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Of Algeria: Childhood and Fear

Mustapha Marrouchi

[B]arely understanding my world . . . I too could begin only with the externals of things. To do more, as I soon had to, since I had no idea or illusion of a complete world waiting for me somewhere, I had to find other ways. (V.S. Naipaul, *Reading & Writing*)

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*His **Presence of Mind** is due in 2003.*

Alger est une ville verticale, qui échoue lentement sur les rives de la Méditerranée, ville déterminée entre collines et mer.

À Alger, il y a des zones interdites, “non netoyées”.

À Alger, il y a un port de pêche et un port de bateaux marchands, face aux vouîtes sédentarisées.

À Alger, on parle une langue qui brasse l’Arabe dans une tonalité berbère, avec des emprunts au français.

À Alger, il y a une multitude d’escaliers qui défient la rectitude de n’importe quelle montage. (Safaa Fathy, *Tourner les mots*)

If he examined his own behavior, Arrouj could only surmise that as a child he was dissatisfied with his relationship with the adult community, and this is a genesis of a mild form of dissent, that of a child sitting in judgment on adults over whom he had no power. He found adults lacking in originality, incapable of providing answers to the pressing questions he had; with them, it seemed, most human activities were devoid of sense. When he asked how children were born and why; when he saw meaning in the movement of a vulture's head; when he called attention to the quick descent of a hawk on its prey; when he inquired about a crow hopping about as though something were the matter with one of its feet; when he wondered whether his father was really his father; when he wanted to know why did Sallouha have three breasts instead of just two; when he lighted on a new idea—when he asked about such things he was told to be quiet. This is how he grew up: neither as a replica of his parents nor of the once colonial ruler. Later he discovered that his line of questioning uncovered the brutal circumstances of his origins. But as Sallouha used to say, we die anyway, origins are a messy business, and the truth of who we are may not be found in legends of birth.

Like other children in the colonies dependent on France, he too, had to learn about “*nos ancêtres les Gaulois*”—those spurious ancestors who had somehow buried the genetic ancestors in nonhistory. He also had to read the same “classics” of Western literature, probably encountering what he would like to think of as the great book of Mediterranean intelligence, the *Odyssey*, at precisely the same moment in his development as every French schoolboy in *La Métropole*. And, like other intellectually promising youths in the 1950s, prepared to become “plus royal que le roi,” his own odyssey, his errantry, took him from Algeria to pursue education to its farthest reaches.

By the time he got to *Le Grand Collège* at age eight, Arrouj was already hopelessly paradoxical to himself. He had exhausted the resources of the tiny school at *Bab Al-Oued*. This meant that he really knew much more than that school could offer him. He could sense from the beginning of his life that he would know things when he needed to know them, he had known a long time ago that he could trust his own instincts about things, that if he were in a difficult situation, if he thought about it long enough a solution would appear to him. That there would be limitations to having such a view of life he could not know, but in any case, his life was already small and limited in its own way.

When he enrolled at *Le Grand*, as it was called then, Arrouj was given the school handbook, a series of regulations governing every aspect of school life—the kind of uniform he was to wear with a number embroidered on the inside of each garment (he was allotted number 565), what clothes were needed for sports, the dates of school holidays, and so on. But *Le Grand's* first

rule, emblazoned on the opening page of *Le Cahier de Texte*, read: “*Le Français est la langue officielle de l’école. Aucune autre langue ne sera tolérée.*” There were no native French-speakers among the pupils. Whereas the masters were all French, we were a *mélange* of Arabs and Europeans of various kinds, Berbers, Jews, Italians, Spaniards, Maltese, each of whom had a native language that *Le Grand* had explicitly outlawed. Yet all, or nearly all, of us spoke Arabic—many spoke Arabic and *Tamazight*—and so we were able to take refuge in a common language in defiance of what we perceived as an unjust colonial stricture.¹ For Arrouj, there was an added complication in that although both his parents were Algerian, he was of Berber descent. For objective reasons that he had no control over, he grew up as a Berber with a Western education. Ever since he can remember, he has felt that he belonged to four worlds, Berber at home, Arabic in the street, French at school, English in the world, without being completely of one or the other.²

Most of Arrouj’s education was Gallocentric, so much so that he knew a great deal more about French and European history and geography (required subjects) than he did about the history and geography of The Maghreb.³ But although taught to believe and think like a French schoolboy, Arrouj was also trained to understand that he was a subaltern, a native *Other*, educated by his betters to know his station and not to aspire to being French. The line separating “him” from “them” was linguistic, cultural, racial, and ethnic. To be at the same time a *crapaud* (a name given to Algerians by the French) and Francophile was to be in a state of standing civil war.⁴

The moment one became a pupil at *Le Grand*, one was subjected to more than one tyranny. First there was *Madame* Joséphine Larrosière, Arrouj’s language teacher, who used to explain grammar to the boys by writing nearly everything she said on the blackboard in large curly letters. While she prompted, they mumbled their way through, getting out the answers, and catching up with each other to arrive in unison at the correct one. Next they would be set to copy those answers out with chalk on jagged slices of slate. If one finished early one simply had to wait until all the rest got to the end and then it was time to stop. One spat on one’s slate and rubbed it with one’s fingers when one made mistakes, so sooner or later the letters all got lost in a grey blur. Not many of them learned to read or write by this method. That did not matter too much, though. *Le Grand* was less concerned with teaching its pupils reading, writing, or arithmetic, than with discipline, obedience, and memorizing. So one was able to recite a passage from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *Le Petit Prince* or La Fontaine’s *Fables* and the multiplication tables with confidence.

After two years in *Madame* Larrosière’s class, Arrouj moved to her sister, *Mademoiselle* Danielle Fabre, and after that to the biggest class, in the hand of

the headmaster, *Monsieur* Victor Gaillard, who delighted in inflicting suffering. In addition to being short and stout, correct in glasses and a suit, and quite a flogger when he roused himself, taking short, stressed breaths while he flogged, as though he were a sufferer, *Monsieur* Gaillard was also a figure of fear, a kind of absentee deity. Offenders from the lower classes were sent to him for the stick, and were known to wet themselves on the way. Arrouj had his share of *Monsieur* Gaillard's perversion: slapping on the face, caning, standing on one foot for one or two hours in a corner of the classroom. When *Monsieur* Gaillard was in his humor, he would send Arrouj shopping for the Gaillards. And although Arrouj enjoyed the escape, the task proved too difficult to handle because he stuttered and was therefore unable to tell him (out of fear) what he had bought; he had to write everything down and then he would forget one item and be subjected to further punishment. Caning was the most popular.

