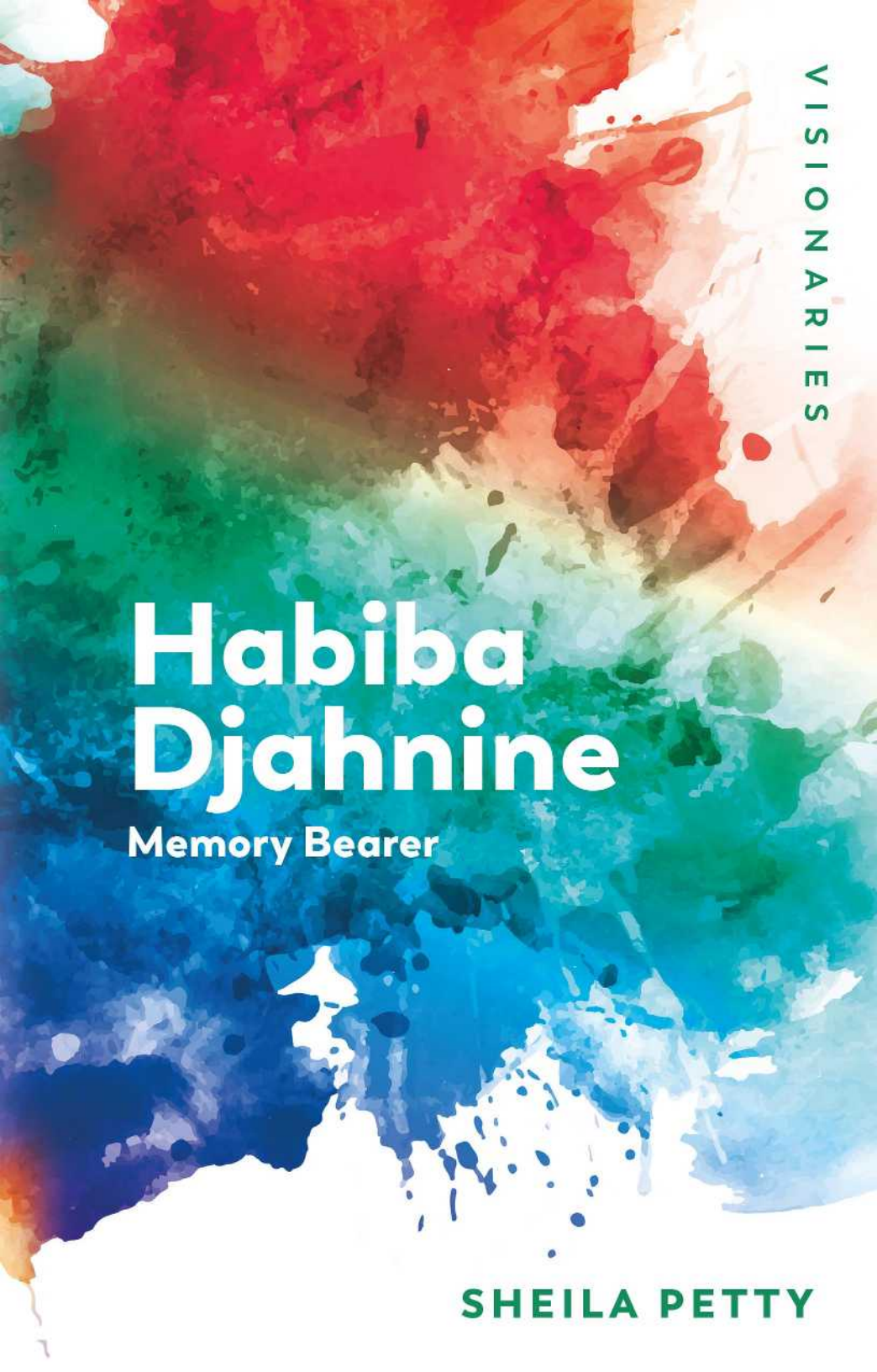
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Memory Bearer
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Habiba Djahnine

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Cover design: Stuart Dalziel

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Edinburgh University Press Ltd
13 Infirmary Street
Edinburgh EH1 1LT

Typeset in 12/14 Arno and Myriad by
IDSUK (DataConnection) Ltd, and
printed and bound in Great Britain

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4744 4053 0 (hardback)
ISBN 978 1 4744 3999 2 (paperback)
ISBN 978 1 4744 3998 5 (webready PDF)
ISBN 978 1 4744 4001 1 (epub)

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Acknowledgements

This book is dedicated to Djemaa and Habiba.

My heartfelt thanks to Habiba Djahnine, whose poetry and films inspired this book project and who generously gave her time, patiently answering my endless questions and providing archival documentation and photos.

I am deeply grateful to Djemaa Maazouzi for introducing me to Habiba's work and for her friendship and creative, scholarly collaborations over the years.

Several research assistants have provided invaluable, thoughtful, critical analysis and discussions of Habiba's films and the political, social and cultural context of Algeria's Black Decade, as well as North African cinema in general: Brahim Benbouazza, David Gane, Fausto Llampallas Iturriría, for terrific photography advice, and Narges Rezaian, for superb film aesthetic analysis.

Fatima Sissani, Nadia Seboussi and Nadia Zouaoui have also generously shared their work and their knowledge of Algerian cinema and culture with me.

I am especially grateful for the guidance, patience and professionalism shown by all the folks at Edinburgh University Press who have journeyed with me from the beginning: Lucy Bolton, Richard Rushton, Gillian Leslie, Richard Strachan, Sam Johnson, Kelly O'Brien and the entire production team – many, many thanks! Thanks, too, to copy-editor Adam Bell.

For financial support to complete this project, I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

My thanks go to Edinburgh University Press and *Área Abierta. Revista de comunicación audiovisual y publicitaria* for allowing the inclusion of reworked material from the following previously published essays: Petty, Sheila (2015), '"We All Invented Our Own Algeria": Habiba Djahnine's *Letter to My Sister* as Memory-Narrative', In *Post-1990 Documentary: Reconfiguring Independence*, Camille Deprez and Judith Pernin (eds.), Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 125–37 and Petty, Sheila (2019), 'Epistolarity, Voice, and Reconciliation in Recent North African Documentaries', *Área Abierta. Revista de comunicación audiovisual y publicitaria* 19 (3): 347–61.

Finally, I thank my main source of inspiration, Vaughn Borden, for his encouragement, insight, patience and support.

Introduction: filmmaker, poet, feminist, teacher

I first encountered the films of Habiba Djahnine in April 2012 at a screening and discussion of *Letter to My Sister* (*Lettre à ma sœur*, 2006), at the Cinémathèque Québécoise in Montreal. The event was part of a three-day colloquium on memory in film and literature organised by the Université de Montréal. The theatre was packed and included not only the symposium participants but also a large segment of the Algerian expatriate community of Montreal. During her introduction to the film about her sister Nabila, who was assassinated in 1995, Djahnine described the importance of breaking the silence through cultural production after the 1990s decade of war against civilians[1] (Black Decade), but she also reminded the public that it was not her goal to please everyone with her projects. Indeed, the multiplicity of the many (often emotional) responses to the film following the screening from audience members recounting their own memories and relationships to the Black Decade events demonstrates the complex historical and cultural terrain that is Algeria, even to this day. The screening provided the forum for Algerians in the diaspora to share their community and speak about the terror that had been silenced during all the years of the Black Decade. This event demonstrated that it will take many voices and many memories to reconstruct, reconcile and tell the full story from all Algerian perspectives. Recently, Walid Benkhaled and Natalya Vince have described how the collective *nous* which was shaped following the War of Independence, to promote a singular national identity

and cohesive portrait of Algerianness, is being challenged by many cultural producers. Specifically, in their description of the 'zero-sum struggle to define the language and culture of Algeria', they maintain that two main narratives have been produced: that of state and regime against the 'people' as victims and 'that of the perpetual identity crisis' whereby 'Arabophones' and 'Francophones'; 'Berberophones', secularists and Islamists; and 'progressives' and 'modernists' are all pitted one against the other in 'a black-and-white language of perpetrators versus victims and totalizing, mutually exclusive identities' (2017: 243). They argue that 'we need to move away from a focus on how different groups *define* Algerianness, and towards a study of how, *taken together*, these different groups *collectively perform* Algerianness' (2017: 244–5; emphasis in original).

This book takes up Benkhaled and Vince's challenge of a potential Algeria and focuses on the work of Algerian feminist documentary filmmaker Habiba Djahnine. I consider her to be a 'memory carrier' (Stora quoted in Durmelat 2011: 96)[2] in contemporary Algerian filmmaking because she 'gives voice' to Algerian women and men to tell their own stories in her films and enables the transmission of knowledge and the reconstruction of post-1990s Algeria through her film training workshops. For Djahnine, recovering fragments of submerged histories and memories goes beyond reclaiming the gaze. It is also about listening as a revolutionary gesture, and 'giving voice' to those silenced by official histories to tell their own stories in their own voices (Martin 2011: 57; Donadey 1999: 111–12). This also means preparing the next generation of Algerians with the necessary tools to bear witness. The unearthing of history and memory in contemporary Algerian cultural production has been a goal of many cultural practitioners. In her article on memory, history and contemporary Algerian visual artists, Érika Nimis takes on the project of probing 'the role of "speaker" (*diseuse*), but especially of "messenger" (*passeuse*)' in 'the memory work' of some recent visual artists (Nimis 2015: 14). Nimis maintains that these artists act as conduits for history and memories they

have not experienced directly but that their parents or families have experienced or witnessed. It is important for these artists to explore the individual and family histories and memories embedded within the repressed collective history of the Algerian War and the Black Decade. The relative absence of images and documentation of these two key periods in Algerian history is related, according to Dalila Dalléas Bouzar, 'to a denial of memory, maintained by the official history' of Algeria (Dalléas Bouzar 2010: 90).[3]

Figure 0.1 Habiba Djahnine on location at Tirourda, a mountain village near Tizi Ouzou for the filming of *Before Crossing the Horizon Line* in 2010. Courtesy of Habiba Djahnine.

Habiba Djahnine's filmic oeuvre is one of contestation and courage in a country with a history of repression of memory and freedom of expression and scant, but recently growing, history of documentary filmmaking. Born in 1968 at Miliana, Djahnine grew up in the Béjaïa region of Algeria, in a large family, all intensely interested in the arts, especially theatre and cinema. In 1985, at the age of seventeen, and still in high school, Djahnine and her sisters created a women's film club in Béjaïa. None of them was a filmmaker at the time, but their goal was to create a 'cinephile' space for women to access films and learn about and discuss feminist issues (Djahnine 2022a). After high school Djahnine moved to Algiers to begin university courses before moving on to Constantine, where she became a newspaper columnist while hosting a women's film club at the local cinémathèque. Profoundly affected by the assassination of Kabyle journalist, poet and fiction writer Tahar Djaout, Djahnine migrated to the southern Algerian desert and lived for a year between Timimoun and Adrar, before Nabila convinced her to join her in Tizi Ouzou. They would organise, in 1994, one of the first women's film festivals in Algeria, entitled 'Images and imaginaries of women in Algerian cinema'.

In 1995, they were planning the second edition of the festival, titled 'Les femmes dans les révolutions', when Nabila was gunned down at point-blank range as she was leaving work. In an interview with Camille Leprince, Djahnine describes how

> où l'on souhaitait interroger le pourquoi du statut de la femme à notre époque, alors même que celles-ci avaient combattu aux côtés des hommes durant la Guerre de Libération et auraient dû se voir reconnaître davantage de droits. On voulait aller au-delà des clichés, partir de témoignages, de la réalité. Et puis on voulait aussi s'intéresser aux autres révolutions nationales, au Vietnam, à Cuba et explorer la place des femmes dans ces changements.
>
> where we wanted to question the reason for the status of women in our time, even though they had fought alongside men during the War of Independence and should have been granted more rights. We wanted to go

> beyond clichés, start from testimonies, from reality. And then we also wanted to take an interest in other national revolutions, in Vietnam, in Cuba and explore the place of women in these changes. (Leprince 2021)

The whole Djahnine family was deeply affected by the tragedy of Nabila's assassination and grief-stricken Habiba ended up moving to France where she met members of Kaïna Cinéma, an association based in Paris that promotes exchanges in the audiovisual field between Algeria and the countries of the Mediterranean Basin (Touihri 2004).

By 2003, Djahnine had returned to Algeria and co-founded Rencontres Cinématographiques de Béjaïa and founded Béjaïa Docs – image and cinema training workshops, organised, as Djahnine describes it, in the 'spirit of sharing' (Touihri 2004). The year-long course focused on all aspects of the film industry, including film history, production, distribution and screenwriting. Students were required to complete a film on the life of their own community. These workshops, which originally trained both male and female youth, exist today under the name of Collectif Cinéma et Mémoire, and were moved to the Saharan oasis of Timimoun in 2017 where the training was focused exclusively for women by women professionals in the film industry. The equipment and infrastructure were gathered from foundations, associations and private individuals. The workshop was funded by the Arab Fund for Culture (Tenfiche 2022: 310–11). The Collectif has created a cross-border partnership with Kaïna Cinéma (Habiba Djahnine is Déléguée générale), as well as Les Ateliers Varan, a Parisian structure that has been promoting the establishment of workshops in foreign countries for thirty-five years. From 2019 to 2022, Djahnine was director of the Imagine Project, developed by Kaïna Cinéma in Paris and Cinéma et Mémoire in Algeria. Within and beyond these networks, Habiba Djahnine's legacy is monumental and her decades-old goal of carving out spaces for Algerian alternative documentary film production, screenings and dialogue is ever more imperative today.

As a documentary filmmaker, Djahnine has directed *Les métiers de proximité* (2002), *Migrants in Europe* (*Migrants en Europe*, 2004), *Letter to My Sister* (*Lettre à ma sœur*, 2006), *Otherwise Citizens, Associations on the Move* (*Autrement citoyens, des associations en mouvement*, 2009) and *Returns to the Mountain* (*Retours à la montagne*, 2010). She has also published short stories and poetry, most notably the volumes of poetry entitled *Outre-Mort* (2003), *Fragments de la maison* (2015) and, most recently, *Traversée par les vents* (2023). She is also co-author of *Associations algériennes, parcours et expériences* (2008) and chief editor of the film journal *Imagine, les carnets Cinéma Mémoire* (2024), produced by Collectif Cinéma et Mémoire (Algeria) and Kaïna Cinéma (Paris). *Before Crossing the Horizon Line* (*Avant de franchir la ligne d'horizon*, 2011) retraces twenty years of activism and political repression in Algeria, while *Safia, a Woman's Story* (*Safia, une histoire de femme*, 2011) focuses on a battered woman who seeks and successfully obtains a divorce. In 2012, she was awarded the Prince Claus Award for

> breathing new life into Algerian cinema; for creating sensitive, challenging and insightful documentaries on contemporary realities; for her egalitarian vision and commitment to inspiring, training and mentoring new generations of socially engaged cinema professionals; and for courageously championing freedom of expression and widening key debates in Arab cultures. (Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development 2012)

Her most recent film projects include the role of producer on three documentaries (2023–4) and an experimental short documentary, *From a Desert* (*D'un désert*, 2019), which is constructed as a free-association, visual and poetic dialogue with the paintings of Gustave Guillaumet and the writings of Tahar Djaout and Mouloud Mammeri, set against the backdrop of the southern Algerian desert.

It is Djahnine's intense intellectual feminist activist focus on real-life issues faced by Algerians and the ways in which they

overcome obstacles that are at once personal and collective that make her films fascinating to study. From sustainable development to neurodiversity and social models of disability issues to women's rights, Djahnine's body of films resembles a tapestry she is stitching together to illustrate the resilience of her compatriots and their collective desire for a better future after so many years of war and terror. Like many of her artist colleagues, her creative process involves simultaneously digging through the ruins of Algeria's memories as she reconstructs her own. As memory bearer, Djahnine brings a corrective to singular narratives of the Black Decade through her cinematic strategies and through her stitching together of multiple stories to create an archive of memories, stories and histories that are not in competition but are 'entangled', to borrow Lia Brozgal's apt term of 'entanglement', and can be shared non-hierarchically (2020: 306). She argues that this trope shares properties with Michael Rothberg's (2009) concept of 'multidirectional memory', which allows one to consider 'memory as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing, as productive and not privative' (Rothberg cited in Brozgal 2020: 306). Brozgal links this reasoning to Max Silverman's (2013) idea of 'palimpsestic memory' whereby past and present form a relationship of 'superimposition' in a 'composite structure' (306). This conceptualisation has cinematic overtones especially when one considers that, in film, a superimposition edit is the fusing of two images from two different points in time to denote the passage of time. Even more importantly, however, it points us towards some non-hierarchical aspects of Indigenous epistemologies, including 'different orientations towards time and space, different positioning within time and space and different systems of language for making space and time "real" underpin notions of past and present, of place and of relationships to the land' (Tuhiwai Smith 2021: 63).

The quest for the plural and non-hierarchical is taken up by Viola Shafik in her 2022 edited volume, *Documentary Filmmaking in the Middle East and North Africa*. She contends that she conceived of the 'volume as a poem, but without meter or rhyme, a sort of

expressive mosaic – I am borrowing here Michael Renov's notion of the "poetic documentary" (Renov 1993, 25) – a discourse quite unlike a meta-narrative' (Shafik 2022: 1). She prefers to think of histories as plural, and documentary form as the vehicle through which multiple expressions, memories and stories are possible (1). Lia Brozgal cautions that multidirectional memory has its limits because not all cultural production can be easily read through the lens of the 'multidirectional' (2020: 307). However, Maria Flood argues that Rothberg's model 'opens a memorial space . . . for the analysis of intersecting histories' (Flood 2017: 4). Flood further maintains that it is also useful to turn to the work of Mireille Rosello who puts forward in her 2010 book, *The Reparative in Narratives*, that once 'memorialization and cultural recognition of historical trauma' have occurred, there are still remnants of 'cultural and social recognition . . . present after a text has been worked through the public sphere'; what she describes as the '"reparative" in narratives' (4). Habiba Djahnine has explained that her own creative production methodology, whether it is for poetry or cinema, is guided by the philosophical notion of sharing and of looking back without anger at the events of the Black Decade. It took her ten years to develop a 'regard apaisé/calm gaze', before she could begin the film about her sister Nabila. It took her this long to come to terms with the events leading to Nabila's assassination and then develop a process of shriving that involves sharing memories with others while working to rebuild the nation. Her process involves 'the ethical imperative to bear witness' through an empathetic gaze that is not voyeuristic but that seeks to 'tell the untellable' (Baron 2016: 168, 163). Tirelessly, she seeks to understand why and how Algeria has come to this, and she finds that hate and violence are not the answer.

Historical and cinematic background

Contemporary Algeria is a complex, complicated product of many influences and factors, including French colonialism, the

Algerian War of Independence, and Arab, Islamic and Amazigh (Kabyle) cultural traditions. The building of a nation state and the national integration of political, economic, religious and cultural sectors have remained challenging at best. It has been argued that Algerians have endured 'the most complicated history of citizenship in the world' (Khanna 2008: 70). Armed resistance to invasion dates back as far as the seventh century when Kocéïla and Kahéna, 'Queen of the Aurès', fought against Arab invasions. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Spanish and Portuguese attempted invasions (Lacoste-Dujardin 2001: 63). By the nineteenth century, Algerian territories were under Ottoman control and governed by a dey when the French colonisers arrived in 1830 in their conquest of North Africa. Amïr Abd-el-Kader, the son of a religious leader, rose up to organise an army and lead Algerians in their struggle against French domination, until 1846 when he lost forces and surrendered to the French. Armed resistance continued throughout the years and, in 1857, one of the most renowned resistance heroines, Fadhma n'Soumeur led forces against the French in Upper Kabylie (Lacoste-Dujardin 2001: 63). What followed, however, were years of layered interactions between French settler colonialists, metropolitan France and Indigenous Algerians, as France refashioned Algeria into a colonial settler regime with the standard civilising mission argument that the Indigenous population needed rescuing from their outmoded ways of life (Ruedy 2005: 50–51). The French would ultimately impose a system of control that would divide Kabyle (mountain dwellers) and Arab (lowland dwellers) majority populations. However, they misjudged the communities' 'loyalty to the common Algerian heritage' as Algerian Arabic gathered strength under the French project of 'political and economic integration' (Ruedy 2005: 90–92). The assimilation of Algerians to French civilisation went much further than language and culture as thousands of hectares of mostly Kabyle land were appropriated for French settlers. This would, in turn, have an impact on rural societies, leading to their disintegration and forcing many dispossessed of their land to emigrate to France. Relationships and

interactions would only become more complicated through the colonial period as various groups worked with, for or against the French. During the Algerian Revolutionary War of Independence (1954–62), Kabyles were often considered traitors, partly because of their perceived integration into French colonial society, and were often targeted by the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale),[4] forcing many into exile in France. Following the war, a process of collective memory and amnesia took hold and memorialising the war soon 'became a key means of narrativizing and mythologizing the liberation struggle, and was one of the means whereby that struggle was rewritten so that certain groups were gradually excluded from cultural memory' (Austin 2010: 28). With the dominance of the FLN for more than thirty years, national identity was shaped to promote a singular cohesive portrait of Algerianness. The Algerian War was depicted as the defining moment in Algerian history with a liberation struggle defined solely by pro-independence fighters within the FLN (28). As the FLN persisted in the complete Arabisation of government, policy, education and culture, all diversity was actively discouraged, leading to the abolition of minority languages and cultures, such as the Kabyle. This banning of Indigenous language and culture was a catalyst for the 1980 'Berber Spring' demonstrations. When Kabyle novelist and poet Mouloud Mammeri attempted to travel from Algiers to Tizi Ouzou to give a presentation at the university on ancient Kabyle poetry, he was intercepted by authorities at the Isser bridge (Lacoste-Dujardin 2001: 59).

Several scholars argue that Algerian cinema was literally 'born out of the war of independence' and became a preferred medium through which to mythologise the freedom fighters and memorialise the liberation struggle (Austin 2012: 20; Salmane 1976: 5). Following independence, filmmaking in Algeria was state-run and tended to favour realism and didacticism alongside a total commitment to the liberation struggle in '*cinema moudjahid* or "freedom-fighter cinema"' (Austin 2012: 20) where cinema, as a form of communication as well as an art form, was used to celebrate heroes and martyrs and pit recent new nations against

colonial France (Martin 2011: 7). Martin also argues that 'the redistribution of discourse after independence, for instance, had to both renegotiate residual discourse of the colonialists and residual discourse of the freedom fighters (in Algeria especially) and revive and revise indigenous forms of discourse' (15).

In the early years film production was exclusively male dominated. Ahmed Rachedi directed the feature documentary *Dawn of the Damned* in 1965 (written by Mouloud Mammeri and René Vautier) and *The Opium and the Baton* (based on the novel by Mouloud Mammeri) in 1969. Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina directed *Wind from the Aures* in 1966 and the award-winning *Chronicle of the Years of the Brazier* (Palme d'Or Cannes 1975) in 1974. By the 1990s, and after years of rule by the FLN, the Algerian nation fell into a tumultuous state of civil war following the 1991 repression of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) by the FLN during national parliamentary elections, so they wouldn't win. Various armed groups emerged and carried out a campaign of terror and violence against government supporters. On 29 June 1992, President Mohamed Boudiaf was assassinated by one of his own bodyguards (an FIS sympathiser) in Annaba during a public meeting, which was later broadcast on national TV. The failed mission of Boudiaf, who had been one of the few surviving veterans of the War of Independence, had been to squash the FIS, put an end to the civil war and restore national order. Following this violent and very public murder, journalists, artist, writers, activists, feminists, foreigners and anyone who dared express opposition to the FIS were all targeted during the ten-year period (until 2002) now known as the 'Black Decade', which saw as many as 200,000 fatalities. Guy Austin has noted that during this period film and video images were scarce, but by the early 2000s, many contemporary Algerian filmmakers began making films evoking both recent and deep-rooted pasts, effecting a sort of return to the source in order to understand the present and make sense of the dispossession and loss of identity that permeates contemporary Algerian history (2012: 158–9). Rather than providing mere descriptions of historical events, filmmakers portray their

consequences on society in order to make sense of the violence and trauma experienced by the nation. Ratiba Hadj-Moussa contends that:

> instead of using history as the reconstitution of Algerian identity, or more precisely instrumentalising history for the benefit of a (necessary) mythological nation building, that contemporary films use singular and collective experiences to reconfigure history, where experience is conceived as a kind of history. (Hadj-Moussa 2008: 188)

Indeed, speaking about the past has increasingly become an imperative in Algerian culture. By recovering fragments of submerged histories and memories, filmmakers give voice to ordinary Algerians to speak what was once forbidden and unspeakable. This strategy works to open up a space of *engagement* and debate with the viewer – the possibility to help build a new Algeria, for all Algerians.

