

Notes on Chantal Soussi Chiadmi's bookshelves

Virginie Bobin, Ouidade Soussi Chiadmi

Chantal Soussi Chiadmi was born in the early 1950s, in the French Alps. Her parents lived for a few years in Tunisia before moving back to her father's village at the foot of the Mont-Blanc, where he worked as a postman while her mother grew vegetables and raised goats. Chantal was close to the Jeunesses Ouvrières Chrétiennes, a leftist Christian youth movement. From her teenage years, she followed the social and political experiments born out of the independences, and heatedly defended the Palestinian cause during family dinners. As a young adult, she traveled to Portugal right after the 1974 revolution, to Lebanon and to Algeria. Thanks to a State grant, she studied to become a social worker, focusing on the living conditions of migrant workers in France. When she began to work, she roamed leftist bookstores in Bourg-en-Bresse and Paris in search of pro-palestinian, anti-colonial and anti-racist literature, randomly collecting social science studies, activist pamphlets as well as novels.

In the summer of 1976, Chantal was invited to Tangier by a Moroccan woman she had befriended after accompanying her as a social worker. There, she met her brother Abdallah, a leftist activist. Their love story grew in the interstices of a few stumbling French words. In the late summer of 1979, they got married in Morocco, grabbing two tourists in the street to play the role of best men. Chantal is pregnant. A long, fastidious administrative saga finally brought Abdallah to France a few weeks before their son Bachir was born.

I had no clue about all this when I first met Chantal and Abdallah in Tangier in May 2010, where I had followed Bachir, my lover. Chantal was a small, discreet woman, who rarely spoke about herself. I began assembling some pieces of the puzzle in 2014, when Chantal and Abdallah moved out from their apartment in the French mountains. I helped Chantal packing her bookshelves, browsing through her books, her photo albums and her souvenirs. I was astonished to discover the rich variety of her small-scale book collection, where I encountered Frantz Fanon, a maoist review, anti-racist pamphlets, histories of slavery, analysis of islamophobia in France and numerous literary authors from Morocco, Algeria or Lebanon, among others. She inoculated me with her love for these writers. Since then, books have become vital characters in our conversations, inexhaustible sources of discussions, gifts and complicity.

For Chantal, novels are lenses through which to better understand the world. For both of us, they are also companions and allies to narrate, record and care for the family's story — a story that is both unique and inseparable from political histories in France and Morocco, particularly concerning the way France has been treating immigration from the Maghreb. Chantal's books also enclose the ghosts of two unattainable languages that haunt the family: French, which remained for Abdallah a place of struggle, bitterly tinted with the experience of factory years, unemployment and racism, as well as with the loss of reading and writing; and Arabic, which was not spoken at home when Bachir and his younger sister Ouidade were growing up. Each member of the family had to labor into the elusive language of the other(s), loaded with desire, frustration, gaps, memories and love. However, the Moroccan *darija* (spoken dialect) recently resurfaced in the family's conversations when Ziyad, the son of Ouidade and her Moroccan husband Khalil, was born in 2017. Languages in motion continue to impress and shift the family's relations.

Chantal and Abdallah have different ways of telling their stories. I began listening to them year after year, summer after summer, when a book, a photograph, an object or an anecdote became triggers. As I became fully integrated into the family, I also retained this “newcomer quality” that allowed some stories to be uttered without the pressure of a shared past. In the summer of 2019, I invited Chantal to engage in a more formal conversation about her books collection, to be published on Qalqalah قلقله. Through her books, I wanted to pay homage to the extraordinary figure of this admirable woman; to a life of commitment, courage, curiosity and love, which remained mostly unspoken and unnoticed.

Our conversation took place in her garden, in French, surrounded by pumpkins, tomatoes and the severe silhouette of the mountains; punctuated with the ring of cow bells and the buzzing song of bees. Ouidade, who works as a photographer, took pictures of our discussion and the books. She occasionally joined the conversation.

This article is not a translation but a version of the French introduction and conversation available [here](#), from a different angle. You are invited to browse through the books/characters depicted below, accompanied by Chantal’s words — short quotes from her stories about them. A third version of that encounter is available here in *darija*, as told by Ouidade Soussi Chiadmi. The three versions are situated attempts to reflect — in voluntarily fragmented ways — our family’s polyphonic, multilingual stories in the making, tending to their silences as well as to the bonds they weave.

V.B.



Portrait of Chantal Soussi Chiadmi by her daughter Ouidade, August 2019.
Image: Ouidade Soussi Chiadmi.

Chantal:

“I have always been protesting against the world, the political world. During my childhood, we had many family discussions about politics. My parents had a subscription to *Témoignage Chrétien* [Christian Testimony], a leftist christian magazine. It supported the independence of Algeria, all independences and decolonization. When I was a teenager, a local priest took me to the Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique [Catholic Youth Workers], where I met people who were very much into politics, into defending workers. It was a very important experience. I was never an activist myself, for different reasons. But I have been marked by the founding of the State of Israel. I thought it was unbearable. It became a strong subject of conflict between my father, my brothers and I since I have been 15 years old.”



