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A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY OPEN BOOK

## (RE)BUILDING ALGIERS: Racial Segregation in the “Republican” Empire

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*La ville du colon est une ville en dur, toute de pierre et de fer. C'est une ville illuminée, asphaltée... La ville du colon est une ville de blancs, d'étrangers. La ville du colonisé, ou du moins la ville indigène, le village nègre, la médina, la réserve est un lieu mal famé, peuplé d'hommes mal famés... La ville du colonisé est une ville affamée, affamée de pain, de viande, de chaussures, de charbon, de lumière. La ville du colonisé est une ville accroupie, une ville à genoux, une ville vautrée.*

The settler's town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt . . . The settlers' town is a town of white people, of foreigners. The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute... The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. (Fanon 1966, 39)

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In this passage from *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon describes the archetypal colonial city. To Fanon, it was a space defined by its duality. The city of the colonizer—the white, European city—prioritized ease, comfort, concrete, and open space. In contrast, colonial authorities squeezed Indigenous populations into crowded, haphazard zones. As Fanon describes, this “starved” city was deprived of economic power, downtrodden by police control, and denied resources. Fanon wrote *The Wretched of the Earth* after working in Algeria and in writing of the double-sided colonial city, Fanon might have had Algiers in mind. Throughout the colonial period, Algiers existed as precisely this model of bifurcated city, an urban agglomeration with invisible but inescapable boundaries between the city of the *colon* and the city of the *colonisé*.

When French observers talked about the *ville indigène* of Algiers, they meant the Casbah. The Casbah, originally named for the Ottoman fort that stood at its apex, filled the hilltop of central Algiers with a network of white-washed residences. Colonial commentators describing the Casbah evoked a world of sensuality, danger, and difference. For them, the Casbah stood as a metonymy for the Algerian population of Algiers.<sup>1</sup> Algerians crammed into the confines of the Casbah, while European settlement sprawled out in the rest of the urban metropolis (Kaddache 1970, 13). This pattern of residence is perhaps not surprising. As Fanon points out, Algiers was hardly the only colonial city to see racial difference inscribed onto urban space, but segregation there contradicted the proclaimed logics of France’s assimilationist colonial policy. Algerians civilized by French tutelage, the argument went, could eventually become equal partners in the republican French empire. Racial discrimination, although evident in legal codes and governmental practices, was not openly condoned by politicians. How then did the Casbah become such a profound space of *de facto* segregation in the absence of a *de jure* legal apparatus?

Scholars have explored the complicated construction of French Algiers. Urban historians have traced how French conquest destroyed the Ottoman city and how French urban expansion redefined its boundaries (Benatia 1980; Çelik 1997; Icheboudene 1997; Kaddache n.d., 1951; Lespès 1930). All these authors agree: like Fanon, they describe Algiers as a dual city, divided into European and “*indigène*” spaces.<sup>2</sup> Historians have largely accepted urban segregation in Algiers as fact, focusing on differing French visions of urban planning, debates over social dangers in the *bidonvilles*, or political histories of anti-colonial resistance to French rule (Çelik 1997; Descloitres 1961; House 2018, 2019; Icheboudene 1997). Yet there has been little attention paid to *how* Algiers became a segregated space.

In other contexts, there is a rich literature examining the creation of racial urban segregation. African Americans, for example, were trapped in underfunded, overcrowded neighborhoods due to legal tools like restrictive covenants and red-lining (for example, [Michney and Winling 2021](#); [Rothstein 2017](#)). Colonial cities, too, offer examples of segregation orchestrated through pass systems, public health codes, or racial zoning laws (see [Myers 2003](#); [Mitchell 1988](#); [Murunga 2005](#); [Nightingale 2012](#); [Swanson 1977](#)). In one such case, the French colonial state used a plague outbreak in Dakar in 1914 to impose racial segregation, using a language of public health to justify land expropriation and the ghettoization of African communities ([Bigon 2016](#); [Curtin 1985](#); [Velmet 2020](#)). Unlike other colonial cities, however, no formal laws restricted Algerians' buying power, no pass system kept them cordoned to specific zones, no policies empowered landlords to deny tenets based on race. Nor did segregation in Algiers follow the "preservationist" logics of Lyautey's Rabat (see [Rabinow 1989](#)).

The mechanics of segregation in Algiers are opaque in the archive, but no less real for their near invisibility. This article draws primarily on documents created and preserved by the French colonial state, archives formed as practical ledgers for managing the conquered city. In engaging these records, however, I deploy a method of reading "along the grain" of the archive, pointing out the omnipresent racial assumptions and interrogating the things left unsaid in official decrees ([Stoler 2009](#)). As [Michel-Rolph Trouillot \(2015\)](#) argues, elements of the past can be "silenced," removed from the history we teach and talk about because they threaten hegemonic narratives. Likewise, the history of segregation in Algiers was silenced, an effort by French colonial actors to render this separation inevitable and natural.

As colonial rule solidified, segregation became a defining feature of colonial Algiers. Colonial urban planning, coupled with every day, street-level racism, steadily rebuilt Algiers as a French colonial capital. This revision was supported by a colonial apparatus that understood *Algérois* as divided into two categories—"indigène" and French. I argue that no one code created segregation in Algiers. Rather, it emerged from a slow, constant project of erasure, racial violence, and expropriation that limited the urban possibilities for Algerians. To claim Algiers as their own, French settlers made the Algerian inhabitants of the city, the original *Algérois*, invisible, frozen in historical time and displayed only as a contrast to the gleaming new city they planned to build.

But these same segregated spaces, like the Casbah, could also become chosen homes and zones of solidarity in a colonial city built to reproduce violence.

As Édouard Glissant (1990) suggests in his call for a “right to opacity,” opacity can be a source of power. French officials complained about the “closed” nature of the Casbah, unable to understand its physical logics or control circulation within it. Residents of the Casbah concealed political organizing, built networks of community that were illegible to the French state, and inhabited space in ways that matched their own priorities rather than a colonial mandate. The same opacity that made Algerian spaces invisible in formal governance also made these neighborhoods a meaningful resource for movements of resistance.

