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Paris, the Metro and the Migrant

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Disorientation and Accompaniment: Paris, the Metro and the Migrant

Mireille Rosello

Abstract *In his 1975 novel, Topographie idéale pour une agression caractérisée [Ideal Topography for an Aggravated Assault], Algerian novelist Rachid Boudjedra reminds us that disorientation is a fascinating but life-threatening experience. His main protagonist, a Berber migrant newly arrived from his village, is lost in the Parisian metro. Boudjedra's attempt at writing from the perspective of the disoriented traveller disrupts generic conventions and confronts his readers with an unreadable textual labyrinth that exhausts and confuses us. Disorientation in and by a novel forces us to find answers to such questions as: How do we know we have arrived somewhere or that we belong? What does the representation of a disoriented subject teach us about the (reading) skills we need to integrate into a foreign place/culture? Is integration a form of violent reorientation? Boudjedra tempts us, dares us, to give up and abandon the book and the migrant to his fate (in the book, he is murdered) but also encourages us to think about an alternative practice of 'accompaniment'. He invites us to consider what happens to the idea of integration if we cannot conceptualise arrival. His book exposes the invisible violence experienced by the migrant who is expected to reorient him or herself, and suggests that we might see accompaniment as a two-way integration that requires a permanent, mutual and disorienting process of differed arrival.*

To speak of the metro first of all means to speak of reading and of cartography. (Augé 2002 [1986]: 9)

Imagine a Berber migrant who has just left his village in Algeria, crossed the Mediterranean Sea and taken a train from Marseilles to Paris. Implausibly, he finds himself at 'Gare d'Austerlitz' instead of 'Gare du Lyon', one of the many disorienting details of which the reader will have trouble making sense. We do not, however, have much time to acknowledge our surprise because the plot and the style of the novel immediately create other forms of intense disorientation for the protagonist and the reader. As the main character gets off the train in Paris, he immediately gets lost in the metro.

He cannot read a map, he cannot read at all. He does not understand the meaning of the endlessly repeated advertising posters that cover the walls and corridors, and he does not even know what advertising means. He is incapable of making sense of the chaos of impressions that constantly overwhelm his senses. He carries a heavy suitcase that slows down his progress and exhausts him, and he holds a little piece of paper on which a girl from his village has carefully but clumsily written the address he is trying to reach. A few people try to help him, showing him, provisionally, what could be the right direction at that particular moment. The very notion of direction, however, is radically questioned in this underground space. And when he finally emerges from the underground after 12 hours of exhausting non-progress, he is savagely murdered by a 'herd' of racists (Boudjedra 1975: 150). Those of you who have read the novel have recognised Algerian novelist Rachid Boudjedra's gruesome representation of 1970s Paris, *Topographie idéale pour une agression caractérisée* (*Ideal Topography for an Aggravated Assault*).

In this essay, I propose to examine how the novel helps us experience spatial and cultural disorientation from the point of view of an illiterate (or differently literate) migrant who tries to 'read' the metro. Boudjedra's attempt at representing disorientation accepts a textual challenge. A narrative, like the metro, requires from us a process of navigation that relies on implicit or explicit maps, and supposedly shared assumptions about at least two factors: destination (where are we going and how do we know when we are there) and a definition of coordinates (how we get there, how we understand a map). By 'map' I mean the parameters that we use to navigate the world as we see it. Sometimes, the map is called a 'culture'. Other times, it is what Michel Foucault called the 'politics of truth' (2007), what Jacques Rancière calls 'an aesthetic regime' (2004), or what Sara Ahmed calls 'queer phenomenology' (2006). To put ourselves on such maps we must, at the very least, understand them as maps. Instead, Boudjedra's novel deprives readers of the coordinates that would help them navigate the textual journey.

Consequently, *Topographie* begs two questions: first of all, I concentrate on what it means to textualise disorientation, on what constitutes a felicitous account of a disorienting city and ask how Boudjedra creates a paradoxical topography of disorientation. In a second part, I wonder what could be the point of Boudjedra's storytelling strategy. What does this textually disorienting anti-travel guide want from us? If we can agree that the narrative is a disorienting story of disorientation, what does the novel wish to achieve by making us share the vision of the metro as a fatal labyrinth?

