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Patricia Lorcin, *Historicizing Colonial Nostalgia: European Women's Narratives of Algeria and Kenya 1900-Present*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. xii + 317 pp. Maps, photos, notes, bibliography, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-230-33865-4.

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Anyone who believes that comparative studies generally fall prey either to superficiality or to comparison merely for its own sake should read Patricia Lorcin's new book. *Historicizing Colonial Nostalgia: European Women's Narratives of Algeria and Kenya 1900-Present* demonstrates how much the specialist, in one case, can learn from the unexpected juxtaposition of another, and how much the non-specialist may gain from the comparison of histories different in detail but similar in outline. Lorcin presents well-orchestrated, thoroughly researched work in comparative colonial history that achieves more than the title promises. In the process of "historicizing colonial nostalgia," Lorcin delivers broad social and cultural histories of settler societies in Algeria and Kenya, probably the two most significant cases of failed settler colonialism in modern history. Her book is excellent and anyone working in French or British colonial history will benefit from it.

The book begins with the crucial insight that "in the colonial context, the possibility of loss—of power, of territory, of the upper hand—was an ever-present, if subliminal, anxiety. Nostalgia, therefore, was inherent to the settler psyche and colonial nostalgia was built into the settler system from the outset" (p. 10). Lorcin's first distinction separates colonial from imperial nostalgia: the first longs for a lost culture and lifestyle, while the second longs for a lost national prestige and power. While imperial nostalgia appears only after independence, construed as the metropole's "loss" of its colonies, colonial nostalgia already appeared at many points during the colonial period. The process of modernization (or "civilization") of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonies included a nostalgic re-creation of conditions no longer available in Europe. First, the colonizers were no longer living there, and second, socioeconomic conditions had diminished the power of ideals such as *noblesse oblige* or feudalism (for example) in modern meritocratic society. These cultural survivors from previous eras quickly proved their usefulness in the colonial context, as Maréchal Hubert Lyautey demonstrated with his essentially feudal views in Morocco.

The chapters of Lorcin's book explore from a variety of angles this paradoxical association of a modernizing colonial mission with the affect of nostalgia. Each chapter discusses both colonies, keeping the book's comparative orientation foremost in the reader's mind. Since colonization in Algeria ran from 1830 (or 1871, counting from the start of civilian rule) to 1962, while the British protectorate in Kenya began in 1895 and ended in 1963, Lorcin has some slight differences in periodization to deal with by defining the early period thematically rather than by using the same dates for both colonies. The first chapter thus address the pioneer period in each colony, in order to show the developments of a mythology of early settlement in both places. Lorcin argues that women in both colonies imagined their lives "in ways that reflected both the values and customs of their homelands and the opportunities and experiences of their 'adopted' land" (p. 43).

In Algeria, the imported cultural content had to do with republican modernity, but also with the erotic possibilities of French Orientalism; in Kenya, the values involved were those attributed to the British landed gentry. These rather conflicted sources grounded women's attitudes in both places, and Lorcin's second chapter illustrates this with analyses of two women and authors who personified nostalgia in their respective colonies: Isabelle Eberhardt in Algeria and Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen) in Kenya. Chapter three moves to less familiar authors who formed cohorts that emerged in each colony between the two world wars. While pro-independence agitation in the colonies did not develop on exactly the same timetable, both colonies and the European women living in them experienced analogous political and cultural developments, treated in Lorcin's chapters three, four, and five on the interwar years. In both Kenya and Algeria, settler populations demanded greater autonomy from their respective metropolises, and significant differences in the two political scenes developed, leading to rather different life experiences for women in them.

Women's writing imagined the respective colonies in divergent ways, reflecting nostalgic conceptions of what it meant to be French or British respectively. Lorcin argues in chapter four that colonial women's writing reflected both metropole anxieties and colonial visions, forming a "seductive vision" of the colonies in a period in which many Europeans (at least those not part of the various artistic *avant garde* movements) mostly wanted a return to stability (p. 85). In Lorcin's view, the elements of this seductive and sometimes exoticist view of the two colonies would later provide material for post-independence nostalgia among the former settlers. In this chapter she lays the groundwork for her most important later claim, that colonial nostalgia (for lost features of the metropole) and post-colonial nostalgia (for lost idylls in the colony) were in fact two different portions of a single continuum of essentially conservative reconstruction of the past to serve the needs of radically different present moments: the apogee of European rule, and the aftermath of its end. Lorcin's last chapter in this section concludes that literary realism in the two colonies represented social and ethnic conditions rather differently due to the divergent situations of the two countries. Women authors in both colonies still attempted, even as they remained nostalgic, to promote the values of modernity that they believed essential to the future of their adopted homes in Africa. These authors remained blind, in both countries, to the ways that the colonized were beginning to adopt ideologies of cultural integrity in the face of European efforts to change them. Colonial women writers failed to see that resistance to European modernity could constitute a political strategy.

