

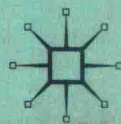


HISTORICIZING COLONIAL NOSTALGIA

EUROPEAN WOMEN'S NARRATIVES OF
ALGERIA AND KENYA 1900-PRESENT



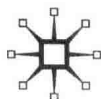
PATRICIA M.E. LORCIN



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Patricia M. E. Lorcin

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HISTORICIZING COLONIAL
NOSTALGIA

For Oliver and Melissa with Love

I feel kind of homesick for those old times, although I never knew them.

Greg Francis a 30-year-old Anglo-Indian from Calcutta quoted in
The New York Times, International Sunday, August 15, 2010

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It is impossible to do justice to all the people who contributed in one way or another to the genesis of this book. Unlike my first book, which was written in somewhat of an academic vacuum when I was part of a diplomatic milieu, this work has benefited enormously from the contacts and connections I have made as a Jeannie-come-lately to the profession. These acknowledgements, therefore, not only signal the institutions, colleagues, and friends whose support I appreciated, but they also trace my trajectory from the diplomatic to the academic world.

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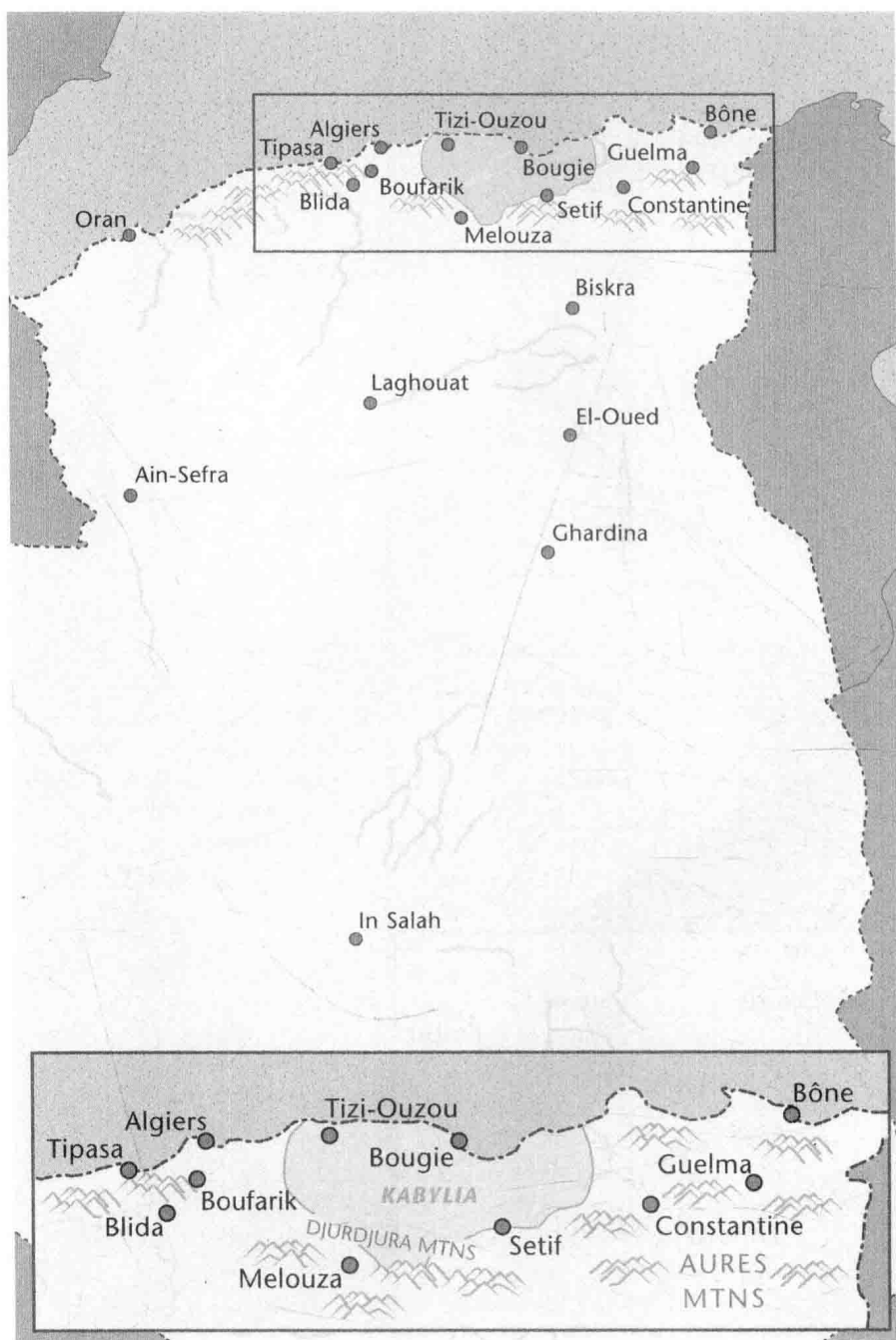
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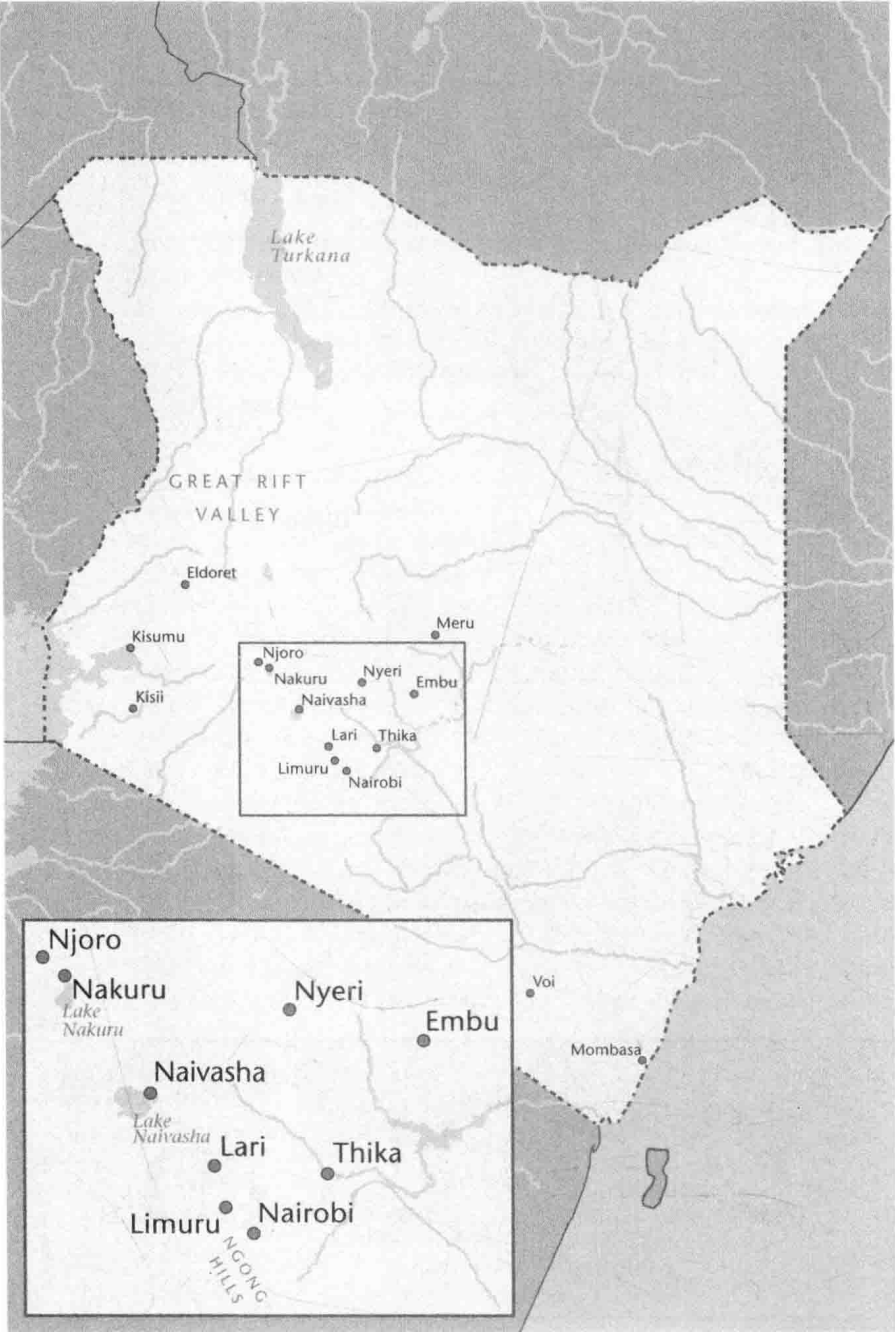
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Colonial Algeria. Created by the University of Minnesota Cartography Lab