The representation and performance of disorientation

In *Topographie*, Paris is a death trap. Here, the metro is not seen as a means of transportation that takes passengers to their destinations. It is a self-contained underground universe where the migrant endlessly suffers. As soon as he reaches the surface, he will be murdered. But the reader should not find this anticlimactic irony too surprising given that the traveller already had been given up for dead by the people from his village. The villagers duplicitously encouraged him to leave, but they were absolutely convinced that he would die in France.

Very early on, the novel rules out the possibility that if the migrant had found his way to the surface, the city would have been any more welcoming. He cannot arrive because the type of travel he has started has always already ended. As Vatin (1976) points out, the novel transgresses the usual topoi of travel narratives. This is not an exploration, it is not an initiation, it is not a passage: 'there is no enlightening discovery, no admission to the mysteries of the West, no gradual, positive progression' (Vatin 1976: 73).

Topographie is a performative textual account of the migrant's constant disorientation. Both the traveller and the reader are confronted with a hostile though fascinating barrage of signs. This novel is almost unreadable. To finish this book, we need patience, determination or perhaps coercion (such as having proposed to write an article on that book, or having no choice but to go on, in the case of the migrant). This is the kind of book that you would rather, at some point, abandon. It is opaque and unforgiving. We may feel incompetent as readers and blame the novel: there are too many or too few of the signs we have been taught to expect. As a result, we become aware of which markers we usually need, because they are missing in this textual chaos.¹

Here are some examples of the systematic disorienting narrative techniques: the fabric of the text consists of endless sentences (there is no beginning and no end to this journey), of repetitions with no accumulation of knowledge, and of arbitrarily truncated sentences that present the real as a 'disarticulated centipede' (Boudjedra 1975: 17).

From the beginning, we are confronted with endless sentences that stretch over three or four pages, so that the critic cannot orient their reader through this book with traditional tools: I cannot quote without transgressing the borders of the sentence, one of the most traditional units of writing. Any attempt at quoting adds to our disorientation: it is almost impossible to decide where to begin and where to stop, as if we had embarked on a journey with no planned layover. Even worse, the lack of distinction between what may be important for the plot and what is not, what is a detail and what is pertinent, transforms the text into a city without landmarks. And since quoting from a book would be the equivalent of giving directions, in the absence of such orienting devices, readers are likely to share the traveller's extreme fatigue, his sense of helplessness and despair. Consider the beginning of the book. This is the first page and the first sentence, not yet finished, which we can look at as if it were a painting rather than read it. It is deliberately opaque and impenetrable:

¹The narrative is extremely non-linear. Like the character who is not getting anywhere, who turns in circles and retraces his steps without realizing it, the book focuses on objects that function as fake landmarks: it is obsessed by what happens to the suitcase, what it looks like, how the traveller carries it, what happens to it when it is dropped, noticed by others, searched by a suspicious officer. Many pages are also devoted to a meticulous description of the advertisements that fascinate and disorient the traveller.

Le plus remarquable, ce n'était pas la valise en carton-pâte bouilli qu'il portait presque toujours à la main gauche (l'enquête prouvera plus tard qu'il n'avait jamais été gaucher) avec le bras quelque peu en avant de telle façon qu'à chaque détour de couloir ou à chaque tournant d'escalier mécanique, on la voyait apparaître – bourrée à craquer, avachie et au bout de son vieillissement avec sa peau tavelée de centaines de rides, créant une sorte de topographie savante à force de ténuité menant vers une abstraction de mauvais aloi pour une valise aussi malmenée d'autant plus que ses ferrures rouillées donnaient à sa clôture une fragilité supplémentaire – précédant le corps de son propriétaire ou plus exactement le bras de ce dernier, de quelques secondes poussives paraissant des minutes fabuleusement longues à ceux qui, soit par inadvertance, soit par curiosité la voyaient apparaître suspendue en l'air entre le gris sale du sol jonché de jaune (tickets de métro) de blanc gris (mégots de cigarettes) et de bleu-rouge (papiers divers), etc., et celui de l'espace plus laiteux certes mais cerné de temps à autre par des losanges de lumière rachitique et jaunâtre émise par des . . . (Boudjedra 1975: 1)

