

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

January 13, 2015

*“My Algeria Hurts”:
A Review Essay of Denis Guénoun’s A Semite: A Memoir of Algeria*

Denis Guénoun, *A Semite: A Memoir of Algeria*, translated by Ann and William Smock, Columbia University Press, 2014, 176 pp., \$35.00 US (hbk), ISBN: 9780231164023.

A trip to Algeria in the fall of 2009 took me, along with two colleagues, to Jewish cemeteries in the northern cities of Oran and Tlemcen, and the desert town of Ghardaïa. I was not sure what to expect from these forays off the beaten track in a country where the beaten track itself can be difficult to discern. Moreover, the ramifications of three American Jews meandering beyond the confines of the capital city of Algiers, in search of holy sites belonging to a religious minority that had long since gone to ground, were unclear.

Neither overtly hostile nor particularly curious about the three people knocking at his gate, the guardian of the Jewish cemetery in Oran waved us in begrudgingly and went back to his television, leaving us to navigate the debris-cluttered tombs and the overgrowth on our own. In the walled and shady cemetery of Tlemcen, however, where the tombs and alleyways were swept clean and the foliage submissive, the young caretaker produced a small *Clairefontaine* graph-paper notebook in which he had inscribed not only the names of the dead but also a set of coordinates that allowed him to determine the precise location of their tombs—an indexing system of his own creation. He was proud of his small archive, aware that his act had symbolic value; “The Jews are our brothers” he told me more than once. “We want them to come back; when they do, they will see that we’ve taken care of their dead.” Standing side by side, he and I observed my fellow traveller contemplating a tomb, visibly emotional. “He probably just found a relative,” the caretaker whispered to me.

The cemetery in Ghardaïa was decidedly less organized. Unprotected and mostly untended, this burial ground in the desert looked to be only a few sandstorms away from its own internment. Nonetheless, when we found the caretaker—an elderly fellow weeding subsistence plots that were barely differentiated from the cemetery itself—he stopped his work to come walk with us amongst the red sandstone grave markers. Spontaneously, as if to offer context, he told us a story about his imprisonment during the Algerian war for independence and his eventual release, which had been negotiated by a Jewish lawyer who supported the Algerian cause. His pride in watching over the Jewish tombs of Ghardaïa seemed to derive, at least in part, from a sense of gratitude that extended, through the figure

of the lawyer, to all Algerian Jews. Although he moved with great difficulty, he bent over from time to time to clear debris from a gravestone, apologizing for the state of the grounds and explaining that there was no help or money to keep the cemetery in proper shape; he and his sons did the best they could, on their own time and using their own limited resources.

What emerged from these unexpected manifestations of interreligious identification on the part of the Muslim keepers of Jewish cemeteries in Algeria, from their sense of duty, their pride in their task, and their apparent belief in *convivencia*, both past and future, was nothing less than a discourse of empathy.¹ The caretakers seemed to have a positive memory of a time when the Jews of Algeria numbered nearly 150,000 and when Jews and Muslims lived together in cities and villages throughout the country; moreover, their statements suggested that a return to that state of affairs was not only possible but perhaps even likely. This attitude stood in contrast to what an informed visitor might have expected to encounter in a country whose government is hostile to the state of Israel and generally intolerant of other religions and of more moderate forms of Islam. How then should one interpret this positive and hopeful vision of a multi-cultural, pan-ethnic Algeria? Were the sentiments authentic, and had I been wrong to presume that official policy would be borne out at the interpersonal level? Or were the caretakers simply rehearsing a politically correct *doxa* trotted out for tourists to make them feel welcome and safe?

