Double Exposure: The Family Album and Alternate Memories in Leïla Sebbar's The Seine was Red

Laila Amine

Version of record first published: 10 May 2012

To cite this article: Laila Amine (2012): Double Exposure: The Family Album and Alternate Memories in Leïla Sebbar's The Seine was Red, Culture, Theory and Critique, 53:2, 181-198

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2012.680256

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Double Exposure: The Family Album and Alternate Memories in Leïla Sebbar’s *The Seine was Red*

Laila Amine

**Abstract** Amine’s essay explores memory-making and highlights a paradox in Leïla Sebbar’s *The Seine was Red*, a novel that describes the conflicting memories of the police massacre of Algerians in Paris on 17 October 1961. Structured as a family album with captioned identities, place, and time, Sebbar’s novel employs a mode of remembrance that conventionally illuminates the unity of families. Instead, the text emphasises conflict among diverse protagonists (French and Algerian participants and witnesses on both side of the Algerian war and their descendants) and absences with blank pages that evoke missing testimonies. In reversing the general tenor of the family genre to narrate an imperial tragedy, Amine argues that *The Seine* exposes the often linear, consensus-driven narrative of community that obliterates inglorious events, which states as well as families adopt as they suppress internal conflict in the representation of their past. In opposition to these exclusionary and homogeneous narratives constructed by select actors, *The Seine* offers a commemorative model that is inclusionary, dissonant, and participatory.

The fiftieth anniversary of the police massacre of Algerian demonstrators in Paris on 17 October 2011 marks the newly acquired public consciousness about ‘the bloodiest act of state repression of protesters in the modern history of Western Europe’ (House and MacMaster 2006: 1). The French state had sought to conceal its existence by destroying historical documents in the aftermath of the repression and by denying access to archives (Einaudi 1991: 288). Filling the previous gap, a slew of literary texts and films since the 1980s, and increasingly since 1996, had preserved and transmitted memories of this event. Among them, Leïla Sebbar’s *La Seine était rouge* (1998) (*The Seine was Red* [2008]), an account of the police repression, calls attention to the absence of colonialism in the Parisian public landscape as it examines the conflicting memories of this event among its participants. The novel critiques the centrality of consensus in French (and Algerian) official collective memories of the Algerian war by demonstrating that familial, communal, and national memories do not correspond neatly with blood ties, ethnic membership, or national borders. Through the use of the family album genre, the text juxtaposes a familial mode of remembrance with a...
national one and proposes a different model of memory-making. One mode foregrounds consensus and is constructed and policed by the state. It provides national subjects with a common past, erected into monuments, legitimated in museums, and celebrated in the national calendar. The other illuminates conflicting views of events within families, communities, and nations, and highlights collective memories as subjective puzzles reconstructed by diverse individuals from archival and domestic fragments and disseminated through film, testimonial accounts, and graffiti. In examining competing recollections with and within the nation, The Seine urges us to both de-essentialise our understanding of memories, and to take into account modes of remembrance, power imbalance, and spatial segregation to better understand memory-making as a site where individuals and groups seek to assert recognition and establish legitimacy.

Critical examinations of The Seine have focused on how state obliteration of historical events hinders the transmission of family history (Dana 2004), how generational memory of the massacre functions as a mode of Holocaust remembrance since it is the second generation that ‘reconstruct the stories of a reluctant generation of witnesses’ (Rothberg 2009: 299), how necessary it is to create a public space recording memories of the massacre for a successful collective recollection (Donadey 2003), and how collective memories, like the Parisian metropolitan landscape, rest on fantasies of community and continuity (Hiddleston 2003). This essay examines another location for the fantasy of community and continuity in this postmodern novel: the family album. Though the novel illuminates how family memories captured in photographs oppose or fill gaps in the national narrative, it also utilises the family album structure to juxtapose state and family silences. Yet, in contrast to this mode of remembrance that conventionally illustrates the unity of families and their integration into a cohesive narrative, the testimonies of participants in the 17 October 1961 Algerian demonstration portrayed in The Seine reveal the conflicting, incomplete, and fragmented memories of this episode in French colonial history. The protagonists’ memories disclose perspectives that do not cohere into a larger story, for they are dissonant.

In reversing the general tenor of the family genre to narrate an imperial tragedy, The Seine uncovers the often linear, consensus-driven narrative of community that obliterates atrocious events, and which families as well as states adopt in the representation of their past. By organising the novel as a family album – with individual snapshots of participants, perpetrators, and witnesses of the massacre as well as their descendants – and by labeling identities, place, and time as in the caption of a photograph, Sebbar exposes not just disparate memories but the conventions we utilise to remember. In opposition to exclusionary and uniform familial and state accounts constructed by select actors, The Seine offers a polyphonic structure that revises French official history, proposing an alternative mode of remembrance that is inclusive, dissonant, and participatory. The album, therefore, serves both as the means through which the text subverts conventional modes of remembrance by making internal conflict, silences, and censorship within domestic, communal, and national collective memory visible and the means through which it proposes an alternative mnemonic model by staging a cacophony of voices, each snapshot representing one protagonist who as a witness-historiographer
recounts the story from his or her unique perspective on the night of the massacre and on the occasion of its 35th anniversary. The album structure of the novel suggests that what unites these portraits is the common object of memory (the massacre), rather than blood ties, ethnicity, or nationality.

