

Small Archives and the Silences of Algerian History

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"Algeria continues its history thus: each generation assumes the responsibility for reinventing everything, starting all over again, because successive governments have ensured that everything is erased, wiped out, as if its first principle was that amnesiacs must be the most docile and easily governed people."

Nourredine Saadi (1999:7)

After the "Black Decade" of terrorism (1991–2002), Algeria and the Algerian diaspora witnessed an intellectual and artistic effervescence which rapidly spread to the international scene. For example, in 2003, an event jointly organized by a mix of Algerian and French cultural institutions, "Djazaïr, une année de l'Algérie en France," presented an opportunity to several artists to break the silence of war. The historian Anissa Bouayed reminds us that at the beginning of this century, Algerian artists "served as sensitive revealers of unspeakable horrifying situations, or as fearless agitators scrutinizing social or political realities" (Bouayed 2012a:177). Ten years later, the turmoil in Algeria and its diasporas is still perceptible, and the fiftieth anniversary of independence in 2012 gave artists and intellectuals the occasion to "have a fresh perspective, and astutely criticize the national War of Liberation" that lasted from 1954 to 1962 (Kharfi 2012). This focus on history in contemporary Algerian artistic works is not only apparent in literature (which has long paved the way), but also in the visual arts and, as Benjamin Stora reminds us, in cinema. He concludes an article on the subject by asking whether Algerian cinema will find its way back to the international scene through the path of history (Stora 2012:188).

Nonetheless, referring to the War of Independence, Christiane Chaulet-Achour wonders, "[M]ust we declare this memory no longer relevant and move on to other things or might it still be

useful to recuperate and re-examine it from forgotten material?" (Chaulet-Achour 2012:196). Judged by the contribution of works discussed in this article, the memory of the Algerian Revolution is far from outdated, and much still remains to be said. I have, therefore, decided to question the role of "speaker" (*diseuse*), but especially of "messenger" (*passseuse*) (terms borrowed from the writer Assia Djebar) in the memory work conducted by a new generation of visual artists on the international scene: Rachida Azdaou, Dalila Dalléas Bouzar, Amina Menia, and Zineb Sedira.

These "messengers" employ photography, video, and installations, as well as more classical media such as drawing or painting, to broach the history of Algeria and the War of Independence, which they themselves did not experience, but their parents witnessed directly. With the help of various archival sources, these artists question and try to reinvigorate family or individual memories which may or may not have been passed on to them. For them, it is a matter of accounting for other histories, those of individuals marginalized by "History with a capital H."¹

Before proceeding, let's draw up a list (not exhaustive) of some shared characteristics of this artistic group. First, these artists are part of the "new generations" defined by the historians Mohammed Harbi and Benjamin Stora (2004:13) as "those who ... have no responsibility in the confrontations of yesterday. They wish to read this page methodically, with their own questioning and perspectives. They intend to escape from the imprisonment of colonial trauma." Second, the work of these artists is steeped in family experience of the war. Thus, the family plays a fundamental role in the transmission (or not) of these memories. Not the "people,"² put forward as the subject of history during the Revolution, but individuals in their singularity—their faces and words—are at the heart of these works, which draw upon private and family sources (photographs, testimonies, and transcribed oral texts), as well as



1 Assia Djébar
Still from *La Noubia des Femmes du Mont Chenoua*
(1977), 115 minutes

Photo: courtesy of Women Make Movies, www.wmm.com

2 Zineb Sedira
Mother, Daughter and I (2003)
Triptych 1, C-print mounted on aluminum; Portraits:
120 cm x 120 cm each; Hands (in oval format): 90 cm
x 26 cm each

Photo: © Zineb Sedira; courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris



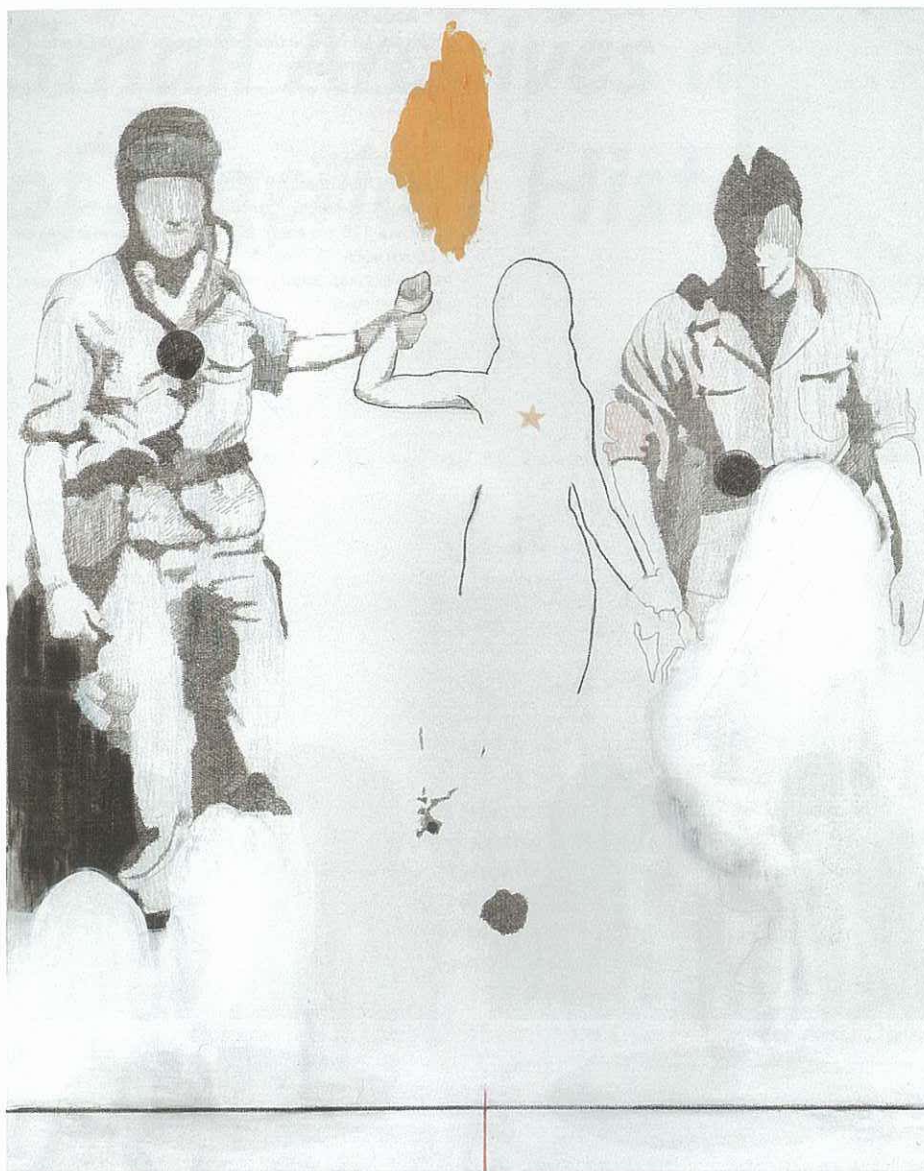
previously unseen and marginal sources, to make present a war which has long been repressed by the state authorities.