Lorcin demonstrates in the last chapters some vitally important distinctions in the way post-independence nostalgia developed in the case of each (former) colony. Settlers in Algeria had formed a particular culture, independent to some extent from that of France. Lorcin argues that it does not matter, in the end, whether this culture was chimerical since the settlers were convinced of its existence. The *pieds-noirs* now back in France seem, publicly at least, to continue to believe in it, as well as in a new colonial myth, the alleged "happy family" of Algerians and Europeans under French rule that one reads about in their post-colonial memoirs. The British in Kenya, of much less diverse origin, did not form nearly such a self-defined culture, and had less trouble integrating themselves into British life after independence than some of the *pieds-noirs* in their early years in France. The *pieds-noirs* have since achieved notable financial and social success in France, and have also managed to have politicians address their historical grievances symbolically and publicly in the usual French ways.[1] Lorcin also points out the difference in political climates in the newly-independent countries, from the point of view of the settlers. In Kenya, many found it possible to remain after independence, while in Algeria, very few did. As a result, for former Kenya settlers, she writes, "the personal rupture was potentially gradual, and the resultant nostalgia less strident" (p. 192). In her conclusion, returning to the distinction between imperial and colonial nostalgia, she argues that "whereas the former is usually written in national terms, the latter is written in personal terms. Colonial nostalgia, therefore, is not a monolithic category encompassing the imperial loss(es) in general, but is as varied as individual colonial societies are one from the other and [as] the settlers that peopled them" (p. 195).

Although the book presents histories of the two settler societies as wholes, some of the best parts of the book deal quite specifically with women's political activities and expectations. This is particularly true of the portions dealing with settler politics in Algeria (pp. 73-82 and 127-138), in which Lorcin analyzes the ways in which campaigns for voting rights for Algerians collided with campaigns for voting rights for French women. Several of the most prominent women writers from North Africa played significant roles in the various associations vocal on the subject and, despite some variations in their sentiments toward Arabs and Berbers, generally opposed the extension of the franchise to them, especially since European women did not yet vote themselves. Lorcin's work here is very useful in summarizing the history of women's suffrage in France and in its colonies, but she particularly advances our understanding of the social politics of feminist organizations on both sides of the Mediterranean. Her research here, as elsewhere, is unimpeachable.

Lorcin herself spares her readers a recital of the received wisdom on the contrast between British and French colonial rule, as well as between direct and indirect administration, instead stressing the divergence between the assumptions underlying the two systems (of cultural difference, for the French, and of political and physical distance, for the British). Pro-colonial literature of the periods that Lorcin discusses commonly includes invidious comparisons between the French colonial regime and how authors imagined the English ran their colonies, on the French side. These criticisms of the racist practices in the competitor's empire peaked around the centenary of French Algeria in 1930. To judge from the self-righteous comments of French colonial apologists, Albion was even more perfidious if you were black or Arab under English rule. Scholars accustomed to the overblown rhetoric of colonial self-congratulation are naturally suspicious of such pronouncements, at the very least because of the inherent incomparability of the two systems: from the point of view of the colonized the distinction between treatments at the hands of the two empires was rather fine. Lorcin's work, however, demonstrates that comparisons between the two systems do in fact deserve the historian's consideration.

Whatever our knowledge of just how inequitable and exploitative colonial Algerian society was, Lorcin makes clear that the British in Kenya simply could not conceive of any mixed society along the lines of the one to which French settlers at least paid lip service. Regardless of the self-serving platitudes, French statements in the 1920s and 1930s about how the British strove mostly to maintain racial segregation turn out not to have been wholly false, as Lorcin's research in both library and archival documents demonstrates. "Eventual equality," she says, "which may have been mooted as a long-term goal in the context of the republican ideology in 1920s Algeria, was not a consideration in Kenya" (p. 100). Colonial Algerian society was in fact mixed in ways absolutely unheard of in Kenya, and writers in the French colony at least imagined the possibilities of greater mixing, even if they were not always optimistic about how this would end. British women in Kenya, encountering colonized people they considered primitive in the extreme, thought it best to keep their distance. This distinction between the two colonial societies led to a major difference in the ways in which their respective literatures treated sexuality. "In the case of Algeria, although [interracial] liaisons were destined to failure, suggesting their social undesirability, there was an implicit acknowledgment that the allure of the Orient made them understandable, if not acceptable. But for women writing in Kenya interracial sex was depicted as sordid and socially a taboo" (p. 99). Her passages on these issues provide models for cultural historical investigation of mixed-race relationships and their representation in public discourse.

Whether everything that Lorcin says about settler societies always had to do with nostalgia remains debatable. Although the people who found it expedient to promote feudalist political and social arrangements in the colonies *may* in fact have been longing for a lost past, it seems likely that they simply found them expedient, even if they also had more elegant ways of characterizing their goals. In addition, the impact of nostalgia in the colony on women's imaginings of themselves and their societies seems to have been complicated and variable. Lorcin remarks that "nostalgia was inherently written into [colonial women's] daily lives in the sense that women reproduced metropole patterns of behavior in an altogether different environment, whether they actually longed for the absent metropole or not" (p. 13).

