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# Urbanity and Literature – Cities as Transareal Spaces of Movement in Assia Djebar, Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Cécile Wajsbrot

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Transarea studies focus upon spaces as created by the movements that criss-cross them. From this point of view, from its very beginnings, literature is closely interrelated with a vectorial (and much less with a purely spatial) conception of history – and with urbanity, which plays a decisive role in Gilgamesh's travels through a (narrative) cosmos centered upon the city of Uruk. This article explores the city as a transareal space of movement in three examples of literature, with no fixed abode, around the turn of the millennium, i.e. Assia Djebar's *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*, Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Istanbul-Berlin Trilogy*, and Cécile Wajsbrot's *L'île aux musées*. These three writers project, in a very specific way, cities in motion as anagrammatic and fractal structures.

## Assia Djebar, or the city of streets

Can we understand a city without being aware of its movements, without knowing that we may not restrict our perspective to archeological strata, but that we must understand a city's dynamic directionality? Does not literature have the specific capacity to show us how important it is for us to submit our view of the city to a fundamental epistemological shift, which takes us from a history of space to a history of movement?

*Les Nuits de Strasbourg*,<sup>1</sup> a novel by Assia Djebar, a writer born in 1936 in Cherchell, near Algiers, takes place in the heart of that specific geo-cultural space that we must consider the European field of movement *par excellence*. The novel's diegesis (which does not remain restricted to European territory), instead

of centering on a landscape, describes the cityscape of the Alsatian city of Strasbourg. In the course of the love story depicted, the city also vividly comes alive as a ‘soundscape’, a ‘touchscape’ and ‘smellscape’.

Strasbourg, in many respects a ‘*ville transfrontalière*,’<sup>2</sup> is the focal point of a story that establishes its temporal frame by referring to the European Middle Ages and the beginnings of French colonialism in Northern Africa. It focuses on the ‘long’ twentieth century while creating a spatial structure that uses Strasbourg as a point of departure and goes on to develop a transareal dimension evoking France, Germany, the Netherlands, but also the North-African ‘counterpart’ to the European coast, especially Algeria. All paths passing through this vast space intersect in Alsace; that is, in Strasbourg, which in Assia Djébar’s book is the place where all roads and paths meet – as the etymology of the city’s name implies.<sup>3</sup> This city takes its mythical beginnings in the concept of routes, a *ville des routes*, and seems to have been born from movement. The novel unfolds this phenomenon in a conceptual structure of movement. Therefore, this urban novel, in whose title the German name of the town still peeks out from under the French, does not take any special interest in roots, in the roots and foundations of a clearly defined (and delimited) identity, a concept that claims one isolated source. Rather, the novel highlights the importance of routes, pathways and movements, which create the subject, the city, the network of streets with no beginnings or endings.

The structure of the novel is symmetric. It begins with a prologue, ends with an (implicit) epilogue, and presents the main narrative as a sequence of nine nights. The fifth chapter – which marks the center of the text – is entitled ‘Le fleuve, les ponts’ and urges us to interpret the cityscape as a ‘landscape of theory’. As a logical consequence, the prologue of the novel, ‘*La Ville*’, places the city at the center of the reader’s attention. But at the same time, *centre-ville* turns out to be a *centre vide*, as the first-person narrator crosses town for the last time, shortly before daybreak: a city-center that was abandoned by its inhabitants in September 1939, while the German Wehrmacht prepared its assault, and Strasbourg – east of the famous Maginot-line – seemed an inevitable military sacrifice. Again, the concept of movement reappears, even though these are movements of a different sort, namely persecution, migration and delocalization. The novel’s *incipit* speaks of these movements: ‘Tous, d’un coup, au-dehors, sur le pavé ou par les routes, c’est une armée, une horde, un exode.’<sup>4</sup>

The people flee, but the streets and the statues remain. Apart from the French troops in the barracks and the officials who have been left behind to take care of the abandoned city, only the statues remain. They stare down upon the deserted city from bridges, churches and pedestals, enveloping it in the network of their gazes. Even though the statues seem ‘indifférent’<sup>5</sup> to the human population, like the buildings, churches or bridges, their gazes come alive very quickly: their eyes take note of the changes. They sense the silence, even revolt against the

‘mutisme étrange’<sup>6</sup> of a soundscape that has deadened abruptly. They cannot foresee that they will be ‘déboulochées, concassés, transportées à la remise, déportées’,<sup>7</sup> once the city has been sealed off, ‘immergée dans ce vide’.<sup>8</sup> It was not before 15 June 1940 that the Nazi troops crossed the Rhine at Colmar and reached Strasbourg four days later. The novel repeatedly mentions the Prussian occupation of Strasbourg in 1870, when the French fought for the city. The prologue ends with the French capitulation on 22 June 1940.<sup>9</sup>

But the Algerian author’s reflective recollection of European history does not end here. The abandoned city of Strasbourg – which is hardly ever mentioned in German or French history-books – confronts the reader with a puzzling lesson. Fifty years after these events, the novel’s Algerian protagonist aims to solve this riddle: a question that has not lost any of its relevance in the twenty-first century and which asks how we might live together peacefully, respectful of our differences, and how we might share the experience of our lives despite our long history of wars and bloody conflicts.

