay homage to a conveniently distorted memory of Algeria's national "heroes". She decries the self-serving amnesia of official accounts of the war with France, where "les mensonges se tressent, se tissent, et s'impriment" 'lies are spun, woven, and published.'⁸⁹ The narrator's thoughts are summed up in her friend's statement: "quelque chose était pourri dans notre révolution!" 'something was rotten in our revolution!'⁹⁰ For example, she notes the irony of Abbane being buried next to his murderer, Krim Belkacem, who is in turn buried near his own murderer, president Boumediene. All three however have ended up in the martyrs' cemetery, serving the interests of state-driven memory. The war memory has been transformed into an icon for use by state power, part of the quasi-religious ceremonial of Algerian politics: "devant chacun et devant tous à la fois, les gouvernants qui se succèdent à Alger viennent s'incliner chaque 1^{er} novembre et renouvellent 'le Serment de novembre.' " 'before each and all at once, the governors succeeding each other at Algiers come to bow each November 1 and renew "the Oath of November."⁹¹ Her assessment is scathing. She concludes that the state's attempt to manipulate collective memory represents "une déliquescence morale qui ne deviendra forcément que plus hypocrite. . . Ainsi s'amplifia la caricature d'un passé où indistinctement se mêlaient héros sublimes et meurtriers fratricides" 'a moral decay that will only become ever more hypocritical. . . Thus we see amplified the caricature of a past where sublime heros and fratricidal murderers blended indistinctly.'⁹²

However, the narrator contributes to these processes even as she denounces them. One does not read far in *Le blanc* without encountering the glorifying of war figures like Abbane Ramdane,

⁸⁸ Étienne Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," 1991, cited in Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, 2010, 29.

⁸⁹ 132.

⁹⁰ 134.

⁹¹ 135.

⁹² 136. Such hypocrisy and historical falsification even explains something about the civil war: "Comment s'étonner que la révolte, que la colère, même déviée, même dévoyée, des "fous de Dieu" d'aujourd'hui se soit attaquée dès le début aux cimetières, aux tombes des *chahids*, les sacrifiés d'hier?" Harbi describes the Algerian situation as "une histoire prisonnière du dogme de la lutte armée." "Preface," Meynier, 2002, 10. This brings to mind what Paul Ricoeur describes as "the heritage of founding violence," in which a community or regime celebrates "under the heading of founding events" a series of "violent acts legitimated after the fact by a precarious state of rights," a process whose purpose is to "signify glory" for the established regime. As institutionalized power tells stories about itself, "It is . . . the selective function of the narrative that opens to manipulation the opportunity and the means of a clever strategy, consisting from the outset in a strategy of forgetting as much as in a strategy of remembering. . . . A history taught, a history learned, but also a history celebrated." *History, Memory, Forgetting*, 82, 85. In a similar connection, Raul Hilberg writes: "Among the practices that give me discomfort is the creation of a story in which historical facts are altered deliberately for the sake of plot and adventure." For Hilberg, "The manipulation of history is a kind of spoilage, and kitsch is debasement," *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian*, 1996, 139, 141.

who joins her list of heroic martyrs ("je le vois clairement, Abane Ramdane est un héros de tragédie car il va à la mort les yeux ouvert" 'I see it clearly, Abanne Ramdane is a tragic hero because he went to his death with eyes open.'). As she relies on her own subjective judgment to line up a canon of intellectual heroes, we find a result similar to the one she critiques—"la caricature d'un passé"⁹³—with the lumping together of disparate and sometimes mutually exclusive figures under a single, homogenized rubric ("our heroes"), for the sake of a convenient, legendary collective memory. Abbane himself is presented as "un héros" of the revolution,⁹⁴ he is "le chef incontesté de la résistance algérienne" in late 1956 and early 1957; we learn that "[il] a critiqué les méthodes brutales et les violences interalgériennes," and that he was an active promoter of unity: "Abane travaille efficacement au rassemblement des différentes composantes de la résistance—qui jusque-là se fragmentaient, ou s'opposaient, ou s'ignoraient."⁹⁵

It is difficult to rectify this portrait of him with what is known about Abbane's actual actions. He was hardly one who opposed inter-Algerian violence. On the contrary, he wrote that "any conscious follower of Messali must be shot without trial." In his April 1955 Declaration, a reissue and updating of the November 1st Declaration, Abbane wrote that the ALN, the army of the FLN, would be "pitiless towards traitors and enemies of the country," a category in which many indigenous Algerians would find themselves.⁹⁶ Regarding Messali Hadj, described by Harbi as the father of Algerian nationalism, Abbane wrote in September 1955: "Messali . . . est devenu l'ennemi n. 1 de l'Algérie. . . . Nous avons aussi décidé d'abattre Messali si le gouvernement l'autorise à rentrer en Algérie."⁹⁷ Directives such as this contributed to the massacres, during the same period, of hundreds, probably thousands, of Messalist-oriented Algerians.⁹⁸ Abbane's most well-known phrase regards his preference for terrorism: "one corpse in a jacket is always worth more than twenty in uniform."⁹⁹ In fact, Abbane was a principle

⁹³ 136.

⁹⁴ 127, 133, 135. It is possible that the term is meant from the state's point of view, and not the narrator's, or that it is intended ironically, but these points do not affect my argument here.

⁹⁵ 120, 119.

⁹⁶ Evans, 2012, 129.

⁹⁷ See chapter 3, footnote 15 and surrounding discussion.

⁹⁸ Meynier, 446-447. Ruedy writes: "In time, whole communities that refused to cooperate with the FLN were subject to the most severe sanctions. During the first two and one-half years of the war, the FLN killed only one European for every six Muslims it liquidated." 164. The most dramatic examples were the "nuit rouge" massacres at Feraoun village and in the lower Soummam, the most famous of which was the Melouza massacre. The FLN, including under Abbane, cultivated an aggressive hostility toward alternative nationalist orientations and a ruthless method of consolidating power, one that certainly produced huge amounts of "interalgerian violence." However, nothing substantial at the level of ideology opposed the MNA and the FLN. The latter was originally a breakaway faction from the Messalists. Ideologically similar, the subsequent conflict was basically over power and leadership, with the FLN far more prepared to seize it through violence and to physically eliminate its rivals. Meynier, 2004, 449.

