Excavating Revolution:

Stories of Memory and Material Culture

Tricia Woodcome

New York University, Global Liberal Studies
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Preface

The motivation behind the following essays began with a simple question: How can objects of memory reconcile the legacy of three unique yet related revolutionary movements with our present-day’s sociopolitical reality? The revolutionary movements in question are the Weather Underground Organization (1969-1977), the events of May 1968 in Paris, and the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962). Inspired by objects of memory chosen by either myself or my interview subjects, the essays intentionally vary in form, style, and tone to reflect the nature of each movement, as indicated by their respective titles. An accompanying process document details my theoretical, methodological, and reflective approach to writing this collection.

Acknowledgements:

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I. Doors of the Underground

“There are things known and there are things unknown, and in between are the doors of perception.”
--Aldous Huxley

“Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.”
--John F. Kennedy, Remarks on the first anniversary of the Alliance for Progress, 1962

“The first lesson a revolutionary must learn is that he is a doomed man.”
--Huey P. Newton

For Assata Shakur

Underground is not the right word
it makes it seem too simple,
As if there is an easy way to disappear
A place to go.
--Anonymous Weatherman, June 1973

I.

This is a story about doors, those that give us the illusion of being separate, hidden, or invincible, and what happens with those real or imagined barriers shatter. It takes place on a quiet block in Greenwich Village, just north of Washington Square. The hectic pace of lower Manhattan slows to a near halt as I turn onto West Eleventh Street, the noise of Fifth Avenue fading with every step inwards. The tree-lined block is insulated by two rows of identically brick-faced townhouses, each with its own eight-step stoop leading up to a white-trimmed door. Windowsill planters still host a sprinkling of red and yellow flowers granted longer lives by this unusually mild November. I peek into one of the home’s large front windows, unsurprised to find it filled with elements typical to homes of New York’s elite: a grand mahogany dining table topped with a bouquet of white orchids, surrounded by plush crushed-velvet chairs. Retreating back to the sidewalk, my gaze settles on three forgotten, rotting pumpkins with melting grins lining the steps of one very peculiar townhouse.

1 Dohrn, Ayers, and Jones, Sing a Battle Song, 81.
18 West Eleventh Street, NYC

18 West Eleventh Street shares many features with its neighbors: a heavy redbrick façade with vast windows, a wide staircase leading up to a white doorframe. Unlike its neighbors, though, the front door of this townhouse is partly obscured by a thick splinter of brick jutting out towards the street. While the neighboring homes are restrained into a smooth line, the first two floors of this building burst forward. On the almost violent, angular protrusion of the building are three tall windows. Home today to a young financier and worth nearly $10 million, the townhouse carries the weight of a much less glamorous history. If you had passed by the address several years ago, and if your eyes were drawn upwards to its protruding first floor windows, you may have noticed a teddy bear waving back at you. In an even earlier incarnation, the townhouse was indistinguishable from its neighbors. Their façades shared the same plane, windows and doors aligned in perfect parallel rows. Back then, it was owned by James Platt Wilkerson, an advertising executive, radio station owner. His daughter, Cathy Wilkerson, a Swarthmore College graduate and political revolutionary was partly responsible for an accidental bomb detonation that left a gaping hole in the place of this enigmatic townhouse. Before she tells her story, though, there are a few things you should know.

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II.

The year was 1970. Richard Nixon had just entered his second year as President of the United States. Nearly fifty-five thousand American soldiers had been killed in Vietnam. Fathers, brothers, sons, and friends had been drafted, plucked from their homes to fight an endless war in dangerous, foreign jungles. Idealist, leftist youths had come down from the high of Woodstock and entered a more harsh political reality, a reality that had no road map and no visible conclusion. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., the Civil Right Movement’s most important beacons of progress, had been assassinated. A new generation of black leadership emerged with the 1966 formation of the Black Panther Party (BPP), a revolutionary black nationalist and socialist organization whose core practices included, but were by no means limited to, armed self-defense, community health clinics, and the Free Breakfast for Children Programs. Founded by the visionary Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, the BPP outlined its demands in a Ten-Point program, listing freedom, full employment, decent housing, proper education, and an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people. To the interminable F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover, the Panthers were considered “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country.”

To many, this came as no surprise, considering Hoover had earlier deemed Martin Luther King Jr. “the most dangerous Negro of the future in this nation.” The Panthers, however, were not the only revolutionaries preparing for battle.

Outrage across college campuses sparked a tidal wave of sit-ins and protests (some of which turned violent), led primarily by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a nationwide coalition of progressive student activists rallying around the antiwar and black liberation movements in varying degrees of radicalism. With every year the war continued to rage in Vietnam, SDS grew more and more militant in its beliefs, and its raucous conventions more contentious. Both the Panthers and SDS frightened Hoover, not just by their political convictions, but also by their charisma, attitude, and power of attraction. Dressed in slick leather jackets, and with tilted black berets sitting atop their Afros, the Panthers’ image attracted black and white youths alike. SDS’s nationwide reach across campuses could lead to more demonstrations and unending dissent amongst America’s youth. Rather than listen to these groups, Hoover initiated an extensive program of surveillance, infiltration, perjury, and police harassment known as COINTELPRO. The “war on drugs,” officially announced in 1971 by President Nixon, functioned as a façade for heightened racial discrimination and as a ploy to silence the antiwar left.

Nixon’s chief domestic advisor, John Ehrlichman, later revealed that, “We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or blacks, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with

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marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news.” With every door that authorities tried to shut on antiwar protesters and disenfranchised black populations, new doors to liberation and equality were forced back open, each time more passionately than the last. Not all would escape unharmed.

III.

On the evening of December 2, 1969, 21 year-old Fred Hampton returned to his Chicago apartment after teaching a political education class at a local church. He and several other Panthers intended to spend the night at the apartment. When they shut the door behind them that night, no passersby strolled the sidewalks outside. The Panthers had no idea that in their midst was FBI informant named William O’Neal, who slipped a powerful sleep aid in Hampton’s drink that evening. At 1:30 A.M., Hampton fell into a deep sleep while talking to his mother on the phone. Hampton slept particularly deeply that night, and would never step out of his front door again.

Head of the BPP’s Chicago branch, Hampton was in the midst of preparing for an upcoming merger between the Panthers and a south side street gang, effectively doubling their size and increasing their influence with Whites and Latinos. In the eyes the F.B.I., Hampton proved a very real threat. Ironically borrowing the famous words of Malcolm X, Hoover ordered the complete destruction of the BPP “by any means necessary.” Before long, a squad of heavily armed Chicago policemen narrowed in on the door to Hampton’s apartment, guns at the ready.

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At 4 A.M., on that cold, December evening, eight officers stood at the front of the building, six at the rear. Forty-five minutes later, they launched their attack on the quiet apartment. Bullets flew through the front door, one hitting Mark Clark, the Panther on duty that night, straight in the heart, killing him instantly. In a muscle convulsion caused by the fatal wound, Clark’s shotgun fired once—the only shot fired by a Panther that night. Through the chaos of the gunfire, Hampton slept peacefully, still feeling the effects of the sleep aid. Police dragged Hampton’s fiancé Deborah Johnson, who was eight and half months pregnant with his child, out of the line of fire. Hampton, still asleep, was shot twice in the shoulder. Harold Bell, a Panther who survived the attack, claimed to have heard policemen identify Hampton’s body, noting that he was barely alive but would “make it.” The officers then dragged his body into the doorway. The next thing Bell heard were two gunshots. Reports later showed the two shots were fired directly through Hampton’s skull. “He is good and dead now,” an officer declared as the 21-year-old, soon-to-be father, and black revolutionary Hampton lay limp by his blood-soaked mattress.
Three months after the assassination of Fred Hampton, three other revolutionaries died. They were not Black Panthers, nor were they being hunted by police. Instead, their deaths were the result of a high-stakes science experiment gone wrong in the basement of a Greenwich Village townhouse.

IV.

