

**Recasting *urgence*: Algerian francophone literature after the
'décennie noire'**

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Abstract

This thesis explores contemporary Algerian francophone literary production during and after what is widely known as the ‘*décennie noire*’ in Algeria, also called the ‘Algerian Civil War’ of the 1990s, and a period of intense violence during which up to 200,000 people are reported to have been killed. The research sits between a literary and sociological approach (equating, in broad terms, to the study of the world in the text and that of the text in the world) and has a main corpus of living writers, published between Paris and a blossoming francophone publishing market in Algiers. It calls on both sociological and literary approaches to think through questions of how the 1990s have been written and read in and between France and Algeria. One of the main concerns of the research is to reconcile the complex relationship between literature as a form of social and political testimony and literature as a creative and aesthetic endeavour that gives a far more open-ended and equivocal account of experience and existence. Split into four sections, the thesis studies this problem in the context of contemporary Algeria through the lens of *urgence*, a term which was employed by the Algerian State (‘*état d’urgence*’), by publishers, the press and critics (‘*écriture de l’urgence*’) and finally by Algerian writers. Exploring the emergence of a narrative of *urgence* principally within what we define as a Franco-Algerian ‘*champ littéraire*’ during the 1990s, Section One also reviews the wide array of literature on contemporary Algeria in an attempt to show how a set of binary narratives was established which implicitly played into the ‘official story’ of the Algerian State. In a further three sections, the thesis shows, through six detailed case studies of the Algerian francophone writers Maïssa Bey, Salim Bachi, Djamel Mati, Habib Ayyoub, Mustapha Benfodil and Kamel Daoud, how literature published after the ‘end’ of the 1990s has increasingly become a site of creative experimentation for the development of discursive strategies to disrupt and contest the dominant binary narrative structures which frame Algeria from within and from outside. The thesis argues that, more than attempting to represent the period of the ‘*décennie noire*’, a host of writers has sought to recast the ethical imperative of the 1990s in the discursive realm of literature, beyond previously reductive narrative frames.

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General Introduction

In 2012, international media reported that workers at the In Amenas gas facility, located in the east of the Algerian Sahara, had been taken hostage by Islamist militants, who were being led by the elusive Algerian ‘one-eyed war veteran’ Mokhtar Belmokhtar.¹ International media organisations – while clearly lacking expertise on Algeria – would nonetheless immediately relate this moment of violence to that of Algeria’s ‘savage’ and ‘bloody’ past in the Algerian War of Independence and violent ‘civil war’ of the 1990s, what is known more widely as Algeria’s ‘*décennie noire*’. In an examination of the media’s response to the hostage-taking, the historian Natalya Vince suggests that such characterisations are unsurprising, but that by reducing Algerian history to its violent moments they nevertheless reproduce ‘an Orientalist stereotype of Algerians’ as, bluntly put, ‘a bunch of crazy hothead machos, for whom human life means little and pride everything’.² Vince comments how the expert opinions offered were vague, unspecific and largely uninformed in the context of an ‘information vacuum’ which exposed the Western media’s lack of knowledge about Algeria. The narrative of Algeria at this time of crisis was one framed almost exclusively by previous media narratives and images which had fallen into the same Orientalising trap. In an article which goes on to underline the dangers of the traps of binary thinking when it comes to Algeria, Vince suggests that rather than constituting a history of violence, Algerian history is in reality one of silence: ‘The challenge is to listen to those silences, because they may challenge what we think we know.’³

¹ See, No name, ‘Profile: Mokhtar Belmokhtar’, *BBC News*, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-21061480>> [accessed: 13 March 2016].

² Natalya Vince, ‘In Amenas – a history of silence, not a history of violence’, *Textures du temps*, online blog, <<http://texturesdutemps.hypotheses.org/576>> [accessed: 10 March 2016].

³ Vince, ‘In Amenas’.

Vince is referring to the distinct lack of a written history of post-independence Algeria. If, as she writes, ‘time ends in 1962 and only half restarts in 1988’, the intervening period can be seen to be filled with only ‘suppositions and shortcuts’.⁴ This absence of history is not meant in the sense that people were not talking or writing about the past; indeed, there was a clear proliferation of texts published after independence which dealt with Algeria’s pre-1962 past. If, as Malika Rahal notes, ‘the year 1962’ marks the ‘end of history’ in Algeria, in effect Algerian history was being written anew, in what Alice Cherki has called ‘une histoire écrite à partir d’un point zéro’.⁵ This meant that a new generation of Algerians would be forced, as Cherki continues, to find for themselves ‘les repères nécessaires pour se constituer des traces, susceptibles d’être élaborées en souvenirs’.⁶ On the one hand a ‘travail métaphorique’ to be undertaken by ordinary Algerians, this was a task performed in the very first instance by the newly independent Algerian State, with the revolutionary FLN as its legitimising and guiding force. Rahal argues that this difficulty of doing history in the post-independence period is rooted in a ‘failure to apprehend plurality’, which emerges for a number of reasons, including the imposition of a hegemonic revolutionary narrative scripted by the ruling FLN, but also because of the paroxysmal emotions involved in recounting the more recent past.⁷

The above accounts by historians are compelling in their focus on how Algerian history has *not* been written; in many ways, beginning with this absence, working from what has *not* been done, is the only way one can write post-independence Algeria given the difficulty of access to (official) written sources, but also because of the multiple competing and often political narratives at work both *in* and *on* Algeria. Whether these are narratives deployed by the Algerian State, religious leaders, the media or intellectuals and writers more

⁴ Vince, ‘In Amenas’.

⁵ Malika Rahal, ‘Fused Together and Torn Apart: Stories and Violence in Contemporary Algeria’, *History & Memory* 24, 1 (2012), p. 125. Alice Cherki, ‘Confiscation des mémoires et empêchement des identifications plurielles’, in *Retours du colonial? Disculpation et réhabilitation de l’histoire coloniale* (Nantes: L’Atalante, 2008), p. 178.

⁶ Cherki, p. 179.

⁷ Rahal, ‘Fused Together and Torn Apart’, pp. 125; 141.

generally, they seem at various points to coalesce or to be, to use Rahal's terms, 'fused together and torn apart' in a set of varying and sometimes contradictory discourses which come to make up what we understand as 'contemporary Algeria'.

This thesis explores a selection of Algerian francophone literature emerging from the crisis years of the 1990s, but which appeared largely after the year 2000 and the supposed end of the violence of the 1990s and was published between the French and the emerging Algerian literary fields. Sitting between a sociological and literary approach, the thesis examines how, over time, writers have processed, and explored this contested period principally through their literary fiction and, crucially, sought to recast the ethical imperative of the period of the 1990s by engaging with its previous articulations and accounts. Focusing in detail on the work of six Algerian francophone writers, the thesis seeks to demonstrate how the multiple languages of *urgence* which came to frame the period of the 1990s, emanating from the State, the field of literary reception and from publishers and writers themselves, have been creatively recast by writers as part of a broader and more complex discursive interrogation. One of the major questions explored in the thesis is how an emerging publishing market in Algeria has been able to foster a space for new literatures in French emerging from the 'décennie noire', which have, in their distance from French literary markets, been able to move away from thematic demands of reading and writing and towards a largely new, inventive and self-reflexive exploration of literary form, genre and aesthetics. While others have shown how Algerian francophone writing has continually challenged articulations of the nation on the level of State narrative or religious discourse, the thesis looks at how novels and short stories written after the period of the 1990s return to and challenge the binary lenses which previous readings have often tended to produce. By reading literature closely and with a sensibility to its historical and social contexts, the thesis assesses how historical and political reference can be introduced to our readings,

whereby the reader appreciates the multiple ways in which a text might be *engaged in* a political present, without necessarily taking that text as an *account of* a political present. Finally, we suggest that it is with the benefit of time that literature emerging after the 1990s recasts these previous readings, actively encouraging readers to engage with questions of how literature performs a challenge to power formulated through a set of narrative and discursive practices.

In addition to underlining the lack of history done in Algeria since independence, Vince's account shows how, in the absence of stable knowledge, the media narrative easily resorts to previous types and images of Algeria. The 1990s were, as the historian Benjamin Stora has argued, a time when Algeria became increasingly 'invisible' to the outside world, largely due to the State policy of silence surrounding the unfolding violence.⁸ But this was also a time when Algerian literary works experienced something of an upsurge in publications, notably within publishing houses in France. Prized for its often highly graphic representations of the horrific violence sweeping Algeria, this body of writing became widely known as 'écriture de l'urgence' and has variously been described on a scale ranging from a necessary work of testimony, or of anamnesis regarding the silences of the period, to a problematic body of writing which plays to a thematic demand in order to appeal to a mostly French readership.⁹ The problem was that it was far from clear which works could be placed within 'écriture de l'urgence' and what were the formal or generic markers of this

⁸ Benjamin Stora, *La guerre invisible: Algérie des années 90* (Paris: Presses Sciences Po, 2001).

⁹ Névine El Nossery has studied how a selection of literature produced during this period performs an anamnesis; see, *Témoignages fictionnels au féminin: une réécriture des blancs de la guerre civile algérienne* (New York: Rodopi, 2012). See also, Patricia Geesey, 'Violent Days: Algerian Women Writers and the Civil Crisis', *The International Fiction Review*, 27.1-2 (2000)

<<https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/IFR/article/view/7658/8715>> [accessed: 08 November 2015].

Charles Bonn considers the broader structural dynamics of this body of writing, noting how '[c]es témoignages, sans doute autant suscités par une politique des éditeurs friands de drames actuels que par une évolution littéraire « normale » en rapport avec cette actualité, sont souvent le fait des femmes.' See his entry, 'Algérie' in *Littérature francophone. Tome 1: Le Roman*, ed. by Charles Bonn & Xavier Garnier (Paris: Hatier, 1997), p. 208; see also, Farid Laroussi, 'When Francophone Means National: The Case of the Maghreb', *Yale French Studies*, 103 (2003), p. 88.

designation. Applied by the press, literary periodicals and by some academic critics to a host of writers producing work during the 1990s, the term came in many ways to invent a homogenous body of literature which, as we will see, did not in reality exist.

The problem identified in the thesis is one principally of the thematic classification and promotion of works within the French market place, where the image of Algeria described by Vince is reproduced once again in the reductive reception of works within France and the Franco-Algerian ‘champ littéraire’. Pioneered by Pierre Bourdieu, the ‘champ littéraire’ is one of a number of ‘champs’ within which art and, in particular, its regimes of symbolic value can be studied.¹⁰ A ‘champ’ is described by the sociologist as semi-autonomous, removed, on the one hand, from market conditions and from political power, but also attached to a system of cultural capital and cultural value, so contained within a ‘champ culturel’ which is in turn contained within a ‘champ du pouvoir’. The ‘champ littéraire’ encompasses literary works and writers themselves (the pole of production), but also literary critics, periodicals, reviews, prize committees and academia (the pole of consumption).¹¹ As we go on to explore, it is at this time that the stakes of literature and of the writer become particularly acute within Algeria, but as we shall see, writers and their works, published principally from within France, were nevertheless subject to what Bourdieu describes as a process of consecration as ‘biens culturels’ within the market place. If, principally, seeming to claim to represent the realities of what was

¹⁰ Bourdieu first published on what he calls the ‘champ intellectuel’ in 1966 and went on in a number of publications to refine his method. See, Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Champ intellectuel et projet créateur’, *Les Temps Modernes* 246 (1966), pp. 865-906; see also, ‘Le champ littéraire’, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 89 (1991), pp. 3-46, many elements of which are reproduced in *Les Règles de l’art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

¹¹ Bourdieu’s method is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the diagrams he gives; see, ‘Le champ littéraire’, pp. 11; 31. In an interview with Loïc Wacquant, which gives one of the clearest English-language introductions to Bourdieu’s thinking, the ‘champ’ is defined by Bourdieu as a ‘network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.)’. See, Loïc J. D. Wacquant, ‘Towards a Reflexive Sociology: A Workshop with Pierre Bourdieu’, *Sociological Theory* 7, 1 (1989), p. 39.

going on in contemporary Algeria during the 1990s, such literature has been little considered in the context of how it was constructed as a body of writing which met, what Bourdieu warns of as, the *'demande préexistante'* and *'des formes préétablies'* of the market.¹² Questions surrounding the 'champ', and its own reception as a viable lens through which to study literature, are revisited below.

The General Introduction outlines the broad range of analytical concepts and contexts covered in the thesis; it is arranged in five sub-sections which can be returned to and used as points of reference when reading the thesis. It gives a brief account of the 'events' of the 1990s, followed by an introduction to questions of narrative, discourse and language which will help to frame many elements of the thesis. Finally, it returns to questions of approach and methodology before introducing the four main sections of the thesis and the corpus of writers studied.

The 'events' of the 'décennie noire'

The intention of the below summary is to offer an initial overview of the 1990s in Algeria and the events which have been reported as leading up to the crisis.

What is widely referred to as the 'décennie noire' both within and outside Algeria concerns the broad decade of the 1990s in Algeria. Although the dates are disputed, and the violence itself is subject to number of questions related to its protagonists and how it has been told and framed, the beginning of the period of unrest is largely situated in what some have named Algeria's 'democratic experiment' of the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹³ Its 'end' is widely supposed to coincide with a State amnesty voted into Algerian law by referendum in September 1999, after the election earlier that year of the new president

¹² Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art*, p. 236.

¹³ See, for instance, John L. Esposito & John O. Voll, 'Algeria: Democracy Suppressed', in *Islam and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 150-72; James D. Le Sueur, *Between Terror and Democracy: Algeria Since 1989* (New York: Zed Books, 2010), *passim*.

Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who had been one of the younger members of the group who led the Algerian resistance of the Algerian War of 1954-62.

Contrasting with the glory years of independence experienced throughout the 1970s, and after the unexpected death in 1978 of socialist president Houari Boumediene, the 1980s was a time of economic downturn under president Chadli Bendjedid who had attempted to liberalise the socialist economy which had prevailed under Boumediene at a time of global economic recession. In 1984, the controversial *sharia*-inspired Code de la Famille was passed by a government ceding to the demands of conservative elites with growing Islamist sympathies. A massive fall in oil prices in 1986 worsened an economic crisis which had already been brewing and, in October 1988, young, mainly male, disenfranchised Algerians took to the streets in what are now seen as pivotal demonstrations during which the armed forces fired on protesters and were accused of torture on a significant scale. Up to five hundred people were reported to have been killed during the October uprisings.¹⁴ If the riots were reported in the international media as the result solely of economic or religious factors, instigated by Chadli's economic reforms and led by 'Islamic fundamentalists', others have pointed to the fact, largely obscured in the international press, that those participating in the October riots were motivated mainly by their total loss of respect for their country's leadership and the values they embodied. Chadli and his inner circle were widely viewed as corrupt and accused of propagating a system of corruption within government.¹⁵ As Laurie Brand puts it, it is at this point the official narrative began to fracture.¹⁶

In days that followed the rioting, which had lasted for five days, Chadli instigated wide-ranging constitutional reforms which would end one-party FLN rule and pave the

¹⁴ Martin Evans & John Phillips, *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 105.

¹⁵ Hugh Roberts, *The Battlefield Algeria 1988-2002: Studies in a Broken Polity* (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 107-08; see also Evans & Phillips, pp. 103-04.

¹⁶ Laurie Brand, *Official Stories: Politics and National Narratives in Egypt and Algeria* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 153.

way for Algeria's first multi-party free elections. Up to sixty new parties were formed, but it was the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) – the main Islamist party which had cleverly positioned itself as an inheritor of the legacy of the symbolic Algerian revolution of November 1954 – that made significant gains in local and regional elections of June 1990. In the first round of the elections for the Assemblée nationale, which took place in December 1991, the FIS won 188 seats and, in Hugh Roberts' estimation, would have won around 75% percent of seats if the second round were to have gone ahead.¹⁷ Chadli was forced to resign and a transitional body established by the ruling army generals, the Haut Comité d'Etat (HCE), took control.

In June 1992, Mohamed Boudiaf, who had been chosen to lead the transitional government, was assassinated by one of his own body guards. While, officially, the blame was placed with the 'challengers' of the FIS (the body guard was said to have Islamist sympathies), many Algerians saw elements of the previous Chadli regime to be behind the killing as Boudiaf had begun to look into the corruption apparently existing at the centre of the previous presidency.¹⁸ With the sudden extinction of this brief moment of hope, and with the spread of fundamentalist groups named collectively as the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA), the crisis deepened and violence increased.¹⁹ Although often presented as an emerging 'civil war', where the legitimate government faced an illegitimate 'challenge' from a fundamentalist Islamist opposition, and despite the extreme nature of the violence, the conflict became notable for its invisibility on the international stage as well as for its lack of a clear sense of who was responsible for the violence.²⁰

¹⁷ Roberts, p. 120.

¹⁸ Such a language of the 'challenge' is adopted by Michael Willis in his book, *The Islamist Challenge in Algeria: A Political History* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

¹⁹ Claims have been made that the GIA had from the earliest days of its existence been infiltrated by the Algerian security services, at the time called the Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (DRS). See, notably, former DRS colonel Mohammed Samraoui's *Chronique des années de sang. Algérie: comment les services secrets ont manipulé les groupes islamistes* (Paris: Denoël, 2003).

²⁰ See, Luis Martinez, *La Guerre civile en Algérie, 1990-1998* (Paris: Karthala, 1998); Willis, *The Islamist Challenge*; see also Stora, *La guerre invisible*.

In 1993, the Algerian novelist Tahar Djaout was one of the first of many intellectuals, writers and journalists to be targeted by fundamentalist groups. Responsibility for the assassination was claimed by the GIA. Algeria was becoming a dangerous place to live for writers. Yet, in the years that followed some of the most shocking violence to be documented would take the form of massacres perpetrated between 1994 and 1998.²¹ Those receiving most international attention were the massacres which took place between August and September 1997 at Raïs and Bentalha. Over seven hundred people were reported to have been brutally murdered – three hundred at Raïs and four hundred at Bentalha.²² What was different about these massacres was that in the numerous accounts emerging from survivors, the army was accused of not intervening, despite being stationed nearby and, in the case of Bentalha, apparently standing guard at the edge of the town.²³ As with the international attention they brought to the Algerian crisis, these massacres would give rise to the famous and still unresolved ‘Qui tue qui?’ question. With accounts of the massacres being published in France, such as Nesroulah Yous’s *Qui a tué à Bentalha?*,²⁴ and with broader accusations of army involvement in staging the violence of the 1990s through widespread infiltration of the GIA made by defectors from the special forces,²⁵ information, albeit limited and likely biased, was creeping out of the Algerian crisis to implicate the State and also, as Martin Evans and John Phillips put it, challenge ‘the official script of the “good army” versus the “evil terrorists”’.²⁶

After the election of Bouteflika in 1999, the State began to reassert its control over the official narrative of the 1990s. The new president promised to bring an end to the violence and, although clemency laws had been in place since February 1995, Bouteflika’s

²¹ These massacres, with approximate numbers killed, are documented in Youcef Bedjaoui et al., *An Inquiry into the Algerian Massacres* (Geneva: Hoggar, 1999).

²² Evans & Phillips, pp. 237-39.

²³ See Roberts, p. 309.

²⁴ Nesroulah Yous, *Qui a tué à Bentalha?* (Paris: La Découverte, 2000).

²⁵ Also notable was the testimony of former special forces soldier, Habib Souaïdia, in *La sale guerre: le témoignage d'un ancien officier des forces spéciales de l'armée algérienne* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001) which was released, as with Yous’ book, by the left-wing publisher La Découverte, previously Les Editions de Minuit.

²⁶ Evans & Phillips, p. 240.

flagship policy was the ‘Concorde civile’ which promised amnesty to members of armed groups. A continuation of earlier policies drafted by Liamine Zéroual, Algerian president between the disbanding of the HCE in 1994 and the election of Bouteflika in 1999, on paper the amnesty did not excuse the more serious crimes of rape, murder or torture, but the reality was that these laws meant a broad amnesty and constituted an official attempt to impose silence surrounding the violence of the 1990s, including crimes committed by individuals and those that might have been sanctioned by the State and army.²⁷ The law was voted in by referendum, with 98.6 percent said to be in favour (based on an apparent turnout of 85 percent).²⁸ In 2005, these laws were further consecrated in the ‘Charte pour la paix et la réconciliation nationale’ which added a number of elements including naming the period of the 1990s Algeria’s ‘tragédie nationale’ and banning any use or appropriation of ‘les blessures de la tragédie nationale, pour porter atteinte aux institutions de la République algérienne démocratique et populaire, fragiliser l’État, nuire à l’honorabilité de ses agents qui l’ont dignement servi, ou ternir l’image de l’Algérie sur le plan international.’²⁹

If such narrative closure brought an official ‘end’ to the crisis years of the 1990s, the initial years of Bouteflika’s presidency and the transition to peace were far from stable. One of the main reasons for this was Bouteflika’s illegitimacy in the eyes of the Algerian people. Although apparently elected in 1999 with over seventy percent of votes, all of the other candidates had in fact pulled out of the election after allegations of vote rigging and the population had boycotted the elections en masse. Reported by State media at sixty percent, turnout was estimated to be more like twenty percent.³⁰ The Algerian people felt cheated and in the context of increasing economic austerity enforced as a result of debt

²⁷ See George Joffé, ‘National Reconciliation and General Amnesty in Algeria’, *Mediterranean Politics* 13, 2 (2008), pp. 213-28.

²⁸ Evans & Phillips, p. 263.

²⁹ République Algérienne Démocratique et Populaire, ‘Charte pour la paix et la réconciliation nationale’, *Journal officiel de la République algérienne*, 11, 28 February (2006), <<http://www.joradp.dz/FTP/jo-francais/2006/F2006011.pdf>> [accessed: 27 November 2015] (p. 7).

³⁰ Evans & Phillips, p. 257.

restructuring by the IMF and World Bank, young Algerians in particular suffered high levels of unemployment and destitution. Suicide rates experienced a sharp increase in young men.³¹ The divide between the entitled elites and a dispossessed young generation, which made up the majority of the population in Algeria, became increasingly clear as the president became a figure widely ridiculed. In floods which, in 2000, killed over six hundred in Bab El Oued, a poor district of Algiers and former FIS stronghold, it turned out that drains filled with concrete by the authorities during the 1990s were likely to blame. After a 2003 earthquake, whose epicentre was to the east of Algiers in the town of Boumerdès, the government was once again blamed for its lack of a sufficient response.³² Such events and the political climate in general would inspire the work of all the writers considered in the thesis, though perhaps more particularly Maïssa Bey and Habib Ayyoub, explored in further detail in Chapters Two and Five. This, coupled with unrest in the Kabylia region, meant that Bouteflika's transition to national peace and reconciliation was itself far from peaceful or reconciliatory.³³

If, in the above summary, the 'décennie noire' is contained within a certain period, to periodise is not the main intention here. Two of the main questions posed in Chapter One of the thesis revolve around how such periodization has served to distort the reality of what is a highly complex situation and the extent to which literature has been taken as a simplistic lens through which these events can be told and hence also consecrated as 'events'. Perhaps most importantly, we will explore how such narrative periodization was appropriated as a political tool by the Algerian State as it attempted to re-establish its legitimacy after the crisis. Chapter One picks up and expands on many elements of the above necessarily incomplete account.

³¹ Evans & Phillips point to a number of press reports which appeared in the Algerian press of the phenomenon of suicides in young men (p. 272).

³² Evans & Phillips, pp. 272-73.

³³ On the unrest and political uprising in Kabylia, see Emma Tilleli, 'Le mouvement citoyen de Kabylie', *Pouvoirs* 106 (2003), pp.151-62.

Discourse, Narrative and the State

This section will introduce notions picked up later in the thesis and lay out how the State and other actors have sought to capitalise on a national narrative to bestow a sense of legitimacy upon their actions. By far the most prominent of these voices has been the Algerian State; although its make up has changed over time, the State has maintained a keen interest in and has readily understood the importance of narrative ‘as the means used to organise a society into a structured reality, in order to give it stability and meaning.’³⁴

In a book which explores the question of national narrative between Egypt and Algeria, Laurie Brand examines how the Algerian State has held on to its legitimacy by, in part, continually re-scripting the national narrative. Her study looks at a number of primary sources, including State textbooks, official publications and speeches, which allow her to chart a set of interventions by the State which she argues make up an omnipresent narrative strategy to control the population. However, as Brand spells out citing Teun A. van Dijk’s *Discourse and Power*, discourse must be seen to operate ‘through the “minds” of people’. If this means that the State might work to communicate in a variety of ways to persuade or coerce these ‘minds’, it becomes clear that controlling the behaviour of a population through narrative and discourse is a far from straightforward operation.

Brand’s text views discourse and the ability of the State to manipulate discourse as central to their ability to continually shape and reshape the national narrative, which itself acts back on discourse in a form of continual exchange. National narrative, Brand writes, is ‘one key instrument in a leadership’s “discursive toolbox”’.³⁵ The national narrative is perhaps then, to use Michel Foucault’s terms, an ‘objet de discours’, or rather an object

³⁴ Brand, p. 5.

³⁵ Brand, p. 8.

offered to discourse as if formed outside of discourse. If, for Foucault, it is discursive relations that ‘déterminent le faisceau de rapports que le discours doit effectuer pour pouvoir parler de tels et tels objets, pour pouvoir les traiter, les nommer, les analyser, les classer, les expliquer’, it is in the deconstruction of discursive relations that discourse can and must be unveiled ‘en tant que pratique.’³⁶ Discourses should no longer be treated ‘comme des ensembles de signes (d’éléments signifiants renvoyant à des contenus ou à des représentations) mais comme des pratiques qui forment systématiquement les objets dont ils parlent.’³⁷ While, in what follows, we can in no exhaustive sense fulfil the elements outlined in Foucault’s work, the terms within which his work defines discourse will help us, as they help Brand, to frame our analysis of the object of the national narrative and the nature of the discursive challenge or deconstruction that seeks to recast that narrative.³⁸

If they have not delved so deep into a theory of discourse which contains their utterances, throughout Algeria’s independence, its various leaders have come to quickly understand the importance of the national narrative as a ‘tool’ in shaping a broader discourse, or realising the fact of what Foucault calls ‘le régime des objets’ in reality.³⁹ Attempts to shape discourse took a variety of narrative forms under Ben Bella, Boumediene and Chadli, established principally through the Algerian constitution and a variety of State charters. If deployed to a less successful degree during the 1990s, if as Brand suggests the narrative suffered a series of fractures, discourse and narrative under Bouteflika again became a central concern, as the newly elected president sought to quickly draft official documents which would shape and script the ‘end’ of the ‘décennie noire’.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *L’Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 63.

³⁷ Foucault, *L’Archéologie du savoir*, pp. 66-67.

³⁸ This would be to tentatively recognise, what Robert Young calls, Foucault’s ‘institutional account of discursive events’ and to move away from using Foucault in overly textual or literary terms. See, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 408-10. For discussion of what he sees as Young’s marginalisation of literature, see Chris Bongie, *Friends and Enemies: The Scribal Politics of Post/Colonial Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), pp. 15-24.

³⁹ Foucault, *L’Archéologie du savoir*, p. 66.

In Brand's estimation, the Algerian State has not been critical or creative enough when seeking to shape these new national narratives and has, as a result of this, reproduced the epistemology of previous colonial narratives it had of course sought to refute.⁴⁰ The national narrative's hegemonic nature, as well as one of its central tenets being the imposition of Arabic as the sole language of Algeria, did not help distinguish it further from its colonial predecessor. Narratives which had sought to lay the ground for the Algerian people's liberation, were not properly understood in the discursive context within which they had been formed, and were still being formed, as objects. The unfortunate irony here is that in reproducing a negative double of the colonial narrative, the Algerian national narrative served counterproductively to strengthen the stereotyped colonial vision of Algerians as barbarous, violent and in need of a certain degree of narrative control. In the words of the historian James McDougall, these stereotypes can be understood in a set of discursive 'codes of Algerian violence' which have reappeared throughout Algeria's history and most recently in accounts of the violence of the 1990s.⁴¹

The variability of the national narrative – outlined by Brand as positing stories of an 'ancient past' and 'mythical origin', often realised alongside 'a set of identifiable heroes', allowing for the identification of a 'distinct identity' of a 'national collective' which emerges out of a set of particular events – constitutes what she goes on to call, after Lois Zamora, 'useable past[s]': 'a set of heroes, events, and/or story lines that can be marshalled to serve the needs of the leadership'.⁴² Each narrative, therefore, also contributes to an image of a nation which is a product of its narration, as Homi Bhabha has famously underlined. Yet, it is precisely because of the multiplicity of its narrations, its coming into being 'à la limite du discours', to use Foucault's terms, or as a 'liminal figure', to cite Bhabha, that the nation

⁴⁰ Brand, p. 10.

⁴¹ James McDougall, 'Savage Wars? Codes of violence in Algeria, 1830s-1990s', *Third World Quarterly* 26, 1 (2005), pp. 117-31.

⁴² Brand, pp. 9-10.

can only be seen as an ‘impossible unity’.⁴³ The State must continually intervene, as Brand highlights, to police the edges of its national story and hence maintain control. If the above narratives seem subject to some fluctuation, this is because, on one level, there is a need for actors to continually recast these narratives and figures in service of their own interests and, as Bhabha underlines further in his essay ‘DissemiNation’, the ideological discourse which encompasses and produces these narratives is subject to a split between the representation of the rule and its effective operation. There is therefore an unavoidable ambiguity at work in the State’s narrative which battles with ‘the enigma of language’ as both ‘internal and external to the speaking subject’.⁴⁴ This difficulty of articulating and policing the national narrative has elsewhere been conceived as a problem of maintaining history’s ‘living relationship’ with its present. For Peter Osborne, this is a problem that can be seen more widely than in the context of narrating nations, but as a ‘crisis’ of modernity itself; here, narrative is articulated in opposition to discourse. Where narrative fails to imagine and recast the dead spaces of history, it is perhaps within more consciously discursive forms, like literature, that links between the past and the present can be creatively reimagined and remapped.⁴⁵

In her article, Rahal develops the notion of the ‘entre-soi’, borrowed from the anthropologist Françoise Héritier, to begin to write post-1962 history and conceive of the complex ways in which Algerian identity was taken up within different groups with their own ideological positions: if the FLN State was a major voice in promoting what Rahal calls an Algerian ‘vivre ensemble’, the democratic opposition parties (notably the Union démocratique du manifeste algérien [UDMA] and the Parti de l'avant-garde socialiste

⁴³ Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir*, p. 63. Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Introduction: Narrating the Nation’, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 1; see also, Homi K. Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation’, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 291-322. References are made to the more recent volume in which the essay appeared, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 199-244.

⁴⁴ Claude Lefort, cited in Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation’, p. 210.

⁴⁵ Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995) p. 133.

[PAGS], uniting former elements of the Parti communiste algérien [PCA]) and the Islamist groups (the FIS and the GIA) emerging after the reforms of 1989 would also become central actors in their attempts to appropriate the national narrative, developing their own strategic versions of Algeria's national story.⁴⁶ For Rahal, ideology alone is not sufficient to account for the emergence of these divergent groups and their resort to direct and indirect forms of violence to assert their prominence. Indeed, until 1989, opposition groups had been banned under the one-party FLN State. Present in all three articulations of the 'entre-soi' is the wish to construct the nation, as she puts it, to 'purify the collective body', by killing and denying humanity to members of other groups which held competing ideas of the 'entre-soi'.⁴⁷ The leaderships of each group, therefore, have the desire to recast a certain idea of the nation in their own interests and in the supposed interests of their members. If, on one level, this pursuit of the 'entre-soi' meant a hegemonic domination of the national narrative, the State would soon realise how it might benefit from the discursive opacity created by these multiple competing narratives. In this regard, the State's continual interventions into the national narrative, necessary to narrating the nation, could be viewed as a convenient opportunity for State actors to increasingly obscure the realities of the violence occurring during the 1990s.

Based largely on interviews, and hence arguing for the necessity of oral history in Algeria, Rahal's work responds to that of cultural anthropologists working in Algeria, such as Fanny Colonna, who in 2003 underlined 'the deep-seated refusal to recognise as legitimate (indeed, the *de facto* prohibition of) any consideration of, and research on, the

⁴⁶ Rahal, 'Fused Together and Torn Apart', p. 128. One potential problem with Rahal's account is that it tends to lump together fundamentalist groups, united under the auspices of the GIA, and the FIS which were separate entities. On the question of the legitimacy of the claim to power of the FIS in 1992, see Myles O'Byrne, 'The *Front Islamique du Salut* and the denial of legitimacy' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2010), <<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/3919/>> [accessed: 14 March 2016].

⁴⁷ Rahal, 'Fused Together and Torn Apart', p. 132.

local, the particular, the “singular”.⁴⁸ While influenced by multiple discursive frames, or multiple versions of the ‘entre-soi’ mentioned above, such a prohibition existed at the level of State control of the historical narrative in publishing and the setting of university research agendas. However, given that Colonna goes on to admit such control became operative principally as a form of ‘*de facto* self-censorship’ adopted by researchers and students, it seems likely that other competing narratives emerging after 1989 will have come to exert some influence here.⁴⁹ If, on the one hand, this can be linked to Bourdieu’s idea of ‘champ’, where the State seeks to control the output of writers, it must also be recognised that – though regularly referred to as *le pouvoir* – the State was only one of the more powerful sites of narrative control, which would become further unsettled during the 1990s. The complexity of these numerous subject positions and splits are continually articulated in the corpus of works studied from Section Two of the thesis onwards. What we should keep at the forefront of our minds is that despite an ostensible control over narrative, the State and other actors must continually re-posit narrative within a broader discursive frame whose borders are constantly shifting and changing. Rahal’s notion of the ‘entre-soi’ in Algeria is one which recognises the complexity of the need of the national narrative to move through the shifting discursive frame at different historical moments, but it is also one which highlights the existence of a set of competing narratives which favour the dominant position of the State.

⁴⁸ Fanny Colonna, ‘The Nation’s “Unknowing Other”: Three Intellectuals and the Culture(s) of Being Algerian, or the Impossibility of Subaltern Studies in Algeria’, in *Nation, Society and Culture in North Africa*, ed. by James McDougall (London: Frank Cass, 2003), p. 155.

⁴⁹ Colonna, p. 157.

Publishing in French

The first Algerian constitution of 1963 inscribed Arabic as the sole official language in use in Algeria.⁵⁰ This was despite the presence of a rich tradition of multilingualism in the country. While French was no longer in official use, many struggled with the use of Arabic in official circles. While the government was required by law to use Arabic, many government employees had been educated in French, selected under the racist policy of the colonial administration from the Berber region of Kabylia because of their lighter skin colour.⁵¹ This led to a kind of fused ethnic and linguistic struggle, where the largely ethnically Arab ‘Arabisants’ would favour the use of Arabic and the Berbers would favour the use of French in administration as well as demanding the further integration of Tamazight into social, governmental and cultural circles. One result of independence and of the French colonial policy of selectively educating a class of so-called *évolués* was that, far from disappearing, the French language enjoyed an increase in its use as swathes of the population previously denied education were suddenly learning to read and write. After Boumediene came to power in a 1965 military coup, the recruitment of Arabic teachers would speed up the process of Arabisation in the country, although many Algerians already educated within the French system would not learn Modern Standard Arabic. The spoken language of Algeria (known as *Darija*, meaning the everyday language) is therefore a hybrid which varies across the county and integrates Arabic, French and the Berber (or Amazigh) languages. In the light of the Arabisation policies of the late 1960s and 1970s, and the

⁵⁰ See, République Algérienne Démocratique et Populaire, ‘Constitution de 1963’, <<http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.dz/Constituion1963.htm>> [accessed: 13 March 2016].

⁵¹ ‘Berber’ was the term employed by the French to describe the ‘indigenous’ Amazigh people who resided principally to the east of the capital, Algiers, in the mountainous region of Kabylia. For an in depth consideration of the ‘Berber myth’, see Yassin Tamlali, *La Genèse de la Kabylie: Aux origines de l’affirmation berbère en Algérie (1830-1962)* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2015).

cultural decolonization of North Africa more generally, it is perhaps unsurprising that North African writers were warning of the ‘end’ of the French language novel.⁵²

Far from dying out, as predicted, the French language and French language publishing in Algeria is alive, well and enjoyed a resurgence in the years after the ‘*décennie noire*’.⁵³ French-language novels are far more numerous in Algeria than their Arabic language equivalent. Although this may have something to do the fact that the Arabic novel is a far more recent development than its European counterpart,⁵⁴ and of course reflects how the Paris market is seen as a desirable publishing destination for many writers, the proliferation of French-language writing is also testament to the efforts of publishers, such as Editions Alpha, Apic, Barzakh, Casbah, Chihab, who have all provided spaces for the publication of francophone texts. Daoud, whose latest novel is published by Barzakh, taught himself the French language by reading; his main education was in an Arabic-language school. While there is a clear stock of French-language Algerian writers able to write and publish in these new publishing markets, there are also a number of younger writers who are writing in French despite this being their second language. Amin Zaoui is one example of a writer who has written in both Arabic and French and the young novelist Sarah Haïdar has also recently published in French and Arabic.⁵⁵

⁵² Albert Memmi and Abdelkebir Khatibi had, for instance, predicted the death of the French language in Maghrebi literature, as formerly colonised societies would adopt a new language and identity. See, Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé, précédé de portrait du colonisateur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 140; Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Le Roman maghrébin* (Paris: Maspero, 1968). Others would further nuance their relationship to French. Kateb Yacine famously pronounced that the French language was a ‘*butin de guerre*’, while the Tunisian writer Abdelwahab Meddeb speaks of a French in which he actively chose to write. On Meddeb, see Samia Mehrez, ‘The Subversive Politics of Radical Bilingualism: postcolonial francophone North African literature’, in *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives of Hegemony and Resistance* (New York, Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 269. These writers adopted a view of language espoused in Derrida’s *Le monolinguisme de l’autre, ou, La prothèse de l’origine* (Paris: Galilée, 1996) and explored in Khatibi’s later writing on bilingualism and plurilingualism. See, *Maghreb pluriel* (Paris: Denoël, 1983).

⁵³ Indeed, this has recently been judged to be the case across the Maghreb. See Roger Célestin, Patrick Crowley, Eliane Dalmolin & Megan MacDonald (eds), *The Contemporary Roman Maghrébin: Aesthetics, Politics, Production 2000-2015*, special issue of *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 20, 1 (2016).

⁵⁴ Arabic language writing had been limited to poetry until the appearance of the first novels in Arabic around the turn of the twentieth century. See, Rita Salam, ‘Le roman politique des écrivains algériens de langue arabe’, *Mots* 54 (1998), p. 97.

⁵⁵ See Amin Zaoui’s author page at Editions Barzakh: <<http://www.editions-barzakh.com/auteurs/amin-zaoui>> [accessed: 13/03/2016]. Sarah Haïdar’s most recent novel *Virgules en trombe* was published by Apic in

Many writers, including Daoud or Benfodil, write for French-language newspapers in Algeria, which enjoy healthy circulation alongside their Arabic-language counterparts. Two of the major francophone dailies *El Watan* and *Le Quotidien d'Oran* have a circulation of over 100,000 and between 150,000 and 200,000 respectively, while the leading Arabic-language titles *Echourouk* and *El Khabar* are estimated to have a circulation of around 500,000 and 350,000.⁵⁶ The linguistic split, which was written into the national narrative after independence, where French was the language of the former colonizer and Arabic that of the legitimate Algeria, in recent years seems to have become less toxic. Although, during the 1990s, language was often used as an excuse to justify attacks on those writing in French, drawing on the division between French and Arabic in Algeria as a causal factor in the violence of the 1990s has proved somewhat of a distraction from the other perhaps more dominant causes of the violence, situated in the factional and identity-based struggle for power at the level of the regime.⁵⁷ If anything, the split between languages has been consistently instrumentalised by those in positions of power to bring about a simplistic and somewhat imagined binary division between Algerians using the French language, the so-called 'Hizb França' (the party of France), and those using Arabic.⁵⁸ As Rahal shows, these conflicts and instrumentalisations of language can be traced back to factional struggles between the various congresses and associations organizing at the beginning of the Algerian independence movement.⁵⁹ In Colonna's view, it is precisely the fact of the population's bi- and tri-lingualism that unveils the myth of the linguistic conflict and shows

2013. She is the author of three previous novels in Arabic, *Zanadeka* (Apostates), *Louaâb el mibbara* (The Spit of the Inkwell) and *Chabkat el farass* (The Sigh and the Mare), all published by Les Editions El-Ikhtilef in Algiers.

⁵⁶ See, 'La presse algérienne', <<http://www.journauxalgeriens.fr/>> [accessed: 13 March 2016]; see also, Djamila Ould Khettab, 'Quels sont les journaux algériens les plus lus?', *Algérie-Focus.com*, 21 May 2014, <<http://www.algerie-focus.com/2014/05/echourouk-reste-le-journal-le-plus-lu-dalgerie/>> [accessed: 13 March 2016].

⁵⁷ Such is the conclusion of Roberts, and Evans & Phillips.

⁵⁸ As Hafid Gafâiti writes, the simplistic Manichean opposition between Francophones and Arabophones denies the complexity of the realities of the violence of the 1990s. See, 'The Monotheism of the Other: Language and De/Construction of National Identity in Postcolonial Algeria', in *Algeria in Others' Languages*, ed. by Anne-Emmanuelle Berger (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 20-21.

⁵⁹ Rahal, 'Fused Together and Torn Apart', pp. 133-34.

the primacy of ‘assumed or ascribed “identitarian” affiliations’ or, in other words, ‘*the impossibility of thinking cultural personality outside the political idiom*’ where one was *either* the ‘true Nationalist’, ‘suspect Berberist’, ‘atheistic Communist’ or ‘conservative Reformist’.⁶⁰ Later, such distractions and binaries would feed into the State’s strategy of bolstering its own legitimacy as protector of the Algerian people against the fundamentalist forces attacking it.⁶¹

The reality is one of Algerians living an everyday *trilingualism*, to use Colonna’s words, although this might better be described in Khatibi’s terms as *plurilingualism*, which is distinct from the minimally bilingual in that speakers effectively create their language moving between a tapestry of Arabic (both modern standard and dialectal forms), Berber languages and French (also Spanish in parts of Morocco). In his 1983 chapter ‘Bilinguisme et littérature’, which begins with a reading of Meddeb’s *Talismano*, Khatibi explains how the bilingual reader’s language is suspended between the maternal and the foreign, ‘aux marges de l’intraduisible.’⁶² Reading the first letter of Abdelwahab Meddeb’s first name, transcribed on the front cover of his book as ‘A’, Khatibi explains how the ‘A’ replaces the phoneme (ع) which does not exist in French but which, in Arabic, signifies the ‘eye’.⁶³ Without even opening the text Khatibi notes how, by evoking the image of ‘un œil absent’, there is at work an unreadability and untranslatability which the bilingual reader is invited to explore. Although the reduction of Arabic writing to the ‘ordre alphabétique’ of the French language, for the (at minimum) bilingual reader could be seen as alienating, Khatibi identifies how Meddeb’s overuse of the preposition ‘à’, as well as his staging of the naming process within the text, comes to substitute for the loss of the original Arabic sound, with its grave accent pointing towards the excluded Arabic phoneme.

⁶⁰ Colonna, p. 164.

⁶¹ In some quarters, it has been suggested that one of the outcomes of Arabisation was precisely the rise of the the Islamist movement in Algeria. See Willis, *The Islamist Challenge*, p. 51.

⁶² Aldelkebir Khatibi, ‘Bilinguisme et littérature’, in *Maghreb Pluriel* (Paris: Denoël, 1983), p. 183.

⁶³ Khatibi, ‘Bilinguisme et littérature’, pp. 181-82.

If, for Khatibi, the foreign language gives with one hand and takes with the other, this double movement also brings into existence the ‘texte bilingue’ which at once alienates and transforms.⁶⁴ It is, thus, a ‘récit de traduction [...] un récit qui *parle en langues*’ which Khatibi stresses characterizes ‘toute cette littérature maghrébine dite d’expression française’.⁶⁵ French is not simply a third language, but part of a complex system whereby the former colonial language ‘se traduit[*t*] lui-même du français en français’,⁶⁶ and bilingualism is shown to be internal to every language as ‘[l]a langue française’ becomes ‘plus ou moins toutes les langues internes et externes qui la font et la défont.’⁶⁷ We can, according to Khatibi, establish a diglossia in this new French, between the written and voiced forms of the language, which resists any attempt at formal translation and makes of the bi- or *pluri*-lingual text a ‘perpétuelle traduction.’⁶⁸ Therefore, French becomes a linguistic palimpsest, where the francophone North African text is as a result always at least double, performing a suspended relationality between languages. As Réda Bensmaïa has written of Khatibi’s novel, *Amour bilingue*,⁶⁹ the question for Khatibi is no longer a political one of whether to write in one or the other language (Arabic or French): ‘Rather the point is to make visible another (infraliminal) level of writing and thinking that renders the dualistic opposition that has dominated Maghrebi literary production completely obsolete.’⁷⁰

Such ‘dualistic opposition’ we can see perhaps most clearly in the production and reception of Algerian literature during the 1990s. While all of the texts in our selected corpus are, at their base, French-language texts, they all at various levels constitute a necessary reinvention of the French language and, in turn, the novel form more generally. Moreover, Khatibi sees his linguistic deconstruction of the French language as concomitant

⁶⁴ Khatibi, ‘Bilinguisme et littérature’, pp. 183-86.

⁶⁵ Khatibi, ‘Bilinguisme et littérature’, p. 188.

⁶⁶ Khatibi, ‘Bilinguisme et littérature’, p. 188.

⁶⁷ Khatibi, ‘Bilinguisme et littérature’, p. 188.

⁶⁸ Khatibi, ‘Bilinguisme et littérature’, p. 205.

⁶⁹ Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Amour bilingue* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1983).

⁷⁰ Réda Bensmaïa, ‘Multilingualism and National “Traits”’, in *Experimental Nations, or, The Invention of the Maghreb* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 103-04.

with decolonisation and as intervening politically, but in the sense, as Bensmaïa puts it, that the French language is ‘wrest[ed] from the metaphysical and precritical state in which it was supposed to be merely a *secondary* tool for the expression of a single and/or unified mind, culture, or subject.’⁷¹ Although composed with the broader Maghreb in mind, Khatibi’s work becomes more acutely relevant in the Algerian context,⁷² where monolingual language policies had brought about a form of linguistic alienation which was also stifling the proper emergence of Algeria’s properly plural past.

The rise of new independent publishers, and the relinquishing of bookshops from the hands of the State-owned and run publishers ENAL (Entreprise Nationale du Livre), which was until 1983 the SNED (Société Nationale d’Edition et de Diffusion), and the OPU (Office des Publications Universitaires), coincided with the liberalisation of the press and with the lifting of one-party rule in the wake of the October 1988 unrest. Although some publishers were created at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s – Editions Laphomic, Bouchène, Chihab between 1988 and 1990 and Casbah in 1992 – the number of literary works published during this time was still significantly limited.⁷³ Hadj Miliani, in his study of the French-language literary field in Algeria comes up with only a handful (up to only nineteen) French-language novels in his bibliography of Algerian-published works between 1992 and 2000.⁷⁴

In stark contrast to the situation during the 1990s, the number of Algerian publishers skyrocketed after 2000. This was due to the mechanism by which funds were distributed to publishers in subsidies offered for one-off projects by the Ministry of Culture. An article published in *Le Monde diplomatique* in 2013 noted that there could be as

⁷¹ Bensmaïa, ‘Multilingualism and National “Traits”’, p. 107.

⁷² Anne-Emmanuelle Berger makes this point in her introduction to *Algeria in Others’ Languages*, p. 11.

⁷³ Faïza Ghazali, ‘Edition algérienne: entre dèche et débrouille’, *Jeune Afrique*, 3 February 2010, <<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/199062/culture/edition-alg-rienne-entre-d-che-et-d-brouille/>> [accessed: 13 March 2016].

⁷⁴ Hadj Miliani, *Une littérature en sursis? Le champ littéraire de langue française en Algérie* (Paris: l’Harmattan, 2002), pp. 237-41.

many as four hundred publishing companies in Algeria, while the website of the Algerian Ministry of Culture lists as many as eighty publishers currently ‘en activité’.⁷⁵ These include projects for volumes concerning, for example, the celebration of the fifty-year anniversary of independence, or for various festivals or ‘capital of culture’ celebrations.

In reality, a smaller group of publishers has managed to retain influence and funding, constructing catalogues which incorporate a range of francophone and Arabophone texts whether literary fiction, history or school textbooks.⁷⁶ A number of texts also appear in Tamazight. This wide-reach of the catalogues has likely served to keep many of these publishers in business. As Patrick Crowley suggests, it is this main group of publishers – Editions Alpha, Apic, Barzakh, Casbah and Chihab – which can be read as the principal actors in what others have called the ‘nahda’, ‘nouveau souffle’ or ‘renaissance des mots’ inside Algeria.⁷⁷ In 2001, Algeria’s first literary prize, the ‘Prix Mohammed Dib’ was launched, awarded to Habib Ayyoub in 2003 and to Kamel Daoud in 2008, and the Salon international du livre d’Alger (SILA) was in its twentieth year in 2015.⁷⁸ Of this group of publishers, which has survived on a mixture of State funding through independent project subsidies and outside help,⁷⁹ Barzakh is perhaps the most interesting both in terms of Algerian literary production and as a symbol for Algeria emerging from the years of the

⁷⁵ Pierre Daum, ‘Éditeurs et librairies en Algérie’, *Le monde diplomatique*, August 2013, <<http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2013/08/DAUM/49513>> [accessed: 13 March 2016]. See also the website of the Algerian Ministry of Culture: <<http://www.m-culture.gov.dz/mc2/fr/editeursalgeriens.php>> [accessed: 13 March 2016].

⁷⁶ If the money raised through the sale of educational textbooks allows the publisher to publish less lucrative literary fiction, it also raises the question of that publisher’s relationship with the State and their editorial independence when selecting which works to publish.

⁷⁷ Patrick Crowley, ‘Literatures in French Today: Markets, Centres, Peripheries, Transition’, *Australian Journal of French Studies* 50, 3 (2013), p. 416; see also, Rachid Mokhtari, *Le nouveau souffle du roman algérien: essai sur la littérature des années 2000* (Algiers: Chihab, 2006); Adlène Meddi & Mélanie Matarese (eds), *Algérie: la nahda des Lettres, la renaissance des mots* (Paris: Riveneuve Editions, 2015).

⁷⁸ Crowley, ‘Literatures in French Today’, p. 417. The SILA, which was incorporated in 2009 under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, apparently welcomed a record 1.2 million visitors in 2010. See, ‘Les 20 ans du SILA’, <<http://www.sila-dz.com/20-ans.html>> [accessed: 28 March 2016].

⁷⁹ The French Cultural Centre in Algiers has for example helped with the cost of purchasing rights to publish French-published texts under the Barzakh imprint and at a guaranteed lower cost for Algerian readers. See, European Cultural Foundation, ‘An Alternative Gaze: A shared reflection on cross-Mediterranean cooperation in the arts’, <<http://www.culturalfoundation.eu/library/an-alternative-gaze>> [accessed: 29 March 2016].

‘décennie noire’. The press which began by uniquely publishing literary texts has now expanded its catalogue to include history, political and social memoir and fine art (mainly collections of photography) and at the time of writing has at least one hundred and fifty texts in its catalogue.⁸⁰

In Sufi theology, the *barzakh* is a space of purgatory; the term also means ‘isthme’ (the isthmus), defined as a piece of narrow land which connects two separate land masses.⁸¹ According to Amina Bekkat, the name comes from the Juan Goytisolo novel *La cuarentena* – translated as *Barzakh* and published by Gallimard in France – which is translated to English as ‘Quarantine’ and which charts the supposed forty day journey between death and the afterlife in which the narrator’s journey, while set during the first Gulf War, in fact recasts, through pulling apart and questioning it, the media narrative of that war.⁸² As a symbol for postcolonial interconnectedness between France and Algeria, but also as a transitional figure between the conflict of the 1990s and its afterlife in the wake of 2000, the publisher has become emblematic of cultural production in contemporary Algeria which has sought to find a form to both come to terms with and move on from the violence of the 1990s, but crucially to look back to explore how this violence was represented. Both as a factor of its later success and in the light of the efforts initially made by its founders, Sofiane Hadjadj and Selma Hellal, the publisher was awarded the Prince Claus Award in 2010 – a Dutch fund which supports culture and development –

⁸⁰ The catalogue can be viewed on the publisher’s website, <<http://www.editions-barzakh.com/>> [accessed: 13 March 2016]. The recent special issue of *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, which takes as its focus the contemporary ‘roman maghrébin’, includes two separate articles on this publisher. See Corbin Treacy, ‘L’Effet Barzakh’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 20, 1 (2016), pp. 76-83; Mary Anne Lewis, ‘The Maghreb’s New Publishing House: les éditions barzakh and the Stakes of Localized Publishing’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 20, 1 (2016), pp. 85-93.

⁸¹ For definitions of the *barzakh*, see William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 14; 117-18; 124.

⁸² See Amina Bekkat’s short piece, ‘Une jeune maison d’édition algérienne: Barzakh’, *Limag.com*, <<http://www.limag.refer.org/new/index.php?inc=iframe&file=Textes/Bekkat/BekkatBarzakh.htm>> [accessed: 22 July 2015]. Juan Goytisolo, *La cuarentena* (Madrid: Mondadori, 1991); *Barzakh* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994); *Quarantine* (Normal, IL : Dalkey Archive, 1994). Stanley Black relates this to Jean Baudrillard’s work on the question of medium and event. See Black’s *Juan Goytisolo and the Poetics of Contagion: The Evolution of a Radical Aesthetic in the Later Novels* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), p. 220.

guaranteeing the publishers a prize of €100,000. Part of the logic for awarding Barzakh the prize was based on the publisher's catalogue of works which challenged the realities of conflict and the orthodoxies of speaking about conflict in its aftermath. More generally, Barzakh was seen as an example of an independent publisher pushing the boundaries of reality not simply within the texts it published but by its efforts to survive in a space where funding opportunities were few and far between.⁸³

Barzakh is, therefore, a publisher which by its existence challenges not just the dominant State narrative of *urgence* in Algeria, but the erroneous and at times damaging presentation of Algeria during the 1990s under the French publishers' rubric of 'écriture de l'urgence'. As the co-founders explain to Daikha Dridi, the venture was conceived as a means of discovering 'les timbres et styles inédits et précieux' which would contain the 'minimum syndical [...] d'effroi et de violence intégriste'.⁸⁴ In this same text, Dridi describes how she had first met Hellal in the first days of Barzakh during the 'folles années' where the publisher was, in effect, its own distributor: 'elle parcourait des centaines et des centaines de kilomètres, dans sa Kangoo remplie de cartons de livres, qu'elle allait distribuer elle-même dans les librairies des grandes villes du pays.'⁸⁵ If initially existing precariously, the publisher now stands on firmer ground.

Symbolically, the figure of the barzakh – as isthmus, the transitory 'entre-deux' – can be seen in many ways to prefigure the literature the publisher will make available in its catalogue in reimagining the Algerian nation beyond its scripted character, in France, Algeria and elsewhere. Despite receiving funding from the Ministry of Culture, Barzakh implicitly attacks the State's own 'national story' and returns its audience to the

⁸³ The prize was granted under the theme of 'borders of reality'. For information, see the prize fund's website, <<http://www.princeclausfund.org/en/network/barzakh.html>> [accessed: 13 March 2016].

⁸⁴ Daikha Dridi, *Alger: blessée et lumineuse* (Paris: Editions Autrement, 2005), p. 181.

⁸⁵ Dridi, *Alger: blessée et lumineuse*, p. 181.

(im)possibility of the nation existing in a creative ‘imagined’ or ‘narrated’ space.⁸⁶ However, in using the mystical and theological language of the *barzakh* (as purgatory), the publisher performs more than a simple counter to the State narrative by at least implicitly drawing attention to what Bhabha calls ‘the essential question of the representation of the nation as a temporal process.’⁸⁷ Section Three of the thesis returns to these questions in more detail through the study of two writers, one of whom (Habib Ayyoub) is published by Barzakh and whose works also engage with this essential question of time.

Among the first writers to be published by Barzakh were Habib Ayyoub and Mustapha Benfodil, whose works we explore in detail in Chapters Five and Six; in its first days, Barzakh also published a commissioned text from the well-established writer Rachid Boudjedra and re-edited texts by Mohammed Dib and Isabelle Eberhardt in a collection entitled ‘Pœil du désert’.⁸⁸ Miliani also lists texts by Sofiane Hadjadj (the publisher’s cofounder), Malek Ali and Youcef Zirem as appearing with Barzakh in their first year.⁸⁹ In its first collaboration with the French, Arles-based, publisher Actes Sud, Barzakh published Arezki Mellal’s *Maintenant, ils peuvent venir*, a harrowing story of a father attempting to protect his child in the most desperate circumstances as they are forced to leave their home in a climate of increasing violence.⁹⁰ These works, on the very edge of the exit from the ‘décennie noire’, begin to experiment with what one might call a transitional form. Benfodil’s *Zarta!* is for instance split in two – the first half written in a testimonial first person, the second part rendered in a more distanced and reflective third person, where the problematic process of writing is itself figured within the narrative.

⁸⁶ The idea of the nation as imagined community has been discussed most famously in Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

⁸⁷ Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation’, p. 204.

⁸⁸ Bekkat, ‘Une jeune maison d’édition’.

⁸⁹ Miliani, pp. 240-41.

⁹⁰ Arezki Mellal, *Maintenant, ils peuvent venir* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2000); the novel was published in France by Actes Sud in 2002.

The question of the extent to which the publisher wishes to stage an ‘end’ to the tragedy of the 1990s – or indeed label the period as a tragedy at all – is left open, however. To do so would be to align with the voice of the regime, headed by Bouteflika who was at the time seeking to create his own ‘end’-narrative to the violence. Existing in its own creatively suspended space, Barzakh, like the works it publishes, removes itself from prescriptive narratives. It does this by continually casting doubt on the fixed idea of narrative, asking questions of it and recasting narrative *tout court* within a creative, experimental and discursive space, which is also a suspended space, of literary fiction.

Defining the ‘champ’: Methodology and Approach

As we have already indicated, the ‘champ’ is used by Bourdieu to designate his objects of study, namely art and its regimes of symbolic value. In his first article published on the ‘champ intellectuel’ in 1966, Bourdieu uses the figure of the intellectual to announce his study of ‘champs’. In this article, Bourdieu writes of shifting but related ‘forces’ and interactions between intellectual ‘agents’ each determined by the positions they take within the ‘champ’, encompassed within a wide ‘champ culturel’ which is a system of relations between ‘thèmes’ and ‘problèmes’. The order of these relations is subject to a ‘type déterminé *d’inconscient culturel*’.⁹¹ Individual ‘agents’ are, therefore, not always aware of their movement within the field, nor their existence as forces within the field, but are given this ‘*poids fonctionnel*’ from outside the field by the sociologist who studies their and the corresponding positions of other agents within the intellectual field.⁹² Although the field is determined in this way, it also possesses an ‘autonomie relative’, it is semi-autonomous, in its relation to the field of power which encompasses it.⁹³ Crucial for the consecration of writers or intellectuals within a field is their ability to work within a field of power which

⁹¹ Bourdieu, ‘Champ intellectuel et projet créateur’, p. 865.

⁹² Bourdieu, ‘Champ intellectuel et projet créateur’, p. 865.

⁹³ Bourdieu, ‘Champ intellectuel et projet créateur’, p. 866.

controls the publishing apparatus. While this might initially have involved institutions like the monarchy, the church or State, the context is soon transformed to the rise of the bourgeoisie towards the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century and the emergence of literary markets. Crucial to the emergence of the ‘champ’ is therefore the apparent rise of the autonomous intellectual.⁹⁴

What would become known as Bourdieu’s ‘field theory’ is elaborated further in relation to the literary field in articles published at the start of the 1990s and in his book *Les Règles de l’art*, published in 1992.⁹⁵ The sociologist expanded on his ideas on numerous occasions in speeches and in particular in his ‘cours’ given at the Collège de France between 1981 and 1982.⁹⁶

In his work, Bourdieu stresses the importance of focusing on the empirical and rejects the suggestion that he is proposing a ‘theory’ (‘model’ or ‘system’), instead continually referring to a method, which is susceptible to refinement depending on the objects being studied.⁹⁷ It is as methods of studying discursive relations that we wish to engage with Bourdieu’s method of the ‘champ’ alongside Foucault’s conception of discourse. The interdisciplinary approach taken in this thesis seeks, then, to read literature sociologically without arbitrarily containing its meaning, or simplifying its power to intervene socially. Bourdieu’s method is useful to us both in providing an analytical frame through which to view the dynamics of production and consumption and in what some have described as its overly restrained or reductive account or ‘theory’ of literature. This possibility of a restrained or reductive account is precisely what we are investigating in the context of the Franco-Algerian field of the 1990s. When we refer, therefore, to what we

⁹⁴ Bourdieu, ‘Champ intellectuel et projet créateur’, pp. 867-68.

⁹⁵ Bourdieu, ‘Le champ littéraire’; *Les Règles de l’art*. Richard Jenkins is one among many who refer to Bourdieu’s method as a theory. See, *Pierre Bourdieu* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁹⁶ See, Pierre Bourdieu, ‘La culture est en danger’, in *Contre-feux 2. Pour un mouvement social européen* (Paris: Editions Raisons d’Agir, 2001), pp. 75-91; see also, *Sociologie générale. Volume 1, Cours au Collège de France (1981-1983)* (Paris: Seuil, 2015).

⁹⁷ Bourdieu, *Sociologie générale*, p. 580.

have called the Franco-Algerian ‘champ littéraire’ of the 1990s, we do so in order to describe a reductive and contained field of understanding, which has dealt in a generalised currency of the symbol which overrides specific analysis. This is not to pretend to survey the ‘champ littéraire’ in its totality, but to identify one homogeneous element within the overarching discursive field, which we might refer to as the ‘sous-champ’ of *urgence*.⁹⁸

Without wishing to intervene in the active debate on the respective value of Bourdieu’s or Foucault’s methods concerning the study of objects within or outside discourse, it is clear that both thinkers can help us to frame, but also make us acutely aware of the dangers implicit in framing, our own objects of study.⁹⁹ If, in selecting a ‘corpus’ or ‘body’ of texts, we have to some extent invented our own outside objects and brought them into a discourse in which they already existed and functioned as objects prior to our own study, it should also be made clear here that our main ‘corpus’ presents what is a representative selection of texts produced by Algerians in France and Algeria over the last fifteen years.

Mainly because of the ongoing fluidity of the status of the emerging literary field in Algeria, but also because of the interplay in our own corpus between local and transnational markets, we limit our use of the ‘champ littéraire’ to discussion of the Franco-Algerian ‘champ’, and to the ‘sous-champ’ of *urgence*, of the 1990s outlined above. Together with the potential drawbacks associated with using Bourdieu’s method selectively (with the

⁹⁸ Bourdieu uses the term ‘sous-champ’ to describe smaller fields of production within the ‘champ’, such as the avant-garde on the one hand or industrially produced art on the other. See, ‘Le champ littéraire’, p. 11. Bourdieu’s encompassing method has recently been taken up by Tristan Leperlier, whose thesis promises to be a fascinating and in depth study of the Algerian ‘champ littéraire’ between 1988 and 2003. See, ‘Une guerre des langues? Le champ littéraire algérien pendant la « décennie noire » (1988-2003): crise politique et consécration transnationales’ (unpublished PhD thesis, l’Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2015).
⁹⁹ On where Bourdieu and Foucault can be brought together, see Tony Bennett, ‘Culture, power, knowledge: between Foucault and Bourdieu’, in *Cultural Analysis and Bourdieu’s Legacy: Setting Accounts and Developing Alternatives*, ed. by Elizabeth Silva and Alan Warde (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 102-16. Michel de Certeau who addressed both Foucault and Bourdieu together in his book *L’Invention du Quotidien* underlines the drawbacks of Bourdieu’s method in its tendency to read art ethnologically. See, *L’Invention du Quotidien*. Vol. 1, Arts de Faire (Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1980), p. 138.

practical limitations of exploring a ‘social totality’¹⁰⁰ we will seek to, as Tony Bennett suggests, ‘loosen up’ Bourdieu’s method and speak of a broad discursive field or realm which contains a set of sometimes competing sometimes coalescing narratives.¹⁰¹ It is within this broad field that we begin to explore the relations between narrative and its discursive frames by looking within the works themselves, which can be seen to develop and deploy their own critical strategies for reading the relationship between narrative and discourse in the Algerian context in particular.

In its necessity for an all-encompassing overview, its need for a complete or contained view of the agent and in its claim to a general sociology, Bourdieu’s work has met with some criticism.¹⁰² John Frow has referred to a certain ‘thinness’ he claims is ‘inherent in such projects of literary sociology’.¹⁰³ Critiquing a sociology of literature, including that practised by him, ‘grounded in the perspective of social totality’ – his target is also Bourdieu here – Frow favours what he calls ‘a sociologically informed strategy of reading’, which serves not to stand in for the reader (as the sociologist might do in a contained theory of the ‘champ’) but to reconstruct reading practices and representations of reading indirectly, through what he names, after Pavel Medvedev, a ‘sociological poetics’.¹⁰⁴ Calling also on Mikhail Bakhtin, Frow recalls how ‘texts are neither the reflection of a history which is external to them, nor are they placed within that history’; rather, texts ‘construct or reproduce a historicity by means of their relation to a set of generic and discursive materials, and that relation is disclosed only by way of reflexive attention to textual workings (an attention which has its own structural conditions of

¹⁰⁰ See, John Frow, ‘On mid-level concepts’, in *The Practice of Value: Essays on Literature in Cultural Studies* (Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2013), p. 222.

¹⁰¹ Bennett, p. 110.

¹⁰² Jenkins, p. 90.

¹⁰³ John Frow, ‘On mid-level concepts’, p. 218; for more general debates on these questions, see Frow’s *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

¹⁰⁴ Frow, ‘On mid-level concepts’, p. 222.

possibility).¹⁰⁵ To simplify, Frow advocates studying the text in the world through a study of the world in the text, where Bourdieu's model has a tendency to limit its view, or rather overview, to the text in the world.

This seeming unwillingness to look within the text or to focus on the body as locus of the performative is tackled by Judith Butler as one which relies on a tenuous distinction made by Bourdieu between the linguistic and the social.¹⁰⁶ In a sustained critique, Dan O'Hara makes a number of points which bring Bourdieu's method into question. He writes, for instance, that in order for Bourdieu's method (O'Hara uses the term 'system' here) to work, the agents must be 'cachectic, coherent, and homeostatic'.¹⁰⁷ Part of Bourdieu's problem, in O'Hara's view, is precisely in the empirical drive he stresses, leading the sociologist to borrow terms from physical, biological and economic sciences and falling victim to a common ambiguity in modelling whereby the 'causal ordering of his strata' becomes 'artificial and redundant'.¹⁰⁸ Bourdieu's system or model is static and fails to accommodate variation or entropy.

Another bone of contention in Bourdieu's method has been in its containment of the zones of production and consumption. While they might be seen to feed into one another, where, as we will see, the pole of consumption or demand acts back on the pole of production, Bourdieu seems not to allow for the possibility that individual agents, writers and readers, could be both producers and consumers and, in particular relation to readers, the sociologist fails to recognise how readers are never simply consumers of the text as an object, but active producers of the text and its meaning. As Frow underlines,

¹⁰⁵ Frow, 'On mid-level concepts', p. 221.

¹⁰⁶ Judith Butler, 'Performativity's Social Magic', in *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Richard Shusterman (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), pp. 113-28.

¹⁰⁷ Dan O'Hara, 'Capitalism and Culture: Bourdieu's Field Theory', *Amerikastudien/ American Studies* 45, 1 (2000), p. 46.

¹⁰⁸ O'Hara, p. 49

citing Bennett, the production of texts is never complete: ‘They are endlessly *re-produced*, endlessly remade with different political consequences and effects’.¹⁰⁹

Through close reading of the literary works, we hope to avoid the pitfalls of Frow’s methodological ‘thinness’ and begin, as he goes on to suggest, to pay a ‘reflexive attention to textual workings’ and to the ‘regime of reading’ which has ‘neither the specificity of the concept of text nor the generality of the concepts of literature or of the social.’¹¹⁰ We will seek to track what Frow calls the ‘heterogeneous assemblage of factors that modify the text as it modifies its environment’.¹¹¹ Indeed, in her recent ‘Etat Présent’ on francophone North African literature, Jane Hiddleston suggests that critics need to understand the ‘new preoccupations of francophone writers from the Maghreb and to establish conceptual frameworks for reading that would be appropriate to the concerns of our time.’¹¹² The thesis contributes to the still growing scholarship on writers from Algeria and emergent work on writers residing in Algeria, paying particular attention to the material structures, discursive and conceptual frameworks within which such writers have written, been published, read and reread. It is not a history of contemporary Algerian literature, nor does it offer an encompassing account of the period of the 1990s or 2000s; rather, it seeks, through analysing a selection of works that can be seen as representative, to show how the possibility of an equivocal ‘account’, already given by many, must be questioned.

Case Studies

The thesis is split into four sections, encompassing seven chapters. There are two excursuses in the thesis: the first serves as a bridge between Sections One and Two, while the second, which is located between Sections Two and Three, introduces an important debate on national allegory which will inform the discussion in the third section of the

¹⁰⁹ Frow, ‘On mid-level concepts’, p. 224.

¹¹⁰ Frow, ‘On mid-level concepts’, p. 227.

¹¹¹ Frow, ‘On mid-level concepts’, p. 225.