In her article on feminist rereadings of Maghreb documentaries, Stefanie Van de Peer has pointed out that, although Algeria is the largest country in the Maghreb, its cinema history, especially for women, is the briefest and most recent (2012: 177). Women were largely absent from the filmmaking landscape until 1978 when writer Assia Djebar produced the docu-fiction feature, *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*. In this groundbreaking film, Djebar sets the stage for contemporary women filmmakers by employing tropes many now favour: depicting illiterate women in their domestic spaces; reworking the gaze; rewriting women into Algerian history; and highlighting women's own heroic contributions during the War of Independence (178). Salima Tenfiche writes that Assia Djebar was the only woman filmmaker of the Algerian golden age of cinema (1962–84) and that, by the end of the 1980s, the state cinema structure began to crumble and by 1991 the Black Decade had begun (2022: 297). The Black Decade spawned a second generation of women filmmakers who took up the camera to challenge patriarchy, Islamist terrorism and violence against women (297–8). Novelist Hafsa Zinaï Koudil

Figure 0.2 Poster for 'Images and imaginaries of women in Algerian cinema'. Courtesy of Habiba Djahnine.

was 'blacklisted' for her 1993 film *Le Démon au féminin*, based on a true story of a young professional woman whose husband was convinced she was possessed by a demon. She was violently exorcised by Islamic fundamentalists, leaving her with injuries that confined her to a wheelchair for the rest of her life (297). Koudil's film was screened at Nabila and Habiba Djahnine's 'Images and imaginaries of women in Algerian cinema' in Tizi Ouzou on 6 July 1994 with the filmmaker present for the after-screening debate and for the round table the following day with other women film technicians such as Amina Kessai and Hamida Aït El Hadj (Djahnine 2022a).

Djamila Sahraoui shot several documentaries before filming two fiction features on the Black Decade, notably *Barakat* (2006) and *Yema* (2012), while Yamina Bachir-Chouikh released her fiction feature *Rachida* on women's resistance against terrorism, in 2002 (Tenfiche 2022: 298). A third generation of women filmmakers arose immediately following the Black Decade,

including Habiba Djahnine. This cohort of filmmakers also comprises writer, filmmaker and educator Fatma Zohra Zamoum, whose feature films to date include *Kedach ethabni/How Big Is Your Love?* (2011) and *Parkours* (2019) and producer/director Nadia Cherabi-Labidi (298–9). Many of these women filmmakers/photographers/video artists live and work between Algeria and France (or other parts of the diaspora). Such is the case of Zineb Sedira (London), Nadia Seboussi and Nadia Zouaoui (Montreal), and Fatima Sissani (Paris). Tenfiche writes that a *renouveau* or *nouvelle garde* new generation of young Algerian filmmakers has emerged since 2010. This 'new wave' group formed the CRAC (Collectif pour un renouveau algérien du cinéma) in February 2019 with the goal of protesting against censorship and lack of state funding and infrastructure support. Women filmmakers include: Narimane Mari (*Loubia Hamra*, 2013); Sofia Djama (*Les Bienheureux*, 2017); Bahia Bencheikh El Fegoun (*Fragments de rêves*, 2018); Meriem Achour Bouakkaz (*Feu*, 2019); Yasmine Chouikh (*Jusqu' à la fin des temps*, 2018); and Mounia Meddour (*Papicha*, 2019 and *Houria*, 2022) (Tenfiche 2022: 299–300).

Methodology and outline

I employ an interdisciplinary, contextual method of analysis that involves close readings of the films' narrative and aesthetic properties in concert with their political, historical, cultural, production and reception contexts. I borrow the latter part of this method from Carmela Garritano (2013). Originally developed by Julianne Burton as a method to read oppositional Latin American films, the practice of contextual criticism 'posits a dialectical relationship between the cultural form and its many contexts and investigates how these contexts shape the text and how the text affects its context' (Garritano 2013: 8). For example, this method is useful to determine (among other things) how Amazigh cultural sovereignty is expressed narratively and aesthetically in Djahnine's films. Within the Amazigh philosophical context,

the interrelationship of visual and verbal is very important, and, within the arts such as film, literature, theatre and visual arts, Amazigh ideology is a structuring principle (Laouidat 2015: 45). Mohammed Laouidat defines Amazigh cinema as using 1) Amazigh languages for dialogues (or narration in the case of documentary films); and 2) Amazigh culture for the films' subjects – all within Amazigh topology, memory, time and space. Within this structure, films should meet certain authorial criteria whereby the filmmaker is a militant Amazigh activist (45). My work has been informed by these considerations, through which I read Djahnine's work, putting her films in conversation with other Maghrebi films in what Nigel Reading describes as the 'fusion format' of exhibition and display whereby multiple connections of similarities and distinctions function as in a conversation, promoting a call to action (Reading cited in Allen 2012: 5).

My method is anchored in the theoretical frame of Maghrebi feminism inspired by the work of Zahia Smail Salhi (2003, 2010), Stefanie Van de Peer (2012, 2018), R. Khanna (2008), Ratiba Hadj-Moussa (1994, 1997, 2008, 2014), Marnia Lazreg (1994) and Florence Martin (2011); memory and trauma studies (Judith Butler 2004; Cathy Caruth 1996; Russell Kilbourn 2010; Mireille Rosello 2010, 2011; Marianne Hirsch 2008 and Leshu Torchin 2012); documentary film theory (Bill Nichols 1994; Michael Renov 2004; Pamela Wilson 2016) in combination (combinatory poetics) with work in Amazigh studies (particularly Kabyle), Fazia Aïtel (2014), Frédérique Devaux Yahi (2016) and Mohammed Laouidat (2015) to provide new directions and insights for understanding identity construction through voice, memory and the gaze in the Kabyle context.

Within this theoretical frame, Djahnine's documentary practice is informed by aesthetic and narrative ingenuity, including 'self-reflexivity and autobiographical inscription, historicity, epistolarity' and 'multilinguality' and 'resistance to closure' (Naficy 1999: 131). Hamid Naficy describes this style as 'accented' and contends that the very structure, organisation, themes and visual style of accented filmmakers' works transform

'displaced subjects into active agents of their own emplacement' (2001: 98). With Djahnine, this applies especially to her themes and structures of emotion that are built into the works' mise en scène and but that also arise from the viewer's engagement with them. Sophie Bélot has made a similar argument for the documentary films of Algerian filmmaker Jean-Pierre Lledo when she contends that his films are 'accented' because they emphasise the exilic and displaced as well as personal experience and 'political position' (2016: 109).

The 'testimonial witness' plays an important role in Djahnine's cinematic work and creative production process. The complexity of the witnessing in her films requires taking on a diverse and layered territoriality/space, which means reconstructing memories and chronicling historical events collectively and anchoring the *je* in the *nous* without resorting to tones of victimisation or self-satisfaction. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's performative and therapeutic models of testimony are useful to consider here. They argue that testimony is a 'speech act' meant to effect 'beneficial change', and that creation of a community that listens and responds is as important as recovery of the experience. Testifying transcends mere narration and involves committing oneself and 'one's narrative, to others . . . to take responsibility for the truth of an occurrence. Bearing witness is a process, an encounter that implicates speaker and listener alike' (Torchin 2012: 5). Leshu Torchin argues that 'performance and iconography' especially focused on experiences of suffering are germane to the tradition of witnessing and testimony (5).

In this context, the artist transposes the event or moment to another 'displaced' space, or '*interstitial* moment' as Homi Bhabha would have it (1994: 269). Subjectivity and identity are determined in these interstitial moments, at the interface of the local and the global, the *je* and the *nous*, creating a transversal authorship. 'Transversal authorial space' has been described by Dominic Thomas as a 'dialogic relationship with other bodies of literature' (Reeck 2011: 12). I would extend the frame of this concept, arguing that Djahnine's work demonstrates an innovative

blending of the autobiographical, performative and documentary to create a personal relationship between artist and viewer, thus demanding an active audience in the process of meaning making. In concert with her complex theoretical foundation, Djahnine firmly anchors her documentary practice within the Algerian historical frame, and thus historical evocation and emotive connection to the subject matter is as important to her as factual referencing. According to Bill Nichols, this suggests that although 'performative artworks might possess historical grounding, the aesthetic goal is not to provide an accurate description of history, but rather an evocation of it' (1994: 100). Ratiba Hadj-Moussa contends that 'instead of using history as the reconstitution of Algerian identity, or more precisely instrumentalising history for the benefit of a (necessary) mythological nation building, contemporary artworks use singular and collective experiences to reconfigure history, where experience is conceived as a kind of history' (2008: 188). This astutely describes the work of Djahnine, but also that of Lledo, and the handful of Algerian documentarists striving to resolve Algeria's 'unresolved history' through film (Bélot 2016: 106). Near the end of the Black Decade period, Djahnine lamented in an interview with Carole Filiu that

> no actual documentary can be made in this country. Mostly, fiction and reports are produced. We are at most five or six Algerians working on documentaries with a very intimate approach. There was never any effort done on image in Algeria: images come from outside and young people can't identify to them. They need to make their own images. This is why we created Bejaïa doc in 2003. (Filiu 2011)

Djahnine's fundamental belief in documentary film as a tool that can assist Algerian society in coming to terms with its complex past, and help build constructive images of who it is and what its potential future can be, informs her work as a feminist, teacher and poet. She frames historical moments and current social issues, creating a time and space of performativity within community. As a filmmaker and teacher, she stages history lessons through each

of her films, often using the performative documentary mode for personal and autobiographical explorations of Algerian history and culture, creating an archaeology of Algerian history, memory, culture and human rights.

The subject of female authorship and agency in documentary film practice is not a new issue, especially since the women's movements of the 1960s and the arrival of new technologies and lighter-weight camera equipment. In the early 2000s, Michael Renov led discussions on the nature of subjectivities in contemporary documentary cinema practices, resulting in sustained reflections and thinking about 'more truthful and inclusive documentary discourse' (Ulfsdotter and Backman Rogers 2018: 2–3). Discussions of modes of address, and voice and gaze, led to the recognition of a new film form, 'the essay film', theorised by Laura Rascaroli (2009) to include 'an authorial figure as their point of origin' (Rascaroli cited in Ulfsdotter and Backman Rogers 2018: 3). Alisa Lebow (2012) would contribute to the debate with her work on 'first person' cinema, which she contends is voiced 'from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position' (Lebow cited in Ulfsdotter and Backman Rogers 2018: 3). Habiba Djahnine's oeuvre acknowledges the filmmaker's subjective position vis-à-vis her urgent quest to rebuild contemporary Algeria. Each film focuses on a specific issue germane to this construction process. Each of the following chapters therefore focuses on one of her key films and explores in depth the issue presented.

Chapter 1 focuses on Djahnine as *porteure de mémoire*/ memory bearer through an analysis of her 2006 documentary *Letter to My Sister*, in which she retraces the circumstances surrounding her sister Nabila's assassination on 15 February 1995 in Tizi Ouzou, capital city of the Kabylia region of Algeria. The chapter examines how Djahnine, as a contemporary Algerian Kabyle feminist filmmaker, reworks the gaze and voice in this film to represent the notion of 'the unspeakable' and how she finds ways to express traumatic experiences and repressed testimonies using documentary form.

Chapter 2 focuses on the film *Otherwise Citizens, Associations on the Move*, which Djahnine filmed in partnership with Le Programme Joussour, ou Programme Concerté Pluri-acteurs Algérie (PCPA Algérie), an umbrella association created in 2007 to act in the interests of children's and youth well-being in Algerian society. The film profiles various charities and social groups working to eradicate social stigma around physical and mental neurodiversity, AIDS, and violence against women and children. The film also focuses on the efforts of youth groups working to promote literacy and cultural activities for marginalised youth within Algerian society. The chapter also explores the rise of associations in Algeria since the 1990s and their promotion of cultural heritage and social issues.

Chapter 3 deals with Djahnine's 2010 film *Returns to the Mountain* in which she travels to various mountain communities in Algeria to listen to the stories, projects, challenges and hopes of mountain dwellers at Tazla, Heizer, Mount Chenoua and Sidi Semiane. The chapter depicts how oral tradition, poetry, language, land and culture are the patrimony of contemporary Algeria.

Chapter 4 focuses on Djahnine's 2011 film *Before Crossing the Horizon Line*. Djahnine is concerned with chronicling the events in Algeria between October 1988 and 2010. 'Why 1988?' she is asked in an interview in *El Watan* (Meddi 2011: 7). Because 5 October 1988 was a moment of rupture, she claims: the day rioting broke out in central Algiers and quickly spread to the rest of the country as youth protested the one-party FLN system and the growing disparity between the rising upper class and the deprived majority population.

In Chapter 5, I focus on the short documentary *Safia, a Woman's Story*, released in 2011. The film lays bare the experience of one Algerian woman called Safia, a mother with four children, who had been physically and psychologically abused for an extended period. The film follows Safia's successful quest for a divorce in a country where women have rarely been successful at initiating divorce proceedings even after several revisions to the Family Code.

Chapter 6 focuses on Djahnine's latest film (at the time of writing), *From a Desert* (2019), in which she engages in an interior conversation with the desert of southern Algeria. The film also stages free-association 'dialogues' with the paintings of Gustave Guillaumet and the thinking of Algerian writers Tahar Djaout (assassinated) and Mouloud Mammeri.

The significance of Djahnine's oeuvre is that is does not present a singular 'Algerian experience' but, rather, urges sustained and forward movement towards a democratic Algeria (Benkhaled 2016: 95).

Notes

1 Walid Benkhaled and Natalya Vince argue against 'labelling the 1990s a "civil war", preferring instead the term "war against civilians" as more accurately reflecting the lack of clear ideological dividing lines' (2017: 250, n. 40).

2 According to Sylvie Durmelat, Benjamin Stora originally used this term very specifically to refer to the memory excavation of all those affected by French colonisation and the Algerian War of Independence, including settlers who left Algeria for France, soldiers on both sides of the War, French supporters of the War, Algerian immigrants to France, and the descendants of all these groups in the French metropole (Durmelat 2011: 108 n. 6). I extend the meaning of the term to include memory work of both the Algerian War of Independence and the Civil War or Black Decade of the 1990s and hence its relevance to the work and activism of Habiba Djahnine.

3 See Kerstin Silja Pinther's (2016) essay, 'Artists' archives and the sites of memory in Cairo and Algiers', which provides some interesting points on the control of images (and thus, history) by outside sources of Algeria's wars, obfuscating the important work done by Algerians, especially photographer Mohamed Kouaci who is often not credited (even by Algerians) for his work for the FLN's Ministry of Information during the War of Independence.

4 The FLN was founded on 23 October 1954 and established itself as the main nationalist group in Algeria to fight for independence. It is still the largest political party in Algeria. The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was founded in Algiers on 18 February 1989 with the objective of establishing an Islamic state ruled by sharia law.

1.

Out of amnesia: filming the memory-narrative. *Letter to My Sister* (*Lettre à ma sœur*, 2006)

Engaging with trauma is a key feature of many films made following Algeria's 1990s Black Decade, with filmmakers narrativising suffering as a form of shriving of the violence enacted on and endured by Algerians during that decade. The challenge for filmmakers, and contemporary artists, according to Fanny Gillet, is how to '*show* that which cannot be *said* about Algeria's past' (2017: 141). Yet, speaking about the past has increasingly become an imperative in Algerian culture. By recovering fragments of submerged histories and memories, the filmmakers give voice to ordinary Algerians to speak what was once forbidden and unspeakable. This strategy works to open up a space of engagement and debate with the viewer.

The chapter examines how Djahnine, as a contemporary Algerian Kabyle feminist filmmaker, reworks the gaze and voice in this film to represent the notion of 'the unspeakable' and how she finds ways to express traumatic experiences and repressed testimonies using documentary form. In *Letter to My Sister*, Djahnine's voice-over shapes the narrative, but she also appears on-screen, reminiscing with family and friends as she creates her journal of the impossible, that is, the 'possible or potential Algeria'. This film sets the stage for her subsequent films foregrounding how social change is the key to Algeria's potentiality.

Three decades before the release of *Letter to My Sister*, pioneer Algerian novelist and filmmaker Assia Djebar breaks her own personal silence to film the women of Mount Chenoua, in turn breaking their silence, to voice their stories and keep their

memories alive. Djebar's 1978 *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*, in which the filmmaker's point of departure for the film is the breaking away from the silence of the Algerian *mujahidat* – recognising them and their rights to silence and/or words (Martin 2011: 56), brings correctives to French and Algerian national histories. Interestingly, it has been well documented by others that women's roles in the liberation of Algeria were seldom, if ever, the subject of Algerian films. In fact, it was the Egyptian filmmaker Youssef Chahine who provided one of the first depictions of female fighters in *Jamila the Algerian* (*Jamila al Jazairiyya*) in 1958 (Austin 2012: 22). And although the women in Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 *Battle of Algiers* serve the revolution, they barely speak while the men organise and give directions. In more contemporary films such as Salim Hamdi's fiction feature *Reconnaissance/Gratefulness* (2018) and Fatima Sissani's feature documentary *Your Untangled Hair Hides a 7 Year War* (*Tes cheveux démêlés cachent une guerre de sept ans*, 2017), women are provided a more robust platform, through interviews and re-enactments, to express their own contributions to the War of Independence.

In *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*, the main character Lila (described by Stefanie Van de Peer as Djebar's alter ego) interviews women involved in the Algerian War of Independence. With her camera, and in the women's domestic space (which I will come back to in Chapter 5), she represents, through words and images, 'the unspeakable' by, about and for women (Van de Peer 2012: 178). *Nouba*'s style and themes would help pave the way for other Algerian women filmmakers wishing to move beyond the War of Independence to express the legacies of the Black Decade, including Habiba Djahnine, Drifa Mezenner, Amel Blidi and Nadia Zouaoui, who take up the urgent imperative of 'giving voice' and, through their films, return to the sites and sources of trauma to perform excavations of silence and the repressed. I explore how the filmmakers mediate elements of film form (framing, image and sound) and genre (documentary and fiction) and the relationship between image, voice-over narration and point of view/the testimonial

witness, and how this is anchored in the historical frame of the legacy of the Black Decade.

Memory, trauma, inclusivity

In her 2006 documentary *Letter to My Sister*, Djahnine retraces the circumstances surrounding her sister Nabila's assassination on 15 February 1995 in Tizi Ouzou, capital city of the Kabylia region of Algeria. Nabila Djahnine, a feminist architect with alleged links to the international Trotskyist movement, was shot and killed by two men in a drive-by shooting during protest marches. President of the Algerian association Thighri N'Tmettouth (Cry of Women), Nabila was a staunch promoter of women's rights and an advocate of the Kabyle language and culture. In the film, Djahnine returns to Tizi Ouzou to speak with the people her sister knew and worked with, as well as those who were touched by her advocacy.

As she drives through the picturesque Kabylia mountain landscapes, she constructs a letter to her deceased sister to counteract the years of silence since her death. The imperative she sets for herself, 'il fallait dialoguer avec les vivants/I needed to speak with the living' results in a stitching together of remembrances or testimonies of Nabila's final months. Djahnine's film-letter to Nabila becomes a response, in images and words, to a letter Nabila sent to Djahnine in 1994, in which she describes the tumultuous state and disintegration of the nation after 1991. The challenge for both sisters is how to name and describe the violence – how to create and recreate the journal of the impossible, and resurrect a voice after so many years of silence and terror? In memory's relation to history and story, forgetting can play a central role, but by not acknowledging what has been lost or absent, there is the risk of what Paul Ricœur calls a two-fold absence: '"the thing itself that is no longer there" and of the event "that never was – because it never was such as it was told"' (2004: 368).

Djahnine must return to the source of her family roots and resurrect Nabila's memory '*from the site of trauma*' (Caruth 2006:

214; emphasis in original). Trauma, as a 'memory image', according to Russell Kilbourn, requires witnessing after the fact and re-experiencing an event, individually and/or collectively (2010: 133, 82). Djahnine's 'memory film', to use Russell Kilbourn's apt term, is much more than just about memory as theme, representation or narrative structuring device but is 'the very *form* of the narrative' (Kilbourn 2010: 82; emphasis in original). Djahnine disrupts the linearity of time, and thus the space-time continuum, although each '*enactment* of memory' in her film is linked to a specific moment in both time and space within her subjects' lived experiences of history (Austin 2012: 188; Kilbourn 2010: 82).

Nabila was a symbol of resistance and 'a hope of agency' for women in a culture that navigates gender issues with much unease and where, according to Guy Austin, 'gender is one of the most vexed questions in modern Algeria' (Austin 2012: 122, 61). Why was assassination the only response to resistance and emancipation, rather than dialogue? Nabila was an activist who worked with the local women, educating them on issues often considered taboo, such as: the menstrual cycle and ovulation; the contraceptive pill for women and condoms for men; HIV and AIDS; and sexually transmitted diseases. Nabila wanted change throughout society, in favour of women's rights and against patriarchal domination and sharia law in a modern Algeria where gender relations still often function through violence and repression.

Nabila disrupted the two codes that still prevail for women in traditional Algerian society: the code of silence and the code of invisibility. As she notes in the video interview of her at the end of the film: 'on tue tout ce qui derange/anything that disrupts is destroyed'. Despite women's active participation in the War of Independence, women's rights were deeply curtailed both during and following the Algerian War as FLN policy aligned with hardline Islamist doctrine to further entrench patriarchal systems (Austin 2012: 68). Furthermore, the justification of patriarchy was considered a 'religious obligation' with 'modern women' targeted specifically for violent acts because they were seen as a menace toward the patriarchal status quo (MacMaster 2009: 19–20).

Communicating traumatic experiences (unspeakable) through an alternative language (arts) interestingly validates cinema as the assemblage of all arts (music, theatre, and more). Therefore, 'showing' rather than simply 'saying' as 'the main challenge of contemporary art' (according to Fanny Gillet) could be solved through cinematic language or form. In this regard, Djahnine is a true artist who actively uses cinema language to communicate the unspeakable and to engage Algerians in 'showing' and expressing their own trauma as well. Her creative process includes careful mise en scène and framing to create the appropriate settings for this 'showing'. Djahnine concentrates on the idea of solidarity, especially among women; this is germane to her overall philosophical position as a feminist and activist.

In *Letter to My Sister*, Djahnine repeatedly frames subjects in a group where the subjects are positioned side by side. This is especially true of the introductory shots of each scene, in which we see almost all subjects together in the frame in medium to long shots. Occasionally, when a subject talks or becomes the central figure in the shot, the filmmaker uses medium close-ups or close-ups, but the form is mostly always open and the framing is mostly always loose, with the exception of extreme close-ups of Nabila toward the end of the film. The viewer infers that Djahnine uses framing as a symbolic technique for visualising solidarity, especially women's solidarity, and by including herself within this type of framing, Djahnine shows respect and solidarity with the memory of her sister(s).

Within this system of 'open frames'[1] where the handheld camera moves around subjects or subjects move in and out of the frame freely, Djahnine creates an inclusive space where the viewer can imagine all participants of the scene because the moving camera adds space to space. Camera movement in spaces where groups are gathered helps engage the audience in the gathering. This feeling is especially enhanced by the eye level angle of the camera, which creates intimacy between viewer and filmed group since this angle replicates our own view of our surroundings. Therefore, both framing and camera angle work to reinforce the

idea of inclusivity. Djahnine employs this approach near the beginning of the film when a group of young women walk together in the street towards the camera. This powerful image visually symbolises the solidarity among women who share goals as they walk together. The camera films the group from the front and at eye level, rather than from behind or beside them, creating a very impactful image of their solidarity and determination in reaching their goals. Placing this group in the streets, with local scenery, also accentuates Djahnine's central idea of Algerian legacy and identity (marked by the idea of locality and the value of one's own land in the formation of their goals and paths).

Djahnine uses landscape shots for moments of pause between scenes, and they are meant to situate the viewer and introduce the location of the following scene. Each scene is bookended by a landscape, often mountainous, that recalls the area where the sisters grew up and were educated. The very first shot of the film is a ten-second extreme long shot of a cemetery with a serene mountain vista in the background. The filmmaker then cuts to medium and medium close-up shots of herself, and her colleague and cameraperson being greeted by two local men in front of a building, the cemetery and mountains still visible in the background. The viewer wonders if this cemetery is Nabila's final resting place, but the men go on to explain that the building was a school where Nabila gave a lecture to a packed room of women. She had promised to return. Later, the school was transformed into a mosque with a prayer room. Djahnine explains that she is making a film about Nabila and will be back the following weekend to interview the local women. After the local men enter the mosque to pray, the camera fixes its 'gaze' on the building for ten seconds, ending the scene. Djahnine thus establishes her sister Nabila as the frame of the film. Nabila 'opens' the film as subject and returns to 'close' the film in the final shots. The video interview of her discussing how 'les femmes ont toujours protestées/women have always fought back' ends in extreme close-ups as she exclaims that women are also human beings!

Figure 1.1 Nabila Djahnine. Courtesy of Habiba Djahnine.

By opening her film with images of a mosque and prayer room, Djahnine forces the viewer to pay their respects to Nabila's soul and to think about atonement for past sins. The camera's/Djahnine's gaze is meant for Nabila – who would immediately recognise the landscape – words and voice-over are not always necessary in the letter-film, yet when they are used, they are of 'central importance' to the film (Naficy 2001:120). The first-person cinematic voice embedded in the structure of much reflexive documentary film takes on complex inflections in the Algerian context. The singular *I* is often subsumed in the *we* or *us*, connecting 'inward and outward gazes' (Renov 2004: 69). The autobiographical is rooted in the local and the national and personal histories are woven into national constructs.

