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## Impossible reconciliation? The representation of traumatic memories in *La meilleure façon de s'aimer* (2012) by Akli Tadjer

This article analyzes the representation of traumatic memories of Algeria in the novel *La meilleure façon de s'aimer* (2012) by Akli Tadjer, a French writer of Algerian origin. While recent decades have seen a more regular engagement in the French political and public spheres with the past shared by France and Algeria, this confrontation with the past is not a straightforward process. As demonstrated by the reactions to the state-commissioned report on France's colonial past in Algeria, written and submitted by the renowned historian Benjamin Stora in 2021, constructing a singular shared narrative of the past is fraught and laced with difficulty. Drawing on theories of trauma and the representation of traumatic experiences, this article examines the extent to which reconciliation of the past is possible, through a close textual analysis of the representation of memories of Algeria in Tadjer's text. It will be shown how memories of Algeria are depicted in the novel as incomplete, fractured, and characterized by a difficult transmission from generation to generation. Thus, rather than the simplicity denoted by the notion of reconciliation, *La meilleure façon de s'aimer* highlights the complexity of communicating traumatic pasts and reiterates that the "unspeakable and the unknown" constitute intrinsic elements of any representation or narrative of such pasts. This does not mean that remembering the past is a futile task, but that recognizing conflict, silence, and forgetting as defining characteristics of the Franco-Algerian past provides a more productive exploration of the past than the potentially facile notion of reconciliation. Furthermore, the article will show how Tadjer's text reflects the need for multiple, overlaying narratives in order to provide a more inclusive, wide-ranging, though perhaps never complete, account of the past.

Cet article traite des représentations de mémoires traumatisantes dans *La meilleure façon de s'aimer* (2012), un roman de l'auteur franco-algérien Akli Tadjer. Bien qu'il y ait eu plus d'engagement avec le passé algérien au cours des dernières décennies dans les sphères politiques et publiques en France, cet engagement avec le passé reste encore épineux. Le rapport sur les mémoires de la colonisation et de la guerre d'Algérie, rédigé par Benjamin

Stora en 2021 sur ordre du président Macron, a suscité des réactions qui ont montré que la réalisation d'un récit commun singulier du passé est encore chargée de tensions. En faisant appel aux théories du traumatisme et de la représentation d'expériences traumatisantes, cet article examine la possibilité de la réconciliation du passé par une analyse attentive du texte portant sur la représentation des mémoires de l'Algérie. L'article démontre que celles-ci sont présentées dans le roman de Tadjer comme inachevées, fracturées et caractérisées par une transmission générationnelle difficile. Ainsi, plutôt que la simplicité indiquée par la notion de la réconciliation, *La meilleure façon de s'aimer* souligne la complexité de communiquer les passés traumatisants et que "l'indicible et l'inconnu" sont des éléments inhérents de toute représentation de tels passés. Cela ne veut pas dire que l'acte du souvenir du passé est une tâche vaine, mais que la reconnaissance du conflit, du silence et de l'oubli comme des traits majeurs du passé franco-algérien s'avère plus fructueuse que la notion potentiellement simpliste de la réconciliation. En outre, l'article soutient le besoin de récits multiples, qui se superposent, pour offrir un récit du passé plus inclusif et divers, qui ne sera peut-être jamais complet, mais qui prendra en compte une pluralité de points de vue.

## Introduction

With the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Algerian War (1954–1962) upon us, memories of Algeria continue to proliferate in France. Once labelled a “war without a name” (Talbot), an allusion to the fact that only in 1999 did the French government recognize it officially as a war, but also highlighting the wider forgetfulness amongst French institutions with regard to the Algerian past (Stora, *La gangrène et l'oubli*; Shepard; Evans), since the turn of the century, the Algerian War has regularly been at the forefront of public and political debates. Examples have included: the debate on the use of torture by the French army during the war in the early 2000s; the passing and subsequent repeal in 2005 of an article requiring French schools to highlight the “positive” role of colonialism, especially in North Africa; the state recognition in 2012 by former president François Hollande of the events of 17 October 1961, when a peaceful Algerian demonstration was brutally suppressed by the Parisian police; the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015, which invited comparisons with terrorist attacks enacted during the Algerian War (“L’attentat le plus meurtrier”; Brusini; Bonnefous

and Revault d'Allonnes; “Face au ‘terrorisme de guerre’”); the formal recognition in 2018 by current president Emmanuel Macron that the anticolonial activist Maurice Audin was tortured and killed by the French army during the Algerian War; and Macron’s admission on the sixtieth anniversary of 17 October 1961 that “inexcusable crimes” were committed against Algerians by the French police on that date (“Cérémonie de commémoration”).

