WITNESSING ERASURE: DIASPORIC MEMORY AND THE ALGERIAN STRUGGLE AGAINST FRENCH NATIONAL AMNESIA

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The concept of diaspora, often entangled within the nation-state's rigid boundaries, presents a crucial yet often overlooked lens to denaturalise ossified narratives associated with the linear progression towards the centralised 'neutral' state[1]. In crossing borders and boundaries, the Algerian diaspora in France occupies a liminal space that continuously reimagines, challenges and deterritorialises notions of ethnicity, citizenship and belonging[2] . Pierre Nora's seminal work *'Lieux de Mémoire'* provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between locations, events and symbols as central to the collective memory of the nation[3]. It is notable that he, being a member of the French settler community in Algeria, was deeply entwined with the history of French colonial rule. However, Nora's works often anchor themselves in a collective memory that has sanitised the traces of empire as if deemed unworthy of remembrance or simply considered marginal[4] . Whilst Nora's works are central to the field of memory studies, his perspective risks perpetuating a vision of France that obscures the foundational violence of its colonial enterprise and the enduring liminality of its post-colonial subjects. Although post-colonial perspectives have gained traction within and amongst French academic circles, they often challenge key aspects of French national character[5] . Namely, the foundational role of *Liberté* (liberty), *Egalité* (equality), *Fraternité* (fraternity) and *Laïcité* (secularism) that underscore French national pride and embolden France's historical claim to modernity. Nora's colonial amnesia is 'neither an oversight nor blindness' but indicative of a broader structural issue within France reverberating across all levels[6] . During a speech in Senegal, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy pronounced 'the tragedy of Africa is that the African man has not entered history…he remains motionless'[7].

The relegation, erasure and essentialization of 'non-European' history are not merely semantic, but emblematic of institutionalised reductionism and dismissal. Ideas of progress and modernity are presented as inherent and universalistic. In this sense there is a dual process of historical erasure, firstly the erasure and essentialization of 'non-European' history and secondly the erasure of the memory of the atrocities committed during French colonial rule. This dynamic ultimately affirms the positional superiority of France through disseminating a worldview that privileges Western epistemologies. This dual process of erasure is particularly pronounced when understanding the experiences of the Algerian diaspora whose presence actively challenges the memories and imaginaries of French colonial rule and modern claim of neutrality. The Algerian diaspora dispels the myth of a static, territorially bound nation-state by merely existing within French borders. The post-memories and mythification of Algeria in the consciousness of second and third-generation Algerians challenge the assimilationist policies of the French state whilst unsettling what 'home' means for these communities. Thus, diasporic memories are a form of resistance, recasting the past in a light that illuminates the pluralistic and often contentious nature of identity and belonging.

The memories of the Algerian diaspora unsettle monolithic narratives of national identity and immigrant histories as they challenge the entrenched binaries of Muslims as 'oppressed' and the secular French state as 'free'. In doing so, such memories expose the essentialisms these communities are often subjected to, revealing the constructed nature of cultural identity and the non-neutrality of the French state. The modern French nation-state often characterises itself on its secular liberal values that emphasise the separation between the public and private and the centrality of constitutionalism[8]. One of the key principles embedded is that of Laïcité which aims to protect the freedom of thought, legal equality and state 'neutrality'[9]. However, in a country whose empire encompassed a wide array of races, religions, and ethnic groups, such assimilationist principles expose the extent to which the French state's claim to neutrality is undermined. These principles often serve to demobilise and diminish what the state deems 'unneutral' identities, particularly those of diasporic groups[10]. In France, individuals with Algerian heritage constitute one of the most prominent demographic groups with a significant proportion identifying as Muslim[11] . The enactment of laws prohibiting conspicuous religious symbols in schools in 2004, followed by the 2010 ban on the niqab underscores how the memories and cultural identities of Algerian Muslim women are muted as they unsettle cultural binaries of the 'oppressed Muslim women' vs the 'free Western woman'[12]. These measures reflect how the French state's

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claim to neutrality is not only constructed but deliberately maintained.