This film for and about her sister acts as a memorialisation process that Djahnine herself calls 'dis-alienation'. Here, this is about communication between the living and the dead. Nabila was killed in a drive-by shooting and, interestingly, Djahnine

begins narrating the letter-film to Nabila in her car, driving in the mountains and into the cities as though Nabila is with her in the car:

> Ten years after your assassination and it is only today that I can revisit those moments. To speak about you is to speak about all the women in the world who refuse to give up their dignity. It was only the gunfire that made you afraid … an instant after, you were no longer there. Your demise was the beginning of our helplessness and confusion. The voyage began. I prepared your coffin and wrapped your body in the cloth of our denial. How can we live with these wounds? How can we vomit our fear and hate of the assassins? I can barely distinguish mourning from madness. Into what kind of silent abyss have they thrown you?

Djahnine's voice-over is now accompanied by the melancholy chords of a stringed instrument:

> It's four in the morning. Your friends all gathered to accompany you on this final voyage. We were surprised by the calm and order in the midst of pious, weathering and bitter pain. At once, it seemed hot. This omnipresent heat, almost unbearable. The route is long. Who is the driver who is transporting us? He does not seem bothered by anything. Not even by the cars following us. I only have one fear. That they take your body away from us. Who are they? Men without faces, without names, without identities. They have done nothing. They have already done everything. There were three waiting for you with their sawed off shotguns. You looked up quizzically, then in terror as you faced down death. Now, you are in your coffin. I am taking you to Béjaïa. Our parents are waiting for us there. What can I say? I am speaking to you. How can I tell this anonymous driver to go more slowly so the sides of your coffin won't hurt you? But you were already hurt.

This trope of first-person testimony of memories and trauma while driving is taken up by Jean-Pierre Lledo in his 2007 *Algérie: Histoires à ne pas dire/Algeria: Unspoken Stories*, which was released shortly after *Letter to My Sister*. Point-of-view shots of various

Figure 1.2 Habiba Djahnine retraces the journey she made to transport Nabila's coffin to Béjaïa. Courtesy of Habiba Djahnine.

locations in Algeria as Lledo drives around Algeria punctuate the film's complicated narrative tapestry of testimonies by people he meets who share remembrances of the resistance during the War of Independence and the legacy of the Islamist violence during the Black Decade. Much like the work of Habiba Djahnine, Lledo's work resists casting the history of the nation in a single narrative. The film is a reflexive and performative documentary as Lledo's voice-over helps shape the trajectory of the narrative: 'we're all a little responsible' he muses to Katiba, the radio personality who was forced to leave Bab El-Oued in Algiers during the Black Decade for Tipaza, sixty kilometres away. As he drives through Algiers, Lledo sighs, 'after over a decade of Islamist violence, committed in the name of God, more and more Algerians wonder if "any means possible" is the way to defend a cause', in a state ruled by a single ideology. If asked, Habiba Djahnine would counter that violence is not the answer and silence is not an option.

Disjunction and mobility are two common aesthetic tropes in *Unspoken Stories* and *Letter to My Sister*. The disjunctive

relationship between voice, interiority and identity in *Letter to My Sister*, which Stefanie Van de Peer has previously argued in the case of Jocelyne Saab's films, is simultaneously self-reflexive and non-synchronous (2018: 78). This speaks to the ambiguity of the film's title, *Letter to My Sister*. Which letter and which sister? We do not see Djahnine actually writing a letter and reading it. We assume she is responding to a letter written to her by Nabila the year before her assassination. We also assume that because she is the filmmaker, she is composing the letter in her mind and narrating it to her dead sister as she drives through the mountains. The narration is very self-reflexive and signifies her painful memories of her sister's demise, and yet, the way the letter is spoken over the driving point-of-view shots raises 'ontological doubt' about temporality and space in the film (78). Is Djahnine driving as she makes her film in the present, or is this the journey with Nabila's coffin ten years ago? Djahnine's voice-over provides an ideological thread to the image track's point-of-view driving shots through mountains and towns. The spatial and temporal points of reference are her sister and their relationship, from which a melancholic form of poetry is born.

History, story, poetry

In her work on the transmission of the history of the Algerian War, Francesca Aiuti focuses on the contribution of Franco-Algerian (Kabyle father and French mother) writer Alice Zeniter to the development of knowledge on the Algerian War. In particular, through the analysis of her book *L'Art de perdre* (2017), where several voices and generations intertwine, Aiuti probes how Zeniter's 'told' story (*parole-témoignage*) challenges the idea that History belongs only to historians, and that History, especially when it is repressed and not spoken, creates intergenerational trauma (2022: 136). Benjamin Stora's monumental work details how memories of the War of Independence were subjected to interminable processes of 'gangrene' and 'oversight' due in part to an absence of ways of telling the History/story of the War and

its legacy from its colonial beginnings to its endurances in the memories of the present (1991: 321).

The layering of memories and use of voice-over in *Letter to My Sister* recall Laura Marks' theoretical model of enfolding (forgetting or hiding) and unfolding (remembering) of knowledge. According to Marks, 'the past persists, enfolded in virtual form, and some of its facets may unfold to some degree in the present' (Marks 2015: 11). Stefanie Van de Peer takes Marks' idea further by suggesting that 'sensitive information . . . can be revealed and liberated, or unfolded through the act of "listening" and "seeing" in the audio-visual art of documentary' (2018: 25). Van de Peer also contends that it is through voice-over that filmmaker and subject 'converge' (93) allowing the linking of 'historical and contemporary intersubjective relationships' (95). Habiba Djahnine employs this process of enfolding and unfolding when she writes poetry. She maintains that for her, writing poetry is a form of personal and intimate introspection and that some things can be shared, but not others. She muses that she only publishes poetry when she feels ready to share with others, which was her experience with her volume of poetry, *Fragments de la maison*, which embodied, for her, the withdrawal from shock, and the act of reconstruction, including a dialogue with phantoms (Leprince 2021).

Oral cultural expressions such as poetry, proverbs and songs are very important to the Kabyle culture of Algeria, to which the Djahnine family belong. Tassadit Yacine writes of how Kabylia has famous women poets such as Yemma Khelidja Tukrift, and that, in fact, each village generally boasts one or two poetesses who stand out from all the rest. Words and poetry play an important role in Kabyle society and possess the power to give or take away life. For this to be effective, words and poetry must be recited face to face and in public space (Yacine 1999). Fazia Aïtel describes how traditional Kabyle songs became well known through Taos Amrouche, a 'major figure' in Kabyle culture, who collected songs from her mother and recorded them and sang them during the 1950s and 1960s on French radio shows (2014: 118). According to Aïtel, Amrouche 'endowed these songs with international prestige and provided them with a place among

world music' (118). Her incredible repertory of work constitutes a living archive that is a source of pride to Kabyles at home in Algeria and in the diaspora (118). It continues to be safeguarded by artists such as Habiba Djahnine, who infuse their own cultural production with Amrouche's poetry and songs (see Chapter 3), thus ensuring transmission of Kabyle cultural heritage through the generations.

Djahnine visits the elderly Kabyle women who knew Nabila and they prepare a meal for her and dedicate a song to her that they improvise on the spot in memory of Nabila. The women, for whom poetic creation is spontaneous, transform the words into an homage to Djahnine for keeping the memory of her sister Nabila alive: 'O my soul, improvise a poem. For her, so dear to my heart. Today her sister has come. Listen to our message. She has come to ask, what her sister did. Her soul is in paradise. She who stands up for women's rights; Today we remember her, as if she is here with us'. As the final words are sung, the image track shifts from medium shots of the small group of women singing to a long shot of a solitary Kabyle woman wending her way down a road into the background. The shot lasts ten seconds, allowing the viewer the time to ponder the significance of the women's words. The singular and the collective are sutured as Djahnine is simultaneously spectator and recipient of the homage (Maazouzi 2013: 4–5). Djemaa Maazouzi argues that as the village women improvise the *achewiq* (song improvised in memory of someone) their collective voice joins with the other women's voices in the film to provide a 'polyphonic' description of the incredible heritage that Nabila bestowed on the women (Maazouzi 2013: 5). Maazouzi contends that the *achewiq* acts as a form of suture to the pain caused by the assassination: physical pain suffered by Nabila and emotional and psychological pain suffered by Djahnine, her family and friends. The present, embodied in the women's performance for the camera, is infused with the ancestral past (5).

Performativity of movement and emotion within an event can function as the recreation or 'the representation of an action or

a state', which Daniel Kunene terms as the 'ideophone' arising out of African prose, poetry and drama (Mphande 1992: 118). For Kunene, who has extensively analysed the properties of poetry rendered in Indigenous African languages, ideophones are 'involved with evoking a sense for movements and gestures, vivid situations and attitude, emotions and feelings, colors . . . and even silence' (122). Kunene further argues that 'the most remarkable thing about the ideophone is that it constitutes a dramatic presentation of past and future events and states' and conjures up for the spectator events which are not happening at the time of the presentation. These qualities afford the possibility of intensifying the narrative or story situation (128). The ideophone's richest potential lies in the intensified, dramatic emotion evoked in the viewer by a situation or event.

The blending of lyric approaches in documentary film is taken up by Drifa Mezenner, who also used documentary form to create a lyric film essay that is both personal and political. Laura Rascaroli writes that 'far less critical attention has been paid to the definition of the lyric essay film than to the literary one' (2017: 156). She argues that 'poetic fragmentariness', reflexivity, metaphor and 'creative nonfiction' are all potential features of the lyric essay film (156). These were all present to some extent in *Letter to My Sister*. Mezenner was a student of Habiba Djahnine in the Béjaïa Documentary Workshop in 2011, and under her guidance she produced her first short film, *J'ai habité l'absence deux fois/I Lived in the Absence Twice* (2011), which was selected for several international film festivals and has won awards. *I Lived in the Absence Twice* deals with the impact of absence on the filmmaker, and the effects of absence and disaffection on Algerian youth following the Black Decade, as well as on Mezenner's own family. The film is set in Algiers, where Mezenner revisits her old neighbourhood of Kouba to excavate memories of the past. Her brother Sofiane is central to the narration of separation, pain and absence because he is the family member who, in 1992, had fled the country's turmoil during the Black Decade and immigrated to Britain in search of a better life. Details of his departure – legal or illegal – are left

out of the film, as though the filmmaker is deliberately creating several layers of absence. These layers of absence become layers of distance, in Rascaroli's terms (2017: 163).

Mezenner adds layers of distance – a reflective stance, as she frames her father in a medium shot facing off-screen right and addresses the spectator: 'This is my father . . . and the girl behind the camera is me: Drifa'. As she pronounces her name, the image transitions to a close-up of her directly addressing the camera/spectator. She continues, 'I was born and grew up in Kouba and am still living there'. These close-ups give way to images of the neighbourhood as Mezenner explains that this is the area which saw many youth emigrate to the United Kingdom. Her brother Sofiane is one of them and he has been gone for almost twenty years. Her voice-over continues as she presents her other brother, Hamoudi and her mother (who is still waiting for Sofiane) and explains that the year Sofiane left is the year they moved to another house in another neighbourhood. Like Habiba Djahnine, Mezenner returns to her childhood neighbourhood to excavate memories. In a later sequence, she addresses her brother directly in voice-over while his image disappears from the frame, 'Sofiane, you migrated and were exiled abroad. We stayed here and were exiled inside us. Your absence made those who are present seem absent'. All the seasons passed, 'and me, I lived in the absence twice'. The film ends as Mezenner's mother composes a poem for the absent Sofiane. She sits facing the camera in direct address medium shots. Her voice-over sings the poem as she sits in silence and the screen fades to black and the credits roll. The melancholic tone is highly reminiscent of that in the *achewiq* addressed to Habiba Djahnine and dedicated to her sister, Nabila.

Exhuming the past

Mezenner employs voice-over narration to enfold the reasons for Sofiane's departure and exile, but also to unfold her own memories of the past twenty years. Interestingly, the past is exhumed while

visually depicting images of the present. The personal and the political are carefully intertwined and raise important issues of generational conflict in contemporary Algerian society. Drifa expresses her personal experience of the Black Decade and that of her siblings and friends in contrast to her father's anger and silence regarding Sofiane's choice to immigrate to a perceived easier (although clandestine) life in England. Drifa's personal history, like that of Sofiane and the rest of her family members, is part of the larger political and historical tapestry of the nation.

In Amel Blidi's short docu-fiction *Tchebchaq Maricane!* (2021), the film's introspective narrative is deeply intertwined with the complexities of the Algerian context. Through the mature female voice-over of Samia, the film transports viewers two decades back, highlighting the obliviousness of childhood to the bloodshed in their neighbourhood due to political upheaval: 'we were so excited to grow up that we were missing out on the blood that was being shed in our neighbourhood . . . Politics spilled over onto children's innocence'. The title of the film, referencing a children's game, symbolises the yearning for lost innocence. The narrative revolves around Nouara and Samia, childhood friends eagerly anticipating their first menstrual periods, while also confronting the trauma of Nouara's father's assassination. This incident intertwines with the whispered rumours about Samia's journalist father being the actual target.

Blidi delves into the intersections of experiences and history, framing the childhood narrative against the backdrop of the aftermath of the Black Decade. As Samia and her mother watch a TV programme called *The Route*, which highlights the efforts and reforms initiated by then-president Abdelaziz Bouteflika to rebuild and strengthen Algeria's international standing after the Black Decade, the film prompts viewers to confront the characters' experiences within historical contexts. The granting of amnesty to militant Islamist groups within Algeria in a bid for peace and self-reconciliation for all Algerians is also depicted. This thought-provoking space created by the filmmaker encourages viewers to engage with the characters' struggles amidst pivotal historical moments.

In her award-winning documentary feature *Islam of My Childhood* (*Islam de mon enfance*, Canada, 2019), Algerian-born, Montreal-based documentary filmmaker Nadia Zouaoui makes a deeply personal journey to her homeland, Algeria, on a quest to understand what happened to the tolerant and humane religion of her childhood, which is now associated with extremism and terrorism in the minds of many Westerners. Like Djahnine, Mezenner and Blidi, Zouaoui looks at Algeria's decade of terror and the legacy of the country's war against Islamist radicals and the ascendance of political Islam. She states, 'I tell the story of Islam of my childhood that was very peaceful, that's when Islam didn't want to take over governments and impose on people how to live', she said. She calls *Islam of My Childhood* a road movie, and like Djahnine, she drives through Algeria excavating memories and interviewing Algerians about this new literal version of Islam (as she terms it), which leaves almost no room for spirituality, tolerance and individual liberties. She claims her goal is to build bridges between cultures, between North and South and between people of different origins and opinions, and to initiate critical thinking and dialogue for a better life together.

Like *Letter* and *Absence*, *Islam* engages the performative and reflexive modes of documentary; and similarly, Zouaoui's voice-over provides the narrative thread. Likewise, she anchors her film in the Algerian historical frame, but here, distance is measured less through personal family histories, and more so through an exploration of national tragic events and iconic monuments and sites. While Djahnine uses landscape shots for moments of pause between scenes, and Mezenner uses her settings to depict closed family spaces, Zouaoui embeds representation through archival footage of atrocities such as the 1997 Benthala Massacre and iconic shots of Basilique Notre Dame d'Afrique in Algiers to stimulate discussion around Algerian history. Archival photographs of violence enacted against civilians and video footage of the destruction of statues of 'unclothed' women by radical fundamentalists are accompanied by Zouaoui's voice-over despairing of the 'phantoms that we are living with', echoing Jean-Pierre Lledo's words in his trilogy. If violence is conjured

and only spoken about in *Letter* and *Absence*, here it is depicted visually, but from historical measures of distance.

Landscape takes on a more active role in the second half of *Islam* as Zouaoui travels to the heart of the Kabylia region out of which she believes true change will arise. The driving shots take on an almost frantic pace, as though time is running out, in stark contrast to the languid, melancholy driving shots in Djahnine's film. The discourse of trauma and violence in the first half of the film gives way to an exploration of a 'possible Algeria' in the second half. *Islam* takes on the theme and tone of activism as Zouaoui proceeds to interview several journalists and activists who claim that the infiltration of Wahabism and Salafism, mainly from Saudi Arabia, ravaged the fabric of Algerian social solidarity, and literally destroyed 'the roots of our Islam'. They conclude that the solution to the situation is a return to 'devoir de solidarité/ duty of solidarity' of the whole nation in which many Islams can co-exist peacefully side by side.

At the pre-screening lecture on *Letter to My Sister* at the Cinémathèque Québécoise in Montreal in April 2012, Habiba Djahnine described how, 'after fifteen years of civil war and enforced silence, "*words finally came*"'. If the film for and about her sister acts as a form of shriving of trauma, violence and silence, then her subsequent films, created within the spirit of feminist protest and activism form the narrative thread between the texts. Point of view shifts from *je* to *nous*, to accommodate the *je* in the *nous*. The complexity of the collective *nous*, and the *je* in the *nous* requires taking on a diverse and layered territoriality/space which means reconstructing memories and chronicling historical events collectively, without resorting to tones of victimisation or self-satisfaction. This is a form of 'postmemory' whereby 'the generation after' acts as knowledge and memory keepers of cultural tradition for future generations (Kartowski-Aïach 2020: 237). Coined as a term by Holocaust/trauma theorist Marianne Hirsch, postmemory involves intergenerational trauma and memory/ remembering of living cultural heritage by 'the generation after' who strive to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of the generation that preceded them (2008: 106).

Note

1 I am indebted to my former graduate student and research assistant Narges Rezaian, who studied the structure and aesthetics of *Letter to My Sister* and pointed me towards the term 'open frames system' to describe one aspect of Habiba Djahnine's cinematic stylistic signature. Narges borrowed this term from Dave Monahan and Richard Barsam (2021, p. 215), who previously drew on the work of Leo Braudy (1984).

2.

Becoming citizens. *Otherwise Citizens, Associations on the Move* (*Autrement citoyens, des associations en mouvement*, 2009)

With her 2009 documentary *Otherwise Citizens, Associations on the Move*, Djahnine moves beyond mourning and personal trauma to begin the healing process, which, for her, is national as well as personal, and inclusive. This chapter explores the rise of associations in Algeria since the 1990s and their promotion of cultural heritage, social, neurodivergent and wellness issues. In writing about Algerian heritage associations, Jessica Ayesha Northey claims that 'associations continue to play an important if sensitive role in Algeria, both internally and externally, as intermediaries between the state, international actors and the population, for the protection of Algeria's heritage' (2017: 118). Many associations include education and training programmes to re-form Algerian society. Mentoring is an important aspect of the new Algeria, whether it is in the arts and culture sectors or health, social and education sectors. An interesting aspect of this film is how Djahnine depicts the process of mentoring in various spaces (public and private) and situations within contemporary Algeria. The challenge for Djahnine, is how to portray through documentary film a nation intent on moving beyond the Black Decade to explore all its potential as a more inclusive society. She is not the first Algerian art-activist to work toward a more inclusive Algeria. In his introduction to his edited volume titled *Algeria: Nation, Culture and Transnationalism 1988–2015*, Patrick Crowley singles out two prominent Algerians who both died in

2015 and whose work has contributed to new ways of considering contemporary Algerianness: feminist writer and filmmaker Assia Djebar and FLN and Front des Forces Socialistes (FFS) leader Hocine Aït Ahmed (Crowley 2017: 18–19). How will Habiba Djahnine extend their important work through 'processes of inclusion' in her own films?

Otherwise Citizens was filmed in partnership with Le Programme Joussour, ou Programme Concerté Pluri-acteurs Algérie (PCPA Algérie), an umbrella association created in 2007 to act in the interests of children's and youth well-being in Algerian society. The film profiles various charities, associations and social groups working to eradicate social stigma around physical and mental disabilities, AIDS, and violence against women and children. The film also focuses on the efforts of youth groups working to promote literacy and cultural activities for marginalised youth within Algerian society. The film emphasises the work of the Association de Protection Contre le Sida/ Association for the Prevention of AIDS – Oran, which organised a day-long event at the University of Oran, including a theatre performance/play titled 'Stand' and a conference and debate.

Rise of associations in Algeria

One of Habiba Djahnine's goals in making *Otherwise Citizens* is to document the incredible rise of associations in Algeria and to show how these organisations enhance the abilities and strengthen the resilience of vulnerable Algerians by equipping them physically and mentally. Patrick Crowley writes of how during the 1990s in Algeria thousands of local associations were founded, so that, by 2012, with

> more than 93,000 civil associations or NGOs registered [. . .] Algeria has more associations than any other country in the Arab world, ranging from cultural heritage, sport and social needs, to the kinds of village associations that pursue older forms of social organization by modern means. (2017: 13)

Jessica Ayesha Northey contends that it was the various riots across Algeria during the 1980s, fuelled, in part, by growing frustration among a large, mainly Kabyle population over lack of equal access to social systems that led to the October 1988 riots, forcing more inclusivity across the nation. The result was 'constitutional and legal reforms of 1990, which opened up the associational sphere in Algeria' (2017: 102). Northey's optimistic view that this led to the creation of 'thousands of independent organizations' (102) contrasts with the somewhat more pessimistic opinion of Algerian legal scholar Chafika Kahina Bouagache, who maintains that, through the Law on Associations, the government appears to accommodate citizens without effecting any real change, a policy she terms 'blocking the system' (2007). In her writing on Algerian women's associations, Catherine Lloyd argues for a wider concept of civil society, one that moves beyond violence and conflict to foreground the 'courageous resistances involved in Algerian society' (1999: 488).

In his recent documentary feature *Nissa/Women* (2020), Algerian filmmaker Merzak Allouache takes up the task of resurrecting archived images of Algerian women's courageous resistance and associational activism that he filmed in 1988 following the October riots. As he explains in the intertitles at the beginning of the film, Allouache used a Camescope V8, one of the first types of video camera, to film the emergence of feminist associations and their struggle against intolerance and Islamic integralism. More than thirty years later in 2019, he returned to this precious archival footage to incorporate it into a new documentary film on feminist activists and women's rights in Algeria from 1989 to 2019. He creates a layered structure with young women artists, painters and performers in their studios as they rehearse dance and movement routines in the contemporary time and space of the peaceful Hirak[1] movement; they pause from time to time to discuss and question the past, present and future of feminist activism. Allouache enfolds these images with shots of women protestors holding a large banner of photos of five Algerian women, from left to right: Baya Touhami; Nabila Djahnine;

Fadma N'soumer; Hassiba Ben Bouali; Amina Merabot. The women chant, 'We are forever militant . . . democracy is the right of women'. Allouache creates a further enfoldment through medium shots and then close-up shots of feminist activist Sanhadja Akhrouf sitting at an outdoor patio table scrolling through photos of women feminist activists from the 1980s on her cell phone and showing them to us, the viewing audience. These transition to video footage of a feminist conference in Algiers in 1989 as Assia Djebar's voice-over commentates on the proceedings and the efforts made by the women to attend. This incredible archive is paused and the viewer brought back to the present tense with more interviews of feminist activists in 2019 Algeria. Psychoanalyst and feminist activist Faïka Medjahed explains that all this incredible activity in the 1980s and early 1990s stopped abruptly when Nabila Djahnine was assassinated at Tizi Ouzou in 1995. She declares that the feminist movement imploded at this point, yet feminist precepts endured afterward for years as a challenge to oppressive gendered constructs. The challenge for Habiba Djahnine is how to transform these oppressive constructs into more inclusive opportunities for all Algerians?

Healing the nation: filmmaking and the healing process

Health, healing and the breaking down of social stigmas has long been a topic in Algerian documentary and fiction films, if only recently explored as a burgeoning topic in African film studies. In a recent conference call for papers on the theme of 'Marginality and Fragility in African Cinemas', held in Montreal in April 2023, the African Documentary Collective (Alexie Tcheuyap, Suzanne Crosta and Sada Niang) argues that the gathering of African filmmakers and film activists in Algiers in 1973 was an opportunity to discuss the practices of colonisation following independence. African filmmakers took it upon themselves to participate in nation building and reverse colonial systems of oppression by

forging new histories and archives that bring both external and internal forces into account, to take African cultures into the future. At the Second Congress of the FEPACI (Fédération Panafricain des Cinéastes) in Algiers in 1975, Algiers Charter of African Cinema was adopted with a focus on the necessity of training future generations of filmmakers and capitalising on pan-African and transnational networking. Ato Quayson has put forward that, in contemporary times, the terms fragility and marginality frequently point to vulnerable groups whose experiences embody the interfacing of physical impairment with a socially and culturally specific milieu (Quayson 2007: 101). Ratiba Hadj-Moussa argues that, in the case of Algeria, there is an 'endlessly reactivated historical *discontinuity* between the present and the past' and the complexity of 'suffering still has to be problematized' within both past and present contexts, one not 'overpowering' the other (2014: 151–2). Hadj-Moussa contends that at the time of her writing (2014), Algeria had yet to produce many films dealing directly with suffering, and she considers it odd given the violence of its 'colonial war' (151). And yet, the very 'focus on colonial violence has paradoxically forgotten those who suffered it' (151). Although Hadj-Moussa's work considers the trauma, suffering and subsequent fragility of Algerians after the War of Independence and during and after the Black Decade, she is concerned with 'Algeria *after* France. The issue is the relation of Algeria to itself' (158). Thus, the process of healing and breaking down social stigma around the effects of trauma, the fragility of physical disability and marginalisation in society begins with 'telling the suffering' in order to confront the past and help build a stronger 'relation with the present' for a better future for all Algerians (155).

