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A historian woman between the living and the dead; between the North and the South

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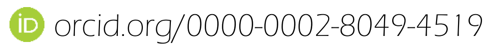
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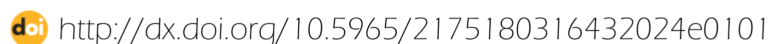
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Abstract
The Battle of Algiers, more accurately referred to by historians as “the great repression of Algiers” (Gilbert Meynier), has become a landmark event, symbolizing, for a part of the world, the Algerian War of Independence. Along with my colleague Fabrice Riceputi, I conduct a collaborative historical project on forced disappearances during the Battle of Algiers. On the project’s website, we have created a page for each identified abductee and issued a call for families to confirm the fate of everyone. Since then, we have been contacted by dozens of families: sometimes they send us a person's photos, provide written testimonies, or send us documents they have kept. In our investigations as historians of the present time, we take on roles that are not always inherent to our subject. To put it another way, we push the boundaries of our field, navigating between the living and the dead. This is the focus of this article.

Keywords: Battle of Algiers; forced disappearances; memorial policy.

L’historienne entre les vivants et les morts; entre le Nord et le Sud

Résumé
La bataille d’Alger, plus justement nommée par les historiens « la grande répression d’Alger » (Gilbert Meynier), a fait date, au point d’être le symbole, pour une partie du monde, de la guerre d’indépendance algérienne. Je mène, avec mon collègue Fabrice Riceputi, un travail d’histoire collaborative sur la disparition forcée durant la bataille d’Alger. Sur le site internet du projet, nous avons créé une page par personne enlevée identifiée et lancé un appel aux familles pour qu’elles confirment le sort de chacune. Depuis, nous avons été contactés par des dizaines de familles : parfois elles envoient la photo de la personne, livrent des témoignages écrits ou nous envoient des documents qu’elles ont conservés. Dans nos recherches d’historiens du temps présent, nous jouons des rôles qui ne sont pas toujours les nôtres. Pour le dire autrement, nous touchons aux limites de notre discipline et circulons entre les vivants et les morts. Voilà le sujet de cet article.

Mots-clés: Batailler d’Alger; disparition forcée; politiques de mémoire.

In November 2023, I was visiting Bologhine, on the outskirts of Algiers, along with Mohamed Rebbah, a historian man and former Algerian activist. He had been abducted by the French authorities on January 26, 1957, along with a whole group of his Algerian Muslim scout friends, nationalist activists and supporters of the National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale [FLN]). He was then detained in several camps across the country along with tens of thousands of other people. Together with my colleague Fabrice Riceputi, we were searching for the places where, during the misnamed 'Battle of Algiers,' in 1957, the French army detained people it had abducted, often tortured them, and, in some cases, murdered them. In the neighborhood where we were that day, one of these places was the cellars of the Grande Terrasse, a restaurant that General Massu, head of the 10th Parachute Division in charge of Algiers, had asked for at the time. The event took place in the middle of the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), the war waged by the FLN to bring to an end the French colonization that had been going on for more than a century.

The Battle of Algiers, more accurately referred to by historians as "the great repression of Algiers" (Gilbert Meynier) has become a landmark event, symbolizing, for a part of the world, the Algerian War of Independence. Two movies made it known throughout the world, *Jamila, the Algerian*, by Youcef Chahine, in 1958, which features one of the FLN activists, Djamila Bouhired, and *The Battle of Algiers*, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, in 1965. It is also known through the works by major historians, notably that by Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1958). More recently, it has been illuminated by works such as that by Raphaëlle Branche (2001), whose first study describes and analyzes the use of torture by the French army during the Algerian War. Despite the pioneering book by journalist Florence Beaugé (2005), there was still a lack of an approach less interested in the army and its methods than in the experience of a population that had underwent these methods. Moreover, naming and counting the victims always seemed to require military archives that would be all the more decisive since the perpetrators themselves might report their crimes but remain untraceable. For the sake of comparison, we did not wait for the Argentinian or

Chilean military personnel themselves to provide us with lists of their victims, but rather sought information about these victims from the affected families.