While this more regular engagement with the past shared by France and Algeria is to be welcomed, confronting the past is not a straightforward process. Indeed, the proliferation of memories instigated by highly charged, polarizing, sometimes deadly recent events can lead to the replaying of past conflicts, underlining Martin Evans’s classification of the Algerian War as an “unfinished war” (Evans 365). More recently, Paul Max Morin has observed that, with regard to recollections of the Algerian War in the French political arena, “[e]vocations of the past [...] became the source of highly polarised discourses” (7). The fraught nature of constructing a more inclusive narrative regarding the colonial past, one that encompasses all perspectives, has been illuminated perhaps most prominently by the recent discourse on “reconciliation,” a concept that has become highly politicized since the president of the Republic Emmanuel Macron tasked the renowned historian and expert on North Africa Benjamin Stora with submitting a report on the memorialization of France’s colonial past and the Algerian War. The publication of the report exemplified once again the polarization of discourses and perspectives on the Algerian War. While there have been relatively favourable responses to the report by French historians such as Pascal Blanchard and Gilles Manceron, as well as by the Algerian journalist and writer Kamel Daoud, the report has been criticized by the Algerian historians Nourredine Amara and Afaf Zekkour, as well as by French historians Raphaëlle Branche and Sylvie Thénault. Underlining the wider interest in the publication of the report, a round table was organized by Cornell University on 9 April 2021, at which Branche and Amara both expressed their reservations on the report (“Rapport Stora: quels impératifs éthiques pour l’histoire?”). For their part, the historians Guy Pervillé and Jean-Jacques Jordi, both specialists on the history of colonial Algeria, published an open letter in response to Stora, to which a number of other historians and experts contributed, expressing further misgivings on the report.

Submitted in July 2020 and published in January 2021, the Stora report was commissioned “dans une volonté nouvelle de réconciliation des peuples

français et algériens” (Stora, “Les questions mémorielles” 2), as outlined in Macron’s *lettre de mission* to Stora, which is reproduced at the beginning of the published report. Macron’s commissioning of the report can be viewed within a wider initiative on the part of the government to “build a common national narrative that would allow for the coexistence of different memories” (Morin 10), as a response to the instrumentalization of memories of the past by extremist groups, for example the far right and radical Islamists (Morin 7). However, it is this emphasis on reconciliation, and a certain definition of reconciliation put forward by the French president, that has proved contentious amongst certain historians. For example, Amara has highlighted the superficiality of a state-sponsored “réconciliation sur ordonnance” (El Azzouzi 3), noting that the report is more about addressing present political concerns (for example, migration from Algeria to France and the ever-persistent question of the “compatibility” of Islamic identities within the French republican model of citizenship) than about establishing the truth about what happened in the past (El Azzouzi; Amara). Other prominent historians of the Algerian War, such as Branche and Thénault, have similarly questioned the focus on reconciliation and the feasibility of achieving such an optimistic outcome (“Rapport Stora: la repentance est-elle un piège politique?”; “Rapport Stora: quels impératifs éthiques pour l’histoire?”; Thénault). One of the major obstacles to reconciliation, as Jordi and Pervillé note in their open letter to Stora, is precisely the circulation of “[l]es diverses mémoires qui s’expriment concurrentement en territoire français.” The emphasis on reconciliation in the report suggests a narrowing of perspectives that may prove less conducive to the “coexistence of different memories” identified by Morin (7).

