

# **(In)Edible Algeria: Transmitting Pied-Noir Nostalgia Through Food**

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For the nearly one million French citizens who fled Algeria during and after the Algerian War for Independence (1954–1962), the desire to return home has not easily been attenuated. These exiles, commonly referred to as Pieds-Noirs, settled predominantly in France where they experienced discrimination and exclusion due to their colonial ties. Consequently, the once diverse population bonded together in a close-knit community that became consumed with saving and transmitting memories of the homeland, and in a historical period of public silence about the Algerian War until 1999 when it was officially recognized. As Benjamin Stora points out, upon the Pieds-Noirs' exile in 1962, 'la mémoire de l'Algérie française va d'abord se transmettre, essentiellement, par les tenants d'un «pays perdu»' (1999: 72).<sup>1</sup> In their effort to maintain their cultural roots, each year on the anniversary of their exodus Pieds-Noirs gather to share memories and to enjoy 'authentic' Pied-Noir dishes such as couscous, merguez, anisette, *mouna*, and *méchoui*. In these almost stereotypical feasts among friends, the community reconnects to the past as they re-enact what was once a familiar experience. Much like biting into a Proustian madeleine, the Pieds-Noirs can be transported, if only fleetingly, to a former time of wholeness and comfort as they partake in the culinary delights of their youth.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'the memory of French Algeria would first be transmitted essentially by guardians of a "lost country."' This and all other translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> As Mark Swislocki states, "The idea that food can evoke another time and place has been a modernist

Although food serves a reparative role for national and in this case community memory, it is also the site of rejection and pain for some of Algeria's former French citizens. Marie Cardinal, one of the foremost Pied-Noir authors, writes about food as a source of unity with the Algerian community and rejection of her colonial French family. Similarly, in the collective autobiography *Quatre soeurs: Hier, en Algérie, aujourd'hui en France* (2001), Frédérique Boblin, Eve Calo, Nelly Collet and Fabienne Rozotte explain their compulsions and rejections of food both in Algeria and France. Through an analysis of these cultural and literary texts, this essay demonstrates how food is used as a vehicle for reconnection to and transmission of memory, while also serving as a mode of rejection of historical connections and memories. While some Pieds-Noirs are transported to their past and reunified as they bite into a *mouna*,<sup>3</sup> others cannot stomach food that ties them so inextricably to a now absent and idealized land. In this sense, the Pieds-Noirs can eat to remember Algeria, but the Algeria they knew can also prove to be inedible.

### **Transmitting culinary nostalgia**

Although in recent years nostalgia has fallen out of favor among critics, it is arguably a side effect of separation that seeks to establish a sense of stability for the fragmented individual. David Lowenthal explains that as early as the seventeenth century nostalgia was considered to be a physical rather than mental condition, and it was treated as a potentially fatal malady up to the Second World War (1985: 10–11). Nostalgia is often read as an inability to criticize a painful past, such as one based on violence and exile. While nostalgia tends to glorify a happier past, literary critic Linda Hutcheon locates nostalgia more closely to the present:

Nostalgia, in fact, may depend precisely on the *irrecoverable* nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia's power—for both conservatives and radicals alike. This is rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire. In this sense, however, nostalgia is less about the past than about the present. (1998: author's emphasis)

Like Hutcheon, Lowenthal demonstrates nostalgia to be dependent upon the present situation of its producer, 'A perpetual staple of nostalgic yearning is the search for a

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truism ever since Marcel Proust, in *Remembrance of Things Past*, transported his readers to the Combray of his narrator's childhood' (2009: 4).

<sup>3</sup> Mouna is a traditional Pied-Noir Easter brioche. See 'La Mouna' (2013) at the website La Cuisine de Christophe Certain for a recipe and cooking lesson.

simple and stable past as a refuge from the turbulent and chaotic present' (1989: 21). Indulging in nostalgia offers respite from the sometimes painful and confusing absences one feels at the moment of remembering.

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym separates the melancholic longing for the past into two major veins: restorative and reflective nostalgia. While restorative nostalgia seeks to repair the relationship of the self to the past, reflective nostalgia works rather to understand the fragmented state that impels one towards this longing (2001: 49). For those who eat to remember, or practice what Mark Swislocki refers to as 'culinary nostalgia' (2009: 1), restorative nostalgia is on the menu.<sup>4</sup> Debora Lupton's *Food, the Body and the Self* confirms that some exiles relate 'happy memories of food from childhood' (1998: 50) and those memories rely on utopian clichés of the past: "The eggs tasted better and the yolk was yellower than eggs at any other time of the year." The memories are rosy and replete with detail, and the pervasive emotions conveyed are those of excitement, security, delight and being loved' (1998: 52). Lupton concludes that: 'Such nostalgia is not dependent on a happy childhood, but recreates a fiction of one. Nostalgia serves to gloss over difference, paradox and conflict by constructing a harmonious past. This yearning may instigate individuals' attempts to recreate an aspect of this past life by reproducing activities related to the rosy recollections of it' (1998: 50). For Jean Duruz 'Remembering produces a comforting narrative of the "past" and an earlier self, through eliminating conflict and tension, and smoothing out disquieting contradictions' (1999: 237).

