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## Franco-Algerian memory and questions of gender in Ahmed Kalouaz's *Point Kilométrique 190* (1986)

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*This article suggests that gender and cultural memory are both performative acts and that memories of the colonial re-enact certain gender codes associated with the act of colonisation. Colonialism can be understood in terms of a gendered hierarchy: that the colonisers were imagined as virile and male, violating the virgin, 'feminine' territory of the colonised land. In this way, colonised peoples were gendered as feminine in order to justify European rhetoric of racial superiority. However, the narratives of anti-colonial writers and thinkers who condemn colonialism, such as Frantz Fanon, are 'haunted' by gendered tropes of the colonialism – that colonisation is a rape, and that the colonised people are feminised victims. This article uses Ahmed Kalouaz's 1986 novel *Point Kilométrique 190* as an example of trans-national memory which successfully transcends these gendered stereotypes. The short novel functions as a mnemonic device (a commemoration to Habib Grimzi, a victim of anti-Algerian violence) which makes connections between racist violence in France during the 1980s with the history of the Algerian war. However, simultaneously, the narrative avoids gendered stereotypes associated with French and Algerian men and women. Using a French woman to posthumously voice a murdered Algerian man, Kalouaz creates a pluralistic narrative which shatters Algerian/French, Feminine/Masculine binaries and allows for the transfer of traumatic memory across boundaries assigned to gender identities, as well as national groups.*

### Introduction: Gender and collective memory

Judith Butler differentiates gender from sex by establishing that gender is not a biological fact or pre-existing characteristic. Instead, gender is an act or action which is constantly in the process of being mediated. In making this distinction, Butler argues that the gendered body is performative, that 'acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organising principle of identity as a cause' (Butler *Gender Trouble* 185). By identifying the gendered body as an 'effect' of 'acts, gesture and desire', we can understand that 'gender is not an attribute but an activity' (Moloney and Fenstermaker 194). Indeed, gender is an activity undertaken by individual and collective acts, crafted by rituals and actions, whether by everyday social acts or textual enunciations, such as in film, art or in literature (Butler 'Performative acts' 462). Moreover, Butler's argument demonstrates that the body does not naturally contain a gendered 'essence', but that the body *performs* gender and this performance is both *gendered* and *gendering* – in other words, action both produces gender and is a product of gender.

Collective memory is, also, not an attribute but an activity which is performed in a similar fashion to gender. Memory does not exist naturally or biologically within a culture but is produced and reproduced through action and re-enactments. Jay Winter has argued that:

[m]emory performed is at the heart of the collective memory. When individuals and groups express or embody or interpret or repeat a script about the past, they galvanize the ties that bind groups together and deposit additional memory traces about the past in their own minds. (11)

Therefore, like gender, memory cannot be reduced to a singular, biological category as it is 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative' (Rothberg 3). This article does not attempt to collapse one category (gender) into the other (memory) and equate the process by which memory is produced with those that perform gender, since they are indeed different. While gender is a performed act, memory is a re-enactment of the past in the present. However, I do claim that they intersect and that this intersecting relationship has not been fully explored. Memory and gender are both fluid and unstable processes of mediation and negotiation which acquire significance through their repetition and re-enactment; both memory and gender are double processes since they are simultaneously 'product' and 'producing'. To explore how memories of colonial and postcolonial violence intersect with questions of gender, I will analyse the 1986 novel *Point Kilométrique 190* by French-Algerian writer Ahmed Kalouaz. The novel deals with a specific case of anti-Algerian violence, the 1983 murder of Habib Grimzi at the hands of three French soldiers. The novel's narrative performatively re-enacts the posthumous voice of Grimzi through Sabine, a French journalist who is assigned to cover his murder. Kalouaz sensitively represents the voice of a murdered Algerian man, via the voice of a French woman, while resisting simplistic gender binaries in the reconstruction of the victim's memory.

