Severed images: Women, the Algerian War of Independence and the mobile documentary idea

Siona Wilson City University of New York

Abstract
During the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62), conflicts over the meaning of appearances, particularly in relation to the bodies of Algerian women, were a major locus for political conflict, subterfuge and violence. As demonstrated in the most famous representation of the war, Gillo Pontecorvo’s widely celebrated film La bataille d’Alger (Pontecorvo, 1966), the strategic use of the veil and of unveiling was the mechanism that produced the Algerian woman as insurgent. What the eyes (or camera) saw was not always to be believed and nor was visual appearance akin, in any straightforward way, to truth. Drawing on key historical examples, including La bataille d’Alger, Marc Garanger’s Femmes algériennes 1960 (1960) and Assia Djebar’s 1979 essay ‘Regard interdit, son coupé’, as well as Zineb Sedira’s contemporary film installation Gardiennes d’images (2010), this article proposes a theory of the documentary image in light of the political complexities over vision and appearance that have continued to haunt the historical representation of Algerian women. Placing an emphasis on the circulation of images and the mobility of meaning, the argument stresses communities of political belief rather than visual truth in establishing documentary meaning.

Résumé
Pendant la guerre d’indépendance algérienne (1954–62), les conflits à propos de la signification des apparences, notamment en relation du corps des femmes algériennes, ont été un lieu majeur de conflit politique, de subterfuge et de violence. Comme le démontre la représentation la plus célèbre de la guerre, le film de Gillo Pontecorvo La bataille d’Alger (1966), l’utilisation stratégique du voile et du dévoilement a été le mécanisme qui a produit la femme algérienne comme insurgante. Ce que les yeux (ou la caméra) ont vu n’était pas toujours à croire et l’apparence visuelle n’est pas non plus apparentée, d’une manière directe, à la vérité. S’appuyant sur des exemples historiques clés, tels que La bataille d’Alger, Femmes algériennes 1960 de Marc Garanger et l’essai ‘Regard interdit, son coupé’ d’Assia Djebar de 1979, ainsi que l’installation cinématographique contemporaine Gardiennes d’images de Zineb Sedira (2010), cet essai propose une théorie de l’image documentaire à la lumière des complexités politiques sur la vision et l’apparence qui ont continué à hanter la représentation historique des

Zineb Sedira’s three-screen film installation, Gardiennes d’images (2010), is about a failed archive. Documentary photographs taken during the Algerian War of Independence by Mohamed Kouaci, the sole photographer for El Moudjahid, the newspaper for the armed wing of the FLN, have found no place in the decolonized nation state. Why have these images been forgotten, why have they been repressed? Is this repression because of the archive’s many images of women? If, this is, as the film seems to suggest, indeed partly the case, the reasons are more complex than they might initially appear. As Ranjana Khanna has argued in her book Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present, citing Frantz Fanon, the figure of the Algerian woman continues to occupy a ‘zone of occult instability’ (2008: 117).

During the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62) conflicts over the meaning of appearances, particularly in relation to the bodies of Algerian women, were a major locus for political conflict, subterfuge and violence. As demonstrated in the most famous representation of the war, Gillo Pontecorvo’s widely celebrated film, La bataille d’Alger (1966), the strategic use of the veil and of unveiling was the mechanism that produced the Algerian woman as insurgent. What the eyes (or camera) saw was not always to be believed and nor was visual appearance akin, in any straightforward way, to truth. With reference to colonial-era photography, Malek Alloula, in his book Le harem colonial, has suggested that ‘[i]l n’y a pas historiquement d’exemple de société où les femmes furent autant photographiées dans l’intention d’être livrées au regard public’ (2001: 11). His analysis of the colonial obsession with the veiled Algerian woman (and her unveiling), which continues to this day, is not only characterized as ‘réalisme forcé’ but, he argues, it produced an alignment between the (false) image of the Algerian woman and Algerian society per se (2001: 37). In both these cases, the relationship between representation and idea, image and reality is fundamentally destabilized, if not subject to deception on both sides of the colonial relation. More recently, the historian Natalya Vince has argued that during the decade immediately following independence, not only did the postcolonial Algerian state mobilize national identity through the figure of the Algerian woman, but, she writes, ‘women were called upon to embody the nation, or had “the nation” foisted upon their bodies’ (2015: 173). As these diverse examples suggest, both the colonial and the nationalist mobilization of ideas about Algerian women produces a tension between myth and lived reality. But this tension should not be understood as a simple opposition of truth and falsehood, actuality and fantasy, history and memory. Instead, mythmaking gives meaning to history, and memory is not a given: it is contested, subject to construction and produced through processes of representation that can fundamentally change with different audiences and at different historical moments.1

This article suggests a theory of the documentary image – visual modernity’s historical mode – that emerges at the meeting place between

1. There is a vast body of ‘memory studies’ literature related to the Algerian War of Independence. The most influential intervention in this field has been Michael Rothberg’s idea of ‘multidirectional memory’ (2009). For a considered feminist critique of the recent explosion in memory studies see Susannah Radstone (2011).
It characterizes documentary as a historical mode, as distinct from a genre – that is, a particular type of film, photography or literary production – because the documentary value of the works discussed here is not pre-given. Rather, claims to historical veracity emerge through a complex process of collective consensus. Therefore, the examples that this study draws upon, including *La bataille d’Alger*, Marc Garanger’s military identity photographs of forcibly unveiled Algerian women, *Femmes algériennes 1960* (1960) and Assia Djebar’s poetic essay, ‘Regard interdit, son coupé’, about Eugène Delacroix’s painting *Les femmes d’Algers dans leur appartement*, do not belong to documentary as a genre. Even Sedira’s *Gardiennes d’image*, which I will return to at the end of the essay, could be seen as liminal to documentary proper since it is a film installation, a work of contemporary art. Yet, to different degrees and in different media forms, these examples mobilize the discourse of documentary in order to make arguments about historical representation. In doing so, these works foreground conflicts over the gendering of visual truth and mobilize constructions of political belief that continue to remain relevant in the present.

