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Leïla Sebbar, *The Seine Was Red. Paris, October 1961: A Novel* (translated by Mildred Mortimer). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008. xxiv + 116pp. \$17.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 10-0253-2202-38.

Review by Jim House, University of Leeds.

The official French obfuscation of the police violence against Algerians in Paris in October 1961 has inspired long-term personal and collective memory retrieval that has taken many forms, and cultural vectors have long played a fascinating role in this complex process. The work of Franco-Algerian novelist and essayist Leïla Sebbar has for many years provided an eloquent expression and examination of the Franco-Algerian encounter, and, in particular, of the generational factors within Algerian migration in France. This novel, initially published in 1996 as *La Seine était rouge* and reviewed here in Mildred Mortimer's excellent translated version, thus constitutes a continuation of Sebbar's earlier work.[1] Mortimer's useful introduction explains that in October 1961, Sebbar was a student in Aix-en-Provence, and heard about the Paris demonstrations by radio. A request in 1990 to write a text for the official Algerian publication aimed at the emigrant community in France brought her back to the subject. Sebbar's novel originally appeared at a quiet time in which there was at most faltering resurgence of the public memory of October 1961 in France, after a peak in commemorative activity around 1991. This situation inspired the timely and ultimately crucial decision by campaigners to publicize Papon's role in the 17 October 1961 violence at his trial in Bordeaux in 1997-1998 relating to his role as Secretary General of the Gironde Préfecture during the Vichy regime.[2]

Sebbar's short but very dense novel constitutes probably the most eloquent example of the sub-genre of novels concerning 17 October 1961.[3] The text addresses a number of difficult and sensitive issues. For the novel is not only about the need to cultivate memory of October 1961 as a counter-memory to the Republican versions of the past commemorated highly selectively on the walls and through the statues of the former colonial "centre": Sebbar's novel is also about strategic silence at personal and collective levels, and how such silence is created, and perpetuated. The difficult questions raised by the novel are therefore not only asked of the Republican state, but also addressed to the central characters, none of whom represent official French (or Algerian) viewpoints, but all of whom are struggling with the past and how it can be assessed, and indeed re-assessed, in the light of the present.

The central character, Amel, is a young woman of Algerian heritage living in France (a common figure in Sebbar's fiction), whose family was closely involved in Algerian nationalism and the Front de libération nationale's (FLN) demonstrations of 17 and 20 October 1961. Her mother, Noria, grew up in the radically pro-nationalist shanty-town of La Folie in suburban Nanterre, where Amel's migrant grandparents lived. Amel's problem is one often met by those in her position: her parents and grandparents seem reluctant to talk about the past, a reluctance informed by a variety of reasons that it is complicated to understand precisely because their causes are seldom, if ever, verbalized: such motivations often include trauma, the culture of secrecy imposed by the FLN, language problems, and the desire not to generate hatred for French society in their children by recounting the sufferings endured in the fight for independence. Nonetheless, Noria's silence to her daughter is in contradistinction to the attitude she shows when asked by Louis, the documentary film-maker son of

family friend Flora (a former radical anti-colonialist imprisoned during the war for her activism), to talk about her childhood. This story included the experiences Noria can remember of the October demonstrations as a nine year-old. In addition to focussing on October 1961, Louis' film is designed to investigate the radical anti-colonial activism of his middle-class parents, one that saw them witness the bloody events of 17 October and help those, including the young Noria, to escape police violence.

Inter-ethnic political solidarities, and the friendships generated during the war that have continued into the 1990s, therefore create the conditions of possibility for Noria to speak in the semi-public context of the documentary film to a trusted individual (Louis), a scenario that has been played out on many occasions in real life since the 1980s. But of course what Noria, like some of the other characters in the novel, brings to the past is a reconstruction: only through subsequent reading could she discover the itinerary followed by her and her mother in October 1961. For Noria belongs to the "1.5 generation" of the late-Algerian war period [4]: old enough to have been physically and psychologically implicated but not old enough to understand all that was happening, and hence reliant on a historical memory that can only be pieced together in a fragmentary way given the incompleteness of historical knowledge of the events.

