Introduction: "sa vie étrange autour de nous"

Writing in 1891, Louis Rinn, French colonial administrator, ethnographer, and self-promoter, claimed in retrospect that on "July 13th, 1871, despite our reverses, despite the faults or the failings of several of our agents, we remained still, in the eyes of the natives, the uncontested sovereigns and recognized friends of the political or religious lords of the Sahara," and, he implied, of Algeria as a whole, despite the insurrection of 1870–1.[1] These words would have rung false, in 1870 or in 1871 or in 1891, to most Algerians, for whom colonial administrative failures loomed far more significant than any assertions of amity. Notwithstanding Rinn's assertions to the contrary, there remained, in 1871 and in 1914, nothing "uncontested" about empire in Algeria. The massive insurrection of 1871, initiated by the Raḥmāniyya in Kabylia, had threatened French control over Algeria.[2] Even on July 13, 1871, few administrators would have hazarded Rinn's later assertion. After such a demonstration of the precariousness of the colonial project in Algeria, administrators, scholars, and others struggled to prevent the constant, if often localized, forms of contestation of empire from again erupting into full-scale rebellion.

Indeed, these very contestations of sovereignty, the persistent and often violent rejection of colonial claims, resulted, in the aftermath of 1870, in a proliferation of texts that recorded the interests, anxieties, and errors of a colonial state stubbornly attempting to assert its power. The history of such texts, of their methodologies, narratives, and analyses, reveals the methods French colonial administrators, scholars, travelers, and politicians used to gather information about Algerians. These writers gathered, above all, potentially useful information, narrating cultural forms in an attempt to facilitate control. As J. P. Daughton contends, "French colonialism took shape according to the exigencies of limited colonial

[1] Louis Rinn, *Histoire de l'insurrection de 1871 en Algérie* (Algiers: Adolphe Jourdan, 1891), 503.
[2] Edmond Doutté, *L'Islam algérien en l'an 1900* (Algiers: Giralt, 1900), 75–7.

manpower and budgets, as well as fears over indigenous unrest."[3] Between the end of the insurrection of 1871 and the (illusory) rise of the specter of Pan-Islamism in the 1910s, cultural descriptions articulated with an eye toward the maintenance of power represented the fundamental means through which agents of French colonialism conceived of Algerians and analyzed potential unrest. Comprehending the history of Algeria in the late nineteenth century requires teasing out these strands of politically interested narratives, and demands a critical understanding of the relationship between the production of cultural knowledge and attempts to sustain colonial control.

These narratives, analyses, and descriptions represented the fundamental means through which administrators and others interested in empire came to terms with Algeria and with Algerian Islam. In essence, personal interactions enshrined in texts governed how French administrators governed, producing generalizations and explanations that determined practices. These texts reveal the ways in which their authors recognized difference in an attempt to limit its political impact. "Each time that [he] had the occasion of the details of Arab life," Achille Robert, ethnographer and colonial administrator, had "but one desire, that of lifting a bit more the veil that yet hides from our eyes the native people."[4] In tellingly gendered language, Robert presented his role as one of uncovering, exposing, laying bare. The gift he made of his book to the governor general's chief of staff leaves little room for doubt about the ultimate purpose of such revelation. The exposure of cultural elements of Algeria aimed at providing a corpus of handbooks for the colonial project and its administrators.

Many of these texts took the form of what I call here "ethnography," cultural narratives drawn from participant observation and research in vernacular languages, in this case largely Arabic, though also various Berber languages. Ethnography is a pervasive style of culture writing simultaneously resulting from and valorizing participant observation as a method of knowing about others. During its formative years, ethnography bolstered colonial authority by codifying identity as a discrete realm for colonial intervention. It includes "a characteristic attitude of participant observation among the artifacts of a defamiliarized cultural reality."[5]

[3] J. P. Daughton, *An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 261.

[4] Achille Robert, *L'Arabe tel qu'il est: études algériennes et tunisiennes* (Algiers: Imprimerie Joseph Angelini, 1900), 5.