The implicitly positive narrative of Judeo-Muslim relations embedded in these small, personal encounters is also visible in two recent phenomena that attracted international attention. *El Gusto*, a documentary film released in 2012, tells a version of contemporary Algerian history through the story of *châabi* music, its conservatory in Algiers, and the mixed-faith orchestras that performed to large crowds until 1962, when independence resulted in the exodus of nearly all Algerian Jews. Billed as an Algerian *Buena Vista Social Club*—insofar as it brought together a group of older performers who had lost touch with one another and who were, in some cases, living in poverty and no longer practicing music—*El Gusto* is a narrative of perfect harmony between Jews and Muslims: the leitmotif “We lived together; we were the same,” threads through the musicians’ testimonials.²

The second phenomenon was the decision, announced by Algerian Minister of Religious Affairs Mohamed Aïssa in early July 2014, to reopen the nation’s synagogues. Despite the massive departure of the Jews in the 1960s, 25 of Algeria’s synagogues remained operational until the civil war of the 1990s, when they were declared security risks and subsequently shuttered. The symbolism of Aïssa’s gesture was made apparent in a speech he delivered in Oran: “This is a message to the Jews, as well as to all those who practice a religion other than Islam: Algeria is not against them.” He went on to claim that Algeria’s linguistic and cultural diversity was an asset, and that “Algeria accepts those who are different.”³

¹ The Spanish term *convivencia* refers the period of Iberian history during which Jews, Muslims, and Christians purportedly enjoyed a peaceful coexistence (700-1492 CE). I invoke this term specifically because of the way in which it has come to also connote the *myth* of interfaith harmony. See for example Darío Fernández-Morera, “The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise,” *The Intercollegiate Review*, Fall (2006): 23-31.

² It should be noted that the documentary has been a critical and popular success. The director and producer, Safinez Bousbia, won the prize for Best New Director (documentary) at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival in 2011.

³ Aïssa’s original announcement stated: “C’est un message adressé aux Juifs ainsi qu’à toutes celles et ceux qui pratiquent des confessions autres que l’Islam: l’Algérie n’est pas contre eux. L’Algérie est riche de ses différentes langues et cultures et elle accepte l’autre.” Quoted from Walid Ramzi, “L’Algérie va rouvrir les synagogues et églises,” *Maghreb24*, July 14, 2014, <<http://magharebia.com/fr/articles/awi/features/2014/07/14/feature-02>>.

Aïssa's announcement and the success story of *El Gusto* both participate in a narrative of postcolonial, multiethnic Algeria that is perhaps, in its enthusiasm for tolerance, too eager to escape its historical entanglements. With its stunning aerial shots of Algiers and masterful cinematography that finds beauty in even the most decrepit corners of the Casbah, *El Gusto* celebrates the capital city (and by virtue of synecdoche, the nation itself) while subtly eliding the fact that the Jews of the orchestra (who now live in France) are not welcome in their homeland.⁴ As for the opening of the synagogues, had domestic and international political conjuncture allowed for speculation, it might have been possible to probe the motivation behind legislation that would have benefited a population that no longer exists.⁵ For not only have most, if not all, existing synagogues in Algeria been repurposed to function as mosques, but even if the physical spaces could have been reallocated for Jewish worship, who would worship in them? In 2013 it was estimated that the Jewish population had dwindled to less than 75 individuals and an uncertain (and likely uncountable) number of Jews living as *comversos*, practicing their traditions and rites only in secret.⁶

The putative truth of these narratives of tolerance is perhaps less instructive—and indeed, less interesting—than the fact of their existence. And while foregrounding the positive valences of any given history may be salutary, it also carries the risk of neatly packaging the past by blending away the ambivalences that constitute it. Yet an antidote exists to the rosy narrative I have just traced through my own, anecdotal experiences at cemeteries and the more public events of *El Gusto* and Aïssa's political *acte manqué*. It can be found in a small but powerful corpus of memoirs written in French by Algerian Jews, in which the complex history of the Jews in Algeria—along with all the attendant questions of identity, subjectivity, belonging, and empathy—are figured as a tangled relational knot, rather than a story of interfaith harmony.

