

---

H-France Review Vol. 22 (September 2022), No. 153

Review by Rebekah Vince, Queen Mary University of London.

*Hoarding Memory: Covering the Wounds of the Algerian War* highlights the intersections between memory studies and trauma studies, while implicitly complicating notions of victim and perpetrator to reveal subjects implicated in the Algerian War of Independence. These subjects in turn depict this implication in their creative works, which transmit experiences of disintegration. The title itself hints at what the monograph contains in its reference to hoarding as a cover for traumatic memories of violence and exile during and following the Algerian War. As Amy Hubbell notes in the introduction, “[t]he compilation of traumatic memory is at once a spectacle and a protective cover over the initial wound” (p. 3). This compilation takes literary and visual forms in the works of Marie Cardinal, Leïla Sebbar, Benjamin Stora, and a selection of artists who use varied techniques of repetition and layering to illustrate the surplus of memory. Hubbell compares these techniques to “compulsive hoarding” which “operates as a psychological disorder and...connects to the anxiety of forgetting” (p. 4), yet she goes on to demonstrate how such processes can paradoxically contribute to forgetting as memory reaches saturation point. Through an examination of hoarding disorder, Hubbell reveals that “it is not the incapacity to forget that creates this excess of memory”; rather, it is the “excess itself [that] creates a type of forgetting” (p. 13). To avoid falling into this trap, the book engages in a selection process as it attempts to “sift through the multiple and competing forms of memory of the Algerian War, which have accumulated rapidly and coalesced over time” (p. 4). In spite of this claim to multiplicity but in keeping with such a selective approach, it focuses on *pied-noir*, *métisse*, Jewish, and second-generation memories in France, rather than broadening its reach to encompass the plurality of experience across Algeria itself, notably in relation to the indigenous Amazigh and Arab-Muslim majority. Hubbell is upfront about the limitations of the book’s scope, noting that it “relies primarily on the European memory of the past and the ways in which that memory has been inscribed in French autobiography, fiction, history, and art in layered and repetitive ways” (p. 6). In this sense, the book is a curated collection rather than a hoard, though it does occasionally repeat itself in its illustration of excess.

The introduction “Too Much Memory and the Algerian War” serves as the opening chapter and gives a historical overview of the shift from “imposed silence” (p. 10) to early *pied-noir* narratives that emphasized a “nostalgia for a lost homeland” and “re-created [French] Algeria as a lost paradise” (p. 6 cf. p. 78), to memory laws and what Amar Guendouzi calls “an overflow of remembrance” connected to trauma (p. 8). It provides a theoretical framework embedded in memory studies engaging with notions such as “le cloisonnement de la mémoire” (Benjamin Stora), “la concurrence des mémoires” (Danielle Michel-Chich), and “multidirectional memory” (Michael Rothberg), suggesting the latter is “a potential solution to pacifying the traumatic past” while noting that “where the Algerian War is concerned, memories remain deeply competitive”

(p. 10). [1] To avoid risking such competition, it would have been helpful to draw on Rothberg's notion of the "implicated subject" in differentiating the authors and artists in the book from direct victims of colonisation or torture. [2] At times, there is a risk of conversely depicting them as innocent victims of *decolonisation*, when often they were implicated in the very processes of oppression that led to the Algerian Revolution, while the *pieds-noirs'* "homeland" (p. 25) was of course a colonial invention. Yet when it comes to Algeria's Jewish population, represented and depicted by Benjamin Stora in the book, this implication has another layer, as its presence pre-dates colonialism, although it is often conflated with *pied-noir*. Indeed, certain uses of *pied-noir* reveal the trouble with binary categorization. For example, Leïla Sebbar does not easily fit into the category of *pied-noir*, as the daughter of a "Française de France" and an Arab Algerian teacher of French, while Nicole Guiraud is both a *pied-noir* and a victim of terrorism.

Hubbell relates hoarding to trauma, particularly the loss of a sense of home, though this is complicated by the fact that, for European settlers, this was premised on expropriation of indigenous land, which the author might have addressed more explicitly. Nevertheless, the metaphor of hoarding as an attempt at bringing stability through owning a profusion of memory, while inadvertently obfuscating it, is a salient one. This leads us to ask, "[h]ow does the anxiety of loss and fear of forgetting translate into the obsessive hoarding of things and vice versa?" (p. 13), which relates to excessive memory of the Algerian War and its disorienting *séquelles*. As Hubbell notes, "[t]he accumulation of memory may indicate a need to be anchored but, at some point, the multiple versions of the past begin to pile up on themselves and threaten to topple in, having a destructive rather than tethering effect" (p. 11). This begs the question, "[a]t what point does memory cross over from being a support to becoming a crushing weight?" (p. 11).