Parallel to this immersion in the oral and visual memory of individuals who experienced the war, these artists do considerable research in order to reach some understanding, by confronting their personal inheritance of the Algerian War of Independence, comprising silences, absences, or, in contrast, an excess of material, with an abundance of literature and cinematography concerning this past.³ They want to go beyond what was transmitted to them, in order to translate their intimate experiences of this history in words and to move beyond the imprisonment of the colonial trauma.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these artists have the profound desire to diminish the tensions of such memories, to mitigate the battle of words and images inherited from the War of Independence which is still very present in the public sphere both in France and in Algeria. They hope to create a dialogue between group memories, both on the Algerian side (where the

official memory of a "hero-people" has finally disintegrated) and on the French side (where different communities of memory attempt to cohabit, suffering from hyperamnesia since the 1990s),⁴ in order to "tend to the wounds, which involves acceptance and recognition" (Azdaou 2012:157).

In order to place the works presented in this article in perspective, I will link them with the monumental work of Assia Djébar, who has always sung the praises of Algerian women, the "messengers of histories" who relay memories of the time before colonization and the Revolution. In her preface to the issue on the war in Algeria in *L'Esprit créateur*, Lila Ibrahim-Ouali demonstrates that writers have progressed further than visual artists in their pursuit of the past (to better experience the present) and that, amongst those, women especially do not hesitate "to deride the official historical discourse and [to inscribe] history as they experienced it, in its repercussions on daily life, in their texts. The act of writing personalizes the relation that the individual has with the national issue and creates a place of memory to rival



3 Dalila Dalléas Bouzar
blue white red (2011–2012)
 Pencil and acrylic on canvas; 100 cm x 80 cm
 Photo: © Dalila Dalléas Bouzar

the greater collective memory which, for its part, rejects anonymity in the shadow of history” (Ibrahim-Ouali 2001:7).

Based on “Djebarian” thought on the transmission of history, this article will focus on one work from each of the four artists. Whereas Dalila Dalléas Bouzar offers an intimate pictorial work that draws upon visual archives, Rachida Azdaou opts for a conceptual installation, but like Dalila Dalléas Bouzar, questions the historical amnesia of Algerian society. Amina Menia and Zineb Sedira, for their part, attempt to fill the gaps in memory and history by delving into some previously unexplored “archives” that speak of people and places that had been buried in anonymity and indifference. Through meticulous research on newly discovered documents, both of these artists attempt to reestablish the connections lost with a past muzzled and instrumentalized by political forces, in the form of video installations. These four artists rely on archives available to them and appropriate them to the point of becoming one with them, bearing witness in the first person through the use of gestures (in drawing), writing, words, or images.

THE LEGACY OF ASSIA DJEBAR

A key figure in Algerian literature since the late 1950s, Assia Djebbar is part of “the generation that defined itself through the struggle for independence, and whose recovery of identity is closely linked to the participation in a history actively experienced, no longer subject to forced confinement” (Clerc 1997:6). Consequently, in her works, she has always claimed the role of “messenger of histories,” the role of the Algerian woman who, since colonial times, has relayed orally in her home (and beyond, through her art) the history of the family and that of the country, mixing private accounts with official history.

In 1976, her career took a turn when she launched herself into the production of her first film, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*⁵ for Algerian television, with the aim of expanding her public. *La Nouba des femmes* (Fig. 1) is a day-to-day history of women in her home region, realized through their testimonies on the War of Independence. Lila, the heroine of this film, a blend of fact and fiction, is the daughter of a female resistance fighter who disappeared during the war. Lila returns to the country after a

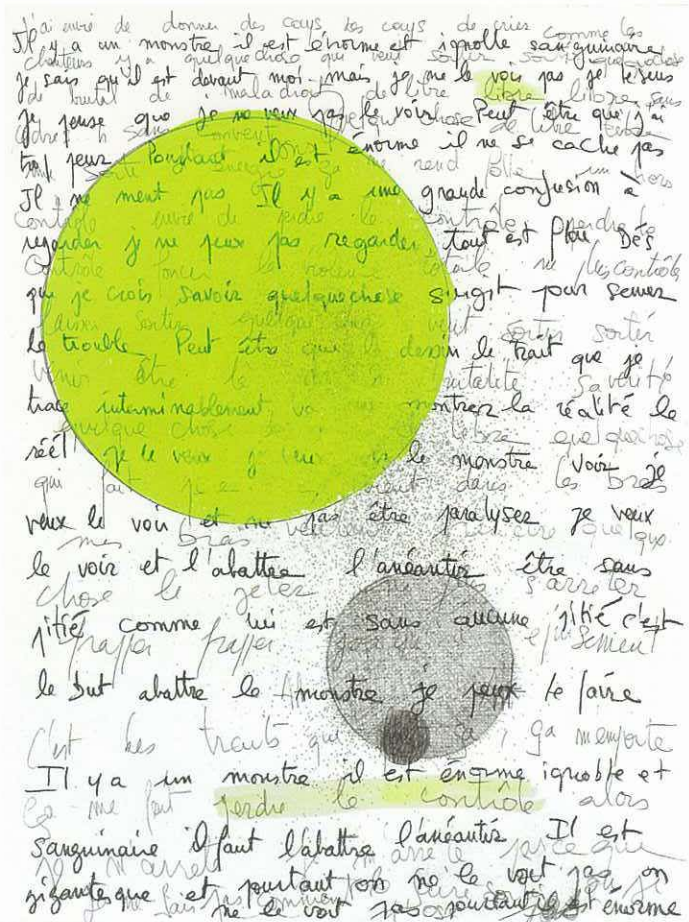
long absence to interview women who fought during the war and to "[recover] a voice that colonization almost extinguished and, with it, the life stories which it conveyed" (Clerc 2001:95).