⁹⁹ Ruedy, 168. Harbi records that the FLN's animosity toward Messali was purely a "conflit de pouvoir;" "Messali n'a pas été combattu en 1954-1955 parce qu'il *était* contre-révolutionnaire. On l'a *traité* de contre-révolutionnaire pour l'éliminer, au besoin physiquement. 'Nous allons agir de manière à le faire douter de son patriotisme. Déjà nous faisons les communiqués pour exploiter à notre profit les attentats commis par ses partisans' dira Abbane Ramdane." 1984, 156 (emphasis added). See also Jean-Louis Planche, 2001, 224-225.

architect of the FLN's terror policy of the Battle of Algiers.¹⁰⁰ Alistaire Horne wrote that Abbane "has been variously described as the Robespierre, the Jean Moulin or the Bourguiba of the FLN."¹⁰¹ A senior member of the FLN leadership declared that "the only thing of importance to [Abbane] was national unity, and he was determined to obtain it by any means. This is what shocked many militants. He was violent, brutal, radical and expeditious."¹⁰²

Given such information, the portrait of Abbane as "un héros de tragédie" who criticized "les violences interalgérienne" and fought for the "rassemblement des différentes composantes de la résistance" appears quite like "la caricature d'un passé." The point is not to suggest that Djebbar, or the narrator of *Le blanc*,¹⁰³ are responsible for the kind of precision, factual accuracy, and rigorous presentation of a historiographical work. Clearly, *Le blanc* is intended for a popular readership, not a scholarly one—although scholars seem quite prepared to treat the text and Djebbar's work in general as representing scrupulously documented historiography.¹⁰⁴ The larger point is that *Le blanc* organizes its presentation around state-nationalist impulses, though certainly with far more sophistication than the regime the narrator harshly criticizes. The example of Abbane, which is clearly a partisan portrait, crystallizes this point. While anti-FLN nationalists such as Messali Hadj are barely mentioned, Abbane is held up as the ultimate martyr, the Christ of the revolution.

Ironically, Abbane is held up in *Le blanc* as "le symbole d' [. . .] amnésie"—evoking, for the narrator, the mythification of history. Algeria's difficult confrontation with its history has been the subject of much discussion; it is what Evans calls "the falsification of history in post-independence Algeria."¹⁰⁵ Omar Carlier refers in the Algerian context to the "mythical dimension of history:" "for the study of the mythical in history, the only ground more fertile than independence movements and revolutions is religion;" this is because "faith, like revolutions and nationalist movements, sets aside social disparities through the sacred."¹⁰⁶ In Algeria, "for the media as with the State, history is a dimension of the sacred."¹⁰⁷ In a similar vein, Marc Ferro describes the tendencies of concentrated power to dominate or control collective memory by controlling the means of public representation. "To control the past is to master the present, to

¹⁰⁰ Horne, 183-184.

¹⁰¹ Horne, 132.

¹⁰² The citation is from Ouamrane, cited in Horne, 132.

¹⁰³ For purposes of analytical clarity, I take Djebbar to refer to the author as a person, who may have similarities to and differences from the textual first-person character who presents herself as the narrator of *Le blanc*.

¹⁰⁴ For example, Giuliva Milò devotes an uncritical page to the Abbane episode as it is presented in *Le blanc*, concluding that "Abane Ramdane opère le lien entre l'histoire et la culture. Son meurtre . . . figure l'attentat à la démocratie au profit d'un pouvoir sans partage . . ." Milò testifies tellingly to the "history effect" of *Le blanc*'s mode of presentation when she declares that Assia Djebbar "montr[e] que l'actualité algérienne peut s'expliquer par une exégèse scrupuleuse et documentée de l'Histoire." *Lecture et pratique de l'Histoire dans l'œuvre d'Assia Djebbar*, 2007, 264-265.

¹⁰⁵ Evans, *Algeria*, 2012, 355.

¹⁰⁶ "Scholars and Politicians: An Examination of the Algerian View of Algerian Nationalism," 1997, 136.

¹⁰⁷ "Mémoire, mythe, et doxa de l'État en Algérie," 28-29.

legitimize dominion and justify legal claims. It is the dominant powers—states, churches, political parties, private interests—which own or finance the media or means of reproduction, whether it be school-books or strip-cartoons, films or television programs.”¹⁰⁸ *Le blanc* shares this critique, and is harshly critical of the state's political theatre, in which murderers and their victims are assembled together in the unity cemetery of "national martyrs" and founding heroes. The narrator highlights the hypocrisy of such an affair:

[L]e corps d'Abane Ramdane eut droit à sa troisième tombe. Une troisième fois, on célébra le mort "tombé au champ d'honneur," il y eut probablement d'autre discours, aussi pompeux. Cette fois [. . .] on l'enterra tout près . . . de Krim Belkacem, son meurtrier, et ce dernier reposa non loin de l'imposant tombeau de Boumediene, celui-ci en somme le meurtrier du meurtrier...

Trois héros, parmi d'autres; devant chacun et devant tous à la fois, les gouvernants qui se succèdent à Alger viennent s'incliner chaque 1^{er} novembre et renouvellent "le Serment de novembre."

De nouveau Ali Zaamoum conclut amèrement: "Ils ont enterré ensemble les assassins et leurs victimes. Ils les ont tous décorés et déclarés officiellement "héros de la Révolution." [...] "Si l'idéal de novembre a pu être usurpé aussi effrontément, qu'en est-il du reste?"¹⁰⁹

By burying the dead in a manner to serve the interests of power, disparate figures are forced into the crucible of the memory constructions of the state, producing symbols of unity and legitimacy.

But the pages of *Le blanc* perform a similar operation. The text serves as a kind of burial site, a stringing together of eulogies. But the determination of the selections is factitious, not unlike the case of Krim buried next to Abane. For example, it is difficult to imagine figures more antithetical in their position on the Algerian war than Albert Camus and Frantz Fanon.¹¹⁰ Yet

¹⁰⁸ *The Use and Abuse of History: Or How the Past is Taught to Children*, 1981, X.

¹⁰⁹ 135.

¹¹⁰ Fanon, in Leninist fashion, wrote that any part of the masses, "the lumpenproletariat," who did not join and support the radicalism of the FLN were displaying a "lack of political consciousness and ignorance;" misunderstanding how things work, they came down essentially "on the side of the oppressor." For Fanon, "Violence alone, perpetrated by the people, violence organized and guided by the leadership, provides the key for the masses to decipher social reality." "Grandeur and Weakness of Spontaneity," 1962, 87, 96. Nothing could be more diametrically opposed to Camus's anti-Leninist libertarianism. "Terror does not evolve except towards a worse terror, the scaffold grows no more liberal, the gallows are not tolerant. Nowhere in the world has there been a party or a man with absolute power that did not use it absolutely." Cited in Peter Marshall, 584. While strongly denouncing the treatment of Muslims in Algeria, Camus had no patience for the absolutist thinking, authoritarian practice, or terror tactics employed by the FLN, which he repeatedly denounced in public speeches and writing. They led, in his opinion, down a path according to which "l'Algérie deviendra pour longtemps un champ de ruines." For Camus, the whole point was to rise above tribal, racial, and religious loyalties and reach toward a common morality, institutionalized as the equality of rights. Directly criticizing the position taken by those like Fanon, Sartre, and the FLN, Camus argued that "On accepte trop facilement à la fatalité. On accepte trop facilement de croire qu'après tout le sang seul fait avancer l'histoire . . . La tâche des hommes de culture et de foi n'est, en tout cas, ni de

they are here "buried" next to each other,¹¹¹ in the service of a community the narrator generates, implied through the central, alluding term "Algerian White." Consider, in light of this point, the reflections of a recent work on nationalism:

Although historically the nation-state arose in the world before compulsory mass education, only through this system could it consolidate its position. Culturally constructed memories were firmly entrenched at the upper levels of state education; at their core was national historiography.