¹¹² Jane Hiddleston, ‘Etat Présent: Francophone North African Literature’, *French Studies* 70, 1 (2016), p. 90.

thesis. Section One, made up of one longer chapter, seeks to set the scene of the 1990s in Algeria, expanding on the above introductory remarks, while also introducing a number of concepts which appear throughout the thesis. This part of the thesis explores how a predominant media narrative latched onto the terminologies of *urgence* deployed by the State, publishers and writers, as it employed the term ‘écriture de l’urgence’ to frame literature as a documentary lens through which the violence of the 1990s could be read – to give an account of the violence through literature. Citing Deepika Bahri’s warnings of the ‘native informant’ becoming central to market, pedagogical and cultural spaces defined as postcolonial literature, where the minority view is privileged as ‘authentic’ and where the ‘native informant’ fulfils the demands of a ‘needy metropolitan audience’,¹¹³ Chapter One looks beyond Bourdieu to the work of Nicholas Harrison, who recalls the words of Jacques Derrida in exploring how the literary might better be conceived in terms which emphasise its ‘suspended relation to meaning and reference.’¹¹⁴ As Harrison elaborates in a later article, this means that while literature will always at some level emerge out of and refer to experiences in the real world, it will always at the same time ‘defer or frustrate’ those references.¹¹⁵ Harrison continues to cite Derrida who himself elaborates: ‘*Suspended* means *suspense*, but also *dependence*, condition, conditionality.’¹¹⁶ One of the underlying aims of the first chapter is to ask how the literary was consistently misrepresented within the bounds of the Franco-Algerian ‘champ littéraire’ of the 1990s, framed as something more politically robust and graspable, where certain ‘ideas of the literary’ became prominent.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Deepika Bahri, *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 19. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak first discusses questions surrounding the ‘native informant’ in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1999).

¹¹⁴ Nicholas Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism: History, Theory and the Work of Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 139.

¹¹⁵ Nicholas Harrison, ‘Who Needs an Idea of the Literary?’, *Paragraph* 28, 2 (2005), p. 13. These questions have been explored further in relation to postcolonial literature in Patrick Crowley and Jane Hiddleston (eds), *Postcolonial Poetics: Genre and Form* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).

¹¹⁶ Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p. 139; see also, Derrick Attridge & Jacques Derrida, “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’: An Interview with Jacques Derrida”, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derrick Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 48.

¹¹⁷ Harrison, ‘Who needs an Idea of the Literary?’, p. 8.

While Bourdieu recognises the ambiguous and often contradictory relationship artists maintain with the works they produce, he does not look in any detail at this tricky problem of the artist, the work and the production of meaning, which he seems largely to skip over in favour of thinking about the object of the work and the intellectual taken together as cultural symbols – what he first names, in his 1966 article, the ‘*projet créateur*’.¹¹⁸ If, to a degree, it seems necessary to look at how the intellectual or writer and the work is received and thereby constructed in this way, as a whole, there seems also to be a danger that literature is being taken as an example which *affirms* a certain political position or certain political values in a simple way, which moreover fails to question a set of predefined ‘ideas of the literary’.¹¹⁹

The longer first chapter of the thesis highlights, through an assessment of the politics and dynamics of the reception of literature during the 1990s, how *urgence* was first *cast* during the 1990s, while the remaining three sections analyse, in six individual literary case studies, how *urgence* has been subsequently *recast*; that is to say, revisited and rethought in a new light which takes account of the complexities of compartmentalising and classifying literature in a language which poses the danger of predefining that literature’s meaning as something solid, containable and graspable.¹²⁰

Section Two brings together two writers who began writing during the 1990s in Algeria, but both of whose major works were first published in France. The work of Maïssa Bey and Salim Bachi is a complex engagement with questions of history, and in particular the writing of Algerian history, but also tragedy and practices of reading. Both

¹¹⁸ Bourdieu, ‘*Champ intellectuel et projet créateur*’.

¹¹⁹ As Harrison writes in his article, ‘ideas of the literary [need] to be taken into account even by those critics who are concerned only with the ideological work that literature may do or has done, or with literature’s ability to communicate “experience”, if only because ideas of the literary have formed an integral part of the shifting conventions of authorship and reception.’ ‘Who needs an Idea of the Literary?’, p. 8.

¹²⁰ In her 2001 book, Anne Donadey employs the metaphor of the ‘cast’ primarily in the theatrical sense, as she places postcolonial women writers at the centre of her study. It would be difficult not to read a deconstructive metaphor also at work in the title of her book: to ‘recast’ postcolonialism is, for Donadey, to (re)use the discipline against its own uneven focus on male writers, as well as to continually interrogate the critic’s own position in relation to the writers studied. See, *Recasting Postcolonialism: Women Writing Between Worlds* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001).

offer their literary works as a platform through which Algerian history can be viewed critically. This is achieved primarily by integrating and processing the reductions of Algerian history common during the 1990s through a set of inventive narrative strategies, which enable the recasting of a far more inclusive Algerian history within a broader discursive literary space.

Where Bey's first novel and collections of short stories relate more directly to the events of the 'décennie noire', and offer an interrogation of the language of *urgence* of that period, her later novels can be read to take a historical turn. Given that she was born in 1950, the narrative of post-independence Algeria was particularly present for Bey as she was growing up. Chapter Two aims to show how Bey's literary fiction recasts this scripted version of history which had excluded Algerian women and seeks to explore her own form which unites the multiple experiences and voices of Algerian women at this time. Bey admits being driven to writing later on in life by the events of the 'décennie noire' and it soon becomes clear that the writer's works self-consciously recast the ethical imperative of the 1990s, reorienting literature's critical gaze towards the dangerously reductive history upon which the foundations of the 'décennie noire' are built.

Chapter Three looks at a selection of Bachi's novels, which have employed the composite mythical figure of Cyrtha as a means of remapping Algerian history, while encouraging the reader to look critically at their own understanding of history as a particular account of events within a contained geography. By focusing on Bachi's trilogy of works on Cyrtha (two novels and a collection of short stories), and two further post-9/11 novels which take on the perspective of two accused perpetrators of terrorist acts, the chapter analyses how Bachi is able to unsettle stable narratives of history, making them subject to a host of interrupting mythologies and, in turn, a constant flux and variation as myth acts back on the events described and creates conditions for new events to take their place. The chapter shows how in the process of re-writing and transfiguring the founding

myths of Algerian identity, what Brand refers to as the ‘identifiable heroes’ (such as Jugurtha or La Kahéna),¹²¹ Bachi’s novels remove history from its ivory tower and bring into focus the fact that history is both *already written* and continually being *re-written*.

Section Three looks to two writers less known on the international stage and whose works remain unpublished in France. Revisiting an old debate on allegory, played out in recent years by a number of scholars around the work of Tahar Djaout (a debate introduced in the second excursus), this section of the thesis asks how Algerian literature after the ‘*décennie noire*’, published within new Algerian publishing markets, can itself be read to revisit questions of literature and national allegory first raised in Fredric Jameson’s well-known essay ‘Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’. Jameson’s claim that ‘[a]ll third world texts are necessarily [...] allegorical’ led to his essay being largely dismissed subsequently, but this part of the thesis explores how the works of two locally published writers, Djamel Mati and Habib Ayyoub, encourage the reader to revisit these questions in the context of the fractures of the ‘*décennie noire*’.¹²²

While Mati’s trilogy of novels initially posit a neat if disturbing figure for the Algerian nation, the reader soon discovers the instability of plotting reference in a space subject not only to a set of dystopian hallucinations, but the ever-changing and slippery space of the desert. Ayyoub’s stories and novels, while constituting a host of more explicitly political fables, look to frustrate a referential and temporal stability established in dominant accounts of the Algerian nation which emerged after independence and which the State and others had attempted to reassert during and after the years of the ‘*décennie noire*’. Like the works of Bey and Bachi, these works look back to and recast a pre-established ‘*registre des métaphores*’ in Algeria.¹²³ This section also explores the extent to

¹²¹ Brand, p. 9.

¹²² Fredric Jameson, ‘Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, *Social Text* 15 (1986), p. 69.

¹²³ These are the words of Aïda, the narrator in Maïssa Bey’s *Puisque mon cœur est mort* (La Tour-d’Aigues: L’Aube, 2011), p. 127.

which the works reread and recast the allegorical mode as a disjunctive space of representation where the question of the nation's representation as 'temporal process', in Bhabha's words, is brought into focus.¹²⁴ While, on the one hand, both writers' works can be seen to continually frustrate and defer meaning by constantly re-positing and recasting national allegories, they still offer a scathing and often, in the case of Ayyoub, caustic critique of power and ideology in contemporary Algeria and hence fuse the possibility of the political with the poetic, positing the poetic *as* political precisely in its ability to destabilise the idea that power is fixed and immovable.

In its focus on Mustapha Benfodil and Kamel Daoud, Section Four stages something of a reversal in publishing trends. Where Bey and Bachi had initially been published in France, Benfodil and Daoud's works were published and distributed first in Algeria, by Barzakh, before being picked up by French publishers. Paris, it seemed, was no longer operating as the primary centre of literary invention, as Daoud's novel, *Meursault, contre-enquête*, became one of the first French-language novels to win a host of French literary prizes while not originating with a French publishing house.

Where Mati and Ayyoub's works deal in a more schematic way with questions of allegory, reference and literature's place in unveiling ideological narrations of history, Mustapha Benfodil's works – and in particular his 2007 novel which Chapter Six takes as its focus – can be seen to radically reject all forms of reference, almost turning the form of the novel inside-out, as its structuring underbelly is thrust upon the reader. What emerges from a reading of Benfodil's work is a challenge to all levels and power and discourse, including the narratives of *urgence* established during the 1990s; it is a challenge which, the chapter argues, consists in imagining a way forward beyond the mere destruction of discourse as Benfodil's novel cleverly deconstructs both the world in the text and the text in the world.

¹²⁴ Bhabha, 'DissemiNation', p. 204.

Chapter Seven looks at Kamel Daoud's novel, *Meursault, contre-enquête*, and charts the story of the novel's initial publication in Algeria and its sensational success once published in France. In returning to the original text, this final chapter of the thesis seeks to reread Daoud's work less as an affirmative rewriting of Albert Camus's *L'Étranger*, and less as a form of postcolonial 'writing back', but rather as an ironic comment on literature itself and the questions surrounding the limits of literature's ability to represent contemporary Algeria. A significant portion of the chapter is therefore given over to studying how Daoud's novel was framed by its various publishers and by the media receiving it. Given the proximity to the date of publication, the final chapter sketches a set of more tentative conclusions; by focusing on reception, the end of the thesis returns to questions established at the outset: in the absence of the ability to write a history of independent Algeria, how is contemporary Algeria, and in particular its violence, told through a literary lens and what are the problems associated with this mode of reading?

While, in Chapter One of the thesis, the construction of an 'écriture de l'urgence' might serve as a warning to reading society through the lens of literature, Daoud's novel presents an opportunity to begin to read, to tentatively grant access to, Algerian history which would otherwise be obscured, or remain depicted through the reductive binaries offered by a media narrative, unknowingly coalescing with the Algerian State narrative. Five years after the publication of her critique of the international media's treatment of the In Amenas crisis in 2011, with which we began this introduction, Vince published an article on Kamel Daoud's novel. If, as she writes, 'much of our knowledge of post-independence Algeria comes from fiction',¹²⁵ then surely we must seek to find new ways to read this fiction critically in order that students and scholars alike can be given proper access to

¹²⁵ Natalya Vince, 'Literature as post-colonial reality? Kamel Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation*', *Fiction and Film for French Historians* 6, 4 (2016), <<http://h-france.net/fffh/maybe-missed/literature-as-post-colonial-reality-kamel-daouds-the-meursault-investigation/>> [accessed: 13 March 2013].

contemporary Algeria beyond the imaginaries of violence which have hitherto inflected our readings of a country with rich traditions of plurality and hospitality.

What unites all the works explored in this study is their critical awareness of, and capacity to discursively incorporate and recast, the multiple sometimes coalescing, sometimes conflicting narratives of 'Algeria'. In the particular context of the 1990s, these works all in some way think through and recast the ethical imperative of the period, variously reorienting *urgence* as a thing which is immanent in all acts of literary writing, in the sense that writing always constitutes *urgent* acts of reading and hence rethinking the world in the discursive space of literary fiction. It is therefore a cycle of reading and writing brought into focus by an aesthetic practice which at once relies on and eschews its own periodization, *imagining otherwise* the political function of objects represented in, and produced by, the realm of discourse.

Section One: Casting *Urgence*

Chapter One

Scripting the ‘décennie noire’: competing narrations

N’y a-t-il pas une sorte de paternalisme, derrière la bonne volonté politique, de ne pas voir dans les écrivains maghrébins autre chose que des porte-parole?

–Ghania Hammadou¹²⁶

Ce qu’on écrit doit être d’aujourd’hui et pour toujours. [...] Ce n’est pas l’écriture qui est d’urgence, mais une écoute qui, elle, est en état d’urgence.

–Slimane Benaïssa¹²⁷

The aim of this chapter is to explore the reception of Algerian francophone literature during the 1990s and, in particular the construction of meaning in and around this literature within what we have named the Franco-Algerian ‘champ littéraire’ and more particularly the ‘sous-champ’ of *urgence*. It serves also as an introduction to the politics of writing during the contemporary Algerian period and as a review of the existing studies on literature produced during the 1990s. Its argument is that while heterogeneous in its multiple forms and genres, Algerian literature can be seen to suffer systematically reductionist readings in the French, and some Algerian, press during the 1990s, where a certain language and terminology are employed to frame literature within the scope of what became known as an ‘écriture de l’urgence’. The chapter which makes up this first section demonstrates how a certain discourse deployed across spaces of critical reception has played a significant role in shaping readings of texts viewed as ‘emerging from’ Algeria during the 1990s.

¹²⁶ Ghania Hammadou, ‘Préambule : Ecrire, encore écrire!’, in *La graphie de l’horreur: essai sur la littérature algérienne (1990-2000)* by Rachid Mokhtari (Algiers: Chihab, 2002), pp. 21-22.

¹²⁷ Slimane Benaïssa, Jamel Eddine Bencheikh, Jean-Louis Hourdin, Waciny Larej, Nourredine Saadi & Leïla Sebbar, ‘Comment écrire l’Algérie aujourd’hui?’ *Algérie Littérature/Action* 10-11 (1997), p. 224.

In what follows, we consider the degree to which literature was during this time increasingly becoming promoted as a way to read Algeria itself, where writers were becoming what Deepika Bahri, after Spivak, calls ‘native informants’, often framed within what she calls a ‘critical approach based on the approximation of the aesthetic to the thematic kernel’.¹²⁸ Recalling Spivak’s exploration of the confusion between the political and artistic realms of representation, where the intellectual is both writer and a politico-cultural representative of society, we chart the extent to which the artistic and political have been fused together in the case of the 1990s to create something like Bourdieu’s ‘projet créateur’,¹²⁹ within the bounds of what Graham Huggan in a different context calls a form of exoticised cultural representation, where texts are constructed as ‘readily translatable’ marginal voices.¹³⁰ If, as Huggan suggests in the context of postcolonial studies, some critics have fused these two realms, treating the writer as an ‘authentic’ political spokesperson for their ‘culture’ or community, there is a clear risk that literature loses its ‘suspended relation to meaning and reference’ and, consequently, its status as literature.¹³¹ If, in the Algerian context, the invention of ‘écriture de l’urgence’ could be said to solve this problem, resisting generic designation, it nevertheless raises a number of questions about discourse and the *literary* status of writing during the 1990s.¹³²

This chapter argues that the specific terminology of *urgence*, used in the mainstream press, literary reviews and periodicals, to describe both the events of the 1990s and their account in writing was one weighed in favour of the status quo – creating, moreover, a discursive space which reinforced a binary narrative propagated by the Algerian State. Here,

¹²⁸ Bahri, p. 14.

¹²⁹ Bourdieu, ‘Champ intellectuel et projet créateur’.

¹³⁰ Spivak does this by reading the distinction in Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, initially in her essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313, and subsequently in a critique of Foucault and Deleuze in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, pp. 255-66. See also, Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 26.

¹³¹ Derrida, cited in Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p. 139.

¹³² These points are also linked, of course, to the problem Michel Foucault famously describes as the ‘fonction « auteur »’. See, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?’, *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 63, 3 (1969), pp. 73-104.

as the narrative tells, the State was subject to an illegitimate ‘challenge’ to its legitimacy, led by the FIS and supported by armed groups under the GIA. The chapter explores how this dominant binary was constructed and reinforced throughout the 1990s in the wider discursive space of the Franco-Algerian ‘champ littéraire’. As a result, much of the analysis is of writing produced *about* writing and writers during the 1990s.¹³³

This first chapter concludes by mapping the links between the accounts of the 1990s, the construction of *urgence* during the period and its subsequent recasting by Algerian writers whose works begin to emerge after the supposed end of the ‘décennie noire’ and within a blossoming Algerian publishing sector. The suggestion is that in spite of the way their work was being received and represented, writers during this period had continually sought to think through and remap the ethical imperative of the 1990s, which implicitly and sometimes explicitly rejected the reduction of literary works to a ‘champ’ or ‘sous-champ’ of *urgence*. By re-orienting the language of *urgence* employed to frame their works, writers of the period and those publishing afterwards can be shown to be continually rethinking *urgence* as immanent in literature, in all literature, whose role is not simply to challenge on the level of narrative, but to *unwrite* a number of prevailing discourses, questioning in more complicated and equivocal ways the ‘realities’ of the ‘décennie noire’ and how, in turn, those realities have been constructed and told.

In reading the pre-existing scholarly work produced on contemporary Algerian literature, I argue for the necessity of sitting between the disciplines of literary studies and the study of political discourse in which texts are promoted and received.¹³⁴ As such, the chapter seeks to map out a methodology of its own – similar to that advocated by Frow –

¹³³ The importance of adopting an approach which looks both at works of literature and their reception, particularly through the lens of press reviews, is captured by Hadj Miliani when he underlines that for a novel *not* to be reviewed in Algeria would almost certainly, given the weak circulation of literary works, mean condemning it to non-existence. See, Miliani, p. 81.

¹³⁴ This is not to confuse the literary and the political, but rather to flag the ways in which the two spheres have already been fused together (consciously or unconsciously) in overly reductive ways. The dangers of such a confusion in postcolonial studies have been discussed most prominently in Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001) and Chris Bongie, *Friends and Enemies*.

that stresses the need to read texts' reproduction of their own 'historicity' and the relation this then has to a range of existing 'generic and discursive materials'.¹³⁵

From *état d'urgence* to '*écriture de l'urgence*'

The '*état d'urgence*' was established on 9 February 1992, around one month after the army intervention and cancellation of elections and in the more immediate aftermath of violent demonstrations by supporters of the detained leaders of the FIS.¹³⁶ This was the first time a law with a controversial history in the War of Independence had been enacted in post-independence Algeria. It was only repealed nearly twenty years later in 2011. From the point of view of the newly established HCE, the '*état d'urgence*' was a means of controlling the population through curfew and the banning of public assembly. However, as Jacob Mundy highlights, it was for the transitional structure of government a pretext to establishing camps in the south of Algeria to detain many of Algeria's alleged Islamists.¹³⁷ Among many other things, the '*état d'urgence*' placed limits on freedom of expression which meant that despite the liberalisation of the press in the reforms following October 1988, newspapers had to pass through official government censors and were regularly censored throughout the 1990s.¹³⁸ Further to an effective ban on reporting details of attacks on State targets or on distributing recordings of information related to such acts, the State was able to mobilise its control of the major television news organisations to show some of the more horrific images of the massacres which took place later on in the decade and which would help create support in favour of the State and army's '*éradicateur*'

¹³⁵ Frow, 'On mid-level concepts', p. 222.

¹³⁶ Stora, *La guerre invisible*, p. 18.

¹³⁷ Jacob Mundy, *Imaginative Geographies of Algerian Violence: Conflict Science, Conflict Management, Antipolitics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 54. According to Mundy, up to 20,000 of Algeria's alleged Islamists and sympathisers would pass through these camps at some time during the early 1990s. If anything, the inmate-managed camps were a space for fighters to regroup and to organise against the State. On this point, see also Stora, *La guerre invisible*, p. 17.

¹³⁸ See Stora, *La guerre invisible*, p. 25, who notes how the State established Algérie Presse Service (APS) as a means of controlling the release of information during this time. Stora cites 58 acts of censorship between January 1992 and January 1997.

position.¹³⁹ On 7 June 1997, a government communiqué was sent out to the editors of the national press services which requested what it refers to as a ‘compréhension mutuelle’ in the fight against terrorism: ‘Au moment où tous les efforts des forces vives de la nation sont tendus vers l’éradication du terrorisme et de la subversion, je sais pouvoir compter sur votre contribution positive dans la lutte antiterroriste et antisubversive.’¹⁴⁰ Benjamin Stora notes how this same communiqué recommended the media place a stress on reporting ‘les atrocités commises par les régimes islamistes’ as well as linking Islamist activity to criminal practices and even the use of drugs.¹⁴¹

The State was, therefore and unsurprisingly, quite clearly attempting to take control of the media narrative to paint a certain picture of those responsible for the increasing levels of horrific violence in Algeria. Officially, however, the Algerian State remained reluctant to release any accounts, reports or to offer any sign of an inquiry over the mounting violence. The ‘culture du secret’, which Stora suggests was a hangover from the clandestine operations of the FLN during the War of Independence, would dominate in the Algerian regime’s information strategy during the 1990s.¹⁴² In fact, as Mundy suggests in his book, this opacity over the ‘Qui tue qui’ question was one of the reasons foreign states refrained from intervening in Algerian State affairs in the latter years of the decade; this was despite calls from a number of human rights groups in the wake of the massacres at Raïs and Bentalha.¹⁴³ The silence of the State on these massacres and on the violence in

¹³⁹ The ‘éradicateurs’ was one of a number of factions that emerged during the 1990s; emerging within the Algerian army, this group was said to favour the outright repression of the ‘challenge’ to the State’s authority through violence. Its opposite was the group of ‘conciliateurs’, which favoured the opening of dialogue between the *maquis* and State forces. Although this provided a neat frame through which to read the politics of the period, it nevertheless replicated yet another binary which belied the complexity and nuance of the positions taken by individuals and groups in Algeria. For further discussion of factionalism, see Martin Stone, *The Agony of Algeria* (London: Hurst and Company, 1997), pp. 4-5.

¹⁴⁰ Cited in Stora, *La guerre invisible*, p. 25.

¹⁴¹ Stora, *La guerre invisible*, pp. 26-27.

¹⁴² Stora, *La guerre invisible*, pp. 45-46.

¹⁴³ See Mundy, p. 124-25. The main human rights groups to be active and speaking out on Algeria during the 1990s were Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Algeria Watch – an Algeria specific human rights group set up in Germany in 1997, but operating a German, French and English-language website. See their website: <<http://www.algeria-watch.org/>> [accessed: 27 October 2015].

general meant that both within and outside Algeria, rumour took hold. Publications which appeared after the end of the 1990s – including the controversial and highly mediated account of the special forces soldier, Habib Souaïdia, who had deserted the army and fled to France – began to accuse the Algerian State and army of involvement in the massacres.¹⁴⁴ In the most serious of cases, the army was being accused of ‘false flag’ operations, going so far as to wear fake beards so as to be seen as Islamists while massacring whole villages.¹⁴⁵ According to Roberts, while the more extreme examples cannot be proved, the army can be seen to have had passive agency in the massacres, given the proximity of their bases to the massacre sites and in the light of testimonies claiming that army helicopters were hovering above during the massacres – in particular at Bentalha.¹⁴⁶ In the context of such uncertainty within Algeria and in the French press, which was in some cases being used by the Algerian State to shape the narrative in Algeria, a silent void – what Stora calls the invisibility of the 1990s – is filled by a narrative of repetition, a pathological language of ‘récidive’ and one which encodes the latest violence based upon stereotypes established under colonial rule and during the War of Independence.¹⁴⁷ While within Algeria such images of repetition seemed very real, it was clear that they were being used in an essentialist and reductive manner outside the country.¹⁴⁸ To cite just one example, it was suggested that the very same buildings used to torture Algerian dissidents during the War of Independence were now being used by the Algerian State to enact a similar treatment on Algerians suspected of being Islamist

¹⁴⁴ Souaïdia, *La sale guerre*.

¹⁴⁵ Yous seems to corroborate these claims in part in his book, *Qui a tué à Bentalha*, p. 169.

¹⁴⁶ See Roberts, pp. 309-12, who in part assesses Yous and Souaïdia’s claims. See also Mundy, pp. 140-45.

¹⁴⁷ The term ‘récidive’ is used by Stora, *La guerre invisible*, p. 56. On the idea of ‘codes of violence’ during this period, see McDougall, ‘Savage Wars?’.

¹⁴⁸ As Rahal underlines, the Algerian people have genuinely suffered a great deal of exposure to violence and those studying the country must take this into consideration when formulating approaches to writing its history. See Rahal, ‘Fused Together and Torn Apart’.

insurgents and sympathisers.¹⁴⁹ The image at least implicitly invoked was that of the once oppressed Algerian slipping into the position of the oppressor.

The significant silence, due mainly to a dearth of reliable information emerging from Algeria, and which was part of the State's official strategy, was, in the newspapers and in the French cultural imaginary – or more particularly what we have called a Franco-Algerian 'champ' – ready to be filled by a quite new and emergent phenomenon of writing from Algeria. Just as during the Algerian War of Independence metropolitan France had become a space where Algerians could publish dissident anti-colonial writing, so contemporary French publishers would print and promote testimonies which took the form of pamphlets, essays and literary texts which would be framed and marketed as texts bearing witness to the unspeakable acts of violence being committed in Algeria. If Algerian writers were some of the first actors to intervene in a supposedly *urgent* manner, other non-fictional testimonies would emerge later to supplement this developing market place of testimony in France. The example of Souaïdia's text would become particularly important, because of the mediated defamation trial which followed its publication in France.¹⁵⁰ A leading member of the HCE, General Khaled Nezzar, was directly named by Souaïdia as being involved in some of the more serious claims of ordering false-flag operations in the DRS. In an effort to defend his name, Nezzar sued Souaïdia for defamation, but lost the trial. One result of Nezzar's decision to take legal action was that the French courtroom became one of the first places where the events of the 1990s were being played out; hence, the significant media interest in the trial.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ On this, see Benjamin Stora, 'Deuxième guerre algérienne? Les habits anciens des combattants', *Les Temps Modernes* 580 (1995), pp. 242-61.

¹⁵⁰ The political positioning of intellectual voices in France had already begun well before the publication of this text. Roberts notes how French intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy would endorse the view of Algerian State, in a series of features published in *Le Monde* in January 1998, on the massacres of 1997. See Roberts, p. 309.

¹⁵¹ In 2002, Nezzar published his account in, *Un procès pour la vérité: l'armée algérienne face à la désinformation* (Algiers: Anep, 2002), while back in France Souaïdia published his account in *Le procès de « La sale guerre »: Algérie, le général-major Khaled Nezzar contre le lieutenant Habib Souaïdia* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002).

From testimonial literature to fictional testimony and ‘écriture de l’urgence’

In her book on contemporary Algerian women writers and what she terms the ‘guerre civile algérienne’, Névine El Nossery designates her principal corpus under the term ‘témoignages fictionnels’ – narratives which both testify to a lived experience (representing ‘témoignages authentiques’) and whose condition of that very testimony is the fictional lens through which it is told (they are also importantly ‘productions esthétiques’).¹⁵² One cannot testify to the witnessed horrors of the 1990s in a direct manner, because the horror exceeds the real. Hence fiction becomes the sole way of describing the violence. El Nossery uses Michael Riffaterre’s notion of ‘fictional truth’ in order to conceive of how the works included in her corpus can be seen to replace a ‘reference of reality with a reference to language.’¹⁵³ While verisimilitude is established here as a linguistic phenomenon it is also said to rely on existing societal codes separate from the internal fictional narrative. So in order to write the shocking truth of what happened during the 1990s, narratives of the period must necessarily suspend that reality in a fictional space.

For El Nossery, the problem (or opportunity) posed by these narratives is at once ethical and aesthetic: in her appreciation, they can be both ethically reliable testimonies of events at the same time as being fictional and aesthetic creations of the imagination. As she writes, ‘[c]ontourner la réalité par le biais du symbolique, de l’allégorique et souvent de l’onirique semble ainsi la seule alternative pour confronter cette réalité innommable.’¹⁵⁴ The thrust of El Nossery’s argument is to suggest four categories into which texts published during the 1990s can be placed: the majority – and those which make up her corpus – are classed either under ‘témoignage fictionnel’ (fictional characters placed in a real setting) or

¹⁵² El Nossery, p. 12.

¹⁵³ Riffaterre, cited in El Nossery, p. 12.

¹⁵⁴ El Nossery, p. 13.

‘témoignage factuel fictionnalisé’ (real historical characters placed in a fictional setting). The other category for which El Nossery provides examples is ‘témoignage factuel’ (whereby there is no attempt to fictionalise either characters or setting). A final category, for which she offers no examples (the box in the explanatory table is left blank), is named ‘fiction testimoniale’.¹⁵⁵

By dismissing this category of testimonial literature, El Nossery is able to underline a difference in the corpus she treats within the Algerian context. The distinguishing line between what El Nossery names ‘témoignage fictionnel’ and ‘fiction testimoniale’ is drawn at the point of the political and revolutionary nature of the comparative context of Latin American writing, the way in which it stands for a wider community, as well as, crucially, the basis of ‘témoignage fictionnel’ being in ‘des faits ayant eu lieu’.¹⁵⁶ If there seems to be a contradiction here between, on the one hand, the necessity of the fictional in testimony and, on the other hand, its being rooted in a form of reference to real events, El Nossery’s work might benefit from citing Derrida:

Il n’est pas de témoignage qui n’implique structurellement en lui-même la possibilité de la fiction, du simulacre, de la dissimulation, du mensonge et du parjure – c’est-à-dire aussi de la littérature, de l’innocente ou perverse littérature qui joue innocemment à pervertir toutes ces distinctions. [...] si le témoignage, dès lors, devenait preuve, information, certitude ou archive il perdrait sa fonction de témoignage. Pour rester témoignage, il doit donc se laisser hanter. Il doit se laisser parasiter par cela même qu’il exclut de son for intérieur, la *possibilité*, au moins, de la littérature.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ El Nossery, p. 13. There are interesting links between Algerian writing at this time and the Latin American context of *testimonios* (testimonial literature) which are not explored further in this text. Latin American testimonial literature, which includes writers such as Domitila Barrios, Omar Cabezas and perhaps most famous Roberta Menchú, is described as a literature of political and cultural resistance which takes on the voice not just of one single witness but of a whole community. In the same way that postcolonial literature sought to undo genres and forms of the dominant centres of literary production, testimonial literature is also seen in this context of ‘writing back’ reinvented aesthetic forms; but it is also crucially seen to unseat the assumed relation between text and author deemed so central to Western literary criticism. The practice of the postcolonial ‘writing back’ was first established in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989). For further discussion of Latin American testimonial literature, see Georg Gugelberger & Michael Kearney, ‘Voices for the voiceless: testimonial literature in Latin America’, *Latin American Perspectives* 18, 3 (1991), pp. 3-18; on Roberta Menchú, see Chapter 8 of David Damrosch’s *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003), pp. 231-59.

¹⁵⁶ El Nossery, p. 10.

¹⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Maurice Blanchot* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), p. 31. Interestingly, El Nossery does not refer to Derrida in her book.

How Derrida helps here is in his insistence on the fact that testimony cannot be a form of proof, documentary evidence, information or archive. If testimony is rooted in ‘des faits ayant eu lieu’, its role is neither to confirm nor deny that those ‘faits’ took place. It would seem, though, that two versions of ‘testimony’ were emerging here – one understood by writers and philosophers and another understood somewhat differently, as more straightforwardly referential, by critics and readers. A similar danger can be seen to appear in the Algerian context.¹⁵⁸

As we go on to explore, the language of *urgence* can be seen to be associated in the press and in literary periodicals with emerging literary fiction, such as Rachid Mimouni’s *La Malédiction*,¹⁵⁹ but it is also present in the reception and promotion of more politically explicit essays and pamphlets; and, often, the term, *urgence*, is associated with a confused picture of what literature is at this time. For example, on the back cover of Malika Boussouf’s *Vivre traquée* (a work Charles Bonn includes on a list of writers he sees as participating in a testimonial turn during the 1990s),¹⁶⁰ *urgence* is fused with journalistic reporting, testimony with autobiography.¹⁶¹ Again, the publisher’s blurb on the back cover of Fériel Assima’s *Une femme à Alger* (also listed by Bonn) seems confused in its description of what the work is: ‘Témoignage sans complaisance [...] le livre de Fériel Assima n’est pas un pamphlet politique, c’est une fresque de l’horreur [...] Il s’agit bien, ici, de littérature’. Yet, the book’s subtitle is ‘*Chronique du désastre*’.¹⁶² These contradictions come to show

¹⁵⁸ While, as we mention, it does not concern El Nossery in her study, the Latin American comparison demonstrates the importance of how literature is framed, marketed and in turn received by a wider public, where the referential function of literature is reintroduced. Indeed, Marie Estripeaut-Bourjac writes in a book on what she interestingly names Latin American ‘écriture de l’urgence’, testimonial forms – in particular in Colombia – had a ‘tâche urgente’ to ‘articuler la nation’ and to ‘re-raconter le pays’ in a context of reconciliation. There seems to be more of a resemblance and potential continuity between these two modes of writing as forms of testimony. Looking back to the development of a testimonial literature in Latin America, while taking note of the geo-political specificities, might give some sense of where Algerian francophone literature could go from here. See, Marie Estripeaut-Bourjac, *L’écriture de l’urgence en Amérique Latine* (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2012), p. 390.

¹⁵⁹ Rachid Mimouni, *La Malédiction* (Paris: Stock, 1993).

¹⁶⁰ Bonn, ‘Algérie’, in *Littérature francophone. Tome 1: Le Roman*, ed. by Charles Bonn & Xavier Garnier (Paris: Hatier, 1997), p. 209.

¹⁶¹ Malika Boussouf, *Vivre traquée* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1995).

¹⁶² Fériel Assima, *Une femme à Alger: Chronique du désastre* (Paris: Arléa, 1995).

how the terminology was far from clear at the time, even within the hands of writers themselves. If confused in their account of themselves as novels, testimony, historical chronicles, political writings or literary fiction, *urgence* still came to constitute the language of the critical reception of texts, posing the danger of reinforcing a dominant binary narrative of a war between two clear ‘sides’, which was playing into the hands of the Algerian State. In an interview conducted as recently as 2010, the Algerian writer and scholar Rachid Mokhtari maintains a language of Islamist ‘challenge’, citing the massacres committed by an ‘islamisme armé’ as the context for the increasing production of testimonial works in Algeria during the 1990s.¹⁶³ Although he admits the problem of the literariness of testimony at this time, viewing ‘écriture de l’urgence’ in more complex terms as something which was problematic on the level of the market but also necessary in terms of its documentary value, Mokhtari nevertheless reduces writing being produced at this time to the context of the State/Islamist binary frame.

As Zineb Ali-Benali has written in work which begins to focus on the heterogeneity of literary production during the 1990s, and to return to the question of representing the horrors of the 1990s, writing at this time varies in its degree of proximity to the real.¹⁶⁴ While some works represent more directly violent acts committed during the 1990s – including, commonly, rape, murder, but also the slaughter of young children – Ali-Benali argues that such graphic details do not necessarily remove these works from the realm of an experimental literary aesthetics. Her research looks more widely to writers like Mimouni and Boudjedra, but also to Tahar Djaout, Assia Djebar, Noureddine Saâdi, Yamina Méchakra, Aïssa Khelladi, Leïla Marouane, Boualem Sansal, Maïssa Bey and Ghania Hammadou. Our concern here is to assess the language used in the reception of these works, but, as Ali-Benali suggests in her chapter, there is clearly further scope for study of

¹⁶³ Yassin Temlali, ‘Discussion avec Rachid Mokhtari sur la violence dans la littérature algérienne’, in *Algérie, Chroniques Ciné-Littéraires de Deux Guerres* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2011), p. 61.

¹⁶⁴ Zineb Ali-Benali, ‘L’histoire tue. Le roman algérien des années 90’, in *Où va l’Algérie?*, ed. by Ahmed Mahiou & Jean-Robert Henry (Paris: Karthala, 2001), pp. 319-46.

these many writers and their works which have been reduced to a certain frame.¹⁶⁵ For Ali-Benali, the texts written by these writers are still in large part literary texts, which offer the possibility of caricature, parody and the carnivalesque built into texts which are a nuanced engagement with, and at the same time replay, versions of memory and history produced at the level of both the State and those more disparate groups supposedly seeking to ‘challenge’ that hegemony. Despite the realist mode in which these texts are often composed, the fictional characters, as Ali-Benali puts it, are still of course wearing masks.¹⁶⁶ If such complexities are recognised by certain critics, this has not always been the case.

The term ‘écriture de l’urgence’ appears in the introduction to El Nossery’s book; she writes that writing the real of the 1990s is ‘ce que l’on a convenu de décrire comme une « écriture de l’urgence ». Expression qui a été forgée sous la plume de plusieurs auteurs et critiques, répondant à cette nécessité pressante de témoigner et de dénoncer les intégristes et leur violence brutale et impitoyable’.¹⁶⁷ She cites a roundtable discussion between five Algerian writers, published in *Algérie Littérature/Action* in 1997 as a point of reference and as a suggestion for further reading. While she cites this roundtable between the writers Slimane Benaïssa, Jamel Eddine Bencheikh, Jean-Louis Hourdin, Waciny Larej, Nourredine Saâdi and Leïla Sebbar, El Nossery does not cite or pursue Benaïssa’s observation on the question of ‘écriture de l’urgence’ which we have taken as an epigraph for this chapter. The playwright, who relocated to France in 1993 and whose best-known work is *Les fils de l’amertume*, specifies: ‘Ce n’est pas l’écriture qui est d’urgence, mais une écoute qui, elle, est

¹⁶⁵ A selection of studies have begun to explore these writers’ works. On Mimouni and Boudjedra, see Najib Redouane, ‘Représentations de la nouvelle guerre chez quelques écrivains algériens’ in *Algérie: vers le cinquantième de l’indépendance*, ed. by Naaman Kessous, Christine Margerrison, Andy Stafford & Guy Dugas (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2009), pp. 127-46; on Djaout and Djébar, see Dominique Fisher, *Ecrire l’urgence: Assia Djébar et Tahar Djaout* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007); on Saâdi, see Zineb Ali-Benali, ‘La mémoire et le lieu. Le roman en contre-histoire. *La Maison de Lumière* de Nourredine Saadi’, in *Subversion du réel: stratégies esthétiques dans la littérature algérienne contemporaine*, ed. by Beate Burtscher-Bechter and Birgit Mertz-Baumgartner (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001), pp. 41-54; Leïla Marouane’s work is explored by El Nossery, pp. 137-78.

¹⁶⁶ Ali-Benali, ‘L’histoire tue’, p. 344.

¹⁶⁷ El Nossery, p. 18.

en état d'urgence.¹⁶⁸ In addition, El Nossery does not reveal nor does she explore how both Saâdi and Bencheikh explicitly reject the denomination 'écriture de l'urgence' during this roundtable discussion.

Interestingly, Benaïssa's words have been cited elsewhere: they are notably misquoted by two scholars writing on literature and the 1990s. In her article 'The Tragedy of Algeria', Janice Gross misquotes Benaïssa's words, citing the same roundtable discussion we cite above and in our epigraph, although the misquotation is not originally hers.¹⁶⁹ She cites from a chapter by Farida Boualit, who has rendered Benaïssa's words as follows: 'Ce n'est pas l'écriture qui est d'urgence mais une écoute qui est *état d'urgence*.'¹⁷⁰ In Gross' text, this becomes: 'Benaïssa's dramatic impulses led him to write out of a duty to the listener or audience emphasising "une écoute qui est *état d'urgence*". Gross translates this in parentheses to: 'the urgent state of needing to be heard'. Notwithstanding the grammatically flawed French,¹⁷¹ this is important because of the way in which Benaïssa's words are taken from the initial context of him rejecting the idea that the writer produces work as a matter of *urgence* and adapted to a context in which the writer is writing in an 'urgent state of needing to be heard'. In the original roundtable, Benaïssa is placing an emphasis on the way in which the reception of Algerian works had sought to place them in a state of *urgence*. He notes, seemingly in an effort to distance his work from the reductionist discursive frame of *urgence*, how some sections of his play *Les fils de l'amertume* were in fact written during the 1970s.¹⁷² One might suggest, then, that his views are not accurately represented and, moreover, that the authors of these scholarly studies perpetuate precisely the climate of *urgence* many of the writers who participated in the

¹⁶⁸ Benaïssa et al., 'Comment écrire l'Algérie aujourd'hui?', p. 224.

¹⁶⁹ Janice Gross, 'The Tragedy of Algeria: Slimane Benaïssa's Drama of Terrorism', *Theatre Journal* 54, 3 (2002), p. 374.

¹⁷⁰ Farida Boualit, 'La littérature algérienne des années 90: Témoigner d'une tragédie?', in *Paysages littéraires algériens des années 90: Témoigner d'une tragédie?*, ed. by Charles Bonn & Farida Boualit (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999), p. 36.

¹⁷¹ The clarifying 'elle' is excluded here, presumably used by the writer to minimise ambiguity, it seems unlikely that this is merely an unintended typo.

¹⁷² Benaïssa et al., 'Comment écrire l'Algérie aujourd'hui?', p. 224.

Algérie Littérature/ Action roundtable sought to refute.

While El Nossery claims this movement in writing to have been ‘forgée sous la plume de plusieurs auteurs et critiques’, she is not the only critic not to recognise (in the very source she cites) the fact that many Algerian authors were rejecting the terminology of *urgence* throughout the 1990s, despite, as Benaïssa underlines here, considering it to be a preoccupation of reception (critics, but also publishers and readers). Benaïssa suggests that *urgence* does not originate from within the domain of the writer, but in how writers’ works are framed and read – works which have often been in development over a much longer period than that of the immediate context of the 1990s. Other writers, such as Rachid Boudjedra have noted how writing is *always* done in a state of *urgence*. In the preface to the Algerian writer and scholar Rachid Mokhtari’s book on the 1990s, *La graphie de l’horreur*, Boudjedra asserts: ‘on écrit toujours dans l’urgence [...] le geste vers l’écriture est une façon de sauver sa peau et celle des autres.’¹⁷³ Boudjedra seems here to contradict a statement he had made during the 1990s, in an interview given in 1997 to the Algerian daily *El Watan*, declaring, after the publication of his novel *La Vie à l’endroit*, ‘il y a urgence à écrire’.¹⁷⁴ However, as we will go on to argue with reference to the main corpus of writers treated in the thesis, it is possible and quite plausible that Boudjedra – as a writer – had rethought his position over time. In this sense, the ethical imperative of the 1990s is re-mapped, rearticulated and recast by an Algerian writer through the lens of an *urgence* which he considers at some level to be immanent in literature itself. Indeed, another critic writes of her surprise that the label would be attributed to writers at this specific point in time, given that ‘les violences et, par évidence, l’écriture de l’urgence ont toujours dominé l’ensemble de la production littéraire et artistique algérienne, sans exception’. She continues,

¹⁷³ Rachid Boudjedra, ‘Preface: Le palimpseste du sang’, in Rachid Mokhtari, *La graphie de l’horreur: essai sur la littérature algérienne (1990-2000)* (Algiers: Chihab, 2002), p. 15. In his interview with Temlali, Mokhtari traces the expression back to Marguerite Duras, who had apparently asserted how literature was *always* ‘un appel de l’urgence, un appel vital face à la mort.’ Temlali, ‘Discussion avec Rachid Mokhtari’, p. 58.

¹⁷⁴ No name, ‘Entretien avec Rachid Boudjedra’, *El Watan*, 8 October 1997, p. 15.

reinforcing Boudjedra's more recent words: 'dire dans l'urgence est un reflexe évident qui naît d'une pulsion, réaction normale de la conscience de tout intellectuel qui se ressent le devoir de réagir par l'écriture, car c'est là qu'intervient son éthique.'¹⁷⁵ While analysing the works themselves in some detail, El Nosserly's book does not focus on their (para- or epitextual) promotion or reception and hence the place of the texts within what some claimed to be a developing market of testimony – dubbed 'écriture de l'urgence' – which could be seen increasingly to invert the poles of literary production and consumption within the Franco-Algerian 'champ littéraire'. Here, the consumption of the 'novel' (its foreseen reception) would come in advance of and above all to dictate the production of the text. In a speech delivered at the International Forum on Literature which took place in Seoul in 2000, Pierre Bourdieu expands on his earlier work, warning of such an inversion taking place at the broader level of globalized literary markets, which, as Patrick Crowley summarises, would '[result] in a form of censorship by money.'¹⁷⁶ However, such a general sense of an inversion fails to take account of the particular context in which, as we have mentioned, readers and writers are not a homogenous block. If it might also be seen to risk replicating a reductive binary of production and consumption – concepts which, as we discussed in the General Introduction, are perhaps not as separable as Bourdieu suggests – there is evidence to suggest (for instance in the cases of Boussouf, Assima and Mimouni, discussed below) that publishers were promoting works to privilege the depiction of violence. If an inversion did exist, it was less at the level of writers or texts than in the spaces in which they were being promoted and received.

In her book *Ecrire l'urgence*, Dominique Fisher writes of the possibility of an anamnesis performed by what she terms an 'écriture d'urgence' within and beyond the immediate period of the 1990s. In an analysis which draws on the work of Djébar and

¹⁷⁵ Zoubida Belaghoueg, 'Le roman algérien 1990-2000', *Algérie Littérature/Action* 47-48 (2001), pp. 179-81.

¹⁷⁶ See Bourdieu, 'La culture est en danger', p. 78; see also, Crowley, 'Literatures in French Today', p. 413.

Djaout, Fisher contends that ‘écriture d’urgence’ is an experimental form of writing which can allow for the mourning of lives excluded from dominant social or official State-sanctioned history and which resists such structures deemed to produce violence. She cites Gérard Genette’s notion of the ‘horizon de lecture’ between literary and official discourse,¹⁷⁷ seemingly in order to stress how texts are framed, read and ultimately pre-conceived within a certain realm of expectation. For example, she underlines how Djaout’s work gained a mark after his death, whereby the writer’s novels were read almost solely in the light of their ‘condamnation du radicalisme islamiste’, when in reality Djaout’s work was a far more complex meditation on the writing of Algerian history over a far longer past.¹⁷⁸ Here art and religion were being pitted against each other in absolute terms. Like El Nossery, Fisher does not study in any great detail the conditions of the reception of works during the 1990s. If Djébar’s work (from *Le Blanc de l’Algérie* onwards) can be described as ‘écriture de l’urgence’ in terms of her works’ focus on the urgency of speaking out, but also of performing anamnesis and challenging the silences of official discourse, it cannot, for Fisher, be placed within a politics of a certain type of representation, nor can it be contained as an ethnographic, autobiographical, testimonial or engaged writing.¹⁷⁹ Djébar’s work during and after the 1990s is said to prise open ‘un espace de réception clos, ou plutôt forclos.’¹⁸⁰ According to Fisher, literature gains an ‘état d’urgence’ in the face of silence, yet its writing is also ‘motivée par un état d’urgence’.¹⁸¹ It is unclear whether Fisher is referring to the ‘état d’urgence’ established by the HCE; there is no explicit reference to the official discourse here or that of the media, and hence to the ‘espace de réception’ of

¹⁷⁷ Fisher, p. 67. The ‘horizon de lecture’ also recalls Hans Robert Jauss’s ‘horizons of expectation’, where the literary work is never absolutely new. See his *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

¹⁷⁸ Fisher, p. 21.

¹⁷⁹ Fisher, p. 45. For Jane Hiddleston, too, *Le Blanc de l’Algérie* stretches the limits of narrative and continually escapes definition in its use of ‘both content and form to deconstruct the layers and masks of commemorative discourse and the political misuse of those masks.’ *Assia Djébar: Out of Algeria* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), p. 121.

¹⁸⁰ Fisher, p. 41.

¹⁸¹ Fisher, p. 89.

urgence. Beyond the literary aesthetic value Fisher attaches to ‘écriture de l’urgence’, more attention to the question of the existence of narrative strategies and discourse across the literary and political divide – what Frow calls the ‘set of generic and discursive materials’ – might allow us to think through how *urgence* was constructed and understood both in Algeria and France at this time.

While El Nossery is able to read her corpus in a detailed manner, and while the author makes a contribution to the question of the slippery boundaries between and the limits of fiction, nonfiction and testimony, the question of the ideological appropriation of her corpus is not broached. However important to the broader image of Algeria during the 1990s, the question of the possible inversion of the poles of production and reception, suggested by critics like Bonn, are not mentioned by El Nossery and only hinted at by Fisher in her references to Genette’s ‘horizon de lecture’.¹⁸² If one might accuse these scholars of skipping over questions surrounding the market-driven inversion of the poles of production and consumption,¹⁸³ which in turn reinforces the hegemonic narrative favoured by the Algerian State, it is important to underline the difficulty of making such an unequivocal statement. Given that Bourdieu’s method would in his own estimation require a total overview of the field, it is understandable that scholars have stayed away from his work, but it seems important to at least consider that a representative sample of writers can still illustrate a tendency within a given discursive field.

Boudjedra, Mimouni and others: ‘écrivains de l’urgence’?

Two of the first and more celebrated Algerian writers to become part of the 1990s publishing scene were Rachid Boudjedra and Rachid Mimouni, respectively with *FIS de la*

¹⁸² El Nossery doesn’t go into very much detail about how her corpus interacts with what Bonn describes as the ‘attente de lecture’. See Bonn, ‘Algérie’, p. 209. See also Fisher, p. 14.

¹⁸³ Bourdieu, ‘La culture est en danger’, p. 78.

haine and *De la barbarie en général et de l'intégrisme en particulier*.¹⁸⁴ These works became the first pamphlets and essays to intervene in the debate on the violence in Algeria as early as 1992. As Carine Bourget has underlined in her reading of these two works, however, they are intensely political. While Boudjedra's is more openly vitriolic, Bourget shows how both adopt rhetorical strategies which espouse the point of view of the status quo in Algeria and are early examples of works by literary writers that embrace and reinforce, especially within a French readership, the position of the Algerian State.¹⁸⁵ Despite these seemingly urgent calls for attention to the crisis in Algeria, it was not until the publication of Mimouni's fictional work, *La Malédiction* in 1993 that the media turned to adopting a language of *urgence*.¹⁸⁶ Between the commercial promotion of works and their academic study, the printed press is one major example of the narrative receiving and framing literary output at this time.

In a report in *Le Monde*, which appeared after the publication of *La Malédiction*, Mimouni is said to be 'en colère' and writing 'dans l'urgence, dans un style extrêmement rapide, dru, sans recherche'.¹⁸⁷ For *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 'le livre n'est pas un livre de plus sur le FIS' but rather, 'une plongée douloureuse, fiévreuse au cœur de la nouvelle tragédie algérienne'.¹⁸⁸ The language of fever here is a reflection of the novel's allegorical setting in a hospital taken over by Islamists. Jean Déjeux notes how Mimouni's novel, while lacking the literary quality of the previous works, is nevertheless "engagé" dans un combat urgent'

¹⁸⁴ Rachid Boudjedra, *FIS de la haine* (Paris: Denoël, 1992) – the text was rereleased by Editions Gallimard in 1994; Rachid Mimouni, *De la barbarie en général et de l'intégrisme en particulier* (Paris: Le Pré aux Clercs, 1992) – the text was published by Les Editions Rahma in Algeria. While both of these writers had long-established publishing relationships in France, it was only now for the first time that they turned to nonfiction.

¹⁸⁵ Carine Bourget, 'The Algerian Civil War: Rachid Boudjedra's *Le FIS de la haine*, Rachid Mimouni's *De la barbarie en général et de l'intégrisme en particulier*, and *Une enfance algérienne*', in *The Star, The Cross, and The Crescent: Religions and Conflicts in Francophone Literature from the Arab World* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), pp. 89-114.

¹⁸⁶ Algerian scholars, writing later, have adopted this (seemingly unavoidable) language too. See, for instance, Redouane, p. 129.

¹⁸⁷ Jean Noël Pancrazi, 'Rachid Mimouni en colère', *Le Monde*, 24 September 1993, 36.

¹⁸⁸ G.A., 'Un écrivain contre la terreur islamiste. Mimouni le valeureux', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 7-13 October 1993, p. 118.

against ‘une intolérance annoncée.’¹⁸⁹ Déjeux uses the same words in a review published in the periodical *Arabies*.¹⁹⁰ The ‘urgent’ reception of the work continues in the periodical *Notre librairie*, which notes the defiance in the act of writing and strikes a more nuanced note in the way it describes the purpose of an ‘écriture de l’urgence’ as resisting rather than becoming a part of the depressing reality.¹⁹¹ Later, in 1994, both Boudjedra and Mimouni are discussed in *L’Express* in terms which relate them to the Rushdie affair in the late 1980s; in the words of the headline, these Algerian writers are ‘les Rushdie du monde’. The article describes Boudjedra as living ‘dans l’urgence’ after the publication of his pamphlet: ‘Lui se réfugie dans une semi-clandestinité; il est armé; continue à intervenir dans les réunions publiques; vit dans l’urgence.’¹⁹² In fact, Boudjedra had been critical of Salman Rushdie going into hiding and of the apology he issued for his work; as he describes in a 1992 interview with *Arabies*, his position was to come out to challenge the fear which caused Rushdie to back down. As Boudjedra puts it in the interview, ‘[e]n reculant, Rushdie était menacé réellement. Le fascisme gagne si l’on a peur. Il faut affronter la peur.’¹⁹³ Boudjedra’s political posturing here and deliberately rhetorical appropriation of the term ‘fascisme’ is a seeming attempt to unite the event of the issuing of a ‘fatwa’ on Rushdie, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Algeria and his position as an outspoken writer, equally subject to threats of violence. However, this still denies the specificity of each context. In the case of Rushdie, it was precisely the *literary* nature of *The Satanic Verses* which he emphasised in his defence.¹⁹⁴ In the case of Boudjedra and Mimouni, they were seemingly threatened because of their highly engaged and explicitly political texts, but the press narrative slips between their literary texts and their political writings, without making a clear distinction.

¹⁸⁹ J.D., ‘Rachid Mimouni, La Malédiction’, *Hommes et Migrations* 1170, November (1993), p. 20.

¹⁹⁰ Jean Déjeux, ‘Roman: La Malédiction, par Rachid Mimouni’, *Arabies* 84 December (1993), Paris, Centre Culturel Algérien, Dossier de Presse ‘Rachid Mimouni’.

¹⁹¹ No name, ‘Rachid Mimouni, La Malédiction’, *Notre Librairie* 119 (1994), pp. 191-92.

¹⁹² Jean-Michel Demetz, ‘Tous les Rushdie du monde’, *L’Express* 2224, 17 February 1994, p. 74.

¹⁹³ Corinne Cayez, ‘Rachid Boudjedra ou la fascination de la modernité’, *Arabies* 66, June (1992), p. 80.

¹⁹⁴ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988); see also, Salman Rushdie, ‘Choice between light and dark’, *Observer*, 22 January 1989, reprinted in *The Rushdie File*, ed. by Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland (London: Fourth Estate, 1989), p. 75.

Indeed, Boudjedra's (at least his reported) lack of nuance plays into the hands of a media discourse which would fail to create distance between the writer and the literary work.

The increase in a language of 'urgence' in the French media is mirrored also in the Algerian press, especially in the newspaper closest to the State, *El Moudjabid*. One example reports on a lecture given by Boudjedra on the occasion of a visit to Italy to promote a translation of one of his books. With the headline, 'Dire l'urgence', the article quotes Boudjedra as he again describes the situation in Algeria as a problem of Islamic fascism. He is reported as saying that he has come to Italy 'pour dire [...] l'urgence d'une situation'.¹⁹⁵ While 'fascism' is continually used by Boudjedra – and it no doubt also speaks to certain key political and cultural markers in the Italian context – the use of the term to describe Algeria's Islamists is not questioned by the media reports. *El Watan* has since been more broadly critical in its use of a terminology of *urgence*, however, questioning the production of what it names 'l'essentiel et l'urgence' in Algeria.¹⁹⁶ While, at the time, in questioning the 'ampleur médiatique' of Mimouni's work, *Algérie actualité* suggests the plot might have been 'prêt-à-porter' for other Algerian writers.¹⁹⁷ If the reception of a novel like *La Malédiction* was implicitly calling into question its literariness, it seemed at the same time to be affirming the work as a piece of literature under the sign of 'écriture de l'urgence'.

The language of *urgence* is not only used by the media, but also by writers themselves. Here too, a number of contradictions and inconsistencies emerge. We have already cited the roundtable discussion from *Algérie Littérature/Action* – where many disagree with the use of a terminology of *urgence* – but we could also cite an article by the Algerian writer Y.B. who denounces more successful novelists, such as Malika Mokeddem,

¹⁹⁵ No name, 'Rachid Boudjedra, "Dire l'urgence"', *El Moudjabid*, 20 March 1994, Paris, Centre culturel algérien, Dossier de Presse 'Rachid Boudjedra'.

¹⁹⁶ Kamel Kennouche, 'Littérature algérienne d'expression française: Quel devenir?', *El Watan* 14 April 2010, <<http://www.djazairess.com/fr/elwatan/156519>> [accessed: 27 October 2015].

¹⁹⁷ Brahim Hadj Slimane, 'Une trame « prêt-à-porter »', *Algérie Actualité*, 4-10 January 1994, Paris, Centre Culturel Algérien, Dossier de Presse 'Rachid Mimouni'.

for surfing what he calls ‘la sanglante vague algérienne.’¹⁹⁸ Mokeddem’s *La nuit de la lézarde*, published in 1998, is according to Y.B. ‘un non-roman [...] ensablé dans un oasis bidon, où des personnages invraisemblables et sans intérêt parlent comme des livres qui n’ont rien à dire.’ With its ‘maximes niaises’, the novel apparently offers nothing more than a ‘métaphysique Leader Price’, according to the reviewer.¹⁹⁹ He goes on to embrace Leila Marouane’s *Ravisseur*, which he adds ‘n’est pas « écrit dans l’urgence »’ nor is it ‘« à lire de toute urgence »’, but ‘à lire absolument...’.²⁰⁰ While Y.B. sees what he doesn’t like in Mokeddem, he is less clear on what it is he likes about Marouane’s novel. Indeed, in his denunciation of the implausibility of Mokeddem’s characters, he seems to infer that literature needs to have something to say directly through its characters; Y.B. might also be seen to fall into the same trap as others who gave literature during the 1990s an affirmative, ideological, mission. In positioning himself against it, the terminology of *urgence* frames and perhaps limits Y.B.’s critique.

There is, it would seem, something about literary fiction that attracts critics and readers in the press to the descriptor of ‘écriture de l’urgence’. Yet, placed alongside other more explicitly nonfictional forms, there also seems to be a difficulty in escaping the will to imbue literature with an ideological purpose in general. While the suspended nature of literary reference might, on the one hand, offer reviewers room to create their own interpretative framework, there is perhaps a danger, on the other hand, of that framework becoming self-fulfilling, whereby a prominent language comes to precede and to prejudge the texts under review. In this sense, the publishers and critics of the Franco-Algerian ‘champ littéraire’ (whether implicitly or explicitly) could be said to have come to demand a form and style of writing during the 1990s which, to return again to Bourdieu, ran the risk

¹⁹⁸ Y.B., ‘Algérie: le nouveau roman’, *Le nouvel observateur*, 27 August-2 September 1998, p. 73.

¹⁹⁹ Y.B., p. 73.

²⁰⁰ Y.B., p. 74.

of inverting the poles of literary production and consumption.²⁰¹ The more abstract post-structuralist notion that texts were ‘endlessly *re-produced*’ in the realm of their consumption seemed to be having a more concrete impact on the material production of documentary novels.²⁰² This is more particularly concerning at a time when the novel is being framed, in spite of its literary form, as a vehicle of unambiguous testimony – in other words, literature seen as a document.²⁰³ If, as Derrida has suggested, fiction is a crucial element in testimony and that both reading and writing have been seen to bear witness, to testify, to experiences as forms of literature, the notion of an unambiguous testimony must be questioned.²⁰⁴ Moreover, testimony, as an emerging genre, must also be situated within the regimes of symbolic and cultural value ascribed to it by readers and critics.

The ‘*écoute*’ which Benaïssa describes as being ‘*en état d’urgence*’ can perhaps be said to be true of both France and Algeria during the 1990s. In addition to the official ‘*état d’urgence*’ (which imposed a night time curfew and so kept many Algerians indoors), the uncertainty of the situation in the country meant, as one researcher has put it, that Algerians were glued to their televisions. The images were beamed into their living rooms by satellites which had become widespread towards the end of the 1980s and meant that people could often receive foreign channels, notably French news channels which were not subject to the same censorship and editorial control as the Algerian State-owned channels. With reference to Anna Bozzo’s research, Stora describes how the Algerian State, in addition to the FIS leaders who were already in exile in France, became increasingly aware of the role of French television in shaping the views of Algerians

²⁰¹ Bourdieu, ‘La culture est en danger’, p. 78.

²⁰² Bennett, cited in Frow, ‘On mid-level concepts’, p. 224.

²⁰³ As Geesey notes, ‘a work subtitled “novel” is more often a journal of events and a meditation on the causes and on the nature of the conflict’ informed by the politics of its author. See Geesey, ‘Violent Days: Algerian Women Writers and the Civil Crisis’.

²⁰⁴ On these questions, see also Alison Rice, *Polygraphies: Francophone Women Writing Algeria* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), pp. 3-6.

during the 1990s.²⁰⁵ In what Bozzo describes as a triangular effect, where news was in effect being refracted back to Algerians, France became the primary source of information for French and Algerians alike.²⁰⁶

In Algeria, *Algérie Littérature/Action*, which published from 1996 previously unseen novels in full at the beginning of its literary journal, is, in addition to the French and Algerian press, a good place to look for uses of the term ‘écriture de l’urgence’. Viewed as path-breaking, the journal offered space to writers (principally Algerian) to publish short stories, testimonies and poetry and was committed to publishing these works as an act of resistance against the increasing violence and censorship of intellectuals within Algeria at the time.²⁰⁷ *Algérie Littérature/Action* starts out by embracing the terminology of *urgence* in a postscript (authored by Marie Virolle, a co-founder and editor of the journal) to a novel written and published in the first issue of the journal. The novel, *Peurs et mensonges*, is written by Amine Touati (the *nom de plume* of Aïssa Khelladi, co-founder and co-editor of *Algérie Littérature/Action* with Virolle). According to Virolle, ‘[l]’urgence c’est de donner chair émotive à ce qui fait la manchette des journaux, c’est de raconter, d’illustrer, d’expliquer l’ordinaire de l’horreur, c’est de plonger au fond d’une âme qui n’a pas de parti pris.’²⁰⁸ She continues, ‘[l]’urgence, c’est de laisser trace, pour soi et pour les autres, la trace d’une vie qui ne tient qu’à un fil et qui, par l’écriture, tisse les fils innombrables d’une connivence. Etablir la connivence au détriment des consensus.’²⁰⁹ Similar to Fisher’s account, the editorial gives *urgence* a memorial function, again within a work of anamnesis, beyond a reductive *urgence* of the State and the initial realm of reception in the French press.

²⁰⁵ Stora, *La guerre invisible*, pp. 70-71.

²⁰⁶ See Anna Bozzo, ‘L’Algérie de l’intérieur et l’Algérie de l’extérieur à l’heure des médias’, in *Algérie, France, Islam*, ed. by Joseph Jurt (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997), pp. 213-24.

²⁰⁷ See Christiane Chaulet-Achour, ‘Une revue inédite: Algérie Littérature/Action’, in *Paysages littéraires algériens des années 90: Témoigner d’une tragédie?*, ed. by Charles Bonn & Farida Boualit (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1999), pp. 129-39.

²⁰⁸ Marie Virolle, ‘Postface’, *Algérie Littérature/Action* 1 (1996), p. 173.

²⁰⁹ Virolle, ‘Postface’, p. 173.

It is perhaps therefore a notion which writers are already reworking and recasting during the 1990s.

In the third issue of the journal, published later that year, Leïla Sebbar in the postscript to Waciny Larej's novel, *La Gardienne des ombres*, considers (despite her understanding the events of the 1990s as propelling writers to express themselves in literature) whether this work can be effectively carried out by fiction: 'Le travail de fiction, de création à vif, en direct, cela est-il possible? On dit qu'il faut du temps, de la distance, pas seulement géographique, pour échapper au piège de l'émotion facile, du sensationnel...' Sebbar continues, warning of how 'l'urgence du dire nuit à la qualité littéraire, qu'il faut laisser la presse faire ce travail de proximité. Il est vrai.'²¹⁰ Far from criticising Larej's work, Sebbar concludes noting the control of the writer's emotion as crucial: 'les écrivains qui contrôlent les cris qui leur auraient échappé sur la page, ou les larmes, ou les lamentations qui s'entendent et se voient sans le secours du texte, ces écrivains-là ne sont pas nombreux, mais ils existent.'²¹¹ Indeed, Sebbar praises Larej for his ability to write the crisis of the 1990s through the 'détour' of Spain and the figure of Cervantes, which she notes gives the novel its originality. For Sebbar, Larej's novel is an example of a more successful and effective text which deals with this difficult period with a sense of aesthetic control over its use of the 'real' of the 1990s.

In the first issue of the journal, the *urgence* of Touati's novel is invoked as an affective response to the dispassionate news reports of the horrific events in Algeria; it seems also to be equated with a work of memory or of anamnesis in the face of a violence which has been made invisible by Algeria's isolation from the outside world. In the very next issue, Sebbar seems to attenuate, if not contradict, Virolle's words in the first issue of the journal, asking of the possibility of an 'écriture de l'urgence' which would not be

²¹⁰ Leïla Sebbar, 'Postface', *Algérie Littérature/Action* 3 (1996), p. 163.

²¹¹ Sebbar, 'Postface', p. 163.

significantly reduced in literary quality. By questioning the ability of literature to do the documentary work more suited to journalism, Sebbar seems to raise the possibility that the ability of the press to do this documentary work in Algeria was perhaps not as impeded as was being depicted outside the country. In the editorial to the third issue of the journal, Khelladi asks of the reasons for an increase in French publishing interest in Algerian literature at this time, all the while defending the journal regarding its publication of material that could have been seen to fall within the reductive bounds of ‘écriture de l’urgence’. The journal, through its editorial, distances itself from an ‘écriture de l’urgence’, writing how the emergence of a new generation of writers was not solely explainable by the increase in violence.²¹²

In further issues of the journal, the explicit question of *urgence* fades, but reappears on some occasions, in for instance the 1997 roundtable discussion cited by El Nossery and by Boualit.²¹³ The journal is still interested in the language used to speak about the events in Algeria and there is a notable absence in all the issues of the use of terms which would even subtly indicate the taking of sides. The editors avoid the use of the term ‘guerre civile’; they also publish discussions on the use of language and the presentation of the Algerian crisis by the French media. In the first issue to appear in 1997, the journal publishes a ‘dossier’ which includes the contributions of a number of intellectuals – including Jean Daniel, Francis Jeanson, Claude Lanzmann, Arezki Metref and Pierre Vidal-Naquet – concerning what Virolle describes in the introduction as an image of silence constructed around intellectuals and Algeria.²¹⁴ This same issue publishes work by Bonn which is critical of French publishing markets and which talks of the ‘retour du référent’ within these market spaces.²¹⁵ Another article by Francis Jeanson questions the

²¹² Aïssa Khelladi, ‘Editorial’, *Algérie Littérature/Action* 3 (1996), pp. 175-77.

²¹³ Benaïssa et al., ‘Comment écrire l’Algérie aujourd’hui?’

²¹⁴ Marie Virolle, ‘Dossier: Mon Pays’, *Algérie Littérature/Action* 7-8 (1997), pp. 233-36.

²¹⁵ Charles Bonn, ‘Le retour au référent’, *Algérie Littérature/Action* 7-8 (1997), pp. 201-04.

framing of the 1990s in the language of tragedy.²¹⁶ The varied and inconsistent picture painted is perhaps itself more a symptom of the publication's contemporaneity with the events of the 1990s than a sign of the journal itself taking an ideological position on the violence. The reduction, over time, in the use of the term *urgence* is interesting, however, and might be said to point to its emergence as something of a stigma being applied to works perceived to be of inferior quality.²¹⁷

In many of the more famous examples of Algerian literature published in France during the 1990s, literary fiction had been framed as a way to denounce the supposed factual utterances and official narrative of the State; if the fictional became the domain of the real, the official voice of the Algerian State became one which told countless fictions. However, such a simple inversion, which the press, and some scholars, had been keen to highlight,²¹⁸ failed to ask important questions surrounding the polarisation of discourses around Islam and the State at this time in Algeria, as well as the role of the status quo in dominating a discursive field. While supposedly fictional works were said to denounce the role of the State in producing and contorting the image of the violence during the 1990s, it could be argued that as a discursive frame, constructed by a certain language predominant in circles of reception, there emerged a greater sense that 'écriture de l'urgence' was offering implicit support to the State narrative. Even those who opposed the imposed framework could be said to fall into a trap of the negative double, where, by opposing it, one was implicitly giving it a certain legitimacy. This can, for instance, be seen in the realm of the reception of those authors praised for writing the period of the 1990s with a distance required to understand the complexities of the violence.

Even those who seemingly recognised literary fiction's more complex suspended relation to reference found themselves participating in a discussion coloured by a

²¹⁶ Francis Jeanson, 'Les pièges du confusionnisme', *Algérie Littérature/Action* 7-8 (1997), pp. 233-36.

²¹⁷ Y.B.'s criticism of Mokeddem could be viewed as one early example of this.

²¹⁸ See, for example, Lucie Knight, 'Writing Wrongs: The Representation of "Harkis" in Yasmina Khadra's *La part du mort*', *French Forum* 36, 2-3 (2011), p. 163.

particular language.²¹⁹ In a letter to Anouar Benmalek, after the publication of *Les amants désunis*, Mohammed Dib praises the author for not partaking in an opportunistic literature ‘qui tirerait indécemment parti d’une actualité.’²²⁰ Nevertheless, Benmalek’s work was framed in the French press in a language which portrayed an Algeria in the context of rising Islamic extremism. This is despite Benmalek’s plot which takes as its starting point the 1957 massacre at Melouza, perpetrated by the FLN and still a moment disputed within official accounts of Algerian national history.

