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The Archive of Displacement: Vernacular History and Urban Cemeteries in Oran, Algeria

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Abstract

Oran—Algeria's second-largest city—is an *archive of displacement*, containing the imprint of overlooked, erased, or forgotten (often violent) pasts stored in everyday things like trees, trash, talk, and translations. Uniting all these unintended archival deposits are the dead—especially the uncommemorated, forgotten, or abandoned dead—and the urban spaces they co-inhabit with the most marginalized of the living. Based on sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, this paper centers on urban cemeteries as archival nodes that gather together impressions—physically and psycho-semiotically—of uncommemorated pasts that nevertheless have left their mark on the urban fabric and people's lives. This material "documentation" embedded in the built environment provides a vernacular alternative to the "fantasy" of official, national archives, foregrounding the blurry colonial-postcolonial divide in ordinary people's historical imaginaries. Urban traces of displaced people and pasts show how complex semiotic residues get carried across otherwise disparate urban spaces where the postcolonial present has yet to reckon fully with colonialism's mortal remains.

Keywords: Algeria; coloniality and postcoloniality; memory and history; displacement; the archive; materiality; vernacular politics; violence

Introduction

I was sitting in the Director of Funeral Services' office in Oran, Algeria's second-largest city, when I first heard about the trees. Our friend, a local historian and former civil servant, Rachid,[1] reminisced with the funeral director about when city authorities planned to cut down hundreds of century-old ficus trees in 2007 to make room for a new tramway line. These trees had to be removed because the city was expanding, but also, at least partly, because the ficus tree was the "colonial symbol par excellence," as one of my friends explained to me. The trees came from another, deeply problematic time; they were indirectly "dark heritage" (Slyomovics 2020)

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[1]All names are pseudonyms unless otherwise stated.

planted by French settlers (also known as *pieds noirs*) to root themselves in this land to which they once staked claim. One hundred and thirty-two years of French settler colonialism in Algeria fundamentally altered the landscape's fabric, leaving postcolonial people to dwell in its enduring semiotic residues, even sixty years after nearly a million French settlers fled independent Algeria in 1962.

On the possibility of a postcolonial world, Frantz Fanon (2004[1961]: 6) claimed, "To destroy the colonial world means nothing less than demolishing the colonist's sector, burying it deep within the earth or banishing it from the territory." Powerful as this sentiment was, it does not fully account for the complexity of how postcolonial Algerians have reckoned with colonial remnants, such as these ficus trees, in their everyday lives. Given the trees' imminent demise, Rachid had an idea: Aïn-el-Beida cemetery on the city's outskirts could house these displaced trees. The Spanish company building the tramway agreed to help. Nearly seven hundred colonial-era ficus trees were uprooted and rerooted in this Muslim cemetery.

When I first visited Aïn-el-Beida with Rachid, the sight of these displaced trees was truly spectacular, particularly because Oran's rapidly expanding peripheries were notoriously treeless (figure 1). Overlooking the cemetery were dozens of brand-new public housing complexes, to which thousands of Orani city dwellers were displaced from the colonial-era city center that was crumbling to the ground. Like these trees, city dwellers were uprooted from their central *ḥomāt* (neighborhoods)—the most important unit of local identity—and regrouped in these peripheral constructions, where trees and green spaces were an afterthought at best.

Standing with Rachid in the cemetery, I realized that the transplanted ficus trees marked something beyond the violent colonial displacement of Algerians from their land to make room for French settlers. These trees were also unintended archival deposits of survival against all odds. As Ross (2015) pointed out, the word "to survive" stems from the French *survie*, meaning life beyond life, which was a fitting term for these century-old trees' afterlife in a cemetery that itself spanned the colonial/postcolonial divide. Rachid told me that he worried incessantly about whether the trees could survive their uprooting and rerooting, but of the several hundred displaced, only six died. These trees, therefore, re-inscribe into the landscape the resilience of life amid the destruction characterizing contemporary urban life. They were an archive of layers upon layers of displacement that was constitutive of the city.

The archive, in its conventional sense, is a physical institution that houses and organizes the documents, inscriptions, and markings of sovereign power over a

Figure 1. The transposed trees of Aïn-el-Beida. Author's photos, May 2019.

particular territory. Indeed, the "fantasy" of official national archives and their supposedly transparent and stable representation of state power *in this place* is a central tool through which power authorizes itself (Asseraf and Rahal 2024). The etymology of the word "archive" derives from the Greek, connoting "beginning, origin, first place," rooting authority in the "power of consignation"—that is, placing documents into a specific place ("the archive"), but also the "act of *con*signing through gathering together signs" (Derrida 1996: 3). In other words, the official archive brings together certain texts that come to stand for the state power. In its attempt to fix sovereignty, however, the state's consignment in the archive necessarily includes certain texts while excluding others. In contrast to state archives that aim to *emplace* power—ordering the landscape, rooting certain people in a territory while exiling others, and claiming state sovereignty—these displaced ficus trees illustrate how ordinary people engage with the cityscape as an active, chimeric, and mutable archive of *displacement.*

Displacement here refers to the physical-material, socio-political, and psycho-semiotic processes by which people, things, ideas, or signs are carried over, transferred, translated, and deferred from one place to another, often through violence and/or force. Displacement, as a political process, is never solely about relocation and replacement—whether of people, things, or meaning. It is also a process that negates and even dispossesses certain human beings of their fundamental need for rootedness in the world (Glissant 1997; Munn 2013). Landscapes matter in this process because people often come to know "their place" in the social order by reading the physical environment like a map of social meaning (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010; Duncan 1990; Basso 1996). Therefore, paying attention to how people, things, and signs are made to be *out of place* can reveal the inner workings of political power and what it must negate to assert its sovereignty (Love 2025). As a psycho-semiotic process, displacement is the constitutive element of metaphor (Derrida 1977), where one kind of thing is experienced and understood in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). In other words, the archive is not just a mechanism but also a metaphor of power, which, at its very core, is constituted by displacement.

Indeed, one cannot overlook a primary paradox of historiography in contemporary Algeria: to write Algerian colonial history, one must rely on French colonial archives—documents authorized through practices of domination, erasure, and silencing (Brozgal 2020; Trouillot 1997; Stoler 2013). The postcolonial archive, on the other hand, is often inaccessible, if it exists at all (Soufi 2000; Asseraf and Rahal 2024; El Shakry 2015). This paradox underscores how "there is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory itself" (Derrida 1996: 4). In creating and promoting hegemonic historical narratives, state-authorized historiographers (in the broadest sense of the term) push aside the "excesses" of history—bits that do not fit into the narrative—sometimes burying them away in the very spaces inhabited by the dead, like the ficus trees in Aïn-el-Beida.

The city as an archive of displacement offers an alternative ground from which ordinary people authorize stories of their own lives outside the official narratives handed down by the state. The unruly materiality of the city enables ordinary people to draw upon places where "the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting" (Benjamin 1998[1963]: 179), enabling other types of "tellings" (Smalls 2024) that resist the fixity of official narratives. This is particularly important in Algeria, where I encountered a common trope in popular discourse: official historical narratives—taught in schools, repeated by the political elite, and commemorated in

the landscape—are said to be "lies" told by *pouvoir* ("the powers that be") to maintain its permanent rule over the country (Asseraf and Rahal 2024; Scheele 2006b; Goodman 2013). In postcolonial Algeria, where authoritarian media surveillance and censorship permeate social life, alternative and complex histories can be difficult to find in national print culture (Gafaïti 1999).

However, during my sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork from 2018 to 2020 with Orani taxi drivers, tour guides, urban preservationists, and many others, my interlocutors showed me how "real" history could nevertheless be uncovered in the material deposits of everyday urban life "in the street, the gutter, the hidden alleys, all those spaces never intended to commemorate, but on which history has nevertheless made its 'impressions'" (De Jong and Murphy 2014: 2). Through my interlocutors' focus on urban spaces that contain imprints of the past excluded from official historical narratives, the city itself emerged as a vernacular archive, holding unauthorized deposits stored in everyday things. These ordinary urban archives (Rao 2009)—like the trees, trash, talk, and translations I explore throughout this essay—together constituted the evidence for an alternative telling of Algeria's past, one embodied in the deep and unhealed wounds of 132 years of settler colonialism *and* 60 years of postcolonial state violence. As the Algerian psychoanalyst Karima Lazali (2021: 5) wrote: "…the legacy of colonialism exposes an unusual psychic phenomenon, namely, the existence of a whole field of invisible traces that, in spite of their seeming absence, give shape to subjectivities and political discourses … [it is a] history deprived of arches, literally and metaphorically. It is now no longer a question of deconstruction, but one of reconstructing traces that exist outside of memory." The widely circulating discourse that "history has been stolen from us" has resulted in ordinary people reconstructing other "arches" in the urban fabric to tell their otherwise silenced stories.