[The most remarkable was not the cardboard suitcase he always held in his left hand (the investigation would later show that he had never been left handed) with the arm a little bit forward so that at each turn of every corridor or at each curve of an escalator one could see it appear, jam-packed, misshapen and at the end of its ageing process with its skin marked with a hundred wrinkles their thinness creating a sort of sophisticated topography moving towards a dubious abstraction for such a beat-up suitcase especially since its rusty locks increased the fragility of its closure – appearing before its owner's body or rather his arm by a few out-of-breath seconds feeling like fabulously long minutes for those who, either inadvertently or out of curiosity saw it appear hanging in the air between the dirty grey ground littered with yellow (metro tickets) or grey white (cigarette butts) or blue red (various papers) etc. and that of an admittedly milkier space but surrounded in places by lozenges of yellowish and scrawny light coming from . . .]

The temptation is to stop reading and to watch. Throughout the book, we can look at some words or passages more closely, but they function more as close-ups rather than quotations, to the extent that we have to arbitrarily disarticulate sentences and paragraphs. Let us look at three passages. On page 18, we are confronted with this block of text:

[the map] On which lines zigzag across meanders that make his memory want to get rid of the overload of impressions accumulated during the last two days and piled on top of each other just like the black, red, yellow, blue, green lines, then red again but this time criss-crossed with black, then blue but criss-crossed with red, then green criss-crossed with white then numbers, that he could read (10, 12, 7, 1, 2, 5 etc.), then names written in bolder letters but everything drawn with letters going backwards unless this is a. (Boudjedra 1975: 18)²

On page 106, we (the disoriented migrant and reader) find ourselves in front of an almost identical image, a long incomplete non-sentence:

Then bang! once again the map that he does not understand but attracts, surprises and fascinates him where lines zigzag along multi-coloured meanders, red, black, yellow, green, blue, red again but this time criss-crossed with black, then blue but criss-crossed with red, then green criss-crossed with white with empty circles or black dots, then numbers, that he could read (10, 12, 7, 1, 2, 5 etc.), then names written in bolder letters but everything drawn with letters going backwards unless this is a. (Boudjedra 1975: 106)

And again on page 136, the so-called map re-appears:

With the lines of a completely incomprehensible map zigzagging across meanders that make his memory want to get rid of the overload of impressions accumulated during the last two days and piled on top of each other just like the black, red, yellow, blue, green lines, then red again but this time criss-crossed with black, then blue but criss-crossed with red, then green criss-crossed with white with empty circles and circles with a black centre, then numbers, that he was able to read (10, 12, 7, 1, 2, 5 etc.), then names written in bolder letters but everything drawn with letters going backwards unless this is a. (Boudjedra 1975: 136)

Once we have read or perhaps stared at the excerpts, we still do not know where we are in Paris, or in the story; and the irony is that these segments of prose are a textual representation of a map of the metro. The text that we watch like an image represents a type of image that is meant to be read and interpreted as a set of instructions. Instead, the map has morphed into an irritatingly repetitive text that we can only watch. We are asked or forced to see the map from the lost migrant's perspective. We, as readers, discover what happens to a map when it ceases to be a map. One set of recognisable parameters clashes with a reading that ignores them as parameters. The map is absolutely useless as an instrument of orientation. Instead, the text forces us to think about what we normally expect from maps and about what happens when they fail us.

These passages are representative of the novel as a whole. Disorientation is caused by unmanageably long sentences and constant repetitions that generate a dizzying impression of *déjà vu*. Whole paragraphs are repeated and these repetitions slow us down, they are obstacles to any accumulation of narrative knowledge. The narration does not move forward. Like the character who does not know where he is, we encounter vaguely familiar blocks of text whose meaning is not clear. We are deprived of the equivalent of unique landmarks, like the migrant who thinks that he may have retraced

²All translations are the author's unless otherwise indicated.

his steps when he sees the same advertisements in different stations. Sometimes, he stares at posters or at the station itself,

... wondering if he was not once again on the wrong side of the tracks because both sides of the station looked so much alike, each one the reflection of the other, especially since the signs could not help him, he disliked, even hated them because he could not decipher the script that appeared to him as a set of useless shapes whose only purpose was to exasperate him, hence a radical suspicion towards them and everything else! (Boudjedra 1975: 9)

The principle of repetition and the notion of unique coordinates are confused. Like a topographer who focuses on the wrong points of reference, the traveller ends up with a bad survey of his environment and does not even have a correct account of his movements within the labyrinth. Similarly, the narrative's non-linear and repetitive structure generates no sense of a progression towards narrative closure or resolution.