Some of the titles, while already translated into English and widely read and taught in the Anglophone world, are likely more familiar as works of “theory” than as autobiographical essays (see for instance: Jacques Derrida's *The Monolingualism of the Other*⁷ and Hélène Cixous's *Reveries of the Wild Woman: Primitve Scenes*⁸). Other texts, however, have yet to find their way into English and are thus virtually unknown beyond a small French readership: Albert

⁴ “There is unfinished business. The orchestra has yet to stage a full concert in Algeria, because the Jewish musicians, who make up a small but crucial part of the orchestra, have been reluctant to return. The country is still recovering from the civil war that broke out after 1992 election results were annulled, and the Armed Islamic Group declared war on non-Muslims and foreigners. ‘As a Jew and as a singer, I’ve been afraid to go back,’ Mr. Cherki said. ‘I’d love to go back to my country. But it’s a different country now.’” Elaine Sciolino, “Algerian Songs and Friendships, Reborn,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/13/arts/music/algerian-chaabi-musicians-reunite-in-the-band-el-gusto.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>.

⁵ Because Aïssa's proposal turned out to be ill timed (the Israel-Gaza conflict began on July 8, 2014, just a few days after the announcement), and because the virulent and threatening reaction from Algerian Salafists effectively buried the measure, there was never an opportunity to engage the decree.

⁶ See Syfax N’Ath Wezguen’s article on Jews living in secret in Algeria, “La communauté juive pratique sa religion en catimini,” *Tamurt.info*, February 28, 2013, <<http://www.tamurt.info/fr/la-communaute-juive-pratique-sa-religion-en-catimini-en-algerie,3654.html?lang=fr>>. For additional material on the decision to reopen the synagogues, see Sarah Stein, “Algeria’s Jewish Past-Present,” *Jadaliyya*, September 11, 2014, <<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/contributors/197399>>.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁸ Hélène Cixous, *Reveries of the Wild Woman: Primal Scenes*, trans. Beverly Bie Brahic (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2006).

Bensoussan's short story "L'Enfant perdu" (1997); Daniel Timsit's *Algérie, récit anachronique* (1998); Annie Cohen's *Géographie des origines* (2007).

One work, meanwhile, has recently joined the slender ranks of Judeo-Algerian memoirs available to Anglophone readers, in an expert translation by Ann and William Smock: Denis Guénoun's *A Semite: A Memoir of Algeria*, first published in French in 2002. Guénoun was born in 1946 in the coastal city of Oran, to Jewish parents whose lineage in Algeria dates to the Berbers. In 1961, a year before Algeria became independent, the Guénouns joined the exodus of Jews (and native Europeans) to France. Denis attended high school in Avignon (a city in southern France famous for its prestigious annual theater festival) and grew up in the shadow of the Pope's Palace (which also serves as the main stage for the festival). These surroundings were undoubtedly formative for Guénoun, who trained as an actor and later founded his own theater company. After a long career in performance, he became a professor of the philosophy of theater at Paris IV-La Sorbonne, where he still teaches today. Jews, Arabs, Algeria, France, theater: all of this is important to understanding *A Semite*.

Even given its arrival on the literary scene at a moment when the concept of self-writing seems more flexible and capacious than ever, *A Semite* fits awkwardly into the genre of autobiography. Certainly, Guénoun's voice is the subjective glue that holds the narrative together, and his experience of writing the memoir frames the text. Moreover, when he poses the question "Who am I?" the answer—"one more Semite"—bolsters the notion that the titular Semite *is* Denis Guénoun (66). Furthermore, in telling the story of an indigenous Algerian Jewish family, replete with the oscillations of their administrative status (from French citizens to *apatride* and back, thanks to Crémieux and Vichy); their departure on the eve of decolonization; and the psychic wounds resulting from this lifetime of indeterminacy, Guénoun is indeed telling *his* story, assessing his birthright, constructing his self from its position on a very particular family tree.