Some of the books that Chantal acquired during her studies and her first years as a social worker in the 70's. Titles read: *For a Christian Reading of Class Struggles; Poverty, People's Wealth; Thinking Social Action Anew; Childhoods and Cultures...*
Image: Ouidade Soussi Chiadmi.

“From very early on, I was interested in the Algerian revolution. I have many books about the Algerian experience: sociology books or studies about the country’s organization. I had the opportunity to travel to Algeria in 1978 with an organization. I bought most of my books before my wedding. Because, after that, I had other things to pay for and I bought less books. There was even a time when I did not buy books anymore at all.”



Titles on this shelf read: *Arabs; Is there a future in Morocco, Yasmina asked me; The Unrooted Man; Life of an Algerian; Maghreb, People and Civilizations; Algerian workers in France; We tortured in Algeria; Maghreb: History and Societies; Algerian State Capitalism; Algeria: Nation and Society; Women, Granaries and Capitals; Crimes of the French Army; The Algerian Way...* Image: Ouidade Soussi Chiadmi.

“My father called me an ‘unconditional fan of the Arabs’, although I had never met any Arab before I began my studies to become a social worker in 1969. Studying has been a huge opening onto the world, it was fantastic. I was passionate about law and sociology. Many other students had had other professional experiences before and it was very enriching to be with people who had lived more than me. At the time, social services worked a lot with migrant workers and families from Portugal, Spain and later the Maghreb. I did a study on migrant workers’ living conditions in hostels. I met a researcher from Tizi Ouzou, who was one of our lecturers. He gave us a very different vision of the Maghreb, far from the usual scorn and ignorance of ‘the Arabs’ that were commonplace in France at the time.”



GISTI is an Information and Support Group for Immigrants created in 1972 by social workers, activists and legal practitioners. In 1974, it published *The little legal handbook for migrant workers*, conceived as both a professional and a political tool.
Image: Ouidade Soussi Chiadmi.

“During the 70’s, I traveled to Paris a few times with my best friend Marie-Thérèse. She looked for music, I looked for books. When I began to work, I also spent time in a bookstore in Bourg-en-Bresse, where I would go regularly for meetings and training. You could spend hours there, seating and reading. I was looking for books on Algeria, Palestine, migration: these were my topics. Nobody advised me, and there was no Internet at the time to help you look for things. I stumbled on books by chance.”



Chantal holding a copy of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), which she bought in the late 70's during her bookstore errands. Image: Ouidade Soussi Chiadmi.

“I got interested in Morocco after I met Abdallah. At the time, for people like me who contested the French government's line, Morocco was a *bête noire*, because of the king and all that. I was very conscious of this before I met Abdallah, although I did not expect to live it in person... So, I was interested in Moroccan dissidents. This is why I have many books by Tahar Ben Jelloun from the late 70's. He was already very famous in France.”



Hospitalité Française [French Hospitality] was written in 1983 in reaction to the murder of Toufik Ouanes, a 9-year old boy who was shot by his neighbour because he played with firecrackers in a suburban housing estate in La Courneuve. This event contributed to the emergence of a structured anti-racist movement in France. An edited version of the book was published in 1997, subtitled *Racism and Immigration from the Maghreb*. Image: Ouidade Soussi Chiadmi.

“I was very interested in authors from the Maghreb. I read the ones who wrote in French, because they were educated in French before the independences. Or the ones who were translated from Arabic to French. Abdellatif Laâbi was a great discovery for me. He is very special to me, because of our family’s history. He was imprisoned for more than 10 years, as an opponent to Hassan II, the king of Morocco. He was married to a French woman, a teacher, who always supported him while he was in prison. They wrote children books together. Well, he is a true character, a true poet, with a free mind. There are people, like him, whose perseverance strikes you. I don’t read much poetry, but he wrote novels and reality books that are very interesting.”



Mohamed Choukri's autobiographical novel was first published in 1973 in English under the title *For Bread Alone*, after Tangier-based writer Paul Bowles worked on a translation with Choukri. Tahar Ben Jelloun later translated the book into French: *Le pain nu* was released in 1980 by Maspero. It was published in Arabic in 1982 and subsequently forbidden in Morocco from 1983 to 2000.
Image: Ouidade Soussi Chiadmi.

“*Le pain nu* was given to us as a present by my brother in 1980, when Abdallah arrived in France. Abdallah read it in Arabic. He does not like this book because it reminds him too much of his childhood's living conditions. The novel itself does not shock him. He could have written pretty much the same story. He grew up in the countryside, but when his family moved to town, when he was 10 years old, it was really misery. What he does not like, is that French people talk about the book and say: ‘You see, living conditions in Morocco...’ It is not their story, it is his. Stressing the problems is a bit like voyeurism, you see? He does not like this.”



View from Chantal's bookshelves, featuring mostly French novels from her earlier years. Image: Ouidade Soussi Chiadmi.