**Documentary and decolonization**

Understood as a genre, documentary is easily filed under the larger heading of ‘realism’ and in contrast to the dominant archival label of ‘modernism’. The idea of artistic or literary genres like its cognate genders are organized by a strictly hierarchical value-coded matrix. For ‘realism’ we should read: subject matter at the expense of formal complexity (accessible, social, collective and objective). ‘Modernism’, in counterpoint, is coded as intellectual, sophisticated, individual and subjective. Conventionally, within literary studies and art history, documentary is not addressed alongside or as an important part of visual modernism. Yet, as Tyrus Miller has convincingly argued, the documentary/modernism opposition is ‘familiar to the point of near-banality’ (2002: 226). Like ‘folk wisdom’ as he puts it, these descriptors may have the ring of truth, but as oppositions they do not hold up under serious scrutiny (2002: 226). Rather, ‘documentary’ and ‘modernism’, in Miller’s argument, form ‘complementary moments of a broader modernist poetics’ (2002: 226, original emphasis).

Miller, concerned principally with British poetry, addresses documentary’s initial emergence in the 1920s and 1930s in Europe and the United States. The ‘crisis in the regime of the real’ that gives documentary its motivating force during these decades is defined by the impact of the Russian Revolution and the rise of fascism (Tagg 2009: 57). There are well-established lines of political linkage from fascism in the 1930s to the post-Second World War era of decolonization, with Algeria’s anti-colonial struggle providing a particularly significant conjunction of historical factors. Drawing on the writing of Frantz Fanon and W. E. B. Dubois, Nicholas Mirzoeff has suggested that ‘Fascism itself can be situated as a North-South flow of colonial politics’, and in light of the post-1945 opposition to neo-fascism, ‘The Algerian War was a crucial turning point for European and Third World intellectuals alike’ (2011: 232–33). Many other writers – including those contemporary to this moment – have

2. As a measure of this scholarly norm, Jeff Allred, in his 2009 book about US Depression-era documentary, notes how the subject search terms ‘modernism’ and ‘documentary’ are combined as key words in only five scholarly publications listed in the MLA database (2009: 10).
3. Simone de Beauvoir’s role as a public intellectual in France is discussed below. With Jean-Paul Sartre, they both made the links to fascist policies seeing a line of continuity between the treatment of Jews under Nazism and the Algerian population in France (1958; also see Fanon 1961).

4. Ariella Azoulay’s work has been particularly important for my understanding of the shift in the treatment of documentary and journalistic photographs from questions of representation and the moment of production to an understanding of the image in circulation and reuse (2008). Vered Maimon, in personal discussion as well as published writing, has also been instrumental in my understanding of the significance of political belief as part of the affective re-circulation of photographic images (2017).

5. The opening intertitle was added when the film was released in the United States (Daulatzai 2016: 27). described the French government’s mobilization of fascist policies of population control and suspension of civil and human rights for Algerians both in France and in colonial Algeria itself. Hannah Feldman, in her art historical study, From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945–62 (2014), describes the political disavowal that comes with characterizing the timeframe for her subject using the standard periodizing terminology, ‘post-war’. Instead, she frames her analysis of French art and visual culture from 1945 to 1962 as ‘created within, shaped by, and fully legible only in the historical context of an ongoing war – or wars’ (Feldman 2014: 2). Preferring the term ‘art during-war’ (2014: 2, original emphasis), Feldman offers a sketch of the continuous military activities on the part of France, beginning with the 8 May 1945 massacre in Sétif, Algeria at the very end of the War in Europe, followed by the First Indochina War (1946–54) and, of course, the Algerian War of Independence (2014: 2).

While the argument of this article holds with the lines of historical continuity suggested by Feldman and Mirzoeff, my intervention is different from each. The former writer is focused on art and visual culture in France and the latter is invested in realism and visuality as his defining categories. Specifying documentary and the figure of the female insurgent as the focus of visual modernity’s figuration of anticolonial struggles and postcolonial state building places a particular emphasis on media dissemination, the patterns of remediation and their delayed effects. The distinction underlined here is from a focus on representation and the moment of the making of an image to questions of image circulation and reception. Here, the interest in documentary, although influenced by Mirzoeff’s critical reclamation of realism, is concerned less with the politics of looking, or ‘the right to look’ as his book’s title puts it, and more with the communities of belief that form around the production, dissemination and remediation of the documentary idea. In this regard, La bataille d’Alger, directed by the Italian filmmaker, Gillo Pontecorvo, makes for a particularly illuminating example. The film deploys a distinctly neo-realist aesthetic, but La bataille d’Alger is not strictly speaking a documentary film. Moreover, any straightforward notion of its documentary status is repudiated in an opening intertitle, which declares ‘not one foot of newsreel or documentary footage has been used’. This disclaimer notwithstanding, the film’s documentary value has nonetheless persisted and it is typically described in terms of visual rhetoric. This includes the use of handheld camerawork, journalistic-type telephoto lenses and the newsreel appearance of the grainy film stock, as well as the use of other conventions of documentary such as voice-over, communiqués and press conferences. But it is not simply the look of documentary that provides the film with its historical significance, rather, it is the community of belief that structured its making and reception. From the involvement of key individuals from the War of Independence and the community of Algerian ‘extras’ from the Casbah who were its victims, to the ways in which the film went on to be received by local and global audiences, La bataille d’Alger stakes its veracity on the belief in the historical truth it synthesizes and (re)tells rather than through the camera’s mechanical witness to actual, or ‘real’ events. Documentary, moreover, does not attain such historical truth through visual means
alone; it must be discursively sited and open to contestation. This requires political belief drawn from human testimony and collective consensus in order to frame the historical veracity of any visual document. In this regard *La bataille d’Alger* is exemplary, which is perhaps the reason why almost every scholar who writes about the War of Independence is compelled to refer to this work.