This is a fundamental question for the future. It has taken hold of our cities, which function as dynamic, amplifying spaces and which we can no longer grasp by searching for their roots. In an essay published in February 2009 and entitled *Le dérèglement du monde*, Amin Maalouf, who was born in Lebanon and lives in France, grasped this problematic extremely well: the challenge of living together peacefully with others. This is how Amin Maalouf put it:

Toutes ces populations, différentes par la religion, la couleur, la langue, l’histoire, les traditions, et que l’évolution contraint à se côtoyer en permanence, saura-t-on les faire vivre ensemble de manière paisible et harmonieuse? La question se pose dans chaque pays, dans chaque ville, de même qu’au niveau planétaire. Et la réponse, aujourd’hui, est encore incertaine.<sup>10</sup>

How can our cities respond to that challenge, what could an adequate reaction look like? If we want to say something about it, we should try to find out how Assia Djébar’s novel confronts the reader with multi-, inter- and transcultural ‘encounters’. The first chapter, which introduces the protagonist, shows us Thelja, a young woman who lives in Paris and who will soon turn into a foreigner in Strasbourg, ‘l’étrangère’.<sup>11</sup> The novel presents her pattern of movement as a voluntary, double delocalization: from Algeria to Paris, and from Paris to Strasbourg. After traveling on the night train, Thelja arrives at the Alsatian capital before daybreak and immediately begins to roam the streets of still deserted Strasbourg, ‘les rues dépeuplées’, with its cobblestone streets, statues, churches and public squares. But she takes care not to enter the center of medieval Strasbourg and stays away from the cathedral.<sup>12</sup>

The stroll through town makes it clear that all of the novel’s processes of understanding and reflection are spatial processes. Thelja’s approach to the city mirrors Assia Djébar’s structuring of the novel: *Centre-ville* makes its appearance

as *centre vide* and changes into a space for patterns of movement. The young woman has come to Paris on a stipend in art history. Now, the mobile cartography of Strasbourg becomes the setting for nine amorous nights with an Alsatian called François, who is 20 years older. Their relationship remains confined to the nine nights.

Obviously, Assia Djébar's translingual writing in a language other than her mother tongue places a special emphasis on the choice of language. While Thelja masters two languages, which her lover does not speak or understand – colloquial Arabic and Berber – François speaks a language and a dialect that she does not understand, namely German and Alsatian. They communicate in French, which becomes the language of their love relationship, but nevertheless does not erase the other languages and dialectal expressions. It is important to note that this symmetrical structure hides an asymmetry: While French is François' mother tongue, it is a foreign language to Thelja (though also homely and familiar).

*Les Nuits de Strasbourg* is about an urban experiment of cohabitation. Within the confines of a given stretch of space and time, the book tries to establish, with literary means, under which conditions it becomes possible to share the experience of life in difference. In this sense, it does not view difference as an external 'disturbance', but as an erotic contact-zone and area of friction. Carefully established antagonisms, especially sexual, cultural and linguistic, create a feeling of tension that does not limit itself to the erotic, and which is transposed to the cityscape as the couple moves from one hotel to the other.

The bed is at the center of Assia Djébar's experimental literary assembly. In *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*, it is not a specific, individualized bed, but a sequence of different beds in different hotel rooms and – when other couples appear in the novel – apartments. As an abstract concept of space and functionality, the bed turns into a privileged place in which love and life take their course: it is the focal point of all forces, motions and patterns of movement traversing Assia Djébar's fascinating novel.

Roland Barthes has emphasized the bed's enormous relevance in literature and cultural history.<sup>13</sup> The bed is the place where the poetry and movement of a couple's life are at home. There can be no doubt that *le lit* – along with the bedside lamp, which begins to play an important part in the second night and provides the lighting (and complete darkness) for the various 'bed-scenes' – is the true home to the delights, deceptions and duties of those who inhabit the pages (and beds) of this novel. Differences between the sexes, generations and the basic worldviews of religions, cultures and languages, always at the root of bloody confrontations, remain alive in the novel and – in a *mise en abyme* of the urban – are set in motion: the history of conflict between orient and occident is not portrayed in a static way, in an attempt to find its roots, but *vectorized* spontaneously.

*Les Nuits de Strasbourg* was written with the historical context of seemingly endless massacres in Algeria in mind. Assia Djebar's writing and her life-knowledge are her way of resisting these developments. This is the reason why most of the macro-historical events evoked in the novel represent the failure of a peaceful life with others. On a global level, the nations involved in the First and Second World Wars spread the unease to their colonial possessions. On the level of interconnected areas, French colonialism gave rise to the political relationship between France and Algeria. On an international level, we have a string of wars, for example between France and Germany. On a national level, there are bloody power-struggles in politically independent Algeria or with the Red Khmer in Cambodia. On a regional level, confrontations flare up between the inhabitants of the two banks of the Rhine. On a local level, tensions and violence erupt between migrants from suburban housing-projects and the bourgeois middle-class. We could go on and on, and mention more conflict-zones from the novel, such as the tension between different religious groups, members of different cultures and the battle of the sexes. Assia Djebar's novel on the city of Strasbourg is anything but an idyllic representation of peaceful cohabitation.

