Intersubjective Memory in Maïssa Bey's *Entendez-vous dans les montagnes*

Rebekah Vince,
University of Warwick

The train journey: a *nœud de mémoire*

In calling for such a new approach under the sign of "noeuds de mémoire"—knots of memory—we hope to stimulate further conceptualization of collective or cultural memory beyond the framework of the imagined community of the nation-state.[1]

In Maïssa Bey's *Entendez-vous dans les montagnes* (2002), 'the past is perfomatively regenerated [...] as if it were fully present', to use LaCapra's terminology,[2] through the use of the present tense and the impetus of the train journey. What is more, Bey writes herself into her story, using the third person and combining internal reflection (through thought-tracking) and external articulation (through dialogue). Contrary to the kind of 'trauma theory [which] elides distinctions between perpetrators and victims and […] remains trapped within a Eurocentric framework',[3] Bey tracks the dialogue between the three distinct

[1] Michael Rothberg, 'Introduction Between Memory and Memory', *Nœuds de mémoire: multidirectional memory in postwar French and francophone culture*, ed. Michael Rothberg, Deberati Sanyal and Max Silverman (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 7.

[2] Dominick LaCapra, 'Trauma, Absence, Loss', *Critical Inquiry*, 25 (1999), p. 716.

[3] Rothberg, speaking of 'the work of Cathy Caruth and her associates'. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (*Stanford: Stanford* University Press, 2009), p. 87.

characters of an Algerian refugee, a former member of the French army and a seemingly unaffected third-generation *pied-noir* called Marie. The young French girl is depicted as carefree and fearless (*EVM*, p. 14), ambivalent to the past, as opposed to the Algerian refugee for whom fear is a constant companion (*EVM*, pp. 21-22).[4] The *nœud de mémoire* (memory knot) as 'a new model […] of remembrance' is a term coined by Rothberg as an attempt 'to stimulate further conceptualization of collective or cultural memory beyond the framework of the imagined community of the nation-state'.[5] Arguing that Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*[6] is limited to 'an implicitly restricted notion of a homogenized France stripped of its colonies and the ongoing legacies of colonialism', Rothberg has embarked on the 'project of rethinking French and Francophone sites of memory as *nœuds de mémoire*'.[7] In *Entendez-vous dans les montagnes*, Bey's characters are caught up in identitarian and distinctly Francophone memory knots of exile – Marie's grandfather as a *pied-noir*, the Algerian refugee in the face of Muslim extremism, and in a less obvious way, the solicitation of the war veteran to fight in Algeria, leaving France behind. Rather than being restricted to the 'notion of a homogenized France stripped of its colonies and the ongoing legacies of colonialism',[8] Bey's characters face up to '« *le passé douloureux de la France* »' (*EVM*, p. 43).

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[4] Maïssa Bey, *Entendez-vous dans les montagnes…*(La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 2002). Unless otherwise stated, all quotes from the primary text will be indicated in parenthesis using the abbreviation *EVM*, followed by the relevant page number(s).

[5] Rothberg, 'Introduction: Between Memory and Memory', p. 7

[6] See Pierre Nora, 1984. 'Entre Mémoire et Historie', *Les Lieux de mémoire, 1, La République* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), pp. i-xlii.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

The very fact the dialogue the *récit*recounts takes place within the spatial and temporal non-location (or non-locality) of a train journey 'exceed[s] attempts at territorialisation'.[9] Indeed, Rothberg writes that: 'Performances of memory may well have territorializing or identity-forming effects but those effects will always be contingent and open to resignification'.[10] Thus, while the journey has a physical destination – a temporary refuge on French soil for the Algerian refugee and presumably the home of the other two characters – it also has a metaphorical impetus which challenges the colonial rhetoric of progress as neither the Algerian refugee nor the former soldier fully articulates the past and therefore the ending is non-conclusive. What is more, the Algerian refugee's flight is not only from her country but also from her past, thus her journey of asylum-seeking takes on another, less conclusive meaning: 'S'enfuir... tout quitter sans regarder derrière soi, essayer de trouver un lien, un ami, un lieu où se terrer' (*EVM*, p. 29). Despite the possibility of finding physical refuge, the chances of mental relief are slim: 'Elle ne supporte plus aucune allusion à la violence, et voilà qu'elle se retrouve rattrapée par tout ce qu'elle essaie en vain de fuir' (*EVM*, p. 27).