Remembering and transmitting the past is an essential aspect of individual and community healing and identity building, especially in cases where the community is aging and dying out. As William Cunningham Bissell proposes, given that 'nostalgia requires an object world to seize on—buildings, fashion, images, and the ephemera of everyday life' (2005: 221), food is an efficient tool for maintaining and transmitting 'happier times.' Food is tangible, renewable and easily transportable, and specialty dishes can be constantly reproduced across time, ready to evoke visceral memories in those who are feeling nostalgic. But food cannot be untangled from its context. Swislocki explains that culinary nostalgia has 'been a valuable framework for

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<sup>4</sup> In his study of food history in Shanghai, Swislocki defines 'culinary nostalgia' as 'the recollection or purposive evocation of another time and place through food' (2009: 1).

articulating both ideology and utopia, and for learning how to live with the consequences of the one or the absence of the other' (2009: 5). This is precisely the difficulty with Pied-Noir nostalgia: when food evokes Algeria, it recalls a Paradise Lost, a utopian ideal of a colonial past.<sup>5</sup> While most Pieds-Noirs believe they evoke a 'transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home' that is founded in 'truth and tradition' rather than nostalgia (Boym 2001: xviii), the community 'magnifie les souvenirs de convivialité et efface ce faisant les inégalités du temps colonial' (Stora 1999: 73).<sup>6</sup> When the Pieds-Noirs eat to remember, they are nostalgically transported back to colonial Algeria.

### **Communal memory, eating to remember**

Monique Ayoun, in *Mon Algérie: 62 personnalités témoignent*, an early work on the Pied-Noir community, argues that 'Acheter un billet pour Alger, c'était s'offrir un voyage dans le temps, croquer la madeleine proustienne' (Ayoun & Stora 1989: 17).<sup>7</sup> The memory of Algeria has nourished the Pieds-Noirs for some fifty years. Food is a major source of Pied-Noir cultural difference from the French and helps to connect Pieds-Noirs to Algerians. Food continues to provide the sensual link, the little bit of Algeria, that they can reproduce at will throughout the years. In essence, for Pieds-Noirs food is a transportable and renewable piece of the past.

As a tool to sustain community memory, Pied-Noir cuisine is a focal point for many gatherings. For example, in preparation for a commemoration of the Pied-Noir exodus in Uzès, France in 2003, the invitation read:

Vous trouverez sur place: Boissons, merguez et pâtisseries orientales. Bônois, Constantinois, anciens de Tunisie, Pieds Noirs de tous horizons, amis et sympathisants, venez nombreux participer à cette journée, afin de retrouver des visages connus, d'échanger des souvenirs impérissables et d'assurer dans la joie et la bonne humeur le succès complet de cette manifestation. Chacun apporte son «Couffin» ou sa «Cabassette», sa petite table et chaises pliantes. N'oubliez pas les verres pour l'Anisette (se délecter avec modération). (*Bône la coquette* 2003)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The Pieds-Noirs tend to long for specifically Algerian dishes, yet even within Algeria, the mark of the French continues. Baguettes and croissants remain staples. Jansen's study of Algeria from 1976 to 1984 argues that food was used to express and change collective identities (2001: 195).

<sup>6</sup> 'magnifies the convivial memories and in doing so erases the inequalities of the colonial era.'

<sup>7</sup> *My Algeria: 62 Celebrities Testify*. 'Buying a ticket to Algiers is like giving yourself a trip back in time, biting into the Proustian madeleine.'

<sup>8</sup> 'On site you will find: drinks, merguez and oriental pastries. Bônois, Constantinois, and the older generation from Tunisia, Pieds-Noirs from all backgrounds, friends and supporters, come one come all to participate in this day, to reunite with familiar faces, to exchange everlasting memories and to ensure the total success of this gathering with joy and good humor. Bring your own "Couffin" or "Cabassette," your folding table and chairs. Don't forget the glasses for the anisette (to enjoy in moderation).' *Couffin* and *cabassette* are Pied-Noir terms for picnics. Anisette is made from alcohol, water, sugar and green aniseed

Because of the need for stable identity markers, Pied-Noir culinary traditions have changed little over the years, and are sustained today, if not by generational transmission of family recipes, at least through popular cookbooks<sup>9</sup> and these well-attended communal gatherings. One of the most recognizable Pied-Noir events occurs at Ascension each year when thousands of Pieds-Noirs make a pilgrimage to Notre Dame de Santa Cruz church in Nîmes. The streets are lined with North African and Pied-Noir vendors selling ‘authentic’ foods, and people with Algerian heritage plainly label their vans with the names of their Algerian predecessors.<sup>10</sup> On a smaller scale, at a 2012 conference dedicated to the memory of the Pieds-Noirs in Masseube, France, prominent Pied-Noir artists and historians gathered for the closing event, a *méchoui* or a North African style spit-roast lamb. Food, for the Pieds-Noirs, as for any community, is both sustenance and communion.

In addition to bolstering memory at communal gatherings, food is strongly associated with memory in historical and autobiographical accounts of the former colony. On the website *Souvenir de Maison carrée*, which is dedicated to a suburb twelve kilometers from Algiers, Jean-Jacques Dusnasi intertwines the history of Maison carrée with the food that was sold and consumed there:

Les souvenirs qui remontent, ils font partie intégrante de notre vie là bas ... Pâques et Pentecôte : avec les pique-niques ou plutôt les ‘cabassettes,’ et la traditionnelle ‘Mouna’ qu’ on déballait aux Pins Maritimes. Tout Maison-Carréen est allé à la baignade à Fort de l’Eau, notre station balnéaire, avec sa réputation de brochettes, de merguez et aussi de la délicieuse soubressade Mahonnaise, c’était notre St Tropez à nous.<sup>11</sup>

Dusnasi’s recreation of place is intertwined with picnics and specific foods at the heart of these events. His community is recognized for the foods they enjoyed. In a similar way, in *Je me souviens... L’exode des Pieds-Noirs (1962–2012)* actor Jean Benguigui writes about his departure from Algeria expressing that the memory of certain foods has not waivered:

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spirits.