To promote a homogeneous collective in modern times, it was necessary to provide, among other things, a long narrative suggesting a connection in time and space between the fathers and the "forefathers" of all the members of the present community. Since such a close connection, supposedly pulsing within the body of the nation, has never actually existed in any society, the agents of memory worked hard to invent it. With the help of archaeologists, historians, and anthropologists, a variety of findings were collected. These were subjected to major cosmetic improvements carried out by essayists, journalists, and the authors of historical novels. From this surgically improved past emerged the proud and handsome portrait of the nation.

Every history contains myths, but those that lurk within national historiography are especially brazen. The histories of peoples and nations have been designed like the statues in city squares—they must be grand, towering, heroic. [Producing the portrait of the national community has long been] the life's work of the national historians and archaeologists, the authoritative priesthood of memory.¹¹²

désertent les luttes historiques, ni de servir ce qu'elles ont de cruel et d'inhumain. . . . C'est à cette condition que l'histoire avance véritablement, qu'elle innove Pour tout le reste, elle se répète, comme une bouche sanglante qui ne vomit qu'un bégaiement furieux. . . . Puisque c'est là notre tâche, si obscure et ingrate qu'elle soit, nous devons l'aborder avec décision pour mériter un jour de vivre en hommes libres, c'est-à-dire comme des hommes qui refusent à la fois d'exercer et de subir la terreur." Camus, 1958, 181-183. For further elaboration on Camus's position on these matters, see Olivier Todd, 844, 851-859, 1052. It should be obvious that this position is the extreme inverse of Fanon's position above, perhaps best summarized by Sartre in the book's preface: it is only through violence and killing that colonized people can regain their sense of confidence and rejoin the human world as "full" humans: "Fanon . . . shows perfectly clearly that this irrepressible violence . . . is a man reconstructing himself. . . . Violence alone can eliminate [the traces of the colonizer's violence]. As soon as it begins it is merciless. Either one must remain terrified or become terrifying A [peasant] fighter's weapon is his humanity. . . . Killing is a necessity: killing a European is killing two birds with one stone, eliminating in one go oppressor and oppressed: leaving one man dead and the other man free." "Preface," in Fanon, 1962, lv. But if one admits of the extreme incompatibility of Camus's views and those of Fanon, the juxtaposition of Camus with another "cemetery neighbor" in the "Algerian White" funerary procession, Abbane Ramdane (116-117), is even more disconcerting, given his outright advocacy and *practice* of terrorism against both French and Algerian civilians. It is interesting, furthermore, to note how the narrator's Abbane absorbs something of Camus's position, since she portrays Abbane, ahistorically, as a unifying presence attempting to attenuate conflict and violence between Algerians.

¹¹¹ In "Procession 1" they are the first two figures. 95-99; and again 113-116.

¹¹² Sand, *Invention of the Jewish People*, 2010, 14-15.

It is interesting to note that in some passages, *Le blanc* bitterly mocks the nation-preserving memory function described above, especially when the state performs it, as when it buries Abbane next to Krim who is buried next to Boumediene. Or, when it seeks to retrieve the body of Abdelkader for the purposes of state-imposed national memory. Or, when it propagandizes ahistorically about the FLN's war-period unity. Such intolerable distortions of memory are bitterly condemned by the narrator. For *Le blanc*, these are the acts of, to use Shlomo's term, an "authoritative priesthood of memory."

But in other places, *Le blanc* itself slips into this function, also becoming a momentary member of this priesthood, as in the example of its partisan representation of the war of independence, or in the way it treats the figure of Abbane, cases concerning the treatment of the war with France. However, in its portrayal of the civil war, *Le blanc* is even more striking in its readiness to join with the "priesthoods of memory," a point to which we proceed immediately.

8.4 Writing the Civil War: Islamists and the State in *Le blanc de l'Algérie*

Le blanc extensively deploys rhetorical devices to give an impression of journalistic accuracy, historical even-handedness and rigor, and non-partisanship. The text of *Le blanc* concludes with a list of non-fiction works, including serious historians such as Harbi, works that, according to the narrator, "m'ont permis de mieux éclairer certaines scènes de ce récit."¹¹³ The work plainly invites the reader to project a high level of confidence in its historicity. The episodes the narrator recounts are often delivered in a near-journalistic style, with concision and details such as the precise date and time of a phone call or departure.¹¹⁴ In addition, the narrator, consistently self-referential, declares in the opening lines that she participates in no partisan discourse ("je ne polémique pas"), but merely tells the truth. "Le plus simplement possible (et, pour certains, après enquête auprès de quelques proches) je rétablis le récit des jours [. . .] à l'approche du trépas."¹¹⁵

However, when it comes to the civil war, the manner in which it is portrayed by *Le blanc* reveals an unwavering partisan perspective. In the episodes reviewed above, *Le blanc* waxes ironic on the willingness of the Algerian state to manipulate memory in producing a self-serving image. Citing Harbi and others, the narrator corrects the record, castigating the state officials for their lack of attention to accuracy or historical truth. But when it comes to representing Islamists, it often seems as if any stereotype—often the same ones peddled by regime spokesmen¹¹⁶—will do just fine. There is no clearer example than her depiction of the murder of contemporary intellectuals. Nowhere is there a hint of doubt about responsibility for the murder: it is "un

¹¹³ 249-250.

¹¹⁴ For example, 72-73.

¹¹⁵ 11. Such a declaration evokes the long history of such assertions—"I'm only telling the truth about what actually happened"—appearing at the opening of prose writing. See Ghallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality." in Moretti, ed., 337.

¹¹⁶ For examples, see Chapter 5.

intégrisme religieux décidé à prendre le pouvoir coûte que coûte."¹¹⁷ This fits with the narrator's Manichean vision of the civil war context. "La moitié de la terre Algérie vient d'être saisie par des ténèbres mouvantes, effrayantes et parfois hideuse..."¹¹⁸ And when the narrator describes the murderers, whom she repeatedly admits are "unknown,"¹¹⁹ the result is merely a shuffling of anti-Islamist stereotypes. When the *Le blanc* imagines Djaout's killers, actually unknown,¹²⁰ they are fanatical buffoons who have walked out of an anti-Muslim propaganda film. Though the three murderers of Youssef Sebti are admittedly "inconnus," the narrator is gives voice to an imagined conversation: "L'un des trois assaillants a craché quelques phrases: —Ainsi, aux étudiants, tu dis, et tu redis, et tu t'en vantes, que tu ne crois pas en Dieu, que tu ne crois pas en son Prophète."¹²¹ Further on, the narrator's fantasy continues:

Soudain, c'est décidé, cet émir, son émule à son côté, son rival tout près, tous se donnent le mot:

—Tuons ici aussi des communistes, comme en Afghanistan, hier! Lâchons nos sbires, nos garçons dévoués contre ces prétendus lettrés[.]

[...] —Vous avez dit Djaout?

—Un communiste?

—Un journaliste, c'est pareil! Un agent de l'étranger, de l'Occident, de la France, de...

