


**Decolonizing Memory: Algeria and the Politics of Testimony.** Jill Jarvis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021). Pp. 288. \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9781478011965

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From colonial times to the present, Algerian writers have played a crucial role in asserting political resistance to state violence. As Algerian novelist Tahar Djaout wrote shortly before his death at the hands of Islamist terrorists in Algiers in 1993:

Le silence c'est la mort  
Et toi, si tu parles, tu meurs  
Alors, dis et meurs.

Silence is death And you, if you speak, you die So speak, and die.

In *Decolonizing Memory*, literary critic Jill Jarvis draws upon a variety of texts—theoretical, juridical, visual, political—from Algeria's colonial past to the present day, works of fiction and nonfiction written in French and Arabic, to argue convincingly for the value of resistance literature. She examines the role of literature in uncovering and challenging the unjust treatment of Algerians, first as colonized subjects in French colonial Algeria (1830–1962) and then as citizens of the Algerian state (1988–1999). In her analysis, Jarvis explains that by bearing witness to important events with written testimony, writers support resistance to state oppression, thereby correcting and rewriting official histories as they promote the vision of a truly decolonized world. Her text offers us close readings of the works of Zahia Rahmani, Yamina Mechakra, Fadhma Aïth Mansour Amrouche, Waciny Laredj, Assia Djebar, and Samira Negrouche, as well as testimonials of Algerian victims of torture, including Gisèle Halimi and Simone de Beauvoir's celebrated defense of Djamilia Boupacha, a young Algerian militant tortured by the French army during Algeria's independence struggle.

In the introduction, the critic alerts her readers to the fact that scholars cannot study any aspect of modern day France without considering its history of empire: the transatlantic slave trade, colonizing wars, settler occupation. She states that France remains “haunted by empire that it has tried both to exorcise and atone for” (p. 12). Yet, as historians such as Benjamin Stora have shown, the postcolonial period produced amnesia and blindness on the part of the French with respect to the true historical scope of state violence and racism. Sadly, the state violence that marked the colonial era continued in Algeria during *la décennie noire*, the dark decade of the 1990s.

In her text, Jarvis explains that the works she has chosen are not documents of past events but rather traces of a dynamic, collective, open-ended process oriented toward the future (p. 14). In this regard, she refuses to view Algerian history as consisting of three separate phases—colonization, decolonization, and civil war—but rather sees continuities between periods of violence. Insisting that writers are able to articulate demands for justice that cannot be expressed within existing legal frameworks, she finds literature indispensable in the struggle for a just society; it is literature, she asserts, that moves beyond the historiographical and legal genres to the imaginative.

Her study consists of four chapters and a conclusion: Chapter 1, “Remnants of Muslims,” examines Zahira Rahmani's novels *Moze* (2003) and *Musulman “roman”* (2005), both based on the life of the writer's father, a *harki*, and therefore marked as an outcast by Algerian society, along with Giorgio Agamben's theoretical reflection in *Remnants of Auschwitz* on the haunting figure of the “Musulmänn,” the Jewish survivor of the Nazi death camps who was the most

abject prisoner, the “half-living ghost” (p. 34). Agamben looks at this prisoner and sees an absence of dignity; Rahmani, in contrast, finds human dignity and resistance (p. 53).

Chapter 2, “Untranslatable Justice,” studies the censored and clandestine testimonies of Algerian and French anticolonial activists during the later years of the Algerian War: *La Gangrène* (1959); *Nuremberg pour l’Algérie* (1962); and *Djamila Boupacha* (1962). Jarvis begins this chapter by noting that the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem drew worldwide attention during the same period that saw Algeria’s war of liberation becoming increasingly violent in both France and Algeria, but Algerians like Boupacha were largely ignored. Indeed, Gisèle Halima and Simone de Beauvoir published *Djamila Boupacha* to draw attention to the failure of the French judicial system. Their testimonial text proved necessary, as Jarvis explains, because of the breakdown of France’s judicial system during the anticolonial war.

Chapter 3, “Mourning Revolt,” examines Yamina Mechakra’s novels, *La grotte éclatée* (1979) and *Arris* (1999), as works that pay tribute to those who did not qualify for the National Liberation Front’s definition of *shahīd*, or martyr. Mechakra calls attention to the ghosts of the disappeared and forgotten, thereby challenging the heroic narratives of sacrifice and martyrdom put forth by the FLN (National Liberation Front), the ruling political party.

Chapter 4, “Open Elegy,” deals with Waciny Laredj’s novel *Sayyidat al-maqam* (1993), translated from Arabic into French as *Les ailes de la reine* (2009). Jarvis reads the text alongside *The 1001 Nights* and Fadhma Mansour Amrouche’s memoir, *Histoire de ma vie* (1968) to show how multiple voices in multiple languages join to create alternative forms of testimony.

The conclusion, “Prisons without Walls,” brings together novelist Assia Djebar’s poem, “Rais, Bentalha” (1998) and poet Samira Negrouche’s installation, a series of poems presented on posters. Both Djebar and Negrouche express a poet’s anxiety in the face of the military repression of popular protest in Algeria in October 1988. Djebar, the critic notes, writes to defend the dead from the “indignity and violence of police instrumentalization” (p. 177), and Negrouche calls for testimony that has not yet been written.

Although *Decolonizing Memory* is a very thoughtful and well-documented study, the chapter devoted to Yamina Mechakra’s writing neglects to include the novelist’s critique of traditional Algerian society, focusing only on her critique of heroic narratives promoted by the FLN. In addition, although informing her readers that the Chaouia language influenced Mechakra’s French language text, Jarvis neither explains this nor offers concrete examples. Despite these omissions in her text, the critic must be commended for her careful textual analysis, supplemented by extensive footnotes and a solid bibliography.

In conclusion, Jarvis offers her readers a compelling theoretic work that not only examines literary works that have not received enough critical attention but is innovative in rethinking the concept of the *shahīd*, engaging with Lia Brozgal’s concept of the “anarchive” (a collection of works that counter official historical narrative), and viewing decolonialism as a continual struggle. Most importantly, her in-depth analyses reveal the crucial role of Algerian writers in transforming the genre of testimonial literature. Significantly, the critic published her text as the HIRAK movement was unfolding and Algerians were taking to the streets to protest President Bouteflika’s hold on the government despite his infirmities, his far too long tenure in office, state corruption, and unemployment. Her text marks a significant contribution to Francophone literary theory at a time when Algeria is experiencing a new chapter in its history, with both its citizens and its writers continuing the fight for justice as they hope for a brighter future.

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