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Virtual Returns: Colonial postcards online and digital 'nostalgérie' among the former European settlers of Algeria

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This article analyses how certain former European settlers of Algeria (*pieds-noirs*) have created a digital space of remembrance online using scans of colonial-era postcards. Tracing the role of colonial-era postcards in *pied-noir* memory narratives, from the phototexts of the 1980s to websites from the mid-2000s onwards, I suggest these digital sites of memory attempt to maintain a connection to an imagined Algerian homeland during the so-called 'memory wars'. By collecting, scanning, and reproducing postcards and photographs of colonial landscapes, *pieds-noirs* websites aim to reconstruct a lost topography of houses, shops, streets, and towns that have been renamed and rebuilt since independence. These 'virtual returns' to Algerian urban topographies rely predominantly on affective responses to 'nostalgérie' or nostalgia for Algeria. However, in relying on colonial-era postcards they ultimately recreate the 'visual economy' (Welch and McGonagle) of French Algeria in the early 20th century. I argue that, despite the radical 'connectivity' presented by the internet, these websites remain primarily focused on creating a homogenous collective memory for an imagined audience of *pieds-noirs* online. Nonetheless, I conclude by suggesting that this online model of colonial nostalgia *has* permeated, in limited but influential ways, how other groups interpret visual 'nostalgérie'.

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Introduction

As the articles in this special issue suggest, scholarship on digital technologies and the remembrance of postcolonial migrations has been primarily focused on Anglophone linguistic and cultural frameworks. However, the online 'francosphère'[1] also engages with digital practices of remembrance and contestation of France's colonial past. Particularly contentious are the legacies and 'ruinations' (Stoler, 2013) of France's settler colonial project in Algeria (1830–1962). On 5 July 1962, Algeria celebrated its independence after 132 years of French colonial occupation. Algerian independence also marked the official end of the bloody Algerian Revolution or Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962). In a matter of few months over the summer of 1962, around 800,000 people left the newly independent Algeria, mostly for metropolitan France. These were the European settlers and naturalised French Jewish Algerians – by then collectively called the *pieds-noirs* – for whom 1962 continues to represent the moment of profound rupture and the start of their exile from what they perceive to be an Algerian homeland. This article contributes to growing scholarship on *pied-noir* memory and commemoration (Barclay, 2018; Eldridge, 2016; Hubbel, 2011, 2015; Phaneuf 2012; Scioldo-Zürcher, 2012; Sims, 2016; Slyomovics, 2020) by tracing some of the ways in which self-identified *pied-noir* individuals disseminate images of French Algeria online.

The 8 years of the Algerian War for Independence remain the 'fulcrum of Algeria's 20th-century history' (McDougall, 2017, p. 4), to the detriment to other *longue durée* approaches. The shadow of the war looms heavily over any public discussion of life in colonial Algeria, crystallising the different camps and factions that had existed in French-Algerian settler colonial society; with the 'French' settlers—or *pieds-noirs*—on one side and the 'Arabs' and 'Algerians' on the other. Frantz Fanon famously described the colonial world of Algeria as a Manichean one (Fanon, 1963, p. 41), of divided camps supported by the racial hierarchies of empire. In the simplest terms, the position of *pieds-noirs* in colonial Algerian society was underpinned by their privilege in a rigid colonial system. The words of Elaine Mokhtefi, American translator for the Algerian National Liberation Front, bluntly summarise perceptions of the *pieds-noirs* by the late colonial period: in Algeria, the *pieds-noirs* were 'greedy' and complacent, while in France, they lined 'up for indemnities from the French government' (Mokhtefi, 2018, pp. 55–56). Unsurprisingly, the narrative presented by *pieds-noirs* activists and associations after 1962 are diametrically opposed to suggestions that *pieds-noirs* either contributed to the violence of colonial Algeria or benefited materially from the French state in their exile. Rather, their narratives centre the *pieds-noirs* as doubly victimised and abandoned by both the *métropole* and post-colonial Algerian state (Eldridge, 2016).

