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# Conceptualising the North: Re-Imagining the Spaces of the North in Jacques Ferron's *L'Amélanchier* and Mohammed Dib's *Les Terrasses d'Orsol*

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## **Abstract**

This article is a study of the representations of the spaces of the North in a cross-cultural context and from a postcolonial francophone literary perspective. It aims to analyse what narrative functions and values are assigned to the spaces of the North in the two texts selected in the postcolonial context of Québec (Ferron) and Algeria (Dib). Whilst Ferron explores the mythical dimensions of the space(s) of the North within the situated histories and memories of the space of Québec, Dib's concept of the North is developed from the position of migration that is *deteritorialised*. The article will argue that the space of the North in the two texts analysed can function either as a mythical (Ferron) or as a socio-political (Dib) construct, making it a highly ambivalent concept and an *empty signifier* as Ernest Laclau defines it. It will conclude that in Ferron's case, the idea of the North is conceptualised as a mythical construct through the function and strategy of *re-orientation*; as such, it remains mystified for the reader. Contrary to this, in Dib's text, the North is conceptualised through the function of absence and the construction of *non-place*.

**Keywords:** space, spatiality, semiotics, North, empty signifier, non-space, comparative francophone postcolonial studies, Québec, Algeria.

## **Résumé**

Cet article étudie les représentations de l'espace du Nord d'un point de vue interculturel et dans la perspective des littératures postcoloniales francophones. Son but est d'analyser les fonctions narratives et les valeurs attribuées aux espaces du Nord dans deux textes choisis dans le contexte postcolonial du Québec (Ferron) et de l'Algérie (Dib). Alors que Ferron explore la dimension mythique de l'espace du Nord dans le cadre de l'histoire et de la mémoire du Québec, Dib développe le concept du Nord en adoptant une position migratoire reposant sur la notion de *déteritorialisation*. L'article essaie de démontrer que l'espace du Nord, dans les deux textes analysés, fonctionne soit comme un concept construit à partir du mythe (Ferron), soit comme un concept reposant sur la dimension socio-politique (Dib) de l'espace. Cette double fonction du concept de l'espace du Nord produit une ambivalence



qui peut être vue comme un *signifiant vide*, notion introduite par Ernesto Laclau. L'article conclut que, dans le cas du texte de Ferron, l'espace du Nord est construit en tant que concept mythique par le biais de l'utilisation d'une stratégie de *réorientation*; cette stratégie renforce la fonction mystificatrice de cet espace. Contrairement à cela, dans le cas du texte de Dib, le concept de l'espace du Nord est construit à travers la fonction de l'absence et du "non-lieu".

**Mots-clés** : espace, spatialité, analyse sémiotique, Nord, signifiant vide, littératures comparatives postcoloniales francophones, Québec, Algérie.

## Introduction

The North is a space that is impossible to define completely. Its meaning is constantly shifting, as Peter Davidson implies in his book *The Idea of North*: "wherever it is located, it always points to a further north, to an elsewhere" (Davidson 2005: 7). To a Southerner it means something essentially different to what it means to a Northerner. The North like the South can be exoticised, mythicized, but it can also be deconstructed, demystified. The concept of the North is unpindownable, it is highly ambivalent. It can be understood as an "empty signifier", a concept that Ernest Laclau defines in his essay "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics" (Laclau 1996). In this article, I will try and unveil the ambivalent nature and function of the idea and the concept of the North based on the analysis of the two texts selected. I will present and discuss two main conceptualisations of the North as they appear in Jacques Ferron's *L'Amélanchier* (Ferron 1970) and Mohammed Dib's *Les Terrasses d'Orsol* (Dib 1985). My choice of these two texts is based on the results of a larger research conducted on the representations of space, place and spatial loss in North African and Canadian writing in French (Jasmina Bolfek-Radovani 2015). Both Ferron and Dib are considered to be important authors in the literary area they belong to. Although the two texts chosen here are among their most accomplished works, little attention has been given to a systematic analysis of the representations and values of the space of the North in these two works. Using semiotic analysis, my aim in this article is to show that the space of the North as real and imagined territory manifests itself in two different ways in these texts, giving rise to the space of the North that is highly ambivalent, as previously mentioned. The North is constructed as a mythical construct, a mystificatory tool and symbolic device of nation-building (Ferron), and it is used to deconstruct or demystify the socio-political discourse on space (Dib) unveiling the *geographies of power* or, what the human geographer Doreen Massey calls, "power-geometries of space-time" (Massey 1999: 13). In the analysis presented,



I will argue that in Ferron's case the space of the North remains mystified to the reader; the idea of the nation-state is represented through an imagined space of the North that serves to *re-orientate* the main subject and the reader. In other words, through the deployment of the spaces of the North represented in *L'Amélanchier*, Ferron aims to construct the identity of the Québécois nation. On the other hand, in Dib's text the space of the North comes to signify a *non-place*, allowing Dib to deconstruct and demystify the spaces of the North represented through the function of absence at the semiotic, socio-political and psychoanalytical level.