There is an overvaluation of the words and writings by the French military personnel as the main source that is an enigma. It is surely explained, in part, because, in the militant context of the Algerian war and post-war period in which, in France, people sought to demonstrate crimes against a rather skeptical or indifferent opinion, definitive evidence was needed, a *smoking gun*, ideally a document through which the French army might incriminate itself (Rahal; Riceputi, 2022). In this demonstration, the words by people who had undergone these practices could be considered of lesser value and undoubtedly tainted with a hint of militancy, either a militancy linked to the FLN during the war or memorial militancy since 1962. Nowadays, it is very late to hope to obtain complete lists of abducted people, but the list that we can obtain today will always be richer than that which other historians will be able to obtain in twenty years.

The Battle of Algiers has returned to the public debate in France as a part of President Macron's memorial policy. In September 2018, he acknowledged the death of one of those abducted at the time, Maurice Audin, a communist activist, a mathematician and Frenchman committed to Algerian independence. In an ambitious statement, he turned Audin into the symbol of all the missing persons. However, this posed the huge issue of choosing an only Frenchman among thousands of missing persons. As if to compensate for this, in March 2021, E. Macron again acknowledged the responsibility of the French army in the death of Ali Boumendjel, an FLN activist, for whom the official version was still that he had committed suicide during his detention (Rahal, 2022b). We could analyze this memorial policy of E. Macron at will, but it is not a question of turning him into the main character of this story.

Herein, at the very core of the story, there is Mohamed Rebah, his comrades and their families.

On the event they experienced in 1957, I am conducting, with my colleague Fabrice Riceputi, a collaborative historical project on forced disappearances during the Battle of Algiers. In Arabic, we do not say 'missing persons,' but

‘abducted people’ (*al-makhtufun*). On the project’s website, we have created a page for each identified abductee and launched an appeal to families to confirm the fate of everyone. Since then, we have been contacted by dozens of families: sometimes they send us a person's photos, provide written testimonies, or send us documents they have kept. In general, there is no file related to abduction in the name of the person in the colonial archives; thus, it is the historians who assemble a kind of a file on the website using the documents collected in the archives and those provided by the families.

Our investigation recalls the work of researchers on forced disappearances during Latin American dictatorships or in Spain during the Franco era. We learned a lot from our Latin American and Spanish colleagues, and first of all simply to think in terms of ‘forced disappearances’ (Ranalletti, 2014; Gatti, 2014; Catela, 1998). These movements, from Latin America to the Maghreb, are a kind of return of older movements. Indeed, the Latin American executioners had themselves learned their methods of abducting, forced disappearances, and torture from the French executioners (Robin, 2008; Rubenstein, 2022).

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It is in the context of this research on the abductees of the Battle of Algiers that, in October 2023, Fabrice Riceputi and I visit with Mohamed Rebah his childhood neighborhood in Bologhine, formerly Saint-Eugène at the time of colonization. Mohamed Rebah is a delightful man who lightly greets the retirees sitting in the shade to chat and discuss with young people who are painting a fresco on a wall. As he walks, he shows us where one or another of his abducted comrades lived. He also points out the street signs that now bear their names. He confirms the fate of each of them and we carefully note the names of those who never came back. Thanks to him, we collect information on the event itself at the same time as we observe its celebration in the Algiers metropolitan area since independence; the presence of the past at various times in the country's history, in short a true history of the present time.

At one point, Mohamed Rebbah chuckles and shows us a street that goes down to the sea and has a street sign with his name on it: “They were wrong, he explains, they thought I was dead.” He didn’t want to bother them by pointing out their mistake. When someone tells him about this street, he claims that it is dedicated to an imaginary namesake. He adds, still laughing: like that, my street is already ready for the day when...

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I work in France, in a CNRS laboratory that I now head, the Institute of History of the Present Time (Institut d’Histoire du Temps Présent [IHTP]), which has played a major role in the development of this type of history in France. It was headed before me by François Bédarida, a former resistance fighter and historian of Great Britain and the Second World War, by Henry Rousso, a historian known for his work on the Vichy regime and on the memory of the Second World War, or by Christian Ingrao, a specialist in Nazi violence. The Institute is the heir to a former Committee for the History of the Second World War. Despite the current broadening of themes, it is understandable that the founding event for the Institute and, more broadly, for the entire history of the present time in Europe — the massive and dominant event — has long been the Second World War.

