

## Re-writing the Algerian War on French Soil: Family Memory, National Memory

Annedith SCHNEIDER

On 17 October 1961, just months before France officially recognized Algeria's independence, 30,000 Algerian men, women and children set out for a peaceful demonstration in the streets of Paris to protest a curfew imposed on North Africans. The response by the police was savage: more than 100 people killed, thousands severely wounded and arrested, and some 1500 deported. Yet until the 1990s, this event virtually disappeared from public memory. Leila Sebbar's novel *La Seine était rouge* (The Seine Was Red) retells the story of this violence through the memories of her protagonists (protesters, bystanders, and very rarely the police) and the reactions of the children of those present at the protests.

Sebbar's novel is one of testimony, but it begins with a statement of silence: "Her mother told her nothing, and neither did the mother of her mother" (13).<sup>1</sup> This opening sentence also introduces one of the central themes of the novel: communication and silence within family. The central figure in the narrative, 16-year-old Amel complains that she wants to hear the truth, but her elders reply that the truth will only bring unhappiness. Louis, a friend of Amel's makes the same plea to his own mother and receives vague promises that when she has time, she will tell him the story. In the end, both young people will hear the story, but not from their own parents. Public and family memory are certainly not unrelated, but in this novel a distinction between the two will surface again and again, and this distinction accounts for Sebbar's choice of narrators and the way the violence of October 17, 1961 is narrated.

The silence within Amel's and Louis's families repeats the public silence that initially surrounded the demonstrations and their aftermath and that continued until the 1980s, when a handful of publications began to take up the story, including academic projects, journalistic accounts and works of fiction.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1990s interest in this event has continued to increase, as evidenced by publications about the event. The first edition of Sebbar's novel, published in 1999, is already out of print, and a second edition was released in 2003. However belatedly, this has clearly become



an issue of growing interest to at least part of the French public.<sup>3</sup> This emphasis on memory across generations in Sebbar's novel is not surprising perhaps since the novel has targeted a readership of young adults. The novel appears to have a specifically pedagogical intent. For example, the brief endnotes explain terms that might be unfamiliar to younger French readers, particularly those who do not come from a North African background, and the dedication to writers, filmmakers and historians who have dealt with the events of October 1961 provides a sort of reading list for further study.

All of the primary characters in this novel are linked by ties of family or friendship. Amel is the daughter of Noria who is the daughter of Lalla, an Algerian who immigrated to France with her husband before the Algerian war. The Frenchwoman Flora is a family friend, who has known Noria since she was a child and was present at Amel's birth. She was also a *porteuse de valise*, or a member of a clandestine network of French who supported the Algerian independence movement. Flora is a friend of Mina, an Algerian refugee in France, with whom she spent time in a French prison during the Algerian war of independence. Flora's son Louis is friends with Amel, and with Omer, the son of Mina. As should be clear from this description, it is a complex network of relations that extends across generational and national borders. Critic Anne Donadey, in an essay looking at the novel as "an attempt to piece together an anamnesis (a collective memory)" (48), notes that the very project of memory depends on the interdependence among these Algerian, French and immigrant families.

Much of the narrative consists of Noria's testimony in a documentary Louis produces and Amel's reflections on that testimony. In the novel, Noria's recollections are interwoven with Amel's reactions, as well as with narratives from 1961 as presented in archival footage in Louis's documentary. Significantly, Noria chooses to tell her story to Louis and not to Amel directly, thus choosing a public rather than a private venue for her memories. It is not simply a question of keeping the truth from her daughter, since Noria must be able to imagine that Amel will see Louis's film. This suggests several possible explanations. First, her public testimony as part of a larger project of remembrance makes her own individual contribution less personal and less individual, so that Amel can see her mother's past as a document, as part of history, rather than as personal tragedy. Second, it also suggests a desire for a specifically public recording of personal history, rather than the private, ephemeral place of family memory. Finally, it also ironically may indicate a desire to keep control of the narrative. I say ironically because, of course, Noria gives up some control by allowing her testimony to become



part of Louis's creative project. But she also maintains control by fixing her memory in a recorded format of her own choosing. Her own memories are not subject to the vagaries of another person's memory, and they remain *her* memories. In other contexts of public memory, witnesses have complained about the loss of control in oral testimony, which can then be fragmented and reused and indeed separated from the original human teller; they have expressed particular discomfort with the way the self comes to be separated from the story so that it becomes just another story (Ross 230).