## The North and the strategy of re-orientation in Jacques Ferron's *L'Amélanchier*

Jacques Ferron was born in Louiseville (the province of Maskinongé, Québec), in 1921. No longer alive, he remains one of the most important Québécois writers today. A doctor by profession, he began his writing career in the theatre. In 1962, his first major work, *Contes du pays incertain* (Ferron 1962), a collection of short story-tales, was published, for which he later received the prestigious Governor General Award. This was followed by the publication of *Contes anglais et autres* (Ferron 1964), *La Nuit*, later re-written by Ferron and published as *Les Confitures de coings* (Ferron 1972) and *Le Ciel du Québec* (Ferron 1969). In 1970, Ferron wrote what was to be, according to a number of critics, his most accomplished text, *L'Amélanchier* (Ferron 1970). Beside his literary and medical interest, Ferron was also very active politically. In 1960 he participated in the founding of the *Action socialiste pour l'indépendance du Québec* and in 1963 he formed his own independent party, *Parti Rhinocéros*, and remained its candidate during several federal elections.<sup>1</sup> Although Ferron's work includes theatrical pieces, novels and short stories, his writing style is most often associated with the subversion of the traditional storytelling genre. Pierre L'Hérault speaks of the phenomenon of the *repiquage du conte* in his analysis of Ferron's work (L'Hérault 1980: 22). This process of *repiquage* to which Ferron himself refers to when speaking about Québécois folktales fulfils a unique function. It transforms space from an unfamiliar to a familiar one through the process of *localisation*. The marks of *localisation* used have the function of enabling the storyteller (and the reader) to translate the unfamiliar world of uncertainty into one that is familiar, thus opening up a new space of collective identity and consciousness. Through the use of folktale, Ferron interrogates his relationship to the space of the nation-state. He explores the collective myth of the return to the origin or land that figures so prominently in the Québécois imaginary. As L'Hérault observes when speaking about the role that the

1) The source for this summary is Pierre L'Hérault's essay *Jacques Ferron, Cartographe de l'imaginaire*.



trope of the homeland or *le pays* as an imagined space plays in Ferron's *Contes* (Ferron 1968):

Loin donc d'être un refuge et déboucher sur le mythe, l'imaginaire québécois de la légende est un moyen de s'appropriier la réalité (...) Et le pays cesse d'être un lieu de peur pour devenir un lieu habitable, grâce à la force de l'imaginaire (L'Hérault 1980 :23).

The recreation of historicity as deployment of *l'image matricielle* in Ferron's work, argues L'Hérault, passes precisely through imaginary space as a space of collective memory. Thus, Ferron's practice of localisation in the space of the imaginary allows him to recreate the individual and collective space of the imagined nation-state; it allows him to recreate an imagined community as Benedict Anderson would define it (Anderson 1983). However, Ferron's use of the practice of localisation can be interpreted as an expression of the writer's anxiety in relation to Québec as a viable or actualised national space, as well as an expression of the sense of *dépaysement* that is characteristic of a number of Québécois writers (such as Gaston Miron) in the period of nationalistic Québec that follows the Quiet Revolution (Zoppi 1998).<sup>2</sup>

*L'Amélanquier* is an autobiographical novel narrated by a child and, later, a young woman called Tinamer de Portenqueu who, crossing into adulthood, realises that she has been living in a state of *dérive* at the same time as she has already become a writer. It is at that moment of turning back and recounting one's memories, a moment that occurs in parallel to one's sudden realisation of passing of time and of a loss of innocence, that the story begins. In the novel, the spaces of the North appear as spaces signifying the quest for origin, the quest for identity, through the process of localisation and the strategy of *re-orientation*. At the beginning of the novel one is introduced to the heroin, Tinamer de Portenqueu, about to embark on writing her life story:

Mon enfance je décrirai pour le plaisir de me la rappeler, tel un conte devenu réalité, encore incertaine entre les deux. Je le ferai aussi pour mon orientation, étant donné que je dois vivre, que je suis déjà en dérive et que dans la vie comme dans le monde, on ne dispose que d'une étoile fixe, c'est le point d'origine, seul repère du voyageur. (Ferron 1970: 27)

As shown in the above quotation of the opening paragraph of the book, the place of origin is symbolically represented as a stable and constant space of the North that allows Tinamer, the *voyageur*, to orientate herself on the voyage of life. The act of writing stands in opposition to forgetting or to the state of *dérive* in which Tinamer, the

2) Gaston Miron's poetry collection *L'Homme rapaillé* (Miron 1970) was published the same year that Ferron published *L'Amélanquier*. Among other things, the Italian critic Sergio Zoppi argues that Miron's poems can be seen as an attempt to transform the abstract and unfamiliar space of Québec into the habitable, familiar place of his native Gaspésie through a variety of textual strategies.



subject and the narrator, finds herself before she starts writing her memoirs or her autobiography, something that constitutes the main subject of Ferron's book. Thus, writing becomes a strategy of *re-orientation* of space.