Like the traveller going back and forth between spaces that look alike and prevent him from orienting himself, the reader reads similar passages that he or she cannot read properly (did I misplace my bookmark?). The repetition of passages within the text confuses our perception of where we are in space, in time and of where the narrative is going. The meaning of obvious repetitions is not clear: there is no accumulation of knowledge, no discovery, no progression from ignorance to knowledge. Like the character, the reader is stuck in a maze of words.

Finally, sentences not only spread over whole pages but they are sometimes truncated at the most implausible moments. Often, a period appears where we least expect it. Three times, the description of the map of the metro ends in a suspended sentence: 'unless this is a.' (followed by a period). The expression reproduces the mental process of the traveller going through a series of hypotheses and finding himself incapable of making a decision about which one of his ideas is the most plausible. Other possibilities are present in his mind, but they are not spelled out. The sentence is interrupted, it fails to complete itself. Like the traveller, it goes nowhere but there is neither peace nor resignation in this 'nowhere': the period both stops us and tells us that it is impossible to stop there. The truncated sentence makes us experience what it means to be at one's 'wit's end'. One must go further. One cannot go further. The period materialises a form of physical and mental exhaustion that leads to silence. The traveller cannot make sense. Still he must make sense. 'Not understanding' is not an option. The familiar map of the metro is flattened, turned into an image, a pointless accumulation of signs and we cannot put ourselves on the map. The text itself is 'fragmented, broken, segmented' and looks like an undecipherable and disorienting mess. We can read the words one after the other but the sense of direction and destination is lost. We cannot arrive anywhere, we turn in circles. The novel accumulates words that do not make the description more precise but rather more tedious and disorienting for the reader.

As readers, we don't understand the narrative 'map' and we fail to recognise textual elements that are or are not maps. We would need shorter

sentences that do not exhaust us and force us to concentrate and work well beyond what has become normal: like the traveller, we are forced to go on and on even when we feel exhausted and lost. We would also need the narrative to provide us with a sense of destination (a plot) and a generic map (is this a thriller, a testimony, the story of a journey?). This is uncharted and unchartable textual territory.

But then, the question remains: What does the novel want from us? Are we simply supposed to observe the textualised performance of disorientation? If the text makes us more aware of our traditional orientation techniques, what do we learn as a result? Can we discover something that would change not only our way of reading but our understanding of orientation?

What does the novel want from us?

My first intuition, as a reader, was to look for other cultural representations of disoriented travellers. Should we, for example, compare the fictional migrant to the heroes of an eighteenth century philosophical fable or to a *Zazie in the metro* (Queneau 2006 [1959])? Probably not, because while Montesquieu's *Persians* or Voltaire's *Micromégas* fictionalise their authors' feigned astonishment at their own society, Boudjedra's description of the metro makes us see our world as an incomprehensible chaos of signs wrapped in an incomprehensible genre of writing (Voltaire 1979 [1752], Montesquieu 2003 [1973; 1721]). In this book, there is no reversal of implicit binaries (home is elsewhere). The hero will never return 'home' to tell the tale. And he will not discover anything that others did not already know (they had announced his death in the labyrinth).