[...] L'un des chefs jette à la poubelle le dernier article que ce Djaout a écrit. A quoi bon lire? Il parle de liberté, cet intellectuel? Et la foi en islam, cela ne lui suffit pas? Il parle d'un Etat laïc? Il aurait dû rester au Moscou[.]¹²²

A lack of source or evidence notwithstanding, the narrator is prepared to give voice to her fantasy about the nature and motives of Djaout's killers. Since little is actually known about the episode, it is telling that the narrator is ready to present a detailed portrait of what it must have been like, in her opinion. Take the case of Tahar Djaout. That he was murdered is a fact. That he was murdered by Islamist terrorists, as the narrator clearly thinks, and as she asserts through the passage above, is mere speculation, since there has been no serious inquiry into the matter, and, according to numerous analysts, there is no established evidence about culpability. But none of this is visible in *Le blanc*, where the question isn't *what* individual or group murdered Djaout, but

¹¹⁷ 241.

¹¹⁸ 231.

¹¹⁹ 217.

¹²⁰ Mellah, 2004, 8.

¹²¹ 218.

¹²² 201-202.

why did the Islamists murder him. The narrator makes clear that she is fabricating, but she is nonetheless quite prepared to present a detailed portrait of what the reader is to understand as the likely scenario. For the narrator of *Le blanc*, Djaout's murderer isn't unknown: he was a "young warrior" fresh from his peregrination through the war camps of Pakistan and Afghanistan who, upon return, "gave himself the title 'émir.'" ¹²³

But did Islamists actually kill Djaout, or was it state security forces? It is true that an Islamist activist was presented by the regime as the culprit. After being tortured, he was made to read an extracted confession on national television. ¹²⁴ This was, furthermore, during a period of media censorship: no perspective challenging the regime was allowed into the press—least of all the perspective of Islamist groups and intellectuals—leaving the official version as the only version. ¹²⁵ But at Djaout's funeral, one of the slogans chanted was "*Pouvoir assassin*." Shortly after Djaout's murder, a number of his friends and colleagues were quite unsure about the "official version" of his murder. Boucebcı, moreover, named by the narrator as a personal friend, established a *Comité pour la vérité sur l'assassinat de Tahar Djaout*, whose purpose was to "lancer un appel contestant la version officielle de l'assassinat de son ami." Reportedly, Boucebcı "soupçonnait le régime d'avoir commandité l'assassinat de Tahar Djaout." ¹²⁶ François Gèze would later write: "Par la suite, les enquêtes ne menèrent à rien et la probabilité est aussi élevée que les auteurs de cet assassinat soient des islamistes — au nom de leur combat contre le pouvoir, T. Djaout était pour eux une cible toute désignée — que les militaires." ¹²⁷ In regards to the spate of murders of Algerian intellectuals, Gèze further wrote that

très vite, la confusion s'est installée, notamment avec les premiers assassinats d'intellectuels et de journalistes, *tous attribués aux terroristes islamistes par la presse liée au pouvoir*, ce qui est pourtant loin d'être évident. Que certains de ces meurtres soient le fait de militants islamiques est plus que probable. Mais l'implication directe ou indirecte de la Sécurité militaire dans plusieurs d'entre eux est tout aussi probable. ¹²⁸

For purposes of my point here, the factual circumstances, if we are ever in a position to find out, are irrelevant. What is relevant is that, in the absence of evidence one way or the other, we may observe that *Le blanc* reacts to the situation by offering a portrait identical to the state's own.

¹²³ 201.

¹²⁴ Aggoun, 320-323; Bedjaoui, 521, 686.

¹²⁵ Ghania Mouffok reported in 1996 in *Le Monde Diplomatique*: "Les premiers titres victimes de cette épuration médiatique seront les journaux du FIS, El Mounquidh et El Forkane, qui disparaîtront presque en même temps que leur parti. Ils seront bientôt suivis de plusieurs journaux, notamment arabophones, qui paieront, à force de suspensions et d'interdictions, leur manque d'enthousiasme à soutenir l'annulation des élections de janvier 1992 ou leur plaidoyer pour un plus grand respect des droits de l'homme. Une partie de l'opinion sera ainsi exclue de la démocratie, alors même que cette dernière tend à se confondre avec 'la lutte contre le terrorisme'."

¹²⁶ Aggoun, 320-321.

¹²⁷ "Aux origines de la violence," 1998.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Boucebci is another of the intellectual martyrs whose murder, while presented unequivocally as the work of Islamist insurgents, is actually unattributable. Boucebci is portrayed in *Le blanc* as railing against "le nouvel obscurantisme."¹²⁹ As in the case of Djaout, the case is closed for the narrator: "Un mois plus tard, l'enquête établit qu'un des infirmiers [. . .] avait, lui, désigné le professeur comme cible à de jeune tueurs." We are informed that Boucebci had generously recruited the nurse "tout en connaissant son idéologie religieuse," which the reader is to understand as Islamist.¹³⁰ However, the narrator fails to inform us that the "investigation" referred to is presumably the state's own, not an independent or credible one. Again, according to analysts, the state also stands out as a possible culprit: "les autorités avait également des raisons d'en vouloir au célèbre psychiatre."¹³¹ Again, the regime was quick to pin the murder on "des islamistes." But, we are reminded, Boucebci had helped establish the *Comité national contre la torture*, which was strongly critical of state policies and "très gênante pour le haut commandement militaire." Only weeks before the assassination, he had refused to cooperate with a regime whitewash of the Boudiaf assassination.¹³² Perhaps most importantly, however, Boucebci suspected the regime "d'avoir commandité l'assassinat de Tahar Djaout."¹³³ He had declared publically: "les images de lampistes exhibés à la télévision ne pourront masquer le visage des commanditaires de l'ombre."¹³⁴ However none of this information is mentioned *Le blanc*; and the case is quite similar with other assassinations presented in *Le blanc*.¹³⁵ Conclusive evidence is absent, so it is impossible to attribute responsibility *either way* with any authority until further evidence is available. Testimonial evidence, however, has been forthcoming.¹³⁶

¹²⁹ 73.

¹³⁰ 74.

¹³¹ Aggoun and Rivoire, for this and following, 320-321.

¹³² Specifically, he refused to sign a medical report confirming that Boudiaf's killer, Boumaârafi, was legally insane—which, according to Aggoun, "aurait permis de cautionner la thèse officielle selon laquelle l'assassinat du président algérien n'était qu'un 'acte isolé.' "

¹³³ According to Aggoun and Rivoire, it was only the night before his murder that he had established the *Comité pour la vérité sur l'assassinat de Tahar Djaout*.

¹³⁴ Aggoun, 320-321.

¹³⁵ In the case of Boukhobza, there is no doubt, at least for the narrator: "Un homme tel que celui-ci, ils l'ont tué! –Ils l'auraient tué au nom de l'islam! C'est cela, l'islam? –Non, ce n'est pas l'islam!" (70). While there is no evidence about who killed Boukhobza, the reader is left to assume, with the narrator, that he was murdered by religious fanatics. But he had also made enemies in the regime, which he had denounced, notably in his 1991 book, and he had apparently attempted to publicize evidence of corruption. Aggoun, 321. The case is similar with Saïd Mekbel, who also appears in *Le blanc*. He was assassinated in December 1994, shortly after having published an article directly implicating DRS director Mohamed "Toufik" Médiène in what he called the "pedagogical assassinations" of Algerian intellectuals. Aggoun, 322. This is left out by the portrait in *Le blanc*, which leaves the reader again to understand that Islamist fanatics were responsible for Mekbel's murder. Again, this may in fact be the case, but without evidence, and with a strong record of state acts of terror and assassinations, the choices made by the narrator in *Le blanc* are telling.

