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FROMENTIN, ALGERIA, AND THE DECOLONIAL POLITICS OF MEMORY

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Abstract: In the nineteenth century, travel literature played a crucial role in shaping Western perceptions of the "*Orient."* While claiming to offer objective accounts, European travellers often perpetuated colonial stereotypes, portraying the East as an exotic, inferior, and vanishing "*Other."* This article examines Eugène Fromentin's *Une Année dans le Sahel* (1859) as a paradigmatic example of French colonial Orientalism, where aesthetic refinement serves to mask the violence of empire. Fromentin's poetic vision of Algeria naturalises displacement through what he called *l'art pour l'art*, a philosophy that transfigures colonial domination into melancholic spectacle. Drawing on postcolonial thinkers such as Assia Djebar, Frantz Fanon, and Malek Alloula, the study shows how Fromentin's travelogue performs symbolic violence, what Djebar allegorises as the "mutilated hand of Algeria" by transforming Indigenous loss into aesthetic pleasure. Extending this critique, the article situates Fromentin within contemporary decolonial frameworks, engaging Achille Mbembe's notion of aestheticised necropolitics and Ann Laura Stoler's concept of imperial debris to examine how Orientalist vision persists in modern archival and museological practices. It also incorporates Abdelkader Aoudjit's reading of Algerian literature as a counter-discursive act of witnessing to a *différend*, a colonial silence that resists translation into imperial epistemology. By tracing Eugène Fromentin's legacy from colonial nostalgia to present-day debates on restitution and memory, the article argues that *Une Année dans le Sahel* is not merely a historical text but a critical site in the ongoing struggle over how Algeria is remembered, represented, and reclaimed.

Keywords*:* Algerian cultural memory, colonial aesthetics, Decolonial Theory, French colonial discourse, Fromentin, orientalist travel writing, politics of memory

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1. Introduction

Eugène Fromentin's *Une Année dans le Sahel* (1858) occupies a significant gap in understanding French Orientalism. While his work has at times been read either as colonial propaganda or as an exercise in aesthetic detachment, this article argues that such binary readings obscure the complex ideological labour performed by Fromentin's text. Building upon the seminal insights of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and more recent interventions by scholars such as Julia Clancy-Smith and Ali Behdad, this study situates Fromentin's *Une Année dans le Sahel* within the contested historiography of Orientalist representation and French colonial discourse. Fromentin's romanticisation of Algeria's dying world (*monde qui s'en va*) transforms the brutal realities of military conquest into a melancholic spectacle, rendering Indigenous displacement tragically beautiful yet politically inert. This paradox between Fromentin's genuine admiration for Algerian culture and his aestheticised silencing of French violence reveals the complicity of *l'art pour l'art* in the service of imperial ideology.

At the heart of nineteenth-century French travel writing lay a tension between the documented materiality of colonial expansion and the imagined Orient that authors sought to conjure. The notion of an Orient 'in the making' reflected not merely French encounters with colonial milieu but also the conventions of a literary genre invested in exoticism and nostalgia. As Rana Kabbani observes, such narratives often projected an idealised and timeless Orient precisely at the moment it was being transformed and subordinated by European power (Kabbani, 1986). In Algeria, the destruction of *maghrébine* architecture and tradition recorded by French writers paradoxically evoked a sense of loss for an imagined Oriental world that was, to a great extent, a European invention.

Thus, Orientalism and imperialism could function as both complementary and antagonistic discourses, with the constructed Orient serving simultaneously to affirm and to criticise European social and intellectual norms. Consequently, travel writing came to provide an important ideological space where conceptions of European identity, the Orient, and Otherness were not only negotiated often through deeply ambivalent textual strategies, but also served to illuminate the tensions implicit in French colonial discourse. Our reading builds on Assia Djebar's indictment of Orientalist art as a form of "amputated memory" and Frantz Fanon's critique of cultural violence, while challenging earlier scholarship that divorces Fromentin's aesthetics from his colonial context.

For nineteenth-century French writers and artists, travel to the "Orient" and the subsequent publication of their impressions became a cultural rite of passage. In France, this tradition counted among its practitioners some of the most celebrated names in art and literature, from Chateaubriand, Lamartine, and Delacroix to Nerval, Dumas and Gautier, all of whom helped construct an imagined East that oscillated between fascination and condescension. Fromentin, whose *Une Année dans le Sahel* documents his Algerian sojourns of the 1850s, stands as a pivotal figure within this tradition. His text not only chronicles personal impressions of North Africa but actively participates in constructing the colonial imaginary that underpinned France's imperial project. As scholars such as Mary Louise Pratt have argued, travel writing operates as a "contact zone," where asymmetries of power are both enacted and effaced (Pratt, 1992). Fromentin's writing exemplifies this dynamic: while aestheticising the Algerian landscape and culture, it simultaneously occludes the violence of conquest, thereby naturalising colonial rule.