## Reconciliation and trauma

The responses to Stora’s report outlined above emphasize that, if reconciliation is possible after over a century of colonial rule culminating in a bloody war of independence, not to mention postcolonial tensions since 1962, it is a difficult, long-term endeavour. Furthermore, the debates engendered by the report, and particularly its focus on reconciliation, underline the controversial nature of notions of reconciliation in post-conflict societies. As Rachel Kerr and Henry Redwood outline, though reconciliation has become “a central facet of most, if not all, political transitions and post-conflict peacebuilding programmes,” it may also be used as a “byword

for impunity, understood to be the antithesis of justice or a vehicle for a politics of distraction, diverting attention from the inequality and injustice that might have led to conflict in the first place” (Kerr and Redwood 1). Furthermore, while reconciliation is often seen as a means for societies to “heal from their traumatic past,” state-sponsored reconciliation usually involves the promotion of a particular national narrative that may contradict the task of giving voice to those that have been traumatized by the past (Hamburger, “Social trauma” 11).

It is to a certain extent unsurprising that trauma should be evoked in tandem with questions of reconciliation, as recent publications by Andreas Hamburger (*Trauma, Trust, and Memory*), Hamburger, Camellia Hancheva, and Vamik D. Volkan (*Social Trauma*), and Henry Redwood, James Gow, and Rachel Kerr (*Reconciliation after War*) have shown. Accordingly, in his report, Stora emphasizes the trauma experienced by the different groups involved in the Algerian War, including French army officers and conscripts, Algerian nationalists, *pieds-noirs*, *harkis*, and Algerian immigrants who moved to France. Thus, reconciliation involves addressing the traumatic “traces de guerre qui hantent les mémoires” (“Les questions mémorielles” 5), and Stora goes on to outline the persistent trauma that has manifested itself on both sides of the Mediterranean since the end of the war (“Les questions mémorielles” 8; 11). The report’s frequent evocations of trauma recall previous academic work that has highlighted the traumatic, repressed aspects of the Algerian War and the ways in which the Algerian past has continued to “haunt” French society (Barclay; Rousso; Donadey). Indeed, studies have not only been confined to analyzing trauma affecting French society on a broad scale, but have also shown that psychological trauma as a result of the Franco-Algerian past, and its lack of transmission in the postcolonial period, continues to affect both French and Algerian citizens on an individual level, even when they do not have any direct experiences of colonialism or the Algerian War (Lazali).

Stora’s emphasis on the traumatizing effects of the Algerian War and French colonialism in Algeria on both French and Algerian society is thus not misplaced. However, given the problematic notion of state-sponsored reconciliation, the extent to which the type of reconciliation sought by Macron and the French government is an achievable task is more uncertain. My aim in this article is to assess the extent to which reconciliation is conceived as a realizable goal in *La meilleure façon de s’aimer* (2012), a hitherto overlooked novel by Franco-Algerian author Akli Tadjer. My analysis, which focuses on the recollection, transmission, and representation of

traumatic events from the past, underlines the difficulty of reaching easy reconciliation of a past that is characterized by forgetting and violence. I will also show how Tadjer's text reiterates the insufficiency of a singular narrative on the war and colonial past. Rather, the text reflects how multiple, overlaying narratives are required to provide a more inclusive, wide-ranging, though perhaps never complete, account of the past.

As outlined in the introduction to this special issue, cultural texts constitute an important means of furthering understanding of the complexities inherent in contested pasts and the diverse ways in which they are recalled and narrated in the present. Before introducing and analyzing the novel in depth, it is worth stating that, while the Algerian War and Franco-Algerian past more broadly has been very much present in French public and political discourse for a couple of decades now, representations of this past in literature go further back, as demonstrated by numerous studies (for example, Dine; Silverstein; Barclay; Hubbell; Eldridge; Lewis; Brozgal). These studies have shown how literary texts challenged the state silence with regard to the Algerian War long before its official recognition as a war in 1999, and how they have contested partial accounts of the past. For example, Lia Brozgal has recently argued in her study of representations of 17 October 1961 that literary texts, as well as other forms of cultural production, may inform our understandings of past events "in the absence of the archive" (Brozgal, "In the Absence of the Archive"; Brozgal, *Absent the Archive*). Turning to such cultural works becomes particularly useful when they refer to past events, such as the Algerian War, that have been silenced or to which archival access has been limited.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, rather than offer singular or partial narratives of the past, literary texts represent the inherent "plurality and multidirectionality" of memories of the Algerian War, resisting attempts to construct "singular and complete narratives of the past" (Lewis 167). In this way, they remind us that establishing a singular shared memory is not a straightforward process, and that the reconciliation of memories is a difficult, if not impossible, task.