¹³⁶ Here, for example, is the account of a group of dissident Algerian officers, who published regularly to denounce the regime from the inside. According to the dissident officers, "Mahfoud Boucebci was assassinated, as was Tahar Djaout and later M'Hamed Boukhobza, by a group acting on orders from the DRS," for the reason that "the message had to be sent to the West:" opposition forces (such as the FIS) "had only knives [for slashing throats] and only

Were state security forces responsible for the murders of Djaout and other intellectuals? Hard evidence lacking, we are left to speculate. But authoritarian regimes with secret police, a sprawling state intelligence apparatus, and a well-documented absence of respect for even the most basic human rights might well be expected to attack their critics. "Tahar Djaout was anti-Islamist," a dissident officer points out, "but he was also against the government."¹³⁷ Omar Belhouchet, editor of *El Watan*, declared on French television: "I believe for my part that a number of journalists were assassinated by the regime. It's grave, what I am saying, I don't have any proof, but there are journalists who were bothering the regime and I would not be surprised, tomorrow, to find out that some of my colleagues were assassinated by figures within the regime."¹³⁸ The animosity of the regime for intellectuals who were critical of state actions is well-known. Le Sueur writes that

It would have been bad enough for Algerian intellectuals if their opponents had been none but religious zealots. What made their situation truly unbearable was the state's parallel attacks on the Algerian intelligentsia, as the political situation deteriorated even before the military coup in 1992. *It is clear that the Algerian state openly targeted intellectuals* During the first years of the 1990s, the state censored, harassed, and even imprisoned writers with the full power of its security branches and with the support of a genuflected judiciary. Indeed, many officials and military leaders condoned the violation of human rights (including the use of torture against civilians, giving security officials carte blanche). . . . While the intelligentsia eventually found itself squeezed from both sides (the state and radical Islamists), *it was the Algerian junta that first had real power to persecute Algerian writers. . . .* Consequently, whatever the original purpose may have been, *by attacking intellectuals first, the state created the conditions for radical Islamists to follow suit*, rendering the liberal media especially vulnerable.¹³⁹

However, the reader of *Le blanc* senses none of this: the only question is *which* Islamist killed Djaout and the others and why; even the mere possibility of state involvement is non-existent. As a prominent British human rights advocate stated, "The whole phenomenon [of the Algerian civil

understand the message of eradication." To send such a message, it was necessary to strike the imagination with "atrocious things." Moreover, according to the officers, the "wave of terror attributed to the Islamists" was meant equally to propagandize "journalists, university students, artists, and political figures," making them feel "a sense of debt" toward the security forces and the regime. The intellectual class remained "with only one alternative: exile or the regime's security residences." Aggoun, 323. The dissident officers organization is the (Movement Algérien des Officiers Libres, MAOL), for which Captain Ali B. is the spokesman. Although it is considered an important source by serious analysts, it is impossible to know if the claims made by the organization throughout the 1990s are true without further documentation.

¹³⁷ Aggoun, 323. Le Sueur provides details. See above, note 72 and surrounding discussion.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹³⁹ 172-173. Emphasis added.

war] has been seen through the distorting lens of a prejudice, which casts political Islam as the enemy of democracy.”¹⁴⁰ In the cases reviewed above, there has been no independent inquiry and there is little solid evidence available. The narrator's depiction of the murders, her invented "solutions" to the crime of their murder, the enigma of civil war violence presented in *Le blanc*, are systematically one-sided. There is no attempt to understand the Islamist opposition, nor to seriously call into question the position of the regime. Despite a lack of clarity about the murders, and reasonable suspicion that at least some of them may have been killed by undercover security forces or by militia groups under control of the DRS, the narrator presents readers with a "case solved" approach: it was the Islamists, monsters that they are.

In the final analysis, when it comes to the civil war, the partisan perspective of *Le blanc* stands out clearly. The opening premise seems to be that Islamism is a fundamental cause of evil in Algeria: "Half of the territory of Algeria has just been seized by a moving darkness, terrifying and sometimes hideous."¹⁴¹ While the state is occasionally depicted as hypocritical and excessive,¹⁴² the systematic thrust of its portrayal of civil war violence places blame squarely on a "religious fundamentalism" that is "determined to seize power at any cost," apparently unlike the regime.¹⁴³ This view, presented by the narrator of *Le blanc*, happens to correlate with statements made elsewhere by the author.¹⁴⁴ If a bias against Islamism and for the state is part of an unannounced premise of the work, that would probably explain why, given conflicting evidence or an absence of evidence, *Le blanc* is portrays the civil war violence in the manner described above. It is noteworthy that this procedure closely resembles the one outlined in 1994, a year before the publication of *Le blanc*, by state decree to the media.¹⁴⁵ While *Le blanc* is different in many respects from *Les agneaux*, the two have this point in common. For *Le blanc de l'Algérie* the conditions of possibility for making the civil war violence visible would seem to include a marked invisibility of one half of the civil war—the one opposed by the state—which remains masked by caricature and stereotype.

¹⁴⁰ Lord Averbury, founder of the Britain-based Parliamentary Human Rights Group, "Preface," Bedjaoui, xvii.

¹⁴¹ 231.

¹⁴² See chapter 3, footnote 5.

¹⁴³ 241.

¹⁴⁴ For example, in a public speech in 2000, Djebar describes Algeria as having been "infiltrated by Islamists" in 1988. Such movements are "determined to impose their caricatural vision" of Islam." Chikhi, 2007, 162. Elsewhere, she writes that "writers are physically killed, alongside journalists, teachers, and doctors" by "murderous Algerians" who are "instrumentalized by a so-called fundamentalist propaganda in the name of political Islam favored by a new religious Inquisition, worthy of what existed in Catholic Europe at the end of the Middle Ages," while claiming "in their manner: 'Everything must disappear!' " *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, 1999, 244.

¹⁴⁵ See chapter 5.