This article examines how Fromentin's travel writing functioned as an instrument of colonial discourse during a period of intensified French expansion in Algeria (1850–1870), when literary journeys accompanied and legitimised military campaigns. Focusing on *Une Année dans le Sahel*, this study interrogates key mechanisms of Orientalist representation: How do Fromentin's depictions of Algerian landscapes, cultures, and peoples reproduce colonial hierarchies? What tensions emerge between his aesthetic appreciation of Algeria and his textual complicity in its subjugation? How does his portrayal of an Algerian *monde qui s'en va* simultaneously mourn and justify imperial violence? By addressing these questions within the broader historiographical debates surrounding Orientalism and French colonialism, this article demonstrates how Fromentin's dual portrayals of Algeria, as both exotic fantasy and degraded society, operate as a subtle yet powerful vehicle of colonial ideology, one that, while occasionally betraying unease about the moral costs of empire, ultimately serves to aestheticise and depoliticise its consequences.

2. Methodology

This study combines close textual analysis of Fromentin's *Une Année dans le Sahel* with visual critique of his paintings (e.g., *Falconry in Algeria: The Spoils,* 1863), framed by Said's (1978, 1993) contrapuntal reading to expose gaps between Fromentin's aestheticised Algeria and colonial violence. Drawing on Djebar's (1985) and Fanon's (1963) decolonial critiques, we interrogate his elegiac tone and ethnographic omissions as acts of epistemic erasure, while Alloula's (1986) *dévoilement* theory unpacks gendered Orientalism in harem fantasies. Archival records of French *razzias* and Lorcin's (1995) historiography contextualise his travelogue within 1850s military campaigns, revealing how *l'art pour l'art* sanitised displacement. This interdisciplinary approach, which bridges literary, visual, and historical analysis, demonstrates how Fromentin's work aestheticised hierarchy under the guise of artistic detachment.

3. The Aesthetics of Complicity: How Fromentin's *L'art pour L'art* Sanitised Colonial Violence

Fromentin's *l'art pour l'art* was not apolitical but a colonial aesthetic (Alloula, 1986), transmuting violence into melancholic spectacle. His lament for a palm tree 'dishonoured' by French cement (Fromentin, 1999), for instance, aestheticised displacement as poetic tragedy while erasing the *razzias* (military raids) that necessitated it. These raids were part of a campaign of extermination, such as the 1852 genocide in Laghouat; a city Fromentin documented, where French troops, under orders to "exterminate them to the last," massacred two-thirds of the population (Labter, 2018, cited in Amrouche, 2023, p. 57). This exemplifies his paradoxical gaze: while mourning ecological destruction, he omits the *razzias* that displaced Indigenous communities. This elegiac mode, what Alloula called the 'pornography of conquest', allowed him to mourn Algeria's 'dying world' (*le monde qui s'en va*) while benefiting from its destruction.

Fromentin's dying world diverged from Gautier's static 'fairyland Orient' (Gautier, 1973, p. 147) by framing Algeria as a site of active erasure. Where Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* ('Journey to the Orient') (1851) exoticised Islamic mysticism, Fromentin's focus on decay aestheticised colonial violence, rendering destruction tragically beautiful. This elegiac mode, unique among his peers, naturalised displacement as inevitable, even as it betrayed unease about France's 'civilising' brutality. His peers' romanticisation lacked Fromentin's paradoxical tension between admiration and culpability, making his work a keystone for understanding Orientalism's ideological labour.

Aimé Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* exposes the ideological complicity of colonial culture in masking the atrocities of empire. He argues that colonialism "travaille à déciviliser le colonisateur, à l'abrutir, à le dégrader" by awakening the latent instincts of violence and domination (Césaire, 1955). This degeneration, however, was paradoxically veiled by a cultural apparatus that strove to aestheticise the crime of conquest. In literature, painting, and travel writing, colonial artists and writers often converted acts of dispossession into spectacles of exotic beauty, transforming the moral ugliness of domination into a sublime narrative of discovery and civilissation. In this sense, as Césaire suggests, colonial literature *a cherché à sublimer le crime en beauté pour masquer la barbarie de la conquête,* ("sought to sublimate crime into beauty in order to mask the barbarity of conquest") (Césaire, 1955, p. 65, author's translation). A process vividly at work in the writings of Eugène Fromentin, whose romanticised depictions of Algeria aestheticise colonial violence under the guise of artistic contemplation

This ideological labour becomes even clearer when contextualising France's 1830 invasion of Algeria, which launched both a military conquest and a cultural campaign that sought to justify colonial domination through literature and art. Within this context, travel writing functioned as a vehicle for imperial ideology. As Steve Clark argues, the genre is inherently 'encoded' with colonial assumptions (Clark, 1999, p. 87), while Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone' reveals how European descriptions of foreign lands were acts of epistemic appropriation (Pratt, 1992). Patricia Lorcin's analysis of French Orientalist writers including Fromentin demonstrates how their depictions framed the East as a 'space of private fantasy,' reinforcing stereotypes that legitimised domination (Lorcin et al., 1995). These critiques are amplified by postcolonial voices like Assia Djebar, who, in *L'amour, la fantasia*, allegorises Fromentin's work as the symbolic mutilation of Algeria, offering its mutilated hand to the coloniser's gaze. Fromentin's travelogue, like those of his contemporaries, thus oscillated between aesthetic admiration and colonial contempt, a duality that obscured the violence of France's 'civilising mission.'