### DESTROYING ALGIERS

Prior to French conquest, the city of Algiers was contained within the ramparts of an Ottoman fortress, the literal *casbah* that gave the neighborhood its name.<sup>3</sup> In the Ottoman period, the city housed a diverse array of peoples, including Ottoman Turks, Arabs, Amazigh, Maghrebi Jews, European foreign merchants, and a small number of Black Africans.<sup>4</sup> The urban divisions of Ottoman Algiers, ruled by a local Dey, reflected this social world. Algiers was comprised of dozens of small neighborhoods, each with its own administrative system and often grouped by ethnicity, religion, or status (Çelik 1997, 13–15). The Jewish quarter, for example, sat next to the major marketplace and the wealthy Turkish ruling class congregated in the upper reaches of the walled city. When the French arrived, they imposed new logics of social division, ones that flattened the complex hierarchies of the Ottoman city into a “European” and “*indigène*” binary.<sup>5</sup> The category of “*indigène*” was codified with the *indigénat* code, denoting both a legal status and a racialized group.<sup>6</sup>

The French first invaded Algiers in 1830 following a trumped up diplomatic dispute with the Dey, brutally disrupting the city (Sessions 2011, 25). The French army reconfigured Algiers to meet military needs, renaming roads, expropriating homes, and eventually tearing down the walls of the fortress.<sup>7</sup> French authorities designed a new main square, the Place du Gouvernement, including a courthouse, mayoral residence, library, stock exchange, and church, all built in French style. This French city, dubbed the Marine Quarter, swallowed entire sections of Algiers, a process of expropriation that redefined Algiers as a European space, rather than an Ottoman stronghold.<sup>8</sup> In remaking Algiers in their own image in the first decades of colonial rule, the French strategically created space for European settlers to occupy.

Prior to 1830, Algiers had a relatively compact footprint, restricted by the walls that enclosed the town. After invading the city, the French army

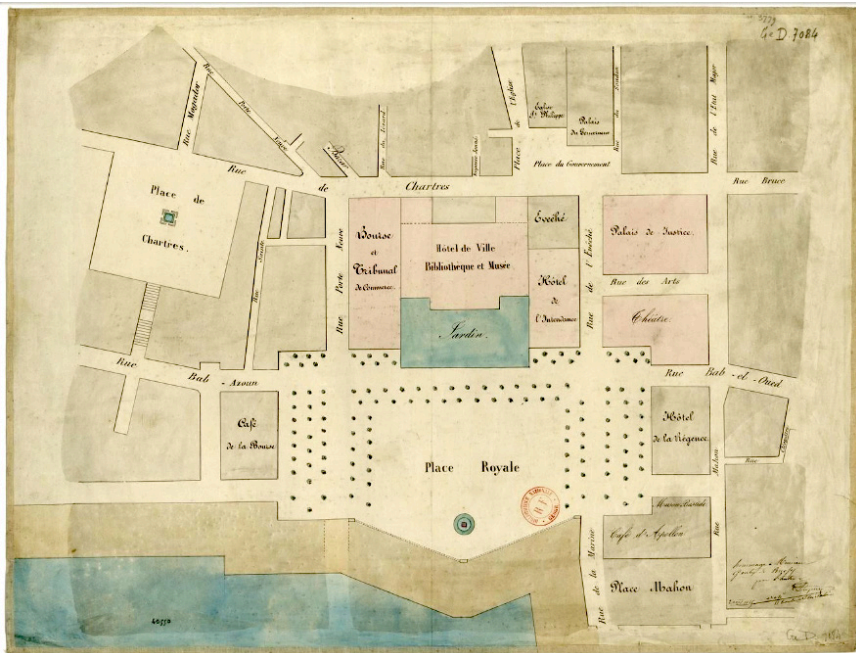


Figure 1. C. Dupuy, « Plans des rues avoisinant la place Royale et la place de Chartres, à Alger. » 1845, Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

immediately began knocking down buildings, clearing roads, and commandeering space to use for drills. Military planners designed roads, squares, and entire new neighborhoods, using requisition orders to acquire land. As the army ripped apart Algiers, they often failed to compensate the Algerian owners of requisitioned buildings, reducing these families to poverty and homelessness (Lespès 1930, 220). A note from 1836 confirms this point. In a letter, the Director of Finances in Algiers wrote to the Minister of War in Paris about indemnities due to property owners for the homes and businesses demolished by the military in Algiers. Due to poor budgeting, the director warned, the “unhappy” property owners would likely remain unpaid for their land.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars traditionally narrate this early period of French invasion as the “flight” of Algerians from the city center. With the chaos of military occupation, wealthy Algerians began to leave, heading to suburban villages like Hamma, Kouba, or Saint-Eugène.<sup>10</sup> French observers argued that the exodus was driven by Algerian cultural norms that dictated separate spheres for men and women. The traditional *dars* that dotted Algiers had small exterior windows but luminous interior courtyards and balconies. Women reigned over this interior world

but rarely went out in public. According to the French explanations, Europeans settling in the city ignored gendered conventions and invaded the privacy of Algerian women, causing disgruntled Algerian families to flee the Marine Quarter for the relative privacy of the “*haute-ville*” or Casbah. In 1840, for example, the Director of the Interior wrote to the Minister of War to discourage a plan to requisition more land in the heart of Algiers. He cautioned that the “lower city is almost entirely depopulated of *indigènes* and it tends every day to become exclusively European.”<sup>11</sup> He claimed that Algerians had fled the area because European families would indulge in “indiscreet investigations” of Algerian households from their neighboring terraces. Most of the evidence for this narrative comes from sources written by French colonial authorities, but local Algerian historians, too, offer this reason to explain the flight of Algerians from the lower city and their resulting concentration in the white-washed reaches above.<sup>12</sup>

But cultural difference was not the only reason Algerians streamed towards the Casbah. In the same 1840 letter, the director also mentioned another factor: rent. He noted that “*indigènes*” had been pushed from the city by “the high cost of rent developed by the ever-growing needs of commerce in that section of the city . . .”<sup>13</sup> As European speculators bought up or rented more and more land, rent prices increased to such outlandish heights that ordinary Algerian families simply could not afford to live in the neighborhood. As a result, Algerians retreated to the upper echelons of the city, “whose tranquility corresponds better to their habits and whose rents are more in line with the limits, or in other words, the almost nullity of their resources.”<sup>14</sup>

If the director discussed the more reasonable rents of the Casbah as a pull factor, he pointedly ignored the French role in impoverishing Algerians. The colonial government lured French commerce to Algeria, encouraging shipping companies, industrial production, and agricultural entrepreneurs. All these ventures required space and the intense European demand for land bred rampant speculation (Icheboudene 1997, 132–33; Lespès 1930, 238). Historian Larbi Icheboudene argues that French colonialism introduced capitalism to Algerian society. Before French arrival, the Ottoman state promoted artisanal production, but under French rule, artisans were stripped of their international networks (Icheboudene 1997, 142). French policy instead supported a chain of imports and exports that centered France and favored French merchants. When the Algerian economy collapsed after French conquest, France actively prevented Algerians from rebuilding wealth. Denied access to French-language education and legally prevented from obtaining certain public sector jobs, many Algerians found themselves relegated to the lowest-skilled, lowest-paid work. Rent prices

soared throughout Algiers, while at the same time colonial expansion throttled the artisanal economy and expropriation and road “alignment” projects cut Algerians out of land and homeownership. Algerians could not afford to live in the lower parts of Algiers, which already by 1840 had become “almost exclusively European.” Concluding his warning, the director noted that planned expansions into the Casbah were misplaced. “There would be a sort of barbery, Monsieur the Minister, to take from them this last refuge,” he cautioned.<sup>15</sup>

The continual process of urban demolition exacerbated other factors that eroded Algerian wealth. One Algerian homeowner, Mamed ben Mahmoud, protested in 1844 against an urban planning project that would require the demolition of his home. While municipal authorities proposed to compensate him, Mahmoud argued that the city had not fairly appraised the value of his home. He described his home as a traditional *mauresque* construction that was “one of the loveliest of Algiers.”<sup>16</sup> Yet the administration proposed to compensate him only for the land and not the value of the house itself. Although colonial officials claimed to fairly pay owners, road-widening and reconstruction projects stripped Algerian property owners of assets, creating a colonial sub-class forced to retreat to the Casbah or leave Algiers together.

