



Writing the *Pieds-Noirs*: The Construction of *Pied-Noir* Identity in Algerian and French Literature

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Abstract

*This article examines representations of pied-noir identity in contemporary French and Algerian literature by situating them at the intersection of memory studies, postcolonial studies and literary criticism. Engaging with the theoretical frameworks of Homi K. Bhabha and Pierre Nora, it interrogates the ways in which nostalgia, displacement and cultural hybridity are mobilised in Yasmina Khadra's novel *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit* (2008) and Patrick Jusseaume's *Non-Retour* (2021). Through a comparative close reading of these texts, this article reflects on the contested construction of memory and the divergent narrative strategies used to portray postcolonial subjectivity.*

*By foregrounding the notion of the third space, the analysis traces how both texts destabilise traditional binary models of coloniser and colonised by placing their protagonists in ambivalent positions of cultural liminality. Khadra's novel advances a reflexive and often critical portrayal of the French pied-noir settler population, while simultaneously acknowledging the emotional complexity of their attachment to Algeria. Jusseaume's *bande dessinée*, by contrast, uses the immediacy of visual storytelling to emphasise the trauma of repatriation, but prefers a depoliticised narrative that omits colonial complicity.*

This article contributes to ongoing debates within Francophone postcolonial studies regarding the narrativisation and contestation of settler memory, and the afterlives of empire in both metropolitan and diasporic contexts.

Keywords: postcolonial memory, literary analysis, *Pied-Noir*, identity, displacement, Franco-Algerian relations, hybridity, settler colonialism

Introduction

The *pied-noir* identity occupies a complex and contested space within both Algerian and French historical narratives, and has been profoundly shaped by colonialism, violence, displacement and postcolonial memory. As European settlers incentivised to immigrate to a recently colonised Algeria from the nineteenth century onwards, the *pieds-noirs* developed a distinct cultural identity that became uprooted—and later rendered ambiguous and controversial—following Algerian independence in 1962. France

positioned itself as the political homeland of *pieds-noirs* of all European backgrounds, offering them legal protections and French citizenship (Savarese, 2016, pp. 173–174). Their “return” to metropolitan France, which was neither desired nor welcomed by native French society, left them in a state of cultural liminality, being neither fully Algerian nor fully French. As a result, they were regarded as outsiders by both communities and were often blamed for acts of violence. As proponents of settler colonialism—a colonial system that displaces native populations to maintain control over a territory—the *pieds-noirs* remain a highly scrutinised group, due to growing opposition to the practice (Day, 2015, pp. 104–105). This article explores how this complex identity has been constructed, contested and reimagined in both Algerian and French literary fiction. Comparing literary portrayals of *pieds-noirs* from both traditions demonstrates how their contrasting representations engage with broader themes of nostalgia, exile, belonging and postcolonial memory within contemporary and historical frameworks. Although *pied-noir* heritage lies not just in France, but in Spain, Italy and Malta (Connolly, 2020, p. 4), this article pays particular attention to *pieds-noirs* of French origin and those who took on French nationality following the exodus from Algeria.

The *pied-noir* identity is emblematic of the tensions inherent to national identity formation and decolonisation, due to its intrinsic hybridity and the group’s history of displacement. For such groups, literature serves as a critical space for negotiating identity, particularly in post- and de-colonial contexts where their narratives are often fractured or challenged (Khan *et al.*, 2024, p. 309). The selected texts—*Ce que le jour doit à la nuit* (2008) by Yasmina Khadra and *Non-Retour* (2021) by Patrick Jusseaume—offer varied and complex depictions of *pieds-noirs* in Algerian and French literary traditions respectively. Through a comparative analysis, this study explores how these texts construct and critique the *pied-noir* identity and what they reveal about postcolonial memory and identity construction through contrasting national narratives. These texts present complementary yet contrasting reflections on the *pied-noir* experience. Khadra’s nuanced prose and Jusseaume’s visual imagery converge on shared themes of trauma, nostalgia, memory and identity. What is illuminating is how the Algerian text tells the story of the *pieds-noirs* from their colonisation to their exile and new lives in France, whereas the French text focuses on the

immediate trauma of exile, omitting the context of an imperial past. As these two works apparently align with their respective national narratives while handling similar themes, *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit* and *Non-Retour* are compelling texts to study how Algerian and French authors depict the *pied-noir* identity and experience. This article demonstrates how these two texts are ideal case studies for comparison of depictions of the *pied-noir* identity.

The *Pied-Noirs*

The term *pied-noir* translates as “black-feet” and refers to a community that emerged as a distinct identity during the colonial period in Algeria. The *pieds-noirs* are an ethno-cultural group comprised mainly French-born Algerian citizens and their descendants, and lay claim over both French and Algerian culture, but also possess a culture unique to the community. These men and women began to arrive in Algeria from the 1830s, when French Algeria was seen to be peaceful and prosperous. The settlers usually held both French and Algerian citizenship and were at the top of the colonial hierarchy (Eldridge, 2016, p. 18). As their French identity placed them above native Algerians, the settlers’ “Frenchness”¹ became a key component of *pied-noir* identity. This manifested in a reverence for the French language, Christianity and French cultural traditions, propelled by disdain for the Arabic language, Islam and Arab cultural traditions. By 1954, approximately 10% of Algeria’s population were *pied-noir* (Eldridge, 2016, pp. 18–19).

