

## DOING MEMORY. PARISIAN HOTELS' PORTRAITS WITH OLD MIGRANTS

Claire LÉVY-VROÉLANT, Paris, and Céline BARRÈRE, Lille\*

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### *Zusammenfassung*

#### *„Erinnerung machen“. Pariser Hotelportraits mit alten Migranten*

*Hôtels meublés in Paris sind traditionell kurzzeitig bewohnte, spärlich ausgestattete Unterkünfte, wo Migranten, zuerst aus den französischen Provinzen, später auch aus dem Ausland, vor allem aus dem Maghreb – und hier wiederum insbesondere aus Algerien –, unter schlechten Bedingungen leben. Von der Blütezeit der Hôtels meublés in der Zwischenkriegszeit, als sie rund 11% der Pariser Bevölkerung beherbergten, bis heute ist ihre Bedeutung stark zurückgegangen, und sie wurden mehr und mehr stigmatisiert. Dies ändert jedoch nichts daran, dass sie als postkoloniale Gedächtnismilieus der Migration beschrieben werden können, die mit unterschiedlichen Generationen, Rahmenbedingungen und Herkunftskontexten verknüpft sind. Mit Hilfe eines Zugangs, der ethnographische (Beobachtung und Interviews) sowie literarische (Analyse eines großen Corpus an Romanen) Ansätze und Methoden verknüpft, wird im Beitrag gezeigt, dass diese Orte symbolisch für bestimmte Erinnerungsregime stehen – für dominierte und unkonventionelle, erleidende und kreative. Im ersten Teil werden die Hôtels meublés als mehrdeutige und komplexe Orte beschrieben, in denen die subtile hierarchische Ordnung von Räumen das Zusam-*

\* Professor Claire LÉVY-VROÉLANT, Université de Paris VIII-Saint-Denis, , 2 rue de la Liberté, F-93526 Saint-Denis Cedex, France; email: clevyvroelant@gmail.com; Senior Lecturer Céline BARRÈRE, Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture et de Paysage de Lille, , 2 rue Verte, F-59650 Villeneuve d'Ascq, France; email: c-barrere@lille.archi.fr

menwohnen möglich macht und Erinnerungen unterstützt. Der zweite Teil beschäftigt sich konkreter mit ‚Erinnerung machen‘: Oral History und literarische Arbeiten werden als interpretative Konstruktionen zusammengefasst, in denen Erfahrungen neu formuliert werden. Zuletzt werden in den Hotels wirksame Kategorien und Zuordnungen aufgegriffen, wo Narrative sowohl ein Recht auf die Stadt als auch eine gewisse Anerkennung der Subalternen einfordern – jenseits von Kategorien wie Zerrissenheit, Vertreibung und Schweigen.

Schlagwörter: *Hôtels meublés*, Migranten, Erinnerung, Narration, postkolonial, Ethnographie, Literatur

## Summary

Parisian *hôtels meublés* are traditionally short-term accommodation where migrants, first from French provinces, then from abroad – especially Maghreb, and more specifically Algeria – where living in poor conditions. From the ‘golden age’ in the interwar period where they housed around 11% of the Parisian population until current times, the sector has decreased, and become more and more stigmatised. Nevertheless, they can be considered as post-colonial ‘*milieu de mémoire*’ of migrations belonging to different generations, contexts and origins. Thanks to a composite approach, ethnographic (observation and interviews) and literary (study of a large corpus of novels related to *hôtels meublés*), the chapter shows that those places are emblematic of specific regimes of memories, both dominated and unconventional, suffering and creative. The first part is dedicated to describing the hotels as ambiguous and complex places, where the subtle hierarchy of spaces makes the co-habitation possible, and can be considered as support for memories. The second part deals more precisely with ‘doing memory’: Both oral histories and literary works are embraced as interpretative constructions reformulating experiences. The last part shows categories and assignments at work in the hotels, where narratives are calling for both a right to the city and a certain acknowledgment of the subalterns beyond disruptions, displacements and silences.

Keywords: *Hôtels meublés*, migrants, memory, narration, post-colonial, ethnography, literature

## 1 Introduction

Can Parisian *hôtels meublés*<sup>1)</sup> be considered as “*lieux de mémoire*”<sup>2)</sup> of migrations belonging to different generations, contexts and origins? Is their epic insightful for collective

<sup>1)</sup> Throughout the article, we will maintain the French term “*hôtels meublés*” as there is no proper translation in English of its specific organisation be it furnished hotels or tenements. Furthermore, it is neither a social shelter nor a workers’ home. Rooms are rented on a weekly or a monthly basis.

<sup>2)</sup> For Pierre NORA, this category of “*lieux de mémoire*” deals mainly with legitimate items whose aim is to enhance social cohesion. He defines his *lieux de mémoires* as collective constructions leading to a consensus, transforming an item – be it material or ideal – into a symbolic element related to a community (see NORA 1989).

memory construction processes? To what extent and how is oblivion part of the process? These questions have turned out to be productive ones. Often looked at as stigmatised relics of ancient times, old-fashioned *hôtels meublés*, also called *garnis*<sup>3)</sup> until the 1970s, seem to constantly rise from their ashes and serve different purposes and clientele. They have always accommodated migrants, first from the provinces – Bretagne, Auvergne, Normandy [Normandie] –, then from neighbouring countries (FAURE & LÉVY-VROELANT 2007) and colonies, Algeria having the largest part before, during, and after the Independence War (1954–1962). In a way, *hôtels meublés*' history follows and mirrors the first industrial revolution, the urbanisation of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the colonial episodes in France.

