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Going Postal: On Colonial Algeria

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Reality as such is redefined – as an item for exhibition, as a record for scrutiny, as a target for surveillance. The photographic exploration and duplication of the world fragments continuities and feeds the pieces into an interminable dossier, thereby providing possibilities of control that could not even be dreamed of under the earlier system of recording information: writing. (156)

---Susan Sontag, On Photography

In the June 12, 1852 issue of La Lumière, a Parisian journal devoted to the young science and art of photography, a journalist, commenting on Maxime du Camp's recently published calotype album Egypte, Libie, Palestine et Syrie, dessins photographiques recueillis pendant les années 1849, 1850, et 1851, remarked: "Nous n'avons plus besoin de monter sur les vaisseaux de Cook ou de LaPérouse pour tenter de périlleux voyages, l'héliographie confiée à quelques intrépides nous rapportera l'univers en portefeuille, sans que nous quittions notre fauteuil" (Khémir 2). Armchair traveling in a proto-touristic era notwithstanding, this quote attests to the documentary pretensions as a mimetically reliable medium of representation associated with the photographic process since its emergence in 1839 with Louis-Jacques M. Nicéphore Niépce's first daguerrotype of a Parisian boulevard. Moreover, rapid technological innovations like the calotype process popularized in the late 1840s and the collodian glass-plate negative invented by the English photographer Archer Scott in 1851 resolved procedural limitations like impractically long exposure times and the non-reproducibility of the daguerrotype image produced, thus making photography a viably ambulatory medium of image collection and mass dissemination.

The insatiable thirst on the part of nineteenth-century photographers and their consuming public for supposedly "real" images of elsewhere is, without a doubt, a

manifestation of a larger cultural paradigm in which the world, like its images, are subjugated to the hegemonic appropriations of European military and economic expansionism. For France, of course, after a steady decline in its international presence in the eighteenth century, Revolutionary isolation, and failed Napoleonic expansionist designs, this process successfully begins in the nineteenth century on June 13, 1830 with the Conquest of Algiers. A significant dimension of the French military mission, arranged in its final stages of planning and implemented by the journalist and playwright Jean-Touissant Merle, consisted of the importation of a European printing press onto the shores of Africa.¹ The ephemeral periodical produced, L'Estafette d'Alger, two numbers of which appeared beginning on June 25, 1830 and whose prospectus reminded its metropolitan subscribers that not all French newspapers were created by Parisian editors, not only inaugurated French colonial journalism, but also, in its columns detailing the movements of the French military presence in Algiers, took the first steps in conceiving and constructing Algeria as a colonial space. Recalling the exaggerated language of his melodramas, Merle, sententiously commenting on the appearance of this military dispatch in his Anecdotes historiques et politiques pour servir à l'histoire de la conquête d'Alger de 1830, would call it “un des événements les plus influents de la civilisation sur la plus belle comme sur la plus florissante des nos colonies” (160).²

While it remains to be seen whether Merle's imperial contentions were realized on the shores of North Africa, he is not alone in evoking the overdetermined importance

¹ It is notable that Napoleon's unsuccessful military expedition to Egypt (1798-1799) included a lithographic press which was used primarily for the production of images of historical monuments and architectural detail which would form the basis for the 22 volume Descriptions de l'Egypte.

² In L'Amour la fantasia Assia Djebar treats this episode of the Conquest by insisting on the theatrical background of Merle, as the director of Paris' Théâtre de la Porte Saint Martin. By extension, the French military incursion in Djebar's novel is sexually allegorized as a quasi-operatic performance that ultimately comprises “une entreprise de rapine” (56).

for the European between the printed word and cultural valuation. In a work that was part of the plethora of publications on Algeria appearing in the immediate wake of the Conquest, M. Renaudot writes in the 1831 Alger, tableau du royaume de la ville d'Alger et de ses environs “On ne connaît point d'imprimerie en Barbarie, et il ne s'y trouve aucune ressource intellectuelle” (17). These comments ultimately underscore the partnership and complicity between dominant and nascent European media and imperialism as the articulation of the cultural ramifications of the assertion of “civilization” in the colonization of Algeria develops from the printed page to the mechanically reproduced image.

