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France and the Mediterranean

International Relations,
Culture and Politics



Peter Lang

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ANDREA BRAZZODURO

Postcolonial Memories of the Algerian War of Independence, 1955–2010: French Veterans and Contemporary France¹

Cette guerre coloniale est originale même dans la pathologie qu'elle secrète.²

Dans l'Armée, nous avons fait notre devoir, pour rien finalement, mais nous avons trahi l'Algérie française, et depuis, personne ne nous entend, sauf vous.³

Elie was born in Rennes, in Bretagne, on April 1939, no more than a couple of months before the beginning of the Second World War and the Nazi occupation of France. In 1960, aged twenty-one, Elie was called up by his country to serve in the army in Algeria. There, France is conducting something called a 'public order operation' (*opérations de maintien de l'ordre*) against an internal '*rébellion*' – as it was called at the time – which has, during the previous six years, enflamed the French *départements* of Algeria.

1 I would like to thank Peter Lang's anonymous reviewers for helpful critical suggestions. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

2 'This colonial war is singular even in the pathology that it gives rise to.' F. Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: Maspero, 1961), 191.

3 'In the army we did our duty, in the end for nothing, but we betrayed French Algeria, and since then no one listens to us, except you.' Jacques (1936, 60-1/A), dentist, 4th section d'infirmiers militaires, second lieutenant. Letter to the author, 17 January 2008. ('60-1' gives the year and semester of conscription; the final letter (which can be either A, B, or C) refers to a division of the semester into thirds, which was implemented after August 1954. So 60-1/A means that Jacques was drafted in 1960, in the first semester, and in the first two months of that semester. Conscription was automatic at age twenty, except in special cases such as Jacques': born in 1936, he was supposed to leave in 1956 but as a university student he was able to put off the call-up until he had completed his studies.)

Elie will spend two years – as a simple, second-class, infantry man in the ranks of the 156th infantry regiment – patrolling the region of Constantine, moving from one operation to another as far as the Tunisian border (and beyond) and as far as Khenchela in the Aurès-Nememcha.

Forty years later, in January 2000, Elie decided to recount his experiences by writing a book. In the absence of a publisher his memoir takes the form of forty-seven A4 pages, with maps, pictures and drawings. The chosen title is ‘Drafted in Algeria: The Retrieved Voice’ (*Appelé en Algérie. La parole retrouvée*). The foreword begins with these words, which demand close attention from the reader:

Je viens d’achever la lecture d’un livre acheté par Maïwenn, ma fille, qui voulait en savoir plus sur la question de l’Algérie.

En premier lieu, lorsque j’ai vu l’ouvrage, j’ai d’abord été surpris par le choix de Maïwenn, puis je me suis laissé dire qu’elle avait besoin d’être un peu plus éclairée. Je n’avais pas fait mon devoir d’information envers mes enfants et je me sentais frustré. C’est précisément parce que ma parole aussi avait été *confisquée*.

[I have just finished reading a book bought by Maïwenn, my daughter, who wanted to know more about the issue of Algeria.

Initially, when I saw the work, I was taken by surprise by Maïwenn’s choice, but then I brought myself to understand that she needed to be a bit more informed. I had not done my duty to inform my children, and I felt frustrated. This was precisely because my voice too had been *confiscated*.]

This text, which superficially might seem anodyne and anecdotal, is in fact full of information useful to the historian of the present day who is concerned with memorial processes – i.e. with the way in which groups and individuals remember the past in the present.⁴

First let us note how the recollection in Elie’s case begins as a reaction to a feeling of frustration, which in psychoanalysis may be associated with the onset of a removed desire. Second, let us note also that this feeling is

4 Memory is the presence of the past, according to the acute definition offered by Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, XI: 20, 26; for more on this, see the commentary by P. Ricœur, *Temps et Récit III, Le Temps Raconté* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), 19–53.

taking form within an intergenerational relationship. In response to his daughter’s (implicit) question, Elie engages in memory-work on a period of his life which he had not so much forgotten as repressed or removed.⁵ Since forgetting and silence are not the same, Elie comes to encounter a new framework in which someone pays attention to his voice, listening to his combat (and homecoming) stories, and thereby allowing him to start this work which ends in speaking out (*prise de parole*).⁶ He finds once again the words to tell his experience and therefore to tell himself. The philosopher Paul Ricœur showed us, with the notion of narrative identity, the extent to which we are what we tell ourselves (*on est ce qu’on se raconte*):⁷ recounting life events – particularly combat ones – allows one to create a coherence, to ‘make the events understandable to [one]self too in order to provide an interpretation of them to an outsider.’⁸ As in the case of Elie – writing to explain himself to his daughter – we need this outsider to such an extent that in order to think we have to invent a fictive other to talk with. If veterans remain silent for a long time, this is primarily because French society does not want to listen to them. We don’t remember alone, as Halbwachs was the first to notice.⁹

5 On memory transmission, see M. Bloch, ‘Mémoire collective, Tradition et coutume. A propos d’un livre récent’, in A. Becker (ed.), *L’Histoire, la Guerre, la Résistance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006 [1925]), 335–46; see also F. Dosse, *Les Héritiers du silence. Enfants d’appelés en Algérie* (Paris: Stock, 2012).

6 This was the title chosen by M. de Certeau, *La Prise de parole. Pour une nouvelle culture* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1968). See the useful distinction between amnesia and aphasia suggested by A.L. Stoler, ‘L’aphasie coloniale française: l’histoire mutilée’, in N. Bancel et al. (eds), *Ruptures postcoloniales. Les nouveaux visages de la société française* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010), 71–2.

7 See P. Ricœur, *Temps et Récit III, Le Temps Raconté*, 347–92.

8 F.H. Allison, ‘Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight: Changing Perspectives Over Time’, in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006 [2004]), 226.

9 ‘En résumé, il n’y a pas de mémoire possible en dehors des cadres dont les hommes vivant en société se servent pour fixer et retrouver leurs souvenirs’: M. Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994 [1925]), 79.