Colonial Kenya. Created by the University of Minnesota Cartography Lab

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INTRODUCTION



Although I did not realize it at the time, the seed for what follows was inadvertently sown as a result of a holiday I took in August 1994, while living in the Ivory Coast. On the recommendation of friends, I had journeyed to Sinématiali, in the North of the country, to stay with a French couple who had a farm nearby, where they received guests. Near Sinématiali, we turned off the main road and drove for several miles along a dusty track which appeared to be leading nowhere. The instructions we had been given seemed decidedly vague to our urban sensibilities referencing, as they did, baobab trees and clusters of huts as the relevant signposts that would head us in the right direction. Any doubts we had about finding the place were dispelled when we found ourselves on a eucalyptus lined dirt "avenue," which led us to the farm. *Vidalkaba, La ferme africaine*, as it was called, was in fact a mango plantation or at that time the early stages of one (it is now an export business) to which the owners had added accommodation for guests in the form of a collection of small wattle huts. We were shown to our accommodation and told that drinks were served at sundown on the veranda of the reception hut, which was set on a sharp incline overlooking the plantation below. We arrived before our hosts and after admiring the magnificent view over the valley below we wandered into the sitting room.

A few years earlier I had read Karen Blixen's *Letters from Africa* and was familiar with most of her fiction. Thanks to Judith Thurman, I was also familiar with her life story.¹ As I walked around the sitting room, looking at the pictures on the wall, the zebra skins on the floor and heard the roar of the lion (they had a pet lion), I had a feeling of déjà vu. At dinner, when our hostess appeared in an elegant long dress and we sat down to a table dressed with fine silver and multibranched candelabras, with dinner served

by an impeccably liveried African "boy" in white gloves, the parallels with Blixen's Africa came into focus. The next day when our hostess, dressed in jodhpurs and a straw hat shaped like a pith helmet, showed us around her farm and her "people" (Ivoriens who lived on their land), I couldn't resist asking if she had ever read the works of Karen Blixen. She looked pleased. She told me that before moving to the North from Abidjan, where she had been living, she had spent some time in Paris recovering from a personal setback. An acquaintance had recommended the works of Blixen as a way of reconnecting to her temporarily shattered African life. She knew nothing of Blixen's works but by the time she had finished reading them, she had emerged from her doldrums and had decided what she wanted to do. She persuaded her husband to take an early retirement from his lucrative business in the Ivorian capital and invest in a plantation in the North. He would run the plantation and take guests trekking, hunting (game and photographic) in "the bush" and fishing on the nearby river, while she would provide an elegant end to the guests' day, a beguiling combination of the "primitive" and the "civilized." As I listened, what intrigued me the most was the starting point for our hostess' recreation as it was from a British colonial setting rather than a French one. Much later, when I started to think in a more structured way about the significance of nostalgia and the choices our hostess had made, I realized that the concept of nostalgia was not solely framed, as some scholars would have it, by the home or nation. The usual analysis of nostalgia as a longing to return home could be complicated by rethinking the concept in relation to notions of space and time and their use in women's personal strategies.

This is a study of the writing and strategies of European women in two colonies, French Algeria and British Kenya, the aim of which is to historicize nostalgia. I make a distinction between imperial and colonial nostalgia, concentrating on the latter and arguing that women's writing made a singular contribution to its development. I differentiate colonial nostalgia and colonial myths: namely that the former was the embellishment of lived experience, whereas the latter was either the misinterpretation or incomprehension of the colonized territory and its people or the fabrication of a nonexistent dimension of colonial life.