### **Gender and colonialism**

First, however, it is important to clarify the role of gender in colonialism. Colonisation is the physical, mental and geographical occupation of one group of people by another. In colonial discourse, the coloniser is able to justify this treatment of another group of people by imagining them as inferior, and therefore enabling their subjugation and dehumanisation. While it is obvious that colonial subjugation is performed on the assumption of racial superiority of the coloniser, it should not be overlooked that the colonised were also deemed inferior in terms of sexuality. The term sexuality here refers to more than questions of sexual relations, but customs, ideas and rituals associated with gendered bodies. I share Evelyne Accad's conceptualisation of sexuality as incorporating 'notions of territory attached to possession and jealousy' (2). In other words, within a colonial context, the process of occupying and possessing territory is also a symbolic act through which coloniser and colonised are sexually defined; the coloniser as jealous possessor, and the colonised as the jealously possessed. The coloniser is therefore envisaged in terms of masculine imagery, and colonisation is the performative penetration of new, virgin, and 'feminine' territory. The equation by which the European coloniser is imagined as masculine and the colonised is imagined as feminine is not simply the facile collapsing of sexual and racial difference. As Butler argues, analytical categories of 'race', 'sexuality' and 'sexual difference' can, and do, intersect:

Though there are clearly good historical reasons for keeping ‘race’ and ‘sexuality’ and ‘sexual difference’ as separate analytical spheres there are also quite pressing and significant historical reasons for asking how and when we might read not only their convergence, but the sites at which the one cannot be constituted save through the other. (*Bodies That Matter* 168)

Butler approaches this issue with caution but argues that theories of gender and race are at times integral to each other, and that ‘the sexualisation of racial gender norms calls to be read through multiple lenses at once’ (*Gender Trouble* xvii). Indeed, in *Colonial Masculinity* (1995) Mrinalini Sinha claims that Victorian fears of female sexuality are duplicated in the colonial creation of an ‘effeminate’ Bengali (35). At this time of colonial expansion, both women and colonised people are considered to be incapable of controlling their sexual desires, and therefore must be monitored and controlled by an external power structure – the masculine coloniser.

In Saïd’s seminal *Orientalism* (1978), the colonised are not only differentiated racially from ‘Arabs’ but also by notions of sexual difference:

An Arab Oriental is that impossible creature whose libidinal energy drives him to paroxysm of over-stimulation – and yet, he is as a puppet in the eyes of the world, staring vacantly out at a modern landscape he can neither understand nor cope with. (312)

What Saïd’s study shows us is that the construction of the Arab as ‘puppet in the eyes of the world’ is due to the association of the ‘east’ with over-abundant sexuality. This sexual and racial differentiation is an element of the colonising process through which the colonisers legitimise their sense of superiority. In his analysis of Gustave Flaubert’s encounter with the Egyptian courtesan dancer Kuchuck Hanem, Saïd argues that this sexualised power dynamic allows the west to represent the ‘orient’:

[S]he never spoke for herself, she never represented her emotions, presence or history. *He* spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, and male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuck Hanem physically but to speak for her. (6)

Not only does Flaubert’s identity as a European allow him to possess and represent Hanem as “‘typically Oriental’” (ibid), but the fact he is male and she is female further reinforces the gendered and sexual nature of representing the ‘oriental’.<sup>i</sup> In the Algerian context, this sexual and racial differentiation is epitomised by French orientalist who depicted Algerian women as cloistered and exotic decorative objects, such as in Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* (1834), which then became the subject of the 1980 collection of short stories by Algerian writer Assia Djebar (Mortimer 306). Not only must the Algerian be categorised as racially inferior to the French, but also sexually inferior through the association with ‘feminine’ exoticism. Returning to Butler’s theory of gender performativity, she claims, ‘one is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does

one's body' ('Performative Acts' 464). Therefore it can be argued that the discursive violence in the representation of Algerians in oriental and colonial French imagination performed Algerian gendered identity *on their behalf*. French colonisation *did* the body of the Algerian; performatively differentiating Algerian identity as feminine and exotic as opposed to the French colonial virility.