In a visit to an Algerian library in an effort to promote his work, a journalist recounts, citing Benmalek, the first days of the late 1980s and early 1990s: ‘il vivait à Mohammadia. Les islamistes y tenaient le haut du pavé. “Le quartier bruissait des “Allah Akbar” crachés à longueur de journée par des haut-parleurs.” Non seulement l’existence d’une bibliothèque publique était impensable, mais “comme, à un moment, en France, tout le monde semblait pétainiste, tout le monde ici semblait islamiste”.’²²¹ Writing in *Le Magazine Littéraire*, Jean-Paul Dollé in his description of Benmalek’s novel speaks of ‘la lutte cruelle qui oppose les islamistes aux forces armées gouvernementales.’ In the same piece, Benmalek is described as hiding nothing of the ‘démence meurtrière qui sévit en Algérie.’²²² Pascale Dupont writes of a generation of writers, out of which Benmalek had emerged, ‘[p]rofondément marquée par la violence de l’islamisme.’²²³ In a longer ‘Enquête’ published on the occasion of ‘L’Année de l’Algérie en France’ in *Le Magazine Littéraire*, Valérie Marin la Meslée goes further as she returns to a broad corpus of works composed during the 1990s. In Marin la Meslée’s words, these writers ‘continuent d’écrire à tout âge, en français, en arabe, en exil ou in situ depuis que leur Algérie natale a été ravagée par la

²¹⁹ Hafid Gafaïti admits falling into the trap of adopting a Manichean perspective on the Algerian violence of the 1990s in an earlier essay ‘Between God and the President: Literature and Censorship in North Africa’, *Diacritics* 27, 2 (1997), pp. 59-84. See Gafaïti, ‘The Monotheism of the Other’, p. 20.

²²⁰ A copy of Dib’s letter to Benmalek is held at the Centre culturel algérien in Paris, within Benmalek’s author ‘dossier de presse’.

²²¹ Catherine Bedarida, ‘Les rencontres extraordinaires d’Anouar Benmalek avec ses lecteurs’, *Le Monde Culture*, 2 October 2001, p. 34.

²²² Jean-Paul Dollé, ‘Les amants désunis’, *Le Magazine Littéraire* 369, 1 January 2010, p. 86.

²²³ Pascale Dupont, ‘Lettres d’Algérie’, *L’Express* 2462, 10 September 1998, p. 95.

terreur intégriste.’ She continues, summarising, ‘quelle perspective devant l'arbitraire insensé de la barbarie? La littérature en est une.’²²⁴ The reports in this selection certainly employ the Algerian ‘actualité’ to frame the work, if not directly emphasising the Islamist, fundamentalist and barbaric roots of the violence.²²⁵

Questions surrounding State violence are rarely broached in explicit terms, despite a seeming concern within the literary text to put these questions to an audience. Dollé’s words are particularly interesting, as they create the image of an opposition between government and Islamists as if emerging naturally from a ‘lutte cruelle’, used as the subject of the sentence here (what else could such a ‘lutte’ produce?). What is absent in the above press narrative is a discussion of Benmalek’s work *as literature*. Moreover, the figure of the writer is privileged over any discussion of the work itself. The confusion between two forms of representation, outlined earlier with reference to Spivak and also in Bourdieu, is clearly present within the press narrative where elements of Benmalek’s biography are fused with discussion of his literary fiction and the political situation during the 1990s. Similar to Spivak’s discussion of the confusion between two forms of artistic and political representation, the ‘projet créateur’ comes to merge the intellectual with the work, skipping over the often complex relationship between the two things.²²⁶ Benmalek is the ‘authentic’ voice who represents contemporary Algeria and, together with the literary work, becomes what Huggan calls a ‘bona fide cultural representative’ of contemporary Algeria and its violence.²²⁷ Literature and criticism were perhaps coming to a point where it was increasingly difficult to distinguish between these two forms of representation and where the discursive frame would inevitably be that, whether implicitly or explicitly, of *urgence*.

²²⁴ Valérie Marin la Meslée, ‘Algérie: l’écriture face à la violence’, *Le Magazine Littéraire*, November 2003, p. 96.

²²⁵ See also Anne Griffon, ‘Thématique des romans noirs algériens’, *Algérie Littérature/Action* 47-48 (2001), pp. 182-94. Here the socio-political crisis years of the 1980s, and its literary reflections, are said to cede to ‘une autre forme de violence, celle du terrorisme qui secoue l’Algérie depuis 1992’ (p. 182).

²²⁶ Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, pp. 255-66; Bourdieu, ‘Champ intellectuel et projet créateur’.

²²⁷ Huggan, p. 26.

One of the ways to disrupt and escape this discursive frame was perhaps to stop attempting to flee from its grasp and to turn back to it and to attempt to recast it. It is interesting that Assia Djébar's major works of the 1990s were not placed within a reductive 'sous-champ' of *urgence*, despite the writer herself employing the term.²²⁸ As we have mentioned, Assia Djébar's 'récit', *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, is one example of the way in which the generically and formally inventive literary text can deconstruct and recast a reductive narrative or discursive frame, thus keeping the writer's work outside reductive accounts.²²⁹ Published in 1995, Djébar's text recalls the ghosts of a host of Algerian writers – some of whom were killed during the 1990s – and attempts to think through forms of memorialising and mourning which escape the reductive limits of official State, dominant social or media narratives. Towards the end of her text, and as the writer presciently recasts what was at the time a nascent discourse of *urgence*, Djébar writes of 'l'écriture et *son* urgence.'²³⁰ This is misquoted by El Nossery and in an earlier chapter by Boualit as 'l'écriture et l'urgence', which gives a different image of the relation between literature and *urgence*.²³¹ Djébar's declaration is followed by a definition of Algerian literature as one written in multiple languages, one which extends from the second, fourth and fifth centuries, with Apuleius and Augustine, and one which included figures like Kateb Yacine and Mouloud Mammeri, the emir Abdelkader (who led the Algerian resistance against the French in the 1830s), but also Camus. This plurality – this intertextuality – is, Bonn writes, what manifests 'la vie du roman maghrébin' and what developed 'l'espace d'une Littérature.'²³² The possessive *son* is suggestive of an *urgence* which is immanent in writing itself and not solely in Algerian writing, or indeed

²²⁸ These works include: *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*; *Les nuits de Strasbourg* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1997); *Oran, langue morte* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1997).

²²⁹ See Jane Hiddleston, 'Political Violence and Singular Testimony: Assia Djébar's *Algerian White*', *Law and Literature* 17, 1 (2005), pp. 1-20; see also 'Violence, Mourning and Singular Testimony', in *Assia Djébar: Out of Algeria*, pp. 120-57.

²³⁰ *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, p. 242, my emphasis.

²³¹ El Nossery, p. 18; Boualit, p. 35.

²³² Charles Bonn, 'Littérature algérienne et conscience nationale: après l'indépendance', *Notre librairie*, 85 (1986), p. 36.

attributable to Algerian writing during the 1990s.²³³ Rather than submitting to an *urgence* cast within a nationalist frame, or an ‘écriture de l’urgence’ which became a byword for Algerian literature of the 1990s, Algerian writers might be seen to recast the ethical imperative of the period by transgressing the borders of one language, of narrow categorisations, and transcending the reductive limits of one nation – or one idea of the nation. If writing can be placed within a time, contained within or reduced to a certain space of critical reception, it would seem that, as a literary thing, writing always exceeds the situation of its initial production so that its meaning can never really be fully contained. Here, the ethical imperative is recast as an ethics of the literary itself, which forever holds meaning at the point of an irreducible and ambivalent tension.

The order of language and event: ‘imaginative geographies’?

The editorial and market dominance mentioned above is precisely the one that Bonn warns about in his work on the Algerian novel in 1997: referring to the increasing body of testimony written by women, Bonn notes how ‘[c]es témoignages [sont] sans doute autant suscités par une politique des éditeurs friands de drames actuels que par une évolution littéraire « normale » en rapport avec cette actualité’.²³⁴ In Bonn’s estimation, it was after the symbolic death of Djaout that Algerian literary production ‘semble avoir tourné le dos à la littérature, pour multiplier les témoignages’.²³⁵ Pointing to the way in which the ‘actualité algérienne’ had sparked interest in Maghrebi writers more generally among European and US publishers, Bonn restates the documentary nature of what he calls ‘attente de lecture’.²³⁶ He names the writers Leïla Aslaoui, Malika Boussouf, Fériel Assima, Nayla Imaksen and the interviews between ‘la très médiatique’ Khalida Messaoudi and

²³³ In Fisher’s study, the quotation is split and rearticulated as an ‘« urgence » d’écrire’ (which also gives the book its title); Djébar does not use the fully fledged ‘écriture de l’urgence’ in her work. See Fisher, p. 41.

²³⁴ Bonn, ‘Algérie’, p. 208.

²³⁵ Bonn, ‘Algérie’, p. 208.

²³⁶ Bonn, ‘Algérie’, p. 209.

Elisabeth Schemla as participating in this testimonial turn. He also cites Malika Mokeddem and Latifa Ben Mansour as writers who, while writing within the ‘actualité’ of the violence, are nevertheless able to offer ‘de bons romans d’écriture « classique »’.²³⁷ As we have highlighted, it is not just literary writers whose work forms part of what Colonna refers to as the ‘social demand’ of the exiled intellectual in France, but the testimonies of those defectors from the Algerian army and special forces who would become better known after the 2002 Souaïdia/Nezzar defamation trial in France.²³⁸ Bonn closes his chapter with a question (and a prescient warning): if this body of literature is the result of a particular set of ‘politiques éditoriales’, feeding a particular market demand, how does this then feed into a ‘champ littéraire’ where it is ‘les textes *francophones*’ which are increasingly awarded literary prizes over their French equivalents?²³⁹ And how might this shift be related to a particular increase in women’s writing at this time?²⁴⁰

Many of the issues which have more recently been raised in the field of francophone postcolonial studies, perhaps especially in relation to the metropolitan marketing of authenticity and the way in which literary prizes have become central to these markets, are addressed by Graham Huggan in his book, *The Postcolonial Exotic*.²⁴¹ However, Huggan’s work is not negative in its outlook or assessment of postcolonial writing. Many of his individual chapters are studies of works which are themselves aware of the mostly metropolitan industries which have been developing marketing strategies which exoticise and objectify literature. Indeed, these dynamics are perhaps less rooted in postcolonial literature than in the structure of capitalist markets more generally in the

²³⁷ Bonn, ‘Algérie’, p. 209.

²³⁸ Colonna, p. 168.

²³⁹ Bonn, ‘Algérie’, p. 210.

²⁴⁰ Laroussi calls this a reinvention of exoticism; see, ‘When Francophone Means National’, p. 88.

²⁴¹ In francophone postcolonial studies, see Crowley, ‘Literatures in French Today’. Informed by Bourdieu, Crowley begins to consider the importance of the relationship between publishers, literary reviews and prize committees in France. See also Chapter Four of Huggan’s book, which focuses on the Booker Prize.

production of literature, addressed by Bourdieu in *Les Règles de l'art*.²⁴² If Huggan's study provides a pre-existing framework for addressing questions of the market and postcolonial writing, the particularity of Algerian literature is perhaps in its continuing concern for violence. Transposed to the context of an Algerian 'écriture de l'urgence', Huggan's account of exoticism being 'bound up [...] in the sympathetic identification with supposedly marginal groups', could be said to resemble the conditions under which Algerian literature was being promoted and received in France during the 1990s.²⁴³ While contemporary Algerian writers have been persistent in their focus on the violence of the 1990s as well as on colonial State violence, and – as Huggan shows in his book, writers *and* readers have a certain level of agency – this focus has nonetheless created a marketable space, whereby a fusion between the imagined and the real has taken place. What Fredric Jameson saw as postmodernism's tendency towards commodity culture in its constant 'aestheticisation of the real' is not far here from Bahri's comments on the thematics of contemporary postcolonial writing and the tendency of critics to demand certain types of writing.²⁴⁴ In the insights it could supposedly give on the violence of 'the real', the constructed 'sous-champ' of 'écriture de l'urgence' was perhaps increasingly subject to such a demand from the former *métropole*.

More recently, historians and social scientists have entered this debate. James McDougall has warned of the replication of the image of barbarity when speaking of Algeria's violence; in the multiple stages of Algerian history, from colonization, to the War of Independence, to the 1990s, McDougall shows how Algerian violence has been 'encoded' in a variety of ways. His reading of Algerian violence seeks to work against the image or label of 'Algerian Savagery' and to promote a socially, politically and

²⁴² Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art*.

²⁴³ Huggan, p. 17.

²⁴⁴ Jameson, cited in Huggan, p. 18.

historically contextualised understanding of each particular moment of violence.²⁴⁵ In the context of writing during the 1990s, he has also reflected on the dangers of the self-narrative – where Algerian history is inscribed through various forms of memoir, autobiographical narrative or auto-fiction – which has been privileged over a more critically oriented work of history. McDougall explains this need for the self-narrative as a result of ‘a surplus of the “social” and the lack of space for individual self-expression’; yet, the historian warns of the way in which self-narrative – marketed as testimony – has produced an ersatz history of Algeria: ‘this recent visibility and marketability of “memory” as *témoignage* within Algeria is both a reaction to the absence of sustained, critical and open historical scholarship, or of the public debate that such scholarship might ultimately inform, and a poor substitute for both.’²⁴⁶ Mundy’s recent work tackles head-on what he names, after Edward Said, the ‘imaginative geographies’ of Algeria’s violence in the context of the social and political sciences, conflict management and contemporary terrorism studies. If developed within the field of social and political science, his approach might be tentatively but effectively transferred to the Franco-Algerian literary field of the 1990s, where a host of imagined ‘Algerias’ often located and inscribed at the site of individual narrative bodies were released into the French publishing market.²⁴⁷ Principally oriented around memory and exile, these narratives which posited multiple ‘Algerias’, were at the forefront of representations of Algeria in France.

Another related phenomenon, highlighted by Stora and to which we alluded earlier, is that of the returning narrative of the Algerian War of Independence. Chiming

²⁴⁵ McDougall, ‘Savage Wars?’

²⁴⁶ James McDougall, ‘Social Memories ‘in the Flesh’: War and Exile in Algerian Self-Writing’, *Alif* 30 (2010), p. 45.

²⁴⁷ Leïla Sebbar has used this image of multiple Algerias in her ‘carnet de voyage’ *Mes Algéries en France* (Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule: Bleu autour, 2004). On this, see Helen Vassallo, ‘Re-mapping Algeria(s) in France: Leïla Sebbar’s *Mes Algéries en France* and *Journal de mes Algéries en France*’, *Modern and Contemporary France*, 19, 2 (2011), pp. 129-45.

with McDougall's discussion of how Algerian history has been 'encoded' within the discursive frame of violence, Stora's work suggests how, particularly in France, the invisibility of the Algerian conflict of the 1990s was accentuated by what he calls 'la production frénétique des récits-témoignages sans mise en perspective historique'.²⁴⁸ This is where he details the presence of a pathologising language of 'récidive' and attempts to show how the violent binary of 'eradication' may have developed at least partly out of the individuation of the 'tragedy' of the 1990s through autobiographical narratives which, in his words, became a 'moteur de compréhension'.²⁴⁹ As he notes earlier in his book, '[s]ous les yeux des « spectateurs » français, tout est dans les mots, les récits; les images semblent impossibles à regarder. Car l'« écran », comme il a été dit, n'est pas si vide que cela.'²⁵⁰ The empty space of the screen is filled, according to Stora, by a spectacle where the invisibility of the violence conjures stereotypes left over from the War of Independence. If writers who have made the link between the 1990s and the War of Independence do indeed reflect a feeling of similarity and repetition in Algeria, it is a context of reception which is often pre-established within its own 'critères idéologiques' which, as Bonn writes elsewhere, dates back to the 'autre époque' of the War of Independence.²⁵¹ While there seems to be a generational aspect to this, where it is writers above a certain age drawing these links, this is perhaps a result of what Rahal names the

²⁴⁸ Stora, *La guerre invisible*, pp. 115-16.

²⁴⁹ Stora, *La guerre invisible*, pp. 50; 92; 105.

²⁵⁰ Stora, *La guerre invisible*, p. 56.

²⁵¹ Charles Bonn, 'Paysages littéraires algériens des années 90 et post-modernisme littéraire maghrébin', in *Paysages littéraires algériens des années 90: Témoigner d'une tragédie?*, ed. by Charles Bonn & Farida Boualit (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999), p. 23. The implications of these 'ideological criteria' being based on reception surrounding the Algerian War and not the specific history of the 1990s – or what Hugh Roberts argues should be read in the light of France's neo-colonial, post-Cold War economic policy in Algeria (p. 313) – means that those purchasing novels depicting the descent of Algeria into the violence of the 1990s might understandably read the novels as depicting a failure of independence, a rejection of the FLN as the arbiter of that independence and, further, reinforce the essentialist assumptions surrounding the dangers of decolonisation, expressed perhaps most tellingly in the now repealed Article 4 of the 2005 French law, which would necessitate the teaching in France of the positive role played by French colonialism. See, Article 4, Loi n° 2005-158 du 23 février 2005 portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés', in *Journal officiel de la République Française*, 0046, 24 February 2005 (p. 3128, texte no. 2), <<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/loi/2005/2/23/DEFX0300218L/jo#JORFARTI000002059357>> [accessed: 11 April 2016].

competing versions of the Algerian ‘entre-soi’ discussed earlier.²⁵² There is also the possibility of the presence of a kind of memory palimpsest in reverse here, where the key symbolic ‘event’ of the War of Independence becomes a surface layer, beneath which exists the obscured ‘events’ of the ‘décennie noire’.²⁵³ The problem, in Stora’s eyes, is with the *French* reception and (re)production of a narrative of contemporary Algeria through the stereotypes produced of the country before and during the War of Independence, in whose image ‘l’Algérie est une terre vouée aux guerres, frappée de malédiction, embarquée dans une fatalité tragique perpétuelle.’²⁵⁴

In a 1995 article in *Les Temps Modernes*, Stora at least momentarily seems to participate in the alignment of the two periods of violence when he cites Albert Camus’s ‘Discours pour une « trêve civile en Algérie »’ from January 1956 in an epigraph to his article. The epigraph, which reads ‘L’histoire se répète comme une bouche sanglante qui ne vomit qu’un bégaiement furieux’, finds its way into Stora’s text which asks of the possibility of naming the 1990s a ‘deuxième guerre algérienne’.²⁵⁵ While offering a critical reflection of the instances of repetition, Stora nevertheless adopts the language of ‘first’ and ‘second’ wars. Indeed, Camus would become a major vehicle for this narrative of the repetition of wars as he was revived in a wide range of Algerian works published in Paris throughout the 1990s.²⁵⁶ In works published mainly in France, it was Camus’s ethical engagement at the time of the War of Independence which Algerian writers would deem

²⁵² Rahal, ‘Fused Together and Torn Apart’.

²⁵³ See the third part, in particular Chapter 7, of Désirée Schyns, *La mémoire littéraire de la guerre d’Algérie dans la fiction algérienne francophone* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2012), pp. 227-56. In his analysis of francophone fiction and film, Max Silverman shows how repressed memories of the Holocaust and colonialism have been covered over and revealed through this palimpsestic figure. See, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013).

²⁵⁴ Stora, *La guerre invisible*, p. 56.

²⁵⁵ Stora, ‘Deuxième guerre algérienne?’; see also, Albert Camus, ‘Pour une trêve civile en Algérie’, *Essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965 [1956]), pp. 991-99. For more extensive discussion of Camus and Algeria, see David Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

²⁵⁶ Christiane Chaulet-Achour’s work also looks at Camus’s re-appearance in the Algerian press at this time. See, ‘Camus dans la presse algérienne des années 1985-2005’, in *Albert Camus: l’exigence morale*, ed. by Agnès Spiquel and Alain Schaffner (Paris: Editions Le Manuscrit, 2006), pp. 141-61; for a fuller bibliographical survey, see Amina Azza-Bekat, Afifa Bererhi, Christiane Chaulet-Achour & Bouba Mohammedi-Tabti, *Quand les Algériens lisent Camus* (Algiers: Casbah, 2014).

worthy of re-invoking at this time. In one example, which charts Algeria's past from the 1830s colonial invasion to the unrest of the 1990s, the narrator of Aziz Chouaki's 1997 play *Les Oranges*, creatively re-imagines Camus dividing a symbolic Algerian watermelon into wide round slices so that everyone could have 'un peu de cœur.'²⁵⁷ For the narrator the question is no longer about the controversial narrative of Camus's *L'Étranger*, or questions over the Nobel Prize, but a down-to-earth humanism and ethics which recognises the plurality of what he calls 'la grande famille des oranges.'²⁵⁸ Some rehabilitations of Camus's ghost have also been associated with a language of *urgence*,²⁵⁹ whereas others have been part of more complex strategies of re-staging history in order to interrogate the assumptions upon which it is written.²⁶⁰ Camus's presence as an ethical voice at this time did however at a very basic level align accounts of the War of Independence and of the violence of the 1990s. If, as Mundy argues, the 'imaginative geography' of Algerian violence precedes and constructs the reality of the events, then Camus, or some myth thereof, can be seen to play a posthumous role here in situating the War of Independence as a lens through which the so-called 'second' war can be read. Although, just as history haunts and in some way constructs a language of the present, language also continually acts back on history, making and remaking events in their wake.²⁶¹

²⁵⁷ Aziz Chouaki, *Les Oranges* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 1997), p. 31.

²⁵⁸ Chouaki, p. 48.

²⁵⁹ See, Gilles Bousquet, 'Preface', in *Albert Camus, précurseur: Méditerranée d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*, ed. by Alek Baylee Toumi (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. ix-xi.

²⁶⁰ For instance, Camus's ghost appears with more subtlety in both Assia Djebar's *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995) and later in *La Disparition de la langue française* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003). On this, see Christine Margerrison, 'Assia Djebar, Albert Camus et le sang de l'histoire', in *Algérie, vers le cinquantenaire de l'Indépendance*, ed. by Naaman Kessous, Christine Margerrison, Andy Stafford & Guy Dugas (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2009), pp. 161-82; more generally on this phenomenon in the context of theatre, see Janice Gross, 'Albert Camus and contemporary Algerian playwrights: a shared faith in dialogue', in *Albert Camus, précurseur: Méditerranée d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*, ed. by Alek Baylee Toumi (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 127-40.

²⁶¹ Mundy cites a passage from Said's *Orientalism* which encapsulates this point: 'But if we agree that all things in history, like history itself, are made by men, then we will appreciate how possible it is for many objects or places or times to be assigned roles and given meanings that acquire objective validity only *after* the assignments are made.' See Mundy, pp. 27-28. See also, Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), p. 54.

The problem of naming: between ‘guerre civile’ and ‘tragédie nationale’

Tragedy, a term which will return in the official government scripting of the period of the 1990s in 2005 laws on reconciliation, is another major site of tension. If, on the one hand, a necessary means of understanding and of working through traumatic or violent pasts, the frame of the tragic has also meant adopting a teleological outlook which recasts the past with a certain purpose or envisioned outcome.²⁶² By framing Algerian history as both glorious and as subject to tragedy, the official narrative itself might be seen to project an Algeria ‘vouée aux guerres’ and as ‘frappée de malédiction’. One might ask, moreover, whether the government can be seen to script the tragic narrative presented in the charter of 2005 under the influence of a body of cultural production which had come before and at various levels named the 1990s as tragic. While identifying the roots and routes of this language would be a long and complicated task, it will be useful to assess how scholars and critics writing about the 1990s have sought, or in some cases not sought, to interrogate the narrative or discursive frames of tragedy and war within which Algerian writing of the 1990s has been placed.

Known more widely and ominously as the ‘décennie’ or ‘années noire(s)’, the ‘décennie rouge’ – ‘décennie noire’ is a term which had already been used in some press reports to name the 1980s economic crisis in Algeria and which was soon transferred to the 1990s – the violence which occurred during this time was first named and discussed as a ‘guerre civile’ by the political scientist Luis Martinez in his book *La Guerre civile en Algérie*.²⁶³ As Mundy points out, it was adopted by many other theorists, principally non-specialists on Algeria, without a discussion of the way in which this term came to be

²⁶² See ‘Charte pour la paix et la réconciliation nationale’.

²⁶³ Luis Martinez, *La Guerre civile en Algérie*.

controversial inside and outside Algeria from a number of different perspectives. As Mundy underlines, Martinez' reasons for naming the violence in Algeria a 'civil war' are inexplicably left out of the English translation of the book.²⁶⁴ This lack of critical attention to language and discourse, as well as the intervention of largely Anglophone non-specialists in the debate, became crucial in constructing and imagining the conflict beyond its 'invisible' reality in Algeria.²⁶⁵

Nevertheless, in the French version, Martinez justifies his use of the term 'guerre civile' in a claim to the political and ideological middle ground: 'cette dénomination permet de dépasser le discours des protagonistes (le régime, en Algérie, parle de « terrorisme » pour qualifier la violence des islamistes de la guérilla; parallèlement ceux-ci affirment qu'ils mènent le *djihad* – guerre sainte – afin d'instaurer un Etat islamique).'²⁶⁶ These criteria are not especially relevant in terms of the political science of civil wars and although Martinez's book considered some of these factors (the spread and intensity of the conflict, the split between State and opposing rebel groups), it did so on shaky ground. Critical of the certainty of Martinez' account of opposition between the Algerian State and the Islamist movement, Hugh Roberts contends that 'a thoroughgoing ambiguity has characterised the behaviour of the Islamist movement', which he argues is 'symptomatic of the fact that opposition between the State and the Islamist movement has been by no means absolute, and accordingly not the cause of the drama at all.'²⁶⁷ Roberts takes issue with Martinez' notion of the 'imaginaire de la guerre' and assumptions he makes around a pathologising '*war in general*' where, for instance, violence was for Algerians the traditional means of gaining power.²⁶⁸ For Roberts, Martinez reads the actors of the conflict – which

²⁶⁴ Mundy, p. 182 (n. 71). See Martinez, pp. 11-16.

²⁶⁵ One notable voice, with which Mundy takes issue, is Stathis Kalyvas who writes about the violence in his essay, 'Wanton and Senseless? The Logic of Massacres in Algeria', *Rationality and Society* 11, 3 (1999), pp. 243-86.

²⁶⁶ Martinez, p. 14.

²⁶⁷ Roberts, pp. 250-51.

²⁶⁸ Roberts, p. 256.

he understands in too simplistic terms – in overly symbolic terms:

The emirs of the GIA are to be understood as the latest in a series of emblematic figures dominating Algerian history, all of whom exemplify in different guises, the idea of “the political bandit”, a series which begins with the Barbary corsairs of the pre-colonial era, followed by the caïds [...] and the colonels who commanded the guerrilla units of the *Armée de Libération Nationale* (ALN) during the war of independence.²⁶⁹

Hence the way in which some social and political scientists come to understand the events of the 1990s is coloured by the other moments of violence and images of violence written into Algeria’s history. As Roberts has it, ‘the Martinez thesis boils down to a reformulation, within the trappings of academic sophistication, of that very old, and unmistakably cultural-essentialist, idea, to which the *pieds noirs* were so viscerally attached, that *les Arabes* are cut-throats.’²⁷⁰ Martinez’ book is not the only work reviewed by Roberts here. Michael Willis, who reads the events of the 1990s as an ‘Islamist challenge’, and William Quandt, who, according to Roberts, overstates the importance of the 1989 end of the dominance of one-party rule, also come in for criticism.²⁷¹ Roberts argues that many attempts to explain the violence actually helped to further obscure what was happening in Algeria, concluding that the authors of these texts are ‘uneasily aware of, but unsure how to handle’ what he understands as ‘the incessant factional struggle within the Algerian power structure itself’. Grasping these facts of the conflict in Algeria is said to be ‘exceptionally difficult’, because the conflict is being played out within the ‘informal sector of the Algerian polity’.²⁷² It is nevertheless necessary to recognise and engage with the complexity of these questions and the lack of adequate response to them.

²⁶⁹ Roberts, p. 255.

²⁷⁰ Roberts, p. 256. This is a view reflected in the work of McDougall, Mundy, Stora and in an earlier piece by David Macey, ‘The Algerian with the knife’, *Parallax*, special issue “Translating “Algeria”” 4, 2 (1998), pp. 159-67.

²⁷¹ See Michael Willis, *The Islamist Challenge*; William Quandt, *Between Ballots and Bullets: Algeria’s Transition from Authoritarianism* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

²⁷² Roberts, p. 259.

Like Martinez, Mundy tells us that from the point of view of the official narrative during the 1990s, the government was interested to speak of ‘terrorism’ and did not consider itself to be engaged in a civil war or conflict with either a legitimate or illegitimate force such as the FIS, the armed groups of the GIA or the AIS; in addition to delegitimising the armed groups, this strategy was also adopted to maintain an opacity surrounding the violence that had hitherto proved beneficial to the State. Yet, whereas the State was reluctant to call the 1990s a civil war, many in Algeria – intellectuals and political figures – had spoken of the need to *prevent* ‘civil war’. These names include the first president of independent Algeria, Ahmed Ben Bella, Hocine Aït Ahmed, leader of the Front des Forces Socialistes (FFS), Chadli Bendjedid, the president in post at the time of the October 1988 uprisings, and even Mohamed Boudiaf, president of Algeria assassinated in 1992.²⁷³ Though, as Mundy shows, it was ultimately from outside Algeria that the term ‘civil war’ was applied to the violence of the 1990s after the fact. Indeed, in the wake of the massacres of 1997 and 1998, which gained international attention, it was the narrative of the foreign media that changed from that of restraint in naming the 1990s a civil war to that of describing the *extent* of a civil war in Algeria, as if that is precisely what it was and had been from the beginning.²⁷⁴

The problem highlighted here is the lack of an existing and stable definition of the term civil war in addition to its often confused relationship with genocide. As Stathis Kalyvas writes in his influential book, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, the ‘very use’ of the term civil war can often be ‘part of the conflict itself, conferring or denying legitimacy (or status equality) to the parties in the conflict’.²⁷⁵ According to Mundy, if it can be said to infer a chaotic reality on the ground, ‘civil war’ can better serve those reluctant to

²⁷³ See Mundy, pp. 33-36.

²⁷⁴ Mundy, p. 36.

²⁷⁵ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 17.

intervene in conflicts, whereas genocide mandates international intervention in conflict.²⁷⁶ So, in the case of Algeria, civil war may have been an attractive name for those on the outside, but was unpopular to those within Algeria, not least because of the confusion surrounding who exactly was participating in the so-called conflict. What is also clear in the Algerian case is that, if there were factions within State and government circles (which had existed since independence), there was never a direct split internal to State sovereignty or what Kalyvas more particularly calls the requirement for ‘*armed combat within the boundaries of a recognised sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities*’, where a ‘key intuition’ of the definition is the ‘violent physical division of the sovereign entity into rival armed camps’, entailing a ‘*de facto territorial division*.’²⁷⁷ This definition of what might be considered a classic civil war in no clear way applies to Algeria during the 1990s.

If ‘the Algerian Civil War’ was principally *made* outside Algeria, it would appear surprising that the newly elected president Bouteflika used the term ‘civil war’ in an interview after he took office in 1999.²⁷⁸ Whether we put it down to the influence of international attention given to Algeria’s crisis, or to Bouteflika’s need to take back control of the national narrative, this outside and qualified inside naming of the 1990s as a civil war meant that the still confusing, yet nonetheless existing definitions of civil war could retroactively be applied to the Algerian case: said to begin in 1992, the ‘war’ would last until 1999 and would claim in the region of 100,000 to 200,000 lives.²⁷⁹ What is clear, though, is that after 1999 Bouteflika’s government attempted to take back what Brand describes as the ‘fractured’ narrative of the period and attempt to reconstitute it in a

²⁷⁶ Mundy, pp. 31-32.

²⁷⁷ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence*, p. 17.

²⁷⁸ Mundy, p. 35.

²⁷⁹ The wide variation here is put down to the paucity of information coming out of official Algerian government circles, as well as to the occasional reports of leaked documents where the figures vary greatly. However, perhaps most strange (and what ultimately produces the discrepancy between 100,000 and 200,000 lives) is Bouteflika’s own shift from the figure of 100,000 after he was first elected president to the figure of 200,000 once in his second term. See Mundy, p. 42.

digestible form to outside observers.²⁸⁰ If Algeria had had a civil war, it was ultimately ‘won’ or brought under control by the historically legitimate State, which continued to represent and embody the struggle of the Algerian people.²⁸¹

This retaking possession of the national narrative was the objective and ultimately the result of laws first referred to under the umbrella of *rahma* and later the ‘Concorde civile’.²⁸² These laws of clemency, which were first launched by Zérroual in 1995, were designed to offer amnesty to fighters during the 1990s who were deemed not to have been involved in massacres, rapes or murders.²⁸³ Despite the fact that the laws under the ‘Concorde civile’ were due to expire in 2000 and opposition from members of the military and other Algerian political leaders, Bouteflika insisted that they remain in place; as George Joffé has noted, this led to a certain level of ambivalence surrounding the legal status of the amnesty between 2000 and 2005.²⁸⁴ In 2005, Bouteflika officially renewed these laws in the ‘Charte pour la paix et la réconciliation nationale’.²⁸⁵ After this point, the question of tragedy returns, prompted by the official scripting of the 1990s within this charter as a ‘tragédie nationale’.

Some writers and scholars had in fact already adopted this terminology, and were already contributing to the development of a thematic of tragedy which emerged during the 1990s. Gross shows how ‘the tragedy of Algeria’ was prominent in the trajectory of Slimane Benaïssa’s work during the 1990s. In her reading, Algeria’s tragedy is a result in part of a multilayered and complex history of conflict which, in Benaïssa’s play *Les fils de l’amertume*, ultimately pits Algerian against fellow Algerian.²⁸⁶ Gross’ account of tragedy

²⁸⁰ Brand, pp. 153-86.

²⁸¹ In the interview conducted by the BBC, cited by Mundy, Bouteflika employs the term ‘civil war’; the president is additionally quoted to say: ‘Every drop of blood adds to Algeria’s strength.’ See Mundy, p. 35.

²⁸² *Rahma* meaning clemency. See Joffé, p. 215.

²⁸³ Joffé, pp. 215-16.

²⁸⁴ See Joffé, p. 216.

²⁸⁵ See ‘Charte pour la paix et la réconciliation nationale’.

²⁸⁶ Gross, ‘The Tragedy of Algeria’.

draws explicitly on the narrative of repetition, which Stora warns of in his book.²⁸⁷

While the question of tragedy receives less critical attention more generally, Boualit has nevertheless surveyed the use of the term by writers during the 1990s, finding that the terminology appears from Mimouni's 1992 essay and recurs throughout the 1990s.²⁸⁸ Indeed, it is Mimouni's 1993 novel, *La Malédiction*, that is seen to inaugurate such a fatalistic terminology, apparently replicated by many other Algerian writers during the 1990s. Boualit also shows how French publishers were keen to employ such language on the back covers of novels. However, describing writers during the 1990s as 'des écrivains-victimes de l'histoire', Boualit might ultimately be seen to fall into a trap which views the crisis of the 1990s in the broad narrative which casts Algerian history as tragic.²⁸⁹ While, on the one hand, tragedy can be said to offer emotional closure – as the State clearly attempts to do in its efforts at reconciliation – it does so by foreclosing a critical, and what some see to be crucial, discussion on events and the history of those events still to be written. And, as Stora highlights, the gap is often left open for the self-narratives and historical memoirs which fuel this uncritical history of an Algeria, 'vouée aux guerres, frappée de malédiction, embarquée dans une fatalité tragique perpétuelle', or in Roberts' words condemned to being at '*war in general*'.²⁹⁰

If tragedy has been appropriated by the State in its narrative of amnesia, it is important to note how tragedy can also grant access to a distanced and critical perspective on the theatre history itself becomes and on the cyclical violence which recurs within that theatre. Hence, while tragedy is potentially useful in the Algerian context, its use must also be assessed within the context of the multiple narrative forces which frame it.

²⁸⁷ Stora, *La guerre invisible*.

²⁸⁸ Boualit, p. 32.

²⁸⁹ Boualit, p. 35.

²⁹⁰ Stora, *La guerre invisible*, p. 56; Roberts, p. 256.

Conclusion

If *urgence* was an element which encouraged readers to make documentary readings of novels written during the years of the 1990s, then what comes after can be seen as a challenge and an attempt to escape that reductive way of reading Algerian writing. If, as we go on to see, literature of the post-2000 period constitutes a reappropriation and continuation of the postcolonial project in breaking new ground in terms of experimentations in the form and genre of the Algerian novel, *urgence* is also reappropriated and recast in a variety of ways which move beyond the imposed narrative limitations of the 1990s. We have seen how such limits were expressed both at the level of the State control of a publishing sector in Algeria, as well as at the level of the reductive spaces of reception operative within the Franco-Algerian ‘champ littéraire’. But they were also clearly present within the parallel field of political science, where, for instance, Martinez would read recent history emblematically and symbolically. If Bourdieu’s ‘champ’ can offer us an analytic framework here, it also at the same time poses the danger of promoting reading practices that contain and construct an accessible set of ‘events’ in terms, which as Roberts noted, reproduce a ‘cultural-essentialist’ frame.²⁹¹ The spectre of what Frow named analytical ‘thinness’ raises its head here whereby the desire for an all-encompassing overarching theory comes to predetermine and hence limit critical inquiry.²⁹²

If Bahri and Huggan give a more overt warning of the dangers of the market privileging or exoticising authenticity in postcolonial literature, where, for Bahri, the ‘native informant’ meets the demands of a ‘needy metropolitan audience’, Harrison recalls Derrida’s notion of a literature in suspense in relation to meaning, where suspense means being simultaneously attached to and detached, at an ambivalent proximity or distance, to

²⁹¹ Roberts, p. 256.

²⁹² Frow, ‘On mid-level concepts’, p. 218.

or from reference.²⁹³ From the reduction to the thematic within the Franco-Algerian ‘champ littéraire’ of the 1990s, the body of writing which begins to emerge at the beginning of the new millennium, alongside the creation of independent publishing houses in Algeria, moves to reignite debates, obscured by the dominant press narrative during the 1990s, around the aesthetics of Algerian literature and the power of aesthetic experimentation to effect political and social change. In the three sections that follow, the thesis assesses how Algerian literature of the post-2000 period incorporates and outplays reductive readings of literature common in the mainstream literary press, periodicals and publishing markets.

This first section has highlighted how *urgence* was first *cast* during the 1990s – and more particularly how it was cast alongside, and fused with, other reductive accounts of the period; the three sections to follow explore how *urgence* has been subsequently *recast* in a new light which takes account of the complexities of compartmentalising and classifying literature within a particular discursive frame or ‘champ’. If *urgence* is immanent in literary writing, it can also be said to spill out beyond writing, in a movement perhaps analogous to Said’s discussion of filiation and affiliation in his introduction to what he names ‘Secular Criticism’ at the beginning of *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. As Said demonstrates, the role of the critic is not to catch and contain this spillage, but to observe its flow, movement and absorption within new derivative writings; to step back, sit between, to *suspend* oneself at some level in a critical space that Said knew as the exilic condition which gave rise to the possibility of what he called a ‘critical consciousness’.²⁹⁴

²⁹³ Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p. 139; Attridge & Derrida, p. 48.

²⁹⁴ Edward Said, ‘Introduction: Secular Criticism’, in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Vintage, 1983), p. 24.

Excursus One

While, towards the end of the 1990s, Algerian publishing was no longer solely dominated by the State, it still lacked any real opportunity to blossom during a decade of violence where writers (particularly francophone writers and those seen to be involved in the promotion of francophone writing), were directly targeted. If the French publishing market was drawn primarily to works saleable under the rubric of ‘écriture de l’urgence’, it also became apparent that many Algerian writers who found it impossible to publish inside Algeria would begin to eschew the realism associated with ‘écriture de l’urgence’ much earlier than the appearance of new Algerian publishers such as Barzakh. As Fisher’s work shows, and as we have discussed in Chapter One, Djaout and Djébar are two figures who can be seen to begin to re-orient and recast *urgence* from within the limits of French publishing; and they were not the only ones to do so. Mohammed Dib also continued to publish in France during the 1990s, offering in what has become known as the ‘trilogie nordique’, a complex and sometimes experimental work which pushed beyond what had been classed as the realist aesthetic of ‘écriture de l’urgence’.²⁹⁵ If one can speak of an aesthetic shift in these new works, it might more correctly be described as a continuation of formal experimentation in literary writing from the 1990s, as exhibited in the writing of Dib, Djaout and Djébar.²⁹⁶

Both novelists addressed in the following section, Maïssa Bey and Salim Bachi, are first and foremost Algerian authors published in France. However, Bey is one of the first

²⁹⁵ Dib’s ‘trilogie nordique’ includes the collection of short stories, *La Nuit Sauvage* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), the novel *Si Diable vent* (1998) and the generically indeterminate *L’Arbre à dire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999). On the trilogy, see Rachid Mokhtari, ‘*Si Diable vent* ou l’urgence du retour à la terre natale’, in *La Graphie de l’horreur: essai sur la littérature algérienne (1990-2000)* (Algiers: Chihab, 2002), pp. 39-53. More specifically on *La Nuit Sauvage*, see Naaman Kessous and Andy Stafford, ‘Responsable(s) de la violence, ou responsabilité de l’écriture? Le cas de “La nuit sauvage” de Mohammed Dib’, in *Algérie: vers le cinquantenaire de l’indépendance*, ed. by Kessous et al. (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2009), pp. 93-114.

²⁹⁶ The question surrounding official amnesia and further censorship laws announced in 2005 does, however, mean that writers could be read to be further engaged in strategies to subvert these new laws through a formally inventive and experimental writing.

and together they are two of the more prominent writers to move back to the new emergent publishing sphere of Algeria after 2000. Editions Marsa is Bey's first publisher – an offshoot of *Algérie Littérature/Action*, published in France towards the end of the 1990s – but she will later be published in a collaborative partnership between the French publisher Editions de L'Aube, based in La Tour-d'Aigues, and Barzakh in Algiers. Salim Bachi, one of Algeria's most recent writers to be published in France by Gallimard, has also had the rights to some of his novels purchased by Barzakh in order that his works would appear in Algerian bookshops.²⁹⁷ What, for many years, had been read as a Francophone Algerian literature was only now for the first time making its entry into an Algeria in which its authors had been born, and in Bey's case still lived.²⁹⁸ If the space depicted and imagined in these novels was now finally being read within and perhaps compared against the actual space of contemporary Algeria, the incorporation of questions surrounding previous reductive modes of reading would also emerge as a means of attenuating the dangers of reading that actual space as one which could recount the 'real' space of contemporary Algeria.

²⁹⁷ As it stands, three of Bachi's works have been published by Barzakh: *Les douze contes de minuit* in 2007, *La Kabéna* in 2012 and *Le dernier été d'un jeune homme* in 2013; see the catalogue entry for the author online: <<http://www.editions-barzakh.com/auteurs/salim-bachi>> [accessed: 28 May 2016].

²⁹⁸ Bachi moved to Paris in 1996 to study for a doctorate and has since remained there; Bey lives in Sidi Bel Abbès, a town located to the south of Oran, Algeria.

Section Two: *Urgence*, History, Myth

Chapter Two

Maïssa Bey: Recasting *urgence*, (re-)inscribing history

Le nouvelliste, lui, est un écrivain saisi. Saisi par le réel. D'une certaine manière, le rapport au réel est inversé. De prédateur quand il est romancier, il devient, nouvelliste, la proie du réel, sans le moindre signe précurseur.

– Catherine Lépront²⁹⁹

Maïssa Bey remained in Algeria throughout the 1990s, publishing her first novel, *Au commencement était la mer*, in 1996 in one of the first numbers of *Algérie Littérature/Action*, a journal which, as we discussed in Section One, published many previously unseen Algerian authors over the course of the 1990s.³⁰⁰ Since republished in France on four occasions, Bey's first novel was published in Algeria for the first time in 2012 by Barzakh.³⁰¹ This first novel establishes her work in a practice of using the space of the novel to fuse fiction, autobiography and history.³⁰² In a story ostensibly set during the violence of the 'décennie noire', the protagonist Nadia falls pregnant by Karim, with whom she has fallen in love and has been seeing secretly. In its most horrific scene, the novel charts how Nadia hides from her family as she aborts the foetus of her unborn child. Readings of the novel saw the aborted foetus as a symbol for an aborted or still-born Algerian nation and its descent into the violence of the 1990s.³⁰³ More broadly, the novel stages a stifling paternalistic society which is shown to determine the violent outcomes in the narrative.

²⁹⁹ Catherine Lépront, 'La proximité du réel: à propos de la nouvelle', in *La nouvelle hier et aujourd'hui*, ed. by Johnnie Gratton & Jean-Philippe Imbert (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1997), p. 271.

³⁰⁰ Bey's novel is published in the 5th number of *Algérie Littérature/Action*.

³⁰¹ Maïssa Bey, *Au commencement était la mer* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2012).

³⁰² Assia Djebar's *L'amour, la fantasia* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1985) is foundational in this sense of fusing genres of writing and returns throughout Bey's work.

³⁰³ See Claire Etcherelli, 'Postface', in *Au commencement était la mer* by Maïssa Bey (La Tour-d'Aigues: L'Aube, 2003 [1996]), pp. 153-55; see also, Lila Ibrahim-Ouali, 'Maïssa Bey: « des mots sous la cendre des jours »: *Au commencement était la mer*... et *Nouvelles d'Algérie*', *L'Esprit Créateur* 40, 2 (2000), pp. 75-85.

Initially a school teacher of French, Samia Benameur (Maïssa Bey is a pseudonym chosen by the author) came to writing aged forty six, driven by what she describes in an early interview as a need to ‘*se mettre au monde*’.³⁰⁴ It is in this sense of personal liberation, and writing on behalf of women in Algeria more generally, that Bey frames her decision to publish her first novel. Speaking of a ‘*nécessité impérieuse, d’urgence*’,³⁰⁵ the author also tells of a necessity to ‘*donner vraiment la parole aux mots, à tous les mots enfouis au fond de soi depuis si longtemps sans penser à autre chose qu’à rompre le silence et à affronter sa peur*’.³⁰⁶ The *urgence* of which Bey begins to speak in this interview seems to be one related to the necessary expression of words trapped within the writer’s own mind, but also one which captures the imperative to write on behalf of Algerian women. If this can be read as an *urgence* of representation (of re-presenting the repressed voice of Algerian women), it is not, as we learn when reading the multitude of women’s voices staged in Bey’s works, an *urgence* which seeks to represent Algerian women in a direct political way. Bey does not speak on behalf of Algerian women in general, but attempts in her works to put forward a complex mix of Algerian women’s voices which, inside Algeria, have been continually excluded from the dominant narrative of history and, outside, reduced to an image of the singular woman emanating from Algeria – what Djébar refers to in terms of a demand for the symbolic ‘*Algérie-femme*’.³⁰⁷ Later, noting the etymological root of *poesis* in the term creation, Bey speaks of her ‘*désir de donner libre corps à la capacité de poésie que chacun porte en soi*’.³⁰⁸ Bey’s idea of the essential democracy of poetry is one which shows *urgence* to be immanent to writing, where the need to write is seen not only alongside contemporary events, but as a difficult process of articulation and expression whereby the

³⁰⁴ Maïssa Bey and Martine Marzloff, *A Contre-silence* (Grigny: Parole de L’Aube, 1998), p. 29.

³⁰⁵ *A Contre-silence*, p. 29.

³⁰⁶ *A Contre-silence*, p. 29.

³⁰⁷ Assia Djébar, *Ces Voix qui m’assiègent* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), p. 224.

³⁰⁸ *A Contre-silence*, p. 36.

writer continually struggles to read and to articulate the world as something which revolves around and crucially emanates from the self.

While Bey plays down the dangers she faces as a woman writer, it is clear that to be both a woman and a writer was, during the 1990s, to become something of a target.³⁰⁹ If El Nossery has written of the text which becomes ‘aussi dangereux qu’une arme’, this should be understood less that the pen can be a literal counter to the weapon, more that writing would indeed become as dangerous as a weapon when such an act would attract the targeted violence of armed groups keen to silence writers at this time.³¹⁰ Since the State’s 1984 Code de la Famille, women’s rights in Algeria have been significantly degraded. Bey writes within the context of these repressive laws against women, coupled with the rising violence of the 1990s, but these do not fully determine her works. If emerging from within a particular context, *urgence* is ultimately re-oriented by this writer as an *urgence* of rewriting history, inclusive of all members of Algerian society, despite their gender. As Bey puts it: ‘C’est toute notre société, qui [...] est ébranlée aujourd’hui, plus de trente ans après l’indépendance, par la recherche d’une identité qu’elle ne saura trouver que si elle assume son passé, son histoire, toute son histoire.’³¹¹ The turn to history is made through Bey’s novels, which frequently fuse autobiography and fiction as part of a negotiation of the potential of the novel to testify to women’s multiple experiences and to change the direction of, in other words to recast, a dominant history written by men.

While Bey’s work can be viewed within the frame of what El Nossery calls ‘témoignage fictionnel’ during the ‘décennie noire’, her work can also be read to offer a critical reflection on the meaning of testimony in the context of contemporary Algerian writing.³¹² Looking first at how Bey establishes a *suspended* dialogue between two collections

³⁰⁹ Bey was also at the time a French teacher in a local school.

³¹⁰ See Névine El Nossery, ‘Quand le texte devient aussi dangereux qu’une arme’, in *Témoignages fictionnels au féminin*, pp. 21-46.

³¹¹ *A Contre-silence*, p. 43.

³¹² El Nossery, pp. 16-17.

of short stories, one published during and one after the end of the 1990s (*Nouvelles d'Algérie* and *Sous le jasmin la nuit*), we subsequently move to explore a broader shift in form in her post-2000 novels. While self-admittedly driven to writing later on in life by the events of the 'décennie noire', it is clear that Bey soon seeks to recast *urgence* in a self-conscious manner, orienting literature's critical gaze towards the history and symbolic violence upon which the foundations of the 'décennie noire' are built. In this sense, her novels can be read as exploring the boundaries and ultimately fusing the genres of historical and testimonial fiction. As Fisher writes of Bey's precursors, Djaout and Djébar, writing as a mode of survival is also about writing a corrective to a history upon which the present is constructed: 'écriture de l'urgence, mue par une pulsion mémorielle, d'une œuvre à l'autre [...] s'inscrit un dialogue dans l'écriture et se posent les termes d'une mise en question de la lecture de l'histoire.'³¹³ While Bey's first works might be seen more directly as emerging from the crisis years of the 'décennie noire', an *urgence* is established in their task of questioning the reading and writing of history. In the interview cited above, Bey continually returns to the importance of reading, her passion for reading literature and the way in which this informs her writing. The author underlines, 'l'écriture m'est devenue nécessaire. Presque aussi nécessaire que la lecture.'³¹⁴ As we show in what follows, if writing is vital, it never exceeds the necessity and importance of reading which is, moreover, posited here as a multi-layered process of self reading.

The short story: *Nouvelles d'Algérie* and *Sous le jasmin la nuit*

In the form of the short story, the two collections *Nouvelles d'Algérie* and *Sous le jasmin la nuit* offer a fluid and self-conscious interrogation of form and representation towards the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s, the point at which Algeria was transitioning from the

³¹³ Fisher, p. 273.

³¹⁴ *A Contre-silence*, p. 37.

violence of the 1990s to the relatively more peaceful 2000s. Here, Bey finds a form which instantly represents the already fragmented Algerian society with which she is faced during the ‘décennie noire’,³¹⁵ yet this same fragmentation also allows for an open-ended dialogue, where stories which the author will publish later can be read to intervene and reshape the previous collection in an act of reappraisal and rereading. As well as exploring how the author stages a suspension of literary reference, this first part of the chapter considers the extent to which Bey’s two collections vehicle a transition from a visible physical violence to one which is increasingly symbolic. In an interview with Rachid Mokhtari, Bey recounts having three options when coming to writing the *Nouvelles d’Algérie*. The first was to write in a journalistic style, the second was to turn to humour and the third, which she chose, was to ‘confère[r] à la réalité une dimension poétique’ whereby ‘la beauté du texte transcende l’événement.’³¹⁶ In what follows, we compare the representational strategies of these two collections, considering how, in their oscillation between the realist, referential mode and a more distant poetic or oneiric writing, the stories offer a self-reflexive meditation on the problems of writing and reading the 1990s.

The *Nouvelles d’Algérie* immediately place the reader in the play between reality and representation.³¹⁷ If, as is underlined by Lila Ibrahim-Ouali, the play on words in the title shows how ‘l’intention réaliste et informative sous-tend l’intention poétique’, it also offers a

³¹⁵ René Godenne’s notion of the ‘nouvelle-instant’ is cited in Ibrahim-Ouali, ‘Maïssa Bey’, p. 82. Such photographic imagery of the short story, reminiscent of the Barthesian *haiku* – the ‘thatness’ or ‘ité’ of the photographic moment – is also directly present in the work of another Algerian *nouvelliste*, Chawki Amari. In the first story of his collection, *De bonnes nouvelles d’Algérie* (Paris: Baleine, 1998), the author simultaneously plays with the act of taking a photograph and of pulling the trigger of a gun, for instance. This photographic realism of the *nouvelle* is also noted by Jacques Chevrier in a special number on the short story, ‘De Boccace a Tchicaya U Tam’si’, *Notre Librairie* 111 (1992), p. 7. On the connection between photography and the *haiku*, see Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du roman (I et II). Cours et séminaires au Collège de France (1978-1979 et 1979-1980)* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), pp. 53-69.

³¹⁶ Maïssa Bey and Rachid Mokhtari, ‘Maïssa Bey: «J’écris pour éviter les hurlements»’, in *La Graphie de l’horreur: essai sur la littérature algérienne (1990-2000)* (Algiers: Chihab, 2002), p. 149.

³¹⁷ Maïssa Bey, *Nouvelles d’Algérie* (La Tour-d’Aigues: L’Aube, 2011 [1998]). This collection was initially published by Grasset & Fasquelle in 1998; references are made to the 2011 re-edition, henceforth parenthetically. Other notable collections of short stories have employed this same play, include recent multi-authored collections *Nouvelles d’Algérie* (Algiers: Apic; Paris: Magellan & Cie, 2009), *Des nouvelles d’Algérie 1974-2004*, ed. by Christiane Chaulet-Achour (Paris: Métailié, 2005) and former Algerian journalist Chawki Amari’s above-mentioned collection, *De bonnes nouvelles d’Algérie*, also published in 1998.

critical commentary on the supposed function of the Algerian writer during the 1990s to produce a literature through which a particular reality can be read. The *Nouvelles d'Algérie* are both 'short stories' and 'news', which offer, without even the need to open the text, a comment on the problem of writing contemporary Algeria in literature. The collection of ten stories begins with a short preface from the author which underlines the incentive for writing during the time of the civil unrest. Bey refers to this work as '[t]extes écrits dans l'urgence de dire' and as part of a difficult experience of fighting a 'tentation du silence' in the face of fear (p. 11). And, in the face of a history that so often forgets the name, the individual, Bey notes, in addition to the familiarity she feels with the characters she has created, that 'toute ressemblance avec des personnages ayant existé ou existants *n'est pas fortuite*.' (p. 12, my emphasis) Her text thus roots itself in the everyday, the so-called 'retour du réel et du récit', announced by Bonn,³¹⁸ her 'mots' and, as we will see, 'paroles' emerging from the 'quotidien de moins en moins supportable' as a 'pulsation de la mémoire de tout un peuple que l'on voudrait réduire au silence.' (p. 13)

Each of the ten stories give the reader a glimpse into the life of a female narrator or protagonist and those around her. The first story 'Le cri' opens the collection in a third-person account of the day a little girl's father is taken in unclear circumstances.³¹⁹ With a sustained 'long cri sauvage' (p. 15), which follows the girl throughout the story and which is subsequently transferred to a broader omnipresent 'cri', engulfing the whole collection, the story maintains a referential ambiguity between the history of the Algerian War of Independence and of the more recent events of the 'décennie noire': Bey's own father, whom she knew only as a young girl, was taken and killed by the French army during the War of Independence. The opening story is thus one that frames the collection as slippery – between history, autobiography and fiction – and one which announces an incessant

³¹⁸ Charles Bonn, *Anthologie de la littérature algérienne* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1990), p. 211.

³¹⁹ 'Le cri' is first published in *Algérie Littérature/Action* 9 (1997), pp. 131-32.

noise and feeling of pain, whose origin is unknown: '[c]'est dans la tête. Dans son corps. C'est quelque chose qui s'écoule d'elle [...] Quelque chose qui la quitte. Et cela fait un vide.' (p. 20) Ending with the image of a sustained anxiety, fear and memory blanks, Bey's first story might be read as a testimony both of a personal experience during the War of Independence and of the contemporary 'disappearances' that had become increasingly common during the 1990s.³²⁰ By layering these representations of violence on top of each other and so drawing the reader's attention to a referential instability, Bey's text manages to escape from the framework which would reduce her works to the function of describing an inherently violent Algeria. The 'cri' might also function as a sign of the anamnesis the collection as a whole seeks to perform. As Dominique Le Boucher writes, the 'cri' is not solely an act of defiance in refusing the imposed silence of dominant history, it is a founding act of speech which announces the birth of a 'parole' within the stories and, in turn, is a metaphor for the birth of women's voices in this collection.³²¹

Other stories in the collection oscillate from focusing on a husband killed by Islamists because he worked for the State ('Dans le silence d'un matin'), to giving a glimpse into the eyes of the terrorist (« Croire, obéir, combattre »). In 'Sofiane B., vingt ans', the destructive weight of a paternalist society is staged through the story of the young man who was killed after joining the Islamist *maquis*. The story, told by Sofiane's aunt, recalls her encounters with the family and their shock at seeing their son described in the press as a dangerous terrorist, when their memories are of a sensitive, thoughtful and caring young man. Leaving behind his twin sister, the two become symbolic of an Algeria itself suffering a split at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. In a more literal way, 'Sofiane B.'

³²⁰ Photographer Omar D. has recently exhibited and published a project on the disappeared of the 'décennie noire', entitled *Devoir de mémoire = a biography of disappearance, Algeria 1992-* (London: Autograph ABP, 2007). Another recent fictional account of 'disparition' which offers an over-layering of histories is to be found in Djébar's *La disparition de la langue française*. There are also frequent references to disappearance in Bachi and Ayyoub's works.

³²¹ Dominique Le Boucher, 'Un corps qui dance', in Maïssa Bey and Martine Marzloff, *A Contre-silence* (Grigny: Parole de L'Aube, 1998), pp. 98-101.

also begins to offer a representation of the vulnerable male and the destructiveness of patriarchal society which narrowly prescribes gender roles within Algeria.

Moving from graphic realist descriptions of violence ('Corps indicible') to more dream-like sequences in the stories 'La Marieuse' and 'Quand il n'est pas là, elle danse', the collection sits uncomfortably within a prescribed 'champ' of 'écriture de l'urgence', as its representational mode begins to shift to more layered sequences that will characterise Bey's second collection of short stories, *Sous le jasmin la nuit*. The final stories of the collection progressively move away from realist accounts of violence. After the sixth story, 'Corps indicible', which describes the 'unspeakable' and 'unwritable' of a tortured woman's body, the collection moves to 'Et si on parlait d'autre chose', which underlines the stagnant nature of words which describe the horror of violence as they become dangerously subsumed into the banal everyday 'reality' of an order which both denies the existence of a chaos and which could be seen to have given rise to it in the first place:

Elle pensait que les mots si souvent répétés ne servent qu'à essayer de donner un semblant d'ordre à une réalité trop chaotique, et qu'ils s'efforcent ainsi de garder toute leur lucidité pour essayer de comprendre, de prendre du recul, en parler, au moins pour ne pas perdre pied, et par là même, se convaincre que cela existe vraiment. (p. 114)

Henceforth, Bey actively questions the capacity of words to represent, which is perhaps in turn reflective of a questioning of the ability of a realist literature to portray what is, what seems, so far from reality understood in its everyday form.³²² Having anguished over the question of how to continue in the context of the violence of the 1990s, how not to feel guilt, 'comment faire front contre la terreur...', the story repeats the ghostly words of a former teacher and poet assassinated, 'qui cherchait des mots sous la cendre des jours', that come into the mind of the protagonist, Hanya. Hanya remembers the assassinated poet's

³²² In Slavoj Žižek's reading, living in a world where reality is so often constructed, the traumatic confrontation with the real can in fact mean experiencing that real as a 'nightmarish apparition', as an 'unreal spectre'. See: 'Passions of the real, Passions of semblance' in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 19.

words: ‘Donner la parole aux mots, disait-il, et faire comme si demain était possible.’ (p. 125) It is the ‘parole’ – beyond the mere ‘mot’ – that now takes centre stage in Bey’s pursuit of an adequate form of representing the violence of the 1990s, while not falling into the trap of the prescribed or pre-constructed thematic of *urgence*. As Ibrahim-Ouali observes, while within the context of the 1990s, ‘le rôle des mots reste essentiel’, it is the ‘parole’ of words which will enable the protagonist to imagine a freedom of expression beyond the static nature of words.³²³

If the stories of *Nouvelles d’Algérie* were framed as more direct ‘urgent’ depictions of people living in the present moment of violence, *Sous le jasmin la nuit*, which was published six years later, could be said to propose a movement to potentially more peaceful futures.³²⁴ However, *Sous le jasmin la nuit* also explores the possibility of writing gendered violence beneath the surface. Taken together, the second collection complicates the reader’s relationship with the first, as the stories seem to act back staging Bey’s metaphor of ‘mots’ to ‘parole’ across the two collections. Bey’s second collection is not a simple exit from *urgence* – what Ana Soler describes as a flight from ‘une écriture marquée par l’urgence de dire’ – but an attempt to look back, to reread and to imagine a dialogue with the previous stories.³²⁵ In this regard, Bey also highlights the particular sociability of the short story form, as it can be physically moved around, published in different collections, but also very often functions intertextually within the space of the author’s own work, whereby certain characters reappear and where themes repeat themselves in new stories.³²⁶

³²³ Ibrahim-Ouali, ‘Maïssa Bey’, p. 84.

³²⁴ *Sous le jasmin la nuit* is published in 2004 in France by L’Aube and in Algeria by Barzakh. References are made to the French edition of the text, henceforth parenthetically.

³²⁵ Ana Soler, ‘La pratique fictionnelle de Maïssa Bey: approche des techniques narratives de *Sous le jasmin la nuit*’, *Horizons maghrébains* 52 (2005), p. 102.

³²⁶ The ‘sociability’ of the short story, its ‘gregarious’ nature, has been discussed in relation to Dib’s short story writing during the Algerian War. Andy Stafford has looked at the title story of Dib’s 1966 collection *Le Talisman* in relation to both his shift from the realist novel to a mythological, mystical writing and the way in which the sociable form of the short story has allowed Dib to write both a story of horror, but also to come

While each short story in *Sous le jasmin la nuit* revolves around a female character, who each expresses her own voice in the context of a paternalism encircling her, the narrative voice also incorporates the voice of men. Increasingly written in the third-person, these stories are less easily attributed a simple testimonial function. For instance, the title story presents a split third-person account of the thoughts of a couple waking up from a night's sleep. Alternating between the male and female perspectives, each paragraph gives us further access, via a point-of-view narrative, into the thoughts of each character; the man remains nameless, and the woman is named as Maya. As he assumes she sleeps, the first paragraph recounts his thoughts as he awakes: 'Penché sur elle, il la regarde dormir. Lèvres entrouvertes, souffle léger, paupières closes refermées sur des visions, des rêves qui l'excluent, il ne peut pas en douter. [...] Il vient de la posséder. De la prendre. De la pénétrer. Apparemment.' (p. 9) After watching her dream for the remainder of the paragraph, the man's perspective is then immediately countered by the woman's thoughts in the following paragraph: 'Très vite, sous ce regard posé sur elle, elle a fait semblant de dormir. Elle contrôle sa respiration, en ralentit le rythme, souffle lent, puis régulier, yeux scellés, détente de tout le corps, relâchement progressif, jusqu'à feindre l'abandon du sommeil.' (pp. 10-11)

In the alternation between the two perspectives, the narrator of this first story creates a conversation between the two characters where neither voice is heard by the other. As the story progresses, we discover that its title, and that of the collection, comes from a 'chanson mystérieuse et douce' (p. 13). As he goes about his everyday business of leaving the house, she continues in her dream-like sequences, singing: '[r]etrouver les paroles de cet air qui chante en elle *sous le jasmin la nuit*' (p. 13). Hearing him call her name as he leaves the house, Maya sings, drowning out his voice: 'Mettre en mots ce qui s'impatiente en elle,

up with a strategy of dealing with that horror. See Andy Stafford, '« Stayin' Alive »: mythe et sociabilité de la nouvelle dans « Le talisman » de Mohammed Dib', *Recherches et Travaux* 81 (2012), pp. 169-84.

cette incroyable douceur qui alanguit ses gestes maintenant qu'elle est seule. La traversée du jour propice aux attentes, aux rêves mirages accourus à présent.' (p. 14) The 'parole', announced in the previous set of short stories is thus, in part at least, discovered beyond the threshold of a symbolic 'jasmin', which could either represent love and sensuality, but perhaps also a scent of revolution, an incomplete revolution that constantly hovers between the 'mot' and the 'parole'.³²⁷ Bey's story performs a broader dialogue, suspending the reader between both sets of short stories where the woman's freedom is articulated in the performance of song (the 'parole'). If the 'mot' represents the violent imposition of language, the 'parole' and the movement between the 'mot' and the 'parole' embodies a movement to free the female protagonist from the stifling presence of multiple repressive languages, imposed from above. In a final sequence which pulls the reader back to the violence of the 'décennie norie', Maya leaves the house and walks in the street. Yet it is in an acutely oneiric sequence that we are presented with a description of the blood which covers the walls of the streets outside, the vision of a quite unreal reality which prises open the silences that surround the 1990s more generally:

Aveugle, égarée, elle avance dans un dédale de rues [...] Elle contourne d'immenses bûchers traverse les saisons elle avance ne se retourne pas guidée par les couleurs qui barrent son horizon. Le rouge est fantasque. Il sinue sous ses pieds et son incandescence traverse sa chair, blessure nécessaire pour qu'elle puisse s'orienter. [...] Elle tremble elle appelle elle n'entend que l'écho de ce long hurlement qui sort d'elle et se fracasse contre nos silences. (pp. 20-21)

What was once describable has moved into the realm of the unreal, seemingly too traumatic to depict. Returning to his perspective on her, the final paragraph confirms that Maya is dreaming: '[e]lle semble profondément endormie. Totalement immergée.' (p. 21)

³²⁷ Symbolic references include the 'Jasmin Revolutions' in Tunisia – both for the rise and recent fall of Ben Ali – also where men wear Jasmine behind their left ear to indicate that they are single; 'jasmin', deriving from the Arabic form, 'yasmin', meaning a gift from God. There is also a Southern Asian botanical genus of jasmin called 'night jasmin' whose flowers bloom at night. See: "jasmine | jasmin | jessamine | jessamin, n.", in *OED Online*. The 'nuit' of course also symbolises the violence lurking beneath the surface of this collection. <<http://0-www.oed.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/Entry/100834?redirectedFrom=jasmin>> [accessed 16 Jun. 2013]

Yet the dream exists in the state of being awake, as the realist narrative becomes incapable of representing the reality of the violence in its horror.³²⁸

In the title story, violence emerges through symbols, metaphor and allusion, where the ‘mots’ of the 1990s are overlaid with a ‘parole’. As we move through the collection, this layered way of writing the 1990s, through the metaphor of ‘mots’ to ‘parole’ continues. In ‘Improvisation’, a young actress takes to the stage giving a remarkable monologue which challenges the essentialising and sexist gaze of a metropolitan French audience. The actress recounts her reasons for being on stage in a sporadic non-linear manner so as to unsettle her audience, as well as the reader. As the title of the story suggests, she has not prepared for the audition. Invoking the figures of Phèdre and Antigone, the protagonist announces the irony of these highly symbolic women who have ‘histoires’ but are nevertheless absent from history:

[C]e ne sont que des histoires de femmes [...] quand les femmes prennent la parole, elles ne sont pas prêtes à la rendre. La preuve... on dit bien des femmes à histoires. Est-ce parce que des hommes n’ont pas d’histoire? Ou seulement parce que ce sont eux qui font l’Histoire, avec un grand H? (p. 52)

In a comment perhaps aimed at people’s unwillingness to challenge official scripted history, the monologue closes with, ‘il suffit de mettre le masque, de placer sa voix et tout le monde y croit.’ (p. 59) This wearing of the mask, the placement of one’s voice and the fact of being believed is an embodiment of the necessity of performance in liberating women’s voices, but it is also a warning of how performance always in some ways constructs and obscures realities from an audience.

‘Sur une virgule’, which is republished in this collection after initially being published in 1998,³²⁹ describes the narrator Sarah’s return to the diaries of Marie, a European settler whose words recount the final days of the War of Independence. The

³²⁸ Žižek, ‘Passions of the real, Passions of semblance’, p. 19.

³²⁹ As part of the collection, *2000 ans d’Algérie* (Biarritz: Seguiet, 1998).

story of Marie is inscribed in the present story of the life of the young Algerian protagonist, as she reads and identifies with Marie. In a narrative which breaks down the simple binaries between Algerian and settler, the two figures are made the victims of a violence which is both particular and extends beyond their historical time. Ending suddenly ‘sur une virgule’, the story of Marie is violently cut off and remains incomplete. In an overwritten multidirectional image, Sarah pursues the history of her country through Marie’s diaries, living vicariously through the same space (Sarah now occupies Marie’s bedroom). While nothing really seems to have changed, it is in the figure of ‘le piano [...] maintenant désaccordé’ that the violence, albeit in subtle ways, emerges (p. 87). In a further image of the movement from ‘mot’ to ‘parole’, Sarah announces, ‘[j]e vais, moi aussi, quitter ma maison natale. Pour une nouvelle vie. Mais j’emmènerai le cahier avec moi.’ (p. 90) By refusing to leave the diary behind, Sarah recognises the power of her own agency to write the future, as she moves away from the oppressive spaces around her and picks up the past as if it were a moveable object, to be continued and written in her own image.

