

*Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*

(Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2001)

**Robert JC Young**

**Preface**

In the cinema again. Earlier than last time though, in fact the first time that I ever went. Intense excitement as we walk out of the weak sunshine of late autumn into the aquamarine art deco building, through the lights of the foyer, and then down the red carpet into the darkness of the huge interior. The seats are laid out above me in the balcony, below me, the huge screen hiding behind a heavy folded curtain that is drawn in and out at strategic moments. Before the film begins, the Pathé news starts. Suddenly huge black and white pictures of the streets of Budapest, bare trees punctuating the tall dark nineteenth century apartment blocks. Tanks are rolling down the cobbled streets along the tramlines, people are rushing to and fro, children throwing Molotov cocktails at the tanks in vain. It is November 1956, and Imre Nagy has in vain declared Hungary's neutrality and asked for help from the West. The State Department has assured Khrushchev that the U.S. would not interfere, and the Russian army moved in to 'save' the Hungarian people from themselves and democratic self-determination. The camera gives us a pause from these cruel hopeless scenes, and soon we are in Port Said, its bright sun bleaching the contrast from the picture. The sky goes dark as the camera switches to

a blazing refinery. Then there is a dark strip going from upper right to lower left: the Suez Canal. British and French troops have landed to save it from Nasser's nationalisation—even though the British left the India to which it leads almost ten years before. Suddenly, the British viewer, young or old, is on the other side, carried over by the metaphors of power. 'Our troops', as the announcer puts it in his crisp, full voice, have moved in to repress a nationalist rebellion and to save the world from the man whom Eden saw as another Hitler. After these two sequences in black and white of dark, militant troops impassively carrying out their tasks of domination by force, the film begins in bright, dramatic colours, with lush musical sounds. It is Walt Disney's *Bambi*.

While writing this book, I have been haunted by two photographs. Black and white from the fifties, from the same contradictory years of my childhood. They are both photographs of Algerians. Both interpellate me with the transgendering force of colonial power, and the brute reality of its realization. The first I came across in a battered paperback entitled *La Bataille d'Alger* that I bought one hot summer afternoon whilst wandering around the Arab quarter of Manosque with my small children. The book is not the film: it is a propaganda effort produced by the French *colons*—the French settlers in Algeria—in April 1957 while the battle of Algiers was still taking place. The pamphlet includes a number of photographs showing the military in a positive light in their relations with the Algerian people. The frontispiece shows a smiling soldier with a rifle walking along holding the hand of two young girls, the elder of whom wears a veil. Another photograph shows the same soldier, still smiling, standing beneath a battered traffic sign warning of a school, portraying two children crossing the road. He shakes the

hand of a smiling toddler, whose mother, fully veiled, stands behind with two more smiling children: the caption reads 'Nous retournons à l'école. Merci, Monsieur'. The photograph that haunts me, however, is of two older girls, still teenagers I would guess, unveiled, and apparently in western clothes, who stand side by side, looking up out of the picture to the side. Their look is intense, and completely serious, while at the same time the very intensity of the close-up shot gives the photograph a slightly sensual aura. One girl has her hair up, slightly frizzy and unkempt, her hand on the zip of her raincoat, her fingers pulling it up over the layers of clothes beneath. Her mouth is shut, set firmly like her defiant eyes. The other has her hair let down to her shoulders, rimless glasses, a scarf tied neatly around her neck, between the lapels of her coat. Her lips are slightly parted, her gaze no less unyielding. The caption reads: 'Les "porteuses de bombes" des stades: l'âge de Juliette, l'âme de Ravachol'. These are presumably photographs of Djouher Akhror and Baya Hocine, the young women arrested for planting the bombs at the stadium bombings in Algiers and El-Biar on the 10<sup>th</sup> February 1957. The bombings with which the Battle of Algiers opened represented a major shock to the life of the *colons*, signalling that the war for independence was being brought against them in their everyday activities. The police quickly arrested what the book describes as 'une sinistre collection de bandits, agrémentée de deux jeunes filles qui avait reçu mission, sachant qu'elles ne seraient pas fouillées, de porter les bombes jusqu'aux lieux du crime'. The author comments that by March, four of those arrested were condemned to death by a military tribunal. Were the young women among them? Were they submitted to the interrogation procedures and summary executions which, even in France, became known simply as *la torture*? Did they share the fate of Djamila Boupacha (de Beauvoir & Halimi

1962)? How different they look from those smiling children of the frontispiece photograph. Their solemn faces raised defiantly, the intensity of their gaze signalling their complete refusal to submit to their captors. Algeria unveiled indeed. How many liberation struggles, from Algeria to Kenya, from India to Ireland, from Vietnam to South Africa, were waged by women as brave and uncompromising as these?

Tough women in the first photograph, a feminised man in the second. I saw it in the second volume of a history of the Algerian war (Courrière 1968-71): I glanced at it only for a moment, but cannot erase it from my memory. The caption between this and a photograph of bodies below reads ‘Victimes musulmanes des “Ratissages”’. The pictures are small, with poor contrast, slightly fuzzy, amateur. Many of them in this section show atrocities of various kinds, bodies and indistinguishable parts of bodies, of children and adults, clothed, naked or burnt, lying on the ground. These ‘nature morte’ representations are interspersed with another which at first looks like a completely different scene, of four European men standing in an open field, smiling and laughing at the camera, clearly in great spirits, holding another up as if giving him ‘the bumps’, the boisterous homoerotic play of sportsmen. They wear wide hats, he does not. The man that they carry in their arms is naked, and is clearly Algerian. His legs are held spread apart, raised high in the air, his circumcized genitals brazenly exposed like a contorted ‘spread-shot’ in a pornographic magazine. His face is one of abject fear, misery and terror. Yet he looks at the camera for the shot, automatically perhaps as if he were posing for any conventional photograph (if indeed he had ever posed for a photograph before), or was he appealing to its gaze and beyond that to the photographer whose eye it had become? What were the

*colons* about to do to him, as he was posed for the photograph, poised between life and death? The possibilities are all too obvious, his vulnerability too self-consciously dramatised for there to be much doubt.

For me, the postcolonial remains always marked by these images, preserving the traces of the violence, defiance, struggles and suffering of individuals, that represents the political ideals of community, equality, self-determination and dignity for which they fought. One and a half million Algerians died in the war for independence. This photograph records the event of just one of them: the subject of violence, of colonial degradation, caught at the liminal brink of a gratuitous, inhuman death.

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