Emphasizing the importance of public memory, Sebbar links the events of October 17, 1961, to other historical periods of violence, the most apparent being the Holocaust. She reminds us, for example, that it was the same man, Maurice Papon, who as an official under the Vichy regime, was responsible for deporting French Jews to Nazi concentration camps, and who as the head of the police in 1961, gave the orders that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of peaceful Algerian demonstrators. Descriptions of the treatment of the thousands arrested in 1961 recall descriptions of those taken to Nazi concentration camps:

The men were piled up, packed in, hundreds of them, beaten, wounded, clubbed... They had to empty their pockets in the same place: wallets, packs of cigarettes, boxes of matches, combs, watches, handkerchiefs, subway tickets, bus tickets, cans of chewing tobacco...A pile more than a meter high.<sup>4</sup>

In short, all the personal possessions, all the objects that people carry with them, that distinguish them as individuals, were confiscated, and all the men reduced to members of the same anonymous, dehumanized crowd of prisoners. In fact, the objects and the men seem to occupy the same position, the men being piled up, the personal possessions forming another pile. Of these men, some 10,000 in total and most with French nationality, 1500 would be deported within days to Algeria without trial or appeal, or any chance to contact family in France. The echoes of deportations of Jews during World War II are unmistakable here. It hardly seems coincidental that one of Sebbar's sympathetic bystander witnesses is a Jewish student who recalls his family's own history as Jews who left the Ukraine at the turn of the century.

Allusions to the Algerian civil war of the 1990s are more fleeting but more direct. Both Mina, an attorney, and her son Omer, a journalist, are in France as refugees from the violence that swept Algeria in the 1990s



and that targeted intellectuals and journalists most publicly. Flora recalls the other less mediatized victims of the civil war: “Women, men, children die, [...] terrorists slit the throats of women, mothers, sisters, cousins, [...] the army and the police carry out executions and torture.”<sup>5</sup> Omer tells Amel that he finally decided to flee Algeria after a third assassination attempt killed his friend and driver. In another example, Noria in an interview for Louis’s documentary links the civil war of the 1990s to the deadly struggle for power during the Algerian Revolution between the rival independence groups, the FLN and MNA: “Today it is others who kill, who leave bodies to rot in the squares, by the side of the roads, brothers, fathers, friends... enemies...”<sup>6</sup>

In connection to yet another violent period in French history, Louis and Omer also link the events of 1961 to the French Resistance during the Second World War. Plaques all over Paris commemorate members of the French Resistance who gave their lives to expel the occupying German forces. Louis films these plaques, and then films Omer’s own “commemorations,” written in bright red spray paint next to the plaques. Where, for example, the official plaque remembers the place where the first students to answer De Gaulle’s call for resistance were imprisoned, Omer writes “1954-1962. In this prison, were guillotined Algerian resisters who rose up against the French occupiers,”<sup>7</sup> thus directly putting the two situations in parallel and repeating the language of imprisonment and resistance to an occupying power. Given the almost sacred status of the French Resistance in collective French memory, Omer’s graffiti is provocative, particularly since, as Donadey notes, it represents the French as occupiers (53). Importantly, by associating these two periods in French history, Omer also makes a claim for the events of October 1961 to be considered as important as the Resistance in official French public memory. In fact, Omer’s graffiti additions to the public record actually overshadow the official plaques, which are in two other instances shown as fragmented or incomplete, in one case partially blocked from view by police, and in another, by Omer’s shoulder. In October 2001, after the publication of Sebbar’s novel, in Paris at least, the local government did commemorate October 1961 with a plaque placed at the Saint-Michel Bridge, one of the places where Algerians were thrown in the river. But even this modest plaque to the memory of “the many Algerians killed during the bloody repression of the peaceful demonstration of 17 October 1961”<sup>8</sup> was not without opposition in the city council.

