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Jonathan Lewis, *The Algerian War in French/Algerian Writing. Literary Sites of Memory*. Cardiff: The University of Wales Press, 2018. xii + 217 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. £50.00 U.K. (pb). ISBN 9-78-1786833044; £50.00 U.K. (eb). ISBN 9-78-1786833068.

Review by Lia Nicole Brozgal, University of California, Los Angeles.

In his introduction to *On Leave* (2014)—the English-language translation of Daniel Anselme’s Algerian War novel *La Permission* (1957)—David Bellos observes, “it’s often said that the Algerian War produced no great literature.”[1] The remark functions as a device to set up to Bellos’s discovery of Anselme’s little-known novel: a friend took *La Permission* off the shelf, handed it to Bellos, “and said without any words: There *was* a literature of the Algerian war. And here it is” (p. xxii). Effective as it is in lionizing the nearly unknown Anselme and his novel, the anecdote should give us pause: After all, most scholars of French and Francophone studies already know that there *is* a sizeable corpus of literature of the Algerian War, dating from the moment of the conflict (Kateb Yacine’s *Nedjma*, 1956, for example) and written by authors from both sides of the Mediterranean (see Alexis Jenni’s *L’art français de la guerre*, 2011, prix Goncourt).

Does the problem, then, reside not in the existence of this literature, but in its difficult qualification as “great”? After all, when Bellos suggests that the Algerian War of Independence has not inspired an equivalent of *War and Peace*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, or *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, he seems to be gesturing to the “great books” tradition, an institution in which Algerian literature has not been enshrined. If it is true that no Algerian War novel currently enjoys the same recognition as the abovementioned books by Tolstoy, Remarque, and Hemmingway, the reasons for this must be complex and worthy of unpacking, as questions of literary value are, as we know, nothing if not subjective.

While proving the *value* of Algerian War literature is not the stated goal of Jonathan Lewis’s monograph *The Algerian War in French/Algerian Writing. Literary Sites of Memory*, the book does a great deal of work to provide evidence of its *existence*, and to expose its complexities. As Lewis points out, there has been considerable study of the Algerian War and its memory, as well as significant attention to the literary production of the *beur* generation (or children of North African immigrants), yet no scholarship brings the two together to examine the “ways in which the memory of the war manifests itself in the work of this generation of authors” (p. 7).

Lewis is to be commended for complicating the question of memory from the outset. The book begins with the statement “Memories of the Algerian War are everywhere in France” (p. 1). This

may surprise those who've grown accustomed to understanding the place of the Algerian War in French memory as one of lack: long known as *la guerre sans nom*, the war is often represented in public, political, and scholarly discourse as a site of *oubli* papered over by decades of amnesia—as evidenced, for example, by its glaring absence from Pierre Nora's multivolume juggernaut *Les lieux de mémoire*. Lewis certainly does not deny that colonial aphasia (to borrow a term from Ann Laura Stoler) has long been a feature of post-imperial French discourse, but he is aware that his project requires a more agile treatment of questions of memory and forgetting. As he observes: “the Algerian War...emerged from the periphery to occupy a central position in twenty-first century French society and culture,” yet it remains, in so many ways, an “unfinished war” (p. 2).

Lewis's decision to “analyze and problematize the notion of literary texts as ‘sites of memory’...drawing on Nora's notion of sites ‘where memory crystallizes and secretes itself’” (p. 2) is put forward diplomatically, although one certainly would have understood (and perhaps even applauded) a more pugnacious engagement with Nora (given the evident colonial blind spots of *Les Lieux de mémoire*). But the idea of “sites of memory” has exceeded Nora's original parameters, becoming a useful heuristic tool. By opting to deploy this framework without becoming mired in its polemics, Lewis tacitly signals the detachment of the concept from its problematic origins, and thus gives space to the French/Algerian stories that are at the heart of his study.