The types of spaces that dominate in *L'Amélanchier* are spaces that relate to nature. The most frequent tropes of space and place relate to natural spaces such as /*forêt*/ (forest), /*clairière*/ (clearing), /*bois*/ (wood), /*jardin*/ (garden), /*arbre*/ (tree) (138 occurrences). These are in opposition to urban spaces (53 occurrences). To illustrate this, table 1. on the following page shows the semiotic analysis of the spaces mentioned here that were conducted on the text. The sememes that dominate within the category of natural spaces are those of /*bois*/, /*forêt*/ and /*arbre*/.<sup>3</sup> The spaces of nature or the sememes /*bois*/, /*forêt*/ and /*arbre*/ or /*wood*/, /*forest*/ and /*tree*/ that have the highest occurrence often appear in the text in connection with the evocation of an imaginary space, which is also the space of Tinamer's childhood memories. The only natural space that is marked by phoria or ambivalence is the space of the forest.<sup>4</sup> As is characteristic for fairytales, the forest is experienced both as an enchanting and a strange, daunting place in which extraordinary characters make their appearance. A series of characters appear/ disappear such as Monsieur Northrop, an Englishman carrying a compass that was once a rabbit – an obvious reference to *Alice in the Wonderland* – and who is always in a hurry, or the priest Messire Hubert Robson who a century ago lost a girl called Marie Mahon and who has been searching for her in the Canadian forests ever since. Thus, in *L'Amélanchier*, the space of the forest is not only invested with the values of nature, but also with those of the cultural and collective memory, imagination, as well as limitlessness and deepness.

The narrator's native space, the *comté of Maskingongé*, appears less frequently in the text than other types of spaces, such as, for example, the natural spaces shown in table 1. However, it appears more frequently than spaces such as /*Canada*/, /*Bas-Canada*/ or /*Québec*/. This confirms what L'Hérault says about Ferron and the relative abundance of toponyms of Québec in relation to the sparse occurrence of toponyms of Canada in his text.<sup>5</sup> According to L'Hérault, the abundance of toponyms of Québec in relation to the sparse occurrence of toponyms of Canada in Ferron's work, shows that Ferron's representation of space is firmly anchored in the Québécois spatial im-

3) They constitute 57% of the total number (138) of sememes of space in this category.

4) Phoria is a value that belongs to the thymic category. It is considered as a compound value (in the same way aphoria is) that is used in semiotic analysis to explain the state of ambivalence (both positive and negative) of the subject in relation to a certain object. The positive state or value is designated as euphoria, whileas the negative state or value is designated as dysphoria (Hébert 2006).

5) It has been argued elsewhere (Nardout-Lafarge:1998) that the names of Québec, Canada, Gaspé or Kamouraska (to name just a few) are all of Indian origin; both spatial and geographic loss in Québec are inscribed in the history of the name, according to Nardout-Lafarge.



Isotopy/ Semes*	Frequency of sememes**	Sememes	Opposition
Nature	138	/bois/, /arbre/, /jardin/, /clairière/, /forêt/	Nature–City
Native	54	/comté (de Maskinongé)/, /domaine/, /pays/, /maison/, /origine/, /lieu/, /village/	Native–Foreign Internal–External Inside–Outside
Urban Space	53	/école/, /cité/, /hôpital/, /institution/, /orphelinat/, /maison psychiatrique/, /prison/, /rue/, /quartier de Montréal/, /ville/, /labyrinthe/, /building/, /fleuve/, /égout/, /trottoir/	Nature–City
Local	20	/village/, /province/, /other/	Local–Global
National	4	/pays/	National–Global
Global	3	/monde/	Local–Global
Foreign	5	/espace inconnu/, /les pays hauts des Sauvages/, /ville (de France)/	Native–Foreign

\* The seme is the smallest unit of meaning or “the smallest common denominator within a unit of meaning” (Martin and Ringham 2006:172).

\*\* The sememe is the actualised occurrence of the seme in the text.