Conclusion

This study has considered how three francophone novels by Algerian authors, all published in the 1990s, portray the Algerian civil war. Specifically, I have considered how they represent the conflict, its actors, especially Islamists, and its relation to Algerian history. The study has attempted to contextualize the civil war in Algerian history, and it has brought in the state's own representation of the conflict as a point of comparison. From this vantage point, a number of observations emerge. One is the proximity or distance of the novels' perspectives to that of the state. This can inform us of the extent to which these cultural productions are potentially aligned with state interests. In this case, the three novels offer interesting cases. In the essential contours of its portrayal of the civil war, *Les agneaux* converges almost precisely with state accounts on virtually all points. On the other hand, *Le blanc* offers a mixed case. In portraying Algerian history and the regime itself, *Le blanc* displays a strong revisionist sentiment, accusing the independence-era FLN of major crimes, and the postwar regime of pervasive corruption, institutionalizing itself as a sclerotic, hypocritical, self-serving power system. When it comes to the civil war, however, it is interesting to note that the portrayal of *Le blanc*, like *Les agneaux*, converges very closely with the state's own account. On these points, *Le serment* is the most distinct. Announcing at the outset that "nothing makes sense," the novel consistently evinces an intense skepticism about the role of the state in the civil war and the FLN's position in Algerian history. One of the dominant themes of the novel is the rank, pervasive corruption of all forms of power in Algerian society, including the regime itself. This corruption has distorted history, identity, and public memory in Algeria to such an extent that a deep understanding of the civil war is inaccessible to ordinary Algerians, such as the novel's protagonist. Without a broader, deeper view, one that is uncorrupted by the interests of power, the civil war is literally unthinkable, even while its violence is pervasive and constantly renewed.

In their assessment of Algerian history, all three novels are suggestive of deep injustices at the heart of the nationalist project. In *Les agneaux's* treatment of both the Harkis and the dispossession of the well-to-do families in the postwar era, the novel sympathetically probes sentiments of resentment and injustice that contribute to the civil war. *Le blanc* is openly denunciatory on this point, and delivers pages of historical revisionism, relying on Harbi and others to dispel some of the common myths of the FLN victory, while showing a willingness to discuss ugly aspects of the event of national liberation. *Le serment* is very much in the same vein, though it goes even further by directly confronting the civil war between the FLN and the MNA, and accuses the FLN of ruthlessness and self-serving tactics that were not in the interests of ordinary Algerians. Moreover, *Le serment* gives the strong feeling that the manner in which the national liberation war was gone about wrecked in some sense the possibility of a better solution that was once possible, one that would have been more conciliatory, less chauvinistic, more tolerant of difference, and more politically inclusive. In this point, the novel echoes the sentiments long expressed by historians such as Harbi, and political actors such as Ait Ahmed and Ferhat Abbas. An important distinction between *Le blanc* and *Le serment* in their treatment of this point is that the former seems to feel a strong urge to glorify a kind of purity within the FLN's nationalism, which it conveys by posing Abbane as a Christ-like martyr, innocent yet

sacrificed for the greater cause, symbolic of the inner purity of the movement. That this is a perfectly ahistorical portrait does not change anything; *Le blanc* uses this construal of Abbane as a foil to denounce all that is corrupt in the FLN. In doing so, the novel essentially evokes two FLNs: one legitimate, honorable, pure of intention, and worthy of glory; the other corrupt, violent, excessive, hypocritical, self-serving. This allows the novel to offer only a limited form of criticism in the state's handling of the civil war. The state is portrayed as excessive, corrupt, sclerotic, hypocritical; but its basic legitimacy is never called into question, and it is clearly construed as the better of two evils, with the Islamists portrayed as the forces of darkness, a kind of demonic fury overtaking the land. It is on this point that *Le serment* goes much further than the other two novels in its unwillingness to interpret the civil war in simplistic moral or political terms. It is far more less assertive in its assessment of what is known about the civil war: resoundingly, next to nothing. Instead, the *Le serment* is content to sketch out insidious developments in postwar Algeria, in a manner openly denunciatory of the regime's handling of the situation. But if *Le serment* is constantly suggestive, it is never conclusive. It merely evokes lines of causality within the nefarious networks of patronage, corruption, and behind-the-scenes, mafia-like actors, which emerged from Algeria's war-time and immediately post-war developments: the powers that prevailed, the political paths taken, with non-victorious groups marginalized, excluded, and forced into exile.

Regarding solutions offered, the novels also diverge significantly. *Les agneaux* plainly displays state violence as a legitimate and just response. The novel can even be read in reverse as an apology for state violence. Starting with the founding assumption that state violence is the legitimate response, the next step is to demonstrate the rank criminality and irretrievably anti-social nature of the insurgents, perhaps couching this in a briefly-sketched framework of ordinary village life in Algeria. While *Le blanc*, on the other hand, does not in any overt way apologize for state violence, it does offer a strong implicit defense of it. By portraying state actions as merely excessive, the novel clearly represents the Islamist opposition as the true criminals in the civil war, doing extensive work in this vein by inventing copious lurid details of violence and murder to insert into the factual sketches of various episodes of assassination. Most telling on this point is that in cases where details and knowledge are missing and guilt is difficult or impossible to establish, based on available evidence, the novel is prepared to insert this detail into the sketches, supplying otherwise missing information as if it were established fact, and attributing virtually all acts of violence to the Islamist opposition. Moreover, the latter are always portrayed as fools, bigots, and obscurantists, foils to the glorified intellectuals being assassinated. But the novel ends on a mournful note, perhaps mourning the wrecking of Algeria's national project, marked by the de-mythification of its past. Suddenly, the parallel to the civil war is the purges of Amirouche and the murder of Abbane, all papered-over in the aftermath of empty glory, corrupt regimes, and distorted memory. All of this is symbolized by the martyrs' cemetery, arranged according to state needs. The themes and tone are a striking contrast to former works by Djébar such as *L'amour, la fantasia* or *Vaste est la prison*, which treat the nationalist cause and the war of liberation in a far more celebratory manner. But if *Le blanc* portrays the FLN nationalism as corrupt and sapped of its inner glory through the iconic murder of Abbane, a betrayal of "the ideal of November 1," the novel seems to be attempting to salvage or refound a kind of nationalist legacy through its homage to a string of intellectual martyrs. In the course of this quasi-liturgical "procession" of Algeria-related intellectuals, the arrangement, choices, and

contrasts are sometimes surprising or incongruous, verging at times on the outright incompatible, as when Camus—who fought intensely in the pages of literary journals to promote a "civil truce" while denouncing all forms of terrorism—is placed in the procession next to Abbane, who was the figurehead and planner of the Battle of Algiers terrorism and viciously partisan, ever-prepared to "liquidate" rival Algerian factions, and to "motivate" ordinary Algerians to join the FLN cause through terror tactics. There may well be plenty to appreciate about Abbane, especially when the alternative was Krim and Boumediene. But the willingness displayed by *Le blanc* to paint an idealized portrait of what in fact were quite grim realities, requiring substantial nuance, is evidence of an impulse to reproduce a purer nationalism than that corrupt version history has left us.

