



# It's only a mirage: Tahar Djaout's critique of logocentrism in *L'Invention du désert*

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## Abstract

Set in Algeria, France, and the Arabian Peninsula in the early twelfth and the late twentieth centuries, *L'Invention du désert* is about an author who reexamines his life and his craft while writing a history of the Almoravid dynasty that ruled Andalusia and a large portion of the Maghreb from 1056 to 1152 CE. Accordingly, the novel is made of two basic narrative strands. The first focuses on the private musings and reminiscences of the narrator, moving forwards and backwards in space and time and going all the way to his childhood. The second narrative strand recounts the life, rise to power, and downfall of Mohamed ibn Toumert, the religious scholar and zealot whose followers brought down the Almoravids and founded the Almohad dynasty that lasted from 1152 to 1269 CE. The two major story-lines that constitute the novel are brought together by the narrator's reflection on history and archiving for the purpose of problematizing the way Algerian history is conceived and used to address two major social and political concerns confronting Algerians: religious fundamentalism and national identity. The purpose of this article is to examine how Djaout uses the desert both as a topography and a metaphor to challenge the logocentrism of religious fundamentalism and narrow and essentialist definitions of Algerianess. The paper at the same time shows how the understanding and critique of historical logocentrism that are advanced in *L'Invention du désert* parallel Jacques Derrida's philosophy put forward in *Of Grammatology* (Derrida in *Of grammatology*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1976) and other early works. Because the manuscripts, critical of Islam as practiced under Almoravid rule, Ibn Toumert carries with him function as archives, the paper also engages with some of the themes Derrida developed later in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Derrida in *Archive fever: a Freudian impression*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996).

**Keywords** Archives · Logocentrism · Desert · Tahar Djaout · Jacques Derrida · Fundamentalism

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## Introduction

Literature is to a large extent a response to and reflection on a society's ongoing issues and concerns. It is also a function of the predominant intellectual norms. Thus, much realism—the depiction of the mundane, everyday life, without embellishment—developed in relation to a new concern for the poor urban masses and the peasantry of Europe in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, and was influenced by anti-romanticism, the natural sciences, and August Comte's positivist philosophy. For Realists, Romanticism was not an appropriate response to the new social conditions: they thought it is escapist, exaggeratedly sentimental, and elitist. Modernism—the examination of the self and consciousness—developed in reaction to the carnage and meaninglessness of World War I and was influenced by Freudian and Jungian psychologies, the philosophies of Frederick Nietzsche and Henri Bergson, and developments in physics such as Albert Einstein's relativity theory and Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle.

Neither literary movement can be understood independently of these social preoccupations and intellectual frameworks. Likewise, the new Algerian historical novels such as Tahar Djaout's *L'Invention du désert* (The Invention of the Desert, 1987), Assia Djebar's *Loin de Médine* (Far from Medina, 1991), Rachid Boudjedra's *La Prise de Gibraltar* (The Conquest of Gibraltar, 1987), Mohamed Sari's *Pluies d'or* (Rains of Gold, 2015), and Waciny Laredj's *La Maison Andalouse* (The Andalusian House, 2017) are a response to and reflection on the issues of national identity and religious fundamentalism that are at the center of Algerian cultural and political debates. They also exhibit—in different degrees—certain obvious features of post-structuralism, undoubtedly the predominant contemporary philosophy. With Jacques Derrida, they share the belief in the primacy of language and the indeterminacy of meaning; with Michel Foucault, the idea that claims to truth are intertwined with structures of power; and finally, with Jean-Francois Lyotard, they share an incredulity toward ideologies of emancipation and historical theories on the grand scale, which he calls *metanarratives*, on the grounds that any such theories and ideologies are inevitably self-interested and, consequently, oppressive.

To achieve their goals, the new Algerian historical novelists turn to history: Djebar to the early days of Islam, Boudjedra to the conquest of the Iberian peninsula, Sari to the War of Independence, and Laredj to the times of the Corsairs. Djaout turns to Mohamed ibn Toumert, the religious scholar and zealot whose followers brought down the Almoravids who ruled Andalusia and a large portion of the Maghreb from 1056 to 1152 CE.<sup>1</sup> and founded the Almohad dynasty (from Arabic *al-Muwahhidūn* or those who assert the strict unity of God) that lasted from 1152 to 1269 CE.

Algerian writers' interest in history is quite understandable; historical questions are in many ways central to other questions concerning politics and identity. History is often looked at—in Algeria and elsewhere—to find solutions to

<sup>1</sup> The Almoravids (al-Mourabitoune) were a war-like religious brotherhood that in the eleventh century swept out of Western Sahara purify the faith, establishing a mighty empire that stretched from what is now Western Sahara to southern Spain.

current social and political problems. At a more fundamental level, however, history is evoked to articulate and assert a national identity and thereby elicit a sense of collective pride and allegiance to a state or a nation by celebrating its past strengths and achievements.

Accordingly, Djaout turns to Ibn Toumert; first, because the achievements of the Almohad Empire profoundly marked the history, philosophy, science, literature, architecture, and art of the Western Muslim world; and, second, because the worldview and politics of contemporary fundamentalists are similar to Ibn Toumert's. They both appeal to supposedly universal, absolute or ultimate truths; they both hold a strict and highly selective interpretation of the Koran and the Islamic tradition; and they both think they can make sense of and find a way out of social problems in the supposedly paradisiacal age of the Prophet and the Rightly Guided Caliphs who succeeded him.