<sup>9</sup> See *A Pied-Noir Cookbook: French Sephardic Cuisine from Algeria* by Chantal Clabrough (2005).

<sup>10</sup> When I attended the Pilgrimage in 2007 and 2011, I visited and photographed the same vendors, specifically ‘Maison Perez,’ which is cited in Domergue’s study *L’Intégration des Pieds-Noirs dans les villages du Midi* as ‘Perez et fils’ (2005: 156).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Memories resurface, they are an integral part of our life there ... Easter and Pentecost: with picnics or rather “cabassettes” and the traditional “Mouna” that we unpacked in the coastal pine forest. Everyone from Maison-Carrée went swimming in Fort de l’Eau, our seaside resort with a reputation for kebabs, merguez and delicious Minorcan *sobrasada* sausage. It was our own little St. Tropez.’

je n'ai jamais cultivé la nostalgie Pied-Noir ... Je garde néanmoins une nostalgie de l'Algérie. De la mer, du soleil ... de certains mets comme la *calentita*, un plat d'origine espagnole: une purée de pois chiches que l'on vendait sur des plaques, cuites au four et découpée comme une pizza avec un mélange de sel, de poivre et de cumin dessus. C'était goûteux et aromatique. Ce souvenir culinaire reste très fort. (2012: 44–45)<sup>12</sup>

For the exile, food and memory are indissociable and in most accounts, culinary memories are rife with 'utopian clichés of the past' (Lupton 1998: 52). Food becomes yet another fantasized element underpinning the fiction of a happy Algerian past.

### Stereotypes and diversity

With its ability to unite a community and its nostalgia-inducing properties, food has perhaps not surprisingly become a feature of the Pied-Noir stereotype and a presumably easy way to identify a Pied-Noir. In an online edition of 'Ça se discute: Que reste-t-il de la culture pied noir'<sup>13</sup> posted in 2000, food is identified as a major component of Pied-Noir culture and a source of their nostalgia. The author asks, 'Quels sont les fondements de la culture Pieds-noirs?':

- La nostalgie du pays: les pieds-noirs s'échangent leurs souvenirs, tentent de retrouver leurs voisins de l'époque.
- Le langage: le pataouète.
- Les pèlerinages: Notre dame de Santa Cruz à Nimes à l'Ascension.
- La gastronomie: couscous merguez comme la kémie (apéritif traditionnel).
- La joie de vivre, l'humour, le parler avec les mains.<sup>14</sup>

'Couscous merguez' is a predominant image associated with the community. In the July-August 2002 edition of the Pieds-Noirs of Bône newsletter *La Seybouse*, the editor Jean-Pierre Bartolini puts it plainly: 'Beaucoup d'associations, que nos détracteurs nomment couscous-merguez, s'éteindront petit à petit car elles ne trouveront personne pour prendre le relais' (2002: n.p.).<sup>15</sup> The Pieds-Noirs are well aware they are dying out, but for the most part they embrace the 'couscous-merguez' stereotype as food is their common ground and a real source of communion. Already in 1984, Pied-Noir singer

<sup>12</sup> 'I never cultivated Pied-Noir nostalgia ... Nonetheless, I still have nostalgia for Algeria. From the sea, from the sun ... from certain dishes like *calentita* which has Spanish origins: puréed chick peas sold on a baking sheet, baked and cut up like a pizza with a mix of salt, pepper and cumin on top. It was tasty and aromatic. This culinary memory remains very strong.'

<sup>13</sup> 'Let's talk about it: what's left of Pied-Noir culture.'

<sup>14</sup> 'What are the fundaments of Pied-Noir culture? Nostalgia for their country: the Pieds-Noirs exchange their memories, attempting to find their neighbors from that time; The language: Patouète; Pilgrimages: Notre Dame de Santa Cruz in Nimes at Ascension; Gastronomy: couscous merguez as well as Kémie (a traditional aperitif); and *joie de vivre*, humor, and talking with their hands.'

<sup>15</sup> 'Many organizations, that our detractors call couscous-merguez, will die out little by little because they won't find anyone to take over after them.'

and musician Raymond Chayat was relying on stereotypical images of his community to make a living. On the album cover and in the lyrics to his song 'Le Pied-Noir,' Chayat proudly proclaims his identity using *merguez* and *frites*:

Entre le couscous et les frites  
 Les merguez et la Mort Subite  
 Parole d'honneur parfois j'hésite ...  
 Je suis pied-noir et t'es mon frère  
 J'te l'jure sur la tête de ma mère  
 Je suis pied-noir dans mes manières  
 Et de mon accent je suis fier<sup>16</sup>

Chayat still performs for Pied-Noir commemorative meetings, such as during the *méchoui* at the 2012 conference in Masseube, France, and he regularly entertains guests on cruises organized for the Pieds-Noirs to return to Algeria.