[5] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 121; Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900–1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,

Though long the preserve of anthropologists or ethnologists, ethnography itself represents not a discipline, and assuredly not a "science,"[6] but a genre, a specific kind of non-fiction writing with attendant narrative conventions and set pieces in prose. However, "ethnography, a hybrid activity," in the words of James Clifford, "appears as writing, as collecting, as modernist collage, as imperial power, as subversive critique."[7] Moreover, in colonial Algeria, various other forms of texts consciously mimicked ethnographies based on participant observation. In an attempt to bolster their own narrative and analytical authority, travelers, novelists, and political figures imitated ethnographies, creating not ethnographies of their own, but rather ethnographic texts, narratives that intentionally resembled other forms of ethnography, and largely participated in the same discursive debates. The genre's recent rediscovery by non-anthropologists returns ethnography to its roots in manifold disciplines, highlighting its multiplicity of voices. Neither the twentieth century, nor any particular discipline, gave birth to ethnography. This book represents not a history of the discipline of ethnology, but rather of ethno*graphy*, of narrative writing about culture that took place in part, and often largely, outside of disciplines. The history of ethnography traces not a disciplinary history, but a literary one.

Defined through relations of participant observation enmeshed in unequal power relations, colonial ethnographies trace the histories, above all, of interactions. The behaviors and beliefs of many Algerians remained occluded, outside the purview of ethnographers. Hence, colonial ethnographies, like all administrative archives, perhaps overemphasize zones of contact and interaction.[8] The Algerians who had closest contact with ethnographers manifested various intentions, personal and political,

1992), 15. Cf. Emmanuelle Sibeud, *Une Science impériale pour l'Afrique?*: *La construction des savoirs africanistes en France 1878–1930* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2002), 35–40, 244.

6 Stephen A. Tyler, "Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document," in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1986), 130.

7 Clifford, *Predicament*, 13; James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*, 2.

8 Allan Christelow, *Muslim Law Courts and the French Colonial State in Algeria* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 83–4; David A. Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880–1920*, Western African Studies (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000), 2–4, 37–8, 50. Julia Clancy-Smith correctly identifies "bet hedging, revolt, shifting trade strategies, migration, withdrawal [and] avoidance protest" as "the main motors of historical change" in nineteenth-century Algeria; only some of these "kinds of sociopolitical action" show up in ethnographic texts, though all such ethnographies arose out of such a context. Julia Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800–1904)* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1994),

through the information or misinformation they provided to administrators and other writers.[9] Nevertheless, colonial administrators and other ethnographers *interpreted* such intentional interactions as *typical*; each informant served as the presumed archetype for the multitude of Algerians who refused to countenance such ties, who may or may not have shared such intentions, and about whose beliefs the archive often remains silent.

Moreover, such interactions arose out of specific political and intellectual formations on the part of bureaucrats, as well. French engagement with Islam and with Algeria by no means began in 1870 (or, for that matter, 1871). The scant few weeks between Charles X's 1830 invasion of Algeria and the rise of the July Monarchy demonstrate a fundamental continuity in France's colonial policy in North Africa. Despite the often violent transitions from the Restoration, to the July Monarchy, to the Second Republic, to the Second Empire, to the Third Republic, no nineteenth-century French regime attempted to roll back France's empire in Algeria. Although the challenges, responses, policies, and commitment of these various regimes differed, they ultimately all shared the pursuit of the extension of French control over the Maghrib. Nevertheless, Algerians contested the colonial project, at times violently and episodically, and at others times in more covert, if more deeply entrenched, ways.[10]

Moments of violent resistance often occurred simultaneously with, or in response to, French attempts at closer domination. The 1830s and 1840s witnessed the efflorescence of ʿAbd al-Qādir's attempts to purge Algeria of the French and the concomitant expansion of French use of violence, the despoliation of *ḥubus* land (land bequests for specific religious purposes), and the creation of the *bureaux arabes*, the first French attempts to codify knowledge about Algerians. Intelligence officers and Arabic speakers, the agents of the *bureaux arabes* formed much of the policy directed at Algerians, in the process alienating Algerians and settlers alike, yet also providing a template for the emergence of a codified body of knowledge and purported expertise.[11]

4. On theorizing power gradients in the contact zone, see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 1–11.

9 See, broadly, James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990).

10 Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint*, 4; Charles-André Julien, *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine*, vol II: *La Conquête et les débuts de la colonization (1827–1871)* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1964), 427–9.