His own class of advanced pupils, too, regarded him with dread. For one or two periods a week at school he would read to us from *La Nausée*, (*Collection de Poche*). He also liked to preside over the boys invisibly from his house next door, emerging when the noise reached a level deafening enough to disturb him, to hand out summary punishment. When caning proved insufficient, "*les cancre*s" were sent off for a period of time ranging from two weeks to a month. In the winter of 1954 Arrouj was banned from *Le Grand* for two weeks, thrown out for being a "*mauvaise graine*," a nuisance, a troublemaker and advised to look elsewhere, which meant that he was more visible and more easily caught than the other boys in the daily skirmishes between *Monsieur* Gaillard, *Madame* Larrosière, *Monsieur* Matichard, *Monsieur* Lerma, and all the other French teachers, on the one hand, and the boys, on the other.⁵

The further up the school one went, the less one was formally taught or expected to learn. There was a good deal of woodwork, digging trenches, and cleaning the school. On weekends, the boys kept busy chopping wood, taking out the ashes from three large wood stoves, filling water buckets, and digging the garden, *Monsieur* Gaillard's. None of the more substantial people sent their children to *Le Grand* for it was designed to produce not pupils but domestic servants and farm laborers, and functional illiteracy was still part of the expectation, almost part of the curriculum. Not long after Arrouj started there, this time-honored parochial system was shaken up when some of the older boys were removed to *Lycée Ben Aknoun*. This thinned out the population and damped down the racket in *Monsieur* Gaillard's class, though quite a few restive overgrown boys still stayed on until they were 14 and the law allowed them to leave. Passing *Le Baccalauréat* ("scholarship") was unheard of;

and anyway harder than it might have been, since other schools in neighboring areas had quotas for native children.

The record of failure was starting to look fishy. The world was changing, education was changing, and the notion that school should reflect one's ready-made place in the scheme of things and put him or her firmly back where s/he came from, was going out of fashion even at *Le Grand*. It was against the grain to acknowledge this reality, though. Arrouj, along with 11 other pupils, were given sums to do, then told to compare the results in a corner next morning. If all 12 of them arrived at the same answer, then that was the correct one. If—as often happened—all 12 of them produced different answers, then that particular long division or fraction retreated into the realm of undecidability. Most of the boys' answers were at best odds-on favorites. Arrouj for one developed a dauntingly Platonic conception of arithmetical truths. The *real* answer must exist, but in some far-removed misty imperium.

Sums were his purgatory. Numeracy was not one of his gifts; he never played with numbers. Besides, they were no fun at all. He went to school armed against the spit-and-chalk routine—words went on working—but with sums he struggled like the rest, since it was never part of *Monsieur Gaillard's* plan (the school's plan) to reveal that the necessary skills were learnable. His theory was that if one passed *Le Certificat d'Études*, which enabled one to receive a scholarship, that was because one was somebody who should never have been at *Le Grand* in the first place. One day he lined up his class of advanced pupils, and went down the line saying with gloomy satisfaction: "*Des rats!* *Des rats!*" You'll be muck-shovelers, you'll be muck-shovelers. . . ." As things turned out, he was mistaken—by the time Arrouj's school generation grew up there were few jobs on the land, the old labor-intensive farming had finally collapsed, farmers had gone over to machinery, and the boys he had consigned to near-illiteracy and innumeration had to re-educate themselves and move on. Which they did, despite all the school had done to inculcate ignorance. Back there and then in their childhoods, though, in the mid-fifties, *Monsieur Gaillard* seemed omniscient. He ruled over a little world where conformity, bafflement, fear, and furtive defiance were the orders of the day. Every boy's ambition at *Le Grand* was to avoid attracting his attention. They all played dumb, the one lesson everyone learned well.

The boys had their tactics, too. They would have seemed a lumpen lot: sullen, unresponsive, cowed, shy, or merely stupid in the presence of grown-ups. A bunch of nose pickers, with scabbed knees, warts, chapped skin, and unbrushed teeth. They shared a certain family resemblance, in other words. Some of it was absolutely, *organically* real: seven or eight large families accounted between them for nearly half the population of the school. There

were brothers and cousins and distant relatives who slapped, shoved, and bossed each other unmercifully, but always stood up for their own flesh and blood in the end (thickened, it was rumored, by incest). “*T’ouche pas notre Shahid*” “You leave our Shahid alone.” Or else. Having big cousins or (much better) big brothers—since the big boys had their own separate playground and did not usually deign to intervene—seemed the first condition for survival in the Infants’ Class.

There were quite a few parents who worked out that one way of escaping poverty was having fewer children, and a subtle eye could have detected among the mass of rowdy, runny-nosed urchins a small sub-class of better dressed, prissier, and slightly more respectable children. The boys were untidy, cowardly, and full of ruse. Being an only Qureishi—as Arrouj was, for a while—was a mixed blessing at best when it came down to the gritty realities of the playground. The other children he despised, and it was entirely mutual, since he was somehow organized, scout-like, and had never been treated like a child. And the tribes despised him for being odd, a stutterer, and “stuck up,” so to speak. So the playground was hell: beatings, slaps, kicks, and horrible games. He can still hear the noise of a thick wet strap hitting his back. Joining in was only marginally less awful than being left out. And if most women forget the pain of childbirth, Arrouj thinks that we all forget the pain of being a child at school for the first time: it is like being at the barber’s for your first hair cut, the sheer ineptitude, as though you will never learn to mark out your own space. “It is doubly shaming—shaming to remember as well,” he used to mutter to himself, to feel so sorry for one’s scabby little back there in small people’s hell.

The only writer Arrouj knows of who has done justice to the experience of childhood at school is a science fiction writer, Ray Bradbury. He wrote *The Playground*, where a father makes a pact with the powers of evil in order to substitute for his son in the battle. He is sucked back into memory and finds himself miniaturized and skinless all over again:

There were screams, sharp visions, children dashing, children fighting, pummeling, bleeding, screaming! He saw the tiniest scabs on their faces and knees with amazing clarity . . . smelled the cutting odors of iodine, raw adhesive, and pink Mercurochrome, so strong it was bitter to the tongue. The wind of iodine moving through the steely wire fence which glistened dully in the grey light of the overcast day. And the rushing children there, it was like hell cut loose in a great pinball machine, a colliding and banging and totaling of hits and pushes and rushes to a grand and as yet unforeseen total of brutalities. (Bradbury 1967, 111)

Smells are particularly evocative of a whole universe of hurt. One of the things that makes the tale so effective is the fact that the playground does not

even have a school attached, so that one is in a world made of children, with no exit to the future. All schools, however hopeless, have some line about growing up (“And you’ll be muck-shovelers”) and teachers make kids sit still; whereas during playtime children are sentenced to *collide*, as Bradbury so exactly put it, because they have not yet learned where their bodies’ boundaries are.