Continuing the theme of overwriting and the reverse memory palimpsest, discussed briefly in the General Introduction, ‘Nuit et Silence’ is a story which seems to deliberately create slippage between the histories of the War of Independence and the violence of the 1990s. If, with the presence of torture, rape and narratives of treason within the *maquis*, Maria Cristina Batalha doesn’t question the short story’s setting of the War of Independence, Adbelmajid Kaouah takes the context to be ‘les années les plus horribles du terrorisme intégriste.’³³⁰ While the end of the story is dated ‘Alger, janvier 2000’, it is possible that the story is presented as an account (a delayed diary entry). As we signalled in Section One, it was common to read the 1990s through the lens of the War of Independence. However, such interference is perhaps deliberately staged by Bey as a means

³³⁰ See, Maria Cristina Batalha, ‘Maïssa Bey: histoires de vie’, *Synergies Brésil* 10 (2012), p. 94; see also, Adbelmajid Kaouah’s preamble to an interview with Bey, ‘Maïssa Bey: la parole conquise’, *Notre Librairie* 155-156 (2004), pp. 66-79.

of drawing closer attention both to the question of the origins of Algerian violence, but also, as we have seen, the possibility of reductive or recidivist readings of the 1990s, where Algerian history is viewed solely through its violent moments. In the final story of this collection, 'La petite fille de la cité sans nom', we are returned to the at once real and symbolic figure of the absent father. In a story which could be seen to close the opening 'cri' of the *Nouvelles d'Algérie* which announced the disappearance of the father, a young girl wanders in a forest and dreams of 'un père plus grand que les arbres là-bas, plus solide encore, avec des milliers de racines pour s'enfoncer dans la terre et ne jamais être emporté.' (pp. 157-8) In following 'le chemin des rêves', passing to 'l'autre côté de son rêve', the young girl discovers a tree whose branches spread high into the sky above. If the tree is representative of the narrator or the author's own father, it is also a metaphor of the living and breathing nation, which spreads and sheds its branches, embodying a continual movement between what Said names the filiative and the affiliative, between which is captured, *suspended*, the 'critical consciousness' of Bey's practice of reading and writing contemporary Algeria.³³¹

If, in her first novel and collection of short stories, Bey can be said to be 'saisi par le réel', the author makes an interesting turn away from realism during the early 2000s, moving into a more detached metaphorical mode that would overwrite the violence of the 1990s and begin to push the reader to think critically about how that violence came about as both literal, but also gendered and as a result of a set of pre-existing readings of Algerian society. On an individual level, the short story slips and slides, expressing an 'esprit vagabond',³³² yet it can also be collectively recast in order to perform a social or dialogical function, looking back as a means of gaining a better understanding, before moving on. By shifting from the fixed 'mot' to the more discursive 'parole', Bey's work dialogues not only

³³¹ Said, 'Introduction: Secular Criticism'.

³³² Chevrier, p. 7.

with itself, but crucially with a stultified historical narrative it seeks to challenge and ultimately to *unwrite*. If, on the one hand, such a metaphor can offer the potential of a challenge to the dominant narratives of publishers, critics and the State, on the other hand, the metaphor, as a *suspended* thing, never challenges in a simple or stable way, continually calling on the reader to complete what seem to be staged as two orders of language.³³³ The importance of reading, and reading for Bey as previous to writing, can be reaffirmed here. If Soler speaks of the ‘mise en relief de l’acte de l’écriture et, par la même, de l’instance narrative’, the second collection can perhaps be said to perform a rereading of the first.³³⁴ If to read is to write, then to write is first of all to read and, crucially, to begin a process of rereading.³³⁵

The Novels: Rewriting contemporary Algerian history

After 2000, Bey published a series of novels, as well as a number of essays and ‘récits’.³³⁶ The first of these novels, published in 2001, doesn’t simply move away from a literature that bears witness to the 1990s, so much as take the figure of the witness and internalise this within the narrative which pursues a broader and pluralised history of Algerian women. If the short stories offered Bey a certain level of immediacy in relation to the violence of the 1990s, the form of the novel seemingly has the ability to take a step back, adapting its form to the multiple voices staged within its pages. In what follows, we explore how Bey’s

³³³ Roland Barthes speaks of myth in this way in his essay ‘Le mythe, aujourd’hui’ published at the end of *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), pp. 179-233; however, Bey’s almost musical metaphor of the ‘mot’ to ‘parole’ has the advantage of retaining a literal image of the voice, in particular the singing voice of a woman, which brings a static language to life in new ways. In this way, the metaphor is perhaps deliberately gendered.

³³⁴ Soler, p. 97.

³³⁵ Hafid Gafaïti underlines this point in relation to Rachid Boudjedra’s *La pluie*: ‘Ecrire c’est lire pour écrire, pour lire de nouveau’. See Gafaïti’s *Les Femmes dans le roman algérien: histoire, discours et texte* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996), p. 306.

³³⁶ *Entendez-vous dans les montagnes*, co-published by Barzakh and L’Aube in 2002 is a ‘récit’ which tells the story of a woman who travels to France to discover the traces of her dead father; *Peirre, Sang, Papier ou Cendre* (La Tour-d’Aigues: L’Aube/Algiers: Barzakh, 2008), adapted from a play performed in Reims in 2008, is a response to a since repealed article the French law passed in 2005 which required schools to teach the positive aspects of colonialism; *L’une et l’autre* is an autobiographical essay, published in 2009 by L’Aube and in 2010 by Barzakh. After 2013, Bey publishes a number of short pieces of theatre with the publishing house she co-founded, Chèvre-feuille étoilée.

novels take a historical turn to the period between 1962 and 1988 and subsequently to the period after the election of Bouteflika in 1999. As we have noted, in the run-up to the 1990s, Algeria had suffered from what Alison Rice calls a ‘lack of history’, not in the sense that people were not talking or writing about history, but rather in the way that history had effectively been written from scratch after independence in 1962. The ‘travail métaphorique’, of which Cherki writes, is taken by Rice and transferred to the context of Bey’s *Cette fille-là*.³³⁷ Perhaps especially given that Bey was herself born into this post-independence generation, this period of history is central to her series of novels which seemingly work to *unwrite* so as to collapse the authorised, from scratch, version of post-independence history between 1962 and the start of the 1990s and recast the past through the ordinary voices of Algerians who lived through that time. The novels, like much post-independence literature written in French, also demonstrate how the complexity of the colonial legacy cannot simply be written out of history.

Cette fille-là

Set in an old house, built during colonisation, described by what it is not, as ‘[n]i maison de retraite, ni asile, ni hospice’ (p. 16), the principal narrator Malika gathers the ‘témoignages’ of the eight women living there: Aïcha, Yamina, M’a Zahra, Fatima, Kheïra, M’barka, Badra and Houriya. *Cette fille-là* is a novel which internalises the process of historical witness and in so doing encourages the reader to question their relationship to the multiple tellers of the story before them. Faouzia Bendjelid reads the novel as an almost direct response to ‘une écriture du témoignage’ of the 1990s, yet increasingly removed from the ideological positioning of writers during the period of the 1990s, placing Bey within the group of writers described by Rachid Mokhtari as the ‘nouveau souffle’ of Algerian

³³⁷ Maïssa Bey, *Cette fille-là* (La Tour-d’Aigues: L’Aube, 2001). References are henceforth made parenthetically. Rice, p. 173; see also, Cherki, p. 179.

literature.³³⁸ Rice describes how the novel gives voice to a number of women, principally by naming both their bodies and their experiences of colonialism and independence. The importance of going back in time and discovering these distinct voices is, for Rice, about a need to imagine Algerian women outside a fixed metaphor of nation and in turn to give them a stake to make them an ‘active agent of the nation’ which Bey’s novel seeks to map out anew.³³⁹ Consequently, Rice suggests that the non-space of the ‘[n]i maison de retraite, ni asile, ni hospice’ (p. 16), becomes a destabilised figure for the Algerian nation itself.³⁴⁰ In fact, Malika writes a novel within a novel, as she gathers the stories of the eight women, through which Malika discovers and writes her own story, which will double as the story of a remade Algerian nation. As Malika herself recounts: ‘Je suis l’héritière d’une histoire que je dois sans cesse inventer.’ (p. 64) As Rice underlines, this continual reinvention of the national narrative, through the collected voices of a number of Algerian women, is not simply a direct challenge to State hegemony, but to the myth of the Algerian woman imagined as a metaphor for the nation.³⁴¹

Abandoned as a baby, Malika’s light hair and blue eyes betray her mixed heritage. She believes she is the daughter of an Algerian prostitute and a French soldier and hence fits well alongside the canonical figure of Nedjma, describing her birth as the result of ‘les spasmes éjaculatoires de l’œuvre civilisatrice’ (p. 65); indeed Malika imagines having been named Nedjma, as she describes a birthmark in the shape of a star on her ankle.³⁴² If this image strikes a note with that of the symbolic stillborn child of independence appearing in Bey’s first novel, it moves beyond a fixed symbol as Malika lives and pursues the writing of her own novel, made up of the multiple and varied stories of the eight women living within the indeterminate home.

³³⁸ Faouzia Bendjelid, ‘Enonciation des formes romanesques dans *Cette fille-là* de Maïssa Bey’, *Synergies Algérie* 5 (2009), p. 228.

³³⁹ Rice, p. 183, citing Anne Donadey and Françoise Lionnet.

³⁴⁰ Rice, p. 166.

³⁴¹ Rice, p. 183.

³⁴² Kateb Yacine, *Nedjma* (Paris: Seuil, 1956).

In a novel where naming, or the absence of naming, is crucial – the novel's title does not name the narrator – one of the eight women, Aïcha, tells of the pursuit of her real name, having been given the name Jeanne after some confusion at the office of the 'état civil'; the French official, apparently unable to distinguish what her parents wanted to call her, resorted to a French name. Another of the women, Yamina, tells of how she was shamed after an affair with a man, but claims ultimately to have realised the constructed nature of her womanhood: 'c'est dans le regard d'un homme [...] qu'un jour j'ai compris que j'étais devenue femme.' (p. 90) Fatima tells of a violent and oppressive father, while M'barka tells of her long journey north from southern Africa, through Niger. Houriya's story is one of forbidden love with a Frenchman named Jean, who had been in Algeria fighting on the side of the French during the War of Independence. Throughout, Malika constantly attempts to locate her own detached self within the stories of the women she meets. However, she soon realises that her own identity is far from stable. She is pursued by a double of her self, which emerges from within and is named M'laïkia. This second figure is perhaps one which embodies the writer herself, placing her story alongside those of the eight women: 'L'autre, M'laïkia. Celle qui me poursuit. Qui voudrait être moi. Mais je sais que l'écho n'est qu'un leurre, je sais bien qu'elle est là. En moi. Depuis si longtemps prisonnière. Comment la faire exister?' (p. 157) The fact of M'laïkia's imprisonment perhaps reinforces the idea that she is an autobiographical figure for the author, lurking beneath the surface of these stories, whose voice is trying to escape.

If Malika writes a novel about these women's experiences, we begin to see how the narrator-writer must also negotiate the writing of her own self through the experiences of these women, discovering her own complex history through her conversations, through the testimonies she gathers for her text. Malika is no longer merely a product of her (illegitimate) conception and birth as writing frees her hidden self. Writing has the power to remake Malika into M'laïkia, for one to emerge out of the other, constructed through and

beyond the particular stories of the eight women she meets in the novel. M'laïkia describes her body coming undone, floating into the night and consuming itself:

Mon corps se dénoue, et mes pieds s'envolent, esquissent des pas, dessinent d'étranges figures sur la terre [...] personne ne peut, personne ne doit me retenir, mon nom est M'laïkia, j'appartiens à la nuit et j'aiguisé mon regard au rougeoiement des braises avivées par mon souffle. Juste avant de me consumer. (p. 239)

Bey's novel pluralises our understanding of Algerian history and identity. By removing the witness from the limits of the 1990s and by creating an aesthetic form where multiple fictional testimonies come to shape what is written as history, Bey shows how history has been and could be written. In this way, alongside the placement of a more unstable autobiographical presence in the novel, the text articulates its challenge to the reductive linear and teleological narratives of national history by staging the necessarily fragmented state of post-independence history in Algeria.³⁴³ Bey's novel could be seen to begin a work of history, but also to subvert the 'authority' of history and of the written word over the spoken word – the historian becomes an interviewer, a listener. But the novel also stages the effects of this process, where the historian often becomes what Rahal calls the 'last recipient' of narratives which will have an inevitable impact on their lives.³⁴⁴ Malika's transformation is representative of the transformative effect personal, fractured and often violent narratives of the past can exert over those who write history; it also encourages the reader to think about the possibility of writing a less biased, more open and plural account of the past. History, understood as an objective dispassionate account of the past, is clearly therefore questioned both at the level of how it has been written and how it might be written and rewritten in the future.

³⁴³ There are clear intertextual links with Assia Djebar's work, especially *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Les Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1980).

³⁴⁴ Rahal, 'Fused Together and Torn Apart', p. 146.

Surtout ne retourne pas

On 21 May 2003, an earthquake struck the northern coast of Algeria. The epicentre was in Boumerdès, about forty miles east of the capital Algiers. Over 2,000 people were reported to have been killed and there was significant damage to buildings in Boumerdès and the surrounding area. An already beleaguered president Bouteflika, whose reputation was still suffering from the highly questionable elections of 1999, the aftermath of the floods of Bab El Oued in 2001 and who was presiding over an economic downturn, travelled to Boumerdès only to have his car attacked by protesters. The first buildings to collapse had not been older buildings built during the French colonial period, but those constructed after independence in 1962. Symbolic of the crumbling post-independence Algeria, and of the poor record and corrupt practices of the Algerian State, there was significant public anger in the wake of the events.³⁴⁵

Published in 2005, and dedicated to the memory of the victims of the earthquake, *Surtout ne retourne pas* is a novel which tells of the journey of a young girl and narrator, Amina, who sets off from home to help in one of the numerous camps set up for those who had lost their homes after the disaster.³⁴⁶ As she abandons her home, without leaving a note for her family, Amina recalls the earthquake in a style reminiscent of the more oneiric scenes of *Sous le jasmin la nuit*. First describing the fragmented parts of the town, '[h]orizon barré de poutres de fer et de bloc de béton aux arêtes tranchantes. Partout où se porte mon regard ce ne sont que plaies, béances' (p. 18), Amina moves to describe the damaged land as a rupture affecting her whole body:

Surgi du centre même de la terre, un fragment de lumière en fusion se détache. Il vient se ficher à l'intérieur de moi. Il me transperce. D'un bout à l'autre. Provenant des tréfonds de mon être, une immense clameur fuse. Elle rebondit en échos, d'abord très proches, fracassants, puis, peu à peu,

³⁴⁵ See Evans & Phillips, p. 273.

³⁴⁶ Maïssa Bey, *Surtout ne retourne pas* (La Tour-d'Aigues: L'Aube, 2006/Algiers: Barzakh, 2005); references are henceforth made parenthetically to the French edition.

lointains, de plus en plus lointains, enrobé de silence. Elle revient à moi. M'enveloppe. M'aspire vers un trou sans fond. Un vide tout blanc. Tout noir. Je ne sais pas. Je ne sais pas.

As the land shakes further, in an aftershock to the earthquake, it does so as an 'animal monstrueux', 'une seconde fois. Comme pour s'ébrouer ou se débarrasser du poids d'une humanité trop pesante.' (p. 28)

Naïma Bayhou has underlined that what is perhaps most interesting about this novel is the way in which it detaches its main character and the women she encounters from their previous lives, presenting them with lives they do not recognise as their own.³⁴⁷ The extreme rupture of the earthquake, which gives rise to this trauma and amnesia, undoubtedly carries its own symbolic weight, as Amina's pursuit of witness encases a number of other possible points of reference, linked to the War of Independence, the violence of the 1990s or to the government's policies in the wake of the violence. If, on the face of it, she flees home to help the victims of the earthquake, she also flees the overbearing paternalism embodied in the father and his fiancé. *Surtout ne retourne pas* could also be read as a metaphor for a society's unwillingness to look back at the immediate past of the 'décennie noire', where the official response had been amnesty and amnesia.³⁴⁸

As Amina enters the town where the camp is located, there are echoes of '*Mektoub. C'était écrit*', as residents look through the rubble and resign themselves to the seemingly pre-written nature of the tragedy. This is followed by a voice (italicised in the text), which appears throughout the novel, announcing: '*Je ne sais pas ce qui est réel et ce qui ne l'est pas, ce qui est lisible et ce qui ne l'est pas.*' (p. 60) The reality Amina knew is suspended as she enters the camp and meets a number of women living in the tents and who have taken it upon themselves to manage and organise the space, 'comme si elles avaient toujours vécu dans la même précarité, dans les mêmes conditions.' (p. 70) Many of these women attempt to

³⁴⁷ Naïma Bayhou, 'Conquête de soi et mythologie', in *Littérature algérienne contemporaine et actualité des symboles culturels*, ed. by Yamilé Ghebalou-Haraoui (Algiers: Hibr Editions, 2010), p. 102.

³⁴⁸ The words '*surtout ne retourne pas*' also appears in *Sous le jasmin la nuit* (pp. 20-21) and *Cette fille-là* (p. 45).

recall their pasts, but their memories are full of gaps. In the case of one woman, Nadia, the narrator describes a ‘fardeau trop lourd à porter, qui peuple ses nuits de cauchemars et assombrit ses jours.’ (p. 105) Another character, Nono, also traumatised by the earthquake, has become obsessed with counting the numbers of dead and disappeared and is incandescent about the rounding up of numbers with the term ‘environ’: ‘Environ 55 000 morts ou disparus! Pas 54 998 ou 55 002! Une vie, deux vies, dix vies, des centaines de vies, c’est rien, c’est rien pour eux!’ (p. 118)³⁴⁹ In a seeming attempt to re-write her identity, Amina changes her name to Wahida, pretends her parents have died in the disaster and decides to live under the care of her ‘grandmother’, another resident of the camp, Dadda Aïcha.³⁵⁰ There is also a presence of foreigners in the camps who have come to the aid of the victims during the ‘situation d’urgence’ – psychologists treat the so-called ‘sinistrés’, traumatised children – politicians and journalists are closely protected by police as a ‘décennie d’exactions’ looms over the event of the earthquake (p. 89). Hence, the ‘décennie noire’ is figured as a diegetic traumatic history and as the symbolic violent weight under which the land shook and these references are more broadly placed with a ‘situation d’urgence’, representing the response of the State, but also foreign onlookers, aid workers and the media.

If, on the one hand, the novel writes its women characters as the saviours of the land after it has been destroyed by patriarchal violence, it also seems to deliberately thwart the possibility of an allegorical reading, where the earthquake becomes a rendering of the rupture and aftermath of the 1990s. The fact that the ‘décennie noire’ is itself referred to within the novel (‘décennie d’exactions’) complicates the possibility of allegory, drawing attention to the problem of reading and writing the 1990s more generally. As in *Cette fille-là*,

³⁴⁹ The numbers he cites refer to the Armenian earthquake of 1988; Nono is obsessed not just with the Algerian events, but with seismic activity all over the world.

³⁵⁰ Amina is keen that the name change is official; there is a sense of relief when one of the other residents of the camp is able to have the documents signed off. Alison Rice comments with regard to the name change in *Cette fille-là*, that this is about reclaiming an identity as a woman. See Rice, p. 185.

narrative tropes are pulled apart, as, for instance, the land removed from its symbolic equivalence to the nation. History, in other words, is a story placed on top of the land, rather than something inextricably tied to it. Neat allegories of nation are unsettled as the reader is forced to return to and to reread the novel, whose instability disrupts linear narrative and introduces a number of potential contradictions resolved in the unusual twists and turns of the story. Given that the novel is readable in many ways, the stability of the narrative is shown to be subsequent to the work.³⁵¹ The referential ambiguity of the narrative, the ambivalence and ambiguity of the amnesiac characters and the multiple referential possibilities in the novel are perhaps a more accurate replication of the effect of traumatic displacement. Rather than the characters internal to the fictional text, it is the reader who is displaced at the end of the story, still searching for a stable meaning or reference they might beforehand have expected to be offered to them. If Amina uses a mirror in a failed attempt to place meaning or reference on her body – to discover her own body, but to fail to place stable points of reference onto it – the reader's mirror seems to break apart in the fractured narrative of the text before them. The text not only enacts the problem of meaning and reference in Algerian writing, but forces the reader to recognise that they are central agents within that problematic space.

Bleu, blanc, vert

In a temporally rooted narrative, *Bleu, blanc, vert* charts the lives of two young Algerians, Ali and Lilas, set in the thirty years after 1962, coming to a close at the point of the descent into the 'décennie noire' in 1992.³⁵² Split into three decade-long sections, the two characters, who first meet at school and who end up marrying and having a child together, find their voices in alternating sections subtitled 'Lui' and 'Elle'. These two separate yet linked voices,

³⁵¹ We go on to explore questions of allegory and of national allegory in Section Three of the thesis; however, those questions certainly begin to become important in Bey's later work of rewriting official and dominant historical narrative of Algeria, at home and abroad.

³⁵² Maïssa Bey, *Bleu, blanc, vert* (La Tour-d'Aigues: L'Aube/Algiers: Barzakh, 2006); references are henceforth made parenthetically to the French edition.

told in the first person, construct their own and each other's lives not so much in a dialogue, but in a series of alternating monologues. If, on the surface, this represents the couple's difficulty in communicating, it also shows how each character's speech, perhaps in particular that of the male character, is rooted in a particular discursive frame.

Corbin Treacy reads the novel in the context of language policy, nationalism and questions around native language in the wake of independence, where Bey attempts to put forward a plural 'poetics of inclusion' as part of a new vision of Algerian nationalism which would oppose attempts by the Algerian State to impose Modern Standard Arabic on a population speaking local Algerian dialect (*Darija*) and an education system based on French, without the capacity to transform its teaching to Modern Standard Arabic.³⁵³ The intransigence of the State in the face of complex language questions is clearly underlined, especially when it comes to the transitional period in language use between the colonial period and independence. Here, a generation of Algerians, like Lilas and Ali, were taken from French-language education and placed in classes with teachers of Arabic from outside Algeria. The novel captures this blunt transition in its title and in its beginning, where a confused Ali and his class are told they should no longer use a red pen in their school books, because of the risk this would recreate the tricolour of the French flag, together with the blue pen and the white of the paper. They are told, instead, to use green.

The novel is also importantly a rewriting of history by Lilas, one of the first generation of Algerian women to live under the independent State. As Treacy underlines, the fact that the lives depicted in the novel are middle class and unremarkable, is itself remarkable in a body of literature that had hitherto almost exclusively focused on the events of the 1990s.³⁵⁴ While the novel is concerned with discourse, it looks more broadly at Algerian history through the seemingly banal and the everyday. If Ali and Lilas discuss

³⁵³ Corbin Treacy, 'Contested Cartographies: Maïssa Bey's *Bleu, blanc, vert*', *The Journal of North African Studies* 18, 3 (2013), pp. 402-15.

³⁵⁴ Treacy, 'Contested Cartographies', p. 403.

everyday elements of their lives, it is the manner in which those lives are told which seems to be foregrounded. For instance, the text on the page itself seems to be symbolic of the power to write and rewrite history. As initially both 'Lui' and 'Elle' write in streams of unbroken, unparagraphed and dense text, Lilas begins to introduce paragraphed breaks as she gains a power over the male voice which sits alongside hers (p. 149). Creating the effect of a move away from a style of writing associated with the *urgence* of the 1990s, it is Lilas who brings the narrative under control and inaugurates the more reflective and critical process of writing and reading. Ali's paragraph breaks come, but not until seventy pages on (p. 221), and even then they are less frequent and less pronounced. While under control, Lilas' words move sometimes to poetic verse as the Algerian woman moves beyond static and contained forms of writing (p. 204).

Lilas qualifies as a psychologist – giving her insights into the lives of ordinary, yet often traumatised, Algerians – while Ali is a lawyer. Despite the fact that Ali is able to recognise the ideological narrative pedalled by the independent State, and while he regularly critiques it, he is nonetheless depicted as falling into a number of narrative traps when it comes to his relationship with his wife. He is a realist when it comes to politics and to his family, which means he has a certain way of seeing the world, often from within a bigger paternalist structure from which he is unable to break free. Lilas – a self-professed dreamer, who aspires to become a writer – loves reading novels and escaping the everyday realities of her immediate surroundings. But this is precisely where Ali begins to attack Lilas; he worries about the dangers of books in the way they 'éloignent de la vraie vie.' (p. 195) He also begins to contain Lilas within gendered roles, such as the mother of their child, and becomes increasingly intolerant of her way of seeing the world which is incompatible with his realist outlook:

Elle a toujours été un peu décalée par rapport au présent, par rapport à la réalité. Et je crois que c'est ce qui m'avait attiré en elle. Mais ce n'est plus pareil maintenant. Je pense qu'elle a compris qu'on ne peut pas éternellement vivre en se projetant dans les ailleurs impossibles. (p. 176)

Ali attacks Lilas' feminism with the argument that it is unrealistic and precisely part of a previous (perhaps rebellious) version of her, which he had once loved, but now sees as impractical. He asks her to find a job in administration in order to '[se] changer les idées.' (p. 205) Increasingly aware of her submission to her husband, especially she notes as he begins to resemble his father (a member of the FLN who had left his family to pursue his ambitions in politics), Lilas begins to feel imprisoned and recalls the passing of the Code de la Famille, reflecting on how she had thought the law could never really affect her. She could not then, as she does now, have imagined wanting to leave her husband. In the text itself, Lilas' entries become shorter, where they had previously always been longer than Ali's. Yet, Ali allows her to leave their home, himself seemingly also run down by the pressures of political and social conditions in the country. Lilas stays with a friend but ultimately returns to Ali. Yet, as the narrative turns to the uprisings of October 1988, the subsequent liberalisation of the press and shift to multiparty democracy in Algeria, the roles take a sudden shift. Ali, excited by the prospect of change, becomes the dreamer, whereas Lilas becomes more cautious. For this middle class couple, history and politics had existed largely in the background until the events of 1988. Their concern has been with buying a new house and living peacefully away from the increasing violence of the city. It is only towards the end of the novel that the violence begins to enter Lilas' story. In one instance, she is spat at for not wearing a veil. If Lilas worries about how other families will have been transformed by the recent crisis, the final words are of hope for a future: 'Personne, j'en suis sûre, personne ne peut assassiner l'espoir.' She cites words from a Julio Cortázar novel she had been reading that very afternoon: '*« L'espoir appartient à la vie. C'est la vie même qui se défend. »*' (p. 284).

If, as Treacy suggests, language is central to the novel, then it is in Lilas' ability to appropriate that language and to write Algerian history in her own words that the novel itself acts as a figure for overcoming the reductive narrative of the post-independence State and its monolingual nationalism. If present at all, then the urgency of the narrative – and in particular Lilas' story – seems to be to write and rewrite a history from which she and Algerian women more generally have been excluded. The inclusion of the male voice as a counterpoint is, however, crucial. As Ali suffers an identitarian struggle of Algerian men in the wake of independence, his reality becomes increasingly moulded around conservative norms; this is despite his seeming ability to unveil and critique the ideological narrative of the State. Even if Ali is able step outside dominant narratives and myths of post-independence nationalism or of political Islam, the idea that this allows him a universal critical consciousness is questioned.

While capable of stepping outside the national narrative, Ali does not recognise the increasingly suppressed role women play and perhaps always already played in society. Ali's character becomes static even as he begins to invest hope in a future democratic Algeria. Lilas remains critical, however, as she continues to read and to witness the society around her change. What becomes most urgent – at least to Lilas – is not an escape from the grasp of an oppressive violence or an oppressive husband – they remain together through to the end of the novel – but a more complex means of writing an escape from the structural violence of both the national narrative and that of the patriarchy. It is only through the imagination, dreams, through reading and writing, that such an escape might be achieved.

While Ali's critical ability is fixed within and limited to static points, or ruptures, in history, Lilas, like Bey, is consistent in her pursuit of reading as a vehicle for critique based on fluctuating circumstances. The critical consciousness here is achieved in the constant movement between filiative and affiliative positions, where Lilas' continued reading trumps the more static notions of history being written as a prior account of events as they are

lived in the present. If *urgence* can be said to be recast in the novel, it is done so in relation to the re-writing of a history, confiscated well before the events of the ‘*décennie noire*’. Implicitly rejecting the narrow periodisation of Algerian history in the War of Independence and the ‘*décennie noire*’, the novel favours a contextualisation of both periods of violence within a past which fell between them and which, moreover, had been subject to a number attempts to write history in a prescriptive and reductive way.

Performing Grief, reclaiming tragedy: Post-urgent reflections?

After a cycle of novels which addresses the history of post-independence but also colonial Algeria, *Puisque mon cœur est mort*, published in 2010, is a return to a mode of writing which depicts in a more direct way the events of the ‘*décennie noire*’.³⁵⁵ Here, the story is told through the letters of a mother, Aïda, whose son has been killed by an extremist. The killer has since benefited from a State amnesty on fighters active during the 1990s. Her son, Nadir, has it turns out been killed in error; the bullet which killed him was in fact destined for Hakim, a friend of Nadir’s and the son of the local police chief. The novel stages the grief of a mother, but it does so with the benefit of time and allows the reader to ask questions less about the events themselves than of the narrative which followed in the aftermath of those events.

In a series of fifty numbered and subtitled letters written to her son, Aïda retraces his life with the help of his friends and a girlfriend. Aïda’s journey is prompted when she sees a picture of her son’s pardoned killer and, after meeting with women who have also been affected by disappearances of their children during the ‘*décennie noire*’, Aïda learns how her son’s murderer has returned from the *maquis* and has benefited from the State amnesty laws. He is one of the so-called ‘repentis’ or ‘amnistiés’ (pp. 142, 170). As Aïda

³⁵⁵ *Puisque mon cœur est mort*, published in France by L’Aube and in Algeria by Barzakh. References henceforth made in the body of the text.

negotiates her grief and recalls the final days of her son's life, she speaks of how the 'concorde', or the 'amnistie' exists '[à] défaut de justice et de vérité.' (p. 32) In this context, the 'tragédie nationale' is described as a 'mauvais rêve', whose traces must be erased as quickly as possible (p. 132). In the eyes of official State policy, it is the perpetrators who are made victims in an account which renders them 'égarés' (p. 143). In Aïda's eyes, the real victims like her son have been forgotten.

In her nervousness at living alone, Aïda asks Hakim to get her a gun. But, in a final scene which resembles the murder scene in Camus's *L'Étranger*, Aïda claims to have located her son's killer on a beach; his name, which she calls out, is Rachid. It is unclear whether Aïda is imagining this scene, or indeed if she still writes the scene in one of the many letters to her son. As she confronts Rachid, the voice of her son seems to cry out, 'Yemma. Ya m'ma!' (p. 216) In the confusion, Aïda accidentally shoots Hakim; the epilogue recounts this tragic mistaken killing and ends with the ominous lines, '[i]ls sont là.../]'entends, j'entends le bruit de leurs pas.' (p. 222) These lines might remind the reader of those anonymous killers who remain, who will not be brought to justice for their crimes. Yet, the confused and indeterminate scene where Aïda shoots Hakim in error brings about the fusion of victim and perpetrator, as Aïda now turns to a violence which produces a new tragedy.

Throughout the novel Aïda comments on the spectacle of the violence she has witnessed – how she feels at times like she might be watching a film, uncertain of the reality of what she sees (p. 154). Elsewhere, though, the spectacle is about how she and others suffer the pain of the death of relatives: Algerian women, like her, cry tears of blood, 'pour rester dans le registre des métaphores que nous affectionnons tant.' (p. 127) Indeed, the events surrounding her son's death never really become clear until over half way through the novel, as the performance of her emotion surrounding his murder take centre stage. In the epigraph to the novel, Bey quotes a passage from Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, where the narrator warns himself against adopting the 'attitude stérile du

spectateur’, continuing ‘car la vie n’est pas un spectacle, car une mer de douleurs n’est pas un proscenium, car un homme qui crie n’est pas un ours qui danse...’ (p. 7).³⁵⁶ This attention paid to the spaces of performance and spectacle – between the experience and the account of an experience in its aftermath – becomes relevant not only to a history of colonisation and of writing the other within this history, but to writing violence *tout court*. Aïda’s warning about ‘le registre des métaphores’, for which her fellow Algerians are so fond, captures a contradiction in the, on the one hand, necessary performance of pain and suffering through the spectacle of tragedy and, on the other, the dangers faced when such spectacles become appropriated and subsumed within State arenas of narrative control. If Aïda’s letters in some way reclaim tragedy, they do so running the risk of reproducing certain forms of tragedy which extend beyond her control.

By reflecting back on the ‘décennie noire’ with the benefit of time, Bey’s text not only evokes the still raw and unresolved emotions surrounding her experience of this time, but also encourages the reader to reflect on how the State narrative in the wake of the 1990s has been articulated. In its epistolary form the text also brings further into focus the act of reading itself: letters are written to be read.³⁵⁷ With the benefit of time, the text seems to ask how a language that initially performed the violence of the 1990s as a tragedy has entered into government discourse and policy. In the 2005 charter, the language of tragedy and wounds is associated with a corporeal image of the Algerian nation; it speaks not only of ‘tragédie’ but of ‘blessures’. The official documents clearly adopt the ‘registre des métaphores’ associated with an image of the nation first articulated in literature and scripted and re-scripted on numerous occasions in the official national charters, especially

³⁵⁶ See Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1983), p. 22.

³⁵⁷ As Paul de Man writes of Rousseau’s *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, ‘there can be no better way to thematize the ever-present necessity of reading than the epistolary novel.’ Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 193.

as the State makes attempts at a ‘reincorporation’ of the so-called ‘repentis’.³⁵⁸ The novel is then, on the one hand, a recognition of tragedy and, on the other hand, a challenge to its misappropriation within the ordered narratives of the State and perhaps the market of 1990s literature more generally. Aïda, and the women she meets, embody this quandary as their lives inevitably become implicated in a State sanctioned narrative of tragedy. These women continue to have no right to their own tragedies, with no right of ownership of their personal stories; they have only the right to a collective catharsis, realised through the stultifying State apparatus, the national narrative of amnesty and amnesia.

Conclusion

We began this chapter with an exploration of two collections of short stories and the dialogue established between them in the wake of the ‘*décennie noire*’. We noted Bey’s stylistic shift, even within the first collection, as the trauma of the real gave way to increasingly oneiric descriptions and the short story fell ‘prey’ to a real it could no longer control within the realm of a realist mode. We concluded our initial analysis by focusing on how Bey’s second collection performed a literary glance back, by overwriting the realism of the first collection with the second in a set of backwards interventions which, moreover, modelled a suspension of reference where the stories are never simply made to refer to events or experiences in a straightforward manner. To illustrate this dialogue, we took Bey’s own metaphor of ‘mots’ to ‘parole’ which, as well as being a vehicle for liberating the stifled female voice, challenges in broad terms a stasis of literature and its account during the ‘*décennie noire*’.

In a return to the novel, and in a historical turn, dominant social and historical narratives and discourse more generally come under closer scrutiny. The figures Bey

³⁵⁸ Brand, p. 178. As Brand notes, in what some saw as adding insult to injury, the ‘repentis’ were often given housing and jobs out of reach to many young unemployed people. (On the continual re-scripting of the national charters, see pp. 162-80.)

deploys in her fiction, in particular her various narrators or main characters, are outsiders not just in the sense of their narrative privilege – or in the fact that they are often women – but exiles in terms of their ability to offer a critical viewpoint on a place they might once have considered as home. If, as Aamir Mufti remarks of Said’s use of Auerbach, ‘exile consists not in rejecting ties to the home but rather in “*working through*” them’, then Bey’s female characters are perhaps, like Bey herself, figures of an internal Algerian exile.³⁵⁹ In this regard, the characters of Bey’s historical novels are instructive, particularly the women of *Cette fille-là*. This novel does not simply take a set of ‘témoignages’ from a number of displaced women in order to remap a nation from which they have been excluded; the ‘témoignages’ themselves become the means by which these women *work through* what they had previously called their home, their nation and what had tied them to it. Indeed, the indeterminate *non-space* of the ‘[n]i maison de retraite, ni asile, ni hospice’ reinforces the fact that these women are in a stage of transition between one home and another. Malika/M’laikia is not simply a new figure for the nation, but one for writing itself, the very process at the heart of the novel. The question asked in *Cette fille-là* is not of *what* one can imagine in the future, but of *how* one might imagine that future. A similar observation might be made of *Bleu, blanc, vert*; here, it is Ali who is capable of imagining *what* the Algerian State might look like – especially in his optimism after 1988 – whereas Lilas remains concerned with the *how*: she continues to search for hope in the novels she reads. If, in *Surtout ne retourne pas*, we are at first faced with an undeniably stable point of historical reference in the earthquake, the job of the novel is to progressively undo that stability, in such a way as to signal how the novel never simply tells, or testifies, but draws the reader into its unstable, at times fragmented and *suspended*, world of reference. In its negative articulation, the title of the novel implicitly affirms that looking back is a necessary part of

³⁵⁹ Aamir Mufti, ‘Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture’, *Critical Inquiry* 25, 1 (1998), p. 98.

moving forwards, of imagining something different from the oppression suffered in the past. But the novel is also referentially indeterminate and, as such, encourages the reader to ask questions of the reliability of symbol and allegory in Algerian society more generally. This is what Aïda will articulate in her letters as the ‘registre des métaphores’ against which she fights. The *urgence* in *Puisque mon cœur est mort* is located less in the telling of the story than in the analysis of the conditions of its telling. In its interrogative epistolary form, Bey’s work makes a more marked political intervention in the narrative and spectacle of the 1990s.

In looking back, the cycle of novels concerning Algerian history seems to become some kind of necessary prequel to writing the ‘décennie noire’, framing a set of fragmented, testimonial, realist – but no longer necessarily urgent – narratives in the history written in the image of a violence which begins well before the end of colonialism. To cite Fisher again on Djaout and Djébar, ‘écriture de l’urgence’ is recast as ‘un dialogue dans l’écriture’ where it is ‘la lecture de l’histoire’ which is subject to interrogation.³⁶⁰ The task of each of Bey’s works, more generally, seems to be to question, interrupt and to attempt to re-write a history as a process of continually rereading the past. As Rice comments of the author’s stress on the practice of reading: ‘To be an exceptional writer, Bey shows us that it is necessary to be an extraordinary reader.’³⁶¹ Indeed, as Khatibi writes in his essay ‘Bilinguisme et littérature’, ‘Le « sujet » qui écrit n’est pas celui qui écrit, mais il s’entend, il s’écrit, il se lit dans le même acte.’ An act of writing is an act of reading, but also crucially an act of deconstructing and rearticulating the self. In this way, Bey’s work both confronts and escapes the ‘décennie noire’, offering a space where reading can be a form of deconstructive history, incorporating autobiography, which does not reproduce or participate in a cathartic narrative stage-managed by the Algerian State or by literary

³⁶⁰ Fisher, p. 273.

³⁶¹ Rice, p. 56.

markets of *urgence* which sought to offer symbolic repetitions of violence rooted in clearly identifiable spaces and mapped on clearly identifiable bodies. Bey's writing is therefore concerned both to remember particular pasts and to challenge a narrative which repeats the violence of those pasts in the form of imposing silence, especially on the voices of Algerian women.

Chapter Three

Salim Bachi's *Cyrtha*: Algeria, Paris, New York

Pour écrire des livres sur l'Algérie, il fallait prendre de la distance [...] Paradoxalement, il faut s'éloigner pour se rapprocher de son pays et faire œuvre d'écrivain.

–Salim Bachi³⁶²

Salim Bachi, born in 1971, grew up in the city of Annaba and came to prominence after the publication of his first novel *Le chien d'Ulysse* in 2001.³⁶³ It was awarded the Prix Goncourt du Premier Roman that same year.³⁶⁴ He is one of only a handful of Algerian writers writing today to be published by the prestigious Gallimard house and has since 1996 lived in Paris.³⁶⁵ Bachi has published a range of works, including, in the 'Cyrtha trilogy', a novel, *La Kabéna*, and a collection of short stories, *Les douze contes de minuit*.³⁶⁶ In 2006, the author published *Tuez-les tous*, a controversially received novel which takes on the voice of one of the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks in New York; he published another terrorism related novel, *Moi, Khaled Kelkal* in 2012, again to a controversial reception.³⁶⁷ With over eight novels and 'récits' published since 2001, Bachi is one of the more prolific Algerian writers alive today.³⁶⁸ In this chapter, we look first at the novels and short stories of the

³⁶² Bachi cited in Ali Remzi, 'Salim Bachi: Les quêtes fertiles d'un écrivain', *La Dépêche de Kabylie*, 20 July 2010 <<http://www.depechedekabylie.com/culture/84737-salim-bachi-les-quetes-fertiles-dun-ecrivain.html>> [accessed 12 June 2014].

³⁶³ Salim Bachi, *Le chien d'Ulysse* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001). References to the text are henceforth made parenthetically.

³⁶⁴ The novel was also awarded the Prix littéraire de la Vocation and the Bourse Prince Pierre de Monaco de La Découverte. See Patrick Crowley's introduction to his interview with Bachi, which includes biographical information, some of which is repeated here, in 'Myth, Modernism, Violence and Form: An Interview with Salim Bachi', *Bulletin of Francophone Postcolonial Studies* 4, 1 (2013), pp. 2-11.

³⁶⁵ Other recent Algerian writers to be published by Gallimard include Abdelkader Djemaï and Boualem Sansal.

³⁶⁶ *La Kabéna* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003); *Les douze contes de minuit* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006). References to these texts will henceforth be made parenthetically.

³⁶⁷ *Tuez-les tous* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006); *Moi, Khaled Kelkal* (Paris: Grasset, 2012). References to these texts will henceforth be made parenthetically.

³⁶⁸ Aside from Bachi's major works under study here, he has published *Autoportrait avec Grenade* (Paris: Editions du Rocher, 2005), a 'récit' which is an of autobiographical, turned dream-like account of his travel to

Cyrtha trilogy before analysing Bachi's controversially received terrorism-oriented novels, *Tuez-les tous* and *Moi, Khaled Kelkal*, which we will call his post-9/11 works.

We will look at how the above-mentioned works engage with the events of the 'décennie noire' and challenge the myths surrounding its account in France and beyond during the 1990s. We do so in an investigation of the ways in which Bachi has deployed myth and realism, fusing and overlaying the two narrative styles or modes in what Patrick Crowley has called a 'not easily named' literary style of 'mythological realism'.³⁶⁹ Not only do Bachi's experimental works take on the construction of multiple *urgences* of the 1990s, they do so while offering genuinely new possibilities of interpreting the act, performance and representation of violence into the twenty first century and beyond. If, in Bachi's first novel, the violence of the 1990s is represented in a nightmarish inescapable cycle of tragedy and despair, the author's continued use and development of the transformative figure of Cyrtha permits the reader to imagine the possibility for a hope beyond the persistent replication of the reductive binaries of contemporary political life. For, in Bachi's reading, much like that advanced by Bey, this replication of false binary structures is to be seen as a violence in itself. One principal overarching binary which Bachi's novels can be shown to deconstruct is precisely that of the particular and the universal. As his works move from the setting of 1990s Algeria, to the more distant past of the land known today as Algeria and to the more recent events of the terrorist attacks in the US and Europe, the works

Grenada; *Le silence de Mohamet* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), a novel which tells of, and reimagines, the lives of the prophet Mohammed from four separate voices; *Le grand frère* (Paris: Editions du Moteur, 2010), which tells of the young naïve inhabitant of the Paris 'banlieues', Rachid, who is recruited to the fundamentalist cause by the eponymous 'Grand frère'. Bachi has also published *Amour et aventures de Sinbad le Marin* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), a novel which charts the travels and adventures of the newly imagined Sinbad, inspired by the initial stories of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, but here morphed into a contemporary setting. Sinbad is also a modern day *Harraga* in this story, crisscrossing the Mediterranean. In 2013, Bachi published *Le dernier été d'un jeune homme* (Paris: Flammarion), which imagines a portion of the life of Albert Camus and fits alongside a number of other Algerian works published in the centenary year of Camus's birth. The novel, written from Camus' point of view, was refused by his publisher Gallimard. Bachi's most recent novel (at the time of writing) is entitled *Le consul* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014) and charts the life of the largely forgotten Aristides de Sousa Mendes, the Portuguese Consul-General of Bordeaux who saved thousands of Jewish lives during World War Two by issuing visas and passports for them to escape the Nazi invasion of France.

³⁶⁹ Patrick Crowley, 'Mythologizing the City, Rethinking the Nation: Salim Bachi's Cyrtha Trilogy', in *Mediterranean Cities: Real and/or Imaginary*, ed. by Federica Frediani (Florence: Nerbini Editore, 2014), p. 275.

explored here collapse each period of history into the other, demonstrating through the form of the novel, how every event is always, at once, particular *and* universal.

The Cyrtha Trilogy

Le chien d'Ulysse

Bachi's first novel charts in twenty-four hours the lives of the first-person narrator Hocine and his friends. The day is the 29 June 1996, which we learn is exactly four years after the assassination of the president Mohamed Boudiaf. The violence of the 1990s is approaching its height, as we see from reports within the novel. Hocine's friends include Mourad, an aspiring poet and slippery figure for the author himself,³⁷⁰ two former communists and fellow students Rachid Hchicha – so named for his ability to procure cannabis which the group duly smokes – and Poisson, named for his seeming success in attracting and seducing women. Seyf is a now former student who has, in the crisis of the violence of the 1990s, decided to join the Algerian police; he is part of the ominous 'Brigade de répression du banditisme', in short, the 'glorieuse BRB' based in Cyrtha (pp. 177-78). Ali Khan is their literature professor at the university of Cyrtha. Hamid Kaïm, a friend of Ali Khan's, is a journalist and aspiring writer. A number of other characters populate the novel, including the spectral female figure of Nedjma, whom Hocine pursues throughout but never truly attains.

The novel introduces the city of Cyrtha, the setting for Bachi's broader trilogy, as a sometimes living and breathing character of its own. It is described as a contradictory space: a 'cité en construction et pourtant ruinée' (p. 13), a 'Rocher' whose inhabitants are 'captifs, emmurés dans le dédale de ses rues' (p. 17) and a space which produces 'émanations délétères' (p. 72). Cyrtha is a hybrid figuration of the historical and geographical

³⁷⁰ He has we are told published his first piece of writing as a short story in a French newspaper (p. 49), which we later learn is 'une nouvelle allégorique des premiers attentats terroristes' which concerns insects that consume the inhabitants of an imaginary land (p. 254); Bachi did just this in his first published and prizewinning short story, 'Le vent brûle' in *Le Monde diplomatique*, January 1995, p. 19.

metropolises of the ancient Numidian capital of Cirta, now Constantine, Annaba, the city of Bachi's birth, and modern day Algiers.³⁷¹ If, as Crowley notes with reference to Bonn, the city increasingly becomes the central setting for Maghrebi novels after Algerian independence, it is equally to be seen as a move which is part of Maghrebi literature's itinerary towards the universal; this means that when the novel describes one city, it can be said to describe – or at least move towards describing – any city. While the novel may describe a city, it is not necessarily *inscribed within* that city.³⁷²

Within the novel, Cyrtha is both setting and living character, Hocine's home, his nemesis, a prostitute and at one point his lover who becomes pregnant and gives birth to his degenerate children. It is also a distinct part of the imagination of each character. For example, as intruders attack Hamid Kaïm in his home and destroy his works, Cyrtha disappears with them: 'Cyrtha bâtie de mes mains, sortie de ma cervelle, me fuyait et mourait sous les coups répétés.' (p. 143) The city is, moreover, a cradle of corruption with its police station described as a 'vaste prison [...] confondant bourreaux et victimes' (p. 219). It is a city in which the threat of being 'disappeared' by the 'Force militaire' looms large. Smard, who it turns out has married Hamid Kaïm's young love interest and led her to feign her disappearance by the security services, is the archetypal representation of the corrupt colonel leading the secret services in Cyrtha. Referring to the assassination of Boudiaf – the focal point which has both been produced by and which continues to produce the deleterious space – Hocine announces that '[t]out finissait mal à Cyrtha. C'était écrit.' (p. 271) He continues, 'Dans notre croyance, l'homme, avant même de vivre, lit le

³⁷¹ Bernard Aresu offers the whole range of possible interpretations of Cyrtha. See his article 'Arcanes algériens entés d'ajours helléniques: *Le chien d'Ulysse*, de Salim Bachi', in *Echanges et mutations des modèles littéraires entre Europe et Algérie 2* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), p. 178.

³⁷² See Crowley, 'Mythologizing the City', pp. 271-72.

compte rendu exact de son existence future. Quelle dérision! Pourquoi ne déchiffrais-je pas mes errances dans le ciel?’ (p. 271)³⁷³

Hocine’s constant wish to escape the city is made clear by his repeated descriptions of the clear skies above, but he is also trapped in a double bind: this is the city in which he wants to continue to live. His critique of ‘croyance’ is a critique of both religion and national culture, which seem to collide in their efforts to shape Cyrtha; and it is the fact of ‘*notre croyance*’ that the narrator strives to escape: ‘J’abandonnai l’idée du départ’, Hocine announces as again ‘[L]es fenêtres donnaient sur les étoiles, les constellations.’ (p. 284) Cyrtha, as a product of the imagination offers Hocine the possibility of this cosmological escape, but its double nature, rooted as it is in the violence of the real, brings the characters and readers swiftly back down to earth. As Hocine returns to his family home at the end of his twenty-four hour odyssey, and the narration shifts finally to the third person, he is recognised only by his loyal dog and shot by one of his brothers who mistakes him for a terrorist.³⁷⁴ As he lies dying, Hocine looks finally to the constellations, as a time beyond the vicissitudes of the real begins to speak again: ‘Ganymède, Cassiopée, Orion dansait dans le bleu de la nuit, doucement, de toute éternité dansaient. Le temps aveugle l’enveloppa et lui parla.’ (p. 291)³⁷⁵ As he lays dying, he sees also that his old loyal dog has been injured by the gunshots and is bleeding. They die together as the blood of one falls into the other.

Time re-enters Cyrtha, or at least Hocine’s world, in the form of death – ‘Le temps aveugle l’enveloppa et lui parla’ (p, 291). Therefore, another time beyond the narrative limits of Cyrtha is shown to exist.³⁷⁶ Both time and death are unalienable at this final point where the blood of man and animal unite in the final moment of life. Cyrtha is both real

³⁷³ There is a similar instance of this in Bey’s *Surtout ne retourne pas*, with the narrator’s discussion of ‘Mektoub’ (p 59). This is not just an Oriental peculiarity, however, as in both Bachi and Bey’s work, characters pass comment on the place of the press (local and international) in writing a predetermined image of Algeria.

³⁷⁴ As in Homer’s *Odyssey*, the loyal dog Argos is the only one to recognise Odysseus upon his return home to Ithaca; the dog has been neglected and soon dies.

³⁷⁵ These constellations are all of course names from Greek mythology; these names and references to them appear also in Joyce’s *Ulysses* and as far back as Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad*.

³⁷⁶ In one scene, for instance, Hocine meets a personified time (p. 164).

and imagined, particular and universal, crucially suspended in its form, in that it represents one life and all life: cruel, but hopeful; eternally contradictory; seemingly timeless and eternally difficult to represent: ‘Cyrtha, comme sa vie et son voyage, inachevés.’ (p. 291) This vision of Cyrtha as unfinished, as suspended in time, allows for the reader a critical entry into a space where time is considered beyond a narrated national time, working also to embody life itself, especially as a written thing, as fundamentally unfinished. Cyrtha is therefore the site of an immanent critique, whereby, in an inversion of the outward looking modern world, the reader is continually encouraged to look within in order to uncover the reality of their own cities, of their own lives, which lie beneath a projected and narrated surface – the disjointed and chaotic Cyrthian surface. If in one sense Cyrtha is able to unsettle the narrative of *urgence* which had become common during the 1990s, it is also crucially a disruption of what Bhabha sees as the modern time of the nation itself, expressed through linear modes of writing history.

For Valerie Orlando, *Le chien d’Ulysse* offers a chaotic account of contemporary Algeria in which the characters’ search for stable collective ‘lieux de mémoire’ are constantly thwarted. The disruption and ultimate impossibility of establishing these ‘lieux de mémoire’, a term taken from Pierre Nora’s famous work on memory and whose establishment and identification he describes as a necessary part of forming a society’s collective memory, is seen by Orlando to both represent the contemporary turmoil of the 1990s and the impossibility of a stable future being built out of an unfixed and chaotic past.³⁷⁷ Moreover, it is the conflictual state of metaphor, reality and myth which, for Orlando, ‘render writing a collective, true account about the past, present, and future of Algeria impossible.’³⁷⁸ Seeing Bachi’s story as ‘forcibly construed within’ what Bensmaïa has called ‘a transcendental configuration’, where the story can no longer be rooted in a reality,

³⁷⁷ Valerie Orlando, ‘The Truncated memories and fragmented pasts of contemporary Algeria: Salim Bachi’s *Le Chien d’Ulysse*’, *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 6, 2 (2003), p. 103-18. See also, Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992).

³⁷⁸ Orlando, p. 106.

Orlando claims that Bachi's novel nevertheless 'reveal[s] the difficulty of deciphering the literary from the historic'.³⁷⁹ This means that the novel asks crucial questions about the power of writing to intervene in and to explain the violence, where Cyrtha serves a crucial function of opening up a space between literature and history, mediating the space between the past and the present, recasting what is already written in a single story as fundamentally fragmented and unwritten in the chaos of the present. If, for Orlando, the feminisation of the mythical figure of Cyrtha creates a contemporary 'femme fatale' which draws men to commit violence within the story, this also reorients the reader's critical gaze back to the problem of the troped 'Algérie-femme' written into the mythical history of an independent Algeria and appropriated as a figure which extends to the international markets of francophone writing.³⁸⁰

La Kahéna

The second novel in Bachi's trilogy contains a complex and multi-layered narrative which tells a series of stories at once. The title, *La Kahéna*, is taken from the seventh century Berber queen who resisted the Arab invasion of what is now Algeria and the story of La Kahéna (the Berber queen) is told through the story of a house named after her, built in the city of Cyrtha by Louis Bergagna, its mayor and a colonist who came to Algeria in 1900 from the island of Malta. If these two elements constitute the first two levels of the story, the third level is told through the familiar character of the journalist Hamid Kaïm who lives in '*La Kahéna*' (all references to the house are italicised in the text)³⁸¹ with Bergagna's granddaughter, who is the sometimes slippery narrator of the novel as well as Kaïm's lover. Structured around three 'nuits', the main intrigue of the novel is in the discovery of Kaïm's

³⁷⁹ Orlando, p. 106.

³⁸⁰ Orlando, p. 115. See, Djébar, *Ces Voix qui m'assiègent*, p. 224.

³⁸¹ This makes of the house a text, of course, and creates a problem for the critic when writing about the novel; the intent, perhaps, is that both become one.

father's diaries which have been kept within the walls of the house and which Kaïm reads throughout the third 'nuit' of the novel.

The stories of the father and the son become inextricable, as both in turn experience the violence of independence and the violence of October 1988 and its immediate aftermath. *La Kabéna* is therefore a story of modern day Algeria told not just from the point of view of independence and the events of October 1988, but through the lens of an Algeria framed in a far broader political, historical and mythological context. In engaging with a set of fused and indeterminate metaphorical figures, the narrative serves to complicate and to unsettle the telling of history itself. References to Cyrtha are placed alongside references to Algeria and Algiers (Hamid Kaïm travels by plane from Cyrtha to Algiers, for instance),³⁸² meaning the reader is never quite sure of how to read an external reality depicted in the novel, or indeed the internal reality of the novel, especially given that Cyrtha is supposedly a hybrid figuration of the cities of Annaba, Constantine and modern day Algiers. In another scene, Louis Bergagna imagines Cyrtha and Algeria alongside one another: 'Cyrtha et l'Algérie, l'une incluse dans l'autre, en s'embrassant' (p. 261). '*La Kabéna*' is at once a house, a historical and mythical reference and a text.

The link to *Le chien d'Ulysse* is established by the novel's setting in the city of Cyrtha, but also in the maintaining of a number of the main characters from the previous novel. Hamid Kaïm is now the central character of *La Kabéna*, while Mourad and Rachid are also present. There is no chronological continuity between the novels, but a variety of other sometimes only allusive points of reference are established throughout the novel. As in *Le chien d'Ulysse*, Kateb's *Nedjma* is prominent in both the presence of characters (Rachid and Mourad are also characters in Kateb's story), but also in a number of analogous scenes. The life of Camus and some of his major works are alluded to in constructing the story of Kaïm, perhaps especially in his relation to the father and in the discovery and posthumous

³⁸² See p. 237.

reading of Kaïm's father's manuscript.³⁸³ If these intertextual elements offer interesting subtexts to Bach's novel, they also serve a function within the narrative structure itself, bringing into focus the process of writing, as well as asking questions surrounding the originality of the text and its ability to tell a single story at one time or in one place.³⁸⁴ Indeed, the broader focus of the novel seems to be precisely about the possibility of interrogating the links, the ancestry and the blood (both ancestral but also literal) between the inhabitants of Cyrtha, while breaking down the historical boundaries constructed between the generations who have lived within the walls of '*La Kabéna*'. As a journalist, finally, Kaïm is also crucially a figure for the teller of contemporary Algeria, asked, as he is towards the end of the novel, for a 'témoignage' of events. As Kaïm reflects in response to this request:

Le mélange des genres ne le séduisait pas, lui qui sa vie durant cherchait à lever les voiles successifs qui masquaient le réel, dont la quête, fictive parfois, visait à pourfendre l'illusion et le mensonge. Un journaliste devait rendre compte des faits et non ajouter de l'obscurité aux ténèbres. Il refusa. (p. 302)

This refusal to write a testimonial text echoes a scene in *Le chien d'Ulysse* where Kaïm expresses his exasperation at the outsider accounts of October 1988: 'De l'étranger, des parties démocratiques avaient beau ergoter sur les ondes, supporter, épiloguer, disputer sur ce qui arrivait, ils ne savaient rien des préoccupations d'une population aux abois, d'une

³⁸³ There appear to be allusions to a number of Camus's major works: the question of the relation to the father and the reading of the posthumously discovered manuscript resonates both with the plot, and event of the discovery, of Camus's posthumously published unfinished work *Le premier homme*; the story of Hamid Kaïm's education – the 'bon Arabe' who gets into the Grand Lycée de Cyrtha – and his encouraging teacher M. Germain, is a reference to Camus's education under Louis Germain. In the following passage, Rachid is perhaps presented in a counterpoint to Camus's Meursault: 'Rachid, ce jeune homme sur une plage que le soleil incendiait, avait assassiné le patron du Beau Rivage.' He does this apparently while '[l]es clients présents ce jour-là continuèrent à boire leur bière comme si de rien n'était.' (p. 298) Finally, there are increasing references to rats towards the end of *La Kabéna*, which brings to mind Camus's *La Peste*. This reference is also present at the beginning of the *Le chien d'Ulysse* where the narrator announces the memory of the 'grande peste' of the 'seconde hécatombe' of the century (p. 14).

³⁸⁴ Indeed, it is perhaps worth mentioning that Kateb had sought to establish a similar dialogue or early counterpoint with Camus in *Nedjma*, according to Gilles Carpentier's preface to the 1996 Seuil edition of Kateb's novel.

jeunesse désespérée.’ (p. 147)³⁸⁵ The words of Kaïm recall those of the author who, in an interview, refuses the label of the ‘écrivain-témoin’, where the very invention of the fictional Cyrtha becomes his means ‘pour ne pas tomber dans le témoignage...’.³⁸⁶ In this same interview, Bachi distances *La Kabéna* from the other two texts in the Cyrtha trilogy. If *Le chien d’Ulysse* and *Les douze contes de minuit* were focused more on the years of the 1990s themselves, *La Kabéna* is a novel which takes us only up to the very immediate aftermath of the events of October 1988.

La Kabéna is, then, also interesting for its anachronistic shift back in time. In this way, it offers a contextualisation to the two further texts of the trilogy which Bachi knew would be read more particularly within the period of the ‘décennie noire’. The novel was published after *Le chien d’Ulysse* and before the short stories, and could be viewed as a necessary move by Bachi to contextualise the previous novel, as he was keen for that novel not to be contained within reductive historicist readings of the 1990s. If October 1988 can be said to function as a foundational moment for Kaïm, and for what will come afterwards, it is by placing the event of October 1988 in the history of a number of other moments of violence and uprising that Bachi is able to make a comment about how history is viewed, framed and periodised. By overlaying the 1988 uprisings targeted against the FLN’s single party rule on top of the uprisings at Sétif in 1945, Bachi’s novel makes a controversial comment on the army’s replication in October 1988 of crimes committed under colonial rule. However, Bachi does not merely overlay two historical moments to make a comment on the recidivism of the 1990s. The novel shows these histories to be accessible only through the complex space, historical figure and myth of ‘*La Kabéna*’. If, for Kaïm, ‘*La Kabéna*’ is the house where he grew up and is now able to read his father’s manuscripts, for

³⁸⁵ This passage will remind of the scene again in *Surtout ne retourne pas* where Bey’s narrator comments on the arrival of foreigners after the earthquake of 2003 and where we see the moral judgements made surrounding the so-called ‘décennie d’exactions’ (p. 89).

³⁸⁶ The 2007 interview is republished in: Yassin Tamlali, ‘Salim Bachi: « un romancier et non un témoin »’, in *Algérie: Chroniques Ciné-Littéraires de Deux Guerres* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2011), p. 92.

the reader, *La Kabéna* is also the figure and space through which we are granted access to Algerian history.

Les douze contes de minuit

The short stories which make up *Les douze contes de minuit* constitute, as a whole, the third text in the Cyrtha trilogy. Like *Le chien d'Ulysse*, the violence of the stories will initially lead the reader to read them more closely alongside the events of the 1990s. Cyrtha is retained as their setting and the characters of the former two novels reappear and populate the stories. While they could be said to represent more directly the period of the 1990s, the stories might not necessarily be described as more realist depictions of the period, rooted still in the 'mythological realism' of the previous two novels.³⁸⁷ The stories echo *Le chien d'Ulysse* in terms of characters and setting and some material is repeated from the first novel. While the stories exist separately, the characters survive across them. Cyrtha makes its appearance from the first story 'Le vent brûle' which is the redrafted version of the story Bachi published in *Le Monde diplomatique* in 1995. Seyf, the first-person narrator from 'Le bourreau de Cyrtha', survives *Le chien d'Ulysse* and now also resonates further with the first-person narrator Seyf el Islam, also from *Tuez-les tous*, who comes to occupy the other side of the binary.³⁸⁸ Similar to in *Le chien d'Ulysse*, the story of 'Le bourreau de Cyrtha' follows Seyf, here the narrator, who joins the Algerian police force, finding himself part of the infamous 'Brigade de répression du banditisme' (p. 122).

'Nuée ardente' tells of the 'pantin' colonel ruling over the people of Cyrtha; in what seems to be a comment on the state of health of the president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who had fallen ill in 2005, none of the characters in the story knows if their leader is dead or alive. He is described as destroying everything around him: 'Il agit sur le monde comme le mal sur son corps.' (p. 152) The 'disappeared' of the 1990s are represented as the victims of

³⁸⁷ Crowley, 'Mythologizing the City', p. 275.

³⁸⁸ The form and the narration of this story resemble in other ways Bachi's 2006 novel.

the end of the so-called ‘grand moudjahid’ and the perpetual war in Cyrtha (p. 148). After months of rumours, the official announcement of the colonel’s death is made; millions are paralysed with grief and a year-long period of mourning is announced (pp. 153-54).³⁸⁹ The day of the funeral, crowds descend into the streets and the army plans an operation in case the crowds turn hostile. The operation is named ‘Nuée ardente’ (p. 154). As the crowds form in the streets, so too do thick dark clouds in the sky above – to such an extent that the two become indissociable: ‘Des nuages qui jetaient les rues dans l’ombre. Des centaines de milliers de têtes se pressaient, les unes contre les autres.’ (p. 154) In scenes again reminiscent of October 1988, an army vehicle enters the main square and faint black dots begin to fill the sky. These black dots turn out to be bombs (launched from ‘nos bombardiers’) which produce ‘une pluie rouge’, which falls onto Cyrtha, ‘fouettée par le vent’ (p. 155). By combining the most natural elements (wind and rain) with the most unnatural (army vehicles and bombs), the final scene seems to turn an image of hope of nationhood, realised in the coming together of the people, into a tragic image of despair where that very hope rains down in bombs and results in the spilling of blood. Although on the surface locatable at the point of the October uprisings of 1988, there is a referential instability in the story which continues to disrupt and to frustrate the reader’s need to place reference and meaning. The hope followed by despair, the crowds following a funeral cortege of a leader and the violence of the armed forces can all be placed at numerous moments of Algerian history.

In ‘Icare et le Minotaure’, Hamid Kaïm speaks of the death of intellectuals and writers, killed by a ‘horde barbare’, forgotten by the State. But Kaïm also seems to attack those writers and journalists who use a particular language and cliché to depict the deaths of writers as inevitable in a place like Cyrtha: ‘Un intellectuel est mort, « sauvagement

³⁸⁹ There seems to be a referential instability here between Boumediene and Bouteflika, but also Boudiaf; the death of the first and the last drew crowds to the streets.

assassiné » titreront les journaux demain [...] « Sauvagement assassiné. » Y a-t-il une autre manière de l'être? » (p. 159). Cyrtha is depicted as being destroyed as Kaïm's works are discovered and laid out by two armed figures who come to assassinate him; again, this resembles a similar scene depicted in Kaïm's 'carnet' in *Le chien d'Ulysse*.³⁹⁰ As he stares down at the fragments of his work, Kaïm sees 'Cyrtha en ruines' as '[l]es pages craquaient et se tordaient, la proie des flammes.' (p. 168) As he is judged guilty by his interrogators, Kaïm recalls a childhood dream in which algae threatened to overrun the city, but he soon realises that this was a bad dream and that the algae had in fact come to save the city of its cancer and to erect a new 'Rocher'. As he watches a gull fly between the sea and the sky – 'redoutant la fatale attraction de l'un et l'autre' (pp. 170-71) – where the water weighs down the bird and the cloud burns its feathers, Kaïm considers how Cyrtha's own 'tentacules' threatened the traveler, he who might have sought to leave; as for Kaïm, his wings 'étaient entrées en combustion.' (p. 171) If the need to maintain the balance between flying too close to the sun and keeping far enough away from the dangers of the land and sea is emblematic of the work of the journalist in contemporary Algeria, the bird in flight also offers a figure for a literature in suspense, where a balance between the event and its representation, between literal reading and the allegorical counterpart, must continually be maintained. The reader and the writer, embodied in the fragile wings of the bird, can be seen to continually learn and relearn – to read and *reread* – as they move through this interstitial space.³⁹¹

³⁹⁰ See *Le chien d'Ulysse*, pp. 143-45.

³⁹¹ As Maureen Quilligan notes of allegory, '[r]eaders [...] gain in sophistication only as they follow the narrative', where 'the experience of reading allegory always operates by a gradual revelation' to the reader who 'discovers [...] usually by a process of relearning'. The reader will always necessarily 'have to pause in the process of making easy statements, back up, and reread'. See *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (London: Cornell UP, 1979), pp. 227-28.

Le mythe agissant: the post-9/11 novels³⁹²

In an interview with Crowley, Bachi, seemingly embracing Barthes' view on the possibility for a competitive appropriation of myth through the construct of what he calls the *artificial* myth,³⁹³ affirms the following:

Je m'intéresse aussi au mythe agissant, au mythe contemporain comme le 11 septembre par exemple [...] Je me suis intéressé à la violence en Algérie en tant que mythe moteur de son Histoire [...] La figure du terroriste est pour moi une figure mythique, un mythe violent qui me fascine.³⁹⁴

If, as Barthes suggests, myth gives back to society 'une image *naturelle*' of the reality that it consumes, then the figure of the terrorist as consecrated, as *naturalised* in society is as Bachi notes a fascinating, but also a worrying prospect.³⁹⁵ When one asks of how the terrorist becomes *naturalised* in this way, the response has often been framed in the narrative of a foundational and civilizational 'clash',³⁹⁶ excluding the possibility of a critical reading of how the 'terrorist' has been constructed and framed throughout history and of how the 'terrorist' is today framed in the modern media. If Bachi's *Cyrtha* offers a mythological counterpoint to the pathologising myths of violence in contemporary Algeria, as well as a space in which to stage these myths, then his two novels which take up the voices of the accused perpetrators of terrorist attacks in Europe and the US can perhaps be said to show how myth has been used to both inspire acts of terrorism and to once again frame

³⁹² See Crowley, 'Myth, Modernism, Violence and Form', p. 8.

³⁹³ Barthes underlines, 'la meilleure arme contre le mythe, c'est peut-être de le mythifier à son tour, c'est de produire un mythe artificiel'. Barthes, 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui', p. 181.

³⁹⁴ Crowley, 'Myth, Modernism, Violence and Form', p. 8.

³⁹⁵ Barthes cited in Crowley, 'Mythologizing the City', p. 267.

³⁹⁶ As in the well known and perhaps what would become the self-fulfilling political prophecy of Samuel Huntington's 'The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs*, summer (1993), pp. 22-49; later published in book-length form (without the question mark), *The Clash of Civilizations: And the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

those acts within a new and *naturalised* reality where the false civilizational binary and the language of the ‘clash’ return to recreate the very conditions for repeated acts of violence.³⁹⁷

Central in addressing the myth of the terrorist is the media spectacle which continually performs this figure as nonhuman – as what Mohamed El Amine Roubai-Chorfi describes as a language of ‘Ogre, Monstre, Sauvage, Maléfique, Diabolique...’³⁹⁸ – and which, in the case of the following examples, attempts to produce these caricatures as a *naturalised* image, more akin to the broader climate of fear inaugurated by the media and politicians.³⁹⁹ Bachi seeks in his works to disentangle from myth human acts in their complex multiplicity. As Judith Butler reflects after the events of September 11, it is ‘at the limits of its capacity to make sense’ that the human must be staged in order for us to begin to understand the motivations behind violent terrorist action and in order for us to begin to chart a way beyond the mere replication of binaries which give rise to expressions of violence.⁴⁰⁰ It is this task which Bachi’s novels also take on as they delve beneath that *naturalised* image and display the human lives embedded beneath the surface figure or myth of the terrorist. In their engagement with a range of moments of violence across the history of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Bachi’s post-9/11 novels encourage a critical interrogation of multiple moments of *urgence* which extend beyond that of the reductive lens of contemporary Algerian violence.

³⁹⁷ In Judith Butler’s reading, the way in which one life can be seen as more ‘grievable’ than another is a crucial, if unwelcome, outcome of this myth of the clash between cultures and identities; see ‘Violence, Mourning, Politics’, in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), pp. 19-49.

³⁹⁸ Mohamed El Amine Roubai-Chorfi, ‘Le personnage du terroriste dans le roman algérien: un Mythe moderne?’, *Synergies Algérie* 3 (2008), p. 106.

