Colonial/Postcolonial Intersections

Lieux de mémoire in Algiers

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*Lieu de mémoire*, a concept developed by historian Pierre Nora in order to help explain the construction of a nation or a community, offers a useful tool to architectural historians by emphasising the importance of physical and conceptual sites. Nora associates the role played by memory with a ‘symbolic typology’ and identifies the sites where memory resides as *lieux de mémoire* (the place, the site, the realm of memory). A *lieu de mémoire* is thus ‘any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which, by dint of human will or the work of time, has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community’.

2 Pointing to the difference between history and memory, Nora claims that ‘memory is life’ whereas ‘history is the reconstruction... of what is no longer’. Memory is subject to remembering and forgetting; it is vulnerable to appropriation and manipulation; and, it can lie dormant for long periods only to be reawakened suddenly. The *lieux de mémoire*, the material, symbolic and functional sites, are the products of the interaction between memory and history. They embody a will to remember (memory) and to record (history). They also display the exciting quality of being able to change, that is, to resurrect old meanings and generate new ones, along the way establishing unpredictable connections.

2 While focusing on the sites of memory that define France, Nora’s concept pertains to all societies. Starting from this assertion, yet staying in part within French history, I hereby extend the concept to Algeria and show how the *lieux de mémoire* acted as catalysts in the imposition of power structure, as well as the definition and endurance of identity in a colonial context. The symbolic sites for the coloniser culture continued to maintain their significance in the postcolonial era as their capacity to change and acquire new meanings allowed them to act also as places of memory for the colonised.

My case studies are drawn from two different types of *lieux de mémoire* identified by Nora: the topographical, characterised by their specific location...
and their rootedness, and the portable. The urban spaces of Algiers will serve as my topographical lieux; Eugène Delacroix’s famous painting, Les femmes d’Alger and its various reincarnations as the portable.

In a city with as turbulent a past as Algiers, the lieux de mémoire are many, but even here several stand out more prominently than others. Place d’Armes, opened in the heart of the city immediately following the French conquest in 1830, was undoubtedly the receptacle of the most charged meanings and memories. The initial gesture stemmed from practical necessities: the French army needed a large open space for gathering and manoeuvres, not accommodated by the tight urban fabric of pre-colonial Algiers. The initial carving out took place in the months that followed the conquest and was randomly continued for the next two years. The Place d’Armes, explicitly associated with the French army and the military occupation, was an ‘immense’, if shapeless void in front of the Palace of the Dey, the headquarters of the Ottoman governor of Algeria. The symbolism of the authoritative presence of the Place d’Armes was blatant for both the conqueror and the conquered, but the new plaza was also imbued with the memory of what it was before the occupation. The army engineers had demolished here an entire fabric that had harboured some of the city’s most vital institutions — most prominently, the al-Sayyida mosque that stood in front of the Palace of the Dey and which was remembered as the most elegant of all religious buildings in Algiers. In addition, an extensive commercial tissue was torn down that had comprised the food markets, the specialised suqs, such as the suqs of the jewellers, leather workers, weavers and booksellers, and in the centre, the Badestan. Several military barracks that belonged to janissaries and many houses were also taken down.

The physical transformation did not erase the past for Algerians. The pre-colonial fabric of the Place d’Armes survived in memory and was passed from generation to generation. The following excerpt, from a much longer poem, dating back to the time of the conquest, testifies to the persistence of the memory, as well as of the violence exerted on the place:

O regrets for Algiers and for its stores,
Their traces no longer exist!
Such inequities committed by the accursed ones!
Al-Qaisariya has been named Plaza
And to think that holy books were sold and bound there.

Within a couple of years after the occupation, the image of the Place d’Armes was not deemed fitting to reflect the grandeur of the French Empire. Innumerable projects were drafted to endow it with the appropriate glory. Order and regularity that contrasted with the pre-colonial urban forms of Algiers were taken as design guidelines to symbolise the new presence. In 1831, for example, Mr. Luvini, the Government Architect, proposed a rectangular plaza, defined by monumental structures that represented France — among them a theatre and a Palais du Gouvernement; the seventeenth century al-Djadid Mosque, another major religious monument, would be demolished to make room for the new configuration. The project encountered opposition from the lieutenant-general Lemercier — beginning to acknowledge the initial errors committed by the army engineers, he made a call to show respect for ‘the religious sentiments of the Moors’. Lemercier’s consideration of the Algerian society was not taken to heart immediately by the army engineers as can be
traced in another project for a rectangular plaza in 1833 that attempted to raze the al-Djadid Mosque. Nevertheless, his objection to the demolition of Islamic religious monuments found a response in another theoretical project for a rectangular plaza in 1834: the al-Djadid Mosque was preserved, setting a precedent for further regularisations.10

