

Nuclear Legacies: Representations in Literature and Film of French Nuclear Testing in Algeria from 1960 to 1966

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On February 13th, 1960, French President Charles de Gaulle declared, “Hurrah for France! Since this morning she is stronger and prouder”; France had just successfully detonated its first atomic bomb at a testing site near Reggane, Algeria (“La première bombe A”). This bomb was the first of seventeen detonations in the Algerian Sahara from 1960 to 1966, leaving profound marks on the physical and cultural landscape. Despite this, French nuclear presence in Algeria has consistently been silenced and erased: French nuclear testing is often discussed through the rhetoric of national security efforts, overlooking the lived experiences of Algerians and the French soldiers who witnessed the bombs.

This summer, I aimed to explore the hidden, invisible, and silenced experiences of the French atomic bomb—the experiences detailing the death, destruction, and horror of witnessing something as catastrophic as a nuclear weapon in action. In considering how to make the invisible visible, I turned to aesthetic works, due to their capacity to bring people or ideas, who are typically left on the margins of history, to the center, defying typical constructions of the past—constructions that center around the colonizer, with the colonized left to the forgotten margins of history.

Having established the importance of aesthetic works for making the invisible visible, I turned to fictional literature written in French, as well as a documentary style film produced in the French language, to understand the erased impacts of French colonialism and the French atomic bomb. These books were Christophe Bataille’s *L’expérience* (2015), Victor Malo Selva’s *Reggane mon amour* (2012), and Djamel Mati’s *Sentiments Irradiés* (2018). The documentary style film I watched was *At (H)ome* (2013), a collaborative project between filmmaker Elisabeth Leuvrey and photographer Bruno Hadijh. Each of these works, in conjunction with a variety of historical texts and analyses, permitted me to understand, more completely, the catastrophe of French colonialism and French nuclear testing, as well as explore the necessity of literature and film for raising forgotten colonial experiences to the center of our current historical narrative.

At the end of the summer, I wrote a twenty-page essay describing my exploration, all in French. These works allowed me to begin to answer essential questions such as: How can we rectify a forgotten and erased history? What is the lasting legacy of French colonialism in the Sahara? I also began to question modern constructions of the desert being empty, and that description being inherently linked to colonialist ideology and justifications. I also strengthened my French language comprehension. In reading and watching works only produced in French, and writing the entirety of my paper in French, I grew as a Francophone Studies student: both my grammar and language use strengthened, as did my knowledge of French colonialism and Francophone culture.

Additionally, this project finds itself particularly pertinent in today’s world. After the release of the popular movie *Oppenheimer* (2023), directed by Christopher Nolan, the atomic bomb (despite not being the French atomic bomb) once again finds itself at the center of the popular imagination. But what has the atomic bomb left us with, really? Where do we, as individuals and as a society, go from here: a world where few have the power to destroy many in just a matter of seconds. The French soldiers forced to travel to *point-zéro* to study the human limits of the bomb, as well as the inhabitants of the Algerian desert) still face the effects of radiation, in the form of various cancers, birth defects, and damage to a vibrant landscape that once nurtured them. What about their lives, and legacies: what future remains for them? These questions will guide me as I begin to pursue a Francophone Studies honors project. Undoubtedly, however, the atomic bomb is not a thing of the past: it is a thing of the present and the future, effecting the lives of generations to come.

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References:

“La première bombe A française a explosé Samedi matin” *Le Monde*, 14-15 February 1960.