11 Patricia Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice and Race in Colonial Algeria* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 78–81, 91; John Ruedy, *Modern Algeria: The Origins and Development of a Nation*, 2nd edn (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2005), 72–3.

The turmoil of the Second Republic at home mirrored turmoil in Algeria. France's affirmation of Algeria as inalienable, French territory in 1848 fooled none of the Algerians who rose up in the Aurès, Zaʿatsha, Kabylia, or Laghouat between 1850 and 1852. Though discontinuous in their armed contestation, Algerians never acquiesced to French bureaucratic and military impositions. Indeed, Napoleon III's 1860 introduction of the concept of a French "Arab Kingdom" may, in fact, have reflected less the emperor's affinities for Algerians than a belated recognition of the precariousness, eventual if not immediate, of France's empire in North Africa.[12] The continued legalized and extralegal confiscations of communally held lands throughout the 1860s attested, however, to the continuation of colonial policies favoring the increasingly large and increasingly strident settler population of Algeria. Whatever its rhetoric, during the Second Empire Napoleon III's "Arab Kingdom" shrank both as a political idea and in terms of the area of land under Algerian control. Similarly, as Patricia Lorcin has ably demonstrated, the emergence of the "Kabyle Myth" reflected the assimilationist and discriminatory cultural logic of colonial power.[13] Token policies, such as the ability for Algerians to request naturalization as French citizens, came with such severe strictures as to render their application nearly moot, and the French "Arab Kingdom" did little or nothing to mitigate the effects of the massive 1865 famine.[14]

The fall of the Second Empire dramatically changed the relationship among the colonial government, settlers, and Algerians. Both the 1870 Crémieux Decree, which granted French citizenship to Algerian Jews, and the major Raḥmāniyya insurrection of the same year, which nearly ousted French control, ushered in a new era of cultural and administrative politics. The Ṣūfī-organized insurrection, in particular, threatened to destabilize the foundations of the colonial regime.[15] Administrative changes in the 1880s both bound the colony more tightly to France politically and augmented the settlers' role in governance. Increased settler participation in colonial governance exacerbated colonial tensions and worsened conditions for many Algerians.[16] By 1914, compulsory

[12] On the *Royaume arabe*, see Julien, *Histoire de l'Algérie* 425; Lorcin, *Imperial Identities*, 76–97; Ruedy, *Modern Algeria*, 75–7; Benjamin Stora, *Algeria 1830–2000*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 5.

[13] Lorcin, *Imperial Identities*; Charles-Robert Ageron, *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine*, vol. II: *De l'insurrection de 1871 au déclenchement de la guerre de libération (1954)* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1979), 137–51.

[14] On the Second Empire more broadly, see Julien, *Histoire de l'Algérie*, 387–452.

[15] Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint*; Julien, *Histoire de l'Algérie*, 453–500.

[16] Ageron, *Histoire de l'Algérie*, 10, 19, 66; Julien, *Histoire de l'Algérie*; 495–500; Ruedy, *Modern Algeria*, 81–6; Stora, *Algeria*, 6–7.

military participation meant that almost 200,000 Algerians fought as soldiers in World War I, yet the imminent disintegration of the Ottoman Empire raised Pan-Islamism as a looming specter in French, if not Algerian, eyes.

The period between the Raḥmāniyya insurrection and the largely illusory Pan-Islamist "threat" corresponded to administrative and political change in France and Algeria that reoriented scholarship produced on Islam. The period 1870–1914 witnessed modifications in both policies and representations, contestations, and experiences, in the religious and cultural politics of empire. The concatenation of debates about French republicanism, the aftermath of the Raḥmāniyya insurrection, the emergence of the social sciences, changes in governance practices in Algeria, and debates about religion make 1870–1914 a particularly fruitful period to examine the production of ethnographic texts, before the advent of World War I and the potential threat of Pan-Islamism fundamentally altered interpretations of Islam. As a form of narrative associated with fieldwork practices, ethnography took on greater importance in the early Third Republic.