Last arrived, worse housed. Migrants and workers' homes have always been the less healthy, the more uncomfortable and the poorer ones. As they arrive, they join the poorest and most often stigmatised working-class people neighbourhoods where they find cheap accommodation. Those parts of the city are animated by successive migratory flows, which have played a crucial role as “transition areas”<sup>4)</sup> and, to a certain extent, still do. In most cities of the industrial age, migrants were those arriving from the countryside of the nearer or more rural provinces. At that time, *garnis* and *hotels meublés* were, beside pensions, barracks and collective accommodation (*dortoirs*, *asiles de nuit*), the most common way for the newcomer to be accommodated in big towns such as European capital cities (BERTILLON 1894; MICHEL 1959; PINOL 1991; FAURE & LÉVY-VROELANT 2007; etc.). After World War II, the *Foyers*<sup>5)</sup> *de travailleurs migrants* (FTM) appeared in France, as collective habitations founded by the state in order to house foreign workers called to participate in the economic reconstruction, and supposed to be “*de passage*” for few years, and then back to their origin country (SAYAD 1999; LOVATT, LÉVY-VROELANT & WHITEHEAD 2006). The *foyers* policy had several consequences: They have practically excluded immigrants from the whirlwind of the city, but also allowed them to join and fight for their rights. Anyway, privately provided accommodation – like *hôtels meublés*, pension in someone's home, attic maids' rooms, shelter in exchange for work, etc. – have been the mainstream for migrants and newcomers for a long time.

Among this type of housing, *hôtels meublés* are particularly interesting. Based on an easy verbal agreement between hosts (hotelkeepers) and guests (clients) who were looking for a furnished room and services, modest and most of the time poorly equipped, they were very common in Paris between the two world wars: In 1930, around 11% of the Parisians were accommodated in a *hôtel meublé* (FAURE & LÉVY-VROELANT 2007). Such establishments have made their way across the century. Less and less discernible in the

<sup>3)</sup> In French, *garni* (from the verb *garnir* ‘to garnish’, ‘to decorate’, ‘to fill’) is used to qualify a place, an object, which is decorated and full. By extension, it means a house containing furnished (garnished with furniture) rooms, accessible for persons with few means.

<sup>4)</sup> We refer here to the well-known notion developed by the Chicago School founders (see PARK et al. 1925).

<sup>5)</sup> *Foyer*, in French, means ‘home’, the place of the fire originally, but its meaning progressively changed, referring more and more usually to collective habitat shared by particular population. In the case of *Foyers de Travailleurs Migrants* (FTM), the building is exclusively occupied by migrant workforce. It is divided in *unités de vie* (‘life units’), rooms have three to five beds, at average. Kitchen and baths are shared by the occupants of several rooms.

urban fabric, they can nevertheless be considered as *lieux de mémoire* (e.g. being the stage of dramatic events during the Algerian war, 1954–1962), and, at the same time, as *milieux de mémoire* where memories are renegotiated and everyday life's arrangements invented. As such, they appear to be places where subalterns could survive, promoting heterodox values, in a word, as “locations of culture” (BHABHA 1994). Actually SAYAD used to oppose the *foyers* (as disciplinary and unfriendly places) to the *hôtels meublés*, where certain forms of hospitality and solidarity can be found (SAYAD 1980). The ambition here is therefore to increase the knowledge about those paradoxical urban margins whose functions have been crucial from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until today, and to contribute to the study of subalterns' memories through their physical presence and the narratives developed (and collected) in situ.

We have set this target six years ago, when we started a long-term endeavour aimed to investigate hotels as places of memory.<sup>6)</sup> We discovered that while lodging the poor and the migrants, they were full of history and stories. We have been inquiring in 20 hotels located in different districts in Paris.<sup>7)</sup> Following Maurice HALBWACHS ([1950], 1968, [1925], 1994), historians, geographers and sociologists interested in the relation between power, memory and places (HOBSBAWM & RANGER 1983; MASSEY 1995; HAYDEN 1994; LEE & YEOH 2004; ERLI & NUNNING 2008), we consider memory as necessarily embedded with places (place-bound), and revealing domination processes (power relations). As a matter of fact, French society activates norms, representations and reputations that tend to distort and stigmatise the ‘glocal community’ who shares the condition of living in a *hôtel meublé*. Migrants, legionnaires, unskilled workers, all carrying the legacy of the colonial era and caught in “a past that has not passed” (ROUSSO 1994), accepted to engage in interviews that we have conducted during more than two years, visiting several times and settling in (BARRÈRE & LÉVY-VROÉLANT 2012). We invited our interlocutors to go back in time, remembering the various places where he/she has been living, as far as he/she could, and wished. Narrating one's life to someone else is always a situated and located action: It brings together those who remember and those who receive these memories in the very place where the narrative is being told. Thus, the place is both the scene where memory is revived and the subject of what is remembered in the present. As in all human encounters involving conversation, each narrative depends on the distinctive interaction that takes place when it is uttered, because the interaction and its conditions – such as space, intentions and moods, the quality of listening, the ballet-like situation around the interlocutors, etc. – shape the narrative in a unique and ephemeral frame. Such characteristics contribute to design “that which is said to have happened” (TROUILLOT 1995). That is why we compared two sets of narratives and two modes of expression: On the one hand conversations, stories and anecdotes collected in Parisian hotels with residents, clients and landlords alike; on the other hand, a selection of literary fiction and non-fiction works by French-speaking authors expressing the relationship between narrators, characters and ho-

<sup>6)</sup> This research was part of a larger research program “Immigration and Places of Memory” supported by the French Ministry of Culture through its Mission à l'Ethnologie, 2007–2011.

<sup>7)</sup> They were located in the popular northern and eastern boroughs of Paris: Mainly the 11<sup>th</sup> (Voltaire District), the 12<sup>th</sup>, the 17<sup>th</sup> (Clichy), the 18<sup>th</sup> (La Chapelle, Barbès, Clignancourt), the 19<sup>th</sup> (Stalingrad) and the 20<sup>th</sup> (Belleville, Couronnes).

tels. Mixing factual and fictional narratives, our method is indicative of unseen existences through collective narratives and individual trajectories.

The research conducted from 2010 to 2013 reveals a historically constructed micro-cosmos: Both post-industrial and post-colonial, different according to the neighbourhood where it stands, it reflects the shift in migration issues and globalisation. We mentioned that Parisian *hôtels meublés* are places hosting individuals who have suffered domination as a result of colonial wars, poverty or unsuccessful immigration. Therefore, those places refer to failing and dominated memories, to problematic or repressed remembrances of a mostly silenced past. At the same time, they can be considered as breaches in the inhospitable and commodified city, offering forms of solidarity and welcome. But since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these functions tend to be neutralised by a process of institutionalisation, through charity organisations operating under state control and funding.