As pro-independence movements gained traction in Algeria, the *pieds-noirs*’ position within Algerian society became precarious, as tensions mounted and eventually boiled into a war for independence. When it became clear that independence was inevitable, there was a mass exodus of *pieds-noirs* to metropolitan France, as hatred for Europeans in Algeria began to manifest in individual instances of violence, such as the 1956 Milk Bar Bombing, as well as in organised massacres, such as the Oran Massacre (Hubbell, 2015, p. 8). As the French Army began to withdraw from Algeria, it could no longer promise protection for *pieds-noirs*, and so an estimated

¹ The boundaries of this term are contested, and the French identity is highly racialised. For how “Frenchness” is performed and signalled, particularly by North Africans, see Beaman, 2017.

80% of settlers fled. Nearly one million were “repatriated” to France, where the term “*pied-noir*” was used as an insult, reflecting the socio-political climate in France at the time. Many *pieds-noirs* preferred the term “*Français d’Algérie*” (“French of Algeria”), but the term *pied-noir* was later reappropriated to become a symbol of pride (Hubbell, 2015, p. 10).

Though traumatised by being forced from their home country, some *pieds-noirs* were eager upon arrival in France to finally experience the country that they had engaged with through generational relationships. In a series of interviews conducted by Jeannine Verdès-Leroux with *pieds-noirs* at the end of the twentieth century, the historian explains how the interviewees viewed France before their repatriation. They were quoted as saying “On ne vivait que dans l’image de la France [...]. La seule chose qui intéressait, c’était la France [...]”,² and “La France, c’était une sorte d’Olympe, de sanctuaire” (Verdès-Leroux, 2003, p. 324).³ Verdès-Leroux (2003, pp. 324–325) summarises by saying that the *pieds-noirs*’ concept of France was one of splendour, culture and intelligence. This meant that when they came to the motherland, their expectations, shaped by the admiration their parents and grandparents had expressed and fostered across successive generations, clashed with the reality of a country that disappointed many of them. One interviewee said that “Nous voulions, comme Pieds-noirs, la France plus belle qu’elle ne pouvait être” (Verdès-Leroux, 2003, p. 333).⁴ Other interviewees mentioned that upon arrival they felt little affinity with France, considering it a dirty, rigid, backward country, which showed little love for them (Verdès-Leroux, 2003, p. 334).

Because of the racial hierarchy in Algeria, white *pieds-noirs* generally lived more privileged lives than native Algerians before the Algerian War (1954–1962). They were stereotyped by both Algerians and the French alike as “rich and exploitative” and were viewed as white colonists by Algerians at large (Eldridge, 2016, pp. 20–21). The reality, however, was that *pied-noir* stereotypes erased the variety of classes and experiences within the group. Its members, while often wealthy and prejudiced, were also integrated into wider Algerian society and lived more modestly.

² “We lived only in the image of France [...]. The only thing that interested us was France [...]”. Note that all translations from French to English are my own, unless otherwise indicated by a citation.

³ “France was a sort of Olympus, a sanctuary”.

⁴ “As *pieds-noirs*, we wanted France to be more beautiful than it could be”.

Generally, *pieds-noirs* had a lower standard of living than the metropolitan French, and for the wealthier among them, most lacked the liquid funds necessary to start a new life after repatriation, having left their assets behind (Baillet, 1975, p. 304). The essentialist stereotype was described by *piéd-noir* repatriate Jean-Pierre Hollender as follows:

[...] gros, gras, rouges et suants, cigare aux lèvres, jetant nos billets de banque par la portière de notre voiture ou fouettant les glaneurs qui osaient ramasser les blés abandonnés par les grosses moissonneuses batteuses. Les femmes étant couvertes de bijoux et passant leurs journées affalées sur des sofas en mangeant des “loukoum,” pendant que des négriennes au moyen de grands éventails chassaient les mouches en les ventilant [...].⁵
(Hollender, 1997, p. 16, quoted in Hubbell, 2015, p. 12)

Despite living privileged lives in Algeria, the standard of living in France was overall higher, and so upon arrival to France, *piéd-noir* communities found themselves in a new, distinctly lower socio-economic position. This contrasted sharply with the idealised image of France as a revered homeland. A combination of an absence of facilities and resources to support their transition into French society, a lack of familial connections in France and the resentment they faced from the native French resulted in financial struggles and difficulties in integrating into a country that largely did not welcome *pieds-noirs*. As a result, many found a sense of community in their perceived victimhood. The settlers expected to arrive in a France which welcomed them as brothers, but they were instead viewed as outsiders who were distinct from the metropolitan French in how they dressed, spoke and ate (Hubbell, 2015, pp. 10–12). The group, fearing that their identity would be lost after repatriation, consolidated the multiplicitous *piéd-noir* identity into one image, which often conformed to its stereotypes. This was because they understood that their survival as a distinct cultural group was dependent on unity. As such, rather than basing their identity on their European heritage and being “more French than the

⁵ “[...] fat, greasy, red and sweaty, cigar between the lips, throwing our banknotes out the door of our new car or whipping the gleaners who dared to gather the wheat left behind by our great combine harvesters. The women being covered in jewels and spending their days slouched on sofas and eating Turkish Delight, while their black servants fanned them, chasing away flies with large fans [...]”.