By mid-century, Orientalist paintings and travelogues had become wildly popular in France, presenting Algeria as simultaneously exotic and backward. French travellers consistently framed Algeria through tropes of pre-modern mysticism and decay. Gustave Flaubert's '*land of religions and flowering robes'* (Flaubert, 1996) found echoes in Fromentin's depiction of Algiers as a 'shrunken' relic of Turkish rule (Fromentin, 1999/1859) and Gautier's anticipation of an 'exotic and savage' Orient (Gautier, 1973). Yet upon arrival, many also noted the colony's hybrid reality: Observers like Jean Joseph François Poujoulat noted the city's '*Arab physiognomy blended with European'* identity (Poujoulat, 1861), while Feydeau described its '*incredible mélange'* of cultures and its '*physionomie hybride'* (Feydeau, 2003).

This tension between imagined purity and colonial mélange reveals how Orientalist discourse both constructed and contested Algeria's *otherness*; a dual narrative that obscured colonial violence while fuelling European fantasies. Eugène Fromentin emerged as a defining figure of this tradition, his work epitomising the contradictions of French Orientalism through his unwavering commitment to *"l'art pour l'art"* ("art for art's sake"). This philosophy, while ostensibly apolitical, became the perfect vehicle for colonial representation, allowing Fromentin to aestheticise Algerian suffering while maintaining plausible deniability about his complicity in imperial projects.

Fromentin first gained renown as a painter of fashionable Orientalist scenes before establishing himself as a writer with *Une Année dans le Sahel* (1859). This epistolary travelogue documented his 1852-1853 journeys through Algiers, Blida, Laghouat, and Biskra routes that would later appear in Michelin guidebooks as tourist itineraries. Though he

considered himself primarily a painter, Fromentin turned to writing when he doubted painting's ability to capture reality, eventually producing works that blended travel narrative, memoir, and artistic treatise.

His declaration, *"Le monde est à celui qui voyage"* (“The world belongs to those who travel”) revealed the colonial privilege underpinning his gaze, transforming military-controlled terrain into an artist's playground. Positioning himself as a detached observer, he masked his role in the colonial machinery. His wanderings, documented in sketches and journals, were enabled by French military control; Fromentin romanticised them as pure aesthetic pursuits, epitomised by his credo *"l'art pour l'art”.* This paradox underscores the broader function of Orientalist travel writing: to sanitise imperialism by presenting it as a cultural encounter, even as it reinforced hierarchies between the European "*Self*" and the Algerian "*Other*."

Nowhere was Fromentin's conflicted position as both critic and beneficiary of French colonialism more vividly expressed than in his haunting description of a palm tree "hanging on" in urban Algiers: *"Its base is cemented over, dishonouring it and yet not preventing it from dying"* (Fromentin, 1999). This potent metaphor, recurring across his writings and paintings, epitomised the paradox of Orientalist gaze. While ostensibly mourning the erosion of traditional Algerian life, Fromentin’s aestheticised portrayal ultimately reinforced the colonial structures he purportedly questioned. The tree is "dishonoured" yet persistent existence mirrors his own *l’art pour l’art* philosophy: artistically poignant in its documentation of change, yet politically ambivalent

Fromentin’s unease extended beyond symbolism. He openly lamented that Algeria was ‘dishonoured, since it is French’ (Fromentin, 1984), a statement that crystallises the paradox of colonial modernity: economic progress arrived hand in hand with cultural erasure. This lament has been read as an instance of colonial melancholia (Bhabha, 1994), yet Fromentin’s discomfort simultaneously lays bare the underlying fragility of Orientalist discourse. In contrast to Gautier’s unreflective exoticism, Fromentin’s ambivalence, whether genuine or performative, reveals the tensions and contradictions at the heart of imperial ideology. Like Gautier, who mourned the disappearance of the ‘fairyland Orient’ under ‘French tastes’ (Gautier, 1973), Fromentin documented the ‘debris and wreckage’ of Indigenous life with a disenchantment verging on nihilism. Yet this very anxiety, what Gautier himself termed the ‘illusion’ of Orientalist fantasies (Gautier, 1973, p. 140), ultimately served to justify Fromentin’s realist project. By striving to preserve Algeria’s ‘dying world’ in both art and text, he paradoxically consecrated the colonial violence that rendered such preservation necessary in the first place. This elegiac impulse, to memorialise Algeria even while participating in its dismantling, pervaded Fromentin’s entire oeuvre. His paintings and writings, framed ostensibly as tributes to the ‘grandeur’ of France’s new territories, betray a persistent tension between romanticisation and complicity.

