

# The Algerian wife or “l’amour n’a pas d’âge”

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## Abstract

Young male immigrants from North Africa come to France as much to defy a sense of globally structured exclusion as to escape the effects of other geopolitical stresses. While most anthropological work on Islam and North African youth in France documents a return to conservative Islam, this letter discusses another response to this same experience by illegal North African immigrants living in France. The response described here is one of humour, romance, and a continued desire to join the West rather than a rejection or challenge to French society. This letter provides ethnographic data on the phenomenon described above and so gives a view from the street of how romance may be one of the most important preoccupations of the clandestine male.

**Keywords:** male migration; North Africa; France; love; romance

On a warm night in April 2006, I was showing my new housemate around the center of Marseilles. We sat down in front of the Opera House as night fell to rest before dinner, and four boys circled in front of us, one on a bicycle. My friend was a black African and not of interest to the boys, who were of North African descent. I was more interesting to them, presumably because I had white skin, and they spoke to me while ignoring my companion.

## ***Bonsoir mademoiselle. Ça va? (Good evening, miss. How's it going?)***

They called out greetings, some polite and some overly familiar, until one – the largest – stopped his bicycle next to me without dismounting. I asked why he called me *tu*, the familiar tone of address that children in France rarely (and should not) use with an adult they do not know.

The ringleader wasn't discouraged, and his three comrades sat down around me. They wanted to know where I was from, why I was walking around with a *noir*, a black, and if I wanted to have dinner with them that night. One put his hand on my shoulder and tried to slide it down, but I stood up. "I'm too old for you," I said, but I was hardly surprised by the all-too-familiar response,

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### ***“L’amour n’a pas d’âge.” (Love knows no age)***

In the previous nine months that I had spent in Marseilles, I had already come to know the narratives of love and longing that were overwhelmingly important in the lives of young – even very young – males of North African descent. I had also come to see that such romantic gestures and discourses were partly related to these young men’s perceptions of a great history and appreciation of romantic love within their own North African cultures that resonated with what they perceived in the West.

Ethnographic fieldwork also made it clear to me that the importance of romance for such young men was surprisingly most heightened within the concrete perspectives on everyday life in France as lived by disallowed outsiders from North Africa. Love, or at least its appearance, was considered essential for a good life and social standing in the loosely-defined society of North African *clandestines* I worked with during a year of fieldwork in Marseille.

“*Clandestine*” is a term used in France to refer to illegal immigrants in that country who are primarily from Africa and who have no right of appeal against deportment and no means for obtaining a ‘real’ job or education. In addition to conjuring up images of poor Algerians or Senegalese (among others) cramming into apartments and taking illegal work, the term *clandestine* has also become an increasingly inflammatory term in French politics because the subject of immigration, legal or otherwise, has become a central political and economic concern in France (McNevin 2006).

The *clandestines* became my population of interest within the social fabric of Marseilles because they responded to a difficult, constantly stressful situation with humour and hope instead of with resentment. Many of them had risked their lives –or at least travelled in very uncomfortable situations – for the chance to come to Europe. They had been ready and willing to work hard and succeed upon arrival, not realizing that migration to France is, at present, a nearly sure ‘lose’ for someone without any right to education or employment.

Facing a situation where there was little they could call their own, the men and boys I knew turned romance into a public arena for both a connection to Western culture and also a showing of their masculinity and fitness. Their ideas about romance were not ‘resistance’ but rather a creative construction of a reality where there existed the possibility of advancement.

My informants had thought to escape into the center of things, only to find themselves still excluded from assimilation or even participation in ways now more structural than social compared to their felt isolation before immigration. When in France, my informants remained materially indigent, but now they also faced the stressor of potentially imminent deportation if any policeman should decide to ask for papers or identification. Moreover, there was no more work to be had in France than in their home countries, so that the men loafed around without a job and without any societal consensus

about whether they could or should be where they were at all. Even the potential for gossip ran thin, as their social circles were necessarily limited to others like themselves who similarly had little news to transmit from day to day.

In the face of the boredom that has become the newest hardship for the Subaltern escaped to the West, my friends and informants showed me an impressive power for creative constructionism in choosing a new field of battle to give them some interest and standing even in their difficult circumstances in France. They chose to interest themselves in love – a pursuit that could (potentially) lead both to a sense of empowerment in the face of a globalizing system that had driven them to France *and also* to real material gains such as, French citizenship via marriage to a French citizen (Friedman 2007, Castells 2000).

