

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Part One

1. Welcome to Elkader 3
2. The Death of the Author 14

Part Two

3. Poetry, Prose, and the Politics of Writing in Algeria 41
4. Final Projects 64

Part Three

5. Dialogues with the Dead 87
6. Voyage Immobile 115
7. A Posthumous Interview with Tahar Djaout 135

Notes 145

Works Cited 181

Index 193

ONE

Welcome to Elkader

Elkader lies about five hours northwest of Chicago. Once you fight your way out of the city and pass Rockford, the landscape changes from hard and urban to something more organic that allows the earth's contours to be seen beneath the road. It is early spring, and the rolling hills of northwestern Illinois are beginning to green. Stubby cornstalks cover most of the fields, though some have already been tilled: soft brown expanses scratched with subtle rivets and mounds. We are not prepared for the gentle beauty of this part of the country or for its sweet language: its "Burton's Furnace Roads" and "dinner" at lunchtime and "supper" at dinnertime. In our minds Illinois had hardened into a flat place of unwelcoming highways and aggressive billboards, and in our imaginations Iowa (for neither of us has visited this state) had grown into a stultifyingly boring landscape interesting only for its lack of interest. But we were wrong. After we cross the Mississippi at Dubuque, the road rises and offers a staggering view. There are islands at this point in the river. Following the early spring flooding, trees stand up to their knees in water, their lengths doubled by reflections. "Now that's a mighty river," says Sean without a whiff of irony. He likes to use the word *mighty*, but only for rivers. Slow-moving and majestic, the Mississippi doesn't disappoint. Elkader is not far.

We are investigating a link between the Midwest and Algeria. The town of Elkader (pronounced Ell-kay-derr) was named for the Algerian national hero, Emir Abd el-Kader (or Abdelkader,

as it is most often spelled), the son of a marabout who led the resistance against the invading French army from 1832 until he gave himself up in 1847. Elkader was named in 1844 (well before Abd el-Kader's surrender to the French) by Timothy Davis, one of the town's three founders, who had been impressed by the Emir's courage in his struggle against the invading Europeans. I need to see this place named for an Algerian in Iowa: it exemplifies how people leave traces on parts of the globe they have never seen, and how place-names contain stories and worlds. A North African, a devout and learned Muslim, once famous internationally but now remembered only by his countrymen, has left his name on the map of America.

Elkader is a tiny place with a population of fewer than two thousand. It lies on the banks of the Turkey River (a vestige of the village's imaginary Ottoman past, I muse as I stand on the bridge, watching the slow-moving current), and it is surrounded by cornfields. We spend the night at a bed and breakfast in one of these fields, where John the proprietor shares the premises with horses, barn cats, an affectionate corgi, and a big old German shepherd named Dervish, who was rescued from a Chicago animal shelter and named for the way he whirled in his cage while recovering from broken bones resulting from a car accident. Before getting into the B & B business, John worked for the U.S. military in Pakistan, maintaining air conditioners.

The town's namesake, Abd el-Kader, is regarded as a revolutionary who, despite himself, had a talent for military leadership. The father of modern Algeria would have preferred a life of prayer and contemplation. Abd el-Kader succeeded in uniting some tribes of Western Algeria¹ for the first time through a combination of negotiation, military conquest, and elimination of enemies and challengers to his authority. He created an army complete with ranks, uniforms, flags, and honors. He minted his own money, produced firearms, and paid civil servants and soldiers from public coffers.

The Emir even resurrected the ancient city of Taqdemt, originally founded in 761 then abandoned in 909, where he planned to establish a university and a library whose core collection would consist of his own books.

For fifteen years, Abd el-Kader fought off the French, carved out a territory for himself, and gained his opponents' respect. But with the appointment of Maréchal Bugeaud as governor of Algeria, the balance of power changed. Thousands more soldiers were mobilized to fight Abd el-Kader, who beginning in 1841 began to suffer serious losses. After much bloodshed, the Emir decided to end the conflict, put down his weapons, and hand himself over to the French. He left Algeria in 1847, accompanied by his family and servants, as well as fifty-seven fellow combatants who chose to follow him into exile. Forbidden from traveling to Mecca or residing in Alexandria, as Bugeaud had promised he could, Abd el-Kader was imprisoned with his family in Fort Lamalgue, in the south of France, then at Henry IV's former estate in Pau, and finally at a medieval fortress, the Château d'Amboise, on the banks of the Loire River. For two years all visits and correspondence were forbidden. Abd el-Kader refused to leave his quarters in the castle in protest, and his health began to suffer. One of his three wives and three of his children died in captivity. Finally, in June 1850, Louis-Napoléon made the decision to release the Emir. He delivered this news to Abd el-Kader in person, informing him that he would be escorted to Brusa (Broussa), Turkey.

