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# Abstracting Space: Remaking the Landscape of Colonial Algeria in Second Empire France

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CHAPTER 6

# Abstracting Space

## Remaking the Landscape of Colonial Algeria in Second Empire France

The world of images and signs exercises a fascination, skirts or submerges problems, and diverts attention from the "real"—i.e. from the possible. While occupying space, it also signifies space, substituting a mental and therefore abstract space for spatial practice . . .

Henry Lefebvre

This chapter takes as its subject the negotiation of spatial and individual boundaries in the colonial context of Algeria under France's Second Empire. My subject involves the representation of the most distant and wild of Algeria's landscapes, the desert. The paintings I consider are more experimental in their technique than other Orientalist paintings produced at this moment in France. Nevertheless, such a limit case illuminates one recurring theme in the history of artistic and colonial exploration: while works of art enhance a viewer's understanding of a world beyond view, they reflect and articulate a particular set of conceptions, an interpretation of the world. Such an interpretation exists in dialogue with other representations, but the terms of representation manifest and represent an existing set of values. In the case of landscape painting, it is space that is ordered into a pictorial language, which is a manifestation of both artistic conventions and the individualized technical practices of the artist. Landscape paintings represent the world in a more or less subjective way, and one of the keys to understanding the development of French art in the latter half of the nineteenth century is the way in which landscape painting became more individualized and less conventional. The effect that landscape paintings had upon viewers changed during this period as new forms of representation—*plein air* painting, Impressionism—required a more direct engagement with the artists' process than earlier academic landscapes, or *paysages historiques*, had.

Landscapists generally began to provide specific characteristics in their paintings that evoked the place represented, aiding the viewer's engagement with the site depicted and allowing the artist to signify his or her particular way of representing it. Curiously, the desert landscapes discussed here actually deny the specific characteristics of the place that they purport to represent, offering instead a seemingly abstract space. This practice allowed nineteenth-century viewers (and contemporary historians) to erase or obscure alternative or competing interpretations of the spaces in which people lived and continue to live. In other words, the potential power of landscape paintings to enact a form of possession for the artist and viewer, when realized in representations of Algeria in the Second Empire, replaced the spaces of human activity with the space of pictorial representation. This imperial act is consistent with the colonial domination of the era: this form of possession takes place in the realm of projected ideas and marks a new manifestation of the empire of landscape. As will be shown below, this representation of the Algerian desert paralleled the development of new paradigms of landscape description in colonial geography. Territory, that raw material of colonialism, is paradoxically also the product of colonial practices, the implementation of a certain imperial view of the world *upon* the world and those who inhabit it.

Here, I want to trace a certain historical shift in spatial representations of the colony. This transformation had a visual character as well as social and political dimensions in the French colonization of Algeria that occurred in the last years of the Second Empire, between 1863 and 1870. The space of France's colonial desert, the Algerian Sahara, was the very limit of its empire in the 1860s and, as such, it represented a liminal terrain both in material terms and as a symbol of French national landscape when depicted in works of art. In order to describe the metamorphosis of representations of colonial space in the last half of the Second Empire, it will be necessary to compare legislative and geographical representations of Algeria with a handful of artistic ones created by Gustave Guillaumet and Eugène Fromentin.

In brief, a self-consciously colonial posture arose among many of the writers who addressed

Opening image, detail of fig. 70

the issue of France's political problems in Algeria in the 1860s. The future of colonialism in Algeria had been a pressing political issue in France between 1839 and 1844, but in the 1860s, ethical concerns and practical problems that might complicate the unrestrained exploitation of the colony's resources were brushed aside. In the early 1840s, the opposition criticized the colonial administration for its ineptitude and its unjust treatment of Algeria's indigenous population. In the 1860s, the opposition criticized the colonial administration for its ineptitude and its overly generous treatment of Algeria's native population. Although the conquest was complete and the military administrators of Algeria were not entirely consistent, there is ample evidence that they continued to undermine native social and religious institutions during the Second Empire.[1] It was the political rhetoric that shifted—partly as a result of the increased organization of the colonists, which allowed them to voice their sense of entitlement.

While interesting in themselves, such political debates gloss over the deeper changes that constitute the foundation of the rhetorical arguments from this period of Algerian colonialism. Such a transformation of conceptions is very difficult to pinpoint, but here it will be useful to turn to a French theorist of society and space, Henri Lefebvre. Central to my argument is his concept of abstract space: "Homogenous in appearance (and appearance is its strength), abstract space is by no means simple. In the first place, there are its constitutive dualities. For it is both result and container, both produced and productive. . . . For, while abstract space remains an arena of practical action, it is also an ensemble of images, signs and symbols. It is at once lived and represented, at once the expression and foundation of a practice, at once stimulating and constraining, and so on."[2] The basis of Lefebvre's notion is that lived space and the means of perceiving it through vision are intimately connected by representation. Abstract space is an order into which human activities are placed, but it is ultimately a conception of space that shifts practices. It constitutes a way of perceiving the world that changes what the world is and what happens there.[3] For this analysis, the visual aspect of abstract space is crucial and, as will be shown, a landscape painting can represent an abstract space even though it is a figurative painting.

In Lefebvre's terms, any landscape painting would be an abstract space, but the issue here is how such a thing might come to be represented. At this point in history, our sense of abstraction is perhaps as various and nuanced as our sense of nature (which is a strong reason for investigating it more fully). Here, I will examine how representation—in whatever form—can serve to denature a subject, in this case a colony, a desert, and a landscape.