Whether this nightmarish reality applies to boys only, who are learning to be manly, i.e. violent, Arrouj is not sure. One must think of the front line, he imagined. For all that, it fits his personal memories well. His first days at school were punctuated by fierce contests in the yard, duels almost, complete with spectators, with the one same boy who might have been expected to be his friend, and the one who might have been expected to beat him. In fact, one little boy did become his friend, years later, when the boys went on to become students at university, but for now he was Arrouj’s sworn enemy. Lounès had thick, curly black hair, clear black eyes, slightly olive skin stretched tight and shiny over his muscles, and he was nearly two years older than Arrouj was. He would go to war against him in any case since he was so physically confident, in charge of his body even when he was eight. Was he already going to boxing lessons? Arrouj could not tell. In adult life he became a sports teacher and even in the days of their childhood life he would sometimes win an argument not intellectually, of course, but by twisting Arrouj’s wrist or breaking one of his fingers. Arrouj was convinced at the start, anyway, that Lounès was simply better at inhabiting his body than he was—not only better at boxing, punching, and wrestling, and every sort of violence, but wiry and graceful, so that he made him feel like an unstrung puppet. After thoroughly trouncing him in public, Lounès ignored him, the stutterer, and held court in his own corner every playtime. He, like Arrouj, remained something of a loner, however.

Even playground games, in the intervals of thumps and pushes, were all about the changeless order of things. It is tempting now, looking back, to see in our partial efforts a dim reflection of colonial social policies. Certainly *Le Grand* was a pretty good microcosm of inequality. None of those children who puddled around so busily at the pump, and solemnly divided up the drafts, had any ideas about what was to become of them later in life: victims of an educational system that was installed from above to hammer out little colonials who would in the long run stand for the most refined and perhaps successful colonial products. Later, they were called “*évolués*.” Their feelings had been buried there for the sake of learning, and the graves were unmarked, they had no more property in the school than anywhere else. Arrouj had none there either. Just like his mother who had lived under patriarchal authority, he was at school under yet another authority, colonial.

Back at school, the boys took it for granted that life after *Le Grand* was a really serious matter to contend with. They spent many hours preparing for the entrance exam to *Lycée Émile-Maupas* in the expectation of *becoming* fully cultured one day. Whether they have achieved that, Arrouj cannot make out to this day. Furthermore, it was clear to them that the only reason they went on was that they were scared, really scared to not go on, to not pass and with distinction, too. It was fear they learned, and thanks to fear they advanced as “scholarship boys.” Or perhaps this was the theory Bradbury suggested earlier on: away from the playground, on classroom territory, the boys set up as experts on spooky topics, and managed—on some blissful days—to feel accepted, a member of the child world of *Le Grand*.

The high point in Arrouj’s life as a colonial child was coincidentally inspired by the school doctor. Medical examinations were a complete novelty to most of the boys at *Le Grand*. They consisted of an elaborate team of nurses, who lived nearby while caring for the boys. Nowhere else was more private than at the infirmary and it was there that Arrouj began a friendship with one of the nurses. Her name was *Mademoiselle* Lucille Chanel. She was kind, eccentric, and always on the hunt for him. With her, he felt secure and somehow special. “*Regardez-le, comme il est mignon*,” she used to say. The boys would line up, Arrouj recalls, behind a pine tree, shuffled along to have their parts examined by the medical team, who, after having a good look and making dubious predictions, always prescribed the same thing: another vaccination but this time for polio or tuberculosis or typhoid and so on. Except for *Mademoiselle* Chanel, the doctor and the nurses were always unkind. Little by little fear predominated. Arrouj became a timid, clumsy, speechless misfit—astonishingly resentful of his entourage. He was often tense and bored. This evidently began early, and it continued during his life as a schoolboy, in gusts (increasingly rare, it was true, thanks to homework), and it was always noticeable to others. A panic boredom, to the point of distress: like the kind one feels at parties among strangers. “Might boredom be my way of expressing perversity?” he used to ask himself. One might find this far-fetched, but this is the stuff of which some people’s misfortune is made, myth galore! More and more Arrouj lived on the fringes, so to speak, in books; they were his comfort, refuge, addiction, compensation for the humiliations that attended contact with the world outside. Besides, they were friendlier, wiser, and more humane. After all, they did not hit him when he could not answer the questions they raised even if as a child trying to read, he had felt that two worlds separated him from the books that were offered to him at school and in the library.

To the boys,

Algeria was in no manner of speaking the province, nor Algiers the working-class district. Right from childhood, Algeria was, for them . . . also a country, and Algiers, a city within a country in a fuzzy sense of this word which coincides neither with the state, nor with the nation, nor with religion, nor even, dare I say, with an authentic community. And in this “country” of Algeria, besides, we were witnessing the reconstitution of the spectral simulacrum of a capital/province structure (“Algiers/the interior,” “Algiers/Oran,” residential districts generally on hill-tops/poor districts often further below). (Derrida, 1996, 74)

They knew that God gave Algiers a beautiful location: nested against a wall of mountains, smack-dab on the shores of the deep blue purple sea. Its social topography was something they knew like the back of their hands. White Algiers was European in places like *Jeanne d'Arc* and “ethnic” neighborhoods of working-class people everywhere else.

It was on the fringes of the city that most of the natives lived. And although European Algiers and native Algiers were the same city in reality, they were two different cities of the mind, or at any rate the names signified two plateaux in the city's history. White Algiers was a colonial city: its colonial planning and allocations were largely intact. *Le Boulevard de France* and *La Rue de Lyon*, *La Rue Michelet* and *Le Square Bresson*, where students from *L'Université d'Alger* used to gather before and after classes, *La Rue Languedoc* all on one side, and, on the other, the curve of *La Rue de la Marine* as it led toward the sea and the gateway of Algeria. Within these loosely defined parameters were situated schools such as *Le Grand*, *Lycée Ben Aknoun*, and *Belcourt*.