Should we then read *Topographie* as an experimental auto-ethnography that proposes to disorient and then re-orient the reader as migrant? Announcing a text that Marc Augé would publish ten years later, *Topographie* could have been titled, like Marc Augé's book 'an ethnologist in the metro' Augé (2002 [1986]). Perhaps I could map this novel onto that grid: could the intertextual presence of the distinguished anthropologist's memoirs function as an orienting device? After all, texts such as *Passing through the Luxembourg Gardens* (Augé 1985) and *In the Metro* (2002 [1986]) are narratives whose form questions one's relationship to culturally organised spaces, as well as the way in which the story of such explorations can be written (Sheringham 1995: 220). Would it help, then, to read Boudjedra's text as an 'ethno-novel' that forces us to reconsider our definition of 'space' and the way in which we choose our orientation devices?³

The first intertextual compass I attempted to use to answer this question was not the work written in the 1980s but the later publications in which Augé theorises his famous distinction between spaces and non-spaces. After returning from New Guinée and Togo, Augé started scrutinising 'the near' (Paris),

³The subtitle of *La Traversée du Luxembourg* is *Paris, 20 Juillet 1984: ethno-roman d'une journée française considérée sous l'angle des mœurs, de la théorie et du Bonheur* [*Passing Through the Luxemburg Gardens: Paris, 20 July 1984: Ethno-Novel of a French Day Observed from the Point of View of Mores, Theory and Happiness*].

then changed perspective again as he considered what globalisation was doing to space itself. In his 1992 *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, he theorises the by-now classic distinction between anthropological spaces and the non-spaces of supermodernity. Spaces are familiar, connected to a history that is ours, and where we locate our senses of home and dwelling. One of the characteristics of our 'supermodernity' is that we more and more often find ourselves in non-spaces, train stations, airports, motorways and massive shopping centres where the 'persistent experience of "always passing through" goes together with an excess of global visual messages that replace the familiarity of local bearings' (Aurigi and De Cindio 2008: 30).

Before going further, however, I would like to stress that Augé does not conceptualise spaces and non-spaces as mutually exclusive; they are constantly interwoven: 'Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten' (1995: 79). Non-spaces are both recognisable 'places' and also 'spaces' constructed by our practices.⁴ Still, it is worth noting that Augé was never tempted to explain the metro as a non-space. In 1986, the metro is still very much a space connected to national and personal history and memories. '[M]any Parisians have "periods," such as a Montparnasse period, a Saint-Michel period, and a Bonne-Nouvelle period' (Augé 2002 [1986]: 10), which correspond to other idiosyncratic maps (a 'Carte de tendre' for example). Much later, in 2008, when Augé publishes *Le Métro revisité*, he recognises that the metro has changed and is becoming a non-space for some users when they travel on lines that are only the prolongation of the Réseau Express Régional (RER) (Augé 2008). As Paris spreads and turns into a place of transit and circulation, certain areas start resembling train stations, which themselves resemble airports where individuals are lost in their 'internal music' (Augé 2009).

Could it then be that Boudjedra's novel is a felicitous account of how migrants experience a 'non-space' as disorientation decades before the concept has been deployed? Of course the traveller cannot conceptualise the idea of having a 'Montparnasse period'. He cannot map his own history on to the network. If routine creates a social map, he is also deprived of a compass. For him, the metro stations represent neither a social identity nor an address connected to a given function (home or work, tourism or recreation). Instead, he is always in the process of 'passing through' without ever seeing the Paris that is above ground. He is bombarded by an excess of visual signs but he cannot even identify them as signs. Even more significantly, the ethnologist's narrative is characterised by the radical inability to give an account of oneself (as Butler (2005) would put it).

⁴Augé explicitly credits de Certeau and adapts his opposition between place and space: 'Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities . . . space is the word when it is spoken' (de Certeau 1984: 117).

And yet, that reading is not satisfactory either. Augé's non-spaces are 'spaces of circulation, communication and consumption, where solitudes coexist without creating any social bond or even a social emotion . . .' (Augé 1996: 178). Boudjedra does not describe a community of solitudes: he scrutinises one very specific type of solitude whose need for relationality is acute and intense. The migrant is not just passing through (because the metro as trap is now everywhere) but neither does he dwell in the 'passing through' like the famous character of the film *The Terminal* who appropriates Roissy as his home. The migrant cannot visualise himself as scripting a *Traversée du Luxembourg* because he does not have any point of view, be it that of the ethnologist of the near (who studies his or her own culture) or of the distant (who travels to far away places). What makes Augé's *Traversée* an ethno-novel is that there is a vantage point, an orientation ('from the point of view of mores, theory and happiness') but also that the 'I' claims the position of ethnologist. Here, the disoriented text mirrors the disorientation of the subject: the narration has lost the ethnologist's 'I'. Like the hero, like the text, we are lost in a non-existent space in between space and non-space: the migrant wanders in a threatening, protocol-free non-space while Parisians, around him, meticulously plan and execute their trips with a great deal of know-how.