On a quiet afternoon in 1970, the block of West Eleventh Street was as calm as it is today, unfazed by the usual noise and rush of downtown Manhattan. A bright blue sky and trees hinting at green suggested the rapidly approaching spring on that unusually warm March day. Behind the door of 18 West Eleventh Street, 25-year-old Cathy Wilkerson anxiously washed and ironed the sheets in her family’s townhouse, vacuumed the floors, and cleaned the kitchen. Her father and stepmother were due to arrive home around 5 o’clock that night. Her heart pounding at the thought of their imminent return, Wilkerson frantically tried to put the house back in perfect condition. Her parents had no idea that she had invited four friends, including her boyfriend, to stay with her that week. Nor were they aware of the lead pipes, blasting caps, and the sixty sticks of dynamite stashed in their basement.

Suddenly Wilkerson felt the old, wood floorboards beneath her bare feet begin to shake, and her grip tightened around the iron as the vibrations intensified. A first blast burst from the basement, and Wilkerson sank slowly, still standing on the “thin carpet as it stretched and slid across widening, disjointed gaps.” A second explosion tore through the house, and a “mountain of splintered wood and brick” rose up, surrounding Wilkerson on all sides. The home became a snow globe of plaster dust and debris. Still gripping the heavy iron, Wilkerson struggled to find a safe surface to place it in the “noisy, moving, three-dimensional swirl of disintegrating house giving way to the shuddering blast of waves of force that had passed through it.” She could barely open her eyes for a “thick cloud of dust...now filled every space and crevice.” Through the rubble, Wilkerson heard the voice of her friend Kathy Boudin, who had been in the shower when the blast hit. Guilty of storing explosives in the home, Wilkerson and Boudin’s first instinct was to escape. Their bodies were coated with a layer of dust as they tore their way through the rubble. As Wilkerson remembers, “For a fraction of a second I thought to turn toward the front door, until I realized the absurdity of looking for a door when there was no longer any distinction between floor and ceiling or space in between.” Instead, she and Boudin spotted a small, dim opening hinting at daylight. They could hear the roaring fire approaching, feel its suffocating heat narrowing in on them. Another blast ripped through the crumbling home as Wilkerson and Boudin climbed through a hole in the debris, emerging onto the sidewalk. A passerby wrapped Boudin, still naked and wet from the

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8 Wilkerson, *Flying Close to the Sun*, 345.
shower, in a towel. She asked the women, “‘was it a gas explosion?’” Wilkerson offered a hasty a knowingly inaccurate response, “‘Yes, it must have been.’”

In that moment, Wilkerson was sure of three things: one, that gas had nothing to do with the explosion behind her; two, that the police were en route to the scene; and three, that her remaining friends were nowhere in sight. Desperate, afraid, and in shock, Wilkerson and Boudin followed Susan Wagner, a longtime resident of the block, up the stairs of her neighboring brownstone and through her front door. Wagner kindly offered them clothes and water before rejoining the growing crowd of onlookers on the sidewalk. By the time emergency vehicles arrived, Wilkerson and Boudin had disappeared from Wagner’s home and descended into the subway. Figuratively, they would remain underground for the next ten years, living under pseudonyms without any contact with family, friends, or acquaintances from their lives before the explosion. While Wilkerson and Boudin escaped unharmed, Ted Gold, Terry Robbins, and Diana Oughton were soon discovered dead in the rubble of the townhouse. All in their twenties, Ted, Terry, and Diana lost their lives to what would be a fatal miscalculation. News of their deaths spread as quickly as Wilkerson and Boudin fled.

Townhouse Explosion, March 6, 1970
(Image: Marty Lederhandler/AP Images)

12 Wilkerson, Flying Close to the Sun, 347.
V.

Born “Phoenix-like” from the ashes of the townhouse explosion, the Weather Underground Organization heralded in the seventies and a new era of revolutionary violence. Originally a militant faction within SDS, the Weather Underground emerged on its own terms in 1969, the same year SDS crumbled under intensifying governmental surveillance and harassment. Their main goal? Overthrowing the U.S. government. Led by the bright and charismatic Bernardine Dohrn and Bill Ayers, members consisted mainly of white, middle-class, college-educated youths. Borrowing its name from a Bob Dylan lyric, “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows,” the organization was the “intellectual vanguard,” determined “to launch guerrilla warfare in the streets of America” with the revolutionary ideologies of the black power and antiwar movements.

Preaching the slogan “Bring the War Home,” the Weather Underground believed in fighting fire with fire, using disruptive or violent tactics against the same government sending soldiers to die in Vietnam, whose police force aggressively targeted minority populations, and whose capitalistic foundation perpetuated class struggle and inequality. Their political actions, which notably caused zero casualties, targeted symbols of U.S. imperialism, from the Pentagon to banks to the U.S. Capitol Building to corporations acting in opposition to third-world struggles. Early actions included the 1969 and 1970 bombings of Chicago’s Haymarket Police Memorial and their first public demonstration, the “Days of Rage.” Member John Jacobs quoted Lenin in his plans for the “Days of Rage,” hoping the organization would “shove the war down their dumb, fascist throats...In an all-out civil war over Vietnam and other fascist U.S. imperialism... ‘Turn the imperialists’ war into a civil war.'”

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13 Dohrn, Ayers, and Jones, Sing a Battle Song, 21.
14 Burrough, Days of Rage, 87.
By the turn of the decade, the Weather Underground’s leadership had mastered a language of certainty and an intellectual coolness, attracting progressive youths to their elite circle of radical activism. Armed with conviction, outrage, and dynamite, the Weathermen took the national stage as leaders of a controversial agenda, which they outlined in their communiqués. The first communiqué, titled “Declaration of a State of War” was released on May 21, 1970, two months after the townhouse explosion. Americans listened to Dohrn’s eerily calm voice warning of the organization’s plans to “join forces in the destruction of the empire,” or, in other words, to overthrow the U.S. government.  

With constant emphasis on armed revolution, Dohrn paid homage to symbols of international revolutionary success such as Che Guevara and the guerrilla fighters of the Viet Cong, and bookending the first communiqué with references to black revolutionaries such as Eldridge Cleaver and H. Rap Brown. While their alliance with the struggle for black liberation may be genuine, the Weather Underground nonetheless benefitted from their white privilege--and they knew it. “Black people have been fighting almost alone for years,” Dohrn declared, “We’ve known that our job is to lead white kids into armed revolution.” They saw it as their duty to stand with their black sisters and brothers, using their whiteness as leverage over the system designed in their favor. The Weather Underground taunted “Amerikan imperialism” and the “pigs,” or policemen, as enemies of the people in the “fucked-up” system under which they “will never live peaceably.”

Dohrn challenged the “parents of ‘privileged’ kids [who] have been saying for years that the revolution was a game for us.” Defending the seriousness of leftist organizations, and the Weather Underground in particular, was as great of a task then as it is today in the face of doubts, derision, and demonization. The organization, whose political actions notably inflicted zero casualties, is frequently labeled a “domestic terror group.” For the Weathermen, many of whom had joined SDS during their college years, their fight had begun years prior to 1970, and their conviction, if not their tactical approach, proved unwavering. As Dohrn once declared, “White youth must choose sides now. They must either fight on the side of the oppressed, or be on the side of the oppressor.”

Mark Rudd, Weatherman and ex-President of SDS’s Columbia University chapter, described his dedication to organizing as the result of “understanding what the position of the United States is in the world.” Fiercely dedicated to American progress and admittedly “in love with a country,” Rudd claimed that his overwhelming realization of American injustice at home and abroad was the source of his commitment to the movement.

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16 Dohrn, Ayers, Jones, Sing a Battle Song, 149.
17 Dohrn, Ayers, Jones, Sing a Battle Song, 149.
18 Dohrn, Ayers, Jones, Sing a Battle Song, 149.
19 Dohrn, Ayers, Jones, Sing a Battle Song, 149.
22 The Weather Underground, Green and Siegel, 2002. Film.
By 1970, the Weather Underground had not only isolated itself from reality, but also constructed a labyrinth of closed doors within the organization’s internal structure. Psycho-sexual dynamics, criticism/self-criticism sessions, and a need-to-know basis for any internal transfer of information all intended to create a more communitarian and secure group, but resulted in a sense of confusion, dehumanization, and passivity in many members. With little to no contact with the organization’s leadership, members existed in a type of hazy bubble while underground. Living as fugitives, members moved from one run-down apartment to another, existing on oatmeal and white bread for months on end. Meanwhile, they planned political actions, built bombs, and read the texts of revolutionary thinkers. Some members regret the group’s destructive tactics and its dehumanizing interpersonal dynamics. Others remember the fun of it all. Living as an outlaw, smoking grass, and fighting for liberation--what’s not to love?