In *Entendez-vous dans les montagnes*, to use Rothberg's terminology, 'memory emerges from unexpected, multidirectional encounters—encounters between diverse pasts and a conflictual present',[11] in this case within the coincidental space of a train carriage. The 'diverse pasts' are encapsulated in the war veteran's experience of the 1962 war, the murder of the Algerian woman's father, and the young girl's *pied-noir* inheritance. The 'conflictual present' can be seen in the juxtaposition of the third-generation *pied-noir*'s apparent ambivalence and the events of the 1990s in

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Rothberg, 'Introduction: Between Memory and Memory', p. 9.

Algeria which traumatise the Algerian refugee and stir empathy in the former soldier. Thus, while Pancrazi's work supports the 'notion of trauma as an individual's repetitive, haunted, "unclaimed" experience of unknowable violence', Bey demonstrates the collective, transgenerational, and 'multidirectional potential'[12] of trauma in *Entendez-vous*. What is more, in *Entendez-vous*, her depiction of trauma is 'cosmopolitan'.[13] Indeed, a*nœud* or *boucle de mémoire* is created in the intercultural interaction between the three characters:

> Et voilà ! La boucle est bouclée ! Une petite fille de pieds-noirs, un ancien combattant, une fille de fellaga. C'est presque irréel. Qui donc aurait pu imaginer une scène pareille ? Cela ressemble à un plateau télé, réuni pour une émission par des journalistes en quête de vérité, désireux de lever le voile pour faire la lumière sur « *le passé douloureux de la France* ». Il ne manque plus qu'un harki. Et surtout, pour mettre en relief l'absurdité ou l'étrangeté de cette situation, il ne faudrait pas omettre de la présenter non seulement comme une fille de fellaga, mais elle-même contrainte à fuir son pays pour échapper à la folie intégriste. On pourrait presque en faire le sujet d'une pièce de théâtre, en choisissant un titre anodin, d'une banalité recherchée, par exemple : « *Conversation dans un train* ». Acte I. Les personnages sont en place (*EVM*, pp. 43-44).

Here, the multidirectional nature of Bey's text comes to the fore, as the shared train journey 'track[s] the interconnectedness of different perpetrators and different victims in overlapping, yet distinct, scenarios of extreme violence'.[14] The reader acts as observer of a cross-cultural, multigenerational panel representing the multidirectional nature of Franco-Algerian memory. As both a daughter of a *fellaga* and a refugee fleeing the Algerian Civil War

[12] Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p. 88, p. 87.
[13]Ibid., p. 90.
[14]Ibid., p. 96.

of the 1990s, the middle-aged Algerian woman represents two identities, while the old man is both a war veteran and the murderer of the woman's father.

Moreover, the train journey can be seen to serve as a metaphor for the acceleration of 'history and modernity' in which Rothberg sees the potential for the 'pluralization and blurring' of 'the boundaries of identity', a process which 'need not be coded as loss' in the way that Nora laments it.[15] In other words, Rothberg sees this acceleration in terms of progress rather than regression. To use his terminology, the train journey and dialogue of *Entendez-vous* can be seen as 'rhizomatic networks of temporality and cultural reference that exceed […] attempts at territorialization'.[16] And yet at the same time, as Etienne Achille points out, *Entendez-vous* rigidly sticks to 'les trois unités de temps, de lieu et d'action' of a classical play.[17] In this way, Bey remains true to the traumatic nature of the memory which she relates as, to use LaCapra's terminology, the text can be seen as a form of 'acting out' trauma in a 'controlled artistic procedure'.[18] While apparently fixed in time and space, with the train heading in one direction, the dialogue between the (secondary) victim and the perpetrator is nevertheless multidirectional, blurring the identity-construction of what Achille Mbembe terms 'the diabolical couple formed by an enemy—or tormentor—and a victim'.[19] Moreover, in her use of *l'invraisemblable* in the theatrically coincidental encounter

