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Sung-Eun Choi, *Decolonization and the French of Algeria: Bringing the Settler Colony Home*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. x + 220 pp. Images, notes, bibliography, and index. \$100.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-137-52074-6.

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Anyone who has ever picked up a *pied-noir* publication will know that they make difficult reading. Not only are they suffused with nostalgia for an Algeria that never existed, but the people who write for them labour under a permanent inferiority complex. Contributors repeatedly ask why “no one” is listening to their story or taking them seriously. This feeling partly explains the tendency, in recent decades, for *pied-noir* activists to compare themselves continuously to other victimised groups, like the German *Vertriebene* or the Palestinians. They have been desperately searching for exposure by association.

Yet there is something even more fundamental that drives *pied-noir* anxiety: the fear of being forgotten. The permanent break with the Algerian homeland, and de Gaulle’s clear message that settlers were to be “sacrificed” for decolonisation, left indelible marks in a group already traumatised by war and flight. The majority of *pied-noirs* moved on once they had arrived in metropolitan France. They preferred to build a new life rather than reminisce about the past. But the fear of being forgotten was sufficiently widespread that it motivated some of them to set up organisations single-mindedly committed to preserving the memory of their community. The power and influence of these organisations from the 1970s to the early 2000s does not immediately suggest that the *pieds-noirs* were a “forgotten” community. [1] On the contrary, *pied-noir* activists like Jacques Roseau did rather well at imposing their ideas and agendas on national politics. They certainly received a disproportionate amount of attention in relation to their numbers. Nevertheless, activists have been right about one thing: the *pieds-noirs* have been largely forgotten by the scholarly literature.

This striking omission is a consequence of a very specific political configuration. From the 1950s to the present, the overwhelming majority of scholars who have worked on questions relating to decolonisation and immigration have been on the anti-colonial left. Given that the *pieds-noirs* were vilified during the Algerian War as colonists, racists and anti-republican supporters of the Organisation Armée Secrète, and have continued to be stigmatised as anti-immigrant, nostalgic supporters of the Front National, their story sits uncomfortably with an anti-colonial narrative of French decolonisation. But this neglect has had important consequences for the study of postwar French history. Not only has it deprived us of information about one of the biggest population movements in postwar Europe, it has also led to a general sense of confusion about how pro-colonial ideas have remained embedded in the highest echelons of French politics.

Fortunately, things are changing. In the past decade, a number of excellent new books have appeared that have begun to flesh out our skeletal understanding of how the *pieds-noirs* experienced their exile, how they have been treated by the French state, and what they have done since they arrived in

metropolitan France.[2] To this list can now be added Sung-Eun Choi's stimulating and rapid-fire, if sometimes slightly incomplete, historical overview of France's exiled communities from Algeria (the *pieds-noirs*, but also the *harkis* and the North African Jewish population).

The first thing to strike any reader is just how short Choi's book is. The body of the text is a little over 150 pages long, with the remaining sixty-five pages devoted to the bibliography and index. Squeezing the history of what Choi calls "the French of Algeria" into so few pages is remarkable and makes for a straightforward read. The book is divided into seven chapters, the first six of which tell a broadly chronological story about Algeria's settler populations and their experience of repatriation. Choi begins with a short overview of settler colonialism in Algeria in her first chapter, before turning her attention to the Algerian War and its aftermath in chapters two to four. The fifth and sixth chapters are devoted to the French state's policy towards the repatriate community under Pompidou, Giscard and Mitterrand.

The chronological structure makes it possible to build up a nuanced picture of who the repatriates actually were, a vitally important issue for any book on the repatriate population. Indeed, the blanket use of the term "French of Algeria" in the book's title is rather misleading. Most of the people Choi talks about were not of French origin. Many *pieds-noirs* came from other European countries, while Algerian Jews and *harkis* had no connection with France at all. But, by referring to them all as "French," the author draws our attention to a vital part of her story. It was not the primordial "Frenchness" of the French of Algeria that mattered; it was their ability to *become* French over time. As a result, the struggle over how to define Frenchness--whether through citizenship, filiation or territory--was at the heart of the repatriate predicament.

For the most part, Choi is very attuned to this issue. Early on in the book, she emphasises the diversity of communities in French Algeria and her historical contextualisation will be invaluable to confused students trying to grasp the complexities of the period. At the same time, the decision to include all three groups in her analysis is fully justified. Without this ecumenical approach, it would be impossible to explain how the French of Algeria could maintain their separate identities (even after Algerian independence in 1962), while simultaneously coalescing around the single identity of "repatriate," a catch-all term invented by the French state to classify all French citizens who were leaving the colonies to settle in the metropole.

Likewise, Choi's flexible approach helps us to understand how, since arriving in France, the *pieds-noirs* have been able to invoke the *harkis* or the Algerian Jews as fellow travellers, even though the latter had qualitatively different experiences of colonial Algeria, exile and settlement in metropolitan France. I do think Choi could have gone further by articulating explicitly the different kinds of Frenchness that existed in colonial Algeria--from the strongly racialised identity of many European settlers to the desperate military loyalty of the *harkis*. This would have helped to ease some of the awkward transitions between discussions of the *pieds-noirs* and of other groups (for instance, on p. 45). Overall, though, the first six chapters offer a helpful and concise perspective on the history of repatriates.