It is no coincidence that unintended archival deposits, like the ficus trees, often end up in or near cemeteries. In fact, cemeteries are archetypal archives of displacement, where life is translated or carried over to death, and human beings become the landscape. They are sites of the uneasy, ambiguous divide between life and death, presence and absence, and even the colonial and postcolonial. On the one hand, cross-culturally, cemeteries serve as urban "texts" mobilized to narrate "allegorical narratives of power" (Duncan 1990: 19; Verdery 1999). Cemeteries are "places where society remembers itself" (Scheele 2006a: 860; Bloch 1971). They are continuous parts of a landscape that constitute "a story … [people] tell themselves about themselves" (Geertz 1972: 26). As such, urban cemeteries function as archives in the Foucauldian sense, providing a "border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it" (Foucault 1972: 130).

However, cemeteries also represent another potential terrain where rupture supersedes continuity, and fragments replace narratives (Ho 2006). They are spaces where the most marginalized among the living congregate, such as those in public housing at the edges of Aïn-el-Beida. As Marwa Ghazali (2021) has argued about inhabitants of Cairo's City of the Dead, the social lives of precarious city-dwellers become enmeshed, both literally and figuratively, with the dead, creating an experience of "living death" with profound political implications. Consequently, cemeteries can serve as sites that challenge the political order in specific ways. As vernacular archives of displacement, they are material testaments to the notion that "death is decisively and primarily the opposite of power, not life" (Bamyeh 2007: 3). In fact, death indexes the fragility of sovereignty and power claims, enabling people to

craft different tellings that connect the past, present, and future. This is because death is rarely final—the dead and their tombs can crumble, decay, be vandalized, moved, restored, valued, devalued, and ultimately reabsorbed back into the earth. Indeed, the dead can sometimes challenge political power through their irascible material presence.

In the sections that follow, I delve into abandoned cemeteries and mausoleums of various religions—Christian, Jewish, and Muslim—as sites that gather unintended deposits available for people to uncover and to draw on to make sense of their complex lives. These cemeteries are places where postcolonial injustices sometimes obscure the trauma of colonialism in people's imaginations. To make this argument, I first historically ground the cemetery as a complicated place of political action and imagination in Algeria. Then, I pose the question: What kind of archive are the dead? Then, each subsequent section illustrates a particular facet of Oran's archive of displacement stored in different Orani cemeteries, tombs, or mausoleums: the arboreal archive, the archive of the utterance, the translated archive, and the archive of refuse. Each type of vernacular archive suggests how urban spaces for the living and the dead tend to overlap, carrying across complex semiotic residues in a city fundamentally shaped by colonialism's mortal remains.

Power and Colonialism's Mortal Remains

For 132 years as a settler colony, France inscribed its claims to sovereignty onto the Algerian landscape, often through its power to commemorate certain dead in place names and monuments. Cemeteries also served as subtle spaces that authorized political power and colonial domination, acting as physical manifestations of settler claims to the land. Colonial cemeteries contained the remains of up to five generations of settlers, creating an "environment that reflects [the settler's] own image and which negates the ancient universe, a universe where he feels at home, where, in a natural reversal, the colonized ends up appearing as foreigners" (Bourdieu 1958: 114). Settler cemeteries were not just sites of grief and commemoration; they were rooted in the "logic of elimination" (Wolfe 2006), an uprooting of indigenous claims to the land through the settler's dead which, in turn, rooted the settler in the land. Upon entering the Bay of Oran in 1831, French urban policy displaced and massacred native Algerians, attempting to eliminate their presence from the landscape (Benkada 2019). This was a process the French called *pacification* and later the *mission civilisatrice* ("civilizing mission") (Djerbal 2016). By the twentieth century, settlers claimed Oran as the "most European of Algerian cities" (Lespès 2016 [1938]: 104).

For this reason, settler cemeteries and monuments in Algeria became indirect sites of resistance to colonial domination and displacement. As the French Algerian orientalist Jacques Berque (1962) wrote, the settler takeover of the best agricultural lands after World War I and the failed harvest of 1920 forced droves of *miskin* (poor people) onto the road. This led to violent conflicts: "if these did not necessarily break out openly, they found an outlet in symbolic impulse. The Algerian press repeatedly mentions cases of the desecration of graveyards" (31). Then, after the bloody War of Independence (1954–1962), colonialism was declared "dead," marking the birth of a new era, nationally and globally. Independent Algeria became a rare thing: a post-settler colony. Nearly a million French settlers (*pieds noirs*) fled Algeria, leaving

almost everything behind, including their dead. Abandoned French cemeteries in postcolonial Algeria became archives of settler displacement.

For postcolonial Algerians, the question of how to "translate" the world left behind by fleeing settlers into something new became a major political struggle, manifesting in attempts to transform the landscape through semiotic means. For example, as a local Algerian official exclaimed at the 1963 renaming ceremony of Gdyel, a town near Oran: "This happy day and historic day. Your village takes back the name given to it by your ancestors. Saint-Cloud is dead and Gdyel is reborn.… Goodbye Saint-Cloud! Hello Gdyel!"[2] But reclaiming space involved more than renaming it; it aimed at nothing short of creating a decolonial world. Frantz Fanon (1994[1965]: 27–28) wrote: "The old Algeria is dead. All the innocent blood that has flowed onto the national soil has produced a new humanity and no one must fail to recognize this fact." To this end, the independent Algerian state claimed sovereignty, like the colonial French, by exercising its power to commemorate the dead. Algerians named themselves "the people of a million and a half martyrs" (*sha'b al-maliun wa nisf shahīd)*. In the postcolonial landscape, the martyrs of independence were hyper-commemorated (Lazali 2021) becoming namesakes of nearly every street, square, and building around the country. This was a landscape "rooted in the memory of martyred ancestors and promised to the fulfillment of a utopian destiny" (McDougall 2006: 52). Urban inscriptions of martyrdom—images, names, martyrs' cemeteries, and monuments—constituted official history made material, present, and palpable in the landscape.

But all translations inevitably exclude certain signs and meanings—that which is "lost in translation." There are always unruly excesses when displacing one political-semiotic system or imagination for another. For example, the postcolonial commemorative regime centered on martyrs' heroic sacrifice as a unified front constituting "the community's 'essential self'" (ibid.) Suppressed from this official narrative were the thousands of innocent non-combatant victims destroyed by colonial violence or those killed by fratricidal, postcolonial power struggles (Lazali 2021). These "missing masses," as I will show, nevertheless left their impression on the landscape—in trees, talk, trash, and translations—as a lived, active, mutable, and relational archive in the making. In the following sections, I take the reader through an itinerary of the Orani landscape, always pushed and pulled between official inscriptions mapped onto the environment (see figure 2 for a map of the urban sites discussed in this essay) and a vernacular archive of displacement *con*signed around Orani cemeteries but alive in people's everyday urban imaginations.

Archive of the Dead

What do the dead archive? What impressions do they leave on the world and the material environments from which social practices and imaginaries emerge? If death is not the opposite of life but of power, as Mohammad Bamyeh (2007) has argued, the dead inhabit a paradoxical place in the social world. Even the disappeared and forgotten dead leave traces in people's mouths, the shape of the city, political