In an interview Djébar affirmed that

the re-possession of identity can only occur through history, that is, through the past. We have to re-establish the dialectical relationship of past and present. We must not be afraid of history's dark pages, but shed light on what we must keep for the present and the future. We can only conceive of a culture in once colonized countries through a search for our roots. Right now, we are a society cut off from its roots at the level of memory.⁶

A few years later, in 1982, still for Algerian television, Djébar produced *La Zerda ou les chants de l'oubli*.⁷ This time, the archive invaded the screen. Djébar begins with the raw material (fragments of cinematographic archives from colonial times) that constitutes the "dramatic and emotional driving force" of the film (Ménager 2000:115). Thus, in the film's prelude, the author tells the story of "the entrance of the country into the colonial night" and reveals her intentions:

In a Maghreb region subjugated by colonial domination and reduced to silence, photographers and filmmakers invaded to capture us in images. *La Zerda* is their bleak "celebration" of our society. In stark contrast to their images with their penetrating gaze, we attempted to create an alternative vision, offering glimpses of a daily life held in contempt ... But above all, behind the veil of this now exposed reality, we collected anonymous voices that re-imagined the soul of a reunified Maghreb, and of our past.⁸



(above)

4 Dalila Dalléas Bouzar

Writing (2011–2012)

Pencil and acrylic on paper; 40 cm x 30 cm

Photo: © Dalila Dalléas Bouzar

(left)

5 Dalila Dalléas Bouzar

Lounès Matoub (2011–2012)

Pencil and acrylic on paper; 40 cm x 30 cm

Photo: © Dalila Dalléas Bouzar



6 Rachida Azdaou
Archives d'Alger (2010), installation view

In producing these two programmatic films in the 1970s–1980s, Assia Djebar not only affirmed the need to free the intimate word from the weight of collective amnesia, but also totally renewed her novelistic writing by “rekindling the vividness of the past (*rallumer le vif du passé*) ... bring[ing] stifled voices and asphyxiated memories back to life and into history” (Donadey 1996:892).

If we pursue our reflections, we might even claim that this attachment to oral transmission seen throughout the work of Assia Djebar stems from a feminine approach to history. As we will observe, the word (written or spoken) and its private, unrestricted flow are also at the heart of the works to be discussed (Fig. 2). In this way, it seems important to bring together the work of Assia Djebar (and some artists to be discussed here) with the work of women historians such as Arlette Farge and Régine Robin, for whom “small lives”⁹ are worth as much as

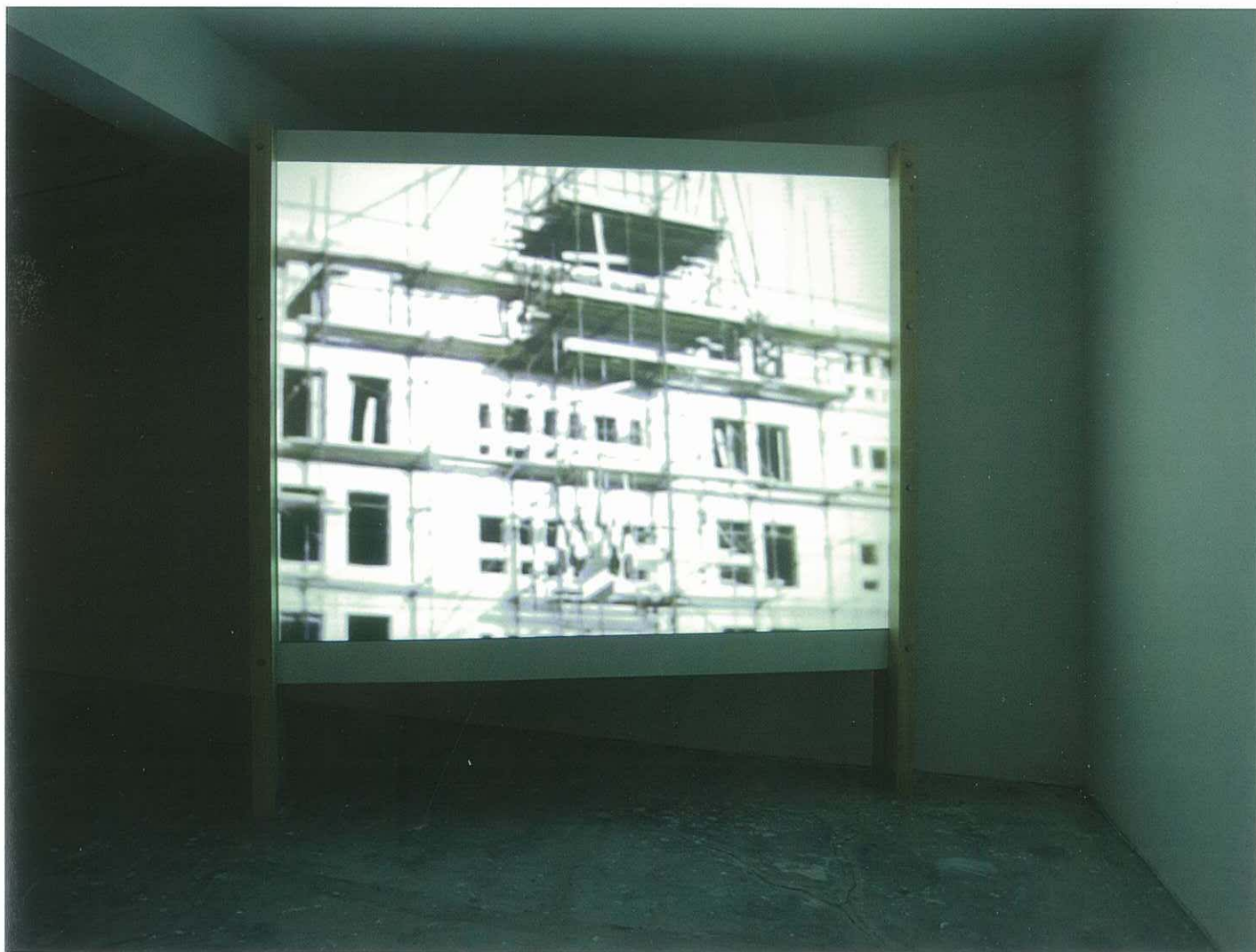
those of “great men.” “Something tells me,” writes Arlette Farge (1994:back cover), “that we have to go elsewhere. Because in the archive we can read about the weight of speaking beings, this fluttering that history erases in its official record.” Therefore, at the heart of the archive and beyond it, it is important for historians to seek forms—fictional or poetic—which, without filling the gaps, allow us to reach some understanding and express doubts about history. Anissa Bouayed says exactly that in the text that she composed for the catalogue of the exhibition “Algérie, année zero” by Dalila Dalléas Bouzar:

[H]istorians are not the only masters of the game in their investigations of the past. The need to look backwards, here by a young artist born well after the events, appears as a quest for truth and gives an account of history on the verge between traces left by the past and the imagination (Bouayed 2012b:38).



(above)
7 Amina Menia
A Peculiar Family Album (2012)
 14 min 48 s
 Stills from the video

(below)
8 Amina Menia
A Peculiar Family Album (2012), installation view,
 Sharjah Biennial
 Photo: © Alfredo Rubio





9 Zineb Sedira

Still from *Retelling Histories: My Mother Told Me*
(2003)

Single screen projection, 10 min, French and English
subtitles

Photo: © Zineb Sedira, courtesy the artist and kamel
mennour, Paris

**"SEARCHING THROUGH THE MEMORY OF ALGERIA, AT
THE SAME TIME AS SEARCHING THROUGH MY OWN MEMORY"**

In *Algérie, année zéro ou quand commence la mémoire*, a series produced in 2010–2011, Dalila Dalléas Bouzar (b. 1974, Oran) reconstructs her faint memories through the slowness of drawing. It is only very recently that the artist developed this awareness, this need to reconnect with her family's past and that of her country. Living in Berlin in the fall of 2010, she was shocked when watching a documentary film, *Algeria(s)*, on the "Black Decade."¹⁰ This documentary made her realize that there was an absence of images on the Algerian civil war. Thus she started looking for photographs about the two wars—the civil war and

the war for independence—in the media available to her, such as the Internet. She ultimately chose forty images of these two wars to form the basis for the series *Algérie, année 0*, patiently reproduced them on paper, and partially modified them by adding forms and colors, red and yellow in particular (Figs. 3–5).¹¹ Her "memory work" did not stop there, as she also wrote an introductory text for this series and invited several contributors, mindful to revive these memories in collaboration with others. On the back cover of the catalogue resulting from this work, the artist revealed her motivations thus:

I felt compelled to search for images in the archives of the Algerian independence War and the "Dark Decade" because of a deeply inti-

mate sense that there was a lack of images of these two moments. It seems to me that these two periods lie at the basis of contemporary Algeria.¹² They are contemporary with my own history and my father's experience; he was twenty during the Liberation War. As for the "Dark Decade," its shock treatment forced me to embark on memory work (Dalléas Bouzar 2012).

Her awareness of the civil war led her to trace back her family's memory. She wanted to interview her father: what was he doing during the Liberation War and why did the family subsequently move to France? It was the silence of her father, forcibly recruited into the French army at the start of the 1960s, that triggered her desire to produce the series *Algerie, année 0*. She had to exorcize this break in memory:

I think that the source of the violence of the civil war which devastated Algeria in the 1990s is linked to a denial of memory, maintained by the official history of this country. Exploring Algeria's memory, at the same time as exploring my own memory, became a necessity, an act which should allow me to unveil what had been concealed, and to free myself [...] by reconnecting with my origins, both cultural and existential (Dalléas Bouzar 2010:90).

Transformed by the treatment of the design and the painting, it is as though the images of the archive of *Algérie, année zéro* are emptied of their violence, neutralized, placed at a certain remove in a quasi-abstraction, as if the artist wanted to allow us to look squarely at them and to be able to meditate on their impact, indeed to begin a process of mourning that the visual pantheon

10 Zineb Sedira

Lighthouse in the Sea of Time (2011)

Video installation of six screens (Parts I–III)

Shot in HD and super 16 mm; format 16/9

Part I: installation of four screens; 16 min 53 s

Still from the video, Commissioned by the Triennale de Folkestone

Photo: © Zineb Sedira, courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris





11 Zineb Sedira
Lighthouse in the Sea of Time (2011)
 Still from Part III, *A Museum of Traces*; one screen;
 12 min 32 s
 Photo: © Zineb Sedira, courtesy the artist and kamel
 mennour, Paris

of the official version of the Algerian Revolution does not allow.

The titles are there to situate these works redolent of painful memories. And the interactions between the pictures and the virtual archival images that inspired them are inevitable. The artist's pencil depicts the "martyrs" Amirouche (a colonel of the ALN [Army of National Liberation], eliminated in questionable circumstances by the French army in 1959) and Lou-nès Matoub (the famous Kabyle activist singer assassinated in 1998; Fig. 5) in the style of cenotaphs or tomb sculptures, while she takes an image from television that immortalizes President Mohamed Boudiaf in the second before his assassination in Annaba on June 29, 1992.

"IF WE KNEW HOW TO SAY 'I AM' AND TO START TO BE ..."

Born in 1973 in Tizi Ouzou, Rachida Azdaou lives and works in Algiers, where she teaches at the School of Fine Arts and paints, draws, makes prints, and photographs. More recently, she has begun working with video. In a text entitled "La longue nuit" (the long night), which appeared on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Algerian independence, she returned to the vital role her parents played in transmitting to her the memory of the war in Algeria (Azdaou 2012:147). In an interview, she added:

We all share these memories. I have worked for many years on the absence and transmission of memory. Why? It is in speaking of something personal that I move towards what surrounds me, my society and the ignorance of what we are. And I tell myself that we would have been able to solve many issues if we knew how to say "I am" and to start to be ... But to be, we first have to know who we are (Ferhani 2010).

