



Absent the archive: cultural traces of a massacre in Paris, 17 October 1961

by Lia Brozgal, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2020, xiv + 354 pp., £22.99 (softcover), ISBN 978-1-80034-819-6

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BOOK REVIEW

Absent the archive: cultural traces of a massacre in Paris, 17 October 1961, by Lia Brozgal, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2020, xiv + 354 pp., £22.99 (softcover), ISBN 978-1-80034-819-6

On 17 October 2022, 61 years after the massacre of peaceful Algerian demonstrators by the police on the streets of Paris, Karim Benzema, the iconic French footballer of Algerian descent, ended his acceptance speech for the *ballon d'or* – footballers' most coveted individual prize – with the words: *c'est le ballon d'or du peuple* (it's the people's *ballon d'or*). In France and beyond, these few words were sufficient to trigger abundant commentary about what was meant by them, i.e. the erasures that they brought to the fore *à demi mots*: were they a hidden reference to Franco-Algerian memories of struggle? An elliptic allusion to Algerian revolution (old or new)? And what of the chosen date? Was that too of salience to the imbricated histories of Algeria and France? Almost slipped in as an afterthought, the utterance of these words in Paris in front of the world's collected sporting press have a complicating value to history (5) and fit squarely into Lia Brozgal's beautifully written three-wave exploration of the 17 October 1961 anarchive. What is more, Benzema's words and their exceptionalism, like many anarchival productions, fit ill with any particular genre, sitting somewhere between commission, script, and performance.

Absent the Archive is a literary tour de force that combines long-term, in-depth research of 17 October contextualisation and poignant critique of primary and secondary anarchival sources, plus astute and subtle political commentary. Following the book's breathtaking cinematographic opening, detailing the largesse of cultural life in Paris in October 1961 against the 'invisibility, silence, and pathologies' (12) that undergirded the trauma of its parallel colonial (Algerian) substructure, the writing turns to the notion of anarchive. Unstable and unbounded by hierarchy, the anarchive – a rogue selection of texts (5) – is immaterial cultural production that acts as an alter-archive to that which the state apparatus – the police – would not render public. Gilroy, Rothberg, and Silverman have enabled us to better think about the overlaying of politics and cultural production in traumatic memory and Brozgal, in sketching out the anarchive, draws on their thinking as well as that of Derrida, Massumi, and Rancière. The Derridian archival death drive, the aescepticisation, institutionalization, and the hierachisation that it brings to knowledge (24–25) serves the heuristic basis for the book's anarchival concatenation process, while Massumi's SenseLab provides 'programmatic' (25) guidance. Finally, Rancière's visibility-invisibility paradox as applied to the events of October 17 – the ultra-visibility of murder in apparently invisible plain sight – highlight the ambivalence of simultaneous popular proliferation

of images, stories, and representations, and state censorship of facts, figures, and tactics around the date.

Chapters 1 and 2 do two things. The first is to 'build an inventory' (31) on the basis of three waves, while the second is to narrativise the archive itself, its material instantiations by way of the 'smoking gun' (72) metaphor. Chapter 1 provides density to the three intertextual waves of October 17 cultural production that Brozgal expertly excavates, contextualises, and analyses in light of one another. Whilst dubious of strict periodizations given the 'porousness between waves' (68) and not having pretension towards exhaustivity, Brozgal's aim in a three-wave structure is to allow the possibility of tracing its paradoxes through diachronic pathways (33). The first wave, immediately after the massacre, coincides with what historian Henri Rousseau has called the 'amnesty phase' in Algerian war memory, focusing in particular on Jacques Panijel's *Octobre à Paris* (1962), a film about the massacre which only screened a few times in spring 1962; the Afro-American author William Gardner Smith, whose semi-autobiographical novel *The Stone Face* (1963; Smith 2021) concludes with an eyewitness account of 17 October; and 'Dans la gueule du loup' (1962), a poem by Kateb Yacine.

