

## **Representations of child ‘migrants’ in Akli Tadjer’s *Le porteur de cartable*<sup>1</sup>**

Fiona Barclay

Migrants are made by borders, argues De Genova (2013, p. 255), for ‘if there were no borders, there would indeed be no migrants – only mobility’. While De Genova’s definition ignores the millions of internally displaced people (IDPs), his figuring of the migrant as one who crosses borders highlights the role of the nation’s boundaries in producing the foreigner or migrant, both in the French popular imagination and in reality. Borders exist to preserve the distinction between those who belong to the territory and those who are excluded, with particular forms of privileged legal status – most notably citizenship – serving as passkeys to access and participation in the national body. This chapter argues that this conception, while widely accepted, neglects the non-juridical barriers to social participation experienced by displaced persons or their descendants. It examines how the French colonial space, in which there were no legal barriers to movement, was disrupted and complicated by decolonization, as new national borders emerged in the space constituted by France and Algeria and in the imagination of their inhabitants. Decolonization and the period prior to it brought an increase in mass migration from Algeria to France and the establishment within France of a large community of Algerian origin. This coincided with a hardening of attitudes towards individuals perceived to be of North African origin, producing a paradox in which in some cases individuals who had crossed no borders were nonetheless labelled as ‘migrants’ by the majority population.

The chapter investigates this paradox by examining representations of migration from Algeria that occurred before independence in July 1962. It takes as its focus Akli Tadjer’s novel, *Le porteur de cartable* (The schoolbag carrier) (2002), which engages with ideas of migration and nationhood in the context of decolonization, to argue that economic migration from North Africa, frequently read as synonymous with the figure of the ‘migrant’ in France, has led to a reductive understanding of migration that obscures the reality that legal status was only one of the many obstacles that led individuals to be defined as ‘migrants’. Set in Paris in 1962, during the closing months of the Algerian War, Tadjer’s novel focuses on two ten-year-old boys: Omar, born in Paris to Algerian parents, and Raphaël, born in Algeria to white,

settler colonist parents, so-called *pieds-noirs* who fled Algeria shortly before its independence. The boys' families belong to opposing sides in the Algerian War, and the novel follows the two boys as they tentatively negotiate a friendship that is based in part on a shared experience of exclusion from wider French society. Tadjer, himself of Algerian origin, delivers a literary critique of discourses around constructs including 'race', 'home' and 'Frenchness' and, by highlighting the ambiguous, shifting and subjectively understood nature of borders in the context of changing colonial relations, exposes the discontinuities in understandings of what it means to be either 'French' or a 'migrant'. Analysing the novel's creative approach to relationality, the chapter shows that a reconsideration of the figure of the migrant allows us to prize open the stubbornly intractable categories mentioned above, with radical implications for our understanding of French society. It indicates that the postcolonial landscape demands a new politics of belonging and, with it, a reconceptualization of 'Frenchness' that would recognize and acknowledge the routes/roots which have brought individuals and groups to the Hexagon.

### **France in Algeria: historical context**

*Le porteur de cartable* takes place in the final months of French Algeria, culminating in Algeria's independence in July 1962. Although set in Paris, far from the military conflicts taking place in Algeria, the war is its constant backdrop, determining relations between the communities ranged on opposing sides. Omar, the narrator, is the only son of Algerian parents who have left the poverty of Algeria in order to seek a better life in France. Muslim Arabs and Berbers made up the vast majority of the population in Algeria, comprising nine-tenths of the population, but under French colonial rule they held the status of French subjects, denied citizenship and political representation. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Muslim leaders called repeatedly for political reform. French and settler intransigence inadvertently sowed the seeds of Algerian nationalism, culminating in the uprising of November 1954, which signaled the start of the eight-year war of independence. However, even before independence, there were Muslims working in mainland France, driven by the 'push' of weak North African economies and the 'pull' of declining migration from the traditional centres of Poland, Spain, Portugal and Italy. When France embarked on a massive programme of modernization, their numbers increased. As Tadjer (2002) recounts, they were frequently met with racism and xenophobia, exacerbated by the tensions of the Algerian War. Subsequently, as the historian Benjamin Stora (1999) argues, after

colonization ended officially in 1962, colonial attitudes towards France's former Arab and Berber subjects persisted.