VI.

November 20, 2015. Paul Miller sits across from me in a booth at a classic American diner in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn. Setting his grey baseball cap by his side, he scans the menu. He wears an olive-green fleece jacket and has long, thin white hair. He is humble, kind, and can probably sense my anxiety to be interviewing the Weather Underground’s primary bomb maker. He seems genuine, unassuming, with a presence that does not take up a lot of room. He orders a toasted bagel, two fried eggs with hash browns, and a black coffee. He looks at me. “So, what would you like to know?”

Miller spent his twenties stepping through a series of opening doors, each one bringing him closer to armed revolution. A Vermont native, Miller found his political voice as an organizer of anti-draft actions, researched his thesis on the Cuban Revolution, and enjoyed playing around with mechanics. Rather than traveling to Cuba for thesis research, Miller moved to Chicago in 1968 to join protesters fighting for the release of the Chicago Seven, a group of black antiwar protesters charged with conspiracy and inciting to riot. As news broke that BPP co-founder Bobby Seale had been chained and gagged in the courtroom, Miller and others fought the rulings and worked to raise bail money with even more urgency. Amidst the chaos of the protests in Chicago, Miller opened new doors within the movement, meeting a diverse cast of revolutionary characters, from SDS members to Panthers to his future comrades in the Weather Underground. One of these characters stuck out to him more than the others, though. His name was Fred Hampton. Miller recalls the fast-talking Panther coming into the SDS office asking for help with printing services. Busy with their own set of tasks, SDS failed to follow through. Miller looks down at his hands. “Two weeks later, Hampton was dead.”

After a moment, Miller reaches for his coffee. His right hand wraps around the thick mug, and I notice his mangled middle fingertip, its jagged nail and choppy cuticle. Noticing my interest, he extends
his hand to give me a closer look. “I messed up all the time trying to learn to use that printing press,” he explains. When he moved to Chicago in 1968, SDS needed printers. Miller used his mechanical savvy to make himself useful, but not without the occasional accident. What to Miller represents his first role in revolutionary movements is now more often a curiosity to his young son’s friends. “It’s not like I get nostalgic every time I look at, though,” he claims. Instead, he reminisces about more leisurely moments of his involvement, caring for Red Dog, the Irish Setter taken in by his New York cell. If he stumbles upon a ‘57 Chevy, he remembers the therapeutic moments he spent fixing up one of his own for his underground cell. Surprisingly, he does not mention planning political actions, or the dynamite he fixed into bombs.

VII.

January 2016. Cathy Wilkerson has a dentist appointment today. The dentist’s office is in midtown, so she and I agree to meet at a deli nearby. It has been nearly fifty years since Wilkerson fled the rubble of her family’s townhouse. Today, her grip is tight not around an iron, but around her cup of tea, which warms her fingers on a frigid winter morning. Petite with short, straight grey hair, Wilkerson bears little resemblance to the image of a convicted felon, fugitive and radical activist who once appeared on the F.B.I.’s Ten Most Wanted List. Like several other Weathermen, Wilkerson has published a memoir documenting her years of activism, from her political awakening during her childhood in Connecticut to her final days as a Weatherman. She is committed to telling her own story, and does not hesitate to answer a single question. A retired math teacher, she now lives a normal life in Brooklyn with her partner, criminal defense attorney Susan Tipograph. The patchwork of Wilkerson’s many roles, from radical activist to prisoner to teacher to mother, is held together by two main threads that seem to inform her life the most: political organizing and trying the best she can in any situation thrown her way. Teaching math, she explains, felt the same as organizing politically. In order to have an informed electorate, kids must know “how to be problem solvers, and how to look at things from multiple perspectives.”23 For the most part, her students were unaware of their teacher’s turbulent past, though she jokingly admits to impressing students by saying she knew Tupac, whose mother, Afeni Shakur, was a Black Panther.

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The moment that bomb accidentally detonated in the basement of her family’s townhouse, killing Ted Gold, Diana Oughton, and Terry Robbins (her boyfriend at the time), Wilkerson escaped into the underground. Or, as she would put it, the townhouse explosion forced her into the underground. Indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of conspiring to bomb and kill, Wilkerson knew she would face up to fifteen years in prison if caught immediately. Going underground seemed like the necessary, if difficult, next step.

Today, she claims she would have left the Weather Underground if it hadn’t been for her fugitive status. Like many of her comrades, Wilkerson joined the organization after being “drawn to the impulse of self-sacrifice in the face of the government’s overwhelming cruelty.” Unfortunately, she had fallen

25 Wilkerson, *Flying Close to the Sun*, 263.
victim to the organization’s carelessness. As she explains, they all prepared for the bombing as if it had
been a science project, each person performing their respective task with little foresight into the
possibility of an accidental detonation. Her memory of her specific role while underground is perhaps
conveniently spotty—she would neither agree nor deny being called the organization’s West Coast
bomber, despite previous accusations. “That’s not the thing you should focus on, who did what in the
actions. It’s not the point,” she once told Burrough, author of the controversial Days of Rage, ignored and
accused her all the same.26 What she is willing to confirm, however, is that moving underground gave her
the time and space to recover from the trauma of the townhouse explosion. “I was working minimum
wage, I had a kid, and I sort of got into the groove of what that world was like and met a lot of really
wonderful people,” she tells me, “So I always felt really lucky that I landed like that.”27 Wilkerson spent
her days reading Ho Chi Minh, whose ideas on liberation and nationalism remain some of her greatest
inspirations.

In 1980, Wilkerson turned herself in, pleading guilty to the charge of possession of illegal
explosives. By that point, Jimmy Carter was president, and the risk for a high penalty was quite low as the
nation sought to heal from within following the turbulent previous decade. Wilkerson, sentenced to zero
to three years in prison, spent eleven months at the all-female Bedford Hills Correctional Association.
While she answers questions about her underground years with noticeable brevity, Wilkerson’s eyes light
up when asked about her time in prison. She spent her days reading, meeting interesting women, not
worrying about paying her bills on a minimum wage salary. “I was exhausted,” she admits, “So for me,
going to jail where you get three squares a day and you have time to read…I was like--awesome!”28 If she
hadn’t had a child, who during her sentence was under the care of her father, Wilkerson says she would
have happily stayed behind bars longer.

Wilkerson insists that her story is just that—her story, lived by nobody but herself. She reflects on
her time underground with confidence in the unwavering political conviction that led her to the
organization. She tells me, “I’ve tried to do the best that I could do with the knowledge that I had at any
given moment. And at that moment in 1969—that was the best I could do.”29 When I ask her what objects
remind her of her time with the Weather Underground, she does not tell me about her family’s
townhouse. Nor does she tell me about her jail cell. Instead, she reminds me to a different door, this time
attached to a run-down apartment on Chicago’s West Side. If opened, this door would have revealed a
group of young men and women sleeping peacefully. This door was not opened, however. It was

26 Wilkerson, Personal Interview, 6 Jan. 2016.
29 Wilkerson, Personal Interview, 6 Jan. 2016.
shattered by a heavy, incessant stream of bullets. Fred Hampton never stepped out of that door again. Wilkerson’s eyes meet mine. “In our hearts, I think what all of us wanted to be were Black Panthers.”

VIII.
After years of living underground, the Weathermen gradually emerged into the public sphere, where they resumed relatively normal lives as teachers, professors, lawyers, and community organizers. Only three, including Wilkerson, would serve jail sentences. Bernardine Dohrn and Bill Ayers, married and living in Chicago, maintain an active political life, nearly derailing Barack Obama’s 2008 Presidential run by appearing at a fundraising event.

Deborah John gave birth to Fred Hampton Jr. on December 29, 1969, twenty-seven days after his father’s assassination. Today, Fred Hampton Jr. is the president of the International People’s Democratic Uhuru Movement and chairman of the Prisoners of Conscience Committee. He is rumored to be a member of the New Black Liberation Militia.

The steps of the Townhouse remain covered in old newspapers and rotting pumpkins. The teddy bear no longer waves from its front window. Not a single plaque or monument remain to commemorate the elusive group known, by some, as the Weather Underground.