My second hypothesis is that I could embrace the structural resemblance between the novel and the experience of the migrant in order to observe what kind of relationality the novel creates between the reader and the character. In which labyrinth do we get lost? The first possibility is to become fascinated by the literary experiment. Like the migrant who stares at the map and cannot use it to orient himself, we could scrutinise the pages and remain stuck on a given passage, mesmerised by Boudjedra's virtuosity. After all, he is also part of a literary tradition that has treated the Parisian metro not only as anthropological space but as the pretext of textual experiments. This time, *Topographie* could be compared to Jacques Jouet's 'poèmes de métro', oulipian exercises that follow formulas dictated by the metro itself (for example, when a poem must have as many lines as the number of stations minus one, or when the poem must be composed between stations).⁵

We could then assume that the book has disoriented us. Like the traveller, we have no destination except 'the end' (at the end of the book, our own reading experience stops but more by accident than because of narrative closure). Like him, we may feel tired and frustrated by the endless repetitions and spiralling structure of the book. But we may also be fascinated by the long descriptions of an object that interrupts the reading process or the traveller's progression. Like him, we need patience and the illusion that, at some point, we will come out of the labyrinth and that it will be worth it.

At the same time, insisting on the structural resemblance between the traveller's perception and the reader's experience is dangerous. It masks the radical difference between the material conditions that separate the migrant's

⁵Wrona (2008) mentions Henri Thomas 1956's *La Nuit de Londres* and Guy Konopnicki's 2005 *Ligne 9* (in which the 38 chapters correspond to the 38 stations of Line 9 which the 38-year-old Joseph Kaplan uses as a hermeneutic grid to understand the city).

life from our reading experience. We may well be frustrated by the book but we are never going to be 'Unnerved, breathless, lifeless, haggard, emaciated and starved' (Boudjedra 1975: 133).

The risk of such an interpretation would be to appropriate disorientation as a form of knowledge, as yet another exotic product to be consumed and brought back home at the end of the cultural trip. Of course, this may well be one of the effects of the novel. We may start assuming that we now understand the traveller and resemble him, and that, on some level, every trip to Paris is the same. Yet, no matter how much we can now 'imagine' what it means to encounter Paris as a migrant, if we are capable of reading this text (or of reading a book and a map), we could find our way in the metro. The book has not created a set of all equivalent, ontologically disoriented travellers.

The virtuosity of the textual representation of disorientation would be less politically relevant if the only lesson were to make us believe that we share the migrant's disorientation once we start being exasperated by a chaotic narrative, endless sentences, incongruous periods, endemic repetition.

Yes, it takes patience, determination, respect, and hours of concentration to finish the book, but it is not the same as dying of disorientation, which is why I am not completely convinced by critics who suggest the main point of Boudjedra's experiment is to denounce through textual experiments. For example, Zlitni-Fitouri (2004) writes:

Transposing collective and individual violence, the violence of the real space has repercussions on the textual space that also reflects the image of generalized violence. The narration and typographic space are attacked and pierced so that textual subversion provides a concrete translation of Boudjedra's will to displace spaces and replace them with a better perception of the real and a denunciation of blind and insane violence. (Zlitni-Fitouri 2004: 261)

I agree that the textual representation of a disoriented traveller 'displaces' traditional perceptions of space or perhaps 'reorients' us, helping us approach the metro from a different perspective. The difficulties that we encounter when we try to recognise a genre or a form of story that now looks like 'signes comme à l'envers' [backwards alphabet] force us, readers, whoever we are, to navigate between several levels of comparable though different forms of violence. Violence has become part of the map. We have, according to Zlitni, a 'better perception' of Paris if we see the resemblance between outside and inside. In fact, it is even better to be aware of the impossibility to ever get out or in because the same dangers lurk in and outside of the metro.⁶