The purpose of this article is to examine how Djaout uses the desert both as a topography and a metaphor to challenge the logocentrism of religious fundamentalism and the narrow, exclusive, and essentialist definitions of Algerianess held by Arabists and Amazighists alike.<sup>2</sup>

In its critique of fundamentalism and essentialist conceptions of identity, *L'Invention du désert* is less concerned with the past as such, and more with the way that it is remembered and "represented" in a variety of narrative forms. This makes it a work of historiographic metafiction, simultaneously engaging with ontological and epistemological issues regarding history and fiction while weaving a compelling story using postmodernist narrative techniques: self-reflexivity, fragmentation, temporal distortion, and non-closure. As Linda Hutcheon explains, the historiographic metafictional novels are not "just another version of the historical novel, or the nonfictional novel," they are "intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical knowledge" (Hutcheon 1988, p. 5).

In reading and interpreting *L'Invention du désert*, this paper follows a two-stage method. In the first stage, it posits the fundamentalist ideology and essentialist definitions of national identity in their full strength as forms of logocentrism, coherent and stable systems, free of multiplicity and undecidability. Then, in the second stage, the paper shows that that coherence and that stability are only apparent; they are beset by contradictions and conceal alternative views through subtle but insidious workings of power. In *Writing and Difference*, Derrida explains the difference between the two methods as follows:

The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the order of the sign and which the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned to the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or ontotheology—in other words, throughout the entire history—has

<sup>2</sup> In this article, "Amazighists" is used to refer to the activists who advocate a greater recognition and revival of Tamazight language and culture and "Arabists" to those who tend to think that Maghrebi culture is exclusively Arab.

dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play. (1981, p. 292)

The paper at the same time shows how the understanding and critique of historical logocentrism that are advanced in *L'Invention du désert* parallel Jacques Derrida's philosophy put forward in *Of Grammatology* (1976) and other early works. Because the manuscripts, critical of Islam as practiced under Almoravid rule, Ibn Toumert carries with him function as archives, the paper also engages with some of the themes Derrida developed later in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1996), a reflection on archives using Freud's thought, Freudian archives, and Yosef Yerushalmi's study of Freud *Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (1993).

In "The Archive and the Human Sciences: Notes Toward a Theory of the Archive," Irving Velody writes, "[A]s the background of all knowledge research stands the archive. Appeals to ultimate truths, adequacy and plausibility in the work of humanities and social science rest on archival presuppositions" (1988, p. 1). Archives are not only central to recovering the past, as Velody points out, they are also implicated in the control of memory and history and are, thus, eminently political. As Derrida puts it in *Archive Fever*, "There is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation" (p. 3). Velody's and Derrida's statement are all the more true of the manuscripts (archives) Ibn Toumert carries with him at the risk of his life—along with a leather flask of water and an olive-wood walking stick: the Koran, obviously, but also writings critical of Almoravid theologians and jurists.<sup>3</sup> The manuscripts are, in Derrida's words derived from his investigation of the Greek *Arche* and *Archeon*, both "commencement" and "commandment" (p. 1). They are a commencement because they refer to a beginning, an origin; in this case, the Word of God and some imagined "golden age" of a pristine and original Islam. They are "commandment" because they have the force of legislation. Ibn Toumert is also, according to the same Greek etymological inquiry, the equivalent of the Greek *Archons*, the superior magistrates who make or represent the law; he gathers, orders, preserves and protects the documents he carries and, more importantly, has the "hermeneutic authority" to interpret them. As Derrida explains, "The archons are first of all the documents' guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives" (p. 1).

In this article "archive" is understood more broadly than usual. It includes public records such as those in the United States' National Archives and Records Administration, but also private collections, monuments, artifacts, vestiges, ruins, and everything that has to do with what Derrida calls "social memory" (Derrida 1984, p. 26). Indeed, ruins, such as those of Tahouda in the Algerian Sahara provide a link to the past and are either neglected, protected, or destroyed by the powers that be like

<sup>3</sup> The manuscripts were later compiled under Abdelmoumen's supervision to make *A'az Ma Yutlab* (The Most Noble Calling), *Muhadhi al-Muwatta'* (Alternative to Imam Malik ibn Anas' *Muwatta'*), and *Talkhis Sahih Muslim* (Summary of *Sahih Muslim*).

any historical documents. “Much like the archive,” Thomas Houlton explains, “the monument finds itself at this intersection of the nation-state, the individual, the legal constitution, memory, history, politics, representation, writing, the dead, the spirit world, an afterlife, ghosts. It is imbued with fantastic power, from which ‘men and gods command’” (2022, p. 53).

## The social and political context of *L’Invention du désert*

To understand *L’Invention du désert*, it is necessary to put it into a wider social context and provide a short summary of the novel.