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[2]*Ce jour heureux et un jour historique. Votre village reprend le nom que lui donnèrent vos ancêtres. Saint-Cloud est mort et Gdyel revit…Adieu Saint-Cloud! Bonjour Gdyel!* (Reported speech of Mr. Benmehdi, published in the local newspaper *La République* on 4 May 1963, 3).
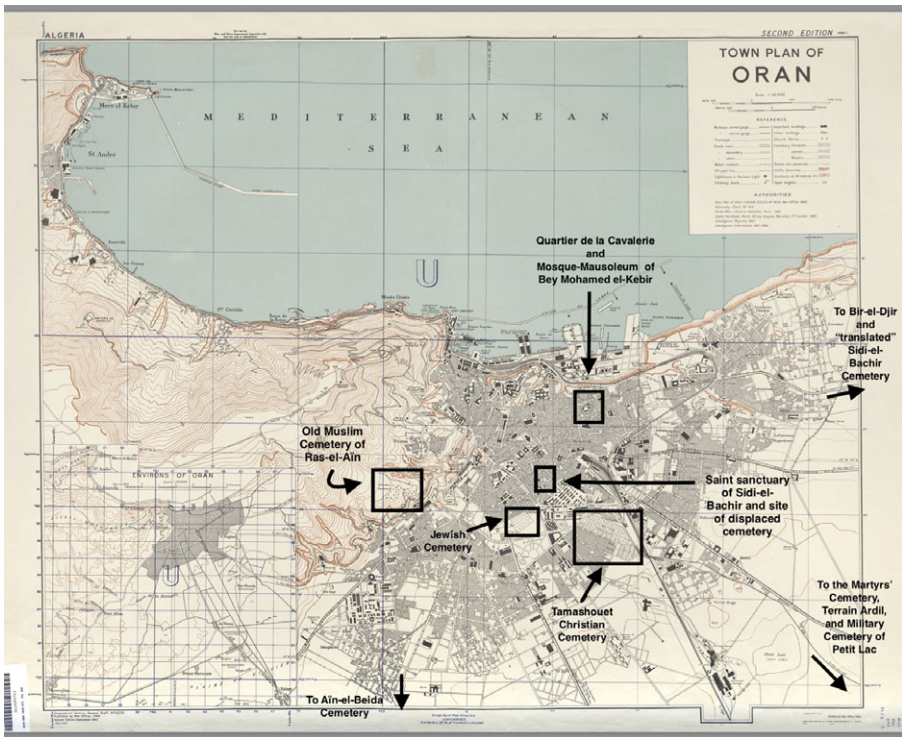
Figure 2. A U.S. military map of Oran from 1942 prepared for Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa by Allied Troops, with the added locations of cemeteries discussed in this article. Source: University of Texas Library, https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/ams/algeria_city_plans/txu-oclc-6540533.jpg.

imaginaries, and the composition of the soil. In other words, the dead embody an irreconcilable paradox for nationalist narratives. They hold a central legitimizing power for nation-states who "obsessively return to the dead, especially the anonymous dead, for the construction of their sacral continuity and encompassing logic" (Klima 2009: 14). Deceased people, however, exude a potential for agency on the landscape through their material bodies and artifacts they leave behind; their materiality acts on the world, archiving other types of associations that can challenge official narratives.

For example, the soil of the Aïn-el-Beida Muslim Cemetery in the southern Orani outskirts is a deep burgundy rust. Rachid, the local historian of cemeteries I introduced earlier, explained that the soil's color and composition come from the cemetery's past life as a vineyard, the principal cash crop of French colonial agriculture in Algeria. Before becoming a cemetery, Aïn-el-Beida was owned and cultivated by an *ancien colon* (landowning French settler), whose children, after his death, sold the vineyard to the local government in 1948. With the land, local authorities planned to build a Muslim cemetery. Rachid told me that the soil in this part of Algeria is rich in calcium, which is excellent for wine production, once making western Algeria the leading producer of wine for mainland France (Laffont 1968). However, over the decades as a vineyard, the vines stripped these minerals from the soil, making it unsuitable for a cemetery. Because Orani Muslims bury their

dead directly in the ground in a funeral shroud without a casket, cemeteries require soil rich in minerals and heavy metals to keep the deceased buried, Rachid said.

Today, Oranis in Aïn-el-Beida place rocks on graves to keep their loved ones in the ground (see Hirreche Baghdad 2013). Beyond the science grounding this assertion (and I could not independently verify Rachid's claims), his narrative gave meaning to daily practices and techniques of the body (Mauss 1973) as a type of archive of the colonial past and its long-forgotten people. In other words, the cemetery's soil—the physical, material composition of the ground—was itself a legacy of settler colonialism. The "dead" settler colonial past changed the composition of the soil, and ordinary funeral rituals like laying rocks on top of graves serve as an archive of that past. While most Oranis may not know this story, it has a latent force on everyday urban practices and encounters with the dead. It is a trace "that exists outside of memory" (Lazali 2021: 5) for most people, though it nevertheless has shaped the city in important ways.

Anxieties over keeping the dead buried are not unique to the Aïn-el-Beida cemetery but have been a recurring source of urban struggle and political contestation for over a century. Such concerns fueled Muslim Oranis' first mass protest movement during the French colonial period, linking urban politics and cemeteries through the unruly materiality of the dead (Benkada 1998). In 1926, Oran's mayor and founder of the antisemitic Latin League, Dr. Jule Molle, issued a municipal decree citing public health concerns that prohibited the Muslim population from burying their dead in Oran's oldest and most prestigious Muslim cemeteries, including the cemetery known as El Djedid in Ras-el-Aïn (an area that would become a large shantytown). This cemetery was located on the private property of a prominent Algerian Turkish man, Hadj Hacène Bachterzi, who was from one of Oran's most important political families. After closing the cemetery, the city acquired land in Saint-Antoine, on the city's southern outskirts, to construct a Muslim cemetery that the authorities hoped would displace and replace three cemeteries in Ras-el-Aïn.

As the Orani historian Saddek Benkada (1998) explains, it took two years of pressure from Muslim politicians and elites for this new cemetery to open, leaving many Muslims without a place to bury their dead. During the same period, the Muslim population of Oran increased from 30.46 percent to 43.78 percent. Rumors spread—often propagated by socialist newspapers—that the land for the new Muslim cemetery was a former garbage dump, and that the Muslim dead would be buried in rubbish. However, left with no other recourse, Muslims began to bury their dead in the new cemetery. When the winter of 1933–1934 brought an unusual amount of snow and rain, much of the city flooded. The Muslim population watched in horror as graves in the new cemetery collapsed and bodies buried the day before reemerged from the ground. Bodies still in their white funerary shrouds sat decomposing in the sun. According to Benkada, this grisly affair caused the first mass mobilization of Orani Muslims, who gathered to protest the state of their cemeteries in 1934. The mobilization had lasting consequences for forming an elite Muslim political class with close relations to the masses, enduring through the Revolution.

Aïn-el-Beida, one of the two primary cemeteries in Oran today (the other being Sidi-el-Bachir, which I will discuss later) demonstrates that the archive of the dead extends far beyond the individual life stories of the people buried there. The dead mark past social and political struggles and paradoxes, displaying the fragility of power even at sites meant to bolster official state narratives. The French opened Aïn-el-Beida in 1957, in the middle of the War of Independence. Because of this, the first

bodies interred there were Algerians killed in the war, both those who fought for and against the French. Since then, the cemetery has steadily grown. As we stood near the cemetery's entrance next to the towering Martyr's Memorial (*maqam al-shahīd*) on the day of my visit, Rachid pointed to whitewashed walls that created a boundary between where we stood and the sea of other graves. He told me that, in 1973, local urban authorities constructed this wall to create a martyrs' corner (*carré des martyrs*)— a vital institution, like martyrs' cemeteries, that exists in nearly every Algerian city, town, and village (Scheele 2006a). Slowly, we strolled through this walled-off section, commenting on specific tombstones. Many of the graves here were made of quality marble, with the names, birth, and death dates visible in French and Arabic. These recently restored tombstones often displayed official Algerian nationalist iconography, such as the Algerian flag.

However, alongside these well-groomed graves, I also noticed others that had long ago lost any visible inscription; all that remained of these plots, having decomposed and returned to the earth, were chunks of rock covered by weeds (figure 3).

I asked Rachid why specific graves were maintained with great care while others were neglected, abandoned, and left to decay within the walls of the martyrs' corner. Rachid explained: "Oran doesn't have a martyrs' cemetery. There is (only this) martyrs' corner (*carré des chouhada'*) with the first revolutionary martyrs, but they are buried alongside collaborators (*les collabos*) who were killed at the same time … they should be exhumed and put somewhere else, but…" Rachid trailed off. That Algerian martyrs and collaborators were buried side-by-side within the same martyrs' corner was a powerful image displacing the official postcolonial history of

Figure 3. The grave of an Algerian martyr guillotined in the prison of Oran, next to unmarked burial plots. Author's photo, May 2019.

unanimous national unity and heroism. Instead, the martyrs' and traitors' material co-presence archived another past through its contiguity with the official state commemorative landscape. Rachid's comment was indeed far from unique; as early as 1965, locals complained that some people officially labeled *mujāhid* (and profiting from the benefits that label offered) were, in fact, *harki* (collaborators) for most of the war, only switching sides at the very end (Asseraf and Rahal 2024). For Rachid, this cemetery became an archive of the uncommemorated, painful, and exceedingly complicated past.