Fromentin thought of his paintings and texts as testimonies to the grandeur of the newly acquired territories. His oeuvre, including paintings like *Falconry in Algeria: The Spoils* and writings such as *Un été dans le Sahara* (1856), oscillated between admiration and condescension. His exclamation *"Si beau! tout est beau, même la misère"* ("So beautiful! Everything is beautiful, even the misery") epitomised this tension, aestheticising Algerian suffering however ignoring its colonial causes. While claiming to pursue pure artistic expression, his works inevitably served imperial interests by transforming colonial violence into aesthetic spectacle.

Fromentin's work embodies the fundamental contradiction of colonial Orientalism - capable of lamenting French "arrogance" while still participating in its destructive machinery. His emotional confession to Paul Battaillard, "*J'ai pleuré de chagrin en laissant là tant de trésors que je venais de découvrir*" ("I wept with sorrow at leaving behind so many treasures I had just discovered"), reveals this tension. Even as he documented the "human wreckage" of colonisation and acknowledged the transformative impact of French scientific, political and military interventions, Fromentin ultimately retreated into the sanctuary of *l'art pour l'art*.

This aesthetic stance, while burnishing his reputation as a sensitive observer, served to neutralise political accountability, allowing colonial hierarchies to persist unchallenged beneath layers of artistic refinement. Yet post-colonial theorists' focus on imperial ideology risks overlooking the subjective fractures in such accounts. As Brian Musgrove notes, efforts to dismantle imperialism's ideological apparatus often ignore individual experiences that defy neat accusations of appropriation (Musgrove, 2003). Fromentin's lamentations over Algeria's 'dishonoured' traditions, while silent on French violence, may also reflect the 'annihilating' dislocation Bhabha associates with cultural encounter (Bhabha, 1994). His aestheticised Algeria, suspended between fantasy and contempt, could thus embody what Musgrove terms the traveller's psychic 'disunification' (Musgrove, 2003), a tension that resists binary readings of colonial discourse." His Algeria thus remains suspended between fantasy and contempt, a land to be mourned aesthetically even as it was being dismantled politically.

Fromentin's writings reveal the fundamental tension at the heart of French colonial ideology, the paradoxical belief that colonisation simultaneously civilised Algerian retrograde society while destroying its cultural foundations. Like many European travellers of his era, he documented both the transformative promise and the devastating consequences of France's "modernising" mission. The crumbling palm tree, the disrupted urban landscapes, and the displaced communities in his accounts testify to what he called the "human wreckage" of colonial expansion, undermining the optimistic rhetoric of imperial progress. This duality reflects what postcolonial scholars have identified as the colonial imaginary's binary vision: Algeria appears in Fromentin's work alternately as a site of romantic fantasy (in his lush descriptions of exotic landscapes, ornate interiors, and eroticised *Oriental* encounters) and as an object of contempt (through depictions of indigenous *misery*, *savagery*, and alleged deceit). Rather than contradictions, these representations functioned as complementary justifications for colonial domination, the fantasy demanding preservation, the contempt demanding intervention.

4. Fromentin's Erasure of Colonial Disruption in 'Timeless' Landscapes

Fromentin's 'eternal' Sahara (Fromentin, 1999) was a calculated erasure, what Said (1978) termed 'imaginative geography', a fantasy of timelessness that masked the railroads and forts reshaping Algeria. His awe at Biskra's '*solemnity of the palms against the burning sky*' ignored the military campaigns that had decimated its inhabitants, transforming the oasis into a colonial outpost. This exemplifies the Orientalist habit of erasing history to frame North Africa as an unchanging tableau.

This tendency to fixate on the 'pre-modern' Orient was not unique to Fromentin. French travellers throughout the nineteenth century viewed the region through a lens that emphasised its religious and archaic qualities. Gustave Flaubert, for instance, spoke of 'the old Orient, land of religions and flowering robes' (Flaubert, 1996), while Fromentin himself described Algeria as preserving 'the customs and practices of yesterday… the Algiers of the Turks, only shrunken [and] impoverished' (Fromentin, 1999).

This aestheticisation of "timelessness" existed in stark contrast to the violent present: even as Fromentin sketched the dunes, French engineers were laying railroads across them, and military forts punctuated the horizons of his picturesque oases. Yet, under the guise of documenting "eternal" beauty, this romanticised stillness deliberately obscured the violent disruptions of French colonisation. While Fromentin waxed poetic about Biskra's "eternal" beauty, he sidestepped the military campaigns that had recently decimated its inhabitants, transforming the oasis into a colonial outpost. His landscapes thus functioned as what Edward Said termed "imaginative geographies" projections of European desire onto a terrain actively being remade by French engineers (Said, 1978).