The second wave coincides with a so-called *beur* France: a second-generation mass protest against racism and structural oppression and for recognition, an important component of which was cultural production, including the music and literature of Charef, Lalloui and Messaoudi. Finally, the fullest and best known in its representation of October 17 is Didier Daenickx's *Meurtres pour memoir* (1983), a *roman noir*. Since the end of the Papon affair and the opening of the colonial archive in Aix-en-Provence, the third wave, which is imbued by 'narrative proportion' (56), i.e. ellipses, allusion, and intertextuality to other waves, has been gaining momentum. In this wave, Brozgal pays attention to 'paraliterary genres' (51) such as pulp, noir, but also photography (Kagan), graphic novel (Boudjellal), posters, pop music and 'young adult literature' (54). Yet this material only becomes an archive when set against the archive which Brozgal does so skilfully in Chapter 2, by intertwining her experience with the archive. The author incorporates Alice Kaplan's call to narrate archival genesis stories, something that Kaplan has so delightfully fictionalised in her novel *Maison Atlas* (Kaplan 2022), inhabiting the position of archon but not as a guard (114), and rather as 'docent, translator and reader' (25).

Much cultural production in fact turns on tangible archive stories, inside them, on their steps, and involving archivists. Einaudi's real life testimony against Papon – for his involvement in 17 October, not Vichy – is a leitmotif among these texts, as it was bolstered by archivists and with Einaudi's testimony upsetting the fiction of the Paponian *roman national*. Likewise, Lalloui in *Une nuit d'octobre* (2001) subverts the archive by his use of alternative voices: those of the massacre victims (97) fictionalised from the real archive. Daenickx in *Meurtres pour mémoire* uses the archives of Toulouse in front of which a protagonist is shot as 'an avatar of Bordeaux' (92), and in Streiff's *Les caves de la goutte d'or* (2001) protagonists Chloé and Cavignic, a doctoral student and archivist respectively, live in 'Les Archives' (in Paris's 3rd arrondissement). The archive here becomes an index: to

testimony (109), to the power of official narrative, to its literal and metaphorical centrality and the difficulty with which to upturn that.

Chapter 3 and 4 move the reader from fact to plot and from narrative to mapping: from the systematically erased graffiti *ici on noie les Algériens* to the hidden graveyard that is the Seine, via the impeccable route the FLN traced for the march that ended in massacre (124), and the coloniality of cartography and cover-up. How to semiotize erased signs, Brozgal asks (116), and how to represent the actual embodied experience of drowning (212)? To do so, Brozgal draws carefully on De Certeau's city as text (116) and inverts Barthes 'scriptable' (117), a mix of 'readable', i.e. able to be read, and 'readerly' i.e. already a classic text.

The anarchivise offers non-uniform remedies, peripheral or peri-urban, to the archive's meta-script about 17 October. Where physically a square in Aubervilliers was rebaptised '17 octobre' the Parisian transport system (RATP) refused the same name for the Asnières station (119-20); where Yasmina Adi's cartographic montage suggests both hegemony and resistance (136), Kattane's novel *Le Sourire de Brahim* (1985) salvages only in Brahim's smile the metonymy of massacre (138). Guides too serve as routes through urban cartography, like Kaci the historian in Lalloui's *Les Beurs de la Seine* (1985), or Claudine guide to Cadin in Daenickx's *Meurtres*. Brozgal posits that these *non-lieux* challenge Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, which ignored colonial traces (158), but how, she asks, do they avoid simply becoming *lieux* themselves, integrated into the meta-script? Is their continued existence through the ephemera of performance and graffiti enough? This suspended question traverses chapter 4, drawing on Kateb's poem 'Dans la gueule du loup', Médine's rap, Lallaoui's *Les Beurs de la Seine* and Haeneke's film *Caché* (2005), productions in which the prosopopeia of those massacred give an 'iconotextual hyper visibility of the Seine' (211). Considering Paris's waterways as a place of death, hidden stories and *non-lieux* is, like all anarchival content, both obvious and less so, omnipresent and invisible. The end of chapter 4 discusses returning these waterways to Paris's people, pausing over the indeterminacy of anarchival content (210) and the literal, symbolic and performative difficulty to render the experience of falling from bridges and drowning.