Source: Pierre GAUDIN

Fig. 1: Bar of the Hôtel du roi d'Alger

The first part describes the hotels as ambiguous and complex places, and their inhabitants. Long-term approach helps to understand changes and continuity of uses and cultures; the subtle hierarchy of spaces makes the co-habitation possible, if not easy, and can be considered, in a more metaphoric way, as support for memories. The second part deals more precisely with 'doing memory' and the collection of narratives. Both oral histories

and literary works are embraced and compared as interpretative constructions reformulating experiences. Finally, a conclusive part shows categories and assignments at work in the hotels, where narratives are calling for both a right to the city and a certain acknowledgment of the subalterns beyond silences.



Source: Claire LÉVY-VROÉLANT

Fig. 2: The late Hôtel Familial

## 2 A short methodological foreword: Narratives in situation and literature's creative space

Throughout our research, we collected stories but considered them not as mere anecdotes or testimonies, but as narratives, that is to say as interpretative constructions reformulating experiences. It allowed us to explore the hotels as *milieux de mémoire*, where categories and assignments are put into questions. Thus narratives and the process of narrating are keys to analysing the construction of categories such as the “Self”, “the Other” and to explore the construction of identities and, at the same time, the social worlds in which they emerge. In the specific context of vulnerable and invisible memories, narratives considered as transactions in the present of precluded and impeded collective memories were our main focus. Confronting these narratives shifts the focus from the personal dimension to the individual, and from the individual to the collective.

The combination of two corpuses of narratives – interviews and literary works – does not mean denying their fundamental differences: On one side, a first-hand material, collected in situ through qualitative interviews; on the other side, a second-hand material,

already available, published and circulated, forming a complex imagery of the hotels. However, we intended to highlight their parallels and their common ties. Indeed, narratives are neither located in isolation nor are the hotels a mere scene or décor. Both interviews and literary narratives confront us to places and situations that is to say to *milieux*, inhabited places, weaving a physical sense of place and a social space. In our interviews, the 'here and now' of the hotels is at the forefront, revealing this 'milieu' caught in its daily routine. It is not about history, but about common narratives and the possibilities and ways to participate. As we have been told many times, these are just ordinary places: "*des hôtels sans histoire*". In short, nothing there to tell, nothing worth to see. But it is precisely in this ordinariness that lay the roots of memory:

*"Instead of telling you my story, I talk about absence; I tell you about my shortcomings, my hollowness and my dreams. This is because my life is elsewhere and that elsewhere is cracked by ordinary sadness that I hold on – and you with me – to folds of madness and dreams. So follow me and reverse the sentence."*<sup>8)</sup> (BEN JELLOUN [1975], 1995, pp. 93–94)

The main difficulty was to work in inhabited places and spaces, characterised by long-term and powerful forms of domination and exploitation, suspicions and control, where intimacy and privacy are highly problematic. To live in a hotel means to live constantly under the gaze of others and having to deal with them on a constant basis. This obligation to cope with others establishes a conspiracy of secret, motivated by modesty, a precarious sense of privacy and an obligation to live together without being noticed, to stick together despite the constraints. The secret can escape and shatter the fragile balance of the place during a petty quarrel, or following a stance from the hotel landlord or the ramblings of a resident. To remember in the hotel and about the hotel is definitely not an ordinary operation and requires addressing several testimonial spaces and mechanisms.

In consequence we had to adjust our attitude in order that our presence in the hotel would cause no threat to this fragile equilibrium. This is why we chose to settle in the public or open spaces of the hotel – such as cafés, hallways, courtyards, porter' lodges, common rooms, doorsteps, etc. – to realise our interviews. In addition, being in public spaces allowed us to play with the rules of hospitality, those of domestic spaces and those of public spaces, particularly related to the ritual of having coffee (OLDENBURG 1989; DE-PAULE & ELEB 2005).

In the same way, literature allowed us to adjust to problematic remembrance and to differentiate degrees of verbalisation and formalisation of experience. As Haïtian writer Danny LAFERRIÈRE states: "The dictator had thrown me out of my country. To come back home, I go through the window of the Novel." (LAFERRIÈRE [2009], 2013, p. 240) Our purpose was not to look at hotels as literary places, but to address their role in the migrants' experience and trajectory through the narratives as a mode of memory.

<sup>8)</sup> All quotations of Tahar BEN JELLOUN's novels are translated by Céline BARRÈRE (CB) and Claire LÉVY-VROELANT (CLV).

### 3 Spaces and times in *hôtels meublés*

*Hôtels meublés* and their inhabitants are very sensitive to the conjuncture; they reflect successive policies, which are themselves responding to the state of labour and housing markets. Exploring *hôtels meublés*' historicity also reveals how strongly memory is linked to space: Stories unfold in entryways, lodge halls, cafés, rooms, cellars and attics. What we could call the *memorial potential of spaces* differentiates hotels from other types of migrants' accommodations, and make them more similar to vernacular homes, including the possibility to feel 'at home'. *Hôtels* are ambiguous and even double-sided objects, being at the same time, central and peripheral; invisible and stigmatised; hospitable and hostile. Nevertheless, each establishment constitutes a seemingly heterodox community, with its own rules, habits, tensions and solidarisation.

#### 3.1 Times: The tyranny of circumstances

Taking into account the long-term evolution of Parisian *hôtels meublés*, four periods can be identified: (1) During the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century, the sector is constantly developing. Paris is mostly growing in population thanks to immigrants. (2) In the interwar period, and especially by the end of the 1920s, *hôtels meublés* are expanding in an impressive way, offering more than 200,000 furnished rooms in the capital city. As a first step, newcomers were happy – and most of the time forced – to look for such places, which were very numerous in the more populated parts of the cities. Even if hotelkeepers were basically reluctant to accommodate families, women and children were sometimes – temporarily – accepted. (3) The following period is marked by a rapid economic growth and colonial wars: Migrants are again welcome to rebuild French economy and cities. While *bidonvilles* (shantytowns) are spreading around urban centres, the immigrants who live there are working in the construction of huge social housing estates, where some will obtain a flat for them and their family. *Hôtels meublés* being most often managed and occupied by “French Muslim of Algeria”<sup>9)</sup> during the Algerian independence war, several have been used by French police as detention and torture centres in order to eliminate the Resistance movement,<sup>10)</sup> helped by *supplétifs*, or *Harkis*.<sup>11)</sup> At the same time, some hotels were clandestinely supporting the Resistance movement, by welcoming and hiding activists involved in the movement for Algeria's Independence. (4) Finally, since the 1980s, and in a more dramatic way after the end of the 1990s, remaining hotels appear to be places of deep poverty, segregation and exclusion.