### Representing the "unspeakable"

*La meilleure façon de s'aimer* is primarily set in contemporary France, though the reader is transported regularly to a past spent in Algeria via the memories of the female narrator, Fatima, the mother of the male narrator,

Said, in Tadjer's dual narrative. Fatima is bed-stricken in hospital after having suffered a stroke and lost her powers of speech and movement. With the support of medical staff, we learn that she is slowly learning how to write again and, as the text advances, it becomes clear that she is trying to communicate an important piece of information to Said, who cannot make sense of the odd word that she manages to scribble down. While her son remains unaware of what Fatima wishes to communicate, the narrative of the mother, which interchanges with that of the son, feeds the reader with sporadic fragments of the life led by Fatima in Algeria before she moved to France and gave birth to Said. This interchanging and fragmented dual narrative reflects the established definition of trauma as "characterized by a delayed response to an overwhelming event that cannot be processed at the time of its occurrence but manifests itself through intrusive thoughts, flashbacks or nightmares" (Davis and Meretoja 3-4). Trauma is thus a fundamental aspect of the text's narrative function. Through Fatima's fragments of memories, we learn that, after her parents perpetrated a joint suicide bomb attack at a restaurant frequented by *pieds-noirs* in Algiers, she was raised in a Christian orphanage and was also adopted for a period by a *pied-noir* family. In the wake of Algerian independence, the family is forced to move to France, leaving Fatima back in the orphanage. As an adult, she is raped by her best friend's husband and gives birth to a girl, despite trying to terminate the pregnancy. Though destitute, mother and daughter form a strong bond, until Fatima is convinced to move to France to seek better-paid work and provide a better life for her child. On leaving Algeria, she is never to be reunited with her daughter: on a visit to Algeria after her marriage in France and giving birth to Said, she learns that "la petite fille en robe jaune" – as the daughter is referred to throughout the text – had an accident and died jumping off seaside cliffs off the coast of El Djamila (previously named La Madrague, which is the place name used in Tadjer's novel).

It is the existence of "la petite fille en robe jaune" that Fatima attempts to communicate to Said from her hospital bed, though, as memories flood her consciousness and spill out, Tadjer is able to evoke not only the trauma of filial loss but a number of other traumatic episodes. These include rape, the devastating consequences of the Algerian independence struggle, and the transformative experience of migration (both Algerian migration to France in search of a better quality of life and, to a lesser degree, the enforced population transfer undergone by *pieds-noirs* in the wake of Algerian independence). Through representation of different types of trauma, Tadjer



allows for the “interplay between the personal and the cultural in narrating particular experiences of trauma” (Davis and Meretoja 4). Fatima’s personal trauma is intertwined with the wider social and cultural trauma caused by the Algerian War. Furthermore, there is an interplay between what Davis and Meretoja call “everyday experiences of trauma” (5), in this case gendered violence, and the wider collective trauma caused by war. In *La meilleure façon de s’aimer*, gendered violence is not presented as in any way less serious than the trauma of war, demonstrating literature’s potential to “deal with trauma in a way that does justice to the particularity of different kinds of traumatic experiences” (Davis and Meretoja 6) and avoiding the tendency in trauma studies to ascribe universality to trauma. Tadjer’s text, like literature more broadly, “can be particularly well suited to explore the complexity of traumatic experience” (Davis and Meretoja 6).