³⁹⁹ Michael Rothberg notes the important distinction between ‘terror’ and ‘terrorism’, in his exposition of the ideological basis of the term ‘war on terror’; according to Rothberg, the term ‘terror’ draws not on a specific act or acts of ‘terrorism’, but centres rather on a ‘feeling’, that is to say an ‘affective level of politics’. Rothberg sets up the divide here between the staging in official discourse of acts of ‘terrorism’ as a universal or global ‘terror’ and the ability of literature to stage its response to the official rhetoric. See Michael Rothberg, ‘Seeing Terror, Feeling Art: public and private in post-9/11 literature’, in *Literature after 9/11*, ed. by Ann Keniston and Jeanne Quinn (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 124.

⁴⁰⁰ Judith Butler, ‘Precarious Life’, in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 151.

Tuez-les tous

Despite its short length, Bachi's third novel, *Tuez-les tous*, is richly intertextual and complex; it is also a deeply poetic text. As Carine Bourget has shown, the title of the novel, 'Tuez-les tous', is an expression which can be traced back to a number of historical moments of 'terror'. It finds its root in the thirteenth-century Albigensian Crusade, specifically from a command given by the abbot of Citeaux, Arnaud Amaury, at the massacre at Béziers in 1209. In response to the question of how to distinguish Cathars from others in the town, the abbot apparently answered: 'Tuez-les tous, Dieu reconnaitra les siens'. Bourget goes on to note how the expression was also used by American soldiers in Vietnam: 'kill them all, let God sort them out', and in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, when one of the film's characters proposes destroying a whole species of bird in response to the attacks.⁴⁰¹ The image of 'the birds' as a figure for the planes, and the subsequent 'kill them all' reference, also functions as a broader metaphorical narrative of the attacks of September 11 and the subsequent US response.

The story, which plays back the experience of one of the hijacker-pilots in the hours leading up to the attack on the World Trade Centre, is told through a variety of third-person narration and direct speech.⁴⁰² The identity of the protagonist, who is from Algeria, remains unstable: he has no fixed name for the practical purpose of avoiding capture (described variously as San Juan, Seyf el Islam, 'Personne' or, simply, 'Pilote'), but

⁴⁰¹ Carine Bourget, 'Portrait of a Terrorist: Slimane Benaïssa and Salim Bachi's 9/11 Novels', in *The Star, The Cross, and The Crescent: Religions and Conflicts in Francophone Literature from the Arab World* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), pp. 150-51. More recently in 2004 (still before the publication of Bachi's novel) 'Tuez-les tous' was the title of a French documentary on the Rwandan genocide; *Tuez-les tous ! Rwanda : histoire d'un génocide sans importance*, dir. by Raphael Glucksmann, David Hazan & Pierre Mezerette (Dum Dum Films, 2004) [on DVD].

⁴⁰² Martin Amis also published, in 2006, a short story which in a similar manner charts the final days of the supposed leader of the terrorist cell responsible for the September 11 attacks, Muhammad Atta. See: 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta', *The Observer*, 31 August 2006, <http://www.martinamisweb.com/documents/lastdays_one.pdf> [accessed: 15 July 2015].

this also allows for the uprooting of the main character ready for his identity to be *mythified* once more, drawn here into what Bachi calls the ‘mythe agissant’ of the terrorist.⁴⁰³

The immediate narrative describes the night before the attack is carried out, taking as its setting a hotel room in the US city of Portland where the protagonist is staying. Within the early lines of the novel, in a number of highly caricatured scenes, we learn of the life of the protagonist as he takes a bath, sipping from a glass of champagne delivered by room service, paid for on his ‘MasterCard’, before launching into a violent, at times anti-Semitic, diatribe against Israel and the West. The third person narrative, mixed with a significant degree of free indirect speech – adding to the ambiguity of the narrative identity – gives an account of the protagonist’s political beliefs, which are drawn in extreme binary opposition to the supposed values of the West and particularly those of the US. One early example of this binary thinking is, interestingly, evidenced in the protagonist’s view of the film *Hiroshima mon amour*, a recurrent reference throughout the novel. Alain Resnais’ 1959 film, which explores the event of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima, staging the problem of seeing horror from insider and outsider perspectives in a multi-layered manner, and thus questioning viewer complicity in the violence depicted, is repeatedly described as a ‘sale titre de film vu dans une salle obscure à Paris’ (pp. 14, 41-42, 56). The protagonist has apparently seen the film, ‘quand il se civilisait’ (p. 14), fitting into the Paris he moved to after he left his native Cyrtha. Paris is staged here, early on in the novel, as the place where the ‘sale type sans histoires et sans Histoire’ became the ‘intégré en voie de désintégration’ who preferred ‘intégrisme’ over being ‘intégré’ (p. 15).⁴⁰⁴

As he continues to sip champagne in his hotel room, the protagonist learns of yet another ‘attentat [qui] avait secoué sa ville’ on the television news (p. 16). In Cyrtha, the general perception is that women and children are killed and raped, and throats are

⁴⁰³ Crowley, ‘Myth, Modernism, Violence and Form’, p. 8.

⁴⁰⁴ Bachi seems to make an ironic comment here on the legacy of the history of the cultural assimilation of Algerians, where they were historically required to ascend to citizenship in the *métropole*, despite the fact that colonial Algeria was considered to be an *integral* part of France.

regularly cut (pp. 17-18). The population of the city is described as having been reduced to ‘miettes’, where now official amnesty reigns and where ‘la mémoire appartient aux vainqueurs’ (p. 23). Since he left Cyrtha, the protagonist’s life in the West is described as a pursuit, in opposition to religious doctrine, of the material objects and experiences of the MasterCard, champagne, nightclubbing and women (pp. 29-30). Indeed, the figure of a scantily clad woman attempting to hail a taxi in the street is described as a symbol for the US; the protagonist is described as wanting to ‘[tuer] l’Amérique à travers elle’ (p. 34) – the narrator gives a brutal account of how the protagonist would cut her up into pieces and rape her.

As *Tuez-les tous* progresses, these more visible references to violence fade into the background. The protagonist is likened on more than one occasion to Hamlet, where the spectre of the father haunts the present quest for revenge. As in *Moi, Khaled Kelkal*, which we go on to explore, Paris is staged as a problematic postcolonial space – described here as a ‘ville étrangère’ (p. 45) – through which the protagonist passed before arriving in the US. We learn also of a former wife, who aborted a baby: ‘Elle refusa de porter son enfant et l’assassina dans son ventre’ (p. 48). This loss of a child is described as ‘la mort de son avenir’. And indeed it is this rupture with his wife and abortion of the child which drives the protagonist to the mosque, where he becomes ‘un homme sans visage, personne.’ (p. 49)

In a further reference to Resnais’ *Hiroshima mon amour*, it seems as if Hiroshima begins to affect the protagonist. Still described as a ‘sale titre de film’, the city of Hiroshima is substituted for New York in an image which at once prefigures the destruction and horror to come and transfigures Resnais’ palimpsest. In an image which also recalls the hidden trauma of the ‘décennie noire’, but this time in Cyrtha, the reader is introduced to a memory of the protagonist as a child, hiding in a dark cupboard – ‘un placard sombre et noir, derrière une porte close, sous laquelle filtrait parfois un rai de lumière’ (p. 87); here,

the child invents the ‘histoire absurde d’oiseaux’, which will function later as a metaphor for the planes flying into the Twin Towers. This foundational trauma is described as one of the ‘gamin forcé d’imaginer pour meubler son existence’ (p. 88). In the final images evoked before the event itself, the protagonist, sitting in the heat of the bath, recalls the images of children at Hiroshima he had been shown at a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan and is likened, in an image which recalls the disfigured bodies of Hiroshima, to a ‘foetus de six ans qui l’appelait Papa Papa, sauve-moi.’ (p. 110) He checks in for his flight, makes a final call to his handlers and boards the plane, fully realising the absurdity of the action he is about to take.

The event of the plane hitting one of the towers is evoked in the final paragraph of the novel, where the doors of the dark cupboard of the protagonist’s childhood are morphed into the door of the plane’s cockpit, and where he no longer knows his name – ‘son nom, il ne le savait plus’ (p. 153). Just before the plane hits, there is a literal inversion of the self-other binary, where the protagonist flying the plane, who becomes the Nietzschean ‘dernier homme’, sees multiple reflections of his own image in the kaleidoscope of mirrored glass of the tower. This moment is suddenly lost as the plane hits the glass, taking the protagonist into ‘la nuit noire et aveugle.’ (p. 153) This is the darkness and blindness of death, a blindness in the face of extreme violence committed against a perceived other, but it is also a sudden vision – a realisation. In the kaleidoscope, the pilot is presented with an infinite number of mirror images of himself – ‘[il] pénétra dans la salle du trône où il vit des milliers de miroirs qui l’entourent et reflétaient à l’infini ses multiples et effrayants visages’ (p. 153) – where the singular (reverence to a single God, a single text, a single self) is hopelessly, and tragically, pluralised, liquefied, universalised and preserved in the image of the face of horror – in the endless faces of the *self-as-other*.⁴⁰⁵ The novel ends

⁴⁰⁵ This final scene recalls Butler’s discussion of Emmanuel Levinas and his inscribing of ‘the face as the extreme precariousness of the other.’ Butler cites Levinas: ‘the face of the other in its precariousness and defencelessness, is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the “You shall not kill”’. The

here, but the reader knows what image follows. The tower falls, the kaleidoscope of mirrors – once symbolic of a Western arrogance, vanity, imperialism, and which for a single moment offered an image of a human being quite literally caught between the binary – collapses, forming pile upon pile of wreckage.⁴⁰⁶

This image stays with the reader, who perhaps sees themselves in the mirror reflection, where the unstable, fluid identity of our protagonist also returns – San Juan, Seyf el Islam, ‘Personne’, ‘Pilote’. If a comment on myth’s simultaneous ability to refer to and defer stable meaning, this blank canvass both places and displaces the author and, by extension, the reader. The fact that Bachi carries forward and mutates the name Seyf in this context is significant in that, as we have said, it occupies the other side of the binary: in *Le chien d’Ulysse* and *Les douzes contes de minuit*, Seyf is depicted as a police officer, part of the ruthless ‘BRB’; here Seyf is repeated but on the opposite side of a binary: previously a police officer working for the State, he is here called Seyf ‘el Islam’ and clearly works for the fundamentalists. If this binary replication seeks to say something of the ambiguity in establishing the roots of violence, it also seems to be something of a comment on how the binary itself produces such characters.

Moi, Khaled Kelkal

Invited to write for a series of the publishing house Grasset entitled ‘ceci n’est pas un fait divers’, in 2012 Bachi published his second terrorism focused novel, *Moi, Khaled Kelkal*. The narrative follows the real-life protagonist Khaled Kelkal, a 24-year old Algerian, who moved to France as a child with his family and was suspected of planting a bomb in the

face, for Butler, is the site of an ethical ‘struggle’ whereby our recognition of the precariousness of the other – and the ability to relate peacefully to the other on this basis – is dependent on the recognition that the other can be eliminated. See Butler, ‘Precarious Life’, pp. 134-35. The novel seems to stage a form of what Colin Davis calls ‘altericide’; see his book, *Ethical Issues in Twentieth-Century French Fiction: Killing the Other* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000).

⁴⁰⁶ This image recalls Walter Benjamin’s ‘Angelus Novus’ in the ninth of the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (1940). And, indeed, thereafter the US might be seen to be ‘propelled into the future to which its back is turned’ (quote adapted). See Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 257-58.

Paris metro which exploded at Saint-Michel in July 1995; Kelkal was subsequently shot dead by police in an ensuing man-hunt.⁴⁰⁷ The novel imagines the young man's voice from beyond the grave, exploring his upbringing in the *banlieues* of Lyon, suggesting a postcolonial itinerary for the young man who would, as the novel states, become the 'ennemi public no 1' (p. 65). It is thought that the attack and a series of other attempted attacks that same year were orchestrated by the GIA, whose strategy was to internationalise the fundamentalist cause in Algeria.⁴⁰⁸ Kelkal's killing, which had been filmed by a news crew, was later broadcast on French television, and gave rise to a heated debate in the French media. Shortly after the publication of Bachi's novel, the Franco-Algerian Mohammed Merah – another so-called 'radicalised' young Muslim – shot dead seven people in the city of Toulouse; in scenes resembling the Kelkal case, the police man-hunt finally caught up with Merah and he was shot dead. In the days following Merah's death, the French newspaper *Le Monde* commissioned Bachi to write an article, entitled 'Moi, Mohammed Merah', which, like the novel, reimagined the voice of Merah from beyond the grave.⁴⁰⁹ The author in effect asks the same questions he asks in his novel on Kelkal, in an article which, again, gave rise to fierce debate in France.⁴¹⁰

Just as *Tuez-les tous* unfolds within a twenty-four period, this later novel is *staged* in five sections (five *acts*) as a tragedy, with each act split into shorter scenes. In a far more referential story, Cyrtha is explicitly absent, signaling a potential exit from the all-

⁴⁰⁷ 'Moi, Khaled Kelkal' was initially the title given to an interview, published after Kelkal's death in October 1995, by a German sociologist who had been conducting doctoral research on the Lyon *banlieues* in 1992. Dietmar Loch had interviewed Kelkal as part of a wider research project studying young people of North African origin living in the Lyon suburb of Vaulx-en-Velin. His study is published in German as *Jugendliche maghrebischer Herkunft zwischen Stadtpolitik und Lebenswelt. Eine Fallstudie in der französischen Vorstadt Vaulx-en-Velin* (Weisbaden: VS-Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005). After the events of 1995, Loch's interview with Kelkal was published in *Le Monde*, 7 October 1995, p. 10.

⁴⁰⁸ This is seen to have been effective, but not in the interests of the GIA. After these attacks, a poll conducted in France revealed that 91% of French citizens supported the Algerian government policy of 'eradication'. See Evans & Phillips, p. 213.

⁴⁰⁹ Salim Bachi, 'Moi, Mohamed Merah', *Le Monde des livres*, 30 March 2012, <<http://www.paperblog.fr/5477915/317-moi-mohamed-merah-article-de-salim-bachi-et-les-reactions/>> [accessed 12 June 2014].

⁴¹⁰ In his recent interview with Bachi, Crowley helpfully points us towards a selection of articles which appeared at the time. See Crowley, 'Myth, Modernism, Violence and Form', pp. 4-5.

encompassing figure. Composed, for the most-part, in the first-person, Kelkal returns as a ghost and recounts his childhood growing up in the *banlieues* of Lyon.⁴¹¹ His expulsion from school leads to a life stealing cars and, having unwittingly committed the ‘crime impardonnable’ of stealing the BMW belonging to the chairman of the Olympique Lyonnais football team, Kelkal finds himself in prison (p. 55). The reader learns of Kelkal’s upbringing, his parents’ memories of Algeria (what he calls their ‘*prison de souvenirs*’ (p. 29)) and their investment in the fabled image of return to an Algeria that, as we soon find out, does not in reality exist: ‘Ils avaient été chassés du paradis [...] parlaient d’y retourner, enchantaient leur mémoire, se lamentaient de ne plus y être, se plaignaient sans cesse et n’agissaient plus, emprisonnés par leurs fantasmes.’ (p. 29) The reality, when Kelkal and his family do return to Algeria, is that they are stopped by customs, viewed with suspicion, made to wait for hours while their belongings are searched. ‘[F]ouillés comme des criminels’ in what has now become the ‘*paradis infernal*’ (p. 30), Kelkal and his parents are ‘absolument étrangers dans les deux pays’ (p. 32). The author thus recognises the myth associated with the trope of migrant literature itself – the myth of return to the mythologized homeland – and stages this alongside the myth of the terrorist Kelkal will become.⁴¹²

It is in prison that Kelkal discovers religion and meets those who will help make the bomb he will later plant on the RER train. The prison in which he was placed – rejected by French society – is the same space in which he is ‘radicalised’ and from which he will seek revenge. The prison also acts as a metaphor for memory, for the Lyon *cité* in which Kelkal grew up, the prison of the colonial past which (over)determines a post-colonial present, the prison of monolithic thought, the singular text (the Qur’an he studies) and indeed to some extent the text in front of the reader. Hereafter, the lines of text

⁴¹¹ Indeed, in both *Tuez-les tous* and *Moi, Khaled Kelkal*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is never far away.

⁴¹² Such a myth of return is recounted by Alec Hargreaves in his chapter, ‘Perceptions of place among writers of Algerian immigrant origin in France’, in *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration*, ed. by Russell King, John Connell & Paul White (London, Routledge, 1995), pp. 89-100.

become fragmented (the lines themselves begin to break up and run on without punctuation), especially when Kelkal makes a visit to Algeria at the behest of his parents, who are increasingly worried about the trouble he keeps finding himself in. The disordered prison of the violence of the 1990s is thus reinforced: ‘on me conduisait en une autre prison, plus redoutable, à l’échelle d’un pays sous le soleil des mouches, abasourdi de lumière’ (pp. 75-76). Kelkal’s ultimate despair is caused by the prison and all the forms it seemingly takes around him: ‘la prison t’a rendu malade de haine il vaut mieux fumer et rêver à la destruction du monde, à la mort des nations, à l’amour des demoiselles infernales...’ (p. 79). If depicting the violence of Kelkal’s life, the novel is, like *Tuez-les tous*, highly poetic, rhythmic and even musical in its language.

After the attack, Kelkal is described as being hunted ‘comme un animal’ by gendarmes and their dogs. In the final scene, he is shot dead by three gendarmes, who can apparently be heard shouting ‘finis-le, finis-le’ (p. 84). In the final passage Kelkal’s ghost recounts: ‘[j]e m’attendais donc à mourir comme j’ai vécu, ni simplement, ni tragiquement, mais sur scène, face aux caméras, sous les coups d’une mauvaise fortune. A-t-elle jamais été clémente pour moi et les miens?’ (p. 128) Kelkal’s death was broadcast on the television news that same evening.

Both *Tuez-les tous* and *Moi, Khaled Kelkal* work to create a dialogue between the two supposed sides and sites of terror, offering not just a voice, but a myth, a history and a stage to the otherwise hidden human being accused of perpetrating the act. The human being seems to be staged *as trauma* here, where the delayed act of terrorism emerges in the tragic theatre of twenty-first century terror, played out in a pattern of post-trauma. Indeed, in the theatre of ‘terror’, killing Kelkal, before any legal trail has been allowed to take place, is played out not just as an acceptable catharsis, but one which was inevitable, predetermined, prewritten. If, by critiquing the appropriation of the spectacle of tragedy to play out what is performed in the later novel as a form of revenge, Bachi’s novels sit

between the particular and the universal, these novels perhaps constitute an attempt on the part of the author to escape his own ‘*prison de souvenirs*’ situated in the violence of the ‘*décennie noire*’. In comments made in an interview, which we have cited as the epigraph to this chapter, Bachi notes: ‘*Pour écrire des livres sur l’Algérie, il fallait prendre de la distance [...] Paradoxalement, il faut s’éloigner pour se rapprocher de son pays et faire œuvre d’écrivain*’.⁴¹³ If *Cyrtha* is a result of the more immediate experience of Algeria in the 1990s, then its transfiguration (both explicit and implicit) into the cities of New York and Paris is perhaps the result of a critical rapprochement Bachi seeks to achieve in his novels. The hoped-for exit from *Cyrtha*, seemingly mapped within *Moi, Khaled Kelkal*, seems however to fail.

Moreover, by fictionalising the ‘*fait divers*’, Bachi’s post-9/11 works continually draw attention to the spectacle of violence at work within media organisations, where predetermined narratives and generic tropes or modes (such as the tragic) are regularly deployed alongside images which purport to describe a dispassionate ‘*reality*’. Here, again, the ‘*real*’ is subject to contestation within the bounds of the novel and the possibility of a symbolic violence surrounding the imposition of narrative is subject to interrogation.

Conclusion: exiting *Cyrtha*, exiting myth?

In his introduction to a 1990 special issue of *Sociological Perspectives*, David Harvey cites Adorno in his description of critical theory’s resistance to orthodoxy:

The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict a traditional form of adequacy [...] It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹³ Ali Remzi, ‘Salim Bachi’.

⁴¹⁴ Adorno, cited in David Harvey, ‘Introduction’, *Sociological Perspectives* 33, 1 “Critical Theory” (1990), p. 5.

This account of the ‘remainder’ of objects placed into concepts, whereby concepts cannot fully contain, or ‘exhaust’ in Adorno’s words ‘the thing conceived’, allows Harvey to introduce the notion of immanent critique, in which resides the ‘essence’ of critical theory in ‘its most revealing moments’.⁴¹⁵ In many ways, this description of immanent critique could be a description of the reader’s dialectical processing of Cyrtha and the attempt to posit the imaginary (Cyrtha) within the real (Algeria) or vice versa. The ‘untruth of identity’ comes when we see that despite our ability to place Cyrtha as ‘a thing conceived’ within ‘the concept’, which might here be a real Algeria, that ‘concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.’ In other words, Cyrtha survives its allegorical reading, it survives the exit from myth; it survives precisely in its written form, as ‘remainder’, modelled within Bachi’s texts where Cyrtha is a product of the characters’ multiple writings and own imaginations. If this works in a multi-directional way – if, in other words, Algeria is also ‘a thing conceived’ and placed within ‘the concept’ of Cyrtha – then the idea that these texts refer in a stable way is simultaneously maintained and rejected.

In this sense, immanent critique is invited by the internalisation of the writing process within the texts themselves. As the narrator of the final story, ‘Insectes’ in *Les douze contes de minuit*, describes, ‘Le manuscrit entre les mains de ses lecteurs constitue la seule garantie d’authenticité.’ Cyrtha is no more: ‘le monde en question a disparu [...] évanoui sous les strates de la terre et de l’histoire.’ (p. 190) And, yet, of course Cyrtha exists, in the textual declaration of its absence; no character, nor the writer nor the reader can destroy it. In Bernard Aresu’s reading, Bachi’s Cyrtha – and *Le chien d’Ulysse* more generally – brings about the continual transformation of one language by another; Aresu uses Derrida’s image of the ‘greffe’ to visualise this process of forcefully removing a seemingly natural growth of language and *grafting* it onto another (‘dans l’opération de [...] réinscription [...] dans la

⁴¹⁵ Harvey, p. 4.

greffe).⁴¹⁶ According to Derrida, it is a ‘transformation nécessairement violente’ which in many ways resembles myth in Barthes’ account as a movement from a ‘premier langage’ to a ‘langage second’,⁴¹⁷ in addition to Edward Said’s imagining of the shift from ‘filiation’ to ‘affiliation’ between which he writes of the coming into being of a ‘critical consciousness’.⁴¹⁸ These structures of inscription and of reinscription also work to bridge the personal and the political, much like in allegory, whereby reference is introduced but also still suspended between reality and its literary rewriting. Like all Algerians educated after independence, Hamid Kaïm is faced with what Aresu reads as the political ‘tragédie nationale de la post-indépendance’.⁴¹⁹ Like all Algerians born after 1962, Kaïm is implicated in Cherki’s ‘travail métaphorique’.⁴²⁰ But, more perhaps than at any other point in history since independence, they have been forced to live the 1990s as a ‘tragédie nationale’, within the bounds of the officially scripted narrative. Just as is drawn out in Kaïm’s character, and Bachi’s other characters, in Algeria the personal is the political, as identity takes on a quite new form after 1962. Bachi’s novels offer a visualisation of this process of prison-like narrativisations in which Algerians are inescapably implicated and must ‘work through’ in order to escape. Indeed, this language of ‘working through’ (borrowed from Dominick Lacapra’s work on trauma and the Holocaust) is used by Hiddleston in her discussion of how Djébar’s *Le Blanc de l’Algérie* is a text which ‘works through’ traumatic memories ‘by recogniz[ing] the transferential positions that we find ourselves in when reading about the past’.⁴²¹ Cyrtha, one might say, helps bring about such a ‘transferential’ state.

Crowley writes how ‘the image of Cyrtha’s future lies within its ruins, which in turn lie within pages written by the trilogy’s characters’.⁴²² In some ways, then, Cyrtha is posited

⁴¹⁶ Derrida, cited in Aresu, p. 182.

⁴¹⁷ Aresu, p. 179; Barthes, ‘Le mythe, aujourd’hui’, p. 220.

⁴¹⁸ Said, ‘Introduction: Secular Criticism’.

⁴¹⁹ Aresu, p. 180.

⁴²⁰ Cherki, p. 179.

⁴²¹ Hiddleston, ‘Political Violence’, p. 17.

⁴²² Crowley, ‘Mythologizing the City’, p. 282.

as a city like any other, like Hiroshima transfigured into the cities of New York and Paris.⁴²³ And indeed the image of the future of the United States did and perhaps still does lie within the ruins of the attacks of September 11 2001, just as the image of the future of France did and perhaps still does lie at the feet of the ungrievable and disposable lives of its excluded young men.⁴²⁴ However, Cyrtha also teaches us to look beyond the ruins of history; it teaches us, like the characters that write the mythical city, that we have a power to posit that very history which shapes the future. Cyrtha allows us to recognise that in its fundamentally *posited nature*, history has already shaped a future which is now past. If ‘the image of Cyrtha’s future lies within its ruins’, then it does so in recognition of the fact that Cyrtha has been written, and that it can and will continually be rewritten.

⁴²³ As Bonn writes: ‘Et même lorsque le roman décrit le lieu, il n’est pas lui-même inscrit dans ce lieu.’ Cited in Crowley, ‘Mythologizing the City’, p. 273.

⁴²⁴ Butler, ‘Precarious Life’.

Excursus Two

In Section One, we looked briefly at how Tahar Djaout's work had suffered a reductionist mark after his death in 1993. Killed supposedly at the hands of fundamentalists of the GIA, Djaout was framed as an engaged writer speaking out against the violence of the early 1990s. His posthumously published novel, *Le dernier été de la raison*, which depicts the bookseller Boualem Yekker's rejection of the doctrine of the omnipresent 'Frères Vigilants' was read as an encapsulation of the Algerian crisis in the face of what was seen as the rising tide of Islamist extremism.⁴²⁵ Such readings were polarizing, placing a 'secular' and peaceful art on one side and an 'archaic', backward focused and violent, religion on the other. Initial readings of the novel might have situated it in the political crisis of the 1990s, but the novel was a more complicated engagement with Algerian history. Published in 1999, the reception of this unfinished novel would also overshadow Djaout's earlier work, a complex meditation on Algerian history and nationalism. The purpose of the following Excursus is to introduce the reader to questions and debates surrounding the use of allegory, and reinventions of national allegory, in contemporary Algerian literature. We map out the debate surrounding the work of Djaout – a significant precursor to the writers studied in the following section, Djamel Mati and Habib Ayyoub. If these writers seek to re-imagine the Algerian nation, or the nation more generally, in a discontinuous and unstable discursive mode, we explore the possibility that allegory becomes a central counterpoint to the stable narrative or symbolic mode advanced by the State.

In her article on Tahar Djaout's 1987 novel, *L'Invention du désert*,⁴²⁶ Raji Vallury takes up Fredric Jameson's much debated essay, 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', in which the critic famously declares:

⁴²⁵ Tahar Djaout, *Le dernier été de la raison* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

⁴²⁶ Tahar Djaout, *L'invention du désert* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).

All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel.⁴²⁷

Jameson continues, stressing how the relation between the private and the public, between the personal and the political, are distinct within ‘third-world’ texts to the extent that ‘*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.*’⁴²⁸ Vallury addresses the criticisms made of Jameson’s essay by its most fierce critic, Aijaz Ahmad, and, although she deems it wise to accept Ahmad’s critique that by using the terms ‘all’ and ‘always’ – provocative though their intention may be – Jameson offers a reductive account of a host of works he cannot possibly know,⁴²⁹ takes the view, with Neil Lazarus, that this is the perfect time to reread Jameson as if we were reading it ‘for the first time’.⁴³⁰ Placing the emphasis on what she calls the ‘nation-ness’ of Jameson’s conception of the nation, Vallury attempts to save Jameson’s essay from Ahmad’s charge of a ‘(colonialist) blindness’.⁴³¹ One of Ahmad’s main issues with the text, as Vallury sees it, is to do with the problematic term ‘nation’ and the question over its ‘*a priori*’ intent. By citing Jameson elsewhere, Vallury is able to dispel claims of reductionism; Jameson has indeed considered literature’s relation to the nation in the broader sense of nation as a community: ‘all literature, no matter how weakly, must be informed by what we have called a political unconscious [...], all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation

⁴²⁷ Jameson, ‘Third-World Literature’, p. 69.

⁴²⁸ Jameson, ‘Third-World Literature’, p. 69.

⁴²⁹ See, Aijaz Ahmad, ‘Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the “National Allegory”’, *Social Text* 17 (1987), p. 4.

⁴³⁰ Lazarus, cited in Raji Vallury, ‘Walking the Tightrope between Memory and History: Metaphor in Tahar Djaout’s “L’invention du désert”’, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 41, 2-3 (2008), p. 320. Others supporting this return to Jameson include Pascale Casanova, ‘Combative Literatures’, *New Left Review* 72 (2011), pp. 123-34; Imre Szeman, ‘Who’s afraid of National Allegory? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100, 3 (2001), pp. 803–27. Casanova also edits the volume in which Jameson first appears in French; see: *Des littératures combattives: l’internationale des nationalismes littéraires* (Paris: Raisons d’agir, 2011).

⁴³¹ Vallury, p. 320.

on the destiny of community'.⁴³² However we name it, the nation, the 'national experience' in Lazarus' words,⁴³³ 'the destiny of community' are all prevalent in postcolonial literature today.

Citing Charles Bonn, Vallury goes on to suggest that what is important here is not that allegory affirms an ideological discourse, but that literature, defined in more general terms, denies the affirmative nature of ideological discourse, positing it instead negatively or more particularly interrogatively:

La littérature [...] n'affirme rien: affirmer est le rôle du discours idéologique, nécessaire à l'édification nationale, mais qui ne peut être efficace que s'il accepte sa perpétuelle mise en question par le texte littéraire et ce qu'on peut appeler son carnaval.⁴³⁴

Even if we read texts to be 'national allegories' in Jameson's terms, that doesn't take away from the inherent function of literature which is that of doubt, denial, and the fact of non-affirmation. In a recent essay, Jane Hiddleston demonstrates how Algerian literature has more recently 'expressed an increased sense of unease towards its own status and power' by staging forms of doubt within its pages.⁴³⁵ Though, at the same time, this interrogatory mode does not of course remove literature from the political realm. Bonn's view of literature's ability to continually question, echoes Mohammed Dib's view, articulated in the 'Postface' to a 1995 collection of short stories, *La Nuit Sauvage*, that the writer's job is to deploy an interrogative form to *un-teach* rather than merely teach: 'un écrivain n'enseigne pas, il désenseigne. Il n'apporte pas de réponses, il apporte des questions.'⁴³⁶ While one might initially see a relationship between (State) affirmation and its (literary) denial, there is

⁴³² Jameson, cited in Vallury, p. 320.

⁴³³ Lazarus, cited in Vallury, p. 321.

⁴³⁴ Bonn, 'Littérature algérienne et conscience nationale', p. 37; cited in Vallury, p. 321.

⁴³⁵ Jane Hiddleston, "'On peut apprendre de la littérature à se méfier": Writing and Doubt in the Contemporary Algerian Novel', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 20, 1 (2016), p. 59.

⁴³⁶ Dib, 'Postface', p. 246. This collection of short stories is itself subject to a broader move to 'un-teach' the ideological readings of fiction during the 'décennie noire': Dib is republishing a version of the title story initially published in 1963 and at least implicitly asks the question of how the reading of his story has changed in the context of these different times. On this, see Kessous and Stafford.

it would seem a danger of this being another binary construction of literature within stable referential terms. As we have seen, literature's particularity, and as we shall see more particularly here allegory's function, is that reference and meaning are continually suspended and hence must be placed at a distance from the binary structure of affirmation and negation, given they vehicle a crucial interrogation. Returning to these comments on literature's negative or interrogative mode in relation to ideological discourse, Bonn and Vallury allow for a tentative return to Jameson's text in particular relation to contemporary Algerian literary production.

In the case of Djaout, if the later novel was framed within a new ideological horizon, Vallury's readings of national allegory in Djaout's earlier novel untangle literary fiction from its horizon of reception. *L'Invention du désert* is a multi-layered text which charts the journey of the narrator who has been asked by a French publisher to write the history of the Almoravid Berber dynasty in North Africa (c. 1040-1147). The novel is structured in four parts: in the first two sections of the novel, we follow the exiled Algerian narrator's attempts to write the history of the Almoravids through the figure of Mohammed Ibn Toumert (1080- c. 1130) – the leader and founder of the Almohad dynasty (c. 1121-1269) which would defeat and succeed the Almoravids. Beginning in the Parisian setting where the narrator has been asked to produce this work of history, we are soon transported to the space of the desert and to Ibn Toumert's travels across the desert. These various crossings of the unnamed deserts are layered on top of a personal narrative of the narrator-writer's great-grandfather and his own crossings of the desert, before ceding in the fourth and final section to the narrator's crossing of his own metaphorical desert recalling the memories of his childhood growing up in Algeria. Djaout's text employs the allegorical figure of the desert – the slippery space of erasure par excellence, upon which nothing can be written without a degree of impermanence and a sense of constant movement and reconfiguration – and his characters' travels through the desert, as a way of continually deferring reference

within the text to such a point that the reader is never able to place the story in one historical time. As Hiddleston has argued elsewhere, if Djaout's novel 'is an endeavour to understand the present by means of its links with the past', it can in no sense be said to offer 'a reassuring vision of the [Algerian] people's trajectory as a whole.'⁴³⁷

In Bensmaïa's reading, which is informed by Bhabha, the text performs the impossibility of imagining the nation through a number of attempts to posit national allegories with which the reader could identify.⁴³⁸ He shows how in its continual redrawing of time and space, the desert as setting for the many layers of the novel is a space which continually defers stable reference and the possibility of national allegory as Jameson foresaw. One of the major points of contention with Jameson's text is its uniting of poetic and political allegories; Benaïssa's reading shows how Djaout's text is primarily a poetic allegory of the nation, which can never be fixed in one single space. If Vallury agrees in many respects with Benaïssa's reading of Djaout's text, she also claims that his reading of Jameson does something of an injustice to the nuances of his text. For Vallury, Jameson's concept of the national allegory allows us to think through what she calls the 'constitutive interrelatedness of aesthetics and politics in postcolonial literature' which, in Djaout's novel takes 'the nation as the terrain of this mutual imbrication.'⁴³⁹ Where Bensmaïa had seen Djaout's novel to deploy a poetic strategy of a constant deferral of the nation as stable referent, Vallury reads the novel as bridging politics and aesthetics, as one can be seen to exist within the other. In Vallury's account of Jameson's thesis, the private and public, the poetic and the political, are bridged in a challenge to a divide, she claims, 'constitutive of the very experience of modernity.'⁴⁴⁰ Djaout's text is seen by Vallury as a broader challenge

⁴³⁷ Jane Hiddleston, 'Rewriting Algeria, Past and Present: History and Cultural Politics in Two Novels by Tahar Djaout', in *The Fiction of History*, ed. by Alexander Lyon Macfie (New York: Routledge 2015), p. 153.

⁴³⁸ Réda Bensmaïa, 'Postcolonial Nations: Political or Poetic Allegories? (On Tahar Djaout's *L'invention du désert*)', in *Experimental Nations, or, The Invention of the Maghreb* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 67-81.

⁴³⁹ Vallury, p. 326.

⁴⁴⁰ Vallury, p. 324.

to the modern experience which had advanced such a split which she names the ‘false dichotomy of the poetic and the political.’⁴⁴¹

According to Vallury, allegory in Jameson’s text embodies the very heterogeneity that Bensmaïa takes from Bhabha in his reading of Djaout, which she claims misses the crucial tension in Djaout’s novel ‘not only *within* the structure of allegory but also *between* allegories, between two or more conflicting metaphors of the nation, or even between two or more uses of metaphor.’⁴⁴² Vallury takes issue with Bensmaïa’s reading because it ‘ignores the metaphors the novel constructs in order to battle previously given “dead metaphors” of nation.’⁴⁴³ The argument here hinges on the work’s performance of its own metaphoricality and Vallury cites both Jameson and Walter Benjamin to make her point. Bensmaïa’s charge that Jameson fails to understand ‘the shifts and displacements between the literal and the figural’ in allegory is seen to have been already addressed by Jameson in his article: ‘The allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogenous representation of the symbol’.⁴⁴⁴ The suggestion that allegory moves beyond a ‘homogenous’ symbolic representation resonates with Benjamin’s understanding of allegory as ‘a form of expression’ that moves beyond ‘a mere mode of designation’.⁴⁴⁵ As Howard Caygill underlines, allegory ‘[annihilates] natural meaning’. For Caygill, Benjamin’s idea of allegory means ‘allegory of meaning is itself allegorized – the state of fragmentation is itself fragmented, allowing the possibility of putting into question the destruction of meaning.’⁴⁴⁶ By bringing into focus its own mediating function, allegory can be seen to perform the act

⁴⁴¹ Vallury, p. 339

⁴⁴² Vallury, p. 328.

⁴⁴³ Vallury, p. 328.

⁴⁴⁴ Jameson, cited in Vallury, p. 327.

⁴⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 162.

⁴⁴⁶ Howard Caygill, ‘Walter Benjamin’s Concept of Allegory’, *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory* ed. by Rita Copeland & Peter T. Struck (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), p. 249. See also Quilligan on the reader in allegory (pp. 225-28). Benjamin articulates his thinking on allegory most extensively in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, but also later in his sections on Baudelaire in *The Arcades Project* (London: Belknap Press, 1999), pp. 228-387.

of writing literature within the text where, to recall Derrida and Harrison, meaning and reference are placed self-consciously *in suspense*.⁴⁴⁷

To relate this to our reading of Mati and Ayyoub's texts, we will see that we are dealing with material which experiments with the modernist forms of the novel and the short story. If allegory offers a more self-evident protection from censorship, the turn to allegory exhibited by these writers seems also to be a result of an anxiety about how reference and meaning had already been introduced by critics and readers.

Allegory, as we will see in Mati and perhaps more so in Ayyoub, is principally and profoundly unstable, whose points of reference are subject to 'constant change and transformation at each perpetual present of the text.'⁴⁴⁸ Allegory is a 'predicament' here, not necessary a reliable tool for reading texts.⁴⁴⁹ As Benjamin elaborates:

Allegory has to do, precisely in its destructive furor, with dispelling the illusion that proceeds from all "given order," whether of art or of life: the illusion of totality or of organic wholeness which transfigures that order and makes it seem endurable. And this is the progressive tendency of allegory.⁴⁵⁰

If Jameson collapses the division between the poetic and the political, allegory becomes the site at which these two elements can be recast. Through allegory, Jameson claims, 'the intellectual produces both poetry and praxis.'⁴⁵¹ As we will see, Mati and Ayyoub's texts continually re-imagine the nation in a discontinuous and unstable discursive mode using allegory to begin to 'dispel', to use Benjamin's words, a given narrative order. It is, therefore, in their discursive mode that literary texts offer a counterpoint to narrative modes which continually fix ideas of the nation space. If, as Osborne writes, 'historical narrative has lost its living relationship to the present' then perhaps we can begin to speak of 'narrative *as opposed* to discourse', where the literary text can begin to reimagine and

⁴⁴⁷ See Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p. 139.

⁴⁴⁸ Jameson, 'Third-World Literature', p. 73.

⁴⁴⁹ See Caygill, p. 251. As Caygill adds, Benjamin sees 'modern culture [as] intrinsically allegorical' (ibid.).

⁴⁵⁰ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 331 [J57, 3].

⁴⁵¹ Jameson, 'Third-World Literature', p. 75.

recast the dead spaces of history.⁴⁵² In Osborne's reading of Benjamin, it is modernity which has become the site of a 'crisis' in the relation between narrative and discursive forms of history.⁴⁵³ One crucial site of articulating this crisis of modernity is the nation.

In the following two chapters, it is argued that rather than explore potential allegories of contemporary Algerian society and politics in a fixed affirmative or ideological manner, the works of these contemporary writers continue to *reinvent* Djaout's desert as a fluid and ever-changing allegory of the Algerian nation, emphasising moreover what Bhabha calls the 'disjunctive temporality' of the 'liminal figure of the nation-space'.⁴⁵⁴ I will argue that by their continual *reinvention* of the temporally and spatially disjunctive desert, and by focusing on the very process of invention, writing and representation, these works are able to move beyond the unidirectional symbol, recasting the metaphorical sphere of allegory itself, creating what Vallury calls the 'productive tension [...] through a suspension of ordinary reference and a "*projection* of new possibilities of *re*describing the world".⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵² Here, Osborne refers to Benveniste's linguistics, p. 133.

⁴⁵³ Osborne, p. 133.

⁴⁵⁴ Bhabha, 'DissemiNation', p. 212.

⁴⁵⁵ Vallury, p. 328 (citing Ricœur; my emphasis latterly).

Section Three: Reinventing the Desert, Recasting the Nation

Chapter Four

Djamel Mati's *élucubrations*: recasting symbol, rethinking allegory

Le discours parle selon les intérêts du lecteur. Par quoi l'on voit que l'écriture n'est pas la communication d'un message qui partirait de l'auteur et irait au lecteur; elle est spécifiquement la voix même de la lecture: *dans le texte, seul parle le lecteur.*

– Roland Barthes⁴⁵⁶

Aldous Huxley, in his well-known essay charting his experimentation with the hallucinogenic drug mescaline, recounts the experience as a confrontation with what he calls 'a reality greater than a mind, accustomed to living most of the time in a cosy world of symbols'.⁴⁵⁷ Huxley's experience of everyday reality as he understood it reveals how it is staged in its multiple symbolic layers before him. The 'reality greater than mind' is then something bigger than the symbolic nature of a 'reality' perceivably lived. But, according to the author, taking illicit drugs has not been the only way of transcending the monotony of an everyday life of symbols. Taking H. G. Wells' image of the 'Door in the Wall', Huxley proposes that art is one place which has allowed us to step into a new world which permits us to look back at the stage of a life of symbols out of which we have stepped; indeed it allows us to see the world as constructed in an order of symbols, where metaphor (Wells' door) creates a crucial counterpoint where one's mind is both attached and detached from reality – suspended between the "is" and the "is not" – aided and abetted by hallucinogenic drugs.⁴⁵⁸ Such a suspended vision seems to resonate with literature or art in general and with allegory in particular.

⁴⁵⁶ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, in *Œuvres complètes*, tome II (Paris: Seuil, 1994 [1970]), p. 657.

⁴⁵⁷ Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception: and Heaven and Hell* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 33.

⁴⁵⁸ Vallury, p. 328 (citing Ricœur). See also Max Silverman's introductory comments to his chapter 'Trips, Tropes and Traces. Reflections on Memory in French and Francophone Culture', in *Anamnesia: Private and Public Memory in Modern French Culture*, ed. by Peter Colier et al. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 17-28. Of particular interest is his use of Huxley before he gives a description of metaphor as both technique and trope

An engineer, by profession, turned writer of literary fiction, Djamel Mati is one example among many in Algeria today who has balanced writing with a professional career. Having written what would become *Sibirkaï.com*, the first novel in a trilogy subtitled ‘les élucubrations d’un esprit tourmenté’, his wife had without his knowledge taken the manuscript with her on a trip to France and handed it to a number of publishers.⁴⁵⁹ The publishing house Marsa, which had launched as a separate initiative of the journal *Algérie Littérature/Action*, accepted the work, which was published and released as a supplement to the journal in 2003.⁴⁶⁰ The two other works which follow in the ‘élucubrations’ *triptyque* are titled *Aigre-Doux* and *On dirait le Sud*, published in 2005 and 2007 by Apic in Algeria.⁴⁶¹ In this chapter, I wish to use Huxley as a springboard to explore the uses of the hallucinogenic fantasy and dream in Djamel Mati’s literary *triptyque*.⁴⁶² The experimentation with literary mode and genre, as realism and fantasy are intricately and paradoxically woven together, allows the writer to reassess not just the events of the 1990s in Algeria, but the events as they were subsequently recounted, in a number of narrative and symbolic structures. If Mati’s texts deploy an experimental aesthetic which challenges a fixed idea of allegory propagated by the Algerian State’s own national story, they can also be seen to

which allows for the transformation of our ‘habitual reality into something more profound [...] something more complex, ambiguous and intangible.’ (p. 18)

⁴⁵⁹ Personal interview with the author, conducted in Algiers (April 2014).

⁴⁶⁰ The novel was released as a supplement to nos. 73-74 of the journal *Algérie Littérature/Action* by Marsa in 2003. References to the text are henceforth made parenthetically.

⁴⁶¹ Djamel Mati, *Aigre-Doux* (Algiers: Apic, 2005); *On dirait le Sud* (Algiers: Apic, 2007). References to these texts are henceforth made parenthetically. Mati’s other works include a play *Fada! Fatras de maux* (Algiers: Apic, 2004) and *L.S.D.* (Algiers: Alpha, 2009) a novel which imagines the journey through the history of humanity through the eyes of Lucy (from the Beatles song ‘Lucy in the sky with Diamonds’) and of Charles Darwin Jr. (Darwin’s grandson). With *L.S.D.*, Mati changes publisher to Editions Alpha. In our interview, and accepting with grace the aid of his previous publishers, Mati recounts the difficulties of dealing with publishers and their demands to adapt his often experimental narratives so that they fit into a neater framework for the sake of sales. In one example, he notes how a significant French press (he does not name it) had agreed to accept *Sibirkaï.com* for publication on the grounds that he made changes to the story, including adding actual place names, which would have made of the novel a more referential work. As Mati recounts in response to a question about why he refused to make the requested changes: ‘Je trouvais que c’était pour mieux vendre, précisant les noms des lieux, même le nom du président. Je trouvais que c’était trop, trop court comme littérature; si je voulais faire, je l’aurais fait et je l’aurais bien vendu en France. [...] La littérature c’est quelque chose, pour moi, qui est trop pur pour être galvaudé.’ (Personal interview)

⁴⁶² The use of the term ‘triptyque’ over, say, ‘trilogie’ is perhaps not innocent.

encourage the reader to think about how they themselves are living within a narrative and allegorical world, which is to a significant degree *already* written.

We argue that what is ultimately problematised in Mati's works is the door itself, or the *passage through* the door, which at once obscures and mediates an ideological narrative. One of the main aims of the chapter is to read Mati's novels as allegories of the nation which draw attention to an instability inherent in allegory itself. Beginning within the more fixed space of the symbol, I then go on to explore to what extent we can judge his literary work to move into the allegorical realm and in what ways this allows the reader to visualise and to travel *back through* the mediating screen, the door in the wall, or to bring a halt to what Barthes calls the 'tourniquet de forme et de sens' operational within myth.⁴⁶³

The desert *triptyque*

Set in the seemingly innocuous space of a bedroom, the story of *Sibirkafi.com* opens with its first person narrator, unable to sleep, switching on the television and watching a film. At this point, the narrative leaves the stable space of reality and slips into a world of the nameless narrator's dreams and dystopian visions, as he appears to pass through the screen. The setting for the parallel universe is the eponymous 'sibirkafi', a desert shack (a cybercafé), located deep in the Algerian Sahel at the so-called 'Point B114', which we learn in an interview with the author is a 'point géographique' which exists somewhere between the Algerian desert towns of Bordj-Badji-Mokhtar and Reggane.⁴⁶⁴ It is in this parallel microcosmic world that a series of unusual characters emerge and events take place, fuelled by the fact that most characters are hooked up to an interlinked system of *narguilés* (shisha

⁴⁶³ Barthes, 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui', p. 197.

⁴⁶⁴ See Nesrine, 'Quelques pages avec Djamel Mati', *Dzjeriet*, April 2009, <<http://www.djamelmati.info/entretiens/textes/quelquespagesavec.pdf>> [accessed 6 January 2015]. In our interview, Mati explains that the various 'Points B' of the desert were inspired by actual watering points in the Sahel, marked by fuel barrels left by the French army and apparently visible on some colonial maps of Algeria. Interestingly, Reggane was the site of French nuclear tests and the first French nuclear explosion occurred here in 1960. See, Jean-Marc Regnault, 'France's Search for Nuclear Test Sites, 1957-1963', *The Journal of Military History* 67, 4 (2003), p. 1227.

pipes) regularly replenished by the sibirkaifi authorities with ‘chanvre indien’ (a particularly hallucinogenic strain of locally grown cannabis). Desperately attempting to recall an email address to send for help (email is apparently the only way to communicate through the cyber-*narguilés*, which also deliver the mind-dulling drugs), the narrator soon realises he is trapped in this nightmarish place with a number of other so-called ‘loques-à-terre’, unable to send for help, linked by helmets to the *narguilés*, sat on mats which appear to float in the haze of the smoke from the *narguilés*. As it turns out, the emails the narrator sends are emails to the other half of his split self as part of the unending cycle of imprisonment in an increasingly vast yet inescapable space that is at once the desert, the narrator’s own ‘esprit tourmenté’ and seemingly the nation itself.

Aigre-Doux is a longer text which, like the previous one, presents sometimes interlinked, sometimes detached scenes, offered to the reader in a series of short chapters. The narrative begins in what appears to be the still nameless narrator’s home, located in an unidentified Algerian city Casbah. In *Aigre-Doux*, the first-person narrator is woken by his wife from a deep sleep induced by sleeping pills. The story is initially set in a dark, nightmarish, post-apocalyptic city, where crowds march on the streets, complaining that they have been ‘déconnectés’, switched ‘OFF’ by a disembodied ‘ILS’. The narrator is presented with a world where there exists no ‘intermédiaire entre le “ON” et le “OFF”’ (p. 22). The authorities have banned the ubiquitous satellite dishes, which famously adorn Algiers apartment blocks, and the television screens have given way to a black and white crackle, mirroring ‘les perspectives monochromes’ of those watching (p. 24).

In his attempts to escape the nightmarish reality, the narrator regularly takes his ‘pilules au goût aigre-doux’ (p. 27), which throughout the novel lead him into hallucinogenic dreams where ‘le réel est souvent plus supportable lorsqu’il passe de l’autre côté du miroir.’ (p. 28) This slippage to the other side allows the narrator to escape the horrors experienced in this darkened post-apocalyptic city space. Trapped between the

‘irréel insupportable’ of the bittersweet pills and of a ‘triste réalité que je vis et qui va me rendre fou’ (p. 43), he leaves his wife and the city apartment and begins his quest to return to the desert imagined in his dreams. Taking with him the ‘pilules hallucinogènes’, the nameless narrator slips between the perceived real world and that of the imagined, dreamt, hallucinated desert world. As he leaves the city, the narrator describes how he discovers and walks through the ‘porte du désert’ (p. 72), which in turn frames the series of detached narratives, forcing the reader to question whether the narrator is awake or dreaming. As we return to what we think to be the ‘real’ story, the narrator drives south to the desert – in anticipation of the third novel in the trilogy, his ‘esprit s’évade vers le Sud’ – where he encounters again the ‘loques-à-terre’ and other characters from the sibirkaï. The narrator sees and reaches a shack and can drive no further beyond the crowd that meets him. ‘Brusquement’, we are told, ‘un rideau tombe!’ (p. 253) and the reader is rather suddenly transported to a final scene where the narrator describes his metamorphosis into a woman, as he recounts finding himself ‘à l’autre côté de mon miroir’ (p. 260).

If the plots of these first two novels seem in many ways to represent the events of the 1988 uprisings as well as the early 1990s, they can also be seen to begin to problematise this very process of representation and reference. The narrator’s pills resemble Evans and Phillips’ description of how, with the often unpredictable and indiscriminate nature of violence committed during the 1990s, many Algerians were prescribed tranquillisers in order to sleep at night.⁴⁶⁵ The description of the lack of an ‘intermédiaire entre le “ON” et le “OFF”’ in *Aigre-Doux* (p. 22) also seems to bring into focus the harsh realities of the violence as well as the dystopian image of the authority asserting a binary control over people’s minds. However, in its constant slippage between the real and the dream, and with its attention to intermediary space, the novel also constitutes a deeper reflection on questions of allegory and reference, rather than simply offering a narrative which would be

⁴⁶⁵ Evans & Phillips, p. 202.

representative of the period. By beginning in the ‘real’ world and moving into the world of the dream, not only do Mati’s first two novels begin to question the reliability of the realist mode to describe events, but they perform what Bhabha calls a ‘temporality of the “in-between”’.⁴⁶⁶ The split self, which crosses over from man to woman, will also recall Bhabha’s discussion of the ‘double-writing’ necessary in generating an image of the nation. These themes, which are explored further in Mati’s final novel of the *triptyque*, also recall Khatibi’s ‘double critique’, deemed necessary to travel between Western and Islamic metaphysics and resulting in what Bensmaïa calls the ‘poetical androgyne’.⁴⁶⁷

On dirait le Sud follows the journeys of three main characters at once through the physical desert of the Sahel of southern Algeria and the psychological deserts of their minds. Like the previous two novels, the novel contains a number of scenes which might initially be seen to be representative of the ‘décennie noire’. However, as we will see, the novel can further be read as a story of the difficult process of reading and writing the nation and as a comment on the possibilities of national allegory. While the first two novels are arranged in a number of short chapters, with a disjointed first-person narration, and if this leads to the reader feeling less able to identify a coherent plot in these works, *On dirait le Sud* is more readable as it introduces named characters, a more linear plot and a third person narrator.

We are introduced to three main characters: Zaïna, Iness and Neil. Zaïna is held captive at the sibirkafi by a mysterious and spectral beast-like figure, while Iness and Neil meet at Iness’ marriage ceremony in a local Tuareg tribe. Neil, the European sailor who arrives in the desert from the north after an accident had led to the sinking of his boat, elopes with Iness. The three characters are split across a supposed two-dimensional desert: ‘le désert des hommes’ and ‘le désert du temps’. Neil and Iness are in one dimension, while

⁴⁶⁶ Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation’, p. 212.

⁴⁶⁷ Bensmaïa, ‘Multilingualism and National “Traits”’, p. 147.

Zaïna is trapped within the other. As the story progresses, Neil and Zaïna establish, much to the envy of Iness, a ‘relation onirique’ across the two dimensions of the desert. After a long journey across the desert, and with numerous strange encounters within its various oases and mirages, Neil and Iness finally cross this divide, meeting Zaïna at the ‘Point B114’, where the now emblematic sibirkaï still exists. Reunited at the cardinal point of the B114 – in its ‘inquiétante quiétude’ – it is rather Iness and Zaïna, representing each side of the same mirror, who are brought together here by Neil (the apparent ‘lien’ being the mirror image of the name Neil). Neil leaves the sibirkaï – the two sides of the same split self reunited in Zaïna and Iness – and returns north to find his car still stuck in the desert sand; he abandons the car as the sea calls him back. But he soon realises it is in fact at the ‘Point B114’ the car had become trapped and where Iness and Zaïna are nowhere to be seen inside the uninhabited desert shack. It seems, then, that Neil – himself the imagined link between Iness and Zaïna – has dreamt the whole episode.

From symbol to allegory?

If Bourdieu reminds us that symbolic power can be represented by a ‘cercle dont le centre est partout et nulle part’,⁴⁶⁸ Mati perhaps picks up on this notion in relation to the figure of the ‘Point B114’, when we are reminded that this point is ‘au milieu de nulle part et partout’ (*On dirait*, p. 245). But the novels do not simply present a symbol of the Algerian nation in the B114 or the sibirkaï, but rather interrogate the very existence of the nation and its symbolic function by staging the idea of ‘nation-ness’ outside the fixity of symbolic reference within a more complex allegorical structure.⁴⁶⁹ By splitting the desert into two separate dimensions, the novel opens up the already existing gap between the real and the

⁴⁶⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Langage et pouvoir symbolique* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), p. 202. The same image is also used by Bourdieu to describe what he calls the literary International; see Crowley, ‘Literatures in French Today’, p. 414.

⁴⁶⁹ Neil Lazarus, ‘Fredric Jameson on “Third World Literature”: A Qualified Defense’, in *Fredric Jameson: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Sean Homer & Douglas Kellner (New York: Palgrave, 2004), p. 59.

dream, between what is seemingly fixed and what is at the limits of our understanding, but it also incorporates the possibility of a new allegory; this time of language – more particularly what Khatibi refers to as the ‘bi-langue’ – to which we return in a moment.

Besides the broader symbolic or allegorical function of the ‘Point B114’, the multitude of visions conjuring the events of the 1990s will be more than obvious to a reader familiar with contemporary Algeria. The figure of the half beast-half human in *On dirait le Sud*, which reminds of the Minotaur in *Aigre-Doux* and perhaps of the ‘voleur des bijoux’ of *Sibirkaï.com*,⁴⁷⁰ looms as a spectre of the 1990s violence, where the amnesiac Zaïna – switched ‘OFF’, perhaps as a result of official State amnesia of the immediate post-1990s – is haunted by the presence of this violent figure. Indeed, it is the hallucinations that allow her, and us the reader, to *see* this absurd world unfold where the ‘mensonge fait vivre’ and the burlesque reality is no longer something to laugh at. If the movement towards what is referred to as the ‘désert du temps’, and away from the repressive ‘désert des hommes’, on one level reflects an escape from the control of a patriarchal power, perhaps representative of the paternalistic Algerian State or elements of religious doctrine which had become more acutely visible during the 1990s, it is, on another level, an escape from the limits of stable and fixed codes of literary realism and representation which in Mati’s novel enter the realm of a constantly deferred time of the desert which continually rewrites and recasts stable meaning and reference. In this sense, the ‘désert du temps’ is a recognition of the ‘liminal figure of the nation-space’ and its ‘disjunctive temporality’.⁴⁷¹ Moreover, the transition might be seen as moving from a pre-scripted narrative form in the ‘désert des hommes’ (a kind of structured totalising ‘champ’) to the relative freedom of the discursive in the ‘désert du temps’ where historical time can be rewritten.

⁴⁷⁰ The Minotaur is a prominent figure inaugurated by Dib in *Qui se souvient de la mer*: while read by Déjeux as representative of the colonialist repression during the Algerian War, Louis Tremaine argues that the Minotaur figures are far less distinguishable and should be read as such. See Louis Tremaine, ‘Psychic Deformity in Mohammed Dib’s “Qui se souvient de la mer”’, *Research in African Literatures* 19, 3 (1988), p. 287.

⁴⁷¹ Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation’, p. 212.

As illustrated by Neil's forgetting of the trauma of the sinking of the boat he once captained and the loss of his fellow sailors, the desert is a space without memory or history. In *Aigre-Doux*, it is in the figure of an hourglass that this constant erasure and re-scripting of history and its traces are embodied. The hourglass, which enters one of the many scenes of the eclectic novel, serves here as a metaphor of the multi-dimensional desert, where sand continually redraws the traces it had previously left. And so the characters' normal points of reference to memory and to historical time are constantly erased and repositioned. By entering the 'désert du temps', historical time is again rewritten; but it is also, in its desert space, a time continually subject to being overwritten within the bounds of each side of the hourglass which itself contains a particular vision of time. Like the real, time becomes a desert in the face of our inability to fix it, or to grasp its true meaning. Yet, it is still something appropriable within a broader set of discursive relations.

If the crossing to the 'autre côté du miroir', through the 'porte du désert' (*Aigre*, p. 72), is representative of the transition of the narrative from an unsupportable reality characterised by violence to the dream of the desert, that desert space also becomes something of a 'nightmarish apparition' haunted by the ghosts of the reality from which the characters are trying to escape.⁴⁷² Hence, Mati's desert space does not simply model a move away from a reality which becomes the nightmare, it partially recreates that nightmare within a new setting. If this is the case, literature's ability to offer a simple escape from the violence of reality can be questioned, especially given that reality will always be held in suspense between the event and its literary account. While the temptation is to look for some kind of 'narrative closure' in allegory, it is also clear that the foundations upon which the narrative is built are unstable. It is in the focus on the 'miroir' or the 'porte' that the novel draws attention to the construct of narrative itself as it sits *between* a number of

⁴⁷² Žižek, 'Passions of the real, Passions of semblance', p. 19.

competing realities. This in turn reveals the *tension between* existing allegories of nation and new allegories which seek in Vallury's terms to '*battle*' what is 'previously given'.⁴⁷³

The multiple screens through which Mati's narrators and characters pass – the mirror, the television and, as we will soon see, the microwave – are at once visible and invisible, sometimes uncannily reflective, sometimes opaque and can be read as representative of ideological screens which mediate the reader's vision and transition between the perception of reality and its imaginary counterpart. There is a potential danger here of over-valourising the spaces of dream or fantasy, reifying them in a binary opposition to the real. If read as offering an escape from the nightmare of the real in the bounds of fantasy and the dream, Mati's novels might be accused of merely offering a negative double of the realism and so-called *urgence* of the 'décennie noire'. Yet it seems equally important to recognise that Mati's works deploy a far more uprooted form of representation. If the 'Point B114' is a symbol which is a product of a host of competing narrations, the reader is perhaps able to realise only a fragmented image of the Algerian nation through it: in *Sibirkaï.com*, the 'Point B114' is a stable geographical point of reference, but also contains the dystopian space of the sibirkaï within it, where occupants are hooked up to futuristic cyber-*narguilés*, drugged and fed an official narrative which emerges from their pipes; in *Aigre-Doux*, the 'Point B114' is an apocalyptic city space where geographies are subject to disruption and change; both of these novels seem to encapsulate Algeria of the 1990s, but in different and discontinuous ways. The first seems to present a more absolute dystopia, while the second is perhaps a failed attempt to re-enter the space of the city. *On dirait le Sud* presents the 'Point B114' in a stable geography, like in *Sibirkaï.com*, yet the inhabitants have left, apart from the half human-half beast and his prisoner Zaïna. The 'Point B114' has a reputation for being haunted by djinns, the local tribes avoid it and it is a place where Zaïna is regularly raped. Yet by the end of this novel, it is a space full of a sense of hope.

⁴⁷³ Vallury, p. 328.

These contradictions, reinforced by the split between the ‘désert des hommes’ and the ‘désert du temps’, which risk being understood in binary terms, necessitate a figure like Neil (the ‘lien’) in order not simply to cross between the boundary of the two split sides of the desert, but to ultimately break the division entirely. By travelling between these zones, and by inventing figures and characters which enable transition between these spaces, Mati’s novels recall Khatibi’s figure of the ‘professional traveler’ introduced in his text, *Un été à Stockholm*, and associated by Bensmaïa with the figure of the ‘bi-langue’, mentioned earlier and which Khatibi introduces in his novel, *Amour bilingue*.⁴⁷⁴ In Bensmaïa’s reading, the ‘bi-langue’ is coterminous with the ‘professional traveler’, which he also names, the ‘professional stranger’ and the ‘professional writer’.⁴⁷⁵ For Khatibi, the ‘bi-langue’ writer belongs to two worlds at once, they are a ‘passeur’ not just between two worlds but two languages. In a further passage which seems to reflect in particular the character of Neil, the European sailor who mysteriously appeared stranded in the desert, who has no set agenda and who leaves as aimlessly as he arrived, Bensmaïa writes:

Professional travelers can never know in *advance* who they are, where they are, where they come from, where they are going, or how they will or might get there. It really doesn’t matter to them, since what they most want is to expose themselves (to the other), to expose themselves to their own strangeness/foreignness, to the foreignness in them.

What is coded within Neil is his ability, in the process of exposing himself to the other, to break down existing binaries between self and other embodied in the separation of Zaïna and Iness. The foreignness in Neil is seemingly his own name, his own constructed self, which falls apart as he is unmasked as the ‘lien’ between Zaïna and Iness – as a mere function of narrative. Neil puts Iness in communication with Zaïna and two worlds become one through the figure of the ‘bi-langue’ who is also the ‘professional traveler’, the ‘professional stranger’ and, finally, the ‘professional writer’. The link, therefore, is the writer;

⁴⁷⁴ Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Un été à Stockholm* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990); *Amour bilingue*.

⁴⁷⁵ Bensmaïa, ‘Multilingualism and National “Traits”’, p. 135.

the link, the collapse and the uniting of two split sides of the nation must be written within this allegorical space, but it is also, crucially, staged *as* an allegorical space.

Screen and ideological narrative

As we have mentioned, there are a number of figures that can represent the ideological screen and which in turn self-consciously stage the journey from the symbolic world to its allegorical counterpart. In *On dirait le Sud*, Zaina is transported from within an hourglass to outside of its glass compartments to perceive, from this outside space, history itself as a binary process where ‘chaque grain retourne d’où il vient, mais jamais à sa position initiale’ (p. 39). In *Aigre-Doux*, the narrator speaks *as* a grain of sand stuck in the neck between the two bulbs of an hourglass: ‘[j]e suis un grain de sable logé dans un sablier qui refuse de se laisser entraîner par ses pairs, vers le bas.’ (p. 216) Refusing to fall into the past, the grain of sand is suspended between the two compartments of the hourglass, at the point of *passing between* one reality and another. It is caught at the ‘interface’ of one dimension and another, at the point at which it shifts between compartments. It is perhaps a representation of what Bhabha theorises as the *graspability* of the postcolonial subject through what he calls a ‘passage between telling/told, between “here” and “somewhere else”’.⁴⁷⁶ We are also reminded of Barthes’ comments in *S/Z*, where the reader is drawn into the scene as the ‘seul personnage [...] qui est le lecteur’ in a novel which presents no main character apart from the narrator and where ‘la voix même de la lecture’ manifests itself in the figure of the grain of sand trapped between the two compartments of the hourglass.⁴⁷⁷ Earlier in *S/Z*, Barthes also writes of the narrator as positioned at a point of ‘mitoyenneté’, giving way to narrative and at the same time drawing our attention to its coming into being.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁶ See, ‘DissemiNation’, p. 215.

⁴⁷⁷ Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 657.

⁴⁷⁸ Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 572-73.

Again, in *Aigre-Doux*, the screen is brought into focus in a scene, characterised by black humour, where the narrator imagines the torture of a number of vegetables brought to life in one of the narrator's hallucinations, induced by his bitter-sweet pills. The description outlines a number of different ways in which vegetables can be cooked: they can be boiled, fried or roasted and these were apparently methods used 'pendant les guerres'. Although they were soon outlawed, 'déclaré comme un crime contre les potagers de l'humanité' (p. 34), these acts of vegetable torture would merely move out of plain sight. With the invention of the pressure cooker, vegetables would be thrown into a darker enclosed space: '[c]'est dans le silence et l'obscurité que les massacres et les tortures des aliments inertes et sans pensée ont lieu à l'insu de tous les regards'. (p. 35) From pan, to pressure cooker, the torture of the vegetables is clear – although the pressure cooker conceals the sound of their screams. It is with the advent of vegetable rights organisations, 'des Organismes Internationaux de Protections des Droits des Légumes' (p. 35) that the 'chefs' discover the technological advancement of the microwave. Here, vegetables comfortably sit behind a screen and, while appearing content to the inspectors, who issue 'certificats de bonnes conduites', are nonetheless cooked from the inside '[l]es légumes sentent leurs entrailles s'enflammer, mais leur apparence externe reste intacte.' (p. 37) If the intended image here is clearly one of the problem of insider-outsider perceptions of torture, it is also through the figure of the screen that the reader's focus is drawn to the question of the representation of torture in Algeria, from colonial State torture to torture which took place during the 1990s, as well as its subsequent narrativisation.

While torture may have been more visible in the past, and perhaps therefore seen as a more acceptable practice, it is depicted as moving behind closed doors, into the pressure cooker; there is, though, something particularly disturbing about the image of the microwave, where the torture need no longer be hidden, not because it is more acceptable but rather because the screen obscures its reality. If, on one level, the inspectors can be

read as being genuinely naïve, it also seems possible that in shielding the worst horrors of the torture the screen functions to give a sense of ontological security in the knowledge of the existence of a parallel world: they keep us safe; the symbolic order is preserved. But by staging the screen itself, by highlighting its mediating presence, Mati's novel surely allows the reader to imagine that the screen can be broken.

The split subject, and beyond?

At the end of the final novel in the series, the 'Point B114' is the place to which the main character wishes to return. It is a place exorcised of its ghosts of the past: the beast has left, as have the djinns. Zaïna's long journey has allowed her to take a certain distance to better understand the plurality of the once feared 'Point B114'. It is here the split halves (the split self) of Zaïna and Iness, are finally reunited; the 'Point B114' becomes a beacon of hope. The screen, which had propagated the myth of their necessary separation, is hence removed. Ending on an uncertain note, where Neil has dreamt or hallucinated the whole story, a discontinuity emerges whereby the reliability of the account of the experience is brought into doubt. Either Neil has dreamt his elaborate journey and now returns to his car which he left at the abandoned sibirkaḥ, or he is mistaken about where he had abandoned his car. Alternatively, the sibirkaḥ is just one desert shack among many others. The outcome of the story doesn't seem to matter; it is rather the discontinuous desert space which continually erases the possibility of stable memory and stable time which has produced this story and which at its supposed 'end' erases and rewrites the story anew. Moreover, in such a space, the idea of stories with single beginnings and endings and which run in straight chronologies is itself disrupted. We can recall Khatibi's figure of the 'professional traveler', who knows not from where they have come, nor where they will go, nor how they will get there.

The ‘Point B114’ is no single beacon of hope for Algeria, but part of a more complex reconciliation with the idea of the nation, of ‘nation-ness’, figures subject to continuous articulation and re-articulation through a series of ideological screens. As Bhabha notes, this is an ambivalence of articulation itself, of language, where ‘a nation’s people must be thought in double-time’ – at once ‘the historical “objects” of a nationalist pedagogy’ and ‘the “subjects” of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity’.⁴⁷⁹ For Bhabha, ‘It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*’.⁴⁸⁰ The story of the two split halves of the desert, and in particular that of the characters Iness and Zaïna representing two halves of a split self waiting to be reunited by Neil, constituting the so-called ‘lien’ between these two split halves of the nation, is especially visible when placed alongside Khatibi’s idea of the ‘bi-langue’ and the ‘professional traveler’. By staging the unreality of this process, by leaving open the possibility that the story has not been told in a reliable or stable time returns us once again to the question of the reliability of narrative and the disjunctive time of the nation. When Neil and Iness return to the ‘Point B114’ and to the sibirkaï, the desert is precisely the space encapsulating the lack of one single path, the inability to choose, the very paradox of fixing time within a single narration: ‘tout parait entremêlé: passé, présent, futur’ (p. 167). This idea of nation and the above comments on narrative are not necessarily limited to the particularities of the Algerian case. If they can be read in the Algerian context, within which they are written and produced, it is as allegories that Mati’s novels actively push out beyond the limits of reductive contextualisation, as they pursue universal problems of narrating the nation.