But today, for the first time, the IHTP is headed by a woman — and even by two women, since the deputy director is Pauline Peretz, a specialist in racial issues in the United States; by a person who spent ten years teaching in secondary school; by a historian woman who does not have the Second World War in her direct field of vision but considers, like other historians of her generation (Singaravélou, 2023), the colonial wars as a key moment both for the history of formerly colonized countries and for the history of former colonizing countries. Finally, it is headed by a person who is not a specialist in the history of Europe. All of this goes against a history of the present time that has long been very Eurocentric. It is surely appropriate to clarify to Brazilian readers of this text the position of its author who lives and works in France, who is a

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French woman but who is also Algerian. The issue of this place between two countries has a major influence on the issues that are addressed herein.

Working as a historian woman of the present time means first of all working on the fringe of history that is written with living people, the men and women who have experienced the story that is being told. In any case, one of its canonical definitions is to study an ephemeral period that roughly corresponds to the length of a life. Its boundaries are therefore not fixed and as history of the present time advances, historians are faced with new events. Currently, they are gradually but inexorably moving away from the Second World War: the detachment is slow and those who, at the IHTP, are interested in it today have been focusing on the issue of childhood at war. “Their” witnesses, former war children, may still be alive, unlike older witnesses. At the heart of today’s history of the present time is the Cold War and the decolonizations of Africa and Asia, as well as the revolutionary movements that accompanied them. Historians of the present time are also interested in Latin American dictatorial regimes and the violence of the repression they enforced: the confrontation at this period — made possible by the fall of the dictatorships — also contributes to making Latin America the beating heart of history of the present time in the world, as demonstrated by the quality and richness of the symposium reported in this issue (Capdevila; Langue, 2009).

During our walk in the Bologhine neighborhood, walking with our frail and dynamic companion, we often thought that we could have easily missed this opportunity, if we had delayed, or if our walking companion had not enjoyed iron health. However, Mohammed Rebbah (may he live long) gives us irreplaceable information. In addition to administrative information (age, address of the abductees), he adds terribly human details: one was friendly and smiling; to another one he was not very close because they were in two different sports clubs. By chance, as he seemed to point out that street sign with his name already ready for the “day when,” these pieces of information could have been lost forever.

With their mobile periodization in time, historians of the present time are constantly situated on the border between the living and the dead and they are

sometimes caught up in the urgency of working faster than death. As this walk illustrates, history of the present time connects historians and witnesses, the living and the dead, by making the boundaries between them more blurred.

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By studying various events, which took place in different places, historians do not encounter the same living people or exactly the same dead people. We inevitably experience that not all the dead have been treated in the same way, by the collective memory of their society, by their States, by justice, or international institutions, during celebrations of the past but also throughout the work of historians, even though their lives and the circumstances of their deaths are comparable. I publicly raised this issue for the first time during a conference on October 7, 2023. I did not know at the time of the attack organized by Hamas on Israeli soldiers and civilians located near the Gaza Strip. I was also unaware of the attack that would be carried out against Gaza by the Israeli army in the course of reprisals that are still ongoing at the time of writing. For months, in late 2023 and early 2024, we were subject, particularly in France, in the West in general, to media and political discourses explaining that it was more painful (thus more serious) to die in a face-to-face massacre than to die under bombs. Political analysis of the situation in terms of colonial process had completely disappeared, and no one could simply say that Israeli civilian victims are added to the growing number of Palestinian civilian victims, all together victims of an occupation and colonization policy that has lasted for several decades.

As a secondary school teacher, but also a higher education teacher, I am struck by the fact that a story that excludes the dead among those it talks about (the dead of other continents, other great men, great women) can exclude children among those to whom it is addressed. Some of them, intractable avengers and trackers of their teachers' inconsistencies, sometimes throw it back in our face without pity. We can always fidget on our chair and claim that everyone must think that Victor Hugo or Jules Ferry are "theirs," but we need to have seen the emotion of children faced with a verse by Aimé Césaire written on the whiteboard the day after his death and their astonishment that a Martinican

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poet counts *for the history teacher* — which from their point of view means that he counts *for history* —, in order to experience that this is not enough. It is not a question of renouncing a form of universality of history by claiming that we are only interested in history because it speaks to us about "our" dead (which would pose the hard issue of knowing who are "ours") but of coming back to the proposition: when, under the pretext of universality, a mainly Eurocentric history is silent on certain dead — and with them on key events in the lives of people to whom it claims to address, it necessarily fails to speak to everyone.