Abd el-Kader's stay in Brusa was short-lived. In 1855, an earthquake shook the city, destroying the neighborhood where he and his fellow exiles resided. The Emir took this opportunity to return to Paris to speak with Napoléon III to ask permission to leave Turkey. It was decided that Abd el-Kader would go to Damascus, where he spent the rest of his life . . .²

I look up, pausing in the condensed account of Abd el-Kader's life that I am reading a little too quickly to Sean as we drive

the thirty miles to Elkader from John's bed and breakfast. I can taste the dust from the road, and the gravel crackles as it hits the bottom of the car.

"Why was he called the Emir?" he asks.

"It's what his followers called him—it means 'commander' or 'prince.'³ It was a big deal when the French addressed him by that title for the first time," I add. "He was a really interesting man, and anyone—in the West—who still had reservations about his character would have changed their minds in 1860, when Abd el-Kader opened the doors of his home to twelve thousand Christians when their slaughter in Damascus began. When asked why he did it, he basically replied, 'because I'm a good Muslim.'"⁴

Sean grins and flicks his eyebrows in a gesture that says *of course*.

Our first destination is the public library, where I hope to find an account of both the town's naming and Timothy Davis's life. The single-story library is bright with a sterile, beige, institutional feeling, but it has inviting armchairs tucked away in corners and in front of windows that beckon patrons to sit and read. The librarian has pointed me in the direction of a bookshelf filled with volumes of local history, including a yellowing tome called *Old Elkader: Facts and Food*, published by the town's historical society, which contains a short paragraph about its naming and a portrait sketch of Abd el-Kader. I slip a piece of paper into the book to mark it for photocopying.⁵ More complete is an 1879 account printed on the occasion of the Emir's death:

In 1844, when John Thompson, Chester Sage and Timothy Davis, the founders of Elkader were laying out the town, the attention of the whole world was turned toward Algeria, where Abd-El-Kader was fighting for his country, trying to preserve it from the French. When the town had been plotted, and a name was necessary to complete the work, Timothy Davis, with the exploits

of Abd-El-Kader fresh in his mind, proposed the name, Elkader, which was adopted. The chief from whom the town derived its name, died last week in Damascus, in the seventy-second year of his age.⁶

As for the man credited with naming the town, I come across a colorful local account of Timothy Davis's life and death. When we return to Chicago I will read it out loud to anyone who will listen, including my brother-in-law, who looks at me like I am crazy as I act out the final scene of Davis's life in my kitchen:

This well-known pioneer of Clayton County was born in Utica, N.Y., in 1794. His parents had emigrated thither and carved out a home among the wilds of that then new country. It was then that Mr. Davis acquired those habits of industry and frugality which ever accompanied him through life. Inheriting a strong physical constitution, and imbued in early life with pluck and energy, he was well prepared in after life to meet and battle with the world. [. . .]

The honor of naming the town fell to Mr. Davis. At that time there was great excitement about the exploits of the Arabian chief, Abd el Kader, and being an admirer of that daring chieftain, Mr. Davis named this place Elkader. [. . .]

[Timothy Davis] died Sunday, April 27, 1872. He was sitting on the porch of his residence, engaged in a lively conversation with John Thompson, his surviving partner, joking and laughing with him over old reminiscences, when he suddenly fell back in his chair, threw up his hands with an exclamation of "O!" and immediately expired.⁷

Sean has gone for a walk and left me in the library until lunch. I find early photographs of the area's inhabitants. They are farming people, many of whose ancestors came from Germany to seek their fortune: a nearby town has streets named for Goethe and Schiller. It is still an agricultural area today, and as far as I can tell, most of the farms continue to be family-owned. Later,

when Sean comes to retrieve me, we explore the main street. It has a sign that proudly announces the receipt of an award for the Best Main Street in Small-Town America. There is a lovely bakery and a few shops. I snap several pictures each way, taking care to get the marquee of the closed movie theater, which cheerfully proclaims, Welcome to Elkader. Locals immediately become curious about us. Several approach and ask where we are from, and as we read the menu outside a café, a man casually asks us if we are looking for lunch.

“You should go to the Two-mit Truck,” he says. “Best hamburgers in the country. You won’t find a cheaper lunch anywhere.”

“The two-what-truck?”

“Two-mit Truck. You can have your hamburgers *mit* onions or *mitout* onions,” he laughs. “Germans.”