Drawing our attention to the contrast between the maintained and abandoned tombstones, Rachid's utterance suggested that the state's commemorative landscape only tells part of the story of the War of Independence. The martyrs' corner of Aïn-el-Beida appears to be a tactile and sensual manifestation of a shared cultural trope that I heard throughout my fieldwork: whether purposely or accidentally, the heroes and traitors of Algerian history are confused in the state's narratives of the Revolution due to incompetence or ignorance. This is the "hidden history" or the "history stolen from us" that pervades popular discourse. The state's narrative serves specific political-economic goals, such as providing the martyrs' children with special privileges (like monthly pensions and exclusive rights to taxi and bar licenses) or supporting the continued iron grip on power by the Revolution's Front de Libération Nationale (National Liberation Front), known as the FLN (its French acronym). An Orani tour guide once told me that the state-championed martyrs, who became the namesakes of every urban street, square, and building in the country, were, in fact, traitors, while the "real" martyrs went unacknowledged and ignored in the landscape. Such perceptions pushed people to pay attention to the landscape's unruly materiality as an alternative archive, one foregrounding what has been exiled from nationalist narratives. The landscape is a terrain of unintended "*con*signments," where other pasts are documented and stored in archives like the soil or urban trees, a point to which I now return.

The Arboreal Archive

In this section, I step away from the Muslim cemetery of Aïn-el-Beida to examine Christian cemeteries left behind by fleeing French Algerians in 1962. Once manifesting settler claims to the land, most Christian cemeteries are now abandoned, with tombs left to slowly be reabsorbed into the landscape, forming an archive of the settlers' exile from the postcolonial world (see Shepard 2006). In some places, all that remains are the trees that served as the cemeteries' natural boundaries and provided shade for the mourners. For some Algerians I met during fieldwork, these lingering trees were nodes in a fragmented memory of *this* place, which has succumbed to irreversible decay in the twenty-first-century city "as if gnawed at by some mysterious force" (Bey 2009: 54). The Algerian author Maïssa Bey writes allegorically in her haunting novel, *Above All, Don't Look Back*, about a woman's displacement after an earthquake that erases her memory and her desperate attempt to both discover her past and escape it: "Only the trees stood firm. Trees more than a hundred years old. Because … trees are the only being in this world, and perhaps in the entire universe, to have the marvelous ability to develop roots that push deep into the earth" (ibid). However, as the opening vignette of this essay showed, even trees' apparent rootedness can be mutable, documenting discontinuity as much as

continuity. In this section, I illustrate how one of my interlocutors drew on urban trees to ascertain the past of this place, where the vanishing Christian cemeteries became metaphors for what Algerian historian Fouad Soufi (1994) calls "urbanism without history."

Urban trees are a particular type of archival deposit. They are living beings and city dwellers who can outlive their human counterparts. Trees often survive not only the deaths of those who plant them but also many generations afterward. If the landscape is a text, then trees exemplify how "absence is not a continuous modification of presence, it is a rupture in presence, the 'death' or the possibility of the 'death' of the receiver inscribed in the structure of the mark" (Derrida 1977: 8). In other words, trees are traces of absent and absenced lives; they are iterable "marks" that connect fragments of the dead, communicating across time and space. They archive what political regimes have eliminated from the landscape. Perhaps unsurprisingly, trees and cemeteries have a strong relationship of contiguity in urban Oran.

For example, I heard about the Christian cemetery of Bir-el-Djir (formerly known as Arcole in the colonial era)—the peripheral neighborhood where I lived for much of my fieldwork—from Oran's Director of Funeral Services. In his office one winter morning in 2018, the director mentioned a minor scandal a few years after the end of the 1990s Black Decade.[3] A *pied noir* named Marcel Guerra had returned in 2004 to Bir-el-Djir looking for his mother's grave but was unable to find it. *Le Figaro* reported that this was Guerra's first return since fleeing to France in 1962, mere months after burying his mother. Guerra explained that he came from a Spanish family who had never stepped foot in the metropole before 1962 (see Marynower 2013). However, when he finally returned to Oran in 2004, his mother's grave was nowhere to be found. In his statement to the newspaper, he said: "Here, this is not a cemetery. It is a trash dump."[4] The article appeared to embarrass the Algerian authorities; in response, the funeral director told me, Guerra had been promised that the cemetery would remain a "green space" in homage to what it used to be.

The Christian cemetery of Bir-el-Djir presented a complex challenge for the funeral director because, for reasons unknown to him, it had not been included in the nationwide exhumation of abandoned colonial-era cemeteries in the 2010s. Known in French as *regroupement* (regrouping), hundreds of Christian cemeteries (and some Jewish and "mixed" cemeteries) were exhumed in a collaboration between the French and Algerian governments.[5] The bodies of thousands of French settlers were removed from abandoned cemeteries and regrouped in large urban ossuaries, such as Oran's large Tamashouet Christian Cemetery. Authorities exhumed 523 cemeteries throughout Algeria: 453 were Christian, 59 Jewish, and 11 mixed cemeteries. However, Bir-el-Djir was not among them. Most perplexing (and telling)

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[3]During Algeria's first multiparty elections, the party that dominated the postcolonial regime since independence—the FLN or National Liberation Front—lost the municipal elections in 1990 and the first round of parliamentary elections in 1991 to FIS (the Islamic Salvation Front) (Rahal, 2017). Following this defeat, the military canceled the elections, arresting ordinary FIS party members and sending them to prison camps. Many of these young people mobilized into the GIA or Armed Islamic Group, which united several different armed Islamist groups and initiated a guerrilla war against the state. The resulting conflict killed between 150,000 and 200,000 people, many of whom were civilians.

[4]"Ici, ce n'est plus un cimetière. C'est une décharge" (Mollaret, 2010).

[5]https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/BILAN_2013_sepulutures_algerie_cle018837.pdf for the dates and locations of the *regroupement* of Christian cemeteries in Algeria.

was the choice of the term *regroupement* for this process of displacing the dead; it was the same euphemism used for the displacement of nearly a third of Algeria's rural population during the War of Independence (1954–1962) into *Centres de regroupement*, concentration camps built by the French army (Henni 2017).

When I mentioned the case of Bir-el-Djir to Aziz, a twenty-eight-year-old tour guide active in urban preservation, he sighed and told me that a real-estate developer (*promoteur*) had built on top of Bir-el-Djir's Christian cemetery with the bones still beneath the soil. I asked him if he could show me that building, and he agreed. One morning, Aziz picked up my husband, Amara, and me in his white van and took us to a thirteen-story tower not far from our apartment. Aziz had informed the real-estate agent selling the apartments that Amara and I were *émigrés* interested in investment property (*logement de promotion*). His real objective was to show me the bird's-eye view. While the agent showed Amara the kitchen, Aziz took me out onto the balcony: "You see those cypress trees over there?" I squinted through the morning sun in the direction Aziz was pointing. "That's where the French cemetery used to be."

From the balcony, I gazed at the forest of construction cranes bearing Chinese or Latin characters as far as the eye could see. The construction boom on Oran's periphery corresponded with the irreversible decay of the old city center, displacing thousands of Oranis from their homes. Towering apartment buildings sprouted in this once sleepy agricultural town like mushrooms from the arid terrain now subsumed into Oran's sprawl. I finally focused on a rectangular patch of cypress trees next to a decaying colonial-era farmhouse, some of the only trees in sight. Aziz continued: "You can tell it was a Christian cemetery by the trees; the French always planted cypress trees around their cemeteries." Aziz gazed at the trees from the balcony: "See how they build upon the dead with no remorse?"

For Aziz and others active in urban historic preservation, these trees were archival traces of the complex, non-linear relationship between the colonial past and the postcolonial present. Trees became an urban synecdoche—a form of metonymy that integrates seemingly unrelated particulars into a whole, where the microcosm stands for a macrocosmic totality (White 1978; Duncan 1990). For some of my interlocutors, the microcosm of trees came to represent the macrocosm of what had been hidden, discarded, or displaced from the state's narrative of postcolonial development. In Orani urban politics, green spaces—land set aside for trees and humans to enjoy as a public—have become sites of conflict between local authorities and ordinary city dwellers. Local authorities regularly promised green space in exchange for what local activists called "the politics of bulldozers" (*la politique des bulldozers*), where local authorities raze entire historic neighborhoods to the ground. Indeed, local historic preservation activists I worked with were deeply suspicious of the promise of green space. In Oran, trees are shifting semiotic targets; their meanings are constantly displaced as the city decays. In twenty-first-century Oran, trees, like cemeteries, mark an alternative regime of urban value and collective memory. They occupy land in the neoliberalizing city like those uprooted to expand the tramway system but have "no value" in its political economy (Parks 2018). However, they become unintended deposits—carrying over a certain value—in ordinary people's collective historical imaginaries. Indeed, cemeteries and trees were intimately intertwined with changing urban land value regimes.