The film is focused primarily on the events of the 1956–57 urban guerrilla conflict that took place in Algeria’s capital city. The brutal strategies of torture that the French army systematically deployed would soon after be brought to public light. Furthermore, the defeat and de facto expulsion of the FLN from the capital city would lead to its institutionalization through the formation of the interim government in exile in 1958. Although certainly a dramatization of the 1956–67 events, this study suggests that we might more accurately understand the film as a type of historical reenactment. The main adviser and co-producer, Yacef Saadi, was an FLN cadre during the War of Independence.\(^6\) After independence he formed Casbah films and worked to find the right director for *La bataille d’Alger*.\(^7\) All but one of the actors were non-professional. The exception was Jean Martin, the French actor who played Colonel Mathieu, but he was cast partly because of his political credentials. A draft resister in real life, Martin had been fired from a previous acting job for signing a statement against the war in Algeria. The Algerian actors were often selected for their close involvement in the actual events depicted. Saadi, the co-producer and adviser, played a role based upon his own experience in the war. His nephew played Yacef Omar (little Omar), the young boy who died, along with Hassiba Ben Bouali, Mahmoud Bouhamidi and the main protagonist, Ali la Pointe, in the finale. In keeping with the arc of la Pointe’s life story – petty-thief-turned revolutionary – his character was played by Brahim Hadjadj, an illiterate street hustler Pontecorvo picked out at a local market in Algiers. Not only were the locations true to the actions played out on-screen, but an accurate reconstruction was made of the house in which the final death scene took place and then, as with the actual events depicted, it was blown up for the camera in the exact geographical location in the Casbah (Khanna 2008: 273n34). All of this creates a grain of authenticity that contributes to the ‘discourse of subjectivity’ operative at the film’s reception (Allred 2009: 21). As Jeff Allred has argued, citing Paula Rabinowitz, ‘documentary hails a collective and embodied *audience* as a “subject of (historical) agency”’ as opposed to the ‘isolated spectator’ of ‘mainstream cinematic fictions’ (2009: 21, original emphasis).

As a further measure of the film’s documentary value, Vince recounts how several artefacts in the Museum of the Army in Algiers ‘are taken from, although not always credited to, the Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*’ (2015: 2). She names the following historical items: ‘a child-size checked top of “little Omar”, the neatly folded white shirt of Ali la Pointe and the short-sleeved cream T-shirt of Hassiba Ben Bouali, alongside a watch and a pair of glasses with a cracked left lens’ (2015: 2). This latter item is particularly interesting since it marks an important intertextual reference, evoking a lineage of critical realism through its echo of a renowned close-up of a smashed eye
8. Khanna offers an excellent gloss of the complicated political history of the film, which did not pass without criticism and controversy in Algeria (2008: 107–13). Sohail Daulatzai gives the most up to date account of the film’s complex reception outside of Algeria in film festivals and elsewhere (2016).

9. The classic manifesto statement on documentary as an anti-colonial art form is Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas’ ‘Toward a third cinema’ (1969). Their argument, as Daulatzai recounts, was developed as a direct response to The Battle of Algiers (2016: 25–29).

10. The figure of the modern female insurgent emerged in the 1930s during the Spanish Civil War. In this, the first media-covered war, she was widely imaged and became a symbol of the moral rectitude of the Republican cause (Mendelson 2005: 138–43).

Ce n’est pas la mise au jour d’un personnage connu et mille fois fréquenté dans l’imagination ou dans les récits. C’est une authentique naissance, à l’état pur, sans préalable. Il n’y a pas de personnage à imiter. Il y a au contraire une dramatisation intense, une absence de jour entre la femme et la révolutionnaire. La femme algérienne s’élève d’emblée au niveau de la tragédie.

([1959] 2011: 32)

Women insurgents initially operated beneath the cover of the veil, which he describes as a kind of mobile bio-architectural space, like ‘[l]e manteau protecteur de la Kasbah, le rideau de sécurité presque organique que la ville arabe tisse autour de l’autochtone’ so that ‘l’Algérienne à découvert est lancée dans la ville du conquérant’ ([1959] 2011: 33) with bombs, money or other weapons. But the final stage in the creation of this glass lens in Sergei Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin (1925). This institutionalization of artefacts from the film into the official historical record of the conflict is a particularly pointed index of its historical significance and documentary value. Moreover, its instrumental use as a pedagogical tool for counter insurgency, in military training schools in the United States, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay (beginning as early as 1967), is a further index of its perceived authenticity (Daulatzai 2016: 38–61).

It is precisely the film’s status as not being a documentary that allows it to speak to the complexity of documentary as the visual form of decolonization. This is because it opens up the gap between historical truth and visual appearance, which is the very site where the female insurgent stakes her claim. Although this gendered figure was not invented during the Algerian War of Independence, it is certainly with this brutal conflict – manifested in both physical and media form – that la femme algérienne achieved her celebrated political identity. Moreover, the narrative lynchpin of La bataille d’Alger is located around these very questions. In the film’s telling, the conflict was precipitated by a series of bomb explosions in the French section of the city that were planted by three women. These three women passed undetected through the city’s colonial center. By adopting the dress and comportment of the French occupiers, they effectively hid in plain sight.

It is well known that Pontecorvo’s staging of the female insurgents in La bataille d’Alger was indebted to Fanon’s influential 1959 essay, ‘L’Algérie se dévoile’. Here he offers a powerful historical account of the colonial investment in the unveiling of the Algerian woman, which began in earnest as a political strategy in the 1930s. The colonist’s need to make her visible is described in psychological terms as a rape fantasy that is ‘toujours précédé de la déchirure du voile’ (Fanon [1959] 2011: 28). In seeing her ‘se libère de l’êtreinte traditionnelle du haïk’ ([1959] 2011: 25) he also, Fanon argues, seeks to equalize himself, since this is a woman ‘qui voit sans être vue’ ([1959] 2011: 26). The colonial investment in unveiling produced a political reaction, a counter-affirmation, that Fanon refers to as ‘le culte du voile’ ([1959] 2011: 29). With the garment’s investment of cultural and political meaning, Fanon articulates the Algerian woman’s historical significance in strikingly literary terms. He writes,
‘femme-arsenal’ ([1959] 2011: 40) is her unveiling, which is dramatically depicted in *La bataille d’Alger*. Here she is shown mobilizing the colonial fantasy of the visible, unveiled Algerian woman and molding it into a revolutionary act. In doing so, appearance becomes subject to political, rather than visual knowledge.

**The sexual politics of silence**

Other writers have noted how silent the women are in *La bataille d’Alger*. Their silence allows for the armoring of their visibility, and through this, the formation of woman as the figure for national liberation. Three women are the instruments of insurgency in a powerful scene of Europeanization as political disguise. *La bataille d’Alger* stages these women’s visibility and westernized femininity as a weapon. Their dress, make-up, dyed and coiffed hair read as culturally French, allowing them to pass through the police check point unsearched in order to plant bombs amongst the occupying pied noirs. The unnamed women in *La bataille d’Alger* fulfill the colonist’s desire for assimilated Frenchness, silently. In becoming the visualization of revolutionary insurgency, to echo Djebar’s essay, ‘Regard interdit, son coupé’, these women are severed from sound. But silence isn’t quite right, and feminine sound has not been totally severed. It is speech that is lost. The women are without language, without discourse, but the city’s sound is the shrill collective feminine ululation. Community as oppositionality, the political will of the people, we might say, and even the notion of Algerian national identity is feminized in *La bataille d’Alger*.