**Table 1:** The presentation of isotopies of space in *L'Amélanchier*.

aginary whereby Québec becomes an *image signifiante*, a mythic place.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore not surprising to find that the *comté of Maskinongé*, although less frequent than other types of spaces, is given a central place in *L'Amélanchier*. This is achieved through Léon de Portenqueu's recounting of the story of the *bible of the Maskinongé* and of the de Portenqueu family, in which the county of Maskinongé becomes both a place of symbolic rupture and a place of origin or of beginning of a history that is distinct from both French and British histories, and in which the idea of *métissage* and of the First Nations' cultural heritage plays a pivotal role.<sup>7</sup>

The opposition or the distinction upheld between the natural and the urban spaces, and the positive vs. negative values attributed to these spaces, can be interpreted

6) As L'Hérault noted, the image of the homeland or *le pays* in Ferron's work is often expressed through the following four ideas/places: Maskinongé, Gaspé, Jacques-Cartier, Québec (L'Hérault 1980 :45).

7) Léon de Portenqueu is Tinamer's father.



as a typical example of mystifications of space that the French social theorist Henri Lefebvre refers to in his analysis of the representation of space (Lefebvre 1974). The negative values attributed to urban space in *L'Amélanchier* are identified as threatening spaces of American progress and modernity. The urban and social space of the street and the city of Montréal designated metonymically by the working quarter of Hochelaga are being given negative connotations that have the power to corrupt. This can be noted in the following passage:

Par devant la maison, du mauvais côté des choses, passait la rue comme ailleurs, rivière grise et morte d'asphalte refroidi dont la coulée remontait à l'ère tertiaire, époque où ma pauvre mère avait été fillette dans le quartier Hochelaga. (Ferron 1970: 44)

The sememe /rue/ or /street/, is clearly being endowed with a negative value; it is described as a space that is located on *the bad side*. Equally, through the inclusion of the Hochelaga quarter in his description, Ferron gives the urban space a clear socio-political dimension in his text. Ferron's urban spaces in the text stand in opposition to the individuality, subjectivity and individual identity with which natural spaces in the novel are endowed. One of the most important transformations at the level of the narrative occurs when Tinamer enters school, as it is at that moment that the distinction between *good* and *bad* becomes blurred in the narrative until these two spaces eventually switch sides. The same negative values assigned to the spaces of the street and the city of Montréal in particular, spaces that designate technological progress and the process of Americanisation, are also assigned to the space of the labyrinth. The space of the labyrinth is viewed as a deprived space of urbanisation and technological progress brought in by American culture expressed in the image of *le naseau de Papa Boss* as shown in the following extracts:

La rue devant la maison portait le nom de Bellerive, une des centaines et des milliers d'alias du labyrinthe, un faux nom pour compliquer le dédale urbain, suburbain et multimunicipal. (Ferron 1970: 45)

pour parfaire le labyrinthe américain et faire monter, très haut, le naseau du Papa Boss, de nouvelles émanations de la civilisation pétrolière. (Ferron 1970: 120)

As can be seen from above, the figure of the labyrinth in the context of Ferron's text is represented as the urban space of American culture evaluated dysphorically. Thus, and contrary to the feeling of euphoria (or later phoria) associated with natural spaces described previously, the social, urban spaces identified in the novel are viewed negatively; they are invested with a strong feeling of dysphoria.





As demonstrated above, Tinamer's *re-orientation* in space is made possible by an investment of the opposition of natural and urban spaces of the North in the book and the positive and the negative values associated with these spaces. From the point of view of the construction of the narrative, *L'Amélanchier* represents an interesting challenge; the text generates a circular narrative within the realm of the imagined space of subjectivity and introspection. In *L'Amélanchier*, the linear progression of the story starting with Tinamer's *initial* state, childhood, and ending with her *final* state, adulthood, is intertwined with the initial and final states of her as the narrator and of a fictionalisation of her own past and present (Martin 1997).<sup>8</sup> Viewed as a sign of a fractured identity and memory that seems often embedded in postcolonial Francophone autobiographical discourse, the strategy of narrative circularity can pose a complication for the identification of the final and the initial state of the narrative.<sup>9</sup> There is an inherent internal tension within Ferron's text at the level of the narrative. At the primary level of reading, events from Tinamer's life can be followed in chronological order from her childhood to the present time of adulthood.<sup>10</sup> At the second, more interesting level, Tinamer's story becomes an identity quest and a discourse on identity, a discourse that is revealed in the penultimate chapter (Chapter 12), and that functions as the secondary starting point of the narrative. It is through the process of rewriting life as memory that Tinamer takes possession of her own past. Following this interpretation, Chapter 13 can be identified as the final state of the story. Marking the time of the mythological present, this chapter represents the point in the narrative at which Tinamer's writing of her memoirs has already been completed. The real and narrated or imagined time and space find themselves compressed into a single moment of the space-time matrix, as indicated in the passage of Ferron's book cited previously. So, the different levels of reading reality and memory install a narrative circularity or ambiguity at the centre of Ferron's text that function as a meta-discourse on the processes of autobiographical memory and writing. They introduce a narrative circularity or ambiguity on the processes of production of discourse on identity. This discourse on fixed identity is closely linked to a mystificatory discourse on space. Ferron's text recreates an imaginary or an imagined space of the North conceptualised as a mythical construct that is

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8) According to Martin, the analysis of the narrative level of meaning starts with the examination of the global structure of the text and the identification of the initial and final states of the story that, according to semiotic theory of narrative, must be in opposition.

