Parisian Re-orientalism: Encountering the Oriental Self in *Shérazade* and *La vie sexuelle d’un islamiste à Paris*

Separated by over two decades, and coming out of two very different moments in France’s relationship with its postcolonial immigrant population, *Shérazade, 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* (1983), by Leïla Sebbar and *La vie sexuelle d’un Islamiste à Paris* (2007), by Leïla Maraoune, offer fractured narratives of second-generation French Algerians who run away from the banlieues to the center of Paris. In escaping, both protagonists—Sebbar’s Shérazade and Marouane’s Mohamed—are interpellated as North African racial and cultural “others” despite their concerted efforts to inhabit less predetermined subject-positions. “Home” for both protagonists—Shérazade in Sebbar’s novel and Mohamed in Marouane’s—is just outside of Paris, but both texts similarly depict their multi-generational family homes to be akin to a different country entirely—the seat of Muslim piety, traditional family structures, and traditional modes of dress and cuisine. Their alienation from French culture is compounded by the immediate distance between the immigrant community at large and their individual moves into the (physical and ideological) space of cultural capital. Shérazade’s ambivalent fascination with the nineteenth-century Orientalist archive compels her into an “autoethnographic” obsession and fracturing her sense of self, a fragmentation reflected in the text’s episodic form. Mohamed’s fixation with performing the most lascivious Orientalist stereotypes to lure French women into
his bed induces a psychotic break and reveals him to be possibly schizophrenic, a fact which calls the entire narrative and even the act of narration into question. An anxiety emerges in both of these texts in that manifests in the depiction of French acculturation, which occurs through the physical movement out of the banlieues and into the Parisian center. Through a comparative study of both works, this paper aims to examine the profound connection between the transgressing of borders and the internal affect of anxiety, which is once again externalized in the form of the text. I will argue that the ability to move between spaces designated for different (post)colonial subjectivities results not simply in a condition of “metissage” or “hybridity,” but an anxiety that threatens the very possibility of representation.

There is a deep discomfort and anxiety that emerges for both protagonists in French acculturation and *embrourgeoisement*—one rooted in the historical fissure between the North African intellectual elite and the majority of working-class Maghrebi immigrants living outside the *Boulevard Périphérique* in the banlieues of Paris. As the work of Louis Althusser demonstrates, French education in particular is a powerful vehicle of ideology, as it is not simply the dissemination of knowledge, but also of mores and etiquette.¹ In the Algerian colony, the denial of a French education was a potent strategy of control—only a select few colonial subjects were ever to become *évolués*. To deny the majority of Algerian subjects French literacy was

¹ Indeed, in “Ideology and the State,” Althusser correlates education with the skills to obtain power and manage labor. Thus by mere virtue of acquiring a French education, the *évolué* learns the methods and strategies of the ruling class. “[C]hildren at school also learn the ‘rules’ of good behaviour, i.e. the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour, according to the job he is ‘destined’ for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience, which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination. They also learn to ‘speak proper French’, to ‘handle’ the workers correctly, i.e. actually (for the future capitalists and their servants) to ‘order them about’ properly, i.e. (ideally) to ‘speak to them’ in the right way, etc. To put this more scientifically, I shall say that the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the order established by class domination, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class ‘in words’” (Althusser 89).
simultaneously a means of denying them a claim on the post-revolutionary entitlement to French universalism. For the Algerian immigrant, acquiring French literacy, both in terms of language and mores—the principle requirement for any narrative of the immigrant experience in France—creates an immediate distance between the latter-day évoluté and the immigrant community at large.

This distance is expressed psychologically and spatially in both texts as the protagonists move into the Parisian center—thus there appears to be a direct correspondence between French education and Parisian real estate. The distance also produces a familiar anxiety in the protagonists that echoes Frantz Fanon’s anguished scene of interpellation on a Parisian street in *Peau noir, masques blancs* (“Tiens, un nègre!”). But *Shérazade* and *La vie sexuelle*, rather than focusing on the phenomenon of the postcolonial immigrant intellectual suddenly and traumatically being interpellated as one of the immigrant masses, instead depict a process of acculturation in the opposite direction. Both novels portray the trials of “second-generation” Algerian immigrants; by this I mean immigrants who arrived not as adults seeking economic stability, but instead those who arrived as youth or were born in France, coming of age on French soil. But these novels, in their fraught narratives and formal instability, demonstrate that breaching the boundaries of race, class, and city-limits in an effort to join the French elite results in profound anxiety and ultimate failure. This anxiety is palpable in the experimental form of both novels—aphoristic and episodic in Sebbar’s text and hallucinatory and unstable in Marouane’s. The tropes of Orientalism that have circulated by and through metropolitan French culture for centuries prove to be a destabilizing aesthetic block with immense political consequences that prevent them from fully participating in Parisian culture.
I. The Anxiety of the Postcolonial Intellectual

Because access to French education and literacy was so severely limited to a handful of évolués, linguistic, religious, and ethnic differences between colonial subjects were compounded by growing class differences between the majority of subjugated North Africans and the minority who were to become the colonized elite. Aamir Mufti has qualified the transition into “modern forms of culture” under colonization—that is, creating the “fully colonial subject”—to be particularly disorienting. To fully succumb to the cultural paradigms of the colonizer and “modernize,” as it were, is simultaneously an act of treason: “This stain of treachery against one’s own people and of loyalty to the foreign rulers spreads throughout the cultural terrain, coloring even the most radical critiques of indigenous society.” Representing this process, according to Mufti, is symptomatically fraught with the “inability to produce narratives of cultural continuity that can absorb the dislocations of modernity” (Mufti 13). Interestingly, the alienation between different classes or ranks of colonized subjects appears to be distinctly correlated to a sense of dislocation. Thus, the anxiety of alienation from “one’s own people” is somehow spatialized. At the same time, this spatial sense of displacement or dislocation is internalized in the alienated colonized subject. Writing that is produced out of this superimposed class division between colonized subjects betrays a kind of psychic discomfort that aggressively disturbs the delicate ecosystem of colonial subjectivity, yet expresses itself inwardly, or affectively, rather than the more external violent expressions of colonial divisions (for example, in events like the Partition of India or the insurgencies of the FLN).

Jean Paul Sartre’s preface to Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth2 famously deemed the condition of the native a “nervous” one, giving a psychoanalytic valence to Dubois’s “double

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2 “Notre ennemi trahit ses frères et se fait notre complice ; ses frères en font autant. L’indigénat est une névrose introduite et maintenue par le colon chez les colonisés avec leur consentement” (Sartre). It should be noted that
consciousness.” According to Fanon’s logic, in his or her aspirations to mimic and thus become akin to the colonizer, the educated colonized subject suffered a kind of psychosis that originated not from primal familial scenes of trauma but externally from the superstructures of colonial society. Thus for the colonized, *functioning* under the hierarchical regimes of colonial subjugation was predicated upon a psychological *dysfunction*—a deeply destabilizing split in subjectivity that arose from the identification with both oppressor and oppressed. The process of colonial education produced a mode of being that to some degree systematized this traumatic moment of split subjectivity. Acquisition of a colonial education is the currency that allows the *évolué* to live outside of what Fanon deems the *bidonville* (shantytown) or “le village nègre, la medina, la réserve…un lieu mal famé, peuplé d’hommes mal famés” (Fanon, *Damnés* 42). It is the bridging of the divide—or rather the *movement* between—both the psychology and spaces of the colonizer and colonized that produces “l’indigénat névrose.” Though in his writing Fanon specifically addresses the *bidonvilles* of colonial Algeria, the importation of this spatial divide is plainly evident in postcolonial metropolitan France. The genealogy of the immigrant enclaves in Parisian *banlieues* is one that is easily traced back to the *bidonvilles* that were established under colonial rule in Algeria. Indeed, as Susan Ireland remarks incisively, “The layout of French cities today reproduces the old colonial geography” (Ireland 174). Moreover, the spatial relations between the outer rings of the *banlieues* around the central twenty *arrondissements* of Paris create the conditions for surveillance and control of immigrant populations, thereby continuing

_Sartre uses the term “névrose” as a noun to describe “l’indigénat.” “Nervous condition,” a term that has much currency in postcolonial scholarly discourse, comes from Constance Farrington’s 1963 translation into English (“The status of the ‘native’ is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people with their consent” [20, Preface to *Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, 1963]). Richard Philcox’s 2004 translation forgoes this term for one with more contemporary medical and diagnostic valences that perhaps “nervous condition” does not have: “neurosis.” It is as follows: The status of the ‘native’ is a neurosis introduced and maintained by the colonist in the colonized with their consent” (Preface iv, Richard Philcox, 2004)._
the hierarchies of power between metropolitan France and its colonies on the scale of the city.