The nine chapters of the main body of *Les Nuits de Strasbourg* unite these conflicts on two levels, which are kept separate graphically: italics for the nights, regular print for daytime. The days are dominated by the French and European metropolis Strasbourg, its fluvial setting between the banks of the river Ill and the mighty Rhine. Countless canals cut through the old part of town, with their locks, bridges and small piers. The medieval city-center contrasts with a number of very different suburban neighborhoods. Needless to say, this landscape of a city also mirrors the wars and colonial history of the country, deportations and persecution, the migrations of workers and the quest for political asylum. People belonging to the most diverse communities and groups come together here, provoking conflict, but also sharing their knowledge – which is often delocalized or translocalized knowledge – with the city. Strasbourg is a European metropolis and, for that reason, it can no longer be understood or explained adequately by focusing only on Europe or France, let alone Alsace: the streets of the city of Strasbourg form a worldwide network of routes.

As opposed to Paris, however, Strasbourg is a regional, not a national capital. As a border-city, a national perspective sees it as peripheral. At the same time, Strasbourg is the seat of the European Parliament and has taken up a central position in the process of political and economic unification. Therefore, the novel correctly designates Strasbourg as the '*nombril de l'Europe*'<sup>14</sup> – not just a body-metaphor of centrality, but also a type of relation beyond the own body, which refers to the European and global dimension. After all, this has also left its footprint on the architecture of what was once a sleepy Alemannic town.

But Assia Djebar's novel does not depict Strasbourg in harmonious tones. Marginalized communities, such as the migrants from Hautepierre, who – like young Djamila – live under the constant threat of xenophobia, are one of its themes. Another example is the rape and murder of the local girl Jacqueline, who is rehearsing a performance of 'Antigone' with migrants and feels attracted to young foreign men. She pays for this passion with her life. And, nevertheless, the cityscape of the Alsatian and European city of Strasbourg (including the 'Europa-Bridge' leading to the town of Kehl in Germany's Baden region, with no need for passports, but a huge French flag on the German side – a reminder of the Second World War) symbolizes the hope for new forms of cohabitation, representing multilingualism and respect for the other's difference. The city and the cityscape of Strasbourg, with its magical array of canals, locks, streets and bridges, make it clear that – as Amin Maalouf had it in his essay on 'murderous identities'<sup>15</sup> – one can no longer privilege one single *appartenance* or identity. Instead, the city stands for a wide and unfolding web of affiliations. An urban landscape of theory arises: The novel repeatedly mentions the canal's locks, which connect, but do not melt or eradicate difference.

Every figure in the novel is endowed with its very personal life-knowledge. Therefore, due to their highly diverse cultural, religious, national, linguistic, sexual or social affiliations, the *dramatis personae* of the novel create a true microcosm of multifarious forms and norms of life-knowledge. Her life in the interstice of the oriental and occidental worlds gives Thelja a nomadic<sup>16</sup> approach to knowledge, which also expresses itself in the rules François learns about during their first rendezvous:

On se retrouve, lui et moi, au même café-restaurant, mais moi, je tiens alors à changer chaque nuit d'hôtel. Comme j'ai toute la journée pour arpenter les rues anciennes au hasard, je choisis tel ou tel quartier selon mon humeur... Je lui ai proposé ce jeu, dès le premier soir... Je ne lui dis mon choix de la nuit qu'au moment du dîner !... Pourquoi ? Peut-être une façon de lui faire sentir, chaque soir, qu'il doit devenir nomade ! Sans attaches, comme moi, mais dans sa propre ville, celle de son passé, celle où il travaille ! Peut-être qu'ainsi il ressentira, chaque matin, combien je suis prête, à chaque instant, à partir : je ne suis pas venue pour une «liaison», comme on dit ici, je...<sup>17</sup>

This quotation shows that nomadic movement<sup>18</sup> is one of the book's fundamental elements. After all, Thelja's strategy of using the transit-spaces of hotel rooms is an experiment that attempts to turn her lover into a nomad, despite the fact that he – who was born and raised in Strasbourg – has inherited a fixed place of residence within the confines of 'his' city. It is yet another cunning strategy that aims to free our couple from the weight of inherited historical baggage, making room for the pleasurable experience of free movement – a constellation that the concept of literature without a fixed abode helps uncover.



It no longer makes sense to try to grasp Europe as a firmly-defined territory. Whoever aims to understand this continent will have to be aware of the fact that Europe – *in motion*<sup>19</sup> and *as movement*<sup>20</sup> – and especially its larger cities, arises and is born from the movements that cut across and traverse it. If we want to switch perspectives from a European history of space to a history of movement, then the literatures without a fixed abode will play a central part in the process of establishing this new perspective. These literatures without a fixed abode record and create vectorized life-knowledge and insights on how to share our lives with others. These two types of knowledge are linked to literary representations of patterns of movement that allow us to understand Europe simultaneously from the inside and the outside.