⁴⁷⁹ Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation’, p. 208.

⁴⁸⁰ Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation’, p. 209.

The Algerian nation is not merely figured here as symbol, but actively deconstructed and crucially *allegorized*. The attention is drawn not primarily to a stable nation but to what Lazarus and Vallury identify as a ‘nation-ness’, present they argue in Jameson’s original article.⁴⁸¹ Rather than concluding on a point about the unnarratability of the nation, as Bensmaïa does – opposing (Western) critics like Jameson who would apparently see the nation as symbol or allegory in order to ‘wrap it all up and make a beautiful story [...] a beautiful totality’⁴⁸² – Mati’s novels seem to recognise the unnarratability of the nation while at the same time attempting to offer a more discursive form of ‘nation-ness’, which will work as a counterpoint to the fixed and reified nation as made visible through a stultified national narrative. We are here rather far from having a novel which is marketable under the rubric of ‘écriture de l’urgence’. If the events of the 1990s are unclearly figured, if the nation is continually reformulated, and if both are broadly recast in Mati’s novels, then we might speak of the novels in terms used by Paul de Man as presenting ‘allegories of reading’ where reading itself is continually figured within the novel form.⁴⁸³

Conclusion

As Brand underlines in the case of Algeria, such attention to plurality will allow for the accommodation of ‘various narrative strains’, including claims to Arab and Berber nationalism, both of which draw on transnational aspects and the latter of which is of particular importance to Djaout’s work.⁴⁸⁴ Although the affirmative Algerian ‘founding story’ would remain, it has perhaps become necessary for the State to begin a dialogue with

⁴⁸¹ See Lazarus, p. 59; see also Vallury, p. 320.

⁴⁸² Bensmaïa, ‘Political or Poetic Allegories?’, pp. 80-81. Bensmaïa suggests that what Djaout is really writing about is the ‘unnarratable itself’ (p. 73); however, Bensmaïa reaches this conclusion by making the assumption that Jameson (and Western-minded critics like him) are attempting to use symbol and allegory in a simplistic and reductive manner.

⁴⁸³ De Man, *Allegories of Reading*.

⁴⁸⁴ Brand, p. 121.

other strains of the national narrative – with a broader sense of ‘nation-ness’ – opened up in the discontinuous carnivalesque space of culture – here figured through literature. In this view, and contrary to the view that literature presents a (mere) negative double of the State narrative, the State must in some ways respond to the questions raised in the cultural field, such as the question of the ‘tragedy’ of the 1990s, as it attempts to maintain its legitimacy and reassert narrative control. Though, the ways in which it does this often remain, as Brand argues, within their own controlled narrative spaces – the opening up of archives, the drafting of new legislation and amnesties in the wake of the 1990s.⁴⁸⁵ The discursive space of the novel remains somewhat materially isolated from these narrative spaces.

Finally, it is important to underline here that in the realm of literature, the symbolic capital of the State is never simply opposed, and as such can never simply be replicated in a negative double of the State narrative. The process of the production of symbols, reference and representation is itself problematized; the screens behind which lurk hidden deserts of meaning are finally exposed. Indeed, there emerges the possibility that, suspended between fantasy and realism, suspended both in allegory and *between allegories*, Mati’s novels represent nothing but the problems of representation and reading, unveiling the myth that realism could grant us unmediated access to reality. We are very much within what Žižek (aptly for us) names the ‘desert of the real’ where, to use Jameson’s more recent words, any attempt to ‘absorb [the real] by purely mental or conceptual categories’ is thwarted by the incessant movement of sand – the continual redrawing of space and time.⁴⁸⁶ This thwarting of (stable) meaning and the continual manipulation of space move us beyond a politics of the symbol and into what Vallury will call the realisable ‘aesthetico-political’ device of national allegory, but it does so precisely by introducing the question of memory, history and time to a

⁴⁸⁵ See Brand, pp. 177-80.

⁴⁸⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 37. Žižek takes the title of his 2002 collection of essays *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* from the 1999 film *The Matrix*. In the film, Morpheus explains to Neo that what he considered to be ‘reality’ was in fact a dream and that the real is in fact a post-apocalyptic desert space.

debate which had previously revolved around the fixed currency of symbols.⁴⁸⁷ If the thrust of Bensmaïa's argument is to favour a division between political and poetic allegories, and to read literature in the case of the latter, then Vallury's point is to ask how literature can demonstrate that allegory is always both poetic and political.⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸⁷ Vallury, p. 324.

⁴⁸⁸ Vallury, p. 339.

Chapter Five

Habib Ayyoub, or l'écrivain contre urgence?

Ayyoub est le nom du prophète le plus misérable et le plus patient, Job en français; Habib en arabe c'est l'ami. L'ami du pauvre, c'est ce que je veux être.

–Habib Ayyoub⁴⁸⁹

Habib Ayyoub, like his fellow writer Djamel Mati, came to writing later on in life after a career as a journalist and cinematographer. Prompted by the crisis years of the late 1980s and 1990s, Ayyoub wrote a number of short stories, 'récits' and novels, which were later published by Barzakh. Characterised by Daikha Dridi as the 'écrivain contre urgence', Ayyoub's work has been established in opposition to the constructed 'champ' of *urgence* of the 1990s emanating from the State and in the media.⁴⁹⁰ His work innovates on an aesthetic level, like Mati, breaking what Vallury calls the 'false dichotomy' between politics and aesthetics, reconfiguring the political through the aesthetic.⁴⁹¹ The writer achieves this in a number of ways, but the modes and forms he chooses, which often shift and change from 'récit' to the short story and novel, from fable to realism, are a clear part of his aesthetic strategy which continually recasts form as if to unsettle previous readings.

The key themes that concern Ayyoub's works are political corruption, the rights of the oppressed and downtrodden and, relatedly, the role played by the constructs of time and narrative in bringing about such control and oppression of the people of the land referred to mainly as la Barbarie Septentrionale, but also on one occasion as le Barzakhstan.⁴⁹²

⁴⁸⁹ Amina Bekkat, 'Entretien avec Habib Ayyoub', *Algérie Littérature/Action* 57-58 (2002), <http://www.revues-plurielles.org/uploads/pdf/4_57_12.pdf> [accessed: 27 May 2015].

⁴⁹⁰ Daikha Dridi, 'Ayyoub, écrivain contre urgence', *BabelMed*, <<http://www.babelmed.net/letteratura/236-algeria/861-ayyoub-crivain-contre-l-urgence.html>> [accessed 27 May 2015].

⁴⁹¹ Vallury, p. 339.

⁴⁹² This is a portmanteau including the name of Ayyoub's publisher. See General Introduction on the broader symbolic importance of the term Barzakh.

There is a clear focus on how those in power operate in order to obscure reality from those they govern. In this way, the patriarchy – variously figured in a ‘chef du village’, in the more comically overblown ‘Chef suprême de la guerre’, or in the image of a religious ‘Cheikh’ – comes under particular and often acerbic scrutiny. In recalling elements of his work, Ayyoub’s literary works carve out a radical but also critical space envisioned by Frantz Fanon, allowing the people to understand that ‘la richesse n’est pas le fruit du travail mais le résultat d’un vol organisé et protégé.’⁴⁹³ As the writer explains in an interview regarding his choice of penname (his real name is in fact Abdelaziz Benmahdjoub), he wishes to be known as the defender of the downtrodden masses: ‘L’ami du pauvre, c’est ce que je veux être.’⁴⁹⁴ While, in reality, Ayyoub is often referring to contemporary Algeria, the referential instability of literary fiction, and of the allegorical mode in particular, will create a number of opportunities for the writer to explore questions of narrative itself.

In this chapter, we chart the trajectory of Ayyoub’s work over the past decade or so. The analysis has a number of key strands to it. The first, returning to concerns raised in the previous chapter and in the section introduction, relates to the writer’s use of allegory and to Jameson’s original and Vallury’s subsequent account of national allegory: does allegory create a fixed referential frame, or does it, with the introduction of important questions of time, go beyond symbolic meaning, continually deferring and frustrating meaning in a referentially unstable and ambivalent space? With Ayyoub’s texts, it is the multiplicity of possible allegorical readings, and the instability this causes, which seem to encourage the reader to focus on and the question of the reliability of reading itself. The second task of the chapter is to chart the related manner in which Ayyoub’s texts work to both represent and to contest the multitude of images emerging from and of contemporary Algeria and the various ideological narratives which shape the space of the reception of those images.

⁴⁹³ Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: Maspero, 1968 [1961]), p. 128.

⁴⁹⁴ Bekkat, ‘Entretien avec Habib Ayyoub’.

Just as we have sought to do with Mati's works, we ask here at what points and in what ways the reader is pointed towards questions of representation, unveiling how the reader is more often than not Barthes' 'seul personnage', implicated in a narrative which has already been scripted.⁴⁹⁵

Like in previous chapters, we have selected a series of the author's works which best illustrate the above points. The chapter will look in turn at Ayyoub's first-published work, the 'récit' *Le Gardien*, published in 2001, a (long) short story 'Chasse à l'Iguanodon de Barbarie' from the 2002 collection, *C'était la guerre*, for which Ayyoub won the newly inaugurated 'Prix Mohammed Dib'. We then focus on Ayyoub's first novel, *Le Palestinien*, published in 2003 and finally Ayyoub's 2012 'récit' *Le remonteur d'horloge*.⁴⁹⁶ In this way, the chapter seeks also to carve an arched path through the author's experimental use of these multiple narrative forms from the 'récit' to the short story, to the novel and then back to the 'récit'.

Beginnings: from 'récit' to the short story

A 'récit' is generally translated into English as an 'account' or as a 'narrative' and is sometimes also described as a novel, given the wide range of possible texts the genre designates. In a writer like Maurice Blanchot, and also in Khatibi's work, the term has generated further interest. As Daniel Just writes, Blanchot's particular definition of the 'récit' holds that in its generic sense, it is in fact distinct from the novel.⁴⁹⁷ Much more than

⁴⁹⁵ Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 657.

⁴⁹⁶ All of the works are published by Barzakh in Algiers and references are henceforth made parenthetically. One work not mentioned above is, *Le désert et après*, a 2007 'récit', some of whose narrative is incorporated into, or repeated from, a 2005 novel also not mentioned, *Vie & mort d'un citoyen provisoire, ou, La septième mort d'Omar* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2005). In 2009, Ayyoub published a further collection of short stories, *L'homme qui n'existait pas* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2009), which we will not discuss in this chapter. The full title to Ayyoub's last work is: *Le remonteur d'horloge, ou le manuscrit de Sidi Ben Tayeb (découvert en l'an de grâce 2050, par la section Archéologie du ministre des Finances de le l'Histoire intelligente)*. References to *Le Gardien* are made to the latest published edition of the text in *Le désert, et après: suivi de le gardien* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2007).

⁴⁹⁷ Daniel Just, 'The Politics of the Novel and Maurice Blanchot's Theory of the Récit, 1954-1964', *French Forum* 33, 1-2 (2008), pp. 121-39.

the novel, the ‘récit’ form apparently draws the reader to consider the problem of form, genre and of telling itself:

Whereas the novel wants to tell a story, the *récit* tries to undermine it. [...] Blanchot believes the *récit* is able to bring to light the blankness of the present moment, thereby exposing the fact [...] of an essential human togetherness. [...] What matters is what kind of words [are spoken] and how they are communicated.⁴⁹⁸

If, in Blanchot, attention is drawn to the telling of stories, whereby the ‘récit’ comes to destabilise more traditional modes, Khatibi seems to go further, writing, in the case of the *Mille et Une Nuits*, about the split of narrative (‘récit’) from the temporal circularity of the Qur’an to a narrative time which finds itself in the future anterior. In *Ombres japonaises*, Khatibi defines the distinct temporalities of narrative and Qur’anic time in the context of what he names a ‘destin littéraire des Arabes chanté par la prose poétique du Coran, par l’amour du conte et de la poésie.’⁴⁹⁹ He writes of the *Mille et Une Nuits*:

Et si, dans le Coran, le chemin des humains obéit à un temps circulaire scellé définitivement dans l’au-delà : mourir, vivre, mourir, vivre éternellement, dans les *Mille et une nuits*, le principe narratif introduit le travail de la mort, le récit comme travail absolu de la mort, et sans ce travail le récit ne serait point. Accueillant la mort, le récit est le séjour de l’immémorial, ou plus exactement il est le tracé, la parole de ce qui aura été : le récit est au futur antérieur.⁵⁰⁰

This distinction seems too important to leave aside in the case of a writer like Ayyoub, whose texts always state their formal or generic status on the front or inside cover.⁵⁰¹ In its departure and ultimate return to the ‘récit’, Ayyoub’s trajectory is at the very least of interest because of the way in which it brings into focus, returns to and rereads the ‘narrative’ element of literature. In its negotiation of multiple forms, Ayyoub’s work clearly draws attention to the question of form itself and of what forms can do in literature. But it

⁴⁹⁸ Just, p. 137.

⁴⁹⁹ Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Ombres japonaises* (Marseille: Fata Morgana, 1988), p. 12.

⁵⁰⁰ Khatibi, *Ombres japonaises*, pp. 12-13. Also cited in Bensmaïa, ‘Multilingualism and National “Traits”’, p. 143.

⁵⁰¹ As Genette writes, it is the official status of the text that will often determine its ‘horizon de lecture’. *Fiction et diction*, p. 67.

is perhaps in the final 'récit' considered in this chapter where Ayyoub draws most obviously on Khatibi's definition of narrative as being always in the future perfect tense.

Récit

Le Gardien was one of the first texts to be released by the fledgling independent publisher Barzakh. It recounts the lives of an isolated and poor desert community, located within an old Maghreb ksar (a small Maghrebi castle, with a sand-like appearance), which is one day taken over by an army unit that arrives in the drought-ridden land and sets about erecting a commemorative monument, covering it in the flag of national colours, ready to be unveiled. Against the backdrop of poverty and drought, the soldiers (ominously dressed from head to toe in black) are likened by the omniscient narrator to the crow sent by God to show Cain how to bury his murdered brother Abel, which the narrator adds would inaugurate 'la suite des massacres qui ne s'arrêteront, à l'évidence, qu'avec l'extinction de l'espèce humaine.' (p. 52) Meanwhile, the government authorities move to construct their army base, while the village's long-suffering inhabitants plead for a well they have demanded for years. As the village becomes uninhabitable, the villagers flee, but a mysterious and apparently very sick young child remains sleeping within the walls of the old ksar.

Soon enough, and themselves hopeless at the lack of drinking water and the overbearing presence of salt in the desert air, the soldiers begin to abandon the village, leaving their leader, the 'Chef suprême de la guerre', remaining to watch over the ksar. As he comes to realise that the ksar, the monument and the 'mer intérieure' (a sort of internal harbour created for the pleasure boats of the rich and corrupt generals) have all been the inventions of self-interested corrupt politicians, the 'chef suprême' attempts to destroy the commemorative obelisk, drowning in a deluge of rain unprecedented in the village devastated by drought. In a seeming allusion to the Biblical and Qur'anic stories of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the 'chef suprême' is buried under a layer of salt by

the crow, which has hitherto plagued the village. The still unnamed ‘chef suprême’ is perhaps likened to Lot’s wife, depicted in the book of Genesis, punished by a higher power for defying the instruction not to look back and interrogating the reasons for which he has found himself in such a desperate situation. Meanwhile, in a bare room within the ksar, a child awakens from a deep sleep; in a seemingly more direct reference to a verse from the Qur’an, which concerns the bringing down of the sacred text to the people, the child is said to act now as the ‘premier gardien’ (p. 133), cared for by the ‘Seigneur des Mondes’ – he is no longer ill.⁵⁰²

On the surface, this is a story about an army, led by corrupt and foolish generals seeking to blindly follow a pre-scripted historical narrative, symbolised by the construction of the monument in the barren desert village. The figured monument in the Algerian case cannot but remind of the famous Monument to the Martyrs, which towers high above the city of Algiers and which was built to commemorate Algerians who died fighting in the War of Independence. Brand identifies this monument as a foundational symbol in the establishment of the legitimising national story of Algeria, built at a time when the State’s legitimacy was faltering.⁵⁰³ If the story ridicules the post-independence Algerian regime, by showing how this regime relies on the same foundational and legitimising structures of narrative surrounding the French colonisation of Algeria, it also passes more universal comment on the wilful ignorance of those in power and the ability of dominant narratives to control individuals. While the reference to the founding stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel and Sodom and Gomorrah allow the reader to make analogies to the founding stories of French colonialism and Algerian independence and nationalism, it is the very idea of the founding story which is brought into critical focus here.

⁵⁰² ‘C’est nous qui avons fait descendre le Coran et qui en sommes les gardiens.’ *Le Coran*, trans. by O. Pesle and Ahmed Tidjani (Paris: Editions Larose, 1948), p. 162 [15:9].

⁵⁰³ Brand, pp. 156-58.

If this religious intertext seems somewhat to align the foundational story of Adam and Eve with that of colonisation in Algeria, and if this founding act can be seen to create the human as distinct from nature and the animal, then Ayyoub's placement of his story alongside that of the two brothers Cain and Abel demonstrates what will become the prominent theme of alienation and the rather utopian aim of returning the human to a nature which exists prior to ideological discourse and an imposed historical time. Hope, one could argue, is located in two characters of Ayyoub's story. The 'Chef suprême de la guerre' is a character swiftly killed off by a nature unforgiving of his stupidity; he dies in a foolish act of attempting to destroy the monument which he inaugurated and his actions seem almost to conjure the deluge of rain which ultimately kills him. More hopeful is the sleeping child, the 'premier gardien', who receives the sacred text, the sacred narrative, with no firm experience of the oppressive monument, the 'chef suprême' and his army, nor the storm which has now cleared. The hope seems to be placed in the possible remaking of narrative itself, away from the interferences of powers seeking their own legitimisation. As a receiver and presumably as a reader of the sacred text, the 'premier gardien' is perhaps also therefore a figure for the writer, from which Ayyoub himself emerges. It is nevertheless a figure that embodies the remaking of narrative as a kind of protection of narrative, of truth gleaned by the un-alienated child who has slept through the worst ravages of the storm and who, grasping the sacred text, restarts historical time. If many will read Ayyoub's story in the context of a critique of the late 1980s and 1990s in Algeria, the story also contains many layers of meaning and suspends time and reference. Such indeterminacy could point us back towards exploring the possibility and place of the nation in Ayyoub's narrative, of exploring, to restate Vallury, the possibility of the nation as the 'terrain of [a] mutual imbrication' of politics and aesthetics, where politics is pitched in a more ambiguous realm at the level of aesthetics and the literary.⁵⁰⁴ Alongside this, Ayyoub's

⁵⁰⁴ Vallury, p. 326.

first story begins to develop the recurrent question of time and narrative, especially in its relation to religious texts. If, as Khatibi writes of the distinction between Qur'anic time and that introduced in the *Mille et Une Nuits*, 'le principe narratif introduit le travail de la mort', then we can perhaps see the beginnings of this work in Ayyoub's first text.⁵⁰⁵ The extent to which the author maintains an ironic or wry distance from these references is of course valid, but this is a theme to which Ayyoub will return.

Short story

By far the longest (at around sixty pages) and perhaps most interesting of the short stories collected in *C'était la guerre* is 'Chasse à l'Iguanodon de Barbarie'. It begins the collection by presenting a typical allegorical reading of Algeria that could be made of the story. If the reader begins to read the story as referring to a 'dinosaur' colonialist hunted from 'la Barbarie Septentrionale' by the downtrodden inhabitants of a land seeking independence, this possible referential reading is soon broken down, as the story progresses in twists and turns. As if, though, to draw the reader into a stable and readable narrative, the narrator begins by providing a definition from the 'Encyclopedia Universalis':

L'Iguanodon de Barbarie est un reptile dinosaurien de crétacé: survivant des âges obscurs, il présente un air de famille avec le diplodocus à tête chauve [...] Râblé et rapide, il se distingue de ceux de son espèce plus au nord, celle des géants d'Europe – espèce aujourd'hui complètement éteinte –, par une férocité sans limites, d'où le dicton : « Cruel comme un Iguanodon de Barbarie ». (p. 9)

The story is set in la Barbarie Septentrionale, a reference to the northern part of Africa, in terms which were first established during the European renaissance.⁵⁰⁶ In fact, and in spite of the definition from 'l'Encyclopedia Universalis' – a reference text par excellence – which

⁵⁰⁵ Khatibi, *Ombres japonaises*, p. 12.

⁵⁰⁶ 'Barbarie' was the European name given to North Africa during the renaissance period. As the *Encyclopédie des gens du monde* puts it, 'Quand il s'agit d'un peuple, la barbarie est un état intermédiaire entre la civilisation et la condition du sauvage'. See, *Encyclopédie des gens du monde, répertoire universel des sciences, des lettres et des arts*, Tome troisième (Paris: Librairie de Treutel et Würtz, 1834), p. 19. Ayyoub no doubt uses the ambiguity surrounding this term to his advantage here.

seems broadly to signal the referent of the Algerian populace, it becomes rather difficult to establish a simple line of identification between the ‘Iguanodon’ and the Algerian people. We are additionally introduced to a variant of the pure Iguanodon in the ‘pseudo-Iguanodons de Barbarie’ (PIBs), which are said to be the result of a ‘métissage’ resulting from nuclear testing in these poor regions whose environments, according to the narrator, are exploited for such experiments in modern technology and warfare.⁵⁰⁷ Initially presented as hunted until recently by the ‘peuples de Barbarie Septentrionale’ for its mythic qualities (p. 10), the real Iguanodon soon becomes pushed to the limits of extinction by poachers while others begin to hunt the pseudo-Iguanodon for its hair, apparently in demand for fashion implants from the ‘new-hard-rock’ scene. As the ‘Encyclopedia Universalis’ goes on to inform us, this pseudo species soon also becomes threatened with extinction. All this, we discover, is set against the backdrop of a worsening situation in La Barbarie Septentrionale; the narrator claims that the encyclopaedia will, as a matter of urgency, need updating given the ‘événements incroyables’ experienced over the last ten months – events, it is added, that have already produced ‘remous médiatiques [...] dans le monde civilisé.’ (p. 12) The reference text is already out of date and no longer paints an accurate picture.

As the narrator, who we now discover is in fact an inquiring journalist, chats to an old man at the bi-centenary celebrations of the ‘association des « Amis de l’Iguanodon de Barbarie »’, the history of the ‘guerres de l’Iguanodon’ (GIBs) emerges (p. 26). The old man recounts having ‘le pénible honneur de participer’ in the ‘première guerre de l’Iguanodon de Barbarie’, while describing the latest ‘soi-disant guerres’ as ‘un truc que le régime avait découvert pour se maintenir au pouvoir’. This, he claims, was the ‘coup classique désormais de la Patrie en danger’ (p. 26). The old man goes on to tell of how he was tortured during this latest stage of violence and only released for his ‘services rendus au cours de la

⁵⁰⁷ The reader will recall nuclear weapons tests undertaken by France in the Sahara between 1960 and 1966. Centered around Reggane, tests were allowed to continue beyond independence in 1962. See, Regnault, ‘France’s Search for Nuclear Test Sites’.

première G.I.B.’ (p. 27) The representatives in the government protected by the very wars they wage are described by the old man as ‘des marionnettes manipulées par de sinistres clowns, qui ne font rire qu’eux-mêmes.’ (p. 30) According to the old storyteller, the ‘IB’ cannot be caged: they are not an ‘animal domestique’, but will rather ignore the boundaries enforced by ‘les hommes’ (p. 27). As the two continue their conversation about the wars of the past – the old man consuming carafe after carafe of wine – with the odd traumatic memory emerging from the ‘première GIB’ (p. 32), the threat posed by the ‘IB’ looms large over the story, as the IB spreads a panic terrifying the people and risks giving ideas to ‘des anarchistes pour allumer des révolutions et renverser le pouvoir!’ (p. 42)

If the barely veiled reference here is to the Algerian uprisings of October 1988 – a moment which appears to recur throughout Ayyoub’s work – there is still a degree of referential instability in the text, as well as a focus on the production of narrative itself. As the old man and the journalist-narrator part company, the latter recounts how he followed ‘avec intérêt, comme tout le monde, dans un état de tristesse et d’impuissance horrifiée, dans les médias, les comptes rendus, plus ou moins précis et souvent fantaisistes, de cette chasse fantastique.’ (p. 46) The narrator now draws on the account (‘les comptes rendus’) of the beginnings of what would become known as the ‘chasse fantastique’ given by publications at the time, where the ‘fantastique’ – the fantastic, perhaps traumatic element – of the ‘chasse’ gave rise to accounts which were apparently ‘fantaisistes’ – rather far-fetched, fanciful, or indeed superficial. If the hunted IB is an allusion to the capture, torture and killing of those who rise up during October 1988, then the focus on the account of the unfolding events, on the media narrative perhaps looks to the period of the 1990s more generally.⁵⁰⁸

As the violence worsens, international organisations (the United Nations, along with international music and film stars) offer rewards for the successful capture of a living

⁵⁰⁸ See Evans & Phillips, pp. 102-42.

IB and, after a foreign investor is killed by an IB, international powers threaten to intervene. With the government determined to prove to the arrogant Western nations that it is capable of controlling its own problems, and with an influx of millionaire hunters from the US and elsewhere to track down and kill the IBs, the government (rather confusingly for the minister put in charge) creates a ministry devoted to the protection of the IB. The dinosaurs must at once be protected from extinction *and* stopped from killing one another. In a seemingly absurd rendering of the 1990s crisis, the IB now comes to represent some sort of caricature of the Algerian people. To complicate matters further, the 'Compagnie Transatlantique franco-britannique' now organise IB safaris. The solution, finally reached by a senior civil servant at the ministry, will settle the confusion once and for all. The plan is to lure the donkeys of the Hauts Plateaux to gather together under the pretext of protecting them from the violence, after their owners left to hunt the IBs. The donkeys will then be disguised as 'pseudo-IBs', killed and their deaths blamed on the old IB hunters. The plan emerges to photograph the corpses from a helicopter so they cannot be made out as donkeys. After this point, the journalist-narrator recounts, 'la chasse fut totalement interdite' (p. 62) and the old man returns to tell his stories from the hunt, whose twists and turns the people had followed on the television news and at the local cinema screens (p. 67).

The old man recounts the story of how he had tried to kill the IB and how, despite the regime's wish to cover up the killings, international spy satellites had caught the hunters in the act (p. 70). The hunters were compensated all the same, as the old man notes, 'tout le monde – ou presque – a trouvé son compte dans cette histoire' (p. 71). And indeed after the events, the State we are told would legislate for every person to take 'une poudre instantanée' assuring a 'docilité parfaite': we are told how 'l'individu ne pouvait plus dire non', as the government brings forward a number of referenda (p. 72). Winking knowingly at our journalist-narrator, the old man disappears in a blue-cobalt American car. The

narrator is left, as is the reader, wondering about the identity of this old man who doubles as the teller of the story.

In presenting the ambivalent figure of the IB as at once endangered and dangerous, the story seems to draw attention to the act of seeing both from the inside and from the outside. The constant uncertainty surrounding the identity and motivations of the IB is, inside contemporary Algeria, a possible representation of the confusion in locating the violence of the 1990s, contrary to the more concrete narratives presented in the foreign press at the time.⁵⁰⁹ From the outside, the contradiction of allowing the international ‘chasseurs’ into the country to hunt the IB while simultaneously needing to protect the species is perhaps reflective of State attempts to manipulate foreign powers’ views on the violence during this time as emerging exclusively from an Islamist ‘challenge’. The reader might also recall the massacre which took place at the Algerian town of Bentalha in 1997 and which became famous after Nesroulah Yous published a damning testimony which accused the State of massacring its own people under false-flag operations.⁵¹⁰ In some ways, the traumatised old man becomes the figure of the witness of the massacre recounted in a process of narrative overlaying of history, from the Algerian War to the traumatic massacres, kidnappings, killings and torture of the 1990s conflict. The events of the slaughter of the donkeys, masquerading as pseudo-IBs, recalls not just the smoke-and-mirror events of Bentalha in Yous’ account, but a further element of Yous’ story where the helicopter photographing the victims from a distance seems figured as the army helicopter which, Yous claims, could be heard circling above throughout the Bentalha massacre.⁵¹¹

⁵⁰⁹ Some of these press reports are referred to in Section One. As we see in Section One, the press reports from abroad have almost exclusively privileged the language of ‘civil war’ and Islamist challenge, while, in Algeria itself, reporting of terrorist attacks was banned from 1994. See Stora, *La guerre invisible*, p. 25.

⁵¹⁰ Yous, *Qui a tué à Bentalha?* More recent artistic representations of this massacre can be seen in Dalila Dalléas Bouzar’s photo-text *Algérie, année 0 ou quand commence la mémoire* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2012).

⁵¹¹ In this account of the massacre committed at Bentalha in 1997, where he describes what he believes to be army ‘ninjas’ disguised as Islamists (p. 169), Yous repeatedly refers to the fact that an army helicopter circled overhead during the killings (pp. 165; 168; 171). Roberts briefly assesses Yous’ account, noting that Habib Souaïdia’s book in many ways served to fill the gaps in Yous’ testimony. See Roberts, pp. 309-12.

If the above links can be drawn, the slipperiness of the figure of the IB and of the journalist-narrator offer multiple possible allegorical readings, which not only fracture the official account of the Algerian massacres, but break away from the binary language in which the 1990s was being read and constructed. While the media is seemingly staged throughout the story as a site of narrative control, by making a journalist the enquiring narrator, the reader is made an equal party to this increasingly confounding set of events. In our continual search for a fixed allegorical reading, we in many ways mimic the function of the journalist. Indeed, while the narrator questions to the end, he ultimately succumbs to the 'poudre instantanée' which will prevent the population from saying 'non' in coming referenda. The seemingly innocuous substance, which seems similar to the 'chanvre indien' of Mati's trilogy of novels, soon takes over and controls even the most inquisitive of minds. This is perhaps a warning to the reader of the insidiousness of ideological discourse, but it is also one which stages the pursuit of reference and meaning itself as a risky business. The text, in the end, seems not only to encourage readers to reconsider the proposition that forgetting can be a way forward for the people of la Barbarie Septentrionale, but it actively questions the ability of reading itself as a reliable form of gaining a stable knowledge of a set of 'events'.

As a short story, characters are necessarily undeveloped and remain mysterious. It is perhaps this mystery which invites the reader to construct their own version of the story out of the confusion, to effectively rewrite a version of events in the disjunctive narrative space opened up by the text. By doing this, the reader-cum-writer is forced to realise the process of the construction of reality and, though frustrating, the necessary suspension of meaning and reference. The end of the story returns to the beginning, as reference is once again rewritten; the encyclopaedia will never be accurate as yet another authoritative version of history is undermined. The story as a whole, then, is perhaps a demonstration of how story-writing more generally is always a process of rewriting reference in the

suspended space of literature and how stories, while less clear than historical writing, nevertheless offer a more accurate rendition of the past in its unfixed and continually evolving presence.

The experiment of the novel

If the 'récit' and the (long) short story have offered Ayyoub ways of exploring the possibility of political allegory, where the act of writing is itself figured and problematized, his first novel delves even deeper into an exploration of writing as the site of the perpetual contradiction between the freedom to create and the ability of language to restrain. *Le Palestinien* is a text which unearths the related problem of a universal ethics often pitted against local political considerations and, finally, in a common Ayyoubian theme, one which pits the figure of the writer against corrupt powers which seek to realise a number of political 'realities' to meet their own self-interested ends. At its heart, the task of this novel seems to be to unmask and disrupt dominant narrative ideologies by disfiguring and destabilising the very narrative they employ. By figuring writing and narrative as the central problematic of the story, Ayyoub is able to draw his readers' attention not simply to injustices obscured by certain narratives, but to how narrative will always to some degree obscure.

Ayyoub's text is soaked in irony and written in a stream of unbroken writing; there are no chapters, just paragraph breaks throughout the 300-page novel. The story, which is told throughout by an omniscient third-person narrator, follows the life of the eponymous Palestinian, who has returned to his village in Algeria from the Israel-Palestine conflict of 1948 (episodes of which enter the text in parentheses), which he had gone to fight with his good friend Rabah, but only the Palestinian has returned. The text begins with a vivid depiction of a bird of prey hovering above the initially unnamed village of Sidi Bounekhla, which is constructed of old desert 'ksours' (an alternate spelling for 'ksar') joined in sets of

narrow paths. The village is led by the corrupt ‘chef du village’, named Si Messaoud, and the Palestinian, as one of the few villagers who is able to write, takes on the role of the ‘écrivain public’. He has a desk at the local post office, where villagers queue to see him every day each revealing their private squabbles over land, family disputes and administrative grievances. The villagers, who are also depicted as highly superstitious, all need letters writing and the ‘écrivain public’ provides this and the promise of discretion as his service.

The Palestinian has also promised to look after Rabah’s widow, Leila, and his and her son, Samed; however, Si Messaoud, the ‘chef du village’ is already and has for many years been taking advantage of the villagers. We learn that Si Messaoud has been stealing Leila’s State pension for the past twenty-five years, forcing her to rely on handouts from him. Si Messaoud has not only convinced Leila that he is saving her from certain starvation, but is fully aware of the ethical pledge made by the ‘écrivain public’ to those he writes for: by never revealing what he is told to write, the Palestinian hopes to keep himself out of the local squabbles which consume his clients’ lives. As the ‘écrivain public’, the Palestinian writes to the State ministry on Leila’s behalf, fully aware but only privately incandescent at Si Messaoud’s deception. It is this universal moral oath taken by the ‘écrivain public’ which will cause him a number of problems as the story progresses; for now, he must sit by as he curses the ‘tout puissant’ ‘chef du village’ in his thoughts: *‘le chef du village, pensait l’écrivain public, n’est qu’un salopard. Il touche la pension depuis plus de vingt-cinq ans à ta place!’* (p. 15).

While the Palestinian becomes a figure against which the villagers increasingly direct their frustrations, the ‘chef du village’ is busy profiting from rich oil discoveries in the region, spending his time at the Almoravides hotel, where he entertains his guests in a swimming pool kept full even in the most severe of droughts.⁵¹² As Si Messaoud continues

⁵¹² Djaout’s narrator was of course trying to write the history of the Almoravid dynasty in North Africa, having been commissioned to do so by a Parisian publisher. Here, it seems this history – or indeed attempt at writing history – is in the contemporary setting relegated to the name above the entrance to an elite hotel.

in his corrupt ways, the Palestinian, a local exiled poet and Rabah's son, Samed, come together to pursue him. They are principally driven by the fact that in his abuse of power Si Messaoud has married Samed's young love interest, who the somewhat circuitous narrative reveals to be the daughter of the Palestinian, kept locked away from her father since he left for Palestine in 1948. Beyond the reference to the Israel-Palestine conflict of 1948, there is little which allows the reader to place the story in any concrete time or place. If the desert ksours suggest a North African desert setting and the reference to the Almoravides dynasty further contextualises the story, Algeria is never referred to directly.

There are, however, a number of scenes which could be read to allude to Algeria's recent past. As the Palestinian makes his way to the mosque one morning, he hears screams and following the noise is met with a group of jackals; he fights off some of the animals before discovering a scene of two men digging a pit in the ground while holding captive a woman and a new-born baby. As the Palestinian runs towards them, the woman and her captors flee and he is able to save the crying baby (p. 67-68). As the Palestinian returns with the baby, the poet throws rocks at the jackals who flee, but it is unclear whether these are jackals or the men seen digging the grave, as the figures are fused together. A possible allusion to the Bentalha massacre might also be drawn here, but the image of the jackal is also used by Fanon in *Les damnés de la terre*, as he describes the rich as 'des bêtes carnassières, des chacals et des corbeaux qui se vautrent dans le sang du peuple.'⁵¹³ In Yous' testimony, the howls of jackals were said to be audible in the days before the massacre, even though the animals are not native to that part of Algeria.⁵¹⁴ The figure of the jackal also appears in Djaout's novel, where goats must be protected from the jackals who 'tranch[ent] la gorge'.⁵¹⁵

⁵¹³ Fanon, p. 128.

⁵¹⁴ Yous, p. 152.

⁵¹⁵ Djaout, *L'Invention du désert*, p. 167.

The theme of corruption also features heavily. Si Messaoud rides around in expensive chauffeur-driven cars and spends increasing time at the Almoravides, as foreign oil executives descend on the village. He also wishes to sell land belonging to Leila and Samed, which is apparently rich in oil reserves, and his son is appointed to replace the ‘*écrivain public*’ in the post office of the village. The Palestinian is aware of Si Messaoud’s attempts to deceive Leila and Samed, but he holds to his moral of preserving the secrets of the people. However, Si Messaoud, who is about to marry the woman who the Palestinian believes may be his daughter, openly accuses the Palestinian of selling the secrets of the villagers he had promised to keep, in an effort to turn the village against him. Threatened by the ‘*chef du village*’, the Palestinian becomes a figure for the parent searching for the ‘*disappeared*’ child. Si Messaoud flanked by his guards asks ‘[p]ourquoi cherches-tu à remuer le passé?’ (p. 200) before questioning the very existence of the Palestinian’s daughter: ‘*Qui te dit que c’est ta fille? ...Quelle fille?...*’ (ibid.)

Meanwhile, Samed has joined an acting troupe which performs for the increasing numbers of tourists visiting the Almoravides hotel. The tourists come to watch the troupe perform, as they play up to orientalist tropes and stereotypes:

Et la troupe, comme soudain prise de fièvre, s’agitait, dansait, tambourinait, poussait cris et onomatopées inconnues, mais soigneusement étudiées par Samed et ses hommes, pour accentuer le dépaysement des touristes [...] Ils cherchaient aussi de nouvelles onomatopées qui pourraient les faire apparaître plus primitifs, plus « naturels », aux yeux des touristes. (pp. 128-29)

The narrator tells of how a photograph of Samed and another of the male dancers in the troupe had been published in an English newspaper, with the caption ‘*les amoureux du désert*’, after one of the dancers was mistaken for a woman. However, these orientalist stereotypes are precisely those which benefit Si Messaoud and the powerful oil executives he entertains. If staging a reductionist press narrative, these scenes of the novel also show the troupe’s self-awareness in their performance to a number of pre-existing tropes.

The action reaches its height after Si Messaoud's wedding, where Samed attempts but fails to assassinate the 'chef du village'. In a ploy to allow him to deprive Samed and Leila of their inherited land and sell it on to the oil executives, Si Messaoud sentences Samed to death in absentia. Leila soon learns of the sentence and tracks down her son and the Palestinian who finally recounts the truth of Si Messaoud's deceptions. He realises he had been wrong to stick so firmly to his morals and, while Leila is incandescent, she pleads with the Palestinian to leave as word comes that the 'Cheikh' is rallying the villagers to cries of 'Oui, oui-oui!... Le Palestinien!... Tuons-le!' and 'Crucifions-le!... Arrachons-lui la langue et les doigts! Crevons-lui les yeux!...' (pp. 234-35). The once respected 'écrivain public' has become the target of the villagers' anger, stirred by the stories invented by Si Messaoud. In an image which resonates both on a particular level during the 1990s and in a more general way, it is the writer who sees a narrative develop around him over which he has no control. This is the first in a series of comically overblown scenes, where the naïve and superstitious villagers are suddenly persuaded to turn their anger against the Palestinian.

The assembled villagers gather behind their 'Cheikh bien-aimé, flambeau du progrès et de la civilisation'; it is the Cheikh who will lead the villagers to a 'victoire totale contre tous les ennemis de l'ordre et du progrès!...' (p. 235). Despite an impassioned speech from the poet,⁵¹⁶ they advance on the Palestinian's home, who is forced to flee into the desert with Samed. The hypocrisy of the violent crowd is shown as the pursuing villagers stop at the time of prayer (many still under the influence of alcohol from Si Messaoud's wedding celebrations) which is led by the newly baptised Cheikh. Si Messaoud rides ahead into the desert, becoming lost and disoriented; about to return, he catches sight of the two escapees and heads in their general direction, still disoriented by the desert. As the Cheikh reaches the two figures, he is ambushed by the Palestinian and, while injured by Si Messaoud, the Palestinian is able to knock him off his horse before fleeing. In a violent

⁵¹⁶ The poet addresses the villagers as 'vous qui coupez l'arbre pour le fruit' (p. 241).

scene, Samed kills Si Messaoud by beheading him with his own sword and returns to the edge of the village, where the villagers are waiting. The headless body of Si Messaoud is discovered and brought back to the village. The story ends with Samed and his mother passing by the Palestinian's house as they return home to a hungry baby – the young girl discovered and rescued by the Palestinian and the poet. Leila promises her son tea, but he does not hear, as the narrator recounts, 'les mots se perdirent emportés par le vent' (p. 256) and his mother reinstalls herself in front of a dirty window, as she watches Samed disappear slowly bowed against the desert storm.

The novel ends with a quote from the Qur'an, which is linked to the epigraph: both are cited from 'Les Dunes' and both relate to the coming of a storm, but one which is seen both to bring necessary rains, but also damaging winds which punish the people. It is therefore necessary to look back to the beginning of the novel and the epigraph to reread the passage which follows on from the final words of the novel. The novel's end is therefore prior to its beginning. If the final quotation indicates the coming of a storm which will bring much needed rain to the village, the epigraph continues and completes the quotation warning of the dangers of that same storm. The novel in its circular form, coupled with its lack of traditional chapter breaks, recalls the circularity of Qur'anic time and reminds us of Khatibi's invitation to re-read the epigraph to his novel *Amour bilingue*. As Bensmaïa writes, we are constantly invited to 'go back *to the beginning*' of a 'story with no protagonist: or if there was one it was the story itself, which heard itself utter the lone command: Start over'.⁵¹⁷ This is, therefore, an invitation to re-read the novel, and its allegory, which is one of absolutist rule which could be applied well beyond the bounds of contemporary Algeria. As Quilligan writes, the reader can be said to uncover allegory

⁵¹⁷ Bensmaïa, 'Multilingualism and National "Traits"', p. 110.

‘usually by a process of relearning’; the reader must ‘pause in the process of making easy statements, back up, and *reread*’.⁵¹⁸

A return to the ‘récit’: shifting narratives in time and space

Using the clock as a vehicle, Ayyoub’s ‘récit’, *Le remonteur d’horloge*, takes its characters on a journey through a tumultuous history. In the old desert village of Sidi Ben Tayeb, the clock which dates from the colonial period has broken and the villagers begin to panic as they are expecting a visit from a government representative. Dating from colonial times, the clock also serves as a representation of the fixed referential nature of historical time in the post-independence present. Without the clock, the villagers will not know when to expect the visit of the government official and, with four days to go until he will supposedly arrive, the race is on to ‘remonter l’horloge’ and to find somebody capable of doing so.

Having lobbied the lazy and self-interested local officials, one of the villagers, Si Kaddour, takes on the role of tracking down the original French clockmaker, Monsieur Georges, who now lives in France. But Monsieur Georges, nostalgic for his own former colonial time, scams the villagers, taking their money, and fails to repair the clock. In the end, the son of the secretary general of the Mairie – an oceanographer (who has the misfortune of living in the middle of the desert) – comes up with a solution and is able to fix the broken clock before the government official’s visit. The damage is done, however, as tensions in the village begin to mount. While the official visit passes without incident, the villagers’ troubles with the clock, and the unexpected adventure into their history prompted by the broken timepiece leads to the villagers themselves becoming wound up by their own history of oppression and of corruption they have discovered lurking beneath the surface. In scenes that, for those familiar with the history, will recall the events of October 1988 in Algiers, crowds assemble in the streets and erupt into rioting.

⁵¹⁸ Quilligan, pp. 227-28, my emphasis.

The story ends with a letter to the president drafted by the villagers and the new representatives elected to the Mairie. But, it is not a letter we might expect from a crowd reminiscent of that of the late 1980s in Algeria. At first glance, the letter is a strange plea from the villagers written on behalf of the oceanographer living in the isolated desert village, outlining how this young man, who fixed the clock and who could easily have gone elsewhere to practice his profession as an oceanographer, has remained loyal to his birth place of Sidi Ben Tayeb. The villagers' plea is that he be allowed to practice his profession in Sidi Ben Tayeb. The letter proposes that the president will authorise a pipeline from the Mediterranean sea, the village 'se trouvant à 750 km à peine de la côte', to create, in the unused low-lands of Sidi Ben Tayeb, a 'mer intérieure' where the children of the village could learn to swim, the older population of the village would have a chance to see the sea before their deaths and where the young Hadj Ali Koudier (the oceanographer) could practice his oceanography without being disturbed by boats, or submarines 'de la sixième flotte américaine', customs, deep sea divers or monsters (pp. 117-18). A ridiculous request, of course, but the reader will recall the 'mer intérieure' of Ayyoub's first-published 'récit', *Le Gardien*, where it functioned as a container for the boats bought and subsequently abandoned by the corrupt elite of generals who had fled the drought-ridden village.⁵¹⁹

The full title of Ayyoub's 'récit' is *Le remonteur d'horloge, ou le manuscrit de Sidi Ben Tayeb (découvert en l'an de grâce 2050, par la section Archéologie du ministre des Finances et de l'Histoire intelligente)*. The humour and the link made between the finance ministry and an 'Histoire intelligente' are perhaps telling, but the text is supposedly a historical artefact 'découvert' in the future of 2050. If ironic in tone, Ayyoub returns the attention to questions of time and

⁵¹⁹ As it turns out, Ayyoub's 'mer intérieure' likely refers to an actual project, first proposed in 1874 by the French army captain and geographer François-Elie Roudaire, to flood the lower sections of the Sahara desert by constructing a canal which would flow from the Mediterranean coast in Tunisia to the low-lying lands of the Sahel region. The plan inspired Jules Verne's novel *L'invasion de la mer* (Paris: Collection Hetzel, 1905) and was initially discussed by Roudaire in an article, 'Une mer intérieure en Algérie', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, May-June (1874), pp. 323-50. Here, the colony is seen as a colonial playground – a laboratory for the strange projects of colonisers – outside metropolitan France, where one could not imagine similar projects being proposed.

narrative, outlined earlier with reference to *Le Gardien* and to Khatibi's description of narrative time (of the 'récit') as distinct from a circular time of the Qur'an. Using the example of the *Mille et une nuits*, Khatibi shows how in its ultimate and necessary focus on death, narrative is always written in the future anterior. Khatibi stresses how narrative's very existence is reliant on this fact.⁵²⁰ In other words, and in the case of Ayyoub's text, history is necessarily written with a certain end in sight.

In this sense, the text here is not just retrospective but anticipatory, where the present is realised as a product of its possible futures. Indeed, Ayyoub's final *récit* demonstrates Khatibi's thought that as a narrative text, it can never be truly retrospective without positing a certain future; the narrative must be complete before it is told. The image of 'discovering' this text in the future, then, doubles as a critique of the pre-scripted history of post-independence Algeria and even of modern historical time, built within the shores of the *métropole* and exported to the colonies. If Osborne writes that history is 'the screen for the fantasy of the end of suffering',⁵²¹ then, in the case of the inhabitants of Sidi Ben Tayeb, the clock is a figure for this screen – a figure for the coming 'end' – suddenly removed. In its self-conscious projection into the future, Ayyoub's text can be seen to enable a multi-layered critique of modernity, itself a present realised as a product not of its past but of its futurity.⁵²² If one element of colonialism was about the projection of imagined geographies onto real people in real spaces, Ayyoub's text seems to be a perhaps tongue-in-cheek though nevertheless necessary warning from the future, reminding readers that history is written in advance, in a time often made inaccessible to the downtrodden and the oppressed.

What Ayyoub achieves through a complex and multi-layered allegorical and metaphorical web is an unveiling on the part of the villagers; the story can be read

⁵²⁰ Khatibi, *Ombres japonaises*, pp. 12-13. See also Bensmaïa, 'Multilingualism and National "Traits"', p. 143.

⁵²¹ Osborne, p. 125.

⁵²² See Osborne, pp. 127-32.

allegorically alongside a set of events contemporary to its writing and publication, but it also serves to unveil the structure of historical time itself and the possibility of escaping that time. In its ability to narrate numerous historical times at once, the allegorical mode actively deconstructs the unicity of time fixed in the figure of the clock, or of the nation. Indeed, it is the villagers, the downtrodden, the oppressed themselves who have tried endlessly to fix the clock; but, as the villagers come to realise, the clock is less time itself but a representation, a homogeneous symbol, of time, predetermined in an ideological narration written by those in power to benefit those in power. To recall Osborne, ‘historical narrative has lost its living relationship to the present’; it has become ‘narrative *as opposed* to discourse’.⁵²³ If narrative (the ‘*récit*’) must always offer a complete version, constructing both past and predetermining imagined futures, then the novel – in the hands of Ayyoub – can perhaps be seen to map an escape from these reductive and static forms of containment.

The relevance to Ayyoub’s text of Barthes’ writings on myth is to be found in a point he makes on political language as the possible pathway out of mythical language. As we see in *Le remonteur d’horloge*, the villagers’ self-reflexive exploration of time, narrative and history, prompted by the broken clock, forces a descent into unrest, rioting, with a glimmer of revolution on the horizon. Indeed, to stop the clock might in many ways be seen to pave the way for the inauguration of a new revolutionary time. In Fanon’s description, this might mean the true integration of the people in the development of a national consciousness, to allow them to pursue an all encompassing political education: ‘Nous devons soulever le peuple, agrandir le cerveau du peuple, le meubler, le différencier, le rendre humain.’⁵²⁴ In Barthes, as in Ayyoub’s story, there appears to be a possibility of finding a political language which ‘abolit le mythe’, a return to a ‘premier langage’ which is

⁵²³ Here, Osborne refers to Benveniste’s linguistics, p. 133. In Osborne’s reading of Benjamin, it is modernity which has become the site of a ‘crisis’ in the relation between narrative and discursive forms of history.

⁵²⁴ Fanon, pp. 132-33.

not the language ‘où s’installe le mythe’.⁵²⁵ While the clock is ultimately fixed, the villagers’ experiment with time is clear and can be read as an allegorical reflection on the part of Ayyoub concerning Algeria’s own ‘democratic experiment’ of the late 1980s, with the liberalisation of the press and the opening up of the democratic process. The ‘narrative fractures’, as Brand puts it, and the possibility of unveiling myth, the ‘national story’ which has become, in Barthes’ words a ‘langage second’, are demonstrated in this brief hiatus of *suspended* time, which is perhaps more broadly representative of the very brief hiatus of democracy in Algeria between 1988 and early 1992.⁵²⁶ This *suspense* is of course also one which relates back to a literary space. If history has become a static referential narrative, imposed on the people with fixed beginnings and ends – a dead space, in Osborne’s characterisation – then literature perhaps embodies the living relationship, the irreducibly discursive relation, that the past maintains with the present.

Conclusion

While named as the ‘écrivain contre urgence’,⁵²⁷ it is clear that Ayyoub’s epistemological enquiry moves beyond the reductive binaries of the 1990s, where the empirical would become crucial in descriptions and counter-descriptions of certain types of literature. In *Le Gardien*, the enquiry begins with the founding story of Adam and Eve and the parallel drawn alongside the founding story of the Algerian nation – the memorial obelisk inaugurating a new historical time. If, in a highly sardonic gesture, the ‘récit’ draws on the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, depicting the death of the ‘chef suprême’ as a punishment for looking back and introducing a sense of doubt, then it also presents the figure of the child as a symbol of hope. Moreover, the placement of the sacred text within the hands of this child seems to call for the necessary rereading and rewriting of

⁵²⁵ Barthes, ‘Le mythe, aujourd’hui’, p. 220.

⁵²⁶ Barthes, ‘Le mythe, aujourd’hui’, p. 220.

⁵²⁷ Dridi, ‘Ayyoub, écrivain contre urgence’.

contemporary history, suggesting the importance of text and interpretation. If, in ‘Chasse à l’Iguanodon de Barbarie’, the parallels between the slaughter of animals and that of the Algerian people, as spelled out in Yous’ testimony are clear enough, Ayyoub will go further to problematise the telling of this story and the seeming reliability attributed to established practices of reading. The narrator-journalist’s attempts to establish the facts in a murky world lead us to a potential encounter with the uprisings of October 1988 and the glimmer of democracy that followed. The figure of the writer is of course more forcefully introduced in *Le Palestinien* where we are reminded of the responsibility of the writer but also of the dangers this very responsibility places upon a writer. By introducing a circularity of time into the novel, Ayyoub deconstructs narrative in a similar way to Khatibi before him. And, in an absence of time, the clock of Sidi Ben Tayeb allows for the possibility of detaching the nation from its previous ideological, fixed and reductive narrations, instead viewing it as discursive and alive in its relation with the present and the people inhabiting that present.

Resembling the work of Mati and also Djaout, with whom we began, Ayyoub’s nation is first unsettled, then rewritten within a literary and allegorical time, which allows not just for the possibility of envisioning the nation but for the necessity of a ‘double-time’, in Bhabha’s terms, or ‘double critique’, for Khatibi, of the nation in its allegorical narration – suspended in ‘productive tension’ between what Bhabha refers to as the pedagogical and performative.⁵²⁸ In this way, Ayyoub brings the reader back to the question of narrative, to the ‘récit’. As Just comments on Blanchot’s understanding of the ‘récit’, its ‘literary function’ is ‘that of expropriation’; ‘the *récit*’s narrative voice unseats the point from which the narrative is being told’. In other words, in his return to the ‘récit’, Ayyoub displays the ‘I’ – the first person singular – as ‘hollow and empty’: ‘Narrative voice of the *récit* [...] can never become a site of confession simply because it never achieves the fullness of the ‘I’

⁵²⁸ Bhabha, p. 294-95; Vallury, p. 328.

capable of generating discourse.⁵²⁹ Relatedly, recalling Khatibi's understanding of the 'récit' as always already completed, with a beginning and an end, composed in the future anterior, Ayyoub's works can be seen to explore the incapacity of generating discourse out of narrative. This reminds us of Osborne's definition of the 'crisis' of modernity articulated in the tension between narrative and discourse. However, here where the 'récit' is actively exhibited *as narrative*, where the clock is similarly unveiled *as symbol*, Ayyoub's text can perhaps be said to bring into view an 'outside of language' which, as Caygill notes of Benjamin, 'departs from a crisis of representation' (in the symbol) and tentatively begins to 'construct constellations out of the material of the past.'⁵³⁰ If the literary had in Algeria become overly associated with its referential function, then Mati and Ayyoub's works demonstrate how literature had to go further into the realm of allegory in order to draw attention back to the role of literature as something which both relies on but also frustrates meaning and reference.⁵³¹ Allegory is recast here as a mode which never simply refers but that continually – and, to recall Benjamin, in a 'progressive tendency' – defers and reinvents meaning.⁵³²

⁵²⁹ Just, p. 127. Just goes on to cite Dominique Rabaté and his seeing 'this essentially exhausted quality of the *récit* [...] as a common trait of many post-war narratives, thereby suggesting that exhaustion can be seen as "le programme esthétique d'une certaine époque de la littérature."' Perhaps we could transfer Rabaté's reading to our own 'post-war' 'époque de la littérature', where the 'récit' form testifies to a violence done to the 'I' – indeed to the novel – emptied out, not quite ready to be filled again.

⁵³⁰ Caygill, p. 245.

⁵³¹ Harrison, 'Who Needs an Idea of the Literary?', p. 13.

⁵³² Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 331 [J57, 3].

Section Four: Recasting *Urgence*, or a New Aesthetics of *Urgence*?

Chapter Six

Mustapha Benfodil: *Pop' Littéraire*

Je suis plus dans la destruction des genres.

–Mustapha Benfodil⁵³³

The preface to Mustapha Benfodil's first novel, *Zarta!*, is provided by Sid Ahmed Semiane (known by his initials as SAS) – a journalist at the Algerian francophone daily *Le Matin* and known in Algeria for his caustic columns published at this newspaper during the 1990s;⁵³⁴ the preface is entitled 'Génération Benfodil'.⁵³⁵ As well as explaining the meaning of the title ('Zarta' is Algerian Arabic for the verb 'to desert'), the preface introduces Benfodil as a writer who merits our attention because of the way in which he 'rumine ses doutes et ses interrogations'. His works will, like those of Nietzsche, need time before they can be rendered 'lisibles'.⁵³⁶ SAS makes the case for Benfodil's place in a new generation of Algerian writers –one which 'observe son monde avec des yeux de l'urgence et le regard de l'instant' – but it is also one, according to SAS, which moves beyond writers such as Kateb (whose texts, SAS argues, are obsessed with the events of May 1945), Boudjedra (concerned with post-independence) and Mimouni (apparently concerned with the 'effluves bureaucratiques dans l'Algérie des années 80').⁵³⁷ Benfodil's generation is 'une génération qui a sa propre musique, ses propres idoles, ses fantasques onomatopées et ses redoutables virus'; SAS continues:

⁵³³ Personal interview with the author, conducted in Algiers (April 2014).

⁵³⁴ A selection of the columns are published in Sid Ahmed Semiane, *Au refuge des balles perdues: chroniques des deux Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005).

⁵³⁵ Sid Ahmed Semiane, 'Préface: Génération Benfodil', in *Zarta!* by Mustapha Benfodil (Algiers: Barzakh, 2000), pp. 7-9.

⁵³⁶ Semiane, 'Préface', p. 7.

⁵³⁷ Semiane, 'Préface', p. 8.

Une génération qui enfante, comme toutes les précédentes, un univers qui lui ressemble et de nouvelles exigences qui lui conviennent [...] qui se crée des mécanismes de défense dans la création bute toujours sur les barrages de l'incompréhension du temps pour faire les frais des résistances incongrues d'une époque qui refuse toute forme de validation.⁵³⁸

The underlying question of this chapter is to ask to what extent this generational view, taken by SAS in his preface to Benfodil's first novel – a view which seeks to contain writers alongside events and periods – is one which Benfodil's writings, as they progress through the first decade of the new millennium, forcefully reject. A question which will appear more obvious in our investigation is how Benfodil's texts, most notably his most recently published novel, increasingly reject all forms of reading which seek to reduce and contain literature to a certain frame. While, in his preface, SAS could be said to place Benfodil's first novel in the lineage of an 'écriture de l'urgence' – albeit within a new generation of writers – the chapter will trace how Benfodil, most obviously in his 2007 novel, *Archéologie du chaos (amoureux)*, rejects such a simplistic view of *urgence* applied to his works. This chapter is therefore more explicitly about recasting *urgence* – not its outright rejection, but its aesthetic, rather than merely thematic, reorientation.

As we will see, Benfodil's texts do not seek to merely do away with *urgence*, but to engage with it and ultimately to rearticulate it as an urgency of deconstructive reading and writing. In what follows, and after a summary of Benfodil's array of projects which sit between the literary, the theatrical and the political, we look in detail at the writer's 2007 novel, *Archéologie du chaos (amoureux)* and its multi-faceted engagement with the above questions, asking, moreover, how the literary has established a dialogue with the political in contemporary Algeria in new and intriguing ways.

⁵³⁸ Semiane, 'Préface', p. 8.

Existing between forms

Mustapha Benfodil's work outplays and outdoes dominant discursive frames and symbols. Difficult to describe as a novelist, a journalist, a playwright, or even simply a writer, Benfodil, as with much of his work, might best be described as existing between forms. Indeed, this, it might be suggested, is his very *raison d'être* as an artist, intellectual and political activist. Trained initially in mathematics, Benfodil switched to studying journalism at the beginning of the 1990s. In 1993, he was awarded the Prix spécial du jury aux 3e Poésies de Bejaïa for the poem 'À la santé de la République', written in memory of Tahar Djaout.⁵³⁹ It was not until 2000 that his first novel, *Zarta!*, was published as part of the initial releases by the newly established Barzakh. After the publication of his first novel, Benfodil wrote a number of plays for the theatre company Gare au Théâtre, based in Vitry-sur-Seine.⁵⁴⁰ In 2003, his second novel, *Les Bavardages du Seul* was published, again by Barzakh, and was, in 2004, awarded the Prix du meilleur roman algérien.⁵⁴¹ Also in 2003, Casbah published *Les six derniers jours de Bagdad: journal d'un voyage de guerre*, a short book collecting Benfodil's reports of a trip to Iraq made after the US-led invasion and just before the fall of the capital city to coalition forces; these reports had also appeared in the Algerian francophone daily *Liberté*.⁵⁴² In 2007, Benfodil's novel, *Archéologie du chaos (amoureux)* was published by Barzakh; it was released in France by the Marseille publisher, Al Dante, in 2012.⁵⁴³

In 2011, an art installation by Benfodil, entitled 'Maportaliche/It Has No Importance' exhibited at the Sharjah Biennial (an arts festival held since 2003 in the United Arab Emirates), was removed and the show's director was dismissed for allowing what the

⁵³⁹ The poem remains unpublished.

⁵⁴⁰ The author's bibliographical entry on the website of his French publisher Al Dante, lists these unpublished plays as: *Zizji dans le métro; Ça va merder à l'Elysée; France 0 – Uruguay 0; Papa, c'est quoi un faux barrage?; Le Tigre; and H. See*, <<http://al-dante.org/pdf-post/mustapha-benfodil-fiche-auteur/>> [accessed: 25 January 2016].

⁵⁴¹ Mustapha Benfodil, *Les Bavardages du Seul* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2003).

⁵⁴² Mustapha Benfodil, *Les six derniers jours de Bagdad: journal d'un voyage de guerre* (Algiers: Casbah, 2003).

⁵⁴³ Mustapha Benfodil, *Archéologie du chaos (amoureux)* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2007/Marseille: Al Dante, 2012). References are henceforth made parenthetically to the Algerian edition of the text.

authorities saw as an offensive piece of work to be exhibited.⁵⁴⁴ Written on a tee-shirt worn by one of the mannequins which made up the installation was a graphic testimony of a woman who had been raped in Algeria during the violence of the 1990s. According to Karima Bennoune, by citing the voices of the victims of the violence in Algeria during the 1990s, the installation was a form of journalism and had been misunderstood by those offended by the work.⁵⁴⁵ However, as Benfodil himself articulated in a blog entry at the time, while the account was based in reality, it had already been performed in one of his previous plays; the author defends his work on the basis that ‘art is free to be impolite and impertinent.’⁵⁴⁶ As for the delay in his coming to literary writing and his non-participation in the Paris-based publishing market of the 1990s, Benfodil describes journalism as his way of engaging with the reality of the period: ‘Pour moi, c’était une forme d’engagement; je voulais être témoin, et c’est comme ça que je suis venu à pratiquer le journalisme’. Describing ‘l’écriture de l’urgence’ as unsuited to respond to the situation of the 1990s, he continues: ‘je trouvais que le journalisme était le medium le plus adapté.’ He describes ‘le rythme de l’écriture littéraire [...] comme la peinture, l’huile – des choses qui ont besoin d’être assimilées par le corps, par l’inconscient.’⁵⁴⁷

The tone of the first novel, *Zarta!*, is ludic and heavy in irony from the beginning: the cover has a colourful image of a one-eyed, cartoon-like figure, dressed in a dark military green uniform and whose clothes sprout colourful growths as he appears to run. The novel is dedicated to the ANP (Armée nationale populaire), ‘moins quelques généraux’ and its epigraph is a pithy quote attributed to Winston Churchill: ‘La guerre est une chose trop

⁵⁴⁴ See Randy Kennedy, ‘Sharjah Biennial Director Fired Over Artwork Deemed Offensive’, in the ‘Arts Beat’ blog of *The New York Times*, <<http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/07/sharjah-biennial-director-fired-over-offensive-artwork/?partner=rss&emc=rss&r=0>> [accessed: 25 January 2016]. A link to an image of the artwork can be found on the Universes in Universe website, <http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/sharjah_biennial/2011/tour/28_mustapha_benfodil> [accessed: 25 January 2016].

⁵⁴⁵ Karima Bennoune, *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company 2013), pp. 134-35.

⁵⁴⁶ Mustapha Benfodil, ‘Algeria: Artwork on rape of women by fundamentalist armed groups censored at Sharjah Biennial’, <<http://www.violenceisnotourculture.org/content/algeria-artwork-rape-women-fundamentalist-armed-groups-censored-sharjah-biennial>> [accessed: 24 March 2016].

⁵⁴⁷ Personal interview.

sérieuse pour la confier à des militaires.⁵⁴⁸ The novel, as explained by the author in a postscript, was written ‘sous les drapeaux’ while Benfodil carried out his training for military service between August 1997 and February 1998 and itself charts the journey of the journalist Z.B. (these are the initials under which Zen’s articles are published) who secretly writes a column, entitled ‘Conneriques’, while embedded during the 1990s during his military service in the Algerian army.⁵⁴⁹ Suspecting he is up to no good and after Zen declares his desire to desert, his commanding officers imprison him deep in the Algerian desert and fake his death; his sole friend is a scorpion named Sheherayar to whom he recounts his story of his time in the ‘caserne’.⁵⁵⁰ The novel tells a highly caricatured and unlikely story of the narrator’s life, from the first-person account he gives to the scorpion to a third-person account we are given of Zen once he returns to Algiers after being released from his internment. The narrative chops and changes, produces highly implausible scenarios, characteristic of contemporary literary production after the ‘décennie noire’, perhaps especially as we have seen in the work of Mati and Ayyoub. The novel is also an unforgiving caricature of contemporary Algerian politics and society, as well as a seeming parody of a marketised or commercialised ‘écriture de l’urgence’. For example, the text within the text, also called *Zarta*, which Zen has written and published in Lebanon is released in France during the 1990s under the title: *Le dernier cri de Z.B. avant son assassinat*. Zen had become a celebrity in France after being featured on the front page of *Paris Match* and was even invited to work on an adaptation of his novel to a film in Paris.

Les Bavardages du Seul is a mammoth project and, as the author puts it, was highly experimental in its attempt to stage a complex self, exploring the reality of bringing

⁵⁴⁸ Mustapha Benfodil, *Zarta!* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2000), p. 5. The quote apparently originates with Georges Clémenceau.

⁵⁴⁹ Mustapha Benfodil, ‘Post-scriptum: La petite histoire de *Zarta!*’, in *Zarta!*, pp. 217-19.

⁵⁵⁰ Shahryar is the King of Persia in the *Mille et Une Nuits*, who listens to Shéhérazade recount a story to him over a thousand and one nights.

together multiple languages and perspectives of modern Algeria.⁵⁵¹ If the novel could be described to have a main narrative, this is the story of the fantastical travels of the classically naïve, literary fool and accidental prophet Ouali Benoualou.⁵⁵² If, on the one hand, a story of contemporary Algeria and a highly fragmented attempt to explore the experience of the 1990s, the novel is also a work which parodies religion and religious scripture in ways, as Benfodil admits in an interview, that would probably have led to his killing – had anybody actually read the novel.⁵⁵³ Benfodil admits he had written 800 pages of material for the novel, but only 500 were published in the end. But his commitment to literature is made clear when he insists that the distinction between writing journalism and novels is one of time: ‘Le rapport au temps y est très différent. En journalisme, on traite de l’actualité dans un temps autorisé. Il est rare de pouvoir aller au fond des choses.’⁵⁵⁴ Writing literature, as Marwan K. will write in the *Archéologie du chaos (amoureux)* is about creating a *literary* time – ‘écrire c’est créer du temps littéraire’ (p. 138) – beyond that of an immediate time we perhaps think of as the sole terrain of life. Elements of the text’s treatment of the question of time and narrative will remind of our prior discussion of Mati and Ayyoub’s texts alongside Khatibi.

Benfodil has also published a number of short stories and other texts in collections and periodicals. ‘Paris-Alger, classe enfer’ returns to the controversial question of the Harki, as Sabrina attempts to repatriate her father’s body to Algeria after he has died in France, picking up on a common theme of the repatriation of Harki bodies in Algerian literature.⁵⁵⁵ The short story charts the many obstacles Sabrina comes up against as it parodies firm-held

⁵⁵¹ Olivia Marsaud, ‘Mustapha Benfodil l’écriture dans tous ses états’, *Jeune Afrique*, 13 December 2004, <<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/109051/archives-thematique/mustapha-benfodil-l-écriture-dans-tous-ses-états/>> [accessed: 20 January 2016].

⁵⁵² The comical elements of the story are carried also in the name: ‘Ouali’ (homophone of ‘Wali’, meaning ‘governor’) and ‘Oualou’ (meaning ‘nothing’).

⁵⁵³ See TV interview with Mustapha Benfodil: ‘Vivre et écrire en Algérie’, directed by Dominique Rabourdin et Mohamed Kacimi, ARTE France production (2003).

⁵⁵⁴ Marsaud, ‘Mustapha Benfodil’.

⁵⁵⁵ For a broad overview of Harki literature in French, see Keith Moser (ed.), *A Practical Guide to French Harki Literature* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).

stereotypes about the Harki in Algeria; it is published in the collection *Les belles étrangères: treize écrivains algériens*, co-published by L'Aube in France and Barzakh in Algiers.⁵⁵⁶ Like many other collections of short stories published outside Algeria, the book has an 'avant-propos', written by the writer Mohamed Kacimi. Although we are told of how all the collected writers began writing after October 1988 and how many of the writers featured in the collection were writing 'pour étouffer le bruit des balles',⁵⁵⁷ the introductory text nevertheless sketches a far broader history of Algerian literature back to the time of Saint Augustine and Apuleius.⁵⁵⁸ The more recent events of the 1990s are reserved to the final couple of paragraphs of this introduction. In 'Bazar de l'amour à Alger', Benfodil writes an account of online chat rooms; where young Algerians were once writing graffiti on walls, they are now propositioning one another for sex online. The author uncovers these chat rooms to be full of what he calls 'une incommensurable détresse affective et une très grande misère sexuelle.'⁵⁵⁹ Published as a contribution to a 'dossier' in a special issue of the periodical *La pensée de midi*, entitled 'Du désir, du plaisir et de l'amour... en Méditerranée' the contribution paints a picture of contemporary Algeria which is not reduced to a comment on or a piece of writing *about* the 'décennie noire'. 'L'Homme qui voulait changer le monde à huit heures moins le quart' is published in a later edition of *La pensée de midi* and tells of Zino the 'rêveulutionnaire' whose dreams of changing the world remain, as his nickname suggests, contained within his night time dreams. While contemporary Algeria is present in references to the 'ninjas' and the GIA, these references are weaved into the oneiric narrative which uses Bolivia, and the death of Che Guevara, as a lens through

⁵⁵⁶ Mustapha Benfodil, 'Paris-Alger, classe enfer', in *Les belles étrangères: treize écrivains algériens* (Paris/Alger: L'Aube/Barzakh, 2003), pp. 49-71.