Le serment is entirely unwilling to propose a solution, claiming instead that the problem is not even sufficiently visible to be addressed. The crime denounced in the novel is the murder of history, the usurpation of memory by state power, and the corruption allowed to penetrate Algerian society under the paternalistic hypocrisy of a self-serving regime. The novel is openly denunciatory, reminding one at times of the tone of Rachid Boudjedra's equally denunciatory *La répudiation*, both of which unflinchingly evoke state power in hostile, bitter terms like the "Clan" and the "Dictator." *Le serment* is equally unprepared to assign blame for the civil war, since it suggests responsibility to be so widely dispersed. Not an agent or group, but an entire corrupt system has produced the conditions of contradiction, scarcity, and violent exclusion that in turn erupt as the civil war: mafia networks, regime patronage, state power, self-serving diplomats, a chauvinistic society, naively instrumentalized, fanatical Islamists, and even the French state, more interested in clientelist business relations than promoting democracy or political pluralism. *Le serment* is best read as denunciatory in its treatment, condemning both the regime and the conventional understanding of the civil war as fraudulent concoctions of a false history written in the interests of the powerful. The method the novel proposes is to start by reassessing the national project, remaining open to admitting the flaws and the crimes that were part of the story, and refusing to grant a false entitlement or legitimacy to the FLN merely because it happened to be the victor. In its depiction of the aging Bakour mourning at the settler cemetery, the site of the Other of the FLN's nationalism, the novel touches upon a humanism reminiscent of Camus's call to overcome narrow markers of national and cultural identity by admitting of the grievability of all forms of human life. *Le serment* can thus be read as a call for a more humanistic approach to the legacy of Algerian nationalism, opposed to the triumphalist record of national glory.

In their treatment of Islamists and Islamism, it is worth observing that all three novels fail to humanize the insurgents or offer any means of understanding them. *Les agneaux*, interestingly, comes the closest when it displays the misery of everyday life and the sense of social exclusion that prompts some of its characters to opportunistically identify as Islamists in order to engage in a criminal rampage and explore their more sadistic tendencies. While this treatment may be apt for some aspects of the civil war, it criminalizes the entire Islamist perspective and offers the reader no means to understand the vast majority of the Islamist movement, including the salafi minority, which is not reducible to mere opportunistic criminality. *Le blanc* has very little to say about the Islamists, and is plainly uninterested in understanding them. They are merely confused adolescents, when they are not raging criminals and duplicitous or buffoonish murderers; moreover

they are openly obscurantist, scornful of all forms of learning and incapable of nuanced thought beyond scriptural dogma. Where such people came from, and what their human motivations might be, these seem to be questions beyond what *Le blanc* is prepared to consider. Islamists merely appear to be those unfortunate enough not to have been graced with an enlightened, secular education. (Note that I am not claiming that this is a fair representation of the author's views, since I have not reviewed some of the material that would be relevant to such a claim [though the author has pronounced views such as this one on numerous occasions]. What I am claiming is that this is a fair assessment of the portrayal in *Le blanc*.) In *Le serment*, the question is practically irrelevant, since Islamists don't appear, though they are glossed occasionally by the narrator or a character. They are variously fanatical, naïve, self-obsessed, hapless, enraged, and are largely manipulated by greater forces pulling the strings from behind the stage.

One way of asking the question more pointedly is to consider who is allowed to suffer, and thus to be humanized. This is essentially the question asked by Judith Butler in her conceptualization of grievable life, though it is an age-old question of being able to recognize the suffering of others across the lines of class, identity, culture, and even life-form.¹ Putting this question to all three novels, the answer emerges starkly: Islamists are never humanized; their suffering is never represented; their emotions are never legitimate; they appear to lie outside of what the novels are prepared to recognize as a grievable form of life. That is, they are largely just invisible, unseen, unseeable, like the subaltern formations described in history departments. While multitudes of Islamist intellectuals, including teachers, poets, and writers were savagely persecuted by the state during the civil war, with disappearances of such people ranking in the hundreds and perhaps thousands according to some analysts, no such human figure finds their way into the novels considered here. *Le blanc*, for example, focuses exquisitely, perhaps obsessively on the suffering of only a certain class of intellectuals: secular, francophone, liberal. Such intellectuals are intensely humanized, we hear their voices, read lines from their work, we feel their anguish and take pride in their courage. When they are killed, murdered, it is a tragic spectacle we are forced to look at, pathos builds and we feel a strong sense of injustice. No such position is accorded to Islamist intellectuals murdered by state actors. It may well be that the author was unaware of such eventualities, but this is unlikely, given that scenes openly referenced in *Le blanc*, such as the Serkadji prison massacre, show a plain awareness of mass state violence. More likely, the selection is a function of the prejudices of an intellectual elite prepared to sympathize with itself, to humanize the suffering of secular, enlightened, mostly francophone elites in Algeria, but far less prepared to understand the motives and lifeworld of Islamist actors. I point this out not to support, justify or apologize for the spectrum of Islamist positions during the civil war. To be sure, any informed, nuanced evaluation would likely find much to denounce elements on both sides, though that is not my task here, which is restricted to discussion of how the Algerian civil war has been portrayed in prominent works of French-language literature.

¹ Echoing the question put forth in earlier decades by Said, Butler asks "To what extent have Arab peoples, predominantly practitioners of Islam, fallen outside the "human" as it has been naturalized in its "Western" mold by the contemporary workings of humanism? What are the cultural contours of the human set at work here? How do our cultural frames for thinking the human set limits on the kinds of losses we can avow as loss?" *Precarious Life*, 32.

It should probably not be surprising that francophone novels about the Algerian civil war, written by the Algerian intelligentsia, will be generally sympathetic to and somewhat in line with state accounts. Many analysts have attempted sophisticated analyses of the relation between the intellectual class and the state, suggesting that the social rewards and punishments associated with any entrenched power system will tend to strongly influence the political and moral culture of those in a position to receive privileges from it.² Cultural producers are not immune from this analysis. In highly authoritarian states, where there is even more to lose or gain, the situation is likely to be further intensified because power is more concentrated and citizens enjoy fewer protections. Furthermore, in Algeria, the situation is often one of relative insulation of the elite from the lives of ordinary Algerians, ever more so during the civil war. When intellectuals are not in outright exile, as is the case for Assia Djebar and Mohammed Dib, for example, they often have been (since 1991) under state protection, as is the case with writers such as Rachid Boudjedra. In this case, as with the "embedded journalists" recent American wars, one's position (some analysts refer to "bunkerized" intellectuals) will be likely to influence one's perspective.

To take a concrete illustration, the passage in *Le blanc* that glosses the Serkadji prison massacre is quite revealing. The manner in which the Serkadji prison massacre is referenced is emblematic of how the novel treats civil war violence. The scene serves as a device for moving the discussion from Algeria's present to its past. The atrocity of the massacre itself is dealt with in only a few brief sentences. The narrator's main interest in the episode is not the massacre, but the opportunity to open a narrative sequence on two figures of intellectual-political martyrdom, figures who received extensive treatment and who are deeply humanized. Plainly less relevant, though, are the massacred prisoners at Serkadji, a substantial number of whom were likely prisoners of conscience or arbitrary arrests in a due-process-free regime. The narrator acknowledges that prisoners were massacred, and that some of them were innocent. When the passage does mention them (see below), it is only from within a framework that offers a pretext for state repression, presented as excessive but not illegitimate.

Certes, trois, quatre gardiens ont été tués—et affreusement—par les mutins; le lendemain matin, "les forces de l'ordre" sont entrées dans la prison, ont dû tirer dans le tas: deux cents morts au moins—mutins et non-mutins—, entre quatre murs! Ainsi croient-ils lutter contre le chancre intégriste, "alors que ce sera, commenté-je, la gorge serrée, d'un coup deux cents familles, deux mille personnes qui verseront aussitôt dans le camp "islamiste" peut-être, en tout cas celui des désespérés! Quelle honte!... Et ceux qui répriment ainsi prétendent incarner la loi!"³

To be sure, three or four guards were killed—and horribly—by the rioters; the next morning, "the forces of order" entered the prison and appear to have shot into

² See Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 1994 and "The Public Role of Intellectuals," in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, 2004; Noam Chomsky, "Intellectuals and the State," 1977; Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position*, 2006, 209-212.