Hoarding thus serves as a comparison, rather than an equation, between literary or artistic representation and accumulating processes characteristic of a hoarder. Hubbell writes that "[e]ach author or artist grapples with the painful memory of the past in Algeria using repetition, multiple accounts, excessive works, and accumulated and layered words and images in ways similar to [but not the same as] the growing hoard in a home" (p. 14). To illustrate this, each chapter homes in on a metaphor related to hoarding in order to analyze how accumulation functions in the layering and burying of traumatic memories through autobiographical reflection and creative reproduction. Thus the authors and artists are shown to "gather, glean, churn, reproduce, layer, and pile versions of the past in their works in ways that draw attention to the wound while scarring over it in both productive and destructive ways," revealing the traumatic nature of excessive memory in relation to the Algerian War and its aftermath (p. 28).

The second chapter draws on the ancient tradition of gleaning in its analysis of *pied-noir* author Marie Cardinal's writing to explore "how her obsessive recreation of Algeria and specific attachment to memorial objects attempt to fill in the void of her characters' losses" (p. 27). Yet these "collections become unwieldy and unmovable and they ultimately pin down the protagonists in both metaphorical and real ways" (p. 27). The chapter takes Agnès Varda's documentary *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000) as its starting point to explore how "need lies at the root of gleaning" and this can take the form of "psychological compulsion" (p. 29) in a similar way to hoarding, which is "an offshoot of collecting, or collecting gone awry" (p. 31). In Cardinal's work, this translates as "compulsive remembering of the homeland" (p. 32), which itself was a colonial enterprise; the Algeria she "recreates...in fragments" (p. 34) is decidedly French. Her protagonists appear at first to be collectors, "but when the objects and words proliferate and double up, they sometimes impede her characters from navigating the world around them" (p.

33). The chapter identifies a “connection between material and emotional loss and the obsession with memorial objects” (p. 33). This connection merges colonial nostalgia with exilic trauma, revealing “the capacity of memory to become knotted and tangled” (p. 13) when “specific objects are continually reattached to memories of the past” (p. 33). Through its analysis of select fictional and autobiographical works by Cardinal, and specifically her use of “repetition to recreate ruptures,” the chapter concludes that “instead of protecting memory the accumulation of objects and memories threatens to destroy the desired stability and further isolates the memory hoarder” (p. 33). In this way, Hubbell draws a parallel between the protagonist in *La Mule du cobillard* and the author herself: “Like her character Madeleine Couturier...Marie Cardinal felt compelled to fill the void left by her lost country with accumulated memory. However, this compulsive repetition...solidifies memory without protecting the author from inevitable loss” (p. 45). Thus, the author’s hardened memory is exposed, as the present becomes spectacularly “more uninhabitable and the past more obsessive” (p. 49).

The third chapter continues with this notion of obsession in employing the metaphor of churning as a solidifying process to examine how Leila Sebbar “repeats certain images and memories of exclusion, separation, and division across her numerous autobiographical and fictional texts” (p. 25), piling up on the author’s desk in a visual metaphor (p. 74, fig. 3). It focuses in on Sebbar’s autobiographical accounts and collected volumes of exilic experiences, noting that “[i]n the process, Sebbar has built a sprawling community of voices, words, and images around her past” (p. 26). In the hoarding act of churning, the hoarder struggles to “catalog or discard” possessions, similarly seen in Sebbar’s process of “continually reviewing fragments that become fixed in place as she attempts to fill the large voids of exile” (p. 54), not only her own but also that of Jewish and  *pied-noir* communities. In this way, “she engages in churning the artifacts, a process in which she repeatedly uncovers bits of her heritage and buries them again,” serving as both archeologist and undertaker (p. 56). This makes it difficult for the reader to navigate her work, yet also serves as its inspiration and motivation, since “in order to continually use exile as a creative force, Sebbar must sustain her feelings of loss and insist on being foreign and fragmented” (p. 56). It is here that Hubbell’s analysis is particularly perceptive in identifying how “the author is caught in the contradictory necessity of maintaining her divisions while writing to overcome them” (p. 57), engaged in a contrapuntal act of “covering her wounds in fiction and keeping them open in autobiography,” which translates into churning memories (pp. 57-58). Moreover, through her collected volumes, “Sebbar has created a densely knotted community of authors” (p. 60) at risk of transmuting into “the hoarder’s clog created by the desire to maintain connections and the unwillingness to discard or forget” (p. 61) as “the collections are growing beyond what is curatable” (p. 63) from both the author and the researcher’s perspectives. Hubbell reveals how “Sebbar’s churning through both images and texts by other authors becomes a search into herself,” as “her personal experiences become enmeshed in those of the broader exile community” (p. 64). This is visualized by the way in which the artists explored in the fifth chapter employ enmeshing techniques “to relay personal and collective trauma from the war” (p. 28). The originality of this chapter lies in its incorporation of Sebbar’s diverse oeuvre from  *carnets de voyage* to feminist journals,  *lettres parisiennes* to works of fiction, while focusing in on her “collective autobiographical texts” (p. 65) which “unearth representative fragments,” “fragile remnants and diverse voices” in an “attempt to piece them back together” (p. 66). In this way, Sebbar resembles a hoarder who perceives “connections between mismatched items or between themselves and those material things” (p. 67), yet “[w]hen all these books are collected together, the cross-referenced fragments inside them” risk amalgamating into “a clog, no longer movable or