⁵⁵⁷ Mohamed Kacimi, 'Avant-propos', in *Les belles étrangères: treize écrivains algériens* (Paris/Alger: L'Aube/Barzakh, 2003), p. 14.

⁵⁵⁸ As we saw in Chapter One, this is a plurality Assia Djebar had been keen to emphasise in *Le blanc de l'Algérie*.

⁵⁵⁹ Mustapha Benfodil, 'Bazar de l'amour à Alger', *La pensée de midi*, 17 (2006), p. 49-50.

which to view contemporary Algeria.⁵⁶⁰ In 2005, Benfodil conducted a series of interviews published in a polymorphic volume entitled *Alger nooormal*.⁵⁶¹ The book, which is a photo-cum-music-text, begins with a series of photographs of the city of Algiers taken by Jean-Pierre Vallorani and culminates in the interviews coordinated by Benfodil. Sound recordings of the city, music and further interviews are included in the accompanying CD.

Published in the ‘Avant-scène théâtre’ series, *Clandestinopolis* is a play which tells the story of Hippolyte Wetters, who mourns the death of his daughter who committed suicide after being told by her father that she could no longer see a young undocumented Algerian man with whom she had fallen in love. The play stages his guilt as he remembers his daughter on the tramway, where he is also visited by a number of passengers, including ‘Dieu’, a ‘Fou’ who believes he is the avant-garde theatre director Antonin Artaud and ‘La Mort’. Meanwhile, a woman passenger whose resemblance to Wetters’ daughter prompts his memories, reports his odd behaviour to the driver of the tram and, when she adds that she thinks he is carrying a gun, a police operation is mounted to arrest him. The twist in the story is that Wetters, who had forbidden his daughter to see a young Algerian on the basis of prejudice, is now himself mistaken for a dangerous terrorist. In the final scene, Wetters is killed in a hail of sniper fire after reaching for his bag he had been ordered not to touch. The play could perhaps be read as a comment on prejudice and justice, but it also seems subtly to draw attention to the processes of how stories invent events and emotions, how language produces events prior to their actual occurrence.

Le point de vue de la mort stages the soliloquies of an ‘agent de morgue’, Moussa, stationed at BalBala, an imaginary ‘petite bourgade saharienne perdue dans le désert, à l’orée de Hassi Texas, importante plate-forme pétrolière.’⁵⁶² Trained as an oil engineer, Moussa is unable to find work in the town. The play charts how Moussa takes in and

⁵⁶⁰ Mustapha Benfodil, ‘L’Homme qui voulait changer le monde à huit heures moins le quart’, *La pensée de midi*, 18 (2006), pp. 167-72.

⁵⁶¹ See, Mohamed Ali Allalou and Aziz Smati, *Alger nooormal* (Paris: Françoise Truffaut Editions, 2005).

⁵⁶² Mustapha Benfodil, *Le point de vue de la mort* (Marseille: Al Dante, 2013).

washes a seemingly endless stream of bodies. After learning of the death of his friend Aziz, who self-immolates in the court at BalBala during a trial for defamation, Moussa's attention turns to his friend as Aziz's voice comes to haunt the play. A poet and political blogger, Aziz had been writing a book with Moussa. The voice of Aziz recounts how he set himself alight as a desperate attempt to escape the stifling conditions in which he was living: 'J'AI ALLUMÉ MON CORPS POUR LE REGARDER VIVRE!'⁵⁶³ The play is apparently inspired by Benfodil's reporting in the town of Ouargla, in the south of Algeria, where in 2011 a young out of work lawyer set himself alight in the office of the manager of an employment agency after continually being passed over for jobs. Balbala has been read by one critic as an allegory of the frustrations of living in modern Algeria, but it has also been seen in the light of the events which were said to have triggered the 'Arab Spring', namely the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia.⁵⁶⁴ If, in all the above works, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction seem blurred, this allows for the reader to better visualise the power of sitting between artistic forms as a means of depicting contemporary life while simultaneously and continuously interrogating that very means of depiction.

Archéologie du chaos (amoureux)

Archéologie du chaos (amoureux) is by far the most playful of Benfodil's works and apparently proved very popular with younger Algerians after it was published in 2007; elements of many of the texts and plays already mentioned are woven into this text. Like Benfodil's previous literary work, *Archéologie* is clearly embedded within a developing culture of rebellion and protest.⁵⁶⁵ In its reference to Michel Foucault's archaeological method, which

⁵⁶³ *Le point de vue de la mort*, p. 130.

⁵⁶⁴ Emmanuelle Caminade, 'Le point de vue de la mort, Mustapha Benfodil (1er article)', *La cause littéraire*, <<http://www.lacauselitteraire.fr/le-point-de-vue-de-la-mort-mustapha-benfodil-1er-article>> [accessed: 22 January 2016].

⁵⁶⁵ The author expands on the question of protest in his article 'Algérie: de « Bezzef ! » à « Barakat ! », écritures citoyennes', in *Penser la Méditerranée au XXIe siècle: rencontres d'Averroès #20*, ed. by Thierry Fabre (Marseille: Editions Parenthèses, 2014), pp. 189-99.

works to unveil determined discursive practices theorised by Foucault as a totalising ‘savoir’, or *épistème*, the novel articulates a challenge to the *épistème* of both Algerian nationalism and of the ‘décennie noire’.⁵⁶⁶ If its particular target is literature and meaning in contemporary Algeria, the deconstructive, fragmented, often grotesque text might be said to study in a far more overt and self-conscious manner the epistemological function of literature, as well as addressing the question of literature’s place between the ‘constative’ and the ‘performative’ in society. If the constative can be said to embrace a binary account, then the performative will produce what Shoshana Felman calls ‘des *actes* de langage, qui échappent comme tels à la pertinence du critère cognitive: vérité/fausseté’.⁵⁶⁷

Archéologie presents the story of the young and ambitious Yacine Nabolci, a revolutionary dreamer living in Algeria during the 1990s; we learn of Nabolci’s membership of A.G.I.R. (the ‘Avant-Garde Intellectuelle Révolutionnaire’), a group of young political activists whose aim is to ‘agir contre l’« ordre narratif dominant »’ (pp. 59, 135). With members including Jamel Derrida, V’Laid Navokov, Omar Rimbaud, Adlène Luis Borges,⁵⁶⁸ the group has a number of iterations. Transformed into the C.I.F.S. (‘le Commando d’Insémination des Filles du Système’) (p. 87), the principal mission of the group will be to seduce the daughters of the notoriously powerful elite of Algerian generals... and to impregnate them! In a further version, it becomes the group of ‘Anartistes’, whose aim is to ‘déconstruire l’ordre narratif national’ and whose doctrine is spelled out in the politico-poetic ‘Manifeste du Chkoupisme’ which is printed as an annexe to the text (pp. 118-19; 245-50).

The narrative, which becomes increasingly disfigured as it goes on, where characters are fused and confused, is in many ways an autobiographical one of Benfodil himself – a love story (in parentheses) cut short by the chaos of the autobiographical text

⁵⁶⁶ See Foucault, *L’Archéologie du savoir*, p. 262. As we have indicated, a benefit of Foucault’s method is that its conception of discourse is wide enough to encompass discursive events in the material, not just textual sense.

⁵⁶⁷ Shoshana Felman, *La folie et la chose littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 23.

⁵⁶⁸ As the text explains, ‘chacun avait son gourou et son griot d’où il tirait son surnom’ (p. 64).

which encompasses the author's (impossible) death. As much an account of Benfodil's struggle to write literature, and of his struggle to engage politically through literature – the characters of the novel come together to create their own anarchistic literary-political organisations – the novel is a neurotic caricature of the self-narrative and at the same time a reflection on the self-interest, misanthropy and failures of the writer. Nabolci's story is told through a structure of doubled *mise en abyme* by the author Marwan K., who keeps a 'carnet de bord' before he dies in mysterious circumstances and the 'enquête' is taken up, in the final third of the text, by the aging police inspector Kamel El Afrite, who conducts the 'autopsie littéraire' of Marwan K.'s manuscript which has ended suddenly 'sur une virgule' (pp. 199; 243). The central quest of each level of the novel is the discovery of a mysterious and singular 'algorithme' of life, which constantly escapes the grasp of Marwan K., Nabolci and the inspector.

The seemingly doomed self-mocking manifesto – 'Chkoupi' in Algerian Arabic is roughly equivalent to 'fichu' or 'foutu' in French – presents a rousing opposition to the regime and its supporters (who are named here as the 'bouteflicaille'), which it claims will be mobilised through cultural opposition and artistic activism: a 'Maquis Littéraire' will be established (p. 250); there will, according to the manifesto, also arise the need for a new government, a new constitution, a new life where it claims, 'Fellag sera notre Président par contumace.' (p. 249) In a further seeming articulation of Foucault's method, the manifesto states how, 'Il faut, par une archéologie et une généalogie étudiées, destituer les sens primitifs imposés par les castes dirigeantes et casser le logocentrisme ambiant.' (pp. 249-50) The manifesto goes on: 'Une fois ce destin accompli, il faut détruire notre propre langue avant qu'elle ne se mue en langue de bois à son tour, puis en langue de bois pétrifié, puis en langue officielle, puis en langue morte, puis en pensée fossile.' (p. 250) The manifesto presents its intention to escape the very language in which it is composed, before it like everything else is subsumed within a dominating national or official narrative of the State.

In the final part of the novel, it is seemingly ‘écriture de l’urgence’ that comes under an implicit but sustained attack. By replaying the story of the author through the eyes of the inspector, the novel rereads itself, all the while staging and parodying the overly simplistic readings of a life and of a history told through a deliberately fragmented and almost unreadable fiction. A literary professor friend of the inspector reads the phallic symbols in Marwan K.’s drawings and his constant references to an obscure ‘IL’ as proof of his homosexuality (p. 206). Ultimately, El Afrite claims to reveal another more complicated story: the elusive ‘IL’ to which Marwan K. refers throughout his ‘carnets’ is finally revealed by the inspector to be a set of initials for Marwan K.’s lover (of the opposite sex) (p. 236). El Afrite’s reading of the novel remains a simplistic and referential one as the police inquiry into the author’s life and death takes Nabolci’s story as its factual lens. In a passage which could more directly be read in terms of a parody of the climate of *urgence* of the 1990s, El Afrite concludes that Marwan K. died after writing too much, too quickly:

Il était lancé dans une course effrénée contre la montre. Contre la mort [...] Et son cœur s’est arrêté sur une virgule. Arrêt cardiaque littéraire. Une virgule-précipice. Overdose littéraire./ Il avait trop écrit cette nuit-là. Il avait éprouvé jusqu’à l’épuisement de son pauvre cœur, sa mémoire tortueuse et son âme torturée... Il avait soulevé trop de couvercles, avalé trop de couleuvres, sorti trop de cadavres des placards.../ Il avait écrit comme un forçat. Comme un forcené./ Il le disait lui-même: écrire tue (pp. 243-44).

If it can be read at all as a comment on the 1990s, the above might be seen to be a parody and de(con)struction of the body of an ‘écriture de l’urgence’ which first came to write the events of the 1990s. On the one hand, a comically overblown image of the author who dies of a literary overdose in a race against a narrative time and a narrative death, this passage might, on the other hand, be read as a serious attempt to use literature to discursively rearticulate the traumatic events of the 1990s in their *chaotic* and *incomplete* nature.

The text is highly aware of the processes involved in its production; it is also highly, perhaps excessively, intertextual in its multiple references and allusions to a range of writers, philosophers and cultural figures more generally. More specifically, the excessive intertextuality of the text might be read as a refusal to be contained by the language of *urgence* which had been applied to writers during the 1990s. Bonn highlights, in a piece on Algerian literature published in 1986, that while all literature can be said to be intertextual, the best texts ‘prennent au contraire avec les « modèles » qu’ils convoquent la distance, souvent parodique, qui leur permet de les retravailler, de les mettre en question.’⁵⁶⁹ In this way, Benfodil’s text does not merely cite material but integrates it into his own *parodic* plot; the intertexts make up the fabric of the text and in some ways are implicitly called upon to frame and explain the logic of the multilayered story. This *parodic* staging of history will also, of course, recall Foucault’s discussion of history and genealogy in his well-known essay, ‘Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’Histoire’; Benfodil’s text uses a genealogy which, through parody, turns against the search for origins in history – indeed where history is turned in on itself, against its own origins (‘on la retourne contre sa naissance’).⁵⁷⁰ In its local context, Benfodil’s *Archéologie* might be read to develop a new experimental method in order to undo the multiple *épistèmes* of Algerian history. In its parodic staging of history, the text can be seen to reveal the very process by which a narrative frame is made.

Yet, as we can see from the title, the novel is also about the possibility of writing a history, an archaeology of *chaos* – a history of the madness of the 1990s perhaps – and so might benefit from being read alongside the debate about writing and madness, inaugurated by Derrida’s well-known critique, in his essay ‘Cogito et histoire de la folie’, of Foucault’s method in his *Folie et déraison, histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*.⁵⁷¹ In her study of

⁵⁶⁹ Bonn, ‘Littérature algérienne et conscience nationale’, p. 36.

⁵⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’Histoire’, in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite* by Suzanne Bachelard et al. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1971), p. 166.

⁵⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, ‘Cogito et histoire de la folie’, *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 68, 4 (1963), pp. 460-94; Michel Foucault, *Folie et déraison, histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961).

writing and madness and of the relation between madness and what she calls ‘la chose littéraire’, Felman has considered how Derrida and Foucault’s texts can be seen as complementary in the different perspectives they bring to the discussion about the possibility of speaking about madness, but she also seeks to think about the lack of discussion of literature within their respective accounts.⁵⁷² Felman’s question is whether literature can offer a point of entry into this complex debate, as something which forces us to reflect on the meaning of writing about madness and perhaps writing more generally. She begins by thinking about the difficulty of the distinction between writing madness (writing *as* madness) and writing about madness. In asking whether we know what it is to ‘*écrire sur la folie (et non pas écrire la folie)*’,⁵⁷³ Felman’s proposition is that in the absence of a proper meta-language to speak about madness, the two (‘*écrire sur*’ and ‘*écrire*’) will inevitably intersect, existing in an aporetic relation. The question of Felman’s book is whether it is at the point of this intersection, at this aporia, we find literature itself: ‘Ne serait-ce pas dans ce quelque part, justement, que pourrait se situer l’écriture?’⁵⁷⁴

As a text which is both about *chaos* and is visibly *chaotic*, there is therefore a possibility that, rather than the debate between Foucault and Derrida shedding light on Benfodil’s text, it is in fact Benfodil’s text that can shed light on the broader epistemological questions highlighted by Felman and debated by Foucault and Derrida. This inversion between theory and literature is described by Felman in the following terms: ‘La terminologie critique s’avérera des lors être, non pas une nouvelle façon de parler, mais une nouvelle façon de se taire devant la chose littéraire.’⁵⁷⁵ As a text which is both about the *chaos* 1990s and the text’s inability to tell that *chaos* – as a text which is about madness and the inability to talk about madness without incorporating that madness and also

⁵⁷² Shoshana Felman, ‘Foucault/Derrida: folie et logos’, in *La folie et la chose littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), pp. 35-55.

⁵⁷³ Felman, *La folie*, p. 13.

⁵⁷⁴ Felman, *La folie*, pp. 13-14.

⁵⁷⁵ Felman, *La folie*, p. 21.

consecrating that madness – Benfodil has perhaps produced a literature which does indeed sit between writing *chaotically* and writing about *chaos*.

As Felman suggests by the analogy between literature's confinement within 'les belles lettres' and a madman locked up in an institution, it is possible that Benfodil sees his work as in danger of being locked up, rendered something he considers it not to be, and recognises that his task is to free literature from the reductionist nomenclature. As Benfodil admits in an interview with *Jeune Afrique*, there is also a linguistic element to this: 'J'écris en français, je parle l'arabe, et le kabyle est ma langue maternelle. Je suis à un carrefour linguistique. Chaque roman est pour moi une façon nouvelle d'apprendre à parler.'⁵⁷⁶ But how do we speak about literature when literature is the very form through which we do that speaking; how can we write a novel in a language we do not yet know how to speak? How can the writer speak about madness, about *chaos*, without himself becoming mad? While, on the one hand, Benfodil's novel can be seen as a critique of the widely held assumption that 'chaos' ruled in Algeria during the 1990s and that such 'chaos' could be written about unproblematically, the *Archéologie* goes further than this, prompting the reader to ask of the impossibility of critique.

A number of strategies which perhaps attempt to respond to the questions raised above have been deployed either directly by the author and his readers after the publication of the text, or can be read to emerge from within the text. In the wake of the publication of his *Archéologie* and in a seeming effort to deny the fixed nature of the text, Benfodil organised a number of unauthorised street readings in and around Algiers, which he entitled: 'pièces détachées – lectures sauvages'.⁵⁷⁷ These events were mirrored in Paris,

⁵⁷⁶ See Marsaud, 'Mustapha Benfodil'.

⁵⁷⁷ See Benfodil, 'Algérie: de « Bezzef ! » à « Barakat ! »'; see also the entries on Benfodil's blog about the series, <<http://mustaphabenfodil.canalblog.com/>> [accessed: 25 January 2016]. The links between social activism and Benfodil's *Archéologie* have recently been explored in Alexandra Gueydan-Turek, 'Figure of an Anartist: Keeping Local Francophone Literature Engaged with Mustapha Benfodil's Literature-action', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 20, 1 (2016), pp. 48-57.

where sections of the author's (and others') work were read aloud.⁵⁷⁸ In and around Algiers, such public displays of dissent were met with increasing repression by the police. Benfodil's 'lecture sauvage' at Tipasa, a town situated to the west of Algiers, led to him being taken to a local police station for questioning.⁵⁷⁹ In a television interview shown in 2003, the interviewer asks Benfodil who exactly he thinks reads his writing. He responds, after a pause, 'personne'.⁵⁸⁰ Therefore, while words on the page may only unsettle the 'ordre narratif dominant' (p. 135) within the boundary of the text, they have not really threatened the status quo – offering little challenge to the dominant State order; it has, rather, been the performance of words beyond the text, the threat of their discursive and public *énonciation*, which has most unsettled the regime.

In an article published in 2014, Benfodil recounts how he co-founded the group of political activists 'Barakat!' ('enough!' in Algerian Arabic) in opposition to Bouteflika running for a fourth term as president. In the article, Benfodil discusses the legacy of Mohammed Dib's writing on the responsibility of the writer as 'écrivain public'; he also writes about the beginnings of his 'lectures sauvages' and the founding of the group which preceded 'Barakat!', 'Bezzef' (along with writers Kamel Daoud, Chawki Amari and Adlène Meddi). The author recounts how other groups came together to launch spontaneous artistic protests in the streets of Algiers in the run-up to the presidential elections in 2014. The group 'Clacc', which stands for the 'Comité pour la libération de l'action culturelle et citoyenne', organised a spontaneous concert in the space outside the Grande Poste in central Algiers; the group, Benfodil explains, was founded by Amazigh Kateb (the son of Kateb Yacine) and Rihab Alloula (the daughter of Abdelkader Alloula, killed in 1994). He also describes how in one of the first 'lectures sauvages' at the Salon international du livre,

⁵⁷⁸ The web-based World Amazigh TV have posted recording of these readings on the website Dailymotion: <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xas3kd_part-01-manifetse-du-chkoupisme_news> [accessed: 25 January 2016].

⁵⁷⁹ See Mustapha Benfodil, 'Cherche flic pour lecture citoyenne à Tipasa...', *El Watan*, 16 August 2009, reproduced online: <<http://mustaphabenfodil.canalblog.com/>> [accessed: 27 November 2015].

⁵⁸⁰ See, again, the TV interview with Mustapha Benfodil: 'Vivre et écrire en Algérie'.

the group denounced the censorship of Mehdi El Djazaïri's novel, *Poutakbine*, which had been deemed to insult the president, by inventing their very own Prix de la Censure.⁵⁸¹ The main idea of the 'lectures sauvages', as Benfodil explains, was for the writer to read aloud fragments of his own work in public spaces. His analysis of how the 'lectures sauvages' radically changed his relationship to the public space is worth quoting at length:

Depuis les Lectures sauvages, mon rapport à la Cité, à ma ville, Alger, à l'espace public, a complètement changé. Avant, j'étais dans un autre type de contrat avec ma société: j'écrivais comme on écrit des messages de détresse qu'on met dans une bouteille, et qu'on jette à la mer. [...] comme auteur, j'étais davantage dans le schéma qui consistait à dire que l'écrivain est avant tout ses livres, et mes livres s'en sont trouvés chargés – ma littérature surtout – de tous ces cris que je n'arrivais pas à sortir. Mais à partir du moment où j'ai sorti mes textes pour leur faire « prendre l'air » (Léo Ferré, *Les Poètes*), j'ai commencé à écrire un autre texte, tout à fait inédit. Un texte écrit avec les cris et les trottoirs de ma ville. Depuis, mon regard sur ma « fonction », sur mon « status » d'écrivain, a été totalement chambardé. Je découvrais que des flics pouvaient m'embarquer juste parce que je déclamais de la poésie dans la rue. Oui, me faire embarquer juste parce que ma parole n'était plus confinée, emprisonnée dans un livre, dans une librairie ou une bibliothèque, mais qu'elle était incarnée, portée par un corps. Un corps qui dépassait désormais mes frontières organiques.⁵⁸²

As others came together under the banner of 'Barakat!', Benfodil notes how his writing no longer felt like a 'soliloque pathétique', but was rather a 'petite note dans une partition chorale. Une partition libertaire.'⁵⁸³ It is in its performativity, in its embodiment, that Benfodil's text is able to redefine its own textuality, in a deconstructive space which privileges the equivocal nature of discourse and the decentred structure of language and meaning, beyond its seeming impotence as literature and its reduction to a singular *body* of literature, as something else all together, carried in multiple directions by multiple human bodies. Benfodil's 'lectures sauvages' can perhaps therefore be seen to enact what, in *L'Archéologie du savoir*, is named the 'fonction énonciative', where with each reading a new meaning and political resonance of the text will emerge.⁵⁸⁴ As Habib Ben Salha has put it: 'A la source d'une langue, il n'y a pas une seule langue, mais un mélange extraordinaire de

⁵⁸¹ Mehdi El-Djazaïri, *Poutakbine: journal presque intime d'un naufragé* (Paris: Riveneuve, 2010).

⁵⁸² Benfodil, 'Algérie: de « Bezzef ! » à « Barakat ! »', pp. 194-95.

⁵⁸³ Benfodil, 'Algérie: de « Bezzef ! » à « Barakat ! »', p. 196.

⁵⁸⁴ See Michel Foucault, 'La fonction énonciative', in *L'Archéologie du Savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), pp. 116-38.

racines, de codes, de modes, de mutations, de transmutations. Les mots voyagent, les énoncés s'opposent, s'équilibrent; restent l'envie d'énoncer et à chaque énoncé une énonciation nouvelle.⁵⁸⁵

Even within the body of Benfodil's text, there are signs that the language is beginning to break out of the typeface, with sketches, graffiti and Arabic script. The text more generally is often interrupted, broken up and peppered with poetry and lyrics, switching suddenly from direct to indirect speech without warning or adequate signposting; from the perspective of Nabolci to that of his author, Marwan K. To attempt to read the *Archéologie* is something of an undertaking in itself. Some of the more obvious deviations from the classic typed manuscript will recall what Dina Al-Kassim, writing of Khatibi, Boudjedra and Meddeb, terms the 'calligraphic trope' figured as what she will call a more serious challenge to both 'the rhetorical discourses of the Arabo-Islamic tradition' and 'the equally blinkered versions of modernity and history apparent in the rhetoric of the modern postcolonial State.'⁵⁸⁶ Although, in the oppositional language used, Al-Kassim risks falling into the trap of setting up another binary out of what is a fundamentally deconstructive mode. These experimental spillages of language could also be an attempt to prefigure the 'lectures sauvages', encouraging the reader to read aloud the sections of poetry, some of the kaleidoscopic text, or perhaps even to actively attempt pronouncing the words or sentences of Algerian Arabic that appear. As Benfodil himself puts it, this is also a transgressive linguistic experimentation:

Quand j'écris j'invente une langue – même la langue française, je transgresse la grammaire, la syntaxe, les mots – après, oui je suis dans cette famille de la langue française, mais c'est une langue que

⁵⁸⁵ Habib Ben Salha, 'La littérature maghrébine d'impression française', in *La valeur de l'œuvre littéraire, entre pôle artistique et pôle esthétique* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012), pp. 511-28; cited from online version,

<<http://www.aplettres.org/La%20litterature%20maghrebine%20d%20impression%20francaise.pdf>>

[accessed 5 September 2014]. Talk of the enunciative function of discourse will also recall Young's reading of Foucault, which stresses how discursive events exist beyond overly textual reductions and in a political realm. See Young, pp. 408-10.

⁵⁸⁶ Dina Al-Kassim, *On Pain of Speech: Fantasies of the First Order and The Literary Rant* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), pp. 222-23.

j'approprie à plusieurs niveaux. J'approprie en réinventant sa grammaire, donc je suis dans une autre grammaire; et puis c'est cette démarche qui consiste à intégrer dans le corps de la langue dominante des langues périphériques.⁵⁸⁷

This integration of 'des langues périphériques' within the body of dominant language will remind that the writer can never seek a simple escape from language, but, as Benfodil describes, must always project one through another. It is perhaps here that the author discovers a language which realises its ethical potential to work beyond the replication of binary thinking, or in Felman's words, 'la langue dans laquelle se donne à lire une grammaire', which points us back to the aporetic relation between the constative and the performative. It is here, Felman suggests, that literature itself might plug the gap, mediating at the point of the tension.⁵⁸⁸ Resonating with elements of Benfodil's description of the work of literature, Felman concludes by writing of how madness has a '*rythme* imprévisible, incalculable, inarticulable, mais foncièrement narrable, à travers le récit du glissement d'une lecture *entre* le trop-plein-de-sens et le trop-vide-de-sens.' She continues to sum up: 'Ce que la chose littéraire, dans chaque texte, raconte, c'est précisément *la spécificité même de sa résistance à notre lecture*.'⁵⁸⁹ Therefore, what is *narratable*, for Felman, is not necessarily to do with what is comprehensible, measurable or in our case investigable or easily subject to classification; what is *narratable* is our own incapacity to read. This, it would seem, is precisely one of the main theoretical resonances Benfodil's *Archéologie* intends to have for the reader.

To return to the question of performing the text and the 'lectures sauvages', the continued centrality of the figure of the intellectual in Algerian society and politics is also apparent here. While, in his 2014 article, Benfodil returns to Dib's pronouncements during the War of Independence on the responsibility of the writer,⁵⁹⁰ he doesn't cite Dib's

⁵⁸⁷ Personal interview.

⁵⁸⁸ Felman, *La folie*, p. 18.

⁵⁸⁹ Felman, *La folie*, pp. 349-50 (emphases in the original).

⁵⁹⁰ Benfodil, 'Algérie: de « Bezzzef ! » à « Barakat ! »'.

clarifications around this issue in 1995 in the postscript appended to Dib's collection of short stories, *La Nuit Sauvage*, where Dib suggests that if writing and moral responsibility are to be reunited then we must nevertheless remember the writer's role in asking questions, in literature's ability to *un-teach*.⁵⁹¹

If Benfodil's work can be read at all as a comment on the 1990s, as it is in SAS's preface to *Zarta!* and in the press,⁵⁹² then it might indeed be productively read not simply to question the constructed body of an 'écriture de l'urgence' which apparently came to write the events of the 1990s, but the multi-layered language of *urgence* which came to constitute the 1990s in a set of binary narratives which would create simplistic oppositions between the State and Islamists, writers and Islamists and writers and the State. The possibility also remains that the novel constitutes a more serious attempt to rearticulate, in a *genealogical* manner, the traumatic events of the 1990s in their *chaotic*, incomplete and excessive nature, but this is also a part of the text's strategy to deconstruct pre-existing narratives and open up a broader discursive space in which an account of 'events' can be redefined. To recall the 2005 charter for peace and national reconciliation, the period of the 1990s is scripted as a 'tragédie nationale'. As we saw in the General Introduction to the thesis, the charter forbids the use or appropriation of, what it calls, 'les blessures de la tragédie nationale' to 'fragiliser l'État, nuire à l'honorabilité de ses agents qui l'ont dignement servie, ou ternir l'image de l'Algérie sur le plan international.'⁵⁹³ This official writing of Algeria's history as tragic constitutes a classic teleology which would bring about a form of 'réconciliation' as part of what Foucault calls 'une histoire qui jetterait sur ce qui est derrière elle un regard de fin du monde.'⁵⁹⁴ In a seeming reminder of the multi-layered nature of Algeria's post-independence history, the novel can be said to look in multiple directions: *back to* the

⁵⁹¹ Dib, 'Postface', p. 246.

⁵⁹² See, for instance, Delphine Gourlay, 'En Algérie, les enfants d'octobre 1988', *Les blogs du « diplo »*, *Le Monde diplomatique*, <<http://blog.mondediplo.net/2009-10-30-En-Algerie-les-enfants-d-octobre-1988>> [accessed: 22 January 2016].

⁵⁹³ 'Charte pour la paix et la réconciliation nationale', p. 7.

⁵⁹⁴ Foucault, 'Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'Histoire', p. 159.

‘décennie noire’ and its account as constructed in an ‘écriture de l’urgence’ of the 1990s, to the more recent attempts to apply a hegemonic tragic narrative to the 1990s by the State in its charter for peace and reconciliation, and finally *away from* the 1990s altogether as it rearticulates, in a *parodic* and discursive manner, *urgence* as an urgency of deconstructive reading.

Conclusion

To describe Benfodil’s work as aesthetically new, as part of a new generation of Algerian writers – what some have called, after the historian Malika Rahal, the *génération d’Octobre 1988* and what others have more recently referred to as a *nahda* or ‘renaissance’ – would seem on the surface accurate.⁵⁹⁵ Certainly in its more extreme elements, Benfodil’s 2007 novel experiments in new ways with questions of reading and writing literature. The range of forms in which he is engaged is also a sign of his belonging to a new generation of extremely innovative writers and artists. However, as we indicated at the beginning of this chapter – and as we explored in Section One of the thesis – care should be taken when speaking generationally, not least because this risks consecrating *bodies* of literature which may or may not accurately represent the diversity of individual works. In the context of the 1990s, speaking generationally also runs the risk of consecrating a body of ‘écriture de l’urgence’ that, in the eyes of writers said to participate in it, did not exist in such a stable way as was portrayed. The stigma which can be said to have arisen around this largely constructed body of writing perversely risks reinforcing an ‘écriture de l’urgence’ it sets out to oppose. The ‘champ’ here risks becoming something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. To speak in generational terms about the *post-‘décennie noire’*, about *post-urgence* or certainly of ‘renaissance’ or *nahda* could in fact be misleading and runs the risk of periodising novels

⁵⁹⁵ Malika Rahal, ‘Fille d’Octobre. Générations, engagement et histoire’, *L’Année du Maghreb*, 10 (2014), pp. 183-87; Meddi and Matarese, *Algérie, la nahda des Lettres*; see also, Isabelle Avran, ‘Renaissance de la culture algérienne’, *Le Monde diplomatique*, December 2003, <<http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2003/12/AVRAN/10876>> [accessed: 22 January 2016].

and novelists in such a way that they come to speak in and for a particular time. If Benfodil's works set out to contest periodisation and containment, it seems likely they also at the same time play a role in reaffirming reductive practices of reading – though, this is more present in the para-textual material which frames the author's first novel, *Zarta!*

This tricky encounter between the writer as intellectual and as creator of literary fiction is captured in Spivak's famous essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' and is recounted by Harrison as he works through the question of certain slippages in the meaning of the term 'representation'. Focusing on the German terms, *vertreten* (political representation) and *darstellen* (artistic representation), it is shown how the conflation or rather the (con)fusion of these two meanings, within the single term 'representation', has resulted in certain writers and their works coming to 'represent' artistically – their novel depicts a certain place or time – and politically – their novel, the voice within their novel or the novelist *as* intellectual is seen to *speak for* a minority group in society.⁵⁹⁶ Dib's focus on the interrogative imperative of literature brings back into focus the division, made by Bonn, between an affirmative ideological discourse and a literary or artistic discourse more generally, but it also demonstrates how literature can begin to intervene in more politically nuanced ways. The best writing seems to capture and work through this very problem as it narrates existence in an equivocal way, returning attention to the discursive space within which narratives are made. In its distance from more traditional modes of narrative, in its self-awareness, but also in its attempt to connect discursively with a political reality, Benfodil's novel seems to stage this very problem. In a concrete way, the novel is an experimental pamphlet, a manifesto, for the largely young Algerians protesting in the streets; but, in its literary and philosophical potential, it is a contribution to a debate about how we can write beyond boundaries, without falling victim to further attempts to contain

⁵⁹⁶ Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p. 95. See also, Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'; *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, pp. 255-66.

meaning. Overall, though, the novel is about meaning and experience and how these two things are related. While the former is often said to emerge from the latter, Benfodil shows us a more complex reality where one exists within the other; the experiment here is to bridge these otherwise disparate things through what Marwan K. announces early on in the *Archéologie* as his attempt to create a 'Pop' Littérature' (p. 31). It is in both the literal onomatopoeic and figurative senses of the term 'pop' that we should read this statement of intent: a literature that speaks to many, brings people together across boundaries and borders, but one that also quite literally goes 'pop', explodes, or rather implodes in a continual kaleidoscopic self-reflection on its own incapacity to give an account.

Chapter Seven

Kamel Daoud: from newspaper to novel to newspaper

Vous, par exemple, mon cher compatriote, pensez un peu à ce que serait votre enseigne. Vous vous taisez? Allons, vous me répondrez plus tard. Je connais la mienne en tout cas: une face double, un charmant Janus, et, au-dessus, la devise de la maison: « Ne vous y fiez pas. »

–Jean-Baptiste Clamence⁵⁹⁷

Il ne faut pas mélanger entre les idées d'un personnage fictif et les positions de l'écrivain.

–Kamel Daoud⁵⁹⁸

By looking principally at reception, the final chapter attempts to close a loop opened at the beginning of the thesis. It looks in particular at the possibility of drawing parallels between the readings made of what was named and constructed as 'écriture de l'urgence' in the Franco-Algerian 'champ littéraire' during the 1990s and the way the most recent work of journalist and writer Kamel Daoud has been received most notably in France, since its publication in 2014. Given our proximity to the date of publication, and in the light of the fact that debates surrounding Daoud's journalism and writing are ongoing (see the Coda to this chapter), observations and conclusions will clearly be limited, but in light of the explosion in interest in Daoud's *Meursault, contre-enquête*, it will be worth including this novel as a final, albeit more tentative, case-study in a thesis which examines how contemporary Algeria is read through its literary texts.⁵⁹⁹ In light of this peak in interest in the novel, this chapter also extends its corpus of source materials to the Anglophone international press,

⁵⁹⁷ The fictional narrator of Albert Camus's *La Chute* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), p. 52.

⁵⁹⁸ See, Nourhane. S., 'Kamel Daoud : « Hamadache est instrumentalisé par les autorités pour me pousser à quitter l'Algérie »', *Algérie-focus.com*, 21 December 2014, <<http://www.algerie-focus.com/2014/12/kamel-daoud-hamadache-est-instrumentalise-par-les-autorites-pour-me-pousser-a-quitter-lalgerie/>> [accessed: 26 January 2016].

⁵⁹⁹ Kamel Daoud, *Meursault, contre-enquête* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2013); references to this edition of the text are henceforth made parenthetically.

which has reported on the English translation of Daoud's novel.⁶⁰⁰ Through a close reading of the original text published in Algiers in 2013, and drawing on comparisons with the French edition published in 2014, the chapter explores how the novel performs a multi-layered and self-conscious engagement with questions of identification and representation – with the questions of the literary itself – opening a dialogue between multiple representations of modern and contemporary Algeria and encouraging the reader to question these often reductive representations.

After making its own reading of the novel, the final chapter asks how accounts of Daoud's *Meursault, contre-enquête* have conflated the literary and the journalistic voices in attempting to construct the literary text as a lens through which contemporary Algerian society and politics can be viewed and understood, despite depictions of contemporary Algeria being relatively limited in the text. Indeed, we seek to show how the text plays its own game of representation, which has gone unnoticed by many critics, whereby the literary itself is brought into question.⁶⁰¹ The fact that a similar conflation between the journalistic and authorial voice can be said to have taken place in Camus's fiction and nonfiction is seen therefore as a coincidence which occurs *notwithstanding* the fact that Daoud's text is said to 'rewrite' Camus's.⁶⁰² As we have indicated, the overarching question of this final chapter is how a reductive reading applied to Camus's fiction has been carried forward to a present day Algerian writer, where the voice of the intellectual is often clumsily located in the voice established more often than not in the narrator of a fictional story. Thus, in its account of Daoud's novel, the chapter looks back to Camus's works and

⁶⁰⁰ The novel has been translated into twenty-seven languages, with others in press at the time of writing, and a feature film is planned for release in 2017. Two editions are in circulation in English, distributed in the US by the Other Press and in the UK and Australia by Oneworld Publications. John Cullen is the translator.

⁶⁰¹ One recent exception to this is Lia Brozgal, 'The Critical Pulse of the *Contre-enquête*: Kamel Daoud on the Maghrebi Novel in French', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 20, 1 (2016), pp. 37-46.

⁶⁰² On the tricky question of the division between Camus's fiction and nonfiction, see Kevin Newmark, 'Tongue-tied: What Camus's fiction couldn't teach us about ethics and politics', *Albert Camus in the 21st Century: A Reassessment of His Thinking at the Dawn of a New Millennium*, ed. by Christine Margerrison et al. (New York: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 107-20.

their reception – most notably *L'Étranger* – with the help of Nicholas Harrison's work.⁶⁰³ In so doing, we seek to assess the usefulness of making a comparison between the reception of Camus's work, the reading and reception of works *from* Algeria during the 'décennie noire' and, finally, the reception of Daoud's novel in the contemporary literary field, asking to what degree anything has changed in the critical (con)fusion of the voice of the 'intellectual' and that that can be read to emerge from his literary fiction. Put another way, the chapter asks to what extent both Camus and Daoud's works, as forms of representing Algeria and the authors' politics vis-à-vis Algeria, have been over-politicised in their respective contemporary receptions and of how this over-politicisation, partially a product of the market conditions surrounding the cultural value of writers, has and still continues to tacitly promote limited and reductive readings of literature.

Published in November 2013 in Algiers by Barzakh, *Meursault, contre-enquête* received some attention in the local Algiers press; however, news of the novel's publication was soon picked up in France.⁶⁰⁴ It was published in France by Actes Sud in May 2014 and made the final selection for France's most prestigious literary prize, the Prix Goncourt. In the same year, the novel was awarded the Prix François Mauriac and the Prix des cinq continents de la Francophonie and finally the Goncourt du premier roman in May 2015. In December 2014, the leader of the unofficial Front de l'Éveil islamique salafiste, Abdelfatah Hamadache, on his Facebook page called for the Algerian State to sentence Daoud to death after the author made comments on television which Hamadache deemed insulting to Islam. His words, reported by *Le Monde*, read as follows: 'Le Front de la Sahwa, écrit-il, « considère que si la charia islamique était appliquée en Algérie, le châtement contre lui

⁶⁰³ Nicholas Harrison, "'Race', Reading and Identification' in *Postcolonial Criticism: History, Theory and the Work of Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), pp. 62-91.

⁶⁰⁴ See, for instance, an interview with Daoud on France Culture, 'Camus: L'Histoire au Présent', 4 November 2013, <<http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-un-autre-jour-est-possible-serie-camus-vu-de-l-etranger-2013-11-04>> [accessed: 25 January 2016].

aurait été la mort pour apostasie et hérésie ». ⁶⁰⁵ A report published on the website *Algeria-Watch*, which repeats claims that Hamadache was embedded as an agent in the Algerian security services during the 1990s and that the self-styled ‘imam’ was still operating with the approval of the Algerian security services, cites the statement further: ‘Nous appelons le régime algérien à appliquer la charia et à le condamner à mort en le tuant publiquement pour la guerre qu’il mène contre Dieu et le Prophète.’ ⁶⁰⁶ Hamadache was also reported to have recalled the days of the 1990s when he wrote: ‘ceux qui nous combattent par la plume doivent périr par l’épée.’ ⁶⁰⁷ In a petition launched by fellow Algerian author and the editor of the weekend edition of the francophone daily *El Watan*, Adlène Meddi called for Hamadache to be charged by the Algerian authorities for inciting Daoud’s murder. In the description, Meddi recalls the memory of the ‘décennie noire’ and of the ‘pires moments de l’Algérie face au GIA’. ⁶⁰⁸ The call for the Algerian State to sentence Daoud to death was widely reported as a ‘fatwa’ in the French press, despite the fact that Hamadache apparently had no authority to declare any fatwa. ⁶⁰⁹ Daoud himself referred to the call as a fatwa on his own Facebook and Twitter pages and, in an article published on the website of *Le Point*, speaks no doubt with more than a hint of irony about the ‘fatwatisation’ of his life. ⁶¹⁰ In

⁶⁰⁵ Amir Akef, ‘Un salafiste algérien émet une « fatwa » contre Kamel Daoud’, *Le Monde*, 17 December 2014, <http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2014/12/17/un-salafiste-algerien-emet-une-fatwa-contre-kamel-daoud_4541882_3212.html> [accessed: 25 January 2016].

⁶⁰⁶ No name, ‘Fausse polémique et vraie manipulation’, *Algeria-Watch*, 21 December 2014, <http://www.algeria-watch.org/fr/aw/hamadache_daoud.htm> [accessed: 25 January 2016].

⁶⁰⁷ Cited in Claire Devarrieux, ‘L’auteur Kamel Daoud visé par une fatwa. Un imam salafiste appelle au meurtre’, *Libération Culture*, 18 December 2014, p. 25.

⁶⁰⁸ Adlène Meddi, ‘Kamel Daoud/Poursuivre en justice Abdelfatah Hamadache pour incitation au meurtre’, *Change.org*, <https://www.change.org/p/minist%C3%A8re-alg%C3%A9rien-de-la-justice-kamel-daoud-poursuivre-en-justice-abdelfatah-hamadache-pour-incitation-au-meurtre?just_created=true> [accessed: 25 January 2016].

⁶⁰⁹ See, François Menia, ‘Algérie: des artistes en quête de sécurité après la fatwa contre Kamel Daoud’, *Le Figaro*, 22 December 2014, <<http://www.lefigaro.fr/livres/2014/12/22/03005-20141222ARTFIG00228-algerie-des-artistes-en-quete-de-securite-apres-la-fatwa-contre-kamel-daoud.php>> [accessed: 26 January 2016]; Le HuffPost avec AFP, ‘Kamel Daoud: une fatwa lancée contre l’écrivain déclenche l’indignation en Algérie’, *Le Huffington Post*, 17 December 2014, <http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2014/12/17/kamel-daoud-fatwa-ecrivain-goncourt-meursault-contre-enquete-hamadache-ziraoui_n_6339970.html> [accessed: 26 January 2016]; Marion Cocquet, ‘Kamel Daoud sous le coup d’une fatwa’, *Le Point.fr*, 17 December 2014, <http://www.lepoint.fr/culture/kamel-daoud-sous-le-coup-d-une-fatwa-17-12-2014-1890421_3.php> [accessed: 26 January 2016]; see also Akef, ‘Un salafiste algérien’.

⁶¹⁰ For the Facebook post, see Le HuffPost avec AFP, ‘Kamel Daoud’; see also, Sébastien Le Fol, ‘EXCLUSIF. Kamel Daoud: “Mais pourquoi veut-il me tuer?”’, *Le Point.fr*, 30 December 2014,

March 2016, Hamadache was sentenced by a court in Oran to pay a fine and to serve six months in prison.⁶¹¹ Before looking in more detail at the reception of Daoud's novel, we offer our own reading of *Meursault contre-enquête* below.

Meursault, contre-enquête

While widely reported and written up on back covers as rewriting Camus's classic, *L'Étranger*, *Meursault contre-enquête* in fact stages Camus and his text within the story told by the first-person narrator Haroun, in a bar in Oran, of his brother's death (the famously nameless Arab) at the hands of a young French settler, called Meursault. The original text by Camus is incorporated when the narrator, who speaks throughout in a confessional style more reminiscent of Camus's 1956 work *La Chute*, notes that Meursault (*Albert Meursault* in the original Algerian edition of Daoud's text) was not only the murderer of his brother, Moussa, but also the famous author of an account of this murder in the novel, *L'Étranger* (in the Algerian edition) or *L'Autre* (in the French edition) – we return to the question of the title shortly – published after his release from prison.⁶¹² Haroun sees the text not only as unjustly focused uniquely on Meursault, but as a chronicle of the author's life:

C'est le Français qui y joue le mort et disserte sur la façon dont il a perdu sa mère, puis comment il a perdu son corps sous le soleil, puis comment il a perdu le corps d'une amante, puis comment il est parti à l'église pour constater que son Dieu avait déserté le corps de l'homme, puis comment il a veillé le cadavre de sa mère et le sien, etc. (pp. 15-16)

<http://www.lepoint.fr/societe/exclusif-kamel-daoud-mais-pourquoi-veulent-ils-me-tuer-30-12-2014-1893138_23.php> [accessed: 26 January 2016].

⁶¹¹ See, Meziane Abane, 'L'écrivain Kamel Daoud gagne son procès contre un imam salafiste', *Le Monde*, 8 March 2016, <http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/03/08/l-ecrivain-kamel-daoud-gagne-son-proces-contre-un-imam-salafiste_4878558_3212.html> [accessed: 14 April 2016].

⁶¹² Apparently the publisher in France was forced to change these more obvious references to Camus and to *L'Étranger* due to rights issues. In the interview with Daoud, aired on France Culture, the author tells of his intention to rewrite the narrative of *L'Étranger* in the style of *La Chute*. This rewriting of *L'Étranger* through the gaze of *La Chute* might also be seen as a comment on how Camus was himself seen to be self-reflexively rewriting *L'Étranger* in *La Chute*. On these questions, see Colin Davis, 'Camus, Encounters, Reading', in *Ethical Issues in Twentieth-Century French Fiction*, pp. 64-85.

Haroun, who claims to have been trying to write his own book about his brother, and has written the events in a series of journals, cannot understand how Moussa has been forgotten, despite the fame of *L'Étranger* or *L'Autre*. He is outraged that nobody has come to ask about the victim of the murder: 'C'est mon frère qui a reçu la balle, pas lui!' (p. 16) The narrator also continually confuses Camus's fiction and nonfiction, fusing the fictional Meursault and the real Camus: 'Qui sait si Moussa avait un revolver, une philosophie, une tuberculose, des idées ou une mère et une justice?' (p. 16) Still in his search for an answer as to why Moussa has been forgotten, he also tells of how the story was *too* well written: 'C'était quelqu'un de très sévère avec les nuances [...] As-tu vu sa façon d'écrire? Il semble utiliser l'art du poème pour parler d'un coup de feu!' (p. 14) Haroun claims to be able to recite Meursault's book by heart, 'en entier comme le Coran.' (p. 17)

Because of its recounted nature, the story is told backwards and the forwards chronology of Camus's novel is inverted. As Haroun tells us at the outset, 'Ce n'est pas une histoire normale. C'est une histoire prise par la fin et qui remonte vers son début.' (p. 14) As such, it is not until a new character Meriem, a young researcher who is studying the book, comes into their lives towards the end of the novel (which is of course chronologically sooner than the order in which we read) that Haroun or his mother see the offending piece of literature. In the final part of the novel, Meriem helps Haroun read (Albert) Meursault's novel and he begins to appreciate the greater nuances of the work. This precedes a visit from an imam, which prompts the novel's end with Haroun's diatribe against religion, closely resembling that of Meursault at the end of Camus's novel. This fact of the backwards chronology is perhaps again a kind of counterpoint with Camus's text, but it also draws attention to the distance between the *narrating* and *narrated* chronologies, split between the time of reading a novel and the time within the story recounted in the

novel – what Ricœur has defined as the ‘temps du raconter’ and the ‘temps raconté’.⁶¹³ What Daoud’s novel seems to ask, albeit subtly, is of *how* the story is being told, its reliability and relationship to real events.

The entirety of the story is recounted by Haroun to a voiceless character we assume is either a student of Camus’s text or a young French literary researcher in a bar in Oran; the researcher is writing his own account of the tale of the forgotten Arab and is referred to by Haroun as ‘monsieur l’enquêteur’ and ‘monsieur « l’inspecteur universitaire ».’ (pp. 31, 34) Like Jean-Baptiste Clamence in *La Chute*, Haroun is self-admittedly an unreliable narrator.⁶¹⁴ He is old – it is some seventy years since his brother’s murder – and he regularly drinks wine at the bar in which he is recounting the story. Haroun admits there is no evidence that Moussa was the victim of the crime: no body was discovered and even a newspaper clipping describing the event, which his mother had kept on her person, refers to a nameless Arab killed on a beach one summer’s day. Indeed, there is no proof that Moussa existed. The narrative stretches over a number of meetings between Haroun and the researcher, whose voiceless identity the reader assumes. The researcher has come to investigate the story of the Arab contained within the murderer’s original story. In this way, the literary researcher and now the reader are acknowledged as the principal writers of the text’s meaning, as the main judge of the reliability of the story, of its relation to the truth. The multi-layered literary ‘enquête’ is in equal measure a work of historical investigation of the facts.⁶¹⁵

The confessional style is fitting as Haroun will reveal that he has committed a murder in revenge for his brother’s death. With his mother’s encouragement (she is present at the scene of the crime), Haroun shoots dead a French settler on a beach, named Joseph

⁶¹³ Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit 2* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), pp. 113-20.

⁶¹⁴ In *La Chute*, Clamence admits that one cannot rely on one’s own self; his self-proclaimed motto is: ‘Ne vous y fiez pas’ (p. 52); in *Meursault*, the narrator admits he is ‘un vieux buveur de vin qui n’a aucune preuve de ce qu’il avance’, or later, ‘un mythomane que tu as rencontré pour remplir tes cahiers...’ (pp. 181; 191).

⁶¹⁵ It is perhaps worth noting that the modern French term *histoire* stems, via the Latin *historia*, from the Greek *ἱστορία*, meaning *enquête*.

Larquais, one day after Algerian independence in 1962; when interrogated at his local Gendarmerie, the murder is rather quickly glossed over and Haroun is instead quizzed for not signing up to the *maquis* during the War of Independence. The interrogating colonel repeatedly asks why Haroun could not have committed the murder just one day prior, before the ceasefire was announced on 5 July 1962; the implication is that Haroun would have been considered a participant in the fight for independence if only he had paid closer attention to the time. This part of the narrative is a particularly playful inversion of the story of the trial of Meursault in Camus's novel. Ironically inverted, the story now tells of how Haroun, rather than being investigated for the murder he has admitted committing, is judged on his non-participation in the *maquis*. Just as the court in Meursault's case is distracted by the moral question of his behaviour at his mother's funeral, the colonel in Haroun's case is obsessed with the revolutionary narrative of independence. In both cases, human life is secondary to normative expectations.

Like Camus's Meursault, and also Clamence in *La Chute*, Haroun is a difficult character: at times likable, he is nevertheless portrayed as a fool, a drunk and as prone to rambling. The character of Haroun is fluid and contradictory, and often appears to embody a caricature of Algerian society more generally. This is especially visible in Haroun's simplistic, almost religious in its singularity, reading of *L'Étranger* or *L'Autre*. Haroun is obsessed with the text and can perhaps be read as the embodiment of what Daoud most dislikes about Algerian readers – simplistic, unsubtle and always keen to attack Camus, especially on the question of the nameless Arab. As Daoud recounts in interviews, and as we have addressed briefly in Section One, Camus, and in particular the question of the depiction of Algerians in his works and the relation between this and his ambivalent pronouncements on independence, still gains much attention in Algeria.⁶¹⁶ Hence, there is a

⁶¹⁶ See, Mohammed Aïssaoui, 'Kamel Daoud, l'invité surprise des prix littéraires', *Le Figaro*, 16 October 2014, <<http://www.lefigaro.fr/livres/2014/10/16/03005-20141016ARTFIG00018-kamel-daoud-l-invite-surprise-des-prix-litteraires.php>> [accessed: 26 January 2016].

recognition by Haroun of the worn out nature of the story: 'Elle ressemble à un parchemin, dispersé de par le monde, essoré, rafistolé, désormais méconnaissable, dont le texte aura été ressassé jusqu'à l'infini.' (p. 73) Haroun is also shown to be concerned with the need for lineage and filiation throughout the novel. The empty grave of Moussa, which his mother is said to fill with 'une fausse biographie' (p. 68), haunts the story and becomes a symbolic vessel for the story Haroun will tell. In contrast to Kateb Yacine's famous claim that the French language had been for Algeria a 'butin de guerre', Haroun describes the French language as a 'bien vacant' (p. 14) into which he steps, as if occupying the former home of a departed French settler. In many ways the figure of Moussa, the now named Arab, performs a similar role. The two characters (Moussa and Meursault) might be read as metonyms for the Arabic and French languages. The attempted State erasure of the French language after independence is embodied by Haroun's need to avenge his brother's killing, while the Arabic language is symbolised by an empty hole in the ground. But both also reflect the monolingual policies adopted under French colonialism and seemingly replicated after independence by the Algerian State. Moussa and Meursault are continually spoken of alongside each other, and the narrator negotiates the question of naming, and the potential confusion of these names in particular, throughout the novel. As Lia Brozgal suggests, spoken out loud, there is a near homophony between the two names.⁶¹⁷

While concerned with the details of his brother's story, Haroun on more than one occasion claims to know nothing of the geography of the story: 'sache que si je connais l'histoire, et pas qu'un peu, je ne sais presque rien de sa géographie.' And later, Haroun affirms: 'Je ne cherche pas du côté de la géographie, je te dis.' (pp. 74; 79) In this way, the narrator resists the novel being read and placed in a referential time or space. Time, again, appears important when Haroun describes the killing of the Frenchman, Joseph Larquais, where the justice of the 'restitution' is reliant on the murder taking place at the exact point

⁶¹⁷ Brozgal, p. 39.

when Meursault killed the Arab in 1942 (p. 105). Only, Moussa was killed at ‘quatorze heures’ in the heat and blinding light of the Algiers sun, whereas Joseph is killed ‘vers deux heures du matin’ by moonlight. Haroun winds back his watch, and hence manipulates time, noting how his mother will now be able to grow old naturally, ‘et non plus par rancune’ (p. 109). This temporal ambiguity is perhaps an ironic reflection, if not a reversal of that exhibited in Camus’s novel. As Harrison has written of *L’Etranger*, the reader must accept a certain level of ambiguity in Meursault’s account of time, captured most strikingly in the first lines of the novel.⁶¹⁸ By turning back the clock, Haroun alters time to fit his mother’s need to mourn her son after the killing of Joseph has supposedly taken place at the exact time as her son’s murder some twenty years earlier. Later, Haroun will say that he killed Joseph, ‘parce qu’il fallait faire contrepoids à l’absurde de notre situation.’ (p. 164) But what is a ‘contrepoids à l’absurde’?

Beyond the *mise en abyme* which places Camus’s text within the fictional story of Haroun’s ‘enquête’, readers are made aware that they are in the process of conducting their own ‘enquête’ on Daoud’s text. The vexed question of reading contemporary Algeria through literature is brought to the fore as Haroun reads (Albert) Meursault’s text as a chronicle of the events of both its author’s life and the life of his brother. Much like in Benfodil’s novel, it seems possible that the literary ‘enquête’ is employed as a parody of using literature as a lens through which contemporary Algeria can in turn be read or perceived. The use of a *French* ‘universitaire’ as the ‘enquêteur’ is clearly also key to making an ironic comment on how Algeria’s modern and contemporary history has been and continues to be read in an overly reductive and simplistic frame from France. As recently as May 2015, *Le Monde*, reporting on the award of the Goncourt du premier roman, describes how the novel takes as its counterpoint ‘les soubresauts, souvent violents, de

⁶¹⁸ Harrison, “Race”, Reading and Identification’, pp. 79-81.

l'Algérie contemporaine.⁶¹⁹ In Haroun's words, the researcher, the reader, is 'piégé' by the fact that the story of the nameless Arab – within the account the researcher is writing – will become yet another likely absurd story of a nameless Arab from Algeria (p.80). In response to the above question, there is no 'contrepoids', no escape, from the absurd. Haroun is shown not only to be unreliable and manipulative, but he is also made to sound like a fool in his ruminations about writing what will be an impossible *contre-enquête*. One result of this is that readers become more acutely aware of the text before them.

Daoud might be said not to have written a fiction at all, however; as Régis Debray underlined as he spoke at the award of Daoud's Goncourt du premier roman (Debray was on the prize committee), Daoud's novel was '[l]a preuve que le roman peut être autre chose qu'une fiction.' For Debray, Daoud's work was a 'plongée dans la réalité avec une langue soutenue et charnue.'⁶²⁰ Debray is no doubt referring to Daoud's treatment of the period of post-independence and of the successful insertion of Camus's text into his work. It is interesting to reflect on the removal of the more direct references to Camus (the change of the title of the novel from *L'Étranger* to *L'Autre*, the removal of Camus's first name, Albert, from the author's name, which becomes merely Meursault and finally the change from 'l'écrivain assassin' to merely 'l'assassin')⁶²¹ in the transition from the Algerian to the French edition of *Meursault*, especially in light of Debray's words. If we could argue that this shows Daoud need not have been so explicit in the original version (we can assume Debray read

⁶¹⁹ LEMONDE.FR avec AFP, 'Le Goncourt du premier roman décerné au romancier algérien Kamel Daoud', *Le Monde*, 5 May 2015, <http://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2015/05/05/le-goncourt-du-premier-roman-decerne-au-romancier-algerien-kamel-daoud_4628060_3260.html> [accessed: 26 January 2016]. The source for this article, and for the words cited above, was an AFP report by Antoine Froidefond, entitled: 'Goncourt: bête noire des intégristes, l'écrivain algérien Kamel Daoud primé', *AFP Doc*, 5 May 2015, in *EuroPresse.com*, <<http://nouveau.euroPresse.com/Link/umiv/news%20b720150505%20b7ZK%20b7doc-246iu>> [accessed: 11 April 2016].

⁶²⁰ Mohammed Aïssaoui, 'L'hommage émouvant de Régis Debray à Kamel Daoud', *Le Figaro Culture Livres*, 5 May 2015, <<http://www.lefigaro.fr/livres/2015/05/05/03005-20150505ARTFIG00249-l-hommage-emoouvant-de-regis-debray-a-kamel-daoud.php>> [accessed: 26 January 2016].

⁶²¹ Compare, for example, p. 75 of the original edition to p. 63 of the French edition. Again, in his France Culture interview, which was recorded before the novel had been accepted for release by Actes Sud, Daoud stresses the 'confusion délibérée et totale' between Camus and Meursault.

the French edition of the text, given this is the version listed on the website of the Académie Goncourt),⁶²² the removal of the more explicit references, where Camus, the author, becomes (at least in part) implicated in the plot to kill the Arab, could be seen to remove what is an ironic glance to postcolonial readings of Camus which accuse the author of *L'Étranger* of a colonialist mentality.⁶²³ Two of the more famous of these commentaries are made by Conor Cruise O'Brien and Edward Said.⁶²⁴ If Daoud's novel could be said to engage Said's practice of contrapuntal reading, writing important structural but glossed over elements of a story back into the narrative, it also draws attention to the potential flaws of this mode of critical reading which resulted, in the case of Camus's novel, in an assumption of the reader's straightforward and unproblematic identification with the narrator of the story.⁶²⁵

As Harrison has shown, these criticisms of Camus allowed little space for the possibility that he was deploying a mode of literary realism in his novel whereby he and his readers could have been aware of the fictional and hence precarious nature of the enterprise; such a view might be said to chime with Bonn's position that literature is not ideological discourse, working not in and of itself to reinforce an affirmative ideological message, but rather in a negatory way to create instances of doubt and a sense of ambiguity of meaning. As Bonn has it, 'la littérature n'existe qu'à partir d'un recul par rapport à son propre langage'.⁶²⁶ Not only is literature self-aware, but it has the potential to make its readers self-aware and critical. The ideological element, according to Harrison, is far more to do with literature's reception, its functional and social construction, as it is often framed

⁶²² Académie Goncourt, 'Lauréats du Goncourt du premier roman', <<http://academie-goncourt.fr/?article=1358369522>> [accessed: 27 January 2016].

⁶²³ Alice Kaplan briefly considers the implications of the changes made between the Algerian original and the French editions in the article: '« Meursault, contre-enquête » de Kamel Daoud', *Contreligne*, autumn (2015), <<http://www.contreligne.eu/2014/06/kamel-daoud-meursault-contre-enquete/>> [accessed: 26 January 2016]. This is expanded on in Kaplan's forthcoming, *Looking for "The Stranger": Albert Camus and the Life of a Literary Classic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁶²⁴ See Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Camus* (London: Fontana, 1970) and Edward Said, 'Albert Camus and the French imperial experience', in *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 204-24.

⁶²⁵ See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 78-79.

⁶²⁶ Bonn, 'Littérature algérienne et conscience nationale', p. 37.

and promoted by critics and the press.⁶²⁷ Looking at Said's accusations in further detail, Harrison's work draws on the question of fiction and the assumption made by Said of the reader's straightforward identification with Meursault. Harrison persuasively argues that not only have Said and other critics, such as O'Brien, not seen that 'the Arab' and many of the other 'Arabs' that populate Camus's text remain nameless (within the realist mode they themselves attribute to Camus's text) precisely because this is how one would expect a French-Algerian like Meursault to describe the colonised inhabitants of Algeria, but that they have assumed that the French reader automatically identifies, through a stable realist *vraisemblance*, with the character of Meursault. What is not broached in Said or O'Brien, as we have mentioned briefly above in relation to time, is the possibility that Camus's text in fact disrupts 'realist modes of reading' such that Camus is himself performing a level of 'criticism' within the fictional text.⁶²⁸ In this way, Barthes' words on *L'Étranger* and 'écriture blanche', cited by Harrison at the beginning of his chapter, come somewhat to prefigure what Bonn has to say in 1986 about literature and ideology. For Barthes, when writing 'au degré zéro':

L'écriture se réduit alors à une sorte de mode négatif dans lequel les caractères sociaux ou mythiques d'un langage s'abolissent au profit d'un état neutre et inerte de la forme; la pensée garde ainsi toute sa responsabilité, sans se recouvrir d'un engagement accessoire de la forme dans une Histoire qui ne lui appartient pas.⁶²⁹

Barthes goes on to write how (what he also calls) 'l'écriture neutre' uncovers an initial condition of classical art: instrumentality. But now, he continues, 'l'instrument formel n'est

⁶²⁷ Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p. 27.

⁶²⁸ Harrison, "'Race', Reading and Identification', p. 83. As we have indicated, others have read Camus's literary fiction as critically aware, especially as it moves from *L'Étranger*, published in 1942 to the short stories in *L'exil et le royaume* and *La Chute*, published in 1956 and 1957 respectively. See Davis, 'Camus, Encounters, Reading'; see also, Colin Davis, 'The Cost of Being Ethical: Fiction, Violence, and Altericide', *Common Knowledge* 9, 2 (2003), pp. 241-53.

⁶²⁹ Roland Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 56.

plus au service d'une idéologie triomphante'. As Harrison sums up, no text, including Camus's, has the power to 'force us to "identify"' with its protagonist.⁶³⁰

Rather than suggesting that Daoud's text either embraces or refutes the readings of Said and O'Brien, I am suggesting, in addition to the fictional nature of the character of Haroun, that the ironic tone of the novel might point to these readings as reductive by an act of mimesis. In effect, Daoud's text could be seen to replicate the error of these postcolonial readings in deliberately conflating Camus with his protagonist Meursault. Interestingly, the French edition of the novel becomes something of an unplanned *correction* of the Algerian text, which removes the more obvious fusion of the voice of the author with the voice of the fictional narrator. This *correction* is effective to the extent that according to Macha Séry, writing on the front page of *Le Monde des livres*, '[j]amais le nom de Camus n'est prononcé dans le superbe roman de Kamel Daoud'.⁶³¹ Daoud's original novel is therefore only partly a rewriting of Camus's *L'Étranger*. His other targets are Algeria and more notably practices of reading which have consistently broken the boundary between the voice of the intellectual and that of his fictional characters. The problem of Foucault's author function is staged within the pages of Daoud's original text, but subsequently muted.⁶³² As Kaplan writes, '[c]réer un auteur fictif qui s'appelle Albert Meursault, c'est à la fois exposer et ridiculiser cette confusion.'⁶³³ The Arab is given a name by Daoud, but (as with Camus) this is in many ways a distraction. In the more widely sold French version of the text, this important element which could be said to expose reductive practices of reading – what we might call the text's 'recul par rapport à son propre langage' – is not fully apparent.⁶³⁴

⁶³⁰ Harrison, "'Race", Reading and Identification', pp. 90-91. Newmark makes a similar point when reading Camus's short story, 'Le renégat ou l'esprit confus': 'The literary text will always say something more, or at least other than what its author intended by it'. See Newmark, p. 116.

⁶³¹ Macha Séry, 'Kamel Daoud double Camus', *Le monde des livres*, 27 June 2014, p. 1.

⁶³² Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?'

⁶³³ Kaplan, « Meursault, contre-enquête » de Kamel Daoud'.

⁶³⁴ Bonn, 'Littérature algérienne et conscience nationale', p. 37.

Reception: from novel to newspaper

Daoud's return to Camus is not to be seen in isolation. As we outlined in Chapter One, during the 1990s, a host of Algerian writers made what some described as an *urgent* return to Camus – and principally to the ethical positions he was seen to adopt during the Algerian War of Independence.⁶³⁵ If Camus had been lambasted in France for his position or lack of a position on the question of Algerian independence, he was during the 1990s seen to have been proven correct by history as Algeria once again receded into violence.⁶³⁶ These recidivist and *urgent* narratives might also be said to be present in both journalistic and paratextual accounts of Daoud's most recent novel, especially where the author's journalistic work is fused with either the voice of his narrator, Haroun, or with an invented authorial voice seen to be emerging from his literary fiction. On the back cover of the French edition of *Meursault*, the text is described as a 'réflexion' on the question of identity in contemporary Algeria; the author, described as being known for his 'articles polémiques', is said to 'choisi[r] cette fois la littérature pour traduire la complexité des héritages qui conditionnent le présent.'⁶³⁷

The column in question, written by Daoud for the Algerian daily *Le Quotidien d'Oran* since 1994, is entitled 'Raïna Raïkoum' (our opinion, your opinion) and is, again according to the back cover of the French edition, said to be the most widely read newspaper column in Algeria. Daoud also writes for the Algerian news website, *Impact24.info* and has more recently – since the publication of *Meursault* – been invited to write in France for the news magazine *Le Point* and in the US for *The Nation*, *The New York Times* and *Time Magazine*. Daoud is vociferously secularist in his column and regularly takes positions against the

⁶³⁵ See, for instance, Bousquet, 'Preface'.

⁶³⁶ Camus spoke in his 1956, 'Trêve civile en Algérie', of how 'L'histoire se répète comme une bouche sanglante qui ne vomit qu'un bégaiement furieux', cited in Stora, 'Deuxième guerre algérienne?', p. 242. See also, Camus, 'Pour une trêve civile en Algérie'.

⁶³⁷ Back cover of the Actes Sud edition.

Algerian State and those with Islamist sympathies in Algeria. He does not shy away from looking back to the ‘*décennie noire*’, either; in one article, for example, the massacres at Bentalha and elsewhere are brought out of a collective amnesia and Daoud challenges Algerians to perform this same anamnesis in opposition to the State’s policies of forgetting.⁶³⁸ In his other columns, Daoud has attacked Algerians for not participating in protest, for not demanding the change that they could achieve if they would see the world in a different way, outside of the restrictive narratives and myths about Algerian society. The columns are also nuanced: for instance, the journalist recognises the dangers of the replication of a violent binary narrative after the emergence of Daesh in recent years.⁶³⁹ Unfortunately, an archive of Daoud’s column is not held on the website of *Le Quotidien d’Oran*, but the ‘chroniques’ have been collected and published twice in Algeria – first in 2002 and later in 2005.⁶⁴⁰ As well as appearing in *Le Quotidien d’Oran*, Daoud has, since 2013, published his ‘*Raïna Raïkoum*’ columns on his Facebook page.⁶⁴¹

What follows is an assessment of a number of press reviews and reports published in the wake of the publication of *Meursault*. The question we wish to ask here is to what degree a singular intellectual voice can be seen to emerge from the literary fiction and journalism, a reductively conceived ‘*projet créateur*’,⁶⁴² which collapses the complexity of the literary and works against Daoud’s seeming efforts to draw attention to reductive practices of reading within the literary text.

⁶³⁸ See Kamel Daoud, ‘Antigone: Le Blanc insonore des années 90’, republished in the online edition of *La revue des Ressources* 30 September 2014, <<http://www.larevuedesressources.org/trois-chroniques-de-kamel-daoud,2756.html>> [accessed: 27 January 2016].

⁶³⁹ See Kamel Daoud, ‘Le 11 septembre permanent et ses effets calculés’, published on *Facebook*, 16 November 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1697291987168512&id=1388674348030279> [accessed: 27 January 2016].

⁶⁴⁰ Kamel Daoud, *Raïna Raïkoum: [chroniques]* (Oran: Dar El Gharb, 2002); *Chroniques Mac-Arabe: Raïna Raïkoum* (Oran: Dar El Gharb, 2005).

⁶⁴¹ The page is entitled ‘La Chronique de Kamel DAOUD’ and can be accessed in the following weblink: <<https://www.facebook.com/La-chronique-de-Kamel-DAOUD-1388674348030279/timeline>> [accessed: 27 January 2016].

⁶⁴² Bourdieu, ‘Champ intellectuel et projet créateur’.