Michel Laronde asserts that the organization of Paris and its banlieues in concentric circles perfectly reproduces the logic of the Panopticon.

Appliquée à l’immigration, l’architecture du modèle panoptique n’est jamais aussi évidente que dans la spatialité de la région parisienne…. l’arrangement spatial de l’immigration est statistiquement égal pour le centre et pour l’anneau ce qu’il faut considérer, c’est non pas le seul découpage administratif en départements mais investir la géographie interne à ce découpage pour y retrouver le cloisonnement horizontal qui donne au système panoptique sa particularité: celle de l’isolation horizontale entre Surveillés (Laronde 96).

The circular arrangement of Paris’s banlieues ostensibly, according to Laronde, eases the capacity for surveillance and control of immigrant communities by the French state.

Thus ascending out of the ranks of the subjugated proletariat through class mobility does not simply separate the colonial intellectual from the colonial proletariat spatially. It indicates the transition from the ranks of those who are surveilled and controlled to those who sit in positions of privilege and power. In the abstract, it creates a specific kind of anxiety that not only wracks the (post)colonial intellectual’s subject formation, but also the forms of art produced out of this process. This is the anxiety of representation. Anxiety as an affective register permeates the Francophone text that stages the confrontation of the (post)colonial intellectual with the (post)colonial proletariat, because of its implicit and explicit political valences. As Sian Ngai remarks in her important study of literary affect, “the very effort of thinking the aesthetic and political together—a task whose urgency seems to increase in proportion to its difficulty in a[n] increasingly anti-utopian and functionally differentiated society—is a prime occasion for ugly feelings” (Ngai 3). What Ngai calls “ugly feelings”—affects such as irritation, paranoia, and anxiety that are smaller in scale than emotions like anger, terror, or melancholy—spring forth from the very task of coupling the political and aesthetic registers of representation. This task is a
burden the novel of immigration cannot but take on. Moreover, the affect of anxiety according to Ngai’s logic can have a specifically spatial dimension.

The question of timing that one normally associates with anxiety’s affective grammar (When?) can also become a question of location (Where?)…[In] spatialized representations of anxiety…the externalizing aspect of ‘projection’…can be perceived not just as a strategy for displacing anxiety, but as the means by which the affect assumes its particular form…[These representations] reinforce the boundary between center and periphery, and thus the distinction between ‘here’ and ‘yonder’ on which the experience of threat depends, depict anxiety less as an inner reality which can be subsequently externalized than as a structural effect of spatialization in general. (Ngai 213)

Thus there is a profound connection between the drawing of borders—spatial separations that are reified geographic means to separate people—and the internal affect of anxiety, which is once again externalized in the form of the text. The ability to move between spaces designated for different colonial subjectivities results not simply in a condition of “hybridity” or even “ambivalence”—celebratory terms, at bottom, in Homi Bhabha’s lexicon—but an anxiety that threatens the very possibility of representation.

II. Shérazade as a Shape Shifter

The character of Shérazade is at the center of Leïla Sebbar’s eponymous trilogy, including Shérazade, 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux vert (1983), Les carnets de Shérazade (1985) and Le fou de Shérazade (1991). Structured in a fragmented narrative that shifts perspective from chapter to chapter, the first novel in the trilogy features a few months in the life of a seventeen-year-old young beur woman named for the famed storyteller in Les milles et une nuit. Shérazade, whose family hails from Algeria, has run away from her banlieue to the then-bohemian right bank neighborhood of Beaubourg. She is something of a social pariah, surviving purely by

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3 “Timing” can also refer to what Ngai elsewhere deems “deferral” in psychoanalytic discussions of anxiety.
means of her wit and resisting demands that she conform to any sort of social standard, be it that of Algerian immigrant culture, metropolitan French culture, or even the quasi-anarchist counter-culture of the squat where she has taken up residence. Françoise Lionnet identifies her as an “itinerant, fugitive, picaresque character and something of a social parasite” (Lionnet 168). Indeed, Shérazade bears a resemblance to the figure of the pícaro, defying the implicit social protocols and living outside of a standard economic structure. Yet the text does not quite perform the satirical function of the picaresque. Rather than a holistic social critique as such, its narrative fragmentation calls into question the aesthetic representation of a subject like Shérazade, as the historical, social and political circumstances that produce her are so varied and complex. 

Shérazade’s unstable form echoes the instability the eponymous protagonist herself feels as she encounters, again and again, representations of herself (or versions of herself)—ones she feels drawn to and repelled by simultaneously.

Shérazade’s daily life in a squat filled with other disenfranchised youth is punctuated by trips to the Beaubourg library in the Centre Pompidou, where she devours works on Algerian history, art, and literature. Notably, the settings of the novel are profoundly impermanent, whether temporary or public. The chapters in Sebbar’s novel move from the Beaubourg library, to the streets of the Marais, to a squat with a metaphorical revolving door, to the galleries of a modern art museum. Only fleetingly does the narrative ever enter a stable domestic space with a few short scenes in Shérazade’s familial home in the banlieue. The majority of the novel takes place in what Marc Augé calls “non-places,” that is, “hotel chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps, shantytowns threatened with demolition or doomed to festering longevity [in]…world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral” (Augé 78-79). Augé contrasts these spaces to Pierre Nora’s lieux de mémoire—
places saturated with historical significance—but deems them to be just as dialectically important in the formation of cultural identity. “Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten” (Augé 79). The events of Shérazade take place among the not milieu the venerated lieux de mémoire, but instead transpire in liminal spaces of impermanence. This has the effect of superimposing the transitional quality of immigrant life, which is largely relegated to the outer circles of metropolitan Paris, to the very heart of the city.

Shérazade moves constantly, disappearing again and again from each habitation in which she temporarily stops, possessed of a keen, observing eye. Her experience of city space bears resemblance to a nineteenth-century detached flânerie, and even Michel de Certeau’s subversive spatial practice of tactical walking. What is remarkable about Shérazade’s journey into and rambles through the central arrondissements of Paris is her insistence on moving through it as an autonomous subject, despite the multiple forces around her attempting to repress her movements. Indeed, in many ways, Shérazade’s perpetual motion through Paris stakes an implicit claim on inhabiting the city as a flâneur, despite the race, gender, and economic factors that would otherwise foreclose this identity to her. Laura Reeck likens her engagement with the city to aspirant male bourgeois figures of nineteenth-century literature “who ventured to Paris from the provinces.” Certainly, Shérazade’s move from French periphery into center mirrors a classic trope of the nineteenth-century coming of age story. Reeck contrasts, however, “Rastignac, Frédéric Moreau, and Julien Sorel[’s]…premeditated intention and expectation of climbing the Parisian social ladder” to Shérazade’s motivation “simply to escape her familial environment” and use Paris as a “space of performance and enactment” (Reeck 82). But to see Shérazade’s
engagement with the Parisian center as a mere “performance” of earlier models of bourgeois
flânerie does not account for the subversive process of attempting to accrue metropolitan cultural
capital through autodidacticism, and subsequently refusing that social currency by departing for
Algeria.