navigable” (p. 74). Hubbell concludes that “in Sebbar’s attempt to portray this multiplicity, memory is compounded” (p. 75), revealing how a surfeit of memory can obscure the past.

One of the “diverse voices” included in Sebbar’s collected narratives, notably *Une enfance juive en Méditerranée musulmane*,<sup>[3]</sup> is among the loudest when it comes to the articulation and memorialization of the Algerian War and its aftermath, namely Benjamin Stora. This public intellectual has forged “a unique position for himself as an Algerian-born historian and trauma writer attempting to render the suffering of the Algerian War broadly accessible in a historical context” (p. 85). Hubbell argues that while his foundational work *La Gangrène et l’oubli* “sought to understand the blockages and open up the memory of the Algerian War” (p. 79) that had been “cut off,” the proliferation of his writing conversely leads to “[s]edimentation’ and decomposition” (p. 80). It is here that the hoarding metaphor comes to the fore: “[s]imilar to the hoarding home whose rooms are eventually blocked off by dense piles of objects, excessive recounting of memory of the Algerian War may cut off the past” (p. 81). Hubbell traces how “Stora’s personal experiences began progressively creeping into his historical writing,” as “the national discourse on the Algerian War, along with the French national archives, started to open up and the historical facts began to be addressed” (p. 80). Consequently, his status as an “objective” historian has been called into question due to the integration of his “subjective” autobiography: “Stora’s inclusion of personal memory and his unwillingness to separate it with reflective distance undermine the historical narrative and expose him to criticism” (p. 93). He justifies this choice in further writing, while also examining the superimposition of variegated memories, though this multiplicity does not guarantee an uncloistered vision of the past. Hubbell summarizes that “[i]n his role as historian, he both cautions against a *communautarisation de la mémoire*...where the actors in national history want to tell their own stories, and defends the inclusion of memory in his autobiographical texts, by using his academic knowledge to back up his personal experience” (p. 85), notably in *Les Trois Exils. Juifs d’Algérie*. However, the chapter’s argument is undermined when Stora is depicted as “a relic of colonial times...there to teach Algerians about their own past” (pp. 87–88), which risks collapsing his identity as a Jewish Algerian with French citizenship into a  *pied-noir* apologist, as though this past does not also belong to him. And yet, “he returns to his own past, again and again, through his books” (p. 91), which take various forms. The analysis of *Algérie 1954–1962: Lettres, carnets et récits des Français et des Algériens dans la guerre*, coauthored with Tramor Quemeneur, is particularly relevant to the monograph’s emphasis on hoarding as a way of (re)covering past trauma. The “complexly layered” scrapbook-like document (p. 99) consists of “a mishmash of memorabilia: reproduced archival fragments and testimony, meant to be perused, sorted through, interacted with, and processed by the reader,” yet “the fragments threaten to cloud over the information being put forward in the text” (p. 96). This serves as an example of how “history is obscured through the mass of personal texts” in a similar way to how “Stora’s autobiographical fragments interrupt his history books, or the history obscures his personal narrative” (p. 103). Thus, “[t]he obsessive need to continually recreate the memory of the war ultimately begins to obscure it,” as “[m]emory becomes cut off under its own weight” (p. 103), causing us to return to *La Gangrène et l’oubli*.

The fifth chapter moves from written to visual reproduction as “[f]or artists, accumulated retelling takes a visual form that is less concerned with the number of individual works than with how memorial debris is enmeshed within the work itself” (p. 26). Again, a parallel is drawn with hoarding: “[l]ike the hoarder who compulsively collects and stores items that hold significance, but whose compulsions create spectacularly large piles, the artists studied in this chapter visually

represent the dense memory that accumulates on top of a wound” (p. 108). Moreover, “[v]isual debris in these works, like physical debris in a hoarding home, concurrently draws in and distances the viewer from extraordinarily painful personal experiences” (p. 108), interrogating the (im)possibility of transmitting traumatic (post)memories. Thus, “memory is represented through layering” (p. 28) and enmeshing that “contextualizes personal suffering into the deep community wounds” and “traumatic landscape” of the artists (p. 113). In the analysis of Nicole Guiraud’s depictions of amputation and incorporation, it would have been interesting to draw on Alison Landsberg’s notion of “prosthetic memory”[4] both in relation to the viewers’ engagement with the artwork and Jacques Derrida’s notion of “*de trop*...the prosthesis, the excess” (p. 137, fn. 26). Through analysis of the *Survivre* exhibit, Hubbell demonstrates how Guiraud “creates a scarred depiction of Algeria through the various layers of wounded victims she piles into the frame—both visible and buried” (p. 115), recalling Sebbar’s layering and laying to rest of memories through writing.