Print culture in French-occupied Algeria in the 1830s initially developed as a function of colonial journalism. On January 17, 1832, the first issue of Le Moniteur algérien, established by a special decree of the metropolitan government and designed for the weekly dissemination of legal, judicial, administrative, commercial, and maritime announcements, appeared in Algiers. Seven years later, on July 12, 1839, the tri-weekly newspaper L'Akhbar began to appear. A typical four-page broadsheet newspaper, L'Akhbar conceived of the colony of Algeria, not as a space of military conquest and occupation, but rather as a discursive site of colonial residency. As a result, its pages, beyond metropolitan news, included excerpts from regional French colonial newspapers, faits divers of Algiers, birth and death announcements, lists of arriving and departing passengers, a polymorphous feuilleton which meandered between society gossip and the literary, and, on the fourth page, advertisements for a host of local products, services, and businesses of potential interest to the French-speaking community of Algiers. As French

journalistic print culture began to permeate the colony, the representational way had been opened for other dominant and emergent European media.

Developing a Colony

Le mot lui-même, ornement pour les officiers qui le brandissent comme ils porteraient un oeillet à la boutinière, le mot deviendra l'arme par excellence. Des cohorts d'interprètes, géographes, ethnographes, linguists, botonistes, docteurs divers et écrivains de profession s'abattront sur la nouvelle proie. Toute une pyramide d'écrits amoncelés en apophyse superétatoire occultera la violence initiale. (56)

---Assia Djebar, L'Amour, la fantasia

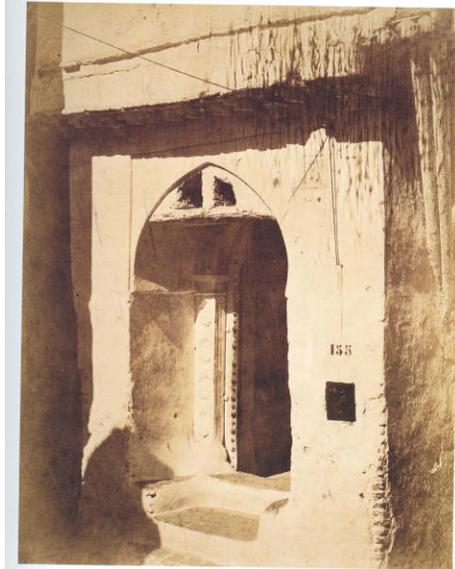
Victor Hugo, in the 1829 preface to Les Orientales, portentously noted:

“L'Orient, soit comme une image soit comme une pensée, est devenu, pour les intelligences autant que pour les imaginations, une sorte de préoccupation générale”

(23). In addition, Jean-Toussaint Merle, writing on the Conquest just a year later, contends that “il fallait que cette expedition eût un caractère de grandeur qui lui fût particulier, pour enflammer toutes les imaginations” (xi). The visual image of the Orient for the French metropolitan cultural imagination quickly evolved in the nineteenth century in great part as function of the expanding French presence in the Maghreb. Quickly enough, the legion of draftsmen and painters who had accompanied and followed the Conquest were joined if not supplanted by the purveyors of the new photograph processes. There is evidence that traveling daguerrotypists worked in Algeria in the 1840s. The daguerrotypist Delamotte, about whom very little is known, was producing images of the colony as early as the late 1840s before becoming associated with the photographer Jean-Baptiste Alary in Algiers.³ Charles Marville, an important metropolitan practitioner of the newly developed calotype process and clearly

³ For more information on traveling photographers and daguerrotypists in the Middle East (primarily Turkey and Egypt), during this period, see Bustarret.

envisioning the commercial potential of publishing photographic albums, left for Algeria in 1851 and ultimately returned with a handful of calotypes including the portrait of a cheik, two images of native women, an image of a marabout in Blida, a view of the former palace of the Dey of Algiers, one of the patio of the archbishop's residence, and an image of a door on a Casbah street.