III. Autodidacticism and Autoethnography

Shérazade tests the limits of the text to contain the various and often contradictory forms
of knowledge, testimony, and representation that constitute the points of confrontation (or, to use
Mary Louise Pratt’s terminology, the “contact zones”) between French and Maghrebi people in
the Parisian metropole. This is most evident through Shérazade’s autodidacticism and dedication
to excavating the personal, archival, and aesthetic histories that precede her own ephemeral
habitation in Paris. Laura Reeck, turning again to Mary Louise Pratt asserts that Shérazade is not
only an autodidact, but an “autoethnographer.” “Sebbar endows Shérazade with the ability to
represent herself on her own terms and to engage with the center in all of its complexities of
people, places, histories, institutions…[She] decodes her observations, [yet] remains writing
within a code…all the while adjusting it for her own purposes and context” (Reeck 82).
Shérazade herself is an avid consumer of all forms of knowledge surrounding the historical
encounters of the French and Maghrebi peoples. Though she runs away from her home, and
ostensibly her ties to Algerian culture, her first instinct is to retreat to the library and plumb the
literary archive produced by Franco-Maghrebis such as herself.

It seems quite important to Shérazade not only to live the experience of a North African
immigrant in France, but also to confront representations of that experience. And in doing so,
through her reading practices, she indirectly yet undeniably changes the circulation of texts in the
Beaubourg library and eventually the reading public of the French library patrons. The librarian is one of Shérazade’s most loyal allies, and also the person who sees her most as a force of cultural change, rather than a representative of any sort of fixed identitarian category. “La bibliothécaire, en parcourant la fiche remplie par Shérazade à l’inscription, avait vite vu en elle une lectrice de ces livres que les Français ne lisaient jamais, soit parce qu’ils ne les connaissaient pas, soit parce qu’ils n’avaient d’intérêt que pour ce qui touchait au Patrimoine (Sebbar 90). The librarian, as a custodian of France’s knowledge-bank, in this way bestows upon Shérazade a place in the intelligentsia who can shape France’s patrimonial archive. An interaction between the librarian and a pair of inspectors Shérazade’s family has employed to search for her reveals a great deal about her radical departure from the stereotype of Algerian immigrant youth. After checking the bars and nightclubs in which they expect to find her, they make their way to the library at the Centre Pompidou as a last resort. There, it is the librarian who not only defends her, but names Shérazade as part of a cadre of young female students who are responsible for the changing face of French literature as such, simply by demanding that minority authors be stocked on the shelves. The shift in the literary archive of the Beaubourg library is an endeavor to represent the multiplicity of postcolonial French culture itself.

Elle parla de Shérazade avec chaleur, leur dit qu’elle lisait beaucoup, en particulier des écrivains d’Afrique du Nord, elle cita Faraoun, Dib, Boudjedra, Djebar, Farès, Haddad, Yacine, Roblès, Memmi, Choukri, Mammeri, Chraibi, Ben Jelloun, des poètes marocains…mais [les inspecteurs] n’avaient pas l’air de connaître, elle indiqua plusieurs rayons qu’ils regardèrent de loin. C’est grâce à Shérazade et à d’autres lycéennes comme elle que j’ai ces étagères sur l’Afrique du Nord…Elles ne leur sont pas réservées: de plus en plus de lecteurs d’Aulnay, des Français, prennent ces livres qu’ils n’auraient pas eu l’idée de demander avant (Sebbar 125).
In naming this litany of Maghrebi authors, the text self-consciously places itself in a canon of literature that sits not only alongside, but within, *la littérature française*.\(^4\) It is important to note that while Leïla Sebbar, the author of *Shérazade*, is part of these of new additions to the French literary archive, *Shérazade the character* is not. Instead, she is a reader, a consumer, a viewer, and an observer. “From Victor Segalen,”\(^5\) notes Jean-Louis Hippolyte,

Shérazade understands that the traveler, the exiled, must be an ‘exote,’ that is, one who is resolutely foreign to the culture he or she explores, not through cultural hierarchy but rather cultural diversity. The modern novel linked the figure of wandering to the development of urban space, as Walter Benjamin notes in *Paris, capital du XIXe siècle*. But Shérazade’s wandering—her name signifies ‘open city’ in Persian—is also an exploration and reveals a lack—topically lipogrammatic—and a search, not only for the missing letters (*Shérazade/Shéhérazade*) but by extension for all letters, all books….The act of reading for its own sake takes on an importance that belies the need for an end, for it is the process itself that looms large in Shérazade’s vision rather than a hypothetical sense of resolution, as if the lack of titles (n’importe quoi’) bespeck the necessary absence of names, compounding paratextual and onomastic lack. (Hippolyte 292).

Shérazade is decidedly *not* an equivalent of the legendary figure of Sheherazade, in that she is not a teller of tales. Her goal is not survival and homeostasis by means of storytelling. She is, rather, always *consuming* literature and always moving, escaping the gaze and bedrooms of the

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\(^4\) On the ways ethnic and sociological categories come to complicate the relationship between *littérature beure* or *littérature de l’immigration* and *littérature française*, Christiane Albert offers this illuminating insight: “L’appartenance ou la non-appartenance des auteurs à la nation française et de la littérature française deviennent donc des critères déterminants dans la désignation de cette littérature. Ceux-ci apparaissent cependant problématiques dans la mesure où la plupart des écrivains qui constituent la littérature beure ne peuvent être considérés comme des étrangers puisque beaucoup d’entre eux possèdent la nationalité française. Ils ne sont cependant pas pur autant intégrés à la littérature française puisque l’institution littéraire dans son ensemble (éditfäh, critique, université) éprouve la nécessité de les regrouper dans une catégorie littéraire spécifique et distincte d’elle. Ainsi ce qui sous-tend la catégorie “littérature beure” ou “littérature de l’immigration”, c’est la transposition dans le domaine littéraire de catégories non littéraires (sociales, ethniques, juridiques) et non a représentation littéraire de l’expérience de la rupture avec son pays ou sa culture d’origine. Théoriquement, celle-ci devrait être une étape intermédiaire menant à l’assimilation par la culture d’accueil puisque la plupart des écrivains qui composent cette catégorie sont nés en France ou y sont venus très jeunes, y ont été scolarisés et sont destinés à s’intégrer en France et à s’assimiler à la littérature française et à prendre de ce fait l’étiquette “écrivain beur”. Cet aspect transitoire de l’immigration n’est cependant pas pris en compte par la critique qui enferme les écrivains beurs dans une catégorie littéraire spécifique” (Albert 59-60).

\(^5\) For an extensive study on Victor Segalen, see Charles Forsdick, *Victor Segalen and the Aesthetics of Diversity* (Oxford University Press, 2000).
men who would keep her romantically hostage by inscribing her into already-written stories. In other words, Shérazade does not perform the role of the artist, but rather, the critic.

III. The Immigrant and the Pied-noir: Inverse Migrations

Shérazade’s most fraught relationship is perhaps with her pied-noir paramour, Julien, whom she encounters in the library. He is a scholar and researcher of the nineteenth-century archive of colonial French expeditions in Algeria. Their relationship has the air of a repetition compulsion—the desire to return to the scene of trauma and replay it. Her excavation into the literary archive in the Beaubourg library is matched by his pursuit as a scholar to inquire into the complex history of colonial Algeria. Julien’s fascination with North Africa harkens back to a belief that these two cultures are imbricated in inextricable ways, and have been so since the time of the Crusades, if not before. His desire for Shérazade as a love-object is inseparable from his baseline Orientalist desire to possess the Maghreb. “Il travaillait à la fois sur des archives coloniales et des arabes. Il était curieux de tout ce qui, du plus loin de l’histoire, constituait sa propre histoire et celle de ces peuples, de ces civilisations qui se fréquentaient depuis les croisades” (Sebbar 106). As Elazar Barakn asserts, “Because of its colonial and neocolonial context, the exchange between Shérazade and Julien…must be constantly renegotiated…Their relationship is not to be read as an apology of colonization, as fruitful encounter or as the site of an unproblematic multiculturalism but, rather, as the realization that the colonial encounter, in its violence, created a hybridization that can never be erased. Such as métisse history must be dealt with, and the search for one’s roots and identity must of necessity pass by this crossroads” (Barakn 262). And yet neither Shérazade nor Julien seem to quite engage in a straightforward “search for roots” in their forays into the various archives they plumb. Their activities as lovers
are riddled with subversive performances of colonial stereotypes, volleying back and forth between re-doing and undoing the gender and power dynamics of colonizer and colonized.

