

## **Cartography and *Clandestinité* in Leïla Sebbar's *Shérazade: 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts***

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**Abstract.** In this paper, I read Leïla Sebbar's staging in her novel *Shérazade: 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* of the resistance by children of North African and other immigrants in the early 1980s to the French state's cartographic modes and documents of control. The paper will consider the many uses to which the map was put by the French state in its colonization of North Africa and particularly Algeria, and later in its attempts to control the banlieues its policies of citizenship and cartographic control yielded on the margins of Paris. In this context, I will explore the ways in which the novel's characters, living clandestinely in a *squatt*, simultaneously resist, put to use, and even supercede state documents of control as they disrupt everyday life and conduct heists across the city of Paris. The paper will explore unofficial cartographies of Paris, from those afforded by the *radios libres* and alternative publications such as *Libération* and *Sans Frontières*, to oral and almost proverbial networks of knowledge criss-crossing the city of Paris, while also tracing the uses to which supplemental cartographic sketches and counterfeit identity cards are put in the pages of the novel. The paper will be in dialogue with theoretical and critical formulations of space, cartography, and state control put forward by Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, and Tom Conley. The paper will conclude with a consideration of the means and limits of resistance by the novel's characters in the context of this body of theory and criticism.

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Maps have a long history of entanglement with the emergence and endurance of modern states and empires. As Tom Conley has noted, in the context of the rise of the modern nation state, "it was seen that maps could be used, like emblems, to imprint upon a nation a sense of its statehood . . . Maps could assist governing bodies in surveying and delimiting space, for the purpose of imposing laws and regulating commerce."<sup>1</sup> In the ensuing creation and consolidation of empires, Conley continues, following Michel de Certeau, Western Europe witnessed the folding into the rationale of the state "the alignment of morality with visual perspective and with technologies of engraving."<sup>2</sup>

Its rise intimately bound up with that of the printing press, the map became a tool, as José Rabasa explains, of “qualitative appraisal of . . . political and military details for strategic alignments.”<sup>3</sup> Maps lent states a spatial perspective experienced as a panoptic position from which to survey and plan future operations. Military action and other modes of control and coercion converted these cartographically produced designs into modern nations and empires, reifying the authority of both the map and the state.<sup>4</sup>

With this modern state and its tools of panoptic, militarily mobilizable surveillance, came a consolidation and centralization of government with its center in the metropole. As cartographic methods of surveying and delimiting space became more refined, so too did the ability of the modern state to perform what Henri Lefebvre outlines as one of its main functions: “the organization of space, the regularization of its flows, and the control of its networks.”<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising, then, that one of the first things the French did in their nineteenth century expeditions into North Africa was to make a map.<sup>6</sup> As Timothy Mitchell relates, when the time came for building the colonial French city, “its layout and its buildings were to represent, in the words of the architect who built Rabat, ‘the genius for order, proportion and clear reasoning’ of the French nation.”<sup>7</sup> Not limiting their scope to the center of the city alone, the French project would attempt to “mark every space and gap,” to be “as continuous as a system of disciplinary power, to include even the ‘native town’ portrayed on the European post-cards.”<sup>8</sup> This centralized, cartographic French state and then empire converged upon Paris, the hub of a radiating system of roads which became with time the heart of a French empire that planned and built cities as a substantiation of its “genius for order, proportion and clear reasoning.”

Though North Africans and particularly Algerians were recruited by the French during both World Wars to assist in the war efforts, it was not until 1947 and the passage of a statute that aimed at “binding the country [of Algeria] more closely to the colonial motherland” through the granting of “the right to move freely in and out of France,” that the North African population really grew on the outskirts of metropolitan France and particularly Paris.<sup>9</sup> Born in France, the children of these North African immigrants inflected the landscape of metropolitan France with their music, literature, film and protest.

Leïla Sebbar’s novel *Shérazade: 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* [*Shérazade: 17 years old, brown, frizzy hair, green eyes*], published in French in Paris in 1982, surveys the demographic history of Paris that is

marked by the legacy of a long history of immigration from outside the consolidated boundaries of the nation, both preceding and contemporaneous with the post-1947 influx of North Africans to France. The novel is in dialogue with the ways in which the French nation went about “the organization of space, the regularization of its flows, and the control of its networks,” particularly in Paris itself, and the ways in which this imperative to spatial control greeted Paris’s latest influx with a planned marginalization. Discussing the cheap real estate in the *banlieue*, Sebbar writes, “no one would want to live near a Z.U.P. that would house all the immigrants whom the renovation of Paris had chased far into the *banlieue*.”<sup>10</sup> Isolated from other residents of the city and far from the center and its networks, the state-planned renovation of the city drove Paris’s immigrants to the *banlieues*, the very edges of the map of Paris.