But we learned months later that Aziz had been mistaken about the location of Bir-el-Djir's cemetery. An old man who worked at a junkyard directed Aziz, Amara, and me to the actual site of the abandoned cemetery, which could not be found on

Figure 4. Aziz climbing the wall of Bir-el-Djir's (ex: Arcole) Christian Cemetery. Author's photo, January 2020.

contemporary maps. We spotted the crumbling stone-and-earth wall adjacent to a dirt road where numerous construction vehicles were parked. A few construction workers stared at us as we climbed over the wall (figure 4). They asked us if we were journalists and, if so, whether we would report on how their bosses were exploiting them. Towering residential buildings loomed over the cemetery. This "green space" was an impression or negative imprint shaping the growing buildings surrounding it. Inside the walls, clover covered the ground like lush hair. It was the middle of winter, the greenest time of the year in coastal Algeria. There were a few cypress trees, but there were also large eucalyptus, ficus, and various evergreens. The only evidence of the mortal remains of *pieds noirs* still underfoot was a few scattered tiles. Only the trees remained as traces of its former life. This is because, as I mentioned earlier, in this urban periphery, there were so few new trees as planting them appeared to be rarely valued by real estate developers in their scramble to construct. The graveyard was promised as a green space, and strangely, it was. But if future residents of these towers used this space as a green refuge, would they even know that human remains lie beneath their feet? Do any of us know when we are walking on top of the dead?

This green space contained trees as a layered archive of displacement: the displacement that made Arcole into a settler colonial village, the displacement of *pieds noirs* at independence that rendered this a postcolonial village, and the ongoing displacement of Orani city dwellers as the city center crumbles, turning the area into an urban outskirt. As city dwellers are relocated here, the buildings and roads of their everyday lives take the shape of invisible traces of the past: in this case, a cemetery reabsorbed into the earth. These trees have outlived any other trace of what this place used to be, and, meaningfully for my interlocutors, they are some of the only trees around. As such, they represent not so much a rupture with the colonial past but rather how its mortal remains continue to displace and dominate in the form of the postcolonial state. Through such microcosms, trees archive colonial and postcolonial displacements "outside of memory" (Lazali 2021: 5). This is true of all cities, whether

people recognize it or not: sediments of displacement—people and meanings—lie just below our feet, archived only by trees.

Archive of the Utterance

Before the French claimed ownership of the land, partly by burying their dead in the soil, precolonial Algerians used saint tombs and mausoleums of notable people as essential memory places. Saint tombs (*quba*, pl., *qubāt*) and the cemeteries that often emerged around them were central to organizing urban space, including village life and place-naming (Lacheraf 1998). In this section, I explore the enduring residues of place names for the dead, particularly through a case study of the colonial destruction of the burial ground and mosque-mausoleum for the Ottoman Bey (known as the "liberator of Oran" from Spanish rule). I argue that place names are archives of displacement that reveal what was effaced during colonial conquest and how people cling to alternate memories amid the destruction. Indeed, place names are archetypical archives of displacement at the tense intersection of official and vernacular histories. On the one hand, place names are often viewed as a linguistic manifestation of political power and durable representations of collective memory. Like archives, place names are metonyms for "how power controls territory and, in so doing, maintains that control" (Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch 2016: 2). Place names also commemorate the dead in ongoing constructions of an imagined collective past, inserting "an authorized version of history into ordinary settings of everyday life" (Azaryahu 1996: 312). As tools of cultural continuity, place names may be "a repository of distilled wisdom," making the embodied experiences and stories of the ancestral dead palpable in the landscape (Basso 1996: 63).

Place-naming can, however, conceal as much as reveal about the fragility of political power and sovereignty claims. This is because names are indexical metonyms—words or icons that stand for something else by contiguity and association, as part of a whole syntagmatic chain of signs, challenging any possibility of "stable" meaning (Duncan 1990). Place-naming is also a subtle but potent practice of colonial dispossession and displacement. Through names, colonial regimes erase indigenous conceptions of space, time, and personhood embedded in the landscape and insert settler-colonial narratives in their place (Carter 1987; Lazali 2021). Like other Algerian cities, colonial Oran was marked by the French mythology of national glory, as place names commemorated French military history and glorified *its* martyrs. The French settler colonial campaign focused on eradicating Algerian family names that tied people to the land, and "stripped of names, the subjects who go through this are also dispossessed of their own death" (Lazali 2021: 48). The French used the names of Muslim saint tombs as points of reference, much like the use of Native American place names in the U.S. settler landscape as an appropriation of "nativeness." These past practices have left deep impressions upon people's everyday talk as an archive of displacement beyond living memory.

For example, one winter day at the end of 2019, I was sitting in Omar's taxicab, a beaten-up grey sedan. It was approaching early afternoon on an already busy day for Omar, which I observed from the back seat with my husband, Amara. We drove down Oran's central business corridor. Halfway down the street, an elderly woman (whom I will call Hadja), wearing a brightly colored *jellāba* with her dyed red hair hanging loose, hailed the cab. Omar pulled over with a jolt. The woman leaned in

toward the open window, saying to Omar, "*rue des Chasseurs*," her desired destination. Omar nodded in agreement, repeating, "Get in, get in." She first looked at Amara and me in the back seat, asking, "Am I bothering you?" We responded no, and she slowly got into the front seat beside Omar, asking him, "Do you remember me?" He smiled in recognition, growing animated: *kī raki hadja, lā bas*? (How are you, madam? Is everything okay?). She had hailed Omar's cab before.

After Omar explained to the woman who my husband and I were and what we were doing, she looked between Omar and us in the back seat and, without a beat, began her story. She told us that her house was broken into; she had to install metal bars around her windows to keep the robbers out. Then, she shifted in her narrative, telling us that the thieves were, in fact, her dead husband's family. Omar later told me that cab drivers like him were the "psychologists of the city," as clients said the otherwise unspeakable to strangers whom they would likely never see again. I could not help but notice an association between the woman's sense of threat from her own family and Algeria's decade-long, uncommemorated civil war, known in Arabic as the "family war" (*harb al-ahliyya*).[6]

However, in the middle of her monologue, she stopped. She appeared to grow confused about where the taxi was heading. She turned to Omar, saying: "Are you going to take *Général Ferradou*?" Omar responded: "No, you said you wanted to go to *rue des Chasseurs*." Hadja shook her head, saying, "You know, the street that takes you to *Gambetta*." Omar snapped his fingers and said, "You mean *Max Marchant*." The woman struck her head in embarrassment. Finally, we dropped the woman off at her destination.

I asked Omar what *rue des Chasseurs* meant. Was it a colonial or postcolonial name? Omar shook his head, appearing not to understand my question. He asserted simply that it was the street's "real" name. By "real name," Omar was indexing the popular authority of vernacular (and often colonial era) place names over official postcolonial names. Omar had told me: "It is the people who name (the city), not the state."[7] These vernacular naming practices are especially significant considering the importance the postcolonial Algerian state placed on renaming the city after 1962, when postcolonial Oran underwent a near-total renaming (*débaptisation*) of the landscape. The postcolonial authorities stripped the city of colonial names, returning certain places to their "original" names and renaming the rest of the city after Oran's part in the "million and a half martyrs" that liberated the country.

Sixty years after independence, however, most Oranis I met still used the old French colonial place names to refer to their city in everyday talk (Kettaf 2017; Boumedini and Hadria 2012; Love 2021). These colonial-era names cannot be found on contemporary maps, only on some fading colonial-era street signs haphazardly scattered on street walls. Primarily, these place names exist only in people's mouths, archived in their utterances. This ordinary refusal to use postcolonial place names demonstrates how names are not only manifestations of political power but also displace power and the commemorative regimes that support it. Most importantly, the archive of the utterance preserves (in a submerged sort of way) deposits of people displaced and forgotten in official commemoration.

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[6]The Standard Arabic term for civil war, though in Darija, many people use the French term, *guerre civile*, which nevertheless also holds the connotation of the family.