I use the photographic technique of double exposure to convey the text’s reliance on a multiplicity of pairing and doubling and to discuss its implications about memory-making. A double exposure is a photographic technique in which a film is exposed twice, resulting in superimposed images. The camera’s sensitivity to light is a function of time. The technique has been used to create ghost images or to add people and objects to a scene in which they were not originally. In The Seine, the paired testimonial accounts of 1961 and 1996 that foreground disparate moments creates a ghost effect as the text – like the photograph for Roland Barthes (1993) – preserves the emanation of the referent. The testimonial superimposition reveals that 35 years after the tragedy, the stories of its participants remain to be heard. Like a double-exposed photograph, the narrative freezes and superimposes two layers of time, illuminating in particular the time gap between these testimonies. The 1996 witnesses’ accounts themselves seek to bridge this gap as they duplicate the act of witnessing an event that occurred in 1961 with the act of recollecting and narrating it 35 years later. The time gap of the double-exposed photograph also serves to highlight the role of mediation in memory-making, with a reconstructed event by the second generation who gathers documents, collects testimonial accounts, and transmits knowledge about this event. Calling attention to its status as a mediation through a mise-en-abyme, Sebbar’s narrative follows and is constituted principally of a young French protagonist’s documentary film about 17 October 1961. The text represents a story within a story with a splintered structure that assembles multiple perspectives, mirroring the plot in which Louis’s film on ‘black October’ relies on a collage of family photos and documents (newspaper clippings, correspondence with Algerian militants), archives, and testimonial accounts by family contacts. The second generation work to superimpose, literally through graffiti, memories of the colonial repression on French official history. The viewing of Louis’s documentary sends two young protagonists of Algerian descent, Amel and Omer, on a weeklong pilgrimage through Paris where they retrace the steps their families took during the 1961 demonstration, and superimpose commemorative graffiti onto public monument plaques that mimic them in form and content. Added as an additional layer, the graffiti exposes another historical image of France, that of extreme colonial violence. This composite layering in time gives a fuller picture of the Parisian public landscape. The graffiti replication calls attention to its status as a temporary memorial of the massacre and the sites where it took place, while at the same time it is recorded for posterity in the novel.

Louis’s film, based on his parents’ photographs, documents, and friends’ testimonies, represents his attempt to understand his family’s active role in the decolonisation of Algeria and to educate Amel, a 16-year-old high school student of Algerian descent with whom he is enamored. Amel is baffled by her mother’s participation in Louis’s film because she had repeatedly refused to tell her about the family’s involvement in the war. On the anniversary month of the 1961 massacre and after watching Louis’s documentary,
Amel runs away from home. With Omer, a 27-year-old Algerian journalist in exile in Paris, Amel retraces the steps the Algerian demonstrators took that fateful night. Though Louis, Omer, and Amel have different motivations to recover memories of the Algerian war of independence, they all have to overcome not only the state’s silencing of the event but that of their families as well. Paradoxically, while Algerian and French families largely fail to transmit their history to their descendants, it is the family friendship of formerly imprisoned French and Algerian activist women (Flora, Mina, and Lalla1) that facilitates their offspring’s (Louis, Omer, and Amel) recovery of the tragic event. This plot about the second generation’s search for their parents’ past is interrupted by testimonies dated 1961 and 1996 by French and Algerian witnesses who favored or opposed Algerian independence.

Revealingly, Sebbar’s parents have not shared with her their experience of the Algerian war either. Born in Algeria to a French mother and an Algerian father who were both teachers in Aflou, a small town of the high plateau, Sebbar left her country of birth soon after its independence to study literature in Aix-en-Provence and later in Paris (Sebbar and Huston 1986: 40; Laronde 2003: 15). Her family history, as she describes it in *Lettres parisiennes: autopsie de l’exil* [Parisian letters: Autopsy of exile] has made her an outsider to both French and Algerian cultures, a ‘division’ that has nourished her fiction (Sebbar and Huston 1986: 29). *The Seine* is dedicated primarily to ‘the Algerian victims of October 1961 in Paris’. On 17 October of that year, about 30,000 Algerian workers and their families left the isolated slums of the Parisian periphery and took to the streets of central Paris to demonstrate for an independent Algeria. The peaceful march expressed opposition to Prefect of Police Maurice Papon’s discriminatory curfew, which forbade Algerians’ presence on the streets of the capital after 8 p.m. (MacMaster 1997: 199). Opposed to the demonstration, the Paris police broke the procession, charging and killing nearly one hundred demonstrators (House 2006: 135). Yet this apex of police brutality against Algerians in France during the Algerian war of independence remains an ellipsis in French official history.

Sebbar’s novel, the first to focus entirely on 17 October 1961 (Donadey 2003: 190), calls attention not only to this momentous event during the Algerian war (1954–1962) but to its suppression by the state. Below the dedication to the Algerian victims of the massacre, *The Seine* lists authors who resisted state censorship of the tragedy, giving them an honorary place in a ‘family’ constituted by its memories of the war. The acknowledgement of the Comité Maurice Audin; historian Jean-Luc Einaudi; photographer Elie Kagan; publisher Françoise Maspero; journalists Paulette Péju and Anne Tristan; novelists Didier Daeninckx, Nacer Kettane, Mehdi Lallaoui; and the activist George Mattei directs the reader’s attention to a long alternative historiography of 17 October 1961. Beyond the Parisian repression, the text also reinserts titles of censored books during the Algerian war such as Jean-Louis Hurst’s *Le déserteur* [The Deserter] (1960) that depicts a French soldier’s refusal to fight Algerian revolutionaries, and Henri Alleg’s *La question* [The Question] (1958) that

---

1 Lalla means grandmother in darija (Maghrebi-spoken Arabic) and is also a term of deference for older women. The actual name of the protagonist remains unknown.
describes the author’s experience of torture by French paratroopers during the war. The dedication and these texts inscribe Sebbar as a participant in a French anti-colonial tradition that has produced a competing archive to the national one. Similarly, in *The Seine*, the family album provides photographic materials that disrupt the unity of a French national narrative.