9) Narrative circularity can be noted in number of texts written by North African authors writing in French to which Mohamed Dib, the author analysed in the second part of this article, belongs to.

10) The initial state of the story begins with the description of Tinamer's childhood and her native space (from paragraph 3 in chapter 1 of the book), ending with the chronological present that is also the starting point of the writing of her memoirs (recounted in the first two paragraphs of chapter 1 of the book).



defined by this identity discourse. In other words, through the deployment of the spaces of the North, Ferron recreates Québec's collective identity and memory.

To conclude, Ferron's *L'Amélanchier* can be viewed as a text on the theme of loss and recovery of identity in the Québécois context and the return to one's origin. In that sense it can be understood as an *identity quest*. The space of the North is deployed as a mythical construct, a symbolic device of nation-building through the construction of the imagined and imaginary natural and urban spaces represented. The imaginary, native, natural spaces are opposed in the text to socially constructed spaces, as spaces of urbanisation and industrialisation that are defined by a number of conflicting and opposing discourses on the socio-political and cultural spaces of Québec that are the result of the process of Americanisation. Both natural and social spaces can be interpreted as being represented through the spatial relationship *internal – external* or *imagined – real*. The function of this relationship would be to reinstall the “re-orientation” between the past and present of Québec and between the internal spaces of the imaginary and external, socially constructed spaces of the *real* through the act of writing. By using the technique of localisation and *re-orientation*, Ferron's text generates traditional representations of native space and place that remain mystified for the reader. This type of conceptualisation of space of the North is essentially different to the one offered by the Algerian writer Mohamed Dib. The different values assigned to the idea and the concept of space of the North in Ferron's vs. Dib's text point to its construction as an empty signifier and as mentioned in the introduction. The Argentinian political theorist Ernest Laclau defines the empty signifier as follows: “An empty signifier is, strictly speaking, a signifier without a signified” (Laclau 1996: 36). Indeed, in Laclau's definition of the concept is entailed the idea of the “floating signifier” or of a signifier void of meaning (that can be filled with any meaning), and as will be shown in the analysis of Dib's text that follows.

## The North and the strategy of *deterritorialisation* in *Les Terrasses d'Orsol*

Whilst Ferron uses the fairytale and the strategy of re-orientation to construct the collective myth and the imaginary space of Québec seen as an imagined North, in Dib's text *Les Terrasses d'Orsol* (Dib 1985) the space of the North is deployed through the process of deterritorialisation and the construction of *non-place*. As will be shown, Dib's *non-place* is located in the imaginary space of the city and the representation of the binary pair North-South, which is translated in the text into the opposition between the West and the Arab-Muslim world at the semiotic, the socio-political and the psychoanalytical level. In his work *Lecture présente de Mohamed Dib* (1988) the



French critic Charles Bonn gives the following interpretation of the concept of *non-place* or *non-lieu* in Dib's text:

Non-lieu où aboutit la quête, dans un ailleurs qui n'est à tout prendre qu'une antériorité à laquelle on n'avait pas assez pris garde, *Les Terrasses d'Orsol* comme *La Danse du roi*, mais aussi comme la fin de *Qui se souvient de la mer*, récuse un ancrage référentiel qui permettait de le réduire à un 'sens' lisible dans la 'réalité' (Bonn 2018).

Unlike Augé's concept of the *non-lieu* as a place of absence of a fixed identity defined anthropologically, Dib defines the concept of *non-lieu* semiotically (Augé 1992).<sup>11</sup> As Bonn posits, this concept produces an absence of meaning in Dib's text in which the relationship between the sign and its referent is broken. In *Les terrasses d'Orsol*, the space of the North as a *non-lieu* is further deconstructed through the critique of the discourse of exclusion (inside-outside) and Dib's deep concern for the question of alterity and communicability of meaning in the Algerian and French, but also in the global context.