## Social Dimensions of Desert Imagery

The Second Empire is particularly significant for the colony because, at this point, France initiated the legal and administrative process of fracturing Algerian terrain into units in an effort to spur colonialism and to engender an understanding of private property among the native inhabitants. The metropole thereby promulgated an abstraction of the colonial landscape. This process of rupturing the country of Algeria in the service of its French expropriation corresponds, in many ways, to depictions of denuded, empty landscapes. It is not simply that the desert, once described as "the negation of Europe,"[4] represented the outer reaches of a colony that had been little explored and still retained an element of distant romanticism. Rather, the desert functioned as a powerful symbol, as analyzed by the

Figure 69. Gustave Guillaumet, *The Desert* (or *The Sahara*), 1867. Oil on canvas, 110 × 200 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo courtesy Musée d'Orsay (Patrice Schmidt).

geographer Michael Heffernan. In his article "The Desert in French Orientalist Painting During the Nineteenth Century," he argued for the desert's double signification: it was the land of "desolation and infertility," yet the desert also implied the power of (European) society and progress to restore it to a mythical former time of prosperity. Such an opposition of meanings, according to Heffernan, led to an ambiguity that, "instead of breeding confusion and vacillation, became a source of imperial power. Europeans could, and did, profess admiration for a separate and distinctive Orient while at the same time promoting the necessity of a transforming and beneficial European imperial presence in the Orient."[5]

This ambiguity will play a role in my analysis of Guillaumet's desert landscape, *The Desert* (1867; fig. 69), also known as *The Sahara*, but it is crucial to make the point at the outset that the desert existed as a symbolic construction of a land outside of time (history) and outside of civilization (society/progress). In terms of European conceptions of space, it was an empty landscape in the sense that it was, by definition, uninhabited—an oasis being within, though not part of, the desert—and therefore an open screen for the projection of whatever meaning a viewer might perceive in it.[6] In this case, the idea of a "pure landscape"[7] possesses historical piquancy, because a landscape image that features a denuded space is open—both to interpretation and to potential settlement. Private property and pure landscapes are ideas that are constituted in relation to an atomized individual who functions as the locus of legal and visual representations of space. Further, pure landscapes, like private property, are an accepted fiction. Just as deeds function to secure private ownership of territory, a painting of the desert secures the notion that the colonial landscape is, in fact, empty, open to European settlement. Of course, this landscape

does not look ripe for settlement, but its lack of apparent landscape characteristics functions in much the same way as an empty room would, allowing the free play of the viewer's imagination without providing any sense of inhabitants who might have marked this space in any particular way.

Guillaumet's *The Desert* could be described as a pure landscape: there are no traces of human presence here, and the space is rendered in a direct, uncomposed manner. More important, it delivers a sense of space that overrides any anecdotal interest, providing a view of a remote corner of the world as a landscape. This is a radical proposal for what can constitute a landscape, and even what can constitute a landscape painting, but it serves as a limit case whose pictorial language illustrates the denaturalization of the colonial landscape in this period.

This painting has received more attention in the last thirty years than in its own epoch, but the descriptions of it provided by contemporary historians are, for the most part, anachronistic. Donald Rosenthal has described *The Desert* as "surreal" and drawn a comparison between this work and the "fantasy academicism" of Dali.[8] Philippe Jullian stated that Guillaumet's landscapes "might have achieved an abstract quality if he had not given too much emphasis to some of the details in order to convey the desolation."[9] Perhaps the most compelling observation comes from Robert Rosenblum: "Throwing aside any notion of perspective as useless in this context, he deploys a limitless space, half-way between documentary reportage and a nightmarish mirage."[10] These comments all share a notion of abstraction common to twentieth-century viewers that would have been lacking in 1867. Only Rosenblum's remark details the way in which the artist ignored the conventions of perspective to achieve his effect. Rosenblum reminds us that the artist elected to deny perspective in order to achieve a sense of limitless space as well as the dreamlike quality of the work that makes it appear surreal. Théophile Gautier's "Salon de 1868" provides a contemporary indication of the artist's ability to evoke a limitless expanse of space without contrivance: "Never has the infinity of the desert been painted in a simpler, more grandiose or more moving way."[11]

The effects Guillaumet achieved in this work are, in some ways, obvious to twenty-first-century viewers steeped in Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art. Through a denial of perspective and recognizable land masses, the artist has reduced the terms of this landscape depiction to the point that the viewer becomes aware of sensations of light and atmosphere. These effects are achieved through the artist's technique, such as the scumbling of paint in the sky and the use of light strokes of dry paint laid horizontally over darker, grey-green tones to achieve the illusion of light on a horizontal plane. The pastel tones inform the viewer that it must be either dawn or dusk. Traces of yellow pigment on the blue surface of the sky suggest dust hovering above the ground and surrounding the viewer with light. The desiccated camel in the foreground provides a decisive form that contrasts with the evanescence produced by sand and sky. The image is also completely static. The lack of movement only enhances the perception of a moment frozen in time, despite the traces of the artist's hand that indicate the time it took to make the painting.