Here we cannot avoid thinking of the ambitions of Assia Djebar's work. The year 2003 represents an important watershed in the artistic career of Rachida Azdaou, whose painting and figurative art led her to installations and a greater desire to express herself, to know who she is, by questioning the silences and absences in Algerian memory. In a sober installation first presented in 2010, she positioned glass jars filled with water at regular intervals on shelves. The title *Archives d'Alger* is stuck to one of the shelves without a date or any further explanation (Fig. 6).

In a text that accompanies the work the artist laments the plight of Algiers, "a city which never stops tracing the forms of its malaise, volumes [buildings] which shelter a population increasingly closed in upon itself. The only comfort is that the sky of Algiers is composed of all the blues." What is the source of this malaise? What is the source of this withdrawal that only the blue of the

Algerian sky can attenuate? The artist seeks to understand these questions and finds the beginnings of a response through a detour to a website dedicated to the city of Algiers.¹³ She learns that part of the mythic neighborhood of Bab El Oued was, in fact, built on a necropolis destroyed in the colonial period to construct an esplanade. This brought about the destruction of a great quantity of bones from this cemetery; they were sent by boat to Marseille to be transformed into coal. Informed by this, these jars filled with water make us think of jars of formalin used to conserve fragments of dead bodies. The installation questions this hidden chapter of the Algerian past that resulted in the desecration of cemeteries:

Archives, the content of which is carefully arranged in jars.

But what remains of this history?

What must we pass down so that the crack does not become an abyss?
[...]

Algerians, faced with this discolored, emptied memory!

The faces, the bodies that wander, that make so much noise, and bring to life these back alleys, are unaware of their histories, incapable of questioning the past.

The places that they occupy, that they create, seem to be ignorant of their trajectories, of their lives (Azdaou 2012:158).

Are Algerians condemned to wander in an eternal present, without being anchored in the past or having hope for the future? While Rachida Azdaou questions "history through a critical

approach of the social and political treatment of the memory of the city of Algiers" (Laggoune-Aklouche 2011:4), Amina Menia unveils the flaws of the city that emerged to her in a very different way. This indicates that, perhaps, she has found a strategy to fill the gaps in Algerian memory.

"THE ARCHIVE, A VERY LIVELY MATERIAL WHICH COMES FROM THE TERRAIN"

The city of Algiers is the central theme in the work by Amina Menia (b. 1976, Algiers) who, through installations, sometimes in situ, offers us different visions of history in various media.

The archive interests me since it is very lively material which comes from the terrain. The information is both current and plural due to the different perspectives of sociology, political science ... My task is to find out how am I going to transcend this information? For that, I favour what is human since I am not involved in direct and cold research (Be Diaf 2013:8).

Well-versed in the architectural history of her city of Algiers, Amina Menia crosses it tirelessly, lovingly, to the point of knowing it down to the smallest, most private nooks and crannies. Therefore, it was natural that she became interested in the journey of Fernand Pouillon, the famous French architect who remodeled many neighborhoods of Algiers in the 1950s, a few

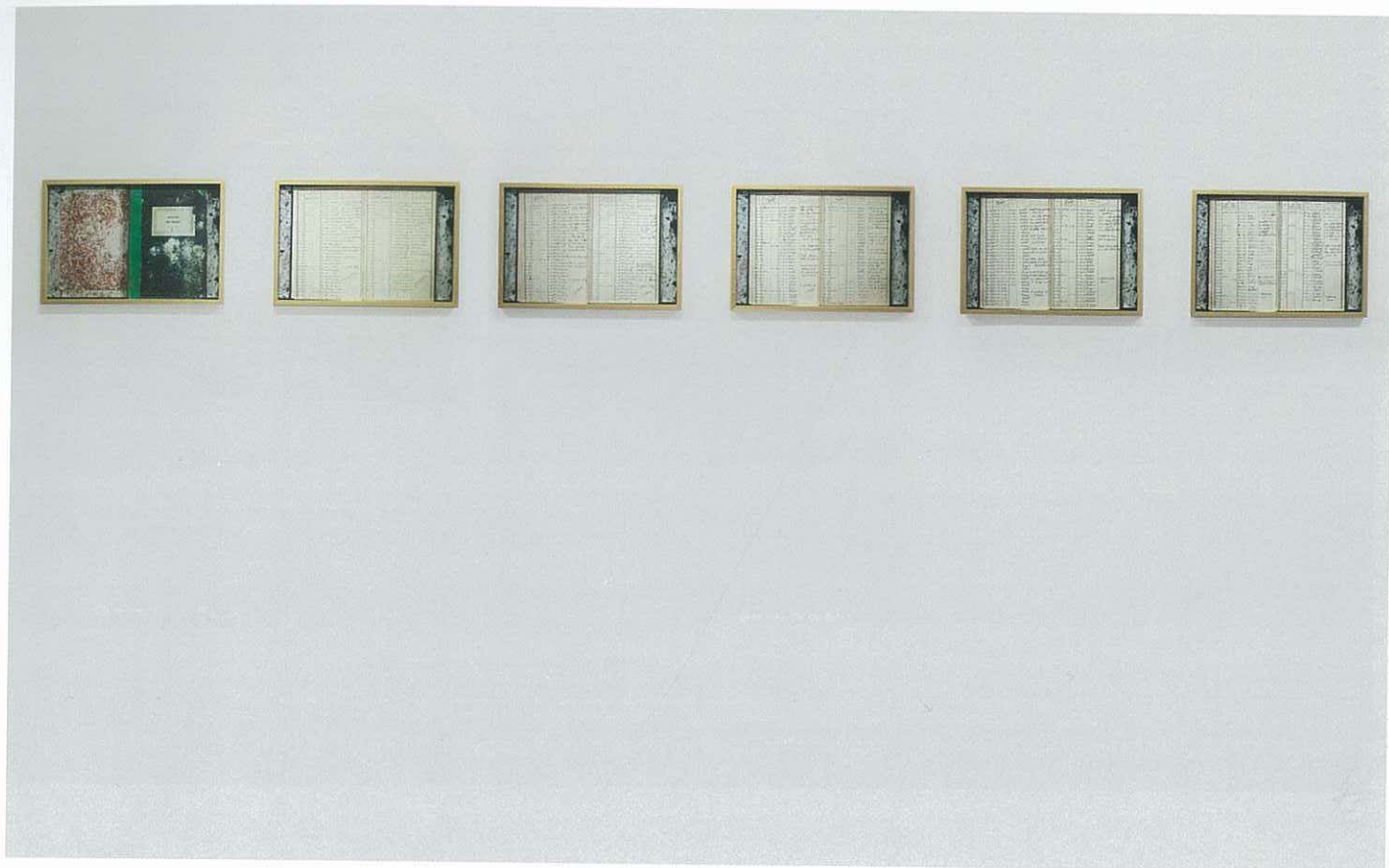
12 Zineb Sedira

Registre de phare (2011)