Not all Algerian homeowners meekly abandoned the *basse ville* city center. In 1861, for example, the Prefecture of Algiers prepared to expropriate a series of buildings to expand streets near Place Napoléon. As part of the process, officials collected testimonies from the owners to assess potential costs. One owner, Abderhaman Zemarly (almost certainly a misspelling of his name), protested the proposed demolition of his home. The dossier noted, “He has only his profession as a barber, which he exercises in this boutique, to live off of and if he is forced to leave [the home], he will see himself reduced to destitution, along with his numerous family.”<sup>17</sup> Zemarly was losing not just his home, but his livelihood. Despite his protest, the plan went ahead. The colonial government determined that he would receive 4,000 francs for his lost property, but no other accommodations were made to compensate for his lost business.<sup>18</sup> As Zemarly’s case demonstrates, not all Algerians willingly fled the Casbah to avoid Europeans’ cultural intrusion. Such arguments, by both French administrators and historians, silence a history of violence visible within the colonial archives.

The rise of a new political regime in France tempered the initial destruction. In 1848, Louis-Napoleon came to power as President of the Second French Republic and then staged a coup, declaring himself Emperor Napoleon III and creating the Second Empire. While Algerian colonization had thus far proceeded haphazardly, Napoleon III espoused a vision of France as the leader of an “Arab

kingdom” and encouraged policies that offered some autonomy to local Algerians.<sup>19</sup> In this spirit, French authorities sought to chart a different path for Algiers. In a letter from 1865, the Prefect of Algiers argued that European settlement should stay in the “lower city”—the newly reconstructed Marine Quarter. He insisted that “the Casbah [*haute ville*] should stay as it is, considering that it is appropriate to the morals and habits of the *indigènes*.”<sup>20</sup> The same letter also argued that urban improvements in the Casbah, like widening streets, would be “onerous” to *indigènes* and that “the lower city [*ville basse*] it seems to His Majesty should be reserved for [Europeans] and it is in this part that we must do all the work of amelioration and beautification.”<sup>21</sup> This framing froze the Algerian section of the city in time, resigning it to an unchanging past in contrast to the “modern” European city.

With this letter, the French government established a policy prioritizing modern improvements for European sectors. Running water, sewers, streetlamps, even gardens and parks—all of these existed primarily in European Algiers. If many Algerians surely did want to keep the architectural specificity of their homes in the Casbah, the assumption that Algerians were ill-suited for “modern” life rested on racist stereotypes of North Africans as backwards, primitive, or uncivilized. In declaring that Algerians would not want to live in the European city, French administrators also set up a tacit rejection of Algerians in this space, albeit without a law that formalized this practice through public health initiatives or residency restrictions.

First military and then civil authorities in Algiers reshaped the city, razing, rezoning, or redesigning large sections of Algiers for military, and later, settler usage. In the archives documenting this destruction, the silence of Algerians is palpable. Stacks of reports note that “houses were evacuated” to facilitate the alignment of streets in Algiers.<sup>22</sup> The passive voice callously hides the human reality. Each home that “was evacuated” represented a family, a repository of memory, a form of generational wealth destroyed. The erasure of Algerians in the records of nineteenth-century urban planning attest to the fact that French authorities had come to conceive of Algiers as a European city. In naturalizing Algiers as a European space and setting up specific neighborhoods as “*indigène*,” colonial authorities reversed the history of the city, justifying segregation.

By the end of the nineteenth century, “the Casbah” had come into being. Once an Ottoman fortress, Algiers was now a colonial capital, rebuilt to look like any other French city. Within the new sprawl, the Casbah filled the hill above the port, a mass of white buildings rising upwards. The winding streets

descended towards the sea, before coming to an abrupt halt at a large Haussmann-style boulevard, Rue Randon. French observers described the Casbah as a mysterious, dangerous labyrinth where adventurous visitors could feel transported to the ancient past. The exoticization of the Casbah also marked it as a space apart, disconnected from modernity and held up for Orientalist voyeurism. This rewriting of Algiers, and of the Casbah, was an intentional process of dispossession, one that reified Algiers as a French colonial capital and silenced its prior history.

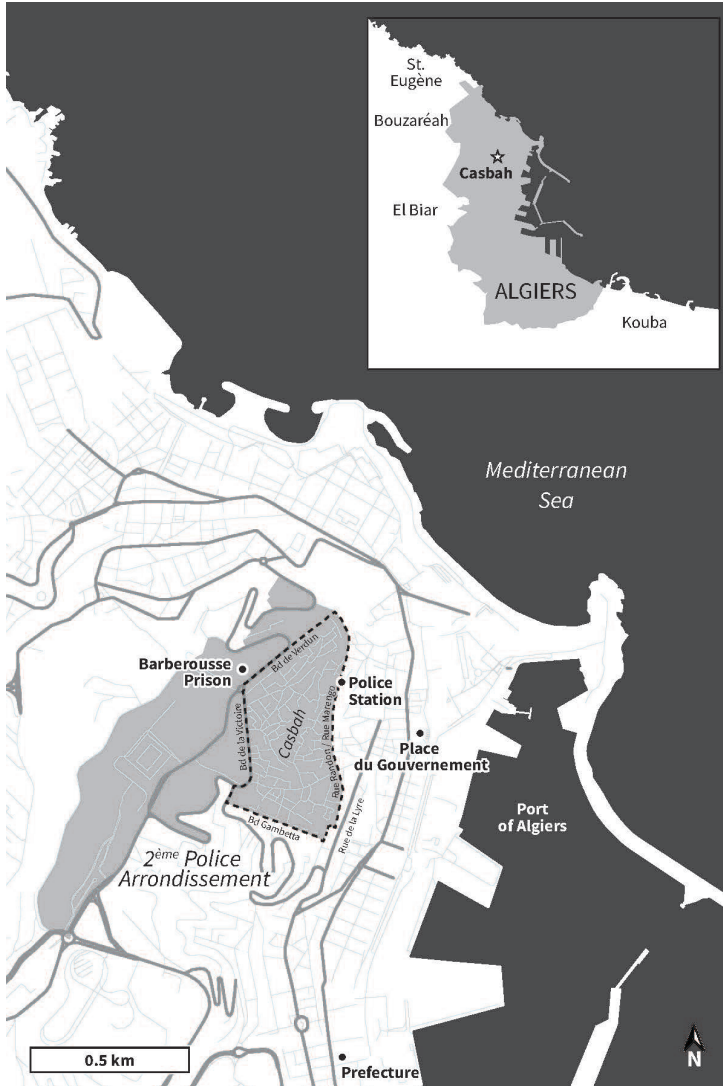


Figure 2. Map by Tim Stallman.