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30 Burrough, Days of Rage, 94.
II. Streets of Protest

“It’s the well-behaved children...that make the most formidable revolutionaries. They don’t say a word, they don’t hide under the table, they eat only one piece of chocolate at a time. But later on they make society pay dearly.”
--Jean-Paul Sartre, Dirty Hands, 1948

“There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen.”
--Vladimir Lenin

Jacques Dutronc, “Il est cinq heures Paris s’éveille”

If you have ever visited Paris, you may have walked the charming Boulevard Saint Germain, come face to face with Notre Dame’s scowling chimeras, and savored a buttery, flaky croissant along the Seine. Today, you will discover a different Paris, one whose brief appearance in these streets nearly overthrew the French government forty-six years ago. Though its physical traces have been largely smoothed over, the student and worker-led protests of May 1968 destabilized French society, sending waves of revolutionary sentiment and dreams of liberation through its institutions, schools, and families.

Your journey begins at the bustling square of Place de la Bastille. Once home to a medieval fortress and prison, the Bastille became the nexus of revolutionary demonstrations on July 14, 1789, when a mob of French revolutionaries unleashed an attack on the symbol of the Ancien Régime. After ten years of violent confrontations, the French Republic was born. Of course, injustice and oppression did not immediately disappear from French society and politics. The rallying cry of Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité echoed throughout the centuries that followed, finding particular resonance with a group of university students in the spring of 1968, with whom our story begins.

31 Accessible online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WcCg6rm3uM
Turn away from the vast square, and follow Rue Saint Antoine. Keep walking straight as the street becomes Rue de Rivoli. This central street lined with shops and cafés stretches across the Right Bank, running parallel to the Seine. Walk a bit further to the Châtelet metro stop, and descend into the maze of connecting subway lines. Follow signs for the RER A, heading in the direction of Nanterre-Université. The RER, an express train connecting central Paris to surrounding suburbs, will bring you to the University of Paris annex in Nanterre, where our story begins.

As you ride this subterranean bullet to the western suburb of Nanterre, close your eyes. Allow me to transport you back forty-six years ago, to the time of yé-yé music, New Wave films, and existentialist thought. The infectious and risqué lyrics of yé-yé pop stars Françoise Hardy, Juliette Gréco, and Chantal Goya had become mainstream, offering a window into sexual liberation for young women. New Wave filmmakers François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard engaged with contemporary social and political issues in their documentary-style films. Their innovations revolutionized filmmaking, and reflected a culture of reevaluating the accepted forms of perception. The ideologies of existentialist thinkers Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir resonated with a youth frustrated with the rigid structure of traditional French society. No one embodied French tradition more than its president, Général Charles de Gaulle. Returned to power in the wake of the long, violent, and costly Algerian War, de Gaulle, along with Prime Minister Georges Pompidou, led France into a new decade with two main objectives: revive the French economy and establish a politique de grandeur to promote its image abroad after its unpopular war. The youth would demand much more.

In 1967, the Journal de Génève published an article titled “Le jeune Français n’est plus ‘yé-yé,’” announcing the death of the light-hearted, playful, and suggestive image of French youth. With the Vietnam War raging abroad, a struggling economy, and a rigid society, French youth grew politicized, antimilitarist, and antiestablishment. As journalist René Dabernat observed, the youth of 1967 “will not
content itself to wanting to live well. They are ready to work and fight.” Students began their fight in the place they knew the best--the university.

*L’Université Paris X - Nanterre*

*Juliette Greco, “Deshabillez-moi”*

Your tour begins at the university where students’ passion, disillusionment, and dreams of equality once inspired a call for revolution well beyond their campus in 1968. The university in Nanterre

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32 Dabernat, “Le jeune Français n’est plus ‘yé-yé,’” *Journal de Genève.*

33 Accessible online: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FnPFWpoHE4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FnPFWpoHE4)
admitted its first students in 1964, at the height of French university system’s state of crisis. The postwar baby boom saw an explosion in France’s student population, which rose from 60,000 students before the war to 500,000 in 1968. Nanterre, like many universities at the time, failed to keep pace with these rising numbers in terms of its buildings, amenities, and teaching staff. Universities quickly transformed from a place of academic opportunity to a “center of political ferment.”\textsuperscript{34} Students, by nature, exist in a state of limbo, no longer coddled as a child, though not yet adults “absorbed by the productive machine.”\textsuperscript{35} In this state of suspension, students are naturally more inclined to question the societal, economic, and political atmosphere they will soon have to navigate as autonomous adults. The tumultuous spring of 1968 proved the power of students to catalyze a revolutionary movement capable of paralyzing a nation, if only momentarily.

Frustrated with the arbitrary gender restrictions within their university’s dormitories, students began to publicly protest their administration’s disorderly reforms. While the early stages of the student revolt made it easy for press and authorities to reduce to fun and games, their protest was “part of a process of mobilization against repression in general, combined with a growing challenge to authority.”\textsuperscript{36} By March 22, students from diverse backgrounds widened the meaning of their revolt to protest the American intervention in Vietnam. Known as the March 22 Movement, the protest began with “a symbolic act, the seizure of the administrative building; that is, the occupation of forbidden territory legally reserved for the authority.”\textsuperscript{37} The student movement was led by Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a German-born anarchist with a “cocky, elastic smile [without whom] the revolution would have seemed sinister”\textsuperscript{38} Affectionately known as Dany le Rouge, Cohn-Bendit brought humor, provocation, and an intellectual audacity to Nanterre as the March 22 Movement’s unofficial spokesperson. From late March through April, protesting students began meeting regularly to outline long-term political objectives and to

\textsuperscript{34} Singer, \textit{Prelude to Revolution}, 50.
\textsuperscript{35} Singer, \textit{Prelude to Revolution}, 53.
\textsuperscript{36} Singer, \textit{Prelude To Revolution}, 61.
\textsuperscript{37} Singer, \textit{Prelude to Revolution}, 62.
\textsuperscript{38} Seale and McConville, \textit{French Revolution 1968}, 58.
cultivate a “guerrilla-like flexibility to hold their own against the state in the insurrection which was about to burst upon them and unfold at breakneck speed”  

On Thursday, May 2, two events would prove the seriousness of Nanterre’s student revolt. At Nanterre, a group of 300 *enragés* “seized a lecture theatre and proceeded to show a film on the life of Che Guevara, ignoring the appeals of a history professor who was due to give a lecture.”  

When the university announced it would bring Cohn-Bendit and five others before the disciplinary council of the University of Paris, student protesters jumped to their defense, accusing their professors and administration of being “‘pompous pillars of a bourgeois university….’”  

The following day, Nanterre closed. Meanwhile, clashing ideologies between student groups planted the seeds of a violent May at the nexus of Parisian student life, the University of Paris, or La Sorbonne. Known as the Sorbonne’s Marxist elite, the Mouvement d’Action Universitaire (MAU) consisted of graduate students and research workers, many of whom had participated in student protests against the Algerian War years prior. That Thursday, another group, this time the right-wing para-military organization known as The Occident, raided MAU’s Sorbonne headquarters. The Occident “set the room alight, tore out the telephone and marked the chimneypiece with their sign, a cross inside a circle. The Right was preparing for battle.”  

And a battle they would get.

*La Sorbonne*

Jacqueline Taieb, “*Qu’est qu’on se marre à la fac de lettres*”

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43 Accessible online: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=lSgqQF8kGQY&nohtml5=False](www.youtube.com/watch?v=lSgqQF8kGQY&nohtml5=False)
In the wake of the events of May 2, students from Nanterre flocked to the capitol, landing, naturally, at La Sorbonne, Paris’s largest, most reputable university. The ease with which the revolt passed from Nanterre to La Sorbonne reflected the depth of the problems within the French university system. This was not just a fight over dormitory rules; this was a struggle against the overcrowded, patronizing, and impersonal university system. In the decade since 1958, the student population had increased from 175,000 to 500,000, a number with which “the buildings, amenities, the teaching staff, could not keep pace.” The physical strains of overcrowding combined with a “mental revolt against the existing industrial state, both against its capitalist structure and the kind of consumer society it has created...coupled with a striking revulsion against anything coming from above, against centralism, authority, the hierarchical order.” Protesters were communists, anarchists, Trotskyists, and everything in between. In May 1968, the university had transformed from a place of intellectual grooming to a hotbed of revolutionary sentiment.