This composition constitutes an interruption in Guillaumet's pictorial production. While he did, in other works, evoke this kind of vast space, it was always populated by exotic figures and trappings and therefore was more conventional as well as more appealing to the state. Looking at an earlier work, *Evening Prayer in the Sahara* (Salon of 1863; fig. 70), it is apparent that Guillaumet's career of official

Figure 70.
Gustave Guillaumet, *Evening Prayer in the Sahara* (Salon of 1863). Oil on canvas, 137 × 285 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo courtesy Musée d'Orsay (Patrice Schmidt).

success began with a more standard Orientalist genre scene, albeit one that evokes a real place in southern Algeria that the artist had traveled to and seen for himself.[12] While this earlier work was rewarded with a Salon medal and a state purchase for the young artist, *The Desert* was mostly ignored by the press and the Salon judges in 1868; the work entered the national collection only after the death of the artist in 1887. The question of what led the academically trained Guillaumet to produce such a radically simplified composition is compelling, perhaps because it is inherently impossible to answer with any certainty. Yet the painting itself and its symbolic references continue to inform viewers about the depiction of the outer reaches of the French empire in the 1860s. The emptiness of this landscape, its most profound pictorial legacy, is the aspect of the picture that demands interpretation. This emptiness is not only meaningful in itself, but it produces meaning as well. It is a representation of Algeria that pictures it as a stretch of naked earth, a landscape with no inherent character, a placeless space full of light and extending forever. The means through which *The Desert* makes the colonial landscape available for the viewer's apprehension and interpretation are also worthy of exploration. Therein lie the mystery and power of this picture. After an investigation of colonial land policy in Algeria at this moment, the significance of this emptiness will be clearer.

## Colonial Land Policy and the Political Economy of Landscape

The *sénatus-consulte* of 22 April 1863 appears, on the surface, to be a piece of legislation enacted by the French government for the benefit of the Arab population of Algeria.[13] It begins, after all, by declaring the tribes of Algeria the rightful proprietors of all "permanent and traditional" lands occu-

pied by them. Considering the fact that this law put an end to the practice of *cantonnement*, or the direct expropriation of a portion of tribal territories by the French administration for the purposes of French settlement and colonization, it was indeed a step in the right direction for the indigenous inhabitants of Algeria. Further, in light of received ideas in France about Arabs in general and Algerians in particular,[14] the *sénatus-consulte* was an enormous improvement in the French conception of Arabs. This law formalized their status as individuals in the French Empire, granting them the rights to hold property and, further, to own the lands from which they generated their livelihood—something French peasants had enjoyed since the Revolution. This law was followed in 1865 by another *sénatus-consulte* granting the native inhabitants of Algeria full French citizenship under certain conditions. This law was later expanded in 1873. In other words, the law of 1863 was one in a string of legislative concessions to indigenous Algerians. It was the kind of metropolitan domination of colonial affairs that infuriated both the colonists and the military administration in Algeria. In the eyes of critics, such laws guaranteed the rights of the Arabs over and above those of the French settlers.[15]

In fact, the *sénatus-consulte* was not created in the interests of Algerian natives at all. It was designed to allow for the future expropriation of tribal lands for French settlement, newly legitimated by the process of granting the natives private property, which could, of course, be bought and sold. As an added benefit to the French administration, it sought through legal means to fix the *douars*—the social groupings of Algeria's rural indigenous population—in place, replacing their nomadic existence with a sedentary one. This process had a history in the efforts of the *bureaux arabes* up to this point. As Patricia Lorcin explains: "In the period up to 1858 a concerted attempt was made to sedentarize the nomadic population through the construction of houses and public utilities, such as fountains, wells, public baths and markets (but not mosques or Koranic schools), and the development of a more sophisticated agrarian economy through the introduction of new crops and agricultural methods."[16] The *sénatus-consulte* was an ambitious attempt to transform the life of Algeria's native rural population completely, but it was not without precedent. Through it, the French government sought to complete the process of replacing traditional lifestyles and indigenous agrarian practices so that the French could guide the Arabs to a greater degree of civilization. Though he welcomed the application of the *sénatus-consulte* and later, in 1873, was the author of a law bearing his name that extended its effects in Algeria, Dr. Auguste Warnier was frank about its effects on the Arab population and its possibility of failure: "When the time comes that an imperial decree orders the creation of private property among the Arab tribes, a complete social revolution will be decreed and it is not at all certain that the tribespeople accustomed to the yoke of their tribal leaders . . . will not themselves repudiate the benefits of private property, in order to preserve the communism of collective ownership more in harmony with their nomadic lifestyle."[17]

This is an excellent example of colonial paternalism mixed with revulsion at the foundations of the nomadic practices of many indigenous Algerians. Warnier was, in fact, one of the most prominent publicists of Algeria during the period. A colonist himself, he ceaselessly defended the rights of the settlers, which, he felt, were neglected by Napoléon III's colonial administration. In his view, the interests of the colonists were sacrificed to those of the traditional Arab aristocracy, a group whose interests were to maintain their feudal con-

trol over the native population at the expense of the progress of colonialism. He stopped at nothing to besmirch the *indigènes*. In the passage above, he insinuates that their way of life is a form of communism, and elsewhere he supposedly provided mathematical proof, based on official figures, that a colonist was worth ten natives.[18] The fact that such a proof rests on agricultural production and paid taxes explains much about the colonial interests of the settlers and the French government. The ideal colonial citizen, whether native or settler, grew a wealth of crops and paid his share of taxes, assuring the prosperity of the colony. Such a view is as simple as it is universal. It is founded on conceptions of production and society that, the author admits, were fundamentally foreign to at least a portion of the indigenous population. These notions are polemical and, when accompanied by the mathematical *proof* of the superiority of one group over another, potentially dangerous.

Warnier's text reveals the intractable biases of a French settler who arrived in Algeria early enough to have lived through many years of battle with the native population, but it further points to some of the fundamental ideas about the colonial project that emerged in this era in France. Progress and colonial prosperity were central, but these notions were tied to French ideas of production and economic success. Further, there was a tendency to assess these factors numerically, as evidenced by Warnier's reduction of cultural difference to an abstract equation (1:10) that can be *factually* established.[19] Through these means, he establishes the predominance of the colonizer and represents the colonized as a fraction. Such thinking demonstrates the use of abstractions to explain the difficult problems that colonialism faced at this juncture. Rather than considering how best to integrate the two distinct populations with different practices of agriculture and patterns of land use, Warnier instead sought a means to quantify the difference between settlers and natives. His equation may seem ridiculous to us now, but in the political debates of the era, Warnier's ability to produce quantifiable evidence for his position was significant. It allowed him to make demands on behalf of colonists like himself, demands based on statistically verifiable information.