## PLANNING THE HOUSING CRISIS

The nineteenth century razing and rebuilding of Algiers resulted in a city that would have been unrecognizable to Algerians in 1830. Segregation had become the norm. Algerians made up only 25 percent of the total population of Algiers in 1911, but more than 75 percent of the second district of Algiers (2ème arrondissement), which included the Casbah.<sup>23</sup> By 1921, as much as 80 percent of Algerians in Algiers lived in the Casbah.<sup>24</sup> Another pocket of Algerian settlement clustered near the Muslim cemetery in the Hamma neighborhood, cordoned off from surrounding European populations in the “Little Casbah” (Desclotres 1961, 42). While the flight of wealthy Algerian families continued, rural Algerian migrants began arriving in Algiers, particularly from the mountainous Kabylia region. By 1936, a third of the Algerian population of Algiers was Kabyle. These newcomers reconfigured Algiers’ connection to the countryside and introduced a new language, as most Kabyle migrants spoke Amazigh rather than Arabic (Kaddache n.d., 16). As the population of the Casbah grew, the constraints of the former walls, surrounding European developments, and the natural verticality of the city kept the neighborhood from expanding. Instead, population density rapidly increased and disadvantaged Algerian families piled into rooms in what were once single-family homes (Kaddache n.d., 38).

The continuing growth of Algiers in the early twentieth century created what local officials called a “crisis” of housing. In the decades-long attempts to address this problem, initiatives focused on a vision of urban life that took racial segregation as an accepted starting point and consistently prioritized access to housing for Europeans. Throughout the early twentieth century, municipal council debates reveal concern over the cost of living and available housing in Algiers. City officials spent hours in municipal council meetings debating how to lower the price of food and other necessities and urged city-wide planning measures to create affordable housing.<sup>25</sup> To address the crisis, the government created a local office of *Habitation à Bon Marché* (HBM) in Algiers in 1922, to finance and build subsidized housing.

The racial segregation already present in the city, however, was fundamental to these new social housing projects.<sup>26</sup> In the 1930s, for example, the city signed off on creating several *cités indigènes*: complexes specifically intended to house Algerian families. In 1931, after years of discussion, officials launched the first 62-unit building on Boulevard de Verdun, at the top edge of the Casbah.<sup>27</sup> The architects and city planners considered this and subsequent projects culturally respectful to the needs of Algerian families. They built white-washed buildings with interior courtyards that mimicked the Casbah or low-lying complexes

with “Arabesque” architectural designs. If the buildings reflected Algerian architecture, however, they also lacked conveniences like an indoor toilet or separate kitchen.<sup>28</sup> French architects justified their plans by citing the “traditional” needs of Algerians, but they designed the units without input from Algerian stakeholders.

The racial segregation in public housing routinely prioritized the needs of European families over Algerians. In 1930, Algerian municipal counselor, Abdenour Tamzali, declared that the government had created more than 15,000 units of affordable housing in Algiers in celebration of the centennial of French rule. Only sixty-four had gone to Algerians (Aïche 2014, 98). By 1940, correspondence from the HBM bureau cited only two hundred units allocated to Algerians.<sup>29</sup> Algiers remained a majority European city in this period but the housing crisis disproportionately impacted Algerians, who were more likely to arrive in Algiers as rural migrants with few resources. Municipal council records, for example, evidence repeated pleas from Algerian representatives for more credits to be allocated for housing initiatives for Algerians and their critiques of policies that continued to prioritize “European” housing.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the real needs of the Algerian population, officials used the “crisis” to justify building more housing for Europeans and reinforcing the racial segregation that already marked Algiers. Politicians, planners, and architects imagined segregated solutions, labeling complexes explicitly as “European” or “*indigène*.” Indeed, historian Thierry Guillopé has argued that social housing in Algeria was an intentional project of the French colonial state to encourage colonization by making Algeria more habitable for settlers (Guillopé 2023, 100). The prioritization of Europeans in social housing efforts was a tool of empire, not an accident. This binary division between European and “*indigène*” reflected colonial social divisions and also racist beliefs that Algerians “wanted” less and would be uncomfortable in units designed to meet Europeans’ more “modern” needs.

The decades-old concerns over housing would only increase as Algiers survived the chaos of World War II. The city grew exponentially during the early twentieth century, particularly during the war, leaping from 266,268 residents in 1926 to 473,261 by 1948 (Descloitres 1961, 79). Multiple factors drove this rapid population growth. The war brought refugees from mainland Europe and thousands of soldiers—Allied, French, and colonial—to the city. Algerians from the countryside also flooded into Algiers during the war, driven by a series of rural famines and the abject poverty caused by the disruption of trade and production (Descloitres 1961, 93–4). The population of the Casbah grew by nearly

50 percent between 1936 and 1946, reaching a staggering population density of 3,800 inhabitants per hectare in some areas (Guillopé 2023, 441). Facing entrenched racial segregation and unable to find affordable housing, many Algerian migrants also moved into makeshift shantytowns, or *bidonvilles*, that began to spring up in vacant lots around the city.<sup>31</sup>

After the war, France started to rebuild its political structures, casting aside the acrid memories of Vichy collaboration with Nazi Germany. In a direct rebuke of Vichy anti-Semitism, French legislators designed the new constitution to eschew any language of race. Instead, they emphasized the equality of all French citizens before the law. The Fourth Republic also granted Algerian men citizenship and officially ended the much-hated *indigénat* legal code that governed colonial subjects. Algerian women, however, could not vote and a two-tiered voting system effectively nullified the voting power of Algerian men. Still, in at least name, France had promised to provide equal rights to Algerians, now Frenchmen like any other.