I would like to stress this point – in regard to Elie’s and other combat veterans’ difficulties in verbalizing their own war experiences – by taking as an example one of the most ancient stories of a soldier’s homecoming, namely Homer’s ‘Odyssey’. If we look at the structure of the poem, the ‘Odyssey’ appears as the narration *à rebours* that Odysseus, coming back from war, is giving to the Phaeacian court, solicited by the blind bard Demodokos. One cannot help but be struck by how thoroughly the Greek poem depicts the archetype of the veteran’s condition. Odysseus returns from war to a thriving and peaceful society: there, he is listening to the blind bard (a kind of historian, who did not directly see the things he is relating) who is singing the history of the Trojan War to the assembly of Phaeacians (i.e. the civilians).¹⁰ Hearing his combat experience objectified as an epic, Odysseus – who actually fought in that war – bursts into tears and is moved to react, thus beginning to speak himself.¹¹ Returning to Elie, we also find a blind bard, an historian, standing between him and his daughter. Thus it is important to notice the way in which Elie identifies the book bought by his daughter Maïwenn (‘who wanted to know more’ (*qui voulait en savoir plus*), as he phrases it) as the origin of the process leading him to voice his war experience. The book is *Appelés en Algérie: La parole confisquée* (‘Draftees in Algeria: The Confiscated Voice’), published the previous year, 1999, by the historian Claire Mauss-Copeaux.¹²

This book made such an impression on Elie that he used the title, *détourné*, for his own testimony: in reaction, as it were, to that confiscated

10 See F. Hartog, *Régimes d’Historicité: Présentisme et Expérience du Temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), 59–65. H. Arendt wrote that, ‘poetically speaking’, we can see the beginning of the category of history in the meeting of Odysseus and the bard Demodokos, ‘when Ulysses, at the court of the king of the Phaeacians, listened to the story of his own deeds and sufferings, to the story of his life’: H. Arendt, ‘The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern’, in *Between Past and Future* (London: Penguin, 1993 [1958]), 29.

11 See J. Shay, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 11–18.

12 C. Mauss-Copeaux, *Appelés en Algérie: La Parole confisquée* (Paris: Hachette, 1999). I am deeply grateful to Claire Mauss-Copeaux for letting me see Elie’s unpublished manuscript and discussing various points of the present article with me; responsibility for any errors in my account is obviously mine.

or seized voice (‘parole confisquée’) of the drafted servicemen analysed by Mauss-Copeaux during the 1990s, Elie’s own voice is retrieved (‘retrouvée’). As in the case of Odysseus (the veteran), Demodokos (the historian), and the Phaeacians (the civilians), we are here witnessing the productive meeting between one of the scholarly vectors of memory (namely historiography) and the social claim to knowledge.¹³

In what follows, I want to explore some aspects of the way in which veterans compose their memories of the war within present-day social frames of memory. How have veterans developed their stories faced with a modern audience that has not experienced war? And how do they cope with the ongoing historical research, now being taken up by a third generation of scholars? Are war veterans still locked into silence and shame, as has long been suggested? (*Le silence et la honte* was the title both of a book by the psychiatrist Bernard W. Sigg and of one by the journalist Andrew Orr, published in 1989 and 1990 respectively.)¹⁴ In recollecting their memories of the last (colonial) French war, to what extent are veterans influenced by contemporary (postcolonial) social and political events – if indeed they are?

* * *

My analysis, in this chapter, is based on interviews conducted with thirty-one French veterans between 2007 and 2010.¹⁵ The sample size has been kept reasonably low in order to allow long and articulated interviews and, where possible, repeated interviews in successive meetings. In the first

13 In his path-breaking book on the memory of the Vichy regime, Henry Rousso underlines the role of *interface* which characterizes the works of historians concerning collective memory. In the ‘interactive chain of transmission’ contributing to the ‘shaping of the representations of the past’, historians are placed between the available sources of information and the social claim to knowledge. H. Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy: De 1944 à Nos Jours* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 297.

14 See B.W. Sigg, *Le Silence et la honte: Névroses de la guerre d’Algérie* (Paris: Messidor, 1989); A. Orr, *Ceux d’Algérie: Le silence et la honte* (Paris: Payot, 1990).

15 Records and transcriptions of the interviews are stored at the Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine, in Nanterre, France.

encounter with each veteran I used a chronological life story approach, and then went on to focus in subsequent meetings on specific events or relevant themes.

Combat memories are not monolithic or homogeneous: they demand that we acknowledge a plurality of perspectives. The memories depend on the zone and the period of service in the long, yet fast-moving, duration of the war. Thus, because *homo bellicus algerianus* exists, but in ‘fragmented pieces’ (*en pièces détachées*), I chose to analyse and compare the memories of men whose experience shared a spatial and temporal unity.¹⁶ I therefore looked for veterans who had fought in Wilaya I: the Aurès-Nememcha area, corresponding, in the terminology of French military bureaucracy, to the ‘Zone du Sud Constantinois’, identified by the south-eastern towns of Batna, Tébessa, Négrine, and Biskra. As epitomized by the military daily *Aurès-Nemencha*, published for the area troops, the motto of the French army was ‘Pacify, Protect, Pursue’ (*Pacifier, Protéger, Poursuivre*).¹⁷

Besides the spatial unity, I wanted the interviewees to be not career but drafted servicemen. This was because I wanted to avoid the *esprit de corps* that characterizes enlisted soldiers and officers. Thus, I hoped to avoid simplistic stances of accusation and defence, and sought instead to highlight the depth of social impact of a war which, through the resort to the draft, concerned a whole generation.¹⁸ For instance, compared to America’s war in Vietnam, the Algerian War of Independence – which lasted the same length of time and demanded a similar level of troops in proportion to population – hit French families, measured by deaths of servicemen,

16 For the quotation, see J.-C. Jauffret, *Soldats en Algérie 1954–1962: Expériences Contrastées des Hommes du Contingent* (Paris: Autrement, 2000), 9.

17 See *Aurès Nemencha*, 5 (juin 1956), in SHD 1H 4600/1 (Annexes).

18 Between 1954 and 1962, 2.5 million Frenchmen crossed the Mediterranean to combat Algerian independence fighters. Among them, the *appelés*, the draftees, drawn from all over France and from all social classes, numbered 1,179,523 – according to calculations by Jean-Charles Jauffret, ‘Une armée à deux vitesses en Algérie (1954–1962): Réserves générales et troupes de secteur’, in J.-C. Jauffret and M. Vaisse (eds), *Militaires et Guérilla dans la Guerre d’Algérie* (Brussels: Complexe, 2001), 21–38.

25 per cent harder than American families (24,000 French soldiers died in Algeria; and at least 250,000 Algerians).¹⁹

The majority of those interviewed were born between 1938 and 1940.²⁰ In 1958–60, when they joined the ‘pacification’ in Algeria as draftees, the war had been going on for at least four years. In May 1958, de Gaulle returned to power in order to seek an end to the conflict, which was tearing the country apart; yet it was to last four more years. Between 1959 and 1960, the Challe and Constantine Plans hit the Algerian independence fighters hard on both the military and psychological fronts, combining war actions with a strong propaganda campaign devoted to gaining the support of the population. Moreover, the ‘Battle of Algiers’, militarily won by the paratroops in 1957, had stirred up a harsh debate about the methods used by the French army, and had shocked metropolitan and international public opinion.²¹ Even if not declared, and therefore ‘without a name’, the war was a major issue for French society – to such an extent that it triggered a regime change.