In the years following Algerian independence, France seemed eager to forget the Algerian War in general, and events like October 17, 1961, in



particular. Press reports at the time were contradictory and partial and soon disappeared altogether from the newspapers. Although Maurice Papon, prefect of police in 1961, was eventually brought to justice for his role in deporting Jews from France during the Vichy regime, he was never charged in relation to October 17, 1961, nor were formal charges ever brought against the perpetrators among the police. In the period between March 1962 and November 1982, the French parliament passed legislation which gradually extended *de facto* amnesty to more and more of those who had been inculpated for crimes related to “events in Algeria,” as the war continued to be officially designated. This general pardon eventually included even those members of the French military who had taken up arms against their own government, in order to establish a separate “French Algeria.” In May 1981, the law reinstated all police and military officers who had been relieved of duty between 1961 and 1963 for crimes committed in the context of the Algerian War. This blanket amnesty meant that there would never be a formal accounting of responsibility. As Benjamin Stora notes, in his history of the period, *La gangrène et l’oubli*, “The people who simply carried out the orders would never be relieved of even part of their guilt, or of their shame. Those responsible would never be identified.”<sup>9</sup>

One might imagine that in response to this concerted effort to forget, Sebbar’s novel as an act of remembrance might present the most striking and memorable examples of violence. Instead, representations of violence are relatively subdued, especially given the actual severity of what happened. The most graphic representations come not from the main protagonists, the network of Amel’s family and friends, but are pieced together from brief, one-time interventions by an Algerian man saved from drowning in the Seine and by bystanders such as a café owner, a French police officer, and a student sympathizer, all narrated from the present of October 1961. It is as though, with the first example as an exception, only those who observed events, not those caught up in them can describe them. Even Noria, the witness in Louis’s documentary can be said to have experienced the events only marginally. Yes, she was at the demonstrations, but as a seven-year-old girl who escapes relatively unscathed with the rest of her family. Her father is deported, but the narrative is remarkably silent about any particular abuse he suffered. Elaine Scarry, writing about physical pain, notes two aspects that are relevant here. First, as she famously argues, pain destroys language, which might account for the fact that Sebbar’s most explicit scenes of violence are narrated by observers, rather than victims. Second, she notes, “to have pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is



to have doubt" (7). Since we can only experience our own pain, hearing about someone else's pain is inevitably more distant and less real. Thus a public remembrance of violence is from the beginning a nearly impossible task, if one's goal is to convince another of what has been suffered. Perhaps Sebbar's understated account is an acknowledgment of this difficulty.

Despite the differences in ethnicity, occupation, gender and age of the people contributing to Sebbar's fictional project of memory, there is a surprising homogeneity in that the memories presented are all those of people who supported the Algerian demonstrators. The sole exception is a *harki* serving in a special police force created by Maurice Papon. The *harki* were Muslim Algerians who fought with the French during the Algerian War. Sebbar presents this particular man as seemingly unrepentant: "The networks of the FLN, I helped destroy more than one of them. [...] As for torture...we were the best."<sup>10</sup> While Sebbar hardly excuses the man, she does provide a predictable story of how he came to become a *harki*: born in a poor family, he was recruited by the French army with promises of a steady income and easy women and little discussion of what his duties would actually involve. Interestingly, towards the end of his narrative, he gives up the bravado of his earlier statements about torture, and his language distances him from some of his acts:

I was called up with some others to watch the shantytowns of Nanterre and to make night raids on some friends of the FLN, we busted up everything in the shacks. We blocked the bridge at Neuilly on October 17, 1961, and on the 18th we surrounded the shantytowns of Nanterre, they were caught like rats. We shot at the demonstrators.