In many ways, Julien is Shérazade’s inverse. He is a migrant from Algeria himself, but the cultural loss he mourns is one of excavation and conquest. For him, the “contact zone” of Algeria and France was not quite one of “hybridity” or even “metissage” but domination. As a former colonist, he has received a very different historical narrative of the relationship between France and the Maghreb and maintains a romantic attachment to the idea of conquering and settling Algeria. To Shérazade, he waxes nostalgic about the pioneer-mentality of his grandmothers’ generation, ruggedly settling the inhospitable terrain of Algeria as though it was a tabula rasa.

Elles tiraient au pistolet et à la carabine aussi bien que leurs mères et leurs grand-mères qui, au début du siècle, ne sortaient pas sans un petit pistolet dans la poche profonde de leurs jupes paysannes lorsqu’elles alliaient surveiller les semaines avec deux ou trois ouvriers arabes à cinq kilomètres du village. Ces femmes se levaien à trois heures du matin, attelaient et conduisaient la voiture à la cheval jusqu’aux champs. La mère de Julien avait été élevée par des pionnières hardies et vigoureuses qui savaient broder, gérer une propriété agricole, tirer à la carabine, galoper à cheval sur les Hautes Plateaux, soigner et accoucher les femmes dans les mechtas, faire des tournées d’infirmière avec boîte à pharmacie et piqûres, aider les institutrices des écoles ouvriers (16).

The romance with which his paints this portrait of pioneer woman stands in stark contrast to the texts from his research he reads aloud to Shérazade, emphasizing the fear of reverse colonizaton that marked the imperial project from its earliest moments.

Il lut à Shérazade un passage des chroniques algériennes de Théophile Gautier, tirées de son Voyage pittoresque en Algérie paru en 1845: ‘Nous croyons avoir conquis Alger, et c’est Alger qui nous a conquis. Nos femmes portent déjà des écharpes trameées d’or, bariolées de mille couleurs qui ont servi aux esclaves du harem, nos jeunes gens adoptent les bourrons en poil de chameau. Pour peu que cela continue, dans quelque temps d’ici, la France sera mahométane et nous verrons s’arrondir, sur nos villes, le dôme blanc des mosquées, et les minarets se mêler aux clochers, comme en Espagne au temps des Mores’ (Sebbar 182-183).
The two portraits of French women here could not contrast each other more explicitly—on the one hand we have venerated women who can conquer the Algerian *landscape* (with no mention of Algerian people) through hard and fruitful labor, and on the other, we have French women who are struck by Oriental lassitude, seemingly by donning the habits of Algerian women. It is adopting the *aesthetic* of the Oriental that, in Julien’s construction, proves to be most threatening to the purity of French culture. His initial scholarly pursuit is to inquire into colonial education practices in nineteenth-century Algeria, but quite significantly, he succumbs to the desire to become a “collector” of Orientalist paintings rather than engage in any critical analysis of the colonial period. “Julien…se promit d’entreprendre aux Archives d’outre mer d’Aix-en-Provence des recherches sur les institutrices et les instituteurs en Algérie, mais la passion de la peinture orientaliste le prit et il se découvrit peu à peu les défauts sublimes du collectionneur” (Sebbar 17). Though Sebbar portrays him to be a sympathetic character with a genuine reverence for North African culture, he cannot overcome his innate desire to capture, to aestheticize, to exoticize, and to succumb to the painterly gaze of the Orientalist. In his pursuit of Shérazade, he attempts to reclaim what has been lost with the end of empire. But she remains ever elusive, despite his attempts to fix her in photographic and filmic imagery.

**IV. Orientalism, Neo-orientalism, and Re-orientalism**

Julien’s fascination with Shérazade manifests in his attempts to match her in body to the images and descriptions of women in the historical and artistic archives of the colonial era. His desire is thus circular—his pre-disposition to be seduced by the Orientalist representations of femininity predetermines his approach to Shérazade. When she does not quite conform to his ideals, his solution is first to *teach her* about the gaze of the colonist, and eventually request that
she *perform* the role. Julien intervenes in Shérazade’s autodidactic process of learning the complex histories that led to her family arriving in France by superimposing the master narrative of colonial domination and coercing her with its most lascivious expressions. He is particularly invested in instructing her on the aesthetic form of the odalisque, the recumbent form in the paintings of Delacroix, Gérôme, and Matisse. “Elles sont allongées, alanguis, le regard vague, presque endormies, elles évoquent pour les peintres de l’Occident la nonchalance, la lascivité, la séduction des femmes orientales. On les a appelées ‘odalisques’ dans l’art du siècle dernier en oubliant que l’odalisque, dans l’Empire ottoman, était simplement une servante, un esclave au service des femmes du harem impérial” (Sebbar 182). Shérazade’s journey into central Paris allows her the possibility of educating herself liberating herself from the oppression she feels from her own family, but this process, through the figure of Julien, exposes her to residual and insidious forms of colonial oppression.

Shérazade seems to command an impressive awareness of herself as an aesthetic object upon whom seemingly everyone around her wants to project their desires surrounding the encounter between France and Algeria—whether it be one of her friend Pierrot’s agitated resistance or Julien’s Orientalist submission. Her response is at once to explore the various ways in which this encounter has been aestheticized through visual and literary representation and to manipulate those representations as she sees fit. Many critics have remarked on Shérazade’s remarkable sense of agency and empowerment, but it is predicated entirely on remaining in perpetual motion. Any moment of inertia finds Shérazade quickly escaping the settling impulse of succumbing to a fixed identity, while appearing to manipulate and subvert the many attempts to pigeonhole her. Sebbar depicts scenes of Shérazade and her female friends—women hailing from various parts of the Francophone postcolonial world—out together at clubs and parties, and
finding themselves immediately aestheticized and fêted for their exotic appearance, especially as a trio. “Souvent elles entendaient dire d’elles: ‘Elles ont un look pas possible’” (Sebbar 145). That their “look” is “pas possible” to the crème de la crème of the most fashionable Parisians reveals the desire of the French elite to deem them mysterious enigmas. By doing so, they can simultaneously erase the long and complex history of colonization and subjugation that created the pathways for members of the postcolonial world to end up in 1980s Paris. Shérazade and her friends, however, demonstrate themselves to be very self-aware, utilizing the cultural capital the fashion world bestows upon them for being “exotic” to float between the squalor of the squat to the glamor of Parisian nightclubs. They even monetize their perceived exoticism by posing as fashion models in an absurd photo shoot mimicking a safari. The photographer shouts out a series of incongruous images that smack of modern incarnations of Orientalism. “On aime beaucoup les scènes de jungle et de forêt vierge en ce moment…Il manque une panthère mais j’ai de quoi dans le coffre, ce sera pour tout à l’heure. Attendez, j’ai une idée, vous allez prendre chacune une mitraillette comme des guérillères, j’en ai là des vraies pas chargées, les jouets font toc, ça vous fait pas peur j’espère (Sebbar 147). Not only are they asked to imagine themselves in jungle scenes among big game, but as guerillas in arms, demonstrating the capacity for even anti-colonial struggle to become aestheticized, Orientalized, and evacuated of political power.

Shérazade and her cohorts engage in a counter-intuitive move by appropriating the stereotypes of Orientalism that is neither full-fledged assimilation into French culture nor a retreat into their “traditional” culture. Rather, they route their identity in Paris through the mediation of Orientalism. Moving into the Parisian center paradoxically propels them away from “Frenchness” as such, and into the stereotypes that French culture assigns to them. This maneuver is similar to what Ali Behdad and Juliette Williams, as well as Michel Laronde, in
separate contexts, have deemed “neo-orientalism.” Behdad and Williams explain “neo-orientalism” to be a mode of representation that, while indebted to classical Orientalism, engenders new tropes of othering... Not only do Middle Eastern writers, scholars, and so-called experts participate in its production, but they play an active and significant role in propagating it. Second, unlike its classical counterpart, neo-Orientalism entails a popular mode of representing, a kind of doxa about the Middle East and Muslims that is disseminated, thanks to new technologies of communication, throughout the world (Behdad 284).

Michel Laronde’s definition of “neo-Orientalism” emphasizes that despite its new incarnations and forms, it continues to place the West at the center of any ideation of the non-West.