My interest in the social history of ideas, in fiction as a historical source, and in the nature of women's roles in the colonies drew me to the subject. I became interested in the ideological aspects of colonial literature when I was writing my first book, a social history of French ideas on ethnicities in nineteenth-century Algeria. After writing a few articles on colonial literature from Algeria, I decided that I wanted to extend my field of vision beyond French North Africa and write a comparative study.² My first question was whether or not to make it gender specific. I opted for concentrating on women because, in the case of Algeria, a colony I wanted to use as one of

my case studies, works on colonial literature were weighted toward male writers.³ The next question was which colonies? I considered comparing the writing of colonial women in different parts of the French empire, but the promise of a more intellectually rewarding enterprise stimulated me to consider women writers from different geographical areas of empire as well as from different empires. I knew that socio-economic and political dissimilarities in different parts of the French empire produced a literature shaped by the desires and mythologies of the people who settled there, people whose socio-economic background often determined the colonies they, or their forebears, chose to inhabit. Such differences might be even greater in considering the literatures of two competing empires, France and Britain. All the monographs on literature and empire focused on one empire (usually the British) or on one colony (India, Kenya, Algeria, Indochina).⁴ Hardly any compared colonies from two different empires unless the focus was thematic, and even then there is not a great deal to choose from.⁵ George Steinmetz has recently examined three German colonies in very different parts of the globe to provide "a corrective to hasty generalizations about colonialism *per se*"; my aim is to add to this corrective by focusing on two colonies from two different empires.⁶

WHY ALGERIA? WHY KENYA? WHY THIS PARTICULAR COMPARISON?

The choice of Algeria and Kenya was not random. There were socio-political, cultural, and thematic reasons why these two colonies would make a good comparison. Both were important settler colonies in their respective empires, the decolonization of which in each case was violent. This suggested that the stakes in their loss were similar, that is to say a land that settlers considered their own. The similarity is deceptive, however. Historians now categorize French Algeria as a colony, but at the time the mainland French, the colonists and even a minority of Algerian *évolués* considered the territory to be part of France. In contrast, although British settlers laid claim to the Kenya highlands as "white man's country," it never became an administrative part of Britain in the manner of Algeria, nor indeed was Kenya ever considered an extension of the British mainland, even if some settlers imagined that it was. Furthermore, territorial expropriation was an essential feature of both and was contested, leading to conflict and uprisings, but the fact that land in Algeria was imagined as French and in Kenya as African but "empty," hence available, shaped colonial writing.

Socio-political differences were also connected to my chosen time frame. By 1900, the approximate starting point of my analysis, Algeria had been occupied by the French for 70 years. Kenya was part of what was then known as the British East African Protectorate. It was established in 1895, one year before work began on the Uganda railway, which eventually transformed the region.⁷ Only in 1920 did Kenya acquire its name and officially become a colony. In Algeria the military administration was replaced by a civilian one

in 1871, and it was during the last three decades of the nineteenth century that the colony was transformed into a bona fide settler "state." The differences in the length of colonization meant that by 1900 Algeria had an urban culture, whereas, Kenya did not. Even before the French occupation there were important urban centers in the territory: Algiers, Oran, Constantine, Bone, Bougie. As settlement increased these centers were transformed, to a greater or lesser degree, into French towns.⁸ In Kenya the only real town, Nairobi (or Nyrobe, from the Maasai *Engore Nyorobe*), was a twentieth-century creation. Its emergence was connected to the construction of the Kenya-Uganda railway and its development into a true urban space was slow. In essence, therefore, Kenya was a rural settler culture, whereas Algeria was an urban one. The preoccupations of each, land in Kenya and cultural hegemony in Algeria, shaped the narratives and predominant literary themes and figures of speech of each.