³ 34.

the crowd: two hundred dead at least—rioters and non-rioters—, between four walls! This is how they plan to fight the fundamentalist cancer, "but what will happen, I commented, a lump in my throat, is that suddenly two hundred families, two-thousand people will lapse into the 'Islamist' camp perhaps, or the camp of the desperate anyway! What a disgrace!... And those who practice such repression dare claim to embody the law!"

The passage displays a readiness to decry the excessiveness of state violence. But it appears to frame state repression within a perspective that both essentially justifies it ("To be sure, three or four guards were killed—and horribly—by the rioters") and demonizes Islamism as something one "lapses into" (the French *verser dans* generally holding a similar connotation). That is, Islamism is something to be regretted and struggled against, instead of being permitted as respected or legitimate form of life.

Moreover, state violence is clearly framed as a *response* to an initial criminal act by the rioters/fundamentalist camp. The sequence of events as presented in *Le blanc* makes this clear: first the rioters kill several guards, *then* the state intervenes with excessive violence. It is apparently an act of excessive retribution in response to a real criminal threat (essentially, it appears, a problem of degree, not legitimacy). To be clear, it might be useful to consider what the narrator does not contemplate. In a state that criminalized political speech and political association, and which practiced arbitrary arrest and torture, as the Algerian state did intensely from late 1991, it might be worth considering why those detained were in prison in the first place.

The narrator does put several phrases in scare quotes to distance herself from the account of events. But the distance she is willing to take only does not seem to extend far. She appears to question a few of the details, but she affirms as factual that "a few of the guards were killed—and horribly," a fact apparently based only on the state's claims, since that was the only information reported in the media at the time (February-July 1995, between the time of the massacres themselves and the date appearing at the end of the text of *Le blanc*, p. 244). If there is any doubt, the narrator closes the section with a question-response between her and another woman:

"Mais l'internationale intégriste, ne soyez pas naïve, madame, elle existe! Je peux vous présenter plusieurs cas expérimentés par moi, ici et en Allemagne!" [. . .]
 "Sans doute, dis-je. Le sang appelle le sang, nous retrouvons cette logique, mais que dire quand ceux qui s'instituent gardiens de la loi appliquent, eux, la loi du talion?"⁴

"But don't be naïve Madame, the fundamentalist [Islamist] International exists! I can show you several examples both here and in Germany!" [. . .] "No doubt," I said. "Blood calls for more blood, we're falling into that logic, but what can you

⁴ 34.

say when those established as the guardians of the law are themselves using the logic of an eye for an eye?"

The narrator clearly does not approve of the slaughter of innocents here ("what a disgrace!"), but the real problem appears to be merely that it is a poor tactic in the strategy to cure society of its fundamentalist problem ("what will happen, I commented, a lump in my throat, is that suddenly two hundred families, two thousand people, will lapse into the "Islamist" camp"). That is, the narrator's primary concern appears to be this consequence of the mass violence: that it will add to the ranks of "the 'Islamist' camp, or the camp of the desperate anyway!"). What makes the passage stand out even more is the narrator's apparent acceptance of the framing of fundamentalism as "a cancer" ("This is how they plan to fight the fundamentalist cancer"). Since the word cancer is not placed in scare quotes to indicate that it is borrowed discourse, it appears to be the narrator's own terminology.⁵ To summarize, the narrator indicates that the state's repression at the prison is unjust, and she reveals some disgust and outrage at the use of mass violence ("a lump in my throat;" "What a disgrace!"). But the general framework of the state's narrative (the criminality of the prisoners; the supposed murder of guards by rioting prisoners) undergirds the narrator's perspective. It is not exactly incompatible with the speeches of "General X," cited earlier. The state is perhaps *excessive* in its use of violence, we are told, but it is essentially fulfilling a just and necessary purpose by fighting against barbaric forces, identified with Islamism, which grow, like a cancer, in Algerian society.

Perhaps most telling of all about the passage is how readily the narrator attributes blame and guilt without regard for evidence or fact. Serkadji, the narrator fails to inform us, was the scene of immense controversy. From the start, the official narrative was full of holes, as was pointed out by many at the time, such as Ali Yahia (who immediately published an open letter on the matter), Amnesty International, and Salima Ghezali, who wrote in March 1996 in *Le Monde Diplomatique* that the massacre appears to have been orchestrated by the state as a means to liquidate masses of unwanted prisoners:

il est difficile de passer sous silence le massacre d'une centaine de détenus placés sous la responsabilité de l'Etat. Tous les efforts déployés pour accréditer la thèse du caractère inévitable du drame n'ont pas pu empêcher les familles des victimes et les observateurs de penser qu'il s'agissait là d'une monstrueuse liquidation.⁶

it is difficult to keep silent about the massacre of hundreds of individuals placed under the responsibility of the [Algerian] state. The efforts put forth to support the claim that the event had an inevitable character have not prevented the victims families and other observers from thinking that it was a matter of a monstrous liquidation.

⁵ It could be potentially be argued that the narrator is being ironic here. But this is far from clear, and such a conclusion would be mere speculation.

⁶ "L'Algérie et les droits humains: Le massacre de Serkadji."

The accounts of the lawyers and human rights activists offer a sobering comparison to the passage in *Le blanc*. According to these accounts, the prisoners' cells were opened by masked men at 5 a.m.; suspecting a trap, the prisoners immediately requested the presence of well-known lawyers and human rights advocates (Abdennour Ali Yahia, Bachir Mecheri, Moustapha Bouchachi). After having opened fire on the crowd in the courtyard, the fleeing prisoners, hiding in the cells, were cornered there and grenades were thrown inside, such that, according to Ali Yahia, "Les dépouilles des victimes, ou ce qu'il en restait, ont été transférées à la morgue de Bologhine, certaines dans des petits sacs à ordures en plastique"⁷ 'The victims' remains, or what was left of them, were transferred to the Bologhine morgue, some of them in small plastic trash bags.' According to a later report, "the shooting lasted 17 hours" and turned some of the wards "into a human slaughterhouse." The surviving prisoners were then reportedly subjected for a day and a half to torture by the security forces in a climate of total impunity.⁸ The point here is not to suggest that the author of a work such as *Le blanc* is responsible for knowing the details or even the basic facts of such an episode. Rather, the point here is to demonstrate the readiness, consistent throughout *Le blanc* (and other novels), to accept the state's basic narrative framing of the civil war, internalizing the assumption that Islamism is evil or intrinsically criminal, that it is the primary source of violence in the civil war, and that it must be eradicated like a "cancer."

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Substantial testimony and documentary evidence is collected and presented in the article penned by the National Union of Algerian Lawyers, Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights, et al., "The Massacre of Serkadji," in Bedjaoui, 278-279.

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