Since the profound rupture of Algerian Independence and the subsequent exodus of *pieds-noirs*, Algerian Jews, and *harkis* (Algerian soldiers who fought for France), different communities on both sides of the Mediterranean have politicised memory in an ongoing struggle 'to be "heard" at different times and in distinct ways' (Aissaoui and Claire, 2017, p. 2). Memory narratives have been associated with particular groups, forming different camps in the so-called 'memory wars' (Stora, 2007 *my translation*) or 'memory struggles' (Harchi, 2017, p. 83 *my translation*) which raged in the absence of any commemorative consensus by the state or majority actors. It is in this context that *pieds-noirs* groups and activists in France have successfully produced and circulated a 'meta-memory' of Algeria 'premised on a canon of historical and cultural narratives' which continues to resonate in postcolonial identity politics today (Eldridge, 2016, p. 48). By the 1990s, memories of colonial atrocities on metropolitan soil were gaining more and more public recognition with the high-profile trial of former Chief of Parisian Police and Vichy civil servant, Maurice Papon (1997–1998) who orchestrated the deportation of Jews from Bordeaux, as well as the violent massacre of peacefully protesting Algerians in Paris on 17 October 1961 (House and MacMaster, 2006). Thus, in the late 20th century, colonial memory in France is partially constituted by various histories of victimisation that are mediated via repeated traditions and cultural articulations by particular identity groups (Assmann, 2011, p. 8). In this crowded and competitive memory landscape, *pied-noir* memory narratives contributed to a competitive logic of 'victim one-upmanship' (Stora, 2007, p. 46 *my translation*) in order to lobby for their particular voices and perspectives in the present.

The visibility of these different memory narratives also coincides with growing access to the internet and personal computers in the late 20th century. Predating the labelling of these 'memory wars' in the early 2000s, individuals and collectives alike were already taking to the internet to advocate for their commemorative perspectives. Throughout the 1990s, 'websites of memory' could function alongside more familiar 'sites of memory' (Nora, 1984), such as physical monuments, news media, and cultural production (Smith, 2013). As Laura Jeanne Sims argues 'since French Algerians come from an absent place, a geopolitical entity that no longer exists, their connection to the land has been irrevocably severed', they experienced a particular 'need for new, local sites' (2016, p. 132).[2] Personal websites offered a relatively cheap and practical solution for this need, with little oversight or perceived censorship. Online, individuals can record their personal memories on behalf of a collective *pied-noir* identity, reinforcing this 'meta-memory' of severance from an Algerian homeland and their experiences of victimisation during the final stages of the war.

This article focuses on the prevalent role played by colonial-era postcards in websites published by self-identified *pied-noir* internet users in this period of the 'memory wars' (mid-2000s onwards). Specifically, it examines how the visual culture represented in these personal and amateur websites of remembrance is linked to particular forms of colonial nostalgia for Algeria ('nostalgérie'). By digitising the images of colonial postcards depicting Algerian peoples and landscapes, these websites support and reinforce efforts by *pied-noir* activists and associations to perform a collective pied-noir identity and mythology. In examining how *pied-noir* memory and identity is represented and performed via French-language websites and social media platforms, we can better understand how these websites attempt to represent *pieds-noirs* as a distinct community, intimately connected to and yet severed from both metropolitan France and Algeria. While this article discusses a small sample of active *pied-noir* websites, it argues that their shared visual representations of colonial space via postcards tells us how these websites aim to be understood as digital 'sites of memory' (Matos et al., 2013) but also function as vehicles for an imagined return (Hubbell, 2011). The visual language of these websites reinforces the idea of Algeria as a geographical site of impossible return, while also reiterating *pied-noir* identity in relation to a particular kind of colonial 'Frenchness', oscillating between an imagined Algerian homeland and France. In reproducing the colonial imagery of early 20th century urban Algeria, these *pieds-noirs* websites create a picture of historically fixed and homogenous *pied-noir* identity as part of what Eric Savarese calls an 'identity strategy seeking to transform a million dissimilar people into an active and politically influential structured group of individuals' (2006, p. 459).