In this light, Napoléon III's interest in preserving the cultural autonomy of the native population seems progressive indeed. However, describing Algeria as an Arab kingdom (*royaume arabe*)[20] and granting tribes the ownership of their lands were two manifestations of a paternalistic posture, concealing the fact that the application of the *sénatus-consulte* would aid the colonial administration in its efforts to maintain a higher level of surveillance of the *douars* and prevent revolutionary or other allegiances from developing among tribes whose lands would be formally separated. In this sense, the effects of the *sénatus-consulte* would have been similar to those of the Haussmannization of Paris that occurred in the same period. The method for achieving this increased control of indigenous Algerians based upon spatial fragmentation—the distribution of private property to *douars* and individuals—was intended to inspire a respect for European (read civilized) values among Algeria's native population.[21] However, the attempt to delimit and attribute parcels of land to individuals or families who had always understood themselves as part of a collective and who may have never farmed the same stretch of land two years consecutively must have seemed incomprehensible to the members of the *douars*.

Three types of property existed in Algeria among rural populations, both Arabs and Kabyles: *Beylick*, or the domain of a *douar* or a tribe; *arch*, or

collective property; and *melk*, something like private property in the sense that it belonged to a family and could be passed from generation to generation. This third category was most common in Kabyle societies, which was one reason this group was favored by French intellectuals over the more nomadic Arab tribes.[22] In the texts of the *sénatus-consulte* and the instructions for its application, only the *Beylick* and *melk* forms of property are mentioned, with a single notable exception. Such an omission constitutes turning a blind eye to one of the fundamental tenets of Arab culture, and worse. The "Instructions générales pour l'éxecution du Sénatus-consulte du 22 avril 1863 et du règlement de l'administration publique du 23 mai suivant" clarify the intentions of this legislation. The constitution of individual property "consists in putting an end to indivision in the colony by determining the respective rights of families that are property holders."[23] It continues: "This substitution of individual rights not commutable to the collective right of the *douar* on a portion of the *douar's* own territory is a true revolution to set in motion in terms of the status of property laws among the Arabs; it is, in effect, the abrogation of the obscure Muslim property rights concerning land called *arch* or *sabega*."[24] This honest admission of the French government's attempt to supplant Islamic law fully on the issue of collective property demonstrates that, far from aiding the Arabs in their quest for self-determination, this piece of "Arab-friendly" legislation actually sought to undermine the legal codes and cultural practices of the Arabs native to the colony.[25] The need to "stop indivision" through the administration of the *sénatus-consulte* had a double purpose for French colonialism in Algeria. On one hand, the law sought to make members of *douars* or tribes into atomized individuals who would protect their own interests. This is nothing less than attempting to foist liberalism and individualism on traditional collectives by singling out individuals to make into landowners. Once an individual owns his own tract of land (only males need apply), he will naturally protect his interests over and above those of the collective. This pursuit is one that I cannot hope fully to analyze here, but it hinges upon France's self-imposed civilizing mission and demonstrates the Second Empire's obsessive fear of collectivization in any form. It was this sentiment that found expression in the text by Warnier analyzed above.

On the other hand, the advantage of making tribal lands into individual parcels was that it opened them up for French settlement. While the previous law of 1851 had held tribal lands apart from the market, the *sénatus-consulte* intended to distribute parcels to individuals who would then, acting in their own interests, sell the parcels to French colonists who sought to expand the colonial empire. In retrospect, this does not seem like a foolproof plan, since it assumed that the indigenous population of Algeria would immediately reproduce the individualistic interests of French entrepreneurs. Before analyzing the process of delimitation, it seems prudent to investigate in greater detail the basis for the perceived need for territorial expansion. As the social scientists who also acted as publicists for Algerian colonization assured their readers, making more land available for settlement was central to France's ability to expand the economic vitality of Algeria.[26] The way in which they arrived at such opinions, however—by figuring the number of inhabitants per hectare—betrays an increasing quantification in the French analysis of social processes, such as colonial settlement, as well as in their approach to territory.

In the geographical writings of the 1860s pertaining to Algeria, the character of the colonial landscape was altered, leading to a conception of

space as value. Whereas the earlier French geographers set out to classify, delimit, and thus synthesize the variegated territory of Algeria into comprehensible units, the works of Jules Duval sought to integrate such findings into the sphere of political economy. It was Duval who began his analysis of Algeria from the perspective of political economy and who eventually attempted to marry the information provided by geography to the systems of political economy in his theoretical work of 1863, *Des rapports entre le géographie et l'économie politique (On the Relations Between Geography and Political Economy).*[27] Duval was something of a one-man intellectual force, serving as both the secretary of the Société de la géographie and as the director of *L'Économiste français,* and he also was one of the most prominent authorities on and boosters for Algeria. His essay "French Colonial Politics, Algeria," appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1859 and advocated what became Napoléon III's two central policy initiatives in Algeria in the 1860s: the privatization of tribal lands and the naturalization of native Algerians to France.[28] In brief, he was a uniquely significant figure for Algerian policy in Second Empire France who also articulated a theoretical application of geographical knowledge to economic issues.