This was also where the native bourgeoisie's houses were concentrated, where the professionally qualified—doctors, surgeons, solicitors, newspaper editors—mainly lived with their families, with a small service industry of beauticians at hand; the kind of native people who had acquired from their colonial masters flats, clubs, roads, specific residential and work areas, along with table manners, a certain intimacy with the French language, and a comparable distance from the less privileged around them. Tall new buildings would come up unexpectedly; their names would become famous—architectural celebrities in a city that loved celebrity. With its sea-breeze, its wide boulevards and long promenades, its year-long sun, its ambitions of upward mobility, this part of Algiers could feel like a California city in the fifties, where the notion of “having fun” still existed within the constricting but benevolent circumscription of middle-class values.

If one moved down *La Place Carnot*, one would pass *Le Club du Théâtre* and the racecourse on one's right, almost the last full-blooded colonial outpost, and then gradually approach parts of the city that were glamorous and

accessible, but relatively distant, such as *Bouzaréah*, with its pristine beach, where certain members of the upper class lived. And then there were the shabbier, sometimes older, sometimes industrialized sections of the city, a few of them on the outskirts—*El Kettar*, *Le Marché du Village Nègre*—where a local populace, largely Mzabi-speaking and often middle-middle or lower-middle class (teachers, lecturers, clerks, and small businessmen) lived a more rooted, less demonstrative kind of life. This part of colonial Algiers, as every school textbook in the city related, consisted of a *mélange* of riff raff: drifters, castaways, and natives. Yet perhaps the city is metaphorically a *massala* (*mélange*) even if it is not one physically—in its atypicality as a colonial city, in its self-containment and complex extremes of wealth and destitution.

“My Algiers is drawing to a close—I only have a little month left. Then I shall go away never to come back, as I trust,” Arrouj would mutter to himself. He knew he could not beat life for the variety of events and emotions. He was feeling something about everything—about the amusing and tragic world he was born into. Then, one summer day, which began so fiercely and festally, was not like other days; it was transmuted and gilded with mythical significance. For suddenly, a strong warm wind (*Echhili*)⁶ arose while like prancing goats the waves of the sea leaped among the craggy rocks. It was for the first time in life Arrouj was about to be cut off from all family ties. He was scared, not unhappy, scared of *La Métropole* where he was bound for good at least for now.

“Since Algiers,” he told his mother, Aïsha, in whose care he grew up, “since Algiers,” being for both of them the major demarcation in his life. He gave up Algiers to go to university in *La Fouance*, although he had made his last visit in 1994, after an absence of something like half his life, before he had returned as a melancholy tourist who stayed in Algiers for the first time in his life. Thus a second visit in the summer of 1996 might have been to any large third-world city, so sprawling and demographically uncontrolled had Algiers become, its services untidy, its immense mass so dusty and so crumbling. He stayed for a week, too unhappy to last any longer. He left.⁷ One of his most vivid impressions of the city, where he was born and spent all his childhood, was of decay: of crumbling buildings, torn-up sidewalks, and sewage on the street. Mosques were now everywhere, and the line between Algiers’s less Islamic haves and its more Islamic have-nots had become more sharply defined. One could not escape the impression that the old multicultural, cosmopolitan, secular Algeria was slipping away. So forlorn was the city without its great hybrid intellectual community, so apparently without a mission, so reduced to minimal existence as a cut-rate resort that it filled him with sadness. Crowds mobbed once attractive shopping streets like *La Rue Michelet*, intent on bargains from stores that had been divided and subdivid-

ed into garishly overstocked slits where cheap shoes and plastic beach toys hung from the ceiling in tasteless abundance. The one or two little islands of Levantine refreshment—the restaurant *Santa Lucia* and *Le Nègre Coste*, the *café* frequented half a century ago by Gide, Camus, Claude Roy, and others—were mostly empty.

Sadder still was a chance encounter with a middle-aged *pied-noir* acquaintance who had returned to the city a year earlier from Monaco, where she had lived most of her life. Her father had been ill, she said, and needed to have her nearby, so she had left her job and taken one in Algiers. A month or two later he died, and (for reasons she did not specify) she simply stayed on. She lived alone in a five room house filled with the European paintings and knick-knacks of bygone times, trying—impossibly but bravely—to consider herself in the “old” Algiers. She spoke only French and English. Her loneliness convinced Arrouj that Algiers was in fact over: the city celebrated by European travel writers with decadent tastes had vanished in the mid-1950s, one of the casualties of nationalism and violence which had drowned the foreign communities in its wake. One of the few meaningful glimpses of the old Algiers is a little quasi-monument to Camus, the great novelist and essayist and a native of Algiers, that exists more or less secretly on the second floor of a guarded house built in the Moorish style. The late Algerian poet Tahar Djaout whom Arrouj had met in France advised him before he left to go to the house and ask to see the Camus room, but at the time he had not paid much attention. Since Algiers boasts no easy available telephone directory (another sign of its abandonment), Arrouj was left to fend for himself when he finally recalled their conversation. It took half a day to find the house, though it stands right across from the University of Algiers Medical School in what used to be *Le Jardin d'Essai*, a section of the modern city about a mile west of *Belcourt*.

The caretaker, a cross Berber woman with better things to do than to speak to unannounced passers-by like Arrouj, told him he could not expect to come in just like *that*, and then more amiably suggested that he return in an hour. He did not leave, for fear that the house might disappear; he parked himself on the staircase with Camus's *Noces suivies de l'été*. After an hour or so he was shown up to a spacious room in which some of the writer's quotidian objects lay undisturbed. There was a sun hat, a pipe, an umbrella, a worn-out pair of shoes, two empty bottles of coca cola, a desk, and a chair Camus apparently used to write his most acclaimed novel, *L'Etranger*, the lady later told him. They were unrevisited and mostly uncared for. In the bookshelves there were about half a dozen of French, English, and Latin works, many of them annotated by the writer, all of them handsomely bound. In the center of the room were several glass cases exhibiting manuscripts, correspondence

between Camus and other writers (including Sartre, Kateb Yacine, Simone de Beauvoir), first editions, and photographs. The bright young Algerian attendant told Arrouj that the small group of chairs and tables came from 4 *Chemin du Lavoir de Grand-Mère*, Camus's last home in Algiers before he left for France. Other visitors to the city have reported that when they went to 4 *Chemin du Lavoir*, they were approached with offers from people who had "Camus furniture" to sell, so one cannot know whether the pieces at the Camus house really belonged to the novelist. Nevertheless the house's melancholy situation, hidden away in a city that has no other recollection of one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, corresponded perfectly with what Arrouj had already discovered: that those few parts of Algiers' past which have not disappeared completely have been consigned to decay. In Algiers one could see evidence of many broken narratives, identities, histories, most of them only partially there, many of them now either ragged or diminished.