On May 3, the first cobblestone, or pavé, was thrown. Amidst meetings between Nanterre and the Sorbonne’s far-left organizations, the Sorbonne’s Dean of Students authorized police, or the Compagnies Républicains de Sécurité (CRS) to evacuate the premises. Later that afternoon, the Sorbonne was surrounded by “a massive police force, helmeted, truncheons in hand, tear-gas grenades at the ready,  

44 Singer, Prelude to Revolution, 45.  
45 Singer, Prelude to Revolution, 21.
prepared for battle.” Students inside deliberated their next move. Before they could react, however, officers forced their way inside, sparking a violent confrontation. “Free our comrades—Libérez nos camarades!” shouted students at the CRS, charging forward. In the first violent confrontation, over one hundred people were injured, twenty were seriously injured, and hundreds of students were arrested. Fearing the bad publicity of escalating violence, the Sorbonne shut its doors later that day. Students were infuriated, and demanded the reopening of Nanterre and the Sorbonne and the disappearance of police forces on campus. University administrators did not budge. Held together by sentiments of revolt, provocation, and systematic indiscipline, the students took to the streets.

*Quartier Latin*

_Dominique Grange: “Les Nouveaux Partisans”*

Circle around the back of the Sorbonne until you reach the wide Rue Saint-Jacques, once a main axial road of medieval Paris. Take a left; walk until you reach Rue des Écoles, and turn left again. Notice the Le Champo, a single-screen art-house cinema perched on the corner of Rue des Écoles and Rue Champollion. Pause.

When you feel ready to move on, continue a bit further, until you reach a three-way intersection. Rather than turning onto the bustling Boulevard Saint-Michel, where you would pass a BNP Paribas,

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46 Singer, *Prelude to Revolution*, 120.
47 Accessible online: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsnTozfRZ_M&nohtml5=False](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsnTozfRZ_M&nohtml5=False)
Starbucks, Nike, and slew of French clothing chains, take the slight left on the far quieter Rue Racine. Stroll down the narrow street. Pause.

Explore the tiny, curving streets of the Latin Quarter a bit more on your own. Eventually, one will drop you onto Boulevard Saint Germain, the main street of Paris’s Left Bank. This labyrinth of streets once flowed through the Latin Quarter like rivers, holding the escalating tension between narrow walls and tall barricades. Every river must meet its sea, collide with its mighty winds and crashing waves. For the protests of 1968, this tidal force rushed through the Boulevard Saint Germain.

Known today for its historic cafés and lively nightlife, Boulevard Saint Germain remains one of the most iconic streets in the eyes of tourists, though many Parisians avoid its overpriced cafés and designer shops. Lining the boulevard are rows of elegant Haussmannian buildings, with their wrought iron balconies and mansard roofs. Sweet aromas of fresh croissants mingle with trails of smoke lingering
from a passerby’s cigarette. Paris can seduce you with its romanticism, but resist the temptation for now. The revolution of May 1968 has just begun.

While the sun set on the evening of May 3, students and police alike prepared for a night of confrontations. During the “Night of the Barricades,” twenty to thirty thousand students and young people spread throughout the Latin Quarter, all ready for battle. Chanting *Sous les pavés, la plage*—“beneath the cobblestones, the beach,” protesters ripped their weapons out of the very fabric of their city. Cobblestones torn from the streets were “small enough to fit in the hand, heavy enough to hurt, provided munition for the fighter and a brick for his barricade.” For weeks, students occupied the Latin Quarter, organized a 25-kilometer-long march, and brought the city to a halt. In an attempt to ease the ongoing chaos, Prime Minister Georges Pompidou announced the reopening of the Sorbonne on May 13. His attempt came too late, though. The revolution had already spread from the university to the factory.

By mid-May, what began as the 22 March Movement in Nanterre flourished into a coalition of left-wing students, union workers, and artists. Some singers, like Dominique Grange, occupied factories, belting out lyrics of liberation with guitar in her hands and conviction in her voice. As painters “sought the best way of proclaiming solidarity with the movement,” actors “went on strike and closed all the theaters in the capitals.” Impressed by the students’ conviction, workers were also attracted to the revolutionary tactics. Students, “by agreeing to fight it out in the streets, by building barricades...symbolically borrowed the traditional methods of the revolutionary working class.” By May 22, eleven million factory workers, nearly a quarter of France’s total population, went on strike. Throughout the latter half of the month, violence and chaos broke out in Lyon, Nantes, Bordeaux, and Strasbourg. The country was effectively paralyzed.

On the student front, underlying ideological differences between “anarchists, Trotskyists, Maoists, and whatnot...now returned to the surface.” By the time they come to an organizational

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compromise, “the unions, the employers, and the government were then sitting around a conference table.” Feeling the economic pressure of the strike, the French government began negotiations with trade unions and the employers’ federation on May 25. These negotiations, called the Grenelle Accords, lasted two days and resulted in an increased minimum wage and the establishment of an official right to a unionize in every company. Labor unions, “admittedly after some delay and frantic efforts, had managed to turn a struggle against the system into a battle within it.”

**Place de la République**

*Claude Nougaro, “Paris Mai”*

![Place de la République, May 1968](image)

Follow one of the many streets leading to the Seine, and cross over to Île de la Cité by way of the Petit Pont. A peek into the bouquiniste stalls may reveal a used copy of anything from Arthur Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* to Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. Along the way you’ll pass a row of tourist shops flaunting racks of colorful Paris-themed scarves, bags, mugs, and key chains. Navigate through the crowds of tourists lining up before Notre Dame until you reach the other channel of the Seine. The Pont d’Arcole will deliver you to Paris’s Right Bank. Keep walking straight, until you find Rue du Temple, a lively street traversing the trendy Marais neighborhood. You’ll pass by cafés filled with young Parisians,

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53 Singer, *Prelude to Revolution*, 244.
54 Accessible Online: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsnTozfRZ_M&nohtml5=False](www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsnTozfRZ_M&nohtml5=False)
colorful vintage shops, and the charming Square du Temple. Eventually your path will intersect with other main streets and boulevards at the Place de la République. You will not miss it.

Perched at the center of the vast, bustling square stands a bronze statue of the Marianne, the personification of the French Republic. In her right hand, the Marianne raises an olive branch in the air, while her left hand rests on a tablet engraved with the *Droits de l'homme*--the French Declaration of the rights of Man and of Citizen. Below the triumphant matriarch stand three statues symbolizing the French Republican values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. At the monument’s base rests a lion guarding a ballot box. During the protests of May 1968, students climbed the monument, clung to its façade in a symbolic reclamation of French Republicanism. *Liberté, Égalité, Sexualité!* Students shouted from up high. Their voices resounded for generations to come.

The final events of the springtime revolt happened as quickly as the spark at Nanterre had lit Paris afire. After a month of near silence, President de Gaulle dissolved the National Assembly, called a new election, and refused to resign. The Communists agreed to the election, workers gradually returned to their posts, and the national student union called off street demonstrations. Sporadic instances of violence occurred throughout June, but little spurred the return of the previous month’s revolutionary clashes. By the legislative election of June 30, President de Gaulle’s party won the greatest victory in French parliamentary history.

Today, a smooth coat of asphalt covers the cobblestones in the Latin Quarter. Graffitied walls have been washed off, posters torn down. The revolutionary actions that nearly toppled the French government have been reduced in history books to a mere month: May 1968. The visibility of the revolutionary spirit that spring has largely disappeared. No plaques adorn the hallways at Nanterre. No official commemorations exist for the protesters. The statue before you, however, remains a nest to which French society flocks in times of chaos, of protest, and of mourning.
The air was cold and still as I walked down Boulevard Voltaire on the evening of January 7, 2015. I did not know what to expect when I reached République. Were people too scared to leave their homes so soon after what had happened? What if it happens again?

At around 11:30 that morning, two brothers armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles forced their way into the headquarters of the satirical weekly newspaper Charlie Hebdo. The men called out their victims by name, and then shot them execution-style. Within minutes, they had killed eleven people and injured eleven others. Their attacks had much larger implications for the French public, however, as they targeted the very heart of the French spirit--freedom of expression, creativity, humor, and diversity.