Capitalising on the damage caused by a fire to the Palace of the Dey in 1844, several projects attempted to readjust the plaza’s overall shape in the following years. By mid-century, it had acquired its final hexagonal form, with arcaded buildings in the French style on three sides and the preserved al-Djadid Mosque determining the irregularity of the east side. The edges of the plaza that bordered the steep hill descending to the harbour level were neatly defined by a balustrade. Most significantly, an imposing, five-meters high equestrian statue of the Duke of Orleans, the prince to the throne who had fought and was wounded in Algeria in 1836, was erected on the site in 1845 — in a gesture that complemented the nineteenth century French ‘statumania’ at home. Monumental civic statues of great men had been understood as elements of modern urban design since the beginning of the century in mainland France and had dotted the public spaces of French cities as symbols of liberal and secular values.11

The placement of the statue of the Duke of Orléans by the sculptor Marochetti did not follow the rules set for similar gestures of celebration in the métropole, but was manipulated to respond to the colonial mission. It was strategically situated, not in the centre of the plaza as one might expect from the geometry-conscious army engineers, but to the side — right in front of the al-Djadid mosque. Elevated on a high base and contrasting with the serene mass of the white mosque in its blackness and dynamic shape, and with its back to the mosque, it conveyed a straightforward message about the power structure in Algeria. The Duke of Orléans’ gaze, turned away from the plaza to

Statue of the Duke of Orléans with the al-Djadid mosque, close up view, c 1900 (postcard)
face the Casbah, underlined the statement about French control over the Algerian people. A public art form that was totally foreign to local norms, the statue dominated the major perspectives toward the plaza, thereby reiterating its message over and over.12 The statue of the Duke of Orléans on horseback permanently constructed the following lines from the Algerian poem (quoted earlier) into the built fabric of the city:

O believers, the world has seen with its own eyes.
Their horses tied in our mosques,
They and their Jews rejoiced because of it
While we wept in our sadness.13

The story of this statue as a lieu de mémoire was not restricted to the city of Algiers. As an act of transporting the memory of the Algerian occupation back to the home country, a replica was produced and placed in the court of honour in the Louvre. It did not enjoy great popularity in its Parisian setting, however, as it soon turned into a symbol associated with royal oppression in the eyes of the working classes. It was knocked down in a mass revolt during the 1848 revolution and transported to the Palace of Versailles to be placed at the foot of the great stairway in the courtyard. In this destination, the memory of Algiers was dimmed and superseded by the memory of a major workers’ revolution in Paris.14

Back in Algiers, the passage from the military regime to a civilian one in the 1870s, with the implication that France was here to stay, led to the renaming of the plaza as Place du Gouvernement, or Government Square. It was frequently referred to as the ‘forum of the colony’. René Léspès, the author of a comprehensive monograph on Algiers, described it as the site where ‘the most passionate discussions on the colony took place’, and where great historic events were acknowledged by public ceremonies that ranged from commemorative gatherings to funerary processions, proclamations of changes in the political regime, and civic and patriotic banquets. The Place du Gouvernement was also deemed to be the heart of Algiers. Théophile Gautier, for example, wrote that it was ‘the meeting point of the entire city’, the place to give appointments, and through which ‘entire Algiers passed inevitably three or four times a day’.15

The Place du Gouvernement embodied both the ‘dominant’ lieux de mémoire and the ‘dominated’ lieux de mémoires. To quote Nora, the former are ‘imposing as well as generally imposed from above by the government’, whereas the latter are ‘the places of refuge, sanctuaries of instinctive devotion and hushed pilgrimages, where the living heart of memory still beats’.16 The colonial interventions to the plaza sharpened the distinctions between the two types of memories and their confrontational quality enhanced the preservation of the Algerian memory, with much help from the statue of the Duke of Orleans. To use Michel de Certeau’s words, the square was imbued with ‘inward-turning histories’ and ‘a sort of knowledge that remain[ed] silent’.17

Following independence in 1962, the plaza was renamed ‘Place des Martyrs’ to honour those who died during the Algerian War. The statue was taken down and its location marked by an abstract memorial. No other changes were made, but the deletion of the statue turned the al-Djaddid Mosque into the unchallenged monument of the Place des Martyres. The appropriation of the public space superposed a new symbolism on it, without radically transforming its formal character, namely its boundaries and the buildings
surrounding it. The preservation of the colonial structure hence did not conceal the thirteen decades of French occupation, but underlined Algerian independence and the memory of the war. This was a 'shrewd comment... upon the realities of the colonial power' that recycled a European tradition (an urban form) while defining a new society. The gesture reversed at the same time the 'dominant' and the 'dominated' lieux de mémoire.