Because history of the present time is also interested in the living and their relationships with their past(s), it invites us to observe the ways in which our contemporaries deal with their individual or family past. In Europe and North America, after genealogists, archivists today see individuals arriving in reading rooms looking for personal files concerning them: school files, naturalization files, military files, or many others, since our lives give rise to the creation of multiple files in a sort of archival revolution that promises historians masses of papers unequaled by the past for decades to come. Some of those whom, along with Antoine Rivière, we name as 'ego-consultants,' come out of curiosity, sometimes leading a family to carry out an interesting experiment as a form of hobby[1]. But the practice first became popular with people who came to the archives to shed light on a painful past. From the 2000s onwards, in fact, archivists have seen waves of ego-consultants encouraged by legal or judicial provisions, such as the report of the Mattéoli commission for the compensation of victims of dispossessions caused by anti-Semitic legislation in force during the Occupation.

In recent years, various cases have gradually come to light — particularly those related to mistreatment suffered in educational or religious institutions — which have searched for one's own file (or files concerning one's family) a widespread practice, to the point of becoming source material for novels or films. Let us cite the case of the Magdalene Laundries (or Magdalene Asylums) in

[1] Since 2022, Antoine Rivière has been leading a project entitled "The person and their file" at the IHTP. See: https://www.ihtp.cnrs.fr/programmes/la-personne-et-son-dossier/. Accessed on: June 20, 2024.

Ireland where 'fallen women,' single women and other dangerous women lived in a form of confinement associated with mistreatment that could lead to death. In one of these Irish convents, in 1993, the graves of 155 women were discovered. In 2013, a public apology from the State was made and a compensation system set up. In 2021, the Truth Recovery Panel published a 75-page report on this theme[2]. In Canada, it was the system of boarding schools for children of native populations (Indians) where children were taken from their families, deprived of their language with a view to forced assimilation, stripped of their legal Indian identity, and subject to forms of abuse (particularly sexual) that caused a scandal. Since the end of the 1990s and a class action of 80,000 former students, the State has been moving forward in a long process with a "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" created in 2008 (Milloy, 2017; Dekker, 2019).

Like an archivist, a historian of the present time can then become an intercessor towards these archives, an adjuvant in the quest to resolve the past because they will know how to find these archives and interpret them to "make them speak." To bring back a disappeared past or to reconstruct a slice of the past of a missing person. But not all countries and all events offer this archival wealth. This is the case in many colonial situations where the archival imprint of individuals subject to colonial domination is much less than that of individuals who benefit from colonial domination. In cases of political violence, such as forced disappearances, the need for perpetrators (military personnel, administrators, policemen) to be held accountable and, in doing so, to leave traces is lessened when violence is exercised on people from the colonized population. To put it another way in the case of the Battle of Algiers, it is easier

[2] The report: DEIRDRE, Mahon; O'ROURKE, Maeve; SCRATON, Phil. Mother and baby institutions, magdalene laundries and workhouses in Northern Ireland truth, acknowledgement and accountability. [Ireland]: The Truth Recovery Design Panel, Oct. 2021. Available at: https://w2w113.n3cdn1.secureserver.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/30092021-Truth-Recovery-Final-Report-FINAL-Online-Version.pdf.
See two articles, the second of which is interesting for oral history methodology: SMITH, James M. *The Magdalene Sisters*: evidence, testimony ... action? Signs, v. 32, n. 2, p. 431 458, 2007 and WILLIAMS, Alice Mulhearn. The whole thing was numbingly bland and it was deliberately so': food and power in Ireland's Magdalene Laundries, 1922–1996. *Gender & History*, [*s. l.*], v. 34, n. 3, p. 648-663, 2022.