Although couscous and merguez have become emblematic of the Pied-Noir community, they are both common elements in North African cuisine that unite a diverse range of people now living in France. For example, Anne Lanta who wrote *Algérie, ma mémoire*<sup>17</sup> (1999) continually strives to distinguish herself from the Pieds-Noirs because of her vast experience in remote regions of the country and her anticolonialist beliefs. But when she describes her return to Oran in 1957 after a long absence, she refers to the Pieds-Noirs affectionately in the most difficult circumstances:

Des comptes-rendus terrifiants de fermes attaquées et de familles entières massacrées ont mis l'angoisse au cœur et la peur au ventre chez ces incorrigibles fêtards que sont les pieds-noirs oranais, toujours dispos quand il s'agit de gueuletons, méchouis, pique-niques arrosés d'anisette et grésillants de merguez. (1999: 107)<sup>18</sup>

In Lanta's account, food is one of the most memorable aspects of Algeria, and her knowledge of local cuisine, among other factors, establishes her as a legitimate member of the community, even if she sometimes relies on culinary stereotypes.

Food also revives memory for more recent North African immigrants to France and a broad spectrum of former colonial citizens beyond the Pieds-Noirs. In Jean-Pierre

<sup>16</sup> 'Between couscous and fries / Merguez and sudden death / I swear, sometimes I hesitate ... / I'm Pied-Noir and you're my brother. / I swear it on my mother's head / I'm Pied-Noir in my ways / and I'm proud of my accent.'

<sup>17</sup> 'Algeria, my memory.'

<sup>18</sup> 'Frightening accounts of farms attacked and entire families massacred struck hearts with anguish and stomachs with fear, even among the incorrigible partiers known as the Pieds Noirs of Oran. They were always ready when it came to binging, barbecues, picnics doused in anisette and sausage sizzles.'

Lledo's film *Algéries, mes fantômes*,<sup>19</sup> his family gathers to share a meal in the South of France. The Lledo family, who are Algerian Jews, were separated by the Algerian War for independence, as his branch of the family remained in Algeria until the Civil War of the 1990s while another part of the family fled to France in the 1960s. In this reunion scene, Lledo's cousin Vincent, his step-brother Nounou and his daughter Naouel, are present alongside French-born spouses and children. During the meal, the anisette and red peppers are declared 'comme là bas,' the meat is authentic from an Oranais butcher, and Naouel confirms that they are eating 'merguez comme de chez nous.'<sup>20</sup> As they share the nostalgic meal and talk about life in Algeria and their decisions to leave, the scene quickly becomes emotional. Ultimately Vincent breaks down in tears declaring, 'Algérie c'est mon pays.' Being transported back to a time of peace and comfort is hard to stomach in light of a present that is filled with separations.

Likewise, Hélène Cixous, an Algerian-born Jewish woman goes straight to the separations she experienced in Algeria in *Rêveries de la femme sauvage* (2000) as she focuses on non-belonging. In her text food is represented as deceptively unifying. Cixous's brother underscores the lack of community he experienced:

—J'avais un copain à Bugeaud dit mon frère. Il y en avait très peu au lycée. Une séparation normale involontaire un état tu nais dans un endroit où les maison ne s'ouvrent pas. Tu ne sais pas que ça peut être autrement. D'un côté les gens vont manger leur Mouna à la Palestre. Ils croient que c'est l'Eternité y compris moi dit mon frère. (2000: 105)<sup>21</sup>

While for Pieds-Noirs all over France *mouna* evokes joyful thoughts of Easter, for the Jewish Cixous family the religiously associated food reinforces the separations of the various communities in Algeria.

### **Transmitting culinary practices**

As food serves to both bring together communities and mark their differences, the importance of specific dishes changed when transported to France. In the sociological study *L'Intégration des Pieds-Noirs dans les villages du Midi* (2005),<sup>22</sup> René Domergue seeks to establish how the Pieds-Noirs were received upon their mass arrival in the

<sup>19</sup> 'Algerias, my phantoms.'

<sup>20</sup> 'like back there' and 'like at home.'

<sup>21</sup> '—I had a friend at Bugeaud says my brother. They were few and far between at the lycée. Your normal involuntary separation a state you are born in a place where the houses don't open. You don't know that things can be different. On the one hand the people go to eat their Mouna at the Palestra. They believe it's Eternity including me says my brother' (Cixous 2006: 61).

<sup>22</sup> 'The Integration of the Pieds-Noirs in the Villages of the South of France.'

South of France. Part of the remarkable foreignness of this population was their culinary culture and its transmission, which Domergue addresses in the social and cultural portion of his study ‘On vous a fait découvrir la paella.’<sup>23</sup> Rather than relying on stereotypical Pied-Noir eating habits, Domergue draws attention to community diversity by subdividing the transmission into ‘intégration et diffusion de pratiques culinaires arabes’ (2005: 145) and ‘diffusion de pratiques culinaires espagnoles’ (152).<sup>24</sup> Domergue explains that French Southerners, especially the older generation, were reticent towards outside influences, most noticeably where culinary traditions were concerned: only the foods that are now emblematic are recognized: ‘Couscous, merguez, brochettes, voilà l’essentiel de ce qu’ils sont prêts à concéder aux Pieds-Noirs’ (145).<sup>25</sup>

Although the Southern French might not be readily willing to credit the Pied-Noir influence, Domergue’s interviews reveal that in Nîmes their influence had a far-reaching impact on the local cuisine. For example, ‘C’est avec l’arrivée des Pieds-Noirs qu’apparaissent les barbecues et les grils devant les bistrot’ (2005: 146).<sup>26</sup> Merguez was little known in the region prior to the 1960s, but it soon became a facet of the culinary choices in Nîmes. According to one interviewee, merguez actually arrived in France in the 1950s corresponding with the arrival of the Maghrebi population. Yet it is the Pied-Noir community that made it known: ‘les merguez ont été apportées par les Arabes, mais leur diffusion, en tout cas dans notre coin de France, date de l’arrivée des Pieds-Noirs’ (148).<sup>27</sup>