“I do not know classical literature very well. If I had to talk with people from the good society, with a proper education, there are many things I would not know... There were no books at home when I was a child. There was an atlas, and that's it. My parents did not teach us literature. I could tell you a lot about children who were not able to enjoy school as much as others because they did not receive an opening to literature or to knowledge from the start. For example, we did not talk about art, we did not know about it. Although my aunts, my mother's sisters, they went to high school. My aunt Gisèle was a teacher. They do read. But they are younger than my mother. My mother did not like reading books. And I think that she did not have the time when she was young, and once she became older, she did not want it anymore. Anyway, I arrived to high school with nothing.”



View from Chantal's bookshelves above her desk. The book on the top reads: "Tales and Parables of Islam's Wisdom". Below are novels and books about Islam and islamophobia in France; French identity politics; colonialism; Palestine... Authors include Angela Davis, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Abdelatif Laâbi, Khalil Gibran... Image: Ouidade Soussi Chiadmi.

"Slavery, racism and Islam became some of my main interest points. I read many books by Abdenmour Bidar. He is a French philosopher who wrote a lot about Islam. His mother was a doctor in France and she converted to Islam, it is a very special trajectory. He writes about spiritual Islam, how to adjust to civilization, how to live with Islam in France. He is very open, he tries to popularize things, to touch people. Recently he was invited on TV a lot, to talk about terrorist events. Before that, you only heard him on the radio."



Portrait of Chantal by her daughter Ouidade, August 2019.
Image: Ouidade Soussi Chiadmi.

“I do not consider myself a feminist, but I find that women face so many inequalities! Around me, women have always been the pillars of family and I think that they are of utmost importance for families’ balance and children’s education. And yet, their fate is so unequal! I say that equality will never come, because women bear children and that is a constraint that needs to be taken into account. But then women should receive help, and support, and understanding. Yes, I would fight for that.

In my work, I was primarily interested in women and their condition. When people live in normal conditions, with a relatively normal material situation and interesting jobs, women already have a lot to bear. But in disorganized contexts, without money, their problems multiply. Or when women find themselves alone, when the children’s father is gone. I was very busy with that. I followed many women who were addicted to alcohol. Generally, everything at home relies on a woman’s shoulder, so the consequences of her alcoholism can be dramatic. And problems of domestic violence. And addiction to drugs. That was more towards the end of my career. Today, I think less about all this. I have been retired for 8 years. I am losing the ties to my former job.”



View of Chantal's bookshelves, with portraits of her late parents, a Moroccan landscape photographed by Ouidade, and a framed poem sent by a friend of hers to celebrate Abdallah's long-awaited arrival to France in 1980.
Image: Ouidade Soussi Chiadmi.

“I would not be able to read a book in Arabic. I can read the letters, but not the words. It is one of my greatest regrets. It would have required more time, and support. Abdallah told me that I could never speak Arabic. It is true that I do not have an ear for language. I never pronounced it properly. But when I go to Morocco, I am more at ease. My nieces there helped me a lot, I am very grateful to them. They are the ones who taught me. I would like to get back to it, now that I have more time. Next Fall, I have two things to go back to: the swimming-pool, and Arabic!”

Virginie Bobin

Virginie Bobin works at the crossroads between research, curatorial and editorial practices, pedagogy and translation. In 2018, she started a practice-based research project on the political and affective stakes of translation, within the framework of the PhD-in-practice program in Artistic Research at the Akademie der bildenden Künste (Vienna). In parallel, she co-founded with Victorine Grataloup the non-profit organization Qalqalah قَلْقَالَة, a platform for artistic exchanges, research and translations.

Until 2018, she was Head of Programs at Villa Vassiliev, a center for art, research and residencies, which she co-founded in 2016. Previously, she worked for Bétonsalon – Center for Art and Research, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art (Rotterdam), Manifesta Journal, Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers and Performa, the New York Biennial for Performing Arts. Her independent curatorial projects have been hosted

internationally, in such institutions as MoMA PS1, e-flux space and Tabakalera, and her texts have been published in international exhibition catalogues and magazines (including Metropolis M, Manifesta Journal, Frieze /de, Flash Art, Switch on Paper). Editorial projects include *Composing Differences* (Les Presses du Réel, 2015) and *Qalqalah* (an online platform jointly edited by Bétonsalon – Center for Art and Research, Villa Vassilieff and Kadist Paris, 2015–2018).

Ouidade Soussi Chiadmi

Ouidade Soussi Chiadmi graduated from the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. After working for more than ten years as a photographer (Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Bétonsalon, g.u.i., Entrez-sans-frapper, TripAdvisor, ReedExposition...), she is currently training herself in the practice of computer coding. She collaborates with Figures Libres, a collective of graphic and interactive designers, which operates at the crossroad of two civic approaches: supporting messages with a public, social and cultural use, while operating with free softwares.

<https://qalqalah.org/en/notes-on/notes-on-chantal-soussi-chiadmis-bookshelves>