Yet it remains unclear what “metropole patterns of behavior” Spanish, Italian, or Maltese women in Algeria would have reproduced, or even for which metropole they may have been longing.

Lorcin’s examples come from novels, memoirs, and letters, and the novels span a number of genres. Yet the genre of historical fiction is absent: surprisingly so, given the likelihood of finding the affect of nostalgia in literature explicitly set in previous historical periods. While we may lack such texts from Kenya, we have a number from Algeria, and one particular set demonstrates the difficulty of using nostalgia as a device for explaining a settler society’s image of itself. At least three European women in Algeria wrote plays or novels about “the Kahena,” the legendary seventh-century Berber queen who famously resisted the Arab conquest of North Africa. These works, with modest pretensions to literary value, fictionalize the sketchy historical record of a mythic heroine in ways that reflect the distinctly different moments of their composition, since they span more than twenty-five years from the mid-1930s to the late 1950s, and demonstrate nostalgia for very different historical conditions.[2] This nostalgia does not refer to a “metropole.” Whatever the Kahena represented for Europeans in Algeria, she certainly did not evoke by herself lost aspects of France. In reading these books, it is difficult to conclude much beyond the political expedience of their portrayals of the heroine and her period. This example should not suggest that Lorcin herself fails to consider the actual objects of nostalgia; she does. It demonstrates, though, one of the limits of the concept of nostalgia as a heuristic device for colonial (or perhaps any) cultural history. Simply diagnosing nostalgia does not suffice, and much of Lorcin’s book therefore explores what cultural or political work nostalgia did in the two colonies.

This book raises questions about the intersection of literary and historical scholarship, issues debated at least since Hayden White’s *Metahistory* and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. [3] Lorcin’s book does not spend much time theorizing about the ways in which the two fields can inform one another, but concentrates instead, in the introduction, on the ways historians may use literary evidence. Yet she also shows sensitivity to literary genre, for example when characterizing the genres she will read: “Each of the three genres (letters, memoirs, and novels) conflates the facts and fictions of a particular time and place in a singular way, but taken together they contribute to the makeup of the colony’s collective identity....Although the connection between [individual and collective] memory and their respective realities is a component of the writings of colonial women, the three genres are all odysseys of sorts in which imagination is the vehicle of self-creation. It is the way in which the imagination is used in each that I would like to stress. Whereas the fiction of the novel can mask the ‘reality’ of society, the ‘reality’ of the memoir can mask society’s fictions” (pp. 14–15).

Lorcin is, moreover, careful throughout to distinguish between claims about actual social practice, and claims about imagined possibilities in narrative discourse. The axiom here is that discourse and imagination play a major role in perceptions of reality, and that historians need to understand these perceptions as much as they need to understand the reality underlying them. Yet this passage, the one where she most directly engages the topic, addresses mostly the question of why and how historians should use literature, rather than considering either what literary studies might gain from the enterprise, or how historians might move beyond mining literature for data (this time, it is true, less for facts than for evidence about cultural attitudes that literature is better placed to offer). Rarely does Lorcin acknowledge that literary works have lives of their own, or that as objects of study in their own right, they might have something quite particular to offer to the cultural historian. When she does, as in her treatment of Isak Dinesen’s *Out of Africa* and Elspeth Huxley’s *The Flame Trees of Thika*, her work has something to offer both historians and literary scholars.

The quality of Lorcin’s research, and the scope of the author’s knowledge of two divergent but analogous colonies, should give it a long shelf life. Although readers might occasionally wonder if Palgrave Macmillan employs proofreaders, little could detract from the quality of the author’s work in the archives and libraries. Anyone looking for a model of comparative historical work, assiduously executed, should read this book.

NOTES

[1] Readers of H-France will remember, in particular, the *pied-noir* political success in promoting passage of the “loi française n° 2005-158 du 23 février 2005 portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés” and its infamous article 4, section 2 (“Les programmes scolaires reconnaissent en particulier le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord et accordent à l’histoire et aux sacrifices des combattants de l’armée française issus de ces territoires la place éminente à laquelle ils ont droit”). The Conseil constitutionnel subsequently declared this article “purely regulatory” and therefore susceptible to repeal by ministerial action and without new legislative debate, which the Villepin government did on 15 February 2006.

[2] The works in question are: Berthe Benichou-Aboulker, *La Kahena, reine berbère, pièce en trois actes et sept tableaux en vers* (Algiers: Soubiron, 1933); Marcelle Magdinier, *La Kahena: roman* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1953); and Germaine Beauguitte, *La Kahena: reine des Aurès* (Paris: Editions des Auteurs, 1959). A number of other literary treatments of the Kahena by Europeans active in the same period exist, all by men.

[3] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination of Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) and White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

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