Habiba Djahnine was not the only Algerian filmmaker in the post-Black Decade years creating documentary films to help the nation heal and tear down social stigmas. In his 2004 feature documentary *Aliénations*, Malek Bensmaïl probes the issue of neurodivergence and trauma by giving voice to patients in the psychiatric hospital of Djebel Ouahch in Constantine – the very

hospital founded by his own father – as they tell their suffering to the camera. He creates a space for dialogue and open expression between patients, their families, and doctors and medical personnel. Many of the patients have been severely traumatised by religious or political events, especially during the Black Decade. Bensmaïl claims he is not interested in filming depictions of neurodivergence per se, but, rather, the spaces created for speaking and listening for those marginalised by all sectors of society. As he explains in an interview with Olivier Barlet:

> My father was one of the founders of Algerian psychiatry. First, he was in charge of the psychiatric wing of the Constantine E.R., and during Boumediene's term, he asked for a hospital to be built, one with behavioral therapy, and a room to host parties or play chess with patients, etc. It was a long fight. Boumediene had said to him 'There is no mental illness in Algeria'. The government considered mental health issues to be a western creation. (Barlet 2020)

Bensmaïl's father did eventually get his hospital, with spaces for therapy and socialising. Toward the end of the film, patients, families and medical staff dance together in a large room, clearly designed for social events. The patients and their families declare their happiness at this opportunity to express their feelings in both voice and dance. The young psychiatrists, trained by Bensmaïl's father, pay tribute to his legacy, and Bensmaïl, the filmmaker, also pays tribute to his father by opening the film with a dedication to him.

Meryem Belkaïd has written that Bensmaïl's and Djahnine's work has 'led the way to a revival of the documentary genre in Algerian cinema' (2023: 56). In the case of Bensmaïl, she argues that he creates a cinema of 'immersion' and 'observation' by imbuing empathy and affect into the viewing experience and blending it with Frederick Wiseman-inspired observational documentary mode (18). According to Belkaïd, an 'aesthetic of immersion', a term borrowed from Insaf Machata, is apt for many Algerian documentary filmmakers because it involves a filmic process that extends beyond discourse and politics toward

'sensory qualities of lived experience' (18). By listening and observing, the filmmaker opens up a space for expression of the tragic psychological after-effects of the Black Decade. *Aliénations* opens with a series of long and extreme long landscape shots of mountains and the area around Constantine as the filmmaker's voice-over speaks directly to his father, as if in a conversation, dedicating the film to the latter. The remainder of the film's sequences are bookended with landscape and cityscape shots as transitions between scenes: long and extreme long shots versus medium and medium close-up shots of patients and family members speaking and doctors interviewed. Bensmaïl chooses more intimate spaces for witnessing, with tighter framing (but not closed form), and wider landscape shots to anchor the narrative as a collective 'Algerian experience'. This allows moments of pause for the viewer to consider the issues that have been presented.

Bensmaïl prefers to work in the documentary mode even though he believes that fiction films depicting difficult issues can more easily dodge censorship (56). Several recent Maghrebi fiction films depict social models of 'disability' by placing the 'equity deserving' subject at the centre of cinematic and textual discourse. For example, the recent Algerian film *Halim el Raâd* (2022), by Mohamed Ben Abdellah, stages the story of Halim, a neurodivergent youth who lives with his struggling (economically) single mother, and who endures sexual violence from a male family member while his mother is away at work. Although the film is a very raw depiction of Halim's world, it offers a glimmer of hope when Halim befriends a young woman who is also neurodivergent, ultimately suggesting that building community is possible way forward through despair and trauma.

Mohamed Karrat's *Petits rêves* (Morocco, 2020) is loosely based on real-life events and takes place in 1994 Casablanca when eighteen-year-old Brahim initiates a court case against the school director who, because of Brahim's physical (speech and motor) disability, refused to enrol him in classes during the 1980s Lead Years of state violence and repression against political dissidents

and democracy activists, when he was a child, and thus deprived him of a formal education, in violation of Moroccan law that stipulates that education is a right of all children from the age of seven onward. The film is a melodrama/essay film with much of the narrative focusing on Brahim's court case. The film spectator must listen to both Brahim, who painstakingly recounts his case, and the lawyer plead the case for Brahim. Brahim's voice enfolds with that of lawyer Hamid, and the spectators – both in the courtroom and outside the diegesis – must unfold the knowledge transmitted by both voices. Tragically, Brahim dies before his case is resolved, but the money he is awarded posthumously is used to found an association for disabled persons and equity-seeking individuals.

While Brahim seeks reparation in Morocco, Nada, the introverted deaf and mute online editor in the Tunisian film noir *Black Medusa* (Ismaël and Youssef Chebbi, Tunisia, 2020), uses violence as a coping mechanism as she picks up men and subjects them to horrific attacks. What makes it distinct is how it breaks free from the 'victimized woman' narrative that has dominated North African cinema, giving the female protagonist agency without judging her. The film is a reinterpretation of the Medusa myth in black-and-white film noir style; organised into a tale of nine nights/chapters, it ends as it begins, with the same opening shots of an outdoor bar and music scene as Nada takes out her knife and disappears into the night. The structure of *Black Medusa* is episodic and Nada's character is a cypher. She is not psychologised either narratively or cinematically, and violence is not sensationalised. This is in contrast to the countless medium and close-up shots (especially in the courtroom) in the melodramatic *Petits rêves*, meant to entice the audience to sympathise with Brahim. In *Black Medusa*, Nada is not morally judged by the filmmakers. The closest the filmmakers come to any form of depiction of symbolism is the sequence of shot/reverse shot close-ups that compare Nada and an image of Medusa in the museum scene in Night Seven. The episodic nature of the narrative structure is such that one could almost mix up and reassemble the nights into various sequences,

although Nights Seven and Eight do have a couple of small through-lines; for example, a radio broadcast questions whether there is a serial killer on the loose or whether the killings are an act of terrorism. The narrative structure underscores the type of work Nada does: as an editor, she assembles and reassembles images. This is an affirmation of her skills as a person, rather than her essence as a woman. *Petits rêves* and *Black Medusa* emphasise the human right of voice. Brahim's 'handicapped' speech is laboured, and the audience must take the time to listen to his story; in *Black Medusa*, dialogue is minimal and the voice-over, when it occurs, is from Nada, who is deaf/mute and 'speaks' to others through smartphone text. Thus, interestingly, the non-diegetic audience 'hears' her but the diegetic characters do not (except through smartphone text).

With *Otherwise Citizens*, Habiba Djahnine engages the strategy of the human right of voice and testimony to effect 'beneficial change', and the creation of a community that listens and responds is as important as recovery of the experience. Testifying transcends narration and involves committing oneself and 'one's narrative, to others . . . to take responsibility for the truth of an occurrence. Bearing witness is a process, an encounter that implicates speaker and listener alike' (Torchin 2012: 5). In writing about Djamel Kerkar's 2017 documentary *Atlal*, focused on 'the process of recovering a lost narrative about the civil war' (2023: 101), Meryem Belkaïd writes, 'In telling their stories, the characters situate themselves in the vulnerable space between the "impossibility of telling" and the necessity of telling as a step toward healing' (106). *Otherwise Citizens* focuses on organisations that target vulnerable subjects to enhance their abilities and strengthen their resilience by equipping them physically and mentally. Djahnine begins the healing process by implicating all Algerians in this national project. In this way, she moves beyond mourning and personal trauma to begin the healing process both on a personal and national level. Djahnine's 'right of voice' cinematic strategy is effected through her specific use of the cinematic gaze, mise en scène and cinematography.

Creating spaces for debate and healing: challenging hierarchical spaces

Otherwise Citizens, Associations on the Move opens with an extreme close-up of Atika El Mamri, president of the Algiers Fédération des Associations des Handicapés Moteurs, facing frame right and declaring, 'faire en sorte que la personne en situation de handicap participe' ('ensure that a disabled person participates') in society. This brief shot is followed by nine quick shots of various men and women framed in medium and medium close-ups declaring that, as parents and patients, they are the true actors of their life scripts. Others manifest their solidarity with the cause of protecting children's and youths' rights while one man, facing the camera in direct address, states that it is discrimination, stigma and denial that holds one back. The final shot of this opening sequence depicts several university students sitting in a ciné-club setting as one youth declares that 'when Hamza takes the mic, he speaks'.

Figure 2.1 Atika El Mamri, president of the Fédération des Associations des Handicapés Moteurs, Algiers. Courtesy of Habiba Djahnine.

This short sequence stages the main issues of the film that will be probed in the scenes that follow: the right to voice and education and the work of associations to break down discrimination and stigma around disability and illiteracy. The shots are edited so that speakers' gazes are directed left, right and centre in a metaphorical inclusion of all Algerians.

Djahnine's first cinematic strategy of inclusion is her construction of an empathetic gaze. She achieves this through this first sequence of shots with multidirectional looks, engaging 360-degree space, reaching outward and actively engaging the world before the camera (Sobchack 2004: 249). Vivian Sobchack has written about the ethical gaze of the filmmaker while filming such an event as death. The *interventional gaze* involves an ethic of commitment and solidarity, often with people in some kind of danger. While this gaze closes the distance between filmmaker and subject, the *humane gaze* inserts some space, often for safety's sake. At the same time, the filmmaker closes the gap through empathy and action, a motivation for the greater good (Sobchack 2004: 249). A modification of this process can be extended to Djahnine – who modifies it to include it as part of her 'healing the nation' process. It forms part of her 'ethical imperative to bear witness' and to establish an archive of experience (Baron 2016: 168). This is not about appropriation or misuse of footage taken out of context and repurposed for other propagandistic means since Djahnine's filmic gaze is one of empathy, responsibility and meaningful inquiry: responsibility to the participants and subject through shared (immersive) lived experiences between filmmaker, spectator and subject (Belkaïd 2023: 18).

Meryem Belkaïd argues that 'by conveying knowledge about the lived experiences of diverse, often marginalized, or unseen populations to the viewer', the current generation of Algerian filmmakers is honouring the legacy of Frantz Fanon (2023: 17). Fanon practised psychiatry at the Blida-Joinville hospital outside of Algiers, until the late 1950s when he resigned his position to work with the FLN. Throughout his life's work, Fanon was preoccupied with issues of black identity construction,

consciousness, liberation and nationalism, and social institutions and lived experiences. He theorised the construct of the gaze as a locus of power-knowledge between the coloniser and the colonised. Fanon set the stage for much theorisation around coloniser/colonised relations and considered violent insurrection or revolution as an inevitable response to oppression. Djahnine would not agree with Fanon's glorification of violence as the only means forward; however, they are in accordance on the imperative of exposing and challenging the status quo.

Djahnine undertakes this challenge through cinematic mise en scène. The characters (interviewees/participants) and space (setting) are the two primary elements of the film's mise en scène and she uses the two to create her space and spatial relations. The documentary consists of various locations and places where various demographic figures from all genders are present, and the film captures and shows their interactions in those spaces. Therefore, the idea of gendered spaces and their role in determining one's behaviour and interaction could result in unconscious hierarchical power-structures and/or gender bias (colonial and patriarchal), but Djahnine challenges these structures. An example of creating new structures to encourage equality and a balanced socio-spatial relationship happens at the beginning of the film, following the opening sequence. A group of university students in Oran decide to create the 'Monde sans Illettrés' and the 'October 31, 2007 Association' with the goal of providing French, Arabic, Spanish and English language courses to disadvantaged youth. The students have all donated weekly to the association and they are about to drive eighty kilometres to Mostaganem to purchase equipment and supplies to set up their classroom. The students set off in cars with a female student driving while male students occupy the passenger seats. In a further reorganisation of patriarchal spatial structures, the youth, upon their return, organise their classroom and assemble a large U-shaped desk in a semi-circular form. Djahnine shows the process of putting the table together: in earlier shots, we see some of the young adults with some of the pieces of the table in

each shot. Then, as they progress in assembling it, we see their number grow. Ultimately, it culminates in the shot where the table is complete and at the same time, we see all of the students sitting around it, males interspersed with females. So, not only can the process of assembling the table be read as a symbolic practice to unlearn/dismantle the setting and reassemble it in a new way but it also creates a visual dialogue and harmony between the subjects (people) in the shot and the space and its component (U-shaped table). Therefore, Djahnine actively uses these two main components of mise en scène to deliver her ideas about patriarchal space and the necessity of reshaping it to include all in an equal and balanced way. Furthermore, both female and male students are accorded equal frame space and time to speak about the project and its goals: the right to education for all.

Challenging the status quo means breaking down societal stigma against AIDS and promoting AIDS awareness and testing. During the scene focusing on the work of the Association de Protection Contre le Sida (APCS) at Oran, an organiser declares that the group has just had a very enriching afternoon that included a theatre play, a colloquium and debate animated by Fatiha and Aziz, and that the students were so completely engrossed in the events they did not want to leave. In a succession of medium and medium close-up shots, two male students circulate throughout the conference space promoting AIDS awareness, prevention and testing by distributing condoms and brochures among other male students. Raised in a majority-Muslim society, the students' strategy is to divide the promotion based on gender: the males promote AIDS awareness among male students, and another female student does the same among female peers with the rationale that, in this majority-Muslim society where such topics are still largely taboo, males will have more success mentoring males and females mentoring females. Djahnine then undercuts the 'patriarchal' build of the sequence by cutting to medium close-up shots of Dr Fatiha Razik of APCS and Dr Abdelaziz Tadjeddine, president of APCS Oran (Fatiha and Aziz), who sit on either side of a desk and share information about their work

with the viewer. Here, discussion around education and testing is depicted in 'equal' frame space. Dr Fatiha describes how the association was created in Oran in western Algeria where AIDS was most rampant at the time of the film (2009). They were able to persuade 300 Imams about the urgency of promoting AIDS awareness among their congregations. Dr Aziz declares that it is really about the struggle against silence – it is silence and not talking about the issues that kills.

The final scene of the film depicts the ciné-club at the Maison de jeunes Filali in Constantine. Taking turns, the students describe their hopes and goals for the club. This scene is highly reminiscent of Djahnine's and Nabila's goals with their ciné-clubs in Béjaïa and Constantine in the mid-1980s. The students want to create a community and to be able to debate issues in a group of fifty, rather than screening a film by oneself. Following the trauma of the Black Decade, they recognise that speaking out is imperative in order to move forward. This is highly reminiscent

Figure 2.2 Ciné-Club, Maison de jeunes Filali, Constantine. Courtesy of Habiba Djahnine.

of the ciné-clubs in Tunisia in the late 1960s that were 'spaces of politicization' for students and workers who 'wanted the liberty to think, to create, to critique, to talk about women's rights, injustices, abuses of power' (Tunisian director Abdellatif Ben Amar quoted in Tolan-Szkilnik 2023: 132–3). This freedom was short-lived and the Ministry of Cultural Affairs found ways to close the ciné-clubs and repress public debates (133).

Interestingly, Djahnine uses both stationary and handheld cameras in the film; the handheld camera specifically helps her to navigate through the space and around the subject (interviewee), creating an immersive space in which she can share the interviewees' experiences. In fact, the handheld camera constantly breaks the space of the film to get closer to whoever is talking in the group. These movements are unique and rather erratic and serve the purpose of jarring the viewer to pay attention to the issues presented. Filmmaker, subject and viewer must all participate collectively in the rebuilding of Algeria.

Otherwise Citizens focuses on organisations that target vulnerable subjects to enhance their abilities and strengthen their resilience by equipping them physically and mentally. The legacy of Djahnine's project and method of immersion and observation (like that of Malek Bensmaïl) are taken up more recently in *Droit d'école* (France/Algeria 2022) by Marina Galimberti and Vincent Joseph. In their quest to document inclusive education practices in the Maghreb, the filmmakers travel around Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco profiling the work of various disability associations that offer children and youth a chance at education. School directors, parents and students offer up their stories in this purely observational documentary where the filmmakers do not intervene with voice-over. In a nod to the work of Djamel Kerkar and Jean-Pierre Lledo, the filmmakers use landscape travelling shots, filmed from a moving vehicle, as transition 'pillow shots' between the various associations profiled in the three countries, to both signal change of location and to provide the spectator the time and space to ponder the stories told. At the Centre Local d'Information et d'Orientation pour les personnes handicapées (CLIO), Salé,

Morocco, Samia tells the final story in the film and recounts, along with the association director and her mother, how she and her parents joined the association when she was six months old and needed prostheses for her left leg and both arms. Today, she is in second year of high school and declares to the camera that every child should be afforded the opportunity to construct his or her own future. Participation and speaking out are imperative for the nation to move forward.

With *Otherwise Citizens*, Habiba Djahnine creates spaces for speaking out and challenging the status quo. A very brief scene of an amusement park halfway through the film seems to be retrospective but also futuristic. It both represents the nostalgia of the past and the future/new generation. In this space and setting, there is no gender-based determination and identification of space and its comportments. Every child is equal and they sit and play side by side using the same playground and equipment. Djahnine intentionally and deliberately included this space to show how banal and achievable such a balance and equally accessible space is, a beautiful visual metaphor, and symbol of equality, of the multiple expressions of Algeria.

Note

1 The Hirak (Arabic for 'movement') mobilised protestors on a national scale on 22 February 2019, repeating the act every Friday until COVID-19 hit in 2020. The goal was to oppose then-President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term. After forcing his resignation, the Hirak demanded the removal of the ruling elite and a transition toward more democratic governance. Interestingly, Merzak Allouache's most recent feature film, *El-aayla/The Family* (2020), is a fictional portrait of how the Hirak is creating sweeping political reform. The film focuses on the character of Merouane, a corrupt former government official, and his wife, Khadidja, who attempt to sell their numerous ill-gotten gains and leave the country with their daughter Sarah, before the law catches up with them. However, as they are fleeing, they encounter roadblocks that stop their progress and force them to focus on family values.

3.

Environment, sustainable development and cultural heritage. *Returns to the Mountain* (*Retours à la montagne*, 2010)

In *Returns to the Mountain* (2010), Habiba Djahnine travels to various mountain communities in Algeria to listen to the stories, projects, challenges and hopes of mountain dwellers at Tazla, Heizer, Mount Chenoua and Sidi Semiane. Mountains, landscape and inhabitants all take centre stage as protagonists labouring to rebuild Algeria after the Black Decade, and now mountain village inhabitants are reclaiming the land and creating sustainable development projects to stem the tide of the exodus to the cities for employment. Projects vary from bus services for schoolchildren to animals and equipment and cash loans from the National Research Institute of Agronomy for farmers to cultivate crops and gardens for local consumption, rather than leaving their land and moving to nearby cities to work in factories. At Mount Chenoua, inhabitants have created an association whose mandate is to promote the replanting of olive trees and the rehabilitation and protection of the local language, the Chenoua dialect of Tamazight, spoken on Mount Chenoua.

The idea of homeland embodies the main theme of the film, and landscape and mountains act as much as the inhabitants as important elements of the narrative and story development. The land is also connected to intangible cultural heritage such as language and poetry. As a result, land here does not simply refer to a mere geographical location but rather to an entire Kabyle and Algerian culture and ecosystem existing in these mountains. The

second main and central theme of the film, in all of the returns (stories), is development and prosperity. As the main goal of the film is to return to these mountain locations to discover and document the process of various development projects from multiple locations, it is obvious that another theme concerns Algeria's future and its prosperity, especially in mountains that were once a refuge for terrorists during the Black Decade, and, before that, hiding places for mujahedeen fighting against France during the War of Independence.

Algeria's mountainous region is vast and occupies about 65 per cent of the northern part of the country. Camille Lacoste-Dujardin writes that this area is mainly occupied by the Kabyle, who are proud mountain dwellers who view Kabyle land and patrimony as intertwined. She maintains that, from about fifty kilometres east of Algiers, 'la Grande Kabylie' stretches 200 kilometres from west to east (to Béjaïa) and about 100 from north to south (2001: 58–9). The mountains in Kabylia have been settings for several prominent Algerian films featuring Kabyle stories. *La Colline oubliée/The Forgotten Hill* (1996) by Abderrahmane Bouguermouh is considered the first Algerian Amazigh feature fiction film in the 'heritage genre' according to Guy Austin (2012: 108). Austin explains that the use of the term, 'heritage genre' derives from the film's conventional narrative form favouring touristy landscapes and vistas and remaining faithful to the source literary text of the same title by Mouloud Mammeri (1952). A frame story, mostly in voice-over, establishes the main narrative quest. Austin also contends that, although the story is deeply anchored in Amazigh cultural heritage, the film is largely dependent on the French language, a factor that helped boost its box-office success in France (108). Interestingly, to this point, Frédérique Devaux Yahi cautions that it is important to distinguish films produced in the spirit of Amazghity from those firmly established within embedded Amazigh topology and language, because Amazighty is present in many colonial films (2016: 229).

La Colline oubliée opens with an extreme long shot of a mist-covered village perched on a rocky mountain. The title of

the film appears in Tifinagh (the official script for Tamazight and Kabyle), and then in French, a deliberate strategy to clearly anchor the setting and story in a Kabyle frame. As the mist lifts from the mountain, a left pan transitions the opening image to shots of a horse-drawn carriage travelling through the mountains. When protagonist Menach is encouraged by his fellow passengers to read the journal he carries, the viewers learn the story (flashback story within frame story) of the difficult years of 1939–43 of boyhood friends Mokrane and Menach. As the flashback story begins, the image dissolves to a high-angle medium shot of Mokrane, having just returned from his studies in Bordeaux, gazing at the mountains, back to the camera. At the end of the film Mokrane dies on the snowy mountain, trying to return to his pregnant wife Aazi. Frédérique Devaux Yahi affirms the interconnectedness of humans and the environment through camera movements in *La Colline oubliée* when she writes that the director links characters to landscape from the very beginning of the film, and then roots these humans on their land. She cites the example of the final shot of Aazi, waiting for Mokrane to return, as she appears to be literally 'nailed' to the earth with mountains clearly visible in the background (2016: 142–3). In fact, Aazi is shot in low-angle medium and medium-long shots as she leans against the outside wall of her stone mountain dwelling. The camera pans to the right and the final shot of the film is an extreme long shot of the mountains as chants by Kabyle poet and singer Taos Amrouche are heard on the soundtrack. Although the ending appears tragic and melodramatic, the low camera angle hints at the notion that Aazi finds strength in the land and the mountains and that she will successfully deliver her child, thus assuring continuity of Kabyle heritage and tradition.

Two other films released around the same time as *La Colline oubliée* also anchor their narratives' settings in the Kabylia mountains: Azzédine Meddour's Amazigh legend, *La montagne de Baya* (1997) and *Machaho* (1996) by Belkacem Hadjadj. Honour, myth and legend are the structuring principles of *Machaho*, whose story focuses on the rescue of a stranger dying in the snowy mountains, who then sows discord (by impregnating his

host's daughter) in the host family and thus larger cultural group. *La montagne de Baya* is staged during the French colonial period and depicts French soldiers' confiscation of Amazigh ancestral lands and territories. After heroine Baya's husband is murdered by a corrupt local official and her village destroyed by the French army, she is driven into the mountains where she eventually 'helps establish a new village on the top of the mountain' (Austin 2012: 114). Austin maintains that through landscape, language and 'decorative interiors' of homes 'much Berber cinema generally . . . functions as a curator of folk memory' (Austin 2012: 107–8).

Shots of mountains function as catalysts for memory in two immigration films, released ten years apart: *La langue de Zahra/ Zahra's Mother Tongue* (Fatima Sissani, France, 2011) and *L'Olivier Sauvage/The Wild Olive Tree* (Kamel Azouz, Algeria/ France, 2022). In *Zahra's Mother Tongue*, Sissani beautifully brings to the forefront the experiences of her Kabyle mother, Zahra, who was forced to leave her native village in Algeria and adapt to life as an immigrant in the suburbs of Paris. Sissani pays homage to her mother and other women like her, whom she refers to as 'analphabètes de grande culture'/'illiterate people of great culture', highlighting their role as keepers of oral tradition, history and poetry in a language that their children often do not fully comprehend. Despite the challenges, Zahra maintained her roots, refusing to assimilate into French society and holding on to the language, religion and customs of her Kabyle heritage. What was initially intended as a temporary relocation became a long-term stay, with Zahra making annual journeys back to Kabylia to reconnect with her roots. Through her film, Sissani skilfully captures the essence of this in-between existence, seamlessly weaving together scenes from her mother's life in France with her annual visits to Kabylia.

The film opens with breathtaking views of the Kabylia mountains and the voices of four women identifying different peaks, such as Azrou-N'thour and Azrou-El-Ghassar. They discuss the legend of a couscous pot that fell from one of the mountains without breaking, as well as preparations for an upcoming pilgrimage. The mountains serve as a significant visual

and metaphorical element throughout the film, even when not explicitly shown, as demonstrated by a Kabyle song, sung by Slimane Azzem, that Fatima and Zahra listen to on a CD player while preparing traditional Harsha bread in Zahra's kitchen in France. Zahra takes the time to explain the meaning of the words to Fatima. Literally, the words refer to a partridge hiding under a stone due to its broken wings. However, metaphorically, it alludes to the FLN resistance fighters seeking refuge in the Kabylia mountains during the War of Independence, who were eventually discovered by the French army and met with tragic ends. Slimane Azzem was born in a Kabyle village at the foot of the Djurdjura mountain range and, during the War of Independence, was accused, along with his brothers, of being traitors to Algeria. Slimane fled to France in 1962, where he then became a renowned voice, singing about exile and other topics, on his daily fifteen-minute show on Radio Paris, a show much cherished by Kabyle expatriates in France.