Tout comme le néo-orientalisme est une invention moderne de l’Orientalisme ‘classique’ en ce que le discours néo-orientaliste sur l’Orient (donc, par translation, sur l’Etranger) est tenu par l’Oriental (l’Etranger) en position interne à l’Occident; le néo-exotisme est un faisceau de pratiques qui appartienne au Monde oriental (donc, étrangères au Monde occidental) mais sont le fait de l’Oriental en position interne au Monde occidental. Dans le deux cas, on voit que quelque chose ne change pas: c’est la place de l’Occident comme base référentielle du discours, ce qui confirme le maintien de l’Oriental dans la position d’Etranger par rapport au discours occidental. Or, ce maintien est voulu par l’Etranger lui-même. (Laronde 293)

In Shérazade’s process of encountering and engaging with the stereotypes of her culture that are, at bottom, an intrinsic aspect of French culture, we see the costs of assimilation. True “Frenchness” being a foreclosed option, the only choice Shérazade and her friends have to participate in central Parisian life is to perform their stereotypes, an unsettling example of “neo-Orientalism.” Indeed by retreating back into older forms of Orientalist stereotypes, more than a practice of “neo-orientalism,” they are perhaps more accurately engaging in what could be called “re-orientalism”: that is, revivifying the means of classical Orientalist tropes to reach very different ends.

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6 I was first alerted to Laronde’s usage of the term in Monique Manopoulos’s discussion of beur literature in “Decentering Language Structures.”
V. Refusing Representation

Shérazade’s final encounter with a representation of what she feels to be an iteration of herself inspires her to leave Paris entirely, a move of re-orientalism that reorients her path in life.

In the Centre Pompidou, a public Parisian space she nonetheless enters on her own terms by stealing into the galleries after hours, she views Henri Matisse’s odalisques in complete solitude and finds herself responding to them as she did before Marc Garanger’s photographs.

Shérazade regarde L’Odalisque à la culotte rouge. Elle ne comprend pas pourquoi ça l’émeut. La femme allongée, les seins nus, les bras derrière la tête recouverts d’une légère gaze, les cheveux à moitié cachés par un foulard de mousseline brodée de perles, a des yeux noirs petits et ronds, un bouche petite, presque un double menton à cause de la position, Shérazade ne la trouve pas belle…[Elle] la regarde fixement jusqu’à midi. Elle a écrit la description de l’odalisque sur son carnet sans rien préciser, sans noter qu’elle la trouve plutôt laide et que pourtant cette femme la touche, elle ne cherche pas à savoir pourquoi. Sa décision est prise. Shérazade ira en Algéria (Sebbar 232).

Though the motifs of Matisse’s painting that she lists bear resemblance to the odalisques of Délacroix and Gérôme Julien shows her—a languid, partially nude, richly adorned woman with the physical features of someone from the Near East—she is nonetheless transfixed in a way that is distinct from her reaction to the other works. Though Shérazade does not find the figure beautiful, she is compelled. She writes a description of the painting in her notebook in the same manner as she retraces the Arabic graffiti in metro, without understanding logically, but feeling connected. Matisse’s oeuvre is, of course, distinct from the verisimilar style of classical Orientalism, with bolder colors and a distinct attention to the textures and patterns of Oriental textiles. And it is Matisse’s own work as a re-interpreter of classical Orientalism that perhaps attracts Shérazade to his version of the odalisque.

A very short chapter in the middle of the novel provides a clue to her emotional response before the Matisse. In it, the women of Shérazade’s community gather together as they do every Thursday to sew traditional Algerian garments, but this time without Shérazade herself. The narrative proceeds in this scene suffused with what appears to be Shérazade’s appreciation of the ritual, though since she is ostensibly “missing” from the neighborhood and thus could not possibly be our entry into the scene. Nonetheless, its position as an anomalous break from the milieu of Shérazade and her Parisian companions gives us a sense that it the gathering is an ongoing phenomenon, always playing in the background of Shérazade’s exploratory activities in the city-center.

Ce jour-là on cousait en arabe pour une mode arabe et dans des tissus arabes que seules les femmes de l’immigration maghrébine portaient. Suivant les années, Shérazade et Mériem, qui réussissaient toujours à récupérer les chutes les plus chatoyantes, avaient entendu, répétés des centaines de fois le jeudi puis les jours de fête, les noms des tissus qui se répandaient partout dans l’appartement, jusqu’à l’heure où le mari allait arriver, alors tout disparaissait à une vitesse qui étonnait toujours les deux sœurs, la place était nette comme si personne n’y avait vécu de la journée. Crêpe patène, moussin, tissu croché, Champs-Élysées, tissu Chadli…Shérazade et Mériem savaient exactement ce qu’évoquait chacun de ces noms, les couleurs, les motifs, la souplesse ou la transparence, et jusqu’à la forme de la robe (Sebbar 193-194).

The attentive and careful descriptions of the way the women in this scene handle the various textiles and textures, and the detail with which Shérazade and her sister, Mériem, have memorized the highly specific names of each these fabrics work to undo the hegemonic Orientalist aesthetics of the classical odalisque. Though similarly surrounded by fabrics, the Algerian women in the immigrant enclave are far from indolent and recumbent. They are instead immensely productive and convivial, laboring and communing together to reproduce the motifs and patterns of their original culture. In so
doing, they recreate a space of Algerian femininity in the French immigrant enclave that is far from the excessive indulgence of the imagined harem. It is perhaps the richness of Matisse’s attention to textiles—to the product of Algerian women’s labor rather than their perceived wanton lassitude—that moves Shérazade enough to inspire her departure to Algeria.

In Shérazade’s self-fashioned encounter with yet another representation of Algerian women, Matisse’s odalisque does not function as an aesthetic object to be appreciated by the colonizing gaze. It is rather repurposed and reimagined as a way out of the anxiety Shérazade feels when the classical figure of the Odalisque is imposed upon her. Fiona Barclay turns to Edward Said and Charles Forsdick to interpret Sebbar’s employment of the odalisque as a motif, arguing that it “operates as an example of Said’s ‘traveling theory,’ an ideological application of the ghostly return in which an idea or theory becomes displaced from one location only to return, phantom-like, in the politico-historical context of another period, reshaped by the reception and use to which it is put. Forsdick argues that the implications of traveling theory extend to the ‘displacement, recycling, and reinterpretation of colonial concepts (and more controversially, of the language used to describe them)’” (Barclay 24-25). The consequences in the act of “displacement”—of peoples, of theories, of aesthetic representations—as I have thus far discussed in this chapter have myriad political and psychological resonances: for example, “treason” (Mufti), “anxiety” (Ngai), or “haunting” (Barclay). When coupled to Said’s “traveling theory,” displacement takes on a valence of eternal return while opening up a space for “reinterpretation.” In Shérazade’s encounter with Matisse’s odalisque, it becomes difficult to locate exactly where and how displacement occurs and what or whom is being displaced—the movements are so numerous that the scene virtually vibrates: Shérazade is displaced from
Algeria to France, from the *banlieue* to Beaubourg, from the squat to the Centre Pompidou; the museum itself is displaced from its public opening hours to an infiltrated space of trespass; the figure of the odalisque is displaced from the reality of nineteenth-century colonial Algeria to the imaginings of a twentieth-century French painter, and from the form of classical Orientalism to Fauvist Expressionism. And moreover, the observant gaze of the painting’s viewer is displaced from that of a bourgeois French museum-goer to a seventeen-year-old runaway who has more in common with the figure in the painting than the vast majority of its audience. This last displacement—the displacement of viewing, observing, critiquing, and interpreting—is perhaps the most potent move of *re-orientalism* in Sebbar’s novel.