With each step I took closer to République, a distant murmur became a roaring cry. My fast-beating heart calmed to a steady pace, beating along with the resounding chants, Nous sommes Charlie! Finally, I entered the crowd. All around me Parisians wept, mourned and professed their solidarity with their nation under attack. Pictures and written messages glowed in the candlelight. Some people huddled in small pockets, adding to a pile of pencils, or a formation of burning candles. Young Parisians climbed the statue of their matriarch. Leading the chants from high above the crowds, they clung to the statues of
Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. A thick black X had been drawn over Liberty’s mouth. Raised high above its head, its hand grasped a thick yellow pencil, its sharpened point piercing the air.

Eleven months later, on November 13, 2015, Parisians began their weekend in typical fashion--dinners with friends, people watching at outdoor cafés, romantic strolls along the Canal Saint-Martin, just north of where you stand right now. The wound has largely healed from the attacks ten months prior, and Parisians had long since resumed their normal, joyful lives. That night, however, their *joie de vivre* was attacked once more, this time in a series of coordinated terrorist attacks throughout Paris and its northern suburb of Saint-Denis. By the end of the night, terrorists had killed 130 people, and injured nearly 400. Paris descended into an all too familiar chaos, submerged in paranoia, fear, and confusion.

Two months after the November attacks, I found myself yet again in front of the Marianne. The large X had begun to fade from Liberty’s lips, but a fresh coat of flags, photos, flowers, written notes and melted candles enveloped the monument’s base. In my eyes, the monument to the French Republic had transformed into an almost permanent memorial, an homage to the lives taken for living by its values. All around me, skateboarders glided across the smooth cement, young couples embraced, smiling friends smoked cigarettes and sipped espressos at surrounding cafés. Aware of it or not, Parisians revolted through routine.
III. Minds of Independence

What makes childhood memories valuable to others and makes them proud, has for me created holes... Qol, an isolated village at the end of the peninsula, later became a “no-man’s land” as it was called; it, too, was now forbidden territory where bodies and shadows remain, at the end of that war of races and capital; bodies in shrouds, thrown down in such a “modern” way and today dispersed. Contrary to the predicted insanity, they watch below the earth and remain present as they pass across borders, histories, generations, and time. This is how, when I was very little, I learned what war was: a state of great confusion in which the minds--those we desperately sought to stimulate--went around yelling, cursing, suspicious, and edgy.

--Nabile Farès

The seeds of the Algerian War of Independence were planted long before its revolution began. Their roots extended deep within the rich soil of the coastal North African territory in 1827, when King Charles X of France began his invasion of the region. At the time of the invasion, Algeria “was not a nation, or even a real state, but a headquarters of the infamous Barbary pirates.” After twenty years of resistance and bloodshed, the indigenous Algerian population surrendered. Accordingly, the French “sped up colonization efforts in order to bring European settlers, confiscating the best lands and relocating Muslims to sterile soils or forcing them to work as sharecroppers, thus causing economic and social havoc.” By 1954, over one million out of Algeria’s ten million population “were of European descent, generally known as colons,” or pied-noirs. Although French leaders considered “Algeria an integral part of France, the native Arab and Kabyle populace were prevented from having any effective political or economic power.” For this native populace treated as third-class citizens, “the original sin of invasion could never be forgotten.”

There were, for me, six years of life in a colonial Algeria...but of a childhood...with a family that, as one would say today, that was very colonized in its mentality. Because they were part of the Algerian minority that had access to education. I had an uncle who was a professor, another uncle who was a

55 Sebbar, An Algerian Childhood, 117, 126.
56 Joes, Urban Guerrilla Warfare, 53.
57 Sebbar, An Algerian Childhood, ix.
58 Joes, Urban Guerrilla Warfare, 54.
59 Hudis, Irving, and Le Blanc, Frantz Fanon, 71.
60 Evans, Algeria: France’s Undeclared War, 16.
pharmacist. So we were part, if you wish, of the privileged, not in terms of wealth, but we had access to what France believed to bring to its colonies. Voilà. We had access to that, and my grandfather in any case, was, as we’d say today, pro-France. But he wasn’t pro-France in terms of its politics. It was that France brought values that coincided with our own, values we could aspire to, that did nothing but lift us up. And these values, my grandfather embraced them in their totality.

—Anonymous

The legacy of the invasion was a “psychological one. Stunned by the magnitude and visibility of the disaster, Muslims carried with them the trauma of the 1830 invasion.” The century that followed saw a series of uprisings on the part of Algerian nationalists, though few were seen as realistic attempts at revolt against the second largest colonial empire. All of this changed in 1954. France grappled with chronic instability after the German occupation of WWII. Dien Bien Phu fell. French Indochina was lost. Suddenly dreams of decolonization and of an independent Algeria were in the realm of possibility. On November 1, 1954, a socialist political party known as the National Liberation Front (FLN) was formed under the pretense of cleansing “the country of the stain of humiliation through violence.” That same day, a series of bombs exploded in Algiers. The Algerian War of Independence had begun.

In response to a series of guerrilla attacks by the FLN’s armed wing, the National Liberation Army (ALN), French General Secretary of the Socialist Party Guy Mollet deployed over 450,000 troops under the pretense of pacification, with the naive hope of avoiding a full-scale war and stopping “the flow of bloodshed, both French and Muslim.” On the political front, France maintained a hard line with Algerian nationalists, though mainly for symbolic reasons. Losing Algeria would destroy “national self-esteem after occupation.” Though as the symbolic war began taking real lives, Mollet’s political game faced criticism from all sides, though most notably from pied-noirs, who, after over a century of living in Algeria, felt it as much their own land as their native counterparts’. Tensions and violence between Algeria’s native and pied-noir populations grew as the war progressed. On 6 February 1956, later known as the “Day of the Tomatoes,” pied-noirs consumed by a “fear of terrorism, fear of being disenfranchised,

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61 Anonymous, Personal Interview, April 2015.
62 Evans, Algeria: France’s Undeclared War, 16.
63 Evans, Algeria: France’s Undeclared War, 120.
64 Evans, Algeria: France’s Undeclared War, 149.
65 Evans, Algeria: France’s Undeclared War. 112.
fear of being sold out,” broke through police barricades to “pelt the prime minister with tomatoes and clods of earth.” By this time, the rural insurgency had moved to the capital city in a yearlong struggle known as the Battle of Algiers.

I noticed a headline in a newspaper someone was reading on the terrace: “Princess Grace has given birth to a daughter, Caroline.” A minute later, there was an explosion inside, and we saw the waiters bring out an elderly woman, her dress covered in blood. Then there was a second, more powerful explosion at the Cafeteria, across the street, followed by a third at the Coq Hardi, where the glass-encased terrace blew up and the heavy glass shattered, throwing out shrapnel-like splinters. There was the usual post-bomb bedlam, with people screaming, sirens blaring, body brigades forming outside the cafés to remove the victims, and young men chasing isolated Arabs who happened to be there, two of whom were killed. The total casualties from the bombs were five dead and forty wounded, twenty-two of whom had limbs amputated on the operating table. The general strike was two days away. This was the overture, announcing to the colon population that their lives were about to be seriously disrupted.

--Ted Morgan

On September 30, 1956, three female members of the FLN coordinated bombings in downtown Algiers, one of which exploded at an Air France office. The Battle of Algiers had begun, triggering the bloodiest year of the FLN’s urban guerrilla war. In the months that followed, the “confrontation took the form of short bursts of fighting at close quarters, interspersed with bombs on one side and mass round-ups and torture on the other.” The FLN understood the need to convince the native population, whose lives and minds had become deeply intertwined with those of their French colonizers, of the necessity for revolution. The FLN decided that “by pulling the trigger and letting the French react, it was unleashing a process of violence that would ultimately force the Algerian population full-square behind” their call for revolution. On January 27, 1957, General Jacques Massu and his division of ten thousand men received orders to “restore order to the Algerian capital.” Massu quickly discovered that “the most effective and indispensable weapon for uprooting or even restraining any underground organization is intelligence.”