The novel's other main character, Raphaël, is born into a family of settlers in Algeria. The descendants of European settlers who arrived in Algeria in the nineteenth century in response to the French state's promise of land, the *pièdes-noirs* enjoyed full French citizenship, and sent representatives to sit in the French parliament. Comprising only a tenth of the population by 1954, they jealously guarded their privileged status, and resisted attempts at political reform. The perception of the settlers in mainland France (known as the metropole) was ambivalent. On one hand, the popular press characterised them as wealthy landowners grown rich on the back of exploiting the natives, to the annoyance of Albert Camus (1955) who attacked their partisan portrayals of the settlers as 'a million whip-wielding, cigar-chomping colonists driving around in Cadillacs'. Certainly, Camus was right to point out that few settlers were rich, and that the average income, although significantly higher than the level of poverty suffered by the Muslim population, was 20% lower than that of their mainland peers. On the other hand, their origins in Mediterranean countries, which included Spain, Italy and Malta as well as France, and their geographical remoteness from Paris meant that many in the metropole viewed them as over-emotional, rough and uncultured, little better than the natives they were surrounded by. Conscious of metropolitan disdain, the settlers oscillated between resentment at their dependence on France, and anxiety at the numerical ethnic imbalance of Algerian society. Their position was made more precarious as the Algerian War progressed, since from 1960 it became clear that Algerians would win the right to self-determination and, with it, eventual independence. In response, a dissident faction of French army officers and *pièdes-noirs*, known as the OAS,<sup>2</sup> formed to fight for the continuation of French rule in Algeria. Its indiscriminate terrorist activity effectively destroyed any chance of the French settler community being able to remain in Algeria after independence. Faced with the choice of 'the suitcase or the coffin', most of the million settlers fled Algeria before independence in July 1962, hastily packing suitcases and queuing for days to board ships for the journey to France, where they were often met with hostility. As French citizens, officially they were simply relocating within France, but the nomenclature of 'repatriate' that was frequently applied to them overlooked the fact that many had never set foot on the mainland. The development of a distinct Algerian identity had been the goal of many settlers; when independence came, many found that distinctiveness repurposed against them as 'foreignness' (Jordi, 1995). In 1962, then, France was the destination for multiple groups of

migrants leaving Algeria for diverse reasons but bringing with them the baggage of 132 years of French colonial rule. The challenge for metropolitan France was how to integrate them into a society scarred by eight years of war.

Numerous studies (Noiriel, 1988; Hargreaves, 1995; Silverman, 1992; Brahimi, 2007; Chabal, 2015) have analysed the policies enacted by successive French administrations in response to postcolonial immigration. To a large extent, policy has been determined by the French republican tradition that considers individuals as equal before the law and refuses to recognise claims based on ethnicity, race, sexuality or other factors that have become associated with the identity politics of the UK or USA. This has produced an assimilationist approach that valorised French values and expected immigrants to embrace them. Key to the process of assimilation are state agents such as the school, which is charged with inculcating future citizens with the values of the Republic. Notable amongst these is the principle of secularism, which regulated public spaces and ensured that, while freedom of conscience and religious practice were protected, elements of ‘private’ identity, such as religion, were excluded. Despite the emphasis on individual equality, paradoxically such republican principles have become associated with a particular conception of the ideal French citizen, figured as male, white and Catholic. Consequently, as Noiriel (1993) states, since the nineteenth century immigration in France has been a potential source of social conflict between the majority population and groups whose different race and culture has been perceived as unassimilable. Chabal (2015, 83) notes that what he terms ‘the republican narrative of national unity’ considers the challenges of ‘ethnic’ integration as little different from those of social cohesion, thereby overlooking the consequences of France’s colonial presence for those whose lives had been shaped by it. Immigrants were expected to assimilate into French society, taking on French values and culture as if they were a blank slate that was not already inscribed with the painful traces of France’s imperial past.

Writing about what he terms ‘racial Europeanisation’, Goldberg (2009, pp. 179–180) argues that European identity is based on an established presumption of whiteness, which excludes non-white individuals. This is particularly true in France, where the state’s longstanding refusal to gather statistics on ethnic origin has reinforced whiteness as the historical default. Goldberg argues that xenophobia in France, as elsewhere, is driven by a nativist ethno-nationalism that fears Europe’s population becoming less white and so altering the character of European identity. Such right-wing language builds on an historic reliance on racial

boundaries that have been used to construct a notion of mainland France that excludes activities such as colonialism and slavery, which took place beyond the national borders (Peabody and Stovall, 2003; Wieviorka, 1992). As a consequence, the designation of ‘whiteness’ became assimilated with French cultural norms, to the extent that perceived cultural similarity, or assimilability, became as important in achieving the ‘whiteness’ standard as actual skin colour. Cultural norms in this context include practices such as religion: while France is formally a secular state, its long history of Catholicism means that the Islamic or Jewish practices have long been regarded as suspect and ‘non-French’. Beaman (2019, p. 552) points to Frantz Fanon’s realization that a French-born Martinican could not be accepted as ‘French’ as an example of how colonization and slavery created boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in the construction of the nation, and argues that ‘whiteness and blackness are co-constitutive of each other [...] whiteness as synonymous with Frenchness relies on being black as the opposite of being French’. The consequence of this is that individuals of Maghrebi (North African) origin can be racialized as non-white (and therefore not fully ‘French’), despite being born, raised and educated in France. The term ‘Français de souche’ (indigenous French) is used to designate those of white ethnic French descent, and never used to refer to people of Maghrebi origin who do not feel accepted as French by others because they are not seen to ‘look French’ (Simon, 2012).