**VI. The Assimilable and Unassimilable**

The trajectory of Leïla Marouane’s protagonist, Mohamed, in *La vie sexuelle d’un Islamiste à Paris,* bears much resemblance to Shérazade’s—he grows up in a *banlieue* of Paris, Saint-Ouen, and “escapes” to central Paris as a means to untether himself from the obligations and oppressions of his family. But as opposed to the seventeen-year-old in the 1980s, Mohamed is a grown man who retreats to a bourgeois Haussmannized *immeuble* rather than a squat in the Marais. He appears to take a much more pre-meditated tack than Shérazade in his will to dominate Parisian culture by means of his bedroom. Mohamed cuts a rather caricatured figure—he is a forty-year-old virgin and former Islamist with a raging Oedipus complex. Having found success as a *financier,* his goal is to acquire an apartment in a posh district of Paris as a means, eventually, to bed hundreds of French women. However, Mohamed’s fantasy life is rife with

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8 It should be noted that Mohamed’s desire to take over bourgeois Paris through sexual conquest bears a great deal of resemblance to the narrative of Mustafa Sa’eed, the protagonist of the Sudanese novel, *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), by Tayeb Salih.
outlandish Orientalist stereotypes and he imagines his apartment to become a de facto harem in the center of twenty-first century Paris. His process is threefold: he initially distances himself from his ardent religious beliefs and thus his familial obligations. He then changes his appearance by straightening his hair and getting blue contacts, and goes on to change his name to Basile in order to sign a lease on an apartment in the sixième or septième arrondissement. Finally his plan is to perform Orientalism—not his own cultural traditions, but the French stereotype of the Oriental—as a seduction method. Thus Mohamed willingly participates in the inscription Julien, the pied noir, tries to force upon Shérazade. Mohamed sees his acquisition of cultural capital through French fluency, landing a Parisian apartment, and succeeding financially as a banker. By extension, his would-be performance of Orientalist tropes is ironically the ultimate expression of Frenchness.

Mohamed’s relationship to his family is one fraught with class shame. He is embarrassed by the fate of his ouvrier father who, according to Mohamed, died an ignoble death as a secret alcoholic. Moreover, he seems to perceive a fundamental injustice of gender in the marriage of his parents that places his mother’s education and liberal, progressive upbringing in Algeria on a lesser plane than his illiterate father’s squalid habitation in the French hexagon.

Car mon père, à peine majeur, et bien avant de l’Indépendence de son pays, la chemise sur le dos, une carte de manoeuvre dans la poche, était venu suer sang et eau pour l’édification de la France, vivotant çà et là, dans les hôtels miteux et les foyers de la Sonacotra, ne convolant qu’à trente-deux ans, en 1965, avec sa très jeune cousine, ma mère, instruite certes, mais maigre et noiraude, donc impossible à caser sinon avec l’orphelin illettré qui, neuf ans durant, l’avait honorée lors du congé payé, attendant le jour où, riche, non pas comme Crésus, mais tout de même loti de quelques économies, il rejoindrait pour de bon sa famille (Marouane 28).

His revulsion towards his departed alcoholic father is bound up in his turn toward ardent and scriptural forms of Islam as much as it is a desire to seek success in French culture via money,
women, and real estate. He feels an immense sense of shame in having had to follow his father around as he sought aid from the bureaucratic offices of France: “préfectures de police, services de logements à loyer modéré et Caisses d’allocations familiales, éprouvant de honte à l’égard de mon père et de son nom d’Arabe, de son teint et de ses frisottis, de l’indigence de son vocabulaire et de sa façon d’étouffer ses pas sa voix, qui ma fierté a pris de large (Marouane 29).

Unlike Shérazade, who is more motivated to learn the history of her immigrant circumstances, Mohamed is driven by humiliation and a resulting will to conquer. The portrait of his father here at once describes his defeat of spirit alongside his lack of vocabulary and his frizzy hair, equating looking Arab to being a perpetual pariah in French society. As opposed to the hyper-sexualized and possibly dangerous Orientalist stereotype of masculinity, in Mohamed’s perspective, his father possesses only qualities of impotence and dejection. Mohamed is compelled to espouse characteristics that are completely opposite to those of his father, which push him, ironically, both towards stereotypes of the libertine Frenchman and the lascivious Oriental. And it is by taking up residence in the central arrondissements that he feels he can inhabit both simultaneously. Where Shérazade eventually learns to inhabit the position of the critic, developing an analytical distance from the options of identity that Paris offers her, Mohamed instead elects to succumb fully to both the compulsions of assimilation and “neo-orientalism.”

At first glance, it would seem that Mohamed’s decision to straighten his hair and don blue contact lenses while re-naming himself Basile Tocquard are measures to appear more attractive to his real estate agent as a client and potential lover, fully internalizing the implicit racism that determines the French public and political attitudes towards postcolonial immigrants. From the time of WWI, certain categories of new immigrants were categorized as “assimilable” and “unassimilable,” as Elisa Camiscioli states:
While there were few obstacles for members of the ‘diverse branches of the white race,’ Africans and Asians were described as impervious to the workings of traditional methods of assimilation. For this reason only foreigners deemed ‘ancestrally close’ to the French, such as northern Italians, Belgians, and Canadians, should be encouraged to immigrate. …[F]or white Europeans, assimilation would succeed if they ‘settled permanently upon French soil, spoke…our language, adopted our customs, received our culture, crossed with the autochthonous population, and sent their children to French schools.’ Whiteness was thus a precondition for access to the mechanisms of the ‘French melting pot,’ while Africans and Asians, because they endangered the ‘physical and intellectual qualities’ of the French ‘patrimony,’ were excluded outright from the possibility of integration.’ (Camiscioli 66)

On the one hand, Mohamad seeks to assimilate, and it seems that before he can do so culturally (and, according to his desires, sexually), he must adjust his appearance physically, so that he seems to be a representative of the “assimilable” races. But if we are to understand Mohamed’s desires to be both assimilation and conquest, we might read the “whitening” of his name and appearance more subversively: he does so to enter into the mindset of the colonist.

In the novel, Mohamed’s desire for an apartment in the sixième or septième arrondissement is conflated with his desire to conquer hundreds of French women. Where the figure of the pied-noir in Sebbar’s novel desires to recapture, if only on film, that which was lost with the end of empire by possessing Shérazade, Marouane’s narrative suggests that staking territory in the poshest districts of Paris would be a colonizing maneuver for Mohamed, and one that is distinctly gendered. Certainly, he still smarts at being treated like a colonial subject in the twenty-first century in being denied a lease by many a real-estate agent, in addition to being turned away from jobs and nightclubs by “les Blancs.”

Non mais pour qui se prennent-ils, ces Blancs? qui honnissent, méprisent, dénigrent les origines et les noms de nos ancêtres? qui affirment avoir semé le bien sur les terres de nos aîeux? alors qu'aujourd'hui encore, en 2007, ils continuent de nous refuser leurs beaux quartiers? leurs prestigieux postes de travail? leurs boîtes de nuit? comme si nous étions toujours les indigènes et les sauvages de leurs colonies (Marouane 31).
Acquiring real estate in the center of Paris becomes not only a way of achieving the Frenchness that remains ever elusive—it is specifically to embody the role of the Frenchman as colonizer. Mohamed’s approach to the anguished position of “double consciousness” is to inhabit the most extreme ends of the identity spectrum simultaneously, resulting in an eventual collapse of sanity and narrative fidelity by the end of the novel. However, Mohamed’s racial disguise fools no one; his real estate agent directs him to the outer arrondissements of Paris, describing “un appartement dans le 18e ou le 20e arrondissement serait parfait pour vous, monsieur Tocquard” (Marouane 42), thereby relegating him to the largely immigrant neighborhoods just inside the Périphérique. It is only through the connections of his westernized sister that he is able to acquire an address in the septième.

VII. Reverse Colonization

Indeed, Mohamed’s wish to fulfill the role of colonizer appears to be determined by the native French assumption that postcolonial immigrants have no other motivations in coming to France. Mohamed’s sister, who assimilates by marrying a Frenchman and minor celebrity, is presumed to be so assimilated that she is subject to conversations with her neighbor who decries the infiltration of Algerians into Paris. Citing their hatred for the French since “1830”—quite possibly the most oblique reference imaginable to the inception of the French-Algerian colonial campaign—the neighbor asserts that their most potent means of colonizing France in reverse is through the reproductive capacities of Algerian women.