However, the gendered characterisation of Algerians as feminine is not limited to colonial discourse, but also reverberates in the works of anti-colonialists. In *A Dying Colonialism (L'an V de la révolution algérienne 1959)*, Frantz Fanon directly links the control of Algerian territory with the control of women's bodies. He claims that a French colonial tactic in the 1930s was to 'win over' Algerian women. Therefore, the fate of the Algerian woman is tied to independence, not because she is a citizen of Algeria, but because the French possession of Algeria is also the possession of Algerian women:

In the colonialist program, it was the woman who was given the historic mission of shaking up the Algerian man ... [This] was at the same time achieving a real power over the man and attaining a practical, effective means of destructing Algerian culture. (*A Dying Colonialism* 39)

(‘Dans le programme colonialiste, c’est à la femme que revient la mission historique de bousculer l’homme algérien... c’est à la fois conquérir un pouvoir réel sur l’homme et posséder les moyens pratiques, efficaces, de déstructurer la culture algérienne’ *L’an V de la révolution algérienne* 21).

For Fanon, the colonial project uses Algerian women in two ways. First, it is quite simply a means of seizing power from the Algerian man and, by extension, the Algerian nation. Political power is usurped from the Algerians by the French through the possession of Algerian women. Second, Fanon claims that controlling women will enable the French not only to possess Algeria but also to dismantle Algerian culture. This is problematic since, whether as the symbol for the political fight for independence or cultural struggle, the woman is reduced to a merely synecdochic role. As a result, the Algerian woman's political agency is bypassed by the symbolic function of her image. By including the woman-as-nation metaphor to portray Algeria as an exotic, feminine, possessable territory, Fanon's writing is 'haunted' by the colonial notions of the colonised body as feminine. I am borrowing the phrase 'haunted' from Laurent Dubreuil's notion of 'hauntings' in *Empire of Language* (see also Colin Davis *Haunted Subjects* and Michael O'Riley *Postcolonial Haunting*). For Dubreuil, colonial 'haunting' takes place at a linguistic level. The 'possession' of Algeria is not an unconscious or passive 'fact' of colonisation, but actively planned and enacted and continues to exist 'in the differential repetition of the colony in our discourse' (36). Whereas Dubreuil was referencing cases of contemporary racism in France, born from colonial resentment, I also believe that this 'linguistic haunting' of the colonial is apparent in Fanon's critique of the barbarity of French colonisation. As Rita Faulkner argues, Fanon 'tries to get into the mind of the young Algerian woman, but perhaps he projects some of the colonized male view' (849). Not only does Fanon project 'the colonized male view' but, by presenting colonisation as a metaphorical 'rape', folds notions of 'sexuality' and 'sexual

difference' into each other (Ibid). Although Fanon criticises the racialised power structure of *l'Algérie française*, he ends up re-using colonial codes of gendered difference in support of the Algerian revolution. Although he denounces French racism, he does not deconstruct the gendered nature of this racism.<sup>ii</sup>

How, then, are these gendered codes of colonial power (Algerians = feminine and violated, French = masculine and violator) transferred from colonial Algeria into post-colonial memory in metropolitan France? In *Le Transfert d'une mémoire: de l'Algérie française au racisme anti-arabe* (1999), Benjamin Stora argues that the proliferation of racist violence and murders of North African immigrants in France since the 1970s is often regarded as a direct consequence of the Algerian war and the violent product of a growing nationalist resentment for the loss of an idealised *Algérie française*. Stora claims that this nationalist nostalgia for the *paradis perdu* of a French Algeria is, in part, created according to sexualised categories:

Algeria is an emblematic region of lonely passions, where the nearly palpable heat of the afternoon heat wave seems to weigh like a fatality.