[7]*Es-sha'b huwa ili issemi, mashi ad-daula.*

Only when I arrived home and looked through old maps of Oran could I piece together the uncommemorated pasts archived in the utterance of *rue des Chasseurs*. Maps are themselves archives of displaced futures past, aspirational rather than a direct representation of reality (Rao 2015). They provide clues about how the cityscape has become what it is against the backdrop of what people desired it to be, as well as what has been erased in relation to what has been maintained. In fact, the name *rue des Chasseurs* marks one of the first mass displacements in the settler colonial city. *Rue des Chasseurs* was originally called *boulevard du 2eme Chasseurs d'Afrique*, a regiment of the French African Army established in 1831 during the first year of the French conquest of Oran. The street took that name because it was a boulevard that hugged the *Quartier de la Cavalerie* (the Cavalry Quarters). In this very spot, in 1832, the French military massacred, displaced, and burned down the Muslim settlements that flourished around the mosque-mausoleum of Bey Mohamed el-Kebir (Benkada 2019), the Ottoman "liberator of Oran" from the Spanish after over two centuries of rule. The mosque-mausoleum housed the mortal remains of the Bey (buried in 1799) and his family. And like dwellings around saint tombs elsewhere in Algeria, a vibrant Muslim neighborhood had emerged around it before the French conquest. In other words, it was a site for the dead where life flourished.

Shortly after invading Oran, the French military quickly burned and razed the surrounding neighborhood, requisitioning the mosque-mausoleum and transforming it into a fortified structure, military hospital, cavalry quarters, and barracks for the 22nd Chasseurs d'Afrique. Indeed, it was common practice for the French military to convert mosques into military posts or churches. By 1834, 400 men and 280 horses were already housed in the mosque-mausoleum. The French army engineers (*génie*) named it the "hospital of the mosque." From here, the French launched their attack against Emir Abdelkader, Algeria's most famous resistance fighter, who fought off the French for over a decade before being defeated and exiled in 1848. Over the next century, this urban zone would become the very heart of the European city. Around the time of the Centennial Celebration of Conquest in 1930 (Henry 2014), the French built the towering *Monument aux Morts* (The Monument of the Dead) nearby to commemorate those who died in World War I.

This history reveals that sites commemorating the dead also hold traces of what is not commemorated, what has been displaced, discarded, and disregarded. Although the military barracks are gone, the very layout of the streets, buildings, and squares took the shape of this history. While not found on official maps, the vernacular names people use in their everyday talk, like *rue des Chasseurs*, *rue de la Vieille Mosquée* (the Old Mosque Street[8]), and *Parc d'Artillerie* (the Artillery Park), are the only remnants of all the people displaced and massacred to create the city as it is today. This is the archive of the utterance.

Even the names *rue Général Ferradou* and *Max Marchant* that Hadja and Omar uttered indexed submerged layers of violent displacement. Général Ferradou was a French general involved in the genocidal French conquest of Algeria, while Max

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[8]"The Old Mosque Street" also goes by the postcolonial official name *rue August 20th, 1955*, commemorating coordinated ALN attacks on Philippeville that killed 120 French Algerians, including children, after which the French military and vigilantes killed indiscriminately between 1,200 and 12,000 Algerians. It was the first major violent confrontation of the war, setting the stage for a war against civilians on both sides.

Marchant was a French educator and supporter of Algerian independence who was murdered just days before the 1962 ceasefire by the ultra-right-wing settler paramilitary organization OAS (Organisation armée secrete). Most interesting was the name Omar and his client did not utter; after independence, the name *rue des Chasseurs* was removed (*débaptisée)* and replaced with *rue Abane Ramadane.* Abane Ramadane was a leader of the Revolution who was murdered during the War of Independence by his brothers-in-arms in a power struggle, which was subsequently covered up by the FLN (Djebar 2000[1995]).

Makika Rahal (2012: 118) has argued that, for many Algerians, such fratricidal murders and other covered-up pasts "still [weigh] heavily on the present and [remain] largely unknown, with a (possibility much fantasized) potential for disruption of present political life if secrets were to be revealed." In other words, the social rupture of fratricide—present both in Abane Ramadane's murder and Hadja's home invasion —gets buried in sediments of uncommemorated violent pasts. The utterance contains these fragments, making them ready for archaeological excavations (such as this very article). The unspoken placename, *rue Abane Ramadane*, is refracted in Hadja's own story about her home being attacked by her very own family, a trace of the uncommemorated civil war that undergirds urban social interaction. Indeed, during my fieldwork, there were no monuments that commemorated those who died during the Black Decade. At the end of the civil war, the law of reconciliation granted general amnesty to all parties, whether insurgents, security forces, or civilian auxiliary forces, without identifying "the perpetrators and the concept of shared responsibility" (Zeraoulia 2020; Moussaoui 2003). Even discussing the Black Decade was made illegal, punishable by three to five years of imprisonment by the law's Article 46.

In this context, vernacular place-naming practices like those of Omar and his client archive displaced people and pasts, albeit indirectly and even paradoxically, in everyday language. The utterance resists official erasures and attempts to establish fixed meanings in maps, such as the postcolonial maps that marked the cityscape with new names. The utterance, in this sense, serves as an archive that exists "outside of memory"; people can draw on it out of habit, not necessarily out of political consciousness. Nevertheless, these vernacular place-naming practices may ironically save the past from oblivion. In other words, Hadja and Omar uttering place names without knowing their stories might be what preserves this last trace of the history of displaced and massacred people who are otherwise uncommemorated in the landscape, subtly archived in the old, now displaced, colonial French commemorative regime that lives on in the utterances.

For my interlocutors, such utterances became a terrain on which they challenged the postcolonial state, often manifesting as a suspicion toward the martyrs' names that authorities had assigned to the landscape. Postcolonial place names turned into grounds for contested meaning through the state's attempts to claim the martyrs as metonyms for its ongoing authority over the country. Instead, people's utterances have kept French colonial place names alive, perhaps as an indirect way to resist forgetting not only those massacred by the French but also those killed by postcolonial state violence. As Lazali (2021: 75) argues: "The cult of the dead who are endlessly glorified hasn't allowed for a full reckoning of the absence provoked by massacres, murders, and destruction. This is an effort to patch over an absence with an overabundance of memory—a task diligently pursued by the political order in post-Independence Algeria." This "overabundance" of certain memories and the suppression of others pushed people, I argue, to cling to colonial remnants not out of

nostalgia but as archival deposits of uncommemorated or unacknowledged dead that continue to shape urban life beyond memory.

The Translated Archive

Cemeteries do not merely contain the traces of displaced people; cemeteries themselves, as material assemblages in the landscape, often get displaced as the city transforms, and the land upon which cemeteries rest is revalued as real estate. In this section, I explore a case study of a Muslim cemetery's *translation* across the colonial/postcolonial divide as a particular type of displacement. The words *translation* in French and English are "false friends." The English word "translation" refers to the rendering of a text from one language to another, a phenomenon that in French is called *traduction*. The French word *translation* instead means "the act of transferring something from one place to another."[9] These "false friends," however, reveal the centrality of displacement in both notions of *translation*, highlighting the deferral and movement of meaning across a threshold of space, time, and language. As such, Oran is a translated archive, foregrounding the displacement of meaning that occurred when the colonial city suddenly became postcolonial and when the property left behind by hundreds of thousands of fleeing French Algerians became *biens vacants* ("abandoned goods") and the raw materials of independence. In becoming "postcolonial," formerly colonial-era urban goods, institutions, and people had to be "translated" into a postcolonial landscape. As a result, the city also contains traces of what got lost in translation, a type of archive of displacement.

Uneasily straddling the colonial and postcolonial divide, this translated archive had subtle but powerful effects on my interlocutor's speech, actions, and movements through the city. For instance, one of my primary taxi drivers and interlocutors, Miloud, took Amara and me to Sidi-el-Bachir Cemetery—in the sprawling periphery of Oran—where his parents were buried. For Miloud and several others I met, the location of one's ancestors mattered; it was material evidence of being a true "son of the city," a valued urban category in which "outsiders" (*barrani*) were blamed for many of the city's social ills. Cemeteries, therefore, revealed one's relative rootedness in the city and became a reference point in the urban politics of belonging. To reinforce his point as we drove toward the cemetery, Miloud pointed to the shanties surrounding it, referring to the people who live there as *nouveaux débarqués* ("newly disembarked"), a French nautical metaphor for those who recently arrived in Oran from rural areas. Indeed, the Sidi-el-Bachir Cemetery was in one of Oran's most stigmatized areas. Miloud pointed to the garbage that littered the streets, stating: "These people cannot live without trash. They wouldn't know what to do without it." Most unsettling, he added that these people were *qash bakhta*, drawing on an Algerian proverb to mean "people without value." This was the irony of urban space for the dead: his parents' graves indexed Miloud's valued urbanity while he devalued the people who lived at the cemetery's edges. Miloud's urban imaginary appeared to contain a powerful cognitive dissonance—something lost in translation.