If women are the symbols and instruments of liberation, their contradictory status registers in the inability for their revolutionary becoming to be integrated into the film’s documentary rhetoric. As Joan Mellen has powerfully argued, the scene of women’s feminine transformation differs notably in style from the rest of the film. ‘As the three Algerian women transform themselves into French women’, Mellen argues, ‘the light, unusually bright for this film, is thrown upon their faces. It adds a

![Figure 1: La bataille d’Alger, 1966, Dir: Gillo Pontecorvo. Photo: Siona Wilson. © Algeria and Italy, Casbah Films, Igor Films.](image-url)
theatrical quality while heightening the nonrealistic aura’ (1973: 47) (see Figures 1 and 2). She goes on to argue, ‘The omnipresence of the mirror gives the effect that we are entering into the consciousness of the three, who are also symbols’ (1973: 47). Unlike the central male characters whose political becoming is part of the film’s narrative, for the women, as instruments of the revolution as opposed to its subjects, not only is their radicalization unaccounted for, but we are never told who they are or why they were chosen for this mission. As Mellen suggests, this break with the film’s documentary rhetoric allows the female bombers to become symbols, and as such their silence provides a narrative aid for a shift towards the mythic, with the lighting as the key visual cue.

The all too bright light that marks the aura of unreality for the three women of Algiers in La bataille d’Alger is a figure for their unveiling. As the women insurgents mobilize the colonial fantasy against the colonists, this lighting up of the scene becomes a revenge on the enlightenment. Reading this scene together with Djebar, one light-saturated room echoes another from Eugène Delacroix’s 1834 painting, Les femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement (Figure 3). In her 1979 essay, Djebar describes the space in Delacroix’s Les femmes d’Alger as ‘baignant dans une lumière presque irréelle’ (1980: 146). ‘Le génie de Delacroix’, as Djebar puts it, means that ‘[t]out le sens du tableau se joue dans le rapport qu’entretiennent celles-ci avec leur corps, ainsi qu’avec le lieu de leur enfermement. Prisonnières résignées d’un lieu clos qui s’éclaire d’une sorte de lumière de rêve venue de nulle part’ (1980: 148).

The story is well known. Delacroix travelled to Morocco on a diplomatic mission in 1832. He spent three days in Algiers at the end of the trip. At the introduction of Monsieur Poirel, the chief engineer for the harbor of Algiers, an avid art lover, Delacroix negotiates an invitation into the home of a privateer to visit the women’s sequestered area. There he sketches for several hours, producing the beginnings of his women of Algiers. In doing so, as Djebar puts it, ‘Pour la première fois, il pénètre dans un univers réservé: celui des femmes algériennes’ (1980: 145).

For a sociological analysis of the *Code de famille* in the context of Algerian society more generally, see Marnia Lazreg (1994).

As viewers of the painting we look with ‘un regard volé’ (1980: 149). In Djebar’s analysis, his is indeed an orientalist work, but of a very different order from other lurid imaginings of the women’s quarters, such as widely known works by Jean-Auguste-Dominque Ingres and Jean-Léon Gérôme. Moreover, it is a world apart from his own epic combination of sexual possession and despotic violence, *La mort du Sardanapale* (1827). Delacroix, despite himself, reveals something unexpected that travels across time to pose, in Djebar’s telling, an unlikely feminist challenge. She reads the painting as accessing a lost space, *as lost*, a lost relation to their own bodies that echoes the writer’s own loss: ‘Rien ne se devine de l’âme de ces dolentes assises, comme noyées dans ce qui les entoure. Elles demeurent absentes à elles-même, à leur corps, à leur sensualité, à leur bonheur’ (1980: 150). Yet the painting leaves space ‘rêver à notre tour la sensualité. Comme si derrière ces corps et avant que la servante ne laisse retomber le rideau, s’étalait un univers dans lequel avant de s’asseoir devant nous, nous qui regardons, elles vivaient continuellement’ (1980: 149). Djebar’s imaginative restoration of this painting is written five years before the imposition of the *Code de la famille* in Algeria in 1984, which radically curtailed women’s civil rights and was the central juridical landmark in the violent political struggles of the 1990s. Written prior to this shift in Algeria’s political landscape, Djebar’s analysis of the painting should thus be understood in the context of women’s relative personal freedom and growing political agency in post-Independence Algeria. This period, however, as historians have begun to argue, has been largely eclipsed, which has led to an ossification of the history of Algerian women into two

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**Figure 3: Eugène Delacroix Les femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement, 1834. Photo: Franck Raux. Musée du Louvres, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY.**
13. Djebar’s strategy also contrasts sharply with Malek Alloula’s approach in *Le harem colonial*. While this book, first published in 1981, addressed Algerian women’s exploitation by French colonialists, Djebar maps a much more complex set of relations that includes those of Algerian men and women at different historical moments. Her account also implicitly challenges Fanon’s claim that there are no historical precedent to the female insurgent. This second period, beginning in the 1990s, is filtered through the violent repression of the black decade and the decade following independence has either been forgotten or recast in light of these later traumatic events.

14. Khanna undertakes a remarkable analysis of the difference between the two paintings in light of the shifting French interests in Algeria following 1848 (2008: 149–53). In light of this historical analysis, Djebar’s political intervention reads as the critical deployment of feminism as a form of transgressive anti-nationalism. The painting, or more precisely paintings since Delacroix recreated his vision in 1849 after the colonialization of Algeria was fully realized, is seen by Djebar as both an historical object and as a documentary dreamwork that speaks to the present. In contrast to Pontecorvo, Delacroix insists on recording the names of every woman he sketches, Bayah, Mouni, Zora ben Soltane, Zora and Kudoudja Tarboridji (Figure 4). He returns from Algiers with objects, ‘des babouches, une écharpe, une chemise, une culotte’, documentary artefacts, we might call them, which Djebar describes as ‘Non pas banals trophées de touriste, mais preuves tangibles d’une expérience unique, fugace. Traces oniriques’ (Djebar 1980: 147). Counter to its staging within the history of art, as a canonical example of Romanticism, a distinctly subjective art movement, she
imbues Delacroix’s painting with a documentary value. This does not rest comfortably on the stable ground of verifiability, but is a contradictory form of realism that emerges as if from a dream. In order for these three women of Algiers to offer a subjective experience of embodied identification in a radically different socio-political space, this light filled room must echo and repeat another. We must thus return, along with Djebar, to *La bataille d’Alger*.