The ninth and last episode of the ‘Strasbourg nights’ projects the ‘*enchevêtrement franco-arabe*’,<sup>21</sup> which Thelja and François practice by enlacing their tongues and bodies, onto a transareal relation between Algeria and Alsace: ‘Alsagérie’, in a tender neologism the book presents and plays with.<sup>22</sup> The country’s multilingualism is a double one, ignored by the maps, but anchored in the life-knowledge of the protagonists. It unfolds a space of movement that enables the two novels to develop a structure displaying a plurality of logics and new forms of knowledge on how to share our lives with others (which we must renegotiate constantly). The loving designation Alsagérie/Alzagérie unites the two languages, tongues and bodies: ‘un couple heureux, un couple faisant l’amour’.<sup>23</sup> Algeria is no longer imaginable without Alsace, and Alsace no longer without Algeria: both regions embody and arise within one another, meeting in the city of streets, the city of languages. A country encompasses many other countries, a city many other cities: the long history of urbanity and literature leaves no doubt that the history of the city should no longer be conceptualized in terms of space, but in terms of movements. The literary text has become a living, mobile cartography of the city.

### Emine Sevgi Özdamar, or the double city

In November 2004, when she was asked whether her escape to Germany from military dictatorship in Turkey was also an escape to the German language, Emine Sevgi Özdamar said

Ja. Man erzählt immer, daß man in der Fremde die Muttersprache verliert. Ich denke, man kann auch die Sprache im eigenen Land verlieren. In schlimmen Zeiten macht die Sprache eine schreckliche Erfahrung. Ich hatte das Gefühl, dass die türkischen Wörter während der Militärputschzeit krank wurden. Ich hatte das Gefühl, dass ich in meiner Sprache sehr, sehr müde geworden war.<sup>24</sup>

This passage, from an interview the Turkish-born author gave on the occasion of winning the Kleist prize, but likewise her trilogy of novels,<sup>25</sup> reflects Emine

Sevgi Özdamar's painful experiences with her mother tongue. And it also becomes clear that her writing, which has won her a number of prizes, does not allow her to separate her mother tongue from the fatherland. Emine Sevgi Özdamar's literary language works like a system of interconnected tubes, in a *translingual* and, at the same time, *transcultural* sense: Sevgi Özdamar suffered a shock from the military dictatorship, fell seriously ill and suffered a breakdown on all levels of life and communication, which nevertheless inspired her impressive literary traversal of different languages and cultures.

Özdamar was born in 1946 in Malatya. The title of her 1992 debut novel – *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei hat zwei Türen aus einer kam ich rein aus der anderen ging ich raus* ('Life is a caravansary has two doors I came in through one and left through the other')<sup>26</sup> – features two doors, which leaves no doubt that, for Emine Sevgi Özdamar, space – including the epochs of her life – is always an area of transit, a place of transition with more than one exit and more than one system of reference and communication. This is also how we will have to conceptualize the dynamic, vectorial architecture of her (literary) cities.

The movements of a pendulum are typical of the patterns we find in the novels of Özdamar. In 1998, she published the second part of her trilogy, *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* ('The Bridge over the Golden Horn'). This is what the book says about the city on the Bosphorus that connects two continents:

Zwischen Asien und Europa gab es damals, 1967, noch keine Brücke. Das Meer trennte die beiden Seiten, und wenn ich das Wasser zwischen meinen Eltern und mir hatte, fühlte ich mich frei. [...] Die asiatische und die europäische Seite in Istanbul waren zwei verschiedene Länder.<sup>27</sup>

The constant movement of oscillation between these two 'countries' quickly turns into an everyday and commonplace procedure allowing the first-person narrator to keep writing her professional, intellectual and sexual coming-of-age novel<sup>28</sup> far away from the parental home and its mechanisms of control. At first, the difference between Asia and Europe appears to be a fundamental one; but the protagonist and thousands of commuters on the ferries overcome this separation on a daily basis. Like the movement of a weaver's hand, the ferries constantly connect the two parts of the city, which are so important in the life of this twenty year-old woman. They create a texture, a text resulting from an interminable process of transportation and translation. This process of translation will not settle down in a clearly delineated 'in-between'. Instead, the interstitial space becomes a space of movement, a space filled with a constant spatial and temporal coming and going.

It is amazing how precisely and meaningfully Özdamar transferred this model of Istanbul to the Berlin neighborhood of Mitte in the 1970s. In *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde* ('Strange stars stare at Earth'), the divided city, still broken up

into different sectors, separates into two realms. Like Asia and Europe, the Eastern and Western Blocks stand in seemingly eternal hostility, two cities and 'countries' separated by their political systems and militarized borders. The Berlin wall has taken the place of the Bosphorus; the Berlin S-Bahn replaces the ferry boats. In the S-Bahn train, the young Turkish woman with a tourist visa and no permanent place of residence takes another 20-minute ride from one side of the wall (with countless graffiti) to the other. She is an actress and was temporarily imprisoned by the Turkish regime, which then made it impossible for her to perform in her homeland. Prior to receiving a three-month visa to East Germany, she shares an apartment in West Berlin, where she experiences a sense of community and support similar to her parental home. Even though it becomes clear that this apartment in the neighborhood of Wedding and its inhabitants, whom she portrays lovingly and humorously (and with a pinch of salt), mean a lot to her, the protagonist nevertheless finds personal fulfillment in East Berlin. It is here that she can enter into 'her' Brechtian world of theater and where, after obtaining her visa, she stays with another young woman, a setting she also renders in great detail.