Given this historical framing, what at first is striking is that most of the interviewees, fifty years after the war, still remember themselves as young and careless, unaware of the issues at stake. They depict themselves as ‘kids’ – as is stressed by one interviewee, Yves, while showing me his

19 58,000 American soldiers died in Vietnam. See M. Alexander, M. Evans, and J. Keiger, ‘The “War Without a Name”: The French Army and the Algerians: Recovering Experiences, Images and Testimonies’, in Alexander et al. (eds), *The Algerian War and the French Army, 1954–62: Experiences, Images, Testimonies* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 32. See also D.L. Schalk, *War and the Ivory Tower: Algeria and Vietnam* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 29. For figures of deaths, see G. Pervillé, *La guerre d’Algérie: combien de morts?*, in M. Harbi and B. Stora (eds), *La Guerre d’Algérie. 1954–2004, la fin de l’amnésie* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2004), 483.

20 A few, coming from upper classes, are older (as is Michel, discussed below, born in 1931). As university students they had the opportunity to leave later (they were *sur-sitaires*): therefore the majority of those interviewed were in Algeria in the second half of the war, after 1958.

21 See R. Branche, *La Torture et l’armée pendant la guerre d’Algérie, 1954–1962* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 147–75.

military record: ‘*Ça c’est mon livret militaire ... vous voyez que j’étais un petit garçon, hein? La première réflexion qu’un des sergents m’a fait c’est: ‘Tiens, on les prend dans les maternités maintenant?’* (‘That is my military record ... you can see that I was a little boy, eh? The first remark one of the sergeants made to me was: “What, we’re taking them out of the maternity wards now?”’).²² In the interviews, after having explained the reasons for the research, I try to collect a story which is as chronologically coherent as possible by asking the following question: ‘Please talk about yourself at the moment of departure, when you receive the call-up card’. Most often veterans answer like Jean-Claude, drafted in April 1958:

JEAN-CLAUDE: Moi, je suis jeune, déjà ... puisque ... j’ai été incorporé dans l’armée à vingt ans.

Je suis né en trente-neuf et donc je pars au service militaire j’ai vingt ans, j’ai tout juste vingt ans ... vingt ans et un mois. Vous voyez, c’est ... Je suis politiquement mpfff ... immature, quoi. A vingt ans, bon, je me préoccupe plus de mes copains, un petit peu des mes copines, un petit peu de savoir si mon scooter va bien marcher ... Et j’ai déjà commencé à travailler. Je travaille depuis deux ans. Je travaille depuis deux ans. Je suis ... J’ai arrêté mes études en seconde, donc j’ai pas le bac. [...] là à dix-huit ans, j’étais un peu désœuvré ... donc je rentre dans le monde du travail. [...] Et alors je travaille, je travaille sans me soucier trop de quoi que ce soit.²³

[Me, I was young, already ... then ... I was drafted into the army aged twenty.

I was born in thirty-nine and so when I leave for military service I’m twenty, I’m only just twenty years old, twenty years and one month. You see, it’s ... I’m politically mpfff ... immature, you know? At twenty years, well, I’m more preoccupied with my friends, a little bit with my girlfriends, a little bit about whether my scooter is going to work okay ... And I had already started to work. I’ve been working for two years.

22 Yves (1939, enlisted in 1958), worker, 457th groupe d’artillerie antiaérien légère, sergent. Interviewed at Villers-Saint-Sépulcre on 10 June 2009 and 18 January 2010. Yves enlisted (entering a military engineering school) to avoid the war and acquire a trade. He did acquire a trade, but, as for heterogenesis of intents, had to go to Algeria. I decided to keep him in the sample because he is closer to the conscripts than to the army *esprit de corps*.

23 Jean-Claude (1939, 59–1/B), employee, 457th groupe d’artillerie antiaérien légère, second lieutenant. Interviewed in Bretignolles on 7 July and in Nantes on 26 November 2008.

I’ve been working for two years. I’m ... I quit my studies in second grade, so I don’t have the bac. [...] from there until I was eighteen, I was a bit idle ... so I entered into the world of work. [...] And so I’m working, I’m working without bothering too much about the things that I should.]

If it is given sufficient room, the characterization by the narrator of himself as ‘young’, namely carefree and politically inexpert, reveals a broad arc of meaning to be investigated. With the distance of age (today’s narrator is no longer the young man of those days past), isn’t there also the trace of a judgement, which is at the same time a note of condemnation (I shall not do again what I did) and a suggestion of exculpation (but I was young ...)?

Another interviewee, Michel, was not so very young when he left for Algeria. Belonging to the small group who then attended university, he could put off the call-up until he was twenty-eight. A reader of the left-wing Catholic journal *Esprit*, he was studying Latin and Greek literature and became fond of contemporary Algerian writers: ‘Je lisais pas mal des romans des algériens ... Mouloud Feraoun, Mouloud Mammeri, Kateb Yacine, Driss Chraïbi ... et j’étais très intéressé par cette question et d’un point de vue intellectuel ... Ça c’est dans les années cinquante-quatre, cinquante-cinq, cinquante-six que je me suis intéressé à ces livres-là ... Avant de partir en Algérie’ (‘I was reading quite a few Algerian novels ... Mouloud Feraoun, Mouloud Mammeri, Kateb Yacine, Driss Chraïbi ... and I was very concerned with this question and from an intellectual point of view ... It was in the years fifty-four, fifty-five, fifty-six that I was interested in those books ... before leaving for Algeria’).

AB: Vous connaissiez donc les livres comme *Des rappelés témoignent*, les manifestations de rappelés?

MICHEL: Pratiquement pas. Très peu. Sauf par la presse un peu ... Je suis pas un militant, je suis un, je suis un ... je suis un rigolo, je suis un ... comment on dit en italien? ... un *amateurl* ... J’ai jamais été très sérieux.²⁴

24 Michel (1931, 58–2/A), high-school teacher, 26th régiment d’infanterie, second lieutenant. Interviewed in Paris on 20 May and 14 June 2010.

[AB: So you knew about books like *Des rappelés témoignent* [The testimony of the returned soldiers], the demonstrations by the returnees?

MICHEL: Practically not. Very little. Except from the press a little ... I'm not an activist, I'm a, I'm a ... I'm a joker, I'm a ... how do you say it in Italian? ... an *amateur* ... I was never very committed.]