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to make an Algerian person disappear than a French person without having to be held accountable.

Moreover, colonial and decolonial violence has rarely given rise to court decisions (and even less so to international court decisions). A rare case because it has given rise to a court decision is that of the great Kenyan revolt known as "the Mau-Mau" against the British colonial authorities in the 1950s, its repression and the massacre of unarmed Kenyan prisoners. When the case was able to be brought to trial in the 2010s, the British authorities were accused and convicted of having destroyed archives in preparation for the trial. Historians such as Caroline Elkins (2010, 2023) and David Anderson (2005) and archivists have collaborated with the plaintiffs' lawyers to demonstrate that archives had been destroyed very recently.

In the case of colonial Algeria, there were few cases of colonial violence that were prosecuted. In the case of abductees during the Battle of Algiers, the longest case was that of Maurice Audin, a French national and communist activist, whose wife was able to have contacts in France, lead the case to several trials and keep it alive. Among the victims of enforced disappearance that we identified, most of the complaints that were filed came from French independence activists. Few came from the colonized population who were able to be the subject of legal proceedings. The proliferation of amnesty laws passed in France since Algerian independence (Stora, 1998) then extinguished the rare prosecutions that had been launched. However, this lack of procedure leads to a lack of documentation for historians.

In addition to the scarcity of archives in a context where authorities are not subject to the same pressure to document their actions in a context and cases are hard to prosecute, a final element also helps explain the difficulty for individuals to find answers in the archives concerning specific colonial crimes. Geographically, independences — when they are also decolonizations, just as in most independences of the 20th century — constitute a withdrawal of the colonial State beyond the sea. It also implies a physical withdrawal of the administrations or authorities from whom accountability is required. This means for the families of missing persons that they have to go to another country

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(today, a visa is required), find their way around the centers and funds in the hope of taking legal action, and cover the cost of the trip. This geographical distance does not allow for the development of a common practice of reading archives. This is in addition to the absence of legal procedure or decision on compensation which — like the Mattéoli commission — would force people to come and read the archives where their chances of finding information are less due to the very nature of colonial domination.

As in many other situations, a historian of colonization becomes, in spite of themselves, an intercessor between survivors or their families and archives that are all the more fantasized because they are far away. Allow me to quote herein, anonymizing it, an email received in 2012 (one year after the publication of my biography on Ali Boumendjel).

> Good evening madam
> I have the honor of writing to you hoping that you will agree to help me with the research on the disappearance of my father and his five friends during the French colonization in algeria my father is called [...] born on 09/27/1906 son to [...] he was arrested by colonialism on JUNE 20, 1957 by military men along with his five friends: [...] it seems that they were thrown into the place called (the devil's puy) in Arabic called bir janab, thank you. (E-mail anonyme, 2012)

The wording and spelling have been retained in this quote not to embarrass the author, but because they reveal that the person is writing in a language that is not their own. This message invites us to imagine a very real correspondent, and to wonder how they could possibly find themselves in the labyrinth of the French archives. These archives are far from them, just as the colonial State. It is key to imagine this geographical, political, linguistic, and social detachment in order to grasp the various ways in which the violent past is apprehended in different situations. Unlike the emergence of dictatorships in Latin America (Chile, Argentina, etc.) where people continue to live in the same State and ask for the truth and reparation from it, decolonization constitutes the geographical withdrawal of the colonial State and its replacement by another independent State that does not have to account for colonial crimes. Therefore, there is no need, in former colonies such as Algeria, to mobilize massively so that the State take action to tackle its past according to its principles of today,

just as in former dictatorships. From this point of view, decolonization and geographical withdrawal of the colonial State has long absolved it of its responsibility and of any need to answer for its crimes. Decolonization can be the means of absolving the colonial State. Unless migrations from former colonies and political mobilizations force it to come back to this past when children of immigrants come to it to cry for accountability.