### **Writing post-*Beur* literature**

Born in Paris in 1954 to Algerian parents, Akli Tadjer is the author of a dozen award-winning novels. Like his protagonist, Omar, he belongs to the generation known in France as the *Beurs*: that is, the French-born children of immigrants from North Africa. During the 1980s *Beur* activists protested against the racism that they frequently experienced from the white French population, which often refused to accept them as French because of their parents’ origins. From the 1980s onwards, *Beur* writers such as Azouz Begag and Mehdi Charef began publishing memoirs and novels based on their experiences of discrimination and alienation growing up in France. On one level, *Le porteur de cartable* follows many of the conventions of the so-called *Beur* novel: like the novels of Azouz Begag (1986; 1989), it is a *Bildungsroman*, following Omar’s interactions with his family, his school and the Parisian community around him as he comes to terms with his identity and positionality at the intersection of divergent cultures. But *Le porteur de cartable* was published in 2002, and was destined for an audience that was familiar not only with the tropes of the Muslim youth

marginalized by French society, but that had watched the often acrimonious debates around supposedly ‘temporary’ migrant workers and knew the outcome: North African immigration had become a permanent aspect of French society. By returning to 1962, the year in which hundreds of thousands of *pied-noir* repatriates sought refuge in France, Tadjer demonstrates that anxieties around immigration were not confined simply to the figure of the Muslim immigrant and invites his readers to question the assumptions on which their attitudes rest. He presents French metropolitan society as it enters the postcolonial period, ostensibly white and republican but with the fiction of its imagined ethnically homogenous community under strain, and he disrupts the dichotomy of metropole and colony by introducing white citizens, who are nonetheless racialized as foreign, into the urban space. Writing in a context in which the French-born descendants of North African Muslim immigrants continue to be excluded by sections of French society, Tadjer demonstrates that border-crossing – and indeed mobility – is only one aspect of the construction of the migrant. Although De Genova’s (2013) definition of the migrant as someone who has crossed borders applies to neither Omar nor Raphaël, since Omar was born in Paris and Raphaël was repatriated when Algeria was still officially part of France, the text explores the multiple ways in which they are repeatedly cast as foreigners.

Tadjer’s choice of two young protagonists struggling to navigate the everyday experiences of marginalization offers the reader a point of identification, as they come to terms with discrimination and struggle to find their place in society. Nominally ‘universal’, childhood is a category constructed according to white, gendered, Western norms, and discursively associated – via the work of Rousseau – with a state of innocence (Rose, 1994; Kincaid, 1992). Lacking the cultural conditioning of adults, the child serves as the reader’s moral surrogate, offering an accessible means of engaging with events. Tadjer uses his young protagonists’ limited, playful and sometimes insightful perspective as a source of humour with which to expose and ridicule the situations around them. Initially, the children are positioned as innocent, immature and powerless in relation to the independent, powerful and ‘knowing’ adults (Robinson, 2002), but Tadjer ultimately subverts the reader’s expectations, replacing innocence with agency in order to expose the imperatives of the final days of the war, and point towards a new hope in a polarized and divided society.

The novel opens with a familiar trope: the family of the young narrator, Omar, is in conflict with the representatives of French society. Housed in a dismal municipal apartment

measuring only 32 square metres, Omar and his mother dream of living in the larger apartment opposite, which features the luxury of an indoor toilet. The gatekeeper who denies them this prize is the French residence manager. He humiliates Omar's father in front of his son, exposing the father's impotence even as he appropriates cultural stereotypes of Arab male domination to suggest that Omar's father should use force in response to his wife's demands. The vignette establishes the uneven power relations operating in society that, although depressingly familiar to Tadjer's twenty-first century readership, are put forward as temporary, soon to be erased by the anticipated outcome of the war. Refusing the father's request, the residence manager draws on a fiction of return in which the father is invested and so cannot disavow: 'Bientôt, l'Algérie va être indépendante. Vous rentrerez dans votre douar d'origine et vous pourrez prendre autant de bains que vous voudrez dans la Méditerranée'. (Soon Algeria will be independent. You will go back to your home village and you can bathe as often as you want in the Mediterranean) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 12). Omar's father is forced to tell his family that the manager is right and that they will soon go home to an ancestral house that, as Omar observes wryly, increases in size with each telling.

Similar cultural prejudices are evident in wider society. Omar has an ambivalent relationship with the local shopkeeper, on whose credit his family sometimes depends. He refers to her as 'la mère Bidal' (old mother Bidal); she calls him 'le p'tit Ben Bella' (little Ben Bella (the nationalist leader)), an epithet he takes initially as a compliment, proof that she sees him as a little leader, until he realizes that she sees Ben Bella as a terrorist and that her racist attitudes mean that his crimes are imputed also to Omar: 'il fallait se méfier de moi comme de la peste car je suis de sa race...' (people should avoid me like the plague because I was the same race as him) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 37). The injustice translates into an antagonistic, asymmetric relationship: she and old Josèpha use social pressure and meagre bribes to manipulate Omar into carrying old Josèpha's shopping, but his compliance fails to change in any way their negative view of him.