The exoticising gaze extended inward, literally, in Fromentin's voyeuristic accounts of Algerian interiors. His lavish depictions of tiled courtyards and "perfumed" harems (likely imagined, as he rarely accessed private spaces) borrowed from Delacroix's eroticised Orient, reducing Algerian women to decorative motifs. These harem fantasies epitomised the colonial paradox of eroticism versus erasure: while fetishising Algerian women's veiled beauty, Fromentin wholly ignored their lived experiences under intersecting colonial and patriarchal violence. Their veils and kohl-rimmed eyes appear in his writings as aesthetic props, never as agents. This erasure mirrored colonial policies that sought to "unveil" Algeria literally and metaphorically, positioning French rule as a liberating force while denying Indigenous women subjectivity.

At the heart of this fantasy was Fromentin's Rousseau-inspired depiction of Arabs as *"enfants et génies"* (children and geniuses, p. 200). His sketches of falconry scenes and "picturesque" Bedouins, whom he praised for their *"instinct supérieur"* in dress and stoicism, transformed cultural practices into aestheticised spectacles, even as France actively suppressed them. He noted that the Arab seemed, "*pauvre sans être indigent… sordide sans trivialité, grave, mollement… ni bête ni grossier, … toujours pittoresque dans le bon sens du mot, artiste par sa tenue… et par je ne sais quel instinct supérieur… il sait se taire, … [il a] le sérieux du langage… [et] le courage absolu dans sa dévotion."* ("Poor without being destitute... sordid without being vulgar, serious, mildly... neither stupid nor rude... always picturesque in the best sense of the word, artistic in his demeanor... and by some superior instinct... he knows when to remain silent... [he has] seriousness of language... [and] absolute courage in his devotion") (Fromentin, 1999. Author's translation).

This tension between admiration and infantilisation peaked in his observation that Arabs *"comme les enfants, ils acceptent l'obéissance sauf a disobéir souvent*" ("Like children, they accept obedience except when they often disobey") he wrote in une année … (Fromentin, 1999, p. 200). He explained in a more complementary way "*il touché aux deux extremités de l'esprit humain, l'enfant et le gene, par une faculté sans pareille, l'amour du merveilleux*" ("He touched both extremes of the human spirit, the child and the genius, with an unparalleled faculty: a love of the marvelous.") (Frometin, 1999, p. 201. Author's translation), a phrase that romanticised "noble savagery" while denying Algerians political maturity

Nowhere is this more evident than in his 1863 painting *Falconry in Algeria: The Spoils*, where the hunters' dignified poses and flowing burnouses mask the colonial reality: falconry, a traditional pursuit, was being displaced by French land seizures. The painting's title, "*The Spoils*", unwittingly echoes the logic of extraction underpinning the colonial project.

5. Fromentin's Harem Fantasies and the Epistemic Violence of *Dévoilement*

Fromentin's harem fantasies were acts of *dévoilement* ("unveilling") (Alloula, 1986), where the coloniser's erotic gaze, fixated on 'perfumed shadows moving behind pierced screens', mirrored France's territorial possession. Like the staged postcards Alloula critiques,

these descriptions fabricated an Algeria legible only through European desire. Unlike Delacroix's paintings, which relied on Moroccan models, Fromentin's accounts lack ethnographic verification. The veil, stripped of cultural meaning, became a tantalising obstruction to colonial knowledge; reinforcing what Djebar (1985) would later call the 'mutilated hand' of representation.

Alloula's analysis of French colonial postcards underscores how Fromentin's literary harem scenes, though predating photographic Orientalism, functioned identically: both reduced Algerian women to eroticised symbols of conquest. His lavish descriptions of "perfumed shadows," constructed a fantasy Algeria where women's veiled bodies signified both exotic allure and the need for colonial intervention. This *dévoilement*, extended beyond voyeurism; it was epistemic violence, denying Algerian women subjectivity while positioning French rule as a liberating force.

Fromentin's narratives meticulously documented interactions with Arab men, yet Muslim women appeared only as spectral figures, odalisques in seraglios or anonymous dancers. The veil, in his accounts, ceased to be a cultural practice and became instead a fetishised obstruction. This selective vision mirrored France's broader colonial project, where the coloniser's gaze dictated which aspects of Indigenous life were deemed worthy of recognition. His artistic output from harem fantasies to Falconry in Algeria circulated in France as *le voyage de l'art pour l'art*, aestheticising subjugation as high culture. Alloula's indictment of colonial postcards as "the pornography of military conquest" applies equally to Fromentin's work. Both mediums transformed Algerians into consumable exotica, their circulation reinforcing the power structures that enabled their creation.

6. Selective Piety: How Fromentin Framed Islamic Practice

Fromentin's portrayal of Islamic 'barbarism' epitomised Bhabha's (1994) colonial ambivalence: he admired Muslim devotion (*touche à tous les aspects de la vie "*affects all aspects of life*"*) yet pathologised practices like saint veneration as proof of Algerian irrationality. This duality is captured in his painting *Arabe portant un fou en croupe* ("Arab Carrying a Madman") and his observations of Muslims venerating the mentally ill (*le fou est un saint*), which simultaneously acknowledged Islam's social embeddedness while framing it as exotic deviation from European norms.