For Sebbar, images of the war of decolonisation are significant traces of the past; they are ‘what is left when everything disappeared . . . in the fact of exodus, of exile, of the loss, the image is there to say: not all is lost’ (Laronde 2003: 160). Flipping through a 1986 newspaper, Sebbar saw the photograph of an unveiled Algerian woman holding the Algerian flag during the 17 October 1961 and recalls being transported back to her Aix-en-Provence campus bedroom where she heard on the radio the call to Algerian women and men to gather in central Paris to demonstrate for a free Algeria on that fateful day (Sebbar 1998: 97). This photographic trace is a rarity because the police forbade the presence of photographers and journalists at the demonstration. Among the individuals acknowledged in Sebbar’s dedication is photographer Elie Kagan who defied the police interdiction and took pictures of wounded and dead Algerians (House 2006: 119). His haunting pictures were featured in the book *Ratonnades a` Paris* (1961) by Paulette Péju, which was confiscated at the printer. Some of Kagan’s since-published photographs of Algerians with their hands on their heads protecting their skull from police bludgeons resurface in *The Seine* as descriptions of a traumatic scene a young girl witnessed during the repression.

Actual photographs (textual rather than visual) in the novel carry multiple functions: they are catalyst for repressed memories in that they bring protagonists back in time; they are historical evidence that capture the geography of colonial violence and segregation; they bridge the gap between the private family’s past and public colonial history; and they constitute a genealogy of affiliation that transcends the national boundaries of France or Algeria and French and Arab ethnicities. In *The Seine* too, the photograph subverts the national imaginary, by freezing in time tragic events the nation wishes to forget and by introducing overlooked participants in its history.

**Familial framing of the national narrative**

1996, the historical setting for Sebbar’s novel, marks the 35th anniversary of the 17 October 1961 massacre, which remained then largely invisible in the French public consciousness. It is the same year when its instigator, former chief of police Maurice Papon, awaited a press-crazed trial (1997–1998) for his complicity in the false arrest of thousands of French Jews during the Nazi occupation (Golsan 2000). In *The Seine*, protagonists recall Papon’s role in yet another bloody affair. Algerian protagonist Mourad attended the 1961 demonstration as a child and asserts he had forgotten about the tragedy, but ‘it’s the Papon Affair that brought it all back’ (79). Like a shadow behind the limelight of Papon’s much anticipated trial, the 1961 police repression is equally obscured in national commemorations of the Algerian war. In fact, 1996 is also the year when President Jacques Chirac unveiled a monument in Paris dedicated to the memory of civilians and military who died in North Africa. At the official unveiling, Chirac spoke of the French colonial enterprise as a national
accomplishment, concealing the brutality of the colonial encounter in a discourse of French exceptionalism: ‘Peacekeeping, uplifting territories, spreading education, founding a modern medicine, creating administrative and judicial institutions, these are many of the traces left by the uncontestable works the French presence contributed . . . Hence, thirty years after the return of the French [of Algeria] to metropolitan France, it is noteworthy to recall the important and rich work France has accomplished there and of which it is proud’ (Le Cour Grandmaison 2005: 125).

Sebbar’s *The Seine* may be best understood as a literary monument to 17 October 1961, which demonstrates that generational and cultural memories as evoked in the dedication are strongest where national memories are either weak in their representation, or violent in their censorship of counter-memories.² Nora broaches this relationship between memory and history, as he asserts that ‘a process of interior decolonisation has affected ethnic minorities, families, and groups that until now have possessed reserves of memory but little or no historical capital’ (Nora 1989: 7). Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot accounts for this lack of capital as he asserts that absences ‘embodied in sources . . . or archives (facts collected, thematised, and processed as documents and monuments) are neither neutral or natural’ and he encourages us to consider silence as ‘an active and transitive process’ (Trouillot 1995: 48). The new *lieu de mémoire* (Nora 1984) inaugurated by President Chirac tells us something about ‘the practice of silencing’ (Trouillot 1995: 48). It is part of an outflow of official monuments and other commemorative practices that increasingly disseminate the illusion of a common memory by creating common mnemonic spaces³ (Gasnier 1994: 98; Young 1993: 736) at a time when France experiences a ‘crisis of identity’ (Blanchard and Bancel 2005: 11). In other words, France’s increasing demands of conformity respond to the cultural diversity of its population and the visibility of its population of color, originating mostly from the former French colonies. Instead of loyalty, the institutional demand for conformity has generated a strong culture of dissent, where works of fiction like *The Seine* play a central role in constructing other versions of French colonial history.