From the beginning, however, it is also clear that transforming the contents of the family archives—"some limp filing folders" in a "crude, threadbare chest" tucked away in the attic of his brother's home in Marseille (3)—is mostly a matter of telling the story of the father, René Guénoun, the other titular Semite. The idea for the book was born from a request that Guénoun "write a few lines" about his father (3). That the resulting text runs for 150 pages makes it plain that a few lines were not enough. At the same time, the yearning embedded in Guénoun's plain but poignant prose, a structure that manages to be at once obsessively circular and resolutely linear, and the ending, which does not conclude the story but rather returns the author to his labors, "digging and turning over the earth of words" (145), all subtly gesture to the notion that an entire book is also not, and can never be, enough.

The story is divided into three distinct sections. At six chapters and nearly 60 pages each, Parts I and II occupy the main stage, while the three brief chapters of Part III function as an epilogue. Each section is titled with a date: December 1, 1940; June 22, 1961; and November 6, 1989. These chronological notations bring the narration into relative temporal proximity with episodes of historical significance: 1940 places us at the beginning of the Second World War and June 1961 is almost exactly one year before Algerian Independence. While there are no references in the text to the geopolitical significance of 1989 for Guénoun, the possibilities are legion: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War; the return of the Jews to Germany; the beginning of what has been termed "the memory wars" in France—ongoing public debates over the recognition and representation of France's Vichy, and colonial, pasts; or the eve of another critical moment in Algerian history: the "dark decade" of the 1990s.

The import of these dates for Guénoun, however, is personal: his father's birthday was December 1; the family's apartment in Oran was bombed on June 22, 1961; and on November 6, 1989 his parents were exhumed from their respective gravesites and reburied together in a cemetery in Marseille. Guénoun thus hints at a vague collusion between the private and the public, and while this is not negligible and cannot be incidental (indeed, such strong intermingling is the very stuff of Algerian Jewry), his emphasis on the familial suggests an ambivalent desire to wrest the personal from the political while also calling attention to the ways in which History has inscribed itself into his story. Moreover, while the temporal precision of these chronological touchstones allows the reader to chart forward motion, it is perhaps not an accident that any sense of *telos* is undermined by the circularity of the sections, which range back and forth in time, spilling beyond temporal limits established by their titles, following different narrative strands through letters and secondhand stories, or exploring iterations of Guénoun's own memories.

A Semite is placed under the sign(s) of the father. The text begins by evoking René's writing:

On December 1, 1940, my father was in prison in Damascus, Syria. It was his birthday. He wrote to his mother. Twenty-eight years old, Mama. You like to recall how the midwife who brought me into the world one Sunday at noon and read my character: this boy, she said, born on a Sunday at noon, he's here to stroll the boulevards. Did she also picture your son in jail in Asia at twenty-eight, maybe for five years? What a fate, Mama. (3)

The stylistic and fundamental essence of this memoir is visible in its first lines: absent the punctuation that would permit the reader to identify direct discourse, Guénoun ventriloquizes family correspondence (here his father's letters, but soon also his grandparents' love letters, and later administrative papers), narrating transparently between subjects, inhabiting an "I" that alternates, often without signaling its operation, between his own voice and those of the actors in his family drama.

Part I fleshes out René's portrait, his marriage, the birth of his first child (Denis' brother), his training as a schoolteacher at the Teachers College of Algiers-La Bouzaréah, his work as a militant with the Communist party, and eventually his mobilization. More importantly, however, the first part of *A Semite* lays bare the father's politics and ethics in a four-page quasi-monologue that reveals and attempts to sort through the tangle that is the situation of the indigenous Jew in colonial Algeria. In a strict chronology, our author has not yet been born (and won't be until the final pages of Part I), yet René's philosophy is figured as a kind of Socratic dialogue between father and son, a round of questions and answers that go straight to the core of identity, belonging, and naming that the memoir's title evokes. To Denis' questions—"Are we French? Arabs, then? What are Jews? What is the difference between Jews and Christians?" (17-18)—René responds, "We're Semites. Semite means Jew or Arab. We have a lot in common.... Always remember, they and we are in the same fix. And will make a world together, or not" (18-19).