The examination of the French states attitudes towards Algerian women aligns with Edward Said's contention against the Orientalist tradition distinguished by its pernicious 'veil of objectivity', which through problematic ethnographic writings on the Middle Eastern Orient characterised the region into a consciously fabricated and immutably essentialized 'other'[13] . Although a feminist perspective occupied a peripheral role in Said's work, his critique of the Orientalist discourse provides an important theoretical framework from which to understand how the memories of the female Algerian diaspora, challenge and confronts the binaries that has been normalised and deemed acceptable in the French societal 'Overton window'[14] . The discourse of liberte in modern French liberalism is deeply problematised by the harrowing memories of Algeria's colonisation from 1830-1962, throughout this period Algeria endured violent repression, systematic exploitation, and attempts to erase its cultural and religious identity. In this context, French colonial 'specialists' often essentialised the entirety of Algeria's culture into a singular binary, stagnant monolith, feeding into a narrative that justified colonial dominance as a 'civilising' mission[15]. The works of the French neo-classical painter Gaston-Casimir Saint-Pierre are emblematic of the Orientalist tendency to fetishise and sexualise the 'Arab Muslim woman'. His paintings of Algerian women, in sheer clothing and unveiled, suggest that the Muslim woman was waiting to be undressed, stripped and liberated from her 'backwards' culture by the 'modern' European man[16] . This dynamic is not independent of the colonial reality, as Islam's purported backwardness was often used as a justification to impose colonial rule. This can be seen through the works of Ernest Renan who argued that an 'Iron band was crowned on the heads of Muslims' which prevented 'scientific thought'[17]. This was mirrored by his mentor and predecessor Silvestre de Sacy, when he proclaimed the proclamation of the Algiers which announced French rule over Algeria[18] .

The discourse of secularism, western feminism and its relation to colonial violence has often been erased from the consciousness of the liberal and 'neutral' French state, however, is embedded deeply within the collective memory of members of the Algerian diaspora. Throughout the Algerian Revolution, French colonial authorities orchestrated Algerian women burning their veils, framing these acts as symbols of 'liberation for Algerian women' to justify colonial rule, whilst simultaneously perpetuating acts of gendered violence, rape and torture as a weapon of war[19]. This dynamic is indicative of what the Algerian-born French writer Francois Verges termed 'civilisational feminism', a form of colonial rule that weaponises the feminist discourse to help maintain control[20]. The painful memory of colonisation and the weaponisation of the feminist discourse has been emotionally and physically inscribed upon the consciousness of members of the female Algerian diaspora community who contend that the entrenched binaries surrounding the 'oppression' of Muslim women have been used to maintain a neo-colonial control of their social skins; replacing 'paternal' patriarchy with colonial patriarchy. The contemporary instrumentalisation of the veil has come to encapsulate the false dichotomies of the Orientalist discourse To the French state, the veil symbolizes 'Muslim women's subjection under Sharia Law,' a moral and legal framework derived from the Quran and Hadiths. However, in the West, Sharia is often reductively portrayed as inherently oppressive, obscuring the complexities of its interpretation and practice. This framing positions the veil as incompatible with adherence to French law. Yet for Algerian women who choose to wear the veil, it can symbolise resistance against the demobilisation of their Algerian heritage and an attempt to assert their identity in a country that continuously marginalises and diminishes their agency[21]. The memories of French colonisation of Algeria amongst the present-day diaspora unsettles the neutrality of the French state depicting the irony of how narratives of French modernity and liberté apply unequally to these communities, carrying contested and deeply troubling memories.

The spatial dynamics within France, impacted by the presence and memories of the Algerian diaspora communities, unsettle the territorial and cultural demarcations of the nation-state. This is rooted in the lived experiences of trauma and re-traumatisation for members of the Algerian diaspora who engender transnational ethnoscapes through their negotiations with sites of memory[22]. The French national memory of the Algerian war occupies an 'ambiguous' role through a

continuous interplay between the 'societal amnesia' and relativist yet reductive explanations that disconnect the past from the present responsibilities of the French state.[23] Following Algerian independence, the French state enacted concerted efforts to repatriate colonial monuments which celebrated French rule. Here, Kirk Savage's contention that 'public monuments do not arise as if by natural law but rather built by people with sufficient power to marshal public consent for their erection' becomes pressing[24] . Dorothée-Myriam Kellou is the daughter of Algerian-born members of the diaspora in France and described how the statue of Sergent Blandan a French officer who served in Algeria was 'terrifying' for her father who used to see the very same statue in Algeria when walking from his village to Algiers and now confronts it in his new hometown in France[25]. The statue was repatriated to France in 1963 and erected for public display amongst other statues which have similar symbolic meanings, depicting how states can engage in selective memory practices[26]. Savage's observation that the construction of public monuments is a manifestation of power and public consensus, highlights how such processes can lead to re-traumatisation of diaspora communities whose memories diverge from the sanitised narratives that 'post-imperial' states prefer to emphasise. This challenges Benedict Anderson's thesis of nations consisting of a unified 'imagined community' suggesting that the process of imagining community is not uniform but layered with memories of the past that may conflict with the territorialised state[27] . As a political entity, the territorialszed state derives its legitimacy from fixed geographic boundaries, asserting sovereign control and a cohesive national identity tied to a specific territory. However, this framework often overlooks the transnational and diasporic dimensions of identity, where collective memories and allegiances extend beyond the state's imposed borders. Ernest Renan's idea of the 'nation as a daily plebiscite' resonates, depicting how spaces can become repositories of national memory and places where engagement with these sites can reaffirm or challenge the collective identity associated with the area[28] . Here, Algerian-French individuals navigate hybrid identities tethered to colonial memories and their present lives in France. The Algerian diaspora's interactions with such monuments underscore the emergence of 'parallel' imagined communities unsettling the traditional confines of identity and nationalist ideology within the territorialised state.