The theme of youth, running like a bass-line through the memories of the majority of the interviewees, and rooted in their (actual, biological) youth, recurs in the retrospective self-representation of Michel as an easy-going, existential youth, of a joker ('je suis un rigolo ... un amateur ... j'ai jamais été très sérieux ...'). As an aside, it is also worth noting the sly wink, the *clin d'œil*, with which the interviewee then looks to the interviewer for empathy, referring to the proverbial Italian character of levity and nonchalance expressed by Michel with the French expression *amateur* (unpaid). Being tall and lanky, one can easily imagine him in Monsieur Hulot's shoes. But for both, for the younger interviewees as well as for Michel, the memory-work seems to be the same. Almost all of them are looking for shelter in the image of the childish existential condition – which Roland Barthes identified as the epitome of the lower-middle-class culture which became dominant as mass culture – and which answers, if not precisely to a search for forbearance, to the difficulty of expressing with modern words a transparent judgement about one's behaviour in the past or taking up one's responsibilities.²⁵ The 'Djebel generation', lacking accomplishments through which to recognize itself, crushed by the giants of 1914–18 and 1939–45 on the one hand, and by the disrespectful dissenters of May 1968 on the other, seems to find in the fragile myth of lost youth the only feature that allows them to think of themselves as a collectivity. Youth, then, seems to function negatively, as a shield that prevents one from looking at the ugly side of the war.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the informants' insistence on that 'juvenile' existential dimension, related to themselves as they were and expressed at the threshold of their narrations, does not mean that they want to give me a sanitized version of the war. On the contrary, it

25 See R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), 143.

seems that it is precisely that introduction which releases their voice and makes possible – after having defused the ethical and political question of responsibility – accounts of war violence, torture, and others' atrocities. Moreover, this lack of self-consciousness – whether or not it reflects the intellectual horizon of the informants at the time of the events (and this is an inescapable zone of indeterminacy given the absence of adequate sources) – is, on the contrary, a faithful reflection of the time in which the interview is taking place, and in which the veterans are verbalizing their memories. And if the present time characterizes itself as 'the victim's time' – rather than 'the witness's one' – it is easy to see how the interviewees, by laying emphasis on their past youth, are trying to build an image of themselves by an analogy with the moral figure that has emerged as so successful at the turn of the century: namely the victim, the sacrificial lamb that has no knowledge or guilt.²⁶ In this context it is clear how the voice of the former fighters is released (or retrieved) only after the borders between victims and perpetrators become uncertain, to the point that agents appointed by the state to exercise violence can passively describe themselves as innocent casualties of the events.²⁷ Alongside those social frames of memory, which draw on tendencies that seem common on a European if not a worldwide scale, the 'juvenilistic' theme also echoes cultural frames more properly linked to the recent French political mood.

As a matter of fact, one of the issues which characterized Nicolas Sarkozy's 2007 presidential campaign was the rejection of 'repentance', an issue that was conjured up in almost all his speeches during the campaign – that is, at least twenty-seven times between 1 March and 3 May.²⁸ 'A tous

26 See H. Rousso, 'Vers une mondialisation de la mémoire', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 23/94 (2007), 5–6. Rousso is referring to the classic study by A. Wieviorka, *L'ère du témoin* (Paris: Seuil, 1998). See also J.-M. Chaumont, *La Concurrence de victimes: Génocide, identité, reconnaissance* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002).

27 On this topic, see the issue of *Memory Studies* edited by J. Dunnage, 'Perpetrator Memory and Memories about Perpetrators', *Memory Studies*, 3/2 (2010).

28 As a sample one can quote: 'Je déteste cette mode de la repentance qui exprime la détestation de la France et de son histoire' (Lyon, 5 April 2007); 'Nous devons aujourd'hui construire ensemble l'avenir, sans repentance, sans réécrire notre histoire

les peuples de la Méditerranée qui passent leur temps à ressasser le passé et les vieilles haines de jadis', Sarkozy declares in Montpellier, on the last day of the campaign, 'je veux dire ce soir que le temps est venu de regarder vers l'avenir' ('To all the people of the Mediterranean who spend their time dwelling on the past and on former hatreds, I want to say this evening that the time has come to look to the future'). Thus, behind the appearances of a 'futurist' attitude, this rupture, this clean break for which Sarkozy calls, functioned as a blueprint for selective reinterpretation of national history. This reinterpretation was aimed at avoiding the link between the splendour of the colonial empire which is receding into an imaginary past, and the complex social reality of contemporary France which is becoming run through by a colour line, a legacy of that colonialism.²⁹ His heart of darkness, the Algerian War of Independence, stands, by synecdoche, for the colonial relationship in its entirety.

* * *

I began to quote Elie's written memoirs to my other interviewees, because his case is representative of that of many other veterans at the beginning of the new century. Indeed, a major difference with the 1990s is that veterans, when asked to tell of their war experiences within the framework of academic research, actually speak. That very fact leads us to consider the word

avec l'Algérie' (16 April 2007, letter to Denis Fadda); 'Ici on n'aime pas la repentance qui est un dénigrement systématique de la France et de son histoire. Je déteste cette repentance qui est une forme de la détestation de soi parce que l'on n'a qu'un pays. Le détester c'est se détester soi-même. Je déteste cette repentance qui est une falsification de l'histoire de France. Car la France n'a pas à avoir honte de son histoire' (Metz, 17 April 2007). The French Heads of State's speeches have been collected, since 1974, on the website 'documentation française' (www.vie-publique.fr/discours/). See S. Lefranc, 'Repentance', in L. De Cock, F. Madeline, N. Offenstadt, and S. Wahnich (eds), *Comment Nicolas Sarkozy écrit l'histoire de France* (Marseille: Agone, 2008), 156.

29 See C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'Un faux concept: la repentance', in *Enjeux politiques de l'histoire coloniale* (Marseille: Agone, 2009), 139–41; V. Martigny, 'Le débat autour de l'identité nationale dans la campagne présidentielle 2007: quelle rupture?', *French Politics, Culture and Society*, 27/1 (2009), 23–42.

as an historical event, meaning – drawing from Arlette Farges's remarks – that we are trying to show that, starting from it, we can perform a *récit d'histoire*: if 'hearing a testimony is comparable to the reading of archives, one is supposed to manage an effort to grasp the historical meaning and insert it into the community from which it is coming'.³⁰ The reason why the veterans are now speaking can be explained by changes in the modalities, both individual and collective, which govern the organization of the memory.

The key moment for this shift was the Papon double trial in 1997–9, which marked 'the transition from an obsessive concern with the "Vichy syndrome" to what might be termed an "Algerian syndrome"'.³¹ That shift is already well known to historians: in a very short period of time, between 1999 and 2003, one saw – among other events – state recognition that in Algeria there had been a war (1999), the speech by the Algerian president to the Assemblée nationale (2000), a large public debate on the conflict and in particular on the use of torture (2000–1), the installation in Paris of a commemorative plaque to honour the Algerians killed on 17 October 1961 (2001), of a monument to the memory of the soldiers who died in North Africa (2002), and also the visit of the President of the French Republic to Algeria (2003).³² The opening of the military archives in 1992 allowed historical research to arrive at that rendezvous on time: thus, a decade later, the publication of research by a new generation of historians came to join with these symbolic acts, and thereby encountered a powerful social claim to a 'specific knowledge', very far from the kind of knowledge proper to the

30 A. Farge, *Quel bruit ferons-nous?* (Paris: Les Prairies ordinaires, 2005), 93, 170. See also A. Portelli, 'L'inter-vista nella storia orale', in M. Pistacchi (ed.), *Vive voci. L'intervista come fonte di documentazione* (Rome: Donzelli, 2010), 8.