**The semiotics of rape**

Mellen’s analysis of the scene of the women’s transformation in *La bataille d’Alger* allows us to strengthen the historical links Djebar makes. She suggests that through becoming symbols of the revolution the women lose their political voice. Although it is an established trope to equate women’s lack of speech with their loss of political agency, the suggestion here is of a different narrative inference to be made from this gendering of silence. Silence is not exactly eloquent, as Marnia Lazreg’s sociological study asserts, but rather it can be understood as a symptom of something that eludes representation. Read symptomatically, the women’s silence in *La bataille d’Alger* can be understood as a figuration of rape.

It is well known that sexual violence against women (and men) was used as part of a ruthless repertoire of torture during the Algerian War of Independence, and this was made public knowledge soon after the Battle of Algiers. While the torture of a male prisoner is depicted in the film, there is no reference to the rape of women prisoners either directly or indirectly. Thus my reading of their silence in light of rape is a reading...
The equation between unveiling and nudity is also made in Fanon’s *Algeria Unveiled*. His reference to the unveiled woman feeling that she is naked is clearly drawn from clinical accounts, as is the evocative idea of the ‘corps dechiquité’ when clothed in western garb ([1959] 2011: 41).

17. Ariella Azoulay has written on this issue in relation to photography (2008: 217–87). Also see her exhibition *The Natural History of Rape*, about the impossibility of visualizing the mass rape of German women at the end of the Second World War, at Pembroke Hall, Brown University in 2016.

The title of the English translation is explicit about this address to the French: *Djamila Boupacha: The Story of the Torture of a Young Algerian Girl Which Shocked Liberal Opinion*. In addition to de Beauvoir’s introduction, the English translation, printed after the Évian Accords, also includes an article she published in *Le Monde* in which she famously describes the attitude of the French nation to the horrific practices of torture in Algeria as a ‘tetanus of the imagination’ (Beauvoir de and Halimi 1962: 194).

Djebar’s use of displacement of unveiled for nudity, breast for bomb, explosion for electrocution, is typical for the representation of rape. As Bal has described, the ‘semiotics of rape’ operates by way of ‘displacement, and misplacement’ (1991: 68). Rape troubles representation, and visual representation in particular, because ‘rape itself cannot be visualized’ (1991: 68). This is not because of the codes of cultural decency or repression (although both are also common responses), but rather, as Bal puts it, ‘rape makes the victim invisible’ (1991: 68). Moreover, ‘the experience is, physically as well as psychologically, inner [...] In this sense, rape is by definition imagined; it can exist only as experience and memory, as image translated into signs, never adequately objectifiable’ (1991: 68, original emphasis). Furthermore, the victim is invisible in another sense, because ‘rape destroys her self-image, her subjectivity, which is temporarily narcotized, definitely changed, and often destroyed’ (1991: 68).

In *Algeria Cuts*, Khanna undertakes a sustained analysis of the use of rape in the Algerian War of Independence and during the black decade. Part of her nuanced account includes the most publicly known case from the battle of Algiers, the rape during the torture of Djamila Boupacha, reported in a book co-written by Simone de Beauvoir and Gisèle Halimi, Boupacha’s lawyer in the case. *Djamila Boupacha* (Beauvoir de and Halimi 1962), written predominantly by Halimi, who testifies to Boupacha’s recounted experience, was aimed at a French audience.  

Framed and introduced by de Beauvoir, it was intended to inform readers about the inhuman practices routinely being used in the name of defending French Algeria. Khanna’s is a superb analysis of literary, political and ethical complexity with the issues of linguistic failure and silence at its core. Since
Boupacha’s torturers received amnesty under the Évian Accords, this account, Khanna points out, became ‘the only recourse to justice given the impossibility of legal redress’ (2008: 80). She describes how Halimi’s testimony had to demonstrate the deliberate and systematic attempt to silence the whole affair, by showing the mechanisms of corruption. In this sense the instruments of pain, and indeed Djamila, had to become, in the courtroom, metonymies (indexes) of the system of corruption. They were therefore brought into the public discourse of a corrupt war – a war in which even militants had their agency stolen from them by torture and the discourses surrounding it.

(2008: 88–89)

The eloquence of Khanna’s account contrasts with Boupacha’s own response to the book decades later. When asked by Vince about this period of public notoriety and literary fame, she confesses, unsurprisingly, that she was not able to read the book. Many years later she felt compelled to do so in preparation for an interview, but she tells Vince, it was ‘like I was being strangled’ (2015: 88). Still traumatized by her torture and imprisonment she explains that she rarely accepts invitations to be interviewed, and that ‘sometimes I can’t even speak’ (Vince 2015: 88). This is not in any sense a criticism of Khanna’s account, but is used to highlight the difference between an ethical discourse about the political use of silence aimed at one constituency, the French public, and the community of silence that continues to endure for the victims of rape and torture. The latter remains opaque, hidden and obdurate. It is subject to a form of analysis that can only be speculative, unstable and unverifiable; and in the last instance, it is dependent on belief.

Thus, to return to the women’s silence in *La bataille Alger*, we cannot know how it registered for the community of belief that constituted the film. We cannot know if the ‘stolen agency’ that Khanna describes for victims of torture and rape might have appeared for audiences in Algeria and elsewhere. These can only remain as quiet possibilities in the face of the louder, known, visible and verifiable truths. This form of address, to the victims, requires a speculative mode of reading that animates a different aspect of the documentary idea than the conventional expository form of address. Furthermore, in *La bataille Alger* this other mode of analysis becomes possible when the film’s documentary rhetoric, as Mellen argues, begins to disappear.