Tadjer is careful not to tar all of the French characters with the same racist brush, however, and the wartime setting enables him to explore the diverse and ambivalent positions present in French society. Also present in the grocer's shop is a French soldier on leave from the war in Blida, whose sad demeanour and words to Omar – 'Tu as de la chance, petit' (Tadjer, 2002, p. 38) [you're lucky, son] – suggest a wistful envy of Omar's simpler life. The soldier's failure to recognize Josèpha's description of her nephew, also stationed at Blida, produces a

moment of levity because Omar immediately identifies that Josèpha's description of a tall, strong, proud soldier bears no relation to the short, fat, pig-faced reality. More significantly, however, this serves as an early reminder that the adults' perspective on events is partial and unreliable, and that their assessments and decisions are not to be accepted at face value.

Tadjer deploys humour as a tool to highlight the incongruity of the gap between perception and reality throughout the novel, including in his depiction of his narrator, Omar, using it as a means of building empathy for characters distributed across the spectrum of French society.

But he does not shy away from depicting the racism present in wartime France: one of the customers says that he does not trust Arabs, and another claims that the French are too kind to 'those terrorists' and that there should be no ceasefire until they have been called to account.

Omar's family is depicted as being amongst the substantial number of Algerians who were working in France before independence. Like the fictional family, many supported the fight for independence led by the National Liberation Front (FLN),<sup>3</sup> and organized into small cells which focused on raising funds that were transferred to Algeria via the network of 'porteurs de valises' (suitcase carriers). Omar's father is in charge of collecting funds for one such cell, which meets in their tiny apartment. Tadjer's portrayal of the group's diverse membership provides much of the humour, from the dramatic hypochondriac Areski and the violent slaughterhouse worker Karchaoui, to the group's leader, Messaoud, who affectionately refers to Omar as his 'premier bras droit' (first right-hand man) and dispatches him as his 'porteur de cartable' (schoolbag carrier) to remind local Muslims of their FLN contributions. The depiction of the rag-tag group is sympathetic, and we assume that they are acting in good faith. Central to the group, and to Omar's life, is the figure of Messaoud. A former teacher, he has the characteristics of a natural leader: tall, educated, articulate and always elegantly dressed. Originally from Sétif, a location associated with Muslim agency following the violent repression of demonstrations in 1945, he draws authority from the brief time he has spent in the USSR, ostensibly sent there by the FLN's leaders. But according to Omar, his imposing presence is primarily due to the fact that 'il est blanc comme un Français' (as white as a Frenchman) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 23).<sup>4</sup> The emphasis on the importance of ethnic appearance highlights the racialized hierarchy which existed within French society, based on an imagined construction of normative whiteness (Beaman, 2019).

### **The child in colonial culture**

The figure of the Muslim immigrant is a stock image of marginalization and foreignness within French society (Brahimi, 2007), but Tadjer problematizes notions of foreignness and migration by considering the figure of the *pied-noir*, the repatriated white citizen seeking refuge. None of the characters in the novel welcome the arrival of the *pied-noir* family. Omar is horrified to find that his much prized neighbouring apartment has been given to another family, while the adults view their arrival through a political lens. Omar's father is horrified to find that his FLN cell is now compromised by his new neighbours, so that he loses the cachet of hosting cell meetings. Indeed, it might be argued that repatriates cause the family's downfall: it is a chance encounter with *pieds-noirs* on the metro that loses Omar's father the trust of Messaoud and leads him to be suspended from the FLN cell, a situation which places the whole family in danger of reprisals, while his violent response to an OAS attack on a Paris bar eventually lands him in jail. But the violence of the war places both communities at risk: for their part, the *pied-noir* family has been forced to flee Algeria by FLN death threats (Tadjer, 2002, p. 106; p. 200). Ostensibly, then, the divisions set up by colonialism and the resulting war striate relations between the novel's (post-)colonial families and communities.

Yet, while the adult characters display the prejudices associated with colonialism, the two ten-year-old boys, Omar, the Algerian born in Paris, and Raphaël, the *pied-noir* born in Algiers, have a different perspective. On hearing Omar's surname – Boulawane – Raphael immediately connects him with his best friend in Algiers. For Raphaël, Algeria is common ground: 'Tu ne vas pas me dire que tu es comme les autres francaouis. Toi et moi on est un peu pareil. On est du même pays. On est comme des frères'. (Don't tell me you're like the other Frenchies. You and I are a bit the same. We're from the same country. We are like brothers) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 66). Omar resists the suggestion, but his rejection of Raphael is solely due to his resentment at the *pied-noir* family occupying his coveted flat, rather than any learned prejudice. He does, however, recognize Raphael as a fellow foreigner, and warns him of the racism he can expect: 'C'est dur la France pour les étrangers. Tu vas vite t'en apercevoir'. (France is hard for foreigners. You'll soon see) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 67). He is proved right: when Raphael starts school, he is bullied verbally and physically by classmates who accuse him of exploiting the 'natives' and being responsible for the war in which their brothers have been killed. Raphaël is ethnically and officially white and French, but his accent ensures that he does not 'pass' as French, and his North African origins and Spanish surname (Sanchez) ensure that he is racialized by those around him as 'foreign'. His experience demonstrates that the metropolitan majority regards both communities – colonizer