Color digital print; 54.5 cm x 37 cm

Photo: © Zineb Sedira, courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris





13 Zineb Sedira

Registre de phare (2011)

6 digital prints on Hahnemule fine art media paper, framed; 54.5 cm x 37 cm each

Installation view: *Beneath the Surface* at the galerie kamel mennour, Paris

Photo: © Zineb Sedira, courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris

months before the start of the armed struggle. As artist-in-residence in Marseille in 2012, she discovered in the archives of the then mayor, Jacques Chevallier, traces of footage documenting the inauguration of these new neighborhoods destined for Algerians in 1953 and 1954, a few months before the Battle of Algiers. She admits to being fascinated and moved by these images, rescued from oblivion, that no Algerian before her had seen. From this sprang the idea of this *Peculiar Family Album* (2012–; Figs. 7–8), indeed, the album of Algiers, in which her semi-autobiographical work of fiction takes account of the social and historical context of the city. Somewhat like Assia Djebar in *La Zerda*, but mixing autobiographical elements with the history of Algiers in an introspective manner, Amina Menia chose to accompany this raw footage from the silent archives with a reading of a story that she wrote during the summer of 2012. In her prose, Algiers assumes the traits of a mosaic city, in constant movement, unpredictable, full of paradoxes, yesterday like today, both repulsive, like an ailing body, and luminous so blue and immutable as the Algerian sky, also evoked in the text which accompanies Rachida

Azdaou's *Archives d'Alger*, discussed above. Beyond its critical dimension (where the reinterpretation of the past occurs in the light of the present),¹⁴ this film is a declaration of love for the city with which the artist entirely identifies herself in the form of a young girl, who appears in the archival images.

Much like Zineb Sedira, who completes this overview of “messengers of history,” Amina Menia deals with the fragility of history and identity and focuses all her attention on what exists and is threatened with disappearance, in order to resist amnesia and to create bridges between memories and points of reference for the future.

“RECREATING AN ARCHIVE FROM SILENCE, FROM THE VOID”

Born in 1963 in Gennevilliers (a suburb of Paris) to Algerian parents, Zineb Sedira has lived and worked in London since 1986. At the start of this century, her personal history and that of her family, who left Algeria for France, comprised the principal focus of her artistic process. In *Mother, Father and I* (2003) and *Retelling Histories: My Mother Told Me* (2003), the artist filmed

DATES		GHT		POURCHUTES		DATES		GHT		POURCHUTES	
LA LUNE		LA LUNE		LA LUNE		LA LUNE		LA LUNE		LA LUNE	
1. 2	17. 40	6. 00	6. 50	Mchleb	Reste en cade 1.1.1962	1. 2	17. 40	5. 15	6. 00	Chaugui	Reste en cade 1.1.1962
2. 3	17. 45	" "	6. 50	Ducland	162.000 Kgs	2. 3	" "	" "	6. 00	Fischer	350.000 Kgs
3. 4	" "	" "	6. 50	Chaugui		3. 4	" "	" "	6. 00	Chaugui	
4. 5	" "	6. 00	6. 50	Ducland	cons. phare 240.000	4. 5	" "	5. 10	6. 00	Fischer	cons. phare 184.000
5. 6	" "	5. 55	6. 50	Chaugui	cons. lumière 30.000	5. 6	17. 45	" "	6. 00	Chaugui	cons. lumière 6.000
6. 7	" "	" "	6. 50	Ducland	cons. cuisine 24.000	6. 7	" "	" "	6. 00	Fischer	cons. cuisine 24.000
7. 8	17. 50	" "	6. 40	Chaugui	cons. Tringère 19.000	7. 8	" "	5. 05	6. 40	Ducland	cons. Tringère 24.000
8. 9	" "	5. 50	6. 40	Ducland	chauffage 2.000	8. 9	" "	" "	6. 40	Fischer	chauffage 2.000
9. 10	" "	" "	6. 50	Chaugui	Verhets 5.000	9. 10	" "	" "	6. 40	Ducland	Verhets 5.000
10. 11	" "	" "	6. 40	Fischer	cons. Totale	10. 11	" "	5. 00	6. 40	Fischer	cons. Totale
11. 12	" "	" "	6. 50	Chaugui	250.000 Kgs	11. 12	17. 40	" "	6. 40	Ducland	250.000 Kgs
12. 13	17. 55	5. 45	6. 40	Fischer	essais lampe Aladin	12. 13	" "	" "	6. 50	Fischer	
13. 14	" "	" "	6. 00	Chaugui	le 15 et 21 Mars 1962	13. 14	" "	" "	6. 50	Ducland	essais lampe Aladin
14. 15	" "	" "	6. 50	Fischer	250.000 essence	14. 15	17. 55	4. 55	6. 00	Chaugui	le 15 et 21 Mars 1962
15. 16	" "	5. 40	6. 40	Chaugui	pétrole 475.000 Kgs	15. 16	" "	" "	6. 40	Ducland	250.000 essence
16. 17	" "	" "	6. 40	Fischer		16. 17	17. 45	" "	6. 40	Chaugui	Pétrole 475.000 Kgs
17. 18	" "	" "	6. 40	Ducland	pétrole trop gros	17. 18	" "	" "	6. 50	Ducland	essence 100 litres
18. 19	18. 00	5. 30	6. 50	Fischer		18. 19	" "	4. 50	6. 00	Chaugui	une 6.000
19. 20	" "	" "	6. 00	Ducland	Phare en bon	19. 20	" "	" "	6. 40	Ducland	le 15 et 21 Mars 1962
20. 21	" "	" "	6. 50	Fischer	état de Marche	20. 21	" "	" "	6. 50	Chaugui	le 15 et 21 Mars 1962
21. 22	" "	" "	6. 50	Ducland		21. 22	" "	" "	6. 40	Chaugui	Réfection le 20.4.62
22. 23	" "	5. 30	6. 40	Fischer		22. 23	17. 50	4. 45	6. 00	Fischer	Fischer de Berdian
23. 24	" "	" "	5. 20	Ducland		23. 24	" "	" "	6. 50	Chaugui	Phare en bon
24. 25	18. 05	" "	6. 50	Chaugui	le gardien. chef	24. 25	" "	" "	6. 40	Fischer	état de Marche
25. 26	" "	5. 25	6. 50	Ducland		25. 26	" "	" "	6. 40	Chaugui	
26. 27	" "	" "	6. 50	Chaugui		26. 27	17. 55	4. 40	6. 40	Fischer	le gardien chef
27. 28	" "	" "	6. 40	Ducland		27. 28	" "	" "	6. 40	Fischer	
28. 29	" "	5. 20	6. 50	Chaugui		28. 29	" "	" "	6. 50	Ducland	
29. 30	" "	" "	6. 50	Ducland		29. 30	" "	" "	6. 40	Fischer	
30. 31	" "	" "	6. 50	Chaugui		30. 31	" "	" "	6. 40	Ducland	
31. 1	18. 05	5. 40	6. 40	Fischer		31. 1	" "	4. 55	6. 40	Ducland	