Republicanism among colonial bureaucrats and ethnographers assuredly did not represent any kind of transcendent, unitary political ideology. Rather, ethnographers and administrators in Algeria embodied the republic in ways similar to those of French people in the metropole: discontinuously, ambivalently, contradictorily, if at all. "We need," notes Frederick Cooper, "to take seriously what it meant for a polity to *think like an empire*."[17] If, in Algeria, writers and officials paid a certain attention to republican political questions, it may have represented more an adherence to bureaucratic form than to any ideology. When I describe texts as "republican," I refer to their reception in ambiguously republican France, not to any evanescent political intent of the author. Colonial ethnography was "republican," when it was, through its engagement with ambivalent debates *about* republicanism.[18] Writing from a wide variety of political perspectives, and explicitly specifying them only rarely, ethnographers did not embody any of the divergent "republican ideologies." Instead, they helped form their parameters. Ethnography did not reflect

[17] Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005), 200. Such thinking, Cooper argues, did not involve thinking like a nation-state, but rather like an empire-state (153, 156, 182); Daughton, *An Empire Divided*, 21. See especially James McDougall on the dangers of projecting the Algerian nation backward through time: James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5, 10, 225–38.

[18] Daughton, *An Empire Divided*, 23, notes "how fragmented and diverse republican opinion about colonization . . . was."

French republicanism but articulated different positions about what that republicanism might look like.

From the perspective of colonial ethnography, republicanism frequently remained a practical or bureaucratic question, rather than an ideological one. Algeria in the early Third Republic formed part of a republican empire-state, but debates about ideology played out differently. "Republicanism" often served as a discursive strategy, utilized for promotion within the bureaucratic ranks or mobilized as an ideological counter-construction to a reified Islamic Algeria. French colonialism relied on and exploited the fluid process of defining the meanings of a republican empire.[19] For the most part, colonial ethnographers manifested an interest in republican ideology only to the extent to which their professional or intellectual formation required it of them in specific contexts, as in their dealings with the politics of religion. As Allan Christelow has written of earlier administrators, "[t]hough the French . . . were not exalted revolutionaries, they did have an egalitarian revolutionary heritage – which occasionally came to the fore . . . and which strongly influenced the values of at least some sectors of the colonial regime."[20] That foregrounding of France's "revolutionary heritage" arose sporadically in colonial ethnography, not as part of a clear, ideological project, but in relation to some aspects of Algeria rather than others. Ethnographic interest in Islam indicates less the triumph of republican secularism or the civilizing mission than anxieties about challenges to both; political ethnography focused on Islam out of concern for its potentially disruptive nature.

Moreover, ethnographers did not actually have to believe in republican values for their texts to serve the purposes of the Third Republic's empire; the political allegiances of authors, varied though they were, scarcely determined the state's readings of ethnographies. As a result, ethnography of Algeria was "republican" only insofar as it enacted a series of discursive practices benefiting from the force – often literal – of power. These practices in turn reinforced the attempted domination of the Third Republic over Algerians. Algerian ethnography illuminates the ways in which the colonial project, fundamentally opposed to many

[19] On meaning-making in the republican empire, see Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997); Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 171–7; Herman Lebovics, *True France: Wars Over Cultural Identity, 1900–1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[20] Allan Christelow, *Muslim Law Courts and the French Colonial State in Algeria* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 109.

aspects of the republic, subsumed and incorporated divergent political views in pursuit of domination.

Colonial ethnographies created cultural representations enforced through assertions of authenticity, generating "facts," descriptions with the force of claims to truth. However, these signs posing as facts have no easily ascertainable relationship to the underlying phenomena they purport to describe. Pierre Martino, a colonial commentator, wrote of contemporary ethnography, "one will never know the true value of these books – what they contain of spontaneous impressions, and of literary procedure, true admiration and official enthusiasm – but in meeting the author," a possibility definitively denied to historians.[21] As James Clifford notes, ethnography has never offered a privileged scientific register for the depiction of cultures.

> There is no way definitely, surgically, to separate the factual from the allegorical in cultural accounts. The data of ethnography make sense only within patterned . . . narratives, and these are conventional, political, and meaningful in a more than referential sense. Cultural facts are not true and cultural allegories false . . . [T]he relation of fact to allegory is a domain of struggle. The meanings of an ethnographic account are uncontrollable,[22]

uncontrollable in the double sense, both escaping hegemonic fixation and lacking a scientific, experimental "control." Specifying particular ethnographic allegories, as with the reading of any other literary texts, in no way forecloses other possible readings. These texts, polysemic and narratively rich, give rise to multiple possible readings, of which I can address only a few.

