proem

Translated from the French
by Olivia C. Harrison and Teresa Villa-Ignacio
Not everyone is born in the midst of gambling dens and sidewalk cafés, in the musical bath of colonial society, an aggregation of predators, a slice of the city that brings together the circus, the market, the barracks, and the inextinguishable thirst that men and women have to meet one another.

A scene relived so many times: a child, not quite ten years old, but familiar with the radio, with which he was born and grew up like few children of his age, he’s familiar with the sounds, the voices, the whistling, the fat buttons and the green eye that gradually thinned or thickened as one approached the chosen station, the sputtering, the musical notes and sometimes the agonizing sound effects of suspenseful radio plays—
the interminable steps of the approaching assassin, the intolerable gasps of his defenseless victims—yes, the child knows them all, which is why that morning, probably because his parents forbade him to turn on the radio during the day—too expensive?—that day, the child could be found at the house of a neighbor, a second mother, who often let him play in her living room, the child approached the big radio with its green eye, a Schneider no doubt, a respectably large piece of furniture with its varnished wooden casing and its gilded brass rods, and he heard that song, that voice, that music, which literally nailed him to the floor, which ran through him, a woman’s voice between weeping and celebration, an ululation made of love, despair, and tenderness. You’re transfixed by the power of the revelation, you’re inundated with a feeling you don’t understand, but which you don’t resist, you’re in the radio, you’re with her, with that voice, you’re with that character, her misfortunes are your own, as yours are hers, no other arrangement is possible, nothing else is imaginable, you have just integrated that voice into the most profound part of your being even though it is the most mysterious voice you have ever heard.

Are you already an orphan? Are you the boy who momentarily escapes the family hearth? Out of his mother’s sight, by a few yards only. It would be more than ten years before you would hear it for the second time. No, to be more precise, to truly express what you felt during those years, you should say that during those ten long years you would search for it in vain, never ceasing to think about it, unable to listen to any music
at all without thinking of that voice, the song imposing itself, dominating everything you hear, taking its place little by little, cannibalizing it. A haunting song.

The organization of a colonial city is distressingly banal, for it is conceived as a military camp. Take a city outlined by Trajan’s or Caesar’s cohorts, take Pompeii, Timgad, or Volubilis: their maps are the maps of contemporary colonial cities, the checkerboard city, drawn in straight lines that betray an obsession with quick invasions and evacuations, optimizing the flow of merchandise, small fort and market square thinking. In its center, two barracks, a church, two schools, a synagogue, a mosque, a square flanked by a lottery shack and the broken-faced WWI veteran tending to it, a covered market, all the shops around it, a brothel-street, and a multitude of watering holes.

The first scene is this one: a block of houses facing a street and five establishments arranged like the points of a star: across the street to the left, the Bar Nègre, to the right the Tout Va Bien, at the end of the block to the left the El Behja Café, across from that the Aurès Café, and at the other end of the block the Brasserie de l’Étoile. To tell the story, you have to make distinctions among them, speak of them separately, while in reality their loudspeakers were in fierce competition, pushing to the max, projecting a sonorous magma into the surroundings, from late morning until just after midnight, a painful racket composed of songs, instruments, orchestras and soloists, crooners and mournful chants, interminable until it became a sonorous magma, overlapping
THE COLONIAL SOUNDSCAPE

Olivia C. Harrison and Teresa Villa-Ignacio
In his photographic essay *Tlemcen or the Places of Writing*, the late Algerian novelist Mohammed Dib offers a meditation on the primordial importance of place for the writer, and in particular the importance of what he names the *landscape*:

In the beginning is the *landscape*, in other words the setting in which a person comes first to life, then to consciousness. . . . A secret labor of identification and assimilation in which consciousness and landscape mutually reflect their respective images, in which their relationship is constantly transformed and enriched as it develops, in which the outside turns inside to
become an object of the imagination, a sub-stratum of reference, the rim edge of nostalgia. (Dib 2012, 23)

Dib’s Algeria, and in particular his native Tlemcen, constitutes the landscape of his writing, a writing that will later reconstitute itself in Los Angeles—where Dib wrote *Tlemcen ou les lieux de l’écriture*—in what he characterizes as a shock of recognition: “the American landscape so assailed me that I remained some time in a state of confusion” (Dib 2012, 23).

Reading *Clamor*, Hocine Tandjaoui’s own writing of place, will, we hope, provoke an analogous sense of recognition in the American reader. For the U.S. is palpable throughout the text in a series of startling transcontinental transpositions. The play between inside and outside, infant and world, is at the heart of *Clamor*, a poetic memoir that narrates the coming-to-consciousness of an Algerian child in a landscape that is not only visible—from image to imagination—but also audible, surprisingly, via American music. In the beginning is the soundscape, might read an alternative opening to *Clamor*.

“Can one speak of the constancy of a place,” the narrator of Tandjaoui’s *proem* wonders? Beautifully written in simple and haunting prose, *Clamor* offers a dazzling poetic evocation of Tandjaoui’s discovery of music—jazz, soul, rhythm and blues broadcast on the radio—during his childhood in colonized Algeria. Against the backdrop of one of the bloodiest wars of decolonization—“you are not yet seven years old
and the world explodes in your face”—a little boy is captivated by the voices of women singing of pain, love, and hope in Black America: “you were in the radio, you were with her, with that voice . . . her misfortune was your own, as yours was hers.” What Tandjaoui describes as “an aria colored by grief” becomes the soundtrack for the war and a private lament for his mother, killed in childbirth by “raging septicemia,” while the plastic explosives, bombs, and grenades echo a grieving boy’s unutterable pain. Tandjaoui’s prose gives political urgency and historical materiality to Jean-Luc Nancy’s observations about the visceral dimension of sound, first perceived in the resonance chamber of the womb:

The womb[matrice]-like constitution of resonance, and the resonant constitution of the womb: What is the belly of a pregnant woman, if not the space of the antrum where a new instrument comes to resound, a new organon, which comes to fold in on itself, then to move, receiving from outside only sounds, which, when the day comes, it will begin to echo through its cry? But, more generally, more womblike, it is always in the belly that we—man or woman—end up listening, or start listening. The ear opens onto the sonorous cave that we then become. (Nancy 2007, 37)

Here the intimacy of the womb leads to the absolute violence of the street. What Tandjaoui calls “the most