Apart from those writing in Algeria, nearly all journalists and critics reviewed the French edition of Daoud's novel. After the translation rights were sold to Actes Sud, along with the rights to Daoud's novel, it is the French edition upon which the twenty-seven translations (thus far) have been based. In the most recent English translation,⁶⁴³ the text begins with a 'praise for' section; although this is commonplace in many paperback publications, thirty-four extracts from reviews here run to six pages. A reader unfamiliar with the context of the production of the work – its beginnings in Algeria, its inevitable link with Camus's *L'Étranger* – will no doubt be informed by these extracts.⁶⁴⁴ While this in no way presents an obstacle to the reader, it can nevertheless be said that these extracts from thirty-four separate reviews perform a level of framing for the international newcomer to Daoud's novel, the work of Camus or to Algeria or Algerian literature more generally. It is self-evident that the fact that the extracts appear in the first pages gives them a privileged role in announcing the plot of Daoud's novel. The French text does not contain the same elements in its paratext, which itself presents further questions related to the assumptions made by a French reader of Daoud's text, vis-à-vis their understanding of Algeria and its literature itself being coloured by France's troubled colonial history, the War of Independence and the 1990s. If the above is central to our understanding of the construction of meaning in Daoud's text, it is the international reaction to Daoud's novel that has been more remarkable than its reception in both Algeria and France.

Initial reports of Daoud's novel in the French press, draw attention to the 'Raïna Raïkoum' column and Daoud's profession as a journalist, but in some accounts the story of

⁶⁴³ At the time of writing, the edition distributed in the UK and Australia had been reprinted three times.

⁶⁴⁴ Daoud's novel is not the sole example of translated Algerian novels being framed in this way. For instance, Rachid Boudjedra's *Les funérailles* (Paris: Grasset, 2003) gains a subtitle in its English translation, becoming *The Funerals: A Novel of the Algerian Civil War* (London: Haus Publishing, 2015). Having subtitled it 'A Novel of the Algerian Civil War' the back cover contains an erroneous description of the historical context, beginning: 'Algiers, 1955. It is in the midst of civil war'. In an otherwise well informed and balanced reflection on the historical setting of the text in the 1990s, in an Afterword to the novel, the translator André Naffis-Sahely nevertheless uncritically espouses the language of 'sides' and civilizational 'clash', for instance, transposing comments made by Christopher Hitchens on the Iranian Hostage Crisis of 1979, 'the Algerian civil war was one of those events that [...] "moved us from the age of the Red Menace to the Epoque of Holy War"'. Naffis-Sahely's afterword is also published as an article, 'The Sons of Hate', *PN Review* 42, 3 (2016), pp. 40-44.

the novelist is fused with that of the columnist and his commentary on events from the ‘décennie noire’ to the *Charlie Hebdo* killings which took place in France in January 2015.⁶⁴⁵ As one might expect, after Hamadache’s ‘fatwa’, the press more or less universally include this in their accounts of Daoud’s novel. A series of reports in *Le Figaro* is illustrative. Mohammed Aïssaoui, writing about the awarding of the Goncourt du premier roman to Daoud, focuses on how the author is flanked by two body guards at the award ceremony after being ‘menacé par la fatwa d’un fou dangereux, imam salafiste’.⁶⁴⁶ In another article, the critic seems to confuse Daoud the columnist with Daoud the novelist, as *Meursault* is viewed to emerge from the journalistic ‘esprit’ and seen to establish a lens on contemporary Algeria:

Un imam salafiste a lancé contre lui une fatwa demandant au gouvernement algérien la peine de mort pour cet homme qui défend depuis toujours la laïcité et qui n’a pas peur. *Meursault, contre-enquête* est le premier roman de cet esprit caustique qui pose sur son pays, mais sur la France aussi, un regard très sévère.⁶⁴⁷

A few months earlier Daoud had said in an interview with the same newspaper that he had himself ‘fréquenté les milieux islamistes’ as a young man; therefore, to suggest that Daoud has defended *la laïcité* ‘depuis toujours’ would be to stretch the facts.⁶⁴⁸ In an article published in the days following the 2015 attacks in Paris of the *Charlie Hebdo* offices, Claire Courbet writes of how the author of *Meursault, contre-enquête* made clear his wish for

⁶⁴⁵ See, for example, AFP, ‘L’Algérien Kamel Daoud lauréat du Goncourt du premier roman’, *Le Point.fr*, 5 May 2015, <http://www.lepoint.fr/culture/l-algerien-kamel-daoud-laureat-du-goncourt-du-premier-roman-05-05-2015-1926423_3.php> [accessed: 27 January 2016]; Philippe Douroux, ‘Goncourt de rattrapage pour Kamel Daoud’, *Libération Culture*, 6 May 2015, p. 24. See also an earlier AFP report by Catherine Rama, ‘Kamel Daoud, dans la “shortlist” du Goncourt, parle de l’Algérie au présent’, *AFP Doc*, 28 October 2014, in *Europresse.com*, <<http://nouveau.europresse.com/Link/umiv/news%0c2%0b720141028%0c2%0b7ZK%0c2%0b7c6661308-a552-41e0-b3cb-60dce91ba4db>> [accessed: 11 April 2016].

⁶⁴⁶ Aïssaoui, ‘L’hommage émouvant de Régis Debray’.

⁶⁴⁷ Armelle Hélot, ‘Le fantôme d’Albert Camus hante le festival d’Avignon’, *Le Figaro*, 22 July 2015, <<http://www.lefigaro.fr/theatre/2015/07/22/03003-20150722ARTFIG00140-le-fantome-d-albert-camus-hante-le-festival-d-avignon.php>> [accessed: 27 January 2016].

⁶⁴⁸ See, Guillaume Hamonic, ‘Kamel Daoud: « On ne naît pas djihadiste, on le devient ! »’, *Le Figaro*, 20 March 2015, <<http://www.lefigaro.fr/livres/2015/03/20/03005-20150320ARTFIG00342-kamel-daoud-on-ne-naît-pas-djihadiste-on-le-devient.php>> [accessed: 27 January 2016].

Muslims around the world to ‘sortir de la victimisation’ and to do more to ‘affirmer leur position face au terrorisme’;⁶⁴⁹ responsibility for the attacks is thus placed rather unambiguously at the door of Muslims in general. In an interview published again in *Le Figaro*, Daoud speaks of ‘bataille culturelle’ necessitated by the increase in terrorist acts; the link is again made to the ‘décennie noire’ and the terms of war are adopted by Daoud; the headline becomes: ‘Kamel Daoud: « pour gagner la guerre, il faut d’abord mener la bataille culturelle »’.⁶⁵⁰ For *Le Nouveau Marianne*, the ‘décennie noire’ is formative for Daoud in his writing of *Meursault*: the author is said to have been only twenty years old when ‘les djihadistes des GIA, les groupes islamiques armés, égorgeaient l’espérance’. Daoud is described here as ‘le témoin et le survivant’ and as having written the novel ‘dans le sillage de ses chroniques rebelles au Quotidien d’Oran’.⁶⁵¹ The literary magazine *Lire* introduces Daoud’s novel, describing it as painting the portrait of ‘une Algérie encore marquée au fer rouge par l’héritage colonial, mais aussi prise en étau entre l’armée et la religion.’⁶⁵²

One might argue that these accounts of Daoud’s novel and the context of Algeria during the 1990s go hand in hand and that the reports are – at least in the case of the last one – balanced in their treatment of both ‘sides’ targeted by Daoud’s writing. There are two problems with this: first, this view would assume that a literary text can indeed *target* politically in an uncomplicated manner – a viewpoint that, as we have seen with Camus’s text, remains highly questionable; the second issue takes us back to our discussion in Chapter One of the thesis which concerned the arbitrary construction of the two ‘sides’ of the so-called ‘civil war’ in Algeria. As we attempted to show in that first section, positing

⁶⁴⁹ Claire Courbet, ‘Kamel Daoud: « Le combat de Charlie Hebdo est aussi le mien »’, *Le Figaro*, 12 January 2015, <<http://www.lefigaro.fr/livres/2015/01/12/03005-20150112ARTFIG00246-kamel-daoud-le-combat-de-charlie-hebdo-est-aussi-le-mien.php>> [accessed: 27 January 2016].

⁶⁵⁰ Alexandre Devecchio, ‘Kamel Daoud: « pour gagner la guerre, il faut d’abord mener la bataille culturelle »’, *Le Figaro*, 26 January 2016, <<http://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/2015/01/26/31003-20150126ARTFIG00330-kamel-daoud-pour-gagner-la-guerre-il-faut-d-abord-mener-la-bataille-culturelle.php>> [accessed: 27 January 2016].

⁶⁵¹ Martine Gozlan, ‘Kamel Daoud contre l’idéo-logiquement correct’, *Le Nouveau Marianne*, 7 November 2014, p. 64.

⁶⁵² Julien Bisson, ‘Kamel Daoud et le désarroi de l’Algérie contemporaine’, *Lire*, 1 December 2014, p. 12.

the 1990s in Algeria as a conflict with two ‘sides’ (State versus Islamists) is far from unproblematic and has not only meant skipping over serious questions that still remain surrounding the events of the 1990s, but uncritically deploying a binary lens to read events and to write history more generally. Whether or not we agree with Daoud’s often deliberately polemical and controversial statements, we can say that the author is given a platform to air his views because of his literary success. All of the articles deem it necessary to introduce Daoud by announcing the success of his novel, forging the voice of the intellectual in a fusion of the distinct realms of literature and journalism. If press reports on Daoud’s political engagement or novel fail to make the distinction, the author himself is precise when cautioning against the fusion and conflation of fiction and nonfiction. In an interview on the ‘fatwa’ issued by Hamadache, Daoud notes how ‘[i]l ne faut pas mélanger entre les idées d’un personnage fictif et les positions de l’écrivain’.⁶⁵³

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the international Anglophone press has played more explicitly on the ‘local’ context in which *Meursault* was written. Out of the thirty-four extracts from reviews in the six-page ‘praise for’ preface to the translation of Daoud’s novel, a number stand out in their account of the Algerian context in which Daoud is said to have written the novel. The back cover of the UK and Australian edition carries a quotation from a review in *The New York Times* which announces the call for Daoud’s ‘public execution’; Michiko Katutani, writing for *The New York Times*, and appearing as an extract in the ‘praise for’ section of the translated novel, focuses on how the rejection of religion is the principal element of the novel, which in turn ‘nudges us into a contemplation of Algeria’s history and current religious politics’.⁶⁵⁴ *The Economist* reads the novel as a ‘lamentation for a modern Algeria gripped by pious fundamentalism’; it is described as a

⁶⁵³ See, Nourhane. S., ‘Kamel Daoud : « Hamadache est instrumentalisé par les autorités pour me pousser à quitter l’Algérie »’.

⁶⁵⁴ Michiko Katutani, ‘Review: Kamel Daoud Interrogates Camus in “The Meursault Investigation”’, *The New York Times*, 28 May 2015, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/29/books/review-kamel-daoud-interrogates-camus-in-the-meursault-investigation.html>> [accessed: 26 January 2016].

‘brave book’ and as a ‘vertiginous response to a century of trauma.’⁶⁵⁵ For James Campbell in *The Wall Street Journal*, Daoud’s novel ‘has an inescapable topical resonance, given the role played by political Islam in Algeria in recent times.’⁶⁵⁶ *The New Yorker*, in a review of Michel Houellebecq’s *Soumission*, seemingly citing Daoud’s novel as an instance of ‘French Muslims writ[ing] about French Muslim experience’ (Daoud is of course not French), underlines how Daoud uses his novel to draw attention to the ‘degradation by political Islam’ of a ‘free Algeria’.⁶⁵⁷ Finally, the extract from *The Sunday Times* review will to some be startling in its unabashed paternalism: ‘Daoud has performed a great service for his country: he has taken a western classic and used it to illuminate the Algerian mind.’⁶⁵⁸ These words are deemed worthy by the publisher to appear on the back cover of the text. Adam Shatz’s long review of the translated text, which does not appear in the ‘praise for’ section, nor on the back cover, is a nuanced and balanced account, but the subtitle of the piece (likely authored not by Shatz himself, but by an editor) is nevertheless eager to emphasise how Daoud’s novel is ‘caught between Islamist fervour and cultural flowering’.⁶⁵⁹

In some ways, the above examples of the novel’s reception fulfil the expectations announced through the parody of the literary establishment in Daoud’s text. These reports all rely on the text and its author’s ‘local’ situation (in the text being *from* Algeria and in the author being threatened by a local ‘fatwa’) and could therefore be said to create an image of contemporary Algeria which over-privileges these factors. Where Said spoke of

⁶⁵⁵ No name, ‘Stranger and stranger’, *The Economist*, 30 May 2015, <<http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21652251-biting-algerian-response-french-colonialism-stranger-and-stranger>> [accessed: 26 January 2016].

⁶⁵⁶ James Campbell, ‘The Novelist as Murderer’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 May 2015, <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-novelist-as-murderer-1432930737>> [accessed: 26 January 2016].

⁶⁵⁷ Adam Gopnik, ‘The Next Thing’, *The New Yorker*, 26 January 2016, p. 28. The relation between the French reception and marketing of Daoud’s text, Houellebecq’s *Soumission* and Boualem Sansal’s *2084* is not lost on some critics. See, for example, Nadia Ghanem, ‘Why Algerian Novelist Boualem Sansal’s ‘2084’ is a Sensation in France’, *Arabic Literature (in English)*, 6 October 2015, <<http://arablit.org/2015/10/06/2084/>> [accessed: 25 January 2016].

⁶⁵⁸ David Mills, ‘Camus condemned: a retelling of *L’Etranger* from the viewpoint of the murdered Algerian’s brother is a tour de force’, *The Sunday Times*, 21 June 2015, p. 39.

⁶⁵⁹ Adam Shatz, ‘Stranger Still’, *The New York Times*, 1 April 2015, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/magazine/stranger-still.html>> [accessed: 23 January 2016].

‘imaginative geographies’ in his canonical *Orientalism*, Mundy writes of ‘imaginative geographies of Algerian violence’ in relation to how the country has been read internationally in the fields of conflict management, terrorism studies and by the social and political sciences more generally.⁶⁶⁰ It is perhaps appropriate to ask here of what exactly has changed in how Western discourses depict the other and, to recall Huggan, to what degree this privileging of the local represents a ‘marketing of the margins’ in an exocitication of contemporary Algerian violence in a kind of literary dark tourism.⁶⁶¹ While literary criticism must clearly understand the local factors involved in the production of a work of literature, it must surely take care not to reproduce ‘the local’ in such a way that this then determines readings of a literary text, limiting the scope of a text to depicting the ‘reality’ of historical events or contexts. In their tendency to treat the text as a document, and its author as a spokesperson for contemporary Algeria, many of the above reviews remove the possibility that what the text in fact does best is to open a dialogue between multiple representations of modern and contemporary Algeria and to encourage the reader to question these representations.

In the ‘translations’ of the novel first to a French and then to an international audience, what is privileged over the experimental aesthetics of Daoud’s text is what, in relation to the reception of contemporary francophone writing, Crowley has called a ‘thematics of “the Real”’.⁶⁶² It is interesting that virtually none of the reviews of Daoud’s *Meursault* mention his previously published fiction. Although there is not space to analyse these other works in any detail here, they could be said to provide further evidence of Daoud’s aesthetic experimentation in fiction.⁶⁶³ In his short stories, for instance, there is a

⁶⁶⁰ See, Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 49-73; Mundy.

⁶⁶¹ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*.

⁶⁶² Crowley, ‘Literatures in French Today’, p. 412.

⁶⁶³ Daoud’s first text, published as a ‘récit’, was *Ô Pharaon* (Algiers: Dar El Gharb, 2004), followed by a collection of short stories, *La Préface du nègre* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2008), which was awarded the Prix Mohammed Dib, and published (with some variation in the stories included) as *Le Minotaure 504* (Paris:

far clearer – if playful and somewhat ironic – access to contemporary Algeria and contemporary Algerian identity. ‘Le Minotaure 504’ presents the monologue of a taxi driver and former soldier angry at what Algiers has become; the image of the minotaur encapsulates Algiers, but also what the taxi driver has himself become. Another voice, a passenger in the taxi, intersperses the text in parentheses, receiving and reflecting anxiously on the taxi driver’s monologue and begins to stage, like in *Meursault*, the relation between storyteller and reader. Indeed, most journalists writing about Daoud’s novel have limited knowledge of the key texts of Algerian literature more generally and so will perhaps inevitably ‘periodise’ in reductive thematic terms. In Crowley’s assessment, thematic readings are more widespread in the reception of postcolonial literature. Referring to Théo D’Haen, Crowley shows how by capturing ‘historic and economic relationships of races and ethnicities’ postcolonial narratives are privileged as lenses through which a certain ‘reality’ is depicted.⁶⁶⁴ It is not just ironic that the removal of explicit references to Camus and to *L’Etranger* in the French edition of the text led to the reading of the text in *more* referential terms; it is of course part of a cultural logic which continually seeks to *locate* ‘the real’, to *identify with* a cultural ‘other’ and to provide readers with the voice of what Bahri, after Spivak, calls the ‘native informant’.⁶⁶⁵

If, by giving the Arab a name Daoud’s novel deals with this question of the ‘historic and economic relationships of races and ethnicities’ mentioned by D’Haen, its thrust seems to be to parody the idea that he should need a name. For Daoud, the name is a distraction. The novel’s underlying critique of the conflation of reality and fiction – something for which it seemingly critiques both Algerian as well as French readers – is

Sabine Wespieser, 2011). The latter two collections were re-released in one volume in France in 2015 as *La préface du nègre, Le Minotaure 504, et autres nouvelles* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2015).

⁶⁶⁴ Crowley, ‘Literatures in French Today’, p. 418. See also Théo D’Haen, ‘World Literature, Postcolonial Politics, French-Caribbean Literature’, in *Littératures francophones et politiques* (Paris: Karthala, 2009), p. 64. This also resembles Bahri’s warnings about postcolonial literature and the ‘approximation of the aesthetic to the thematic’; see Bahri, p. 14.

⁶⁶⁵ Bahri, p. 19.

missed to the extent that the conflation is repeated by critics reading Daoud's story; although, admittedly, this conflation is less clear in the adapted version of the text. Furthermore, in its Anglophone translation, reception and presentation to a new audience – perhaps the beginnings of its consecration as 'World Literature' – the literariness of the text is further repressed. Daoud and his novel can be said not only to translate a certain culture of violence for Western audiences, but also to become the reified objects of a discourse which thrives on reproducing language for a symbolic exchange which survives on cultures of violence.⁶⁶⁶

Conclusion

If, as Natalya Vince suggests, Daoud's novel can offer an albeit tentative entry into post-independence Algerian history for students and scholars, this is not without its risks.⁶⁶⁷ It would mean a clear critical attention to questions of the literary, of translation and reception if the text was being used outside of France, as Vince suggests. Indeed, such access would need to be provided by the novel itself and not by the countless media narratives which have framed the novel; this kind of danger seems to be especially clear in the context of teaching literary texts and strategies would need to be developed to allow students to critically assess the media narrative and the discursive frame deployed by some scholars.

As we saw in Harrison's examination of the first 'postcolonial' readings of Camus's *L'Étranger*, made principally by Said and O'Brien, the presumed identification between the reader and narrator must be questioned as much as the more simplistic imputation of the voice of the narrator to that of the author. While the writer must recognise his essentially political status in contemporary Algeria, literary fiction must remain a form which does not

⁶⁶⁶ See Huggan, p. 29.

⁶⁶⁷ Vince, 'Literature as post-colonial reality?'

simply provide answers, but as Dib and Bonn underline, asks questions.⁶⁶⁸ If, as Vince suggests, literature can be used to grant access to unwritten histories, then more complex questions of the market and cultural value must also be studied in order to negotiate how writers, in Bourdieu's terms, elaborate their *prises de position*, and how literature is often the site at which these *prises de position* are reworked and reshaped.⁶⁶⁹ It should be emphasised, that so long as the question of the literary, and what Harrison calls 'ideas of the literary' are present – and they are self-consciously present in Daoud's novel – then using literature to study history might well help to reaffirm Derrida's idea that meaning and reference should be introduced in a suspended space, recognising, as Harrison has underlined, that literature doesn't just come from nowhere:

The experience of the literary text is simultaneously an experience of the non-literary, in practice; it is mixed and multi-faceted, engaging on one level with issues of reference (history, one might say, or experience), and on another level with those aspects of the text that defer or frustrate reference.⁶⁷⁰

It becomes vital here to 'understand the shape and weight of ideas of the literary for particular readers', but also that 'ideas of the literary have formed an integral part of the shifting conventions of authorship and reception.'⁶⁷¹

At the beginning of this chapter, we asked what had changed from the reception of Algerian literature during the 1990s, and its construction in the Franco-Algerian 'champ littéraire', to the reception and construction of Algerian literature at the time Daoud's novel was published. If we can almost certainly say that things have changed, that 'events' have occurred between the 'end' of the 1990s and the present day, that Algeria is more politically stable, one might be forgiven for wondering whether a set of 'ideas of the literary' still persist in the French, or broader global, imaginary of Algeria. In this fabled image, authors

⁶⁶⁸ Dib, 'Postface', p. 246; Bonn, 'Littérature algérienne et conscience nationale', p. 37.

⁶⁶⁹ See Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art*, pp. 378-84.

⁶⁷⁰ Harrison, 'Who Needs an Idea of the Literary?', pp. 12-13.

⁶⁷¹ Harrison, 'Who Needs an Idea of the Literary?', pp. 7-8.

are still seen to *speak for* their oppressed compatriots, their fictional and nonfictional texts taken together in an uncritical documentary bundle. Moreover, in the context of the perception of an increased terrorist threat in France, writers like Daoud have been cast afresh within the confines of a new *état d'urgence*.⁶⁷² It would seem, as is suggested by Vince in the piece we cited at the beginning of the thesis, that in the context of Algeria it is the violence that matters; what lies between remains obscured, uninteresting and unwritten.⁶⁷³ In spite of Algeria's relative calm of the last decade, perceptions of contemporary Algeria remain highly dominated by the reductive false binary of a 'dirty' State violence and a 'barbaric' Islamic fundamentalism.⁶⁷⁴

There is therefore a crucial importance in adopting a close reading approach, what Harrison after Genette refers to as a functional reading of the text's 'horizon' of meaning, to understand both levels of irony at work within texts and the games that are being played with regard to representation itself – an approach somewhat analogous to that advocated by Frow.⁶⁷⁵ The local contextualisation which this close reading involves is something distinct from fetishisations of 'the local' or 'the Real' implicit in both the French and international reception of Algerian literature and writers. As we mention above, while such fetishisations might chime with established thematics of postcolonial literature in France,

⁶⁷² France re-established the *État d'urgence* – whose controversial history in the Algerian War of Independence did not go unnoticed by critics – after terrorist attacks were committed in the capital city in November 2015. See Marius Loris, '1955-2015 : ce que nous avons à craindre de l'état d'urgence', *L'OBS avec Rue89*, 21 November 2015, <<http://rue89.nouvelobs.com/2015/11/21/1955-2015-avons-a-craindre-letat-durgence-262204>> [accessed: 25 January 2016].

⁶⁷³ Vince, 'In Amenas'.

⁶⁷⁴ Algeria's 'dirty war', inaugurated in Souaïdia's *La Sale guerre* was taken up by a number of journalists; the adjective 'barbare' seems to be a favourite of the French press when speaking of the violence of the 1990s. It is remarkable, but perhaps unsurprising, that *Le Monde* continues to present a grossly oversimplified account of the 1990s in Algeria and hence reinforces the State-Islamist binary. In an article on the sentencing of Hamadache, he is reported to be an 'ancien du Front islamique du salut (FIS), dont les branches armées ont causé la mort de plus de 200 000 personnes pendant la guerre civile qui a marqué la décennie 1990'. As we have shown, not only is such information far from beyond doubt, the oppositional language adopted serves to reinforce a pre-existing narrative. See, Abane, 'L'écrivain Kamel Daoud gagne'.

⁶⁷⁵ Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p. 27. Bonn and Harrison use similar terms to describe this effect: 'attente de lecture' (Bonn, 'Algérie', p. 209), 'horizon d'attente' (Harrison); both seem to be inspired by Genette's term 'horizon de lecture' (*Fiction et diction*, p. 67) and while all can perhaps be related back to Bourdieu's comments on the dangers of the inversion of the axes of production and reception in literature, they seem also to be further nuanced in relation to Bourdieu's methods. See also, Frow, 'On mid-level concepts'.

or of World Literature globally, thematic reductions do a disservice to the postcolonial in its present political and aesthetic project, reintroducing the dangers of a far too simplistic exoticism it had initially sought to contest.

Coda: Reading the ‘affair Daoud’ in France

Though this final chapter was drafted before the occurrence of these events, and its conclusions could stand as they are, what became known in France as the ‘affair Daoud’, speaks so directly to the arguments of this chapter, particularly surrounding cultural essentialism in the press and the ever-present (con)fusion between the writer of literary fiction and the journalist, that it will be useful to add a few words in the form of a coda to this chapter and perhaps more generally to the thesis as a whole. If the task of speaking about this ‘affair’ is made difficult by the multiple ongoing contexts to which it relates – recent terrorist attacks in France and the rise in discussion and debate surrounding identity politics which inevitably follows, alongside the rise of Daesch and the increased movement of people and refugee crises which have resulted – this coda will focus on a limited set of interventions which began with Daoud’s Cologne article and ended with the involvement of the French prime minister, Manuel Valls. We seek briefly to highlight the non-critical appropriation of the figure of ‘intellectual’, questions of implicit reference in relation to the writer’s Algerian identity and the emergence of the ‘affair’ itself as an object constructed within the bounds of the press narrative. First, a brief overview of the ‘affair Daoud’ will be necessary.

On 31 January 2016, Daoud authored an article for *Le Monde*, entitled ‘Cologne, lieu de fantasmes’.⁶⁷⁶ If the article begins with an acknowledgement that we cannot know for sure what happened on New Years Eve 2015 in the German city of Cologne, when reports

⁶⁷⁶ Kamel Daoud, ‘Cologne, lieu de fantasmes’, *Le Monde*, 31 January 2016, <http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/01/31/cologne-lieu-de-fantasmes_4856694_3232.html> [accessed: 16 May 2016].

emerged that a number of women had been sexually assaulted by men of North African or Arab appearance,⁶⁷⁷ it nevertheless pretends to delve into the minds of two sets of actors: ‘des agresseurs’, those who (supposedly) committed the acts, and ‘des Occidentaux’. For, Daoud writes, ‘on sait – au moins – ce qui s’est passé dans les têtes.’⁶⁷⁸ Daoud argues that what happened on New Year’s Eve in Cologne was caused by the clash of a set of ‘fantasmes’. The first ‘fantasme’ was that belonging to members of the European Right: ‘Des immigrés accueillis s’attaquent à « nos » femmes, les agressent et les violent’; a second emanated from the Left who had fallen victim to a ‘surdose de naïveté’, seeing the vulnerable ‘statut’ and not the ‘culture’ of refugees coming to Europe, while the third ‘fantasme’ concerned the position of women in what Daoud called ‘le monde d’Allah’, where, for him, ‘[l]a femme est niée, refusée, tuée, voilée, enfermée ou possédée.’⁶⁷⁹ If continuing to support offering asylum to refugees in Europe (‘il faut offrir l’asile au corps’), Daoud adopts a provocatively reductive language in his call for the need to ‘convaincre l’ame de changer’, whereby ‘L’Autre vient de ce vaste univers douloureux et affreux que sont la misère sexuelle dans le monde arabo-musulman, le rapport malade à la femme, au corps et au désir.’ Welcoming this cultural other, Daoud continues, ‘n’est pas le guérir.’⁶⁸⁰

⁶⁷⁷ There were conflicting reports of what quickly became known as a series of (some claimed coordinated) ‘attacks’ in Cologne, but also in other cities across Germany. See, No name, ‘Cologne sex attacks: Women describe “terrible” assaults’, *BBC News*, 7 January 2016, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35250903>> [accessed: 16 May 2016]. An initial lack of reporting of the incidents in the German press, on top of what was seen as an inadequate response by the police, led to accusations that the German ‘establishment’ and ‘political elite’ was trying to cover up the reported incidents for fear that they would have a negative effect on German chancellor Angela Merkel’s liberal refugee policies; see, Gavin Hewitt, ‘Cologne attacks’ profound impact on Europe’, *BBC News*, 11 January 2016, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35261988>> [accessed: 16 May 2016]. The sexual assaults were linked to other mass sexual assaults which had, for instance, taken place during and since protests related to the ‘Arab Spring’ in Egypt in 2011. On this, see Patrick Kingsley, ‘80 sexual assaults in one day – the other story of Tahrir Square’, *The Guardian*, 5 July 2015, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/05/egypt-women-rape-sexual-assault-tahrir-square>> [accessed: 16 May 2016].

⁶⁷⁸ Daoud, ‘Cologne, lieu de fantasmes’.

⁶⁷⁹ Daoud, ‘Cologne, lieu de fantasmes’.

⁶⁸⁰ Daoud, ‘Cologne, lieu de fantasmes’.

In the days that followed, a collective of nineteen academics responded to Daoud's article, published in a letter to *Le Monde*.⁶⁸¹ Their analysis accused Daoud of psychologising the violence reported in Cologne, recycling the most obvious and well-established orientalist clichés. For the collective of academics, Daoud had reductively read all refugees to be '[c]ulturellement inadaptés et psychologiquement déviants' and was calling for their collective reeducation and cultural assimilation. According to the academics, Daoud's analysis had been misplaced, his point of reference was rather Algeria during the 1990s where he had been 'marqué par son expérience'; here, he was intervening 'en tant qu'intellectuel laïque minoritaire dans son pays', while in Europe Daoud risked espousing an increasingly mainstream Islamophobia. On 11 February, *The New York Times* published a contribution from Daoud, entitled 'The Sexual Misery of the Arab World'.⁶⁸² Apparently drafted before the academics had published their letter, the article nevertheless looked as if Daoud were responding to the collective.⁶⁸³ The tone and language of the article was far more direct than his previous piece in *Le Monde*; Daoud explicitly links Cologne to similar incidents reported in Tahrir Square in Cairo at the time of the 'Arab Spring' in 2011 and goes on to speak of how the Arab and Muslim world is plagued by what he calls its 'sick relationship with women.' His point seems to be that the fact that sex remains taboo and marginalized in the Arab and Muslim world, and which he speaks of as a 'disease', means it is now 'bursting onto the scene in Europe.'⁶⁸⁴

Alongside this, the journalist Adam Shatz, who had become friends with Daoud after reviewing his novel in *The New York Times*,⁶⁸⁵ had written to Daoud to challenge what

⁶⁸¹ Collectif, 'Nuit de Cologne: « Kamel Daoud recycle les clichés orientalistes les plus éculés »', *Le Monde*, 11 February 2016, <http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/02/11/les-fantasmes-de-kamel-daoud_4863096_3232.html> [accessed: 16 May 2016].

⁶⁸² Kamel Daoud, 'The Sexual Misery of the Arab World', *The New York Times*, 12 February 2016, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/14/opinion/sunday/the-sexual-misery-of-the-arab-world.html>> [accessed: 16 May 2016].

⁶⁸³ Adam Shatz, 'The Daoud Affair', *LRB Online*, 4 March 2016, <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/2016/03/04/adam-shatz/the-daoud-affair>> [accessed: 13 May 2016].

⁶⁸⁴ Daoud, 'The Sexual Misery of the Arab World'.

⁶⁸⁵ Shatz, 'Stranger Still'.

he called the ‘mountain of hyperbole’ Daoud was climbing.⁶⁸⁶ In response to Shatz’s suggestion that he explore these questions in his fiction, Daoud claimed he would stop journalism and devote himself solely to literature. As Shatz has written in a piece entitled ‘The Daoud Affair’, published in the *LRB Online* and which gives a clear overview of the events, the publication of the letters between him and Daoud sparked polemics on both sides of the Mediterranean.⁶⁸⁷ However, the majority of the defences of Daoud were also attacks against the group of academics who had first challenged Daoud in their letter published in *Le Monde* and who were now seen as having led Daoud to say he would give up journalism. For instance, Shatz cites the Franco-Tunisian writer Fawzia Zouari who, in an article published in *Libération*, defends Muslim intellectuals critical of Islam and turns on the group of academics accusing them of attempting to silence Daoud in the same way he had been threatened by ‘les barbus de son pays’ (she refers euphemistically to Hamdache’s so-called ‘fatwa’). If Daoud had lacked nuance, she argued, this was precisely his aim, belonging as she claimed to ‘une autre tradition de l’islam, celle des poètes rebelles.’⁶⁸⁸ As Shatz reflects, if responses like Zouari’s are understandable in the face of an overly admonishing or censorious tone of Western academics (in fact while many work in the West, the signatories of the letter are not solely ‘Western’), they also miss the crucial point (made in the letter by these same academics) that this debate is occurring both in Europe and in North Africa and nuance is required in each distinct context.⁶⁸⁹

⁶⁸⁶ The letter and response is published in *Le Monde*; see, No name, ‘Kamel Daoud et les « fantasmes » de Cologne, retour sur une polémique’, *Le Monde*, 20 February 2016, <http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/02/20/kamel-daoud-et-les-fantasmes-de-cologne-retour-sur-une-polemique_4868849_3232.html> [accessed: 16 May 2016].

⁶⁸⁷ Shatz, ‘The Daoud Affair’.

⁶⁸⁸ Fawzia Zouari, ‘Au nom de Kamel Daoud’, *Libération*, 28 February 2016, <http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/02/28/au-nom-de-kamel-daoud_1436364> [accessed: 16 May 2016]. There were other more vociferous attacks made on the collective of nineteen academics; Pascale Bruckner, for instance, coins the term ‘les fatwas de l’intelligensia’, see: ‘Défendons « les libres-penseurs venus du monde musulman » contre les fatwas de l’intelligensia’, *Le Monde*, 1 March 2016, <http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/03/01/defendons-les-libres-penseurs-contre-les-fatwas-de-l-intelligensia_4874077_3232.html> [accessed: 16 May 2016].

⁶⁸⁹ Shatz, ‘The Daoud Affair’.

In a yet more bizarre turn of events, and on which we can bring to a close an already too long summary of this ‘affair’, on 2 March, the French prime minister Manuel Valls intervened publishing a defence of Daoud on Facebook. In the piece, Valls attacks the academics for *their* lack of nuance and directly links Daoud’s decision to stop journalism to the censorious letter: ‘un romancier de talent – et sur qui pèse déjà une « fatwa » dans son pays – décide, face à la violence et la puissance de la vindicte, de renoncer à son métier de journaliste.’ Valls goes on to defend Daoud’s personal interventions as not in need of proof, given the writer ‘nous parle du réel, de ce qu’il voit, de ce qu’il ressent, de ce qu’il vit aussi.’⁶⁹⁰ The height of the ‘affair’, whereby the prime minister intervenes on the basis of and continues to pedal misinformation – Daoud of course never expressed that the academics’ letter played a role in his decision to quit journalism – perhaps best encapsulates its vacuity.

While many interesting questions arise from this ‘affair’ – including questions of how the ‘case’ becomes an ‘affair’, the contexts which have inevitably fed the reaction and grossly offensive and oversimplified attacks by writers and journalists on a group of academics who had very little power to respond with similar public exposure, questions surrounding the oversimplified opposition of the ‘secular’ arts and ‘archaic’ religion – it is Valls’ intervention which is most interesting for our purposes in that it defends Daoud the journalist on the basis that he is a novelist.⁶⁹¹ Moreover, the ‘romancier de talent’ need not present us with proof of the views espoused in his journalism, because he is to be treated as a witness, speaking to us directly of a ‘réel’ he himself has seen, felt and lived. This seems a curious position to take. As we know, Daoud was not in Cologne on New Years

⁶⁹⁰ Manuel Valls, ‘Soutenons Kamel Daoud!’, *Facebook*, 2 March 2016, <<https://www.facebook.com/notes/manuel-valls/soutenons-kamel-daoud-/1002589256488085/>> [accessed: 16 May 2016].

⁶⁹¹ As Jean Kane describes, this invention of the binary between the arts and religion can be seen to have occurred in the case of the Rushdie ‘affair’ of the late 1980s, but also earlier in relation to the publication of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. See, ‘Embodied Panic: revisiting modernist ‘religion’ in the controversies over *Ulysses* and *The Satanic Verses*’, *Textual Practice* 20, 3 (2006), pp. 419-40.

Eve 2015, so this most talented novelist saw nothing of the events. The question remains: what has Daoud seen, felt and lived?

Not only are the figures of the novelist and journalist uncritically fused together by Valls, something which evokes our previous discussion of the reductive account of the figure of the author as spokesperson and, to use Bourdieu's terms, invents a particular 'champ intellectuel' and 'projet créateur' which encapsulate this account, not only is Daoud treated as the essential 'témoin', he has crucially been framed as a witness to something apart from the actual events in question, something implicit which, we could argue, relates to Daoud's identity as Algerian. Valls refers not to Cologne but, of course, to Algeria, and again implicitly to his own 'fantasme' of its violence. As Vince puts it, all else falls between the gaps.

To sum up, there is clearly a need, on both 'sides', for a more nuanced study of the functional apparatuses through which the intellectual or writer is constructed. If the media reaction seems surprising, it can also be seen to repeat structures we saw during the 1990s, studied in Chapter One, and in other similar cases such as the Rushdie 'affair' of the late 1980s.⁶⁹² Indeed, the 'affair' itself can be said largely to be an invention of media discourse, an object constructed within the bounds of the press narrative. If the proportions to which the 'affair' would grow could not be foreseen, the lack of nuanced discussion in the press surrounding these cases in the past should perhaps have served as a warning to the academics of what would become the inevitable emergence of reductive, non-critical and binary thinking in a case which had itself already exhibited these signs.

⁶⁹² As Spivak remarks in the early days of the 'affair', making a literary reading of Rushdie's novel would quickly become an impossibility. See, 'Reading *The Satanic Verses*', *Public Culture* 2, 1 (1989), pp. 79-99.

General Conclusion

In his recent book, Jacob Mundy shows how Algeria during the 1990s was subjected to ‘imaginative geographies’ of violence as the country was objectified in a variety of ways by conflict science, social and political science and more recently terrorism studies.⁶⁹³ It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that this was and has since been a common feature of media reports on contemporary Algeria more generally. In using Edward Said’s term, ‘imaginative geography’ which he employed in his monumental *Orientalism*, and by examining discourse during the period of the 1990s under the influence of the work of thinkers like Said and Foucault, Mundy goes further than offering a critique of a media narrative or academic discourse which simply blamed the ‘Islamist challenge’ in Algeria. Rather, he explores the complex process whereby a certain discourse was reproduced by scholars in social, political and conflict science, who unknowingly reconstructed a set of simplistic lenses through which to read Algerian violence of the 1990s, especially that of the massacres towards the end of the ‘décennie noire’. In this case, the question of responsibility for the massacres was often one of *either* Islamists *or* State; the prospect that the infamous question of ‘Qui tue qui’ might have needed rearticulating outside this binary lens was not properly addressed. The possibility that there was no clear way of establishing the facts was passed over in favour of theorising with little actual information.

If present in the social and political science literature published during and since the supposed end of the ‘décennie noire’, this binary discursive frame can be seen to have been reproduced at the level of the Franco-Algerian ‘champ littéraire’ during the 1990s within the discursive ‘sous-champ’ of *urgence*. On the one hand, ‘écriture de l’urgence’ was being used to describe texts whose literariness had become questionable because of their proximity to the violence and their realist or referential style. Yet, ‘écriture de l’urgence’ was

⁶⁹³ Mundy, *Imaginative Geographies*.

also an object produced by a discourse. As we suggested in Section One, viewing the terminology within its discursive context, from its situation in a State-inscribed *état d'urgence*, is something previously passed over by critics with the result that texts emerging during this time have been seen to constitute unproblematic testimonies on the violence of the 1990s. As Derrida reminds us, testimony is never unequivocal, it can never straightforwardly describe *what happened*; not only does testimony implicate within it the possibility of fiction, but also that of literature, of the literary.⁶⁹⁴

Adapted to a market place where a certain image of Algeria could be sold and in turn demanded, the terms employed in circles of literary reception became even more tied up within what Huggan describes in the postcolonial context as the 'currency of symbolic exchange' where texts became 'reified objects'.⁶⁹⁵ Huggan is reflecting here on Bourdieu's broader warning that literary texts were becoming increasingly subject to a process of consecration as 'biens culturels', which would not only meet a pre-existing market demand but do so within pre-established forms.⁶⁹⁶ These comments are reflected in Charles Bonn's analysis when he suggests that literary production during the 1990s had become subject to a documentary 'attente de lecture' beyond the borders of Algeria.⁶⁹⁷

As scholars – such as Zineb Ali-Benali, Névine El Nossery and Dominique Fisher – have begun to explore literature produced during the 1990s in its heterogeneity, there was still within the Franco-Algerian 'champ littéraire' a clear emphasis on the *urgence* of the Algerian crisis and of writing's clear link to that *urgence*. In the worst cases, contemporary Algeria became subject to a fetishisation in the mainstream press, whereby the country was described as being 'ravagée par la terreur', with literature described as the sole path out of the 'barbarous' violence.⁶⁹⁸ If a more critical space opened up within the journal *Algérie*

⁶⁹⁴ Derrida, *Demeure*, p. 31.

⁶⁹⁵ Huggan, p. 29.

⁶⁹⁶ Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art*, p. 236.

⁶⁹⁷ Bonn, 'Algérie', p. 209.

⁶⁹⁸ Marin la Meslée, 'Algérie: l'écriture face à la violence', p. 96.

Littérature/Action, where studies began to appear analysing the discursive practices which were coming to determine the field of Algerian literature, literary writing produced within its pages would still fall within the dominant language of *urgence* in a space of reception which, as we suggest above, was producing works as objects already situated within a particular discursive frame. If anything, the question of quite what ‘écriture de l’urgence’ was remained unclear. On the one hand, this definitional indeterminacy could be seen as a direct outcome of the crisis which was producing this writing, but the ambiguity over the literariness of ‘écriture de l’urgence’ could clearly also be seen to play into the hands of a developing market of testimonial writing in France and beyond.

By constructing cultural capital around writers and their works, the market place – publishers, supported by literary supplements, magazines, newspapers and literary prizes – was effectively able to collapse what Spivak shows to be the two distinct meanings of the term representation (the artistic and the political) within a more digestible cultural representation, which as we demonstrate in the case of Anouar Benmalek, played on the image of the ‘authentic’ and ‘resistant’ intellectual voice. The fact that such a structure can be seen to be almost directly replicated nearly two decades later in the case of the reception of Kamel Daoud’s novel is of particular cause for concern, especially given that the novel sets out to protect itself against, if not to parody, precisely this kind of reading.

It was after the massacres at Raïs and Bentalha that the question of State involvement in the brutal murder of its own citizens was raised, particularly outside Algeria. The strength of these accusations was reinforced after the publication of testimonies like those of Nesroulah Yous and Habib Souaïdia.⁶⁹⁹ Although observers were beginning to ask questions about State-armed civilian militias and the infiltration of the armed groups under the GIA, more difficult questions of the deep-seated factional struggle within the regime were not posed by many scholars publishing during the period. As Hugh Roberts stressed

⁶⁹⁹ Yous, *Qui a tué à Bentalha*; Souaïdia, *La sale guerre*.

in his critique of Martinez and others, the tendency to avoid asking these questions in fact served to further obscure what was happening in Algeria, to render the 1990s ‘invisible’ to use Stora’s term.⁷⁰⁰ The binary lens adopted meant that it was *either* the State *or* the Islamist opposition that had committed these massacres. There was little effort to explain the violence beyond a pre-existing binary lens – one or the other, not both, had to be held responsible. Emerging accusations of State involvement in the massacres led to a general mistrust among international observers when Bouteflika came to power in 1999 with his flagship policy of the ‘Concorde civile’, later transformed in 2005 into the ‘Charte pour la paix et la réconciliation nationale’. Rather than support these measures, which had been democratically approved in referenda, as Mundy shows, international commentators criticised attempts at reconciliation for denying the existence of the violence of the 1990s and, principally, for not following established trends in conflict management, such as those tested in South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The successes and failures of that particular model were not considered. For Mundy, this revealed strong ‘normative convictions’ among commentators who were in fact more concerned to explain Algeria’s violence as a problem of history.⁷⁰¹

At some level, all the works we have studied in the thesis are concerned with the complex questions of violence and history and the multiple ways in which they are linked. To view literary texts as historicizing the violence of the 1990s, to suggest that literary texts showed how the violence had somehow been historically produced or determined, would be to apply a recidivist narrative to Algeria, to form one’s own cyclical narrative of violence which does not engage with any actual historical evidence and takes the view that violence is culturally embedded. In Foucault’s terms, this would be to make an object of narrative, brought into a discourse from the outside, as distinct from seeing that object as already

⁷⁰⁰ Roberts, p. 259; Stora, *La guerre invisible*.

⁷⁰¹ Mundy, p. 154.

produced within a discursive frame. Furthermore, to view literary texts as capable of discussing violence in such a schematic manner would surely be to remove a crucial element of their literariness.

Salim Bachi's figure of Cyrtha captures this totalising reach of discourse and the tragedy of characters who attempt to escape it, positing narratives, which as we see are mere objects of discourse. If the 'décennie noire' in Algeria is something particular to Algeria, in other words 'local', and the attacks at Saint-Michel in 1995 and in New York in 2001 are 'global', then Bachi's works fuse the two together, permitting a critique of the ways violence is read, framed but also produced in real and imaginative geographies at different historical moments. The figure of Cyrtha is a necessarily more unstable, unfixed and fundamentally discursive lens through which this mythologisation of events can be viewed and critiqued. Surviving its allegorical reading, Cyrtha leaves a trace or remainder which takes the form of a warning: if the primary function of language is to describe events, it can also produce events. A critical focus on the production of language and discourse becomes necessary in Bachi's work so as to prevent the reader from falling back into the trap of the binary. It is with this immanent critical attention to the workings of narrative, and to the discourse which encompasses it, that Bachi's reader is critically enabled in deconstructing myths of events understood in an uncritical continuum of 'terror'. Cyrtha must be written anew and Bachi entrusts this task to his readers.

Maïssa Bey is most explicit in thinking through questions of mourning, forgiveness and the need for the tragic in her 2010 novel, *Puisque mon cœur est mort*. But the novel, like Bachi's works, considers the other side of tragedy as a narrative which seems to have a compulsion to repeat itself, a narrative which self-replicates within a discursive space where narratives compete. Such a compulsion to repeat and to compete is further attenuated in Bey's attention to what she has already written and in the critical reading she makes of her previous writing. As we saw in our analysis of Bey's work, this focus on reading is crucial to

her practice in the later novels of rereading and recasting Algerian history in the voice of the women previously excluded from it. Far from simply telling Algeria's post-independence history, Bey's novels invite the reader to actively read history, drawing us in to its unstable, at times fragmented and suspended world of reference. In this sense, the novel becomes one of the sole ways of *doing history* in contemporary Algeria, which is, as Bey's novels demonstrate in particular, a process of continually rereading the past.

While Bey's works are representative of a hitherto obscured women's experience within Algeria, Bachi's novels focus on young men whose image has perhaps had *too much* exposure and come to determine, in a different way, how contemporary Algeria has been framed. There is therefore an *urgence* to re-inscribe women's experience, but also, in both authors' work, to reassert gender as a category of critical analysis in Algeria, not merely as an object of exoticised interest from outside. If Algerian women are stereotyped as victims of a barbarous violence, then Bey's works reveal the individual voices which resist such violence, at the same time as questioning the reductive readings of violence made outside Algeria. In Bachi's case, the assumption from the outside is of men who are violent as a result of their Algerian roots, but his novels encourage the reader to think in terms of *routes*, to adopt a broader perspective on how human beings are produced within certain discourses and mythologized as certain types of human, or non-human, life.⁷⁰² For Bachi, this process is not one which can be limited to a single time; it must be seen as encoded and rooted in historical narratives of thinking about and writing the other, as well as in broader discourses of colonial and post-colonial assimilation.

Where Bey and Bachi were working from within a certain discursive field or frame to challenge that field or frame, that principally of the Franco-Algerian 'champ littéraire', and where their cultural capital as Algerian francophone writers was constructed principally

⁷⁰² Paul Gilroy uses the homonym roots/routes in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 17.

within the borders of the former *métropole*, the remaining corpus takes an interesting shift to an outside, yet also for the first time an inside, position in an emerging Algerian publishing industry keen to encourage a more experimental writing beyond the thematic demands of the more established market place in France. In this context of what appeared to be the emergence of a new site where national literature could flourish, it is perhaps unsurprising that Djamel Mati and Habib Ayyoub would return in their works to questions of the nation and its narration.

If Mati's novels can be seen to stage the transition from what Jameson calls 'the homogenous representation of the symbol' to the 'multiple polysemia of the dream', this is seemingly embodied in the allegorical spirit and mapped out at the site of reimagining and recasting the nation. To rewrite the nation in Mati's literary fiction is to necessarily expose the discursive frames – the mediating screens – through which his characters and readers must continually pass. By bringing into focus these screens, his stories are about the hope of removing them, of suspending them for all to see, of interrupting what Barthes calls the 'tourniquet' of meaning which operates within mythical discourse to continually re-posit narratives as naturalised objects existing outside of the discursive frame.⁷⁰³ Mati's stories represent nothing but the problem of representation itself, unveiling the myth that realism could grant us unmediated access to reality. In its continual redrawing of space and time, the desert setting of the novels never allows for stable objects to be posited. If, as Bensmaïa had written previously of Djaout, this means that Mati's novels offer an allegory of the impossibility of writing the nation, it also seems likely that by moving between spaces, by blurring the boundaries between the real and the dream or the mirage of the desert, the novels map out, what Vallury names in reference to Djaout, an 'aesthetic politics'

⁷⁰³ Barthes, 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui', p. 197.

of allegory itself, introducing the question of literary form to a discussion which had previously revolved around the fixed currency of symbols.⁷⁰⁴

This turn (perhaps it is also a return) to questions of the allegorical in its discontinuous, discursive and interrogatory mode, present also in the work of Habib Ayyoub, is perhaps representative of a broader anxiety of being read within reductive spaces of a ‘champ littéraire’ and being denied the space to experiment with narrative. Although undeveloped in Algeria, especially in the years following the founding of new publishing houses, pre-existing francophone newspapers would regularly publish reviews and critiques. As we indicated with reference to Miliani, it was even more important to be reviewed in the Algerian ‘champ littéraire’ for a novel to gain any visibility.⁷⁰⁵ Far from being a mode which constructs a straightforward frame through which an alternative story can be told, and in addition to it being a means to circumvent possible censorship, the ability of allegory to narrate numerous historical times at once, means it is able to deconstruct the unicity of time upon which historical narratives depend. The figure of the broken clock in *Le remonteur d'horloge* illustrates how a broken national time, a stopped narrative time, allows the villagers to explore a whole new world of representation, both within and beyond a historical narrative determined in its beginnings and ends. Through the figure of the broken clock, they are able to see clearly how the object of narrative had been posited from outside; with time suspended, they are more broadly able to explore the discursive frame in which their previous understanding of the world had been framed. Within Ayyoub’s story, the political potential of the allegorical mode is itself staged. Moreover, Ayyoub’s epistemological enquiry extends beyond a reductive binary language of *urgence*, as seen from France, and *contre-urgence*, as seen from Algeria. In its ability to unite the political and the aesthetic – to broadly recast the aesthetic as a political phenomenon –

⁷⁰⁴ Bensmaïa, ‘Postcolonial Nations: Political or Poetic Allegories?’; Vallury, p. 326.

⁷⁰⁵ Miliani, p. 81.

allegory presents an opportunity in Ayyoub and Mati's works of both moving beyond the reductive containment of literature as referential document and maintaining literature's ability to refer. It is the allegorical mode itself that draws attention to this gap, or 'false dichotomy' as Vallury names it, between the poetic and the political. The literary text as a discursive space encompassing these debates has the power to reimagine and recast the dead spaces of history and re-establish history's 'living relationship' with the present.⁷⁰⁶

If it can be criticised for its use of a classic teleological language of tragedy, the 'Charte pour la paix et la réconciliation nationale' nevertheless maps a way forward for Algeria which had seemed impossible in the years previous. In their focus on practices of reading and writing, and in the incorporation of these critical questions within their works, Mati and Ayyoub's works offer a critical lens on the broader discourse which frames a set of ideologically conceived narratives. The works studied capture the violence of the 1990s more in the form and aesthetics than in the content of their narratives. Such is their ability to reinvent and to recast not narrative, but an encompassing discourse which produces narrative as an object.

All of the works studied here engage, therefore, with the question of the binary. If narrative is one object among a set, then this implies that it will come up against *other* competing narratives which it will seek to outdo, challenge and overthrow. However, literature has the ability to incorporate and outplay pre-existing narratives not simply in opposition to them, but within and beyond them. Literature is always at once situated and detached, particular and universal, 'suspended' as Derrida tells us in its 'relation to meaning and reference.'⁷⁰⁷ As he goes on to note, "There is no pure singularity which affirms itself as such without instantly dividing itself, and so exiling itself."⁷⁰⁸ Literature does not 'affirm' but denies, doubts, questions the foundations of a discourse which bring its narrative into

⁷⁰⁶ Osborne, p. 133.

⁷⁰⁷ Attridge & Derrida, p. 48.

⁷⁰⁸ Attridge & Derrida, p. 66.

existence. By exploring the limits of discourse, by recasting the national narrative as, in Bhabha's terms the 'liminal figure' of discourse, as an object brought into discourse, Mati and Ayyoub's works, like those of Bey and Bachi, look back on questions of symbol, allegory and a language of metaphor which encompasses them. While incorporating reformulations of previous metaphors, these works also perform what Cherki named the necessary 'travail métaphorique' of doing history in post-independence Algeria.⁷⁰⁹ If, in 2003, Fanny Colonna noted the 'de facto prohibition' of doing research on 'the local, the particular, the "singular"' in Algeria, it was perhaps in the space of literature – and in particular local literatures – that this work is being done.⁷¹⁰ Literature, from inside Algeria, had to find ways to emphasise its singularity, without simply affirming it.

If we could locate non-affirmation and radical doubt anywhere in the contemporary Algerian novel, we could do no better than look to the work of Mustapha Benfodil, which, by its radically decentred form and continual deferral of stable meaning, forces its readers to ask taxing philosophical questions about how literature cannot but fail in its task to read the world. In the *Archéologie du chaos (amoureux)*, Benfodil shows how writing about something almost always involves writing that thing itself. Writing about the violence of the 1990s, writing an archaeology of the chaos, is necessarily to reproduce elements of that violence within the formal composition of the novel. As Derrida had shown in relation to Foucault's attempt to write a history of madness, such a task would necessitate writing madness, writing from the perspective of the madman. If the sexually explicit, grotesque behaviour and immature politics of the characters of the novel might initially put readers off, the novel is highly self-aware, caricaturing and deconstructing its own immaturity and naiveté. The text is very much used against itself. In creatively exploring and deconstructing the epistemological function of literature, Benfodil's text makes a comment not only on the

⁷⁰⁹ Cherki, p. 179.

⁷¹⁰ Colonna, 'The Nation's "Unknowing Other"', p. 155.

writing of the violence of the 1990s, but recasts the reductive reading of Algerian violence more generally in a politico-aesthetic project which can be seen to emphasise, if in an interrogative manner, an *urgence* of deconstructive reading and writing.

As with our previous writers, Benfodil's works are concerned with questions of reading Algeria, and with representation more generally, but they stage this concern as more radically present as the text carves a political project out of its poetic experiment. While less overtly political, the multi-layered and self-conscious levels of reference we see in Benfodil's work are also present within Kamel Daoud's novel, which anticipates and parodies its own reception. In an emphasis on the changes made between the Algerian and the French editions of *Meursault, contre-enquête*, and the different stages of reception of the multiple versions of the text, the final chapter of the thesis raised questions about the seemingly persistent risk of treating the literary text as a documentary lens on contemporary Algerian society. In the Coda, we ask how this reductive treatment of the text – the lack of an ability to read critically which the text itself caricatures – has reproduced a most uncritical debate in the context of European identity politics. If, by establishing a dialogue between multiple pre-existing representations of modern and contemporary Algeria, encouraging the reader to question these representations, the text can be seen to attenuate some of these dangers and offer, as Vince suggests, a possible entry to exploring post-independence history, it seems that in its mainstream reception, the novel persistently found itself reduced in a similar manner to works during the 1990s and the so-called period of *urgence*.⁷¹¹ If Daoud's experiment fails, as he and his work are ultimately reduced, read once again under the sign of the 'authentic' or 'resistant' marginal intellectual voice, it perhaps offers a demonstration of the necessity of more experimental projects like that of Benfodil's *Archéologie* which, in their creative form, defer the dangers of a reductive canonisation.

⁷¹¹ Vince, 'Literature as post-colonial reality?'

In a context where the State has itself been keen to employ and deploy a multitude of narratives to inscribe and assert its legitimacy, not only could it be suggested that literature is important, but that the State has deemed it necessary to keep literature restrained within the boundaries of the written book. For instance, the possibility that the State has been involved in orchestrating the threats made to Kamel Daoud's life,⁷¹² coupled with the repression and silencing of Benfodil's public readings, shows that contemporary Algerian literature is embedded at some level in the complex struggle to write contemporary Algeria from within. In the light of this, contemporary Algerian writing cannot but problematise its relation to narrative; not only do Daoud and Benfodil's novels offer interesting mediations on narrative, they also begin to demonstrate how the Algerian State has at moments felt threatened by the prospect of damage being done to their hegemonic national story by discursive literary forms which undermine and disrupt the foundations of a static or contained narrative. Indeed, the practices of reading outside contained spheres or fields encouraged by literature carries the threat of a loss of narrative control. If seeming on a physical level to try to escape the bounds of the text, Benfodil in many ways reasserts the textuality of political discourse by performing elements of his novel in public.

Some of the most interesting points to be retained from Jameson's essay are those the critic makes about reading beyond the canon which is one way of, albeit more subtly, exerting control, limiting literature to an often static and contained frame. As Jameson provocatively puts it, '[n]othing is to be gained by passing over in silence the radical

⁷¹² Daoud suggests in one interview that the State had tricked the 'imam' Abdelfettah Hamadache (once embedded with the security services) into releasing the statement encouraging Daoud's trial and execution in order to force Daoud to leave Algeria for France. The suggestion is that this would in turn allow the Algerian state to discredit the author within Algeria. See, Nourhane. S., 'Kamel Daoud : « Hamadache est instrumentalisé par les autorités pour me pousser à quitter l'Algérie »', *Algérie-focus.com*, 21 December 2014, <<http://www.algerie-focus.com/2014/12/kamel-daoud-hamadache-est-instrumentalise-par-les-autorites-pour-me-pousser-a-quitter-lalgerie/>> [accessed: 26 January 2016].

difference of non-canonical texts.⁷¹³ The canon – whether that be a determined set of postcolonial texts or those constructed as a body of ‘écriture de l’urgence’, or indeed *contre urgence* – threatens to limit our experience, giving us a reading often ‘sheltered’ in Western modernism. While one could accuse Jameson of setting up a binary opposition of his own, between canonical and non-canonical texts, which serves counterproductively to reinforce the ‘canon’ of which he is speaking, his observation that the ‘popular or socially realistic third-world novel tends to come before us, not immediately, but as though already-read’ can perhaps be said to show his awareness of the fact of the construct of the ‘canon’. What is ‘already read’ in this case is the novel itself, though, by ‘that Other reader, so different from ourselves’.⁷¹⁴ This is Jameson’s ‘Other’ we ‘prefer *not* to know’ – or, rather, an ‘Other’ we know only in a certain way. What Jameson seems to be suggesting, and he presciently brings in ‘world literature’ here, is that our readings, however initial and tentative, however ‘provisional’, must move beneath and consider what has been neglected by ‘first-world’ markets – markets which threaten to fulfil a certain idea of ‘world literature’, without picking up on what has been (perhaps conveniently) forgotten from the political and social contexts of what was once referred to as the ‘third world’.⁷¹⁵

Algerian literature after the ‘décennie noire’ can be shown to have continually developed intervening strategies to recast the object of narrative within a broader interrogative and discursive challenge to hegemonic structures of power, be they at the level of the State or market. To recast is not, however, to oppose. If many read the 1990s as a time when ‘écriture de l’urgence’ flourished in France, there emerged the danger that such *urgence* would be read as being countered or contested in the Algerian publishing market which appeared after the ‘end’ of the 1990s. The attention to periodisation, referential

⁷¹³ Jameson, ‘Third-World Literature’, p. 65.

⁷¹⁴ Jameson, ‘Third-World Literature’, p. 66.

⁷¹⁵ Jameson, ‘Third-World Literature’, pp. 67-68.

containment and to the literary are incorporated within all the above-studied texts and might serve as a warning to those reading a ‘renaissance’ or ‘*nahda* des lettres’ in a *post-‘décennie noire’* Algeria.⁷¹⁶ To view literary works produced after the ‘*décennie noire*’ as composed under the sign of a *contre-urgence* would be precisely to miss the warnings exhibited within the literary works themselves, as well as to imbue literature with an affirmative capacity. By inaugurating a language of *contre-urgence*, there seems to be a very real risk of the emergent Algerian ‘*champ littéraire*’ reproducing a negative double of the *urgence* constructed during the 1990s in the Franco-Algerian ‘*champ littéraire*’ and hence further contributing to its consecration. Once again, the binary itself constitutes the trap. As Daoud’s Haroun puts it, when it comes to Algeria, the reader is ‘*piégé*’.⁷¹⁷ If these risks can be attenuated in our corpus of works, then the question becomes less oriented around the texts themselves, but how those texts are read and framed within the discursive space which receives them.

While the comparison to postcolonial literature is a useful one, there is a particularity to the Algerian context with its rootedness in the questions of political violence and the national narrative. In addition, the more established status of postcolonial literature in Western universities and literary markets means that no major comparison can be made between the analysis of the two distinct fields of postcolonial literature and ‘*écriture de l’urgence*’ during the 1990s. However, it is interesting to see that the postcolonial lens remains heavily present in a post-1990s French-based, perhaps we could call it francophone, ‘*champ littéraire*’. As Crowley writes, postcolonial literatures most likely to be published in France are those which can be read as privileging a certain ‘*thematics of “the Real”*’.⁷¹⁸ Crowley names Salim Bachi among these writers, alongside Anouar Benmalek and Boualem Sansal. Despite the ability of literary works themselves to question

⁷¹⁶ Meddi & Matarese, *Algérie: la nahda des Lettres*. See also, Avran, ‘Renaissance de la culture algérienne’.

⁷¹⁷ Daoud, *Meursault, contre-enquête*, p. 80.

⁷¹⁸ Crowley, ‘Literatures in French Today’, p. 412.

these reductive frames, the commercial reification of writers and their works as ‘authentic’ objects or narratives which offer a particular perspective on the ‘reality’ of things in the former colonies clearly predominates within the space of the former *métropole*.

If we have not focused in any great detail on the question of the spectacle of violence, and the role of the contemporary media in screening that spectacle, it is clear that this cannot be detached from questions of the literary or artistic market place which privileges an aesthetics or thematics of the real. Bachi’s post-9/11 novels are of particular interest when it comes to the question of the theatre of twenty-first century ‘terror’ – what we have called a continuum of ‘terror’ – where the spectacle itself is seen as a form of violence. The ability of the novel to perform this spectacle and its continual reproduction within a certain discursive frame is testament to the power of the novel not simply to represent, to describe events in an artistic realm, but to perform the complex processes of representation and, in turn, to enable readers to interrogate those processes. Bachi’s work seems in many ways to place an emphasis on novels which, as Milan Kundera has put it, ‘n’examine pas la réalité mais l’existence.’⁷¹⁹ The novel, as form, is never really about recounting what happens, in the event itself, but rather what the event becomes in its aftermath – the very possibility of the event beyond its material occurrence: ‘l’existence ce n’est pas ce qui s’est passé, l’existence est le champ des possibilités humaines, tout ce que l’homme peut devenir, tout ce dont il est capable [...] Il faut donc comprendre *et* le personnage *et* son monde comme *possibilités*.’⁷²⁰

The dual approach adopted in the thesis, sitting between a literary examination of texts and the study of literature’s function in society more broadly, was initially conceived as a way to mediate between the political and the poetic, while avoiding simply reducing one within the other. As we have seen, the idea that the two can be separated is perhaps

⁷¹⁹ Milan Kundera, *L’art du roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 57.

⁷²⁰ Kundera, p. 57.

more a result of certain myths about what politics or poetics are. Indeed, to return to the beginning of thesis – and in particular to Foucault’s stress on the need to deconstruct the discursive relations which produce narrative objects – we can suggest that in their deconstruction of a discourse which contains them, the texts under study all in their own manner begin to deconstruct this foundational binary of the political and the poetic or the aesthetic. If it cannot affirm this point, it is rather by a set of ‘reculs’, to recall Bonn’s words, in relation to language and to the political that literature is able to offer an interrogatory mode of contestation.⁷²¹ As Herbert Marcuse writes:

“Aesthetic form” means the total of qualities (harmony, rhythm, contrast) which make an oeuvre a self-contained whole, with a structure and order of its own (the style). By virtue of these qualities the work of art *transforms* the order prevailing in reality. This transformation is “illusion,” but an illusion which gives the contents represented a meaning and a function different from those they have in the prevailing universe of discourse.⁷²²

If, as Bahri writes, this captures the instinct of Marcuse and his colleagues in the Frankfurt School to comprehend art from within,⁷²³ it also demonstrates how in spite of the illusory nature – the fictionality – of a transformation of reality, the ability *to imagine otherwise* the function of what is represented is often sufficient for art to perform a political role within the realm of discourse. Though these points on the novel, narrative and discourse may seem like obvious ones to make, it is within the particular context of contemporary Algerian literature that they demand a reassessment. If, to use Kundera’s words, the novel explores existence as the realm of *possibilities* of the character and his world, it surely also does so by reframing the ‘event’, the ‘what happened’, within a reimagined but crucially suspended discursive space.

The hope which the above thinkers have for art and, in the case of Kundera and for our purposes, literature, may well be attenuated by Bourdieu’s analytical framework of

⁷²¹ Bonn, ‘Littérature algérienne et conscience nationale’, p. 37.

⁷²² Marcuse, cited in Bahri, p. 111.

⁷²³ Bahri, p. 111.

‘champs’, which he recalls in 2000 when speaking about the increasingly globalised literary market and the threat this market poses to literary creation, and which we have used (albeit in a *loosened* fashion) intermittently throughout the thesis, but more especially in describing the Franco-Algerian ‘champ littéraire’ of the 1990s and the discursive ‘sous-champ’ of *urgence*.⁷²⁴ While Bourdieu’s mapping out of the multiple complexities of the commercial realm of literary reception and the possible demands this places upon writers and works is of clear value to a study of a body of literary work, particularly one produced at a time of intense political conflict, it nevertheless cannot help construct the body of which it speaks. As Huggan underlines, adding this voice to a growing body of criticism of Bourdieu, a weakness of the encompassing approach is that it does not really acknowledge the possibility that we are not *all* ideal consumers of a homogenous body of literature and, as we have attempted to show throughout, that it is precisely writers, in their seemingly endless ability to reinvent the world and to experiment with the forms which represent the world, who are best placed to think through complex questions of cultural value and commodification, which are certainly not new to our world.⁷²⁵ Taken to its extreme, Bourdieu’s approach could be seen to replicate precisely the problem it attempts to illuminate – namely that of the reductive naming and classification of literature as an object of study. Although, this is surely something to which all literary scholars and critics must admit. What we can take from Bourdieu’s ‘champ’ is less its ability to analyse, more its ability to show through a stress on a range of framing structures of symbolic power that reading will always to some degree mean containing. Frow’s shift towards reading from within the text, allowing the text to guide us through the sociological issues of its reception, is perhaps better at doing justice to the suspense of reference and meaning Derrida and

⁷²⁴ Bourdieu, ‘La culture est en danger’.

⁷²⁵ Huggan, p. 30. If writers could be described as what Frow, who Huggan cites here, conceives of as “‘cultural’ intellectuals”, then they can perhaps to be seen in his words to be ‘specifically trained in the ability to switch codes [and] to move readily between different practices of reading and of valuation.’ See, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, p. 154.

Harrison speak of in literature.⁷²⁶ Ultimately, then, the singularity of literature is that it will be read. Reading – good reading – as we hope to have shown, is to continually move between the ‘beginning’ and the ‘end’, to think within, between and beyond the printed typeface, to, as Bensmaïa puts it in relation to reading Khatibi, continually ‘Start over’.⁷²⁷ With each new reading new meanings will be produced, critical strategies devised and ‘beginnings’ and ‘ends’ rethought and recast.

A number of wider questions have arisen throughout the research carried out for this thesis which I have not addressed in any major detail above, two of which I wish to end on. The first is the question of local readership in the context of what appears to be an increasingly vibrant francophone book industry in Algeria. The second, related point, is a question about the transnational links established between Algeria’s independent publishing houses and other presses across Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, which subvert Paris as a centre of significant influence in francophone publishing. On the first point, further research is required on the local dynamics of distribution and consumption within the new Algerian publishing markets and the still emergent ‘champ littéraire’ in the country, as well as the relationship between French and the other languages of Algeria. On the second point, Crowley has posed this and related questions in a 2013 article on francophone literatures, although it has yet to be explored in any proper detail.⁷²⁸ If the example of Daoud’s experience seems to present us with a rather negative outlook on these broader transnational connections, Benfodil, in his multi-form approach as an artist, or perhaps the ‘anartiste’ par excellence, has demonstrated his ability to cross borders within the French language, without crossing through Paris, publishing his *Archéologie* and *Le Point de vue de la mort* with the Marseille-based publisher Al Dante. If this draws us back to recently explored

⁷²⁶ Frow, ‘On mid-level concepts’; Attridge & Derrida, p. 45; Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p. 139.

⁷²⁷ Bensmaïa, ‘Multilingualism and National “Traits”’, p. 110.

⁷²⁸ See, Crowley, ‘Literatures in French Today’.

territory in the Mediterranean,⁷²⁹ Benfodil's work has also moved horizontally to cross national, linguistic and generic borders, exhibiting an, ultimately censored, installation at the UAE's Sharjah Biennial in 2011. Coupled with this writer's increasingly experimental and contestatory approach to art and literature in his home country, it will be interesting to explore the ways in which such transnational and translingual aesthetic practices are able to reposition centres of cultural production outside the dominant space of Paris and hence force a reassessment of the principal locations of cultural capital in postcolonial North Africa and beyond in the twenty-first century. As for Khatibi, so for us, *start over*.

⁷²⁹ See, for instance, Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), and, more recently, Claudia Esposito, *The Narrative Mediterranean: Beyond France and the Maghreb* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).

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