Spatial politics and racialised place-making policies in France further depict how the memories of the Algerian diaspora unsettle national histories and imaginaries of a 'neutral' public space. Although French liberal values emphasise a universal, neutral public sphere, in practice, this ideology works to denigrate and marginalise communities of Algerian descent who do not share equal racial, economic and cultural status with the mainstream French population and thus limits their access to exist within these spaces apolitically[29] . The Algerian diaspora have historically faced forms of spatialised segregation having been 'moved and relocated' by French authorities to 'poor neighbourhoods' in the outskirts of the cities called *'la banlieue'* with 'other Algerians'[30]. This started in the 1960's where through the creation of 'socio-spatial subjectivities' and boundaries, the state attempted to 'integrate Algerians economically while excluding them socially'[31] . The forced ghettoization of these communities has resulted in their memories and experiences as French citizens denaturalising traditional narratives of French *egalité* and *liberté* as these identities have been systematically ostracised from the public sphere to ensure its supposed neutrality. Here, Lefebvre's concept of the non-neutrality of space and Simon Sleight's argument of memory as inherently spatial is important to consider, whereby the binaries of the Orientalist discourse have been physically imprinted onto the urban geography of France[32]. Hassan a third-generation member of the Algerian diaspora, described how 'although I never grew up in a *'banlieue'*, I am immediately labelled as a *'banlieusard'* with all the prejudices that follow… after a while I ended up believing and accepting that I am from there too'[33] . This elucidates Lefebvre and Sleight's contention that spaces are inherently imbued with social meanings and power relations that can reflect and reinforce social hierarchies. The physical otherisation through the specialised segregation of Algerian communities, links to the racialisation of urban spaces through the pejorative term *'banlieusard'* often directed towards North-African youths. Silverman described how French nationalism speaks with two tongues at the same time anchored within a social paradox: 'the more the state insists on uniformity and neutrality within the public sphere the

more it constructs the visibility of this particular difference'[34]. Here, it is important to note that majority groups (in this context non-immigrant French citizens) tend to have the prerogative and privilege to create spatial norms regarding how the public sphere is defined and thus rarely, if ever need to examine or question their hegemony of space[35]. Hassan's experience depicts how his memories of exclusion and discrimination in working, living and existing within the normative, secular and white French public sphere have led to him feeling a sense of belonging and comfort within the disreputable and 'unsafe' localities of the *'banlieues'*.

Although the production of space within the French public sphere is often predicated upon assimilation, exclusion, domination and erasure, it is also important to consider how memories of marginalisation have led to creative ways of unsettling notions of home and belonging for second and third-generation Algerians. Asma Saïdani notes how the supposed neutrality of French nationality is often used to reinforce distinctions between the national in-groups and out-groups, whereby groups such as the Algerian diaspora, despite being French citizens and socialised within France are still perceived as out-groups[36]. Memoires of this experience have led the diaspora to construct Algeria as both a real and imagined homeland 'depicted as an authoritative source of value identity and loyalty'[37]. In this context, Nahid Kabir's notion that identity cannot be performed alone, as it is both individual and group-centred is pressing, suggesting that through post-memories transmitted by parents and grandparents, second and third-generation Algerians feel a sense of identity and belonging from imagining Algeria as a place receptive towards their identities that have often been othered[38]. A study conducted on members of the Algerian diaspora revealed that 80% of second-generation participants and 70% of third-generation participants were raised on the myth of return to Algeria, so their 'children will grow up there and not feel what [they] felt in France'[39]. The desire to reclaim and return to Algeria is imbued with a desire to gain agency, unsettling what 'home' and national belonging traditionally mean whilst also unsettling French assimilationist policies. However, whilst these groups certainly imagine themselves as deeply connected to Algeria, it is important to disconnect this from a rigid binary of a rejection of their French identity.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' is useful here, as it captures the way postcolonial diasporic communities negotiate identity through everyday practices, resisting fixed notions of national belonging. Rather, the Algerian diaspora embody a transnational identity and a hybrid sense of belonging that is not anchored in the geographical or cultural confines of either country.

The memories of the Algerian diaspora deeply unsettle both national and immigrant histories through challenging the cultural and physical boundaries of the nation-state. In this sense, the diaspora community challenges the myth of state neutrality, through their lived memories and post-memories of colonisation, French secularism and racialised spatial politics, problematising the national identity of the native population. The spatial politics within the French public sphere, imbued with colonial yet sanitised vestiges of the past often result in a process of retraumatisation for members of the Algerian diaspora whose histories and memories have been erased. The process of state-sanctioned memory erasure and forgetting have resulted in entrenched binaries, essentialisms and discrimination which memories of the Algerian diaspora often destabilise.