We quickly learn that the *plans* [maps] and *cartes routières* [roadmaps] that appear repeatedly in the novel as tools of the French state are somehow inadequate in the text. When we meet the character Djamila, she is in search of a building whose address does not exist, and enters a café looking for help in locating a second address she had written down before leaving Marseille. Though “she knew how to read a map. She had come by herself to Paris from Marseille with a *carte routière*,”<sup>11</sup> Djamila’s attempts to find her way in the *banlieue* are repeatedly frustrated. Hearing the address she seeks, the café patron tells her “that it’s not next door, that it’s impossible to explain, that she would get lost if she was not from around here.”<sup>12</sup> Trying again to locate the address, she looks at a city map with the café patron, whose “index finger, moving more and more erratically, would come to a stop wherever.”<sup>13</sup> Her final attempt to find a place to stay by studying the map without the help of the café patron evaporates in the text as the narrative shifts to tell the story of Djamila’s departure from Marseille and her family there. It is only when by chance Krim, a resident of the *city*, finds her on rue Saint-Séverin and brings her back to the *squatt* where he lives that Djamila finally finds a place in Paris. As readers, our first encounter with cartography reveals the relativity of its authority in the novel, intimating the narrative’s participation in what Graham Huggan describes as “resistance to the notion of cartographic enclosure and to the imposed cultural limits that notion implies.”<sup>14</sup>

This scene and its suggestion of the relativity of the authority of the official *plan* of Paris directs us to other systems of spatial knowledge at work in the novel. Without the institutional means to engrave an enduring map, alternative ways of navigating the marginal geographies

of the city take shape organically. The personal and oral nature of one such network is alluded to above as Djamila finds her way to the *squatt*, and is reinforced much later in the novel when, after having not slept in her bed at the *squatt* for a period of time, Shérazade returns to find her room occupied by two men from Lyon who “arrived by way of *le téléphone arabe*.”<sup>15</sup>

Alternative networks of the immigrant communities in France, such as the oral chain connecting Arabs in France that is implied by *le téléphone arabe*, enjoy only a very partial authority in the novel. This becomes evident during the course of the novel as Mériem and her brothers search for their sister, Shérazade, who ran away from their family home and is living with Djamila, Krim and others in the *squatt*. Her brothers attempt to mobilize *le téléphone arabe* in their search:

They went wherever they heard tell that the run-aways from immigrant housing complexes, Arabs, could be found . . . They went to the nightclubs where it was said that the women who worked there were often Algerian minors . . . They saw girls who could, in effect, have been their sister, but never Shérazade.<sup>16</sup>

The brothers’ quest for Shérazade has them following an oral trail across a network of locations connected by a knowledge that is local and largely anecdotal. *Le téléphone arabe* in the end, however, leaves the brothers with only a string of girls fitting their sister’s description – 17-years-old, brown, frizzy hair, green eyes – but not Shérazade. Attempts at using this network to deliver a message to their sister by leaving notes with her name on them at cafés and bars across the city are ultimately inconclusive. After making yet another tour of this circuit of cafés and bars, this time to see if their sister has come to pick up any of their messages, they discover that “two men said they had seen a girl to whom they showed the envelope, and who took it. One insisted that she had black eyes; the other that her eyes were green or blue, bright, he was sure.”<sup>17</sup> Sure only of their uncertainty that they have reached their sister, the brothers are left to await a call from Shérazade that does not come.

They await this call “with the same patience as Mériem,”<sup>18</sup> their other sister, who, in her attempt to make contact with Shérazade, has herself tapped into the alternative networks that criss-cross the metropole. We first hear of Mériem’s attempts to deliver a message to her sister when Shérazade is on the métro listening to Carbone 14<sup>19</sup> on her walkman. Just before Shérazade hears her name announced, we learn that she “knew the name, frequency, and place on the dial of all the

radio stations,"<sup>20</sup> which appear in the text as a list that Shérazade "could recite in order."<sup>21</sup> She knows by heart the cartography of the *radios libres*, a network that circulates messages to its listeners situated all over the map of Paris, and even to those who, like Shérazade with her walkman, are moving across it. Indeed, the *radios libres*'s saturation of the Paris grid is made legible when her lover Julien turns on his radio: "he cursed because one can no longer find France-Musique with these *radios libres* so close."<sup>22</sup>