The cities and their divided structures are written one-into-the-other, and the travels of the protagonist keep weaving new laces between them. The structure of the living quarters might serve as an example. The temporary living quarters for Turkish women in Berlin, which is changed phonetically to 'Frauenwonaym'<sup>29</sup> during the protagonist's first stay in Berlin, anticipates the living conditions she confronts during her second stay in the city on the Spree. These temporary residences, with their clear subdivisions, their sexual and gendered borderlines, appear as a parodic and paradoxical mirror-image in the shared apartment in the Wedding neighborhood, where new roommates begin their stay – as in the residence for women – by doing the dishes and quickly learn that fraternization will not be tolerated. All through the novel, collective living arrangements create worlds of their own, a kind of urban space of transit, which can transform into a *phalanstère* for a limited period of time. Only when a friend attempts to leave the official residence for women does the narrator realize that Berlin 'had not really existed for us so far':<sup>30</sup> 'We had had our Wonaym, and the Wonaym had nothing to do with Berlin. Berlin was what was outside of the Wonaym.'<sup>31</sup> A city of secret groupings and impenetrable places?

Not at all.

Words beneath words, places beneath places, movements beneath movements, living quarters beneath living quarters, events beneath events, cities beneath cities: *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei*, *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* and *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde* are chronological narratives of a life and the historical contexts surrounding it, such as the contradictory processes of

modernization begun by Atatürk in Turkey, the life-experience of the generation of 1968, the Cold War and – on the horizon – the conflicts aroused by left-wing terrorism in Germany and the fall of the Berlin Wall. But the novels also show that, apart from these syntagmatic elements, the paradigmatic structures of constant fading and overlapping are decisive for the hermeneutic processes taking place in the novels. The techniques of fading in and out and of inscribing one phenomenon into the other make it clear that the European side of Istanbul, on both sides of the Bosphorus Bridge, cannot be conceptualized without taking the Asian side into account as well. The same is true of West- and East-Berlin, Berlin and Istanbul, Germany and Turkey.

The books do not limit their scope to intercultural dialogue, but are expressions of transcultural interlacing and traversal, a choreography of movements across a number of cultures. This is not to say that these movements guarantee euphoria and enjoyment. Very often, they are represented as tense and disturbing. We find fractal, multiple and disjunctive patterns, which nevertheless adopt ‘insular’ forms and structures. In literatures without a fixed abode, these patterns fulfill a fundamental role. And this also amounts to saying that the vectorial mobility of all references and relationships does not take place in a continuous, but in a discontinuous, fragmented post-Euclidean space.<sup>32</sup> The structures and constructions of the cities we have observed so far are located in this particular type of space. Emine Sevgi Özdamar was careful not to center her trilogy of novels on national spaces, but on two urban areas on the seam between eastern and western history, between two continents and two spheres of political power – facts that have changed the topography and infrastructure of these cities. Could we not say that these urban spaces are islands, even entire archipelagos, which, because they are part of a network of relations, show us what the vectorized hermeneutics of urban spaces looks like?

### **Cécile Wajsbrot, or life in the archipelago of cities**

Our analysis of *Les Nuits de Strasbourg* showed us how the evacuation of the Alsatian capital in 1939 left an abandoned cityscape behind. In its center, around an island created by the small river Ill and its network of bridges, the statues were connected by a web of gazes:

Les statues, elles, ont des yeux. Elles regardent. Elles s'étonnent : l'air a changé, imperceptiblement ; la lumière qui, chaque jour d'autrefois, scintillait et dansait pour, peu à peu, s'affaiblir et se terrer, la voici métamorphosée : une abstraction, semble-t-il.<sup>33</sup>

The statues have long-since established their own realm of signs within the human world of signs. Only when the – fleeting – human beings have fled does this realm unveil its richness and obstinate uniqueness. Assia Djebar's cityscape

suggests that the web of gazes that has materialized between the works of art no longer require the presence of humans.

Cécile Wajsbrot lives in Paris and Berlin, commuting between the two capitals. In August 2008, she published the novel *L'Ile aux musées*. No less fascinating than Assia Djebar's book, this narrative does not just show us the statues from the outside, but unveils what we might call their inside. And Cécile Wajsbrot's statues dwell in a place without human residents: Berlin's Museumsinsel, or museum island.

The narrative's spatial and temporal frame is dominated by the quite different, even contrasting (and therefore also complementary) cityscapes of Paris and Berlin, at the heart of which one finds (as in Strasbourg) an urban island, the Ile de la Cité and Berlin's Museumsinsel. The statues cast a web of gazes over these cities, unbeknownst to the people who hurry by, or live below. They are part of our daily lives, but as we pass under their gazes, do we ever look the statues in the face?

This is exactly where the novel starts. Should not literature heighten our awareness for things that have become invisible due to their omnipresence? The novel gets right to the point in the first chapter:

Nous montons la garde, même si personne ne nous prête attention – et peut-être est-il plus facile de veiller quand personne ne regarde. Notre destin est étrange. Avant notre venue au monde, nous sommes l'objet de tractations, de décisions, de revirements, de compromissions, vous vous battez pour avoir le droit de nous donner existence mais une fois que nous sommes là, notre présence s'impose et la vôtre s'efface, les rôles s'inversent – vous êtes les prétextes et l'espace nous appartient.