Like Warnier, Duval was a *colon* who promoted the interests of the settlers in the French press, and in 1869 he collaborated on a book with Warnier.[29] Yet Duval's writings are, for the most part, less polemical. Duval was the first to articulate fully the colonial tactic of assimilation and to spell out what forms it would take in Algeria.[30] In *Des rapports*, he made an argument about the geographical determination of economic factors: "Whether one discusses continents, portions of the world or less expansive regions, the contour exercises an influence that manifests itself in the destiny of its inhabitants: based upon whether it is whole or broken, angular or rounded, based on the respective proportion of these diverse traits, the political and economic effects will themselves be quite diverse."[31] The use of the term "contour" is self-consciously general and abstract, and therefore universally applicable. It is possible to divine that he refers to "natural separations," such as bodies of water and chains of mountains that were elaborated in previous geographical works on Algeria by authors such as Carette, Renou, and Daumas.[32] Of course, the notion that innate geographical characteristics could affect the development of economics and politics would seem to belie the universalist claims of Duval's observation: an argument for attending to distinctions between places ("diverse traits") when analyzing their economic and political development could undermine the undifferentiated formulas of political economy. Duval resolved this apparent contradiction, though, by pointing to exchange as *the* universal condition of humans: "In effect, exchange is the supreme sign of sociability in the material world. Certain animals work, only man exchanges and engages in commerce." He continued,

> Society, in its turn, has instituted the diverse rules of exchange between the metropole and the colony, between people united by certain traits, etc.
>
> In this alliance of human forces, geography indicates the exchanges, commerce executes them and political economy discovers the laws.[33]

While distinctions between countries exist and are the topic of geographical inquiry, exchange is the fundamental principle that connects these regions to one another. In Duval's view, commerce functions to assure relations through exchange; the role of political economy is to study this process and establish laws of exchange. While I am in no position to evaluate the universal validity of political

economy as it is articulated here, it is necessary to point out the way in which spatial configurations are deprived of meaning in this schema. Even a relatively meaningless abstraction of space, such as contours (of the earth? the earth as a body?), ceases to have importance in a world that is regulated by exchange that only political economy can properly understand. The "laws" of political economy, since they express the patterns of commercial exchange, regulate the meaning of space because they cut across it. Regional distinctions are unified into a global economic picture in this framework and, more important, distinct places and cultures lose their meaning in the face of the laws of economic exchange. They become nothing more than the spaces that commerce must traverse in order to achieve the goal of exchange. This line of reasoning is emblematic of abstract representations of space.

Such a system begins to have meaning in the context of Algerian colonization when, in a later work, Duval applies some of the laws of political economy to the colonial project. In 1866, he wrote, "Between the surface expanse of a nation and the forces necessary to exploit it, there is a natural relation." He added, "It can be said that, to a great degree, the amount of budgetary expenses is proportional to the extent of spaces in all civilized countries."[34] These two observations lead the author to insist upon the necessity for more settlers in Algeria, who then need to be granted more land, so that the territory can be more densely populated and thus produce more revenue. The concern is not so much with the policies articulated as with the way the territory of Algeria is rendered in such formulae. The idea that a natural relationship exists between the size of a country and the forces necessary to exploit it reduces the landscape to a measurement of space and reconfigures it as an abstract element (x) in a system governed by questions of productivity. In this equation, Algeria's spaces become fixed and quantifiable, a bounded terrain. Though people live in this space and are crucial in determining its value through the payment of taxes, the formula necessarily negates their presence and their practices in order to maintain its universal validity. The second proposition informs us that because the spaces involved are large, it is also expensive for the colony's governing body, because this expansive space must be covered with public works, such as roads, artesian wells, and the like. The formula articulated here is as follows: the more densely populated a space, the greater the return on expenditure, since more people will contribute to its tax base. Though Duval actually employs the term "spaces" here, indicating that there are differences between them that force the writer to use the plural form, these spaces are so fully abstracted that they form one part of a mathematical equation.

These principles of political economy are new to the discourse of the colonial landscape. The reduction of the spaces of the colony to an abstract, quantifiable signifier was a significant step in the dematerialization of Algeria's terrain. Though this transformation occurred within the realm of the social sciences, it evidences a social metamorphosis in French culture, namely, the ability to denature a terrain completely, emptying it of any other meaning than its quantifiable numerical equivalent (14 million hectares). Based on this number, Duval advocated the adoption of particular policies in Algeria. The equations he employed allowed him to perceive the inhabitants of Algeria as distinct from the lands they occupied; he was able to render the terrain separate from those who resided on it. In essence, this was the task of the *sénatus-consulte*. Though this legislation offered tribal lands to the tribes and individuals within them, the real process of delimitation was to make formal the separation