Romantic love offers young men in France of North African descent or birth a precious route to achieve respectability and some essence of “Frenchness” in the potential for a romance that can end in marriage and attached rights such as citizenship, education, legal work, and social welfare entitlement. If lucky enough to locate and take advantage of such a golden pathway, men can ultimately hope to prove themselves a success even to their families still residing in North Africa, many of which remain ignorant of the conditions in which their young men live while abroad. While such successes are few and far between, they are a good deal better than nothing at all.

## Methods

This letter is based on ten months of fieldwork in Marseilles, France. I worked three days a week as an intake assistant at a day-time homeless shelter located in the downtown area of Marseilles as a jumping-off point for my own social insertion. From this vantage point, and while also residing in a neighbourhood with a population that was numerically dominated by North African immigrant, I was able to garner many social connections with North African communities. My informants for the research in this letter were young men of North African birth or descent, all under the age of 35, and all fluent in French.

My informants came from many walks of life in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, and they were all fluent in French. The majority of my informants had learned French upon coming to France, through free language classes or simply *comme ça, sur la rue* (just from hearing it on the street). Almost all could read basic signs in French, and more than half could comfortably read a newspaper in French (this was tested only through experience and not through officially asking my informants to read for me). My informants all spoke Arabic as their mother tongue, but most of them could not read or write Arabic script because they had not had the opportunity for much schooling in their countries of origin. Amongst them, the North African *clandestines* in my project usually communicated in Arabic with enough code-

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switching that I could get some idea of the subject of many conversations without knowing any Arabic. In the presence of non-Arabic speakers, my informants usually switched to French out of politeness.

The living situation of my informants varied widely, depending on whether they had any family or friends who could house them, whether they had an informal job they could use to pay for a room in a crowded apartment somewhere, and whether they preferred to take their chances in a homeless shelter or on the street. Most had situations that were fairly fluid and tied to more than one place to sleep or spend time.

Marseilles is a city of around a million people, and an enormous portion of the population is not of French birth. One local joke is that the population is probably closer to a million and a half when all the *clandestines* are added. French citizens of North African descent are the ones who will most comfortably refer to this situation since they have no need to fear accusations. White residents normally will not discuss the issue because they do not want to appear reactionary or racist. The French government and general society both maintain that 'French' is a nationality rather than an ethnicity. Adhering to this thinking marks 'correct' thought in Marseilles.

### Conceptions of love in France and in Algeria

My informants were always keen to teach me about Algerian or Tunisian or Moroccan culture, and they did so through many activities, such as inviting me for a plate of couscous or talking to me about Arabic script. In some cases, I found that my informants tried to blur the boundaries of our relationship by ignoring my anthropological interests. They often sought to turn our connection into something with a romantic tinge. I received numerous gifts of unpackaged women's perfume, second-hand clothing, and loose cigarettes wrapped in foil or cloth. My informants gave gifts in order to establish a connection, and often they would ask how my gifts were and whether I still liked them, sometimes several months after the gifts had been given.

The gift itself, like the romance they were trying to create, became something to talk about and perhaps a way of establishing social standing with a female. Implicitly and more symbolically they were striving to establish standing within the realm of romantic love. To have a partner would be to have one's foot firmly into that world, even if the partner was not necessarily someone who could lead them to other material gains they desired.

The informants were often jealous when I interviewed other men, and they sought to make our interactions as intimate as possible even when I spent time with them while openly using a tape recorder and notebook. I was usually dressed so dowdily that my clothing was scarcely acceptable even for a casual afternoon at a Marseilles café, but the men made little distinction between a *grande dame* (well-dressed woman) and a dowdy one, so long as she had the desirable qualities of youth and Westernness. There

was decidedly less enunciated interest in North African women among my informants than there was interest in Caucasian French women.

The informants often told me that Arabs had a long and deep history with romance that was very similar to that of France. “We Arabs have a great history with *l’amour* (love). We are much more skilled at romance than are the French,” as one of my informants put it. It is true that many North African cultures have poetry and songs imbued with romantic love as much as with familial pride (Abu-Lughod 2000), but I tended to find that French-cultural residents of Marseilles emphasized their differences between themselves and North African communities via the issue of polygamy. Hence, even romantic love itself, and related practice, was an area where my informants saw similarity even as the larger society emphasized difference.