Mountain images bookend the film with a final close-up of Zahra singing and reprising songs from throughout the film. These images also function as part of Sissani's cinematic strategy of memory enactment through which Fatima, as daughter, performs as 'memory bearer' of her mother's 'events of memory' (Rosello 2011: 112–26). Habiba Djahnine uses memory enactment and listening to pay tribute to her sister Nabila in *Letter to My Sister* and Assia Djebar uses memory enactment and listening to resist forgetting and cultural amnesia and to break away from the enforced silence of the Algerian '*mujahidat* [women freedom fighters]', in recognition of women's rights to silence and/or words (Martin 2011: 56–7). As Algerian expatriate Lila declares upon returning to the Kabylia mountains fifteen years following independence, 'I'm not looking for anything. But I'm listening to the sound of broken memory'. Memory enactment is an important part of Kabyle oral tradition because it ensures emotional connection to the subject and events.

As recently as 2022, Algerian filmmaker Kamel Azouz used drone-produced crane shots (overlaid with a traditional flute refrain) of the Kabylia mountains, in his film, *L'Olivier Sauvage*/

The Wild Olive Tree (Algeria/France) when the documentary's protagonist, Méziane Azaiche, founder and manager of the *Cabaret Sauvage* in Paris, begins to speak about his homeland: 'I was born in Kabylia in 1955 just at the beginning of the independence war. My father was wanted by the French Army because he was an FLN militant, so he was forced to leave Algeria.' The drone footage punctuates the film and each time it is shown there is a 'return' to a memory or event in Azaiche's native Kabylia as he recounts his life events and their impact on his career and success as a music and cabaret entrepreneur. These threads of Algerian history are interwoven throughout the documentary as performative memory enactment.

Azaiche describes how the Kabylia mountains served as refuge for terrorists during the Black Decade. It gives pause to consider that land that once served to hide FLN freedom fighters from outsiders like the French colonial army was 'reappropriated' thirty years later by terrorists as 'safe spaces' while they waged war against their own compatriots! Much Algerian cinematic production has dealt with the spread of Islamic fundamentalism and its consequences for Algerian society.[1] Merzak Allouache devoted several films, both fiction and documentary, to the topic. In his volume profiling the work of Allouache, Nabil Boudraa describes how Allouache stood out from other filmmakers by chronicling events of the Black Decade from its very 'outset' with his film *Bab El-Oued City* (1993), shooting the scenes depicting the rise of Islamist violence 'as the events were unfolding' (2020: 40). His 1994 television documentary *Jours tranquilles en Kabylie/ Quiet Days in Kabylia* depicts the Kabylia region, its mountains and people as 'a stronghold of resistance, during both colonial and post-colonial eras' (46). Boudraa maintains that Allouache filmed the documentary to probe how a region and people long marginalised by both government and Islamists managed to survive the violence wrought by the Islamists while navigating the dictates of the 'authoritarian military regime' (46). The film is a defence of democracy through interviews with various local citizens who describe how their struggle for democracy also

involves the safeguarding of Amazigh language and cultural heritage. The poetry and song of Taos Amrouche form a significant part of the film's soundtrack.

Quiet Days in Kabylia differs significantly from Allouache's 2012 fiction feature, *El Taaib/Le Repenti/The Repentant* (Algeria/France) in which he probes the paradox of democracy and the price of silence and violence at the end of the Black Decade. While *Quiet Days* foregrounds voice and expression, *The Repentant* eschews a music track and employs sparse dialogue, choosing instead to place emphasis on specific sound effects to elicit emotion. As the film opens, a young man's loud panting accompanies shots of him half-running, half-sliding down a mountain, furtively glancing behind as if he is being chased. Rachid, a young Jihadist, is fleeing the mountain Islamist maquis to turn himself in to the authorities as a *repenti*. Not welcome in his village or family, he is offered a job at a café in a nearby village in exchange for information. He switches from a jihadist to a police informant/collaborator who is not at all repentant for his past crimes. The film challenges the whole process of the Civil Concord Law passed by Bouteflika's government in 1999 'via a questionable referendum, offering amnesty to both "terrorists" and "agents of the state" for acts committed during the Dark Decade' (Boudraa 2020: 106). *Repentis* who surrendered their weapons and reported to the police were 'offered amnesty, compensation, and employment' (105). Rather than put into effect a reconciliation process like those undertaken in Rwanda and South Africa following genocide and violent conflict, the government wanted to move forward 'and forget the past' in the belief that 'various associations for the victims of terrorism' could more effectively do this work (106). In *The Repentant*, when Rachid does speak, it is to inform and collaborate with the police, and not as a shriving process of past tragic events.

Boudraa describes how the Civil Concord served to cement the arrangement between the government and the Islamic jihadists that former President Zéroual had brokered, but did not satisfy the mounting 'fears of prosecution from some military

and intelligence leaders', as well as the outcries of families of victims and 'pressure from various international human rights associations' (105). Thus, in 2005, Bouteflika implemented the Charte pour la Paix et la Réconciliation Nationale/Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation. The underlying goal of the charter was to end finally all the violence, but its implementation resulted in a myriad of consequences for Algerian society. The charter did not acknowledge that 'Algerian security forces were likewise guilty of abusive acts against the population' and that the years of violence would have significant psychological effects on victims and their families. Furthermore, the charter, 'which offered compensation to victims of state terror, blocked any prosecution of state agents for their actions during the "national tragedy"' (105). The consequences of this charter are depicted very clearly in Mounia Meddour's 2022 film *Houria* (France/Belgium/Algeria). Houria, a young ballet dancer who works as a housekeeper in a hotel in Algiers by day and bets on ram fights in the evening in order to save enough money to buy her mother a car, is badly beaten by a sore loser one night, and must undergo a leg operation, curtailing her dance aspirations. When Houria hires an activist lawyer to press charges against her aggressor (who continues to commit acts of violence against women), they discover that he is a pardoned *repenti*, protected by the system, which causes the lawyer to back off the case. Houria's best friend Sonia declares, 'Heureusement qu'on est née à la fin de cette guerre. On vit avec eux. Ils sont partout'/'Luckily we were born at the end of that war. We live with them. They are all around us'. Houria's shriving of her own trauma involves helping a therapy group of women, traumatised by the impact of the Black Decade, to mount a public dance performance, which she then dedicates to Sonia, who is presumed drowned after embarking with a clandestine smuggler attempting to leave Algeria for Spain.

According to Boudraa, a national reconciliation process necessitates 'truth and justice' rather than a silencing of the population as if nothing had happened.[2] The government-imposed 'omerta' and 'amnesia' meant that the country could not mourn because it had to remain silent about its past (106–7). Artists

such as Merzak Allouache and Habiba Djahnine refused to be silent and Djahnine, in fact, effects her own process of reconciliation in which land, language and cultural heritage are inextricably linked in *Returns to the Mountain*, which profiles 'returns' after the Black Decade. The opening shot of the film demonstrates that oral tradition, poetry, language, land and culture are the patrimony of contemporary Algeria. The film opens with an extreme long shot of mountains as Yahia the botanist recites Amazigh poetry. The credits roll and then, in voice-over, Mourad Louanchi recites in French over a closer shot of the mountain range: 'Toi, montagne de lumière; j'ai tant espérer t'atteindre, de visiter pour effacer me torts et mes pêchés. Yahia est botaniste. Après son champ, il regarde Tizi ou Belmine et il dit, "Les sommets des montagnes ont toujours été des lieux de pélérinage"'/'You, mountain of light; I had so much hoped to reach you, to visit you to erase my wrongs and my sins. Yahia is a botanist. Beyond his field, he looks at Tizi or Belmine and he says, "The summits of the mountains have always been places of pilgrimage"'. The camera begins panning over the tops of the mountains as the voice-over pauses for effect and then continues reciting for Yahia,

> est-ce parce que la montagne est protectrice, insaissisable et mystérieuse? La maîtriser est impossible. La dompter est une tâche de chaque jour [. . .] Nous sommes allés à la rencontre d'hommes et de femmes qui vivent à Tazla dans les Bibans, au Haiza au pied du Djurdjura, au Mont Chenoua, à Sidi Semiane sur les monts du Dahra. A leur contacte, une seule envie nous anime, celle de nous laisser nous guider par eux; découvrir leur défis; connaître leurs projets. A chaque lieu, son histoire, à chaque histoire, ses habitants.
>
> Is it because the mountain is protective, elusive and mysterious? Mastering it is impossible. Taming it is a daily task [. . .] We went to meet men and women who live in Tazla in the Bibans, in Haiza at the foot of Djurdjura, at Mount Chenoua, in Sidi Semiane on the Dahra mountains. When we met them, we were driven by a single desire, that of letting ourselves be guided by them; discovering their challenges; knowing their projects. Each place has its own story, each story has its own inhabitants.

The transition from static to panning shots suggests movement as Djahnine invites the viewer to move along with the film narrative and participate, along with the villagers, in the journey on the 'returns' to the mountains. Djahnine mainly uses a handheld camera since the filming takes place mostly in and around mountainscapes where there is little space for a steady stationary camera. The film's narrative/plot structure focuses on four villages and mountain regions in the Tizi Ouzou area: Tazla (Massif des Bibans); Tikjda (Massif du Djurdjura); Sidi Semiane (Monts du Dahra) and Mount Chenoua and a sustainable development project in each area. Each project constitutes a story in the film, so that 'story within story' becomes the structure of the film. The introduction to each 'return' begins with an extreme long shot of the mountain accompanied by sombre notes of a percussion instrument (played by Moussa Selkh), and the plot structure appears linear at first glance, but it is much more of a woven construction creating a tapestry of a people's representation of their world and existence (Hamri 2011: 51). The 'presentness' of Mourad Louanchi's narration brings the past into the present by introducing interviewees who describe past events and how they catalysed present situations (Klecker 2011: 11–27). Narrative time equals story time in the film, and this structuring allows the viewer to exist within the moment of the scene, in participation with the villagers. Each scene's duration in narrative time is directly related to the event depicted in the scene and is not compressed. What Djahnine manipulates is the sequential ordering of scenes (space); fragments of a scene or action are introduced in one part of the film and then revisited in a further development of the scene's action further along in the film. Djahnine enfolds the fragments of information that the viewer must then unfold through the screening process.

The first return is introduced by an extreme long shot of Tazla – the Bibans mountain vista. A profile close-up of a man driving a minibus follows, succeeded by shots of children bouncing around excitedly in their seats. The images transition to point-of-view shots framing the driver's and children's points of view through

the front windscreen as the bus bounces along the mountain road toward the village of Tazla. Once arrived, the children exit the bus and act as tour guides excitedly pointing out various streets and features of the village as the camera follows them to a small group of men assembled by a cluster of trees. The bus driver, Khaled Terranti, is seated on a tree trunk in a leafy landscape and is framed in a medium shot. In direct address to the camera, he explains the genesis of the projects in the village. This visual strategy is highly reminiscent of Amazigh *Raïss* (bards) opening theatre and musical performances in local village settings, inviting viewers into the story space to participate in the performance. Terranti describes how the Association Socio-Culturel de Tazla was founded in 1993 and details two sustainability projects: transportation and agriculture.[3] The transportation project arose because children were being transported to school in dump trucks. The problem of transport and schooling led to an exodus of villagers leaving for more urban areas and the association successfully partnered with the French NGO Biodiversité Echanges et Diffusion d'Expériences (BEDE) to purchase the village school bus. By 1994–5, Islamist jihadists began seeking refuge in and operating their maquis out of the mountains. By 1997, the Black Decade was well underway, and one day a group of terrorists took a wrong turn and ended up in the neighbouring village and clashed with the army, who then vacated the area, leaving villages without protection. The neighbouring village of Ilougane was practically deserted as villagers fled, fearing for their lives. Terranti organised members of his own village and proposed two solutions: either everyone leaves and continues fearing for one's life, or everyone bands together and organises weapons. A group of twelve was created and the authorities designated Terranti as leader of the patriots. Eventually fear dissipated and the villagers remained.

The second sustainability project in Tazla features Chérif, 'l'agriculteur' (the farmer) and his gardens as a 'return' project. Chérif had vacated his village and was working in a home appliance factory in a nearby city. On the condition he return to his village, the Institut National de Recherche en Agronomie

Figure 3.1 Chérif, 'the farmer', describing his garden project to youth. Courtesy of Habiba Djahnine.

d'Algérie and BEDE gifted him two donkeys and materials and loaned him 180,000 dinars to be repaid within three years. The project was a success and Chérif sells his tomatoes, peppers, cabbages and beans at markets in Tizi El Khemis, El Bordj, Ighil Ali and Guendouz. He proudly displays his cabbage harvest and explains to the two youth with him that market-bought seeds could never produce this quality of vegetable. 'La terre est mon métier'/'the land is my job', he declares.

At Sidi Semiane Le Dahra, Mounir Bencharif, president of Association de Réflexion, d'Echanges et d'Actions pour l'Environnement et le Développement (AREA-ED) Cherchell-Tipasa, based in Nador, introduces the film spectator to mountain dwellers' ways of knowing and cultural production. His association's mission is to promote sustainable development, environmental protection and the respectful use of natural resources, and he is involved in helping develop several projects in the various mountain zones. Here, Djahnine weaves story threads throughout the narrative; for example, Bencharif first takes the

Figure 3.2 Chérifa, 'the potter', describing her ceramic bookcases to Mounir Bencharif. Courtesy of Habiba Djahnine.

film spectator to visit Chérifa, the potter, at her home with all her family early in the film, but he returns to her near the end of the film when it is actually the following season and she has sold all her pottery and bookshelves. She briefly describes how she carries bags of earth to her hut on her back and constructs the large bookcases that are then transported to market in a large truck. She moved down the mountain to Sidi Semiane fifteen years ago, with her children and brother-in-law. On their former lands, they were self-sufficient; they grew all their own crops and vegetables, and had fruit trees, but the army forced them to move because of the threat of terrorists hiding in the mountains. There is a wisp of nostalgia in Chérifa's words and gestures, but her belief in the earth (and clay) as a living essence provides succour and the will to carry on.

In his recent documentary *Azar/Racine/Root* (Algeria, 2023), Malik Bourkache effects a similar 'telling' structure (interwoven strands) of the stories of three elderly Kabyle women as they go about their daily tasks in their villages on the north side of the

Djurdjura mountain, near Ath Yenni (Tizi Ouzou). Ammari Dehbia (seventy-four) has been a potter since the age of fifteen and explains that she does not feel 'at home' when she is not working the earth. For her, the land (earth) is a 'remedy or tonic' left by the ancestors to future generations as their roots and identity, hence the title of the film. Sprawled on the cement and earthen floor of her courtyard, she demonstrates the actual process of breaking down the clay into three different types while describing how she used to make about ten utensils a day. She claims that today everything is aluminium, which is why everyone is ill. As she describes how the earth/land is a healer, an insert extreme long shot of a mountain range, reminiscent of the way in which Djahnine keeps her viewers returning to the mountains in *Returns*, reminds the viewer of the power and meaning of the mountains and the land. The three women recite proverbs as they carry out their tasks, and their sequences of cooking, weaving and pottery are interwoven into a tapestry as the focus moves from one woman to the next and back and forth. We witness the whole process of creation – the intangible cultural heritage – of a clay jug from beginning to end in *Azar*, whereas in *Returns* we only see Chérifa's final products. Nevertheless, Djahnine's work paved the way for Bourkache to extend this form of documenting and archiving an aspect (tapestries and pottery) of Kabyle cultural heritage that Camille Lacoste-Dujardin maintains is highly sought after today (2001: 69).

Both films link cultural heritage and sustainable development. Following the first sequence with Chérifa in the first quarter of *Returns*, Djahnine inserts a static shot of a mountain range in the background partially obscured by a large tree in the foreground, and the scene abruptly transitions to profile Omar Nefsi, president of L'association du Mont Chenoua, who explains that the association was created by youth (*des jeunes 'Chenouis'*) to safeguard their cultural, social and environmental heritage. The local language was in danger of disappearing and they acted quickly in 1989 to establish the association and to have the mountain officially designated as a national park. Projects such

as replanting olive trees to combat erosion were soon underway. Panning shots of deforestation on the mountain are contrasted with shots of planted trees and a low stone wall, as part of the association's efforts to combat erosion caused by fires set by the army to drive the terrorists out of the forest, and by heavy rain.[4]

The next 'return' takes us to the Djurdjura mountain range and specifically, 'la main du juif – Taletate' to briefly introduce the Association des Sportives Mimouna, whose goal is to teach youth harmonious living with the mountain through sports such as skiing and mountain climbing in concert with educational programmes to protect the environment. Following shots of men working to rebuild washed out mountain roads, Djahnine reprises shots of Khaled Terranti, seated on the tree trunk accompanied by the small group of men from the opening of the film, including Yahia the botanist. Here, Terranti complements the information provided earlier by Chérif, the farmer. He explains that, in 2005–6, the Institut National de Recherche en Agronomie d'Algérie (INRAA) toured the area and chose Tazla from the province of Béjaïa to invest in sustainable development projects because it had the richest water sources and botanical potential. INRAA put the village in contact with BEDE and it was like a 'renaissance' as projects took off and the village began to thrive again.

The final 'return' takes us to Tikdjda, where a group of hikers are planning a six-hour pilgrimage to the top of the Dandalion mountain. Yahia the botanist is part of the group and recites a poem in Tamazight. Before the Black Decade, mountain sports were the province of the rich and, during the Black Decade, the spaces were completely off limits. Now, the group is working to protect the mountain and take back the spaces forbidden to them during the Black Decade. The ultimate goal is to create an Algeria for everyone!

Returns to the Mountain demonstrates that the returns to the mountains are many and varied, but the central core life of the film is that Kabyle cultural heritage is linked to life of the mountains, which can only thrive with care and respect for their sustainability. Land, language and cultural heritage are inextricably linked.

The final shot of the film underscores the film's central theme of prosperity, hope for a better future, return to a sustainable land and an Algeria for all. In this extreme long shot, the hikers walk away from the camera and toward the mountain, ready to return and build a better future for the nation. The film portrays how the Kabyle villagers are 'giving back to the mountains' through sustainable development projects, sports, decorative arts and crafts, and resistance through Indigenous language safeguarding and promotion, and thus acting as living archives of their own oral tradition and cultural heritage.

Notes

1 Films such as *Atlal* (Djamel Kerkar, Algeria/France, 2017), *Yema* (Djamila Sahraoui, France/Algeria, 2012) and *Barakat!* (Djamila Sahraoui, Algeria/France, 1998) either overtly or implicitly refer to Islamist maquis in the Kabylia mountains.

2 In *Une des Mille Collines/One of the Thousand Hills* (Belgium/France, 2023), filmmaker Bernard Bellefroid documents a process of reconciliation. During the 1994 Rwandan genocide, three young children between the ages of four and nine, living with their parents on one of the thousand hills, were butchered for simply being Tutsi. Now, the children's parents and their killer (from the same village) are brought together to talk, to forgive and to heal. From 2005 to 2012, a transitional justice system called '*gacaca* courts' was used, whereby a community would come together to address the specific crimes of an individual.

3 Bruce Maddy-Weitzman writes that, as of mid-1989, as many as 154 'cultural associations had been established in Kabylie alone', including in most large villages, but also in Amazigh communities in Constantine, Oran and Algiers (2012: 120).

4 Around the time of filming *Returns*, the European Union was assisting L'association des amis du Mont Chenoua with a project on intangible cultural heritage that involved documenting and archiving more than 200 Kabyle stories and fifty poems with the goal of publication (Souad 2007).

4.

'Rise up, youth': performing activism. *Before Crossing the Horizon Line* (*Avant de franchir la ligne d'horizon*, 2011)

In *Before Crossing the Horizon Line*, Habiba Djahnine is concerned with chronicling the events in Algeria between October 1988 and 2010 because 5 October 1988 was a moment of rupture. That day rioting broke out in central Algiers and quickly spread to the rest of the country as youth protested the one-party FLN system and the growing disparity between the rising business class and the deprived majority population. With demonstrators chanting 'Rise up, youth', the violence lasted several days. The army declared a state of siege and used tear gas and tanks to restore law and order. By 10 October, close to 500 people, mostly young men, had been killed, while many more had been arrested and tortured. It was the worst violence in Algeria since independence in 1962, but there would be worse to come during the Black Decade: assassinations, torture, forced disappearances and exile. In *Before Crossing*, Djahnine is concerned with 'giving voice' to activists from the Black Decade twenty years later, as they reflect on the struggles and protests against torture, the fight for democracy, freedom of expression, women's rights and official recognition of the Tamazight language.

In her earlier film *Letter to My Sister*, Djahnine's voice-over shapes the narrative, but she also appears on-screen reminiscing with family and friends as she creates her journal of the impossible, that is, the 'possible or potential Algeria'. In *Before Crossing*, however, it is Djahnine's voice-over alone that provides

the autobiographical frame for this history of activism. She films activists in their workplaces, living spaces and former places of protest. The role of 'words' or speaking in this film is that of liberator – to reach the horizon line, which is still fragile and incomplete, the tormented past, which youth accuse their elders of erasing, must be spoken and performed within the landscape. The visual image becomes the stage for 'Algerians of all ideological horizons', as Djemaa Maazouzi has described it (Maazouzi 2013: 2). The film's opening underscores ideologically and cinematically this rupture and the complex terrain Algerians have had to navigate ever since, and the fact that working toward a fully democratic Algeria is an ongoing process. The film begins with tracking long shots of a cityscape behind bars, evoking the notion of a city under siege, reminiscent of the events of October 1988. This creates a tangible experience for the viewer because such framing implies prison and oppression and is an innovative way to introduce the context of the film: the historical moment of Algerians reclaiming their rights and freedom.

As the camera tracks from right to left, the bars appear to move left to right, creating a sort of colliding, ruptured movement of cross purposes. Djahnine's voice-over provides the performative anchor: 'Algérie 2010 . . . j'entends encore les bruits de la ville assiégée . . . Octobre 88 . . . émeutes, assassinats, tortures, blessures, colère'/'Algeria 2010 . . . I can still hear the sounds of the city under siege . . . October 88 . . . riots, assassinations, torture, wounds, anger', as sounds of rioting, slogans and chanting are heard in the background. Djahnine proceeds to muse about how threads of memories of mobilisation and resistance during that period in Algeria have become the chronograph of tragedies, prompting the reflection on all that was achieved and lost, all the citizens assassinated, disappeared, exiled and the living, the resistors. Djahnine expounds that forgetting is not an option because that would mean not moving forward. This testimonial narration begins in the singular but quickly moves to the plural through shaky, handheld point-of-view tracking shots (reminiscent of a walkmovie, made by filming while you walk),

interviews of activists who mobilised during the riots and have carried on their work through associations, mixed with archival footage of demonstrations, and montages of photographs.

Following the opening credits, Djahnine depicts the first demonstration of the activists and associations that came out of hiding on 23 November 1988, in the 'Marche Nationale Contre la Torture' at Bab El Zouar on the east side of Algiers to denounce the crimes and torture against civilians during the October riots. The handheld camera and close-range framing, along with the huge number of protestors holding hands and chanting together in solidarity, create a strong and impactful image for film audiences, with a sense of being in the moment and in the middle of the riots as students demand an open and democratic university system. The camera appears to move frame left while the protestors move frame right, creating a dialectical montage effect, Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's term for an editing process in which the juxtaposition of two shots, reflecting in this case conflict of movement within and between frames, has the potential to make an abstract concept tangible. The energy of the marchers is palpable as they cross the screen in all directions, filling the frame space until the rupture of an abrupt blunt cut edit introduces medium close-up profile shots of activist Hakim Addad, ex-general secretary of the RAJ (Rassemblement Action Jeunesse), the only organisation in Algeria that has continued to commemorate October 1988 at the time of filming. Addad appears to be contemplating the cliffs and seascape at Bologhine in the northwest suburb of Algiers, with the camera placed slightly behind him. Then suddenly, as if he awakens from his deep thought, he engages with the camera, finally turning around and sighing, 'There is still much to be done'. He ponders how the rage of October 1988 was a form of official birthing of an Algeria that longed for a freer form of self-expression; an Algeria that allowed all associations their autonomy; a democratic Algeria that would recognise the legitimacy of different political parties, especially after the constitution of 23 February 1989 that opened the door ever so slightly to multi-partyism. Ratiba Hadj-Moussa

argues that 'the youth rebellion of 1988' led to the liberalisation and privatisation of 'the Algerian press – and only the press' and that 'cinema and national television remain(ed) under state control' (1997: 46). Bruce Maddy-Weitzman adds that, by 2007, 'Kabyle radio and television' were still 'closely monitored' by the state (2012: 123).

October 1988 came to be known as 'Black October', a series of protests by students and workers in Algiers in response to the country's economic woes, underfunded national education system and the perception by the people of mounting government corruption. The protests originated in the working-class area of Bab El-Oued and swelled to surrounding neighbourhoods, with attacks on police stations and much looting of shops and offices, including the new shopping centre, Riadh al Fath (Rahal 2017: 83–4). Elizabeth M. Perego writes that the protests actually 'began on the morning of October 4, 1988' and that youth were closely following 'the resistance of their Palestinian counterparts, then engaged in a series of protests against Israeli control in the West Bank and Gaza Strip' (2023: 81). This pre-Arab Spring First Intifada, or First Palestinian Intifada, lasting from 1987 to 1993, was highly inspirational to Algerian youth. Habiba Djahnine states that, at the time, Algerian youth borrowed the term 'Intifada' from the Palestinians to frame their acts of revolt and the uprising. She explains that 'There was a reshuffle. The state adapted and anticipated the crisis in a certain way. But it did not respond to the festering anger since it proposed biased frameworks for dialogue. There was a strong demand for social change and yet there was no revolution' (Leprince 2021).

