

---

H-France Review Vol. 21 (June 2021), No. 101

Mona El Khoury, *Remnants of the Franco-Algerian Rupture: Archiving Postcolonial Minorities*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2020. viii + 316 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781793617699; \$45.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781793617705.

Review by Jennifer Howell, Illinois State University.

Nearly sixty years after decolonization, the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) continues to haunt the memory of communities who have come to be defined by the (de)colonization of French Algeria, specifically Algerian Jews, the Harkis (Muslim Algerians who served as auxiliary forces for the French during the war), mixed-race individuals or *métis*, and the Pieds-Noirs (the European settler population). Although scholars like Benjamin Stora have identified and problematized French historical amnesia with respect to the colonial conquest, the subsequent annexation and colonization of French Algeria, and the violent eight-year conflict that resulted in the dissolution of both the Fourth Republic and France’s colonial empire, the baccalaureate exam has largely eschewed questions relative to these moments of French national history.[1] Only in recent years have students been tested on the history and memory of France’s Algerian War. Stora has also underscored the effects of historical amnesia on the other side of the Mediterranean where the political party in power since 1962, the National Liberation Front (FLN), has attempted to erase the history of French colonization, as well as that of other anti-colonialist parties in Algeria alongside their significant contributions to Algerian independence. Given the selective nature of national discourses on the war, contemporary writers and artists—particularly those whose identities are deeply rooted in Franco-Algerian relations—have engaged with the problematic history-memory dialectic of the war in profoundly personal ways. Their works shed light on the experience of minority memory communities often excluded from national metanarratives.

Published as part of Lexington Books’ influential series, “After the Empire: The Francophone World and Postcolonial France,” Mona El Khoury’s monograph offers a fresh perspective on Franco-Algerian collective memory and history in the aftermath of the Algerian War of Independence. What distinguishes El Khoury’s study is her sustained focus on the legacy of four demographic groups (Algerian Jews, Harkis, *métis*, and Pieds-Noirs) whose identity stems from moments of colonial contact and separation and whose minority status can be defined numerically, legally, and/or in terms of power. Through a close reading of five novels, El Khoury proposes a case study of the fragmented collective memories of the aforementioned minority categories to demonstrate how literature can make these communities visible by reinserting them into a transnational history while simultaneously challenging national narratives derived from official historical archives. In her well-written and carefully documented analysis, the author

explores the generational transmission of historical inequality through the figure of the dead or absent Algerian father in H el ene Cixous' *Les R evieries de la femme sauvage* (2000), Zahia Rahmani's *Moze* (2003), Nina Bouraoui's *Gar on manqu e* (2000) and *Mes mauvaises pens ees* (2005), and Boualem Sansal's *L'Enfant fou de l'arbre creux* (2002). According to El Khoury, these texts constitute what she calls "a postcolonial, minor archive" (p. 4). Each chapter highlights one author and the minority group she or he represents, as well as "...the different archiving literary strategies that develop as a means to repair history..." and that propose a "symbolic reparation" (p. 4) of Franco-Algerian history and memory.

Chapter one provides an introduction to the history of French Algeria (1830-1962), the war, and the politicization of collective memory and national history in contemporary France and Algeria. Easily accessible to specialists and non-specialists alike, El Khoury's introduction examines the memory wars that have erupted in both nations following Algerian independence. Readers already familiar with this transnational history will appreciate the author's careful consideration of past and current scholarship on Franco-Algerian relations and postcolonial Francophone literatures of the Maghreb, including works by notable historians (e.g., Benjamin Stora, Sylvie Th enault, Todd Shepard, Patricia Lorcin, Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard) and literary scholars (e.g., Anne Donadey, R eda Bensma ia, Fiona Barclay, Jane Hiddleston, and Djemaa Maazouzi). For those unfamiliar with the field, this chapter serves as an excellent point of entry. Furthermore, the author clearly outlines her theoretical approach derived from seminal works on collective memory (Pierre Nora and Maurice Halbwachs), the archive (Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida), orientalism (Edward Said), and "minor" literatures (Gilles Deleuze and F elix Guattari). Through her careful consideration of select novels that actively engage with (post)colonial history and collective memory and whose meaning lies at the intersection of diverse literary and cultural theories, El Khoury convincingly argues that Cixous, Rahmani, Bouaroui, and Sansal "...construct a new relationship with the past and envisage the present and future through a perspective that takes different asymmetrical situations with the postcolonial into account" (pp. 30-31). Their works constitute a postcolonial "minor archive" (p. 4) or "remnant" (p. 2) that articulates the memories of marginalized groups and challenges national metanarratives.