On the Algerian side, at the end of the war of independence in 1962, many missing persons — abducted or whose bodies were missing for other reasons — were officially declared dead by administrative decision of the newly independent Algeria. Decree 62-126, enacted on December 13, 1962 reveals the instability of the situation. It provides for a simplified declaration of death if the person has disappeared "in circumstances likely to endanger their life", but also a possible cancellation if the person were to reappear. However, there are bodies that continue to be missing from their loved ones, graves that are absent and very often, details of the death remain unknown to a greater extent than in so-called regular wars (let's say the First or Second World War for France, for instance, or the Civil War in the United States) (Rahal, 2022a). This proportion of missing bodies is due firstly to the nature of the revolutionary war waged by the FLN, many of whose fighters are known only by pseudonyms and have destroyed their papers by joining the maquis and are then buried by their comrades at the place of their death. It is also due to the massive use of forced disappearances by the French army. Finally, it is due to the forced displacement of populations in particular, since let us recall that at the end of the conflict, it is considered that a third of the formerly colonized population had been displaced and that a quarter then lived in concentration camps (Cornaton, 2013, p. 9).

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Let us return to our abductees of 1957. In our research as historians of the present time, we play roles that are not always our own. To put it another way, we touch the thresholds of our subject. Or again: we have the impression of tinkering. However, a few examples allow us to see that it is in these limiting

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moments that we touch the heart of what constitutes the history of the present time.

In searching for documentation produced by the military, we learned that some public documents produced by the army were privatized by French officers. Notebooks, registers, or documents were removed from the documentation placed in the public archives. Well-informed people sometimes know *who they are with*. But what can be done to access them? Organize a 'barbouzerie,' an intervention by the secret services, to steal them? Prosecute the military for theft of archives since we cannot prosecute them for murder? Both barbouze operations and prosecutions are the responsibility of State services and not the work of historians. But what can be done then?

Another borderline case is reached when we have strong suspicions of the presence of bodies, especially after the discovery of a famous place of torture and execution on the outskirts of Algiers or when we hypothesize that some of the dead may have been hidden in cemeteries without the families ever being informed. As historians, we have no means of carrying out exhumations or probing the ground, this is a prerogative of the Algerian authorities. This raises the question of whether (or not) we should embark on the path of trying to obtain such exhumations.

Furthermore, the interview with a relative of a missing person almost always provides them with the opportunity to make a request, often at the very end of the interview and in a solemn manner. While in the press and public debate in France, there is much fantasizing about Algerians who would like 'apologies' or reparations in hard cash, during our investigation into those abducted in the Battle of Algiers, no one made such a request. No one wanted to save the soul of France with confessions or apologies. On the other hand, almost all of them asked for "the truth" about the fate of the person and the location of the body. That's all. Even better, in our investigation, the witnesses sometimes addressed us as if we represented "the authorities" or "the archives" or even "France", for instance when they asked us to provide them with photos of their relatives who are certainly in "our" archives. And this is so even as we take the time to explain who we are and the limits of what we can do.

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The last case to mention is that of the dialogue with parents of missing persons, generally with their children. Thus, I happened to show to a lady who is now elderly a copy of a document concerning the abduction of her father. The document includes the army's response stating that he had been "liberated and returned to his family on XX/XX/1957." She knew better than anyone that this statement was false, but I could not leave this sentence without contradiction or analysis. So I explained that we, historians, interpret this sentence to mean that her father had died under torture or that he had been killed on that day (or shortly before). As I spoke, I was suddenly seized by the impression of being the 'official' announcer of the death. While composing remarks as accurately as possible to describe the degree of our (un)certainty, I asked myself what I was playing at by taking on this responsibility that should not be mine, and even wondering if *I was playing it*. On the other hand, no one had played their role until now. Neither the French army, of course, nor the French civil authorities. The Algerian authorities had, for their part, made the death official, without being able to satisfy the desire for truth. We did not seek to play this role; however, our work placed us in the situation of doing so. I cannot say whether for that elderly lady today these sentences had a performative nature, whether she felt the same solemnity or the same emotion as me (perhaps not at all). But in that moment, the responsibility was huge and it had to be assumed.

We see how this particular research raises key questions about the commitment and responsibility of a historian of the present time. But it also raises the question of the place in the world of historians, of the movements and migrations from which they come, which invite them to ask different questions to society and the State through their studies. It is particularly when these migrations ask about the relations between the former colony and the former colonizing country that historians can then ask: where are our dead?

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