Between 6 and 10 October, President Chadli Bendjedid authorised army intervention, which resulted in an official death toll of 169 and an unofficial toll of 500. By 10 October, the president was promising political reform. According to Perego, theories abound concerning the nature of the president's reform agenda, with some going so far as to suggest that he incited the uprising 'as an excuse to move forward with plans to alter state structure despite hostility from certain parts of the FLN and the

military' (2023: 81). On 10 October, the president 'appeared on national television to announce his intention to implement "economic" and "educational" reforms. He also announced that he would stay in power' (81–2).

The new constitution of 23 February 1989, allowed for 'a multiparty system and instated democratic freedoms' (87). This opened the door for the formation, among others, of the Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie (RCD, Rally for Culture and Democracy), the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS, Islamic Salvation Front), and the legalisation of the formerly underground Parti de l'Avant-Garde Socialiste (PAGS, Party of Avant-Garde Socialism) Marxist party (87). PAGS members faced increasing harassment by Islamists, especially at rallies, and women activists wearing what Islamists considered immodest apparel were targeted for violent confrontations (90). According to Malika Rahal, 'workplace confrontations became even more violent after the creation, in July 1990, of a Syndicat Islamique du Travail (SIT, Islamist Workers' Union) under the aegis of the FIS' (2017: 90). The PAGS quickly lost working-class support to the FIS, and, by the 1991 elections, the FIS was able to defeat the FLN, who were then in power. Nabil Boudraa writes that 'to avert this, the military regime cancelled the elections after the first round and forced then-president Chadli Bendjedid to resign from office' (2020: 39). Boudraa further explains that the government jailed the FIS leaders 'Abbassi Madani and Ali Belhadj' and 'thousands of its members' and basically outlawed the party (39). The Islamist response was swift and resulted in the creation of underground armed groups, 'including the Armed Islamic Movement (MIA), the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), and an extremely violent branch, the Islamic Armed Group (GIA)' (39). Boudraa succinctly describes the rise of Islamist violence whereby symbols of government authority were attacked and/or vandalised and 'civilians and foreigners' were targeted for violence. Villages were destroyed, women were 'kidnapped and then raped' and 'Francophone intellectuals, artists, singers, university professors, playwrights, and journalists' were killed 'almost on

a daily basis' (39). Boudraa very astutely suggests that anyone or anything 'not fitting the Islamist mold' was targeted, but that suspicions remain to this day concerning 'the infiltration of some of the insurgent groups by government agents' enacting violence 'in the name of the Islamists' to 'win over the hearts and minds of the population (and of the international community)' (39–40). Bruce Maddy-Weitzman extends this line of argumentation by pointing out that 'during these tumultuous years' Kabyle interests were represented by the Front des Forces Socialistes Party (FFS), headed by FLN leader Hocine Aït Ahmed, advocating a 'democratic pluralist state' and the 'more militantly secular' RCD led by Sa'id Sa'adi. The FFS favoured 'dialogue with the Islamists' while the RCD came to support 'the military's crackdown against the Islamists' in later years (Maddy-Weitzman 2012: 120).

Two Algerian narrative feature films produced in the early 1990s depict this rise in Islamist violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In particular, Malik Lakhdar-Hamina's[1] *Autumn, October in Algiers* (*Automne, Octobre à Alger*, *Al-karif – October fi al-jaza'ir*, France/Algeria, 1993) depicts a family attempting to survive the rise of Islamist fundamentalism and the start of the October 1988 riots in Algiers. Djihad (played by Lakhdar-Hamina) is a musician who supports his whole family through his concert gigs. His feminist wife Amel is a radio talk-show host; his fundamentalist brother Hakim issues orders to the whole family, especially to his sister Nawel and his own wife Saida (depicted as very submissive). Lala Kheira, the mother of Djihad, Hakim and Nawel, is a calm presence whose goal is to maintain family unity. Other typal characters include eighteen-year-old Momo, a small-time trafficker who is in love with Nawel, Zombretto, the wise beggar nostalgic for the early days of independence, and Ramses, the police commissioner's brother who takes the law into his own hands. Family unity begins to unravel when Djihad's music is censored and both police and Islamists beat him up. The fifth of October 1988 is imminent as unrest mounts. Shots of youth protesting behind barriers and gates with iron bars are reminiscent of the images that open *Before Crossing*: the cityscape behind bars, a city under siege.

Merzak Allouache reprises many of the typal characters depicted in *Autumn, October in Algiers* in his film *Bab El-Oued City* (Algeria, 1993). As previously mentioned in Chapter 3, Allouache shot his film as Islamist violence escalated in the country. Like Djahnine's film *Letter to My Sister*, the narrative is structured as a letter-film, but *Bab El-Oued City* is a fiction film, and the letter constitutes the frame story; Yamina, a young woman writes a letter to her lover, Boualem, who left Algeria three years ago promising to send for her. The bulk of the plot is a flashback to the days before his departure. Boualem works the night shift in a local bakery and when he returns home in the morning, the religious sermons from the mosque loudspeaker outside his apartment prevent him from sleeping. In a fit of exhaustion one day, he pulls the loudspeaker from its wires and throws it into the ocean. A local gang of Islamist hoods, led by Yamina's brother Saïd, mistakenly believes the loudspeaker was stolen and terrorise the district to the point that Boualem is no longer safe and must flee.

A more recent fictional portrayal (albeit based loosely on events lived through by the director) of 1990s violence is Mounia Meddour's *Papicha* (Algeria/France, 2019). Unlike *Automne* and *Bab El-Oued City*, *Papicha* focuses more directly on solidarity against Islamist violence, and Algerian women's resilience rather than individual actions and reactions. Nedjma, a young university student in Algiers during the Black Decade, dreams of becoming a fashion designer. She regularly sneaks out of her university residence with her friend Wassila to nightclubs to dance away the evening and to sell their designs in the bathrooms to other young girls (*papichas*, or pretty girls). Violence is increasing all around and one day Nedjma's journalist sister, Linda, is murdered outside her home. Posters crop up on campus and elsewhere, telling women to cover up completely or else they will be 'taken care of'. But Nedjma is resilient and, refusing to succumb to the terrorism, decides to organise a fashion show in her university residence with models based on the theme of the *haik*, which is the traditional clothing for Algerian women. Facing numerous obstacles, including the destruction of her collection by Islamist extremists, she and her friends decide to mount their show at any cost.

The idea of basing the fashion show on the *haik* is depicted in a scene following Linda's assassination.[2] Nedjma toys with the piece of fabric that was meant for Linda's wedding *haik*, which was stained by her blood as she was still wearing it over her shoulders when she got shot. Nedjma first washes it and tries to rinse out the blood, but then she decides to dye it red using natural materials before creating folds and contours to shape fashionable *haik* designs. Thus, Nedjma, through an act of resistance, 'takes back' what some might consider a symbol of oppression or containment and fashions it into a vessel for freedom of expression. The filmmaker uses a shot scale of medium to extreme close-ups via a handheld camera to capture the exuberance of youth, in tandem with a sense of uneasiness and imminent danger (shaky camera movement). Nedjma and her friends are often framed in medium two- and three-shots to underscore a sense of solidarity of action in response to the rise of Islamist violence. It is this idea of solidarity and resistance seeping through the violence that Habiba Djahnine also stages in *Before Crossing*.

Open frames: activists and their surroundings

As described in Chapter 2, the participants (subjects) and the space (setting) are the two primary components of Djahnine's mise en scène. She uses the two to create her space and spatial relations, but she also strategically uses distancing devices, such as voice-over narration or visual imagery, at different intervals in the film to force the spectator to pause and think about the issues presented. For example, static landscape or seascape shots with deep composition and perspective offer moments for reflection off toward the horizon line and invite the viewer to participate in the collective reflection on the future direction of Algeria. An interesting moment of focus takes place in the scenes with long-time activist, university professor, spokesperson for the Conseil National des Enseignants du Supérieur (CNES) and ex-director of the Parti Socialiste des Travailleurs (PST) Adel

Abdelrazak. He is first introduced in the film through walking shots with his back to the camera. He is walking on a country road in Khenchla surrounded by beautiful scenery as the handheld camera follows him from behind transforming from witness into participant. Later, in a subsequent scene, he is with his family in their living room at home watching the same archival footage of demonstrations on television that we as spectators watched earlier in the film. The experience of seeing two generations of Algerians – 1988 riot participants and their children – watching the footage on a television set placed centre frame reinforces the centrality of the activism and each activist's individual contribution to the film's collective protagonist, the me/*je* in the us/*nous*.

Djahnine uses both stationary and handheld cameras in the film, as she often does in her documentaries, depending on the situation and level of engagement and intensity she wants us to feel in any given moment. Her handheld camera specifically helps her to navigate through the space and around the subjects, which allows for more intimacy with the event and deeper engagement with the moment captured on camera. In this regard, the camera itself takes part in the event and becomes an active participant, which eventually involves the viewer in the action. Djahnine uses the camera to induce certain feelings and emotions as well as haptic experiences for the audience.

In the open frames system, the camera allows free movement of the subject in and out of the frame, depicting the subject of the shot in charge and active (as opposed to the inactive or controlled subject in the closed frames system, which shows the subject acted upon by their surroundings). Djahnine's goal is to remind the viewer that an activist is always fighting, and that space does not matter. They dedicate their lives to their cause, which cannot be separated from their social and personal lives. Furthermore, in this way Djahnine reinforces that activists are real people with personal lives, jobs and all the obligations and challenges that everyone else has in society. This approach in setting and mise en scène enhances the viewer's identification and sympathy with the activists. For example, early in the film, Hakim Addad is depicted

in the room in his home where he keeps his memorabilia of the protest demonstrations in which he participated. He opens a chest and lovingly takes out a painting of the RAJ slogan that reads 'Peace Today and Rights Forever', written in Arabic. Posters of revolutionary figures such as Bob Marley and Che Guevara adorn the walls. He sifts through his memories and recalls how the RAJ managed to assemble 10,000 people in June 1995 with the goal of mobilising and raising awareness among youth about democracy and their rights as citizens. An insert shot of sea and sky with a distinct horizon line follows the scene for a moment of pause and reflection on the past and the future. Later in the film, Addad is shown in a narrow street (seascape in the far background) with Dalila Taleb, ex-deputy and ex-spokesperson for the RAJ, who exclaims that silence is unacceptable. They both explain that, by 1993, many militants were either assassinated or exiled. Their sense of frustration contrasts with the footage that follows: canted shots of demonstrators at the Place des Martyrs in Algiers, 2009, for the commemoration of 5 October 1988, depict the energy of the youth as they shout, 'Algérie libre et démocratique'/'Algeria free and democratic' and 'Bab El-Oued des Martyrs'/'Bab El-Oued of the Martyrs'.

A major theme of the film is the legacy of the October 1988 demonstrations and the necessity of passing the torch to the new generation. This idea of youth taking over is threaded throughout the narrative and is prominent in many of the scenes with Professor Abdelrazak. During the second living room scene, where he is surrounded by his son and daughter, he exclaims that Algeria needs to invent a new 1988 as the camera focuses on his son in a close-up reaction shot. His son is silent, but his daughter expresses the sentiments of many of the youth in the film: that they are intimidated by the impressive legacy of their elders but have hope for change inspired by their parents' incredible history. Abdelrazak describes the 24 November 1988 march against repression and advises his children to participate in the construction of 'espaces de contre-pouvoir'/'spaces opposing the power system'. Djahnine uses the construct of dialectical montage

to insert a construction scene with machinery and building materials as a symbolic depiction of rebuilding Algerian society. This is one of many occasions in the film in which Djahnine translates abstract ideas and subjective states of mind or inner emotions into visual images through cinematic language.

Abdelrazak is captured in his classroom (workplace) teaching students, driving his car and walking beside a stream, all the while describing various aspects of the protest movements. He mentions the 1986 high school student protests in Constantine that swelled to include university students and working-class areas and resulted in the arrests of 700 youth. He decries that Algerians have ruined their homeland, yet it is still necessary to cling to utopia. In his quest for democratic university reform, he asks how such an omnipotent power can also be so fragile? Through Abdelrazak's discourse, Djahnine paints the picture of a true activist who is constantly reflecting on, and participating in, the cause in which he believes.

Mise en abyme, the gaze and contemplating the future by reflecting on the past

As Adel Abdelrazak and his family watch the same footage of the 24 November 1988 demonstrations on television, in their home that Djahnine presents to the viewer at the beginning of the film, the camera is once again placed behind the subjects, but the shot functions to create an infinite illusion mirror effect while redirecting the gaze inward.

The family's television screen within the shot's frame (screen) creates a sense of screen within screen. Since the television is placed in the centre on the horizontal line of the frame, it is also visually similar to the image of two mirrors facing each other, creating an infinite reflection of an image. If we consider the content of the film and the footage screened on the television, we discover that the second (internal) screen (the television) is actually playing the same footage played on the main screen (the

Figure 4.1 Adel Abdelrazak and his family watch the 24 November 1988 demonstrations on television in their home. Courtesy of Habiba Djahnine.

film). Therefore, it is as though Djahnine incorporates the idea of two mirrors facing each other in this shot by showing an image that once screened in both frames. Such a reference is significant if put into the perspective of the context of the film and the footage played on both screens. It is as if Djahnine wants to create an infinity replica of that moment and event so that Algerians will never forget the 1988 events. Djahnine brilliantly uses mise en abyme to literally safeguard this historical moment in a cinematic way, to escape invisibility and absence. Near the film's midpoint, Djahnine's voice-over returns and ruminates over a succession of images of protest marches:

> Les rues d'Algérie s'allument chaque matin sur nos amnésies, nos silences, nos refus … Le contexte ne change pas beaucoup … les combats sont les mêmes, hier comme aujourd'hui. Elles, les femmes d'Algérie, femmes militantes, avaient fait de ces rues leur espace d'expression, de contestation, de dialogue. Avec ces photos, Nazim Touati a fixé ces moments dans nos mémoires … dans une histoire

Figure 4.2 Algerian women protestors, 1991. Courtesy of Habiba Djahnine.

> en marche et qui reste à écrire. C'était hier. Ça aurait pu être aujourd'hui.
>
> The streets of Algeria light up every morning on our amnesias, our silences, our refusals … The context doesn't change much. The battles are the same, then as now. They, the women of Algeria, women activists, had made these streets their space for expression, protest and dialogue. With these photos, Nazim Touati has captured these moments in our memories … in a story that is still to be written. That was yesterday. It could have been today.

The women in the photos (and, indeed, all the protestors) have taken back the streets and created spaces of resistance: the 'contre-espaces' that Abdelrazak is urging contemporary youth to build.

Djahnine further complicates the mise en abyme through her structuring of the gaze. Watching Abdelrazak and his family watch the same footage of the protest marches on the television that we as viewers watched earlier in the film gives us a chance to identify

both with Abdelrazak and his family and the protestors. Djahnine returns the gaze and redirects it inward: towards oneself, towards us. Djahnine herself has written about the challenges filmmakers face when attempting to construct a collective gaze out of a common film language. She stresses that tropes such as point of view and processes of identification must be accompanied by a process of disalienation of the gaze in order to construct something new. She maintains that this process allows a form of 'vivre "ici"'/'living here, in the moment', and the possibility of re-exploring territory marked by war and terrorism (Djahnine 2013). Djemaa Maazouzi reads Djahnine's image and identity construction through the work of Lapacherie and likens it to the process of 'extimation' whereby convergence occurs between the inner or intimate and exterior aspects of a subject's identity and being mutually affecting each other (Lapacherie 2002: 12 cited in Maazouzi 2013). This trope corresponds to Djahnine's goal of reaching 'Algériens de tous horizons idéologiques'/'Algerians of all ideological horizons' (Maazouzi 2013). Djahnine's gaze, directed both inward and outward, is an inclusive gaze, one that implicates all Algerians in the rebuilding of the nation.

When Elhachimi Touzane, activist and director of the Amusnc Association, declares near the end of the film that the activists are not tired, even as they face interminable bureaucracy and problems, such as obtaining authorisation from the *wilaya* (province or territorial collectivity) for celebrations and commemoration of the protests, he seems to be responding to Addad's statement at the beginning of the film, and, coming full circle, adds, 'We cannot have an Algeria without the people'. He concurs with Faroudja Moussaoui, director of the Amusnaw Association and Women's Collective of the Black Spring in Tizi Ouzou, that there is still much work to do. Moussaoui, who offers seminars to women and youth on Kabyle women's rights, situates the issues within the frame of human rights. Her declaration that democratic reform has still not been achieved ends with the phrase 'ça dérange encore'/'it still disturbs', echoing Nabila Djahnine's statement in *Letter to My Sister*. Indeed, as Moussaoui

declares, it is up to Algerians to write their own history as no one else will take on the task. The final footage of the film is a black screen while the soundtrack emits sounds of protests, ending with the intertitle: 'Nos bruits de fond'/'Our background noises' before the final credits roll. A fade or cut to black within a film usually signifies some form of narrative closure. However, that is not Djahnine's goal here. Silence is not an option; it must be continually overcome and the horizon line must be crossed to overcome the silence. The image might have dropped out of the frame, but not the voices. In fact, they are the very foundation of more recent protest movements such as the Arab Spring protests across North Africa and the Middle East in 2011 and the more recent Hirak Movement of 2019–2021.[3]

Notes

1 Malik Lakhdar-Hamina is the son of Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina (director of photography on the production). In 1966, the latter released his first feature film, the award-winning *Le vent des Aurès*, a story about a woman who searches for her son imprisoned during the War of Independence. And in 1974, he filmed *Chronique des années de braise*, an historical epic about the first resistance movements to the insurrection of 1954 and through to the post-independence years. The film won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1975.

2 It is both ironic and tragic that Linda is assassinated by someone wearing a *haik* to conceal a shotgun, much in the way that women used the *haik* during the War of Independence to conceal and move weapons for the FLN. The latter is staged in scenes in Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* (*La battaglia di Algeri*, Italy/Algeria, 1966).

3 Habiba Djahnine argues that the Arab Spring actually began many autumns previously, obliquely referring to October 1988 (Meddi 2011, quoted in Maazouzi 2013). The filmmaker made her position clear in a debate organised by *Mediapart*, 25 June 2012, called 'Construire l'espoir' (with Habiba Djahnine, Malika Rahal, Amazigh Kateb, Souâd Belhaddad) (Maazouzi 2013).

5.

Women's rights in the new Algeria. *Safia, a Woman's Story* (*Safia, une histoire de femme*, 2011)

This chapter focuses on the film *Safia, a Woman's Story*, which presents the experience of one Algerian woman called Safia. A mother with four children, thirty-three-year-old Safia suffered physical and psychological abuse at the hands of her husband for a long time. The film follows Safia's successful quest for a divorce in a country where women have rarely been successful at initiating divorce proceedings, even after several revisions to the Family Code. Following independence, a new family code was debated by the Algerian government in an effort to overhaul the confusing family law comprised of a blend of the sharia and French colonial-imposed legislation. By 1975, all colonial overtones were eliminated, which left sharia but resulted in legal uncertainty in divorce and child custody cases. In 1984, a new family code was passed, but grounds for divorce initiated by women were severely cut. The 1984 Family Code ultimately worked to cement legal inequalities between men and women, a situation which spurred many women, including feminist Nabila Djahnine, to refuse the unspoken codes of silence and invisibility and to demand democracy for all.

The feminist movement in Algeria was born in the 1940s during colonialism, long before the War of Independence. Zahia Smail Salhi writes that 'the colonial condition of the country resulted in the dramatic deterioration of the condition of women both in the rural and urban centres. The colonial presence of the French increased veiling, seclusion and unequal treatment of women often as a reaction against colonial rule and Western

ways' (2010: 114). The 'woman question' took hold through nationalist parties such as the Party of the Algerian People and the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Freedoms and, by 1943, the 'UFA (Union des Femmes d'Algérie: The Union of Algerian Woman)' was formed under the wing of the Algerian Communist Party (114–5). By 1951, the UFA had amassed some 15,000 members and founded a journal titled *Femmes d'Algérie* (Women of Algeria) (115). According to Salhi, 'education among rural and urban girls' was a major focus of the UFA (115). This project of consciousness-raising among women, especially in rural areas, would become a major imperative of Nabila Djahnine, considered 'the first feminist to be killed by Islamist bullets during the black decade' (Filiu 2011).

With the outbreak of the War of Independence in 1954, forty-nine women were counted among the 1,010 freedom fighters in an August 1956 census, but at the end of the war the number had swelled to 10,949 (Salhi 2010: 115). Women's contribution to the revolution, which 'ranged from fighting alongside the men, planting bombs in urban quarters, carrying weapons, nursing the sick and wounded in the *maquis* and, above all, keeping the revolution moving forward', helped challenge patriarchal concepts of the labour divide as well as public and private roles (116; emphasis in original). Zahia Smail Salhi writes that any progress gained on policy towards women's social equality by the FLN during the War of Independence was eroded by the 1980s (2003: 28). Salhi argues that some women contend that the erosion actually began well before 1962, when women were excluded from some active fighting zones, and that, following independence, women who were embraced as equal marriage partners during the war, were denied 'basic civil rights' when repudiated for 'younger, more presentable, women' to meet the men's new social and political standing in the new Algeria (Shaaban 1988 cited in Salhi 2003: 28). In 1976, the FLN adopted a new constitution which underscored the War of Independence's role in liberating both the nation and women. Nevertheless, it did acknowledge that the 'status of women still needed improvement' (28). Salhi notes

that the government was proud of its 'socialist regime' as it was understood this would be a democratic way to 'promote justice, strive against backward thinking, and change the justice system in women's favour. The constitution held Islam to be a liberating power, considering women to be equal to men' (28). However, it was left up to women to defend their own rights (28). When Chadli Bendjedid succeeded President Boumédiène in 1978, the 'Islamo-ba'thist clan' (29) that had supported him undertook to uphold sharia law regarding 'women, education, and the justice system' and to phase out any socialist leanings (Messaoudi and Schemla 1998, cited in Salhi 2003: 29).

Issues pertaining to family relations, divorce, child custody and alimony, as well as restrictions on gender and civil rights, would be codified in a new family code in 1984, a first draft of which had been formulated in secret in 1981 and which 'institutionalized the unequal status of women in matters of personal autonomy, divorce, polygamy and work outside the home' (Lazreg 1994: 151). According to Salhi, on 23 December 1981, women veterans of the War of Independence joined forces with feminist activists to protest the proposed first draft of the Family Code as it was seen 'as a betrayal of what they had fought for' (2003: 30). Ultimately, despite all opposition, the code became law by June 1984. The Family Code codified, and severely restricted, women's rights going forward. For example, Article 39 stipulates that women must 'obey their husbands, and respect and serve them, their parents, and relatives' (30). Article 54 decrees that divorce is almost impossible for women to initiate, and, if they do, they must submit to the practice of *Khol'a* which involves renouncing alimony (30). In divorce cases, women have no right to the family home, yet the 'state does nothing to provide housing or financial support for divorced mothers' and 'the streets of Algeria's major cities are the homes of many desperate divorced women' (30).

Marnia Lazreg writes that 'the general orientation of the Algerian economy' was socialist until 1978, but that 'establishing an industrial infrastructure was given precedence over all other economic, political or social issues', creating a 'disjuncture between

socialism and development' (1994: 157). Lazreg further contends that 'the relationship between culture, politics and development' is a primary focus of 'Algerian feminist theory', and many shun restrictive dichotomies such as 'tradition-modernity' (204–5). The state is considered a major roadblock in advancing women's rights and 'womanhood is multiple', underscoring 'that Algerian society is far too complex to lend itself to facile generalizations' (206).

Habiba Djahnine concurs with the notion that the state obstructs advancement of any work around human rights and cultural life by simply blaming terrorism:

> the state doesn't tolerate creative freedom … In the early 1990s, I belonged to the core pool of the Algerian feminists. Even if I still consider myself as a feminist, I have a critical look on what the movement has become today. I try to understand its evolution through my movies. During the 1990s, we witnessed the relentless destruction of all the active places of thinking in the civil society. It's very difficult to talk about activism. The feminist movement in Algeria underwent a significant break-up in 1992: some chose to support the army while others continued to fight on the ground against the power and against barbarism. During the 1990s, we witnessed the relentless destruction of all the active places of thinking in the civil society. The intellectual circles were drawn out.
>
> Since the 2000s, NGOs have brought a new form of culture: they trained the managers of these associations according to European standards, with action plans and so on. There are some very interesting initiatives in this magma, such as the CIDEFF (Center of Information and Documentation on Children and Women's Rights) and the Réseau Wassila (Network of Help for Female Victims of Violence). Today, there are volunteers but no longer activists. Associations with a strong political identity have almost entirely disappeared. Activists used to be the base of social thinking. In the 1980s, they were on the street all the time and took part in political gatherings: it was a social movement which belonged to this decade. Today, there are volunteers but no longer activists. Associations with a strong political identity have almost entirely disappeared.