In chapter two, El Khoury examines H el ene Cixous' novel, *Les R evieries de la femme sauvage*, as an example of the Algerian Jewish minor archive. French citizens since the Cr emieux Decree of 1870, Algerian Jews represent a historical anomaly.[2] Despite their precolonial presence in North Africa dating back to the eleventh century, Algerian Jews are often considered either Sephardic or Pied-Noir. Their legal status as French citizens and ethno-religious identity as Jewish Arabs caused a double separation, first, from the indigenous population and second, from the Catholic (albeit secular) French. Due to their citizenship, the majority of Algerian Jews were forced to leave Algeria in the wake of independence only to face anti-Semitism in metropolitan France. Cixous' semi-autobiographical novel underscores the paradox of Jewish identity on Algerian soil, which oscillated between visibility and invisibility. Their hypervisibility would justify their exclusion from their French and indigenous neighbors while their invisibility would eventually result in their assimilation into the Pied-Noir population after independence. Acutely aware of this paradox, Cixous illustrates this aspect of (her) Algerian Jewish identity through the narrativization of childhood memories, the accuracy of which is frequently contested. Indeed, El Khoury argues that "...the question of faulty, incomplete, or even false memory is a theme that haunts [Cixous] to drive forward the narrative while creating an original archive that registers both the ruptures and hopes that existed between the two communities [here, Jewish and

indigenous]” (p. 76). Throughout this chapter, El Khoury analyzes three aspects of Cixous’ narrative: the French exclusion of Jews under Vichy, Jewish alienation within Judeo-Arab relations, and the different articulations of female exclusion (her German Ashkenazi mother’s exclusion from Sephardic circles and Cixous’ own exclusion from Algerian society after her father succumbs to tuberculosis). Near the end of chapter two, El Khoury’s detailed analysis of the father’s tomb left behind in Algeria underscores the themes of alienation and invisibility, as well as the narrator’s awareness of them, and effectively demonstrates that “[w]riting allows Cixous to arm herself against ‘malgérie,’ and [that] the neutralization of affect permits a reconciliation with the memory of her Algerian past...” (p. 101).

Chapter three also analyzes the loss of homeland via the death of the father in Zahia Rahmani’s *Moze*. Similar to Cixous’ portrayal of Algerian Jews, Rahmani focuses on the Harkis and their double exclusion from Algeria and France after the war. El Khoury provides ample background information regarding the Harkis, including the evolution of the term itself, its politicization, and the negative stereotypes that have led to France’s abandonment of and Algeria’s purging of this population. Throughout the novel, Rahmani endeavors to understand her father’s choice and later his suicide, all the while examining her own identity as the daughter of a Harki living in France. Here El Khoury reflects on the very notion of the archive by analyzing the inclusion of authentic yet incomplete archival documents in Rahmani’s text, as well as the embodiment of Harki memory in Moze’s daughter as she demands justice from the French in a fictional trial. El Khoury demonstrates how Rahmani’s “...narrator liberates her father’s speech...and rehumanizes the figure of the Harki” (p. 124). One of the strengths of *Remnants of the Franco-Algerian Rupture* is the author’s systematic and comprehensive deconstruction of seemingly homogeneous minority communities. In the novels studied thus far, daughters of deceased Algerian fathers challenge official discourses on the war and propose counternarratives that reintegrate minority communities (to which they and their fathers belong) into national collective memory and, perhaps more importantly, enable the narrators to come to terms with and grieve their fathers’ deaths. In order for this to happen, yet another paradox must be exposed. In Rahmani’s novel, the paradox is to be found in the official archive: Although there is evidence proving French responsibility for colonial crimes against humanity, French law guarantees amnesty for state officials guilty of such crimes as a matter of national interest. Although Moze’s daughter refuses to absolve her father completely, she makes it clear that the French state is doubly responsible for committing colonial crimes and for creating the Harkis. El Khoury’s interpretation of Rahmani’s novel therefore highlights the performative aspect of the text and its ability to administer justice metaphorically.

The author’s discussion of “...embodied memory and diversity within identity...” (p. 167) carries over into the next chapter. In chapter five, El Khoury proposes a close reading of two novels by Nina Bouraoui: *Garçon manqué* and *Mes mauvaises pensées*. The minority community that Bouraoui represents is that of the *métis*: Bouraoui was born to an Algerian father and a French mother after independence. For a legal standpoint, the *métis* population did not exist in French Algeria. El Khoury notes that this term is not found in either official documents or historical archives and that artistic and literary representations of the Franco-Algerian *métis* were relatively scarce during the colonial period. And yet such individuals did exist, a fact that Bouraoui’s own existence confirms. Here the author contends that Bouraoui’s *métis* identity embodies both colonial contact and rupture: Her mixed heritage originates in the history of French imperialism, as well as in the violence this history implies. What is more, Bouraoui’s narrative self must negotiate this double heritage despite her French family’s rejection of her Algerianness. Perhaps because of this,