Chapter 5 and 6 dissect race and dangerous historical parallels, namely between Vichy and 17 October, within the anarchivise. Brozgal's discussion of race in France with particular regard to 17 October discourse, is incisive and knowledgeable beyond the immediacy of tensions within the term and the deploying of critical race theory in relation to biology and construct (218). The author demonstrates the legacy of colourblindness by paying attention to a statement made by university professors immediately after 17 October that underlined the colourblindness 'encoded within 1789' as well as the distancing mechanisms from imperial racial violence, pinpointing the 'racism of the curfew but not the racism of the system' (223) as embodied, for example, by the extremely muscular police brigade for the surveillance of North Africans (223). The question of the particularity of an anti-Algerian colonial-type racism and those structural and generalisable mechanisms of discursive and physical racisms are one of the pitch points of the book's last two chapters. Passing or not for White, or not

Algerian, led Moroccans to paint *ici Marocain* on the doors of their huts in the bidonville of Nanterre; yet Paul Smail's Moroccan uncle, Mehdi, in Paul Léger's *Vivre me tue* (1997), is mistaken for Algerian and killed in the massacre. Léger's is a novel which Azouz Begag labelled cultural appropriation (Léger is not Algerian) but in which Brozgal sees a real engagement with the 'complex narrative of the racial politics of October 17' (262).


In her archival research Brozgal excavates multiple historical entanglements of the (non) misidentification by the police of Algerian and Jewish Parisian Moïse Sebbah, who was beaten by the police on two separate occasions in October 1961 then locked up and set apart from other Algerians, and even further discriminated against as an 'Israélite'. This passage sheds light on the institutional lumping together of differences and racial ethnotypes. Mignoneau, the police chief who wrote up the Sebbah report after an official complaint was logged, takes issue with 'telling them apart' and Papon – the ultimate 'metonym for Vichy perpetrator' (289) – attempts to disentangle the very racial distinctions that his multiple postings and actions helped reify across space (Algeria/France) and time (the Second World War and the Algerian War of Independence). The anarchival third wave represents multiple comeuppances or revenge plots against Papon, from Chouaki's *La pomme et le couteau* (2011) to Michel's *Plein présent* (2013). Finally, the intersectional trauma of works in the anarchive construct numerous Jewish-Muslim and Jewish-Arab pairings that serve multiple functions – empathy, solidarity, education, difference – in their palimpsestic overlaying of what Huyssen terms 'unrelated contexts', i.e. Holocaust/non-Holocaust histories, yet as Brozgal points out, such histories in both the specific and metonymic context of Parisian racial politics coexist at a deep psycho-social level; those dangerous parallels, she explains, 'were always there' (309) ...

Pushing forward the research agenda to acknowledge (307) and analyse the meanings of representing the trauma of Vichy and Algeria in a competitive frame is a hugely challenging enterprise, but it speaks in direct ways to the underlying construction of the *roman national* that is at stake in the politics of cultural representation, which lies at the heart of Lia Brozgal's learned monograph – and which underpinned footballer Karim Benzema's concluding words in his speech. Brozgal's prowess as an archon and writer is to juggle temporalities throughout *Absent the Archive*. As the chapters slowly unravel, the three-wave structure with its intertextual and intergenerational dynamic allows the reader to delve diachronically into the anarchive instead of 'ascribing representation to circumstance alone' (262). Brozgal's endeavour and its interactions with mental maps, representations of those drowned and their terrible invisibility, the fluidity and likeness of water and narrative, the tensions and permutations of Algerian race talk and its entanglements with space and time, and the exquisite textures of a variable and nondescript cultural production renders justice to the creativity, care, and passion of the works contained in the anarchive.

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