If the legal category of “*indigène*” ceased to exist in the post-war, urban planners in Algiers continued to approach housing with a rigid idea of racial difference. The rural Algerians arriving in Algiers during the war filled the Casbah to capacity and increased the geographic spread and density of the *bidonvilles*. After the war, the Governor General of Algeria wrote to the Mayor of Algiers to convey the absolute urgency of creating *cités musulmanes* to house Algerians. Because of budget constraints during the war and disputes over who would foot the bill, all plans to build public housing for “Muslims” had been on hold since 1937.<sup>32</sup> By 1948, the Muslim Association for the Homeless was still bringing up concerns to the Mayor of Algiers, pointing out that public housing projects for Algerians remained stalled.<sup>33</sup> Seemingly untouched by these budget constraints, European housing projects had continued apace in the years leading up to the war and major construction began again almost immediately after.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the changing language of citizenship and reform, racial segregation remained a stubborn feature of public housing policy in Algiers. In 1952, for example, urban planners envisioned a series of public housing units in the Marine Quarter. The proposal explicitly referred to the units as “European housing.” Planners were aware of the proximity of these new apartments to the Casbah. “The Marine Quarter is a zone of direct influence on the Casbah. It is, it seems, inopportune to design ‘European luxury buildings’ here.”<sup>35</sup> The report worried about the optics of having new, “luxury” housing for Europeans built adjacent to the crumbling infrastructure of the Casbah. Administrators in Algiers all seemed to agree that the rapid influx of Algerians into the city and the growing *bidonvilles*

posed the greatest concern. Despite this, policy around public housing reliably created opportunities for Europeans while failing to address the *bidonvilles*, prioritizing access to resources along racial lines even as ideas of race were officially rejected in “colorblind” political discourse.<sup>36</sup> Architects and city planners imagining solutions continued to assume that Europeans and Algerians could never occupy the same building, an assumption that betrayed the continuing racial divisions of colonial society despite the post-war declarations of equality.

### EVERYDAY DISCRIMINATION

In addition to policy, everyday racism also determined housing possibilities for Algerians. Records of overt discrimination prove elusive in French records, a silence that becomes visible only in discussions of laws that eventually dismantled some forms of discrimination. For example, when the collaborationist Vichy regime controlled Algiers in 1941, officials implemented laws that prevented landlords from discriminating against large families. The Vichy regime, like its Nazi allies, pursued brutal policies of anti-Semitism, openly embraced racial hierarchies, and sought to promote conservative family structures, including dependent wives and large families (see [Cantier and Jennings 2004](#)). In a note, French intelligence services stated that Algerian families generally approved of the new law but “do not dare hope, however, that one considers this law as being applicable to them, so much are they accustomed to seeing themselves refused rental housing because they are *indigènes*.”<sup>37</sup> The bureaucrat writing the letter quickly excused the European landlords, saying even “evolved” (*évolués*) Algerians made poor tenants since they did not take care of their homes.<sup>38</sup> The solution the note proposed was two-fold. The prefecture needed to ensure that the protection of large families *did* apply to Algerians. However, they should also facilitate the eviction of tenants who “do not take care of the locale enough.”<sup>39</sup> If this language seemed to be race-neutral, the description of Algerians as dirty, uncivilized tenants was seeped in colonial racism. Moreover, by enabling evictions, the proposed solution reinforced the power of landlords to eject Algerian tenants over the slightest perceived misstep, creating a precarity that destabilized Algerians’ access to housing in desirable neighborhoods.<sup>40</sup>

This passing statement in an internal note is one of the few archival references I found of the profound impacts of racial discrimination on access to housing. Algerians knew that this new Vichy law, though in theory for all large families, would not apply to them and did not protect them from the racial discrimination of landlords. Though the government of Algiers did not create laws that restricted Algerians to specific neighborhoods, the lack of laws *protecting*

Algerians from discrimination also meant that overt racism was a ubiquitous part of Algerians' search for housing in a city plagued by shortages. Algerians' concentration in the Casbah or in the growing *bidonvilles* happened because landlords could, and did, refuse to rent to them in other areas, evoking excuses about large families or baldly stating they did not rent to "*indigènes*."

There is also archival evidence of European settlers' deep desire to avoid sharing space with Algerians, a hatred backed by Europeans' ability to mobilize local government. In 1946, for example, the government requisitioned a house in the suburb of Kouba owned by M. Bel Bahar for a European woman.<sup>41</sup> Bel Bahar wrote to the Prefect in the following weeks asking for permission to put his homeless, widowed sister and her eight children in part of the house. The European occupant, however, refused, saying she "does not want to cohabitate with Arabs."<sup>42</sup> She lobbied the Mayor of Kouba to requisition the unoccupied rooms for a European teacher instead, thereby preventing Bel Bahar's sister from moving in. A note responding to the case insisted that this sort of civil requisition was "forbidden" and emphasized that "M. Belbahar, his sister and her children. . . who live in a slum in the Casbah, merit for their case to be taken into consideration."<sup>43</sup> Despite this sympathetic response, the case remained unresolved in October 1947, when it is last mentioned in the archive.

This example demonstrates how racial discrimination operated in Algiers. European residents refused to live with Algerians and mobilized their cultural capital to find (illegal) loopholes that backed their view. In this case, Bel Bahar owned the home in question but was nonetheless prevented from housing his own family because of the racial prejudice of the European tenant. Bel Bahar and his relatives, unable to inhabit the more desirable Kouba residence, seem to have had no choice but to live in a "slum" in the Casbah. This case was exceptional but likely reflective of broader trends. Landlords, perhaps at the behest of European tenants, regularly refused to rent to Algerians, preserving segregation so Europeans did not have to "cohabitate with Arabs."

Although citizenship reforms after WWII eliminated racial distinction in French law, discrimination continued to permeate Algerian society. A particularly egregious scandal erupted in July 1955. Algerian Municipal Counselor Abdelhamid took the floor to denounce an incident in which three young Algerian men had been refused service at a local pool "because they were Arab."<sup>44</sup> Abdelhamid insisted that the refusal to let the young men swim was not an anomaly. "I noticed the same attitude towards myself on a nearby beach. I went alone, they took me to be a European and no one ever said anything to me, but when I brought with me someone with brown skin and they knew that I was an Arab,

they refused to let me in. These things happen all the time.”<sup>45</sup> Abdelhamid’s story indicates that a type of “passing” was possible for Algerians who spoke French and wore European clothing styles, but once “outed” as Algerian, businesses refused them service.

Visual categories of race in Algeria were notoriously hard to pin down, in part due to the Mediterranean exchange of populations that had defined Algiers for centuries. The “*indigènes*” of Algeria could not be neatly labeled by physical appearance. Indigenous Kabyle populations, for example, could famously include individuals with blond hair, blue eyes, and pale skin, a fact often remarked upon in French Orientalist texts that praised Kabyles over Arab Algerians.<sup>46</sup> Ideas of race in colonial Algeria, therefore, were defined through skin color, but also language, education, citizenship status, religious practice, and clothing. This meant that, at times, a form of “passing” could occur for elite, light-skinned Algerians like Abdelhamid. If revealed to be Algerian by association with darker-skinned compatriots or a companion dressed in traditional clothing, however, this momentary assimilation disappeared. In his story, Abdelhamid alleged that when perceived as European, he had full access to the beaches. When perceived as Algerian, these same services were denied. The only explanation, he contended, was the racist attitudes of the hotel staff, a stance in direct contradiction of French postwar “colorblindness.”