> As far as I'm concerned, I am engaged but I am not an activist, even though I am still very close to the political debate. Structures do exist but I'm not interested in those; I am no longer a regional activist … and activism is about collective action. (Djahnine in Filiu: 2011)

Safia, a Woman's Story illustrates one woman's 'ordeal under the dictates of the inequitable Family Code' (Salhi 2003: 34–5). The film was directed by Habiba Djahnine and produced by the Réseau Wassila, an umbrella organisation, founded in October 2000, of militant feminists, health workers and other Algerian associations, who come to the aid of women and children who are victims of abuse and violence. Salhi contends that 'terrorist violence has taught women a political lesson' such that they have resourcefully created innovative grass-roots strategies to support women through the work of organisations 'such as '*SOS Femmes en Détresse*, "RACHDA: Rassemblement contre la Hogra et pour les Droits des Algériennes", "Réseau Wassila" and others' (2010: 123).

Violence against women, domestic violence, patriarchy, feminism, Islamism, citizenship and human rights are the subjects of several feature films and documentaries by Algerian and Maghrebi women filmmakers. Safia's story is that of one woman, but it could represent the story of many women. As in her previous films, Djahnine cautions that the singular cannot be divorced from the plural. These are stories of courage that constitute the vast tapestry of women's filmmaking in the Maghreb. The innovative ways in which these stories are told and how they carve out spaces for women mean that each story is connected to history.

Early feminist films in the Maghreb include the groundbreaking *Fatma 75* by Tunisian filmmaker Selma Baccar, released in 1978 but filmed in 1975 'during the UN International Year for Women' (Van de Peer 2018: 87). According to Stefanie Van de Peer, the film 'was an openly feminist film' that depicted 'the historical context of women's ongoing activism' in Tunisia, which resulted in the film being 'banned for thirty years, and never shown in commercial cinemas' (87). As Van de Peer points out, Baccar's

concern throughout her work 'is the fight for women's status and their freedom of speech' even though Baccar herself is wary of the label 'feminist' denoting what she considers to be 'white privilege' (87, 90). Nevertheless, *Fatma 75* takes the viewer on an incredible journey depicting the position of women in Tunisia from the 1930s to the 1970s. In the film, university student Fatma produces a presentation based on the theoretical writings of Tahar Haddad, an early male feminist from the 1930s, about the different steps in the gradual liberation of Tunisian women. According to Van de Peer, 'Baccar called the heroine Fatma as that was the name every Arab woman received from the colonial administration' (92). This act of 'reappropriation of this identity' is a form of talking back to patriarchy and resistance to colonialism (92). Baccar creates a strong connection between the character in her film and Tunisian women and shapes fundamental inclusivity by using a meaningful name that all Tunisian women could relate to as colonised and oppressed human beings. Zahia Smail Salhi writes that, in the case of Algeria, 'the name of Fatma became synonymous with house maids' during French colonisation (2010: 114). Van de Peer notes that, since the film begins with a quote from Tahar Haddad, it 'grounds the film firmly within a discourse that rebels against dogmatic interpretations of the Koran and places women at the centre of its arguments' (Van de Peer 2018: 94). The film deals with the controversial Code of Personal Status in Tunisia, which came into effect in 1957, and which aimed at the institutionalised equality of women and men, forbade polygamy, mandated minimum ages and mutual consent for marriage, and allowed either spouse to petition for divorce in secular court. However, reality was quite different for many women and Van de Peer writes that 'Baccar attempts to combine her own and other emancipated women's viewpoints convincingly by means of illustrative instances in which women are treated unequally in reality while the law talks of equality' (96).

To illustrate the complexity and contradictory nature of women's lived reality, Baccar employs an innovative style that blends a fictional narrative with actual interview footage,

re-enactments of historical circumstances, and archival material, creating a unique form of docu-fiction. Her concern for staging both women's voices (the spoken) and the unspeakable leads her to embrace many of the cinematic narrative and aesthetic tropes to depict women's places in, and uses of, both public and domestic spaces, that will be taken up by subsequent women filmmakers like Assia Djebar and Habiba Djahnine. For example, narration and direct communication to the camera/audience is a central narrative structuring device in *Fatma 75*. According to Stefanie Van de Peer, 'there are two storytellers in *Fatma 75*: the subject and the filmmaker. Although we are dealing with material rooted in reality, in the essay film the subject and the filmmaker converge in the voice-over' (Van de Peer 2018: 93). The narrator sometimes breaks the fourth wall to create the Brechtian 'alienation effect'. In this way, Baccar clearly asserts her demand for audiences' conscious engagement with the story and characters instead of identifying with them on a subconscious level. At the very beginning of the film, the filmmaker introduces legendary Tunisian women. Fatma, played by Jalila Baccar, embodies and 'gives shape to these women' (94). Each character breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to the camera: the courageous Sophonisba, daughter of a Carthage military general, who fought during the Second Punic War of 218–201 BC; Jalajil, an enslaved woman who broke free and 'founded a school for girls in Kairouan'; princess Aziza Othmana, a wealthy woman in Tunisian history who founded a charity and helped underprivileged young girls secure their marriage dowries (94). Finally, university student Fatma, who is from a working-class family, directly addresses the camera, breaking conservative agendas imposed on women. Breaking the fourth wall, by a woman talking to male audiences, symbolises the breaking of old conventional rules in a patriarchal society as a rebellious act. The three historical figures and Fatma herself underscore women's importance to Tunisian history and society.

Baccar's use of close-up shots of women is another form of empowerment. According to Van de Peer, Baccar likes to portray the unspeakable in these close-up shots of women's faces (Van de

Peer 2018: 102). The close-up shot of university student Fatma at the beginning of the film, as she holds her gaze, suggests that the shot is not merely an introduction to the character, it is a unique moment in the film where Fatma is making a statement: although I am a woman coming from the working class, I have a passion for my future with endless possibilities. She then turns around and walks away from the camera, as if towards that future lying ahead of her. This is a declaration of war against patriarchy and misogyny. This technique helps create a kind of meta-moment in time, the so-called 'mythic time' that also occurs in Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, where he uses metric montage to create a sense of expanded time. Here, Baccar uses a freeze frame to dedicate a longer duration of time to a specific moment on the screen. For Fatma, the student, as she turns around and walks away from the camera, the expanded moment of the freeze frame implies that she is taking charge of her own life. Using cinematic elements and language, Baccar, therefore, is able to show what cannot be told. The unspeakable, which might have referred to the suffering of Tunisian women throughout history, has now transformed into a force behind women activists and filmmakers' work and art. In other words, Tunisian women, such as Baccar, turn the legacy of colonisation and exploitation of their past into a powerful tool for healing historical traumas and moving forward.

Trauma, voice, oral histories and the unspeakable are themes reprised in Assia Djebar's *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua* (*La Nouba des Femmes du Mont Chenoua*, Algeria, 1978). Acclaimed as 'an outstanding formal feminist experiment', 'it replaces the male gaze of Algerian cinema with a female gaze' (Armes 2005: 122; Austin 2012: 76). Set in the Kabyle region of Mount Chenoua, the film focuses on the character of Lila (who some scholars claim acts as Djebar's alter ego[1]) who drives around the countryside near Cherchell (a town on the Algerian Mediterranean coast near Mount Chenoua) to interview and record the oral stories of the women who participated in the War of Independence. Narration is framed and staged differently than in *Fatma 75*. *Nouba*'s narrative structure follows that of the Andalusian form

of music in seven movements throughout which 'each woman's voice will be heard "in turn," each memory will be given time to express itself "in turn"' (Martin 2011: 50–51). We are told the stories of Lila, 'Jamila, Fatma and her mother, Zoulikha and aunt Berkani. We also hear a myth of the seventh wife of a saint' . . . and 'Lila's own grandmother who tells the story of a heroic horseman' (Van de Peer 2018: 113). Van de Peer argues, in concert with Florence Martin (2011), that silence is as important as voice in the film, and that it is through silence – what is not said – 'that the gaps in Algerian historiography are foregrounded' (115).

Lila must return to the site of trauma (like Habiba Djahnine in *Letter to My Sister*) to fill in the gaps of her own traumatic memory fragments, but also to piece together the fragments of the stories told by the women she interviews. Reading Lila's and the women's trauma through the work of Cathy Caruth, Van de Peer argues that 'latency *in* the traumatic' event causing 'the traumatised [to] never fully experience the event' leads to fissures 'in memory and historiography' (124). Stories help in piecing together fragments of memories into a whole tapestry of 'female polyphony' (Donadey 1996: 888).

Nouba begins in domestic space and moves outward: the setting of the 'Toushia-Ouverture', or opening act, frames Lila in a medium shot, leaning against a wall inside her home as her non-diegetic voice mourns, 'I speak, I speak, I speak. I don't want anyone to see me. . . . Prisoner, fate made you a prisoner, in silence . . . in time and space'. Later in the film she is depicted in long shots with panoramic vistas of the landscape and mountains as she drives around the countryside to interview women, her voice-over declaring, 'To be able to speak, I need to be free . . . free of those events that haunt my memory'. Lila is referring to the imposed silence, women's silence and Algerian silence. As Van de Peer writes, 'the reconstitution of history must be achieved through women's testimonies in order to reinstate their agency into the collective memories' (2018: 125).

Sites and spaces of female voice and resistance continue as themes and structuring devices in films by women during the

Black Decade. These are stories of courage in which women take a stand against oppressive (and often Islamist) patriarchal discourse and practice and 'present the trauma of the black decade as a story of women' and 'in a context of sustained violence, against women, in the form of rape and murder' (Austin 2012: 149). Yamina Bachir-Chouikh's 2002 *Rachida* portrays how a young teacher is targeted by terrorists and shot when she protects her students by refusing to plant a bomb in her classroom. Sofia Djama's 2012 short film *Limply, One Saturday Morning* (*Mollement un Samedi matin*), depicts a young woman, Myassa, who returns home from work late one evening and is assaulted in an attempted rape. Her attacker fails to achieve an erection and the next day, the woman must make the choice to either report the assault or forget about it. To make matters worse, she can't take a shower because her flat's plumbing does not work and, when she call for a plumber, she is confronted with her would-be rapist. Ratiba Hadj-Moussa reminds us that 'rape as a crime was erased by the amnesty decreed by the law of national reconciliation (1999)' (2014: 167), and, as described in Chapter 3, pardoned *repentis* still circulate freely among the general Algerian population, often terrorising and molesting women. This does not prevent Myassa from taking a stand and insisting on filing a complaint against her aggressor. In *Rachida*, when the young bride, Zohra, is kidnapped by a group of Islamists and raped, and subsequently occluded as per patriarchal precepts, it is the village women who take a stand and remove their headscarves to cover her naked body and then welcome her into their space to bathe before her wedding.

Habiba Djahnine's *Safia* and the films described earlier show how women in Algeria are increasingly breaking codes of silence and invisibility, and reframing sites and spaces of resistance. *Safia* is the main protagonist's 'memory-narrative', but unlike *Letter to My Sister*, *Fatma 75* and *Nouba*, the film is narrated solely by Safia and told uniquely from her perspective. The film opens with shots of a darkened room, fragmented images of walls, windows, blurred images and muted sounds until the viewer realises a woman and child are playing. The woman teases the child: 'who is that? Is it

Hayette? You are the sun?' as the child squeals with excitement. The viewer never sees the woman's entire body or face and only knows her name from the title of the film. One of the main reasons behind the choice of cinematography and framing, could be to conceal and protect Safia's identity as a survivor of domestic violence, especially in a very conservative society and culture. The other reason behind Djahnine's artistic approach is to emphasise the issue of domestic violence and women's rights and autonomy vis-à-vis their own bodies, and thus she applies techniques that help communicate Safia's situation in a way that provokes a kind of visceral experience of the situation for the viewer.

One of the main formal expressions that Djahnine applies to tangibly convey the domestic violence and brutal experience that Safia went through is by using an unusual but very effective framing. Throughout the film, Djahnine frames Safia in a way that only a part of her body fills the frame. Although we are used to close-ups and extreme close-ups in cinema, this framing is different. Djahnine's framing always leaves the face out (at least the eyes) and mainly focuses on extreme close-up shots of other parts of the body. The effect of such framing is to metaphorically cut Safia's body into parts and show one at a time. This effect is almost a visual and expressive mutilation of her body. It is as if the camera, or perhaps we should say the gaze of the other, becomes the representative of the same ideological agency that deprives Algerian women, and all women under the same ideological system, of their basic rights, even to their own bodies. Therefore, Djahnine's formal approach here is one of the very powerful expressive illustrations of the film. Through such imagery, Djahnine unlocks a symbolistic cinematic language for picturing how patriarchal and misogynist systems brutally exploit and objectify the female body.

The setting mainly involves the inside of Safia's home. Except for Safia herself, her children and her home are the only other elements of each scene. The set is her home filled with her belongings, her children and their toys. These elements represent her world. For instance, home decorations such as embroidered curtains around the room symbolise her as a woman and mother

who provides for and takes care of her children. Djahnine pays specific attention to the decorative elements of embroidered curtains covering windows or entrances and shots of breeze on curtains act as 'curtain shots'[2] for moments of pause so the viewer can absorb the enormity of Safia's story. They function somewhat like Japanese filmmaker Yasujirō Ozu's curtain shots, where, between scenes, he would insert carefully framed shots of the surroundings to signal changes in settings. These shots also act as distancing devices and rest points in the narrative and allow the spectators a chance to ponder what they have witnessed. The curtains also create a shelter for Safia and her children, just like her hijab or even cinematographic techniques such as fragmented framing and out-of-focus cinematography employed to protect Safia's identity as a survivor of domestic violence.

Following the opening scene, Safia begins the story of her challenging divorce process as an Algerian woman and mother: 'Je l'ai connu à un mariage'/'I met him at a wedding'. She never utters her husband's name throughout the whole film; he remains the anonymised 'him'. Safia recounts how she was still a schoolgirl and her mother thought she was too young to marry when her husband's grandfather proposed the engagement. Circumstances in Safia's family, such as her brother being kidnapped by terrorists and her father and mother dying in quick succession, led to a lack of family support for Safia. Her fiancé promised a dowry and their own lodging, but in the end, she got nothing, and they had to live with his parents. The domestic violence started when her daughter was two months old: 'he beat me with his belt after I had just had a Caesarean section'. Safia's 'crime' was that she had not responded to his sister's provocation. Safia fled to her own sisters and would only return if they could move to their own lodging. She even used capital she had inherited from her father to help her carpenter husband buy wood to build the lodging. When he ran out of wood, Safia pawned her gold jewellery to buy more, and when she asked for the return of her gold, he hit her on the head with a stool and said, 'if you are a woman, prove it is your gold'. The domestic violence continued until Safia needed eight stitches at the hospital after he broke a glass bottle over her head.

Figure 5.1 Safia describing her divorce process. Courtesy of Habiba Djahnine.

Her uncle implored her to leave her husband and the children and not return. Safia would not leave her children and lodged a formal complaint at the tribunal of Bir Morad Rais. The female prosecutor told Safia's husband that he had the right to divorce Safia, but not to abuse her. He admitted he was wrong and Safia returned; they slowly built a small hut, that was really only a room, for their young family. In 2007, they finished building their hut and he received a work contract far away. He left Safia pregnant with two young children. When he returned, Safia told him he could not just come and go as he pleased, and she filed for divorce. It took her five attempts to petition for divorce before she started to see some change. In the interim, her husband, by now living with his parents, came and attacked her in the middle of the night and declared in front of the neighbours, ' you are divorced!' However, this 'religious' divorce was not official, because the state only recognises 'officially decreed divorce', as Safia explains. Here, filmmaker Djahnine uses backlighting to depict Safia as a completely black silhouette as she talks, while the back source of light filters through red curtains. This is a typical way of concealing victims' identities and/or witnesses in documentaries.

Safia goes on to describe how he told the court the house belonged to him, the money she gave him belonged to him and

that Safia herself belonged to him! In court, the judge told her to take the children and leave the house to her husband. He also told Safia to stop bothering the courts and, if she wanted the divorce, it was up to her to leave. This response to a woman's petition for divorce is reminiscent of the 1976 constitution, which stipulates that women must lead the battle for their own emancipation and defend their own rights. By the time Safia filed her fifth petition for divorce, she engaged the support of Réseau Wassila and changed lawyers. Legal aid for women who seek to escape domestic violence is one of the support systems offered by the association and Safia would have had access to a female lawyer who was a member of the association. Safia was eventually granted her divorce (informed about it during a period of exhausting chemotherapy treatment) along with child support benefits and legal costs. Furthermore, her former husband was fined 20,000 DA for abandonment of his household. For Safia, her divorce was more important than the compensation she received and she exclaims at the end, 'my life is not over. It began the day of my divorce . . . I wish for my own children and all others to not have to go through this'. The image then transitions to medium-long shots of Safia walking away, back to the camera, out in an open public space, with her children – we never do see her face, but here at the end of the film, the image is in focus. This partially mirrors Fatma's actions at the beginning of *Fatma 75*, when she turns and walks away from the camera, although the difference is that Fatma has addressed the audience in close-up. Like *Nouba*, *Safia* begins in domestic space before opening to public/open spaces.

As is often the case in documentaries about or involving witnesses and/or victims of some sort of violence, the 'narrating victim' is depicted with a blurred-out face. In *Safia*, the whole frame is often out of focus. This can be read as a visual metaphor for her situation in the Algerian legal system as a woman: a system that often still fails to distinguish and recognise the independence of female identity. The use of this technique here in the context of the film works as irony and metaphor. Safia is the main subject of the film (and most of the shots); nevertheless, she is filmed/portrayed

out of focus. Once she is granted her divorce, she throws off the shackles of her previous life and walks free. It could be inferred that the various elements of the film (the concealing decorative elements or even Safia's hijab and cinematographic techniques) all have a double function. On the one hand, they represent systematic exploitation of the female body and, on the other hand, they conceal the identity of Safia who fought and survived it. Thus, it appears that Djahnine calls attention to such issues through the application of irony and metaphor.

The fragmented framing aesthetic contrasts with the open frames system of *Letter to My Sister* and *Before Crossing the Horizon Line*, which often privilege group settings. Safia is one of many women and one of many stories in the collective Algerian *nous*. The 'fragmented and fluid structure and narrative of *La Nouba*' is taken to a different level in *Safia* via the latter's fragmented framing (Van de Peer 2018: 117). Yet, memory, testimony and responsibility to the story are common concerns of Djebar and Djahnine. In *Nouba* Lila must create 'as close a relationship as possible with the testimony-teller' (125). In *Safia*, Safia herself is the testimony-teller and the 'seeming impossibility of representation' can only be achieved through testimony of traumatic memory (125). Safia, however, is not depicted as a passive object of pity because Djahnine successfully navigates the fine line between '"validating the victim" and "validating the story"' and thus shows respect and responsibility to the story (Gready 2010: 178).

Women's testimonials are important to the work of Réseau Wassila; they state that, 'la parole des victims est donc au coeur de notre action: leurs témoignages nourrissent notre réflexion'/'the words of victims are therefore at the heart of our action: their testimonies nourish our reflection' (Djerbal and Oussedik 2014: 137). The film underscores many other elements germane to the work of Réseau Wassila. For example, women's status as a 'political minority' will obviously filter down and have repercussions on their children's status, and the two are linked (138). Safia teaches her children respect for each other and responsibility when she sends two of them to the local shop, directing Wahib to respect

his sister and walk together with her in the street. Interestingly, the Family Code of 1984 reproduced some of the Islamic sharia law provisions, such as the fact that women are directed to obey and respect their husbands. Safia reverses this dictate to make sure her son respects his sister and that he learns early in life that men are not superior, and women are not subordinate.

Access to information and education about the penal code and Family Code is another central pillar of Réseau Wassila's mandate and mission. Women are advised of their rights pertaining to divorce, alimony, child custody, housing rights and heritage rights. Article 54 of the Family Code indicates that 'women cannot divorce their husbands and can only obtain divorce by submitting to the *Khol'a* practice which stipulates that they should give up their legal rights or claims to alimony. Men can divorce as and when they want' (Salhi 2010: 118). In desperation and just before she finds out her divorce has been granted, Safia suggests to the judge that if he won't grant her a divorce, she would submit to *Khol'a*, which she considered a process of reconciliation. However, her husband's family interpreted *Khol'a* through the Family Code and sent the Imam to accompany Safia to the notary public to renounce her house and alimony. Luckily, the divorce came through before this and Safia was granted custody of her children, along with child support, alimony and lodging.

Ten years after the release of *Safia, a Woman's Story*, Moroccan filmmaker Merième Addou also used irony as a structuring principle in her feature documentary *Suspended Wives* (*Lmaalkat*, Morocco/Qatar, 73 min, Arabic, 2021). Like Safia in Djahnine's film, protagonists Ghita, Latifa and Karima decide to turn to the courts in order to obtain divorces, after waiting several years. The procedure turns out to be not only lengthy but also quite absurd. During their lonely struggle against the law and its harshness, bureaucracy and society's prejudices, the three women are assisted by other women who meet every day in a city park. This is the only peaceful place where the trio can share intimacies, and particularly their hope to put an end to their hellish situation and find their rightful freedom and dignity. The film begins with shots

of urban centres and café terrasses peopled solely by men as a radio voice-over (female) announces the names of several women from Casablanca to Fez who have filed for divorce against their husbands. This structure foreshadows the irony and absurdity of the women's situations.

North African divorce stories also spill into the diaspora. In Lina Soualem's *Their Algeria* (*Leur Algérie*, 2021), her grandparents Aïcha and Mabrouk decide to separate after sixty-two years of marriage. They emigrated to France from Algeria when they were a newly married young couple and settled in Thiers, a small medieval town in the middle of the country. Lina, their granddaughter, decides to look into their past and what they went through both as an Algerian couple and immigrants discovering and documenting their personal memories and story of silence, testimony, exile and disconnection from homeland within the context of the collective history of Algeria. The documentary employs two forms of imagery: still images from the past and secondary screen (screens within screens), mise en abyme, representing both past and present (video playbacks and live video calls). This layered structure is reminiscent of *Fatma 75* as well as the fragmented and episodic structure of *Nouba*. These new texts of resistance are complex in narrative and aesthetic structure and work to disrupt the linearity of the space-time continuum of patriarchal systems. This is the work of women filmmakers' lifelong struggle for equality and national liberation.

Notes

1 See, for example, Mani Sharpe (2013) and Stefanie Van de Peer (2018).
2 Special thanks to David Gane for pointing out this aesthetic device.

6.

De-orientalising and expanding the cinematic screen. *From a Desert* (*D'un désert*, 2019)

Habiba Djahnine's six films discussed in this volume take her full circle, in a metaphorical sense, through her professional life's journey. Exiled in France following her sister Nabila's assassination in 1995, she eventually returned to her homeland to 'take back' occluded Algerian history and 'talk back' to oppressive structures through cinema and poetry. After establishing a series of successful workshops such as Kaïna Cinéma in Paris in the early 2000s, the Rencontres Cinématographiques de Béjaïa in 2003[1] and Béjaïa Docs in 2007, she created the Rencontres du Film Documentaire, a workshop open to the public that involved masterclasses by well-known filmmakers and public debates about various aspects of film imagery (Tenfiche 2022: 310).

In 2017, Habiba Djahnine founded the Atelier de Timimoun/Timimoun Workshop in the southern Algerian desert. With the support of Kaïna Cinéma in Paris and the Cinéma et Mémoire Collective in Algeria, as well as support from the Fondation Friedrich Ebert, Fonds Arabe Pour la Culture et les Arts, Comité International pour la Solidarité avec les Peuples, Fonds pour les Femmes en Méditerrannée and the NGO CCFD-Terre Solidaire, Djahnine carved out a safe space in Timimoun for young Algerian women to learn the craft of film without having to worry about the strictures of a patriarchal society monitoring their comings and goings. During the workshop's first edition, six female students from the four corners of the nation, studied the entire filmmaking process from script to screen over the course of a year and a half

(310–12). Tenfiche writes that Djahnine's feminist pedagogical mission is clearly laid out in the workshop's brochure:

> Faire et refaire, construire un regard intérieur en interrogeant le réel sans l'épuiser. Construire et déconstruire avec éthique, imagination et respect des autres en réinventant le sens du mot sororité. Tisser les solidarités par les mains tendues. Composer avec les blessures. Débusquer la joie dans un regard, un sourire. Questionner le passé, vivre le présent, inscrire son identité de femme dans chaque geste.
>
> Doing and redoing, building an inner gaze by questioning reality without exhausting it. Construct and deconstruct with ethics, imagination and respect for others by reinventing the meaning of the word sorority. Weaving solidarity through outstretched hands. Dealing with injuries. Discover joy in a look, a smile. Question the past, live the present, inscribe your identity as a woman in every gesture. (311)

This very poetic description of the workshop's goals also underscores the emphasis on women: women filmmakers telling women's stories. Tenfiche writes that one of the participants, Leïla Saadna, pointed out, at a roundtable during the 2019 edition of Rencontres Cinématographiques de Béjaïa, that it made sense to create a workshop solely for women filmmakers because male film crews would not have the same access to or success at filming women in their domestic spaces (312). The six short documentary films were screened at the Festival de Cinéma de Douarnenez in France in August 2019 and at the Rencontres Cinématographiques de Béjaïa in September 2019 (312).