In a curious twist, the memory of the colonial structure lives in the everyday vernacular of the city: forty years after independence, many residents of Algiers still refer to the square as 'Place al-Auud', or 'Place du Cheval' (Square of the Horse). What remains from the statue in collective memory is not the Duke of Orleans, then, but his horse — for reasons that may have only tangential links to the original intentions, but are also detached from the redefinition of the public space following the independence. To refer to de Certeau's analysis of everyday spatial practices, the 'ordinary practitioners of the city' wrote their own urban text, causing their alternative experience of space to 'slip into the clear text of the planned and readable city'.

Other public spaces underwent similar transformations that interlocked the memory of the colonial and postcolonial eras. Place d'Isly, more commonly known as Place Bugeaud and named after Maréchal Bugeaud (made Duc d'Isly in 1843), was one of the major nodes in the 'European city' next to the old town, designed in the early 1850s after the demolition of the Ottoman walls and the construction of a new set of fortifications that significantly expanded the urban territory. The growth pattern of Algiers under the French was characterised by


19 I thank Nabila Fertani Bakli and Raja Khabcheche, students in my graduate seminar (spring 1999) at the Ecole Nationale d'Architecture et d'Urbanisme, University of Tunis, for this information.

20 De Certeau, op cit, p 93.
two distinct phases: the first interventions attempted to regularise the fabric of the old city by cutting through it in a Haussmannian manner twenty-some years before Haussmann — as seen in the case of the Place du Gouvernement. The wide and straight arteries, lined with colonnades, made references to the public spaces of the métropole, among them the much-cherished Rue de Rivoli. The second phase emerged with the realisation that the original core could not accommodate the increase in the European population and its specific needs. The sixteenth century fortifications were taken down and a new, European city began to be built next to the pre-colonial one. The dual structure that resulted on a trial-and-error basis in Algiers later became official policy of urban design in French colonies as an effective tool to separate the coloniser from the colonised.  

Place Bugeaud was a square-shaped opening in the middle of the Rue d’I’sly, the main artery of the new quarter. The starting point of the rue d’I’sly, the Bab al-Djadid, or the new gate, had special significance in terms of the French occupation, because it was the gate from which the French army had entered Algiers. The perspective from Place Bugeaud toward the north was terminated by a view of the Casbah on the hill beyond. European-style buildings framed the vista to the old city, etching another contrast onto the urban fabric of Algiers. In 1852, a statue of Maréchal Bugeaud was placed in the square. Bugeaud, a key figure in the conquest of Algeria, had fought against the Algerian leader Abdel Kader in the 1830s and was named Governor General of Algeria in 1840. Like that of the Duke of Orléans, Bugeaud’s gaze was fixed on the Casbah, in an act of permanent supervision. In the words of artist and writer Eugène Fromentin, ‘the statue of the Maréchal [was] placed there as a definitive symbol of victory’. 

Lined by elegant structures with commercial spaces on the street level, Place Bugeaud became one of the most popular centres of European life in the city. For example, the Milk Bar, the gathering spot
for the European youth, was situated here in the late 1950s. Its bombing during the heat of the Algerian war on 30th September, 1956, planned by the National Liberation Front as part of a series of attacks that followed each other within minutes throughout the city, added another layer of memory to the square. The first of their kind in Algiers, these attacks were undertaken by women fighters Zohra Drif, Samia Lakdari, and Djamila Bouhired. After independence, the statue of Bugeaud was replaced with a statue of Abdel Kader, on horseback and raising his sword, finally reclaiming his victory over the French military. The name of the square was changed to Place Emir Abdel Kader. The memory of the war also lingers in the daily life of the square in more subtle ways — the Milk Bar is still intact and maintains its original name, but its sign is now only in Arabic letters, and Zohra Drif practices as an attorney from her office in one of the buildings that line the square.