I asked some informants why they spoke of their “romance” in the same sense as the West, despite their polygamous traditions and other differences between their traditions of love and those of France that Westerners seemed to think most defining. My informants told me that the differences were small, and that many of the beliefs about romantic love were the same. They consistently told me, for example, that a man could have only one great love in his life, just as in France, even if he had many wives over his lifetime. They emphasized to me that additional wives were a practical measure, taken as the result of a different society where there was a shortage of men.

What was surprising, in my informants’ reactions, and given the current ethnographic and current affairs writing on Islam in France (e.g. Body-Gendrot 1992, Smith 2004, Murray 2006), was that my informants ultimately *did* want to participate in a Western romance, ideally with a Western woman. Despite the legion of reported evidence that conservative Islam is on the rise among young men in France who are of North African background, I found that my informants still selected aspects of French culture and Western experience - and most often romance - which they pursued as an important part of their social identity and standing, both with women and with their male peers.

### **Wives and other women**

Extending Lévi-Strauss’s contention that women were the first commodities (1971), my informants treated the very idea of women – as lovers, admirers, or wives – as the most powerful tool for trading. Men used stories of their adventures with and yearnings for women as badges of honor and masculinity whenever they encountered one another. They talked about how much they longed for the proper love they had been seeking for so long, or about the loves they had achieved but which were not quite the right thing yet. In their society, it was important to be popular with most young women. Perhaps more important was that their peers believe that they had some standing and experience with women, in addition to mere popularity.

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Contrary to much of what has been written on young Muslims in France (e.g. Tietze 2001, Samers 2003, etc), my ethnographic data showed that my informants' Muslim identity seldom mattered to them in their behaviour and in their identity in a variety of social situations. When they had the assured company of a woman, my informants gladly went to night clubs or invited women out for drinks. They consumed the same amount of alcohol as their French peers would in the same situation.

Islam did not formally restrict my informants' access to these women because it is not forbidden to a Muslim man to pursue or marry a non-believer, but in any case my informants did not often perceive themselves as 'good Muslims.' Most indicated to me that had their lives 'gone another way,' they would have liked to practice properly, but that they could not in the chaotic circumstances of their present lives. Few ever speculated in their conversations with me as to whether they would have liked to be 'good Muslims' even under the right circumstances.

My informants seldom found it problematic to tell me that they had a wife at home but would like to date such and such a woman. This was not entirely puzzling, given the dating etiquette in some 'moderate' Muslim cultures in which no one is surprised to see a married man 'dating' very much in the Western sense of that word. What was surprising and even puzzling was that many of informants, having once told me they had a wife, would later assert that they had never had either a wife or a girlfriend. Conversely, over the course of my fieldwork some of the other young men I worked with lapsed the other way, first asserting that they had 'never had anyone' and later speaking of a wife and even children left behind in Algeria or Morocco or Tunisia. Some informants fluctuated several times on this particularly relevant bit of personal history, so that I was never able to assess which possibility was more likely to have some factual basis.

This ability to fluctuate about a non-present female was perhaps one of the practical aspects that made romance and women such valuable (discursive) commodities. Women were such valuable - and unverifiable - commodities that my informants often lied about them, both to me and to other men. They never admitted as much, but I saw many instances of lying about a wife or the absence thereof during my fieldwork because I had time to interview and observe the same informants during periods of time as long as 9 months. The details were such that they could slip away pleasantly into conversation after a particular story had been recounted or a point made about the joys of married life, etc.

The lies about women revolved around whether or not a man had a wife or two left behind in Algeria. I sometimes use 'Algeria' instead of 'North Africa' because 16/23 informants whose data I have analyzed for this letter were of Algerian origin. Men would sometimes tell me they had a wife, and then some weeks or months later tell me that they were virgins, or at least that they had never been pinned down by any single woman for very long. Conversely, sometimes men would tell me that they were completely unat-

tached in the world and seeking out their great love, only to later casually mention a wife or even a wife and child. I never confronted an informant about these lapses of consistency, nor did I ever see any men confront one another about this. Given the difficult circumstances in which the men live, I do not find it hard to believe that few if any noticed the inconsistencies in the stories of their peers.

Both claims of virginity and claims of having a wife were used to bolster whichever aspect of masculinity - desirability or maturity - was most salient to my informant at a given time. Sometimes men tried to woo me by telling me that they had a wife, but that they didn't love her nearly as much as they could love me or another Western woman who knew more about the world. At other times, these men would try to market themselves with claims of virginity, purity, and naiveté. How men chose when and why to represent themselves in a given fashion remains unclear to the author at present. There were some situational prompts given by the tilt of the conversation, but none that were ever controlling.