31 N. MacMaster, 'The Torture Controversy (1998–2002): Towards a "New History" of the Algerian War?', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 10/4 (2002), 450.

32 For more details, see: the issue of *Modern & Contemporary France* edited by A. Hargreaves, 'France and Algeria, 1962–2002: Turning the Page?', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 10/4 (2002); A. Brazzoduro, 'La guerra d'Algeria nel discorso pubblico francese. Quaranta anni dopo', *Mondo Contemporaneo. Rivista di storia*, 4/1 (2008), 67–93.

'universal intellectual' of previous times – the major exemplar of which was Jean-Paul Sartre, signing, in 1961, the vitriolic foreword to Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre*.³³

In this frame, for some veterans the interview takes on the features of a cathartic experience. To Yves, a blue-collar chemical worker in the capital's hinterland, it is a last chance to get it off his chest ('*Et enfin j'étais content de vider mon sac ...*'): ³⁴ and as a matter of fact, he speaks to me in a tone of voice which sometimes is barely audible, as if with a secret to be protected from indiscreet ears.

Amand, a carpenter in Le Havre shipyards, feels the moment of dizziness always associated with the start of an interview and encourages me not to have reticence of any sort, warmly expressing his trust:

AB: Alors ... moi je voudrais ... euh ... je sais pas on peut ...

AMAND: Vas-y, vas-y! Mène ... mène l'affaire!

[AB: Well ... I would like ... uh ... I don't know if we can ...

AMAND: Go for it! Bring ... bring it on!]³⁵

Even if it is hidden behind the façade of irresponsible youth, the question of why, of the meaning of the war and of the motivations of the parties involved, lies in the background of almost all these narrations. Whether the issue is explicitly tackled or not, the strategic and cumbersome presence of the microphone constructs a situation in which the dialogical

33 For the opposition between 'specific' and 'universal knowledge', see Michel Foucault, 'Intervista a Michel Foucault', in A. Fontana and P. Pasquino (eds), *Microfisica del Potere. Interventi Politici* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 3–28. I take this point from H. Rouso, 'Intellectuals and the Law', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 17/2 (2009), 153–61. On Sartre, see P. Arthur, *Unfinished Projects: Decolonization and the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (London and New York: Verso, 2010).

34 Yves (1939, enlisted in 1958), worker, 457th groupe d'artillerie antiaérien légère, sergeant. Interviewed in Villers-Saint-Sépulcre on 10 June 2009 and on 18 January 2010.

35 Amand (1938, 58–1/C), carpenter, 18th bataillon de transmissions, then 'disciplinary regiment' of the Bérêts noirs, private. Interviewed in Harfleur on 27 June 2008 and on 14 February 2009.

relationship between interviewer and narrator is taking place in the present, starting from the past but striving towards a future for the sake of which the conversation is consciously being recorded. In this connection it is worth noting that none of the informants refused to be recorded – on the contrary almost everyone considered this to be the primary reason for our meeting. The consent to the research project was given at the outset: 'si vous êtes arrivé jusque-là, Jean Pierre tells me, 'c'est bien que je suis d'accord, hein?'³⁶ Equally, nobody asked to protect himself by remaining anonymous. As recently as 1991, Anne Roche – author of the first studies of oral history on *pieds-noirs* and the draft contingents – had highlighted how the collection of soldiers' testimonies had been problematic: those who refused to speak were still 'many', while 'those who agreed [to speak] did so, in over a third of cases, anonymously'.³⁷

Thus, once the microphone is switched on, the meeting always starts with a formal question about the interviewee's authorization for the recording. However, still earlier there is a scene, which constantly recurs, in which the sharply defined and reassuring borders dividing 'interviewee' from 'interviewer' mingle dangerously. The agreement which authorizes the interview – which is also an exercise of power – is called into question precisely by the fact that, in the preliminary stages, that agreement is suspended, thus establishing its artificiality and, hence, revocability. Such a scene can be rather puzzling for the neophyte interviewer. But veterans want to know who is talking to them, what he is looking for and why: the interviewer chooses whom to interview, and in the same way the interviewee chooses the interviewer.³⁸

36 Jean-Pierre (1939, 59–1/A), florist, 457th groupe d'artillerie antiaérien légère, sergeant. Interviewed in La Chapelle Saint-Sépulcre on 20 January 2010.

37 A. Roche, "Je vous le raconte volontiers, parce qu'on ne me l'a jamais demandé". *Autobiographies d'appelés en Algérie*, in L. Gervereau, J.-P. Rioux, and B. Stora (eds), *La France en guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: BDIC, 1992), 264.

38 For a similar remark, see M. Pollak, *L'Expérience concentrationnaire. Essai sur le maintien de l'identité sociale* (Paris: Métailié, 2000 [1990]), 77; and A. Portelli, 'History-Telling and Time: An Example from Kentucky', *The Oral History Review*, 20/1–2 (1992), 51–66.

Thus, the generational gap (I am the same age as their children, if not their grandchildren), and, on the whole, the cultural one (which expresses itself as a feeling of my non-involvement with Franco-French narratives), generate in most cases an unprecedented no-man's-land in which the possibilities for speech seem to be different than is customary. There is also a 'cognitive break' in play here, represented not only by the interviewer's absence of direct experience of war, but also by an (illusory?) departure from the horizon of possibility in the Western world of the very notion of a war fought through conscription.³⁹ Moreover, the veterans perceive that, through myself, the university itself is addressing them; and thus the veterans see this as an opportunity to reintegrate themselves into History, from which they feel they have been excluded.

Except for a very few, all my informants were offering their testimony for the first time – indeed, it was noticeable that their wives often stayed with us, sitting in a corner, or barely hidden in the kitchen with the door wide open: they themselves had never listened to these stories. The veterans accepted that presence, and indeed sometimes urged their wives to stay: their memory, this exercise of oblivion, works nowadays with them. Women can have an inhibitory effect or, on the contrary, can press their husband to tell more: they can urge the telling of stories of violence, but they tacitly stop every word concerning sexuality and sexual violence. Moreover, the wives constitute the privileged connective tissue between the veterans' private memory-work and the public space wherein the antagonistic Algerian memories that traverse French society fight for hegemony. Often younger than their husbands, it is they who move more deftly through the new media. For instance, it is interesting to note on what subjects, and in what manner, Elisabeth – out of sight in the kitchen, but listening – interrupts her husband's account, as he relates to me his painful feelings about the burden of war memory in his present life.