In the subsequent letters, reports, and articles about this issue, a pattern of racist refusal of service becomes clear. Hairdressers, hotels, beaches, gyms—all were accused of discrimination against Algerians. The police investigation into these accusations did not deny discrimination. Instead, Commissioner Costes of the Algiers police justified it by saying that businesses refused Algerians service not because of racial discrimination but because the high standards of the establishments made them understandably picky about the dress and cleanliness of their patrons.<sup>47</sup> This interpretation once again implicitly rendered Algerians as dirty or undesirable. Although these complaints were about stores, discrimination surely permeated housing markets too. This everyday racism, though opaque in official records, played an essential role in urban segregation. It was also a quotidian discrimination that could have physical, fatal consequences in the violence enacted by French colonial police officers, whose patrols reinforced the spatial boundaries of the city.<sup>48</sup>

After World War II, French laws denounced eugenicist ideas of race. Yet in acknowledging race as a social construct, French laws failed to also acknowledge the violent, visceral reality of racism. French anti-racism laws, only established in the 1970s, so narrowly defined hate-crimes, for example, that victims had to meet nearly insurmountable barriers to launch a viable legal case (see [Brahim](#)

2021). In the colonial period, Algerians who experienced discrimination in the housing market, or in other areas of their life, had little legal recourse. Race operated in opacity, operationalized to maintain social hierarchies but rarely openly named by French actors. Unable to sue, Algerians instead opted for public shaming, showcasing examples of racism in public debates and newspaper campaigns.

### HOUSING AND THE PRAXIS OF RESISTANCE

It would be too shallow, however, to assign all agency to French government programs, local racism, or colonial poverty.<sup>49</sup> There were also real advantages and communal benefits to living in an “Algerian” space in a colonial context that criminalized the very fact of being born Algerian. Police sources constantly complained about their inability to “access” the Casbah because residents banded together to avoid police surveillance, refusing to provide testimony or literally forming crowds that forced the police to retreat. Living in the Casbah offered access to a network of relationships that, at times, shielded Algerians from the omnipresent surveillance of the French state.

One can see community building in action in the advocacy of the Committee for the Defense of the Haute Ville-Casbah Neighborhood (CDQC). This civic organization was one of many similar committees throughout Algiers that represented the interests of their neighborhood through correspondence with local officials and grassroots fundraising efforts. The CDQC mobilized to push back against negative stereotypes of the Casbah, reclaiming the space as their own. In 1949, the president wrote a scathing note to the Prefect protesting a planned screening of the film *Pépé le Moko*. The movie, set in the Casbah, portrayed the neighborhood as the playground of gangsters and promoted racist stereotypes of local Algerians. The president demanded that the screening be cancelled, calling it disrespectful to the “in great majority hard-working and honest population” of the Casbah.<sup>50</sup>

Beyond ideological advocacy, the committee also worked to deliver material support to the residents of the Casbah. The police folder on the CDQC documents charity events, fundraisers, and clothing drives, all organized to benefit the poorest residents of the Casbah. In a series of revendications published in the leftist newspaper *Alger Républicain*, the committee made demands on the colonial state for public baths, soup kitchens, and improved infrastructure.<sup>51</sup> They advocated, too, for the creation of a medical center in the Casbah.<sup>52</sup> Again and again, the committee also pushed for more housing in the Casbah. French observers, however, tended to focus on solutions proposed by French architects and urban

planners, when they paid attention to the Casbah at all.<sup>53</sup> Although not always materially successful, the public campaigns of the CDQC provide a powerful example of the possibility for solidarity within the segregated enclave.

There is also evidence in the records of this committee of how political resistance could develop within a marginalized space. In 1948, police sources fretted that many members of the CDQC supported the MTLD, an Algerian nationalist party gaining strength in the post-war period. Internal government sources raised the possibility that the committee's charitable events could turn into "political spectacles."<sup>54</sup> Another note reported that the committee had decided not to ask the municipality for a 500,000-franc subvention because politically active members of the board did not want the city council to use this funding as an excuse to "claim to execute any control whatsoever."<sup>55</sup> The CDQC mixed social uplift with political organizing, asserting their own agenda. These collective actions were at least partially based on the geographic solidarities of shared space in the Casbah.

Expropriation, racism, and unequal urban planning all shaped segregation in Algiers. But there were many reasons why Algerians might have *chosen* to live in the segregated spaces of Algiers labeled as theirs. Living with other Algerians created a collective power that could more effectively voice demands to the French state, as with the CDQC. Choosing to settle in the Casbah also meant gaining access to networks of Muslim religious life or political advocacy that could not operate openly elsewhere in Algiers. The very urban geography of the Casbah lent itself to the subversion of the colonial panopticon. The buildings of the Casbah were internally directed, with few windows facing out to the streets. These interior spaces were inaccessible to the French police. The population density and residential pattern of the Casbah, with multiple families crammed into too small buildings and shared courtyards and balconies the only space of leisure, fostered forms of kinship that crossed households. Algerians constantly faced the everyday racism of settlers, forbidden access to chic areas of Algiers because of their clothing or the color of their skin. But in the Casbah, Algerians were the majority. This was their city, as it always had been. For at least some Algerians, the choice to live in the Casbah was just that—a choice.

Novels, memoirs, and popular portrayals of life in Algiers after World War II often evoke, with a twinge of nostalgia, the social cohesion of the Casbah. These networks became imperative to the operational success of nationalist resistance during the Algerian War of Independence from 1954 to 1962. When the French army encircled the Casbah in barbed wire during the famed "Battle of Algiers," residents banded together to support nationalist militants, smuggle goods and weapons, and plan skirmishes (Benatia 1978; Carlier 1995; Crane

2017; Icheboudene 1997).<sup>56</sup> The resilience of residents of the Casbah became an international symbol of anti-colonial activism, a model that revolutionary groups around the world would emulate. French efforts to cordon off Algerians from the larger city played into their military strategy of containing nationalism, but on a symbolic level, it backfired. Algerians' unity in the Casbah defied the odds and inspired others to join the nationalist cause. The history of segregation in this city and this neighborhood helped shape resistance to colonial inequality, even as discrimination helped to create the space. The opacity of the Casbah became a resource, fostering a zone of fugitivity where rebellion flourished.<sup>57</sup>

## CONCLUSION

After independence, the city of Algiers charted a new path. The bloodshed and bitterness of the decolonial struggle meant that nearly all of Algeria's European population left, most of them heading to France. Algerians reclaimed their "right to the city," moving into buildings once owned by European *colons*. The segregated city became again a thoroughly Algerian space. And yet, housing shortages continued to plague Algiers, a pattern that Algerian historians have argued is rooted in legacies of colonial urban development (Benatia 1978). In the immediate post-independence period, the Algerian government hastily built suburban housing complexes to shelter families from the Casbah, whose homes threatened to collapse on their heads after decades of disinvestment (see Martinez 2000 and Vergès 1994). Today, the Casbah is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Despite this status, visitors to the Casbah encounter crumbling homes, poor infrastructure, and evidence of neglect. The Casbah, Algiers' treasure and blight, remains a space apart in the reinvented post-colonial city.