French” as they did in Algeria, the main locus of sub-group identity came from the specific city in Algeria from which they fled (Hubbell, 2015, pp. 13–14).

Part of this effort to preserve *pied-noir* identity was chronicling the experience of existing between Algerian and French identities, the trauma of the exodus and the nostalgia for a land that was no longer theirs, as well as disappointment in the idealised motherland. Memoirs and personal accounts were being printed within a year of repatriation and continued to be published into the twenty-first century (Hubbell, 2007, p. 59). The chronicling of *pied-noir* identity is seen in poems, novels, artworks, cookbooks and films, as *pieds-noirs* and their descendants attempt to preserve a culture that fades with each generation’s separation from Algeria.

Theoretical Frameworks and Comparative Literary Analysis

When examining the *pied-noir* experience through a theoretical lens, Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of the third space is essential to the discussion. Bhabha (1994, pp. 35–36) believed that postcolonial identities cannot be defined as fixed or binary, as “cultures are never unitary in themselves, not simply dualistic in relation of Self to Other”. The *pied-noir* community’s experience of in-betweenness, displacement, nostalgia and discrimination all forced them into a liminal space between Algerian and French identities. To Bhabha (1994, p. 28), this is the third space of enunciation, wherein the individual who occupies this space is “neither the One nor the Other but something besides”. This meant that *pieds-noirs*, as postcolonial subjects, are in a state of hybridity characterised by a lack of a sense of home or belonging (particularly after the exodus), being the product of cultural negotiation. Thus, Bhabha provides a framework for understanding how the *pieds-noirs* occupy a space of cultural ambiguity.

Pierre Nora’s (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, is also useful in an evaluation of *pied-noir* literary depictions. For Nora, collective memory is anchored in tangible places and objects, or intangible concepts and constructed objects, which symbolise collective memory and historical experiences. This can include monuments, flags and immaterial symbols, which act as repositories of memory (Nora, 1989, pp. 18–25). In

the context of *pied-noir* literature, sites of memory in the form of storytelling are a means to preserve, contest and confront historical trauma and collective memory. By memorialising and debating *pied-noir* identity and its associated themes, literature reveals the disputed nature of memory, where nostalgia for a lost past coexists with present realities and ongoing efforts to preserve and come to terms with personal and collective history, from French, Algerian and *pied-noir* perspectives. Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* thus provides a way of analysing how literary texts serve as containers for collective and personal memories of colonial and postcolonial experiences.

Nostalgia plays a significant role in *pied-noir* literature. Some scholars argue that nostalgia is a conservative tool that reinforces a selective memory of the past and so undermines efforts to address historical injustices (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2022, p. 1233). Others contend that nostalgia can be a dynamic process that fuels resistance and critical engagement with colonial history through literature and storytelling (Hubbell, 2007, pp. 59–65).

A critical comparative approach highlights the differences in how each cultural context engages with the past and how they use literary techniques to construct or reconstruct collective memory. This analysis therefore examines how the tensions between dominant colonial narratives and subaltern counter-narratives manifest in literature.⁶ Dominant narratives in postcolonial literature often downplay or sanitise the brutal realities of colonialism, while subaltern narratives tend to strive towards the restoration of their suppressed histories. As the colonising force, French literature may tend to romanticise or selectively memorialise *pied-noir* experiences, whereas Algerian literature may prefer a more critical and revisionist perspective that is informed by the lingering outcomes of colonial rule (Ivey, 2022, p. 6).

This analysis exposes the contestation of memory and identity inherent in conflicting depictions of *pied-noir* experiences and history in literature, where attempts to define identity are deeply political acts. The following sections do this by closely examining the selected texts and exploring how

⁶ Subaltern narratives are narratives written from the perspectives of those who are lower ranking in colonial hierarchies. See Spivak, 1988.

they portray nostalgia, identity and memory, and how this contributes to theories of hybridity and postcolonial identity.

The Algerian Perspective: Ce que le jour doit à la nuit

Although primarily known for its powerful historical narrative, Yasmina Khadra's 2008 novel *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit*⁷ functions as a critical intervention in the discourse on identity and memory in postcolonial Algeria. As the novel is written by an Algerian author, it has the potential to offer valuable insights into the Algerian perspective on the *pieds-noirs* in the twenty-first century. As will be discussed, the novel employs a range of narrative techniques that both construct and contest the traditional *pied-noir* identity within an Algerian narrative.