39 As stressed by S. Audoin-Rouzeau and A. Becker, 'La guerre, qui a marqué de sa présence récurrente, jusqu'à la fin du conflit algérien, les générations successives du XX^e siècle, est désormais en position de complète extériorité, 14–18, retrouver la Guerre (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 18.

AB: Est-ce que vous y pensez, là, quarante ans après?

YVES: Ah oui oui ... Ça m'arrive très souvent. Mais en premier, les gens que j'ai connu ... les gens aussi qui sont morts ... et je trouve que ça c'est ce qu'il me reste un peu à travers de la gorge ... ils sont morts ... je veux pas dire pour rien ... mais pratiquement si, hein? [...] Puis surtout, il faut quand même le dire, les *pieds-noirs* ... Je suis pas *pied-noir*, mais je me mets à leur place ... d'un seul coup vous partez avec ... comme on dit vos deux pantouffles, un pantalon et ... Ça, ça a été dramatique quand même, hein? [...] C'est un peu ça le sentiment que j'ai ...⁴⁰

ELISABETH: T'oublies quelque chose ... T'oublies quelqu'un ... Et les *harkis*?

[AB: Do you think of it, now, forty years afterwards?

YVES: Oh yes, yes ... it often comes to mind. But mostly the people that I knew ... the people too who are dead ... and I find that that is what somehow sticks in my throat ... they are dead ... I don't want to say for nothing ... but practically so, eh? [...] Then of course one has to mention the *pieds-noirs* ... I'm not a *pied-noir*, but I put myself in their place ... in one fell swoop you leave with ... as we say with your slippers, your trousers and ... That, that was dramatic all the same, eh? [...] That's kind of the feeling that I have ...

ELISABETH: You're forgetting something ... You're forgetting someone ... And the *harkis*?

Elisabeth was not only listening but also carefully watching over her husband's narration. Yves remembers with deep compassion his comrades in combat, particularly the fallen ones, and then the French settlers, the *pieds-noirs*, in a hierarchical order ranging from the inner to the outermost circle, manifesting a perspective on the events which is typical of those who lived a military life on the ground. His memory is definitively a Franco-French narrative, wherein the Others, the 'French Muslims' (not yet 'Algerians'), are invisible. Meanwhile, drawing attention to the *harkis* – Algerians who fought for the French as auxiliaries – Elisabeth is clearly verbalizing the common sense which had recently become widespread in French society and which, starting from the 1990s, accommodated the *harkis* – paternalistically identified as 'victims' of an anonymous historical force – into the *roman*

40 Yves (1939, enlisted in 1958), worker, 457th groupe d'artillerie antiaérien légère, sergeant. Interviewed in Villers-Saint-Sépulcre on 10 June 2009 and on 18 January 2010.

national.⁴¹ But the key moment of this shift was the presidency of Jacques Chirac (1995–2007), that led to the institution, on 25 September 2001, of a day of national homage to the *harkis* (Journée d'hommage nationale aux harkis). The former president – who fought as a conscript in Algeria in the ranks of the 6th Régiment de chasseurs d'Afrique – was always very sensitive to the fate of the *pieds-noirs* and the *harkis*.⁴²

After Elisabeth's interruption, Yves goes on:

YVES: Ah oui! Ça, ça a toujours était ... c'est la honte de l'armée française ... La honte de l'armée française. Ces gens se battaient ... vous pouvez pas savoir ... Ils croyaient en nous et tout ... Et quand je pense qu'on les désarmait avec les 'fells' qui attendaient sur la colline ... pour les passer au ... au barbecue, pour les ébouillanter, pour ... [...] Parce que vous savez que les harkis ... ça a été chaud, hein? ... on a fait les pires saloperies. Je peux pas vous raconter ... [...] C'est ... ils savent très bien qu'ils ont fait des cochonneries, des saloperies ... C'était pas la peine de faire tout ça. Ils ont massacré ces gens là ... femmes, enfants, tout le bazar y est passé, hein?

[YVES: Ah, yes! That, that has always been ... it's the shame of the French army ... the shame of the French army. Those people fought ... you cannot know ... they believed in us entirely ... And when I think that they were disarmed with the 'fells' waiting in the hills ... to carry them off to ... to the barbeque, to boil them, for ... [...] Because you know that the *harkis* ... that was hot, eh? ... there were some dirty tricks. I can't tell you ... [...] It's ... they knew very well that they had done some beastly, dirty tricks ... There was no point in doing all that. They massacred those men there ... women, children, the whole market went that way, eh?]

41 The first law which aimed at providing compensation for the *harkis* was the Romani law, passed on 11 June 1994 (Loi n. 94–488, 'Loi relative aux rapatriés anciens membres des formations supplétives et assimilés ou victimes de la captivité en Algérie'). For a helpful genealogical insight into the public emergence of the *harkis*' memories, see C. Eldrige, "'We've Never Had a Voice': Memory Construction and the Children of the Harkis (1962–1991)", *French History*, 23/1 (2009), 88–107.

42 'Les anciens des forces supplétives, les harkis et leurs familles, ont été les victimes d'une terrible tragédie. Les massacres commis en 1962, frappant les militaires comme les civils, les femmes comme les enfants, laisseront pour toujours l'empreinte irréparable de la barbarie. Ils doivent être reconnus. ... Les harkis ne sauraient demeurer les oubliés d'une histoire enfouie. Ils doivent désormais prendre toute leur place dans notre mémoire'. J. Chirac, *Mon Combat pour la France: Textes et interventions* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2007), 46.

But Yves was in Algeria until October 1961. Therefore he had not seen *harkis* disarmed by the French army nor 'cooked' by FLN fighters 'waiting on the hill' (something that could have happened only in the aftermath of summer 1962). On this point, although his memory is completely mediated it is nonetheless interesting if we see it as an echo of widespread common sense. Thus, it is worth noting that Yves's first statement is that the destiny of *harkis* was 'the shame of the French army': even if – as Yves will later tell me – contemptuous statements like 't'es pire qu'un harki' ('you are worse than a *harki*') were common in the army. Moreover, it is revealing that once the initial statements have been made, as if by way of an overture, the *harkis* become an excuse to talk of 'them' (*ils*) and their '*saloperies*'.⁴³ But who exactly are these mysterious 'fells', 'waiting on the hill' to cook *harkis*, and of course slaughter women and children?