We threw demonstrators into the Seine.<sup>11</sup>

He confidently tells his story from the beginning as a rags-to-comfort story in the first person, insistently repeating the "je," or I, but in the last few lines of his account the emphasis changes, and he uses the impersonal "on," or one. This "on" in colloquial French can, of course, mean "we," but this still moves the story from an individual narrative of "I" to a more general one, whether the impersonal "on" or the more generalized "we." The end of his narrative is distinguished by the change in language, but also by the paragraph breaks that draw the reader's attention specifically to those lines.



With this exception of the *harki*, perpetrators are completely absent from Sebbar's novel. Given what we know about the importance of testimony in other contexts, we have to ask why. This novel continually presents comparisons to other scenes of state violence, in particular in the maintenance of an unjust use of power. In other situations following extended colonial occupation, such as South Africa, it has been argued that for healing to occur, both victims and offenders must speak. This was the particular mandate of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a psychologist who served on the TRC, notes, victims bringing their cases before the Commission insisted not just on the importance of telling, but of acknowledgement from perpetrators that they had done something, that they had in fact harmed a human being. "[I]n order to torture, kill, and maim, perpetrators must first exclude their victims from the moral obligations they feel toward [...] those with whom they are socially and politically connected" (Gobodo-Madikizela 128). When a perpetrator acknowledges doing harm, he or she also acknowledges the humanity of the victim.

In South Africa, however, the events are more recent in origin than in France. More importantly perhaps, perpetrators and victims in South Africa have chosen to work together to create a new political regime. In France, on the other hand, the events of the Algerian war are already 40 or 50 years in the past, and while immigrant communities have certainly affected French culture, there has not been a formal renegotiation of the political structures and power as in South Africa, so that memories of France's colonial past may require a different approach. Although testimony in Sebbar's novel comes from many different sources, as noted above, all but one are witnesses who supported the Algerian demonstrators. Sebbar seems to have made a clear choice to exclude the voices of French perpetrators. Her comparisons to other historical periods of violence certainly place the French by analogy in the position of unjust colonizing and occupying force, but her narrative choice avoids blaming individual French and keeps them from incriminating themselves with their own unrepentant testimony. But is simply recalling events without assigning blame or responsibility enough? In South Africa, the answer has been a definitive "no." In the case of Sebbar's novel, however, the necessary healing is not between perpetrator and victim, many of whom are elderly or no longer living anyway, but between victims and their children and between perpetrators and their children, or more generally between the generation that tried to forget and a generation that wants to remember. This would be in keeping with the notion of two separate



nations that do not need to rebuild a joint society. One might argue that this ignores the situation of immigrant families in France, and it certainly allows individuals to continue to avoid any sense of complicity with France's colonial history. Nonetheless, perhaps Sebbar's novel gestures to the idea that for young people like Amel, it is not a question of Algeria and France, but rather of the relation between France and all its citizens, or even simply of understanding her own family's history within France. Amel does not want to be a victim and is not looking for someone to blame; she just wants to know what happened. Accordingly, the novel recalls that wrongs were done, but avoids blaming particular French individuals. In this project of recovery of family and national memory, it is not surprising that Sebbar targets an audience of young adults born years after 1961. And in order for her account to be accepted, Sebbar cannot antagonize them through a narrative of blame, especially given that her readers are not the participants in the events of 1961, but rather the children or grandchildren of those involved in the demonstrations and its repression. If Sebbar is seeking inclusion of the events in national memory, it would not serve her purpose to assign blame. If she were to include not just a harki, but narratives from French perpetrators, her narrative might well be seen as one of accusation, rather than one of inclusive national remembering.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Sa mère ne lui a rien dit, ni la mère de sa mère" (13). All translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> See Donadey for a discussion of several of these works of fiction. A web site by the organization "L'association '17 octobre 1961' : contre l'oubli" provides an extensive listing of both fictional and non-fictional accounts of the demonstration and its aftermath.