Mohammed Dib was born in Tlemcen, Western Algeria, in 1920. In 1952, two years before the Algerian revolution, he married a French woman, joined the Algerian Communist Party and visited France. In 1959, he was expelled from Algeria by the French authorities for his support for Algerian independence and has lived in France until his death in 2003. *Les Terrasses d'Orsol* is part of what some critics call the *Nordic cycle* consisting of four texts written between 1985 and 1994: *Les Terrasses d'Orsol* (Dib 1985), *Le Sommeil d'Eve* (Dib 1989), *Neiges de marbre* (Dib 1990) and *L'Infante maure* (Dib 1994). The *Nordic cycle* is classified as belonging to Dib's later work under the theme of the *cycle of exile* and a mystical search for meaning. However, Dib's use of the writing strategy of deterritorialisation and his exploration of the imaginary space of the North as a *non-place* (visible also in his exploration of the imaginary of North American spaces) does not follow a linear, gradual and temporal progression. Rather, it can be read as a fundamental mark of Dib's writing. It shows his early concern with the socio-political aspect of space seen as the interconnectedness between space, social relations and power, something that human geographers such as Doreen Massey define as *spatiality* or the hidden relationship between space and social relations. As Massey argues in her latest work on space (Massey 2005), the existence of "implicit", "hegemonic imaginations" of space are not an inherent part of our thinking and practice. Instead, they are inherited through a number of discourses on space that have permeated both intellectual and popular thinking in the West, and have led to the production of a Eurocentric conceptualisation and imagination of space (Massey

11) "Si un lieu peut se définir comme identitaire, relationnel et historique, un espace qui ne peut se définir ni comme identitaire, ni comme relationnel, ni comme historique définira un non-lieu." (Augé 1992: 100).



2005: 17).<sup>12</sup> Dib's examination of the space of the North allows him to explore the problematic space of the postcolonial Algerian nation-state in the context of its relation both to France and the West. However, as a writer in exile his work also speaks of the writer's unbroken connection with the native space and his problematisation of the issues of cross-cultural communicability and *système de références*. In his essay *L'Arbre à dire* (Dib 1998), Dib discusses the ideas of cultural and linguistic translatability in the context of the relationship between Algeria and France, defining and posing the question of the existence of the same frame or system of reference within these two cultures (Dib 1998).

*Les Terrasses d'Orsol* is a novel describing the increasing sense of alienation experienced by Eïd, and his gradual fall into madness. Eïd is a *chargé de mission* who has been sent to Jarbher, a city located in the North, by his government in Orsol without exactly understanding what his mission is. He starts writing weekly reports on the strange humanoid creatures he sees in the caves and the abyss located at the borders of Jarbher, but he receives no acknowledgement or further instructions from his government. The central question that will be posed in this analysis is how is *non-place* deployed in Dib's novel. It will be shown that the notion of *non-place* is constructed as a function of absence. It is constructed as absence of a number of oppositions at the level of the space of perception, as can be seen in the semantic pairs *jour–nuit* (day–night) and *lumière–ténébres* (light–darkness) represented in table 2. on the following page, something that I will get back to later in my analysis.

A number of spaces identified in the text represent the space of the North. Among these the most significant ones are the urban spaces relating to the city of Jarbher and Orsol. During the course of the novel, we learn very little about these two spaces, except that the main action takes place in Jarbher representing a city in Northern Europe. As is the case with the imaginary toponym *Orsol* (the main character's native city), the toponym *Jarbher* points to the construction of a *non-lieu*. We only know that Jarbher is a city located at the ocean (Dib 1985: 85) and through which runs the river Slän (Dib 1985: 167), that its hinterland is mountainous and that its habitants like spending some of their time in wooden houses on the islands located opposite the city (Dib 1985: 162). These descriptions point to an imagined city in the North that stands in opposition to the Southern city of Orsol evoked nostalgically by the main character throughout the text. As can be seen in table 2., there is a clear difference in the number of occurrences in the text of the two cities. The city of Orsol is mentioned only in a small number of flash-backs; this low occurrence in the text contributes to

12) Language is full of stereotypical statements about spaces and places that we constantly use without thinking. Phrases in English such as “at the end of the world” or “in the middle of nowhere” used when describing or referring to unfamiliar or foreign places, participate in the creation of the hegemonic discourse on space and spatial imagination. The same can be said of expressions in French such as *perdre le Nord*.



Isotopies of space / Semes	Total occurrence of sememes	Thymic category	Opposition
jour (day)	7	86% dysphoria	/
nuit (night)	42	92% dysphoria	/
lumière (light)	19	79% dysphoria	/
ténèbres (darkness)	13	92% dysphoria	/
(city of) Orsol	27	93% dysphoria	Orsol–Jarbher
(city of) Jarbher	84	49% dysphoria 26% phoria 14% euphoria	Orsol–Jarbher Island–Jarbher

**Table 2.** Representations of isotopies of space day-night, light-darkness and Jarbher-Orsol in *Les Terrasses d'Orsol*.

its “problematic” status (Bonn 2018). Orsol is described as the place where one drinks tea in the shade of the plane trees (*on boit du thé à l'ombre des platanes*), where one runs towards the sea flickering under the weight of the sun (*court au devant de la mer vacillant sous le poids du soleil*), or where the smell of the perfume of jasmine exhales at night from its white and quiet patios (*ses blanches et tranquilles terrasses*) (Dib 1985: 87–88). Thus, the cities of Orsol and Jarbher firstly seen as mirroring opposites progressively become to designate the same signifying absence. At the beginning, images of the magnificent and glorious city of Jarbher that represents progress, modern living and industrialisation (that all come at a high cost) are contrasted with the poetic images evoking memories of the lost city of Orsol. However, by the end of the novel, Eid is seen wandering through the empty urban spaces of Jarbher without memory, disoriented, a feeling which, in the end, leads to madness brought by the impossibility of his return to his native city and his incapacity to integrate himself in the social life of the Northern city and its circles.