Although now synonymous with the Pieds-Noirs, merguez was not everyone’s dish in Algeria. The Pieds-Noirs interviewed in Domergue’s study recount that merguez was not often eaten in Oran; rather, it was a typical food found on the beaches of Algiers, ‘C’est le pays des brochettes et des merguez. A Oran c’était la *melsa*, la rat’ farcie’ (146).<sup>28</sup> Some Pieds-Noirs, even from Algiers, claim to never have eaten merguez

<sup>23</sup> ‘They introduced you to paella.’

<sup>24</sup> ‘Integration and transmission of Arabic culinary practices’ and ‘Diffusion of Spanish culinary practices.’

<sup>25</sup> ‘Couscous, merguez, kebabs: that’s basically all they are willing to concede to the Pieds-Noirs.’

<sup>26</sup> ‘When the Pieds-Noirs arrived, barbecues and grills started appearing in front of the bistros.’

<sup>27</sup> ‘merguez was brought by the Arabs but, in any case, it was spread in our region of France when the Pieds-Noirs arrived.’

<sup>28</sup> *Melsa* is the Catalan word for spleen. ‘It’s the land of kebabs and merguez. In Oran it was *melsa*, stuffed spleen.’ Of note, this example directly contradicts the previous examples from Lanta and Lledo that associate merguez with Oran. This underscores how the role of certain foods has been amplified and fictionalized through nostalgia.

before coming to France: as with many typical dishes, consumption is linked to social class. Despite the reality of their diet in Algeria, once the Pieds-Noirs arrived in France, social and geographical lines had to be sacrificed for the good of community. Merguez became Pied-Noir food in France and consequently it now must be enjoyed, with or without memorial attachment.

Kebabs and couscous were brought to the South of France much in the same way as merguez. While some young French men who had completed their military service in Algeria were already familiar with the dishes, it was with the influx of Pieds-Noirs that they became accepted in France. Couscous, a more heavily spiced dish than was traditional in the region, eventually became commonplace: ‘et quelles que soient les divergences sur la bonne manière de le préparer, le couscous conserve un statut de plat quasi identitaire pour les Pieds-Noirs’ (Domergue 2005: 150).<sup>29</sup> While some of a certain social class may have never eaten the dish in Algeria, interviewee Monsieur N’djora states, ‘C’est une façon pour eux de retrouver une identité, mais là-bas il y avait une coupure très nette entre les Européens et les Arabes’ (150).<sup>30</sup> As such, couscous has become something far more important and further reaching than it was during French colonial rule.

Domergue explains that while some culinary practices from the Maghreb were readily adopted with the arrival of the Pieds-Noirs (such as kebabs and couscous), others were more moderately imported. For example, anisette never penetrated French culture because *pastis*, which is so similar, was already firmly rooted and readily available in the South. Likewise, *méchoui*, which is appreciated by outsiders, has not been widely transmitted or adopted likely due to the labor-intensive preparation involved. Although *méchoui* remains a special treat, some Pieds-Noirs acknowledge that they eat it far more often in France than they ever did in Algeria: ‘Le méchoui, on en mangeait rarement là-bas. On en mange plus souvent ici, quand il y a des invités. On le fait quand il y a des réunions de Pieds-Noirs’ (Domergue 2005: 151).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> ‘and whatever the disagreements on the right way to prepare it, couscous has maintained the status of being practically synonymous with the Pieds-Noirs’

<sup>30</sup> ‘It’s a way for them to restore an identity, but back there, there was a very clear distinction between Europeans and Arabs.’

<sup>31</sup> ‘We rarely ate *méchoui* back there. We eat it more often here when there are guests. We make it for Pieds-Noirs reunions.’

Alongside Arab-influenced dishes, several Spanish culinary traditions also migrated to France with the Pieds-Noirs. Such is the case of paella and tapas. Domergue purports, 'Pourtant, en 1962 quand arrivent les Pieds-Noirs, personne ici, ou presque, n'a consommé de paella' (2005: 152).<sup>32</sup> One interviewed Pied-Noir claims, 'On a apporté le couscous, la paella, les brochettes ... On vous a apporté plus que ce qu'on a trouvé' (153).<sup>33</sup> The Pieds-Noirs also brought their love of red peppers, which were almost unknown in the South, and their enjoyment of olives with the aperitif, whereas in the South that had previously been limited to composed dishes. The whole habit of 'grignoter lors de l'apéritif'<sup>34</sup> seems to have come from the Pieds-Noirs (154). Domergue concludes, 'il demeure que les Pieds-Noirs ont joué un rôle majeur dans la percée de la gastronomie espagnole, tout au moins dans nos villages' (156).<sup>35</sup>

Pied-Noir culinary traditions have been readily shared through the community and at regular reunions such as at Notre Dame de Santa Cruz in Nîmes. More recently, Pied-Noir cookbooks have begun to play an important role in the transmission of memory. Cookbooks and websites dedicated to culinary traditions fill the gaps when family members are unable to do so. Pied-Noir journalist and historian, Geneviève de Ternant, co-wrote a cookbook with Henriette Parienté that attempts to fill this void. *La Cuisine des trois cultures* (2002) is described on the publisher's website as follows:

Geneviève de Ternant et Henriette Parienté ne donnent pas des recettes, elles les transmettent. Et c'est par le biais de cette cuisine de terre et de soleil que nous aborderons l'art de vivre méditerranéen, judéo-andalou et arabo-berbère aux carrefours des trois cultures, européenne, juive et arabe.