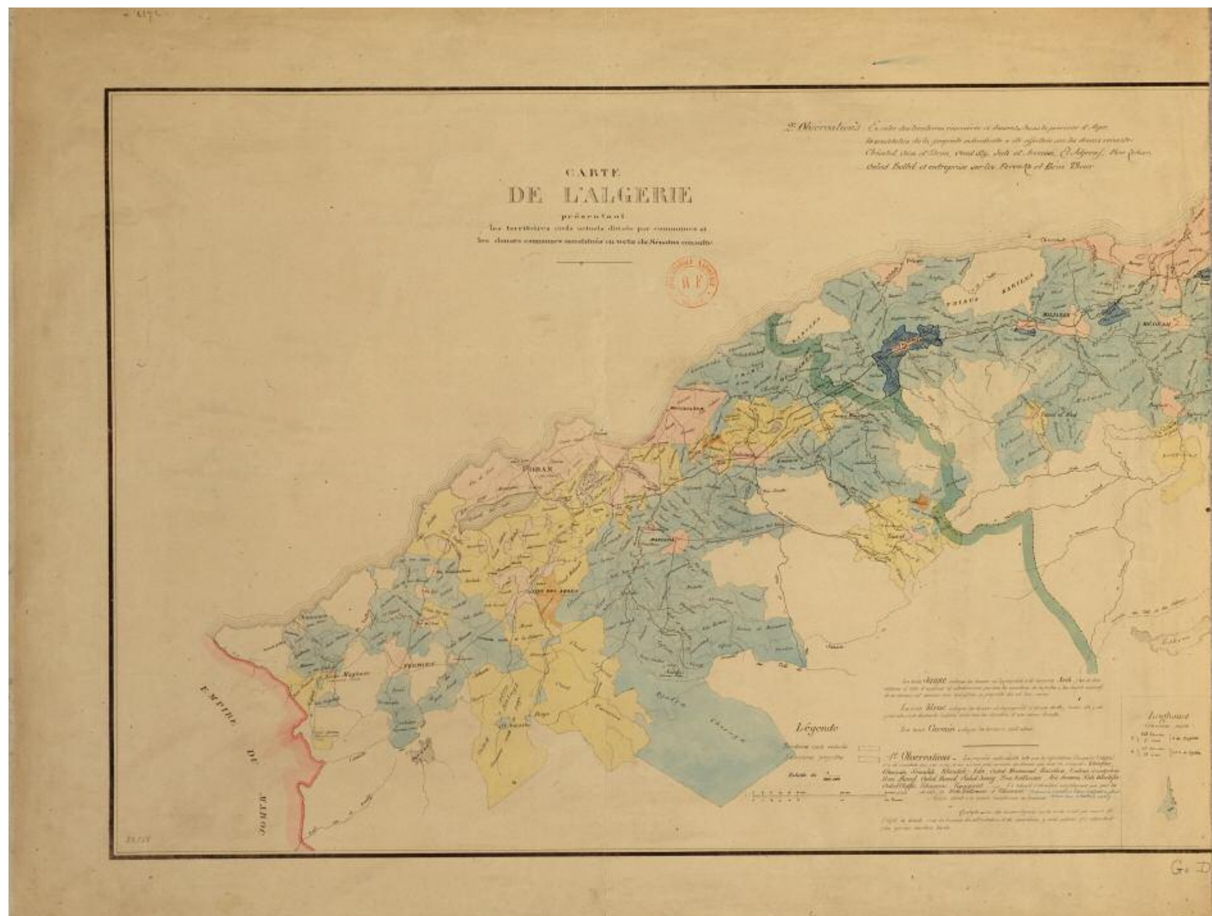



Figure 71.
"Map of Algeria presenting current civil territory divided by *communes* and *douars* constituted by virtue of the *sénatus-consulte*," 1870. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Cartes et plans, Ge D. 4167.

of each landholder from the piece of property whose deed he held.

The process of delimiting territory was the central administrative task of the *sénatus-consulte* and, in the context of the representation of the colonial landscape of Algeria, the most ambitious project for reconfiguring the space of the colony. For the purposes of this inquiry, the application of the *sénatus-consulte* was significant because it remade the map of the colony, both literally and metaphorically. Even more pressing is the way in which it attempted to replace traditional indigenous conceptions of place with the abstract concepts of both private ownership and parcels of land. The former was represented as a deed of title—words on paper—and the latter was delimited mathematically through surveying. Leaving aside the issue of whether the native population was able to understand the nature of such abstractions or whether they might have been hostile to such a transparent attempt by French authorities to undermine their way of life, it is clear that the administration of the law would lead to French domination in at least two ways. First, the second set of instructions guided the subcommissions to study the tribes whose rights they were adjudicating with great care. In

order to safeguard the interests of all, a full inquiry would have to be made about each tribe or *douar* whose property was to be delimited.[35] Of course, information gleaned from the surveillance of tribes would lead to a greater degree of control over those tribes. Further, the delimitation of territory, literally fixing the area of each tribe or *douar* and parceling it into pieces, represents the official triumph of French cartography and pictorial conventions for the depiction of landscape. Obviously, the division of collective land requires a clear and decisive map so that the boundaries forged by the *sénatus-consulte* can be accurately traced and positively fixed. This map—called the "Map of Algeria presenting current civil territory divided by *communes* and *douars* constituted by virtue of the *sénatus-consulte*" (fig. 71)—was finally produced in 1870, at the very end of the Second Empire.

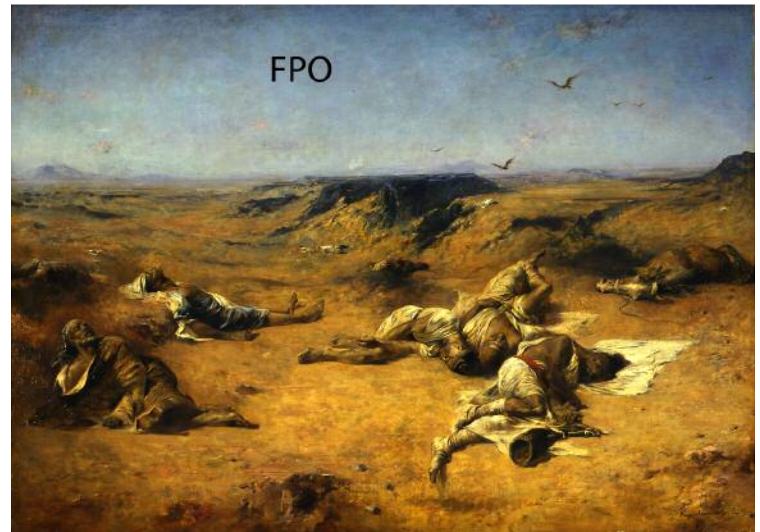
The map shows that by the time the Second Empire fell, the administration had actually accomplished precious little in terms of privatizing tribal lands and opening them up for settlement. This map of Algeria is divided into three sections: civil territory—pink (the only region available for colonial settlement), the *douars* in which property had been recognized as collective—yellow—known as