Part of the city's hold over Arrouj's memory was the clearness of its nearly incredible divisions, divisions almost completely obliterated by new, ugly, sprawling villas and high rises in new development areas and places owned by the *nouveaux riches* whose life style is monstrously ugly. While he was growing up in the city in 1950s, a decade earlier, however, its Arab and Islamic dimensions could be ignored and even suppressed, so strong was the hold over the city of various European interests, each of which created an enclave within all the others. Thus, there was, of course, French Algiers: its center was *Jeanne D'Arc*, whose extensions covered *La Promenade*, *Montplaisir*, *Mutuelleville*, *Notre Dme*, *Le Jardin d'Essai* where recreational activities were held on a weekly basis and *Le Thtre Municipal d'Alger* where recitals, fashion shows, and readings took place. Spanish Algiers was there too, a useful foil and opposition for its historical competitor, found in schools, salons, theaters, ateliers.

So malleable did the city seem, so open to expatriate colonies existing in separate structures. At its heart there was an Algerian, a Spaniard, a Jew, a Greek, an Italian, a Turk, a Maltese, a Corsican, each dependent on all the others, each manipulated or indulged by the major colonial power that was France. Italian Algiers was limited to *Le Village des Italiens*; Jewish Algiers to *Hrit Lihoud*; Arab Algiers to the *Medina*. The Qureishis lived about two blocks from the fabled *Montfleury*, an enchanted place the likes of which Arrouj has never seen anywhere else in the world, a pure creation of the colonial imagination: there were gardens, all perfectly tended by armies of Algerian daily workers whose intensive labors kept the places at a level of beauty and calm designed to reproduce someone's idea of a vast and noble meadow baking in the sun of a French summer day insulated from the outside world of the natives, bustling *kasbahs*, the decaying *souks*, and generally

tiresome realities. White was the prevailing color of dress. White made Arrouj feel the absence of color, and white made him long for color. White also made him understand that the space between the native and the settler was blank and was waiting to be filled up—with color. With a color so definite (white) as if it wished to dispel any doubt that might arise in regard to this particular quality (its color, white). He used to sit on a white stone step observing the daily workers going about their business, enjoying the privilege of being a child oblivious to all the troubles of the world. A feeling only the happy few could afford to have, he thought to himself.

The colonial labyrinth encouraged Arrouj, he remembered, to feel that the logic of the place and what it stood for overruled what to him seemed like the unforgivable messiness of his true reality. Only in *that* Algiers, at *that* time, could his family and he have made sense, with their carefully subdivided existence and absurdly protected minority status as Berbers. Both his parents were Berbers, he from Tamanrasset, she from Ouzzo. His guess was that both their families had converted to Islam long ago. His father became stolidly pious, whereas his mother who came from a wealthier family (landowners) than his father's—slightly more adventurous—did not bother about religion.

The comic, not to say the ironic, results of such a situation for him are now beginning to be apparent. For the colonial power, as for the parents and schoolteachers, native Algiers was assumed to be a potential danger of the extreme sort. Crowds, for example, were believed to be disease carrying and rabidly nationalistic extremists. Left to itself, native society was supposed to be irreducibly corrupt—lazy, sexually promiscuous, irresponsible, dedicated only to pleasure and sin.⁸ Hence the badly fitting boxes which were placed around him and in which he lived, unconsciously for the most part. His life was generally, if not in every detail, French. He read Balzac, Jules Verne, George Sand, and *Madame Bovary*; he listened to Georges Brassens, Edith Piaf, Michel Polnareff; he watched French movies (Serge Régiani, Bourvil, Fernandel, Jean Gabin); he amused himself buying *Paris Match*—and he did all this without direct acquaintance either with any of their Arabic equivalents or of France. He went through French boarding schools in Algeria, each of which was modeled on the general idea of the French *lycée* as had been laid down by Napoleon himself.

As he threaded his way through this crowded but highly rarefied cultural maze, his contact with the Algiers that was neither Roman nor French was like contact with nature. Everything in his strange minority and paradox-ridden world of privilege was processed, prepared, insulated, confined, except for the native Arabs he everywhere encountered in fleeting moments of freedom on the streets, in taxis, movie theaters, demonstrations, and public

occasions. And with this quasi-natural life, he communicated in the language he has loved more than any—the spoken Algiers patois of Arabic, virtuosically darting in and out of solemnity, colonial discipline, and the combination of various religious and political authorities, retaining the quick, irreverent wit of the language, its incomparable economy of line, its sharp cadences, and abrupt rhythms.

Further away than the European city, stood, he thought, a world he could only dream of perilously, the disorderly palimpsest of Algiers' carnivalesque history, some of which he later recognized in Assia Djebar, but whose astonishingly fluent passages of adventure, sexuality, and magic turn up with a great deal of their raw force in some of *The Arabian Nights* and that endless stream of consciousness which is the Algerian drama one finds in bustling cafés, bazaars, souks. A cohabitation of Islamic, Mediterranean, and Latin erotic forms, the latent promiscuity of this semi-underground Algiers, is what he believes he was kept from as he was growing up and what he can easily imagine that European colonists were attracted to, drew on, and—for their own safety—kept at bay, with their schools, missions, social seasons, and rigid hierarchies of rank and caste. The traffic between Europe and this Algeria is being deformed, alas, today for the boundaries are being drawn in the most rigid of manners between believers and non-believers.

Arrouj saw the last and for him the best result of the traffic in *Mademoiselle* Ruby Bouisson, a tiny Jewish woman who came to Algiers in 1956, attracted by the city's warmth and possibilities in contrast to what had come to Europe. She was a lazy, wonderfully precious, and bright-eyed spinster with secret tastes and unknown pleasures, who taught English at his school. He was a student of hers for several years and still remembers with startling vividness how she taught them English literature and language using elaborate drawings on the blackboard. She is now retired in a small house outside of Algiers. "I'm Algerian, too," she told Arrouj. "Here I'm special; there many people are like me. Besides," she added, "I love Algiers." They then joked about his rambunctious behaviour when he was at school then talked about their memories, putting themselves in time to when Algiers, their lost city, was more theirs—cosmopolitan, relatively peaceful, full of wonderful things—than it has become today. They commented relentlessly but fondly as they sat together drinking tea and eating succulent *baqlawa*,⁹ she as a hyphenated French-Algerian, he as a hyphenated Algerian-Canadian, on the years that had gone by, their hopes, the future. Both of them were present as participants and observers, of course. Yet they were worried that that joyful moment was being mutilated by the passing of time. For a brief moment then, the meeting of ultra-Jewish and ultra-Berber cultures brought forth a highlighted image that typified the Algiers of his early years.