René's narrative of fraternity is interrupted by the arrival of the French and the colonial policy known as the Crémieux decree, which in 1870 granted French citizenship to Jews only. He explains that the generation prior to Crémieux was "mired in darkness, but... France lifted us out of that life, the future came and made off with us.... At the same time that we were lifted up [the Arabs] were tied down to misery, ill health, and ignorance. Now it's too late. They want their own country: they have a right to it. There must be a

prosperous and inclusive Arab nation. Injustice goaded them into this fight. They have to win. I'm helping them" (20-21). René's assessment of colonial injustice—an injustice that appeared to favor "his people"—is also an incisive reading of Franco-Algerian history, perhaps even a prescient inventory of imperialism's impact on the future of "Jews and Arabs." What's more, in pointing to a *convivencia* (mythical or not) that was upended by the arrival of the French, René points out the ways in which categories of people are "made, not found" in the crucible of colonialism.⁹

As Guénoun tells his story, we see the complications and ambiguities of this very situation enacted in his prose. If he has landed upon "Semite" for his title, the occasional slippage in his terminology reminds us that no semantic category is fully satisfactory. For example, while he notes that, "Arab was not the word used to speak of us," a paragraph later he describes his paternal grandmother as "a woman—an Arab woman, judging by her legs and neck, her idioms, aphorisms, singing, her *yoo-yoos* at joyful moments..." (5). Despite the author's declaration, he codes his grandmother's language, manner, and even her body as Arab. Later, he will describe his father with "his head held high, his animal face, less Arab with age, as if history had erased his childhood and his ancestors" (123). But Guénoun will also let us know that "Arab" has not always been the preferred term: "At that time Arabs (whom we called Muslims, as a mark of respect, since Arabs sounded a little harsh) ventured less and less into the European quarter" (115).

If Part I probes the question of naming, attempting to deal with the kernel of meaning held in words like Jew, Arab, French, and Semite, this first section is also the site where Guénoun reveals his engagement with problems of interpretation. "I read everything," (3) Guénoun announces on the first page, referring to the boxes of documents stored away in his brother's attic. Here a simple phrase, an ostensible statement of fact, becomes a declaration of method: Guénoun's writing is also a *reading* both in the regular and strong senses. It is an exercise in navigating the family archive (itself a text full of gaps, breaks, and absences), decoding what it says and does not say, and producing a narrative that accounts for its own pitfalls. Toward the end of Chapter 3, in a paragraph somewhat timidly set off in parentheses, Guénoun explains (and apologizes for?) his system:

(I had to choose: to undertake a thorough investigation, interrogate all the surviving uncles and sisters; but if I had done that I would never have known where to stop, how much to ask, how hard to test the truth. From my ancestors the Berbers I have a taste for method. I like this strange but rigorous assemblage: on the one hand a few ill assorted boxes in Marseille, and on the other the memories that burrow through me. I write at the confluence of these two streams. They alone wash over me—they and the landscape, the taste of the air, the rain.) (27)

Through this discourse on his own method, Guénoun links his memory project to Algeria, and even more pointedly, to ancestral traditions. His "assemblage" of existing texts, on the one hand, and his own memory, on the other, are grounded in a kind of authentic, local knowledge and craftsmanship. This "rigorous method" which nonetheless leaves plenty of room for speculation, has the effect of sewing that speculation back into the original fabric. In another example from Part I, Guénoun begins, then interrupts, a story about a vacation his parents took to France in 1939:

⁹ This notion is at the crux of Sarah Stein's work on the Jews of Southern Algeria, *Sabaran Jews and the Fate of French Algeria* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014), 18.