The other two artists studied in the fifth chapter on “Hoarding Visual Debris from the War” explore “inherited memories” (p. 115), theorized by Marianne Hirsch as “postmemory” (p. 107). Patrick Altes deploys borrowed and recycled images and inscribes “multiple experiences upon them to demonstrate...a fragmented and disjointed story of colonialism—rather than the solidifying picture many Pieds-Noirs have attempted to create of their pasts” (pp. 116–117). In this way, his artwork serves as a critique of “the oppressively nostalgic memory of colonial Algeria” (p. 127). Meanwhile, Zineb Sedira uses “photography and video installations to depict the transmission of Algerian memory across generations, and specifically how her parents’ story has been passed on to her” (p. 119). Her “artwork joins the two countries that have been irreparably wounded by their interrelated history, while simultaneously intertwining her own experience with her family’s past” (p. 119), through the depiction of “visible and invisible boundaries and multiple layers of time, expressed through both personal memory and landscape” (p. 120). For Sedira, filming her parents recounting their memories of the Algerian War is a form of personal catharsis but also a dialogical project in which she plays the role of mediator or listener and thus “models reception for a French public...not yet ready to confront the deep traumas of the war due to...persistent and willful amnesia” (p. 121). Through an analysis of Sedira’s contribution to the exhibition *Made in Algeria: Généalogie d’un territoire*, Hubbell demonstrates how this artwork “expose[s] multiple layers of the past to reformulate what had been erased by colonization and what had been silenced in France after independence” (p. 122). This is achieved through “temporal markings” that represent “the accumulated layers of colonial memory enmeshed in contemporary images of the Algerian people and landscape” (p. 122). Hubbell concludes that “[c]ontemporary art offers the possibility of reconstituting varied moments and unifying spatiotemporal distances into single works” through layering techniques which, in Sedira’s work, “express the multilayered possession of the land” (pp. 122–123). In drawing the three artists together, Hubbell proposes that “[t]hrough layering over the past could be one way to lay claim to it again, Guiraud, Altes, and Sedira use layers in ways that call attention to the ruptures and the fragments they have experienced and seen” (p. 126). Consequently, “[t]hese fragments run the risk of blocking out or burying other, deeper, memories, but they also call attention to the jumbled, nonlinear ways in which traumatic memory emerges” (p. 126). This conclusion is slightly undermined by the closing words to the chapter, which favor mutual understanding over incomprehension in the face of “historical trauma” and specifically “crimes against humanity committed under colonial rule” (p. 127) that still need to be properly acknowledged and addressed.

The overall conclusion to the monograph returns to the notion of hoarding and the necessity of a “selection process,” since “[w]hen we allow too much to accumulate, we and our objects are rendered dysfunctional,” in a similar way to how a surplus of memory can become overwhelming (p. 130). It highlights the importance of honoring as “a way of giving priority to selected objects, lives or values” but demonstrates how such selection is rendered difficult by “excessive trauma or excessive loss” (p. 132), as evidenced by the authors and artists analyzed in the preceding chapters who “have each honored the excessive memory of Algeria” in their own way (p. 132). Their written and visual “representations of layered memorial debris, repeated material, and proliferated images demonstrate the overflow of memory surrounding the Algerian War and the vast devastation created by it” (p. 132), which implicate the reader and viewer rather than leaving us with the feeling that “we are going to be okay outside of the frame” (p. 132).

## NOTES

[1] Benjamin Stora, *La Guerre des mémoires. La France face à son passé colonial (entretiens avec Thierry Leclere)* (La Tour d’Aigues: Éditions de l’Aube, 2007); Danielle Michel-Chich, “Entre l’Algérie et la France, les mémoires à vif,” *Mediapart*, 2 July 2012, <<https://blogs.mediapart.fr/edition/les-invites-de-mediapart/article/020712/entre-lalgerie-et-la-france-les-memoires-vif>> (accessed 21 June 2022); Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[2] Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2019).

[3] Benjamin Stora, “Le hammam, et après...,” in *Une enfance juive en Méditerranée musulmane* (Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule: Bleu Autour, 2012), pp. 307–315.

[4] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

Rebekah Vince  
Queen Mary University of London  
[r.vince@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:r.vince@qmul.ac.uk)

Copyright © 2022 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.