Pied-noir identity and metropolitan Frenchness

While lobbying by *pied-noir* activists and associations often departs from the principle of *pied-noir* victimisation at the end of the Algerian War for Independence (Phaneuf, 2012), historians such as Claire Eldridge (2016) have shown that the settlers were well accommodated by the French state which undertook their housing and jobs in a relatively short amount of time. Although exiled from their homelands, the Frenchness of the settlers and Jewish Algerians (who had been naturalised as French in 1870) was never officially in question. Nonetheless, from the 1970s, with much of their material needs addressed, a number of *pied-noir* associations were established to preserve and foster the notion of a *pied-noir* culture, history, and identity. Despite the now ubiquitous appellation of *pieds-noirs*, the European settlers of Algeria were a relatively diverse and heterogenous group in colonial society. Like many settler societies, the European settler society of Algeria was constituted through immigration. These migrants originated from across the Mediterranean basin, including Spain, Italy, and Malta. In other words, not all *pieds-noirs* families originated from France but were largely naturalised as French. The Jewish populations of Algeria were naturalised as French citizens by the 1870 Crémieux decree, creating a legal and cultural distinction between Jewish and Muslim Algerians that was interrupted by the temporary abrogation of the decree during the Second World War. As Benjamin Stora (2006) and Judith have both noted, the Crémieux decree both exiled Jewish Algerians from Algerianness in the adoption of a French identity, and also vivisected the possibilities of Jewish and Arab-Berber fraternity found in the shared term of 'Semite'. Despite their unique identity in French colonial society, many Jewish-Algerian families in colonial France also departed with the *pied-noir* exodus from Algeria. By the late colonial period and the Algerian Revolution or War of Independence, nonetheless, the linguistic and cultural diversity of the settlers and Jewish Algerians tended to be marginalised in favour of a distinct, unified *pied-noir* identity in Algeria.

It would be an oversimplification to suggest that the European settlers and naturalised Jewish Algerians had a straightforward relationship to Frenchness. The community of former communities of settlers would be intimately shaped by the *métropole*'s policy and narrative of what had taken place in Algeria during the 8 years of the War of Algerian Independence. For Fiona Barclay, once *pieds-noirs* had been 'returned' to metropolitan France, they were subjected to a socially constructed melancholia when faced by a society that had little interest in lingering on the events of the Algerian War of Independence (2018, pp. 248–249). Without widespread public discussion or consensus on the events of the late colonial period and the Algerian War, the community itself was able to fill in the gaps with their own narratives about who they are in France and who they were in Algeria. In this way, 'settler colonial culture [outlasts] the temporal bounds of the settler colony', one in which *pieds-noirs* were melancholically transformed into a subject 'caught within the intersecting matrices of scapegoat, victim and executioner' (Barclay, 2018, p. 259).

One way in which the European settlers of Algeria defined their identity in relation to both an idealised Algerian homeland and the relatively foreign metropole is through language and cultural expression. Indeed, the particularity of *pied-noir* Frenchness has predominantly been explored from literary and anthropological perspectives (Hubbell, 2015; Lorcin, 2012; Smith, 2003; Slyomovics, 2020), emphasising the plurality of the *pieds-noirs* as a liminal group that did not neatly fit in with French, metropolitan society. Oral histories with *pieds-noirs* tend not to consider the extent to which whiteness and French citizenship afforded privileges for this community exile. Instead, emphasis is laid on their differences from the metropolitan French society by identifying their common yet diverse European ancestry (especially Spanish), distinct accents, unique *pied-noir* slang and sense of humour (Pied-noir Stories, 2019). Nonetheless, French remains the *lingua franca* of this community. *Pied-noir* community and associational practices reclaim their place as French citizens at the same time as they differentiate themselves as having a distinct and pluralised provincial history and identity (Phaneuf, 2012). But what happens to the diverse origins of settler society in Algeria via the digital representation of *pied-noir* memory? Through the following discussion of *nostalgérie* and visual culture, it becomes clear that online representations of *pied-noir* memory narratives do little to reflect the plurality of North African, or the self-stylised 'Latin', identity (Barclay, 2018, p. 245) of those who left in 1962.

Nostalgérie and visual culture

Pied-noir nostalgia is so prevalent as a cultural phenomenon that it boasts its own neologism: 'nostalgérie', or 'nostalgeria'. The genealogy of the 'mot-valise' 'nostalgérie' predates 1962[3] and the mass exodus of European settlers from Algeria. Indeed, according to Seth Graebner (2007) nostalgia characterised the relationship between France and Algeria throughout colonisation. Eldridge suggests that 'nostalgérie' is more than an affective mode at the level of each individual settler but can 'be read as a consciously formulated counter-history that, irrespective of its accuracy, poses questions about the dominant official narrative' (2016, p. 128), a counter-history which *pieds-noirs* memory advocates (broadly defined as promoters of particular memory narratives) and associations quickly solidified in the decades following repatriation. However, Eldridge also suggests that this 'counter-history' is also a conscious commemorative strategy that is based on a 'lack of self-awareness among certains *pieds-noirs* which renders them unwilling or unable to acknowledge the privileges they enjoyed and their complicity in the colonial system' (2016, p. 128). Part of this commemorative strategy involved reproducing some of the nostalgic imagery and orientalist visual representations of Algeria that have buttressed what Edward Welch and Joseph McGonagle (2013) have called the 'visual economy' of French Algeria. Indeed, the online expressions of 'nostalgérie' explored in this article focus on the experiences of loss of an idealised Algerian space by privileging images of Algeria from the turn of the 20th century. These websites use colonial postcards for the digital recreation of an urban topography that no longer exists, reproduced so that visitors, namely *pieds-noirs* and their descendants, may virtually 'return' to a space and time from which they have been irrevocably removed.