In the summer of '39, if I am not mistaken (this is a very vague memory of a story my mother used to tell me at a time when the chronology of events before my birth mattered less to me, and my parents' prehistory formed a solid block of frozen narratives and motionless photos situated in a sort of homogenous time when the clothing, the smiles, the tandem bicycles, and the hats were glued together as if to the body of an eternity), in that summer of '39 then, I have the impression they took a bicycle trip... (33)

This comment too is a kind of statement of method, and as in the first case, the parentheses turn philosophy into an aside, diminishing it or at least cloaking it modestly. Yet one easily imagines Guénoun first coming to terms with the importance of history, then attacking that formerly frozen solid block of narrative to chip away at it, to melt down the chunks until they run clear like water, like one of the "two streams" that "wash over" him and form the confluence at which he writes. The section ends with a final commentary on the process underway. The war has ended, as we learn from a notation in René's journal: "Monday, August 5 (1945 presumably), Oran, 5pm. Finally" (65). It is at this moment, when René returns to his wife, that Denis Guénoun is conceived. If René's homecoming marks the beginning of a new world order, a reprise of family life, and even the birth of the author, it also marks the limit of the family archive, whose traces end at this very moment of reconstitution: "Here the letters, the date book, all writing cease... Pencils down, a respite from signs" (66).

There is no respite from signs, however, just their reorientation, their channeling into Guénoun himself, who will pick up the story from this point, and carry it forward, aware that "Something of the missing text ran into my veins" (66). In Part II, which recounts the tense years of "the events" (72) and the family's departure for France, Guénoun will take the biological material of his father's story and return the text from his veins to the page, now infused with and structured by the stuff of his craft. The section opens with Guénoun's announcement that, on the titular date, his father "ran toward the window of his study...opened it and released one long cry" (69). In the mode of prolepsis, he only notes, "I'll explain why." Slowly, the "why" will come into view, a layer topping off the sediments of historical context that begins in 1956: the period of clandestine activities of the Algerian Communist Party and what Guénoun calls "the attacks"—the earliest convulsions of the Algerian War of Independence. Insurrections break out; *fellagas* set up roadblocks; there are referendums; de Gaulle visits Oran; strange men knock at the door. A chapter goes by, and Guénoun reminds us again: "It's about a cry. I'm trying to make it audible, the sound, the break... I take it up as a challenge, to convey something of the stage on which the brief event I'm working toward took place—the window, the room where the window was, the house, the street." Another chapter goes by and he admonishes us: "Be patient, reader" (97).

Guénoun's deferral of the cry is not really about creating suspense; we know from the beginning of the section that the cry will come, and very quickly we know that there will be a bomb (110). The bomb explodes in the penultimate chapter of the section, and when it happens, the Guénouns were ready for it, their vital space having been drastically curtailed, prefiguring, symbolically, the "retreat" they would make after the bomb, "back" to France, to relative safety. "Our life at home backed away as far as possible from the front door. Even my bedroom was too near, and they moved my bed into their room. We had been sleeping like that for some time: three *refugees* in the room farthest from the street, at the back of a huge empty apartment" (111, my emphasis).

The narrative deferral of this event, then, is aimed at *setting the stage*, blocking the action, and providing the backstory. That Guénoun is trying to “convey something of the *stage*” (again, emphasis mine) is perhaps a felicitous *lapsus* on the part of an author best known as an actor, dramaturge, director, professor of the philosophy of theatre. Yet an interest in “staging” is evident in the text’s emphasis on the very *scene* of the crime—the one that will beget the cry—and the amount of narrative devoted to exploring and explaining both the interior of the family home and its situation on the street in Oran. Chapters 7 and 10 even make recourse to schematic drawings—the first showing the position of 11A rue Daumas (and its window) with respect to other landmarks (the school, the nearest cross street), and the second a detailed floor plan of the apartment itself. Guénoun here seems to be calling on his own craft in order to block a scene whose climax will feature a solitary actor before a silent public, declaiming his life in what will turn out to be the swan song of a Jew in Oran.