[15] Rothberg, 'Introduction: Between Memory and Memory', p. 10.
[16] Ibid., p. 7.
[17] Etienne Achille, '"Des Arabes, j'en suis sûre !": Rompre le silence dans *Entendez-vous dans les montagnes…* de Maïssa Bey', *French Forum*, 38 (2013), p. 253.
[18] LaCapra, 'Trauma, Absence, Loss', p. 717.
[19] Achille Mbembe, 'African Modes of Self-Writing', trans. by Steven Rendall, *Public Culture* 14 (2002), p p. 252.

between the Algerian woman and her father's murderer,[20]Bey can be seen to defer direct autobiographical treatment of her father's murder, while universalising memory of the Algerian War of Independence by using three archetypal characters implicated in this memory. As Achille writes, 'Bey propose […] un travail de reconstruction de la mémoire collective franco-algérienne'.[21]

Postmemory

Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.[22]

A term coined by Marianne Hirsch, postmemory captures 'the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right'.[23] Although Hirsch developed the concept of postmemory in relation to the children of survivors of the Shoah, she has noted its relevance to 'other contexts of traumatic transfer',[24] and indeed Rothberg has extended the theory to refer to the Algerian War of Independence.[25] He sees postmemory as a component of what he terms 'multidirectional memory':

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[20] See Achille for an elucidation of Bey's use of *l'invraisemblable*.
[21] Achille, p. 252.
[22] Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today*, 29 (2008), p. 103.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Hirsch, 'Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile', *Poetics Today*, 17 (1996), p. 108.
[25] Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p. 271.

> Not only does the mediation and belatedness of postmemory recall the mediation and belatedness of all memory—its construction out of networks of spatially and temporally differentiated "moments"—but those characteristics of postmemory are precisely the point of entry for the multidirectional confluence of disparate historical imaginaries.[26]

In line with postmemory theory, Bey (and subsequently her autobiographical protagonist in *Entendez-vous dans les montagnes*)can be seen as a member of what Geoffrey H. Hartman defines as a 1.5 generation.[27] Born in 1950, Bey is 'too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening' during the events of 1962 'but old enough to have been there'.[28] As if to reassure himself, the war veteran insists that Bey's autobiographical protagonist was 'trop jeune… certainement… vous ne pouvez pas vous souvenir de tout ça, bien sûr' (*EVM*, p. 47). And yet, as the reader gains insight into the Algerian refugee's thought process, the war veteran's seemingly conclusive remark – already undermined by the unconvincing qualifiers 'certainement' and 'bien sûr' as well as the hesitant ellipses – is called into question: 'Elle ne cherche pas à le détromper, à lui dire que si elle ne se souvient pas des arbres, de la beauté de la région, elle se souvient de tout le reste' (*EVM*, p. 47). Thus, despite being 'too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening',[29] the Algerian woman is nevertheless marked by the

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[26] Ibid.

[27] See Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The longest shadow: in the aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

[28] Geoffrey H. Hartman quoted by Erin McGlothin in *Second Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (Rochester, New York: Camden House; Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), p. 125.

[29]Susan R. Suleiman qtd. by Irene Kacandes in '"When facts are scarce": Authenticating Strategies in Writing by Children of Survivors', *After Testimony: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Holocaust Narratives for the Future*, ed. by Jakob

trauma of 'les événements' she survived as a child. This does not, however, signify that she remembers everything. Indeed, as far as her father is concerned, 'elle ne se souvient de rien' (*EVM*, p. 20). The memory of her father is reduced to a photograph and a few words, 'des bribes de phrases qu'elle a encore en mémoire' (*EVM*, p. 20). Her imagination fails to reconstruct her father's face, the verb 'essayer' and the time phrase 'souvent' suggesting a sense of inadequacy and vain attempt: 'Elle a souvent essayé de reconstituer le visage' (*EVM*, p. 20).