Que votre mari se méfie un peu des Algériens, madame de Montélime. Qu’il prenne conscience que ce gens-là nous haïssent depuis 1830. Qu’ils ne nous aimeront jamais. Qu’ils sont capables du pire pour nous anéantir. Et que, du reste, ils ont promis de nous coloniser à leur tour. Et savez-vous quelle arme ils ont trouvée pour tenir parole? L’utérus! C’est comme je vous le dis, madame de
Montélimard. L’utérus. Il n’y a qu’à voir leurs rejetons, tous ces Mohamed et Mouloud, qui aujourd’hui défigurent nos banlieues (Marouane 94).

This neighbor’s narrative of marauding Algerians invading Paris, armed with the potent weaponry of the uterus, reaches its climax with a vision of the disfigured Parisian banlieues. As Naomi Davidson asserts, it is the changing face of the immigrant enclave, the transformation in the “physiognomy of neighborhoods,” that strikes fear into the heart of the most xenophobic natives of France.

It seems clear that the French sensation of an explosion of the region’s North African population is not explained by real demographic changes…. [P]olice records show that certain neighborhoods of the 18th, 19th, and 20th arrondissements, for example, the police reported as early as 1918 that the area around Stalingrad/Jaurès had a high concentration of North African bars and cafés, most of which, they claimed, were also gambling dens. The novelty of postwar Maghrébin immigration for Parisian observers was the way migrants appeared to dominate the neighborhoods in which they established themselves. (Davidson 130)

In recommending him to the 18th or 20th arrondissement, Mohamed’s real-estate agent attempts to contain this perceived spreading of the “physiognomy” of the enclave into the Parisian center—a veritable undoing of the radical reformation of Parisian space under nineteenth century Haussmannization. When Mohamed finally acquires his apartment, he revels in its location “en plein coeur de Paris” and in its bourgeois style: “Haussmannien, altier, pierre de taille,” remarking that the name engraved on its plaque has a particularly decadent literary resonance. “Mais pas que ça: un homme, un littérateur, indiquât la plaque, du nom de Huysmans, né à Paris 1848, y avait rendu son dernier souffle le 12 mai 1907. Ainsi. Dans quelques décennies. Peut-être. Mon nom serait. Gravé. Au même endroit. Né à Blida. En 1966” (Marouane 59-60). As Mohamed haltingly imagines that his name might be inscribed on the exterior of the building, he

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9 Marouane no doubt refers to Joris-Karl Huysmans, whose À rebours is regarded as one of the most important turns from nineteenth-century novelistic naturalism to symbolism and themes of decadence.
is particularly interested in the future plaque bearing the place of his birth: Blida, Algeria. This wish to inscribe, and thus make official, the circumstances of his life on the wall of a Parisian edifice is also a colonizing gesture—aesthetic and gestural, rather than violent and subjugating.

But again, Mohamed wavers between his desires to transform into the perfect model of a modernist French dandy and the most timeworn stereotype of an oversexed Oriental, in effect conflating the two figures. His first impulse is to furnish his new space like a clichéd harem imagining himself the “Sultan of Saint-Germain.”

À l’angle du boulevard et de la rue de Cherche-Midi, reprenant mon souffle, je me suis arrêté devant un magasin de tapis d’Orient. Deux ou trois kilims, des coussins, une lampe aux facettes multicolores, des amphores, un narguilé, bref un petit salon oriental dans un coin de ma salle de séjour, face à la cheminée, ne serait pas du luxe. Et s’il venait à ma mère, elle qui ne quittait jamais Saint-Ouen, de me rendre visite, un endroit où elle déroulerait son tapis de prières la rassurerait sur le sort de son fils. Ô lumière des jours de sa mère, toujours fidèle à ses origines et à son éducation….Mais comme autrefois les femmes des casbahs ne s’aventuraient pas dans les quartiers européens, ma mère ne venait jamais dans le centre de Paris, Barbès et ses environs demeurant, les rares occasions où elle quittait la cité, sa frontière (Marouane 59).

Here the symptoms of Mohamed’s debilitating Oedipus complex become transparent, as his vision of an Orientalist fantasia transitions into imagining a suitable place for his mother to pray in the apartment, and just as quickly shifts into a rumination of her self-colonization in the banlieue. In doing so Mohamed engages in his own practice of Orientalizing his mother. She is “comme les femmes des casbahs” of yore who stayed behind the invisible border that cordoned off the European quarter. The apparition of Fanon’s bidonville returns here, and by crossing the ideological border himself, Mohamed is wracked with anxiety (the “nervous condition,” once again) unable to commit fully to any particular identity, real or imagined.

VIII. Losing Mohamed’s Religion
In his inability to decide on a specific mode of behavior, or moreover, of existence in Paris, Mohamed exemplifies the most contradictory Orientalist stereotypes: hypersexualized yet virginal (if not impotent), hedonistic yet fanatical, threatening yet cowering. He professes, in his musings, vast physical and financial endowments and a will to make the most of his gifts in his new abode, located in the liberated quarters of central Paris. Yet his continuous trips home to Saint-Ouen at the beckoning of his mother—to speak about his familial duties to marry as the first-born, and to demonstrate his mastery of Islamic scripture—betray a much more tortured relationship to his present life as a would-be sybarite. The pull of a lived, practiced way of Islamic Algerian life that Mohamed’s mother fully inhabits, constantly and naggingly on the phone, serves to undermine his nefarious plans to live out the stereotypical transgressions ascribed to the Oriental. As his mother’s persistent reproaching compels him to again and again return to his suburban home, the text demonstrates that indulging in an Orientalist fantasia is impossible for Mohamed, as it is predicated on a palpable distance between center and periphery. The “periphery” is just on the other side of the eponymous highway, and indeed, now has a substantial presence in the metropolitan Hexagon. The banalities of quotidian immigrant life that his mother lists on the phone—dinner menu items, Friday prayer times, obedient convert sons-in-law—counter Mohamed’s wildly vulgar fantasy life. The comical contrast between the imagined Oriental harem in the Parisian center and the practice of everyday life in the banlieue at once undermines age-old stereotypes of Maghrebi life as well as the regular panic surrounding the idea of radicalism brewing in the quartiers sensibles.
However, conversations with his younger brother tap into a more serious and volatile underlying crisis of faith that may well have propelled Mohamed towards central Paris and its insidious Oriental stereotypes. It becomes clear that Mohamed is well-versed in Quranic scripture, and better-educated than nearly anyone else in his extended family, making him an outlier and alone in his depth of knowledge in both Arabic and French.

Marouane constructs an implicit enmity between the privileged fils aîné and neglected fils cadet. With an excessive obsequiousness that betrays a deep underlying bitterness, Mohamed’s younger brother describes his older sibling’s illustrious Islamic schooling:

Mohamed est très calé en religion. Il en maîtrise les règles et les dogmes peut-être aussi bien que l’imam el-Ghazali lui-même. Il le doit à notre grand-père, qu’Allah le reçoive dans ses Jardins, un homme de bien et de grand savoir, un des rares hommes lettrés de Blida…C’est ce maître qui a donné à Mohamed les enseignements du Mashaf, qui l’a initié aux doctrines des oulémas de renom, tel el-Ghazali, justement, et qui en personne le conduisait à l’école coranique chaque matin…qui aussi l’accompagnait à l’école publique, insistant auprès des enseignants pour qu’on lui apprenne bien le français car son petit fils serai peut-être appelé à rejoindre son père en France (Marouane 137).

As the sole recipient of an elaborate French and Islamic education in the family, Mohamed was elevated to the status of an évoluté in his youth, paving the road for him to either become a pious imam or a successful, assimilated, laïque member of French society. His brother goes on to limn with embittered irony just how different their present conditions are as a result of his family’s decision to invest all their efforts into Mohamed’s development. “Si je l’avais eue, cette chance…je serais aujourd’hui…un théologien de renom….Le chômage me sera finalement un mal pour un bien, .... J’ai tout le temps de lire et d’approfondir mes connaissances, et un jour je pourrai entre dans une grande école islamique, à Damas ou au Caire. Inchallah” (138).

Unemployment, according to Mohamed’s brother, affords him the time to truly dedicate himself to the study of Islam, and he looks forward to enrolling in a madrasa in Syria or Egypt.
Marouane creates a potent sense of class difference between the two brothers that lead them on distinctly different paths, both in terms of their public life and their individual angst. To write such sentiments in 2007, with growing paranoia about disenfranchised Muslim banlieusards leaving for Syrian and Egyptian madrasas to be trained in militant Islamism, is extremely charged. By contrasting the malaise of the privileged and the resentment of the deprived between the two brothers, Marouane constructs a rich mise-en-abyme parable about the specter of Islamic fundamentalism.