These colonial-era postcards played an important role in the visual economy of French Algeria long before 1962. At the turn of the 20th century, France witnessed a boom in the production, circulation, and collection of postcards. According to David Prochaska, postcard production grew from 8 million in 1899 to 60 million in 1902 (1990, p. 375). As modern France began to represent itself photographically to the world, the role of colonised territories in the visual reproduction of the nation came into particular focus. The impetus for this mass production of postcards, with a particular focus on the colonies, was nonetheless a metropolitan economic endeavour. Paris-based photographic studies, such as the Neurdein Studios (or ND Studios) were funded by the French government to produce images for travel guides and historic records, but also to stimulate economic investment in French Algeria: tourism was expanding the colonial infrastructure 'and postcard publicity stimulated private investment' (DeRoo, 1998, p. 145). Profiting from a boom in the production of postcards at the turn of the century, these images of

Algeria circulated in France and beyond during the colonial period in order to advertise French Algeria to investors and wealthy tourists alike. Today, these images continue to play an important role in 'selling' particular perspectives, attitudes, and understandings of colonial society in Algeria but to new audiences and with very different purposes.

As in other colonial contexts, the proliferation of photography in the 19th and early 20th centuries is integral to the production of an 'Algérie imaginaire' (Prochaska, 1990) for those living both in and outside French Algeria. The postcards popularised forms of imperial knowledge concerning racial hierarchies and orientalist fantasy all the while being relatively cheap and highly collectable. Welch and McGonagle suggest that the ubiquity of colonial photography means that the circulation of these postcards was 'not just symptomatic of colonial activity, but constitutive of it' (2013, p. 14). Two distinct genres of colonial images emerge through this visual production. On the one hand, cards portrayed the distinct landscapes and architectures of colonised territory, focused on scenes of colonial modernity incorporating images of 'European' architecture and infrastructure in the northern cities of Algiers, Oran, and Constantine. On the other hand, through the popular 'scènes et types' series, the cards also recreated scenes of orientalist fantasy depicting the bodies, clothes, and habits of colonised peoples, fetishizing women in particular in overtly racialized and sexualised forms.

Postcards of colonial Algeria have lived various afterlives after 1962. Reproduced throughout the 20th century, some have been the subject of some reinventions by Algerian writers and artists. For example, Malek Alloula's *Le harem colonial* (1981) and Leïla Sebbar's, 2002 essay 'Les femmes du peuple de mon père', both sought to reappropriate the exoticized and eroticised images of Algerian women and girls, although to very different ends. Around the 1980s, a publishing tradition in France emerged where *pied-noir* writers would produce illustrated books about their hometowns, in which stories about their childhoods (roughly from the 1940s onwards) would often be illustrated with turn of the century images of an Algeria long before they were born. One reason for this is practical: with the rushed and disrupted departure from Algeria, many families did not bring photographs with them, let alone a range of photographs of their homes and streets. Colonial-era postcards, with their focus on marketing French Algeria on behalf of the Empire, stand in for absent family memories.