Another diplomatic move on Lewis's part is the use of the term “French/Algerian,” which does not signal “either/or,” but rather strives to name a complex corpus produced by writers who “transcend traditional notions of fixed nationhood and identity” (p. 10). The slash—as opposed to a hyphen, or a circumlocution such as “French of North African descent”—is a self-conscious redeployment of Chris Bongie's term “post/colonial,” which marks “two words and worlds [that] appear uneasily as one, joined together yet also divided in a relation of (dis)continuity” (p. 11).<sup>[2]</sup>

The study is divided into three long chapters, over the course of which Lewis covers an impressive breadth of contemporary French/Algerian literature. The first chapter, titled “History and Fiction: Literary Spaces, Memorial Spaces,” examines three decades' worth of cultural production, beginning in the 1980s. After a brief survey of relevant scholarship—works by Djemma Maazouzi, Benjamin Stora, Philippe Dine, and Paul Silverstein serve to ground Lewis's literary analyses both historically and in terms of the politics of representation—the chapter works chronologically, teasing out subtleties in the texts' engagement with the Algerian War. This long view covers classic *beur* texts such as Mehdi Charef's *Un thé au harem* and Azouz Begag's *Le gone du châaba*; Leïla Sebbar's first novel, *Fatima ou les Algériennes au square*; several novels by Tassadit Imache; Brahim Benaïcha's *Vivre au paradis*; *Amghrar* by Jean-Luc Yacine; and a handful of others, some well-known, some never studied. The conceit of the chapter, which sets the stage for the two that follow, is to chart a metanarrative arc: through his analyses, Lewis shows that novels from the 1980s appear more preoccupied with “subjectivity and agency” (p. 23), whereas texts from the 1990s on—a period associated with obsessional memory or “hypermnnesia”—demonstrate a more concerted engagement with the past. It would be an error, however, to take this metanarrative at face value; Lewis problematizes this arc as quickly as he establishes it, pointing out that although the early texts appear to elide or ignore the war or colonialism, they nonetheless contain allusions, metaphors, metonymies, and other figures that, when read attentively, can be understood as attempts to recover the past. Furthermore, the putatively straightforward representation of the past in the more recent texts demands to be

complicated; as Lewis demonstrates, even the most contemporary of texts “do not form coherent sites of memory, but continue to depict the heterogeneous nature of memories of the war” (p. 59).

Chapter two, “Marginalization, Violence and (Dis)Integration: Sites of Republican Memory and Legacies of the Algerian War,” revisits a few of the texts studied in chapter one (Charef, Begag, Mounsi) and extends its analysis to twenty-first-century novels such as Ahmed Djouder’s *Désintégration* and Rachid Djaidani’s *Viscéral*. Here, Lewis observes again that sidelong or tacit references to the Algerian War appear to take a backseat to representations of contemporary exclusion that are not placed in direct relation to legacies of the war. He suggests, however, that it is impossible not to read these representations of marginalization without considering the ways in which they lay bare the paradoxes of French republicanism. The texts then become sites “where the contradictions in some of the founding principles of the French Republic are brought to light” (p. 61).

The third and final chapter, “The Entanglement of Dominant and other Histories: Representations of 17 October 1961,” looks at French/Algerian texts that represent one specific episode of the Algerian War—the police massacre of peaceful Algerian protesters in Paris. Three novels are under scrutiny in this chapter: the very well-known text by Leïla Sebbar, *La Seine était rouge* (the only of the three translated into English); Mehdi Lallaoui’s lesser known *Une nuit d’octobre*; and Ahmed Kalouaz’s virtually unknown *Les fantômes d’octobre*. As in the previous chapters, Lewis is attentive to the gaps and blind spots in these novels’ representation of history, suggesting—as he has done throughout—that representation need not lead to resolution of memory conflicts. Both within each text and across the representative corpus of three, fragmentation and multiplicity emerge as figures to thwart the establishment of a definitive, coherent version of history.

Lewis set out to explore the “potential of literary texts to act as sites of memory,” specifically with respect to the Algerian War (p. 161). His conclusion—that “literary texts reinforce the difficulty, even the impossibility, of constructing a singular coherent site of memory of such a highly complex and divisive event”—might be unsatisfying to those who expect art to solve problems (p. 161). But Lewis’s point, ultimately, is that sites of memory need not be any more coherent than memory itself, and as he reminds us in the conclusion, the literary site of memory finds its fullest expression in its capacity “to represent the ephemeral and constantly fluctuating nature of memory” (p. 167).

## NOTES

[1] David Bellos, “Introduction”, Daniel Anselme, *On Leave* (New York: Farber and Farber, 2014), p xxi.

[2] Chris Bongie, *Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 12-13.

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