* * *

Algerians rarely appear in the veterans' pictures. All interviewees keep pictures of the war, taken by themselves or comrades, stored, in order, in an album or a box.⁴⁴ What effect does looking at these photos have on them today? 'C'est difficile à exprimer', Claude says to me, 'car d'une part c'est un retour dans une autre existence [...], mais c'est aussi un retour sur soi-même [...]. Enfin, malgré tout c'est aussi le souvenir d'une aventure exotique, un peu comme je le dis pour expliquer ce ressenti, comme si j'avais été acteur dans un film comportant de multiples figurants.'⁴⁵ ('It is difficult to express, because in part it is a return to a different existence [...], but it is also a return on itself [...]. In the end, despite everything, it is also a memory of an

43 On the political use of the *harkis*' memory by the powerful *piéd-noir* community, see C. Eldrige, 'Blurring the Boundaries between Perpetrators and Victims: Pied-noir Memories and the Harki Community', *Memory Studies*, 3/2 (2010), 123–36.

44 On veterans' photographs, see C. Mauss-Copeaux, *À travers le viseur: Images d'appelés en Algérie 1955–1962* (Lyon: Ædelsa 2003); and M. Chominot, 'Guerre des images, guerre sans image? Pratiques et usages de la photographie pendant la guerre d'indépendance algérienne 1954–1962', unpublished PhD thesis (Université de Paris 8, 2008).

45 Claude (1939, 59–2/B), employee, 457th groupe d'artillerie antiaérienne légère, private. Letter to the author, 4 May 2010.

exotic adventure, a bit like I say to explain this feeling, as if I had been an actor in a film composed of many characters. The main subjects in these pictures – the ‘extras’ in the film – can be roughly divided in three groups: the soldier and his comrades; the landscape and military equipment; and, more rarely, pictures portraying Algerians. Even more difficult to find are the pictures of war actions, where the three groups mingle and sometimes even independence fighters appear, as captives.

The most numerous group is the first, who impress because of the juvenile features of the soldiers and their *bon enfant* mood – as if they were on a school tour, and not in the least warlike. Those pictures were taken close-up and the relationship between the photographer-soldier and his subjects – comrades whose pictures he is taking during pauses in military life – is of complete agreement if not complicity. As for landscapes and military equipment, on the contrary, the field expands to the point of boundlessness. Halfway between a close portrait and the infinite landscape, the rare French Muslims occupy an indefinite area in the pictures of French soldiers, neither close nor far, revealing the ambiguous reality of these citizens *entièrement à part*. The distance between the two groups is also a matter of complying with security rules. Michel tells me: ‘Quand on allait voir la population d’abord on disait, je me rappelle, “Matrafouch! Matrafouch!” (c’est-à-dire: “n’ait pas peur!”) ça signifie quelque chose, non? Vous arrivez dans un ... moi quand je me balade en France dans un village je dis pas aux gens “n’ait pas peur!”’⁴⁶ (‘When we would go and see the population we would first say, I recall, “Matrafouch! Matrafouch!” (which means “don’t be frightened”) that means something, no? You arrive in a ... me when I go for a stroll in a village in France I don’t say to people “don’t be frightened!”’) As a matter of fact the relationship between the soldiers and the Algerian population is one of war, no matter how deeply this is hidden beneath the litotes of ‘pacification’. As a consequence, the few pictures taken close-up give the impression of being stolen or extorted: the Algerians portrayed look to the lens with surprise and diffidence; others

46 Michel (1931, 58–2/A), high-school teacher, 26th régiment d’infanterie, second lieutenant. Interviewed in Paris on 20 May and 14 June 2010.

pretend an unconcern under which proud opposition seems barely hidden. One can easily imagine the situations in which these pictures came to be taken: most frequently just after a patrol of heavily armed (and overexcited or fearful) soldiers has intruded into the everyday life of a civil population fixed on their own activities.

One of Yves’s pictures portrays two women under a tent, likely a mother and her daughter. The youngest is staring at the ground while the woman on her left, spinning wool, is vexedly looking straight ahead, avoiding the lens.⁴⁷ Yves has written on the back: ‘une zouze [*sic*] qui file la laine. La fille pudique baisse la tête car on la regarde. Chéria 1961’ [An old woman spinning wool. The modest daughter lowers her head because we are looking at her]. In this manner the soldiers read an unknown reality, which they do not understand, through stereotypes drawn from colonial times. The woman spinning wool is the perfect image of a pre-modern past looked at with a condescending air as folklore: the woman is an *azouze* condemned by age (biological, but also historical). The young one, sitting beside her and avoiding the soldiers’ look, is on the contrary the object of a unreciprocated desire. The appeal to the virginal topos – the girl is ‘modest’ (*pudique*) – reveals the sexualizing colonial imagery deployed by soldiers who are excited by the (lack of) interaction, and thereby conveniently misunderstand the political implication of the girl’s refusal to look at their lenses and guns.

Rather than focus on violence – a key issue within the colonial relationship that changes political and military conflict into a ‘clash of civilizations’ (‘primitive violence’ being an essentialist character of ‘savages’) – I will end by focusing on two elements which recur in the narrations of the veterans concerning the Algerians: the backwardness of Algerian society and the image of their women.⁴⁸

47 Similar acts of resistance faced with the photographers’ violence are described by C. Mauss-Copeaux, *A travers le viseur. Images d’appelés en Algérie 1955–1962*, 68–9.

48 On violence in this specific colonial war, see R. Branche, *L’Emboscade de Palestro: Algérie 1956* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), in particular ch. 3, ‘L’Algérie sauvage’ (77–104).

The soldiers were indeed struck by the poverty and backwardness of the *indigène* – and the accompanying dirtiness. The soldiers, who watch the Algerians – and photograph them – while always keeping their distance and often without getting down from their jeeps or trucks, all retain a similar (indeed, stereotyped) image: that of a people mired in the past, outside of history. Veterans often refer to them as dwelling in the ‘Middle Ages’ or the ‘Stone Age’. The description is sometimes nuanced, even to the extent that it becomes associated with a certain form of deference: for Michel, the inhabitants of the region were ‘dans un mot, nobles’ (‘in a word, noble’); mais ‘d’une noblesse médiévale, cornélienne. Des misérables: loques, sales, déchirés’ [‘but of a Medieval nobility, Cornelian. Wretched: their rags dirty and ripped’]. But this theme of misery, perceived in the first instance as a lack of hygiene – and thus read as an imperviousness to the course of progress of civilization of manners – contributes powerfully to the construction of a mental image characterized by radical alterity. However, having been constructed through sedimentation of successive layers over the last fifty years, this image no longer belongs just to this single period of war, but also to the postcolonial presents of France and Algeria. It is clear, incidentally, that France in the 1950s – and most notably the rural areas from where the vast majority of the conscripts came – had only just begun to impose on itself the disciplines of hygiene, which today have triumphed to the point of obsession.

AB: Est-ce que c’était une guerre coloniale, selon vous?