To flesh out this speculative reading requires a semiotic gesture of displacement within the operation of my argument. With reference to another example, we can examine how silence and the ‘déchirure du voile’, as Fanon put it, has been mobilized in relation to another important set of visual documents produced during the war, Marc Garanger’s photographic series *Femmes algériennes 1960*. Working as a photographer for the French military stationed in Algeria between 1960 and 1962, Garanger was ordered to produce photographs of Algerian women for the purposes of identification. This was part of a broader visual and geographic control of the population that also manifested in architectural form. Garanger’s military orders required him to enact an official ‘déchirure du
20. The repurposing of the official, bureaucratic project of state surveillance into a subjective work of documentary value is further reiterated in the handwritten design of the typeface Garanger uses for this introductory essay.

voile’, since the women were forcibly unveiled in order to have their photographs taken, and typically it was their very first time in front of a camera. For Garanger, this two-year-long assignment was a life-changing experience, during which he became a staunch opponent of the occupation. For the photographer these images became a record of the women’s resistance and photographing them was his anti-colonial work of protest and opposition. The images were first published in the magazine L’Illustré Suisse in 1961 while Garanger was still an enlisted soldier stationed in Algeria. On return to France he exhibited the images in numerous contexts and later published them in a book. He has always framed them in impassioned subjective terms and in doing so his images have been recast from being photographic documents of state violence to a newly received documentary project of anti-colonial resistance. When he published the collection as a book he included a short text describing his opposition to the conflict, his ambivalent experience as the photographer and the power of the women’s returned gaze. He describes the subjects of the photographs as proffering a violent look back at his mediated address. Like a combatant in battle, ‘j’ai reçu leur regard à bout portant, premier temoin de la protestation muette, violente’ (Garanger 2002: 2).

The power of these images resides in the ways in which they animate the dispersed and unstable temporal complexity of photographic meaning. As Ariella Azoulay has put it, ‘photographs are constructed like statements (énoncés), the photographic image gains its meaning through mutual (mis)recognition, and the meaning (even if not the object itself) cannot be possessed by its addresser and/or addressee’ (2008: 25). Indeed we can discern all of these numerous perspectives in Garanger’s images. We have the charged moment of colonial encounter between the photographer-soldier producing surveillance documentation on behalf of the French state. Moreover, this encounter is predicated on the fantasy of unveiling that Fanon describes, and the women’s dishevelment and awkward comportment of bodily and facial expression reveals the non-compliant violence of this rending (Figure 5). But these images can be read against the grain of their institutional construction, first and foremost, as we have already seen, by the photographer himself, and subsequently, they have been widely analysed by numerous feminist writers. Winifred Woodhull, for example, has suggested that they ‘bespeak contempt and defiance as much as discouragement and defeat’ (1993: 43). In an extended analysis of the images, Karina Eileraas suggests that they reveal how ‘Algerian women attempt to transform the photographic space from within’ (2003: 817). Eileraas sees the subjects depicted in the photographs as revolting against the rhetorical constraints of the frontal presentation that comes with the genre of identity photography. Instead she sees how they ‘customize this posture’ (2003: 817) and their defiant expressions ‘locate possibilities for subversive rupture within the process of photographic composition and interpretation’ (2003: 827). Acknowledging the limitations of the institutional set up, she nonetheless analyses these images as complex documents of resistance.

Her reading of these photographs is powerful and politically charged. In the face of the women’s anonymity and their awkward discomfort in front of the lens, with hair askew and garments – in some cases – hanging
Eileraas’s selection of images tends to focus on younger women. There is quite a variety of ages in Garanger’s œuvre and several older women smile enigmatically (and even mischievously) at the camera. Moreover, she also avoids reproducing the few images that inadvertently reveal décolletage.

21. But, like the silent women in *La bataille d’Alger*, Garanger’s *Femmes algériennes* do not have a voice of their own. Similarly with the 1966 film, these women come to speak for other Algerian women through the voices of others. Eileraas cites Hélène Cixous, who asserts, ‘I don’t think that Algerian women ever interiorized the image offered by the colonizers. I, Algerian born, have never met an Algerian woman who did not resist the use or appropriation [of her image]’ (2003: 829, original emphasis). The photographer, Eileraas tells us, during an exhibition of the images in a Parisian gallery, describes how he ‘was startled by the reaction of a group of young Algerian girls viewing the exhibition with their mothers, survivors of the revolution’ (2003: 827). What he sees is unclear, but Eileraas alludes to another community of looking. ‘The women’s gazes’, she tells us ‘seemed to “cross” or intersect at the surface of the images’ (2003: 827). To echo Azoulay’s terms, this is perhaps an instance of mutual intergenerational (mis)recognition. This anecdote, together with the quotation from Cixous, gestures towards an unknown audience, unauthorized addressees that made up (and continue to make) a community of defiant resistance from the past into the present. Moreover, several writers, including Woodhull and Eileraas, refer to Leïla Sebbar’s fictional staging of an encounter with these images for the protagonist in her novel *Shérazade* (1982). This further extends the community of reception and consolidates the importance of imaginative address as a key dimension of the feminist value that the images continue to have.

Eileraas’s eloquent reading invests these images with profound documentary value. Her impassioned account supports my analysis of the way in which these images are transformed from being documents of the state
to oppositional works with documentary value. As with *La bataille d’Alger*, this rests on the community of belief that is constructed around them, not because of the evidentiary truth that we can see before our eyes. The sites of reception and interpretation are beyond the intended addressees of the images (colonial functionaries of the French State) and they construct a counter reading against the grain of visual verifiability. At times, however, Eileraas also seeks to fix visual evidence in the photographs themselves, which reveals the conflicting discourses of documentary at play. One idea of documentary is reliant on what can be seen and proven (the photographer as witness), the other, determined by a counter-factual reception, is predicated on shared belief, consensus and understanding within a community of viewers of images. When Eileraas emphasizes representation rather than the discursive spaces of reception, a fissure opens in her argument. Overwriting the latter political reading with the former empirical claims, she becomes a ventriloquist of these unknown women and I begin to doubt what is before my eyes. She points to ‘tightly closed fists aimed at the camera’ (2003: 817), but to me they seem relaxed, loosely held (Figure 6). Blank, placid faces appear in the plates where Eileraas claims ‘women dramatically scowl or frown at the camera’ (2003: 817), and even more difficult to discern, their unsmiling ‘mouths convey resolve and the desire to be recognized on their own terms’ (2003: 817).