<sup>9)</sup> *Français musulmans d'Algérie* is the official term used by the French administration to qualify the autochthone population of Algeria until the independence (1962).

<sup>10)</sup> MNA and FLN

<sup>11)</sup> *Harki* (adjective from the Arabic *harka*, standard Arabic *haraka* هاركة, 'war party' or 'movement', i.e., a group of volunteers, especially soldiers) is the generic term for Muslim Algerian loyalists who served as auxiliaries in the French Army during the Algerian War from 1954 to 1962. It is sometimes applied to all Algerian Muslims who supported the French presence in Algeria during this war.



In the last two decades, public authorities have discovered their potential as accommodation for the most excluded among the excluded: Undocumented families and asylum seekers. Times have changed, very different from the time of *foyers*, which have decreased from 264,800 beds in 1975 to 150,000 according to the 1999 national census, and around 110,000 nowadays. Successive French governments have abandoned direct subsidies to specific types of accommodation dedicated to the migrant (man, single, unskilled worker) while immigrant families start integrating social housing. With the drastic diminution of workforce immigration after 1970, *hotels meublés* are closing down, one after the other. Since the end of the 1990s, those who remain are captured, room after room, by associations in charge of sheltering homeless families and children, and at State expense (LE MENER 2013).

Their past is therefore part of French history, part of the capital city's evolution and metamorphosis, part of collective memory, even if not consensual, denied or rejected. Is the past still perceptible *locally*, and if so, how does memory work? Who are those who live in such places? How do people remember, and if they do, what do they remember? In which circumstances can they tell what they remember, if they can? We couldn't ignore the vibrant question addressed by Gavatri SPIVAK (1988): "Can the subaltern speak?", as we couldn't leave apart Georges PEREC's quasi existential interrogation: "*Comment décrire? Comment raconter? Comment regarder? [...]*" while visiting Ellis Island? (1994, p. 37).<sup>12)</sup>

### 3.2 Spaces as matrix of memories

As stated earlier, hotels are first and foremost inhabited places: People live there, sleep, wash themselves and accomplish all domestic usual rites. But spaces are organised and used differently in respect to ordinary housing. Intermediary spaces are crucial, as they signify a blurred and variable relation between private and public, between inside and outside, especially when the ground floor, at the level of the street, is occupied by a bar or a café. Precisely because space is so scarce and delimitations so hard to maintain, thresholds are decisive. Entrances, corridors, landings, elevators, stairs, step-doors, these so-called intermediate places are spaces of negotiation where the co-presences are regulated by everyday practices, under the more or less benevolent authority of the hotelkeeper. The *hôtel* brews, hosts or rejects, therefore recalls the sense of places. This characteristic operates also when collecting narrations.

In the depths of the *hôtels*, stories of the past are circulating. But the pages are hardly readable, as very few frontline witnesses are still alive. The generation who transmits pieces of narratives is born after the Independence War, or is too young to remember. Most of the stories are indirect and vague, but they are sufficient to fuel narratives anchored in the most secret or private places of the building: Cellar, attics, bedrooms and their hideouts.

<sup>12)</sup> "*Comment décrire? Comment raconter? Comment regarder? [...] Comment reconnaître ce lieu? Restituer ce qu'il fut? Comment lire ces traces?*" (PEREC 1994, p. 37)

About heroic times and the mention of possible meeting organised by FLN activists in the cellar, K. TEBANE, a hotelkeeper in his forties, adopts a cautious position:

*“Yes, it is possible, because it was well equipped, in the past, the cellar ... So it is possible. This is true. Because it is nostalgia, they relate how they were heroes. But there are some who really knew those times. Sometimes one believes, sometimes one doesn't ... Because ... you can say ok ... but who can say that it is true? These are stories ...”* (K. TEBANE 15/01/2009)<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, precise souvenirs can emerge, unexpected. The following example shows a double connection: between past and present, between inside and outside. Past and present are linked thanks to the continuity of the hotel and of its protective function; internal spaces are challenged by external ones. The street is dangerous and violent, the *hôtel*'s walls and roof offers safeguard. Dramatic circumstances – 17<sup>th</sup> October 1961<sup>14</sup> – are recalled because the double connection is still active. Actually, this pattern can be found in more than one narrative, either in literary works or in interviews and conversations in situ.

*“Memories, it's ... Our clients were 100% or 95% Algerians. We had often police raids at night, during the day also. [...] I remember the demonstration in October in Paris, October 17, 1961, where our clients, the majority, have gone. I stayed, my brother went there and was injured in the demonstration. When he returned, I remember, we have hidden him on the roof because after the further police raided the hotels to see those who were injured and arrest them. If they were injured, it meant that they had participated in the demonstration. And then, some of the clients have not come back. I do not know what happened to them but there are some who have never come back (silence). Then, I have here two older clients who don't get out of their room, I send them some soup ...”* (Mrs. AIT 16/10/2008)

Finally, in the hierarchy of spaces, the bedroom is the more private one. Being the place where one spends time for basic activities and needs, as sleeping, eating, washing, receiving hosts, the furnished bedroom – generally large no more than 9 m<sup>2</sup> – is the unique space appropriated as a 'home'. Here, bedrooms are at the same time places of birth (or rebirth) and of death. In the discursive order, either in literature or in oral narratives, bedrooms tend to signify the deepest part of the memories, coloured by the fear of death (sense of isolation and destruction), nostalgia (sense of exile), life (renewed energy, love).

*“Before he turned on the light, a few seconds passed, and I stood there, motionless, in the dark. He turned on the light. The room had two beds, one quite large, the*

<sup>13</sup> Quotations of interviews are translated from French by CB and CLV.

<sup>14</sup> The 17<sup>th</sup> October 1961 is a traumatic landmark in contemporary French history, linked to the decolonisation of Algeria. It refers to the deadly crackdown by French police during a demonstration of Algerians in Paris organised by the Federation of France of the FLN (see BRUNET 1999; HOUSE & MACMASTER [1961] 2008).