('L'Algérie est une région emblématique de la solitude des passions, où la chaleur presque palpable des après-midi de canicule semble peser comme une fatalité'; *my translation*, 23)

The nostalgia for this imagined Algeria reinforces the colonial caricature of Algeria as a sexualised paradise, a land of erotic fantasy and is often associated with *pied-noir* writing.<sup>iii</sup> However, *les pieds-noirs* were not the only people to move to metropolitan France after the War of Independence. After 1962, the numbers of Algerians seeking work in France increased (Bell 31) and, as Alec Hargreaves suggests, '[t]hese ethnic minorities – especially those of Muslim heritage have become ever more visible reminders of France's colonial past' and painful defeat in 1962 (*Memory, Empire and Postcolonialism* 4). For Anne Donadey, France is suffering from what she calls the 'Algeria syndrome', in other words, an inability to deal with the painful and politically divisive history of French colonisation. The occultation of this memory has contributed to a 'Freudian return of the repressed', which manifests itself in incidents of anti-Arab violence which increased during the 1980s and 'could be linked to the long repression first of the violent reality of the Algerian war, then of the psychological loss experienced by the French after 1962' (221).

### **Post-colonial memory and gender in *Point Kilométrique 190***

This interest in the link between the colonial past and contemporary racism is a key concern in Kalouaz's second novel *Point Kilométrique 190*, published in 1986. The novel is based on the events of the 14<sup>th</sup> November 1983, when Habib Grimzi (referred to in the text at H.G.) was brutally beaten and thrown from the speeding Bordeaux-Vintimille night train by three candidates for the French Foreign Legion. His murder was treated widely in the media and inspired Roger Hanin's film *Le Train d'enfer* in 1985, where he links the murder of Grimzi with widespread racism and even neo-Nazism in France (Reisinger 193). Indeed, in *Point Kilométrique* the crimes of the present are linked to the crimes of the past, since Grimzi was born during the intense violence of the Algerian War. He is attached to history

by birth and therefore to a legacy of colonialism and racism. In this way, Grimzi's voice not only brings to light racist violence and murder present in France during the 1980s but also evokes memories of the Algerian War. However, although the novel depicts a racist incident while evoking traumatic memories of colonial war, it also manages to avoid perpetuating the kind of gendered stereotypes that appear in Fanon's *A Dying Colonialism*. Butler claims that gender 'is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established' ('Performative Acts' 468) and that these reenactments can, in fact, challenge social norms (469). If the act remembering is also an 'a reenactment and reexperiencing' then this repetition also holds the possibility of subverting these socially established norms. Indeed, Kalouaz voices Grimzi's posthumous 'memories' through Sabine, a female French journalist, to undermine the gendered national identities of *feminine* Algeria and *masculine* France. Furthermore, Grimzi's indirect testimony across the voice of a French woman simultaneously highlights the performative aspect of representing the past, as well as gendered identities.

While the narrative of *Point Kilométrique* centres on a case of anti-Algerian murder, the novel does not attempt to trace a history of French racism, nor go into forensic detail regarding the motivations and consequences of Grimzi's murder. Rather than attempting to reveal the reality or the truth of Franco-Algerian history, Kalouaz's narrative is interested in deconstructing the very notion of a singular or absolute truth - his work demonstrates that there is no definitive single version of the past. Instead, the narrative centres on the voice of the victim who insists upon the need to testify:

*While there is still some blood in my broken skull, before my thoughts fade away.*

*I must say something.*

*What I am.*

*What I was.*

*Soon.*

*(Pendant qu'il reste un peu de sang dans mon crâne brisé, avant que ma pensée ne s'évanouisse.*