Partons, mes sœurs, pour un voyage au bout des papilles, passons le ras-el-hanout. Et, si d'aventure, vos maris ou vos frères veulent vous accompagner, ils seront les bienvenus, à condition de laisser, avec leurs chaussures, leurs préjugés à la porte. (Jacques Gandini n.d.)<sup>36</sup>

In addition to representing the diversity of Pied-Noir culinary traditions, the overt goal of the text is to pass down and protect the memory attached to the past so that it will not

<sup>32</sup> 'However when the Pieds-Noirs arrived in 1962, no one, or almost no one here had eaten paella.'

<sup>33</sup> 'We brought couscous, paella, kebabs ... We brought you more than we found.'

<sup>34</sup> 'snacking during the aperitif.'

<sup>35</sup> 'the fact remains that the Pieds-Noirs have played a major role in the success of Spanish cuisine, at least in our villages.'

<sup>36</sup> 'Geneviève de Ternant and Henriette Parienté do not give recipes: they transmit them. And it's through their earthy and sunny cooking that we will approach the art of Mediterranean living, Judeo-Andalusian and Arabo-Berber at the crossroads of three cultures: European, Jewish and Arab.'

My sisters, let's take a journey to the tip of your taste buds, pass the *ras-el-hanout*. And, if by any chance, your husbands or your brothers would like to accompany you, they will be welcome as long as they leave their prejudices next to their shoes at the door.'

be left behind in Algeria or forgotten. De Ternant and Parienté transmit recipes imbued with memory: they are not just preserving the past on paper, but they are providing a tangible connection to a now intangible past.

Unlike the many autobiographical texts written by Pieds-Noirs that attempt to nostalgically recreate the past, in the 2001 collective autobiography *Quatre soeurs: Hier, en Algérie, aujourd'hui en France* the four sisters (Frédérique Boblin, Eve Calo, Nelly Collet and Fabienne Rozotte) try to piece together their common history through divergent memory. This approach of joining personal and family memory allows for both pleasant and frightening memories of growing up in Algeria to co-exist in one text. Beginning with their childhood in Algeria during the war, the sisters continue their memorial work examining their subsequent adult lives in France. Each sister underwent psychoanalysis and each suffered from an eating disorder that was both genetically and environmentally linked for the women. The chapter 'Manger, entre plaisir et révolte'<sup>37</sup> begins with a reflection on what is transmitted, both what they received and what they are able to pass on to their own families. Nelly writes, 'En cuisine, peu de plaisir, sauf quand je suis à la campagne. Par contre, faire le couscous, la pizza, la tourte maltaise, casser un œuf sur la tchouchouka (plat algérien, sorte de ratatouille) avec les tomates frites. Oui, là, il y a du plaisir' (Boblin *et al.* 2001: 101).<sup>38</sup> Similarly for Eve, 'Faire de la pizza, du couscous, des empanadas, j'adore, mais je n'en fais pas souvent. Les plats que j'aime faire ou manger me rappellent des gens. Maman, c'est le couscous et la pizza' (102).<sup>39</sup> Each sister has several memories of food that are inextricably bound to loved ones, but Frédérique's memory of local food is condensed to a singular couscous:

Le seul couscous dont je me souviens, c'est un couscous au poisson que ma mère avait fait, un jour, lors du passage d'un cousin paternel, René. Ce n'est qu'en France que j'ai eu la nostalgie du couscous et que j'ai eu conscience que ce plat était notre spécificité et que j'ai eu envie d'en faire.

Souvent, lorsque je reçois des amis, je fais un couscous ou des plats italiens ... (107)<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> 'Eating between pleasure and revolt.'

<sup>38</sup> 'Little pleasure in cooking except when I'm in the country. However, making couscous, pizza, a *tourte Maltaise* [a type of quiche], breaking an egg over a *tchouchouka* (an Algerian dish similar to ratatouille) with fried tomatoes. Yes, then there is pleasure.'

<sup>39</sup> 'Making pizza, couscous, empanadas, I love that, but I don't do it very often. The dishes that I love to make or eat remind me of people. For mom, it's couscous and pizza.'

<sup>40</sup> 'The only couscous I remember is a fish couscous my mother made one day when our paternal cousin René stopped by. It wasn't until I lived in France that I had nostalgia for couscous and that I was aware that this dish was specific to us and that I wanted to make it. When friends come over I often make a couscous or Italian dishes ....'

Just as demonstrated in Domergue's sociological study, for these sisters couscous became a personal identity marker in exile—one they and their community would regularly reproduce for each other and for those who wanted to know something about the Pieds-Noirs. Food transcends personal nostalgia and begins to represent a community's idealized past.