L'Espace nous appartient et nous montons la garde. Nous sommes en pierre, en bronze, nous sommes en granit ou en marbre, nous sommes sur les ponts, en haut des édifices ou devant les musées, nous sommes dans les jardins, en signes avant-coureurs, nous sommes dans les niches – mais immobiles, le regard fixe.<sup>34</sup>

This passage not only emphasizes the omnipresence of the statues, but also their semiotic properties as signs, an aspect the novel highlights more than once. Their makers are unaware of their dominance of physical space, and they do not take note of the fact that the statues belong to a spatial and temporal domain that goes beyond the frame of individual human experience: 'Nous sommes là pour des siècles.'<sup>35</sup> As in many of Cécile Wajsbrot's novels – and one could easily point to a number of intratextual references in *L'Ile aux musées* – the presence of the other – be it animals or the arts, such as the white owl of *Mémorial*<sup>36</sup> or Romantic art in *Caspar-Friedrich-Strasse*<sup>37</sup> – unveils an other-logic (of art and nature) that supersedes humanity and the coordinates of human life. Beyond the gazes of human beings, the statues' webs of gazes create relationships that traverse space and time.

Cécile Wajsbrot's novel offers elements from a history of the Berlin Museumsinsel: at the very start, nothing but an island between swamps and sand

in the interstice between two Brandenburg centers of commerce. *L'Île aux musées* mentions this history in a condensed fast-forward motion, rendering it in a couple of lines: step by step, the island became the king's orchard, a botanical garden, and finally – upon royal decree in 1797 – it was connected to the city by bridges and transformed into the museum island.<sup>38</sup>

But if we define an island as a space surrounded by water and therefore subject to a fundamental infrastructural discontinuity – namely the need to switch one's mode of transportation when arriving at or leaving the island – then we could also pose the question of whether or not the Berlin Museumsinsel really is an island in the strict sense of the term. From this perspective, the answer is simple: even before the so-called Altes Museum ('Old Museum') was built between 1825 and 1830, the island had already ceased to be an island. It was no longer a peripheral place, but had taken root in the city-center, with bridges connecting it to the mainland. Therefore, one of the anonymous protagonists rightly remarks: 'et je me suis précipitée dans cette île aux musées parce que j'avais envie d'être sur une île mais c'est une île urbaine qui n'a rien d'insulaire, reliée par les ponts où circulent des voitures'.<sup>39</sup> An urban island, accessible via a network of bridges and (in the cases of the Bode-museum and the Pergamon-museum)<sup>40</sup> small bridge-like elements: a paradoxical non-island. But the voices of the statues insist that this is an insular *île urbaine* which maintains a relationship to other islands all over the world:

Vous êtes sur une île, vous semblez l'oublier – nous savons qu'il y a des îles lointaines coupées de toute terre, des îles sans pont au milieu de la mer et qu'il faut des bateaux et des heures de bateau pour les atteindre, nous savons que certains n'y arrivent jamais, qu'il y a des naufrages. Nous savons que sur certaines habitent d'immenses statues dont nul ne connaît l'origine.<sup>41</sup>

The island is a multi-dimensional phenomenon because it is an element in a globally networked *island-world*, which is also the *world of islands* and therefore a world apart. The inter- and transcultural relationships of the statues, which originated in various epochs and spaces, societies and cultures, form the basis upon which Cécile Wajsbrot's novel erects an insular bridge of cultures, born from a number of different islands and connected to a worldwide array of islands. Starting from this concept, it establishes museum-islands of difference in specific temporal structures. This makes *L'Île aux musées* a perfect literary and cultural fractal, which resembles and repeats itself, thereby placing an island under more islands, a story under more stories, a city under more cities, hiding and revealing them at the same time. Thus, it comes as no surprise that, in a reference to 'ces mathématiciens qui disent que la côte du Finistère est infinie',<sup>42</sup> located at the center of the book, we encounter the name of the father of fractal geometry.<sup>43</sup> *L'Île aux musées* is an impressively dense aesthetic and ethical work displaying an open, poly-logical structure: a (hi)story within a fractal island of islands.



The novel seems to suggest that not one story, not one place is ever forgotten on this island. Whatever has been destroyed, whatever is absent is still present just because it is absent. Cécile Wajsbrot's literary production represents an aesthetic of absence.<sup>44</sup> It represents the past – as the name David in the title of her novel *Caspar-Friedrich-Strasse* suggests – in a way that makes us aware of the blank space, of deferred meaning, of destruction. It introduces us and the world to the invisible islands under the islands, the hidden cities under the cities. The wars of Alexander the Great connect to the Cold War; the fall of Troy (which is one of the novel's earliest themes) and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are elements of this structure, which the novel represents – as literature does – as specific vectorial figures of movement. This is a presence that exceeds all limits of the human present.

Cécile Wajsbrot's novel does not just show us an archeological perspective, which uncovers different strata of history in a vertical movement, but it creates a dynamic cartography of movements. A horizontal perspective tracks deportations and migrations, which always cause an overlapping of physical spaces and even link the representation of one place to another place. The history of space must be replaced by a history of movement if we want to understand these increasingly frequent phenomena of de- and reterritorialization.