Mitchell poses the following question: '[i]f a parent dies or disappears, who or what is the left-behind baby or child? It is a question not of identity but of positioning'.[30] Having lost her father, the Algerian woman can no longer see herself in relation to the father as parent.[31] According to Mitchell, without the referent of the other the self is erased: '[t]he event that breaches', in this case the murder of the father, 'constitutes an erasure of the self, which then survives by following old patterns in which recognition is both essential and elusive'.[32] In line with this need for recognition arising from a post-traumatic 'disintegration of subjectivity',[33] the Algerian woman sees her father in the war veteran, a point of reference from which to construct her own identity:

Lothe, Susan Rubin Suleiman, and James Phelan (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012), p. 186.

[30] Juliet Mitchell, 'Trauma, Recognition, and the Place of Langauge', *Diacritics*, 28 (1998), p. 131.

[31] See Mitchell, pp. 130-131.

[32] Mitchell, p. 131.

[33] Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*(Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), p. 221.

> Une question, la même, toujours, lui vient en tête tandis que l'homme assis en face d'elle cherche ses lunettes dans la poche de sa veste, avant de déplier un journal.
>
> Quel âge peut-il bien avoir ? Plus de soixante ans, c'est sûr…
>
> Cette obsession… la question qu'elle se pose souvent lorsqu'elle se trouve face à face des hommes de cet âge, question qu'elle tente toujours de refouler.
>
> Ces rides inscrites comme des stigmates au coin des lèvres. Mon père aurait à peu près le même âge. Non, il serait plus vieux encore. Il n'aurait pas cette allure… il était bien plus petit de taille… il aurait fini peut-être par ressembler à son père…
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> Le conditionnel vient se placer de lui-même dans les phrases qui viennent de surgir dans son esprit, alors même qu'elle glisse dans une légère somnolence' (*EVM*, pp. 19-20).

The use of the phrases '[u]ne question, la même, toujours' and '[c]ette obsession' highlights the 'essential'[34] nature of this post-traumatic need for recognition, as does the association made between the war veteran and the Algerian woman's father (were he still alive) in their closeness in age – both numerical (in their sixties) and physical (wrinkles). This affiliation is reversed at the moment of negation – 'Non' – and what follows is a demonstration of the 'elusive'[35] nature of recognition, as the war veteran fails to live up to the Algerian woman's imagined view of her father. What is more, the narrator notes how the conditional tense creeps into her consciousness, implying that the Algerian refugee is aware of her father's absence even as she momentarily invests the war veteran with his presence (*EVM*, p. 20).

Alongside attempts at recognition, imaginative reconstruction features as a component of postmemory. According to Hirsch, '[p]ostmemory's connection to the past is [...] not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment,

[34] Mitchell, p. 131.
[35] Ibid.

projection, and creation'.[36] Bey writes that the Algerian woman 'a souvent imaginé LA scène', alluding to the murder of her own father (*EVM*, p. 41). The emphasis on the definite article demonstrates the significance and weight of the knowledge, if not the memory, of this tragic event. Bey states that she wrote *Entendez-vous* out of a 'desire […] to recreate' the moment of her father's murder, a moment which she did not witness but which nevertheless 'forged' her 'awareness of the world'.[37] What is more, from a young age, the Algerian woman is haunted by the image of the perpetrator:

> Toute petite déjà, elle essayait de donner un visage aux hommes qui avaient torturé puis achevé son père avant de le jeter dans une fosse commune. Mais elle ne parvenait pas à leur donner un visage d'homme. Ce ne pouvait être que des monstres… […] Elle voyait alors des hommes encagoulés, entièrement vêtus de noir pour mieux se fondre dans la nuit, un peu à l'image des bourreaux représentés dans les livres et les films d'historie. Des hommes sans visage qui longtemps avaient hanté ses rêves. Plus tard, riche de ses certitudes, elle ajoutait : des hommes qui n'avaient rien d'humain (*EVM*, p. 42).

