Performing the Historical Moment: Nadia Seboussi's *Hidad*

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Sheila Petty

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Performing the Historical Moment: Nadia Seboussi's *Hidad**

Nadia Seboussi, an Algerian-born Montreal-based installation and performance artist, is among a growing cohort of Canadian artists currently contributing to contemporary dialogues on memory, longing and belonging, migration, mourning and exile in increasingly global, mobile cultures.¹ Seboussi borrows inspiration for her art practice from Algerian-based narratives and draws on histories of immigrants who fled during the so-called Black Decade of the 1990s when the Algerian government brutally fought Islamic insurgency groups. Blending the personal and the abstract, in which remembrances in “one’s own voice” are painstakingly pieced together to create documents of freedom of expression on the right to mobility and migration as a human right, Seboussi investigates and complicates spaces of experiences and performance within the reified space of the art gallery. These spaces become spaces of enactment and mobility in which the spectator must engage with the artist in participating in and creating new narrative structures.

Born in the Kabylia region of Algeria, Nadia Seboussi immigrated to Canada in 2002. Her interdisciplinary background in visual arts, journalism and electrical engineering informs her award-winning media arts practice, with works exhibited in Argentina, Cuba, Spain, France, Mexico and Canada. This essay will focus on the way in which Seboussi acts as a “*porteur(e) de mémoire*,” or “memory carrier,” (Benjamin Stora’s term, as quoted in Durmelat 2011: 96), in post-civil war Algeria through her 2015 video series *Hidad*, which means “mourning” in Arabic. After exposing the theoretical and historical frame of Seboussi’s art practice, I will look at her work methodology for *Hidad*, which involves the remediation, staging and performance of

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1. See, for example, the work of Jamelie Hassan, Camille Turner, Kathryn Ricketts and Marlene Nourbese Philip.

an iconic press photo taken by Algerian press photographer Hocine Zaourar during the Bentalha Massacre of 1997. This serves to create a performance of the historical moment by firmly anchoring the “*je*” in the “*nous*,” the personal participation in a shared memory—the outcome of which, for Seboussi, was exile and emigration. The essay will also demonstrate how *Hidad*’s staged “performances” of the photo impose a movement from grief to compassion and act as a form of shriving of trauma, violence and silence—a memorialization process which involves reconstructing memories and chronicling historical events collectively.

The theoretical frame of Seboussi’s art practice is inherently interdisciplinary and is informed by the key concepts of “accented cinema,” the “testimonial witness,” “ideophones,” and “transversal authorship,” used in combination to provide new directions and insights for understanding identity construction. The term “accented style,” or accented cinema, was coined by film theorist Hamid Naficy (2001) to describe exilic and diasporic cinema. This style arises from feelings of displacement and an innate sense of memory of “the traditions of exilic and diasporic cultural productions that preceded them.” The filmmakers acquire two sets of voices from their heritage and lived experiences (Naficy 2001: 22). This style is driven by aesthetic and narrative ingenuity, including “self-reflexivity and autobiographical inscription, historicity, epistolarity” and “multilinguality,” and “resistance to closure” (Naficy 1999: 131). Furthermore, Naficy (2001: 98) contends that the very structure, organization, themes and visual style of accented filmmakers’ works transform “displaced subjects into active agents of their own emplacement.” With Seboussi, this applies to her themes and structures of emotion that are built into the works’ *mise en scène*, and also to those that arise from the viewer’s engagement with them.

The “testimonial witness” plays an important role in Seboussi’s “accented style.” The complexity of the witnessing here requires taking on a diverse and layered territoriality/space which means reconstructing memories and chronicling historical events collectively, anchoring the personal in the collective without resorting to tones of victimization or self-satisfaction. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992) have provided performative and therapeutic models of testimony that are useful to consider here. They argue that testimony is a “speech act” meant to effect “beneficial change,” and that the creation of a community that listens and responds is as important as recovery of the experience. Testifying transcends mere narration and involves committing oneself and “one’s narrative to others [...] to take responsibility for the truth of an occurrence. Bearing witness is a process, an encounter that implicates speaker and listener alike” (Torchin 2012: 5). Leshu Torchin (*ibid.*) argues

FIG. 1. — *HIDAD*, NADIA SEBOUSSI

Photograph: Marilou Crispin. © Nadia Seboussi, *Hidad* (2015).

that “performance and iconography” especially focused on experiences of suffering are germane to the tradition of witnessing and testimony.