The Two-mit Truck is easily the busiest place in Elkader. Lines have formed at each of its two windows, and the couple inside is working hard to keep up with orders. After our lunch—as good as promised and complete with onions—we begin our journey home, back to the fray of Chicago.

We didn’t know it then, but word had spread quickly that we were in Elkader asking questions about its “Algerian Connection.” Our visit had been very quick, just enough to get an image of the place. But a few days after my return home, I receive a letter from John, the bed and breakfast proprietor, gently lamenting the fact that I hadn’t gotten back to him later on during the day we spent in Elkader. He explains that he has contacted a lady who is an authority on local history, and who would have liked to talk to me. In any case, the letter continues, included are several e-mail addresses of people who might be helpful in filling some of the gaps about the link between Elkader and Algeria. One of those contacts is Ed Olson, the town’s former mayor. I write to him and a few days later I receive a package of newspaper clippings.

“‘Ambassador’ from Algerian Sister City Arrives Here,”

reads the headline of the *Clayton County Register*, “The Home Newspaper for Clayton County Folks.” The 1983 story tells of a twenty-seven-year-old Algerian named Benaoumer (Omar) Zergaoui who was working with the United States Information Service in Algiers when he came across some files about Elkader: “He proposed the idea of traveling to Elkader to the Public Affairs Officer in Algeria. It was the suggestion of that Officer that Sister City ties be made between Elkader and Mascara.”⁸ The article goes on to describe Omar’s biography in detail, including an outline of his education and a description of his family that makes special notice of the fact that his father’s name is Abdelkader. Photographs show Omar picnicking with Cub Scouts and inspecting a wire manufacturing plant. It is an account of small-town hospitality, heartwarming in its exuberance. No doubt Elkaderites were thrilled to hear that “all the students [in Mascara] know about Elkader, Iowa” after Omar showed them a 1979 article from the magazine *Al Majal*.⁹

The paper trail documenting relations between Elkader and Mascara is fascinating and weird. An article titled “Elkader Residents Find Sister City” tells of preparations for nine (although the number eventually grows to ten) delegates’ travel to Algeria, including Ed Olson, then mayor. “Fact is frequently more exotic than fiction,” proclaims another recounting the delegates’ return: “and for a 10 member delegation from tiny (pop. 1,700) Elkader, Iowa, their journey to Mascara, Algeria, to form the first link between a U.S. city and a city in that country reads like an adventure tale.”¹⁰ The North African journey transformed Olson into a believer in cross-cultural dialogue. A vocal supporter of the sister cities program, Olson cites its philosophy of “peace through people,” adding “when people cross borders in friendship, armies don’t follow.”¹¹ The Elkaderites’ sojourn in Mascara was followed up in 1984 by a visit to Elkader by, among others, Khaldi M’Hammed, the mayor of Mascara, and Aboubekr Boutaleb, the great-great-great-grandson of the Emir himself.¹² A photograph accompanying

an account of the Algerians' welcome shows a blurry Olson seated beside Mascara's mayor atop the back seat of a convertible, waving to the townspeople lining Elkader's main street: "Saturday, it was Elkader's turn to host the festivities—and the town did it in typically Iowa fashion with a parade that included pickup trucks, high school marching bands, the county beef queen, dairy princess and pork princess, along with some boring speeches by local politicians."¹³ Also included in the package is a letter written by Boutaleb's wife to Queen Elizabeth II, asking about a gift Queen Victoria had reputedly presented to the Emir. Appended is Buckingham Palace's response that there is no record of such a gift, but that several members of the British royal family did indeed meet the Emir.

Later articles tell of Ed Olson's trip to Washington DC, where he was invited as an official guest at the dinner held for the president of Algeria. The stories are hopeful that the sister city program will help raise Elkader's profile, and that tourists will come as a result. But as the violence escalates in Algeria during the 1990s, the town's ties with Mascara falter, and eventually Ed loses the mayoral election because of, as he puts it, the "Algerian issue." A growing feeling among Elkader's townspeople is that too much time and too many resources have been wasted on the mayor's flight of fancy. As the economic situation in rural Iowa grows increasingly dire, Elkaderites are more interested in jobs than peace through people. A sad ending to a curious love affair.¹⁴

Across the street from the library there is a park named for Elkader's sister city, Mascara, Abd el-Kader's birthplace. It's not much of a park, just a vaguely green patch squeezed between two buildings. In this space stands a post mounted with the phrase "Peace on Earth" written in three languages: Russian, French, and English.¹⁵ The fourth language, presumably Arabic, is missing. Sean and I immediately become suspicious about the missing panel, and it is one of the first things I ask Ed Olson about in my correspondence from Chicago. I am interested to