IX. Immigration, assimilation, and narrative instability

Mohamed (especially when performing as Basile, rather than his mother’s deferent “prunelle de ses yeux”) often comes off as flip and vulgar, indulging in the most explicit descriptions of interludes with women who may or may not be phantasmal. Yet his bluster is tempered by an insight into his troubled psyche. We come to learn that rather than piety, the breadth of his Islamic education has led to profound doubt and eventually apostasy. He remembers the teachings of his maternal grandfather, whose “tolerance” and Sufism eventually allow him to migrate to the “impious” nation of France.

J’avoue que parfois, oublié de la tolérance de feu mon grand-père, ce soufi qui, ignorant les faiseurs d’anathèmes, en plein Blida, ville conservatrice et fanatique, s’il en est, avait dévoilé et scolarisé ses filles, parmi elles ma mère, et, invoquant La-ikkoum-dinou-koum-wa-li-dini, permis à son neveu mon père, d’aller trouver pitance en terre impie, je me montrais aussi rigide qu’un pontife, renvoyant des gars au chômage et des jeunes filles dans des dilemmes inextricables (Marouane 27).

Mohamed’s Islamic education in Algeria, then, contradicts common public discourse in France surrounding the virulent forms of Salafism presumed to be brewing in proto-terrorist cells across the Maghreb. Indeed, Mohamed seems to mourn the plurality of the Islam his grandfather
teaches him. His regret indicates that the possibility of practicing a Sufi form of Islam, or really any form of Islam that may be deemed interpretive rather than scriptural is foreclosed to him. Mohamad’s fraught personal relationship to Islam is perhaps made more complex by the attitudes of the French state which ironically corroborates a fundamentalist, monolithic understanding of the religion. As Naomi Davidson asserts,

The reason the French state treated immigrants from North Africa ‘only as Muslims’ is that French Islam saturated them with an embodied religious identity that functioned as a racialized identity. The inscription of Islam on the very bodies of colonial (and later, postcolonial) immigrants emerged from the French belief that Islam was a rigid and totalizing system filled with corporeal rituals that needed to be performed in certain kinds of aesthetic spaces. Because this vision of Islam held that Muslims could only ever and always be Muslim, ‘Muslim’ was as essential and eternal a marker of difference as gender or skin color in France. (Davidson 2)

It would seem that it is in the very act of immigrating that Mohamed’s access to Islamic plurality is denied because of the French state’s insistence that there is only one Islam, which ironically colludes the sentiments of Islamic fundamentalism. And in legislating this monolithic version of Islam under the auspices of l’état laïque, the French state also effectively racializes Islam. Where Republican universalism ostensibly makes France race-blind—meaning there can be no official discourse on race, i.e., no state census—the establishment of laïcité in France in the twentieth century has made it distinctly possible to displace questions of race onto the question of religion. Davidson goes on to argue that “the equation of ‘Muslim’ with ‘Algerian’…at once denied [Algerian immigrants] a potential political identity that threatened its authority (Algerian) while at the same time making it impossible for them to lay claim to a different one (French), because of their innate ‘religious’ identity” (Davidson 10-11). Mohamed’s obsessive and confused wavering between racial, religious, and sexual identities is (much like Shérazade) not
simply a product of cultural “hybridity” as it were, but can be seen as a direct product of official French discourses surrounding postcolonial Algerian immigration.

Moreover, it is exactly Mohamed’s extensive education in both Islamic and western traditions that gives him the scope of mind to doubt. Much of his anxiety stems from his behavioral extremity—he is as much a student and practitioner of hedonistic French Orientalism as he once was of Quranic teachings. And yet he professes a fundamental lack of faith and tendency towards apostasy that no French vision of a monolithic Islam could account for.

Mohamed alias Basile, le maître, Mahmoud le pur, le disciple….Et si tout simplement je n’avais jamais possédé cette foi. Et si, produit d’un long et assidu enseignement, elle n’avait fait me frôler sans jamais atteindre la fibre? La vrai fibre, l’authentique, celle des gens à l’âme sans faille. Comment, autrement, un être peut-il à ce point se détacher de ce qu’il croyait la certitude même? (132).

At bottom, *La vie sexuelle d’un Islamiste à Paris* is the story of losing one’s religion, but French culture cannot and does not offer to fill the void left in its wake for Mohamed. What follows is the dissolution of not only Mohamed’s sanity but also the narrative threads that bind the novel together.

As the narrative progresses, Mohamed’s growing paranoia, coupled with the text’s increasing instability speaks to the psychological damage wrought in the performance of “neo-Orientalism.” Mohamed is unable to “re-orientalize” and reclaim a degree of agency by inhabiting the position of the critic. Instead, he collapses *into* the narrative of residual Orientalism, in the novel’s *disorienting* coda. By the end of the text, Mohamed has expressed his fear that his landlady is a female novelist, Loubna Minbar, who is stealing his life story in the service of a splashy future publication. It also comes to light that each chapter actually begins as a confession to a psychologist. Mohamed’s family retrieves him from his apartment, which turns out to be a squalid hovel. The possibility of assimilating into Parisian culture, either by
performing Frenchness, or more damagingly, French Orientalism, is revealed to be a complete farce. As Mohamed’s family escort him away from his cherished immeuble, his neighbors recite banalities that emptily praise his capacity to integrate.

Si gentil.
Si discret.
Si bien intégré.
En une année, on ne l’a jamais entendu.
Ni visite. Ni sortie.
Merci, merci, disait ma mère.

Au début tout allait bien. Il ne sortait que pour s’acheter des cigarettes. Il se faisait livrer par le Monoprix et par des traiteurs…Je m’occupais de son ménage. Il avait des piles de livres partout dans l’appartement. Puis il m’a retiré les clés et il s’est mis à me téléphoner pour me faire des reproches, qu’il ne retrouverait pas telle ou telle chose…Un vie d’ermite. J’ai pensé qu’il passait par une mauvaise déprime qu’il finirait par s’en sortir, mais après la visite de sa soeur, son état a empire. (Marouane 315)

In their concern, they reveal Mohamed to be an elaborate spinner of tales, one so bound up in the various narratives mapped onto him that he inhabits no perceivable reality. In this way, Mohamed is the opposite of Shérazade, who actively resists being fixed to any one narrative, let alone tangled up in scores of them. As Mireille Rosello writes of Mohamed, “as the story progresses, the only freedom left to the character is the right to document his gradual lack of control over the narration. This is the story of a man who wants to take control over his life and tells the story of how he wants to start writing at the same time” (Rosello 180). However, he is distinctly incapable of creating a coherent narrative for himself or of rendering a representation of himself that is not caught in an echo chamber of pre-existing stories. By the end of the narrative, he himself does not know whether he is a character in a metafictional text by one Loubna Minbar. We are left without any trust in Mohamed’s sanity, nor assurance as to whether the events in the narrative actually happened, or even who has been narrating throughout the novel. The schizophrenia that undoes the entire novel reveals the consequences of breaching the
boundaries of class, education, and religion that are all reified in the boundary between the arrondissements and banlieues of Paris—residues of France’s colonial policies in Algeria.

Unlike contemporaneous British novels that celebrate multiculturalism and integration despite the weight of historical trauma, neither Shérazade nor La vie sexuelle provide us with a model for assimilation or successfully living in the Parisian center as a postcolonial immigrant.

Granted, there was no precedent for a hybrid French-Algerian middle class in the colony and subsequently in postwar France, as opposed to the concerted efforts in British colonial policy to fabricate a bourgeois middle class in the Subcontinent. The text indicates that moving into a higher echelon of French society for a working-class Algerian immigrant involves completely internalizing even the most insidious historical stereotypes of one’s own culture. As La vie sexuelle demonstrates, this perhaps more dangerously alienating than the widespread immigrant illiteracy of the previous generation, and the consequences of this practice are profoundly unsettling.
Works Cited


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