<sup>3</sup> A 1991 survey found nonetheless that less than half of all French people had even heard of the events of 17 October 1961, and only one in five knew what it was about ("Une violence"). My thanks to Dora Carpenter for bringing to my attention this article and others from *Le Monde* concerning public responses to the fortieth anniversary of 17 October 1961.

<sup>4</sup> "Les hommes étaient entassés, parqués, des centaines, battus, blessés, matraqués... Ils devaient vider leurs poches au même endroit : portefeuilles, paquets de cigarettes, boîtes d'allumettes, peignes, montres, mouchoirs, tickets de métro, tickets de bus, boîtes de tabac à chiquer... Un tas de plus de un mètre de haut" (127-28).



<sup>5</sup> “[D]es femmes, des hommes, des enfants meurent, [...] les fils égorgent des femmes, des mères, des sœurs, des cousines, [...] l’armée et la police exécutent, torturent” (20-21).

<sup>6</sup> “D’autres, aujourd’hui assassinent, laissent pourrir les cadavres sur les places, au bord des routes, des frères, des pères, des amis...des ennemis...” (43).

<sup>7</sup> “1954-1962 Dans cette prison furent guillotines des résistants algériens qui se dressèrent contre l’occupant français” (30).

<sup>8</sup> In French the plaque is dedicated to the “nombreux Algériens tués lors de la sanglante répression de la manifestation pacifique du 17 octobre 1961” (Bernard).

<sup>9</sup> “Les simples exécutants ne seront jamais déchargés d’une partie de leur culpabilité, ou de leur honte. Les responsables, jamais identifiés” (283).

<sup>10</sup> “Les réseaux FLN, j’ai aidé à en détruire, et plus d’un. [...] Et pour le méchoui...on était les meilleurs” (46-47).

<sup>11</sup> J’ai été mobilisé avec d’autres pour surveiller les bidonvilles de Nanterre et faire des descentes nocturnes chez les amis du FLN, on cassait tout dans les baraques. On a bloqué le pont de Neuilly, le 17 octobre 1961 et le 18, on a encerclé les bidonvilles de Nanterre, ils étaient faits comme des rats. On a tiré sur des manifestants. On a jeté des manifestants dans la Seine (47).

### Works Cited

- L’association “17 octobre 1961 : contre l’oubli.” <<http://17octobre1961.free.fr/index.htm>>. 16 June 2004. Updated 14 October 2002.
- Bernard, Philippe and Christine Garin. “Le massacre du 17 octobre 1961 obtient un début de reconnaissance officiel.” *Le Monde interactif*. 17 octobre 2001.
- Donadey, Anne. “Anamnesis and National Reconciliation: Remembering October 17, 1961.” *Immigrant Narratives in Contemporary France*. Ed. Susan and Patrice J. Proulx Ireland. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001. 47-56.
- Gobodo-Madikizela, Pumla. *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- Ross, Fiona. “On Having a Voice and Being Heard.” *Telling Wounds: Narrative, Trauma and Memory—Working through the SA Armed Conflicts of the 20th Century*. Ed. Chris van de Merwe and Rolf Wolfswinkel. University of Cape Town: Van Schaik Content Solutions, 2002. 225-33.



- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1985.
- Sebbar, Leïla. *La Seine était rouge*. Paris : Ed. Thierry Magnier, 1999.
- Stora, Benjamin. *La gangrène et l'oubli*. 1991. Paris : La Découverte, 1998. "Une violence 'injustifiable' pour 45 % des Français." *Le Monde interactif*. 17 octobre 2001. 6 Aug. 2004. <[http://www.lemonde.fr/web/recherche\\_bree/1,13-0,37-727709,0.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/web/recherche_bree/1,13-0,37-727709,0.html)>.