### **Inedible Algeria, rejected memory**

While food connects individuals to communities and continually taps into nostalgia for the past, some exiles also recount their rejection of food. Nostalgia seeks to rejoin the individual to the past, but W. C. Bissell in 'Engaging Colonial Nostalgia' proposes that we must 'acknowledge and seek to account for multiple strands of remembrance, seeing how they coexist, combine, and/or conflict' (2001: 216). In his study, Bissell sees that nostalgia can represent specific cultural situations, but 'nostalgia also operates with a crucial difference: rather than evoking commonality and continuity, it works as a mode of social memory by emphasizing distance and disjuncture, utilizing these diacritics of modernity as a means of critically framing the present' (2001: 216). The distances that arise—the constant reminders that Algeria is absent each time one partakes of its food—can be devastating. Not surprisingly, then, painful memories of rejection are also evoked when the Pieds-Noirs remember Algerian food.

In Marie Cardinal's autofictional novel *Les Mots pour le dire* (The Words to Say It, 1975), food alternately represents rejection of her colonial upbringing and idealized belonging with her so-called Algerian family. Through memory, the author/narrator returns to her Algerian childhood to address the multiple sources of trauma that contributed to her madness as she contrasts her mother's cruelty with her love for her family's Algerian servants. In this, as well as in several other works by Cardinal, she repeats a story of a harvest feast on her family's farm, an event where the colonial family enjoys a solid reputation as very generous with its employees:

Une ambiance frémissante, comme des ailes de libellule. On préparait en sourdine la fête des vendanges. Il allait y avoir d'abord le couscous et le méchoui. Déjà les fosses étaient creusés et le bois préparé pour y faire de la braise. Les moutons dépecés, embrochés, empalés sur des pieux dressés contre le mur de l'entrée, attendaient de rôtir; il y en avait une fameuse série! Les femmes caquetaient autour du couscous qu'elles préparaient dans la cour. Elles étaient excitées. ... Je me sentais légère, je restais avec les femmes à grignoter des raisins secs et des amandes grillées. (1975: 110)<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> 'The atmosphere quivered like dragonfly wings. Preparations for the feast of the grape harvest were underway. First would come the *couscous* and the barbecued mutton. The pits were already dug and the

This scene, which evokes both excitement and comfort, interrupts the narrator's remembrance of her mother's horrid avowal that she had tried to provoke a miscarriage when she found out she was pregnant with Cardinal. Unlike her mother, the Algerian farm provides her with comfort, peace, and unity. The Algerian women sit on the ground, unified, as they prepare the couscous together for the event. Replayed in other texts, the scene culminates as Cardinal the child dances feverishly around the servants as they chant 'Ya chaba, ya zina' (1975: 113).<sup>42</sup> The narrator feels whole as she loses herself in ritual and memory. In her posthumously published text, *L'Inédit* (2012), Cardinal affirms the unity she experienced with her Algerian caretakers: 'Pourtant, ce que je garde de ceux qui m'ont élevée, c'est l'amour et la générosité, le recueillement et la contemplation, et aussi la gaîté, et aussi le goût du couscous, de la chorba et le miel des zlabias. Je leur dois l'odeur de la menthe qui perce à peine dans la capiteuse chorba du soir' (75).<sup>43</sup> Her nostalgia for Algeria is closely intertwined with tastes and smells specific to her homeland.

In stark contrast is another episode from *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975) in which Cardinal the child is seated at the family dinner table, a site of French cultural dominance and control. The child's nanny unsuccessfully tries to feed her soup, and when her mother arrives and sees the child has not eaten, she becomes angry. The mother goes into the street to pretend to be the *marchand d'habits* (used clothes merchant), a figure who terrified the young girl. Upon hearing the *marchand's* song, the girl vomits and her incensed mother hysterically demands that she eat her vomit. The narrator describes the event: 'Alors j'ai mangé toute seule mon vomi de soupe et je l'ai fait non pas pour lui plaire mais parce que je sentais en elle quelque chose de dangereux, de malade, quelque chose de plus fort qu'elle et de plus fort que moi, quelque chose de plus épouvantables

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wood gathered to make a brazier there. The mutton cut up, skewered and impaled on stakes, leaned against the entrance wall, ready to be roasted, any number of them! The women gossiped over the *couscous* as they were preparing it in the courtyard. Excitement was in the air ... I felt gay among the women, nibbling on raisins and toasted almonds' (1983: 130).

<sup>42</sup> 'young and pretty' (1983: 133). While in *Les Mots pour le dire* (Cardinal 1975) this phrase is used as an aggression that takes place in the street, in other texts the same words are used to encourage the young girl to dance. See *Ecoutez la mer* (Cardinal 1962: 156), *Amour... amours ...* (Cardinal 1998: 62) and *Au pays de mes racines* (Cardinal 1980: 22). Told as a harvest feast story in *Les Mots pour le dire*, the story appears in *Ecoutez la mer* and *Les Pieds-Noirs* (Cardinal 1988) as a wedding feast for a child bride.

<sup>43</sup> 'However, what I've kept from those who raised me is love and generosity, reverence and contemplation, as well as cheerfulness, and a taste for couscous, *chorba*, and the honey in *zlabias*. I owe them the scent of mint that barely penetrates the headiness of an evening *chorba*.' (*Chorba* is a stew and *zlabia* is a fried and syrup-glazed pastry.)

que le marchand d'habits' (1975: 176).<sup>44</sup> This scene, then, can be read as both a rejection and sublimation—yet a bending of her will that moves beyond the bounds of socially acceptable obedience. The child attempts to exert control through rejecting food, relinquishes her control and obeys her mother, then vomits, and obeys again.

