

In Memoriam: Assia
Djebar, 1936–2015*[[]ai coupé les amarres**I cut myself adrift*—Assia Djebar, *L'amour, la fantasia* 13; *Fantasia* 5*Se dire à soi-même adieu**To bid oneself farewell*—Assia Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* 404; “Nowhere in My Father’s House”¹

ANNE DONADEY

THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN READER AND TEXT IS PARADOXICALLY DIFFICULT TO PUT INTO WORDS—AT THE SAME TIME COGNITIVE AND emotional, ideological and aesthetic, intellectual and physical, it can only be rendered poetically. It is a process of imagination, an unlikely, incandescent connection that can change a reader’s life. At its best, it shakes you loose, turns you inside out, leaves you “pantelant” (“gasping for breath”), a word Assia Djebar uses toward the end of her life in what was to be her last book, the autobiographical novel *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* (“Nowhere in My Father’s House” [106]). The narrator-author remembers her earliest “choc esthétique” (“aesthetic shock”), which she experienced in a French boarding school for girls in Algeria when she encountered Charles Baudelaire’s “L’invitation au voyage” (“Invitation to the Voyage”) for the first time, read aloud to a class of eleven-year-olds by the southern French schoolteacher Madame Blasi (104). Sixty years later, Djebar’s narrator “revi[t] la scène” (“relives the scene” [104]), re-creates it, stages it as a ritual, a “liturgie” (“liturgy”)—the *laïc* (“secular”) rite of poetic recitation in the French classroom where you learn to *mettre le ton* (read a poem or recite it from memory with the appropriate theatrical gravitas), a rite that Djebar qualifies in religious terms, comparing it to the only cognate experience the young girl has had, religious awakening. She likens it to “un verset coranique” (“a Quranic verse” [103]) handed down by an officiating “prêtresse” (“priestess” [102]).²

ANNE DONADEY, professor of French and women’s studies at San Diego State University, San Diego, is the author of a book on Assia Djebar and Leïla Sebbar, *Recasting Postcolonialism: Women Writing between Worlds* (Heinemann, 2001), a coeditor, with H. Adlai Murdoch, of *Postcolonial Theory and Francophone Literary Studies* (UP of Florida, 2005), the editor of a special issue of *L’Esprit Créateur* on Djebar’s works (2008), and the editor of the forthcoming MLA volume *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Assia Djebar*.

Conservative Islamists would be shocked that the sacred language (Arabic) has turned into French, the religious leader into a secular, non-Muslim woman, and the religious text into secular poetry. Proponents of secular French schooling as well as conservative Catholics would not be amused at the public school teacher's being compared to a female priest conducting a religious service. Further, like mystics in many religions, Djebar highlights the sensual aspect of the experience: "votre corps, oui, mais aussi votre cœur . . . se retrouvent pantelants" ("your body, yes, but also your heart . . . find themselves gasping for breath" [106]). *Pantelant* can connote at the same time sexual ecstasy, awe, and physical overexertion. Djebar interpellates her reader by switching from "I" to "you," making the reader participate in the religiously secular and sensual epiphany she stages for us.

Most of Djebar's themes are present in this scene of reading, which resonates for me on many levels. This literary encounter in a colonial setting marked by violent conquest and death connects those who were never supposed to come together—the syphilitic nineteenth-century bad boy and poetic genius with the mid-twentieth-century Algerian girl in a French boarding school. More than twenty-five years ago, another literary encounter, in an American classroom, connected the famous late-twentieth-century Algerian writer with a young graduate student from France who still had everything to learn about her country's colonial history and was handed a book that would unlock this history and many other doors for her. I will forever be grateful to the Mauritian scholar Françoise Lionnet, through whose intercession I discovered the most amazing book I have ever read, Djebar's 1985 *L'amour, la fantasia* (*Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*). The novel—and Lionnet's steadfast mentoring—changed my life.

Lionnet has written about finding the voice of women from other French colonies, Mauritius and Réunion, recorded for poster-

ity in one of Baudelaire's poems. His inclusion of the Creole term *cafrine* (used by local women to name themselves) is "the point of emergence of the *other's* voice in his text, the site of heteroglossia and hybridity in language, . . . the place where Baudelaire is both seduced by the voice of the woman, and enshrines her, imprisons her self-designation within his own discourse" (168). Lionnet's analysis echoes the complexities of Djebar's inclusion of Algerian women's voices speaking in dialectal Algerian Arabic, transcoded into her narratives in French. As Maya Boutaghou argues, Djebar's works are themselves in and of translation ("Style" and "Writing"). Their complex multilingualism reflects both the "epistemic violence" of colonialism and the writer's creative engagement with and resistance to that violence (Spivak, "Three Women's Texts" 804), as evinced in this passage from *L'amour, la fantasia*:

[L]a langue française, corps et voix, s'installe en moi comme un orgueilleux préside, tandis que la langue maternelle, toute en oralité, en hardes dépenaillées, résiste et attaque, entre deux essoufflements. Le rythme du "rebato" en moi s'éperonnant, je suis à la fois l'assiégé étranger et l'autochtone partant à la mort par bravade, illusoire effervescence du dire et de l'écrit.
(299–300)