The postcard is used both as historical source *and* as a personal tool for the preservation of a lost homeland among *pieds-noirs* themselves. Phototexts that collect and reframe these postcards also have the aim of facilitating transmission of this imagined space to new readers and generations of keepers of the *pied-noir* postmemory (Hirsch, 1997). However, in attempting to recreate a memory of this lost homeland, by drawing on early turn of the century post-cards produced by the colonial metropole, these text also uncritically reproduce the visual economy of colonial Algeria. In her discussion of Paul Azoulay's *La Nostalgérie française* (1980) Mary Vogl notes:

> Azoulay is praised in the preface for reproducing these old postcards, which can supposedly help the reader understand an era that witnesses the existence of two separate societies, one privileged and the other exploited. The separation between the two societies is indeed evident in the book, but what is missing is an explanation of how and why this came to be. Instead, Azoulay offers only "the Memory I keep of my ALGERIA": sunshine and happy times for the French colonials. (2003, p. 175)

While Welch and McGonagle also critically assess *pied-noir* phototexts as being firmly within a narrative that confirms, rather than challenges, colonial perspectives, they do not dismiss 'nostalgérie' or overlook its effect on collective and historical engagement with the European settlement in Algeria and their sense of dispossession since 1962:

> Nostalgia should be taken seriously as a mode of remembrance and historical understanding […] we need to get to grips with its forms of expressions, its politics and ethics. Such issues are all the more timely given […] both the persistent presence of images of French Algeria in the broader public sphere in France and its increasing visibility in French culture. (Welch and McGonagle, 2013, p. 17)

Here, they suggest that the recirculation of these postcards, among other visual artefacts, are more than 'vehicles of nostalgia' (2013, p. 38) and can do more than simply reproduce colonial-era racism, but also reinforce the historical agency of the *pied-noir* communities. Indeed, as Katharine Niemeyer points out rather than something to be dismissed, 'nostalgia connects people and this is equally where its danger lies. We should not only ask what nostalgia is *good for* or what it is *not good for* as it can be used in terms of rhetoric political manipulations' (2016). For the *pieds-noirs* in the late 20th century, 'nostalgérie' is a way to construct a collective identity that is both outside the French national identity and post-colonial Algeria identity formation. It enforces their liminality as *both* French and exiles from Algeria.

Pied-noir websites and virtual returns

With the advent of the internet, *pieds-noirs* memory advocates used similar visual strategies to represent lost Algerian homelands online. However, without a centralised or majority acting association to represent all *pieds-noirs*, many of these websites remain personal, non-professional, and relatively isolated. e-Diasporas is a web archive project which includes a study by Yann Scioldo-Zürcher, who has collated and mapped websites run by and for anyone falling into the broad bracket of 'Français rapatriés' (repatriated French). This includes European settlers from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, as well as French Jews who were expelled from Egypt in 1957, Tunisia and Morocco in 1967, and French settlers in Vietnam leaving in 1975. He notes that there are, surprisingly, no websites dedicated to 'repatriatés' from sub-Saharan Africa. According to the e-Diaspora project, *pieds-noirs* from Algeria are by far the dominant group, reflecting Algeria's status as a settler colony but also the weight of the *pied-noir* memory. The project established that, as of November 2011, there were 259 sites by repatriates from Algeria. 76% served commemorative purposes, only 4% mention *both* colonial and post-colonial Algeria, and only one site makes reference to present-day Algeria. In other words, the websites are overwhelmingly concerned with the pre-1962 past (Scioldo-Zürcher, 2012). The study has also found that the repatriate sites about Algeria very rarely create connections with other French settler groups. The websites are divided, firstly, along lines of geography, and secondly, along lines of religion, with dedicated sites to Jewish repatriates that are not well linked to other repatriate sites. In other words, *pieds-noirs* websites are predominantly focused on colonial Algeria and on themselves as *pieds-noirs* from Algeria. The objective and function of these websites, therefore, is to communicate a precisely *Algerian* and *pied-noir* perspective and identity, rather than investigate other experiences, common or differentiated, of colonial societies related to the French empire.

This focus on the specificity of Algeria, rather than forging connections with other colonial contexts, is demonstrated in *pieds-noirs* websites representation of the topography of Algerian cities under colonialism. Indeed, like the phototexts from the 1980s, the websites documented by the e-Diaspora project in

2011 share a common characteristic; both, privilege images depicting the urban landscapes over the 'scènes et types' portraits of Algerian Arabs, Berbers, and Jews (Scioldo-Zürcher, 2012). Reproducing images of colonial modernity amplifies the presence and activities of the European settlers, while marginalising representations of the colonised. If Algerian Arabs, Berbers, and Jews are represented, they are decontextualised, frozen in a non-specific historical time—evidence of a generalised, exotic, and pacified Other. With these visual references, the websites create narratives that exist between history and memory, in which individual experience of loss, nostalgia, and exile is held up to contest other perceived 'official' narratives surrounding the end of empire in Algeria. The representation of the predominantly urban spaces of European modernity in the northern Algerian towns and cities, the postcards are reproduced as authoritative historical documents that can support the *pied-noir* counter-narrative. Furthermore, these images accompany the narratives of lived experience of the places depicted in the postcards, albeit from a different era. Thus, the authors of the websites attempt to create individualised yet authoritative sites of memory.