The novel, set between 1930 and 1962, with an epilogue set in 2008, tells the story of Younes, a young Algerian boy forced to leave his family's ancestral land for the city of Oran after a fire destroys their crops, just days before the harvest. After struggling for months to provide for his family in the slums of Oran, Younes's father entrusts him to his brother—Younes's uncle—who has found success as a pharmacist and married a *pied-noir* woman. Now living in a wealthy neighbourhood and receiving a French education, Younes is renamed Jonas by his aunt, and the couple considers him to be their son. He is quickly accepted into the wealthy communities in Algeria because of his blue eyes, light skin and good looks, though is still regarded as an outsider by both him and those around him because of his Arab heritage. Jonas watches as the Algerian nationalist movement grows. He also experiences racism from *pieds-noirs* in his community. He befriends a group of boys and is the only native Algerian among them, but tensions develop between the boys as they compete for the love of their friend Émilie and grapple with a society that insists that they should be divided. When the impending war forces him to choose sides, Jonas struggles between his Algerian roots and the community he has found among the French settlers. Jonas gets caught up in the violence of the war, while his *pied-noir* friends are repatriated to France and he remains in his homeland.

Khadra avoids taking sides in his writing, depicting both the brutality of the colonists' treatment of Algerians and the everyday ordinariness of *pied-*

⁷ "What the day owes the night".

noir life. Jonas witnesses French employers mistreating labourers and subjecting them to inhumane working and living conditions, but also sees them as complex individuals who, above all else, want to preserve their homes and way of life. Similarly, Khadra's portrayals of Algerians are well-rounded, showing the full spectrum of humanity, with characters ranging from kind-hearted, family-oriented people to those who engage in violent nationalism against European settlers. The novel is also full of richly developed female characters who support one another and lead fulfilling lives independent of men, countering Western stereotypes that depict Arab women as passive or oppressed by war, society or religion (Tabaza and Mustafa-Awad, 2022, p. 368).

Focusing on the construction of the *pied-noir* identity, Khadra's representations of the French settlers are not monolithic. The protagonist, Jonas, is emblematic of Bhabha's hybrid subject, as his identity is a fusion of the cultures of the colonised (Algeria) and the coloniser (France), creating ambivalence when he is asked to choose between the two, thus placing him in a third space of enunciation (Zuraikat and Sahnoune, 2023, pp. 259–260). On one hand, the novel reaffirms his sense of attachment to Algeria through highly evocative descriptions of the landscape and everyday rituals, but on another, it reveals the dissonance between the celebrated memory of an idealised pre-colonial Algeria of the past and the violent processes of colonisation and subsequent decolonisation. This cultural liminality exemplifies the *pied-noir* experience, in which the group occupies a third space between French and Algerian cultures while celebrating a glorified past. Khadra's treatment of identity and memory is therefore ambivalent. Although the text occasionally indulges in romanticised nostalgia, it also critiques that nostalgia by drawing attention to the contradictions inherent in a memory that is selective and often mythologised. The narrative's fluid boundaries between the self and the other, and between past and present, further underscore Bhabha's concept of the third space, where identities are perpetually in flux and fixed binaries fall away.

Depictions of *pieds-noirs* in *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit* all come from Jonas's experiences and interactions with them, which are varied and far from homogenous. As a young man, Jonas admonishes his wealthy *pied-*

noir friend for mistreating his Algerian servant. In response, his friend says that:

Tu n'as pas de valets, toi, et tu sais pas ce que c'est... Les Arabes, c'est comme les poulpes; il faut les battre pour les détendre.⁸ (p. 74)

Later, when discussing a *piéd-noir* opening a bar, Jonas notes that:

On l'imaginait plutôt bien droit dans ses bottes de féodal, la cravache contre la cuisse et le cri sans appel, à botter le derrière aux saisonniers et à vouloir l'Olympe pour lui tout seul.⁹ (p. 102)

Khadra paints a starkly negative image of the *piéd-noir* as the cruel and exploitative coloniser, who uses their position of power to oppress. Throughout the novel, *piéd-noirs* make comments about “lazy Arabs”, calling them dogs and snakes, though they make sure to correct themselves in front of Jonas by calling him the exception to the rule (p. 74), likely because of his European features and affiliation with French culture in Algeria.

The novel strikes a balance by presenting negative portrayal of the *piéd-noirs* in the pre-independence period while also outlining positive characterisations. Throughout the text, Jonas is well-received by European settlers and is generally treated with kindness, though this is likely due again to his European features. His *piéd-noir* friend, Isabelle, for example, becomes angry with him upon learning that he is Arab, not French, and screams at him for “lying” to her about his name and race, saying that it “changes everything” (p. 65) because it would be frowned upon for a white girl to be friends with an Algerian. Though a young Jonas does not understand why this would upset her, she tells him “Nous ne sommes pas du même monde, monsieur Younes. Et le bleu de tes yeux ne suffit pas” (p. 65).¹⁰ Despite this, the novel does call for a more holistic examination of

⁸ “You do not have servants, you do not know what it’s like [...] Arabs are like dogs, you have to beat them to get them to behave” (Zuraikat and Sahnoune, 2023, p. 265).