and colonized – associated with colonialism in Algeria as incommensurate with Frenchness (Goldberg, 2009). Raphaël's situation is reminiscent of the analysis conducted by Neda Maghbouleh (2017) into the situation of American-Iranians. She notes that a tradition exists within sociology that focuses on the upward trajectory of 'brown' groups, arguing that this movement is predicated on the impugning of other minority groups, allowing the former to ascend through social classes to the point where they become economically successful enough to be considered white. However, Maghbouleh identifies that the opposite mechanism pertains in the situation of American-Iranians, in what she refers to as a racial paradox: they are classified by the state as 'white', but their everyday experience is that of non-whites. She theorizes their experience through the concept of 'racial loopholes', a term that refers to the everyday contradictions that arise when 'a group's legal racial categorization is inconsistent with its on-the-ground experience of racialization or deracialization' (Maghbouleh, 2017, p. 5). The same description might be applied to the experience of the *pieds-noirs*, who find themselves racialized as colonial as a result of movement: the migration which has brought them to the metropole has also brought them into the same perceived racial sphere as other migrants from the Maghreb. Indeed, by the end of the novel the repatriates are the subject of the sentiments and vocabulary habitually reserved for Arab migrants: 'Il paraît que les rapatriés vont nous envahir comme des rats...' (It seems that the repatriates are going to overrun us like rats) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 268).

As neighbours and classmates, the two boys are thrown together. Their shared experience of exclusion brings about a schoolroom truce, and the tight regulation of desk-space. Raphaël has a tendency to spread his belongings, which Omar sardonically remarks reflects the natural tendency of *pieds-noirs* to encroach on territory belonging to others. Their bickering naturally leads to a discussion of 'home'. For Raphaël, home is Algiers: 'Qu'est-ce que vous êtes compliqués à Paris. Chez nous c'est plus simple' (You're so complicated in Paris. At home it's simpler) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 74), to which Omar replies, 'Chez toi, c'est ici, pour toujours et pour l'éternité [...] Il va falloir que tu t'intègres dans ce bled et ce n'est pas facile. Déjà que moi, je suis né à l'Hôtel-Dieu, juste en face de Notre-Dame et je n'y arrive pas, alors toi, je te souhaite du courage et beaucoup de patience' (Your home is here now, forever ... You'll need to integrate here, and that's not easy. I was born at Hotel-Dieu, opposite Notre-Dame, and I can't do it, so I wish you good luck and lots of patience') (Tadjer, 2002, pp. 74-75).

The racialization of the *pieds-noirs* is underscored by Raphaël's experience at school. On his arrival the headmaster instructed the pupils to welcome 'ce petit naufragé de l'Histoire' (this little castaway of History) (Tadger, 2002, p. 63) as one of their own, a command roundly ignored. But when classroom tensions see the two boys sent to his office, the headmaster struggles to respond to the naïve answers given by Raphaël, whose assumptions have been shaped by decades of French policy. The boy replies that Algeria belongs to France and the *pieds-noirs* and points out that it is written on the map. The headmaster struggles: the changed political situation makes an embarrassment of earlier state discourse and those who have learned and continue to parrot it. His response, 'La France est grande est généreuse. Elle aime tous ses enfants...' (France is great and generous. She loves all of her children...) (Tadger, 2002, p. 98), displays his desire to take refuge in republican rhetoric rather than engage with the genuine difficulties of both of his pupils. Moreover, the rhetoric is revealed as empty by the punishment he gives to Raphaël, which inadvertently highlights his view of the *pied-noir* boy as differently French. Raphaël is set the task of writing out one hundred times, 'Je ne dois pas abuser de la situation' (I must not take advantage of the situation) (Tadger, 2002, p. 101). When Raphaël questions the meaning of the line, he is given no explanation but is told to ask his father. In this way, the Republic and its citizen representatives are divested of the weight of interpretation, which transfers to the individual *pied-noir*. The punishment and response reaffirm the metropolitan belief that the *pieds-noirs* as a distinct group bear at least partial responsibility for their own misfortune. In the absence of any guidance from authority figures, the boys are left to grapple with their place in a confusing political landscape, a task for which they are poorly prepared. In one comedic exchange, Omar refers to Algeria as 'chez Raphaël' (Raphaël's home). When his father points out that 'Chez lui, comme il dit, c'est chez nous' (his home, as he calls it, is our home), Omar is forced to ask, 'Nous, là, ici, maintenant, on est chez Raphaël ou on est chez nous ?' (Here, now, are we in Raphaël's home, or our home?). His father's reply 'On est chez-nous chez-lui. Maintenant ça suffit' (We're in his home-our home. Now that's enough) (Tadger, 2002, p. 180) reveals the degree of confusion and alienation which exists amongst both *pied-noir* and Arab populations in France, but also exposes the provisional and contested nature of the notions of 'home' and 'Frenchness'. Both populations have a legal right to live in France; neither is accepted as French by the majority ethnic population.