Colonial theory and practice were also different. French colonial policies varied. The two theories were Assimilation and Association. Assimilation emerged from the revolutionary doctrine of the equality of man and the Utopian Socialist assumption of the superiority of European, and in particular French civilization with the concurrent desire to civilize and educate "lesser" civilizations. Assimilationists sought to absorb the colony into the French administrative and cultural framework, and socialize its inhabitants into becoming French men and women. By the early twentieth century, however, in many French territories colonial policy shifted to Association as assimilation of the "natives" was no longer considered to be feasible. Instead they were to be allowed to maintain their culture and develop at their own rate in tandem with the French. In either case direct rule was the structural framework. In Algeria there was never a watershed date separating Assimilation and Association, nor was there any coherence in the implementation of one policy or the other.⁹ Colonial policy in Algeria had a haphazard, changeable quality to it, largely because it was considered to be a part of France and settler lobbies were strong. In Kenya, on the other hand, from the outset the policy was one of indirect rule, expressed definitively by Lord Lugard in his *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*. In it he stated that Britain was responsible for promoting the social, political, and economic development of its African dependencies.¹⁰ These differences in approach shaped the attitudes of the settlers to the inhabitants of their colony. This study seeks to address how these differences in colonial ideology and policy were written into women's fiction and nonfiction.

Literary differences were also noticeable. In contrast to Kenya, by the inter-war period Algeria had developed a lively literary scene. The urban culture and greater size of the settler population in Algeria produced more women novelists than the rural culture of Kenya. A comparison of their respective novelists suggested a study predominantly about Algeria. A possible solution was to compare the novelists in both territories, using the limited output of colonial women in Kenya as a foil for those from Algeria. A more promising approach, however, was to enlarge the scope of women's writing to include

memoirs, letters, and various types of nonfictional writing. This redresses the imbalance and enables an assessment of how fiction and nonfiction converge to reinforce colonial themes within their respective territories or whether each genre responds differently to colonialism. Furthermore, memoir and letter writing are as much a cultural practice as is writing novels. If the former is, at the outset, a more private pursuit than the latter it is no less defining of a society. Examining why this was so can tell us as much about women's attitudes as it can about the society in which they functioned.

A final point of difference has to do with settler demographics. In both colonies the white settler population was a minority, but the similarity ends there. Not only was the settler population much larger in Algeria, but the majority was also of non-French origin, coming from the countries of the northern shores of the Mediterranean: principally Spain, Italy, and Malta. By 1900 most had been granted French citizenship, as had the Jews indigenous to Algeria. In Kenya, on the other hand, the majority of non-British settlers were Indian. Initially brought in to construct the railroad, their numbers had multiplied and they had established commercial roots. Indians were not granted full citizenship nor were they given the same rights as European settlers. These differences in demographics were mirrored in the ideological imaginings of the settlers and in the social hierarchies that emerged in each colony. Settler ideologues in Algeria looked to what they considered to be the Latin roots of Algeria and developed the concept of a melting pot of "Latins," which was producing a "virile, hardworking, hedonistic race" with the potential to "regenerate" France.¹¹ Kenyan settler mythologies were more closely connected to class and the pastimes of the settler "aristocracy," most famously the "Happy Valley Set," which in spite of the numerical (and actual) insignificance of its members became stereotypically associated with a certain white Kenyan lifestyle, overshadowing the reality of settler existence.

WOMEN, GENDER, AND SPACE/PLACE

In considering colonial women's activities in the colonies and their influence on the development of colonial society, feminist scholars have tended to focus on issues of gender, race, and sexuality.¹² Partially a response to the idea, prevalent until the 1970s but still evident as late as 1995, that women were the real source of racism in the colonies, these thematic categories were a convenient way of writing women back into the colonial power structures from which they had been excluded.¹³ There has also been a tendency among scholars to divide women into types: travelers, missionaries, educators, medical personnel, etc.; typological categories that proved useful in recuperating women from the imperial limbo.¹⁴ Whereas the categories of race, gender, and sexuality are valuable in analyzing the social structures of the colonies, the typological ones are useful in pinpointing the chronology and development of women's involvement in the Empire. How then does one tie these themes and categories together to recreate the theoretical and practical complexities of women's association with the colonies?