⁹ “We rather imagined him standing firm in his feudal lord’s boots, the riding crop against his thigh and the merciless scream to kick the behinds of the seasonal workers and to want Olympus all to himself”.

¹⁰ “We are not from the same world, Mr Younes. And the blue of your eyes is not enough”.

the *pieds-noirs*, including their variety of backgrounds and acknowledging their pain for being exiled from their homeland. In the epilogue, Jonas visits an old *pied-noir* friend, Gustave, in Aix-en-Provence in 2008 who was repatriated to France following Algerian independence:

Si seulement on avait quitté le bled de notre propre gré [...]. Mais on nous a forcés à tout abandonner et à partir en catastrophe, nos valises chargées de fantômes et de peines. On nous a dépossédés de tout, y compris de notre âme. On ne nous a rien laissé, rien de rien, pas même les yeux pour pleurer. C'était pas juste, Jonas. Tout le monde n'était pas colon, tout le monde n'avait pas une cravache contre ses bottes de seigneur; on n'avait même pas de bottes tout court, par endroits. Nous avons nos pauvres et nos quartiers pauvres, nos laissés-pour-compte et nos gens de bonne volonté, nos petits artisans plus petits que les vôtres, et nous faisons souvent les mêmes prières. Pourquoi nous a-t-on tous mis dans un même sac? Pourquoi nous a-t-on fait porter le chapeau d'une poignée de féodaux? Pourquoi nous a-t-on fait croire que nous étions étrangers sur la terre qui a vu naître nos pères, nos grands-pères, et nos arrière-arrière-grands-pères, que nous étions les usurpateurs d'un pays que nous avons construit de nos mains et irrigué de notre sueur et de notre sang? [...] Tant qu'on n'aura pas la réponse, la blessure ne cicatrisera pas.¹¹ (p. 203)

Khadra observes the variety of conditions experienced by the *pieds-noirs* in Algeria, ranging from coloniser to outcast, which deviates from the expectation that an Algerian writer would focus solely on their privileged lives (Ivey, 2022, p. 6). Interestingly, Khadra subverts the stereotype of *pieds-noirs* as a homogenous group of brutal colonists, a complaint often made by the *pied-noir* community regarding their reputation in literature.

¹¹ “If only we had left the *bled* of our own will [...]. But we were forced to abandon everything and leave in a hurry, our suitcases filled with ghosts and anguish. We were dispossessed of everything, including our souls. We left with nothing, less than nothing, not even our eyes to cry with. It wasn't fair, Jonas. Not everyone was a coloniser, not everyone had a riding crop against their lord's boots; we didn't even have boots at all, in some places. We had our poor and our poor neighbourhoods, our outcasts and good-willed people, our small tradespeople—smaller than yours, and we often said the same prayers. Why were we all lumped together? Why were we made to wear the same hat as a handful of feudal lords? Why were we made to believe that we were strangers on the land that saw the birth of our fathers, our grand-fathers, and our great-grandfathers, that we were the usurpers of a country that we had made with our hands and irrigated with our sweat and blood? [...] As long as we don't have an answer, the wound will not heal”.

This sympathetic view, which emphasises the victimhood of French Algerians, is, however, somewhat of an outlier in the novel. Gustave, for example, is consistently portrayed negatively. Jonas remembers him as the class dunce, and he only appears in the narrative when drunk, undermining his credibility. When tallied, the numerous remarks and discussions by *pieds-noirs* about Arabs, the expectation that *pieds-noirs* are exploitative colonisers and the continuous portrayal of the group as privileged and racist leave the reader with the distinct impression that although the protagonist is caught between the Arab and French worlds, Khadra portrays the *pieds-noirs* and the French colonial system critically, aligning more closely with the Algerian national narrative concerning settler colonialism rather than the French narrative, which tends to downplay or overlook it (Connolly, 2014, pp. 144–152).

The Franch Perspective: Non-Retour

Non-Retour (2021), a lesser-known *bande-dessinée* (French comic, literally “drawn strips”) by Patrick Jusseume (1951–2017), offers a distinctly French perspective on the *piéd-noir* experience during the Algerian war, foregrounding themes of trauma, displacement and alienation through this particularly French medium. Jusseume is largely credited with the initial storyboarding and artwork, but he died before *Non-Retour* was completed. Guided by Jusseume’s drafts and sketches, Jean-Leurant Truc completed the scriptwriting and Olivier Mangin completed the artwork. All three contributors are French. The graphic novel employs the economy of words and immediacy of visual storytelling to capture the trauma and disorientation of forced repatriation. As *Non-Retour* is both more recent and more obscure than *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit*, less emphasis is placed on secondary criticism in the current discussion, reflecting the limited available relevant literature.