Names of public spaces coalesce into a text and define the city on a semiotic level. In her analysis of the city of Paris as the site of revolution, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson observes that, together with other urban signs such as monuments and statues, the names of public spaces tell the history of a city and act as ‘a system of representation through which the collective identity defines itself, to itself and to the world beyond’. The names are given in order to control the city in the symbolic realm and while they record and interpret the past, they affirm the present ideologically and politically. The ‘urban text’ (the nomination of public spaces) is thus not fixed, but changes in a continual process of interpreting and accommodating social transformations. Daniel Miro’s discussion of street names as lieux de mémoire also underlines their role in displaying a community’s collective memory, as well as ‘the establishment’s representation of the national memory’. The text inscribed on Algiers during the 130 years of French rule celebrated the occupation and appropriation of the city, meanwhile displaying a flexibility to adapt to the shifting conditions at home and in the colony. In the aftermath of Algerian independence, it was rewritten by Algerians in order to claim the city back, to rebuild it metaphorically. While it was clear that the representational landscape of French power had to be erased, the authority of history had to be considered and the past had to be negotiated carefully for the postcolonial text to fulfill its promise.

The renaming of Place Bugeaud as Place Abdel Kader marked an opposition that bound the past to the present. The post-independence names of many streets were similarly rooted in the history of the colonial era and were linked to the present by a corresponding memory that represented the struggle against French rule. For example, Rue d’Isly that bisected Place Bugeaud was renamed Rue Ben Mehdi Larbi after one of the six leaders of the National Liberation Front who had taken the historic decision to launch armed resistance against the French; Rue Bugeaud in the same vicinity took the name of another member of this group, Mustapha Ben Boulaid; Rue des Colonies (Street of Settlers) became Rue de Libérés (Street of the Liberated) and Rue du Colonel Driant (of the French army) turned into Rue du Colonel Salah Zamoum, a National Liberation Army leader in charge of the Algerois region who was killed in 1961. Equal rank was not always an issue: a legendary resistance fighter from the streets of the Casbah, Ali La Pointe, poor and illiterate as he was, could topple a prominent historic military figure, Général Randon, who was remembered for fighting against Abdel Kader and especially for his pacification of Kabylia. Renaming public places after independence was, therefore, a systematic act of reappropriation, one that capitalised on the ideological and pedagogical potential of urban semantics. The names ‘reflect
the idea that a people holds regarding its own history,’ to quote Leonard Kodjo, who examined the same phenomenon in the Ivory Coast.\textsuperscript{30}

The private spaces of Algiers were also imbued with symbolism about power structure and conquest. The dense and interlocked forms of the residential fabric, photographed over and over by the French, stood as the physical manifestation of the impenetrability of the Algerian society. The house, not accessible to outsiders because it was the realm of women and the family, was understood by the French as the key unit to be conquered. For Algerians, it epitomised the ‘inviolable space’ that preserved Algerian identity and acted as a buffer against the colonial society.\textsuperscript{31} The political importance of the houses of Algiers was recapitulated in a painting which itself became a symbol of French colonialism and an enduring lieu de mémoire: Les femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement by Eugène Delacroix, painted in 1834. As a window into the harem of a Muslim house in the casbah, Delacroix’s painting alluded to entering the most private, the most sacred part of Algerian society. An official commission from the French government, hence blatant in its political meanings, it represented the conquest of Algeria by entering the Algerian home. It corresponded chronologically to the carving of the Place d’Armes and complemented metaphorically the physical gesture made by the public square. Les femmes d’Alger carried a long-lasting authority as a lieu de mémoire, intertwining the colonial and the postcolonial periods.

As a masterpiece, Delacroix’s Les femmes d’Alger (prominently displayed in the Louvre) had always been a popular topic of study among artists, but its importance as a political symbol was highlighted around 1930, the centennial of Algeria’s occupation. Earlier, from the 1880s on, the postcard industry had


capitalised upon the same image, popularising and disseminating its innumerable versions throughout the empire — and the world — expanding the accessibility range of this ‘portable’ lieux de mémoire way beyond ‘high’ art circles.\textsuperscript{32}