Taking the website 'Ville d'Oran' as a case study, we can see how individual websites function as sites of memory for specific places and lost topographies. First published in 2007, 'Ville d'Oran' gathers images and postcards of colonial Oran as a way to commemorate the city's distinct identity in Algeria. The page 'En flänant … dans nos souvenirs' ['Strolling … through our memories'] implies that these websites can enable the user the opportunity to return, virtually, to the past. Visiting the website becomes an act of memory, the digital equivalent of walking through the streets of Oran. The author of this site therefore makes the connection between the computer as a mnemonic technology, declaring "J'ai acquis une machine à remonter le temps: un ordinateur!" ("I have acquired a machine that can turn back time: a computer!"). He describes visiting other websites dedicated to Oran, and 'les années se sont effacées d'elles-mêmes, 2007, 2006, 2005, …2000, …1990, …1980 … et 1963″ (and the years melted away, 2007, 2006, 2005, … 2000, … 1990, … 1980 … and 1963). The stated aim of the website is therefore to erase the intervening decades between the present and 1963, transporting the visitor who is presumably disinterested in the post-colonial developments of their old neighbourhoods in Algeria.

The website also invites the visitor to impose their own nostalgic interpretation on the colonial-era postcards used to illustrate this 'virtual return'. Overwhelmingly, the images of postcards are only scanned on one side, that of the image. Any inscriptions on the reverse and the idea that these are images of material, textual artefacts with their own histories and trajectories are not recorded. In other words, the postcard is reproduced primarily for its value as a visual document, as a photographic representation of a real place rather than as a text or message. Instead of recording the textual record of the postcard as a historically situated form of communication, the authors of these websites inscribe their own textual associations through captions or longer textual inscriptions such as that found on the 'En flânant …' page described above. Like the original users of the postcards, the website creators inscribe their own textual messages alongside the image, but with very different objectives; not, 'Wish you were here', but rather 'Wish I was there' (McGonagle and Welch, 2013, p. 13).

Websites dedicated to specific places at a particular time (pre-Independence) tend not to acknowledge the geographic transformations that these cities and streets have undergone since 1962. With Algerian independence, the streets and boulevards of the northern Algerian towns and cities were renamed as part of the reparative act of nation building in the wake of 132 years of French occupation (Boumedini and Dadoua Hadria, 2012). *Pieds-noirs* websites ignore the Algerian street names (frequently baptised after the martyrs of the Revolution), providing instead French street names in order to guide the online visitor through a virtual tour of colonial Algeria. The website 'Algeroisement Votre' (first published 2010) goes as far as to recreate street plans and identify the businesses and spaces (and potential families) who lived at specific addresses. Obviously, there is a practical reason for this choice that also speaks to the website's intended audiences: *pieds-noirs* in France seeking out information about their old neighbourhoods are more likely to remember the colonial street names, than recognise the Algerian ones. However, this very practical choice also produces the particular effect of reproducing a virtual representation of a lost urban topography that ceased in the years following independence. By publishing scans of early 20th century postcards alongside these directions and maps from the decades prior to 1962, visitors to 'Algeroisement Votre' take part in a virtual tour of the city, ostensibly through the eyes of the exiled *pieds-noirs* themselves, but are anachronistically guided by images of the city some 40–50 years earlier.