The story primarily takes place on a plane departing from the Algerian city of Béchar, destined for Marseille, carrying a group of *pieds-noirs* being repatriated on the eve of Algerian independence. Onboard, the passengers’ anxieties mirror the broader crisis of displacement. As they prepare to board the plane, they express resentment towards Charles De Gaulle (1890–1970) for abandoning the *pieds-noirs*, lament the loss of their homes and businesses and worry about their impending cultural dislocation to an alien

land. When the OAS¹² bombs oil reserves in an attempt to sabotage pro-Algerian forces, tensions mount as passengers watch their homeland ablaze below them while their plane slowly loses fuel. The narrative culminates in a series of violent encounters, including the expulsion of a hijacker, who attempts to ground the plane to prevent the passengers fleeing Algeria, and the gory death of an Algerian spy, and the ultimate repatriation of the *pied-noir* passengers to metropolitan France.



Figure 1:

Example of warmer tones and blurred divisions of past and present. Patrick Jusseume *et al.* *Non Retour* (2021). Paris: Dargaud p. 20.



Figure 2:

Example of cooler tones and overlapping panels. Patrick Jusseume *et al.* *Non Retour* (2021). Paris: Dargaud p. 38.

¹² *Organisation de l'armée secrète*: French paramilitary terrorist organisation opposing Algerian independence (Connolly, 2020, p. 4).

Non-Retour unfolds through a series of episodic sequences that, much like *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit*, reflect the chaotic and fragmented experiences of its characters. The narrative interweaves multiple subplots, including the logistical challenges of emergency evacuation and personal tragedies that occur before and during the hijacking of the plane. In this respect, Jusseume's use of panels that jump without clear division from present to past (See Figure 1) and overlap and blend into one another (See Figure 2) are particularly effective at capturing the fractured nature of the *pied-noir* identity and experience, while emphasising the persistence of past trauma in the present. As the story progresses, these tools of visual fragmentation become more frequent, while the passengers get further from their homeland. In addition, as the plane leaves Algeria behind, the colour palette gradates from warm oranges (Figure 1) to cool blues (Figure 2), reflecting the passengers' fears about leaving the familiar Sahara for the cold uncertainty of France (p. 6).

The graphic medium also allows for a juxtaposition between intimate personal moments and broader socio-political crises. A poignant example is the intercutting between a young boy's quiet act of borrowing a comic from an Algerian spy and the collective anxiety of passengers, who lament De Gaulle's failings and the loss of their homes (p. 5). These visual and narrative shifts invite the reader to consider how individual memories are absorbed into larger historical narratives. The children on board witness violence in multiple forms: attacks on *pieds-noirs* in Algeria, the Algerian War and the hijacking of the aircraft, during which passengers are shot and threatened with grenades, before the hijackers eventually falls from the open-door mid-flight. This is contrasted with the children's fragile grasp on innocence. Upon landing in Marseille, the young boy is preoccupied with his misplaced comic book, despite him witnessing a violent death and mourning the loss of his father who remains in Béchar. This duality of innocence and trauma underscores the intense fracturing and hybridity of the *pied-noir* identity, which is caught between multiple layers of internal and external conflict.

Nostalgia, as with much literature around *pieds-noirs*, plays a central role in the story. On the one hand, characters cling to the memories of their home in Algeria, a land imbued with personal histories and a sense of belonging that is now lost. The longing for a return to the familiar, even

amidst the panic of evacuation, is articulated in intimate moments as when a couple vow to return to Algeria (p. 9), underscoring their enduring attachment to the land. On the other hand, the narrative does not allow this nostalgia to remain unchallenged. The pressing, life-threatening circumstances of the flight, combined with flashbacks of loved ones' deaths, expose the precariousness of this attachment. This is particularly resonant in a sequence where the hijacker brandishes a gun while insisting on landing in Oran, where the FLN await its refuelling to prevent the *pieds-noirs* from fleeing (pp. 28–32),¹³ forcing passengers and crew to confront the dissonance between their memories and attachments to Algeria and the reality of the danger that attachment now poses. This duality reinforces the notion that the *pied-noir* identity is not merely composed of a sentimental longing for a bygone era but is also a site of conflict where competing narratives of victimhood and complicity are in constant tension.

Non-Retour is also concerned with the politics of authority and betrayal, as the narrative constantly foregrounds moments of mistrust and suspicion. The subplot involving a French airplane mechanic who acquires sensitive evacuation plans and is subsequently murdered by an Algerian spy highlights the precarious nature of power dynamics aboard the plane. Although this sequence is seemingly minor within the broader plot, it functions as a microcosm of the larger sense of betrayal experienced by the *pieds-noirs*, who are abandoned by both their beloved France and native Algeria, each of which constitutes part of their identity but ultimately rejects them. The confusion of emergency evacuation and forced separation, as well as uncertainty about the future, is further conveyed through the back and forth between the pilots concerning whether they should land in Oran for fuel or continue directly to France. Should they land, they risk being forced from the aircraft by the FLN, but if they continue to Marseille, they risk running out of fuel. This dilemma reflects the fears of the *pieds-noirs*: if they stay in Algeria they will face further violence, but if they leave for France they will face entirely new challenges.