His fascination with Islamic practices revealed deeper contradictions in his colonial gaze. While documenting the spiritual rhythm of daily prayers and the communal significance of *Eid al-Fitr*, Fromentin reduced complex traditions to Orientalist tropes, most strikingly in his voyeuristic accounts of condemned prisoners invoking *Mektoub* ("it is written") with stoic resignation. What he admired as noble fatalism served to reinforce colonial binaries, contrasting 'rational' European agency with 'passive' Muslim resignation.

This selective representation reached its peak in Fromentin's morbid fixation on decapitated heads at city gates. His detailed yet detached descriptions constructed an image of Algerian society as inherently paradoxical, devout in prayer yet tolerant of brutality. Rather than contextualising these manifestations within French military violence (the *razzias*) or cultural disruption, Fromentin presented them as evidence of Islam's 'barbaric' essence. The same observer who noted Islam's integration into daily life remained conspicuously silent about France's own violence, from Parisian guillotines to colonial massacres.

Ultimately, Fromentin's engagement with Islam exemplified what Fanon (1963) would later term the "*Manichean delirium of colonialism*," a discursive strategy that simultaneously infantilised Algerians as incapable of self-rule while melancholically mourning their "*lost"* traditions. His compartmentalised appreciation, reducing spiritual practices to 'picturesque'

details while emphasising alleged contradictions, served to justify the *civilising mission*. Even his genuine fascination with marabout veneration and Islamic social ethics became tools in the Orientalist arsenal, reinforcing the fiction of Muslim 'paradox' rather than examining colonialism's destabilising impact.

7. Degraded Algeria: The Manufactured Backwardness

Fromentin's travel narratives constructed a vision of Algeria that oscillated between romanticism and revulsion, with the latter serving as tacit justification for colonial intervention. His detailed accounts of urban poverty, "*sordid sans trivialité grave*" (Fromentin, 1999, p. 200), framed Algerian society as mired in immutable squalor, contrasting sharply with the redemptive grace he attributed to its landscapes. This emphasis on decay reached its most graphic expression in his morbid fascination with decapitated heads displayed at city gates, which he described with lurid detachment. Rather than contextualising such violence within colonial disruption or resistance, Fromentin presented it as evidence of innate barbarism, reinforcing the Orientalist trope of the "*bloodthirsty Moor*" (Fromentin, 1999).

The colonial binary was further entrenched through Fromentin's portrayal of Arab "cunning" and his reduction of *mektoub* (Arabic for 'it is written,' a concept invoking divine predestination in Islam) to passive fatalism, ignoring its theological complexity and its mobilisation in anti-colonial resistance (Lazreg, 1994). His striking focus on decapitated heads (a practice exacerbated by French counterinsurgency tactics) exemplifies what Lorcin terms "selective barbarism," pathologising Indigenous violence while eliding colonial atrocities. These representations worked synergistically: the stereotype of deceitfulness justified strict French governance, while the framing of Muslim resignation to fate naturalised the violence of conquest.

Nowhere was this selective vision more apparent than in Fromentin's lamentations over Algeria's "dishonoured" culture. While he mourned the erosion of indigenous practices, he conspicuously omitted French responsibility, whether in the military's destruction of the Casbah or the systemic displacement of communities. This erasure served a crucial ideological function: presenting colonialism as tragically inevitable yet ultimately preferable to the imagined "chaos" of autonomous Algerian society.

Fromentin's narrative silences are particularly revealing. His accounts contain no reckoning with French atrocities, from mass executions to scorched-earth campaigns that characterised the conquest. This omission transforms his work into what Fanon recognised as symbolic warfare: by fixating on Algerian "savagery," Fromentin's travelogue diverted attention from the brutality of the civilising mission itself. His Algeria emerges as a disembodied spectacle, its severed heads and "dishonoured" traditions demanding European intervention even as they were products of that intervention.

8. Djebar's Mutilated Hand vs. Lorcin's Fantasy: The Unresolved Trauma of Fromentin's Algeria

Where Lorcin (1995) reads Fromentin's Algeria as a 'private fantasy', Djebar's 'mutilated hand' (Djebar, 1985) forces a reckoning: his art dismembered lived experience, preserving only fragments palatable to Europe. Lorcin's focus on Orientalist projection overlooks the corporeal trauma Djebar centres, the severing of Algerian history from Fromentin's 'beautiful' relics. This tension between scholarly critique and embodied suffering frames the paradox of reading colonial texts today.

Lorcin's analysis positions Fromentin within French Orientalism's tradition, showing how his travel narratives constructed Algeria as a canvas for European desires, what Edward Said (1978) identified as the West's tendency to invent rather than represent the East. Yet

Djebar's intervention proves more visceral, her metaphor exposes how Fromentin's paintings of ruined *Casbahs* and elegies for "vanishing" traditions performed symbolic violence, amputating Algerian experience from its historical roots to create collector's items for the colonial gaze.