It is set in the 1980s, a crucial period in Algerian history in which the rise of religious fundamentalism and new concerns with national identity put Algerian politicians and intellectuals under enormous pressure. Indeed, after the War of Independence, the issues of national origin and identity became prominent, and a new preoccupation with history developed with different aspects of Algerian past being emphasized, sometimes at the expense of others that are no less important. The 1980s have also seen the rise of religious fundamentalism, threatening the very fabric of Algerian society.

The major preoccupation of the government after Algeria gained its independence in 1962 was to pull the population out of poverty and modernize the country. President Houari Boumedienne (1965–1978) launched a program to build an economically independent and socialist Algeria. He nationalized natural gas and oil resources and embarked on an ambitious program of industrialization following the orthodox Soviet model. At the same time, he built a one-party system of government, with the Front de Liberation Nationale (National Liberation Front, FLN) at its helm. Aware that building socialism in a country that was still socially conservative without popular support is difficult, the governments of President Ahmed Ben Bella (1962–1965) and President Houari Boumedienne integrated a form of progressive Islam into their ideology, arguing that both socialism and Islam are egalitarian and both are committed to social justice. Still, Ben Bella and Boumedienne faced constant challenge from religious groups such as the association of Oulemas or religious scholars and the *al-Qiyam* (Values) association. The Oulemas, for example, accused Ben Bella of paying only lip service to Islam. They, at first, backed Boumedienne but withdrew their support after he took a leftist turn in the early seventies. They failed to produce any change, however, and soon after two small gangs, *Ansar Allah* (God’s partisans) led by Mahfoud Nahnah in the seventies and *al-Hharakah al-Islamiyyah al mousallahà* (Armed Islamic Movement) led by Mustapha Bouyali in the eighties took up arms against the government. The groups carried out a series of attacks against the military and engaged in acts of sabotage, including sawing off utility poles and cutting telephone lines, hoping to destabilize the government and gain political advantage. They were eventually defeated.

To prevent the Islamists from presenting a real threat to the state, Boumedienne and his successor, Chadli Bendjedid, sought to co-opt them through concessions while at the same time restricting their activities and bringing religious institutions under state control. Thus, they declared Islam to be the state religion and the

foundation of collective identity and changed the day of rest from Sunday to Friday. At the same time, the government dissolved the *l-Qiyam* (Values) association on September 22, 1966, kept a close eye on militant religious groups, and made the imams civil servants. Despite their efforts, Boumedienne and Bendjedid could not stop the Islamists from consolidating their hold on a segment of the population. Fanaticism continued to rise over the next decade, leading to the creation of the *Front Islamique du Salut* (Islamic Salvation Front, FIS) whose members were even more inflexible than the previous groups, ushering in the reign of terror in the 1990s.

In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the Algerian nationalists and intellectuals directed their energies toward the goal of independence. They looked for Islam, common customs, and a shared history of struggle against foreign invaders to bring Algerians together against the colonizers.

Having finally gained independence July 5, 1962, the articulation of Algerian national identity took center stage again. This time, however, it was related to the need to pull the population out of poverty, modernize the country, and establish unity and order on the aftermath of a devastating war. Above all, the authorities stressed the war effort. Furthermore, in their endeavor to articulate a new national identity, they assumed language plays a crucial role. As a result, the government adopted Arabic as the official language of the country on the grounds that it is the language of the majority of the population and because it is closely associated with Islam, the religion of almost all Algerians, and called it “the national language.” It also made Islam the state religion. Thus, *Le Program de Tripoli* (Tripoli Program) states: “The role of the national culture will be, first and foremost, to give back to the Arabic language, which is the very expression of the cultural values of our country, its dignity and effectiveness as a language of civilization” (Algerian Government 1962). The Algiers Charter adopted by the first congress of the *Front de Libération Nationale* (National Liberation Front) on April 21, 1964, reiterates the same idea: “Algeria is an Arab-Muslim country ... The Arab-Muslim essence of the Algerian nation has constituted a solid bulwark against its destruction by colonialism. However, this definition does not include any reference to ethnicity and rules out any underestimation of what was present before the Arab arrival” (Algerian Government 1964).

By the end of the 1970s, the social and cultural situation of the country started changing as did the purpose of articulating an Algerian national identity. Thus, while acknowledging Arabic language and culture as important dimensions of the Algerian personality, some Algerians objected to the idea of the country as exclusively Arab. They wanted a new articulation of Algerian identity that includes and celebrates the Amazigh heritage of the population and called for a greater acknowledgment and the revival of Tamazight, the language from which Kabyle, Chaoui, and M’zabi dialects are derived.<sup>4</sup> Some however, held to narrow, exclusive, and essentialist definitions of Algerianess.

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<sup>4</sup> In recent years, Algerians have made enormous progress revitalizing such heritage. On February 6, 2016, Tamazight was made a national and official language along with Arabic and permitted it to be taught in schools, and the traditional Amazigh holiday *Yennayer* (new year) was made a national holiday on December 6, 2017, and was celebrated all over the country the following year. February 6, 2016, also saw the creation of the Algerian Academy of Tamazight Language.

One of the goals of *L'Invention du désert* is to undermine the fundamentalist ideology. Its other goal is to transcend the simplistic and hegemonic readings of Algerian history that emphasize one dimension of Algerian identity at the expense of others and the binary thinking on which some of the readings are built such as the distinction between Arabic-speakers and Tamazight-speakers as if they were two distinct ethnic groups each endowed with simple, unchanging, and constraining identities.