In this story, *pieds-noirs* are portrayed as both vulnerable victims of circumstance and as a people who are resilient in confronting tragedy. Jusseaume's visual style, marked by abrupt transitions between moments of relative calm and explosive violence, reinforces that the *pied-noir*

¹³ *Front de libération nationale*: Algerian pro-independence forces (Connolly, 2020, p. 4).

identity is constantly in flux, haunted by memories tinged with both trauma and nostalgia. By interweaving personal loss, collective betrayal and a pervasive sense of lack of control, *Non-Retour* interrogates the possibility of any stable, coherent identity emerging from the ruins of settler colonial displacement. The tension between the desire to preserve a cherished, idealised memory of Algeria and the confronting realities of exile is evident throughout the text, which demonstrates great sympathy for the *pieds-noirs*. It must not be overlooked, however, that this sympathy comes at the cost of the subtle demonisation of pro-independence Algerians, who are indirectly presented as antagonists in this narrative.

The Algerian spy, sneeringly called “un petit gros” (“a little fatty”) (p. 25), is drawn as an ugly, weak-willed man who resembles, but is not, a *pied-noir*, and so is brought aboard. In the first pages, he lends the young boy a *bande dessinée* to calm him on the impending flight. The boy later feels a sense of betrayal when his comic is snatched from him by the spy who runs from the gendarmes upon arrival in Marseille. The spy’s pushing through crowds and running from the policemen is portrayed as cowardly (See Figure 3), and he meets a humiliating end by unknowingly running in front of a moving aircraft’s tyres. He is repeatedly depicted as weak, sweating profusely showing fearful expressions (See Figure 4). His support for Algerian independence is vilified by both the police and passengers. This treatment stands in contrast to the representation of the couple, doctors by profession, who have promised to return to Algeria. They claim that they should be allowed to assist in the fight for independence in Algeria. In their case, *their* passion for their country is treated as legitimate, while the Algerian man’s is condemned. In this sense, the conclusion may be drawn that the position this text takes is that the *pieds-noirs* had a great love for their country and are deserving of sympathy for the trauma of exile. As there is no mention of the French of Algeria as an occupying force, but repeated use of “*salaud*” (“bastard”) to refer to Algerians, it appears that the narrative put forth by *Non-Retour* is one in which the *pieds-noirs* are portrayed victims of violence rather than as perpetrators of imperialism.



Figure 3:

Algerian spy running from gendarmes, about to be killed. Patrick Jusseaume *et al.* *Non Retour* (2021). Paris: Dargaud p. 53.



Figure 4:

Hostess asking Algerian spy “Are you well, sir? You seem feverish...”. Patrick Jusseaume *et al.* *Non Retour* (2021). Paris: Dargaud p. 47.

Interrogation of Nostalgia, Identity and Memory

Both Khadra and Jusseaume’s texts use nostalgia as a lens through which *pied-noir* identity is constructed. In *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit*, nostalgia is layered and ambivalent. Jonas is caught between his innate attachment to Algeria and the conflicting pressures imposed on him by colonial expectations. Like the *pieds-noirs*, he yearns for an almost mythologised version of the past, when he felt a sense of belonging living with his biological family in an Algeria that was his own. This attachment, however, is continuously undermined by the brutal realities of colonial violence and the dislocating forces of colonialism, which move him from place to place and force a French identity onto him (Zuraikat and Sahnoune, 2023, pp. 256–271). Jonas’s internal conflict as he oscillates between pride and shame in his Algerian heritage highlights how memory is not a static repository but a fluid and contested terrain. As the reader encounters *pied-noir* identity through an Algerian lens, they are invited to consider how selective remembrance can both preserve identity and obscure the more troubling elements of the past, as Jonas’s perspective reveals how the *pieds-noirs* create a narrative of victimhood that overlooks their complicity in settler colonialism.

Conversely, *Non-Retour* uses the immediacy of graphic storytelling to capture the raw emotional and physical dislocation felt by the *pieds-noirs* as they experienced exile. As they watched their burning homeland recede below them, their feelings of loss and disruption are plain to see in the panels. In this case, however, nostalgia does not just serve as a consoling force, but also as a catalyst for confrontation. For example, when characters desperately cling to their precious photo albums and memories of Algeria, even though they are forced into evacuation from a home that does not want them, the text exposes the inherent contradictions of a memory that is both cherished and contested. The passengers' lamentations emphasise the role of nostalgia in preserving cultural identity while also exposing its selectiveness and exclusionary nature, as memories of a deeply violent settler colonial past are unacknowledged.