Where such pictures have since gone he does not know, but part of their poignancy for him is that they have never faded away. Perhaps the habits of being transplanted individuals could not be changed as far as they themselves were concerned: but for a short, non-stop-talking spell, their memories and the Algiers of the cultural crosscurrents of the 1950s were alive and full of nostalgia. "Yes, an epoch has resolved itself to a *finale*. . . . Our country is as good as gone," she told him. "I really must go, I have a plane to catch," he intoned. They then parted, wishing each other well.

But even that moment of repose was short-lived. For soon the present would turn ugly. They just reached *La Place des Martyrs de la Révolution* on the way to the airport when his shared cab was flagged down at a police check-point. They had already been blocked by a herd of goats licking the grass remains right in the middle of the road. One of the Algerian officers asked him for ID. He handed him his Canadian passport. The officer looked at it, nodded his head in a way that suggested he had discovered something significant and ordered him to get out while mumbling "*un oiseau rare*." Arrouj was perplexed but did not think there was any reason to worry. He knew there were periodic security alerts in Algeria. General Liamine Zeroual, in power then, was refusing to bow to Islamists. It was for this reason that independent Algerian journalists were regularly detained, maimed, and killed and their newspapers impounded. He also knew that crows, locusts, and whiffs of sandalwood, tastes of tamarind juice and blood—all these interrupted Algeria's earnest efforts to determine its present. Especially blood, which is made to carry so many metaphorical meanings that it loses all sense as it spills across the pages.

"What is your profession?" the policeman asked, leafing through Arrouj's passport while manipulating a cigarette on the ends of his lips.

"Professor . . . at the university," he said.

"What do you teach?"

"English," he said. "*La littérature anglaise*." He tried to find the right words.

The officer shook his head, dismissed the cab driver, and pointed to a police van parked in the shade of a tree on the other side of the road.

"Get inside," he said in a deep voice, putting Arrouj's passport in his pocket and turning his back to Arrouj.

The van was occupied by half a dozen riot policemen eating lunch. They indicated the back seat. One or two of them looked bemused. He was a Kabyle, after all, almost a white man, unlike the assorted street hawkers they had rounded up in the course of a busy morning and who were now squatting on their haunches under the blazing midday sun with their wares: calculators, watches, leather belts, cigarettes, boiled eggs, live rabbits, hens, roosters. Soon the policemen finished eating and belching, strapped on their smart

green helmets, and piled out. The hawkers were directed to get in, and off they went.

It was a short drive to the first police station. They were taken to the charge room and told to sit on the bales of hay that ran along the walls. To one side was a cell filled to capacity with some thirty or more young men, standing room only. Policemen wandered in and out pretending not to notice him, so Arrouj just stared out the window and affected nonchalance. He was in fact pressed for time but there was nothing he could usefully say or do until he knew what was going on.

An hour passed. Other young men were ushered in, until the room could hardly contain any more. By now his shirt was soaked with perspiration. A little while later Arrouj caught the sound of vehicles in the yard outside. One of the policemen told them to stand up and form a line. The man at the front was instructed to bend over and reach between his legs with his right hand to grasp the left hand of the man behind, who was to do the same with the man behind him and so on down the line. Arrouj refused to comply and the policeman did not push it as they led all sixty of them to three parked vans, his fellow culprits shuffling awkwardly, much to the amusement of the onlookers.

They set off toward the city center and soon reached the main boulevard that ran parallel with the sea on our left. Arrouj noted a couple of hotels along the way that looked as if they might be reasonably priced. He had visited Algiers only once before, two years back, but he could not remember where he had stayed. It had not yet occurred to him, as they pulled into the central police station, that he might be detained overnight, and he could miss his flight even as they were instructed to remove their shoes and drop their bags and file into an empty cell.

It was big—it could have easily contained twice their number, and as soon as Arrouj saw the bucket in the far corner he decided to refrain from eating or drinking for the duration of his stay. It took two hours for the bucket to fill up, and that was before they discovered that one of their fellows was suffering from diarrhoea. The police, for their part, ignored them until five o'clock, four hours after their arrival, when they were suddenly ordered to form three lines. The desk sergeant, a neat, handsome man in a freshly pressed uniform, began taking down their particulars in a ledger: name, address, nationality, and profession. Arrouj was the last. Fortunately, his English was good.

"But where is your ID?," he asked, shuffling through the assorted documents in the drawer.

"I don't know," Arrouj said, "you people took it."

He wrote down something in the book.

"Your profession?"

"Professor . . . at the university."

He looked up.

"Books, literature, Shakespeare," Arrouj said. There was a short silence as he paused over the appropriate column and then one of Arrouj's fellow inmates said: "*Monsieur est professeur.*"

He closed the ledger.

"Perhaps now you can explain what I am doing here," Arrouj said, but he ostentatiously ignored him and went back to his own desk in the far corner. Arrouj withdrew to the back.

A few minutes later, three policemen entered the station supporting a man in handcuffs.

"*Ya-Rabbí* (oh my God), who is going to help me now, who is going to help me now?" he wailed over and over. Arrouj could tell by his accent that he was a Mzabi. One of the policemen shoved him into a chair. The man was getting hysterical.

"*Ya-Rabbí* (oh my God), *Ya Sidi Muhammad*, who will help me, who will help me?"

"Shut up!" the desk sergeant barked, moving toward him.

"*Ya-Rabbí* (oh my God), *Ya Sidi Muhammad*, I didn't know the money was counterfeit, please *Sidi Muhammad*, help me, help me."

One of the policemen fetched him a slap across the back of the head that almost toppled him, whereupon the man started screaming. This was the signal for the other policemen to pile in. They beat him about the head and body, scrambling over each other in their haste, and then dragged him off the chair across the concrete floor and through to the back, out of sight.

"These people are animals," the man next to me said in French under his breath.

"You're Algerian?" Arrouj asked.

He nodded. We fell to talking. He told Arrouj that he had been living in Algiers for the last two years, that he and his brother imported second hand clothing from Germany and that he had been on his way to the docks that morning when he was arrested at a checkpoint because he had inadvertently left his ID at home. Lack of papers was the main reason people were being detained, he said, including the majority of their inmates, almost all of whom were from neighbouring Constantine. They come to the capital in search of work, he added. They were used to being picked up, which was why they did not appear too concerned.

"They are very backward," he said, "they don't understand that they have rights." This seemed a little daring but Arrouj let it pass. He was pleased to have found an ally, and thought he might turn out to be useful; he told him

his brother had been with him when he was arrested and was even now working for his release.

