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# Book Review

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Jill Jarvis, *Decolonizing Memory: Algeria and the Politics of Testimony* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021)

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Jill Jarvis's book *Decolonizing Memory: Algeria and the Politics of Testimony* is a promising contribution to the flourishing research being done in the field of Memory Studies, that is challenging the Western and in this case the French politics of testimony from the postcolonial point of view. This book can be read from the larger ethical-political perspective in the field of International Relations, where there is a growing demand for Reconciliation Commissions to address archives beyond the legal framework. The book, as the title suggests, brings together both Postcolonial Studies and Memory studies in the context of Algerian history. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, Jarvis's deconstructive approach to testimony and memory examines how literature archives the two as forms of resilience, as bearers of witness to experiences that surpass both time and space to fill the gaps in official forms of testimony. As more and more nations are demanding compensation from their perpetrators for past violence and crime against humanity on the political front, this book's relevance is heightened with its demand for justice and reform, and not merely to forgive and forget. The work of deconstruction that Jarvis undertakes to break down familiar language through reflections on the idea of Muslim, justice, witness, and revolt among others, she critiques the age-old practices of testimonial interrogations and censure that destabilises the multifaceted embodiment of Empire. "France remains constitutively haunted by the empire that it has tried both to exorcise and atone for" (12) succinctly covers the period of Algerian colonisation in 1830 to France's continued endeavour to redeem and absolve itself from its colonial violence that has been and still remains under the shroud of willful Western amnesia. Jarvis attempts to expose the denial of the paradox of the French Republican values they are so proud of, to demand justice and reform for the most abject.

Jarvis's main subject in the text is the problem of archaization/archives. For her, the history of Western historiography is largely built upon a discourse of domination that is unidirectional and judicially selective, that chooses to archive that which does not tarnish its grand imperial image. Following Lia Brozgal's definition of an archive as "a set of works that evince an archival function and that, together, produce an epistemological system in oppositional relationship to an official archive,"<sup>1</sup> Jarvis postulates that literature as an archive fills in the lacunae in legal forms of testimony and challenges official historical memory. In this view, although literature does not qualify as a verified source through which to access historical memory, it calls to the imagination of the reader for the events to be heard.

Another important theme that haunts the book is that the selection of events to be archived creates a hierarchy, assumes that one event or person is more important than another, and thus negates or dehumanises. While Agamben states that the status of the human is determined and conferred by the law, Jarvis's objective is to show how literature opens the possibility to question and challenge the power of the law to grant the status of the "human" (32).

*Decolonizing memory's* claim that Algeria still looms in the shadows of colonialism, as Todd Shephard also highlights in *Invention of Decolonization*, which is further elaborated by Karima Lazali stating that due to insufficient archaization, France is capable of absolving itself from colonial violence, the range of literary works Jarvis discusses pokes at France's historical amnesia to free memory from the chains of imperialism. This book examines literary works from three periods of Algerian history – colonial, decolonial and the civil wars of the 1990s. Through a close reading of a dozen primary texts, including novels, activist testimonies, autobiographies and poems written in various languages, Jarvis examines these literary experiments that contribute to the archaization of testimonies that transcend both time and space. In the introduction, "The Future of Memory," she sets a tone for justice for Algerians by exposing the ironies and contradictions in the French colonial practices, where to begin with, the laws of citizenship were made ambivalent so that they could modify and interpret at their advantage. The denial of colonial violence as a "crime against humanity" only to be accepted as such in 2017 by Emmanuel Macron, reinforces the silences and silencing of memory.