In his critique of the dominant and competitive model of memory, where memory agents struggle against each other for the recognition of their community’s victimised past, Michael Rothberg urges us to adopt a different framework when considering collective memories. Thinking of memory, instead, as multidirectional means understanding memory as ‘subject to ongoing negotiations, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative’ (2009: 3). Rothberg, thus, critiques views that ‘the public sphere is a pregiven, limited space in which already-established groups engage in a life-and-death struggle’ (5). While Rothberg is right to underline the malleability of the public sphere, he may be going too far in dismissing competition and boundaries between different collective memories. First, the notion that there is room

---

² Michel Foucault (1977) calls counter-memory that which resists the consistency, stability, and uniformity inherent in official narratives of historical continuity.

³ Thierry Gasnier notes that France is a society that easily fabricates national consensus ‘with more than 1,571 national celebrations between 1986 and 1993’ (1994: 98).
for all memories in the civic space is reminiscent of Habermas’s oft-critiqued view of the public sphere in which he assumes that interlocutors with different status deliberate as social equals and that competing publics represents a threat to democracy (Fraser 1990: 117–118). In the case of France, the state certainly holds a dominant role in the ‘memory war,’ or the formidable conflict over memories of France’s colonial past, as it determines the historical content in educational curricula and decides which memories to commemorate. Despite the demands of a significant number of historians and educators for the inclusion of French imperialism, decolonisation, and postwar immigration in school programs, the ministry of education has yet to include these (Aldrich 2005; Stora 1991; Keaton 2006). For historian Henry Rousso, school history programs are ‘the mode of social transmission par excellence’ of memory (McCormack 2006: 136). Furthermore, the recent creation of three national museums, including one on immigration, is another site of state dominance in memory-making (Froning Deleporte 2005). In contrast to Rothberg’s description of multidirectional memory and in response to a state invested in the erasure of its violence, The Seine represents a terrain of competition between the prevailing state narrative of the past and the memory work by individuals dissatisfied by these erasures and others.

Examining ‘plots of filiation’ in Sebbar’s novel and Didier Daeninckx’s Meurtres pour mémoire [Murder in Memoriam] (1984), Catherine Dana argues that historical circumstances such as war and trauma make difficult the retrieval of family history and the lack of memory transmission that ensues leads the character to a search for self that centers on ‘whose son/daughter am I?’ (2004: 114–115). For Dana, the stifling of the historical narrative (the 17 October 1961 massacre) breaks the transmission of family or genealogical narrative, and paradoxically the break in the transmission of family or private memories provides stability to the historical narrative, as it remains unchallenged. In recuperating their domestic history, which I further examine later in this essay, the protagonists certainly construct a narrative that disrupts the official national story. Indeed, the relationship between historical and familial histories can seem at times antagonistic, as the second generation’s (that is, Louis, Amel, and Omer’s) search for its familial past stems from a crisis of identification with the national historical discourse. However, as I argue later in this essay, The Seine does not limit its criticism to the state stifling of the massacre. It also exposes familial and state silences, juxtaposing their similar ways of remembering through the use of the family album genre.

In The Seine, a photograph of an Algerian man fighting in the French army during World War I helps his daughter, the owner of a café in an Arab neighborhood of Paris, the Goutte d’Or, retrace her parentage. This filiation, in turn, informs her activism during the Algerian war. Her testimonial account dated 1961, like a photograph frozen in time, describes her background and recounts her memories of 17 October 1961. Born in the Goutte d’Or to a prostitute who died young, she never knew the identity of her father, except ‘from the only photo [her] mother left . . . he was an Algerian infantryman’ (52). The photograph preserved by the mother and inherited by the daughter thus brought to light part of her Algerian lineage. Though the café owner declares: ‘I don’t know Algeria. I’ll never go there. My life is here,’ she nevertheless supports
the Algerian revolution. Collecting the compulsory financial contributions from her Algerian sex workers for the ‘brothers,’ or National Front of Liberation leaders, she proudly recounts that she is the one to ‘threaten the girls who don’t want to chip in’ and ‘there is never a cent missing, the brothers can be sure of that’ (52). This leadership role in the revolution that overrides her feminine solidarity with sex workers, whose profession she and her own mother shared, is all the more perplexing because the protagonist is not a citizen of Algeria and, by her own confession, knows nothing about the country. Her action on behalf of Algeria’s independence indeed complicates our understanding of homeland and betrays the multilayered affiliations of French citizens of Algerian descent.

Beyond leaving a genealogical trace, this photograph also shows that family memories do not correspond neatly with national borders, encapsulating the patriotism of colonial subjects fighting in the French army in World War I. Other testimonies mention yet other Algerian fathers enrolled in the service of French national and imperial interests. The family narratives of the owners of the Goutte d’Or and the Atlas cafés and of Amel’s mother Noria recounts the participation of fathers and grandfathers, and sometimes their sacrificial death, during World War I, the French colonial war in Indochina, and World War II. As Benedict Anderson notes, the sacrifice of young lives on behalf of the nation represents the paragon of patriotism (Anderson 1983: 148). The photograph of an Algerian man in his infantry uniform and the album of testimonies not only underscore France’s ‘blood debt’ towards colonial subjects, it also proposes a reconceptualisation of the national imagined community by staging obliterated participants in France’s representation of its history (Boittin 2010: 78).