On the one hand, these men are 'sans visage' because she has never met them: she does not know their face. On the other hand, her distortion and bestialisation of her father's executioners is a way of coping by suspending the reality that these men were human beings. The war veteran, meanwhile, recollects the face of the enemy in the face of death, as revealed in one of the internal thought processes indicated in italics:

> *Dans la guerre, dans toutes les guerres, l'ennemi a toujours le même visage. Le visage de notre propre mort. Et personne ne peut supporter*

[36] Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', p. 106.
[37] Bey qtd. by Suzanne Ruta, 'Interview: The Rebel's Daughter: Algerian Novelist Maissa Bey', *The Women's Review of Books*, 23 (2006), pp. 16-17.

> *de se retrouver confronter à sa propre mort. Il faut donc anéantir celui qui nous fait face parce qu'il secrète notre peur, que nous nous reconnaissons en lui – qu'il se reconnaît en nous. Et c'est cette image de nous-mêmes que nous voulons supprimer* (*EVM*, p. 57).

It is the war veteran, then, who annihilated the face of the Algerian woman's father, which becomes defragmented, impossible to reconstruct (*EVM*, p. 20). Seeing his own fear of death in the face of the *fellaga*, and apparently brainwashed into thinking that '*ce sont tous des égorgeurs…*' (*EVM*, p. 61), the war veteran obliterates himself in his murderous act. In this way, the former soldier can be seen as faceless, not only inhuman but also anonymous, as his identity as a murderer is concealed and the event itself written over: '*Huit fellagas faits prisonniers, abattus dans la forêt alors qu'ils tentaient de s'enfuir au cours d'une corvée de bois. Une belle prise, non ? Tu pourras même ajouter qu'ils n'ont pas répondu aux sommations… si ça peut te faire du bien…*' (*EVM*, p. 74). An organised murder is justified, as the *fellagas* are shown to be non-compliant fugitives.

In contrast to her initial tender association between her father and the old man on the train, by the end of the *récit*the Algerian woman realises that his is the face of her father's murderer:

> Même si tout n'est pas dit, même si une douloureuse palpitation la fait encore frémir, quelque chose s'est dénoué en elle. Que ce soit lui ou quelqu'un d'autre, peu importe. Elle se dit que rien ne ressemble à ses rêves d'enfant, que les bourreaux ont des visages d'homme, elle en est sûre maintenant, ils ont des mains d'homme, parfois même des réactions d'homme et rien ne permet de les distinguer des autres. Et cette idée la terrifie un peu plus (*EVM*, p. 75).

It is at this moment, when the perpetrator is given a face, that one haunting *nœud de mémoire* – the faceless murderer – is replaced by

another, terrifying one: the human perpetrator. Achille describes how the war veteran 'passe du statut d'homme quelconque assis dans un train à celui d'un bourreau'.[38]To tighten the knot, the war veteran sees in the Algerian woman the face of the victim he is guilty of murdering. As the train pulls in, the war veteran's words conclude the récit, 'Je voulais vous dire… il me semble… oui… vous avez les mêmes yeux… le même regard que… que votre père. Vous lui ressemblez beaucoup' (*EVM*, p. 77). The trauma of the former soldier is overshadowed by guilt, from which he partially expunges himself by paying this overdue compliment and thus fulfilling the Algerian woman's need for recognition. It is argued in *Historical Memory in Africa* that 'a more inclusive form of memory […] [which] moves beyond commemorating the past and contemplates its role in the present' inevitably involves 'issues like trauma, mourning, confession, forgiveness and reconciliation'.[39] Indeed, there is a form of reconciliatory denouement to the *récit*, in the sense that 'quelque chose s'est dénouée en elle', as the Algerian woman reconciles herself with the idea that 'les bourreaux ont des visages d'homme' (*EVM*, p. 75). Moreover, in her acceptance of the war veteran's offer to take her bag, the Algerian woman can be seen to recognize 'the perpetrator's human nature as a potential for regaining their humanity'.[40] In Bey's text, a shift can be seen in the 'mode of memory discourse' from this 'justification' approach to one of 'mediation' and 'inclusion'.[41] The young girl can be seen as a mediator, as she facilitates the conversation by asking questions while remaining neutral, having not lived through the Algerian War herself (*EVM*, p. 55). In his understanding of this war, meanwhile,