The first chapter, "Remnants of Muslims" which is influenced by Giorgio Agamben's book *Remnants of Auschwitz*, shows how the status of the "human" can be elevated through literature rather than through the legal system. Casing her argument on Agamben's notion of the "Musulmann" which he defines as "not so much a limit between life and death; rather he [the Musulmann] marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman"<sup>2</sup> and drawing a parallel with the dehumanization in the Nazi camps of World War Two, Jarvis shows how history has repeated itself through the Jews. The epithet Musulmann which Agamben leaves out in the Algerian context, Jarvis

takes it up for them. Through a close reading of Zahia Rahmani's *Moze* (2003), she reveals that official testimony silences reality. For the complete truth to be exposed, firstly the French archives need to be opened and secondly, the French nation-state must be put on trial for the unclaimed crimes. The second novel, "*Musulman*": *roman* seeks to articulate new forms of revealing the truth which does not exist in the political-legal framework. The absence of witnesses lost to history as testifying subjects should not be a barrier to accepting alternative frameworks of testimony – i.e., literature.

The second chapter, "Untranslatable justice" argues for a possibility of an alternative form of testimony through exploration and exposure of the failures of the mainstream justice system. It does so by a close reading of three activist texts written before the Evian Accords. The chapter begins by asking if testimony as fiction can be considered as truthful, as responsible and as serious as testimony itself. Through Derrida's notion of the untranslatability of testimony and simultaneously its call to be translated in the absence of the bearer of the violence, Jarvis argues that literature comes into contact with the law when the speaker insists that what he/she is saying is the truth. Therefore, how is the witness standing before a judge in court any different from a testimony through literature? Do any of the two forms of witnesses have proof because they are both secondary carriers of the "truth"? The various forms of testimony in the three texts- perpetrator testimony in *Nuremberg pour l'Algérie*, six first-person statements by Jews in detention camps in Paris in 1959 in *La gangrène*, and a court case study of a tortured prisoner, *Djamila Boupacha*, all three advocate for the victims by re-evaluating the official narratives to prove and expose the violation of the agreements by the French state itself, and a demand for their testimonies to be recognized even outside of the judiciary system.

However, as Jarvis argues in the third chapter, the structural disjuncture in the literature presented through a close reading of Yamina Mechakra's *La grotte éclatée* and *Arris* indicates correspondence to the temporal rupture between the Algerian war and the civil wars that followed. According to Jarvis, Mechakra's literary and linguistic techniques of translating pain and mourning by using medical and bureaucratic terminology creates a multitude of anarchives that are not spoken in public but can fit into the loopholes of the tribunal linguistic system, "By cracking the testimonial genre and unsettling the vocabulary of the nation-state, Machakra repurposes its remnants and fragments to create a fugitive literary space of infinite dimension in which other languages can move" (117).

To make this case, in the fourth chapter, "Open Elegy," Jarvis turns towards regional literature by Wacine Laredj and Fadhma Aïth Mansour Amrouche, who recognize that justice cannot be transmitted uniquely by the legal system, but rather that counter-testimonies in the form of anarchives must be encouraged to be written more and more by Algerian writers in their regional languages, thus building and restoring an archive that could or has

been destroyed by the law. What brings the two *Alf Layla wa-layla* and *Histoire de ma vie* by Fadhma close is that their textual constructions are compilations of stories, a multitude of stories woven together.

The book ends with a conclusion titled “Prison Without Walls,” which declares that although the existing judicial system is restrictive in its practices and outlook, literature has the infinite and boundless capacity to attain justice for the most abject of victims. While the first two chapters set a tone for a new model of the justice system for the victims of violence, the third and fourth chapters eulogize the victims as martyrs and shahid. The texts discussed here carry out an extrajudicial form of a trial of the French state and justice system that remains complicit and unaware of the injustices it was helping to perpetuate and preserve.

The only limitation in Jarvis’s text is that it does not take into consideration the second or third-generation writers who neither have a first-hand experience of the violence nor are they witnesses and still claim to be able to speak on behalf of their forefathers. The question that one asks oneself, in this case, is its authenticity or lack thereof.

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<sup>1</sup> Lia Brozgal, “In the Absence of the Archive (Paris, October 17, 1961),” *South Central Review* 31, no. 1 (2014): 34-54.

<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 55.