Footnotes

1. Victoria Redclift, "The Demobilization of Diaspora: History, Memory and 'Latent Identity." Global Networks (2016) p.501.

2. Vijar Agnew, "Diaspora and Memory." In Diaspora, Memory, and Identity: A Search for Home." University of Toronto Press (2005) p.19.

3. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." Representations (1989).

4. Edward Baring, "Liberalism and the Algerian War." Critical Inquiry (2010) p.239.

5. Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick and Lydie Moudileno, "Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France." Liverpool University Press (2020) p.8.

6. Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick and Lydie Moudileno, "Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France." Liverpool University Press (2020) p.6.

7. Francois Richard, "Recharting Atlantic Encounters. Object Trajectories and Histories of Value in the Siin (Senegal) and Senegambia." *Archaeological Dialogues* (2010). p.2

8. Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick and Lydie Moudileno, "Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France." Liverpool University Press (2020) p.2.

9. Cees Maris, "Laïcité in the Low Countries? On Headscarves in a Neutral State." NYU School of Law (2008) p.5.

10. Nina Hoel, Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Veiling, Secularism and Islamism: Gender Constructions in France and Iran." Journal for the Study of Religion (2007). p.112.

11. Catherine Delcroix, "Two Generations of Muslim Women in France : Creative Parenting, Identity and Recognition." Identity and Recognition. Oral History Review, (2009). p.87.

12. Nina Hoel, Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Veiling, Secularism and Islamism: Gender Constructions in France and Iran." Journal for the Study of Religion (2007). p.111.

13. Edward Said, "Orientalism" Penguin (1978) p.129.

14. Laura Nader, "Contrarian Anthropology: The Unwritten Rules of Academia" Berghahn Books (2018) p.129. A concept that describes the range of ideas and policies considered acceptable and politically feasible to the mainstream population at a given time.

15. Edward Said, "Orientalism" Penguin (1978) p.129

16. See Appendix Image 1 and 2.

17. Robert Priest, "Ernest Renan's Race Problem." The Historical Journal (2015). p.309.

18. Edward Said, "Orientalism" Penguin (1978). p.129.

19. Neil Macmaster, "Burning the Veil the Algerian War and the "Emancipation" of Muslim Women, 1954–62." Manchester University Press (2020).

20. Françoise Vergès, "A Decolonial Feminism." Pluto Press (2021) p.15.

21. Victoria Redclift, "The Demobilization of Diaspora: History, Memory and 'Latent Identity." Global Networks (2016) p.513.

22. Ibid.

23. Fiona Barclay, "France's Colonial Legacies: Memory, Identity and Narrative." University of Wales Press, (2013) p.71

24. Kirk Savage, "Monument Wars: Washington D.C. the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape" University of California Press, (2009) p.15.

25. Myriam Francois, "France in Focus: The Legacy of Colonialism in France | the Big Picture." Youtube, 2023.

26. Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick and Lydie Moudileno, "Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France." Liverpool University Press (2020) p.360.

27. Benedict Anderson, "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism", Verso (1983)

28. Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation? And Other Political Writings" Columbia University Press (1882).

29. Elizabeth Nelson, "Politics of Belonging: Identity, Integration, and Spatial Practices of Algerian Immigrants and Their Descendants in Paris, France" University of Southern California Press (2021). p.261.

30. Asma Saïdani, "Ethnic, Religious and National Identities among Second and Third-Generation Algerians in a Post-Colonial France" University of York (2023). p.61.

31. Ibid.

32. Henri Lefebvre. "Everyday Life in the Modern World" Routledge (1968). p.5.

33. Asma Saïdani, "Ethnic, Religious and National Identities among Second and Third-Generation Algerians in a Post-Colonial France" University of York (2023). p.62.

34. Max Silverman, "The French Republic Unveiled." Ethnic and Racial Studies (2007). p.629

35. Elizabeth Nelson, "Politics of Belonging: Identity, Integration, and Spatial Practices of Algerian Immigrants and Their Descendants in Paris, France" (2021). p.262

36. Asma Saïdani, "Ethnic, Religious and National Identities among Second and Third-Generation Algerians in a Post-Colonial France" University of York (2023). p.8.

37. Rogers Brubaker. "Ethnicity without Groups" Harvard University Press (2006). p.15.

38. Nahid Kabir. "Young British Muslims" Edinburgh University Press (2012) p.20.

39. Asma Saïdani, "Ethnic, Religious and National Identities among Second and Third-Generation Algerians in a Post-Colonial France" University of York (2023). p.64.

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