Performativity of movement and emotion within an event can function as the re-creation or “the representation of an action or a state” which Daniel Kunene terms as the “ideophone” arising out of African prose, poetry and drama (Mphande 1992: 118). For Kunene, who has extensively analyzed the properties of poetry rendered in indigenous African languages, ideophones are “involved with evoking a sense for movements and gestures, vivid situations and attitude, emotions and feelings, colors... and even silence” (*ibid.*: 122). Kunene further argues that “the most remarkable thing about the ideophone is that it constitutes a dramatic presentation of past and future events and states” and conjures up for the spectator events which are not actually happening at the time of presentation (*ibid.*: 128). These qualities afford the possibility of intensifying the narrative or story situation. The ideophone’s richest potential lies in the intensified, dramatic emotion evoked in the viewer by a situation or event. In the African context, much depends on the artistry of the performer. In an accented context, the artist transposes the event or moment to another “displaced” space, or “*interstitial* moment” as Homi Bhabha (1994: 269) would have put it. Naficy (1999: 134) extends the meaning of being interstitial as “being located at the intersection of the local and the global,” mediating between disparate categories. Subjectivity and identity are determined in these interstitial moments, at the interface of the local and the global, creating a transversal authorship.

“‘Transversal’ authorial space” (Thomas quoted in Reeck 2011: 12) has been described by Dominic Thomas as a “dialogic relationship with other bodies of literature.” I would extend the frame of this concept arguing that Seboussi’s work demonstrates an innovative blending of fiction and documentary elements in the autobiographical, performative, ideophonic, accented style to create a personal relationship between artist and viewer, thus demanding an active audience in the process of meaning making. In concert with her complex theoretical foundation, Seboussi firmly anchors her artistic practice within the African historical frame and, thus, historical evocation and emotive connection to the subject matter is as important to her as factual referencing. According to Bill Nichols (1994: 100), this suggests that “while performative artworks might possess historical grounding, the aesthetic goal is not to provide an accurate description of history, but rather an evocation of it.” Ratiba Hadj-Moussa (2008: 188) contends that “instead of using history as the reconstitution of Algerian identity or, more precisely, instrumentalising history for the benefit of a (necessary) mythological nation building, contemporary artworks use singular and collective experiences to reconfigure history, where experience is conceived as a kind of history.”

The historical frame for Seboussi is the Black Decade in Algeria and she singles out significant moments from this period to “enact mourning” in projects such as *Hidad*. The 1990s, generally referred to as the Black Decade, was a period that saw, among many other oppressions, honor crimes, violence against women, and the assassination of the Berber poet Tahar Djaout by the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) because of his views on secularism and the fear that his writings would adversely affect Islamic sectors. During this period, freedom of expression and French-speaking civilians were targets of terror as several university intellectuals, activists and journalists were also assassinated. Despite women’s active participation in the war of independence ending in 1962, women’s rights were deeply curtailed both during and following the Algerian War as National Liberation Front (FLN) policy aligned with hard line Islamist doctrine to further entrench patriarchal systems (Austin 2012: 68). Furthermore, the justification of patriarchy was considered a “religious obligation” with “modern women” targeted specifically for violent acts because they were seen as a menace to the patriarchal *status quo* (MacMaster 2009: 19-20). Toward the end of the decade, entire villages were targeted for massacre, shocking world media viewers and forcing Western nations finally to pay attention to the devastation.

If the civil war was considered an “invisible war,” because of a dearth of images (unlike the war of independence), then artworks about the Black Decade reconstitute the unspoken, or the un-imaged, but not the unimagined or unperformed. Ratiba Hadj-Moussa (2008: 189) points out that it is imperative to further probe how such artworks “situate the *loci* from which they ‘speak.’” Within this context, artist Seboussi acts as a “*porteur de mémoire*/memory bearer” because she enables the transmission of knowledge and the reconstruction of post-civil war Algeria through her accented Algerian ideophones. French-born Algerian multi-media artist Zineb Sedira’s three-screen video installation, *Gardiennes d’images* (Sedira 2010), is a precursor of sorts to *Hidad*. In *Gardiennes*, Sedira remediates black and white images of the Algerian War of Independence taken by the late Algerian photographer, Mohamed Kouaci, and intersperses these with interview footage of his wife Safia describing their life together. While Sedira acts as a “memory bearer” for this previous period of Algerian history, Seboussi, however, takes up the question of women patriots and armed conflict and what it gives rise to: violence, migration and exile. The testimony and documentation of the Algerian women who took up arms (Women Patriots) during the civil war are the starting point of *Hidad* and the catalyst for this action is the Bentalha Massacre of 1997. The history and events leading up to this massacre are complex. After 132 years of French colonial rule and eight years of war for independence,