*arch* in the native dialect—and the *douars* where property was not *arch*, but remained generally undivided—blue. Looking at the map, it is clear that the colony is dominated by the second two categories. Inscriptions on the map spell out what these categories suggest. Out of hundreds of *douars* delimited, the inscriptions explain that the lands of only two have become part of civil territory (i.e., become open to settlement), and private property has been established on only twenty-two others. Tribal autonomy appears to have been sustained in the last years of the Second Empire, despite the French government's attempt to impose the status of "individuals" onto the native inhabitants of Algeria. Yet the patchwork of shapes in this depiction reveals that the process of delimitation had proceeded successfully in Algerian territory.

Following earlier French maps of colonial Algeria, the map of the *sénatus-consulte* speaks volumes about this legislation's clear administrative division of territory. Maps are designed to organize information and to present it visually in an immediately legible way. This map arranges the colony into abstract visual units whose labels explain their significance. In some sense, the *sénatus-consulte* was intended to make possible just such a representation of the colony, because it sought to transform the tribes into administrative units, each occupying a specific territory. Michel de Certeau has discussed the way maps present information graphically in a way that erases the processes involved in their creation: "The map thus collates on the same plane heterogeneous places, some *received* from a tradition [geometry] and others *produced* by observation. . . . The map, a totalizing stage on which elements of diverse origin are brought together to form a tableau of a 'state' of geographical knowledge, pushes away into prehistory or into its posterity, as if into the wings, the operations of which it is the result or the necessary condition. It remains alone on the stage. The tour describers have disappeared."[36] While the *sénatus-consulte* did not lead to the intended privatization of indigenous lands, the map demonstrates that it did effectively redefine the colonial territory in abstract terms. In this representation, Algeria takes on the characteristics of a well-ordered colony, and the activities that made it that way—the painstaking trouble of delimitation, the negation of indigenous conceptions of land and space—have been eliminated from the representation. This is the very visual representation of the abstraction of space achieved by the *sénatus-consulte* and theorized by Duval and Warnier. The map frames Algeria as French. Its proliferation of administrative divisions demonstrates the predominance of French methods of perceiving and organizing space on the surface of this territory.

## Abstract Space as Landscape Painting

Turning to the pictorial representations of Algeria during this period, it is noteworthy that the desert is the focus of landscape painting for the first time in history. As previously discussed, Heffernan has considered the symbolic aspects of the desert in the nineteenth century, which he has interpreted in the pictorial works of Guillaumet and those of Eugène Fromentin, the first artist to make an artistic subject of the Algerian Sahara.[37] Heffernan described the symbolism of the desert in the nineteenth century as two-sided. On the one hand, the desert was the place of ultimate desolation; on the other, it represented the possibility that civilization and progress would reclaim this barren land and put it to productive use. Further, there is symbolic ambivalence in the figures just visible on the horizon. As a viewer, one wonders if it is sunrise or sunset, if these figures are moving toward or away from the viewer, bringing salvation or abandoning




the viewer to desolation. It is even more difficult to read the symbolic message in a work that is nearly without figures. The skeleton of the camel in the foreground is a one-liner, but its presence in the center foreground of this composition makes it difficult to get beyond.

If one considers *The Desert* in relation to other paintings of the Algerian Sahara produced by Fromentin in the same period, it is possible to derive a sense of the work's unique power. There are a number of desert images in Fromentin's oeuvre, dating back to his first trip to Laghouat in 1853, but the most pertinent comparison is between Guillaumet's *Sahara* and Fromentin's two versions of *The Land of Thirst* (figs. 72, 73). In the latter compositions, made in the last years of the Second Empire (only the second is dated, in 1869), it is possible to compare an anecdotal representation of the desert to Guillaumet's extreme simplicity. Like so many of his famous works, Fromentin's composition is based on a story from one of his novels—in this case, a story at the end of *Un Été dans le Sahara*, originally published in 1857. These figures, abandoned in the desert, are literally expiring in our midst; the desert itself, as a powerful force of nature, is paramount in this representation. While the figures add an element of human interest, Fromentin has provided them with realistic (as opposed to fantastic) dress, perhaps in order to make more forceful the actual tragedy the viewer witnesses. In the earlier composition (fig. 72), the central figure reaches for the sky, in a gesture remarkably similar to that of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*.[38] In the second composition (fig. 73), the artist has replaced this dramatic gesture with a number of vultures above the horizon. In both works, the placement of the figures is meant to appear natural, but is in fact rather artfully composed.

There is a landscape here of sorts, a place full of geographical features that provide the eye with a terrain to explore. There may not be any vegetation in sight, nor any sign of human civilization, but the landscape itself has a clear structure, a set of rises and valleys that communicates its rugged character and gives these pictures a sense of particularity. There is legible symbolism, but the story a viewer can impute to these paintings involves a certain kind of place and

Figure 72.
Eugène Fromentin,
*The Land of Thirst*,
undated. Oil on canvas,
103 × 143.2 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo courtesy Musée d'Orsay (Patrice Schmidt).