After we visited his parents' graves, we left the cemetery. Immediately outside the cemetery gates, Miloud brought my attention to a massive field of rubble stretching for several football fields (figure 5). Miloud explained that this pile of rubble was

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[9]In Arabic, the root of *naqala* (translation) also carries similar resonances.

Figure 5. The ruins of the *bidonville* outside of the Sidi el-Bachir cemetery next to social housing built for the displaced residents. Author's photo, April 2019.

recently hundreds of shanties housing 1800 families, primarily rural internally displaced people who fled the worst violence of the 1990s civil war. Then, local authorities decided to raze this shantytown, relocating its residents to public housing that the city had newly constructed for them just a few hundred meters away. Seeing the ruins of these shanties alongside their brand-new public housing project, I understood Miloud's grievance. It was rooted in what he saw as a distinction between himself (a valued "son of the city") and the supposedly "newly arrived" shantytown dwellers who got housing built just for them. Indeed, Miloud had been on the waiting list for public housing for decades, as his degrading *ḥawsh* (a series of rooms with shared common spaces) was not only damp, small, and lacking privacy, but he also thought it caused the severe health problems that have plagued his family, including his wife who lost a breast to cancer, his twenty-year-old son with a brain tumor, and his five-year-old daughter with severe asthma. Miloud's sense of personhood, as a son of the city, did not translate into these contradictory urban images.

However, Miloud's drama was but a small part of a long story of translation and displacement in this very cemetery. As a place and place name, Sidi-el-Bachir had been *translated* in the French sense—that is, transferred, displaced, or carried over—in significant ways during the colonial era. The Sidi-el-Bachir Cemetery has been one of the main Muslim cemeteries in Oran since it was created in 1792 by the Ottoman Bey Mohamed-el-Kabir (Benkada 1998). It was located on a prime stretch of land of nearly 10 hectares, a few kilometers outside the city walls at that time. This site drew the attention of French General Lamoricière in 1845, when the Quarter of the Cavalry began reattracting desperate Muslims, some of whom were the same people displaced to build the military barracks a decade earlier (Lespès 2016 [1938]). In response, French colonial officials and urban planners chose the land situated between the Jewish cemetery to the south and the Christian and Muslim cemeteries to the east to regroup various Muslim tribes in the planned neighborhood called by the French *Village Nègre* (and referred to in Arabic as *Mdina Jdida*, "New City"). Shortly after its construction in 1845, Mdina Jdida became the center of Orani Muslim life, reinforced by its fusion with the community's necropolis, martyr's cemetery, and the saint tomb of Sidi-el-Bashir (Benkada 2019).

In 1868, two decades after Mdina Jdida was built, French local urbanists and authorities decided that this Muslim cemetery had to be *translated*—that is, displaced

and transferred from one place to another—to make way for new urban development intended for European city dwellers (ibid). In 1868, the city exhumed the cemetery, moving the remains to a parcel of land dozens of kilometers outside the city center. An 1869 issue of the local newspaper, *L'Écho D'Oran*, reported the minutes of Oran's Municipal Council meeting. Haïm Benichou, a Jewish council member and local property owner, raised the question of relocating the Muslim cemetery of Oran. Benichou explained in a letter that both the Muslim and Jewish urban cemeteries were at a point of crisis. Muslims were refusing to bury their dead where the municipality had just moved their cemetery, and the Jewish cemetery was confronted with a new road that would cut into its terrain, requiring the transfer of corpses. After being relocated and the area developed, only the tomb of Sidi el-Bachir remained in place, nestled between tall bourgeois apartment buildings that sprouted up on the soil that once housed the dead. This new neighborhood, built on top of the former cemetery, was named Plateau St. Michel.

At independence, postcolonial authorities renamed Plateau St. Michel, revindicating the settler colonial *translation* and returning the neighborhood to its original name: Sidi-el-Bachir. However, there was one major problem. An urban zone already existed with the name Sidi-el-Bashir, a sprawling shantytown surrounding the displaced Sidi-el-Bashir Cemetery where Miloud's parents were buried, one of the city's most stigmatized areas (Lakjâa 2009). The various competing meanings of the place name Sidi-el-Bachir —one as the name of a locally revered saint and another as a twenty-first-century informal periphery—point to how places and their names serve as translations that archive displacement, indicating the clash between historic/contemporary and official/vernacular meanings. This translated archive can be a source of significant struggle, as was apparent in Miloud's valuing of his parents' graves and the devaluing of the people housed on its edges. The translated archive can lead to an urban experience of cognitive dissonance and dissidence, where one's cultural meaning system fails to translate into the material signs on the ground.

Archive of Refuse

In this last section, I guide the reader on an itinerary through Oran's cemeteries, using the lens of refuse to illustrate how these sites are not solely sacred areas of ancestor veneration, they are often silenced, ostracized, or discarded places alongside the marginalized people who inhabit their peripheries. Trash serves as a peculiar type of archive of displacement. It is "matter out of place" (Douglas 2003[1966]), representing the excesses of social life that are discarded and forgotten. However, garbologists sift through trash to identify "the remainders of everyday life, as artifacts of material culture that reveal specific social and cultural behaviors through their presence and absence" (Moore 2012: 787). Moreover, displaced people are frequently treated as if they are disposable; thus, they are brought into proximity with trash, like the "waste siege" endured by the Palestinians (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019). Indeed, within the Orani landscape, the most marginalized individuals are often placed, by association, alongside discarded objects—in shantytowns and substandard housing near garbage dumps and cemeteries. Consequently, socio-political ideologies permeate these neglected spaces, reflecting processes of evaluation and devaluation at the core of urban displacement. In this section, I analyze a case study of cemeteries that serve as landfills of history, an unintended archive of what is discarded from everyday lives and social memory.

Figure 6. The martyrs' cemetery overlooking Dayat Morsli, the site of confluence between garbage and displacement for at least a century. Author's photo, March 2020.

One day, I was taken to a hill by a local urbanist, Houari, overlooking Oran's salt lake, called Dayat Morsli, and a century-old garbage dump with an oversized (though largely suppressed) role in local political history. Where we stood, Houari explained, was a martyrs' cemetery (figure 6). While it appeared on a map I found from 1965, the martyrs' cemetery cannot be found on most official maps today. Erased from official maps, Houari argued that this cemetery was a victim of *memoricide*, the killing off and discarding of memory (Webster 2023). This was particularly confounding in postcolonial Algeria and its "overabundance of memory" (Lazali 2021) regarding the heroic dead. I asked Houari: Who were the martyrs buried here? Why were they not commemorated? Why was this place hidden from view?

To explain why, Houari pointed down from the hilltop to the remnants of a once-sprawling shantytown (*bidonville*) called Chaklaoua by its inhabitants. The demolished shantytown once hugged the boundary of this uncommemorated martyrs' cemetery and what is referred to locally as the "American Cemetery." The "American Cemetery" is, in fact, the French Military Cemetery of Petit Lac, which houses the remains of Allied forces that "liberated" North Africa during World War II. Mixed among the piles of tiles that once supported the shanties, I noticed other small objects of daily life: a toothbrush, a house slipper, a child's sweatshirt. As a former shantytown built on a trash dump, the excessive refuse of displaced memory defined this site. Houari had drawn my attention to this urban space as an archive for an alternative history, one that recenters the displaced and marginalized living and dead, the people and events colonial and postcolonial memory had tried to erase, but whose traces tell how colonialism did not die in 1962 but has lived on under another name into the twenty-first century.

However, to understand the hidden martyrs' cemetery in relation to the shantytown Chaklaoua as an archive of refuse, I must begin at another cemetery to uncover, layer by layer, the displacements that underpin this periphery of Oran. This story starts (as far as I could track it back) at Oran's Jewish cemetery (figure 7), located

Figure 7. View of the Dar-el-Hayat housing project that overlooks Oran's Jewish cemetery. Author's photo, January 2019.

at the southern edge of Mdina Jdida. In this bustling center of Oran, a daily market spills onto every inch of the sidewalk and street. One day early in my fieldwork, a local historian took Amara and me through an unmarked steel door on an inconspicuous street wall. There was no sign indicating what lay beyond: one of North Africa's largest Jewish cemeteries. Upon crossing the threshold, the greenery immediately struck me: wild fennel and other large-leaved weeds had nearly consumed the graves. At the entrance were piles of funeral marble, remnants of tombs displaced when a road and wall were constructed decades, if not a century, before. The guardian, who lived in a small shack at the entrance with his family, greeted our guide with respect and then led us through the brush to the grave of "the last Jew of Oran."

