Like many postcolonial intellectuals, Algerian authors writing around the time of independence found themselves pinned between two irreconcilable drives. On the one hand, they rejected the French-language settler-colonial culture whose supposed “modernity” had done such violence to their minds, their institutions, and their bodies. On the other hand, as they searched in vain for an authentic “native” or “traditional” culture with which to supplant that of the colonizer, they found themselves struggling to resuscitate the vestiges of an ultimately irrecoverable past. While many have discussed this double-bind at length in works of philosophy and social criticism, in this talk I will argue that some of the best articulations of its contours—particularly its psychic dimensions—are to be found in works of literature. To illustrate this point, I offer close readings of two novels that engage the city of Constantine as a multivalent figure for colonial subjectivity: the landmark Francophone text *Nedjma* (1954), by Kateb Yacine, and the later, Arabophone novel *The Earthquake* (1974), by al-Tahir Wattar. I show how both texts destabilize—albeit in different ways—univocal narratives of Algerian national identity by refracting them through the geographical features of the city landscape itself. Just as Constantine’s cavernous ravines, tenuously balanced bridges, and dried-up riverbeds stand in for the disintegration of tribal genealogies and stable modes of reference in these novels, so too the language of each text shatters chronological narration and interrupts its “official” language with Qur’anic, poetic, and colloquial registers of Arabic. In both texts, then—whether Francophone or Arabophone—the city that teeters on a series of cliffs, cleaved by age-old rivers and rivalries, comes to reflect the uncertainty of the post-independence Algerian present.