Jakob Lothe underlines the challenges of articulating trauma in his observation that “[w]hile our memory of a traumatic event may prompt narration, it may also thwart narration” (Lothe 152). Someone who experiences trauma may choose to narrate the traumatic event, or may not wish or be able to do so. In *La meilleure façon de s’aimer*, Fatima’s new capacity to remember has coincided directly with her loss of the power of speech, as her son observes: “ma mère ne parle pas, mais elle n’est pas amnésique” (Tadjer 85). In this way, Tadjer allows for the representation of what has hitherto been “unspeakable.” Fatima herself imagines telling her doctor that though her body may be “délabré,” her head “résonne d’épisodes de ma vie que j’avais enfouis dans les culs-de-basse-fosse de ma mémoire” (Tadjer 54). Her physical incapacitation is juxtaposed with an acceleration of her processing of memories, memories that have been buried in the deepest pits of her mind, underlining their traumatic nature.

The device of depicting a narrator who is unable to speak but whose memories are represented throughout the text recalls the idea, reiterated by Névine El Nossery and Amy Hubbell, that while “traumatic experience may be unspeakable [...] it is not necessarily unrepresentable.” El Nossery and Hubbell go on to highlight the role of literature and the arts as a “mechanism for transmitting what was initially unspeakable” and their potential to aid in “overcom[ing] the barriers created by trauma [...] so that healing may begin” (1–2). By using a mute narrator in his text as the medium through which traumatic memories resurface, Tadjer points to this capacity of the text as a space for “apprehend[ing] the unimaginable, depict[ing] the unrepresentable” (El Nossery and Hubbell 2). Fatima had not articulated these experiences before and, finding herself in a position

where her capacity for recollection has accelerated and the desire for expression finally arrived, she is unable to vocalize her memories. The task of articulation and expression is left to the space of the text itself and Tadjer as author. Given Tadjer's personal history as a child of immigrants, a history shared by his novel's male narrator Said, *La meilleure façon de s'aimer* engages furthermore in a transgenerational process of representing the unspeakable. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, El Nossery and Hubbell's collection on representations of the unspeakable notes "how traumatic memory has been passed down along the generational lines allowing those who did not directly experience the event to finally put the atrocities endured into words" (6).

The observations of El Nossery and Hubbell outlined above also point to some of the contradictions and limitations of the notion of trauma as unspeakable. For example, as their collection and indeed this article demonstrate, many literary and other cultural representations of trauma are concerned with giving expression, in one way or another, to that which has been unspeakable. Michelle Balaev's edited collection *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (2014) focuses precisely on moving beyond the idea, dominant in the field, that trauma remains in the realm of the unspeakable and the unrepresentable. As Barry Stampfl notes in one of the chapters in Balaev's collection, "the unspeakable is always already (paradoxically) part of a universe of discourse, a form of signification" (21). By differentiating between the unspeakable and the unrepresentable, El Nossery and Hubbell seem to recognize the paradox elucidated by Stampfl. Furthermore, El Nossery and Hubbell also conceive of the unspeakable as part of a process of coming to terms with trauma, of "overcom[ing] the barriers created by trauma [...] so that healing may begin" (1–2). Similarly, Stampfl remarks that "traumatization need not *necessarily* conclude in a state of involuntary, deeply conflicted silence" (16; *italics in original*). Thus, Stampfl recognizes the diverse psychological effects of trauma: while trauma may, in some cases, lead to an inability to express the experience, this is not always the case. Rather, "the unspeakable may be merely a phase in the process of traumatization, not the predetermined endpoint" (16). As my analysis will show, Tadjer's novel guards against any overinsistence on trauma as unspeakable, positing instead the complexity and intricacy of expressing traumatic experience. Though Fatima cannot speak, she is consumed by an intense yearning to communicate somehow that which she cannot utter. Ultimately, the unspeakable is communicated, but in a fragmented, nonlinear manner that requires more than one narrator.