I am concerned however by the risk of over-textuality or by the illusion of empathy: first of all, the narration may well be under attack but texts cannot suffer. Moreover, if anyone at all is literate enough to appreciate modernist

⁶See also Vatin (1976), who claims that the novel is closer to a 'pamphlet' than to fiction and calls *Topographie* a 'roman d'accusation' (Vatin 1976: 69).

experiments, *nouveau romans*, baroque enumerations and excessive texts, it should be the Western reader.⁷ There is such a thing as welcoming textual disorientation. And welcoming disorientation is not the same as suffering from it. If we read that text, after all, we have agency. I would rather not fetishise a universalised form of disorientation. Such a reading would fall into the type of studies that (Marxist) postcolonial critics have criticised for their over-emphasis on textuality (Brennan 2000; Rattansi 1997).

The second risk is the illusion of misguided sense of empathy. If I assume that I have been disoriented, ontologically so to speak, I would then be under the illusion that I am like the North African migrant, that I now understand enough to either speak for him or bear witness. And I suggest at least two reading positions, with their respective advantages and disadvantages, may be envisaged as a different response.

The first obvious temptation is to opt out of the reading experience altogether. We could stop reading, declare the novel unbearable, both from political and textual reasons (I did, several times). Or, we could skip passages, skim the long sentences and refuse to watch the map long enough to notice its meaningless details (I did, several times). But by doing so, we would also act like the fictional fellow travellers who abandon the migrant to his fate. His Paris is deadly; it can never be ours. Our reading would then perform our distance from the migrant's unique and non-sharable experience of fatal disorientation. He would be forever othered, spatialised as lost to us, though right next to us.

But we may not have to choose between the temptation of empathy and the renunciation that comes from a refusal to fall into the textual trap. At least one other possibility is suggested by four protagonists within the novel. What they propose, without being able to practice it, is something that could be called an aesthetics and ethics of accompaniment. The word 'accompany' is often used in the context of death.⁸ Accompanying is what we do when we cannot be *like* or even *with* the person but still accept that there is something to do, to the bitter end that we cannot prevent. Accompanying also means being with, without being, the hero of the story. You go with, you go along and you may be of help.

The book suggests that when a migrant is disoriented by a map we can read fluently, it is not enough to 'give directions' or to use our native expertise to try and reorient him or her. My coordinates are not going to be intelligible, what I see would still be unseeable, my map will still be the other's chaos. Just as we cannot abandon this book half way, we cannot get rid of the migrant by simply intervening punctually along the way. It is not useful to 'give directions'. We have to stay with, live with, and share, pointlessly perhaps, his painful experience of disorientation even if it means witnessing, somewhat helplessly, the violence that the community to which 'we' belong is capable of inflicting on migrants. Boudjedra's implied audience is not the migrant, it is the 'we' who are already guilty of complicity. Reading the book as if we

⁷See Boudjedra (1989: 42).

⁸See Ross Chambers' analysis of accompaniment in the context of AIDS (1998) and Emma Wilson's *Love, Mortality and the Moving Image* (2012).

could not escape it would be the deployment of an aesthetics of accompaniment that would do, at the level of the text, what the novel suggests that none of the fellow travellers could do. Even those who wanted to help could not imagine what it would take to help effectively.

In the novel, four different fellow travellers try to help the hero reorient himself by putting him on the already existing map, the one that he does not understand. Clearly, and very pessimistically no doubt, the novel suggests that this type of 'help' does not protect the migrant from being killed nor does it protect the benevolent travellers from experiencing guilt and regrets when they find out about what has happened to the migrant. If someone wants to help, *Topographie* suggests, such tactics are going to be self-defeating.