finally gained in 1962, Algeria experienced a couple of decades of relative peace and stability. By the 1980s, however, a new generation began to question the authority of the one-party military regime, the FLN, which had ruled since independence. Furthermore, the nation was beginning to slip into economic decline with significant challenges around housing in urban areas, increasing unemployment and “a failing educational system” (Arnould 2007: 238). When the FLN lost the National Assembly elections in 1991 to the Front islamique du Salut (FIS), the military intervened and cancelled the process, delivering a major blow to any democratic progress in the nation and precipitating the war that would last nearly ten years (*ibid.*). Bentalha, a town about fifteen kilometers south of Algiers, voted FIS in the elections, and some inhabitants even joined the Islamist guerrilla groups which began fighting the government after the cancelled elections. Both the guerrillas and the army had a significant presence in the town and when the guerrillas openly slaughtered civilians who supported the government between 1994 and 1996, the government retaliated by creating a “Patriot” communal guard of about ten townspeople in June 1996. On the night of September 22–23, 1997, more than 200 villagers who were allegedly “pro-government” were slaughtered with machine guns, *machetes* and hunting knives by guerrillas from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) who went door to door literally tracking their prey, while the army refused to intervene and the communal guard had been sent away on holiday.

Hocine Zaourar, an Algerian press photographer, was working for Agence France Presse (AFP) in 1997 and made his way to the Zmirli Hospital the day after the massacre. Prevented by the authorities from photographing victims, he captured, instead, several images of grieving relatives of the victims outside the hospital. The most iconic of these photos would later be dubbed the “Bentalha Madonna” by *Le Monde*, taken by Hocine Zaourar for the AFP.² It depicted a grieving Algerian woman, propped up against a wall, her mouth partly open, as though she is delirious from grief and about to faint, while another woman grasps her in support. The photo quickly became a controversial³ icon of the massacre, printed on the front pages of newspapers around the world, and

2. The image can be seen online at <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Algerie-Bentalha-Massacre-22septembre1997-1.jpg>>.

3. Oum Saâd, the subject of the photograph, unsuccessfully sued Hocine Zaourar and Agence France Presse for copyright of the image and defamation for having been called “Madonna,” which is a Christian designation, and for diffusing false information about her: “Quand j’ai retrouvé les miens morts, je me suis sentie très mal et on m’a demandé de sortir. Dehors, je me suis évanouie. C’est là que la photo a été prise [...] Moi, je suis algérienne, musulmane, fille de martyr. Je ne veux pas être comparée à une Madone, qui est une chrétienne, pas une musulmane [...] Même dans les mariages, je n’aime pas être photographiée [...] Je veux que le gouvernement algérien arrête la diffusion de cette

compared to Robert Capra's "The Falling Soldier" (1936), taken during the Spanish Civil War. Jennifer Howell (2016: 232, n. 10) terms these images, despite their importance to collective memory, "problematic photo icons" because the general public or average citizen would rarely "retain specifics relative to the historical event, its local and global significance, or the image's original context of production and dissemination." Consider, for example, the comparison made by Juliette Hanrot of the "Bentalha Madonna" and Diana, Princess of Wales, who was killed three weeks earlier on August 31, 1997 in a Paris car crash. Hanrot maintains that Diana's death plunged the whole world into collective mourning and reminiscing, remembering where they were or what they were doing at the time of the tragedy. The world press suddenly transformed the princess into a saint and a martyr and her photos dominated the media well into September, silencing and obliterating media coverage and images of slain Algerian women, as if they never existed. Hanrot (2012: 38-39) contends that collective guilt on the part of the press for their alleged role in provoking the princess's death by pursuing her car into the Alma tunnel while "Algerian princesses" were dying in obscurity, paved the way for the incredible global reception of Zaourar's photos, the work of a true photojournalist, rather than *paparazzi*.