Throughout the book, the urban space of Jarbher mostly signifies a space of ghosts and traces of images of strange yet familiar places that reveal an ambivalent feeling towards the space of the modern Western city. Indeed, both a euphoric and dysphoric value is attributed to the city of Jarbher. The following passages taken from the beginning and end of the book illustrate both the euphoric and dysphoric values attributed to the city, described at the beginning of the novel as a labyrinthine space in which the



main character feels disoriented. By the end, Eid is disoriented and experiences a loss of memory expressed as absence and loss of meaning:

Comme toujours en traversant la ville j'étais ému par l'impérissable lumière de paix dans laquelle j'allais. (Dib 1985: 69)

Et il essaye de faire demi-tour, ou de se rappeler, il s'élançe (en pensée), et ce sont les mêmes rues, les mêmes passages, sûr de pouvoir remonter ainsi le cours de ses souvenirs, mais rien ne se produit, il n'y parvient pas, et ce sera une autre nuit. (Dib 1985: 197)

The city of Jarbher appears here as a symbol of the space of the void, or a space void of memory, signifying absence. In difference to Jarbher, the imaginary city of the South Orsol has a low occurrence in *Les Terrasses d'Orsol*. It appears as a reflection of a place living in the narrator's memory. Feelings of nostalgia and melancholia are experienced by Eid towards his *citée insaisissable* or the unreachable city that remains *rayonnante de blancheur immaculée* or "radiant in its immaculate whiteness" in his memory, and as seen in the following passage:

Orsol hante de plus en plus mes pensées. Rayonnante de blancheur immaculée ainsi que telle cité de légende dans toute sa présence remémorée, ma bonne ville ne me semble pourtant pas pouvoir être plus lointaine. Elle me manque. (Dib 1985: 97)

The imagery of whiteness – in reference to the whiteness of the city's houses - is used here to describe the narrator's native city. Orsol is most probably a reference to the city of Algiers; while the silence and indifference of the State or *État* is almost definitely a reference to the state of Algeria that Dib was forced to leave in 1959. In the novel, light and darkness, day and night are both perceived as dysphoric spaces equally endowed with a negative value, they are semiotically equivalent. An opposition of meaning can be noted in the semantic pairs *jour–nuit* (day–night) and *lumière–ténébres* (light–darkness). This absence of opposition is realised through the attribution of the material and transcendent quality of whiteness and light to both of its comprising elements. So, /night/ and /darkness/ become equated with their oppositional pairs /day/ and /light/. Interestingly, not only in this text, but in other texts too, Dib makes a recurring use of the tropes of snow, desert and steppe. In his writing, these tropes signify whiteness as absence or loss of meaning. In *Les Terrasses d'Orsol*, this imagery of whiteness that is normally associated with the trope of the North – as in the whiteness of snow, for example, - is linked to the notion of absence or loss of meaning. There are numerous occurrences in the text in which the sememes /blanc/, /blancheur/ participate in the annihilation of the binary relation-



ship day–night marking this loss of meaning. The whiteness of night is referred to in the following passage:

aussitôt, ce pont de lumière se met à scintiller, posé même à l'eau, arche d'hypnos dont nous n'arrivons plus à détacher les yeux [...]. Le ciel est clair, encore blanc, presque bleu maintenant que la nuit est tombée, mais il redeviendra plus clair et il le restera uniformément jusqu'au matin. (Dib 1985: 152)

As with the tropes /white/ and /whiteness/ that participate in the annihilation of the binary semantic relationship *day–night*, the semantic pair *light–darkness* also produces an absence of meaning in the text. The meaning of the sememe /*lumière*/, light, is invested with the material quality of blindness, liquidity as in the following quotation:

Mais c'est que toute la lumière est là, liquéfiée. Un infini de lumière et il déroule ses lourds plis brillants, ne cesse de se mouvoir, de se rapprocher sans jamais arriver (1985: 13).