The radio announcer, after a long rant about the unusualness of Shérazade's name, reads: "'Shérazade, it's me Mériem. Just say that you are alive.'"<sup>23</sup> Upon hearing this, Shérazade runs aboveground to the nearest phone booth, but "she hangs up before hearing the telephone ring at her house."<sup>24</sup> The telephone lines are held out, briefly, as a mode of contact, yet in the end Shérazade, by hanging up, resists this contact as she resists contact through the *radios libres*. As readers we know that Shérazade received her sister's message and never responded, yet we find out pages later that:

Mériem listened to the independent radio stations for messages every day, looked through the classifieds in *Libération* and *Sans Frontière* that her sister regularly read. She saw Anna-Maria at school but she never had a letter from Shérazade. Every time the telephone rang, she would rush to pick it up, for nothing.<sup>25</sup>

Though Mériem and her brothers try to use the available alternative pathways that map the city to find their sister, they remain unable to locate Shérazade in the multiple grids and networks of Paris.

It is not only Shérazade's family that remains ignorant of her itinerary in the novel. When Shérazade has not been around the *squatt* for a while, Pierrot decides to go and look for her. Basile, like Pierrot a resident of the *squatt*, wonders aloud how Pierrot will find her, as neither of them know what Shérazade does nor where she goes when she leaves the *squatt*. Julien meets with similar difficulty in discerning her location in the city of Paris, for she likewise gives him no indication of her route or destination before leaving his place. The residents of the *squatt* themselves do not know each others' full itineraries, each living in at least partial *clandestinité*. Pierrot "lived in clandestine resistance" and "gave neither his name nor his address"<sup>26</sup> to anyone outside the *squatt*. Shérazade goes by several names – her own, Rosa, Camille – and never gives out the address of the *squatt* to anyone. The cartographic itinerary of Driss, another resident of the *squatt*, is at times entirely unknown to

the others, as when “he played cards with some young kids and some less young, Algerians and Moroccans, in places whose name and address he would never reveal.”<sup>27</sup>

*Clandestinité* provides a lens through which to understand the relationship between the multiple, overlapping itineraries of the residents of the *squatt* and the official map of Paris. When Shérázade discusses with the residents of the squatt a film on which she, Julien and a friend are working, she does so “without giving them his [the friend’s] address, not thinking they would really target a friend of hers – no, just the same.”<sup>28</sup> By not sharing his address, Shérázade effectively grants her friend a clandestine existence with respect to her fellow residents of the squatt. It is a precaution, taken so that her friends cannot make his apartment the site of their next heist, which returns us to the potential uses of the map. As Conley explains, maps “today fall under the category of ‘locational imaging’ and reach their most refined condition in military technologies.”<sup>29</sup> Using *clandestinité* means obscuring location, and becomes a way of at least partially taking refuge in what de Certeau names an “atopia,” a place that Conley elaborates as being “*un lieu pour se perdre*,<sup>30</sup> that takes [one] off the modern map.”<sup>31</sup> *Clandestinité* not only offers an atopian refuge from the official cartography of Paris, but, as will be seen below, it becomes a strategic vantage point from which to initiate the characters’ various plans of action.

In his seminal work *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau elaborates “the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of [Foucauldian] ‘discipline.’”<sup>32</sup> These clandestine forms are “*ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order,”<sup>33</sup> such as maps and radios. Thinking about the use of maps in the context of the multiple cartographic modes at play in the novel opens a reading of the novel consonant with de Certeau’s imperative that we begin “recognizing in these ‘uses’ ‘actions’ (in the military sense of the word) that have their own formality and inventiveness.”<sup>34</sup>

The state-issued *carte d’identité* [identity card] is yet another document of state power that is made use of by the characters of the novel. In her discussion of identity cards in the context of Marc Garanger’s photography and Leïla Sebbar’s novels, Karina Eileraas considers the “political objectives of the identity card” during the Algerian revolution to be “to classify and identify Algerians to the French military”<sup>35</sup> The identity card, notes Eileraas, in its capacity to render Algerians “‘visible and legible’ to French colonial authorities... formalized the French fantasy of empire.”<sup>36</sup> The *cartes d’identité*, like maps, supported the

French in their quest for “the organization of space, the regularization of its flows, and the control of its networks” in colonial Algeria. The uses to which Shérazade as well as others in the novel put these *cartes d'identité* in the space of the metropole is a narrative substantiation of de Certeau's observation that “the weak must continually turn to their own ends [those] forces [that are] alien to them.”<sup>37</sup> By having fake identity cards made, Shérazade and others in the *squatt* represent an example of de Certeau's paradigm. Shérazade's *carte d'identité* will make her eighteen, a *majeure* named Rosa Mire, and she will be French. The card will allow her to circulate freely because it will misclassify and misidentify her to “les flics” [the cops] in their surveillance project, putting to use what *les flics* take to be their own writing. Fake identity cards consolidate *clandestinité* by obscuring one's location on the state's classificatory grid even at the moment that they seem to reveal it, attesting to what de Certeau identifies as the ability of the North African living in Paris to “find *ways of using* the constraining order of the place.”<sup>38</sup>