The remediation of press and other images is relatively common in contemporary art practice. For example, the work of Omar D (*Devoir de mémoire/A Biography of Disappearance, Algeria, 1992-, 2007*) and Kamel Khelif (*Ce pays qui est le vôtre, 2003*) is situated within the commemorative frame. Inspired by Algerian women who gather in peaceful protest in front of the capital's administrative buildings with photos of their disappeared loved ones, the pair remediate identity and passport photos of missing Algerians since 1992 and memorialize the personal within the collective, the "*il*," or "*elle*," in the "*nous*," in defiance of a government eager to repress collective trauma. They bring personal moments of significance into the public domain, and as Jennifer Howell (2016: 219) explains, "the mere act of repositioning passport photos within the personal sphere, and thus removing them from a state issued document, metaphorically liberates victims from *le pouvoir* and provides partial restitution for families."

In another gesture of remediation, the contemporary French artist, Pascal Convert, has created wax sculptures for gallery installations by drawing inspiration from photos and video screenshots of political strife in Algeria (*Madone de Bentalha, 2001-2002*), Gaza, and the Balkans. According to Nigel Saint (2013: 399): "these works engage with the political and aesthetic

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photo. Je ne veux plus qu'elle circule dans le monde, je veux qu'elle reste en Algérie [...]" (Saâd, quoted in BENNEQUIN 2008).

dimensions of representing the suffering body in sculpture, photography and the media, examining rites of mourning and lamentation, as well as narratives of commemoration.” Jérémie Bennequin (2008) argues that Zaourar’s two-dimensional press image was meant as an instrument of information whereas the three-dimensional (abstract) wax sculpture of the two women in the image evokes the notion of a physical monument.

Seboussi’s remediation of a chosen press image by Zaourar functions differently than that of Convert. Although Seboussi, like Convert, exhibits her project within the auspices of the art gallery setting, her point of cultural departure, like that of Omar D, Kamel Khélif, and Hocine Zaourar, is Algerian and a shared memory in which she has firmly anchored her personal participation. Furthermore, unlike Convert, she has not chosen to work from the “Madonna” photo. The remediation process chosen by Seboussi arguably allows for different interstitial moments than the “*interprétation plastique*” of Convert’s project which is more about adding concrete layers of physicality and weight to the historical moment (Bennequin 2008). To begin with, although Seboussi’s project is one of lamentation, mourning and suffering, she refuses victimization. Thus, the “Madonna” photograph, with its high angle focus (crushing and victimizing the subjects) and tight framing of the two women, shot in medium close-up, is not appropriate to the ideological goal of *Hidad* in which Seboussi creates interstitial moments of time and movement which transcend both the personal and the collective. Seboussi (2016: 23) calls these “timeless interval[s] in which love wins over misfortune.”

The suffering of Algerians depicted in the press photos affords Seboussi what Mirna Boyadjian (2016: 10) has called a “gestural vocabulary” of bodies marked by mourning. Vincent Lavoie (2016: 10) has written that “in Seboussi’s creative process the technical image functions as a testimony triggering mechanism.” These imperatives contribute to Seboussi’s creative process which fundamentally questions the viewer’s own relationship to a collective tragedy. Seboussi chose three photographs by Zaourar and obtained the limited rights to their use for *Hidad*. In collaboration with the Montreal-based choreographer, Sara Dell’Ava, Seboussi studied the postures, gestures, emotions, space, framing, lighting, *mise en scène* and composition of the photos before creating a “staging” and performance of the photos. They crafted a narrative structure and story from each image by having the main actor perform the narrative space and aesthetic properties of the image three times and interact with a different performer in each image. But they also speculated about the events that occurred in the moments before and after the photos were captured, leading to many questions about the veracity of the images and their links to a tragic event such as the Benthala Massacre.

The most striking photograph chosen by Seboussi depicts a medium close-up shot of a young Algerian man holding a young girl's head and shoulder tight against his chest as he gazes mournfully off-screen to the right. The image is in loosely-framed closed form (*champ clos*) shot from a neutral angle, an aesthetic reminiscent of the witness camera approach often seen in African films, which encourages spectators to draw their own conclusions about the issues presented by the films. Movement and dramatic action arise out of the facial expressions, emotion and gestures of the Algerian civilians photographed. Seboussi preserves the direction of the vertical lines produced by the subjects' bodies in the original press photos, but she disrupts a possible Westocentric interpretation by staging the movement within the videos from right to left and left to right with the performers appearing to float in the frame. A further remediation occurs when Seboussi take the naturally-lit (mid-day lighting) press photos and creates her videos in *chiaroscuro* lighting so that there is no background except the black screen. The viewer is forced to focus on the movement of the bodies, the grief on the ravaged faces, and the gestures that embody suffering and mourning. Movement within the composition of each shot of each video, between each frame of each video and between the three videos within the gallery space, all simultaneously point to the challenge of navigating this complex narrative and aesthetic information. Is it possible to enter into an interstitial moment where mourning and compassion carve out new expressions of identity?