Arguably, my informants weren't always lying per se. In a world where you can leave a young bride you hardly know, as some of my informants may have done, it might be the case that you don't know if she's perished or left you since you were gone. You may not even know if you still have a wife. If you've no news of your family, it is arguably true that you both have a family and also haven't. Drifting alone in the West may indeed make it easy to believe that there are fewer objective truths than there would be in a more stable life situation. Why not use whichever truth most conveniently helps you to pursue a new purpose at a new moment?

To see a more concrete example, consider two conversations I had with an informant, Ahmed, age 27 and originally from a village "close to Algiers." The first quoted conversation is from an interview in December 2005, while the second is from an interview in March 2006. As far as I know, Ahmed had not received any news from his family during that time, as he already told me that he had passed eight years in France without contact with anyone in his family except a cousin who lived in Toulouse, France.

*December 2006*

Ahmed: *J'ai une femme là-bas.*

(I have a wife back home.)

AN (Author): *Où ça?*

(Where's that?)

Ahmed: *Chez moi, dans le village de ma famille.*

(At home, in my family's village.)

AN: *Qu'est-ce qu'elle fait maintenant? Pourquoi l'as-tu laissée?*

(What does she do now? Why did you leave her?)

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Ahmed: *Mais, tu vois, j'ai pas pu la prendre avec moi...c'est pas possible quoi!*

(Well, you see - I couldn't bring her with me - that isn't possible.)

March 2007

Ahmed: *Je n'ai jamais rien ici. La France est toute pourrie.*

(I never get anything. France is rotting.)

AN: *Pourquoi dis-tu ça? Il y a quelque chose qui ne va pas?*

(Why do you say that? Is there something wrong?)

Ahmed: *Je n'ai rien ici. J'attends, j'attends, mais je ne trouve même pas une femme. Elles sont toutes racistes ici. Elles ne veulent pas de moi.*

(I don't have anything here. I am waiting, and I am waiting, but I never even find a woman. They are all racist. They don't want anything to do with me.)

Ahmed was in a bad mood in the second quoted interview, but he did not tell me the reason. I suspect that it was during the second quoted interview that he was most honest with me about some of his feelings on the lack of success in his (im)migration. It was the only time he ever admitted such personal vulnerability to me, and I never saw him showing such vulnerability in the presence of his peers.

When the men were in groups together (though granted, also in the presence of a female ethnographer), they spoke a lot about women. They could turn the simple recounting of holding a door for a woman who said, "*Merci*" into a tale that ended with some once-in-a-lifetime romantic twist. Rarely did a peer express scepticism, but rather a whole group would feel a bit better after hearing a story like this one, a story of hope and inclusion.

My informants also took seriously the efforts they made to encounter such tales, even only in passing. Though many of my informants slept in the streets, on the floors of grudging relatives, or in homeless shelters, they all paid attention to their appearance and often wore new clothing purchased in small stores that offered exceptionally low prices if you were willing to dig through large boxes of items to find something acceptable. Amongst themselves, my informants would talk about a woman they were seeing, or who liked them, or who had complimented their clothing. They would also talk about being popular with the women back home in rural parts of Algeria - a difficult-to-verify claim, given what they told me at other times about segregation of the sexes that made 'dating' and the like unheard of in their home villages. As in the case of a wife, other aspects of truth about Arabic vs. French cultures showed a fluid boundary for my informants.

Women were sometimes the subject of up to half the conversations I observed and participated in during my fieldwork, and the importance of skill in romance and the ideal of a true love are themes that should not be ignored



in our understanding of how immigrants - particularly those excluded from any hopes of participation in their adopted countries - nonetheless keep hope alive in ways that do not necessarily lead them either to radical Islam or to the oft-feared but rarely seen 'life of crime.' They were certainly themes elevated to the highest importance in how my informants chose to occupy themselves and their conversation.

I hope this paper will do something to awaken new interest in coping and creative strategies among migrants, and particularly new interest in related-phenomena not easily explained with existing theories of power, resistance, and reaction. More particularly, I hope that the resilience and culturally constructive power and creativity that young men of North African origin have shown in France will be better appreciated and better documented in the anthropological literature on the subject. This change will only do greater justice to the truth of the situation and also further theory in the anthropology and sociology of migration.

So how well founded are the claims that this hugely popular form produces a valuable representation of the complexities of the new millennium?

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