While the novel's primary focus is on relations between Muslim and *pied-noir*, the majority French population and the French state is not forgotten. As befits its role in republican

notions of integration, the school takes centre stage as the arena in which multi-ethnic relations are played out. Tadjer paints a picture of divided youth in which Omar, and then Raphaël, are ostracized and subjected to sporadic violence because of their ethnic origins. The hostility, it is inferred, is based on learned prejudices transmitted by adult society. The pupils laugh at Raphaël's *pied-noir* accent; one mutters that his father was right to say that the repatriates are worse than the Arabs. Nonetheless, Tadjer acknowledges the role of the school and its authority figures in delivering republican ideals of secularism and integration (Hargreaves, 1995). Central to Omar's development is the sympathetic figure of Madame Ceylac, the young female teacher on whom he has a crush, and whose role is to correct Omar's assumption that 'Tous les Français sont contre moi'. (All the French are against me). Her reply – 'Je suis pour la liberté et la liberté n'a pas de frontière'. (I support freedom and freedom has no borders) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 198) – and her profession position her as a representative of French republicanism. In this she is reminiscent of other similarly sympathetic authority figures encountered by young migrants, such as M. Loubon and M. Morelli, the teachers in Azouz Begag's *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986) and André Téchiné's *Les Roseaux sauvages* (1994) respectively, and Madame Burlaud, the psychologist in Faiza Guène's *Kiffe Kiffe Demain* (2004). The presence of figures who are aligned with the aims of the French state demonstrates that, although they feature characters from communities of immigrant origin and may critique the persistent colonialist attitudes of French society, texts produced in France have a residual tendency to valorize the Republic.

One of the novel's key passages focuses on moral lessons, part of the republican process of developing the value structure of future citizens. Omar recites in class, 'La bonté – comme le soleil – doit rayonner sur tous, mais avant tout sur les faibles, les êtres sans défense, les vieillards, les infirmes, les bêtes'. (Goodness – like the sun – must shine on all, but above all on the weak, those who are defenceless, the old, the infirm, animals) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 69), a passage delivered accurately but, tellingly, judged by the teacher to display insufficient fervour. Raphaël responds with lines from Rousseau's *Émile*, learned in the same republican school in far-off Algiers: 'Empêchez les vexations, prodiguez le crédit en faveur du faible à qui on refuse justice et que le puissant accable ; déclarez-vous hautement le protecteur des malheureux, soyez juste, humain, bien-faisant...' (Avoid provocations; give credit to the benefit of the weak who are denied justice and oppressed by the powerful. Boldly declare yourself the protector of the unfortunate. Be just, humane, beneficent.) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 70). The reference to Rousseau is significant, given his valorisation of the child as a form of noble

savage whose innate goodness must be carefully channeled in order to avoid corruption by the world. The paternalistic context of Raphaël's passage reminds the reader of the connection between the figure of the child and inhabitants of the colonies, who historically have been subjected to discourses of infantilization. The point is underscored by a later passage of *Émile* in which Rousseau (2014) sets out his distaste for the use of books in education, with one sole exception: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

Numerous critics (Wallace, 1994, p. 175) have noted that *Robinson Crusoe* represents the archetypal moment of the settler colonial encounter; by referencing it in *Émile*, Rousseau synthesizes issues of childhood, education and colonization. If Defoe's tale of settlement and domestication is the single tale suitable for the (male) child's education, it naturalizes the Western male's right to the domination of land and peoples. That Rousseau's text is recited by a *pied-noir* child who learned it in a French school in Algiers underscores the fact that France continued to enact its policy of colonization as a pedagogical tool until the very final months of the French presence in Algeria. When recited in response to an Algerian child, it could be read as affirming the structures of racial domination. But Tadjer subverts this expectation. Irritated by Raphaël's insistence that his family will soon return to Algiers, Omar sets him straight on the future of Algeria – 'L'Algérie c'est cuit. C'est foutu pour les pieds-noirs' (Algeria is finished. It's over for the *pieds-noirs*) (Tadjer, 2002, pp. 74-75) – and leaves him alone and sobbing in the street. As Omar walks away Rousseau's words resound in his head, reminding him of his teacher's reproving rejoinder that the lesson must come from the heart rather than from the head, and persuading him, despite his instincts, to return and help Raphaël in a move that proves to be the turning point in their relationship. The incident highlights the function of the republican school as a paternalistic institution designed to bring Enlightenment values, but also the expectation of ethnic superiority, to the masses, and to build solidarity between members of the nation. Tadjer, though, destabilises its assumptions: the 'faible' and 'malheureux' (weak and unfortunate) here is the colonizing French citizen, being given support by the colonial subject whose family has suffered from French colonial state policies. In his illustration of the solidarity that is part of the republican ideology, Tadjer overturns the colonial hierarchies produced by that same ideology.