Remediation of the original press photos takes on a further layer of meaning in the gallery space: static two-dimensional images become enactment/performance, which then become video documents, which are then organized into a three-screen/channel video installation. The three projected videos compete for attention, creating a sense of visual tension for the viewer who must mediate their meaning, much like in Sedira's *Gardiennes d'images*. In *Hidad*, the actors perform to a camera and not to a live audience, allowing Seboussi to control and re-mediate the images so that they are not exoticized. Yet, in her quest to bear memory and narrate the un-narrated trauma via large-scale screen images, does risk monumentalizing that very trauma? Is that perhaps Seboussi's goal after all? In evoking a moment of collective grief, it becomes larger and more dramatic on the personal and individual scale.

Seboussi's creative process is reminiscent of that of Canadian dancer and choreographer, Kathryn Ricketts who draws on performative inquiry to explore notions of physical and emotional displacement in a foundational methodology Ricketts (2008: 26) terms "embodied poetic narrative." Rickett's process has involved "listening and gathering stories" and searching "for lived moments of vulnerability which were then carefully crafted into small scenes

to be remembered and sequenced later. The resulting performance of shared processes becomes a testimony to their voices, voices that in many cases have been muffled or even muted.” Ricketts, like Seboussi, encourages interactors’ experiences to become part of the performance or art process. In the end, Seboussi’s goal is not to create a sense of “authenticity” of experience, but to offer up *Hidad* as a form of shriving of collective trauma, violence and silence. Judith Butler (2004: 22) has written that mourning “furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.” Within this context, Seboussi’s project is a testimonial, one that transcends codes of silence and invisibility, and moves beyond the singular and dangerous imperative to simply “relive past experiences of victimization” (Derderian 2006: 248). With *Hidad*, Seboussi shows us that within the historical moment, “difficult stories are a gift” (Ricketts 2017).

University of Regina, Regina, Canada.

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ABSTRACT

Through artist Nadia Seboussi's three-channel video installation *Hidad* (2015), she bears witness and documents the struggle of Algerian women who took up arms ("Women Patriots") during the civil war, taking the Bentalha Massacre of 1997 as the catalyst for the movement and *Hidad*. *Hidad*, which means "mourning" in Arabic, involves the remediation of an iconic press photo taken by Algerian press photographer Hocine Zaourar during the Bentalha Massacre. Remediation of press images is relatively common in contemporary art practice, but what is fascinating about Seboussi's project is that she has firmly anchored her personal participation in a shared memory, the outcome of which, for Seboussi, was exile and emigration. *Hidad* involves staged "performances" of the photo to impose movement from grief to compassion. *Hidad* thus acts as a form of thriving of trauma, violence and silence, a memorialization process that involves reconstructing memories and chronicling historical events collectively.

Keywords: Algeria, historical, mourning, performativity, photograph, testimony, trauma, video installation.

RÉSUMÉ

Jouer le moment historique: Hidad de Nadia Seboussi. — À travers son installation vidéo triptyque, *Hidad* (2015), Nadia Seboussi témoigne de la lutte menée par des femmes algériennes qui ont pris les armes (« femmes patriotes ») pendant la guerre civile, en appréhendant le massacre de Bentalha de 1997 comme catalyseur, à la fois pour ce mouvement et pour son installation vidéo *Hidad*. *Hidad*, qui signifie « deuil » en arabe, se réfère également à la restauration d'une photographie emblématique prise par le photographe de presse algérien Hocine Zaourar après le massacre de Bentalha. La restauration des images de presse est une pratique relativement courante dans l'art contemporain, mais ce qui est fascinant à propos du projet de Seboussi, c'est qu'elle a fermement ancré sa participation personnelle dans une mémoire partagée, laquelle a mené Seboussi à l'exil et à l'émigration. *Hidad* implique la mise en scène de la photographie, l'imposition d'un mouvement de la douleur vers la compassion. *Hidad* agit comme une forme de deuil du traumatisme, de la violence, du silence ainsi qu'un processus de commémoration qui reconstruit collectivement les souvenirs et les événements historiques.

Mots-clés : Algérie, deuil, historique, installation video, performativité, photographie, témoignage, traumatisme.