JEAN-CLAUDE: Moi je crois qu’on avait tous, on avait tous une attitude quand même un peu colonialiste. Par exemple, l’exemple type, quand sur une piste on croisait un vieux, un gars qui été monté sur son, sur son âne et que la femme marchait derrière avec des gosses, on disait ‘non, toi tu descends’, c’était à la femme de monter. Je crois que tous on avait cette idée de leur apporter l’hygiène, je crois qu’on avait tous cette idée là, de leur apporter la civilisation. Donc, je sais pas ce que t’appelles une attitude colonialiste, mais en tout cas une attitude de dire c’est nous qui avons la civilisation, et vous, regardez comment vous vivez dans la crasse, dans le déni de femmes, dans ...⁴⁹

49 Jean-Claude (1939, 59–1/B), employee, 457th groupe d’artillerie antiaérien légère, second lieutenant. Interviewed in Bretignolles on 7 July and in Nantes on 26 November 2008.

[AB: Was it a colonial war, in your opinion?

JEAN-CLAUDE: Me I think that all of us had, we all had an attitude that was a bit colonialist. For example, a classic example, when you’re on a track and you come across an old man, some guy who is riding his, his donkey and the woman is walking behind with her kids, you say ‘no, you get down’, it’s the woman’s place to ride. I think we all had this idea that we could bring them hygiene, I think we all had that kind of idea, to bring them civilization. So, I don’t know what you call a colonialist attitude, but in any case an attitude of saying that it’s us who have civilization, and you, look how you live in filth, in the denial of your women, in ...]

In this manner, gender – the ‘women’ topic, of ‘their women’, whom one should defend, protect, rescue⁵⁰ – becomes a strategically central theme, shaping the memories that swing between past and present and are epitomized, one might say, in Gayatri Spivak’s ironic definition of colonialism: ‘white men saving brown women from brown men.’⁵¹ It is in this sense that the centrality of women in the veterans’ discourse acquires a particular heuristic value: during the war, the frontier between ‘us’ and the ‘other’ was defined with respect to the role of women, and in a certain fashion this process of framing continues today.

‘Les femmes’, says Marc, ‘pour eux c’est rien du tout, hein? ... c’est prrrr ... d’ailleurs ils les cachent, ils les voilent, ils les machinent ... heureusement qu’elles ne sont pas très belles ... c’est un avantage, comme ça on les voit pas! [laughs] Non non, je regrette rien, je regrette pas cette période de guerre d’Algérie. Au contraire je suis bien content qu’on s’en soit débarrassé ...’ (‘The women, for them it’s nothing at all, eh? ... it’s prrrr ... anyway they hide them, they veil them, they control them ... luckily they aren’t very pretty ... it’s an advantage, that’s how we don’t see them! No, no, I regret nothing, I don’t regret that time of war in Algeria. On the contrary I was

50 See R. Branche, ‘Des viols pendant la guerre d’Algérie’, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*, 18/75 (2002), 124–5.

51 See his groundbreaking study on the British abolition of suttee in nineteenth-century India: G.C. Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

quite happy that we got rid of it ...').⁵² It is rare to hear positions expressed as stridently as this; most views are more nuanced. Nevertheless, both strident and nuanced opinions echo the ideological offensive pursued in France, still ongoing after twenty years, against female Muslims, who are for the most part French citizens.⁵³ Since the 'headscarf affair' in 1989, up until President Sarkozy's peremptory declarations in June 2009 ('La burqa ne sera pas la bienvenue sur le territoire de la République'), women have reappeared as a region of confrontation between civilizations.⁵⁴ It has not been 'got rid of', as Marc wanted to say: on the contrary, the ambiguities of colonial Algeria reappear as nightmarish monsters in postcolonial France. The campaigns for *dévoilement* [unveiling] have a long colonial history, as Christine Delphy has pointed out.⁵⁵

Conclusion

Nonetheless, 'such historically dense vocabularies raise basic problems of interpretative licence. To what degree [are veterans'] descriptions of the colonial past to be read as commentaries on the postcolonial present? And given that they must be to some extent 'about' both, how are we to calibrate the relative weighting of the two?'⁵⁶ Veterans' memories swing between past

52 Marc (1940, 60-1/A), garage worker, 457th groupe d'artillerie antiaérien légère, sergent. Interviewed in Les Pavillons sous Bois on 13 July and 11 December 2008.

53 For a concise account of the debates on this issue, see J. Baubérot, 'La Commission Stasi: Entre Laïcité Républicaine et Multiculturelle', *Historical Reflections*, 34/3 (2008), 7-20.

54 See E. Dorlin, 'Le grand strip-tease: féminisme, nationalisme et burqa en France', in N. Bancel et al. (eds), *Ruptures postcoloniales: Les nouveaux visages de la société française*, 429-42. Nicolas Sarkozy's speech was delivered in Versailles, 22 June 2009.

55 C. Delphy, *Classer, dominer. Qui sont les 'autres'?* (Paris: La fabrique, 2008), 144.

56 A.L. Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 273.

and present: even if their memories of the past are profoundly influenced by the present realities of French and Algerian society, at the same time they are still one of the privileged vectors of transmission of past colonial imagery within French society. Nonetheless, in that overused term 'post-colonialism', one must not disregard the heuristic potential rooted in the prefix 'post' – one should not, that is, give way to an implacable logic of continuity or ahistorical permanence of the 'yet'.⁵⁷ Thereby, the postcolonial time 'is the one in which colonial experience appears, simultaneously, to be consigned to the past and, precisely due to the modalities with which its "overcoming" comes about, to be installed at the centre of contemporary social experience'.⁵⁸

Given that witnesses tell stories in different ways, we are supposed to deal with the veterans' memories in the plural, without doing them violence by looking for an authoritative synthesis imposed from outside the conflict environment and military culture: moreover, veterans differ because of their social condition, education, and political stances. Nevertheless, they attempt retrospectively to give a meaning to their war experience through the contemporary socio-cultural frames to which they belong – as does everybody in looking back at their lives.

If we return to the 'Odyssey', and consider Odysseus as the archetype of the veteran narrating himself, we can, perhaps, better understand the manner in which he is *polytropos*, as the first line of the 'Odyssey' says:⁵⁹ *polytropos*, certainly as in a man with many experiences ('skilled' in the Fitzgerald translation), but also polyvalent, concealable. Haunted by the uneasy task of composing the past and the present, the war time and its aftermath.

57 See Chakrabarty's discussion of historicism – as the Modern European idea of history – through the concept of the 'not yet', in D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

58 S. Mezzadra, *La Condizione Postcoloniale. Storia e Politica nel Presente Globale* (Verona: ombre corte, 2008), 25.

59 'Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story of that man skilled in all ways of contending' ('Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα, πολύτροπον), *Odyssey*, I, vol. 1, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1998).

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