Set in Algeria, France, and the Arabian Peninsula in the early twelfth and the late twentieth centuries, *L'Invention du désert* is about a contemporary author who reexamines his life and his craft while writing a history of the Almoravid dynasty that ruled Andalusia and a large portion of the Maghreb from 1056 to 1147 CE. Accordingly, the novel is made of two basic narrative strands. The first, written primarily in the first person, but sometimes in the second and third, focuses on the private musings and reminiscences of the narrator, moving backwards and forwards in space and time and going all the way back to his childhood. It includes the narrator's present life in Paris and his life in Algeria before he moved to France to write a book, his travel across the Sahara, and his trip to Saudi Arabia and Yemen, fulfilling a childhood dream. Embedded in the narrator's description of his childhood is the story of his adventurous great grandfather, especially his pilgrimage to Mecca. The second narrative strand, written in the third person, recounts the life, rise to power, and downfall of Mohamed ibn Toumert on whom the writer decides to concentrate in lieu of the social factors that led to the collapse of the Almoravids, as he has been asked to do by his publisher. While the second narrative is, very much like traditional realist novel, referential; the first is *metanarrative*, simultaneously commenting on history and historical writing while writing a story.

The first three parts of the novel interweave the narrator's meditations and autobiographical elements with historical narrations, some of which are set apart from the rest by the use of italics and past tense instead of the present tense of the autobiography. In the fourth and last part the narrator returns to the small village of his childhood in search of traces of an elusive past but confronts an identity crisis.

Part Don Quixote, part Savonarola, Ibn Toumert appointed himself both *mahdi* (messiah) and *imam* (spiritual leader of the community), formed a group of followers who were seduced by his strict interpretation of the Koran and who were devoted to him. He was the scourge of the Almoravids, whom he thought were depraved. He even succeeded in raising an army five thousand men strong to fight them in Marrakech. He died in August 1130 CE, shortly after his troops were crushed there. By then, he had constituted a large number of zealous disciples and his ideas had taken root. The Almoravids were eventually overthrown by Ibn Toumert's companion Abdelmoumen ibn Ali al-Koumi from Tlemcen, and the Almohads took over the destiny of the region.

## The Logocentrism of fundamentalism and essentialist definitions of identity

Derrida calls “logocentrism” the idea that there is some ultimate principle, logos, or transcendental signified that is the foundation of all meaning and truth. He explains that the entire philosophical tradition bespeaks the “powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire” for such a principle that would “place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign” (Derrida 1976, p. 49). He cites as logocentrist the idea of God, Plato’s Forms, René Descartes’ *cogito*, Immanuel Kant’s transcendental ego, Martin Heidegger’s Being, and Ferdinand de Saussure’s structures. He also includes in logocentrism ideas of center, purity, authenticity, original moments, and golden ages.

Several features of Ibn Toumert’s and contemporary fundamentalists’s worldview and actions make them logocentric: the attempt to assign a single origin to the complexity of life, the desire to exist in an ordered world, and the appeal to coherence and completeness. Other typically logocentric features found in Ibn Toumert’s worldview and actions include dichotomous thinking and the desire to pierce the veil of language to capture the “objective” world and experience as they are in themselves.

The logocentrism of Ibn Toumert’s actions and fundamentalism is most clearly discernible in the assumption that his worldview and principles are sanctioned by God and are, therefore, the correct answer to all questions, including supernatural and miraculous events; they are timeless, inerrant, and irrefutable. The same logocentrism is evident in the FIS (Front Islamic du Salut, Islamic Salvation Front) ideology. Its leaders attacked democracy on the grounds that it is “ungodly” and all the laws and asserted that the fundamental precepts of morality of a good society are already present in what “God and his Prophet have prescribed” and cannot, therefore, be modified (Belhadj 2004, pp. 45–49). In fact, Derrida claims that theology is paradigmatic of the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism. He argues that the theological distinction between the sensible and the intelligible world—“this world” and the “other world”—is at the origin of the distinction between the signifier and the signified; “the age of the sign,” he says, “is essentially theological” (1976, p. 14). He further asserts that theological patterns of thought are pervasive and continual, albeit in a subtle way, even in the supposedly anti-religious ideologies such as secular humanism. All the latter does, according to him, is reverse the order of priority between man and God (1981, p. 143).

Another typically logocentric aspect of Ibn Toumert’s world view is its metanarrative aspect. For him, the Koran and *ḥadīth* embody a comprehensive view of life that covers personal conduct as well as the economy, politics, and the organization of society. This comprehensive worldview is, in addition to being a big story, a *metanarrative*, is also a *metanarrative*, a story that establishes how other stories—little narratives—are to be judged (Lyotard 1984, p. 29). More precisely, the Koran (and the Bible) presents the story of how God created the world and the human race. It also says that God gave humans the hope of eternity once their worldly life has ended. Thus, the Garden of Eden and the Gates of Heaven represent the alpha and



omega of man's journey through life and that journey leading to an everlasting existence ought to be his first concern. For Ibn Toumert and fundamentalists, all stories about how the world came to be, what is true, and what is important in life should be judged according to the extent they either help or undermine the realization of God's plan and man's salvation.