The same spatial practices of control visible in the history and practice of segregation in Algiers would make their way to the metropole, too.<sup>58</sup> In twentieth-century Paris and Marseille, police officers and specialized surveillance services tracked Algerians by targeting the neighborhoods where they lived.<sup>59</sup> In these cities, segregation existed because of the same intertwined processes of urban planning, everyday discrimination, and the choices of Algerian families. The official invisibility of the drivers of segregation, both in Algiers and in France, also made it harder to fight with judicial strategies (Brahim 2021). Today, legacies of these logics of race and space color the French state's relationship to the *banlieues*, where many Algerian immigrants and their descendants live. Racism still impacts residents of the *banlieues*, although discrimination remains opaque in government sources, in part due to the official refusal to study questions of race in France.<sup>60</sup>

The Casbah emerged from a long, intentional history of segregation and racial control in Algiers. The French military appropriated land for Europeans in the nineteenth century, making longstanding Algerian settlement on the land opaque and naturalizing their own presence. In subsequent decades, the colonial government prioritized Europeans' right to the city through public housing initiatives based on race. Although framing colonial rule as "civilizing," French officials prevented Algerians from accessing the very signs of modernity they purported to bring—denying segregated Algerian neighborhoods access to electricity, plumbing, public transportation, and public health infrastructure (Descloitres 1961, 60). Everyday racism blocked Algerians from expanding beyond the confines of *bidonvilles* and the Casbah, a racism supported by complicit elected officials who refused to censure discrimination. But to view segregation as resulting solely from French action would also miss the intentional strategies of Algerian families, who sought out spaces like the Casbah to shelter from colonial oversight, organize resistance to French rule, and create alternative forms of solidarity. Marginalized by the French, Algerians used their illegibility to develop social networks that would be fundamental to the overthrow of colonial rule. In playing with opacity, Algerian anti-colonial actors weaponized the tools of the state, a strategy with continuing resonance.

### ABSTRACT

*Under French colonial rule, the city of Algiers was visibly divided by racial segregation. European settlements sprawled out from the port, while a large percentage of the native Algerian population lived crammed into the Casbah, the ancient center of the city. Yet no formal legal structures, like public health codes, pass systems, or racial covenants, set up these divisions. In this essay, I explore the history of segregation in Algiers, arguing that segregation emerged not from a single code or policy but rather from a slow, constant project of erasure, racial violence, and expropriation that limited the urban possibilities for Algerians. But these same segregated spaces, like the Casbah, could also become chosen homes and zones of solidarity for Algerians living in a colonial city built to reproduce violence. The very opacity that made Algerian spaces invisible in formal governance also made them a meaningful resource for movements of resistance. [segregation; racial discrimination; Algiers; colonial policy; urbanism; anti-colonial resistance; twentieth century]*

### NOTES

1. I use "Algerian" to describe the Indigenous populations of Algeria, both Amazigh and Arab. Although this term flattens ethnic, class, and linguistic differences, I use it to avoid borrowing racist colonial language and to establish this group in opposition to the multi-national settler population, whom I call "European."

2. I intentionally leave the word *indigène* untranslated because this term, both a legal category and a racial slur, has no obvious English translation. It was used by colonial actors to describe the population I call “Algerian.”
3. The Arabic word *casbah* (قَصْبَة) can be translated as fort, citadel, or watchtower. In Algiers, *casbah* means the old town, the equivalent of a *medina* (مدينة) in Morocco.
4. In the nineteenth century, residents of Algiers identified more with their family, tribe, or social status than with an abstract construct of “Algerian,” which did not exist as such in the Ottoman period. In creating a binary in the colonial period, the French also inadvertently helped invent an idea of the Algerian nation. Kaddache asserts that there were about 400 “*nègres*” in Algiers in 1855, an offensive term that I translate here as Black. He says the Black Africans in Algiers were the descendants of Ottoman servants or enslaved domestic workers (Kaddache n.d., 20).
5. This simplified binary, for example, rendered the small population of Black Africans who lived in the Casbah largely invisible in French imaginaries. French Orientalist observers broadly categorized them as working for the road service, as masseurs, or (secretly) as practitioners of witchcraft (see Favre 1949). The Black population of Algiers, however, is not mentioned in government discussions of housing policy or urban renewal.
6. The *indigénat* code in Algeria established distinct legal codes for French citizens and “*indigènes*.” Although supposedly in deference to “traditional” Islamic law, the code also criminalized resistance to French authority and created a legal category that distinguished between European settlers and native Algerians. On the *indigénat* in Algeria, see Le Cour Grandmaison 2010.
7. On the symbolic value of renaming streets, see Grangaud 2009, 190.
8. Zeynep Çelik (2009) has argued that usurping urban space was carried out in the name of imposing “modernity” and “rationality” on Algiers.
9. Directeur des finances à M. le Ministre de la Guerre, « Vente des terrains, » 15 July 1836, GGA 1N 3, Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer (ANOM).
10. This narrative is evident in the histories of Algiers, see Benatia 1980; Çelik 1997; Icheboudene 1997; Kaddache n.d., 1951, 1970; and Lespès 1930.
11. Directeur de l’Intérieur à M. Le Ministre de la Guerre, « Au sujet du glacis projeté en devant de la Casbah, » 6 January 1840, GGA 1N 3, ANOM.
12. For example, both Kaddache (n.d., 1951, 1970) and Icheboudene (1997) assert this rationale.
13. Directeur de l’Intérieur à M. Le Ministre de la Guerre, « Au sujet du glacis projeté en devant de la Casbah, » 6 January 1840, GGA 1N 3, ANOM.
14. Directeur de l’Intérieur à M. Le Ministre de la Guerre, « Au sujet du glacis projeté en devant de la Casbah, » 6 January 1840, GGA 1N 3, ANOM.
15. Directeur de l’Intérieur à M. Le Ministre de la Guerre, « Au sujet du glacis projeté en devant de la Casbah, » 6 January 1840, GGA 1N 3, ANOM.
16. « Observations des parties intéressées au sujet du plan de la ville d’Alger, » August 1844, GGA 1N 3, ANOM.
17. Zermaly signed in Arabic, although the statement is in French, indicating that there was likely a translator acting as go-between. Préfecture d’Alger, « On demande l’expropriation de divers immeubles... » 23 August 1861, GGA 1N 4, ANOM.
18. Etat Supplémentaire des Maisons à Exproprier, GGA 1N 4, ANOM.
19. On the political history of Algeria, see Stora 2004.
20. « Rapport du Maire sur la création d’un square à Bab-el-Oued », 15 May 1865. Lespès cites this quote as an example of why construction in Algiers slowed during this period (1930, 305).
21. « Rapport du Maire sur la création d’un square à Bab-el-Oued », 15 May 1865.
22. For example, see Colonel Charon, Directeur des fortifications à M. le Gouverneur Générale de l’Algérie, 30 September, 1849, GGA 1N 3 ANOM.
23. The traditional Jewish Quarter of Algiers clustered around the synagogue at Place Rabbïn Bloch, adjacent to the Casbah. This likely accounts for some of the 25 percent