[38] Achille, p. 260.
[39] Mamadou Diawara, Bernard Lategan and Jörn Rüsen, *Historical Memory in Africa: dealing with the past, reaching for the future in an intercultural context* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), p. 3.
[40]Ibid., p. 5.
[41]Ibid., p. 3.

the former soldier comes to include and empathise with the victim, while recognising his own wrongdoing.

Bey inscribes herself into the character of the Algerian woman and 'sets up a position from which to perceive [herself]'[42] by incorporating the war veteran. Her choice of staging can thus be seen not only as a deferral of a direct autobiographical treatment of the traumatic event which shaped her childhood, but also as a way of seeing this event, and herself in the light of it, from a different angle. Mitchell writes that, '[t]o be able to write in a sustained, active way necessitates a new positioning'.[43] What is more, as the characters find a 'talking cure' in their train journey dialogue, Bey finds her cure in writing.[44] Dedicating her *récit*to 'celui qui ne pourra jamais lire ces lignes' (*EVM*, p. 7), here writing is 'reflective' in that it acknowledges 'the possibility that the other person to whom it is addressed is not there'.[45] Moreover, to use LaCapra's terminology, 'acting out', fictionally manifested in the documented thought process of the war veteran as he remembers murdering the Algerian woman's father, can be seen as 'a necessary condition of working-through' for Bey,[46] as she positions herself in relation to her father's murderer and acknowledges his humanity alongside her own. By employing dialogue while maintaining third-person internal narrative, Bey's adopts the 'two stages to writing' identified by Mitchell. The first stage is 'the

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[42] 'In terms of human relations, the ability for symbolism depends on being able to position oneself in a place from where one can see oneself in relation to another.' Mitchell, p. 131.

[43] Mitchell, p. 131.

[44] 'In its development of the talking cure, psychoanalysis has forgotten that its founder [Freud] "cured" his own hysteria not through talking but through writing.' Mitchell, p. 131.

[45] Mitchell, p. 132.

[46] LaCapra, 'Trauma, Absence, Loss', p. 717.

making present of the trace [...] which is repressed by speech', in this case the trace being the postmemory of her father's murder and the dialogue being the external equivocation of this reality which remains unarticulated and repressed. The second stage is writing as 'we more commonly understand by the term', that is the process in which 'the writer presents himself [or herself] to another' (that is the reader),[47] in this case through documented internal processes, such as the Algerian woman's imaginative reconstruction of her father's death and the war veteran's recollection of the rueful event (*EVM*,pp. 73-74). In this way, Bey's *récit* can be seen as a means of working through trauma and the loss of her father during the Algerian War of Independence, setting up 'a position from which to perceive [herself]'[48] in relation to the perpetrator and humanising him in the process of intersubjective memory. Moreover, the characters in *Entendez-vous dans les montagnes* demonstrate 'the complementary coexistence of multiple memories' in their intercultural interaction,[49] in line with Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory.

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[47] Mitchell, p. 131.

[48] 'In terms of human relations, the ability for symbolism depends on being able to position oneself in a place from where one can see oneself in relation to another.' Mitchell, p. 131.

[49] Mamadou Diawara, Bernard Lategan and Jörn Rüsen, p. 3.

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