Bourauoui embraces her Algerian identity more so than her French one. Similar to Rahmani's narrator whose voice becomes that of her absent father, the body of Bourauoui's narrator in *Garçon manqué* transforms into a "corporeal archive" (p. 187), one that accentuates ethnicity over cultural identity and is suggestive of the racial hierarchy undergirding French imperialism. This reading of Bourauoui's work allows El Khoury to draw important parallels between Bourauoui and Cixous (alienation and disease), and between Bourauoui and Rahmani (body as archive and performativity): "Silence is compared to a disease affecting the social body, while Bourauoui's body, imagined as an archive of *métis* history and identity, can be seen as performing resistance to this silence" (p. 188). This leads her to apply Marianne Hirsch's notion of "postmemory" to the works studied here. According to Hirsch, trauma is transmitted from generation to generation via stories, images, and behaviors.[3] While postmemory is not a true memory for subsequent generations, it closely resembles memory in that the experience of trauma has been communicated and transmitted to them in profoundly personal ways. El Khoury rightly contends that silence as a behavior serves as a key vector of memory transmission for Cixous, Rahmani, and Bourauoui. Moreover, the transmission of undocumented oral histories such as that of the "Massacre of the Women of the Residence" (p. 193) in Bourauoui's *Garçon manqué*, allows the narrator to supplement "...the French and Algerian official historical narratives, in which no trace of this massacre exists" (p. 193). In other words, Bourauoui, like Cixous and Rahmani, shares a family memory not only to challenge existing archives, but also to complete them. The story she writes on the page therefore becomes an archive in its own right. Bourauoui then enters the text she writes just as she learns to embrace her dual heritage in *Mes mauvaises pensées*. Here, her "...text-skin...operates as an archive..." (pp. 209-210). El Khoury concludes this chapter by writing that "...while the narrative paradoxically creates who Bourauoui 'is,' it also produces the space where she, as a Franco-Algerian, becomes" (p. 209).

The final chapter differs significantly from the previous ones in that El Khoury discusses a fictional non-autobiographical text, *L'Enfant fou de l'arbre creux*, written by a male (Boualem Sansal) who does not belong to the minority community (Pied-Noir) that he chooses to depict. Yet, this chapter adds considerable depth to her overall study. Sansal's novel develops in a nonlinear fashion as a dialogue between two men in an Algerian prison and covers the colonial period to the narrative present in the year 2000. In the process, Sansal attempts to create a collective memory that rejects the FLN's constructed narrative of Algerian history and that accepts the diversity and pluralism of the Algerian nation. According to the author, "[t]he novel generates a sort of archive of the future, or a discursive space that reenvisions Pieds-Noirs identity while nonetheless producing a disconcerting neocolonial epistemic violence" (p. 226). Despite Sansal's attempt to create an inclusive archive through Pierre's (a Pied-Noir later revealed to be an indigenous Algerian) search for his Algerian father, El Khoury's reading of the novel suggests that the shared history of Algeria and France may forever undermine the development of a renewed transnational relationship, one that no longer bears the scars of the past. Interestingly, Sansal's narrative lays bare the alienation of the founding fathers of Algerian nationalism (i.e., that the FLN refuses to acknowledge the role played by other political and intellectual currents in the decades leading up to independence) in a way that recalls the themes of alienation and the absent Algerian father in Cixous', Rahmani's, and Bourauoui's autobiographical fiction. Rather than insisting on the loss of Algeria (lost to Cixous', Rahmani's, and Bourauoui's adult narrators in that their identities prevent them from belonging there), Sansal's complex narrative condemns the establishment of a new colonial order in which the colonized have replaced the colonizer. El Khoury writes: "Sansal demonstrates that the actions of the FLN repeat those of the colonizers, to the extent that the anti-colonial struggle would

have served only to remove the French exploiters and replace them with indigenous ones” (p. 235). This “neocolonial epistemic violence” (p. 226) results in yet another paradox: that the search for an “authentic” founding father of the Algerian nation has led “...to the elimination of potential ‘candidates’” (p. 238) who fail to embody the FLN’s vision of a pure Arab identity. It is thus Pierre, the indigenous Arab turned Pied-Noir by adoption, who becomes Sansal’s prophetic founding father of a new Algerian nation. Despite the novel’s critical tone, El Khoury rightly underscores the text’s ambiguity with respect to colonial history echoed in some of Sansal’s other works and public commentaries. Nevertheless, Sansal leaves his readers with the hope of peace, of a model historical archive that France and Algeria indisputably share.

Throughout her excellent consideration of Cixous’, Rahmani’s, Bouraoui’s, and Sansal’s novels, Mona El Khoury argues that the opening of the archive, both literally and figuratively, can only occur via the inclusion of minority discourses. Sansal’s text, in particular, contends that the future depends on the creation of solidarities between communities that are simultaneously connected and divided by the spectral remnants of French Algeria. Only then will the French and Algerian postcolonial imaginary supersede the colonial binaries of the past.

#### NOTES

[1] Benjamin Stora, *La gangrène et l’oubli. La mémoire de la guerre d’Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991).

[2] El Khoury notes that Algerian Jews briefly lost their French citizenship under the Vichy regime in 1940. Their citizenship would be restored three years later (p. 51).

[3] See Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2012).

Jennifer Howell  
Illinois State University  
[jthowel@ilstu.edu](mailto:jthowel@ilstu.edu)

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.