The first young European who wants to put him back in the right direction is aware that the metro is a difficult environment to navigate. He even comments on the fact that the map on the wall is useless to those who cannot read it. He critiques the rhetoric of posters that pretend to 'welcome' the traveller and praise the metro's supposedly service-oriented and user-friendly layout (Boudjedra 1975: 30–5). Ironically, however, he can only reproduce their mistake. To explain the architecture of the subway system, he compares the map to his own favourite hobby: playing pinball. His analogy may produce the brilliant textual metaphor of the migrant as helpless pin ball, but it does not help him at all ('I even drew a sketch for him, with lines and stations and directions and whatever but he did not seem to quite get it' (Boudjedra 1975: 178)). The young man only adds another incomprehensible map to the chaos of signs when he draws the supposedly simplified itinerary on a piece of paper that the migrant will now carry around. All the other well-meaning travellers do the same so that the migrant ends up with more pieces of the puzzle and no idea of how to put them together. The incomplete and useless maps will be added to the precious and worn-out paper with the address that the migrant cannot read, but that he shows around like a talisman.

Later, interviewed as a witness by the investigator and distraught to discover that his companion is dead, the first young man will say: 'If I had known, I would have accompanied him . . . And now he is dead. Did he suffer? But I ask for my own sake: that will teach me. I should not have abandoned him' (Boudjedra 1975: 178–9).

The desire to 'accompany' to the end is the political dream that the young man could not fulfil, and the novel, in its opacity, may be daring the reader to accept the challenge at his or her own level. At the very least we should read to the end, without skipping, without reorienting ourselves. As we slowly and chaotically go from one word to the next, we know that we will eventually come out of the so-called labyrinth but not because we know how or when to orient ourselves, simply because the author releases us.

The patience and determination that we need to consciously carry out the project might be the kind of patience and determination that is required if we start thinking of accompaniment as a social and political option. The textual map or absence of map functions as an experiment: the novel does not give us directions or pointers, instead, it suggests that 'giving directions' is pointless when the protagonists are not already on the same map.

And if we accept the hypothesis that the novel recommends an aesthetics of accompaniment as the only responsible form of witnessing, then this textual performance of disorientation also comments on the impossibility of establishing a clear distinction between 'arriving' and 'integrating'. The novel questions or even disables the concept of 'arrival' for the migrant.⁹ And by making us question that essential element of any journey, Boudjedra also invites us to go beyond what now appears as a fake distinction between the time of arrival and the time of integration, a most politicised notion. If we realise that certain subjects are not allowed to 'arrive', then the idea that they could later 'integrate' is also an illusion. Once the novel has made us perceive Paris as a radically rather than temporarily disorienting space, we may better understand the tragedy of the migrant's permanently delayed arrival.¹⁰ Integration, we now realise, is a myth grounded in an unspoken prerequisite: a before-and-after-arrival narrative. Before considering if integration is successful or not, even before deciding whether all forms of integration are assimilationist, we need to presuppose that some form of arrival precedes the time of integration.

In *Topographie*, arrival is foreclosed because Paris is not introduced as what would be discovered if one managed to solve the riddle of the metro. Paris is the metro and the metro is Paris. The place of destination and the place of endless travelling are one and the same. What Boudjedra's disorienting novel may teach the reader is that the migrant never 'arrives' anywhere or, rather, that he will always already have arrived before setting foot in the new city unless someone accepts to accompany him, step by step, instead of trying to give him directions by reference to a map that he does not understand. The book, of course, is asking for the impossible: an ethics of accompaniment is quasi impossible to sustain because it would mean sharing the man's utter disorientation for as long as it takes, i.e. a lifetime. But here, the alternative is that the migrant is doomed before he has even arrived and that no matter what, he will be destroyed, killed, by the city into which he hopes to integrate.

The book highlights just how difficult and how crucial it is to replace the cluster of notions that huddle around 'integration' with a constellation of other concepts. Around 'accompaniment' we could at least imagine and practice what is sometimes called 'two-way' integration, a concept which, after reading *Topographie*, I am tempted to replace here with 'permanent, mutual, and disorienting process of differed arrival'.

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⁹See Graebner's remark on the disappearance of the character's name: 'the narrative never lets him arrive; his designation in the text, as *l'émigrant*, itself seems to obviate any possibility of ever arriving anywhere' (2007: 291).

¹⁰This is the opposite of what happens in Cedric Klapisch's *L'Auberge espagnole*, where the narrator (an Erasmus student who has just arrived in Barcelona) fantasises about the moment when he will already have learned to navigate the city: he perceives the unknown and disorienting environment not as a threat but as a promise of future familiarity and belonging.

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