This dichotomy raises urgent questions about aesthetic redemption. When Fromentin declared, "*After the scientific, political, and military voyage, it was now time for the voyage of art for art's sake,"* he revealed the fundamental contradiction of colonial aesthetics, the pretence of artistic purity while benefiting from imperial violence. Djebar's mutilated hand reminds us that his "disinterested" observations were acts of curation, preserving palm trees while ignoring the *razzias* that uprooted them, documenting veiled women while erasing their subjectivity. Even his mourning for Algeria's "dishonoured" culture served, paradoxically, to consecrate the colonial order that caused that dishonour.

The enduring significance of Fromentin's work lies in this double bind. As Lorcin demonstrates, it epitomises Orientalism's epistemological violence "the fantasy of an "authentic" East (Lorcin et al., 1995, p. 76). However, as Djebar's wounded imagery insists, it also embodies colonialism's physical violence, not just misrepresentation, but dismemberment. This dual nature challenges contemporary readers: can we appreciate Fromentin's artistic skill without legitimising the structures that enabled it? Or does his work remain, as Djebar suggests, an open wound in Algeria's cultural memory?

9. Fromentin's Legacy: From Colonial Nostalgia to Decolonial Reckoning

Eugène Fromentin's *Une Année dans le Sahel* played a defining role in shaping how Algeria was imagined in nineteenth-century French Orientalism. His romanticised portrayal of a "vanishing" Algeria not only reflected colonial attitudes of the time but also helped construct an enduring visual and symbolic legacy. Today, this legacy continues to shape debates about colonial memory, cultural restitution, and decolonial aesthetics. Scholars now revisit such works not just as literary artefacts but also as active sites of symbolic power. Ann Laura Stoler describes these lingering effects as the "ruins of empire", not remnants frozen in time, but living traces embedded in how postcolonial societies see, feel, and understand their past (Stoler 2013).

Fromentin's mourning for a "dying world" reflects what Stoler calls *imperial nostalgia*, which is a melancholic view that both grieves and justifies the destruction caused by colonialism. His use of aesthetic language and a so-called apolitical *l'art pour l'art* style softens and even erases the violent realities of empire, framing cultural loss as a natural, almost beautiful, decline. This kind of nostalgia continues to influence how Algeria is remembered in the European imagination, presenting colonial domination through a veil of poetic detachment.

Contemporary Algerian intellectuals have taken up this legacy not to mourn but to challenge it. Abdelkader Aoudjit, in *The Algerian Novel and Colonial Discourse: Witnessing to a Différend* (2010), argues that the most significant response to Orientalist erasures comes not from European critique, but from Algerian literature's act of testimonial rupture. Drawing on Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the *différend*, a wrong that cannot be articulated within the terms of dominant discourse, Aoudjit suggests that Algerian writers bear witness to a history that colonial narratives like Fromentin's render illegible. Fromentin's aestheticised depictions, then, are not only politically evasive but epistemologically totalising: they foreclose Indigenous testimony by reducing Algeria to an image, a tableau, a scene without subjects. For Aoudjit, the task of the Algerian writer is to break that tableau, to speak the unspeakable, to shatter the colonial archive's illusion of coherence, and to reclaim a narrative terrain that had been overwritten by Orientalist fantasy. This act of reclamation is exemplified

in novels like Lazhari Labter's *Laghouat. La ville assassinée ou le point de vue de* Fromentin (2018), which, as Fouzia Amrouche (2023) notes, performs a "*travail de mémoire comme processus réparateur*" ("a work of memory as a restorative process") by reinvesting colonial archives to bear witness to the very genocide that Fromentin aestheticised. Here, the *mutilated hand* that Djebar invoked begins to write back, using the coloniser's own documents against him.

In this light, Fromentin's work becomes emblematic of what decolonial theorists now call the coloniality of knowledge, a system in which European modes of seeing, writing, and archiving not only misrepresent the colonised but silence their epistemic sovereignty. Achille Mbembe's *Brutalism* (2024) provides a conceptual framework to further interrogate this legacy by reframing Fromentin's *l'art pour l'art* as a precursor to *aestheticised necropolitics*, which refers to a visual and philosophical mode that converts destruction into cultural capital. For Mbembe, brutalism is not merely an architectural style, but a broader logic of dispossession and enclosure, wherein violence is rendered sublime, and ruins become spectacles of mastery. Fromentin's melancholic Algeria is emblematic of this logic. By extracting beauty from devastation, Fromentin's work prefigures what Mbembe describes as "the choreography of death in modern colonial aesthetics," where life is subordinated to form and resistance is aestheticised rather than acknowledged (Mbembe 2024).

This reframing shifts the conversation from critique to reckoning. It calls not merely for reinterpretation, but for epistemic disobedience, what Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez describe as the refusal of colonial modes of knowledge production, and the affirmation of alternative ways of narrating, remembering, and witnessing. Fromentin's travelogue, viewed through this lens, is not simply a problematic historical document, but a living site of contestation. The "mutilated hand" that Djebar famously invoked was not a metaphor for silence but a demand for reparation, a symbolic index of the violences that must be named, recorded, and undone. Aoudjit's notion of *bearing witness to a différend* intensifies this imperative: it insists that Fromentin's aesthetic cannot be simply "read against the grain," but must be *interrupted* by counter-narratives that expose its exclusions and reclaim its silences.