Through most of the novel, Omar is portrayed as being the more clear-sighted of the boys, repeatedly telling Raphaël that there is no going back for the *pieds-noirs* when the latter talks about returning home. But his apparent pragmatism belies the illusions which sustain the

Boulawane family, who also dream of returning to Algeria. Omar's father talks repeatedly of the wonderful life they will have in Algeria in his family house, where they will have the modern appliances such as a fridge and inside toilet which elude them in France, and as independence draws near, neighbours start to ask about their plans for returning to Algeria. As readers, we know that the family's dreams of return are no more substantial than are the *pieds-noirs*: both are illusions. Indeed, Algeria has become an imagined land, present only in Raphaël's memories. Omar, who has never visited it, listens fascinated to Raphaël's tales of driving in his father's convertible along coastal roads, listening to the radio as they head to the family's favourite restaurant. Omar knows little of his family's home in Kabylia and prefers Raphaël's stories of sun and sea to the spartan life recounted by his father. He appropriates Raphaël's idealized memories so that, to his father's horror and in a further illustration of the unstable nature of 'home', the *pied-noir* life in Algeria becomes his own imagined homeland.

Omar is not alone in not knowing Algeria. In a comic episode, Omar, accompanied by Raphaël, visits an Algerian home to remind the family that their FLN contributions are due. Only the eldest girl, Safia, is home, allowing Tadjer to play with the clichés of the Oriental woman. For Raphaël and Safia it is love at first sight. The divisions of race and war are forgotten, as Safia is captivated firstly by Raphaël's appearance and then by his tragic story of exile. In a reversal of the gender norms associated with the seductive Oriental woman, Tadjer describes Raphaël as having conquered Safia, who is entranced by his stories of Constantine, her father's city that she has never seen. The *pied-noir* may be socially isolated and excluded in France but ironically it is he who is in a position to tell the Arab characters about life in Algeria, albeit in remembered, reimagined form. Colonial attitudes still persist: there remains a trace of the exotic in his appreciation of Safia's charms, when he says 'sa bouche a le goût du loukoum. [...] de là-bas, chez nous'. (her mouth tastes of Turkish delight, from over there in Algeria) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 220). But Tadjer is careful to avoid reproducing hierarchies of superiority, and in a different passage it is Omar who helps Raphaël with his homework, carefully correcting his conjugations of the imperfect subjunctive. As the colonial subject aids the French citizen with the symbolic aspect of nationality *par excellence* – the French language –, the reader is invited to reflect beyond race on what it means to be French.

### **The long shadow of war**

As the novel progresses, the relationship between Omar and Raphaël becomes stronger and less antagonistic. The change is driven by the hostile circumstances which each face. With Omar's father imprisoned, his mother descends into depression, her withdrawal from the world repeating the response of Raphaël's mother to leaving Algeria. Having smashed their possessions, and barely speaking or eating, the latter is taken first to the psychiatric hospital of Sainte Anne where, having failed to help her recover, the doctors recommend she be sent permanently to an institution in the town of Hazebrouck, over 150 miles away. While many *pied-noir* texts feature the melancholic exiled mother, Tadjer emphasizes the universal suffering due to war by adding to the portraits of the distressed Muslim and *pied-noir* women a brief depiction of a Frenchwoman whose son has recently been killed in Algeria. Crying unstoppably, her pallid features and lack of reaction to those around her create a figure who, like the other mothers, is already partially destroyed by the war: 'On la dirait déjà un peu morte'. (You would say she was already partly dead) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 43).

Suffering caused by the war cuts across the constructs of race, religion and ethnicity; added to the social exclusion experienced at school and in society at large, it brings the two boys together. In a controversial image which notably is attributed to Omar alone, both communities are figured as oppressed by colonialism. Omar's father argues that colonialism has international parallels: 'Les Américains ont exterminé les Indiens. Et nous, on est les Indiens des Français'. (The Americans wiped out the native American Indians. And we're the Indians of the French) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 130). But Omar learns that there is a tribe of 'Indians' also called the *pieds-noirs* (Tadjer, 2002, p. 91) and so, although Raphaël rejects the label, Omar refers to him repeatedly as an 'Indien'. In doing so, he extends to the *pieds-noirs* the category of victims of colonization, telling his father that 'Les Sanchez sont aussi des Indiens!' (The Sanchez family are Indians too!) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 137). Tadjer uses the contentious image as a means of emphasizing the solidarity created by the boys' common experience of war-time suffering, racism and exclusion. When Omar observes that his initial hatred for Raphaël has disappeared, Raphaël responds:

C'est normal. La guerre nous a rendus vieux. Et quand on est vieux, on accepte mieux son destin. Tu vois, Omar, toi tu es né ici et moi là-bas, que ça nous plaise ou non, on est les deux faces de la même médaille. (Tadjer, 2002, p. 262)

(That's to be expected. The war has made us old. And when you are old, you are more willing to accept your destiny. You see, Omar, you were born here and me over there; whether we like it or not, we are two sides of the same coin.)

As the plot unfolds, the boys move beyond constraining categories such as 'home', 'migrant' and 'French', and come to understand themselves as the products of a single Mediterranean history, one that has resulted in experiences that are diverse and conflicting but that nevertheless holds them together in tension.