Yet another logocentric aspect of fundamentalist ideology is its tendency to define the world in dichotomous terms: believers and non-believers, Muslim and non-Muslim, good and bad, "us" and "them," and is, as a result, intolerant of complexity and ambiguity.

In binary thinking, such as speech/writing, mind/body, reason and unreason, presence and absence, etc., explains Derrida, one term, usually but not always, the first is privileged over the other. It is the positive concept, the standard according to which everything is measured and the other term is the negative, the different, the Other. The problem with binary thinking, according to Derrida, is that the central term inevitably represses, subjugates, and persecutes the inferior term. In patriarchal societies, for example, man is central and woman is the marginalized Other, ignored, repressed, pushed aside. For Derrida, the effect of binary thinking extends beyond philosophy to permeate all cultural operations. More significantly, he thinks that this pattern of thinking is responsible for all the oppressive ideologies and forms of thinking that have dominated history: appeals to natural law, God's will, the dictates of reason, etc. He explains in *Writing and Difference*:

Incapable of respecting the Being and meaning of the other, phenomenology and ontology would be philosophies of violence. Through them, the entire philosophical tradition, in its meaning and at its bottom, would make common cause with oppression and the totalitarianism of the same. (p. 141)

Oppression, totalitarianism, and archival violence are clearly manifest in Ibn Toumert's actions. He thinks that his knowledge of theology (*'ilm al-kalam*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the possession of the manuscripts set him apart from the majority of people and make him a member of a privileged elite that has exclusive authority to interpret the Koran and the Islamic tradition. More significantly, he thinks they give him the right to combat those he thinks are miscreants, who do not own any archives. He also ferociously opposes other theologians who have different takes on the scriptures, who have the wrong kind of archives, especially the Almoravids whom he accused of being anthropomorphist and of relying too much on *ijma'* (consensus) at the expense of the Koran and *hadith* (sayings and deeds of the Prophet). The same kind of binary thinking and elitism are clear in FIS leaders' argument that neither the government nor the people ought to be entrusted with interpreting the Koran and *hadith*; it is the responsibility of qualified religious scholars. On their understanding, the masses are the last people to be put in power; democracy, they say, is mob rule, the rule of "the rabble, and charlatans" (Belhadj 2004, p. 46).

Accordingly, Ibn Toumert started enforcing his puritan morality as soon as he left Baghdad. He reprimanded harshly anyone he thought strayed from the Straight Path and tried to forbid drinking, gambling, and all activities he viewed as sinful in all in the localities he visited on his way back to his native

land: Mahdia, Constantine, Bejaia, Tlemcen, Fès, Meknès, Salé, and Marrakech (Kaddache 2003, p. 256; Ezziane 2012, p. 78). Ibn Toumert's audacious preaching angered many, especially the rulers of those towns who accused him of undermining their authority and stirring up the people. Historians report that he "had the audacity to throw an [Almoravid] ruler's sister off her horse when he saw her in the street unveiled" (Djaout 1987, p. 104). They also mention that he caused such a stir in Bejaia that both the population and the ruler wanted to capture him and he would have been severely punished if some of his disciples did not help him escape to the nearby town of Mellala (Oufriha 2015, p. 88). Ibn Toumert sought to reform society, which he found destitute both morally and spiritually. His adventures, as told by Djaout, are fraught with danger and tragedy but they also include a dose of humor:

As soon as he settled in his mosque in Bejaia, the imam went downtown and a scene stopped him and boiled his blood: boys dressed like women, embellished and made-up like them, were strolling coquettishly on the esplanade near the sea. The inhabitants, instead of being outraged, passed their way without flinching ... The emaciated imam launched a terrifying scream, landed on the esplanade with the flexibility of a wild fawn, his stick already biting like a whip. The boys, despite their number, could only scatter screaming, abandoning some of their hair pieces, others their bonnets or their undone skirts. Passersby began to flock; some threw themselves on this fury, and the imam was immobilized after having received several blows. His life was saved by a small group of his students who happened to pass by and rescue him, explaining to the unleashed public the identity and spiritual rank of the new host of the Hammadid capital. (Djaout 1987, pp. 23–24)

In *L'Invention du désert*, the conceptions of identity held by Arabists and Amazighists in Algeria are as logocentric as fundamentalism. They are not only built on the same myth of final origins—they are all absorbed with supposedly simple and pristine identities and cultures—but also on the same binary thinking (p. 27). It follows that, the dichotomy between "us" and "them" at the heart of the essentialist conceptions of identity, very much like the fundamentalists' division between believers and nonbelievers, can also be a source of division and conflict.

## Deconstruction of logocentrism

Logocentrism can take an objectivist or a subjectivist form. For Djaout, Ibn Toumert's desire for purity and eternity, and all quests for origins, fundamental meanings, purity, eternity, etc., which Derrida calls "transcendental signifieds," are expressions of "Archimedes' dream" of finding a fulcrum to lift the planet with a push" (p. 100). He uses the desert both as a topography and as a metaphor to show that they are nothing but "fallacious solutions that make eternity shimmer in front of our eyes" (p. 190).