### Incomplete transmission

While Tadjer's text stages a generational transmission of trauma and underlines the value of articulating through fiction what had hitherto been suppressed, the transgenerational recovery of the past remains a difficult process. Fatima's subconscious only allows for the recovery of traumatic memories after having experienced another traumatic, life-threatening episode. On the one hand, the stroke is represented as a physical manifestation of psychological trauma caused by past suffering. As Said recalls, the first signs that his mother had suffered a serious injury to her brain occurred when, unexpectedly and uncharacteristically given her long-term silence with regard to her Algerian past, she began to talk about Algeria "en trébuchant sur les mots" and in a manner that was "incohérent et parfois inaudible." Said goes on to recount how she had been overcome by a sudden desire to go back "pour retrouver les souvenirs de sa vie d'avant la France" (Tadjer 76–77). The unsolicited and chaotic nature of this outburst lends itself to a reading that the buried psychological trauma of the past has returned and caused a physical trauma in the present. However, as the narrative continues, it becomes apparent that the eliciting of past trauma enabled by the stroke does not lead to a physical healing, which we may have expected if the repression of memories had been depicted as the cause of the stroke. In fact, Fatima's physical degradation appears necessary in order for any kind of psychological healing to occur. This is underlined by the last chapter of the text, in which Fatima expresses her gratitude to her son for having assisted her death. In death, she is "heureuse, apaisée...libérée de la souffrance." She is free not only from the suffering of the stroke, but the past is now presented to her in all its lucid clarity: "Je vois défiler ma vie. Toute ma vie [...] Je n'ai rien oublié. Rien" (Tadjer 205). She is no longer suffering from the sporadic recovery of memory she was experiencing while still alive in her heavily debilitated state and, most importantly, in death she is reunited with "la petite fille en robe jaune." Death is represented as welcome release as only in death can Fatima finally recover memories of the past fully and come to terms with them, exemplified by the reunion with her daughter that never came to pass in life.

Thus, while a kind of reconciliation is achieved by the end of the text, this only occurs as a result of further physical trauma and eventual death. The path to reconciliation is replete with obstacles. The process of eliciting

traumatic memories, represented by the fragmented, dual narrative which recovers memories sporadically and in a nonlinear manner, is a difficult one. While physical incapacitation enables Fatima's capacity for recollection, she also struggles to give order to the wave of memories returning to her, stating that "tout est sens dessus dessous dans la tête" (Tadjer 53). Furthermore, she is convinced that the treatment she is being given at the hospital is hindering her capacity to remember, emphasizing again the correlation between physical degradation and psychological recuperation enabled by the recovery of memory. As outlined above, only in death is the recovery of memory complete. Fatima even appears aware of this and has given up on her physical health: "[l]e corps, ça m'est égal, je n'attends plus rien de lui mais ma mémoire c'est mon unique trésor" (Tadjer 163). She is focussed fully on returning to the past and being reunited with her daughter but, while she remains alive and undergoing treatment, the work of memory and reconciliation remains incomplete.

The difficulty of the process of reconciliation, represented by the disorder and unreliability of memory, is compounded by the lack of generational transmission between Fatima and Said, which remains unresolved in the novel. While the text presents a certain sense of understanding and appreciation between mother and son through Said's euthanization of Fatima, leading to the gratitude expressed by the latter to the former in the final chapter of the text, Said remains mainly unaware of the traumas experienced by his mother in Algeria. His motivations are to relieve her of her physical suffering and stem from a realization that she will never make a full (physical) recovery: "Je ne pouvais accepter que ma mère ne soit plus que l'ombre de son ombre" (Tadjer 201). On the other hand, Fatima's own motivations for welcoming death, and the true source of her gratitude to her son, are so that she can recover fully memories of her past and be reunited with "la petite fille en robe jaune." As indicated at several points in the text, however, Said had little knowledge of his mother's past before her stroke and is unable to decipher the clues to the memories that she seeks to impart to him while bed-stricken in hospital.

Mirroring the fragmented manner in which memories return to Fatima and the overall fragmented nature of the dual narrative, any knowledge that Said has of his mother's life in Algeria has been transmitted to him in "des riens, des éclats de souvenirs jaillis au milieu de discussions sur nos enfances comparées." Already therefore, generational transmission of the past has been incomplete and disjointed, characterized by sporadic outbursts of memory, "des éclats de souvenirs" and "des hoquets mal réprimés"

(Tadjer 153). Tadjer's use of vocabulary here emphasizes the trauma buried deep within Fatima's memories, threatening to manifest itself in these rare moments of sharing her past with her son and prefiguring the outpouring of memories that precedes the onset of the stroke. It is not the son and male narrator Said, however, who then "put[s] the atrocities endured into words" (El Nossery and Hubbell 6), but the author Tadjer who enables this articulation of the unspeakable in the space of the text. The transgenerational expression of trauma thus occurs with one degree of separation: while the fictional male narrator is unable to articulate his mother's trauma, this task of representing the unspeakable is achieved by the author Tadjer, who is himself, like Said, the child of Algerian immigrants. This expression of traumatic memories at a remove complicates any sense that generational transmission is easy or that it will necessarily "obliterate or resolve the traumatic memory" (El Nossery and Hubbell 6).