If the child characters reach an understanding of their common humanity, the situation is more complicated for the adults, who are constrained by the entrenched barriers of prejudice and (colonial) ideology that shifts as the war draws to an end, bringing about new national borders. The changing situation affects perceptions of identity; it also has economic consequences, as Omar's father, who runs a small vegetable stall, discovers. Once the Evian Agreements ending the war have been signed, his regular customers desert him:

Les Français ne m'achètent plus rien. Pas une salade. Pas une banane. Rien. Mes légumes pourrissent à vue d'œil. Je propose même un crédit pour les plus pauvres, comme la vieille Josèpha mais ils préfèrent payer plus cher et aller chez la mère Bidal. (Tadger, 2002, p. 225)

(The French don't buy anything from me now. Not a single lettuce. Not a single banana. Nothing. My vegetables are rotting in front of me. I've even offered credit to the poorest customers, like old Josèpha, but they prefer to pay more and go to old mother Bidal's.)

But where his reaction is to wish, ironically, for things to return to their pre-war state, Omar's mother is more pragmatic: 'Rien ne sera plus comme avant. On a choisi notre camp. On est des étrangers maintenant, alors ils achètent chez des Français. C'est normal'. (Nothing will be as it was. We've chosen our side. We are foreigners now, so they buy from the French. No surprise there.) (Tadger, 2002, p. 225). Their French neighbours are enacting an early form of what Etienne Balibar (1996) refers to as 'la préférence nationale' (preference for nationals), where jobs are reserved for those with a profile based on whiteness.

As for the *pieds-noirs*, Omar's father is convinced that they are his worst enemies and tries to impress this on his son, while Raphaël's father offends Omar's mother by offering her work

cleaning their apartment when Omar's father is in prison. Her furious reply – 'Vous n'avez encore rien compris que tous ces morts, tous ces drames, tous nos maris emprisonnés c'est pour que plus jamais nous ne soyons vos fatmas'. (You have still not understood that all these deaths, all these tragedies, all our imprisoned husbands, all that was so that never again would we be your drudges.) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 279) – demonstrates the extent to which their otherwise courteous relationship is constrained by the residues of colonialism. Raphaël's father apologizes, but a page later he is furious to discover that Raphaël's school prize is a copy of Albert Camus' *L'Etranger* (*The Stranger*),<sup>5</sup> a title that, ironically, he sees as insultingly inappropriate and better suited to Omar. By highlighting that the attitudes of adults continue to be shaped by colonial structures of thought and contrasting them with the more open attitudes of the children, Tadjer emphasizes the potential for human connection and affective relationships to create solidarity and overcome the antagonistic sociocultural boundaries that separate and divide.

The novel closes with another instance of migration. Omar, having learned of Messaoud's corruption and embezzlement of FLN funds, steals the funds that remain and uses the money to help him accompany Raphaël and his mother in their return to Algeria. The attempt may be utopian and doomed to failure, but it speaks nonetheless to the condition of the migrant. Raphaël and his mother are French citizens bent on returning to a home which will soon no longer be French, whilst Omar, the Algerian boy who helps them, will return to his Parisian birthplace. With the FLN network exposed as duplicitous and corrupt, and the French authorities and public marked by colonialism, the younger generation of postcolonial migrants offers the sole vision of hope. As the focus sharpens on new legal and administrative borders, dividing the territories for the first time in over a hundred years, the solidarity which links the ten-year-olds testifies to Tadjer's hope in a humanity that might evade the constructions that work to categorize and exclude, and so produce the condition of the migrant.

Tadjer's novel serves as an important corrective to the notion, represented by De Genova's (2013) definition, that migrants are made by borders. In the late 1950s, groups crossing the Mediterranean from Algeria to France, whether for economic reasons or fleeing war, faced no national borders. Yet despite their situatedness as French colonial subjects (in the case of the Arabs and Berbers) or French citizens (in the case of the *pied-noir* settlers), their racialized North African identities ensured that the metropolitan population constructed them as

foreigners and migrants in the popular imagination, a situation that extended even to their French-born children. Their experience, poignantly recounted by Tadjer, highlights the limitations of the putatively colour-blind French Republic, and foregrounds the importance of the non-juridical barriers to acceptance faced by those who, for reasons of race, ethnicity, accent or religion, do not conform to the model of the ideal French citizen. In sketching the portrait of a society on the cusp of the post-colonial era, Tadjer effectively communicates to his twenty-first century readership the lasting effects of prejudice that are the product of an archaic colonial era, but that remain disturbingly relevant today. Yet, in foregrounding the perspective of his child protagonists, Tadjer offers a vision of hope for the future in which new models of solidarity based on friendship might overcome the discrimination of the past and contribute to shaping a more truly universalist Republic.

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<sup>2</sup> The Secret Army Organisation, or *Organisation Armée Secrète* (OAS).

<sup>3</sup> National Liberation Front, or *Front de Libération nationale* (FLN).

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<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere there is an ambivalence when Muslims are considered to be French: having dressed smartly to enroll her son in school, Omar's mother is horrified to be told by the headmaster that she looks like 'une vraie Française' (a real Frenchwoman) (Tadjer, 2002, p. 94).

<sup>5</sup> Albert Camus (1913-1960) was a *pied-noir* writer and Nobel Laureate, famous for his writings on the Absurd. His best-known novel, *L'Etranger* (1942), centres on the character of Meursault, a *pied-noir* tried for the murder of an Arab.