However, the sememe /*lumière*/ is also invested with a mystical, threatening quality of the *malediction* or a curse in reference to a *lumière dehors* and a *lumière dedans* – external light and internal light. The double opposite meaning that the trope of light has in Dib's text annihilates the existence of the opposition light–darkness and further destabilises the meaning of the text. It has to be noted here that the semantic pairs *light–darkness* and *day–night* have been assigned a spatial character in the analysis. The main character, Eid, experiences these categories primarily spatially rather than temporally. A “multiple temporality” (Adjil 1999: 110) is at work here, and it is this temporal relationship that annihilates the opposition of meaning in the pairs described above. Indeed, the spatio-temporal relationship that is characteristic of linear discourse or narrative is progressively destabilised by a variety of narrative devices such as the switching between pronouns *je* and *il* or the intermittent repetition of Quranic lines that are being recited by what seems to be a second narrating voice or the narrator's alter-ego. The deconstruction of time and space that finds its expression in the chapters on Eid's stay on the island and on his return to the city marks the start of his progressive sinking into madness. Interestingly, the Algerian critic Bachir Adjil explains this non-distinction between figures of night and day as a sign of the already mentioned multiple temporality in which the present and the future co-exist, something that seems to be typical for Arab classical literature: “Cet oxymore du clair-obscur appartient au schème coranique de la création des deux entités temporelles que sont le jour et la nuit” (Adjil 1999: 110).<sup>13</sup> This significantly different interpreta-

13) As part of this quotation, Adjil refers to the sura of the L'Ascension: n°17 verse 12.



tion of temporality adds an important dimension to the idea and production of *non-place* in Dib's novel as one that resists Western conceptualisations of space.

Dib's move towards deterritorialisation installs a dynamics of presence–absence of meaning inscribed as a culturally determined opposition *inside–outside*, giving rise to a critique of the discourse of exclusion and enabling the deconstruction of the Western discourse on space. Both the socio-political and the psychoanalytical aspects of the space of the North represented by the city of Jarbher are deconstructed by Dib in the conversation that Eid has with a stranger, an Algerian migrant, on a bridge over the river Slän. The two talk about the city and the space on its borders where the caves with animal creatures are. Here, the space of the caves under the city with these creatures that have been humans once, can be seen as a metaphor for the repressed (collective) unconscious that stands in opposition to the space of the above or the space of the organised Western society that strives to control, censor and govern human drives and emotions. The display of denial and indifference on the part of Jarbher's inhabitants every time Eid questions them about his experiences and their authenticity reinforces the fundamental distinction that Dib establishes in the novel between the normalizing forces of Western society propagated by the values of bourgeois life, and the assumed abnormality of the repressed spaces of the unconscious. It is in this conversation that Dib's critique of the discourse of exclusion becomes fully visible.

To conclude this section, the space of the city in Dib's *Les Terrasses d'Orsol* is constructed in the space of difference between the West and the East, and between the North and the South. The absence of reference to any *real* space allows for the construction of the imaginary space of the city as an elsewhere or a *non-lieu* (Bonn 2018). More importantly, the space of the *non-lieu* in *Les Terrasses d'Orsol* allows for the *demystification of spatiality* to take place through the destabilisation of the space of perception and the annihilation of spatial oppositions such as *day-night* and *light-darkness* inscribed within the imaginary space of the city, leading to the production of absence of meaning. For Dib, the process of the demystification of spatiality must pass through the processes of deconstruction of language and meaning. Spatial loss, in this context, is determined by and represented in the loss of meaning.

## Conclusion

In this article I presented the analysis of two distinct conceptualisations of the space or the idea of the North in the work of two writers and their novels. The analysis showed that the space of the North is conceptualised as a highly ambivalent concept or as an empty signifier in Laclau's sense. Through the use of





the strategy of *re-orientation*, Ferron's text generates traditional representations of Northern spaces of Québec that create a space of the North that remains mystified for the reader. The narrator's native and natural imaginary spaces of childhood are opposed to the socially constructed spaces of the city as spaces of urbanisation and industrialisation in which coexist a number of conflicting discourses on the socio-political and cultural spaces of Québec that are the result of the process of Americanisation. This movement between the mystification of natural space and the need for demystification of the socio-political space of the city installs a discourse or a paradigm of ambivalence in *L'Amélanchier*. In contrast to this, an essentially different conceptualisation of the space of the North is at work in Dib's *Les Terrasses d'Orsol* at the semiotic, socio-political and psychoanalytical level. Dib's strategy of deterritorialisation operates as a function of absence, creating both a critique of the discourse of exclusion and deconstruction of the Western representations on space that leads to a *demystification of spatiality* in the novel. The imaginary space of the city is constructed in the space of difference and sameness between the North and the South and the West and the Arab-Muslim world. It gradually becomes a space of *non-place* signifying this function of absence.

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**Conceptualising the North: Re-Imagining the Spaces of the North in Jacques Ferron's *L'Amélanchier* ...**

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