To start with, the logocentric idea according to which there is an authoritative ultimate principle or center of meaning and existence that allows one to grasp history as a unified and coherent whole is rejected in favor of the view that knowledge is perspectival in character; there are only multiple points of view and perspectives. The image of the desert is apt here. What the desert, which stretches indefinitely looks like depends on the place from which it is viewed and there is no such thing as an absolute or detached location. The narrator of *L'Invention du désert* says that the desert is of such magnitude that it evokes a sense of infinity (p. 80). He adds that it exceeds and escapes one's grasp and cannot be perceived in one overall view. It is, in this sense, sublime, something of which one can have an idea but not a representation. Furthermore, for the narrator, the desert also disrupts conventional standards of experiencing time and space, "distance and time annihilate themselves, there is no center here, no temporality" (p. 27); and it "scrambles the idea of season." "A car speeding at 130 km per hour," he explains, "travels without moving" because the landscape remains the same and the horizon keeps receding. "[A]s deep as one descends, there is only sand on sand, rock on heaped rocks. As far as one looks, as high, as deep," he adds, "there is only annihilating force" (p. 136). There are also no centers and no directions in the desert because any signpost one sets is soon erased by sand:

The desert is hard to mark up. It undulates under measurements, slips like a snake in the hands of who want to gauge it. Put down a demarcation here and tomorrow you will find that sand has accomplished its flattening job. The ground becomes again the amnesic path of shepherds where goats graze the last stems of legends. (p. 38)

Further undermining the idea that the past can be wholly, or even largely, recoverable is that it is known only through relics that are like desert ruins and vestiges, often worn out, incomplete, fragmentary, and scattered over large areas. Djaout describes them as "debris of a tremor, coming from beyond memories: stony skeletons, eroded like interporal stales" (p. 137). To put them together like the pieces of a giant puzzle is highly problematic. As Cullen and Castleden put it, "Th[e] tension between fragments and totalities, deconstruction and reconfiguration, is a key tension between archival research and knowledge production" (2023, p. 342). Djaout explains in "L'Histoire est une usurpation":

I must [...] admit that I am wary of history, this science of the irremediable, the big story is present in what I write, but not as a place of teaching or rejuvenation. It is rather a place of dispossession, of abortion or stalemate. My three novels published so far are focused on three important moments in the history of Algeria or the Maghreb. But it is, each time, a story impossible to fix, a devouring history of markers and people, a kind of history-ogress. (1988, p. 26)

To recover the past is all the more difficult because what archives and all signs mean is uncertain. The ruins and other vestiges that appear now and then in the desert at the whim of the wind are not complete without others that are still buried

in the sand and may never surface. The place archeologists assign them within a site may also be altered by future discoveries. Thus, it follows that what the ruins and vestiges mean is function of an absolute past and an undetermined future. This is true of all archives and all signs. They never achieve stability; the meaning of archives constantly slides away, changes according to context, and reveals and conceals traces of other signs. To describe the instability of meaning, Derrida coined the term *differance*, in the sense of both difference and deferral. For example, when looking up a word in a dictionary one never finds definitive meanings but only other words that are also in need of clarification, if one looks up these new words one is referred to still other words ad infinitum. One can never come to a fully realized meaning; meaning is elusive; it includes identity (what it is) and difference (what it isn't) and it is both present and absent (deferred). Derrida explains: "nothing escapes the movement of the signifier and ... in the last instance, the difference between signifier and signified is nothing" (1976, pp. 22–23). Applying the idea to archives, Derrida writes:

the structure of the archive is *spectral*. It is spectral *a priori*: neither present nor absent "in the flesh," neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met, no more than those of Hamlet's father, thanks to the possibility of a visor. (1996, p. 84)

and

Something that remains without remaining, which is neither present nor absent, which destroys itself, which is totally consumed, which is a remainder without a remainder." (1995, p. 208)

Furthermore, according to Derrida, signs are open to revisions, (mis)appropriations, and (mis)interpretations.

Likewise, to explain how meaning is uncertain, problematic, divided within itself, and contradictory, Djaout writes, "Memory is a boat that goes along shores without ever landing on them. It suffers the axe of the reefs every time it tries to land" (1987, p. 189). He concludes that history ought to be conceived in terms of "a restless wandering and a perpetual crossing, a kind of smuggler's boat that does not settle at any bank" (p. 27).

In addition to the idea that there is no privileged point of view on the past, no completion, and no certainty, Djaout uses the image of ruins that appear here and there in the desert only to disappear again to stress the fragility of all human endeavors. They remind us of the transitory character of everything, individuals and empires alike, that what seems at one point solid will sooner or later suffer decay and annihilation. Moreover, desert ruins are an indication that one's understanding of the past can easily shift between one's feet. Material remains of the past are at the mercy of the elements: the wind, the sun, temperature, humidity, etc. In addition to nature, man himself has been responsible for damaging or destroying historical artifacts and archives in his role as robber or scavenger.