- of non-Algerian residents in the second district (2ème arrondissement), as Jews in Algeria had gained French citizenship and were considered European in state record-keeping (Kaddache 1970, 32).
24. Though Kaddache labels this as the Algerian population of the Casbah, he seems to include the Marine Quarter and the Casbah in the calculation. He notes that 60 percent of Algerians lived specifically in the 2ème arrondissement, or the “haute ville” Casbah (1970, 13).
  25. *Bulletin municipal officiel de la ville d’Alger*, various dates. Archived and accessible at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb32731184v/date>
  26. On social housing in Algeria and its racial, colonial goals, see Guillopé 2023.
  27. “Indigène” housing units were also built in Clos Salembier and Maison-Carrée. See Çelik 1997, 131; Guillopé 2023, 136–39.
  28. Çelik details the design of several “indigène” housing units in the 1930s (1997, 131–143).
  29. Office Public d’Habitations à Bon Marché, 12 December 1940, 91 101 9, ANOM. In part, this disparity in access existed because obtaining social housing required a stable job contract and a minimum salary that was out of reach for most Algerians. See Guillopé 2023.
  30. Délégation Financières, Session of November 1936, GGA 3CAB 25, ANOM. See also Guillopé 2023, 137–38.
  31. On the *bidonvilles*, see Çelik 1997; Crane 2017; Descloitres 1961; House 2018, 2019.
  32. Gouverneur Général de l’Algérie à M. le Maire d’Alger, « Object: Construction des cités musulmanes, » 19 April 1946, 91 101 9, ANOM.
  33. Capitaine Missoum à M. Le Maire d’Alger, 29 November 1948, GGA 9CAB 140, ANOM.
  34. For one such project, see « Inauguration de la première tranche de maisonnettes au Clos-Salembier, » Undated, 91 101 9, ANOM. For graphs of these trends, see Guillopé 2023, 439.
  35. Préfet d’Alger, André Trémeaud à M. Claudius-Petit, Ministre de la Reconstruction, 17 May 1952, 91 1K 593, ANOM.
  36. Though some post-war, HBM projects valorized mixing Algerian and settler populations, the logics of segregation largely continued. In the 1950s, there were renewed efforts to create specifically “Muslim” housing, often located far from the city center. See Guillopé 2023, chs. 7–9.
  37. CIE d’Alger, « Renseignement: Location de logements aux indigènes, » 25 February 1941, 91 4I 31, ANOM.
  38. CIE d’Alger, « Renseignement: Location de logements aux indigènes, » 25 February 1941, 91 4I 31, ANOM.
  39. CIE d’Alger, « Renseignement: Location de logements aux indigènes, » 25 February 1941, 91 4I 31, ANOM.
  40. In the postwar, leftist newspaper *Alger Républicain* indeed highlighted a rash of “unjust” evictions, although the articles did not give evidence of racial bias. The prefecture, however, denied the accusations, saying all evictions had just cause. « Note sur l’activité de la Fédération Algériens des Locataires et du Journal Alger-Républicain, » 1948, 91 2I 34, ANOM.
  41. It is unclear why this particular woman had the right to a requisitioned home, but it was relatively common during WWII for the local government or military to requisition “unused” homes.
  42. « Expulsions de locataires (1946-1949), » Undated, 91 1K 201, ANOM.
  43. « Expulsions de locataires (1946-1949), » Undated, 91 1K 201, ANOM.
  44. Extrait des Délibérations du Conseil Municipal, 22 July 1955, 91 4I 32, ANOM.
  45. Extrait des Délibérations du Conseil Municipal, 22 July 1955, 91 4I 32, ANOM.
  46. On the “Kabyle myth,” see Lorcin 1999.
  47. Commissaire Divisionnaire Costes à M. Le Préfet, « Object: Refus de services, » 12 June 1954, 91 4I 32, ANOM.
  48. On policing and racial violence in Algeria, see Beaujon 2025 and Kalman 2024.

49. Similar dynamics existed in segregated cities in the United States. For example, see [Drake and Cayton 1945](#).
50. Lettre du Président du Comité. 7 May 19-9 (likely 1949), 91 4I 184, ANOM.
51. « Le comité de quartier de la Casbah présent à M. Naegelen, au préfet et au Maire d'Alger un cahier de revendications, » Alger Républicain, 31 July 1948, 91 4I 184, ANOM.
52. « Le comité de la Casbah a tenu son assemblée générale annuelle. » Alger Républicain, 12 September 1947, 91 4I 184, ANOM.
53. « Faut-il moderniser la Casbah ? » Echo d'Alger, 11 December 1949, 91 4I 184, ANOM.
54. SLNA, « Objet: A/s du comité du Défense des Intérêts des Quartiers de la Haute Ville-Casbah, » 8 January 1948, 91 4I 184, ANOM.
55. SLNA, « A/s du comité du Défense des Intérêts des Quartiers de la Haute Ville-Casbah, » 17 January 1948, 91 4I 184, ANOM.
56. This is not to say, however, that the Casbah was a politically homogenous neighborhood and there is also a record of (often violent) conflicts between different political parties operating in the Casbah.
57. On fugitivity, see [Campt 2017](#).
58. On the “boomerang” of colonial technologies, see [Go 2024](#).
59. On this policing, see [Beaujon 2025](#), [Blanchard 2011](#), [Prakash 2022](#), and [Rosenberg 2006](#).
60. Important recent work has pushed against this tendency to ignore race in sociological studies of France. See for example [Fassin 2011](#); [Jobard 2002](#); [Jobard, Lamberth, and Névanen 2012](#); and, most notably, [Slaouti and Le Cour Grandmaison 2020](#).

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