14 Zineb Sedira
Mars 1962 (Accords d'Évian: cessez le feu)—
Avril 1962, 2011
Color digital print; 54.5 cm x 37 cm
Photo: © Zineb Sedira, courtesy the artist and
kamel mennour, Paris

and interviewed her own parents on the French occupation of Algeria, the war, and their departure for France.

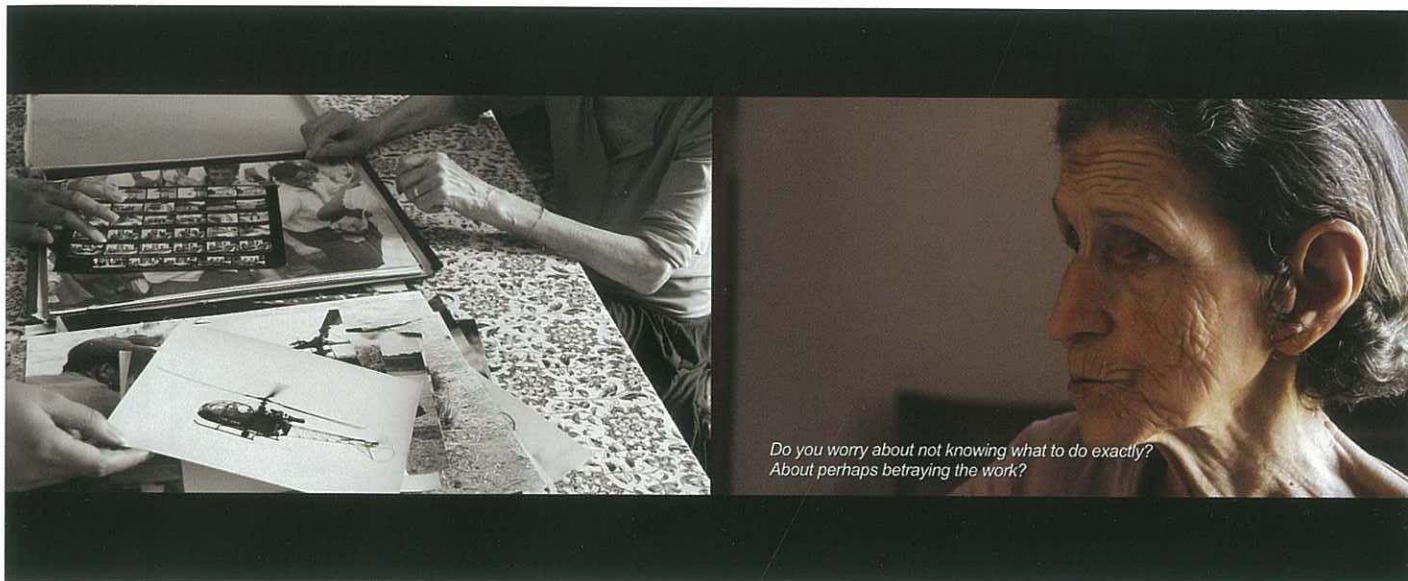
Speaking of *Retelling Histories: My Mother Told Me* (Fig. 9; compare with Figs. 1–2), Isabelle Renard reminds us: “While the work of Zineb Sedira is part of a historiographic process, the documentary style of her videos is also inspired by the traditional approach of oral storytelling[.]” quoting the artist thus: “In front of the camera, my mother retold and relived certain experiences, following this tradition of telling stories which allowed for the preservation from one generation to another of a cultural identity, especially amongst women” (Renard 2007:18–19).

After mining the past of her own family, Zineb Sedira has for several years been “re-creating” the archives of Algeria’s colonial history, which have many gaps. In this context, the installation *Lighthouse in the Sea of Time* (2011) presents, above all, an intimate history of lighthouse keepers (Fig. 10). In perusing the different works included in this installation combining videos and photographs, we learn that all the lighthouses of the country were built between 1865 and 1954. Cap Sigli on the Kabyle

coast still has a number of archives (a logbook and a visitor register) that go back to 1905, when the lighthouse was established. Cap Caxine, in the suburbs of Algiers, for its part, contains a small museum (Fig. 11), the only of its kind in Algeria, displaying objects from 1868, when the lighthouse was constructed.

The artist has filmed, photographed, and compiled all the information likely to reveal traces of Algeria’s past. In 1962–1963, following the Évian Accords, the last French lighthouse keeper of Cap Caxine was appointed to train Algerians in the trade. But before leaving the country once and for all, refusing to leave the slightest legacy to the Algerians, he burned all the lighthouse plans, only leaving them “the lighthouse register,” which the artist meticulously photographed, page by page, month by month, from 1961 to 1963 (Figs. 12–14).