The content of the cry itself is historical, political, enraged, disturbing. René unleashes his bile on the crowd of Europeans who have gathered in the street below, presumably to see the destruction, and Denis replays his father’s words in free indirect discourse:

It is hot. I remember obscene insults... I hear him furiously adding more and more, draining his guts of filth, without restraint... He hates them, he curses them, slathers them with shit... The Arabs will win. Just as the French and the Russians annihilated Hitler... Their downfall is coming, their filth, their death: it’s now, right now. Algeria will grind them up. The Arabs will soon tear them to bits, blow them to smithereens, fuck them... The country could have lived happy and free, with Arabs, French, Spanish, sun-drenched Algeria. But they ripped everything up, wrecked everything. Centuries of enlightenment spoiled, tossed to the dogs. (123)

What has been “ripped up” refers not only to the damage done to the family apartment, which has had its door ripped off and a gaping hole carved out of its façade, but to the historical wreckage and its fallout, expressed earlier in the text in terms less raw and more philosophical. And if this diatribe seems to figure a time when everyone lived in harmony, it is difficult not to notice that René has already, on the eve of his departure, omitted the Jews from his soliloquy. The cry, then, through its elision of the Jews, has the effect of revising the narrative of tranquil, multiethnic cohabitation.

Yet, the visceral nature of the cry cannot be ignored. It is rage embodied (René does not simply yell but “drains his guts,” producing poisonous material with which he “slathers” the Europeans who listen below), and embodiment is precisely the point. Like Albert Camus, another Algerian who did not quite fit, René is in pain, and his “Algeria” is what hurts.¹⁰ As elsewhere in the memoir—Guénoun’s startling mention of his father’s carnality; the steamy excerpt of his grandparents’ love letters, reproduced *in extenso*; or even the matter of the text that “went into his veins”—here our attention is drawn to the body and the various ways it is pressed into service both literally and metaphorically. It is worth noting, moreover, that Guénoun’s continual recourse to the body resonates with the poetics of Cixous’

¹⁰ In the wake of the Philippeville massacre in Algeria in 1955, Camus wrote to his friend Aziz Kessous: “Vous me croirez sans peine si je vous dis que j’ai mal à l’Algérie, en ce moment, comme d’autres ont mal aux poumons.” The original letter was published in the newspaper *Communauté Algérienne* in 1955. The English translation of the letter can be found in Arthur Goldhammer’s translation of Camus’ *Algerian Chronicles* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2013). I have modified Goldhammer’s English translation, which reads, “Believe me when I tell you that Algeria is where I hurt at this moment...” (113), in order to emphasize the embodiment of Algeria encoded in the original French formulation.

autobiographical text *Reveries of the Wild Woman: Primal Scenes* (with its metaphor of the *placenta praevia*, which blocks the unborn infant's head "like a door" and requires that one "break the waters") and with Derrida's theorizing of flesh in *Circonfession* or his aporetic notion of the "prosthesis of origin" in *The Monolinguisism of the Other*.¹¹

But perhaps most importantly, the text ends with the body: in the final section, after a rapid rehearsal of the death of first his father, then his mother, Guénoun comes to the third part's titular date, the moment when his parents' remains are exhumed and reburied together in the same coffin. The son describes the scene of the gravedigger, who "extracted the bones from the earth as he would have pulled leeks" and, as he reburied them, "dumped it all together, the way you heap up some leftover pieces of an old, dismantled, unrecognizable machine" (143-144). Far, now, from meditations on labels, terms, or nomenclature, *A Semite* concludes on a scene "charged with the symbolism of conjoined remains" (144). Rather than attempt to solve questions of identity and belonging, or to give a name to the complex affective and political knot he has put forth but not fully unraveled, Guénoun at the end sets us before the materiality of the body and the most essential of signs, the barest bones.

Lia Nicole Brozgal
Associate Professor
Department of French and Francophone Studies
University of California, Los Angeles

¹¹ See Hélène Cixous, *Reveries of the Wild Woman*, 93-95; Jacques Derrida, *Circonfession* (Paris: Seuil, 1991); and Derrida, *Monolinguisism of the Other*.

© 2015: Lia Nicole Brozgal

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Brozgal, Lia Nicole, “*My Algeria Hurts*”: *A Review Essay of Denis Gu  non’s A Semite: A Memoir of Algeria*, *SCTIW Review*, January 13, 2015. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/373>.

ISSN: 2374-9288