*Il me faut dire déjà.*

*Ce que je suis.*

*Ce que j'étais.*

*Bientôt; my translation, 13)*

The temporal conjunctions and adverb *while, before, soon* reinforce the sense of urgency in Grimzi's traumatic testimony. The poetic, lyrical style in which Grimzi's voice is written suggests the fleeting moments of transition between life and death, between 'I am' and 'I was', and it is this place of in-betweenness that Kalouaz focuses on as he recreates the final hours of Grimzi's life. In her introduction to *Polygraphies*, Alison Rice reminds us that written testimony does not attempt to reveal an unequivocal truth or deny falseness but is an attempt to connect with others: '[w]hen a writer "takes to the witness stand" in the text, she necessarily adopts a stance. She assumes a position that is inclined towards others ... Testimony is therefore, by definition, other-orientated' (9). Kalouaz is not

attempting to 'correct' the dominant version of history nor recreate the 'true' voice of Grimzi. The truth of who Grimzi was or why he was murdered is never the objective of Kalouaz's take to the witness stand. Instead, Kalouaz's narrative embraces the in-between spaces of life and death, knowing and not-knowing. His decision to textually recreate the consciousness of a dead man implores the reader to discover the self through the other.

This dynamic of discovering the self through the other is underlined by the narrative's pluralistic structure. Grimzi's voice is reconstructed via various other interlocutors; predominantly Sabine (a French journalist reporting his death), with extracts from the press and interventions from Grimzi's friends and his French girlfriend, Hélène. The victim is represented, not through an omnipresent third person, but through an imagined voice created from several different perspectives. For Zohra Bouchentouf-Siagh, the reconstruction of Grimzi's voice is the collective act of the group, 'his story weighing down on all its members' ('son histoire pesant sur tous ses membres'; *my translation*, 93). In this way, the memory of Grimzi's death, and the historical violence that resonates therein, belongs to more than just the victim but is shared out via this mixed narrative. However, the character of Sabine is the most prominent in this pluralistic and posthumous reconstruction of Grimzi's voice. Sabine is a journalist called to take pictures of Grimzi's murdered body. She is the same age as Grimzi and the memory of this 'fait divers' (or human interest story) haunts her for an entire year. This haunting is portrayed as a kind of corporeal occupation – Grimzi lives inside Sabine, transported by her desire to understand this senseless murder, like he was transported by the train to his death: 'I look out for this clandestine passenger who has resided within me for a year; so that my words no longer stay in the shadows' ('Je guette le passager clandestin qui habite en moi depuis un an; pour que mes mots ne restent plus dans l'ombre'; *my translation*, Kalouaz 40). In order to ease the pain she feels since Grimzi's murder, she undertakes a reenactment of his final journey, by taking the same night train as he did, exactly a year later. Sabine's voice intermingles with an imagined voice of Grimzi as they take the same journey 'together'; she claims that in 'looking for you, I found myself' ('te cherchant, je me suis trouvée'; *my translation*, 24). This action is clearly a commemoration, but the narrative does not simply aim to eulogize or honour the voice of the dead, instead Kalouaz creates a pluralistic narrative that seeks to investigate the self (Sabine) through the other (Grimzi). As Rice argues, writing the other is an attempt to equally explore the self and that writers explore the fact that '[e]ach person is inextricably connected to others, and the text cannot help but sing of those others' (1). Sabine's voice does not efface that of Grimzi's, rather they mingle together, and the distinction is entirely blurred until the reader is not sure who is speaking. In terms of memory, it becomes difficult to distinguish between who is being remembered and who is doing the remembering. As readers, we partake in the commemoration of Grimzi's life, but this is not done in a didactic or eulogizing way, but sensitively carried out via the experiences of Sabine.