There are other instances in the text when hidden, silenced aspects of his mother's past are presented only in fragments to Said, preventing him from comprehending their full significance. The most significant of these is when he is visiting Fatima's apartment and discovers one of her audio cassettes on which she recorded her own versions of pop songs while living in Algeria. Said puts the cassette on in his car and is moved to hear his mother's voice for the first time in three months. At the end of the recording, though, he hears a second voice, the happy cries and laughter of "la petite fille en robe jaune" mingling with that of his mother. Said rewinds the cassette, attempting to make out what the young voice is saying, but he does not understand the words as they are in Arabic and does not dwell on the significance of this second voice, content instead to replay the tape in order to hear his mother singing. While Said's curiosity is piqued momentarily, Tadjer's description highlights the son's lack of understanding of Arabic, which in this instance prevents him from uncovering perhaps the most traumatic aspect of his mother's life in Algeria, the existence of a first child conceived through rape and who she eventually left behind in Algeria, where the girl died. Said identifies "des mots que je ne comprenais pas" and dismisses the child's words as "une succession de mots arabes" (Tadjer 129). The traces of his mother's past that Said unearths through the audio cassette are already difficult to recover fully, and the break in generational transmission is compounded by the son's inability to understand his mother's first language (recalling the sense of loss expressed by francophone Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar in her text *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*).

This communication of traumatic memories from mother to son, already characterized by fragmentation and interruption, becomes impossible after Fatima's incapacitation, underlining further that while physical degradation has led to an acceleration of memory, it also hinders the ordering and transmission of memories. For example, Fatima's loss of fine motor skills prevents her from being able to write coherently what she is unable to utter. Having managed to write the words "jaune" and "La petite," she attempts to write down "fille" and "robe" as well. However, she first needs to order the words correctly; the difficulty of ordering her memories is reflected in the difficulty of ordering her words in a coherent sentence. Furthermore, she cannot remember how to spell certain words, for example deliberating over the correct spelling of "fille" (Tadjer 137). We learn in the penultimate chapter that Fatima has been able to scribble down a few more words when, after her death, one of the nurses hands Said his mother's notepad that she kept by her hospital bed. The notepad "était gribouillé de mots à peine lisible," including "La petite," "robe," and "jaune." There is also a drawing that looks to Said like "un épouvantail ou un plumeau," with the words "Reviens-moi, je t'en supplie" underneath. Presumably, the drawing is of "la petite fille en robe jaune," but Said cannot make any sense of the words or the drawing: "J'ai essayé de saisir un sens dans tout ça. Je n'ai rien trouvé" (Tadjer 202–203). Thus, Said is provided with two instances when traces of the existence of "la petite fille en robe jaune" are presented to him, the recording of her voice on the audio cassette and a rough sketch surrounded by scattered, illegible words, both of which are too difficult for him to decipher. As a result, while Fatima's death provides her with the opportunity to come to terms with the past, her son remains unaware of the trauma that she underwent.

My analysis of Tadjer's representation of the transgenerational recovery of memory is not dissimilar to Max Silverman's reading of Georges Perec's novel *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975). As Silverman outlines, Perec's text is also concerned with the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next, in this case the trauma of the Holocaust and the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, like *La meilleure façon de s'aimer*, Perec's novel makes use of two intersecting narratives, neither of which "is sufficient in itself to tell the whole truth" (Silverman, "Trauma, transmission, repression" 172). Instead, it is the way in which the narratives interconnect that enables a means of representing the complexity and difficulty of expressing trauma. *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* works on the basis that "one story can only be told through another" (Silverman, "Trauma, transmission, repression" 172). Tadjer's more