Orientalism in retrospect

It was in the desert, in the area of Timimoun, that Djahnine filmed *From a Desert*. Created with the funds of a grant, 'Brouillon d'un rêve de la Scam', the film was exhibited at La Piscine-Musée

d'Art et d'Industrie André Diligent in Roubaix, France, as part of the exhibition *L'Algérie de Gustave Guillaumet* from 9 March to 2 June 2019, and also at the museums of fine arts in La Rochelle and Limoges. The film is meant as a free and open dialogue with the paintings of French Orientalist painter Gustave Guillaumet and Algerian writers Tahar Djaout (assassinated) and Mouloud Mammeri. The film also involves a reflection of an interior conversation with the desert (located in southern Algeria).

According to the exhibition curator and art historian Marie Gautheron, 'Gustave Guillaumet découvre l'Algérie par hasard alors qu'il devait embarquer pour l'Italie'/'Gustave Guillaumet discovered Algeria quite by accident when he was meant to travel to Italy' (2019). He became fascinated with the country and its desert and spent much of the rest of his life living in Algeria, with Algerians. He would often paint scenes of suffering and misery. Algerian women were painted more realistically and exoticised less than in the works of other Orientalist painters. Guillaumet is well known for his monumental canvas *Famine en Algérie* (1868) which belongs to the permanent collection of the Musée National Cirta in Constantine, Algeria (Gautheron 2019). He is also known for his painting *Le Sahara* (1867), which hangs in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. These two paintings function as a point of departure for *From a Desert*. The exhibition title also provides raw material for the film: *L'Algérie de Gustave Guillaumet* signifies possession (although it could also denote 'by', 'Algeria by . . .'), one of the defining tropes of Orientalist discourse. This trope, along with that of discovery, denote conquest and colonial expansion and Western authority casting an objectifying gaze on 'the other'. Edward Said writes:

> under the general heading of knowledge of the Orient, and within the umbrella of Western hegemony over the Orient during the period from the end of the eighteenth century, there emerged a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum… for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial, and historical theses about mankind and the universe. (1979: 7)

The work of Edward Said on Orientalism has been seminal in uncovering the racist imagery created by the Occident about the Orient as he writes 'the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences' (Said 1979: 1). Said defines Orientalism as 'the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority' (1979: 42), and argues that, to make sense, Orientalism 'is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, "there" in discourse about it. And these representations rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects' (21–2). Orientalism thus forces the viewer to take up what Said calls the '*positional* superiority' of the coloniser/outsider (7).

Habiba Djahnine's film is an act of resistance: 'talking back' to colonial and patriarchal oppression and 'taking back' Algerian cultural heritage. Drawing on the Orientalist practice of creating images 'outside' of history to contain difference and create an ideal other for Europeans, Djahnine both appropriates and disrupts the Orientalist gaze on Algeria by delivering what Said calls 'a *re-presence*' (21). The film opens with an extreme long shot of a desert while a fierce wind whistles as sand blows. This shot dissolves into an image/painting depicting a camel carcass in the desert. The painting is Gustave Guillaumet's *Le Sahara*, which features an empty desert with the carcass of a camel in the foreground and a fleeting image or mirage of a caravan on the horizon in the background. The image fades to black as Djahnine's voice-over intones, 'Rien ne résiste au silence. À l'appel des étendues. Au silence comme langage. Rien. Vraiment rien'/'Nothing resists silence. The call of the vastness. To silence as language. Nothing. Truly nothing'. The film's title then appears in white letters on the black screen.

The second painting by Guillaumet, *La Famine en Algérie*, is shown halfway through the film. According to Chafika Bouameur Bendali-Hacine, director of the painting and sculpture collection

at the Cirta Museum, the painting very aptly depicts the famine that ravaged Algeria from 1865 to 1868 during the colonial era and during which almost one-third of the Algerian population perished. She further explains that Gustave Guillaumet was likely 'le témoin singulier des conséquences dramatiques de la colonisation'/'the crucial witness to the dramatic consequences of colonisation' and that his paintings demonstrate a profound understanding of Algeria at the time, including the regions and landscape and 'son empathie envers des Algériens qui vivaient sous le joug colonial'/'his empathy towards Algerians living under the colonial yoke' (Algérie Presse Service 2021).

Habiba Djahnine defamiliarises Orientalist methodology by first presenting five successive shots of various parts of the painting before panning the camera in a full tilt from top to bottom over the canvas. According to Said, 'the Orientalist is required to *present* the Orient by a series of representative fragments, fragments republished, explicated, annotated, and surrounded with still more fragments' (Said 1979: 128). Djahnine does not annotate or explicate; rather, she builds irony by stating, in voice-over, 'si une main jette un os a votre faim, ne mordez pas l'os, mordez la main'/'if a hand throws a bone to your hunger, do not bite the bone, bite the hand'. Clearly, the reference is an ironic one that undermines the humiliating and degrading depiction of Algerians crouching in hunger and grasping the breadcrumbs offered by a white and 'fair' hand. The painting's subtext infers that Indigenous people must rely on the coloniser to survive in their own land! In a further ironic twist, this depiction of the 'oriental other' necessitating aid is replayed through the media hype surrounding the restoration of *La Famine en Algérie*. The painting was 'discovered' languishing in the Musée Cirta (ex-Gustave Mercier) in Constantine where it had been exhibited in 1954 (before independence) and then stored in the museum's vaults for safekeeping. It was 'rescued' by a team of French experts so the painting could be restored during 2017–18 in time for the French exhibitions in 2019. It was subsequently sent back to the Musée Cirta for display in 2019 (Algérie Presse Service 2021).

The two Guillaumet paintings featured in *From a Desert* are static images, suggesting assumed passivity of the 'oriental other', but Djahnine employs ironic juxtapositioning through editing to create new associative relations and meanings between seemingly unrelated images: the paintings, the dialogue in and with the desert, thus undermining the west's gaze on the 'other'. Guy Austin outlines how Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* (1965) subtly subverts the Orientalist trope 'of entirely passive, objectified Algerian women . . . displayed in Eugène Delacroix's famous painting of 1834, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*' (Austin 2012: 65–6). According to Austin, Delacroix's depiction of the women as 'submissive, sensual and inviting' is remediated in Pontecorvo's film (66). The three Algerian women in the film who place bombs in cafes around Algiers are shot 'in a fixed tableau shot that recalls the Delacroix' painting as they wait for the bombs to be delivered (66). The static, closed form tableau, comes to life, however, as the women spring to life and leave to carry out their mission. Austin further argues that this 'agency accorded the bomb-carrying women' is limited as they are not in control of the narrative, and 'remain nameless and voiceless' (66).

Women's control of their own identities and destinies is important to Habiba Djahnine, just as it was to her sister Nabila. Through her feminist activism, Djahnine joins the ranks of other North African women artists such as the Moroccans Lalla Essaydi, Yasmina Bouziane and Majida Khattari, included to showcase 'contemporary views' in a major exhibition of Benjamin Constant's Orientalist paintings in Toulouse and Montreal in 2015, who use Orientalist art as a point of departure from which to reclaim Arab women's 'personhood' from their fantasised image of slave status in Western eyes. Thus, images and representation must also be about action and movement – from silence and invisibility to voice and visibility. Majida Khattari calls this 'art-action' and claims that it is particularly important for the Arab world where both oral tradition and film culture prevail. Her Orientalist-inspired photography involves female models who challenge viewers, 'inviting them to question their own gaze, while the Orientalist style underscores

how the gaze directed at women remains nearly unchanged despite the feminist revolution'. Khattari describes how she uses 'fashion as a tactic to draw viewers into a situation wherein they are led to look at things differently. The idea is to disrupt the Orientalist gaze and relate the original painting to today, fashion and feminism' (Behiery 2015: 254).

Remediation of the Orientalist gaze was taken up in 2015 by Nadia Seboussi, an Algerian-born Montreal-based installation and performance artist, when she mounted a double installation, three-screen video projection exhibition, *Il était une fois l'orient*, in which she ostensibly simultaneously creates and challenges a 'fantasized Orient' (in the words of the press and Whippersnapper Gallery in Toronto, where the exhibition took place in September 2015). Seboussi claims that Edward Said's concept of Orientalism influenced her own understanding of the Orient/Occident relationship and that her exhibition was her own cultural response to Orientalism. By juxtaposing images of women from films of the golden age of Egyptian cinema with images from 'Western' produced films such as *Once Upon a Time in the West* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, she challenges conventional cinematic constructs of narrative pleasure and asks through whose imaginary we read images of 'Oriental' women? Seboussi typically anchors her works within a North African historical frame, but here, however, the exhibition's title immediately disrupts that expectation and creates new ones where historical and emotive connections to the subject matter are at play.

'Taking back' the desert

When looking at Habiba Djahnine's film *From a Desert*, it is tempting to read each scene solely through the prism of the local culture. Habiba Djahnine, however, is more interested in constructing a dialogue with the desert, the ancestors, the landscape and architectural ruins, religious and secular rituals, and phantoms. She creates a sort of desert symphony by layering her

poetic musings over a montage of shots and sequences creating new associative relations and meanings between seemingly unrelated images. Immediately following the film's title screen, a medium-long tracking shot depicts a young boy on a bicycle pedalling as quickly as he can on a desert road in a seeming attempt to catch up to the moving vehicle and camera filming him. As the vehicle picks up speed and moves away, the boy is literally left in the dust and slowly vanishes into the horizon. As he disappears, a sound bridge overlays tones of an ancestral chant and ceremony. The image transitions to medium shots of a traditional Zenet ceremony, called 'Ahellil', an Indigenous Amazigh ceremony that pre-dates Islam and involves participants and instruments that draw entirely on Amazigh terminology (Mammeri et al. 1973: 262). According to Rachid Bellil (2000), the Zenet people of Gourara live in isolated oases located south of the Saharan Atlas and north of Touat (southwest of Algeria) and have struggled to safeguard their language (Zenet is a dialect of Tamazight) and cultural heritage from Arabisation and foreign encroachment. Bachir Bouhania has helped bring to light the fact that 'contact between Arabic and Zenet reflects the connection of a majority group, the Arabs, with a minority group, the Zenets' (2014: 6). Bouhania cautions that efforts of local radio stations to broadcast programmes in the Zenet language are not enough to ensure its survival. He maintains that 'young speakers tend towards the majority's language, Arabic, instead of the original mother-tongue, Zenet, even in the Gourara. They also make use of that ancestral idiom just to address old people at home'. He advises adopting government and societal efforts in order to safeguard the language against the tides of globalisation (9).

Bellil further explains that the 'Ahellil' is actually a collection of poems that are sung collectively and accompanied by a very slow dance in a circle. Djahnine films this scene in one long take (sequence shot) with a handheld camera to respect the entirety of this community practice and collective memory, without fragmenting it (in opposition to an Orientalist method). She allows the poetry to flow and thus pays homage to renowned

Algerian Amazigh poet, linguist and scholar Mouloud Mammeri (1917–89) who collected and published this poetry. Mammeri also compiled the first Amazigh grammar book written in an Amazigh language (Kabyle) and wrote several novels including, *La Colline oubliée* (1952) (see Chapter 3). Mammeri defines the Ahellil as 'A musical, literary and choreographic manifestation celebrated as a secular spectacle at the same time as a quasi-religious ceremony' (Mammeri et al. 1973: 259).

This scene that metaphorically gathers all things important: the religious and the secular, praises to God, the saints and ancestors, is bookended with a shot of a man walking with his back to the camera off into the desert horizon as the wind blows fiercely. This scene disrupts the viewer's willing suspension of disbelief while caught up in the trance of the Ahellil ceremony. In this long take of two minutes and twelve seconds, Djahnine reminds the viewer of humanity's fragility and the necessity of 'facing the elements, living in the present with the presence of always imposing mineral spaces' (Djahnine 2024).

The harshness of the desert is in sharp contrast with the next brief scene of a desert oasis presented in a series of static medium

Figure 6.1 Solitary figure walking into the desert horizon. Courtesy of Habiba Djahnine.

shots; shots of lush palm trees as a man speaks Zenet and sounds of tea being poured; cut to shots of broken containers in the sand; a shot of pails, bottles, a pair of slippers; then abruptly cut to a shot of superimposed images of the vast desert before dissolving to shots of the ruins of Tin hanou as Djahnine slowly recites lines of the poem 'Le Sahara ou le Désert' from her recent volume of poetry *Traversée par les vents* (2023: 69–70). She muses that she attempted an imaginary dialogue with the assassinated poet and gazed at the hand of the painter and understood his fascination for depicting lost souls within vast landscapes. Here, she is enfolding knowledge that the viewer must unfold: she is, of course, referring to the Orientalist painter Gustave Guillaumet and the Amazigh poet Tahar Djaout, assassinated in 1993.

Halfway through her recitation of the poem, Djahnine references Djaout's 1984 novel *Les Chercheurs d'os*. One of the first intellectuals assassinated by the Armed Islamic Group during the Black Decade, he spoke openly and challenged Islamist ideology, much like Nabila Djahnine, who was assassinated two years later. Djaout's work tended towards irony and parody and eschewed the more government-approved socio-realist narrative and historical reconstructions of the War of Independence. Patricia Geesey writes that 'Djaout emphasizes the role that "la mémoire," both collective and individual, must play in the reconstitution of a people's sense of being linked to their history' (1996: 271). Geesey further explains that, in the novel, the narrator embarks on a journey to find and exhume the remains of his dead brother, who was a freedom fighter in the War of Independence. She claims that

> the literal act of exhumation of *maquisard* remains is juxtaposed with the inspiration this quest provides for the narrator's anamnesis, his 're-membering' of the incidents in the village before, during, and immediately following the War of Independence. The story unfolds through both first-person and omniscient, third-person narration. This blend of perspectives serves to reinforce the text's subversion of boundaries between what is interpreted to be historical 'fact' and individual testimony and memory. (1996: 272; emphasis in original)

This strategy of blurring of boundaries, personal musings and testimony, monuments and memory, is germane to Djahnine's poetry and cinema. A woman in a blue *Tiseghness* walks among the ruins and a graveyard and pays homage to the saints and the dead followed by insert shots of women weaving at large looms: 'tissage Zénète'/'Zenet weaving', which is part of the Amazigh world according to Djahnine. Long shots of scratch circles in the desert sand (made by the wind and/or the ancestors?) are interrupted by a brief scene of a dervish repeatedly circling a monument shrine, gravestones scattered in the landscape. Djahnine wanted to pay homage to him and underscore the fact that cultural heritage is never lost or erased from history and memory (Djahnine 2024). The film ends with an extreme long shot of the desertscape in full sunset, accompanied by traditional music.

Djahnine's inner dialogues with the desert reflect on how the land, the desert, is a trusted confidant that collects and holds the memories of one's actions. It also erases the traces of the intruder and coloniser who will not last. By focusing on the desert and old architectural ruins of the land, the filmmaker centres on the idea of geographical Indigeneity and the values of the land. The theme/motif of desert and land act as a key to distinguishing who belongs to the land and who does not (the coloniser). Therefore, in the framing of the shots that involve the desert, the majority of the frame is taken up by the image of the desert. Djahnine's poetic musings inform the viewer that she has come back to live in a place that seems frozen in time, yet the scratch circles in the sand remind us that the ancestors are ever present, regardless of silence or howling winds. Djahnine's strategy of simultaneously hiding and revealing knowledge (Guillaumet, Djaout) is reminiscent of Laura Marks' theory of enfolding and unfolding. The strategy, however, is more akin to Métis artist, curator and critical art writer David Garneau's idea of Indigenous Sovereign Display Territory. He uses this term to describe his experience in 1995 when the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Canada, hosted a retrospective of the work of the late world-renowned Denesuline (Chipewyan) painter

Alex Janvier. Janvier himself toured a small group, including Garneau, through the exhibition, 'explaining every picture' (Garneau 2016: 35). Garneau writes that the fact that Janvier 'invented a way to record his physical, relational, and spiritual territory in a format that could be mistaken for Modernist art was a great lesson' and 'until he explained them, until he talked them into life, they remained oblique hints. It was the combination of visual art, embodied knowledge and a gathering of engaged participants that made the experience significant, that made it exceed the colonial container' (35). Likewise, with the work of Habiba Djahnine, it is the 'hidden knowledge' such as the names of Guillaumet and Djaout and locations of ruins and landscape that 'waits patiently for its Native knowledge, the "secret chamber," to be revealed' (Garneau 2016: 35). Through engagements with and readings of the works, hidden/enfolded knowledge is revealed/unfolded in screen moments that lay bare local knowledge and values (36–7).

Was Djahnine's film the inspiration for Hassen Ferhani to shoot his documentary *143 Sahara St.* (2019) in the desert? Djahnine shot her film before Ferhani (they are friends and Djahnine is thanked in the credits of his film), who filmed in the El Golea desert, north of Timimoun (Djahnine 2022b). The film *143 Sahara St.* features *cinema direct* style depictions of a dilapidated truck stop café in El Menia, an oasis town on the major highway (Route Nationale) in the Algerian Sahara. The café is run by Malika, a Kabyle woman (also a friend of Djahnine's), who serves her mostly male truck-driver clientele, as well as other travellers who venture in off the road for an omelette or soup and cup of tea.

Like Habiba Djahnine and Tahar Djaout, Ferhani also employs parody and irony, despite the film's overall frame in cinema direct style. However, the filmmaker uses story within story for comedic touches in the scene where trucker Ryadh arrives at the café. Through a barred window, he pretends to be a prisoner promising Malika a whole truckload of tuna if she releases him from prison:

'fresh tuna – not like the one we had under Boumédiène'. Algerians would understand the enfolded knowledge of the poverty and hard times they endured under Boumédiène (1965–78) while he developed national infrastructure such as the oil and gas industries in Algeria. Malika further references Boumédiène's drive to industrialise Algeria when she describes how he inaugurated the road of African Unity 'just right here – He drove here, close to the sign. Then he got back in his vehicle and he was gone. And now we don't see their faces anymore'.

The cinema direct camera as witness is defamiliarised once again when actor Samir El Hakim, who is allegedly hitchhiking, arrives, sits at the table and reads the newspaper to Malika as she cooks his meal. He claims he is looking for his missing brother in Timimoun, but when he leaves, Malika tells the audience that she knows his brother is not missing. Her musing that, 'people lie but they don't know how', could be read as a statement by the filmmaker on the constructed nature of film and its capacity for veracity. Should we believe everything we hear, and see? Or is enfolded knowledge meant to be unfolded differently, in varying degrees, by different audiences?

The desert as metaphor and canvas for Guillaumet, Djaout, Ferhani and Djahnine rebounds with the idea of identity, memory and history. Haida artist and master carver Bill Reid has written about Indigenous meaning in cultures of display. According to him, distance from original makers and contexts does not mean loss, defeat or erasure. Reid declares, 'if we can bring to these [signs] our contemporary sensibility, enriched by a knowledge of the world's art, we may perhaps find in them deeper meaning even than their creators intended' (2000: 66). Thus, 'multiply-situated' and 'multiply-informed' viewers may find in *From a Desert* deeper meaning than Habiba Djahnine intended (Allen 2012: 2). In this sense, she has created an expanded cinema conversation that spatialises and mobilises images in new ways, setting in motion new methods of approaching and appreciating Amazigh screen media.

Note

1 Salima Tenfiche has noted that the Rencontres Cinématographiques de Béjaïa was not created without a struggle. At the time, the *wali* (police commissioner) of Béjaïa felt that in Kabylia, where the political context was still very tense following the Berber Spring protests of 2001, the festival posed too great a risk for the authorities' control (Tenfiche 2022: 309). Habiba reacted by sending a letter of protest to the local authorities declaring the festival would project films in the street if necessary, albeit peacefully. She finally obtained permission to go ahead with the festival in 2003 (309).

Conclusion: towards an inclusive Algeria

Is there such a thing as an Algerian New Wave in cinema? If so, what are its constituents and what is Habiba Djahnine's role within it? New wave movements are often characterised by their rejection of traditional filmmaking conventions, or what came before, in favour of new ways of storytelling and experimentation and personal expression. Indeed, Meryem Belkaïd contends that Habiba Djahnine joins the ranks of several contemporary Algerian documentary filmmakers such as Hassen Ferhani, Malek Bensmaïl and Sofia Djama, among others, who 'constitute a new "political generation" in the sense of a group whose political commitment is revealed through their participation as actors or witnesses in a major "generating event," whether political or social, that is no longer exclusively related to independence and the struggles that led to it' (Belkaïd 2023: 16). This peer group 'has freed itself' from the constraints of the past and works actively to challenge state-constructed narratives (17). These filmmakers are conscious of the fact that they cannot leave the stories they have to tell in the hands of government officials as this would result in obfuscation of dissent against government constraint and oppression. Artistic activism involves dissent and the role of the artist, in the eyes of many, 'is to be completely engaged in perpetual dissent' (Ousmane Sembène quoted in Tolan-Szkilnik 2023: 1).

Dissent and dissidence in the films of Arab women documentarists is superbly detailed in the work of Stefanie Van de Peer (2018). Pioneering filmmakers such as Selma Baccar

and Assia Djebar helped pave the way for Habiba Djahnine's generation. Salima Tenfiche writes that, since Assia Djebar 'a ouvert la voie en 1978'/'opened the way in 1978', the number of women filmmakers in Algeria has multiplied by six, but that not one is involved in state-run national glorification production (2022: 313). Rather, they participate in what Belkaïd calls 'this independent cinema still under construction', refusing 'both glorification of the past and idealization of the present' (2023: 16). The notion of construction is fascinating because it means coming to terms with identity. Belkaïd cautions that 'to speak of identity in a relatively recently autonomous nation is, for this new political generation of filmmakers, to reckon with complexity, ambivalence, and hybridity' (17). Consider the teacher in Malek Bensmaïl's *La Chine est encore loin* (2008) who challenges his class to define the 'Algerian personality'. The scene is set in the Amazigh (Chaouia) village of Ghassira in northeastern Algeria, considered the birthplace of the Algerian War of Independence, and the teacher attempts to draw out of his students the components of the 'national personality', including the Arabic language and the Amazigh language with all its dialects. This scene is just one example of what Belkaïd calls Bensmaïl's 'decolonized gaze' on a moment in history that has long been constructed as a collective narrative, or national myth, that has gone unchallenged until recently (2023: 60).

The work to decolonise involves building an anarchive and seeking to build what is often absent from the archive (Brozgal 2020). In her work on the 17 October 1961 police massacre of peaceful Algerian protestors in Paris, Lia Brozgal asks, 'Can the anarchive be archived?' (2020: 314). Even more audaciously, Brozgal asks if oppositional works will ever 'cease to create an oppositional force to the archive? Is it possible to imagine that the official archives and the anarchive might one day reside together, on a single platform?' (Brozgal 2020: 314). This would entail the safeguarding of shared memories and all their parameters, nuances and layerings of dissent and agreement. This is the responsibility to the story – to everyone's stories. Responsibility to the nation's

many stories involves showing courage, taking a stand and dissenting against censorship of multifaceted voices. In August 2023, Algeria's Ministry of Culture and Arts pulled the *Barbie* movie from theatres in Algiers, Oran and Constantine without providing a rationale, although the ban came after governments in Kuwait and Lebanon banned the movie 'for allegedly threatening conservative values'. The Audiovisual Regulatory Authority took a step further and temporarily suspended private TV channel Es Salam's programming for broadcasting content 'containing scenes contrary to the precepts of Islam and the way of life of Algerian society' (*Globe and Mail* 2023: A18). On 26 July 2024, during the opening ceremony of the Paris Olympic Games, the Algerian delegation of athletes carried red roses aboard their boat as it sailed down the Seine River in Paris. As the boat made its way along the Seine the athletes tossed the roses into the water while some chanted in Arabic, 'Long Live Algeria!' (a chant echoed throughout the War of Independence and beyond). In this way, they were reminding France of its colonial past while honouring the victims of the 17 October 1961, massacre. This very public and emotional 'performance' functions as a layer of resistance, dissidence and 'talking back' to the official archive.

Nevertheless, emerging from silence, suppression, and the continued imposition of a singular national narrative are the new and many voices, eager to talk to one another, through acts of courage and artistic activism. Within this vein, Habiba Djahnine has been described as an 'éclaireuse'/'guide', paving the way for others and helping foster a new generation of Algerian filmmakers as well as Algerian feminism (Tenfiche 2022: 308–13). The visionary contributions of Habiba Djahnine – her legacy to filmmaking, to women, to Kabylia, to Algeria, her creation of training opportunities – are an act of reciprocity and a way forward, out of amnesia. Djahnine refuses the label of 'victim' for all her documentary film subjects, since she believes this is the only way forward. Each chapter in this volume has provided a 'building block' issue, from environmental concerns to women's and human rights, in the complex structure that is contemporary Algeria.

Figure C.1 Habiba Djahnine in Timimoun desert. Photo credit: Karim Ahmia. Courtesy of Habiba Djahnine.

As a filmmaker, Habiba Djahnine contributes to modern Algerian history through her memory films, in which remembrances are painstakingly pieced together to create documents of freedom of expression: freedom to express what had heretofore been the unspeakable and the unspoken in Algerian society. Through words, images, poetry and performance, she transcends codes of silence and invisibility and moves beyond the constraint to 'relive past experiences of victimization' (Derderian 2006: 248). In the end, remembrance and image superimpose to become the memory of one's 'own Algeria'.

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