Returning to the use of maps by the characters in the novel, we can then ask, along with de Certeau: “What do they do with it?”<sup>39</sup> What they do with it becomes clear in one of the few moments when the often separate and clandestine itineraries of the residents of the *squatt* converge, namely in their Bobigny operation. Krim intercepts Shérazade upon her return after several days away from the *squatt* to see if she is coming with them to Bobigny. When she asks him why, Krim explains that they are planning the robbery of an electronics store, which in the novel represents the grotesque abundance and over-production of consumer commodity culture. As they get ready to leave the *squatt*, “Pierrot prepare[s] the tools, the pistols, the gloves . . . the map, they look at it in the café alongside the sketch of the small house nearby, the streets of the area that Mouloud had drawn by hand.”<sup>40</sup> The *plan* of Paris finds its place in Pierrot's way of using as one of the tools of an operation ultimately meant to provide better music for the *squatt*, a sort of sonic urban beautification project.

Shérazade's encounter with a former Algerian militant relates this minor operation of theft and beautification to a history of clandestine ways of using the imposed cartographic order. Looking with Shérazade at a *carte routière* of Algeria that she has placed on a Paris sidewalk, the Algerian man “caught himself re-covering the clandestine routes worked out by the resistance strategists in Paris.”<sup>41</sup> The French map of Algeria, a product of French expeditions and subsequent colonization of North Africa, gave the former generations' militants the perspective

on their country that created the very possibility of clandestine networks spanning the Mediterranean. When, moments later, “passers-by trampled the map that had been lying open in front of the bench”<sup>42</sup> as they navigated their ways through the streets of Paris, the struggle between the Algerians and the French for control over the map of Algeria is put in relief.

The legacy of Algerian independence hovers ambiguously over both French national cartography as well as the spatial tactics of the residents of the *squatt*. In his discussion of “use,” de Certeau notes that the “cultural activity of the non-producers of culture” is an activity that is “unsigned, unreadable.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, one of the key ways that the many characters in Leïla Sebbar’s *Shérazade* are able to resist and make use of the cartographic order is through the constant upkeep of their *clandestinité*, a condition predicated on one’s actions remaining anonymous and illegible. Their only access to spatial control such as that consolidated by the French in Algeria and later re-claimed by the Algerian nation for itself, is a borrowed one. Indeed, de Certeau points out that “use” is made up of “practices that produce without capitalizing, that is, without taking control over time.”<sup>44</sup> As a partial mapping of cartographic resistance, Sebbar’s novel occupies an ambivalent space, and this ambivalence directs its readers’ attention to the dependency of the characters’ creatively parasitic tactics upon the dominant order they are ever seeking to resist.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Conley, “On Cartography and Literature: Maurice Bouguereau and His *Théâtre françois* (1594),” in François Cornilliat, Ullrich Langer, and Douglas Kelly eds. *What Is Literature? 1100–1600* (Lexington, Kentucky: French Forum, 1993), 125.

<sup>2</sup> Conley, “On Cartography,” 125.

<sup>3</sup> José Rabasa, “Allegories of *Atlas*,” in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin eds., *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 362.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Carter, “Spatial History,” in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin eds., *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 377.

<sup>5</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (London: Blackwell, 1991), 383.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Conley, “Algeria Off-Map,” *Parallax* 4, no. 2 (1998): 104.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 161.

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell, 163.



<sup>9</sup> Alec G. Hargreaves, *Voices from the North African Immigrant Community in France: Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction* (New York: Berg, 1991), 10.

<sup>10</sup> Leïla Sebbar, *Shérazade: 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* (Paris: Stock, 1982), 65. All translations are my own. Here, the original reads: "Personne ne voulait habiter près d'une Z.U.P. qui allait abriter tous les immigrés que la rénovation de Paris chassait loin en banlieue." Z.U.P. stands for "zones à urbaniser en priorité," or zones to be urbanized, or developed, first.

<sup>11</sup> Sebbar, 29. "Elle savait lire un plan. Elle était venue seule de Marseille à Paris, avec une carte routière."

<sup>12</sup> Sebbar, 28. "Que c'était pas la porte à côté, que c'était impossible à expliquer, qu'elle se perdrait si elle n'était pas d'ici."