This need to shore up doubt with reference to the empirically visible undercuts Eileraas’s more important argument about the shifting and unstable meaning of the images. The institutions of the French State that originally ordered the making of these photographs claim their authority by recourse to the transparency of the visible, that is, photography as visual document. Thus in order to mobilize these images against the grain of their intention, another kind of discourse needs to be set to work. The
Failed archive

Zineb Sedira’s *Gardiennes d’images* is one among several works of contemporary art that have revisited the Algerian War of Independence and its aftermath. These works, moreover, foreground documentary in various ways. For example, Dalila Dalléas Bouzar, in *Algeria Année 0* (2012), uses widely known photographs from the post-Independence period as the source material for her series of paintings. Her painterly transformation intersects with and interrupts documentary photography understood as a fixed historical record. Undertaking another kind of historical work – a history lesson of sorts – in *Foreign Office* (2015), the Moroccan-French artist Bouchra Khalili stages a kind of artist-lecture about Algiers as a destination for numerous Third World leftist groups in the same post-Independence period. As with the other examples, Khalili’s project draws upon documentary photographs, but her focus is primarily on male leaders.

With reference to a range of documentary-inspired practices, including Sedira and Bouzar, Erika Nimis has identified some of the shared features of this second generation of artists whose knowledge of the Revolutionary War comes from their parents’ accounts. These works often focus, she says, on ‘family history’ rather than universalizing ideas such as ‘the people’, and in doing so emphasize ‘individuals in their singularity’ (2015: 26). Although Nimis does not explore this shift using a feminist perspective, in light of the above discussion, the deft avoidance of both collective and national identity clearly has significant gender implications. Of all the artists Nimis cites, Sedira has been the most consistent in her engagement with women’s experience across her practice as a whole. In previous works such as *Quatre générations de femmes* (1997), she has explored the complexities of the veil in conjunction with the Islamic prohibition on (and her transgression of) figurative representation. She inserts photographic portraits of four generations of women in her family (including herself) into a wall designed using a traditional Islamic pattern. Moreover, she contributed work as well as a critical essay to an important exhibition on the question of the veil that explored the on-going political investment in colonial notions of its rending (Sedira 2003). In *Gardiennes d’image*, therefore, it is significant that the question of the veil is not mentioned at all. Instead the installation presents a specific history of one woman’s radicalization and revolutionary labour during the War of Independence. Unlike *La bataille d’Alger* and *Femmes algériennes 1960*, she is named and is far from silent. She speaks eloquently with two other women about history, political motivations, love and everyday life, and, most significantly, there is no ‘déchirure du voile’ (Fanon [1959] 2011: 28). Yet, all these crucial differences are brought into focus precisely because of the various ways in which the scenario presented continues to echo and repeat various aspects of the previous examples: from three women of Algiers in their apartment, to three women of Algiers with bombs, to three women of Algiers in a failed archive.
23. The absence of functioning national archives is a common reality in African postcolonies. Vince provides a useful discussion of this for the Algerian War of Independence (2015: 12). Nimis provides an account of the ways in which contemporary artists in different African contexts have adopted archival strategies in order to compensate for the failures of the state (2015).

24. Vince provides an instructive discussion of the particular resonances of the term mujahidat in relation to others, such as, musabbili (civilian support network) and fida'iyn (urban bombers) (2015: 17–19).

25. The book does not include named editors, but there are essays by Rédha Malek and Pierre Chaulet, both writers for the journal. Chaulet’s essay provides a description of the collective writing process practices in El Mudjahid, which is reflected in the general avoidance of by-lines during the War years. This collectivist logic seems to be followed through in the publication of this historical account, which does not name the editors.

Gardiennes d’images features three women, one elderly and two younger; let us call them Les femmes d’Alger, after Eugène Delacroix’s two paintings. They talk and handle photographs while sitting in a domestic space. The elderly woman, Safia Kouaci, is the photographer’s widow; together they were student radicals in Paris in the 1950s, we learn, at which time they became members of the FLN and later went on to work for the publication El Moudjahid on behalf of the Algerian government in exile in Tunis. The two younger women are both artists; Amina Menia, a close family friend of the widow, asks most of the questions, and Sedira, born in France to Algerian emigrés, now living in the United Kingdom, is seen scanning Kouaci’s photographs. Both Sedira and Menia are part of a second generation of Algerians, daughters of the revolution, feminist artists who have taken up a new kind of historical work. Sedira’s Gardiennes d’images is both about documentary and is, itself, a documentary film essay.

There is a paradox at the core of this film installation. The project is founded on the feminist conviction that this archive is of deep historical significance for Algeria and Algerian women. But simultaneously the work acknowledges the state’s failure of the very women who were instrumental in bringing an independent Algeria into existence. While artefacts from La bataille d’Algèr are part of the Museum of the Army, this unique archive of photographs can, quite literally, find no place within contemporary Algeria. It is a failed archive because the state will not, or cannot, affirm and authorize it.

Safia’s story is about a specific individual. This contrasts not only with the unnamed women of the previous examples, but also she makes no claims to the mythic generality of femmes algériennes. As the sociological study by Lazreg and the historical study by Vince, among others, attest, linguistic, regional, class and ethnic diversity has been strongly asserted by feminists in the face of gendered nationalist generality. Yet having been educated in France, Safia belongs to a constituency of Algerian women that is not addressed in Vince’s important oral history study. The latter, admitting the impossibility of comprehensively representing the diversity of Algerian women, draws evidence from two main groups: the Francophone urban elite in Algiers, an educated minority, and the Berber (Tamazight-speaking) women from rural Kabylie. Moreover, Safia might be better described as a revolutionary worker, rather than a mujahidat, the feminine plural of mujahid, or, female insurgent. Not a veteran, she instead worked as an archivist or researcher, a documentaliste chargée de la presse algérienne, gathering accounts of the Algerian struggle from the global press (Anon. 2011: 135). As a researcher she helped to provide source materials for the collective of writers and articles to be reframed and reprinted in El Moudjahid. A full account of this work is given in another documentary project, a history of the journal during the war years, El Moudjahid: Un Journal de Combat (1956–1962), published in 2011.