One would not necessarily have to think of the other and still well-connected urban island of Paris, the Ile de la Cité, if one wanted to say about the Berlin Museumsinsel: *Une île peut en cacher une autre*. A city is more than its local history, its depth. It is also a vectorial phenomenon, a mobile and dynamic network in a plane of transareal scale. This city under the city displays poly-logical properties which, concerning its museums and artworks, create the open structure of a worldwide archipelago. This archipelago carries the imprint of all living cartographies and choreographies, with its acts of destruction and absences. Is a museum not a space of movement in which the activity of collecting, which occurred in different places, passes over into the activity of collecting in *one* place? Could we ever understand the space of a museum if we only concentrated on its static, architectonic space, without taking the transversal movements generating this space into account?

It is a logical step to consider the statues and their memory of stone, whose presence does not just remain confined to the present tense, but is open to all the existing pasts and futures, islands as well: 'Nous sommes des îles aussi – pour accéder à nous, il faut nous aborder.'<sup>45</sup> Every single statue follows its own logic, has its own history and figures of movement. And these figures of movement are not so much rooted in territoriality or origins, but in a pattern of vectors that makes them explainable as a history of movement. The mountain of the fortress of Pergamon and the museum island of Berlin are intrinsically connected in a transareal way. One could not imagine the 'Alte Museum' without the older Louvre.

As a big-city novel, *L'Île aux musées* makes it very clear that a city such as Berlin cannot be represented or understood if the perspective remains limited to the city's archeology, to its growth in one specific place. What is much more important is to unfold its vectorized patterns, its historically accumulated patterns of movement, which project themselves into the present and future. This helps us see the city as a complex, constantly shifting picture of movement. A city has no roots, but is born from its routes.

This perspective is not just about relations and their concomitant movements. It deals with continuous overlaps and blends in the true sense of the words: in and under the city, a different city appears, turns into an experience and a way of life, while every one of these two cities must always refer to the other if they are not to remain equivocal and elusive. A city creates an image of itself by creating itself as a fractal and setting many cities in motion within itself.

### Notes and References

1. A. Djébar (1997) *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Roman (Arles: Actes Sud). See my extensive analysis in, O. Ette (forthcoming) 'Experimente des ZusammenLebensWissens in den Literaturen ohne festen Wohnsitz: Assia Djébar und die Straßburger Nächte'.
2. See in this context the very interesting essay by W. Asholt (2005) *Les villes transfrontalières d'Assia Djébar*. In: M. Calle-Gruber (ed.) *Assia Djébar, Nomade entre les murs... Pour une poétique transfrontalière* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose), pp. 147–160.
3. See in this context A. Djébar (1997) *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Roman (Arles: Actes Sud), p. 399sq.
4. A. Djébar (1997) *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Roman (Arles: Actes Sud), p. 11.
5. A. Djébar (1997) *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Roman (Arles: Actes Sud), p. 14.
6. A. Djébar (1997) *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Roman (Arles: Actes Sud), p. 17.
7. A. Djébar (1997) *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Roman (Arles: Actes Sud).
8. A. Djébar (1997) *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Roman (Arles: Actes Sud), p. 18.
9. A. Djébar (1997) *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Roman (Arles: Actes Sud), p. 35.
10. A. Maalouf (2009) *Le dérèglement du monde. Quand nos civilisations s'épuisent* (Paris: Bernard Grasset), p. 293.
11. A. Djébar (1997) *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Roman (Arles: Actes Sud), p. 41.
12. A. Djébar (1997) *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Roman (Arles: Actes Sud), p. 50.
13. See Barthes, Roland: *Comment vivre ensemble*, op. cit., p. 155.
14. A. Djébar (1997) *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Roman (Arles: Actes Sud), p. 350.
15. See A. Maalouf (1998) *Les Identités meurtrières* (Paris: Bernard Grasset).
16. For more information on the concept of the nomadic in the work of Assia Djébar, see M. Calle-Gruber (2005) *Assia Djébar, Nomade entre les murs... Pour une poétique transfrontalière* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose).
17. A. Djébar (1997) *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Roman (Arles: Actes Sud), p. 108sq.