Unacknowledged by the author, this childhood scene is replicated in Cardinal's relationship to French Algeria. Cardinal claims she was never pro-*Algérie Française* and so rejected the colonial mission, yet she ultimately becomes a part of it—either willfully or unwittingly—as she grows up. She is personally expelled from the country through—a violent and terrifying war, yet tries to reintegrate Algeria into her being throughout the remainder of her years. This perpetual desire to recreate Algeria is possibly as painful and unpalatable as eating her own vomit.

In a more literal expression of rejection of food, the authors of *Quatre soeurs* attempt to address their experiences with eating disorders. Fabienne, the youngest, details her brutal struggle with anorexia and bulimia, which eventually caused her to be hospitalized in Paris: 'Dévaliser le contenu du réfrigérateur, me faire des fondues savoyardes en rentrant de l'école quand mes parents ne sont pas là et ensuite aller rejeter ces blocs de fromage qui se sont solidifiés dans mon corps' (102).<sup>45</sup> For each sister, the consumption and rejection of food is invariably linked to their relationship with Algeria. The eldest Frédérique explains the connection between her exile and bulimia:

A mon retour d'Algérie, je dévorais tout ce qui me tombait sous la main, sucre, confiture, etc, sans aucun choix.

Ce n'était pas la nourriture qui me plaisait mais, je suppose, le fait d'engloutir. Peut-être que de la même façon, je rejetais le monde sur lequel je n'avais aucune prise pour éviter de prendre des kilos. (Boblin *et al.* 2001: 108)<sup>46</sup>

Digestion here functions like writing, allowing her to consume and control the world around her, her body, and her own experience through rejection and expulsion.

Frédérique uses the same language when she explains her inability to accept her past

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<sup>44</sup> 'So I ate my vomited soup all alone. I did not do it to please her but because I felt something dangerous in her, something stronger than her and stronger than me, something more terrifying than the *marchand d'habits*.'

<sup>45</sup> 'Empty the entire refrigerator, make myself a Savoyard fondue when I get home from school when my parents aren't there and then go throw up these blocks of cheese that had solidified in my body...'

<sup>46</sup> 'When I returned from Algeria, I devoured everything I could get my hands on: sugar, jam, etc. without discrimination.'

It wasn't the food that I enjoyed, but I suppose, the activity of swallowing it up. Maybe in the same I way I was rejecting the world over which I no longer had any hold to avoid gaining weight.'

loss: ‘Je n’ai jamais pu avancer à cause de cette histoire. Mes amies, Babeth et Françoise ont tourné la page. Pourquoi n’ai-je pas pu la digérer?’ (62).<sup>47</sup> The sisters each identify odors and tastes that are linked to Algeria such as ‘créponets, ces glaces au citron, associée au parfum sucré de la pâtisserie’<sup>48</sup> as well as grilled lamb and fried donuts powdered with sugar (55–56). Fabienne, the youngest, asks, ‘Est-ce un hasard, toutes ces odeurs ont un lien avec la nourriture?’ (55).<sup>49</sup> Each woman identifies food that they, as young Europeans, were not meant to eat, food that made them ill, food that links them to their grandparents and parents, food that comforts them still today, and food that recalls their expulsion. These fragmented descriptions are all interwoven with their rupture from Algeria, ‘Il y a un fil qui s’est cassé dans notre vie’ (61).<sup>50</sup> Once cut off from Algeria and unable to control that harsh past, the women endured a visceral struggle to control their own bodies.

### **Nourishing the past and passing it on**

For the former French citizens of Algeria, food is a site of control, renewal, transmission, rejection, power over what is gained and lost, power over what is remembered and forgotten, but food is also inescapably subjected to the memories attached to it. Very tangible tastes and odors evoke an intangible past, one that fades away as quickly as it is revived. Monique Ayoun explains:

Neuf cent mille d’entre eux quittent donc la terre-mère, la terre nourricière, leurs morts et leurs souvenirs, abandonnent leurs maisons et leurs biens. Une mémoire collective est en partance, erre sur la mer, rejoint la France: une abstraction ...

Alors cette terre, ils la cultivent dans le secret de leur mémoire, et elle devient terre de paradis, terre de l’enfance, terre de la mémoire, et elle devient terre de la mère qui les a nourris. Avec elle, s’associent toutes les odeurs, toutes les senteurs, tout ce qui relie la mère à l’enfant, la nourriture, les paysages, les maisons ventruées de vie. (Ayoun & Stora 1989: 10)<sup>51</sup>

The memory of colonial Algeria, like food, sustains and nourishes the Pied-Noir community, but it simultaneously threatens to sicken the individual. To keep the

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<sup>47</sup> ‘I could never move forward because of this story. My friends, Babeth and Françoise, turned the page. Why couldn’t I digest it?’

<sup>48</sup> ‘*créponet*, a lemon sorbet, that I associate with the sugary smell of the pastry shop’

<sup>49</sup> ‘Is it a coincidence that all these odors are linked to food?’

<sup>50</sup> ‘There was a cord that was broken in our lives.’

<sup>51</sup> ‘Then nine hundred thousand of them left the motherland, the nourishing land, their dead and their memories, abandoning their houses and their goods. A collective memory is setting sail, erring on the sea, rejoining France: an abstraction ...’

So this land that they secretly cultivate in their memory becomes the Holy Land, land of their childhood, land of memory, and it becomes the land of the mother who nourished them. Associated with it are all the odors, all the smells, everything that ties a mother to a child, food, landscape, houses stuffed full of life.’

community alive, individuals assume certain stereotypes and transmit culinary practices that may not resonate with their own realities. While some eat to remember, this idealized and fictionalized Algeria can also prove to be inedible.

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