Gardiennes d’images is shown on three screens, but is divided into two parts. Part One is a double-screen film projection in one section of the gallery space, and Part Two, in another area, is a single-screen. Viewing the work requires us to move, to swivel in our seats or walk around the darkened space (Figure 7). Although this spatialization of the image and
embodied approach to looking is a convention within film installation work, it takes on a particular significance for our encounter with these women of Algiers. Their status as image is not simply revealed or concealed (conforming to the logic of un/veiling), but rather, it is felt through our observing bodies in this darkened space. The double screen divides our attention. It foregrounds the materiality of the photographic archive showing, on one screen, the unpacking of images from temporary storage in old boxes of Ilford photography paper, and the parallel screen shows an interview with Safia. Our eyes are compelled to swivel back and forth from screen to screen with a restless vision. On the left we see the space of the archive, unauthorized in its makeshift domestic setting. This is paired, on the right, with Safia at her dining room table discussing various aspects of its history following the death of her husband in 1996. Safia speaks in French, scattered with an occasional Arabic word, phrase or sentence. The degree of restlessness of the viewer’s vision also depends upon access to language, both French and Arabic, that is, the extent to which one is reliant upon reading the English (and sometimes French) subtitles.26 Her account is presented in the frank emotional terms of her ongoing mourning for the loss of her life partner, but the depth of her feelings, the pall of melancholic despair seems to be about more than just her husband’s death. Although she barely touches on the situation for women in post-Independence Algeria and does not mention the horrific sexual violence of the civil war years, the sense of loss that pervades her narrative is palpable. Moreover, she describes the injustice she felt at losing her job in the government following independence, a narrative that echoes many of the women interviewed for Vince’s study. As the latter states in her introduction, women in the post-Independence years ‘are considered to be a forgotten group’ (2015: 4).

Furthermore, Sedira’s style of filming heightens our intimacy with the subject. The camera zooms in very close to Safia’s skin, suggesting a kind of visual touch. Our restless bodies are calmed, pacified by this visual intimacy. She is a plainly dressed elderly woman wearing no make-up and the deep lines that striate her wrinkled face, neck and hands seem to fascinate the camera like a child’s inquisitive stare. The intimacy of the account that she offers to this close family friend is thus mirrored in the closeness of the camera’s tactile gaze. If Safia moves backward or forward in her

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26. I first saw Gardiènnes d’image at the Venice Biennale in 2011 and again at The Power Plant contemporary art gallery in Toronto, Canada, in 2015. These global art world contexts are the typical circuits of dissemination and reception for Sedira’s work, which must also factor into the artist’s working process and implied audience.
27. During the war years, *El Moudjahid* was not actually photographically illustrated beyond the front page. The archive of images as we see it in Sedira’s installation is all the more significant because much of it was not published during the conflict. Furthermore, in addition to the portraits of heroes and heroines of the struggle and images of the liberation of the country, the archive includes images of rural populations, including many of women. At the time of this publication, the archive has still not found a permanent institutional home. Seat exiting the frame, the camera slowly pans to carefully relocate its attention back to her skin. *Gardiennes d’images* is as much a filmic portrait of this singular woman as it is an account of Algeria’s failed photographic archive. Sedira’s portrait contrasts with Pontecorvo’s women as anonymous silent symbols and is distinct from her husband’s photographic portraits of the ‘great men’ of the Revolution that we see handled on-screen.

In Part Two, a single screen presented at a slight spatial remove, Safia offers a chronological oral history account (also through the structure of the interview) of her and her husband’s involvement in the revolutionary struggle. Her account here is given in voice-over, while on-screen we see relevant images drawn from the archive. This more conventional telling of a linear historical narrative is woven together with the story of their relationship and the deep love they both had for each other and for the cause. In an explicitly feminist strategy, Sedira knits the personal and the political together throughout. The bodily intimacy of the camera is also significant here. This is not the orientalist fantasy of unveiling the Algerian woman or the revenge of the ‘femme-arsenal’ but rather, it is an acknowledgment of her full physical, emotion and political personhood (Fanon [1959] 2011: 40).

If Delacroix’s ‘stolen glance’ at the women of Algiers gives us the intimation of a conversation we cannot know and Pontecorvo and Garanger’s women of Algiers are silent, Sedira’s video installation restores voice, speech and personal history and in doing so she changes our relation of viewing. We are now located in a darkened room with more than one screen to watch. This divided vision produces an awareness of viewing as an embodied experience. While this work eschews any direct reference to the veil, it might intimate an experience of another kind of vision, one that is itself veiled. As Lindsey Moore has put it, ‘the figure of the veil reminds us that the field of vision is organized from two sides, not one’ (2007: 348). If a veil appears in this installation, it does so as an imaginative cloaking of its audience. This is not to offer a falsely universal understanding of the experience of being veiled, since ‘anybody speaks and translates experience in situated ways’ (Moore 2007: 348). Rather, as Moore suggests, the metaphor of the veil need not be fixed to the orientalist idea of erotic revelation or ‘déchirure’ (Fanon [1959] 2011: 28), since ‘*any* subject is only accessible “darkly, as through a veil”’ (2007: 348, original emphasis). Sedira’s installation combines this allusion to the audience’s veiled body with an account that emphasizes the complexities of historical knowledge about the War of Independence. In *Gardiennes d’images*, Sedira gives us an artist’s rendering of a room within a darkened room where we sit together watching three women of Algiers quietly talk.

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**Contributor details**

Siona Wilson is associate professor of art history at The College of Staten Island and the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. She is author of Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance (Minnesota, 2015). She has published widely in academic journals, edited collections and art magazines on topics including feminist politics of war imaging, documentary photography, film and video art and the gendering of sound. Her recent curatorial projects include I Can’t Breathe at the Gallery of the College of Staten Island (including works by Nona Faustine, Patricia Silva, Kara Walker and Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa) and, co-curated, Sexing Sound: Aural Archives and Feminist Scores at the James Gallery, New York. This article is related to her current book project that addresses episodes in the history of documentary in light of decolonization and the figure of the female insurgent from the 1930s to the present.

Contact: Ph.D. Program in Art History, The Graduate Center, 365 Fifth Avenue, New York, 10016, USA.
E-mail: siona.wilson@gmail.com
[https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2761-8698](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2761-8698)

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