These tensions have far-reaching consequences. They raise urgent questions about how Fromentin's legacy is curated in Western institutions, taught in literature and art history departments, or cited in French narratives of cultural sophistication. Should his work be presented as apolitical aesthetic heritage, or should it be re-contextualised as part of the machinery of colonial domination? How might Algerian scholars, curators, and writers repossess this archive, not merely to analyse it, but to reimagine new forms of cultural narration rooted in agency rather than erasure?

In Algeria today, where issues like the restitution of stolen artefacts and the decolonisation of public space remain deeply contentious, Fromentin's legacy feels particularly relevant. His travelogue, still taught in French literary canons, is more than a historical curiosity. It functions as a palimpsest through which contemporary Algerian thinkers articulate a *différend*, a wrong rendered invisible by aesthetic refinement. Through the work of Aoudjit, Stoler, and Mbembe, Fromentin's legacy is reimagined not as a closed chapter in colonial art history, but as an ongoing crisis in the politics of representation. Its reckoning lies not in the archive alone, but in the lived and literary voices that continue to bear witness to what it once tried to erase.

10. Conclusion

Eugène Fromentin's *Une Année dans le Sahel* stands as a paradigmatic case of how Orientalist travel literature served as both art and ideology, a medium that simultaneously documented and distorted Algeria under French rule. Through the critical lenses of Patricia Lorcin and Assia Djebar, Fromentin's work emerges not merely as an exoticised travelogue but as a locus of epistemological violence, wherein European aesthetic desire supplanted Algerian historical reality. Lorcin's notion of the "private fantasy" and Djebar's haunting image of the "mutilated hand" lay bare the symbolic dismemberment that underpinned French imperial vision; a vision that turned Algeria into a tableau of vanishing traditions, emptied of agency and rendered consumable for the metropole.

Fromentin's tensions between admiration and infantilisation, between lamenting Algeria's "dishonoured" traditions and silencing France's role in their erasure, reflect Fanon's "Manichean delirium". His *l'art pour l'art* philosophy, epitomised by declarations like "Le monde est à celui qui voyage," masked the brutal infrastructures of conquest that enabled his gaze. Whether evoking palm trees suffocating under French cement or veiled women reduced to aesthetic shadows, Fromentin's writings transformed structural violence into melancholic beauty. Yet his intermittent unease, his discomfort with French "arrogance," his fascination with Islamic social cohesion, suggests the presence of ethical fissures, moments where artistic conscience strained against imperial dogma.

However, as this article has argued, the ethical reckoning with Fromentin's legacy cannot end with ambivalence. The inclusion of contemporary decolonial thought, particularly the interventions of Ann Laura Stoler, Achille Mbembe, and Abdelkader Aoudjit, shifts the critical frame from exposure to intervention. Fromentin's elegiac Algeria must be understood not only as a product of 19th-century Orientalism but as part of what Mbembe calls the aesthetic choreography of necropolitics**;** a regime that renders colonised life disposable while converting its remains into cultural capital. Aoudjit's invocation of the *différend*, meanwhile, reveals how Algerian literary voices have worked to rupture this visual and textual foreclosure by bearing witness to what colonial discourse silences, the irreducible reality of Indigenous suffering, memory, and survival.

In light of these insights, to study Fromentin today is to engage a critical double bind: his oeuvre remains indispensable for understanding how empire was visually and textually legitimated, yet it demands that we move beyond critique to the politics of restitution, re-narration, and decolonial praxis. The stakes are not merely historical. Fromentin's representations continue to shape how Algeria is exhibited, remembered, and taught in museums, textbooks, and public discourse. Thus, we must ask, how do we confront the aestheticisation of colonial violence without repeating it? How do we teach *Une Année dans le Sahel* without re-inscribing its erasures? Moreover, how might Algerian scholars and communities reclaim from its fragments the histories that Fromentin sought to preserve only as ruins?

Une Année dans le Sahel is no longer just a colonial artefact, it is a contested archive that stages the encounter between colonial fantasy and decolonial memory. In re-reading it today, we are not merely looking back, but we are challenging the epistemic regimes that continue to frame how Algeria is seen and known. This work remains to transform the mutilated hand into a hand that writes back.

"En un mot, il y a deux hommes qu'il ne faut pas confondre: il y a le voyageur qui peint, et puis il y a le peintre qui voyage. Et le jour où je saurai positivement si je suis l'un ou l'autre, je vous dirai exactement ce que je prétends faire de ce pays." ("In short, there are two men who should not be confused: there is the traveller who paints, and then there is the

painter who travels. And the day I know for sure whether I am one or the other, I will tell you exactly what I intend to do with this country.") (Fromentin, 1999. author's translation).

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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