*other a folding one, pushed into a corner. How many did sleep there? On the large bed, a piece of cloth, with a round-flower pattern, purple and wide, in separate bouquets, perfumed the room with the smell of fresh cretonne. Because the piece of cloth still had the crease and stiffness of newness. On the table, in the right hand corner, glasses were on top of several boxes. I looked toward the window, my hands hanging on my coat.” (ETCHERELLI [1967], 2008 p. 213)<sup>15)</sup>*

### 3.3 Ambiguities and contradictions: What kind of community?

Narratives show that hotels reveal contradictions, which characterise more broadly the history of immigration in France. The bad reputation they suffer is not new, it is even inherent to the system since its origins. It has become less and less in accordance to the ‘good housing’ norms. In an increasingly commodified urban context, *hôtels* are caught between indifference and scandal: Deadly accidents call media’s ephemeral attention, and urban renewal, the sale by the heirs and forced closure by administrative decision are seriously threatening the sector.

At the same time, because they serve as a reservoir to accommodate asylum seekers, undocumented and homeless families, they play a crucial role as public authorities are obliged to provide shelter to those in need. From their original function of short-term dwellings, they are now engaged in a more long-term activity as they occupy a pivotal position in migrants housing trajectories, regulating shortages and imbalances between supply and demand of housing. Their centrality is also geographical and practical, and gives them value in financial terms, but also in terms of uses. As a result, different populations can be present in a hotel, such as old migrants accommodated for decades, newly arrived migrant families, and, sometimes, impecunious tourists.

The hotels we have surveyed are those where most of the clients belong to the ‘historical immigration’, that is to say former workers coming from Algeria and the Maghreb, but also legionnaires, former soldiers in the French colonial army. How do people share the same places, having so different histories and memories?

We have found that hotels are far from anonymous and anomic. Because the inhabitants are compelled to live together and share, *volens nolens*, everyday life – interior partitions are very thin, scales and landings are inevitable – sociability matters. According to the quality of the establishment and the character of the keeper, inhabitants can cultivate indifference or practice solidarity and even care one for the other. Moreover, heterodox values are promoted, quite close to those prized by the working-class milieu: Labour, equality, friendship, honesty. Easy money, racism, unauthenticity are unanimously rejected, at least rhetorically. Solidarity between human beings, from whatever country they come, is so necessary that memories are not matter of conflicts. In other words, no one seems to be interested in cultivating ‘wars of memories’ inside the small community.

<sup>15)</sup> The narrator is a young French woman who is in love with an Algerian man, and visits him for the first time in his hotel. Translated by CB and CLV.

## 4 Pasts into the present: Doing memory and collecting narratives

### 4.1 Ordinarity as the threshold of repressed memories

Ordinariness of daily life offers a space-time where memory and oblivion are intertwined, reflecting the fate of “lost lives”, “invisible lives” as the respondents echoed again and again, on the edge of disappearance and erasure. Once again, literature and oral history reflect similar processes where words and narratives rely mostly on silences, reluctances and oblivion, as shown in Patrick MODIANO ([1997], 1999), Rachid BOUDJEDRA ([1975], 2005) or Tahar BEN JELLOUN (1975). As Maurice BLANCHOT wrote: “Whoever wishes to remember must trust to oblivion, to the risk entailed in forgetting absolutely, and to this wonderful accident that memory now becomes.” (BLANCHOT 1962 quoted by SEMPRUN 1997, p. 10) This is the common attitude of the protagonists of fictional works as well as the hotels residents. Gaps, holes, repressions trigger narratives, forming a kind of *inventory by absence*. To recall is no ordinary action: It is a process using indirect channels. The activation of memory can be initiated by locations, places, names or encounters, just like what we see in “Dora Bruder”. Patrick MODIANO invents there a paradoxical form of biography, using the holes and gaps as the main thread of the narrative: a narrative through hollowness to reconstruct a teenage girl trajectory, from her *hôtel meublé* in the 18<sup>th</sup> Borough of Paris to Auschwitz [Oświęcim] concentration camp, where she died.

*“They are the kind of people who leave few traces behind them. Almost anonymous. They don’t detach themselves from certain Paris streets, from certain landscape in the banlieue, where I have discovered by chance, that they have lived. For all we know about them often comes down to a simple address. And this topographic clarification contrasts with what we shall ignore for ever about their life – this white, this block of unknown and silence.”* (MODIANO [1997], 1999, p. 20)

The narratives of hotels participate in a deeper knowledge and definition of what hospitality is and means. These narratives deal with several spaces, from private to public, and consequently initiate scale’s changes revealing double sense impacts: the host society on the migrant, and the migrant on the host society. It leads to complex investigations (and narratives), in the place itself, and from the place to anonymous journeys bearing traces of the experience of otherness. Working as clues, they activate multiple memory networks, whose frames are not stable nor sometimes legitimised.

### 4.2 Problematic remembrance and volatile underground memory channels

To remember implies being able to rely on a group, on social frames (HALBWACHS [1925] 1994) that give legitimacy to what is said or claimed, ensuring the passage from one generation to another, but also into the public sphere. Through mechanisms of simplification, distortion or polarisation, collective memory filters and selects within the diversity of experiences, obscuring much of our history and our collective imagination,

presenting a smooth and tamed version based on values promoted by dominant society and conditioned by the opportunity of reception.

These canonical narratives play a paradoxical role: They arguably limit the recognition of the 'underground' memories and of the actors involved, meanwhile their very existence reveals the lasting presence of *silenced* historical episodes. Activated by official channels of memory – such as annual commemorations, opening of museums, etc. –, the canonical narratives can be challenged by alternative ones, showing gaps, holes or oversights. One expression of such underground memory channels is erasure, either self-erasure by *subalternised* subjects themselves, or as a form of essentialisation by external gazes (RAUTENBERG 2007). For instance, Djamal – a client who has helped running the hotel and its bar for the past 18 years – sticks to the idea that hotels “are places for us” where “there are no French people”, where “they only come and go, are afraid to come.”<sup>16)</sup> For him, hotels are resulting from the obligation to leave one's country and family, and engage in “forced labour”. The weakness of social frameworks, able to support remembrance processes, is reflected in every hotel narrative. Families and generations have been disunited by war, exile, and hardships, and hotels are still seen as places of subordination.