Figure 73.
Eugène Fromentin,
*The Land of Thirst*, 1869.
Oil on canvas, 103.5 × 144 cm. © Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels (inv. 3424). Photo: Cussac.

the nomadic people who inhabit it. This specificity allows a viewer to put an interpretive framework in place and to read this picture as a narrative. Whether it reflects the artist's view of imperial ideology, as Heffernan has suggested,[39] or whether it reflects his response to the catastrophic drought that was raging in Algeria at this historical moment, the paintings convey a message through the landscape and the figures that populate it and provide a legible drama, a tableau of balanced pictorial elements—both figures and landscape forms—for the viewers to interpret.

Unlike Fromentin's two versions of *The Land of Thirst*, *The Desert* cannot be described as a tableau. This composition is not ordered, balanced, or self-conscious. Guillaumet, who was otherwise a successful academic painter, turned his back on landscape conventions when he created this piece. Whereas other French painters of Algeria made use of landscape conventions in order to present the exotic terrain of Algeria as recognizable to a French audience, Guillaumet excerpted the desert in such a way that it appears abstract. *The Desert* cuts off the Sahara arbitrarily, cleaving its apparent limitlessness into a comprehensible fraction. Further, the manner in which Guillaumet rendered this plot of land is loose and evocative. The sensations of light and atmosphere, which are the painting's most tenable subject, lead the viewer to a more intimate and personal experience of this territory. The landscape here needs to be translated by each individual who perceives it. In the process, this piece of desert comes to mean something and to belong to the viewer.

Perhaps the most relevant symbolic evocation of the desert to emerge in Guillaumet's *Sahara* is the sense of unlimited space. In this sense, *The Desert* departs most significantly from other contemporary manifestations of landscape painting in France. The recognizable traces in the composition—the camel, the distant caravan, the few plants—do not measure space with the conventions of landscape paintings. There are no trees or figures to establish relative distances, and though a sense of atmosphere is palpable, a systematic use of aerial perspective is also absent. In the terms of landscape painting, *The Sahara* is unmeasured. Beyond the absence of pictorial devices to measure space is the utter lack of any sign of human habitation or cultivation. The desert evoked is the place where human interaction with the terrain, in the form of agriculture, is impossible due to the nature of the place. It is literally a land without masters, because humans could not squeeze an existence out of such a landscape. There is no hope of occupation, let alone agriculture, so the place is necessarily beyond the control of any individual or government.

Following this line of argument, the archetypal desert rendered by Guillaumet is a romanticization sharing little with the historical development of colonization traced earlier. In line with recent scholarship on Orientalism and the fantasies it conjures, one might be tempted to consider *The Desert* as a mystification. Though Guillaumet traveled repeatedly to Algeria and had experiences with the various landscapes and settlements on the edges of the desert, one could argue that he represented the desert as an Orientalist fantasy of landscape. Just as Linda Nochlin has asserted that Gérôme's religious ethnographic art generated the appearance of an unthreatening Islam that diverged from historical reality,[40] one could argue that Guillaumet's archetypal desert distracts its viewers from the very real transformations the French government was effecting in the Algerian landscape. *The Desert* could be read as the very opposite of the map of 1870: it provides a fantasy of a limitless space in the face of the application of the *sénatus-consulte*.

Yet I am not certain that the landscape painting is fundamentally different from the map. Despite

the evocation of limitless space it appears to proffer, the frame of the painting actually provides a boundary for the desert. Guillaumet delimited an enormous expanse of space in this work: he squeezed the entire Sahara into a frame of 110 × 200 cm! In *The Desert*, we see a synechdochic substitution. The painting renders this stretch of the Sahara and thereby lays claim to representing all of it. When a viewer perceives this painting, he or she does not see this fragment of the Algerian Sahara. Rather, the painting evokes the desert as an archetype. It acts as a magnet for received ideas because there are no particularities to dispel them. Nevertheless, if one thinks more literally of the frame and its function, the metaphorical conversion of part into whole takes on a different meaning.

Another result produced by this sort of painting is that the location represented is similarly supplanted by the effect of it. The Sahara is what we might call a geographical fact. It is a desert in North Africa and it is big. In Guillaumet's painting, the Sahara is less the subject than the way it looks to a viewer perceiving it. In other words, if one considers the pictorial representation as a signifier and the Sahara as the signified, what becomes clear in this case is that when a viewer confronts this painting, the signifier does not necessarily direct attention to the signified. Rather, the viewer is able to seize upon the effects captured by the artist, to be immersed in the impression conveyed by the painting without considering it as a representation of any place in particular. Through a newly developed pictorial language, this place is transfigured into an abstract space that can be both measured and divided but only in the viewer's imagination. For what kind of fool would ever attempt to take possession of a desert? How can an artist make a landscape out of a limitless vacuity?

Guillaumet's *Sahara* frames the unlimited spaces at the edge of France's Algeria while conveying the effects of the desert in terms that can only be construed through an individual's perceptual faculties. This artist's flight from landscape conventions ultimately leads to an illustration of the colonial landscape whose terms are analogous to those of the French social scientists and legislators of his epoch. *The Desert* does possess symbolic meanings, but more forceful is the lingua franca it intones, which denudes the colonial landscape of its character and allows for its possession by metropolitan viewers. By making the desert appear abstract yet accessible through the terms of landscape painting, Guillaumet succeeded in framing the Sahara, France's empty Algerian frontier. Summing up Guillaumet's career after his death in 1887, one critic wrote: "As a picturesque description, as a graphic philosophy, dare I say of this once barbarous country today become a new France, the work of Guillaumet is a second conquest of Algeria, the conquest of art after the conquest of war."[41]