66 Evans, Algeria: France’s Undeclared War, 149.
67 Morgan, My Battle of Algiers, 144-145.
68 Evans, Algeria: France’s Undeclared War, 201.
69 Evans, Algeria: France’s Undeclared War, 225.
70 Joes, Urban Guerrilla Warfare, 58.
71 Joes, Urban Guerrilla Warfare, 58.
Soon enough, French military began “to systematically use torture and imprisonment to dismantle the Algerian resistance.” Torture, from waterboarding to electroshock, became the trademark of French interrogation and victory in the Battle of Algiers. On September 24, 1957, one year after the FLN began its bombing campaign in Algiers, General Massu defeated the urban guerrilla movement. Psychological warfare triumphed.

Ja---, smiling all the time, dangled the clasps at the end of the electrodes before my eyes. These were little shining steel clips, elongated and toothed, what telephone engineers call 'crocodile' clips. He attached one of them to the lobe of my right ear and the other to a finger on the same side. Suddenly, I felt as if a savage beast had torn the flesh from my body. Still smiling above me, Ja-- had attached the pincer to my penis. The shocks going through me were so strong that the straps holding me to the board came loose. They stopped to tie them again and we continued.

--Henri Alleg

We were attached here, our hands behind us. And they tipped our heads in the tub. We couldn’t breathe, so we had to drink it. It was the most ferocious torture. Here, it’s the room for the electroshock, which would attach to one’s ear and genitals. To cover the screams, the military sung. It was a song that went, for you my little madness, my little grain of fancy, you who turns me around, you who turn me upside down. And it was the last two phrases that they would repeat again: “you who turn me around, you who turn me upside down.”

--Abdelkader Amane, FLN member

In the wake of the French victory in Algiers, the will to fight for a French Algeria sunk to new lows both on the mainland and abroad. The consequences of Massu’s victory “were not peace or compromise but open, irreconcilable war. French tactics alienated moderate Muslim opinion and provoked much criticism in France, and elsewhere.” French actress Simone Signoret, philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, and writer Françoise Sagan, amongst others, signed a manifesto “defending the accused and supporting the right of French soldiers to desert.” News of the conflict quickly attracted international attention. Guardian journalist Thomas Hodgkin wrote in 1960, “Every family has lost someone--killed,

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72 Sebbar, An Algerian Childhood, xi.
73 Alleg, The Question, 44-45.
74 INA Histoire, “Torture pendant la guerre d’Algérie: Témoignage des victimes - Archive Vidéo INA.”
75 Joes, Urban Guerrilla Warfare, 59-60.
76 Evans, Algeria: France’s Undeclared War, 286.
tortured, imprisoned, or in concentration camps.”\textsuperscript{77} He also pointed out a frequently overlooked injustice of the war, that “the main burden of this revolution is being borne by the most oppressed section of the Algerian population--the peasantry and agricultural proletariat--for whom independence is identified with far-reaching agrarian reform.”\textsuperscript{78} Disapproval of France’s ceaseless and bloody struggle rose as quickly as these international reports spread.

\textit{The journalists told me that the demonstration would be authorized from 6pm to 7pm. The police did not wait for that limit. At 6:30pm, they began to take action...Young men and women arrived at a gallop, followed by police officers with truncheons drawn. Their group dwindled, because one or the other protesters was caught, the officer, on his heels, stops and beats them. Ten to twelve young people give into the blows. Some collapsed and lay on the sidewalk. I can see it perfectly, because in comparison to what it was like earlier, the Rue Monge is almost deserted. A battlefield!...I relate this information two days after the events. It seems like I had dreamt it. I wish I had been dreaming. But on my table there is a handkerchief stained in blood.}

---Anonymous Swiss Journalist reporting from Paris\textsuperscript{79}

Despite its recent victories, the Fourth Republic had sunk to new lows in popularity amongst French on the mainland. In 1958, with desperation at its pinnacle and no peaceful end in sight, the French looked to the man who once led the French resistance against the Nazis in WWII: General Charles de Gaulle. At a time when the majority of the French population had no faith in the Fourth Republic’s ability to end the Algerian crisis, de Gaulle’s return sparked new hope for peace and compromise. With little economic rationale for France remaining in Algeria, de Gaulle sought to turn the page towards a renewal of France’s image at home and abroad, leaving its colonial presence in the past. On September 16, 1959, de Gaulle took the first steps in France’s endgame, proposing the idea of self-determination for the Algerian people. While attractive to the majority of France’s population, de Gaulle’s idea was not enough for many Algerians, and a sign of desertion felt by pied-noirs. As De Gaulle looked towards the future, the “last extremists in favor of French Algeria” founded a terrorist network known as the \textit{Organisation de l’Armée Secrète} (OAS) in 1961.\textsuperscript{80} The OAS unleashed a violent campaign of bombings and attacks.

\textsuperscript{77} Hodgkin, “Algeria as the Algerians See It,” \textit{The Guardian}
\textsuperscript{78} Hodgkin, “Algeria as the Algerians See It,” \textit{The Guardian}
\textsuperscript{79} Anonymous, “Ce que j’ai vu à la Mutualité,” 3 Nov. 1960.
\textsuperscript{80} Sebbar, \textit{An Algerian Childhood}, xi.
against the FLN, Algerian sympathizers, and the French Army as a cease-fire suggested the inevitability of an independent Algeria. Setting of an average of 120 bombs per day, the OAS caused the bloodiest days of the war within the final three months of its conclusion—a grand finale to the eight years of war.

In the neighborhood where we lived, we risked being attacked because the OAS placed bombs at night in order to spread out the maximum number of Arabs. And I remember still very well the night rounds that my family had to do on the terrace. I remember for example that my uncle had to patrol from 8pm to 11pm; next it was my father from 11pm to 2am, then another uncle. And so when one is a child it also transforms the rhythm of day and night.

My father was a storekeeper. So he was in an area that came under mortar fire committed by the French. It was at a market and...in a mortar fire you have bodies that have exploded, everywhere. And so that traumatized me quite a bit. Every time I heard the sound of arms being fired, because we hear that all the time...Every time I heard that I would run off, nobody could stop me until I reached my father because I wanted to make sure that he was still alive.

Anonymous

By March 18, 1962, the FLN and the French government signed the Évian Accords, signaling a first step towards Algerian self-determination and an “Algerian Algeria.” Despite the significant wounds inflicted by the French, the FLN had won by diplomatic victory. In April, nearly 91 percent of the French electorate approved the Accords. In July, nearly six million ballots were cast in favor of independence. Less than twenty thousand Algerians voted against. On July 3, 1962, Algeria was declared independent.

The joyous demonstrations lasted night and day. There was music everywhere. And these were moments of jubilation, of historical, historical joy. These big, joyous demonstrations lasted a few days. And then after that, the city hemorrhaged...the city hemorrhaged. That’s to say, all the French began to leave, or they had already left.

Anonymous

In the years following independence, “successive presidents tried to develop the country’s industry and modernize agriculture. Their vision of Algeria was Islamic and Arabic, and the Berber minority (20-30 percent of the population) kept rebelling against this exclusionary vision.” In spite of this internal conflict, leaders eventually enacted a restrictive code based on Islamic Law. Opponents of

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81 Anonymous, Personal Interview, April 2015.
82 Anonymous, Personal Interview, April 2015.
83 Sebbar, An Algerian Childhood, xii.
the country’s increasing conservatism, many of whom had participated in the war against the French, “saw their rights severely curtailed.”

Thirty years after gaining independence, Algeria entered a civil war lasting from 1990 to 1998.

For example, it’s a detail, it’s idiotic, but my classmates had talked about communion. So I waited for their communions because I was going to attend the parties and all that. And all of a sudden, well, I was, a big part of my childhood was at the port in Oran, in the process of leaving. And that was very sad. And after, well, life was not the same. Life was never again the same.

--Anonymous

Extremism was not unique to Algerian politics in the wake of independence. In 1961, the same year the OAS began its attacks, French politician and future presidential candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen founded the far-right political party, National Front for French Algeria. Born out of the outrage of losing French Algeria, the Le Pen’s party sought to unite far-right movements, including Occident, Groupe Union Défense, and the Ordre Nouveau. By 1972, Le Pen had shortened the party’s name to simply National Front (FN), but maintained the party’s pillars of social conservativism, nationalism, economic protectionism, and opposition to immigration. In 2011, Marine Le Pen, Jean-Marie’s daughter, became the FN’s new leader, ushering in a new era in the party’s national popularity. In a rising tide of French conservatism, the once marginal FN currently holds 21 of the 74 seats in the European Parliament.