Other online advocates of *pied-noir* memory have taken the concept of a 'virtual return' one step further by dramatising images of colonial Algeria as YouTube videos. For example, the YouTube video entitled 'T'en souviens tu avant 1962' (34baimo 2011) ('Do you remember it before 1962') is voiced and edited by a former resident of Algiers. A work of self-curated 'nostalgérie', the creator of the video narrates a guided tour of Algiers 'before 1962', illustrated by grainy reproductions of digitised post-cards and photographs varying from the late 19th century to the modern day. While the individual websites dedicated to recreating lost neighbourhoods and cities can exist in relative isolation, YouTube's comment function prevents this particular work of 'nostalgérie' from existing in a vacuum. The video sharing platform's comment function means that *pieds-noirs* posters are confronted by the concept of 'context collapse', described in social media research as the incongruencies between singular or plural 'imagined audiences' and the multiplicities of real-life internet users (Marwick and boyd, 2011). Indeed, the 161 comments below 'T'en souviens tu avant 1962' (as of 31 October 2021) demonstrate a broad range of reactions that both confirm and contest its content. While not representative of all possible reactions and receptions of the 10-min video, the comments here offer an insight into how *pied-noir* memory narratives can travel and be contested outside the demarcated 'sites of memory' represented by villedoran.com and algeroisementvotre.free.fr and their 'imagined audiences'. For example, a number of comments aim to correct the date of construction of the Saint-Philippe cathedral, pointing out it was built on the site of Ketchaoua mosque. Other commenters contest the nostalgic content of the video by linking out to other YouTube videos with contesting narratives and perspectives on life under French colonialism. Another user posts three links to YouTube videos with alternative histories of the city of Algiers and an amateur documentary on the 8 May 1945 Sétif massacre. While offering additional historical context to the crimes of French colonialism, these comments also insist on a *longue durée* interpretation of Algerian architecture and urban topography that contest the *pied-noir* perspective which focuses on the late 19th and early 20th century. Nonetheless, many comments react on the emotive and affective intention of the video, such as the following comment; 'Ya hasra enfance de mon pere' ('The good old days, my father's childhood').

These comments could be interpreted as a microcosmic visualisation of the so-called 'memory wars', in which the comment section under one YouTube video is transformed into

the discursive battleground for competing factions struggling for commemorative recognition. Alternatively, we could read this in terms of what Michael Rothberg, Debarati Sanyal, and Max Silverman have called 'nœuds de mémoire' (knots of memory) in 2010, suggesting that "knotted" in all places and acts of memory are rhizomatic networks of temporality and cultural reference that exceed attempts at territorialisation (whether at the local or national level) and identitarian reduction' (Rothberg et al., 2010, p. 7). In other words, while these digital sites of *pied-noir* memory attempt to establish nostalgic iterations of French Algeria, the platforms themselves (especially social media and video hosting platforms such as YouTube) allows these memories to exceed their target audiences and encounter counter-narratives and perspectives. Through 'context collapse', *pied-noir* users of social media cannot post their virtual returns without running the risk of their vision of 'nostalgérie' being contested or contextualised.

These contested encounters with *pied-noir* commemorative content online also disturb the predominance of the French-language as the *lingua franca* of colonial nostalgia. Other comments respond in Arabic, or a mix of both French and Arabic. For example, 'ya hasra' (translated as 'the good old days' in English) is a common refrain for some Arabic-speaking visitors of websites representing images of late 19th and early 20th century North Africa. These multilingual responses point to the multi-layered pasts that are being recalled through the video, even if its primary objective is to preserve and transmit *pied-noir* memories above any others. In this respect, these videos do seem to exceed their target audiences, i.e. other *pieds-noirs*. In their preliminary study of Moroccan Jewish, Christian and Muslim online communities, Ouaknine and Aharony (2020, p.106) suggest that '[n]ostalgia proneness has an effect on the intention to share cultural heritage'. Idealising a lost, but shared past, is a way for these communities in Morocco to agree on a desire to repair community relations (2020, p. 113). The experiences of Moroccan and Algerian communities (diasporic or otherwise) under colonialism and war are not the same and cannot be conflated. Nonetheless, expressions of nostalgia across French and Arabic in reaction to the circulation of colonial-era postcards online demonstrate that the visual economy of colonial Algeria does not belong exclusively to *pied-noir* communities.