Scholars, such as historian Pierre Nora, have often condemned the recent tendencies to revisit the French past from a multicultural perspective. Nora, in fact, indicts ‘the proliferation of private memories’ for allegedly contributing to the erosion of a sense of national unity among French citizens (Derderian 2004: 167–168). The notion of private memories suggests their lack of relevance for the public realm of the nation. Yet, it is precisely because family memories and photographs can intervene in the public discourse about the place of former colonial subjects and their descendants in French society that they carry so much interest for Sebbar. The photographs discussed in the novel are all of Algerian individuals: an infantryman, a factory worker, a group of demonstrators attacked by the police, women at the demonstration, and a lover. This pictorial discourse catalogues a shared transnational history and makes visible what the nation has obscured, that is state violence against Algerians, Algerian support of the French struggle against occupation, and Algerians’ own desire for independence. Captured in photographs for posterity, family history, then, may enable individuals to evaluate the national narrative and also serve to ‘maintain at the center of national memory what the dominant group would often like to forget’ (Singh et al. 1996: 6). Though the photograph of the Algerian father is able to assemble and connect a family across colonial lines, Sebbar’s use of the family album critiques the often linear account of the past found in family and state histories.
Adapting the family album

As in a family album, each portrait in *The Seine* offers a different take on an event, here 17 October 1961. Sebbar’s album creates a cumulative and repetitive narrative as it explores the same event narrated from multiple perspectives and temporalities. The text’s 37 subsections produce singular portraits and divergent testimonies as well as evoking silences or missing frames by exhibiting 27 blank pages out of a total of 125. These blank pages denote missing accounts and the impossibility of accessing the full story of what happened that night. Even the individual portraits are rife with ellipses and confessions about forgetfulness, imprecise memories, and doubt (21, 12, 89). In fact, Sebbar’s construction of a family album works against the tenet of the genre in that it exposes silences and exclusions in narratives, not simply of family but also of nation-states. If, as Marianne Hirsch claims, ‘the convention of family photography...reinforces the power of the notion of “family”’ as it showcases its integration, the narrated album in *The Seine* strikes at the idea of a consolidated family or nation (Hirsch 1997: 47). Reversing the structure of ‘the conventional family album – its stress on chronology, continuity...that present the family unit as harmonious and free of conflict’ (Hirsch 1997: 214), *The Seine* presents an account that alternates between 1961 and 1996, which reveals the absence of continuity in families’ transmission of its past, the dissonance in participants’ testimonies, and the porous lines between private and public commemorative spaces. In addition, the novel comments on its own status as a representation of a representation.

While the family album assembles photographs, evidence of ‘that-has-been’ (Barthes 1993: 77), Sebbar’s album narrative focuses on the lack of transmission of familial and imperial histories. Though both family and nation suppress memories of the tragedy, they do so for different reasons. Hanging above the text and separated from it by a space, the first sentence of the novel emphasises matrilineal silence about the massacre: ‘her mother did not tell her anything, nor the mother of her mother’ (15). The mother and grandmother’s reluctance to transmit memories of their ‘unhappiness’ to Amel represents their attempt to shelter her from the family’s losses and trauma during the war (2). In depriving Amel from her family’s past, her relatives also deny her knowledge about her country’s history. Likewise, to make his documentary, Louis has to resist his mother’s initial refusal to participate in his inquiry as she insists that, ‘It isn’t your story’ and that her perspective would be ‘one aspect, a tiny one, and it’s too partial...More than thirty-five years ago...imagine...We’ve forgotten; it will be vague, approximate, uninteresting, I promise’ (12). The text juxtaposes the family silence rooted in a desire to hide traumatic events and partial perspectives with the state’s suppression of this event. Indeed as Amel and Omer retrace the steps of the demonstrators that night, they see many public monuments that commemorate French history, but none about their family’s heritage, which in turn leads them to graffiti commemorations. The absence of commemorations about French colonial history is reminiscent of Ernest Renan’s (1882) claim that ‘the essence of a nation is that individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things’ (Bhabha 1990: 12). National unity, then, is partly manufactured through the exclusion of representations of state violence and exploitation.
In contrast, *The Seine* frames memory of 17 October 1961 as a site of conflict and struggle for recognition among diverse protagonists/historiographers. The narrative is a ‘symptomatic site for the emergence of new kinds of historians and historiographies, the protagonists who discover a relationship between their own story and national history’ (Rosello 2005: 109). The polyphonic structure of Louis’ documentary underscores his view that, ‘everyone has a story, a special way of looking at things’ (14). Thus, unlike theories of memory, such as Nora’s that never questions who writes French history, Sebbar pays particular attention to who represents collective memories, and emphasises the subjective and conflicting nature of these representations.4 As a familial and national album, Sebbar’s text foregrounds dissonance amongst the witnesses of the massacre who were on both sides of the conflict: Algerian workers in Paris and their families (Noria, Lalla, Lalla’s husband, Mourad and his uncle, the owners of Algerian cafés), French supporters of Algerian independence (Louis’s parents, a bookseller, French students), and on the other side French police and *harkis*.5 These memories do not complement each other so much as often compete with each other.6 Dissonance, then, requires us to confront the complexity of affiliations and memberships that normative categories of identity found in national narratives fail to address.