Noria's testimony is interspersed throughout this highly multi-vocal novel with those of a number of individuals caught up in the events of October 1961: a Paris police officer; a *harki*; an Algerian thrown into the Seine. When Amel and her friend Omer enter a café near the Grands Boulevards (the scene of lethal police violence on 17 October 1961), and start asking questions of the café owner about October 1961, she turns out to be a pied-noir "unconcerned" by the events, having been in Algeria in October 1961. However, the testimony of her Algerian employee who witnessed the events as a sixteen-year old, further exemplifies the complex over-layering of personal and historical memory that today characterizes so many accounts of the October 1961 events when historians such as this reviewer undertake interviews with former Algerian demonstrators.

Collectively, the testimonies in the novel highlight not only French racism or indifference as well as the role of the colonial and postcolonial French state during the Algerian war of independence, but also the false idea that Algerians universally supported the FLN: we hear of the internecine violence between the FLN and its bitter rival the Mouvement national algérien, and, then, through the figure of Omer, the distortions and inadequacies of alienating official narratives on the war in post-independent Algeria. Amel's friend Omer, a journalist, and his lawyer mother Mina, have been living with their friend Flora since coming to France to flee radical Islamist violence. Together, Amel and Omer retrace the geographical trajectories of Amel's family on 17 October 1961 as they came in from Nanterre to demonstrate in central Paris. In the process, the pair paint alternative, counter-memorial statements alongside official commemorative plaques marking key events of Republican history, in order to underscore how people experience and remember the (post)colonial city in radically different ways: for Amel, Place de la Concorde evokes the repression at the metro station there on 17 October (famously captured by Elie Kagan's photographs), just as it affords a view up towards La Défense, with the Pont de Neuilly near to this, where many Algerians were killed.

Amel and Omer's discussions often concern the controversial and sensitive question of the possible continuities between the violence of the war for independence in Algeria and the terrible violence of the 1990s, ostensibly between the Algerian security forces and elements of radical Islamist groups. Here, the novel perhaps attempts to do too much, given its short length, since the immensely complex question of how and why Algerian society experienced a return of collective violence should arguably not be relegated to a sub-theme. However, the dialogues between Omer and Amel on this and other issues usefully bring them both to realise that, having been socialised in different countries, they have at times diverging perspectives on these questions and each other's societies more generally, although ultimately Amel prefers Omer to Louis as a potential partner. The Franco-Algerian relation, the novel

seems to be saying, is a permanent but shifting one: the interrelations and cross-fertilizations between the two spaces should not obscure the differences and misunderstandings, past and present.

Sebbar's text, the richness of which it is hard to resume, elaborates a critical postcolonial public memory that, while certainly being a counter-memory to some Republican narratives of the past and / or the obfuscation of that past, also addresses post-independence official Algerian versions of history. Memory, the novel also shows, is not only inter-generational as we have seen, but often multi-directional, and several references to the persecution of Jewish people show the inter-related nature of these memories with those of decolonization, and how narratives of empathy and / or political solidarity can be generated through exposure to both processes.[5] The novel is also very suggestive of the as-yet underexplored histories of how the solidarity shown by a small minority of Metropolitan French people with Algerians prior to 1962 has continued to exert influence on post-colonial French society. Sebbar's text also reminds us of the need to further examine the similarities, distinctions and possible cross-fertilizations between fictional and non-fictional representations of the same event, a complex relationship around which the novel is itself structured, since many chapters are excerpts from the (imaginary) documentary film that Louis has produced. The novel exemplifies how, in the 1990s, the memorial initiative in France regarding October 1961 shifted to the descendants of the war-time generations, French or Algerian. These descendants, who had often initially learned of the war from inter-personal memory transmission, but not from their parents or grand-parents, subsequently forged closer relationships with their elders when socio-political change allowed for greater memorial exchange. This process, however, remains fraught with political, social and cultural factors complicating the transmission of memory.

#### NOTES

[1] Michel Laronde, ed., *Leïla Sebbar* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003).

[2] Jim House and Neil MacMaster, *Paris 1961. Algerians, State Terror, and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), chapter 11.

[3] Michel Laronde, "'Effets d'Histoire'. Représenter l'Histoire coloniale forclosée," *International Journal of Francophone Studies* vol.10 nos.1-2 (2007):139-156.

[4] Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[5] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2009).

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