Indeed, as was the case with the phototexts of the 1980s and 1990s, Algerian creators and collectors engage with colonial postcards (physically and digitally) as a way to reclaim history on their own terms. An expert in Algerian photography, Awel Haouati (2016) has examined the use and reappropriation of colonial images in contemporary, Algerian visual culture. She points out that despite their initial orientalist and colonial production, these images are not necessarily received as such by some Algerian collectors. Since 2011, notes Haouati, several Facebook pages have been created, dedicated to these images of Algeria in the early 20th century. Public Facebook groups expose these images to a wider audience and the postcards are once again re-circulated for different forms of consumption. However, Haouati (2016) also notes that the authors of these posts tend to censure the kind of photographs that they repost, refusing, understandably, to reproduce the images of nudity and the distressing poverty inflicted on Algerians during French colonialism. In other words, like the *pied-noir* websites, images of the systemic violence conveyed by the colonisers gaze are withheld from this reproduction, although for very different reasons. Haouati (2016) calls this the oscillation between the idealisation of the past and the obliteration of its violence. By examining how both *pied-noir* and other groups draw on the same corpus of images, we can trace the migrations and reiterations of an idealised vision of colonial space. In this regard, the cross-pollination and knotting of memory—or 'nœuds de mémoire' (Rothberg et al., 2010)—seems to be a more helpful way of thinking about the kinds of unexpected memory connections produced by reproductions of colonial postcards online. While, the *pied-noir* websites themselves may not be spaces to participate in these rhizomatic networks of cultural references, the images of the postcards can exceed and escape the initial 'nostalgérie' frame of reference that is supposed to target the *pied-noir* community only.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the visual culture of *pied-noir* memory sites demonstrates some of the continuities in the 'visual economy' of French Algeria across the colonial and post-colonial period. While colonial postcards from the turn of the 20th century served to market an image of French Algeria which would be attractive to investors and tourists, these images find new audiences online in the late 20th century as vectors of colonial nostalgia. In reproducing these postcards online as authoritative representations of a lost Algerian homeland, *pied-noir* websites also contribute to the homogenisation of *pied-noir* memory and identity through the lens of what were essentially metropolitan French perspectives of an exotic yet familiar Algerian urban topography. As the lived memory of colonial Algeria fades, the possibility for memory transmission to new generations of *pieds-noirs* has been scrutinised for some time now (Albert-Llorca, 2004). Eldridge identifies a *pied-noir* memory strategy in anchoring 'their historical interpretation in physical sites external to the community so as to better facilitate the preservation of this past beyond the lifespan of living witnesses (2017, p. 228). The 'websites of memory' identified in this article perhaps also serve a similar function of preserving memory connected to lost physical spaces outside of the community. However, as Scioldo-Zürcher (2012) has shown, the websites themselves have limited reach and therefore call into question the transmissibility of these memories to their target audiences online. In the post-scarcity digital age of memory, *pied-noir* sites of memory are competing with other, more creative, post-memory strategies articulated by groups connected to the Algerian War of Independence.

Therefore, this article has also argued that online visual content produced by *pied-noir* activists and individuals are by no means stable sites of memory, despite efforts to reinforce a collective and homogenous *pied-noir* identity online. The images of colonial-era postcards are fluid visual signifiers that acquire new meanings and interpretations as they are shared across different and diametrically opposed memory narratives elsewhere in the digital 'francosphère', namely in French-language Algerian social media (Haouati, 2016). Often made by motivated but non-professional individuals and advocates, the *pied-noir* websites themselves are increasingly populated by degrading and broken links and images. *Pied-noir* content that endures on more stable social media platforms, such as YouTube, are then open to contestation from commenters who question their nostalgic and orientalist representations, or perhaps reclaim this nostalgia for their own purposes. In other words, the *pied-noir* websites might be made with the intention to form a collective memory in the service of a *pied-noir* cultural heritage and shared identity, but once online, these images escape that initial intention. Colonial-era postcards find themselves in new networks and spaces online and therefore open to new interpretations of 'nostalgérie'.

Data availability

This study did not analyse or generate any datasets.

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Notes

1 Here, I employ the term 'francosphère' to refer to the realms and spheres of influence where the 'ghosts of French culture still haunt the landscape for many […] complex political or historical reasons' including but not limited to French colonialism (Hussey, 2012, p. i).

2 On the affective reverberations of sudden exile at the end of empire, see also Piera Rossetto's work on 'emotional sites' [lieux d'émotion] (2016) and the forging of an Italian identity among exiled Libyan Jews (2021) which maps the connections between affect, loss, and mourning among the North African Jewish diaspora.

3 It is sometimes stated that 'nostalgérie' was coined by Gaston Guigon in his autobiographical book *Nostalg…erie* (1971, Salon de Provence). Amy L. Hubbel notes that Dr. Guigon derived the term form his medical experience observing depression among *pieds-noirs* in France. However, Hubbell also cites the 1938 Marcello Fabri poem (2015, p. 27). Philip Dine (1994) traces 'nostalgérie' in artistic production back to 1899.

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Informed consent

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The author declares no competing interests.

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