By investigating the role of multiple generations of French, Algerians, *harkis*, and *Beurs* in voicing, preserving, and transmitting memories of 17 October 1961, the text signals the potential of each individual to become ‘a memory entrepreneur’. Elizabeth Jelin calls a ‘memory entrepreneur’ someone involved in the struggle of memories and ‘who initiates, who promotes and devotes her or his energies to the desired end . . . [someone] personally involved in his or her project; in addition she or he generates commitment from others’ (Jelin et al. 2003: 139). Louis and Omer’s creative initiatives (the film and the graffiti) highlight their effort to publicise the massacre, enrolling Amel in the process. Their commitment to make the past of their families known reinforces the idea that memory-making can, with great effort on the part of individuals, become participatory. Because witnesses divulge their own perspectives and what the massacre means for them, the album they are creating is participatory and inclusive, rather than imposed by the state for the purpose of national unity and legitimacy.

Though it recuperates an obliterated event in French history, Sebbar’s text foregrounds the subjectivity of memories by including disparate recollections of the massacre and commenting on memories as mediated and edited

4 Hue-Tam Ho Tai notes that in *Realms of Memory*, the authors never address who defines the nation and national identity and how well that definition is accepted and by whom (Tai 2001: 918).
5 The *harkis* were Algerian native armed units under French military command. Some were hired by Papon as a supplementary police force to infiltrate Arab neighborhoods in Paris (House 2006: 4).
6 Sebbar brings to light ‘memory competition’ [*rivalité des mémories*] in *The Seine*, as she sees the attempt by different groups, such as the *harkis*, the *pieds noirs* (French who lived in Algeria), Algerians of various persuasions, to have their history dominate (Mortimer 2010: 1254).
materials. In doing so, it disputes the idea of a national master narrative that is uniform, objective, and stable. In *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, Annette Kuhn addresses the edited nature of the family album as she contends that ‘[f]amily photographs are quite often deployed – shown, talked about – in series: pictures get displayed one after the another, their selection and ordering as meaningful as the pictures themselves. The whole, the series, constructs a family story in some respects like a classical narrative: linear, chronological’ (17). Sebbar makes the process of selection, organisation, and editing in memory-making visible. For instance, Noria warns Louis during his interview that ‘I forget to tell you . . . Louis, when you tell a story, you forget, everything comes back pell-mell. I can’t quite recall the precise order of events that day. You will have to ask Lalla. You must put your film together chronologically, if you are able to do so, because I think the demonstration occurred simultaneously in several places’ (89). In addition to the messy non-linear recounting of events that corresponds to how memories themselves operate, the text describes not just the memory but its framing into the film: ‘[Noria’s] face grows grave, like her dark eyes, and her beautiful mouth crumples. Louis hasn’t moved the camera. The eye of the camera remains fixed on the mother . . . A silence . . . a long silence that Louis did not cut’ (28, 29). This attention to the constructed nature of memory-making highlights how the mediums and codes adopted shape our commemorative stories.

**Dissonance as an alternative to consensus**

*The Seine* questions the possibility and desirability of a French or Algerian national consensus around the Algerian war, for such consensus is produced through exclusion. In contrast, through the critique of the family album, *The Seine* promotes dissonance as a template for collecting and transmitting memories. As a mode of remembrance, dissonance not only unravels the official and uniform French and Algerian narratives of colonialism that oppose French to Algerians, it cuts across the notion of family, community, and nation as homogeneous units. *La Seine* casts French supporters of an independent Algeria, Algerian advocates for a French Algeria, and the bloody conflict within the Algerian revolutionary camp, between members of the *Mouvement National Algérien* (Algerian National Movement, or MNA) and the *Front de Libération National* (the National Liberation Front, or FLN). Dissonance helps illuminate divisions within families and communities, and expand the scope of participants in the war, no matter the sides on which they fought. For Sebbar, contestations of the national narrative found in Louis’ film or Amer’s graffiti enable individuals to map out an expanded vision of the war with affiliations that cross social, cultural, and national borders.

Louis notes that in French official history, his parents are ‘traitors’ (15) because they ‘fought with Algerians against [their own] country’ (12), but he is not interested in this nationalist vision that polices his parents’ political ideologies. He tells his mother he wants to know the truth about this war, specifically seeking, the family’s role in it: ‘your truth, Dad’s truth, what you thought, experienced, suffered through . . . your life’ (12). Against France’s claim to rid French Algeria of terrorists, a significant number of French financed the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN), sheltered
militants, and wrote and disseminated anti-colonial literature. As ‘suitcase carriers,’ Louis’s parents transported money and other documents to members of the FLN. His mother, Flora, went to jail for her activities, his father had to hide, both defied the state’s refusal to let Algerians demonstrate on 17 October 1961, and attended the gathering (26). Flora’s friendship with Algerian women such as Noria’s mother and Mina, with whom she developed a ‘profound, real, sincere solidarity’ during the war, shows kinships that transcend patriotic duty and cultural, religious, and racial membership (23). This cross-racial friendship consolidated in prison helps reconstruct a perspective of the Algerian war beyond national and cultural binaries.