The book's seventh chapter--entitled "Repatriates Narrate the Colonial Past"--is quite different to the previous six chapters. Here Choi moves away from an analysis of politics, policy and social history, and turns her attention to literary constructions of *piéd-noir* identity. This includes a discussion of the influential magazine *L'Algérieniste*, founded in 1973, and brief examinations of the work of Jean Pélégri, Marie Cardinal, Hélène Cixous and others. The idea of bookending a monograph on the repatriates with an exploration of literary tropes makes good sense. Nostalgia has become one of the most important aspects of contemporary French political culture and the *piéd-noir* story of exile has had a powerful effect on French attitudes towards the colonial past. In fact, one could easily argue that their accounts of heroic nation-building on the other side of the Mediterranean have become an important substratum of mainstream political attitudes towards the colonisation of Algeria.

The most striking example of this was the passing in 2005 of the “Loi portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés”—something Choi discusses briefly in the epilogue. The controversial Article 4 of the law, which stipulated that French schools should recognise “le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer,” was quickly abrogated by Chirac after a public outcry, but the rest remains on the books. Today, more than ever, the *pied-noir* story of how Algeria was won (and lost) forms part of the official state narrative of decolonisation. While *pied-noir* organisations are rightly concerned that their dwindling and aging membership bodes ill for the future, they can at least congratulate themselves on having guaranteed the *pieds-noirs* a secure place in French history.

For all that it adds value to the analysis, however, the unusual character of Choi’s seventh chapter does raise questions about the aim of the book. Was it designed as a monograph or as a textbook? Choi has certainly done research befitting of a monograph. This is her first book and she deploys an impressive arsenal of archival and written material. Yet the book seems to lack a clear empirical or argumentative focus, while its short length suggests that the author or the publisher wanted an accessible text that would appeal to students. This sometimes leaves the reader confused: a textbook would have needed more contextual depth and a more obviously pedagogical tone, but, while Choi is comprehensive in her coverage, she does not (or could not) include all the background necessary to support her argument.

Take, as an example, the fifth and sixth chapters of the book on the repatriates in the three decades following Algerian independence. In less than thirty pages, Choi covers the plight of the *harkis* in metropolitan France, the highly complex attempts by the French state to indemnify the *pieds-noirs* for their lost property in Algeria, the rise of *droit à la différence* policies under the early Socialist government after 1981, and the emergence of identity politics amongst the *pieds-noirs* and the *harkis*. In the end, it is simply too much information in too few pages. There is no space to explore, say, the origins of identity politics in France or the specific local characteristics of *pied-noir* mobilisation.^[3] And there is scarcely any opportunity to give relevant broader context, such as changes in immigration policy in the 1970s, the transformation of the far right in the 1980s, or the explosion of “memory battles” in France in the late 1990s.

This is a shame, because Choi starts the book with an arresting and important claim. In her introduction she argues forcefully that the “arrival of...citizens from French Algeria, with their diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds” were the first to “profoundly challenge French self-understanding and Republican nationhood after World War II” (p. 8). In this, I think she is absolutely right, and such an argument would have provided a sturdy backbone around which to build the book. If she had framed her material in terms of a crisis of French citizenship, she could have given a stronger thematic direction to the book’s chronological structure. It would also have given greater importance to the engaging final chapter on literary narratives, especially since the example of the *pieds-noirs* confirms emphatically that citizenship is as much a story as it is a political right enshrined in a constitution.

Ultimately, then, the whole of this book is not quite the sum of its parts. I have little doubt that it will find a place on reading lists everywhere. It draws on the latest research to offer a good summary of the field and Choi’s should be congratulated for her heroic efforts to compress her material into so few pages. But attentive readers are likely to come away with too many questions and not enough answers. The author needed more time and space to reinforce the empirical foundations of her analysis and strengthen her arguments. Perhaps there will be the chance to do this in future journal articles? I certainly hope so, because Choi’s book proves that a study of repatriates provides valuable insights into the way France works today.

NOTES

[1] The best discussion of *pied-noir* and *harki* organisations is Claire Eldridge, *From empire to exile: History and memory within the pied-noir and harki communities, 1962-2012* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

[2] In addition to Eldridge's book, see Valérie Esclangon-Morin, *Rapatriés d'Afrique du Nord: de 1956 à nos jours* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007); Andrea Smith, *Colonial memory and postcolonial Europe: Maltese settlers in Algeria and France* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Emmanuelle Comtat, *Les pieds-noirs et la politique: quarante ans après le retour* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2009); Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008); Yann-Scioldo Zürcher, "The cost of decolonisation: compensating the *pieds-noirs*" in Emile Chabal (ed.), *France since the 1970s: history, politics and memory in an age of uncertainty* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); Yann Scioldo-Zürcher, *Devenir métropolitain: politique d'intégration et parcours de rapatriés d'Algérie en métropole* (Paris: Les Éditions de l'EHESS, 2011); Jeannette Miller, "A Camp for Foreigners and 'Aliens': The Harkis' Exile at the Rivesaltes Camp (1962-1964)" in *French Politics, Culture and Society* 31(2013): 21-44; and Jonathan Gosnell, *The politics of Frenchness in Colonial Algeria, 1930-1954* (Martlesham: Boydell and Brewer, 2002).

[3] On these questions, see Emile Chabal, "French Political Culture in the 1970s. Liberalism, Identity Politics and the Modest State," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 42(2016): 243-265 and Emile Chabal, "Managing the postcolony: minority politics in Montpellier, c. 1960-c. 2010," *Contemporary European History* 23(2014): 237-258.

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