18. See also E. Ruhe (2005) 'Un cri dans le bleu immergé'. binswanger, Foucault et l'imagination de la chute dans 'Les nuits de Strasbourg'. In: M. Calle-Gruber (ed.) *Assia Djébar, Nomade entre les murs... Pour une poétique transfrontalière* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose).
19. See in this context K. Bade (2000) *Europa in Bewegung. Migration vom späten 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (München: Verlag C.H. Beck).
20. See in this context O. Ette (2001) Europa als Bewegung. Zur literarischen Konstruktion eines Faszinosum. In: D. Holtmann and P. Riemer (ed.) *Europa: Einheit und Vielfalt. Eine interdisziplinäre Betrachtung* (Münster, Hamburg, Berlin, London: LIT Verlag), pp. 15–44.
21. A. Djébar (2002) La mémoire des femmes. Propos recueillis par Aliette Armel, *Magazine Littéraire* (Paris), 410, p. 100.
22. A. Djébar (1997) *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Roman (Arles: Actes Sud), p. 353; Concerning the border-crossing and transnational perspective, see W. Asholt (2005) Les villes transfrontalières d'Assia Djébar. In: M. Calle-Gruber (ed.) *Assia Djébar, Nomade entre les murs... Pour une poétique transfrontalière* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose); P. Barbé (2001) Transnational and translinguistic relocation of the subject in 'Les Nuits de Strasbourg' by Assia Djébar. In: *Esprit Créateur* (Baltimore) **XLI**, 4, pp. 125–135; M. E. Vialet (2002) Between sound and fury: Assia Djébar's poetics of 'l'entre-deux-langues'. In: *Symposium* (Syracuse) **LVI**, 3, pp. 149–162.
23. A. Djébar (1997) *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Roman (Arles: Actes Sud), p. 373.
24. 'Yes. One always hears that people lose their mother tongue when they are forced to live in a foreign country. But I believe that people sometimes lose their language in their homeland. When times are bad, language lives through a bad experience. I felt as if Turkish words had fallen ill during the military dictatorship. I had the feeling that I had gotten tired, very tired in my own language.' E. S. Özdamar (2004) Wir wohnen in einer weiten Hölle. (Interview mit Nils Minkmar). In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* (Frankfurt am Main) 47 (21 November), p. 23.
25. The first-person narrator from Emine Sevgi Özdamar's novel *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde* uses almost the exact same words to reflect upon language. See E. S. Özdamar (2003) *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde. Wedding – Pankow 1976/77* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch), p. 23.
26. E. S. Özdamar (1999) *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei hat zwei Türen aus einer kam ich rein aus der anderen ging ich raus* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch); for more information on the following remarks see also my essay, O. Ette (2007) Über die Brücke Unter den Linden. Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Yoko Tawada und die translinguale Fortschreibung deutschsprachiger Literatur. In: S. Arndt, D. Naguschewski and R. Stockhammer (eds) *Exophonie. Anders-Sprachigkeit (in) der Literatur* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos), pp. 165–194.
27. 'In 1967, there still was no bridge between Asia and Europe. The ocean kept the two shores apart, and whenever the water was between me and my parents, I felt free. [...] The Asian and the European parts of Istanbul

- belonged to two different countries.’ E. S. Özdamar (1998) *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch), p. 222.
28. Irmgard Ackermann considers *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* a ‘novel of personal development’ (‘Entwicklungsroman’). See I. Ackermann (1999) Emine Sevgi Özdamar. In: *Kritisches Lexikon zur deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*. 62 (Munich: Edition text+kritik), p. 5.
  29. We find this spelling in the title of the first chapter of the first section of E. S. Özdamar (1998) *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch), p. 11.
  30. E. S. Özdamar (1998) *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch), p. 63.
  31. E. S. Özdamar (1998) *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch).
  32. See in this context O. Ette (2005) Von Inseln, Grenzen und Vektoren. In: M. Braig, O. Ette, D. Ingenschay and G. Maihold (eds) *Grenzen der Macht, Macht der Grenzen* (Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert), pp. 135–180.
  33. A. Djébar (1997) *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Roman (Arles: Actes Sud), p. 16.
  34. C. Wajsbrot (2008) *L’Ile aux musées*. Roman (Paris: Editions Denoël), p. 10; For an in-depth analysis of the novel, see my article, O. Ette (forthcoming) Cécile Wajsbrot, ‘L’Ile aux musées’ oder die verborgenen Choreographien der Anwesenheit.
  35. C. Wajsbrot (2008) *L’Ile aux musées*. Roman (Paris: Editions Denoël), p. 11.
  36. See C. Wajsbrot (2005) *Mémorial* (Paris: Zulma).
  37. See C. Wajsbrot (2002) *Caspar-Friedrich-Strasse* (Paris: Zulma).
  38. C. Wajsbrot (2008) *L’Ile aux musées*. Roman (Paris: Editions Denoël), p. 12.
  39. C. Wajsbrot (2008) *L’Ile aux musées*. Roman (Paris: Editions Denoël), p. 38.
  40. See in this context G. Schade (1987) Die historische Entwicklung der Berliner Museumsinsel. In: *Die Museumsinsel zu Berlin* (Berlin: Henschel), pp. 22 and 33.
  41. C. Wajsbrot (2008) *L’Ile aux musées*. Roman (Paris: Editions Denoël), p. 83.
  42. C. Wajsbrot (2008) *L’Ile aux musées*. Roman (Paris: Editions Denoël), p. 106.
  43. See B. B. Mandelbrot (1991) *Die fraktale Geometrie der Natur*. Aus dem Englischen übersetzt von Dr. Reinhilt Zähle und Dr. Ulrich Zähle (Basel, Boston, Berlin: Birkhäuser Verlag).
  44. See in this context O. Ette (forthcoming) ‘Caspar-David-Friedrich-Straße’: Cécile Wajsbrot oder die Ästhetik der Abwesenheit; see also the eighth chapter of O. Ette (2005) *ZwischenWeltenSchreiben. Literaturen ohne festen Wohnsitz* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos), pp. 239–263 and pp. 54–59.
  45. C. Wajsbrot (2008) *L’Ile aux musées*. Roman (Paris: Editions Denoël), p. 85.

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