"But I don't understand why they arrested me," Arrouj said.

He shrugged. "Money, what else?"

"So why haven't they asked me for any?"

"They want you to sweat first," he replied. "That's all it is, you know. They have to supplement their income. The Government even encourages it because they can't pay them properly."

"They've made a mistake this time," Arrouj said, only half convincing himself. He wrote his Toronto telephone number on a scrap of paper.

"Call this number if you get out before me and tell the person who answers the phone to get in touch with the Canadian Embassy. Her name is Pumpkin." He gave him 20 Canadian Dollars.

By now it was getting dark. The desk sergeant asked if anybody wanted to buy bread from the woman inside, another policeman fetched drinking water in plastic containers from the standing tap outside. The detainees were obviously there for the night.

Time dragged. It would have been nice to follow what was on the television, but the desk sergeant deliberately turned it off, and lowered the volume in his ledgers. As soon as he finished with one, He then copied all the names of the detainees using a red pen to draw the vertical lines with a ruler and a blue one for the writing, pausing occasionally to admire his work. And all the while he pretended that they didn't exist.

By about nine o'clock most of Arrouj's fellow inmates were sleeping soundly on the bare floor. Arrouj made fitful conversation with his new-found friend, whose main topic was the Arab world's irredeemable backwardness. Even so, he couldn't think of going anywhere else. That is why he had come to Algiers from Blida to better himself in the first place and why, despite the abuse of human rights, he would remain in the capital after his release.

Shortly after midnight, a van pulled into the yard outside and disgorged a man dressed only in a pair of khaki shorts. He was quickly followed by four policemen who pushed and punched him into the station and then set about beating him until the other prisoners feared for his life. What was especially eerie was his complete silence. He never uttered a sound as he fell to the ground and was hauled up and fell down again. It was as if the beating was no more than expected, deserved even, and the greater his compliance, the better his chances of survival would be. He might as well have been a punch bag: certainly that was how the police appeared to see him. By now the others were wide awake and we simply stood there watching, unable to say or do anything until, semiconscious, he was dragged off in the same direction as

the man who had been beaten up earlier. One of Arrouj's cellmates said something in French, perhaps an attempt at a joke, but nobody responded.

About an hour later, two pretty young women of eighteen or thereabouts were ushered in. One was dressed in a mini skirt and a halter top that showed a lot of midriff. The other wore a cotton dress that emphasised the outline of her body. Both wore cheap high heels and red nail polish. The desk sergeant checked their ID's.

"From Oran," he said, as though this fact by itself was enough to incriminate them. Clearly, he didn't like nonconformists.

"So this is how you girls come to Algiers to have fun," he sneered. For a moment Arrouj thought he was going to slap them, and for a moment they thought so too, and cringed, but instead he took the keys from the nail and opened the door of the cell where all the inmates were held.

"Get in," he said.

They hesitated.

"Get in," he repeated rather angrily, and gave them a shove. Then he turned off the main light and stretched out on a bench.

Inside the cell the women clung to the bars and studiously ignored the men behind them. They conversed in low voices, but self-consciously. They knew perfectly well that every man in the cell was looking at them, mentally undressing them, even weighing up their chances, as perhaps the desk sergeant was encouraging them to do. It didn't matter that they tried to keep still, as though to minimise the space they occupied. Their presence was enough; and then there were the clothes, worn for the very reason that was now working against them.

"What if they decide to rape them?" Arrouj's friend whispered, indicating the other prisoners. In fact, a few of the rougher looking men—the dock workers—attempted to engage the women in conversation, but too many of the others were awake for them to risk taking it any further, at least until they could be reasonably certain of getting away with it. As time went by and the others started falling asleep, the pushier men seemed to become more emboldened, but by then it was too late. The morning shift arrived with the first hint of daybreak and the desk sergeant roused himself from his slumber. One of the newcomers, a round man with a pleasant smile, came over.

"Where is the Canadian man?" he asked. Arrouj stood up. He said something in Arabic but Arrouj shrugged to indicate that he didn't understand. The Officer shook his head and turned away. The desk sergeant opened the cell and ordered the women out. He couldn't resist the lecture, which went on for a good half an hour, after which he handed each of them a broom and ordered them to sweep out the station as well as make a pot of fresh coffee for him and his men. He then turned his attention to the detainees and

barked out an order. Everybody stood up and formed three lines, just like before. Arrouj sat where he was with his back to the wall. The smiling policeman looked at him and told him to join one of the lines. Arrouj jumped up and started shouting that they had detained him without so much as an explanation and that they thought they were going to get away with it then they were badly mistaken and who the hell did they think they were, anyway? He was more upset than he'd realised; he was shaking with rage.

"Okay, okay, go and sit down," the desk sergeant said with a placatory gesture, and then busied himself counting off the others on his ledger. He was the perfect bureaucrat, though Arrouj wondered whether he really believed some of the detainees had escaped while he slept.

As Arrouj had suspected, his friend from Blida was eventually released at eight o'clock, along with a third of the others. He saw the money change hands but nobody had yet said anything to him. It was about an hour later that one of those left behind, ID-less and pot-less, asked him why he, too, didn't just pay the 20 dinars and go.

"Why should I?" Arrouj retorted petulantly, but after another two hours, hungry, thirsty and beginning to wonder whether his friend hadn't absconded with the money he had given him, he was tempted to make a deal. Before he caved in, help arrived in the person of the Canadian Honorary Consul.

The Honorary Consul—"Yes, just like the Graham Green novel," she confirmed—was waiting for him in the police chief's office. The police chief, a pleasant looking man in his forties, shook hands with him and pointed to a chair.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Why are you asking me?" Arrouj replied. "I thought this was meant to be your station."

"Perhaps you'd just better tell him the facts," the Honorary Consul admonished. "That's how we do things here."

Arrouj bit his lip and did as he was told, but stressing the fact that at no time did any of his officers explain why he was being held. He also mentioned the beatings he had witnessed and the two women who were locked in a cell with sixty men for three hours. When the officer had finished he opened the passport on the page with Arrouj's photograph.

"*Vous voyez, Madame La Consul,*" he began by way of explanation to the Honorary Consul, "if you look closely, you will notice that the photograph doesn't exactly cover the space for it. That is why my men were suspicious. They thought that it might be counterfeit. We tried to get in touch with the Canadian Embassy in order to clarify the matter but unfortunately we could not get an answer on the telephone."

"Why should anybody want a dodgy Canadian passport?" Arrouj asked, his sarcasm tempered by the suspicion that the man was telling the truth.