While the family album hides conflict away, Omer and Louis express it and confide that what motivates their search for their family’s past is dissatisfaction with the national narrative. Omer states, ‘The history of the war of liberation, the official Algerian history, I know all by heart, and it nauseates me’ (38–39). He abhors Algerian state erasures such as the fratricidal conflict within the Algerian revolutionary movement that tore families apart and cost the life of Noria’s uncle, an MNA member assassinated by the FLN and found in a pool of blood right outside her home. For Omer, Algerian official history also excludes the role of Algerian women in the war, ‘we didn’t hear about them either here or there’ (39). To challenge these national silences, Omer, a journalist by profession, photographed and interviewed Algerian women, including his own mother. In highlighting disparate visions, the dissonant mode of commemoration in *The Seine* brings to light among the overlooked participants in this colonial episode, the role of these women. With this recuperation, *The Seine* maps out new locations and means of resistance that expand conventional views of activism during the war. Noria’s participation in Louis’s documentary indeed uncovers the role of Algerian women during the war and particularly in October 1961, when

> working with women of the shantytown, [my mother] hid political tracts in fabric, in wedding dresses; the women distributed them. Women musicians would spread the news from wedding to wedding, from one celebration to another. I watched my mother and her friends prepare them; they said they were kitchen recipes and letters for the families back home . . . I later learned that the tracts were signed by the FLN. They were calling for the protest march on October 17, 1961. (27–28)

Noria’s childhood memories of recipes, sewing, and weddings mark the Algerian feminine world as a site of intervention against French imperialism. Her account reveals how Algerian women manipulated the association between gender and domesticity in the service of decolonisation, and thus retrieves spaces and practices of resistance. By portraying her mother’s participation in the war, Noria expands our purview of the Algerian struggle.

**Superimposition: Familial peripheries and nationalist center**

*The Seine* exemplifies the circulation of memories from the private to the public spheres, highlighting in particular differences of power in the
representation of the past. The novel is spatially organised with captions that take the reader from the low-income periphery of Paris, which includes the 1961 slums and Amel’s 1996 family home in Nanterre – where witnesses’ testimonies are heard and domestic archives found – to the center of Paris and the theatre of the massacre: Rue de la Santé, Défense, République, Concorde, Bonne Nouvelle, Saint Michel, Rue Saint Séverin, and Orly.

The title, *The Seine was Red*, evokes both the massacre of Protestant noblemen in Paris on St. Bartholomew’s Day (24–25 August 1572) whose slaughtered bodies were thrown in the river rendering it red, and the bloody repression of Algerian demonstrators. As such the title denotes the superimposition of memories of colonialism onto French history and icons. The two protagonists also reread common sites and monuments where demonstrators gathered, such as the Marianne, as spaces of commemoration and mourning. At République and Défense, meeting points for Algerian demonstrators in 1961, Amel observes the statue of Marianne, ‘a giant woman, standing, as if she were poised to face the enemy’ and asks Ømer, ‘Who defended [the Algerians] when the police charged on the Neuilly bridge? You heard the reports, the panic, bodies tramples, the wounded, the dead . . . baby carriages turned upside down, lost shoes of adults, children . . .’ (39, 40). In reassessing this symbol of the French Republic and the ideals of the French revolution, the novel contrasts republican ideals and the betrayal of these ideals on 17 October 1961. *The Seine* thus promotes a rewriting of French collective memories that challenges the image of a revolutionary republic frozen in time.

Sebbar’s novel sets side by side the containment of colonial memories to the Parisian periphery and the unequal statuses of official and unofficial accounts of the Algerian war. In this regard, the novel models participation in the construction of collective memories not only through sanctioned venues in the cultural sphere such as the documentary film, but also through illegal media, such as the graffiti. Louis includes in his film the graffiti Ømer wrote around central Paris, capturing a moment and space of commemoration that would have otherwise been invisible, thus rendering it eternal. By recording the graffiti in Louis’ film and in the novel, *La Seine* models the significance of Algerian attempts to publicise colonial repression. As such, *La Seine* calls to mind the famous photograph of a Paris bridge taken by Jean Texier in November 1961 shortly after the massacre (see Figure 1). The black and white photograph displays the side bank of the Seine River and a recognisably Parisian streetlight. On the walls of the bridge, the graffiti reads: ‘here Algerians are drowned’. The graffiti makes visible both the act of repression and the site where it took place, identifying central Paris as a theatre of colonial brutality that jars with dominant representations of Paris as a place associated with high culture and romance.

While the protagonists’ use of graffiti as a tool to represent French colonial and familial histories disrupts the relationship between the dominant center and the marginal periphery, it signals, nevertheless, unequal access to means of representation. State memorials are official and timeless, while the graffiti is considered an act of vandalism punishable by law, and will be cleaned off. The two protagonists’ illegal appropriation of the public space also denotes how the state’s exclusion has led individuals to develop compensatory...
strategies to represent themselves and their collective memories. Omer’s hope that his inscription ‘won’t come off, etched in the stone’ (14), relays his wish that his family’s story become part of the Parisian landscape, timeless, and visible to all. Omer explains as he graffities the wall of the Prison de la Santé, a site of remembrance for French resistance to the Nazi occupation and the unacknowledged site where Algerian nationalists were guillotined: ‘I just want to acknowledge what happened in these walls’ (15). The exclusion of memories of colonialism from Paris’s public monuments is not accidental, nor are these sacred places in Paris a given: rather, the coherence of the republican historical narrative requires it. As Van der Leuuw observes, ‘a politics of exclusion might be an integral part of the making of a sacred space’ (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 8).