In her renowned book, Les femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement (published in 1979), Algerian writer Assia Djebar reads this painting in reference to Pablo Picasso's Les femmes d'Alger. One marking the beginning of French colonisation, the other the end, the paintings evoke divergent interpretations for Djebar, sparked by the differences in the visions of the two European artists, but more importantly, in the social and cultural transformations brought by the French occupation and the Algerian War. It is not Delacroix’s ‘superficial Orient’ that Djebar cares to dissect, but the subtler implications of the painting, especially the fact that the scene makes the observer conscious of his unwarranted presence in the intimacy of this room which encloses upon the women who are frozen in an act of waiting, passive and resigned.\textsuperscript{33}

Picasso obsessively re-worked Delacroix's theme during the first months of the Algerian War, producing fifteen paintings and two lithographs from December 1954 to February 1955.\textsuperscript{34} As amply documented by the army photographers themselves, it is during the last years of their rule that the French finally penetrated the casbah, from its streets to its rooftops, to the courtyards of the houses. Against the violence of this background, Djebar argues that in Picasso’s work, the universe of the women of Algiers has been completely transformed from Delacroix’s ‘tragedy’ into a ‘new happiness’ by means of a ‘glorious liberation of space, an awakening of body in dance, energy, and free movement’. Their previous hermetic situation has been preserved, she tells us,

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Pablo Picasso, Les femmes d'Alger, 1955
Collection and photo: Washington University, Gallery of Art, St Louis, Missouri
Djebar, * Femmes d’Alger*, op cit, pp 186–189. The association of Algerian women’s bodies with the memory of the war is a recurring theme in Djebar’s work. See, for example, the discussion by Ranjana Khanna on *La Zerda et les chants de l’oubli* (1980), a film Djebar made with Malek Alloula on the French occupation of Algeria. *La Zerda* begins with the sentence ‘La mémoire est corps de femme’ (memory is the body of women). Ranjana Khanna, *The Battle of Algiers and The Noubâ of the Women of Mont Chenoua,* Third Text, no 43, Summer 1998, p 26.

Steinberg, *Other Criteria,* op cit, p 130.


Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, op cit, p 15.

but now reversed into a condition of serenity, at peace with the past and the future. Djebar associates the ‘liberation’ at home with the occupation of the city’s public spaces by women resistance fighters taking part in the war. She establishes a metaphorical relationship between fragments of women’s bodies and the explosives they carried under their clothes. She also provides a critique of women’s conditions in Algeria following independence by arguing that the grenades women hid under their clothes ‘as if they were their own breasts’ exploded against them.35

Djebar’s reading of Delacroix and Picasso’s works to frame the dramatic change in women’s lives during her country’s *nuit coloniale* and its aftermath calls for continued debate and possibly disagreement, especially given Picasso’s ‘continual struggle in the *Femmes d’Alger* series to reconcile distance with presence, possession, and watching’ — in the words of Leo Steinberg.36 What matters, however, is the fact that Djebar reestablishes the connection between domestic spaces and women’s lives by relying on the authority of one of the most blatant symbols of French colonialism and the artistic tradition based on reproductions and reinterpretations of this symbol. She thus accentuates the entanglements of her message. Delacroix’s painting becomes a place of memory that can be turned around and recharged with new meanings. Djebar’s stand does not imply ‘giving in’ to the coloniser culture, but rather deploying it to broaden and underline her critique.

Djebar is not alone in reloading colonial cultural formations with new meanings and provoking complicated linkages between contemporary Algerian problems and the country’s history. For example, in Kamal Dahane’s 1992 documentary film, titled again *Les femmes d’Alger*, Delacroix’s painting re-emerges: the famous setting is recreated in the last scene, but now is emptied of women. Following the issues raised in the film, Dahane suggests that the women have decided to leave Delacroix’s symbolic realm in an act of resistance to present-day political and religious movements that attempt to ban them from public life and confine them to the domestic realm.

Novelist Leila Sebbar takes another leap and brings *Les femmes d’Alger* back to present-day France, to the realities of postcoloniality in the former métropole. When she sees Delacroix’s famous painting in the Louvre, Shérazade, the protagonist of Sebbar’s *Les carnets de Shérâzade*, associates Delacroix’s women of Algiers with the Maghrebi women imprisoned in dismal, small apartments on the outskirts of French cities.37 Therefore, contemporary Algerian intellectuals deliberately maintain the colonial *lieux de mémoire*, but complicate their original implications. Twisted and turned, they are now used to provide a familiar platform of critique for today’s realities. The *lieux de mémoire* intricately convolute their own themes in ways that define their significance. They act, in Pierre Nora’s words, as ‘distorting mirrors’.38

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