In reading these texts side by side, it becomes evident that literature functions as a mediator between the idealised past and present realities. Khadra's lyrical descriptions and reflective tone create a space where the romanticised version of Algeria is both celebrated and critiqued, while Jusseaume's fragmented and episodic narrative captures the disjointed and often vicious reality of exile. These texts reveal that in terms of the *pieds-noirs*, nostalgia is far from a monolithic sentiment but is a multifaceted tool that both comforts and disrupts, serving as a repository for collective memory that is continuously reinterpreted in light of new experiences and traumas.

Implications for Understanding Hybridity

The concept of hybridity and the third space, as developed by Bhabha, is central to understanding the *pied-noir* identity as represented in both texts. In Khadra's narrative this notion of the third space exemplifies the in-betweenness inherent to the *pied-noir* experience, as Jonas's identity is continually negotiated between conflicting cultures as a hybrid subject who is visibly marked by his light features rooted in Arab heritage. This cultural liminality is further highlighted by the narrative's fluid boundaries between past and present and the self and the other, which suggests that identity is not static but perpetually in flux. This intricate construction of identity demonstrates the complexity of memory and the process of subject formation and reformation in a postcolonial context.

Non-Retour, while operating in a different medium, echoes these concerns through its visual representation of identity fragmentation. The panels overlap, shifting between past and present, and particular colour palettes metaphorically illustrate the disintegration of a singular coherent identity in the wake of displacement. The transition from the warm hues of North Africa to the colder tones of metropolitan France signals not only the physical journey of the *pieds-noirs* but also the emotional experience of exile. Through moments of stark violence, the *bande dessinée* exposes how personal and collective identities are perpetually refracted and reformed by historical events and collective experiences. In this sense, hybridity is presented as an ongoing negotiation characterised by tension and ambivalence.

When these texts are read alongside one another, they reveal how hybridity is both a site of creative possibility and a source of vulnerability. Jonas's internal conflict in *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit* and the passengers' disjointed experiences in *Non-Retour* converge to show that the *pied-noir* identity is constructed at the intersection of multiple narratives that often compete with one another. Rooted in personal memory, cultural attachment and the materiality of exile, these narratives intersect to produce a subjectivity that is neither entirely French nor entirely Algerian, but is instead a negotiated identity that emerges from the convergence of varied histories and lived experiences. Hybridity and nostalgia are therefore closely linked in the *pied-noir* experience as *pieds-noirs* embody both French and Algerian cultures, yet fully belong to neither. This hybrid identity creates a longing for a lost homeland that only exists in memory, making nostalgia both a product and expression of their cultural in-betweenness.

Implications for Postcolonial Identity Theory

Khadra's text challenges the binary oppositions that dominate colonial discourses. Rather than depicting the *pieds-noirs* as simply privileged oppressors or as pitiable victims, the text presents a more nuanced image of the community. It does not, however, shy away from exposing the systemic abuse and racism perpetrated by certain sectors of that group. Jusseaume, by contrast, leans in the opposite direction: the *pieds-noirs* are represented as a resilient people trying to reconcile a lost past with an

uncertain future, while not acknowledging their colonial origins. Both of these depictions, although different, suggest that identity in postcolonial contexts are inherently unstable and perpetually evolving.

Additionally, by foregrounding the notion of the third space in analysing the texts, both invite a rethinking of how historical, cultural and material forces interact with each other to shape subjectivity. They demonstrate that identity formation is not as simple as binary inclusion or exclusion but is a complex negotiation of a variety of factors. This perspective is crucial to postcolonial studies, as it highlights the need to think beyond simplistic narratives of victimhood and dominance, and instead to recognise the intricate entanglements that define the lived experiences of both the colonised and the coloniser.

Conclusion

Working with Bhabha and Nora's methodologies, this article finds that the *pied-noir* identity is a contested and multifaceted construct that is shaped by the interactions of memory, nostalgia and hybridity. Through a comparative analysis of the Algerian novel *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit* and French *bande dessinée* *Non-Retour*, this study has demonstrated how literature mediates the tension between an idealised past and the dislocating realities of postcolonial existence, while also revealing how diverging cultures and national narratives construct and remember the *pied-noir* identity and experience.

Khadra's deeply reflective narrative presents a critical but nuanced depiction of *pieds-noirs* as a hybrid subject that straddles the cultural divides of Algeria and France, while Jusseaume's graphic novel captures the immediacy and fragmentation of exile through its visual tools and episodic storytelling, reinforcing the French national narrative that often sanitises (settler) colonialism in Algeria. While the novel can explore the experience of being a hybrid subject in colonial Algeria extensively through text, the *bande dessinée* uses visuals to create metaphors and convey tension.

By interrogating identity, nostalgia and memory, this study advances our understanding of how postcolonial narratives are constructed and reconstructed in response to historical traumas. It illustrates how nostalgia functions both as a repository for memories and as a disruptive force that

exposes the selective nature of historical recollection. By emphasising hybridity and the third space, these findings challenge rigid binaries to reveal the fluid and negotiated subjectivity at the heart of *pied-noir* identity.

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