Another narrative strategy is to plunge into the trauma to exhibit the violence of what is repressed and silenced. This quotation is from a former *Harki's* interview, L. It shows how hard it is dealing with traumatic memories, especially when there is no (or few) official recognition.

*Do you talk about the past with the other inhabitants?*

*L.: No!!*

*Never?*

*L.: I try to forget.*

*That's it ...*

*L.: One mustn't stir ... how you say ... manure.*

*What's the most difficult regarding the past?*

*L.: Pains are always coming back, from time to time. For example, if your daughter or one of your kids are run over, then, those memories stay, one will remain traumatised for the rest of our life.*

*Did that happen?*

*L.: No! I am giving you an example, a traumatic thing.*

*And what do you mean by trauma?*

*L.: Me ... when I was young during the war in Algeria, I saw they were choking dogs, they hung...*

*Choking ... what?*

*L.: Dogs. They hung dogs to prevent them from barking in the night! And when you go to the river, to take a bath, you'd see bodies filled with water ... murdered ... you think those things are good to know? Better to be in the mortuary!*

<sup>16)</sup> As requested by most of our interviewees, names have been changed. Interview with a client, 13<sup>th</sup> February 2008.

*Yes, that is a lot of pain! And campaigns in Africa, it was not funny either ...*  
*L.: No more. Enough.* (L., 18<sup>th</sup> Borough, February 2008)

Underground narratives are raw. This quotation illuminates, to follow Michael POLLAK ([1989], 1993), how underground channels of memory are volatile, how much they require from those who speak and those who ask and listen. This day, the hotel manager was absent. The following incident took place while we were conducting interviews for the fifth time in one of our most familiar hotels. But this one time, we changed our habit of coming in the morning to greet the owner and then proceed with our discussions. We wanted to measure what life in the hotel was like in the afternoon, when many of its regular clients are coming back from their daily activities. This breach in our protocol has had some consequences on the welcome we received and was indicative of the impact of our previous questioning. We received an explosive speech turned against sociologists and women.

We were directly confronted with the effects of this memory broken into pieces, these repressed episodes belonging to those who were on the wrong side during the war in Algeria – and still are –, but also on their arrival in France: the deliberately forgotten narrative of the *Harkis*, of their children relegated to camps in the South of France.<sup>17)</sup> The injuries of the past vivid in the present were pointed to us by a reversal of the established roles: we were subjected to quick and brutal questioning about our own lives. A kind of *tit for tat*, one could say. This illustrates how painful memories, barely official, suppressed or, even worse, irreparable (both in Algeria and in France, in the case of *Harkis*) is problematic because mediations and collective supports do not or little exist. If one is optimistic, it shows how important research is, especially on the issues of conflicted and contested memory, and peace-making strategies.

### 4.3 Narratives as a capability: the role of narrative identities

Indeed, identity is not fixed once and for all, but as a process, is permanently negotiated through dealing with others and the narratives we share. Narrative, as a space of creation, of claims and stands, highlights identities at work through a ‘narrative identity’ or even a ‘potential personality’. As such narratives are interpretative constructions reformulating experiences, whose aims are to understand (the world), to understand oneself, to be understood (by others) as ethno-psychologist G. DEVEREUX demonstrated (1967, p. 396). These narrative and speech patterns of ‘lost lives’ question the creative dimension of narration and their effect on identity. Indeed, as demonstrated by Paul RICOEUR, in the narrative, the “I” becomes a “subject” because it is addressed. The attitude of the narrator is thus reflexive, both witness and actor. The narrator as an author creates his identity in “engaging himself in a staging under the guidance of the text.” (WHITE 2003) It is the narrative we establish that gives consistency to our experience and, thus, to our identity. What are the characteristics of these identities linked to migration in and from the furnished hotels?

<sup>17)</sup> For further information on the treatment of *Harkis* and their families after their arrival in France after the independence of Algeria see BESNACI-LANCOU & MANCERON 2008 or BESNACI-LANCOU & MANCERON 2010.

We were able to identify different recurring tones and registers: such as the tale, the confession, the confidence, the manifesto, the casual conversation mainly. Each time a dialogue is established between different systems of representation, imaginary, and the specific location of each protagonist. That is why we were mindful of the verbal and the non-verbal signs and how the order of situations and the culture of the interlocutors affected the way in which they expressed themselves, interpreted and reacted to what was said.

In order to understand their significance, it was important to analyse the mechanics of these narratives, understand their structure and identify certain speech patterns. The “narrative emplotment” to use P. RICOEUR’s formula (1984–1988) condenses two dimensions of life: “Life as lived”, that is to say the experience and “Life as told”, that is to say the reworked narrated life. It implies three different times: (1) First of all, the story really lived, that is to say, the biography both in its objective dimension and its perceived one; (2) then, what the subject knows and believes in retrospect of his career and the context in which it has taken place; (3) finally, the present of the narrative produced through the dialogue of the interview – what the subject wants to say and thinks facing the interviewer.

The verb *to tell* is decisive, because it induces a narrative that involves several steps: To describe, to explain and to evaluate. Similarly, oral history does not produce a whole and complete narrative but a life-line. Indeed, silence is the first pattern of importance of our narratives. It is by no means a refusal to speak, but the ordinary regime of speech. In his studies on the utterance of the concentration camp experience, Michael POLLAK demonstrated the function of silence and of the unsaid, as a means to negotiate and mediate the experienced trauma. It does not refer to oblivion, but to a form of resistance between an official and hegemonic narrative, and ‘underground’ and counter-hegemonic narratives developed and transmitted through less legitimated and legitimising frames. POLLAK puts the emphasis on the fact that these “forbidden or shameful memories [...] are transmitted in informal communication structures while remaining unnoticed by the surrounding society” (1993, p. 27) and are dependent on their conditions of utterance. In the same way, repetitions mark the progress in the rendering of a journey through life. It is an imperative necessity because it enables one to ‘resume’, to ‘weave threads’ despite the presence of holes, absences or hesitations to remember and speak. Anecdotes, another speech pattern, feed and expand narratives with unpredictable focuses, sometimes calling for a development or a long silence. Finally, ellipses reflect the non-linear passage of time and a specific association with the ability to draw places and times without set rules. This process of identification questions mainly the building of categories:

*“Listen, to me, everybody who has lived more than five years in Paris, he is a Parisian [...] my father, he has a foreign passport, but he’s been living here for fifty years! My grandfather, he’s been for sixty years in Paris. So, he is a stranger? He has participated in two wars for France ... Stop it!”* (Interview with the landlord, Hôtel de Savoie, 14 May 2008)

In our *hôtels meublés*, the relationship between oneself and the other, between the singular and the plural, as well as to France, appears most frequently through categories

such as “foreign”, “immigrant,” “subaltern”, or “minority worker”. It reveals modes of inclusion and exclusion not referring to the colour of the skin or a geographical origin or even a nationality or political preferences, be they past or present (NOIRIEL 2004). Here, no simple national identity, but heterodox social experiences, unstable identities, and categories are always put into question (NOIRIEL 2007). Rather than an identity grounded on an origin, a religion, a relation to a nation-state, identifications seem to be built through prevailing relationships, inspired and fed by the existence of the others. It is never static, but always in labour.

The narrative identities of the residents of the hotels are built on a displacement, of categories surely, but also related to a geography of transit and migration. Geographical networks carried by the clients and the managers of the hotels intersect and intertwine themselves, forging links between their various affiliations and memberships. Through narratives of these displacements and networks, the hotels become ‘places of cultures’, establishing a ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ that subverts the traditional system of binary relationships between cultures of the North and the South, former colonial powers and their former colonies (BHABHA 1994). This plurality acquires a new meaning: beyond the simple addition of fragmented and conflicting elements, it results on a combination, a “poetics of relationship” as phrased by Edouard GLISSANT, where the ‘multiple’ is the trigger and the cement. It goes beyond the normative definition of diversity, as it is far more radical: No more hierarchy between the various elements, but new mechanisms of associations resolving and leveling former oppositions (GLISSANT [1990], 1997, p. 256). The hotel presents itself, then, as a battlefield of migrant identity, an area of hybridation, in Patrick CHAMOISEAU’S understanding (BOSJEN 2002): A centre of resistance, transfer and compensation. Following the historian Achille MBEMBE (2006), the identity redesigned in the hotels can be associated with the third movement of postcolonial identity, that is to say the rewriting of oneself after the trauma, after the trauma and the erasure of culture and identity suffered during colonisation and its aftermath domination.

#### **4.4 Repertoires of hospitality and care and the fabric of a memory of immigration**

In the hotels, memory and hospitality are closely linked. Different regimes of hospitality lead to different regimes of memory. In fact, we can say that hospitality is the mask of memory, an opening to it: Tales of hospitality have to be told before memory can appear. The first type, grounded on solidarity among brothers, belongs mainly to the clients. Their memory is a short-term one, based on the everyday life struggle to survive. Thus, no sense of hierarchy in their narrative: Few precise dates, except the arrival in France, the date of retirement or birth of the children. But there is a very detailed sense of location: Every name and address of places of work and dwelling is carefully remembered and stated. This narrative is dominated by a sense of duration (work, retirement, exile, life in the hotel). The second type relies of charity and concern toward the suffering other, and addresses the long-term memory of landlords (mainly women) based on a family heritage and the ties to the functions played by the hotel. The past is carried by their association with the hotel as a business, a building and an inheritance from their family.



Therefore the notions of welcome and hospitality are translated into places and protagonists. If we focus on the places involved, there are mostly the café shared with the others, the room and its bed, where the presence of the foreigners is ascribed in a new geographic and symbolic spacing.

The state of hotels' dilapidation highlights the marginal role reserved for migrants. The *hôtels meublés* symbolise the hospitable dimension of the host society, in which the migrant loses his original identity. He is not a subject anymore but an element of a herd reduced to his workforce, together with those that Driss CHRAÏBI (1955) calls the "goats" in his novel *Les Boucs*: a cohort of animalised silhouettes denied as human being by the 'host society'. The same idea occurs in Rachid BOUDJEDRA's following quotation:

*"He hasn't seen the hotels rooms with bed bunks one on top of the other and separated by only thirty centimetres representing all the living space, which tenants have not only when they sleep but also when they rest or when they dream [...] lying on their wet, mouldy and ripped bunks [...] chain-smoking to kill cockroaches and to smoke out bugs [...] and take off from this sordid reality, which lifts them, so, between a rotten ceiling with wide greenish spots [...], and an icy concrete floor, where dozens of crevices bruises their feet."* (BOUDJEDRA [1975], 2005, pp. 181–184)<sup>18)</sup>

The migrant's horizon and his presence are increasingly shrinking. From the inside, the journey through exile is a journey through loneliness on the margins of madness. The hotel embodies an ever-deeper confinement. Solitude and confinement are imposed, but can paradoxically become a survival strategy to recapture their memory from their homeland, their lost land and to travel to their 'inner land', as shown in Tahar BEN JELLOUN'S work:

*"For some time, I live the life of a tree torn from its roots. Dried and exhibited in a glass window. I do not feel the ground anymore. I am an orphan. Orphaned from a land and a forest. Listen to me: My room is a suitcase where I lay bare my savings and my loneliness [...]."* (BEN JELLOUN [1976], 1995, p. 11)<sup>19)</sup>

The hotel and its rooms become the medium of a complex memory process, similar to a cycle of life, death and rebirth. In this place of discontinuous intimacy, "suitcase of loneliness" (BEN JELLOUN [1976], 1995, p. 11), migrants and exiled people can experience a kind of rebirth. After a cycle of deprivation and silence starts a process of self-reconstruction. This is exactly what we observe in the animated pictures video by South African artist William KENTRIDGE entitled "Felix in Exile".<sup>20)</sup> There, an empty room stands as the seismograph of loss and exposes the absence, the dispossession of the self, felt by the exiled character. The blank pages flying around the room increase such a sense of vacuum. But, little by little, the pages are filled with images of what was lost – a landscape, a face, the beloved. This stream fills the room, which becomes a creative space of memory, acting

<sup>18)</sup> All quotations from Rachid BOUDJEDRA's novel are translated by CB and CLV.

<sup>19)</sup> All quotations from Tahar BEN JELLOUN'S novel are translated by CB and CLV.