(figure 1)

With an eye to expanding the visual lexicon of available photographic images of the colony, Marville's ground-breaking photographic tour of Algeria was succeeded in the 1850s by further excursions by a number of established French photographers like Gustave de Beaucorps, Paul Jeuffrain, and others who were not only motivated by the lure of exotic non-European Algerian imagery, but also by the imperial desire to document the progress of the process of colonization, particularly with regards to urban development. The most significant and substantial of these early forays into the colonial theater of images in Algeria was commissioned by the French Ministry of War and led by Félix-Jacques Moulin. Moulin, a well-known Parisian photographer specializing in the nude and genre scenes, departed in March, 1856 with over a ton of supplies, ultimately

spending eighteen months in Algeria photographing a variety of images including urban, archeological, architectural, landscape, and human subjects. Later detailing the harsh conditions of the photographic mission including extreme heat and transport difficulties, Moulin additionally noted the cultural divide between this European mode of representation and the indigenous people's reluctance to participate in the endeavor: "J'avais à redouter aussi la repugnance des Arabes à laisser reproduire leur image" (Khémir 6). Upon his return, Moulin published in 1860 the official document of the mission, entitled Souvenirs d'Algérie ou l'Algérie photographiée and consisting of six albums, two devoted to Algiers, two to Oran, and two to Constantine, and each containing fifty albumin and collodian photographs. As images, Moulin's photographs possess a "rawness" that is lost in later views of the colony which progressively follow repetitive representational codes that visually inscribe the colony's spaces and inhabitants in a rhetoric of colonial standardization. For example, in Moulin's photograph of the port of Algiers,



(figure 2)

little attempt is made to shoot the scene in order to frame and highlight the reconstruction efforts of French engineers and urban planners in the lower city as later photographs of

the same scene would typically if not stereotypically do as a rhetorical gesture showing the architectural enactment of French. “civilization” in the city.

Within a decade, the majority of circulating photographic images of Algeria were, not the result of the work of traveling photographers, but rather that of photographers who had established themselves in the colony and had taken up residence there. The career of Jean Geiser, the most well known of colonial photographers in Algeria in the second half of the nineteenth century due in great part to his dominance in the field of postcard photography, provides a typical if not exemplary biography of the a colonial residential photographer. In 1850, Lucien-Jacob Geiser arrived in Algiers from Switzerland with his wife Julie and three sons. Within a year, he died and his widow, in collaboration with the photographer Jean-Baptiste Antoine Alary, opened in 1855 at 1, rue Neuve Mahon in Algiers the first photography studio in the colony. The three sons, two of whom would die in 1867 and 1872, apprenticed in the studio and Jean opened in 1874 his own studio at 7, rue Bab Azoun, a fashionable address just off the Place du Gouvernement in the newly constructed colonial portion of Algiers. Geiser participated in all aspects of colonial photography, as his studio’s advertisement conveys.



(figure 3).

He also provided photographic illustrations for Charles Barbet's La Reine des Zibans (1897) and Lieutenant Martial's Souvenirs d'In Rar (1902), and his photographs consistently won prizes at French competitions like the Exposition Internationale in Nice in 1901. Geiser's studio, and a branch studio in Blida, would flourish until his death in 1923.⁴

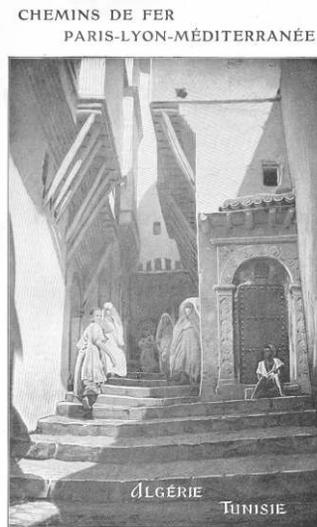
Due to the demographic peculiarities of French-occupied Algeria, the daily commercial realities of colonial society created market forces that impeded the possibility of specialization for the colonial photographer.⁵ Photographers like Alexandre Leroux in Algiers and Lehnert et Landrock studio in Tunis, arguably high-end photographers producing quality photographs with explicitly aesthetic intentions and pretensions, nonetheless participated in the commercial low-end of the postcard trade by selling clichés to printers across North Africa as well as by having their own studios oversee the printing of some of these postcard images.⁶ As a result, the commercial context of the colonial photographer was, from the outset, a dual proposition. On the one hand, the colonial photographer fulfilled the photographic needs and desires of the residential colonial population like portraiture, photographic cartes de visite, images of the colony, and so forth, an activity that was rhetorically legitimated by his or her own status as a

⁴ For more information on the life and work of Jean Geiser, see Dubuisson and Humbert.