Starting from these gaps, Zineb Sedira attempted to recreate something, turning these lighthouses, immutable “in the sea of time,” into the silent witnesses of Algerian history. “What interests me, she admits, is the transmission. Is it always true? I try to recreate an archive from silence, from the void.”¹⁵ One could relate



15 Zineb Sedira
Gardiennes d'images (2010)
 Part I: Double projection with sound
 19 min; Format 16/9
 Production SAM Art Projects, 2009
 Photo: © Zineb Sedira, courtesy the artist and kamel
 mennour, Paris

this to another video installation, *Gardiennes d'images* (2010), on the forgotten figure of the father of Algerian photography, Mohamed Kouaci, who remained in the shadows but whose work can be found everywhere, on stamps and on the mural frescoes in Algeria after independence. Interviewed by Amina Menia and Zineb Sedira, Safia Kouaci, the photographer's widow, acts in this 3-screen video installation as a keeper of the fragile images of the time of the Revolution, like lighthouse-keepers keeping logbooks. The two artists engage in real historical research by combining oral sources and archival photographs. This work also takes on an intimate dimension when Safia, beyond the grand historical narrative, discloses her age, solitude, and the love story between her and her husband (Fig. 15).

In *Le futur antérieur des archives*, Nathalie Piégay-Gros (2012) identifies five characteristics of archives which, according to her, encourage creation: dusty, secret, fragile, small, and missing, the last two of which—small and missing—best characterize the archives dealt with by the artists discussed in this article. As Nathalie Piégay-Gros emphasizes, the small archive, is the “archive of the obscure, indeed the missing archive of existences of which no trace remains in the memory” (Piégay-Gros 2012:38). This “archive of the obscure,” so well highlighted by our four artists, stands in sharp contrast to the political archive, that left by the political authority, which is inaccessible and tightly controlled, and constitutes official history.

CONCLUSION

In proposing an “alternative” usage of archives (and of memories), either collected by the artists or left in their custody, the artists we discussed have resurrected the ghosts of a past marked by the violence of war, and colonization.

Seeking to share memories, these artists want to open up a reflection on history. Does this make them historians? This is a far cry from their conceptions. Rather, their goal is to render the practice of the historian personal, following the model of Assia Djebar who adopted the role of “passing on history” and, in so doing, pose questions about our own identities, as well as the history that might have shaped them. The idea of transmission is the *leitmotif* of these artists.

Rachida Azdaou, Dalila Dalléas Bouzar, Amina Menia, and Zineb Sedira are the media of memory, the messengers of Algerian history. Faced with an official history controlled by the state, the sole guarantor of the Revolution, these artists, far removed from political conflicts, are seeking to loosen tongues, to work with the tensions in memory, to heal the past, and to liberate the present.

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1 This expression is taken from Perec 2003:6.

2 In particular, I think of the recent work of the artist Mustapha Sedjal, who in 2012 questioned this aspect of the Algerian Revolution in "personalizing" (a play on the French word "père" or "father") the famous slogan painted on the wall of the Casbah in Algiers during the War of Independence: "A single hero, the people" (photographed by Marc Riboud) to replace it with "A single hero, my father."

3 All this literature and cinematography is now accessible on the Internet, a rich source of archives on line, which younger generations, who never experienced the war, draw upon heavily.

4 See Branche 2005. In an article published in *Le Monde* (Branche 2012), this historian, who through her doctoral thesis on torture (2001) contributed greatly to the advancement of French research on the Algerian war of independence, exhorted her readers to "pool all information as the only way to bring forward the truth and contribute to forming the bases of a reconciliation which is not paid for by a coerced loss of memory."

5 Assia Djebar, *La Noubia des femmes du mont Chenoua* (Algier: RTA [Algerian TV], 1978; 112'). *La Noubia* was awarded the International Critics' Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1979.

6 Assia Djebar, interviewed by Josie Fanon in *Des femmes en mouvement* (no. 3) in March 1978, and in *Demain l'Afrique*, in 1977.

7 Assia Djebar, *La Zerda et les chants de l'oubli* (Algier: RTA, 1982; 60'). *La Zerda* was awarded "best historical film" at the Berlin Festival in January 1983.

8 Assia Djebar, 1982. Opening of *La Zerda*.

9 To pick up the title of Pierre Michon's *Vies minuscules/Small Lives* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984) with also a nod to the collective work *Histoires minuscules des révolutions arabes*, directed by Wassyla Tamzali (Chèvre-Feuille étoilée eds, 2012).

10 Patrice Barrat, Malek Bensmaïl, and Thierry Leclère, *Algérie(s)* (Documentary film, 2004; 160').

11 *Algérie, année zéro*, through its title, directly draws its inspiration from the history of cinema. How can we not think of the work of Roberto Rossellini, *Germania anno zero*, which came out in 1948? *Algérie, année zéro* is also the title of a documentary (long unseen, because it was banned) produced in July 1962, in the first days of independent Algeria, by Marceline Loridan and Jean-Pierre Sergent.

12 Often artists juxtapose the two wars—one of liberation and one a civil war—and this brings us back to the feeling of rage and impotence when faced with the "gangrene and forgetting" addressed by Stora (2005).

13 http://alger-roi.fr/Alger/feuillet_el_djezair/pages/31_cimetieres_musulmans_feuillet.htm. It is important to note that the artist incorporates the whole of the Internet link in her text, thus indicating the very importance of this Internet source, reminding us that the artist today acts increasingly as a compiler who connects things and shares her/his knowledge in a universe saturated with information. The administrator of this web site, a "nostalgic" *pied-noir*, relies on the work of a historian of the city from the first half of the twentieth century, a certain Henri Klein, founder and secretary-general of the *Comité du vieil Alger* [Committee of Old Algiers].

14 A parallel is established between Algiers in 1954, on the eve of armed insurrection, and Algiers of 2012, the fiftieth anniversary of independence. It is depicted as a city of social contrasts where there is still "the frenzy of the palm trees." Thus, with the prospect of the presidential elections in April 2014, the current powers made public places in Algiers green again, planting hundreds of palm trees and giving rise to numerous critiques.

15 Zineb Sedira, phone interview with author, October 3, 2012.

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