What really makes archives vulnerable, however, is that they are instruments of power and control. Throughout history, interested parties have preserved archives

and ruins and commissioned, maintained, and ritualized monuments. They also let them fall into as state of partial or total disrepair over time due to neglect. A case in point is Tehouda for which there is no commemorative plaque, no road sign indicating its presence, despite the fact that it was the site of events that changed the destiny of the Maghreb (p. 31). Sometimes, however, archives, ruins, and monuments are destroyed deliberately. Some ruins of Tehouda, for example, were, says the narrator, razed by the French invaders as part of their policy to control, silence, and erase Algerian history (p. 32). When an ideology replaces another and becomes dominant the honor granted some people is sometimes withdrawn and the memorials erected to remember them dismantled or destroyed.<sup>5</sup>

Both Derrida and Djaout believe that archiving creates a nostalgic desire, a “burning passion,” to find and possess the *arche*, the original, “the most archaic place of absolute commencement” (Derrida 1996, p. 90); “the unique instant where they [the pressure and the trace, the signified and the signifier] are not yet distinguished the one from the other” (p. 98); the spontaneous, alive, and original experience for which the archive stands; because the archive is not memory; it stands for memory. It is, says Derrida, a “mnemotechnical supplement, a representative” (p. 10), a prosthesis, an external space for safe keeping. According to Derrida, this desire to get to an original moment is evident in Freud’s, archeologist Norbert Hanold’s, as well as Freud’s historian Yerushalmi’s writings. He states that Freud favored original experience over its manifestations, when *arche* “appears in the nude,” (p. 92) and so did Hanold who thought that the actual footprints of *Gradiva*, a woman who was incinerated during the eruption of Vesivius in Pompeii would deliver him to the living person in Wilhem Jensen’s novella *Gradiva* (pp. 96–101). Yerushalmi who endeavored to provide a definitive understanding of psychoanalysis as a cultural phenomenon is also, Derrida claims, a good example of trying to pierce through the veil of language to reach pure experience. This “burning passion,” to find and possess the *arche*, the original, “the most archaic place of absolute commencement” is, according to Djaout, manifest in Ibn Toumert’s obsession with the unadulterated Word of God and a supposedly pristine and original Islam. It is also manifest in the search for authentic origin and static identity; which he calls the “illusion of roots” (Djaout 1987, p. 27).

For both Derrida and Djaout, a return to an absolute commencement, a realm of truth that exists prior to and independently of its representation by linguistic and other signs, is impossible.

Derrida says, “One can always dream or speculate are this secret account... But the secret itself, there can be no archive, by definition. The secret is the very ash of the archive” (1996, p. 99). Djaout likewise says that Tehouda, a place of many events that changed the destiny of the Maghreb “is not a historic place, it is not a place in any sense. Tehouda does not exist” (1987, p. 31). Because, he explains, the past is like a cemetery, “it is like an excavation field from which only funerary objects come to the surface” (p. 88). It is, he adds, “a simple desolate expanse with

<sup>5</sup> In the United States, for example, several statues of Confederate politicians and soldiers have recently been unbolted by the authorities or vandalized by demonstrators as part of the ongoing national reckoning with the country’s past.

skeletons of ancient dwellings and black goats that gamble” (p. 32). Tehouda is gone forever; all that remains are traces of it.

Derrida’s and Djaout’s denial that one can get to an original moment is in line with Derrida’s famous “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*”:

There is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*] ... What we have tried to show by following the guiding line of the "dangerous supplement," is that in what one calls the real life of these existences "of flesh and bone," beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau’s text, there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the "real" supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity, for we have read, *in the text*, that the absolute present, Nature, that which words like "real mother" name, have always already escaped, have never existed; that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence. (1976, pp. 159–160)

In *L’Invention du désert*, what is true of Tehouda is also true of the search for authentic origin and static identity; a final, static identity is a myth that is elusive and inaccessible even to the most thorough investigation. In the novel, it is argued that rather than something that is given once and for all, identity is something that evolves continuously: “The whole history of the country,” the narrator says, “is a history of surveying. We try to mark the stones, to list the trees, to secure the mountains, to ensure that the rivers do not carry their beds elsewhere” (Djaout 1987, p. 121). “But,” he adds, “one fine day, the boundaries capitulate to sand, water sinks into the earth like a scared scorpion, the horizon falls down like an old fence—and the restless wandering without markers resumes” (p. 122). To debunk the narrow, exclusive, sometimes overzealous, and essentialist definitions of Algerianess held by some Arabists and Amazighists alike, Djaout and the other Algerian authors mentioned above show that it is, to the contrary, complex, context dependent and always in process; national identity is given different shapes according to circumstances and the demands of the present.

In *L’Invention du désert*, just as there is no certainty outside the mind there is no certainty inside it either. The consciousness of the narrator constantly shifts between reality and imagination, belief and unbelief, presence and absence. At one point, the narrator expresses doubt as to whether what he knows about his great grandfather are memories of what his mother told him or the product of his imagination:

the child perceived things and words confusedly, he did not know if the story was about him or his ancestor ... if it were he who lived the events or he simply watched them unfold in front of him, external to him. (p. 68)

In fact, he goes as far as to contest the idea of the subject as a unitary, knowing, and autonomous entity that controls thoughts and actions to give experience

meaning. For him, the subject is not stable and unified but multiple and inherently unstable. The narrator describes himself at the beginning of the novel in the third person as “as multiple” and “fight[ing] against himself” (p. 9).