⁵ In recent years there has been renewed interest in colonial photography in North Africa, despite the fact that other aspects of French colonial culture have remained without significant critical commentary. Recent publications on colonial and orientalist photography include Philippe Cardinal's Lehnert & Landrock (Lausanne: Favre, 1987), Alain Flieg's Rêves de papiers. La photographie orientaliste, 1860-1910 (Ides et Calendes, 1997), the catalogue from the Musée-Galerie de la Seita's exhibition Photographes en Algérie au XIXe siècle (Paris: Musée-Galerie de la Seita, 1999), Leyla Belkaïd's Belles Algériennes de Geiser (Paris: Marval, 2001), Jean Michel Belogey and Leïla Sebbar's Femmes d'Afrique du nord; cartes postales, 1885-1930 (Paris: Belu Autour, 2002), Mohammed Messikj's L'Algérie des premiers photographes (Paris: Lageur, 2003), Christine Taraud's Mauresques; femmes orientales dans la photographie coloniale, 1860-1910 (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003).

⁶ Like the historical development of the French presence in Tunisia, colonial photography there emerged later (in the final decades of the nineteenth-century), but developed in a similar way as compared to Algeria. For more on the history of colonial photographers and the production of postcards in Tunis, see Mandery.

colonial resident and the continuous, direct, and authentic experience of colonial life the residency implied. On the other hand, the colonial photographer's commercial success derived in part from an itinerant touristic clientele arriving in the colony after having been enticed if not seduced by the advertising promise of orientalist expectations.⁷



ALGER. — Une Rue de la Ville arabe.
HIVER 1906-1907

(figure 4)

Beyond the production of photographs featuring a supposedly exotic Algeria destined for touristic consumption, colonial photographers also offered the possibility of inserting the touristic client into an exotic studio shot. One finds advertisements like following from The Algerian Advertiser, a bilingual newspaper for British and French tourists sojourning in the colony; from the April 14, 1889 issue: “Jean Geiser. Arab and Moorish costumes if desired. Sale of views and Algerian types of all parts of the country”; and from the November 23, 1889 issue: “Marius Coulon et Vollenweider. Costumes indigènes à la disposition des clients. Belles collections de vues et types du pays. Moorish costumes lent for sittings. Splendid collection of Algerian views and types.” These advertisements

⁷ The tourist trade to Algeria had accelerated from the mid-1860s on, significantly facilitated by the establishment of European-style hotels and railroad lines throughout the increasingly pacified colony. In addition, Algeria became a popular destination for European winter sojourners.

refer to the common practice of dressing up in quasi-authentic North African garb and having one's picture taken as a souvenir of an exotic holiday in Algeria.



(figure 5)

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the greatest and widest opportunity for the production and consumption of photographic images of Algeria definitively shifted to the burgeoning genre of the illustrated postcard.⁸

Postal Clichés

Exposé aux regards curieux des étrangers, dans toutes les vitrines de photographes, il est un portrait de femme du Sud au costume bizarre, au visage impressionnant d'idole du vieil Orient ou d'apparition... Visage d'oiseau de proie aux yeux de mystère. Combien de reveries singulières et peut-être, chez quelques âmes affinées, de presciences de ce Sud morne et resplendissante, a évoquées ce portrait d'«Ouled-Naïl» chez les passants qui l'ont contemplé, que son effigie a troubles? (406)
 ---Isabelle Eberhardt, "Le Portrait de l'Ouled-Naïl"

For the late nineteenth century, the illustrated postcard was an entirely novel means of communication and a new medium of image consumption. The postcard itself was born in Vienna on October 1, 1869 and soon thereafter the major European countries

⁸ The major producers of postcards in Algeria during this period were Jean Geiser, ND Photo (Etienne and Antoine Neurdein), and Collection Idéale P.S.