The fact that voice of Grimzi, an Algerian man, is narrated by Sabine, a French woman, is significant. The plural narrative not only undermines national binaries, but transcends the gendered stereotypes associated with French and Algerian identities. Indeed, Hargreaves has noted that 'granted that the author is a man, one of the most striking features of Kalouaz's narrative is their frequent use of female narrators' (*Immigration and Identity* 72). For Anna Maria Manga a classic



characteristic of *littérature beur*<sup>iv</sup> are the roles that women play. In her analysis, there are two types of women represented in *littérature beur* by male authors. On the one hand, you have the strong mother figure normally representative of 'back home'. On the other hand, you have young desirable French women who represent a 'symbol of the protagonist's total integration into the new country ... the foreign woman is an object of desire and struggle' ('symbole de l'intégration totale du protagoniste dans le nouveau pays ... la femme étrangère est un objet de désir et de lutte'; *my translation*, 58). Manga's analysis seems to support the notion that 'total integration' is possible, and even desirable, and that by desiring French women, young men of migrant origin can renegotiate their mixed origins into a 'whole' French identity. In this sense, female characters are tools with which the male characters can heal their divided sense of self. Manga's analysis fails to identify this symbolic use of women as reductive and simplistic. The role of Sabine in *Point Kilométrique* is far more nuanced than Manga would have us believe. Sabine's voice is not used to symbolise a unified, but homogenous, version of French culture that Grimzi's memory (as symbolic of all victimised 'Arab' men) can assimilate to. Rather, Kalouaz uses a French woman to narrate the posthumous voice of an Algerian man to demonstrate that memory can be shared across boundaries normally associated with gender and with ethnicity. Sabine's yearlong obsession with Grimzi's death is not then an attempt to 'heal' the memory of Grimzi, or help assimilate his Algerian identity into French society. It is, in part, simply an attempt to connect with the dead man whose brutal death has affected her so deeply. In this way, Kalouaz's narrative choices seem to reflect what Mireille Rosello labels as the 'reparative in narratives', which presents an alternative to the usual choice of 'either I should know the past because it is the only way of not reproducing its horror in the present (the 'never again' grand narrative), or I should live in the present to make sure the past horrors do not infect it' (22). What Rosello's argument tells us about narratives of memory, is that they can become trapped in their own rhetoric of either 'correcting' past mistakes, replacing the past narratives with new ones or by attempting to attain a single 'true' memory. As Hargreaves argues, '[b]y choosing protagonists and narrators foreign in some measure to himself ... in preference to ploughing a 'safe' autobiographical furrow, Kalouaz imposes upon himself precisely the kind of imaginative effort which is required if such divisions are ever to be reduced or transcended' (*Immigration and Identity* 73). Therefore, Kalouaz uses a French woman to represent the trauma experienced by an Algerian man in order to defy these divisive notions connected to identity and allow for traumatic memories to be shared across identities associated with both nationality and gender.

To conclude, Rosello warns us that 'each narrative has, as one dangerous horizon, the possibility of participating in a cultural war and of re-establishing in the present moment, the divisive social formations that characterized the violent era that we seek to remember' (25). Kalouaz's narrative has avoided such dangerous horizons. His novel *Point Kilométrique 190* does not offer a narrative that claims to reveal a single 'true' version of the past, nor does it re-iterate the gendered codes of the colonial French-Algerian relationship. In Kalouaz's narrative, female characters are not instrumentalised as tools for healing colonial trauma, nor is the Algerian victim imagined as a feminine, violated body. Instead, he constructs a narrative that transcends the binaries of gendered colonial national identities, and undermines the taboos associated with Algerian men and French

women. It is a French woman who reimagines the voice of an Algerian man from beyond the grave to demonstrate how memories can be shared across gendered national identities and to subvert the notion of a feminine-Algeria and masculine-France.

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<sup>i</sup> However, as Reina Lewis has argued, this gaze was not limited to male orientalists alone, but claimed that 19<sup>th</sup> century Western women artists and writers, 'who [were] feminized as the symbolic inferior other at home', were equally implicated in the problematic orientalist gaze (18).

<sup>ii</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Fanon has been defended by feminist thinker T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, who has argued that there has been a tendency 'to dismiss his relevance to feminism' (90).

<sup>iii</sup> *Les pieds-noirs* are European settlers in Algeria who were forced to leave after independence in 1962.

<sup>iv</sup> *Beur* refers to the descendants of North-African migrants living in France.

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