It’s true that fireworks are beautiful; they’re magnificent—when I can see them. If I can’t see them, because I’m in a street or at home, it’s really alarming because I turn back into the little girl who heard those bombings. And, today I’m sixty years old. Last July, I was in Cannes for Bastille Day. There were going to be fireworks, and my friends said, “Come on, we reserved a table right on the water! We’re going to be right on the water, you’ll see!” But I didn’t know how I would react, so I told them, “No, I’m a bit tired. I’m not going to come.” So I stayed in, and it was terrible. I should have gone because while I stayed in, I heard what I thought were bombings. Bom! Bom! Bom! Bom! Bom! I was curled up in my bed. That will never leave me! And that, for me, is terrible.

--Anonymous

For many years, the deadliest terrorist incident on French soil had occurred in 1961, when an OAS-planted bomb exploded on a train travelling from Strasbourg to Paris, killing 28 people.

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84 Sebbar, Leila, *An Algerian Childhood*, xii.
85 Anonymous, Personal Interview, April 2015
their bombing campaign, the “OAS assassinated French officials involved in negotiating a withdrawal from North Africa and detonated scores of bombs that killed hundreds of French soldiers and thousands of French civilians.”

This changed on January 7, 2015, when two brothers, Said and Chérif Kouachi, forced their way into the offices of French satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*. Armed with assault rifles, the Kouachi brothers killed twelve and injured eleven others. Born to Algerian immigrants, the brothers were raised as orphans in France, moving from a foster home in Rennes to an orphanage in Corrèze before settling in Paris around 2000.

*For many Algerian immigrants in France, the Algerian War has not ended. I repeat. For many Algerians or youths of Algerian descent, the Algerian War has not ended. Why? Because they consider the ravages committed by the French in Algeria constitute obstacles that remain today for Algeria to become a modern, developed country. Because France had committed these ravages, and because [Algerians] had to leave their country because there was no viable economy, there was no work. Because when they came here, they were treated in the same way that they had been treated in Algeria by the French--by an occupying power.*

---Anonymous

Less than a year after the attacks at the *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters, a series of coordinated terrorist attacks occurred in Paris and its northern suburb, Saint-Denis. On the evening of Friday, November 13, 2015, some Parisians celebrated the weekend with a dinner out in the Tenth Arrondissement. Others watched the Eagles of Death Metal perform at Le Bataclan. Soccer enthusiasts, among them President François Hollande, cheered along at the Stade de France as the French and German soccer teams dueled. At approximately 9:20 P.M., suicide bombings, mass shootings, and hostage situations had propelled the city into a state of chaos, fear, shock, and mourning. Attackers claimed their allegiance to ISIL, their attacks a retaliation for French airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. Of the nine attackers, five had been born and raised in France. One, Omar Ismail Mostafai, was of Algerian origin.

*Now I can’t say that the Algerian War has completely ended on the French side because you still have the equivalent of 3 million French that have pied-noir origins and who are descended from pied-noirs. And all those people, who are completely French today, kept a resentment with regard to the Fifth Republic, with regard to General de Gaulle, whom they detest, whom they hate, because he made them lose their country. And they transformed that into racism and hate of Algerians. So for them, there is still*

---Anonymous

87 Laurence, “The Algerian Legacy,” Foreign Affairs

a vivid memory of the Algerian War that dispossessed them of their land. Voilà, so that’s the climate today. One must remember that it’s very bad, and very anxiety provoking and that...I don’t like speaking of civil war, but, we’re not far from confrontation anyhow.

--Anonymous

“Imperialism leaves behind germs of rot which we must clinically detect and remove from our land but from our minds as well.”

--Frantz Fanon

Squinting through the bright, cloudless sky, I found my way to a wooden bench in Tompkins Square Park on a mid-April afternoon. The blue sky signaled spring, but a winter chill still lingered in the air. In the wide opening before me, children kicked a soccer ball across the flat pavement. A couple strolled by, led by a grinning, black and white French bulldog. Behind me, squirrels shuffled in the grass. I opened Joan Didion’s *The White Album*, an essay of snapshots of the author’s life in the late 1960s and early 1970s--among them, meetings with leaders of the Black Panther Party, the Manson murder trial, a Doors recording session, and student demonstrations at San Francisco State College. At the end of her often neurotic and always insightful prose, she confesses, “writing has not yet helped me to see what it means.”

To a certain extent, I felt the same after writing these essays. What does it mean that a 21-year-old Black Panther was assassinated by the F.B.I. while members of the Weather Underground have served little to no time in jail, entered academia, and grown old? What does it mean that the cobblestones are now relics of leftist families and not lining the streets of the Latin Quarter? What does it mean that memories of Algeria’s defeat of imperialism send a grown woman into a state of panic during the boom and fizzle of Bastille Day fireworks? I am not

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certain I know the answer to these questions. Nor I am sure that these essays contain a Great Epiphany. Here is what I do know:

Today, two United States presidential candidates vying for their party’s nomination are making headlines. One, a bombastic reality star, business tycoon, and self-proclaimed “really smart person,” has called for a ban on Muslims entering the United States, proposed constructing a wall along the Mexican border to keep out its “criminals” and “rapists,” and won the affections of white supremacists across America. The other, a Vermont senator, Brooklyn native, and democratic socialist, has called for a political revolution against the 1 percent, billionaire class. Funded without the help of a super PAC, his campaign prides itself on its near 7 million individual donations of an average $27. It is possible neither candidate will see the inauguration, never mind be elected as their party’s nominee, but their populist success reveals the rising polarization, animosity, and frustration of contemporary American politics.

In France, the far-right, xenophobic Front National Party (FN) led by the dynastic Le Pen family, continues to rise in popularity, winning 24 of France’s 74 seats at the European Parliament in 2014, and placing first in nearly half of France’s 2015 regional elections. Fiercely nationalistic and protectionist, the FN’s major policies include the re-introduction of the death penalty and the deportation of illegal, criminal, and unemployed immigrants. Thousands of Parisians began gathering at the Place de la République in April 2016 to protest President François Hollande’s plans to “change protective labor laws to make it easier and less costly for employers to lay off workers.” By mid-April, the movement widened their message to “denounce everything from the dominance of Google to tax evasion or inequality on housing

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91 Carroll, “‘I’m, Like, a Really Smart Person’: Donald Trump Exults in Outsider Status.” The Guardian
estates.” Known as Nuit Debout, the protest movement has spread to cities throughout France, garnering the support of students, workers, and artists united against the shortcomings of Hollande, whose approval rating has sunk to a mere 17 percent.

Meanwhile, Algeria continues to feel the effects of its colonized past, both economically and socially. Corruption is not uncommon in the North African country, whose President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has been in power since 1999. While a small, politically connected elite profit from the oil-rich country’s economy, the vast majority of Algerians live without the same fiscal opportunities. Growing islamophobia and traces of France’s colonial empire continue to stigmatize many French-Algerians, whether first, second, or third-generation immigrants. In the wake of ISIL’s Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015 and January 2016, French-Algerians face increased discrimination, poor education, and fewer opportunities for upward social and economic mobility.

Looking up from Didion’s book, I noticed the light that once reflected off the asphalt now warmed the back of my neck as the sun slipped behind rows of apartment buildings. The children had gone home for dinner. Businessmen and women strode home from work, their shiny, black shoes tapping the hard pavement. I pushed myself up from the wooden bench and meandered home to Avenue C. I thought again about The White Album’s last words: “writing has not yet helped me to see what it means.” And I am not sure it ever could.

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Bibliography

About This Bibliography:
For convenience and clarity, this bibliography has been separated in four parts, each dedicated to a specific section of this collection.

Preface/Afterword:


The Weather Underground Organization:

Anonymous, Personal Interview, 20 Nov. 2015.


Wilkerson, Cathy, Personal Interview, 6 Jan. 2016.


**The Events of May 1968 in Paris:**


**The Algerian War of Independence:**


Anonymous, Personal Interview, April 2015.