In *L’Invention du désert*, the critique of the logocentric idea that subjective experience is undeniable evidence and an original basis of explanation is most dramatically illustrated by the downfall of Ibn Toumert. The zealous imam holds an absolute faith in his ideas. In a blatant departure from Sunni doctrine, he considers himself almost equal to God and thinks he possesses supernatural qualities and, as a result, he and he alone would have political and religious authority. Soon, however, his world crumbles and he faces his worst nightmare. He realizes that the principles the defense of which he devoted his life are built on shaky foundations, that they may not be God’s words but the product of his imagination, nothing but mirages. In one of the novel’s narrator’s dreams, which serves as an alternative history of sorts, Ibn Toumert, who spent most of his life as an ascetic and as an intransigent defender of virtue, and who for most of his life waged a one-man war against society’s vices and follies, in the novel, suddenly finds himself in Paris, a place “where Satan reigns without a rival” (p. 53), surrounded by impiety, shame, nudity, and deprivations of all kinds. Bewildered, he thinks:

God probably died—unless he too was won over by the sluggishness of the debaucheries. But was he not rather dethroned by Satan who now reigns as master on the planet of Sodom and Gomorrah? Onan is rehabilitated; he narrates before humanity his ignominious feats. All the wrongs of the mind, all the defects of conduct, all the shameful practices are here displayed and celebrated. Idols are raised to them as did the anthropomorphists before the triumph of the faith. (p. 51)

The immorality that surrounds Ibn Toumert is such that he wishes for a second Flood that would “begin by smashing Noah’s treacherous skiff to stop any chance of survival. For no being, beast or man, deserves to escape getting stuck in sand” (pp. 50–51). He tries to look the other way, he curses, he prays, he “invokes the protecting faith” (p. 51). Homesick for the Maghreb, conflicted, and rootless, he seeks refuge among Maghrebi immigrants in Barbès and La Goute d’Or neighborhoods, but to no avail. His “interior edifice [starts] shaking like a rotten pillar”; he “does not see clearly, he cannot establish order either in his head or his senses” (p. 51). He resorts to alcohol and ends up drunk, estranged, and battered in spirit (p. 56). The dishonorable desires he repressed all his life, the “buttocks walking in the street and those in the advertisement displays,” and the enormity of the task of “straighten[ing] this civilization of sin” (p. 50) did him in at the end.

The narrator’s inability to put his mind in order and Ibn Toumert’s tragic descent into madness show that, in *L’Invention du désert*, the desert is as much inside as outside: consciousness is as empty as the vast reaches of the Sahara, beliefs are as unstable as its sand dunes, and the self is as elusive as its mirages. As the narrator puts it, “I don’t go south to escape or to seek new sensations. Rather, it’s a way for me to look inwards, as the desert has inhabited and illuminated me since time immemorial” (p. 27).

Djaout dislodges all ideas of stable centers of reference or transcendental signifieds—logocentrism—in history not only through the metaphor of the desert and reflection on consciousness and memory but also through the novel’s style and structure; the indeterminacy of meaning is worked into the form of the novel. *L’Invention du désert* does not advance in a linear fashion. Instead, it frequently shifts from one story to another, backward and forward in time, and from one place to another. For instance, Ibn Toumert is at one point catapulted, drunk, to the twentieth-century Champs-Élysées (p. 57); and Kahina, who fought the invading Arab army from the Middle East, appears suddenly in a modern hotel room (p. 41). The instability of *L’Invention du désert* is further emphasized by the fact that even though the different narratives of the novel are linked together through framing—stories within stories; thematic resemblance—the narrator, his great grandfather, and Ibn Toumert, all travel to Arabia; and cause and effect—his mother’s stories spur him to undertake a trip to Arabia; none of them takes precedence over the others, has a privileged position, is the frame of reference or vantage point, or contains all the others within it. The lack of a center makes the novel without a beginning and an end, continuity, and totality. It is an open rather than a close-ended narrative structure. Just as there is no center in the desert and in history, there is no center in *L’Invention du désert*.

## Conclusion

In *L’Invention du désert*, the desert provides a compelling metaphor for understanding the archival science’s abstract concepts in terms of a more familiar subject matter. Moreover, the novel brings together all the aspects of the *archival turn*<sup>6</sup>: (1) the selection and classification of archives foreground some information and perspectives and marginalize others; (2) Archivists are not passive and impartial custodians of historical records, but their active interpreters; (3) The organization and narrative archivists impose on records are not objective representations of a prior existing reality, but constructions shaped by the surrounding political and cultural environments. More significantly, *L’Invention du désert* successfully uses the desert both as a topography and as a metaphor to lay bare and disassemble the logocentrism of both fundamentalism and essentialist definitions of Algerianess to pursue a program of political criticism effectively. The adoption of a new perspective on the past that avoids essentialist and binary views of identity enables Djaout to answer the Algerians’ demand for a richer articulation of their national identity. The deconstruction of Ibn Toumert’s thought serves as a warning that fundamentalist ideologies can be used for totalitarian or sectarian purposes.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

<sup>6</sup> “At the heart of the new paradigm is a shift away from viewing records as static physical objects, and toward considering them as dynamic virtual concepts [...] and considering records as active agents themselves in the formation of human and organizational memory” (Cook 2001, p 4).



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