recent text underlines this apparent necessity for the overlaying of multiple narratives with each other – a palimpsestic mode of representation, to use Silverman's terms (2013) – in depicting the intricacies of and multifaceted responses to the experience and transmission of trauma. In *La meilleure façon de s'aimer*, Fatima's story needs to be transmitted to her son in order for it to be finally told, but Said is himself unable to decipher the clues that lead to full understanding of his mother's account. The intervention of Tadjer as writer is thus required to piece the story together. Thus, Fatima's trauma is eventually articulated, but the process of generational transmission at a remove represented by Tadjer underlines the complex, nonlinear process of communicating traumatic memories of the past and the need for a collaborative form of speaking and narrating.

## Conclusion

Remembering, articulating, and representing trauma is a task laced with complication, intricacy, and tension. It is for this reason that "traumatic experience cannot be represented in a linear, cohesive and coherent narrative, but rather it is hinted at through overt silence, blanks, ellipses, and hesitations which point to the unspeakable and the unknown" (El Nossery and Hubbell 9). By switching between two narrators and between the present and moments in the past that return in a sporadic and nonlinear manner, *La meilleure façon de s'aimer* underlines the complexity and difficulty of representing what had hitherto been unspeakable. Furthermore, by refusing to provide easy reconciliation, for example through the representation of interrupted generational transmission and the need for a multitude of, at times unreliable, storytellers to articulate trauma, the text highlights that "the unspeakable and the unknown" will always constitute intrinsic components of any attempt to communicate traumatic experience. As Stampfl argues, trauma may not always "conclude in a state of involuntary, deeply conflicted silence" (16), encouraging a move beyond the notion of trauma as unspeakable. At the same time, cultural representations of the unspeakable elements of traumatic experience constitute an intricate form of expression, of speaking the unspeakable, that continue to highlight the difficulty of recalling and articulating trauma.

This recognition of the difficulty of representing traumatic pasts brings us back to the recent state drive to seek a reconciliation of memories with regard to the Franco-Algerian past and the desire to establish a common

memory of the past. The analysis of *La meilleure façon de s'aimer* in this article has underlined the challenge – posed by a number of historians in their reactions to the Stora report – to attempts to impose a state-sponsored, singular narrative of the past, one that elides the full and inevitable complexity of a past that has been characterized by traumatic experience, silence, and forgetting. As depicted in Tadjer's text, the process of eliciting and transmitting memories of trauma is not easy and does not lead to straightforward reconciliation. Rather, it is a task that is ongoing, perhaps never-ending, and one that requires a number of different narrators. As opposed to the simplicity denoted by the notion of reconciliation, as conceived by the French president at least, *La meilleure façon de s'aimer* highlights “the unspeakable and the unknown” as intrinsic elements of any representation or narrative of conflictual pasts. This does not mean that remembering the past is a futile task, but that, as Amara asserts (El Azzouzi 3), recognizing conflict as a defining characteristic of the Franco-Algerian past provides a more productive exploration of the past than the potentially facile notion of reconciliation. Finally, for a common narrative to be possible, a broader, more inclusive, collaborative narrative process is required, one that takes into account perspectives from both sides of the Mediterranean, and certainly not one that is imposed by the head of the French government.

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## Notes

- 1 The opening of archives on the Algerian War has been a long and gradual process. Though some military archives have been accessible since 1992 (Stora, “Les questions mémorielles 42), other archives relating to the war were opened much later. For example, archives on 17 October 1961 were made public in 2011 (Brozgal, *Absent the Archive* 75) while, only recently, the French state announced that it would be making available some of the most sensitive documents related to the war in 2022, fifteen years in advance of when they were originally due to be opened (Boiteau).
- 2 Silverman addresses the debates surrounding the extent to which traumatic, violent events can be compared, particularly to the Holocaust. My analysis in this article subscribes to Silverman's position of “seeing histories of violence not as distinct and discrete but profoundly interconnected” (“Trauma, transmission, repression” 180). The interconnectedness between the Algerian War, colonialism more broadly and the Holocaust has been explored to great effect in Silverman's monograph on palimpsestic memory (2013) and in Michael Rothberg's book on multidirectional memory (2009).



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