Oran was once called the most "Jewish city" in Algeria. Today, this history has all but vanished without a trace as most Jewish Oranis fled at independence along with the French Algerians. The few traces that did remain were themselves decaying: the place name *derb l-houd* (Jewish quarters) was in ruins, a synagogue converted into a mosque, some faded Stars of David in repurposed buildings, and this cemetery hidden behind a street wall with no signs indicating its significance. The Jewish cemetery sat on a plot of land granted to the Jewish community of Oran by the Ottoman Bey, a terrain that, at the time, was outside the city walls. However, as the French colonial city expanded, it began to surround the cemetery. First, the Muslim neighborhood of Mdina Jdida grew to its northernmost wall. The city built up the southern and western edges around the time of the Centennial Celebration of the French Conquest in 1930. To the east was open terrain around the mausoleum of a local Muslim saint, Sidi Hasni.

On the wall of the Jewish Cemetery, stretching west beyond Sidi Hasni's tomb, thousands of people built shanties after World War I, creating one of many

bidonvilles housing Muslim Algerians, Moroccans (from French and Spanish colonized areas), as well as some Spanish, Italian, and Roma people. Due to the colonial expropriation of the best lands and an agricultural crisis in the early twentieth century, rural Algerians moved to cities *en masse*. Most could only live on rented, undeveloped lands, where they constructed these shanties. In the 1950s, local police reports housed in the French colonial archives of Aix-en-Provence described the unsanitary and "immoral" conditions of these bidonvilles. The city and police "suppressed" the shantytown at the Jewish cemetery in the 1950s, razing it to the ground and eliminating it from the landscape. Many of its residents were displaced to an area much further south called *Terrain Ardil*, a former farm adjacent to the Military Cemetery of Petit Lac, which also served as a municipal and private landfill (Coquery 1962).

Standing in the middle of the Jewish cemetery while the guardian searched for the "last Jew of Oran," I looked up at a massive housing complex that loomed over the cemetery, known as Citè Dar el-Hayat ("the house of life") (see figure 5). This tower, built in the years just before independence, was integrated into the cityscape like a Tetris piece, shaped by the cemetery, the razed shantytown around Sidi Hasni's tomb, and the sprawling and increasingly informal urban market. Hugging the wall of the Jewish cemetery, Dar el-Hayat "is a piece of a puzzle that has been constructed and deconstructed constantly" (Ouaras 2019: par. 23).

Over a year after visiting the Jewish cemetery, I went to Dar el-Hayat to see what residents thought of the Jewish cemetery. Immediately upon entering the complex, a woman yelled down to us from her balcony, pointing to the massive puddle filled with trash in the parking lot at the back of the building, facing the wall they share with the Jewish cemetery. She said: "Do you see where we live? The authorities have abandoned us." Sprawled on the walls shared with the Jewish cemetery was the work of a local poet who used the canvas to push the boundaries of "normative space" and "marginal space" (ibid.), decrying the use of his home as a garbage dump and a toilet for the market.

The long walls, both inside and outside Dar el-Hayat, were adorned with block letters created by the artist affectionately known as Uncle Abed by the residents of the housing complex. Known as the "wall poet," Karim Ouaras (2019) documented his work, using French and Algerian Arabic (always rendered in the Latin script) as a distinct form of francophone writing that recreates "a living language, to provide a tomb for the missing (bodies, names, land), to give rise to a sort of indelible textual memory" (Lazali 2021: 60). In this context, his poetry reflects a seemingly quotidian struggle with garbage, which has come to signify much more for urban residents. For the wall poet and many others, trash does not simply denote stuff to be discarded; rather, it implies disillusionment and broken postcolonial promises. Trash is the stuff of metaphors, which, as Derrida (1977) notes, is always constituted by displacement, a transfer of meaning from one thing to another. Uncle Abed has since passed away, a few years before our visit. However, the community has preserved his work on the walls, untouched, as an archive of their sentiments.

Trash, in fact, united Dar el-Hayat with the layers of displaced people who once lived in the shanties hugging the walls of the Jewish cemetery. The people who lived in the demolished shantytown upon which Dar el-Hayat was built were displaced to other shanties near the Military Cemetery of Petit Lac, which also served as a trash dump. Coquery (1962) wrote that residents sarcastically called their camps "douar Lihoud," short for Hollywood Village, but the municipal police called this area "cité

Ordure," or trash city. By the end of colonialism, thousands of people had lived in what was described as a hellscape, many having been displaced there from their more centrally located shanties among municipal and private landfills that were constantly burning. These were the "particularly deprived" (*particulièrement déshéritées*) families that had been displaced from shantytown to shantytown over fifteen years (Coquery 1962). Fifty percent of the inhabitants were under the age of twenty. Men aged twenty to thirty-five were absent primarily due to emigration, joining the anticolonial resistance, or death. Many households were headed by women, each averaging three to five children. These female-headed households outside of traditional village settings became a point of great anxiety and contention for Algerian leaders of the Revolution (House 2014). Not the least, this was also the killing site of the much-disputed massacre of *pieds noirs* on the day of independence, 5 July 1962, during which some exiled French Algerians accused the French military of hiding evidence and even burying the bodies in the trash dump (Soufi 2007; Rahal 2022).

Terrain Ardil was reportedly razed to the ground in 1962, as the fleeing *pieds noirs* opened up *biens vacants* (abandoned goods) and "solved" the housing crisis for a short period. However, this zone was soon repopulated as a shantytown years later, taking the name Chaklaoua, the tile cemetery I saw in 2020. In 2016, residents of Chaklaoua had been displaced and relocated again, this time to a public housing complex in the urban periphery called Oued Tlélat, a town about 25 kilometers from Oran. While their shantytown is gone, they have transposed its name onto their new neighborhood, calling their new apartments *batiments nta' Chaklaoua* (the buildings of Chaklaoua). Trash heaps and discarded memories have marked their story, forming an archive of refuse at the heart of displacement. When seen from the perspective of this layered history of displacement, the erasure of the martyrs' cemetery that I began this section with makes more sense. This location—marked by a fraught history of violence and urban squalor that transcended the colonial and postcolonial divide—is an undesired memory site discarded and displaced in official historical narratives. However, the remains of that past still exist in place, allowing for alternative tellings to be uncovered through, for example, Houari's attention to the forgotten martyrs' cemetery.

Conclusion

Overlooking the Santa Cruz fortress high on Murdjadjo Mountain in Oran, there is a base for a monument without a statue (figure 8). This is one of France's many Monuments for the Dead, commemorating war heroes who sacrificed their lives "for France." The French desperately tried to "repatriate" their monuments upon independence, fearing Algerians might desecrate these symbols of the French imperial and national imaginary (Slyomovics 2024). The partial monument I found remained in the landscape as if frozen in time, pointing to the temporal ambiguity of traces as "both the absence of a presence and the presence of an absence" (de Jong and Murphy 2014: 4). What makes this statueless monument and others like it particularly interesting is that thousands upon thousands of colonized subjects—Algerians and others from France's empire—died in the World Wars. These monuments are, in many ways, as much for the Algerian dead as they are for the French dead. However, with the colonial-postcolonial rupture, such monuments no longer fit into a narrative of place. They constitute a site of displaced memory that remains as an archival deposit in the cityscape.

Figure 8. The statueless base for a Monument for the Dead in Oran. Author's photo, April 2019.

Cemeteries, tombs, mausoleums, and monuments for the dead serve as powerful, if counterintuitive, sites for understanding the city as an archive of displacement. The archive of displacement recenters what has been discarded from memory, but whose traces can be found in place names, urban trees, trash piles, and the shape of city streets, buildings, and squares. This vernacular archive indexes the overlooked and forgotten people who once lived (and died) here while also indicating how cities and their polities are always dying. Death, as the opposite of power, magnifies the continuous process of "becoming past of place," the inevitable morphing of old places and meanings into the emergent new (Munn 2013). All cemeteries are archives of displacement for the people who once lived here, but they simultaneously mark absent futures, past roads not taken, and the disappeared who refuse to remain invisible. Thus, they are always political. Normatively, "a gravestone is a sign whose silent presence marks an absence" (Ho 2006: 3), creating a sense of a "single community consisting of the dead, their heirs, and the soil they share" (Verdery 1999: 104). However, many Algerian cemeteries straddle the uncanny and blurry colonial-postcolonial divide, existing as a non-linear temporality embedded in the very shape of the city. This landscape contains traces of "alien" others, the people who once (or presently) claimed this land as their own. Despite attempts to erase this "dark heritage" from the landscape (Slyomovics 2020), Oran holds these traces "like the lines of a hand" (Calvino 1974: 11).

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