<sup>20)</sup> See the full-length video by William KENTRIDGE (1994, 8 min, 43 sec.).

as a dark chamber projecting and linking fragments of the past. In the end, the room is saturated and overflows, the character is freed from his imprisonment (BARRÈRE 2011).

Indeed, both from our interviews and literary works, the narrative about the room is of a break with a past life, be it a family, a marriage, a house, a country, and a seclusion where one disappears, becomes transparent as a “field of paper in the wind” (BEN JELLOUN [1976], 1995, p. 69). In the room lie the woes and illnesses experienced by its inhabitant such as despair, depression, temptation of suicide, sexual misery, murderous instinct, and schizophrenia.

From and within the hotels a double movement of uprooting and re-rooting takes place. From a first experience of imprisonment, the migrant can experience an opening of the self through intercultural encounters, language transfers and exchanges of narratives capturing pacified or conflicting elements. It offers a crossing of cultures and territories through a series of imagery based on various affiliations and belongings (BARRÈRE 2009). The hotel becomes a space of cultural *métissage* – that is to say of cross-cultural mix, claimed and appropriated by migrants. This “migrant territory” (HAREL 2005, p. 15) is based on new logics of associations and exchanges, on the circulation of cultural signs and fragments of experiences. For instance in two novels, “Le Lys et le flamboyant” (1997) and “Le Chercheur d’Afrique” (1990), Congolese writer Henri LOPES tracks all the steps of this uprooting associating places and scales between the neighbourhoods of Baongo or Poto-Poto and the colonial power, between the village and the European continent, between the fishermen’s island and Paris, between the Congo and France, marking a sequence from the village cabin to a room in a Parisian building. A specific atlas is spread in the rooms, challenging the boundaries and highlighting areas of experience. In both novels, Africa appears as a space that has been left behind. Therefore, literary narratives work as crossroads, combining heterogeneous fragments of life between the lost country and the host country, frictions and frustrations of the migrant’s experience. It sets up what Charles BONN calls a “localization writing” (1985), linking internal exile and geographical exile. It is expressed by the abundance of names, by the multiplication of paths from one space to another. The question then arises of the possible meaning of a prospective return and of a definition of identity through these narratives and their words. It constitutes new spaces of encounter that can be assimilated to “spaces of translation” (DERRIDA 1998, p. 10), where the dynamics of hospitality are re-interpreted, and the dynamics of identity negotiated, exposing cross-cultural values. Positions are re-appraised through the crossbreed of references and the dislocation of places (BISANSWA 2003, p. 39) causing unexpected encounters.

## 5 Conclusion – Voice and right to the city: A fragile perspective

In a way, the hotels we have investigated bear testimony to migratory and political circumstances belonging to the past. Therefore, they are also fully contemporaneous as they echo meaningful stories rooted in history, overflowing and encroaching into the present. Not only *hôtels meublés* are progressively disappearing from the urban landscape, but

those who survive are transformed into hospices for non-European families, in search of asylum or deprived from any right, except the one to receive a temporary shelter because of the laws concerning childhood protection.

While undergoing mechanisms of urban renewal, slum clearing and social reforming that neutralise and eliminate traces of working-class culture and outsiders in the city, the *hôtels meublés* are resilient places constantly renewing themselves and developing *capabilities*<sup>21)</sup> through resistance and dissidence mechanisms. In that respect, *hotels meublés* show particular dynamics of hospitality. Indeed, we have discovered that memories are not construed as conflicting; the group leaves everyone to his or her own truth. The figure of the hotel emerges as an unorthodox social form bringing together family, community and strangers – a random encounter of people resulting from the specific regime of hospitality. Hosts (hotelkeepers) and guests (clients) do not remember in the same way and with the same ease. For the first ones, even being themselves immigrants, mostly from Algeria, they have a more stable background, and quite open perspectives for their children; conversely, the second ones look at their lives as unsuccessful. Both anyway are doing their best to “save the face” (GOFFMAN 1955), as everyone does when forced to exposing intimacy.

Through the narratives emerges a confrontation between what belongs to a social consensus and what belongs to a dissenting narrative, composed of alternative proposals, of a new hierarchy of values. This never finished, always interrupted narrative sheds light on daily strategies of resistance and arrangement as well as conflicts arising from an awareness of the distance to the other and one's place in the world, here and now. As narratives of wounded identities and impeded memory, they act as a kind of stowaway for a yet inaudible memory, raising the issue of the confinement in a negative identity, or the possibility of some form of emancipation (VESCHAMBRE 2008).

Therefore memory becomes a political stake, especially for those caught in a feeble field of recognition and whose places are under threat of disappearance, hidden in the recesses of the globalised and commodified city. Indeed hotels are anti-monuments and their future cannot be seen as part of urban heritage or national narrative. It raises the issue of the possibility or more likely the impossibility of some form of recognition and retribution through a wider access to heritage. Any attempt would reassert them in the normative mould of the dysfunctional city, leaning on stigmatising signs and traces. Heritage would only become a repetition of a wounded identity and maintains a negative labelling of vulnerable populations and of a disincarnate memory, be they migrants, homeless or unemployed people. The issue is about the transmission, through precarious channels of legitimisation and utterance, of a sharp and raw narrative, driven by need, constraint and economic and social domination.

Consequently what matters is people and not solely places, but people in places and places with people – in other words the set of relationships between inhabited places and their inhabitants. As such, hotels, as a collective social stage, are what Patrick CHAMOIS-

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<sup>21)</sup> *Capabilities* as defined by Nobel Prize recipient Amartya SEN are the specific resources of individuals and their ability to mobilise and enhance them. They also refer to the actual possibility of an individual to choose various combinations of operations. It is an assessment of the freedom he/she actually enjoys (see SEN 1985).

SEAU calls *trace-mémoire*. Writing about the former slave quarters of the plantations in the French West Indies, CHAMOISEAU states that it refers to a “space forgotten by History and by unified and consensual Memory, because it demonstrates dominated narratives and crushed memories, and tends to preserve them” (CHAMOISEAU & HAMMADI 1994, p. 16). Hence, we may argue that because of their instability and negative imagery – similar to that of slave plantations, city slums, prisons, etc. –, *hotels meublés* are such places proposing alternative visions of identity resisting top-down assignments.

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