<sup>13</sup> Sebbar, 29. "L'index de plus en plus raide allait s'arrêter n'importe où."

<sup>14</sup> Graham Huggan, "Decolonizing the Map," in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin eds., *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 408.

<sup>15</sup> Sebbar, 222. "Étaient arrivés par le téléphone arabe."

<sup>16</sup> Sebbar, 70–71. "Ils étaient allés partout où ils avaient entendu dire que les fugueuses des cités immigrées, des Arabes, se retrouvaient... Ils étaient entrés dans les boîtes où on disait que les entraîneuses étaient souvent des Algériennes mineures... Ils avaient vus en effet des filles qui auraient pu être leur soeur, mais jamais Shérazade."

<sup>17</sup> Sebbar, 73. "Deux des garçons disaient avoir vu une fille à qui ils avaient montré l'enveloppe et qui l'avait prise. L'un affirma qu'elle avait les yeux noirs; l'autres les yeux verts ou bleus, clairs, c'était sûr."

<sup>18</sup> Sebbar, 73. "Avec la même patience que Mériem".

<sup>19</sup> Carbone 14 is one of the *radios libres* or independent radio stations that in the early 1980s, following the decentralization of the radio system in 1981, broadcasted in Paris. Sebbar, 34. "Carbone 14 passait des messages comme beaucoup d'autres radios, mais cette fois Shérazade cessa de regarder autour d'elle pour écouter fixement le radio. Elle venait d'entendre son prénom."

<sup>20</sup> Sebbar, 33. "Connaissait le nom, la fréquence, la place sur le cadran, de toutes les radios."

<sup>21</sup> Sebbar, 34. "Aurait pu... réciter dans l'ordre."

<sup>22</sup> Sebbar, 90. "Il pestait parce qu'on ne trouve plus France-Musique avec ces radios libres trop près."

<sup>23</sup> Sebbar, 35. "Shérazade, c'est moi Mériem. Dis seulement que tu es vivante."

<sup>24</sup> Sebbar, 35. "Elle racrocha avant d'entendre le téléphone sonner chez elle."

<sup>25</sup> Sebbar, 69. "Mériem écoutait chaque jour les radios libres pour les messages, regardaient les petites annonces de *Libération* et de *Sans Frontière* que sa soeur lisait régulièrement. Elle voyait Anna-Maria au lycée mais elle n'avait toujours pas de lettre de Shérazade. Chaque fois que le téléphone sonnait, elle se précipitait, pour rien."

<sup>26</sup> Sebbar, 58. "Vivait en résistant clandestin"; "ne donnait jamais son nom, ni son adresse."

<sup>27</sup> Sebbar, 79. "Il avait joué aux cartes avec d'autres jeunes et moins jeunes, des Algériens et des Marocains, dans des endroits dont il n'avait jamais révélé le nom ni l'adresse."

<sup>28</sup> Sebbar, 218. "Sans leur donner l'adresse [de Julien] se dit-elle, ne pensant pas vraiment qu'ils viendraient braquer chez un copain à elle – non quand même."

<sup>29</sup> Tom Conley, "Putting French Studies on the Map," *Diacritics* 28, no. 3 (1998): 32–33.

<sup>30</sup> “A place for getting lost.”

<sup>31</sup> Tom Conley, “Michel de Certeau and the Textual Icon,” *Diacritics* 22, no. 2 (1992): 43.

<sup>32</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xiv–xv.

<sup>33</sup> de Certeau, xiii.

<sup>34</sup> de Certeau, 30.

<sup>35</sup> Karina Eieleraas, “Reframing the Colonial Gaze: Photography, Ownership, and Feminist Resistance,” *MLN* 118 (2003): 816.

<sup>36</sup> Eieleraas, 812.

<sup>37</sup> de Certeau, xix.

<sup>38</sup> de Certeau, 30.

<sup>39</sup> de Certeau, 31.

<sup>40</sup> Sebbar, 106. “Pierrot préparait les outils, les pistolets, les gants . . . le plan, ils le regarderaient dans un café en même temps que le croquis du pavillon, des rues du terrain vague que Mouloud avait dessinés d’après nature.”

<sup>41</sup> Sebbar, 174. “Se surprenait à reparcourir les trajets clandestins que les réseaux avaient mis au point dans Paris.”

<sup>42</sup> Sebbar, 174. “Des passants avez piétiné la carte qui était restée ouverte devant le banc.”

<sup>43</sup> de Certeau, xvii.

<sup>44</sup> de Certeau, xx.