and the United States followed the Austrian example. For the French, this means of communication by brief, publicly visible notation ultimately crossing borders of difference played a role in the Franco-Prussian War, being used by both the French population and the German army during the sieges of Stasbourg and Paris. The first illustrated postcards, the progeny of illustrated advertising cards, were the subject of a series of laws enacted by the recently established L'Union Générale des Postes beginning in 1875 which ultimately codified the size and the weight of the postcard, and even the type of image that could be included on it. By 1889, on the occasion of the Exposition Universelle, eight million illustrated postcards were produced for the event using a variety of printmaking, lithographic, and photo-engraving techniques. The invention of the process of collotyping (sometimes called phototyping) in 1894, however, permitted the cheap mass production of the photographic postcard without compromising the visual quality of the image produced, thus leading to the golden age of the postcard – roughly 1896-1910 – during which hundreds of millions of postcards were produced in Europe and in the colonies.⁹

The colonial postcard, like its metropolitan counterpart, offered a wide variety of images, from the extraordinary to the banal, from the guiltily erotic to the supposedly innocent, from the exotic to the colonial. The colonial postcard in Algeria, like the documentary film in the fledgling medium of cinema during this period, pursues in predator-like fashion the establishment of a systematic and encyclopedic taxonomy of images of the colony. Non-mutually exclusive, classificatory categories of postcard images of the colony include views of cities and villages in Algeria (often divided, like

⁹ For more on the history of the postcard in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly with regards to the photographic techniques used to illustrate it, see Zeyons.

the cities themselves, between “French” and “non-European” spaces, the latter frequently designated by the expression “Quartier indigène” or, in the case of Algiers, associated with the Casbah), images of local architectural points of interest (for example, interior and exterior views of mosques, marabout shrines, etc.), images that illustrate French innovations in the colony (colonial architectural projects, bridges, etc.), views of topographical points of interest (including the important sub-category of images of the Sahara desert), images of archeological sites (egs. Timgad, Djemla, etc.), images of local inhabitants of the colony (arguably the most varied of these categories with images quite often subsumed under the rubric “Scènes et types” and including views of individuals, groups, scenes of local customs, and so forth), and cartoon-like engraved and lithographic illustrations by notable illustrators of the day (like Assus in Algiers).

The exotic Algerian image, persuasively analyzed in Malek Alloula’s Le Harem colonial, consistently traces the aleatory alterity and unknowability at the center of orientalist representational strategies when dealing with the female subject.¹⁰

¹⁰ My discussion of the colonial postcard in Algeria benefits not only from Alloula’s controversial work, but also from works critical of it like Ferrié and Boëtsch’s article “Contre Alloula: Le <<Harem colonial>> revisité.”



(figures 6, 7, 8)

In recognizable sub-categories generically designated as “Femme arabe,” “Mauresque,” and “Bédouine,” pejoratively reductive appellations like “Belle Fatma,” “Aïcha,” and “Khédiya,” or specifically identified with a group like the Ouled-Naïl (the women of a nomadic southern tribe highly fetishized in colonial discourse for their exotic beauty and often associated with prostitution), the exotic North African woman is depicted alone, in pairs, and in groups, idle (clothed, bejeweled, unclothed, reclining in a odalisque position, etc.), or engaged in what purports to be an emblematic activity (standing at the window,

serving coffee, smoking cigarettes or a narghileh, going to or sitting in the cemetery, and so forth). The ongoing rhetoric of this explicitly exotic and erotic body of images, despite the fact that the Algerian woman “décourage le désir scopique (le voyeurisme) du photographe” (Alloula 13), invasively and progressively uncovers the object of desire in a kind of colonial striptease fantasy in which the compositional authority of the photographer frames (through posing, prison motifs, duplication of the form, etc.) and thereby more effectively contains the dangerous seductiveness of the subject.