Chapter 1 introduces the mechanisms and practices of colonial ethnographic writing. Focusing on the emergence of participant-observation methodology and the articulation of concomitant narrative forms, the chapter focuses on the political contexts that gave rise to specific ways of writing about culture.

The second chapter traces the lives and worlds of various ethnographers. Their trajectories within institutions, across Algeria, and both inside and outside of organized power structures reveal the diverse opportunities and constrictions that women and men in colonial Algeria faced in writing ethnography. Drawing on theoretical works on reflexive ethnographic narrative, the chapter emphasizes the personal experiences,

[21] Pierre Martino, "L'Œuvre algérienne d'Ernest Feydeau," *Revue africaine* 274 (1909:3), 134–5.

[22] James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in Clifford and Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture*, 119–20.

at times occluded and only gestured at, that construct ethnographic authority.

Chapter 3 analyzes representations of religious sociability. Ṣūfī orders provided the primary means of organizing religious life in nineteenth-century Algeria, at times playing a major role in organizing revolt and providing foyers for cultural, intellectual, and social continuities. In the context of debates over religion and republicanism in France, colonial ethnographies depicted various Ṣūfī orders as politically oriented in various ways. Nevertheless, ethnographic descriptions reached no conclusions about individual orders; rather, such texts often portrayed individual Ṣūfī orders as simultaneously threatening and anodyne, useful and potentially dangerous.

Addressing popular forms of religious belief, chapter 4 investigates the political generalizations and the creation of primitivist ethnography. Beliefs in genies and rituals to end drought reveal specific tropes in the colonial denigration of Algerians' intellectual capacities. The civilizing mission required an object on which to act, an object furnished by ethnographers and their generation of primitivist interpretations of popular beliefs.

Chapter 5 illustrates the moral context under which ethnography operated. Colonial ethnographers reconfigured gender relations among Algerians as the central moral problem, as both empire's obstacle and the means to overcome it. The civilizing mission in Algeria functioned, as well, as a moralizing one revolving around interventions on gendered bodies.

Finally, chapter 6 reveals the ultimate consequences of representations rooted in violence. The deaths of three explorers, their sensationalized coverage in print media and in ethnographies, and their commemorations revolved around configuring entire ethnic groups of the Sahara as inescapably criminal, as culturally predestined to murder and violence. The imbrication of colonial ethnography with the political interests of empire created representations that equated cultural identities with crime.

Colonial ethnography served avowedly political ends. Participants in and observers of the daily lives of Algerians from the Mediterranean to the Sahara, administrators, authors, scholars, and others intended, ultimately, to produce usable texts. The explorer Fernand Foureau addressed one military ethnographer in the introduction to Captain Métois's *La Soumission des Touareg du Nord* (1906). "You have now to surround yourself with serious and sure informants, and you have, by a rigorous control and a meticulous selection, constituted a sort of memo on the political . . . state of the tribes," wrote Foureau, "information that,

alone, permitted you to direct them easily and without clashes towards the goals that seemed the best for the interest of France and for the future of the country itself."[23] Nevertheless, within politicized ethnography emerged other, more narrative impulses both advancing and restraining such aims. Magali-Boisnard, in her ethnography of the Aurès, wrote a poem in rhyme as an ode to her experiences in the region. "Nous voulons voir sa vie étrange autour de nous / Ses gestes de Barbare aux yeux larges et doux";[24] aesthetic experiences of the exotic attracted ethnographers as much as any political project of empire. Direction always remained difficult, goals conflicting, lives strange, clashes numerous and violent. This empire of facts emerged out of contestation and strife, out of narratives and politics.

[23] Fernand Foureau, "Préface," Captain Métois, *La Soumission des Touareg du Nord* (Paris: Augustin Challamel, 1906), 6.

[24] "We want to see its [i.e., the Aurès's] strange life around us / Its gestures of Barbary with large, soft eyes"; Magali-Boisnard, "L'Aurès barbare," *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie d'Alger et de l'Afrique du Nord* 13 (1908:1): 45.