"And there was a security alert," the police chief said, ignoring him.

"*Chef*," Arrouj said, "I have only one question to ask you. How long are you permitted to hold a person before charging them?"

"Forty-eight hours," he said without hesitation.

"It's really a nice country," the Honorary Consul said as they walked out of the station. And so Arrouj was free, 24 hours later, to the dismay of the *Chef* and his men, who, in the end, got no money out of him.

Arrouj said good-bye to the Honorary Consul and went straight back to his hotel where he had to stay until he could catch a plane to London the following Friday. Waiting in the lobby for the doorman to bring in his suitcase and acting on an impulse, he opened an old-yellowed telephone book and looked for his father's name. And, amazingly, there it was; their old address, the unchanged telephone number, as if the Qureishis had never gone away to the unmentionable country across the border. It was an eerie discovery. He felt as if he were being claimed, or informed that the facts of his faraway life were illusions, and that this continuity was the reality. Then he went to visit the family house in the photograph he had brought with him and stood outside it, neither daring nor wishing to announce himself to its new owners. He was overwhelmed. The photograph had naturally been taken in black and white; and his memory, feeding on such images as this one, had begun to see his childhood in the same way, monochromatically. The colors of his history had seeped out of his mind's eye; now his other two eyes were assaulted by the vividness of the red tiles, the whiteness of the baked walls, the yellow-edged green of cactus leaves, the brilliance of the bougainvillea creeper, the delicate white of jasmine petals. When he realized how much he wanted to restore the past to himself, not the faded greys of old family album snapshots, but whole, in Cinemascope, it was too late. Dwelling on the present was his only brief respite from the past.

It may be that writers in Arrouj's position, exiles, drifters, and *émigrés*, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if they do look back, they must also do so in the knowledge—which rises to profound uncertainties—that their physical alienation from the homeland almost inevitably means that they will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that they will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, "imaginary homelands," in Salman Rushdie's totemic formula, Algiers of the mind.

Writing this essay in Toronto, looking out through his window on to a city scene totally unlike the one Arrouj was imagining on paper, he was con-

stantly plagued by this problem, until he felt obliged to face it in the text, to make clear that (in spite of his original and his supposed somewhat Proustian ambition to unlock the gates of lost time so that the past reappeared as it actually had been, unaffected by the distortions of memory) what he was actually doing was an essay of memory and about memory, so that his Algeria was just that: “his” Algeria, a version and no more than one version of all the millions of possible versions. He tried to make it as imaginatively true as he could, but imaginative truth is simultaneously honorable and suspect, and he knew that his Algeria may only have one to which he (who is no longer what he used to be, and who by leaving Algiers never became what perhaps he was meant to be) was, let us say, willing to admit he belonged.

Set against the background of the past, one attempts to reconcile a knowledge of the world(s) one inhabits as well as the ones that inhabit oneself or her and without which life would not make sense. This remembrance Arrouj has done with an intimate devotion to the enrichment of the inner life through the medium of time and then the question begs itself: Does this mean the return of the biographical “he”? In a sense, it undoubtedly does. For in using memory to construct the presence of his past in this way, Arrouj found himself adopting an ethical position—namely, that of contrasting the disarray of the world and of the self with the unending search for that lost, invisible temple, which is the “*felt time of our subjective memories*” (Proust 1981, 189).

The felt time in which the reader is now invited to participate is one of ruses and betrayals, friendships and enmity, daring and cowardice. In the process, the balance between the violence implicit in the marginal status of the narrator and/or the author as well as the grateful capacity for recreating a world, a place of communion in time, is locked in one’s memory. It is this fragile balance that Arrouj seems to have lost for ever. In time, he had willy-nilly to accept the principle of annulment of which Theodor Adorno speaks so perceptively in *Minima Moralia*:

The past life of émigrés is, as we know, annulled. Earlier it was the warrant of arrest, today it is intellectual experience, that is declared non-transferable and unnaturalisable. Anything that is not reified cannot be counted and measured, ceases to exist. Not satisfied with this, however, reification spreads to its own opposite, the life that cannot be directly actualized; anything that lives on merely as thought and recollection. For this a special rubric has been invented. It is called “background” and appears on the questionnaire as an appendix, after sex, age and profession. To complete its violation, life is dragged along on the triumphal automobile of the united satisfactions, and even the past is no longer safe from the present, whose remembrance of it consigns it a second time to oblivion. (Adorno 1974, 211)

Partial pasts and presents and beings, in all the sense of that phrase. Meaning (of each one of them) is a shaky edifice people build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old photographs, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because their sense of the past, not to mention the future; of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that they defend it so fiercely, even to the death.

Narratives of reconstruction of the past may reject such myths of transformation; memory may seek its meanings through a sense of causality that negotiates the recurrence of the image of the past while keeping open the question of the present. "The importance of such retroaction lies in its ability to reinscribe the past," Homi Bhabha writes,

reactivate it, relocate it, resignify it. More significant, it commits our understanding of the past, and our reinterpretation of the future, to an ethics of "survival" that allows us to work through the present. And such a working through, or working out, frees us from the determinism of historical inevitability—repetition without a difference. It makes it possible for us to confront that difficult borderline, the interstitial experience, between what we take to be the image of the past and what is in fact involved in the passing of time. (Bhabha 1993, 214)

In the end, people only marvel at the way the journey is for them an exercise of memory; a way of remembering their own immediate past, a way of getting to a past that is their own and the past as it is indirectly related to them.

Notes

¹ *Tamazight* is one of the three distinct dialects spoken, the two others being *dhamazighth* and *tashilit*.

² I am profoundly grateful to Edward Said's writings on exile, writings that shaped in part the writing of this essay (1999, 2000). I am also indebted to the writings of Maja-Pearce (1987).

³ The Maghreb spelled thus connotes Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.

⁴ This passage is influenced in part by Edward Said. For more on the subject of displacement, see Said (1999, 34-45).

⁵ The boys were all subliminally aware, however, that the old colonial order was crumbling: Tunisia became independent, and so did Morocco: Algeria was engaged in "a savage war of peace" that would eventually see it declare independence.

⁶ Echhili is a warm wind that originates in the Sahara. The French call it *Cirroco*. It can cause diarrhea and fever.

⁷ This passage is shaped in part by Edward Said's writings on exile.

⁸ I pay tribute to Edward Said for influencing the writing of this section. For more on the subject of exile, see Said 1998, 2-5; 1991, 116; 1988, 15-45).

⁹ *Baqlawa* is originally a flat cake folding in hazelnuts and honey.

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