The colonial image, by contrast, functions according to markedly different representational desires and strategies in its depiction of Algeria. Much like nascent popular colonial literature in Algeria in the 1890s which aims to correct metropolitan misconceptions of colonial society in its self-representations (as in, for example, Stephen Chaseray’s Père Robin letters and Musette’s wildly popular Cagayous broadsheet series), these sorts of images frequently seek to deflate the alterity at the heart of orientalist constructions and deflect that otherness into neutralizing categories of metropolitan and colonial familiarity. When depicting the female North African subject, for example, this colonial strategy of representation resists the lure of the exotic and the erotic with images of expressionless women, unimpressively dressed and with children in tow.



(figure 9)

These images, rather than suggesting a veiled mystery or an unveiled object of desire,

alternatively inscribe the female subject in more comprehensible and perhaps less aleatory European discourses of populationism and abject poverty as it renders a de-orientalized and de-eroticized image that ultimately purports authenticity through that very process. This type of image invariably constructs a visual hybridity in which architectural spaces and human figures convey the unresolved duality of colonial society wherein “Frenchness” provides the signifying frame and even center for “indigenusness.”



(figure 10, 11).

In these ways, the rhetoric of the colonial image necessarily engages in a critique of orientalist codes of representation and overtly shifts into the frame supposedly benign signifiers of the exercise of colonial power and administration that negotiate Algerian otherness through discourses that mirror colonial policy ranging from assimilation to association.¹¹

¹¹ For more on the political context of the concepts and rhetoric of assimilation and association in the

The colonial postcard in Algeria during this period employs a number of compositional techniques that ultimately challenge its reception as documentary. The visual components of many of these images follow well established pictorial traditions that include French Academy painting, printmaking, and portrait photography in the nineteenth century. As well, certain thematic groupings like postcards of typical North African professions and local types of work, echoing metropolitan images of the petits métiers which had been circulating in French printmaking since the eighteenth century, inscribe the subject in entirely recognizable and acceptable European cultural paradigms. The use of a studio setting, with obviously painted backdrops and local dress that lacks contextual coherence and authenticity, despite the captioned contention of “dans son/leur intérieur,” indelibly compromises the reality effect of such images.



(figure 12)

Finally, the models themselves in these images sometimes challenge and jeopardize a contention of authenticity. Quite often using the same model in images depicting very different categories of individuals and scenes, colonial photographers ultimately construct these images by using techniques that betray the distinction between a reality that may or may not exist, and the photographic representation.¹²

second half of the nineteenth century, see Koos.

¹² It is notable that colonial photographers frequently used prostitutes as their models for those images depicting the typical North African woman, veiled or unveiled.

The most recognizable and common strategy of organization employed by the colonial postcard – that of classification and standardization – was never fully limited to the visual image, but additionally included the captioning that accompanied the photographic representation. One of the most common series of the Algerian illustrated postcards at the turn-of-the-century was captioned “Scènes et types” or “Types algériens,” followed by a common noun (with an indefinite article or no article at all), particularly when designating the human subject. While, practically speaking, these scripted captions fix in meaning any ambiguous, indeterminate, or unfamiliar image, they nonetheless participate in larger signifying conventions operating in colonial culture in general. These generic contentions, like early French colonial literature in North Africa which quite frequently represents colonial “types” rather than “individuals,” minimize the challenge of the strange, the unique, and the unfamiliar by inscribing it in an illusory code of the everyday.



(figure 13)

Through endless classificatory types that follow a logic of guidebook-like accumulation, the standardizing rhetoric of the colonial postcard in Algeria recreates and redefines the

colony in photographic images that publicly circulate the globe like advertisements for the construction of colonialism itself in Algeria.

The colonial postcard subtly enacts a visual rhetoric which, in collaboration with its accomplice captioning, ultimately accomplishes a decentering of the prominence of the exotic image as the dominant signifier of the colony and progressively juxtaposes with it the colonial subject, thus establishing a compendium of resolutely hybrid images that mirror the conflicted economy of colonial culture itself.



(figure 14)

While perhaps an attempt to counteract if not correct European misconceptions of the colony, but certainly just as “constructed” as the orientalist clichés they unabashedly challenge, these postcards from the edges of an extra-metropolitan France trace and perform the movements of an emergent colonial identity seeking to distinguish itself from metropolitan representational strategies and legitimate its own presence in a space of colonial illegitimacy.

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