Omer’s graffiti adjoined to official lieux de mémoire challenges hegemonic French collective memories through juxtaposition and mimicry. Homi Bhabha called (colonial) mimicry ‘the sign of a double articulation . . ., which “appropriates” the Other as it visualises power’ (Bhabha 1994: 86). Omer’s inscription is certainly an appropriation and reproduction of the official plaque on the wall of La Santé. Critic Anne Donadey remarks that the graffiti by Amel and Omer ‘create a historical palimpsest that subversively sheds light at once on the Algerian events and the lack of official commemoration on the subject in France’ (2003: 195). Indeed, the graffiti literally exposes unequal memories. In contrast to Donadey, Michael Rothberg reads the graffiti alongside the plaque as evidence that ‘La Seine does not engage in competitive memory’ (Rothberg 2009: 299). Yet, as a reproduction of official plaques, the graffiti crucially competes with and contests the French view of the colonial war as ‘peacekeeping’ and a battle against terrorists by appropriating the frame and the wording of memorialised French events to reframe memories of colonialism. One of Omer’s graffiti mimics the plaque in form (capital letters and centered), genre, and wording, juxtaposing the similar resistance of the French during World War II with the Algerians during the war of independence, but with a different outcome for the freedom fighters.
Representing the Algerian war through the prism of foreign occupation, Omer attributes legitimacy to the Algerian struggle, claiming German occupation of France during World War II as a sort of precedent. If the French students incarcerated for resisting the Nazis deserve commemoration, so too do Algerians who were killed for resisting French occupation. The juxtaposition also functions to highlight the extreme measures taken by the French state to execute Algerian revolutionaries. Mimicry here helps rethink the Algerian war by presenting it through the trope of nationalist liberation, illustrating how the language we use to frame historical events shapes not only our understanding of these events, but also the legitimacy we grant their participants. Using the graffiti as a revisionist tool that competes with official accounts, Omer’s inscriptions function as captions in that they help read the Parisian public space. They identify sites scarred by colonial violence and bloodshed as they superimpose the colonial vision onto the republican one. Omer and Amel’s peregrination in Paris and Omer’s graffiti bring out the role of the second generation in revealing the existence of 17 October 1961 to Parisians.

The text itself calls attention to a superimposition of history and fiction with no distinction between accurate details of the massacre and fictional elements, making the readers wonder which parts really happened. More than any other novel about the massacre of 17 October 1961, La Seine focuses on the forms of memory transmission, marrying archival documents and descriptions of historical photographs with family photographs, individual recollections, film editing, graffiti, and references to French popular culture. In addition, the cacophony of testimonial accounts marks La Seine as a different kind of novel from those by French writers of Algerian descent, known as beur writers. Texts such as Nacer Kettane’s Le sourire de Brahim [Brahim’s Smile] or Mehdi Lallaoui’s Nuit d’octobre [October Night] have framed the event as a foundational moment for postcolonial France. By reconstructing an event they had not themselves experienced or witnessed, what Hirsch calls a post-memory (Hirsch 1997: 22), the second generation underscores their strong emotional ties with the decolonisation struggle and its cultural importance for beur identities. Sebbar, on the other hand, illustrates the legacy of 17 October 1961 for a broader range of participants and their descendants who are French, beur, pied noir and Algerian. La Seine also embraces a polyphony of genres, capturing the relevance of both familial photos and memories to recount a colonial tragedy and archival photographs to narrate the family’s past, illuminating the different mediums and hybrid forms future generations can use or create to explore the past.

In The Seine, the album is both an instrument of familial knowledge that fills the gaps of French history and a means to reflect on conventional modes of remembrance. By unveiling not only the heterogeneity of memories regarding the massacre but also the processes at play in familial and national readings of the past, the novel promotes an alternative mode of remembrance
that is inclusive, participatory, self-reflective, and open-ended with many blank pages left to narrate the massacre. It offers a stage for testimonial accounts of the varied protagonists of the 1961 event, and boldly retrieves an Algerian Paris rewritten with memories of colonial repression and colonial resistance. *The Seine* conveys fiction’s ability to provide an unbound space for the public recognition and commemoration of the nation’s obliterated memories. While the Evian agreements granted amnesty for crimes committed during the Algerian war by both the French and the Algerian sides, the novel proclaims that this story, nevertheless, needs to be told and the voices of victims, perpetrators, and witnesses need to be heard. Like the trial of Maurice Papon that provided the crucial context through which testimonies could be ‘heard’ (Wieviorka 2006), *The Seine*’s polyphonic structure is reminiscent of a courtroom setting with its testimonials, its confrontation between survivors, witnesses, archives, historians, and perpetrators. If the trial is a paradigmatic model for what Elie Wiesel called the ‘new literature of the testimony’ (Feldman and Laub 1991: 6), then, in the case of this account of 17 October 1961, the reader is to be the sole judge.

References

Fraser, N. 1990. ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’. *Social Text* 25/26, 56–80.
Family Album and Alternate Memories in *The Seine was Red* 197


Laila Amine is a Chancellor’s Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Department of African American Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. She holds a joint PhD in Comparative Literature and American Studies (Indiana University, 2011). She will be an Assistant Professor in the English Department at the University of North Texas in the Fall. Amine specialises in twentieth-century African American and African diaspora literature with particular interest in interracial romance in post-World War II fiction. Her work has appeared in *Culture, Theory and Critique, Black Camera, and Post-colonial Text*. Amine’s current project, *The Making of Algerian Paris: Colonial Legacies and Transnationalism*, uncovers how the Algerian war (1954–1962) and its legacies shaped representations of a transnational Paris in African American, French, and Maghrebi cultural texts.