The French tongue, with its body and voice, has established a proud presidio within me, while the mother-tongue, all oral tradition, all rags and tatters, resists and attacks between two breathing spaces. With the rhythm of the *rebato* spurring me on, I am both the besieged foreigner and the native swaggering off to die, in the illusory effervescence of the spoken and written word. (*Fantasia* 215; trans. modified)

The languages vying for advantage within the writer are represented in terms of the colonial military conquest and the anticolonial guerrilla resistance. The back-and-forth rhythm of the skirmish is rendered by the rhythm of the sentences, and the linguistic battle to the

death inscribes itself on the narrator's body, which encompasses both sides. The only possible escape—which is never entirely possible, hence Djébar's growing pessimism as reflected in the evolution of her works over the years—is to be found in the pure poetry with which Djébar ends the sentence: "illusoire effervescence du dire et de l'écrit."

In *Nulle part*, the narrator's first encounter with French poetry is far from this type of violence but is also a scene of orality and listening. The young girl is taken by the poetic rhythm, "la beauté des mots français" ("the beauty of French words" [103]). Her aural rendition of the name of the poet that she was hearing for the first time, "Beau de l'Air" ("beauty of the air" [101]), highlights the importance of hearing in her poetic epiphany. Djébar's attention to the ambiguity of language, her foregrounding of the point where recognition is misrecognition, where understanding coexists with misunderstanding, and where all communication is already a translation is one reason poststructuralists are attracted to her works.

Djébar stages the scene of reading or listening by highlighting some important aspects of this "performative encounter" (Rosello). The text has to be intrinsically poetic, rhythmic, and beautiful, but that is not enough for the "felicitous" encounter to occur (Rosello 7). If the text is a gift, the reader or listener must be ready to receive it. Djébar describes Madame Blasi as the "première Française à m'avoir fait un tel don, par élan, par recueillement, . . . en offrande" ("first French woman to have given me such a gift, impulsively, contemplatively, . . . as an offering" [102]). The young girl in turn welcomes the gift: "j'ai reçu ces vers" ("I received these verses" [103]). She surmises, "Je fus sans doute la seule fillette—l'indigène—à être bouleversée à la fois par le rythme, la musique, sa limpidité, les images furtives, si proches, et pourtant venant de si loin" ("I must have been the only little girl—the 'indigenous'

one—who was so deeply moved at the same time by the rhythm, the music, its clarity, its furtive images, so close and yet coming from so far away" [106]). Readers or listeners must be receptive to the text's beauty, ready to let themselves be touched by it. There are many intended readers and listeners but few true ones, for these are struck to the heart by the text. True readers or listeners may not be the intended ones—the French schoolgirls in the French school, where the beauty of French poetry is instrumentalized to create patriotic pride in French children and bolster their sense of French national, imperial identity—but here the true listener is the unlikely threshold reader, the "indigenous" girl who is seen as inferior but turns out to be the only one who has the aesthetic sensibility to experience Baudelaire's verses fully.

In the middle of this gloriously evocative chapter, Djébar abruptly switches gears, contrasting the felicitous aesthetic encounter with its opposite, the school director's refusal to allow the sixth grader to study literary Arabic (she is forced to take English instead, which may shed some light on why Djébar was never able to master English, even after a decade of living in the United States). This encounter with colonialism's yoke, like the encounter with Baudelaire's poetry and the metaphoric battle discussed above, revolves around language. These vertiginously juxtaposed scenes—in which the narrator is not allowed to study her own language in the invader's school, not even as a "foreign," deterritorialized language, yet discovers an unexpected intimacy with French poetry—vividly illustrate Gayatri Spivak's concept of colonialism as an "enabling violation" (*Critique* 371). Dana Strand's insight that Djébar's fiction provides an easier point of entry into postcolonial theory for undergraduate students than the theoretical texts themselves is confirmed yet again in these scenes, which testify to the power of literature to reach a wider public at a deeper level than any writer may have thought

possible. Djébar theorizes in narrative and filmic form, taking her audience on a transformative journey (Christian; Weber-Fève).

Listening to Baudelaire's poetry answers a basic need of the narrator, who uses the metaphor of drinking to capture the experience: her teacher was "la première à m'avoir donné à boire le tout premier vers français" ("the first to offer me my very first sip of French verse"), which Djébar compares to a "filet d'hydromel" ("honey wine drizzle"). Like Baudelaire's poetry, Djébar's re-creation of her first literary "émoi" ("emotion" [106]) relies heavily on the senses: sound (listening to Madame Blasi's voice and to the musicality of the verse), sight (the recollection of Madame Blasi's red-painted fingernails), and taste (drinking honey wine). Touch is also central. Recalling how the narrator's paternal grandmother would hold her feet between her hands to warm them up at night when she was a toddler,³ Djébar compares this scene of tenderness to the kind of protection from the colonial divide that Baudelaire's poetry seems to inaugurate. Using Fanonian language, she contrasts the "monde divisé en deux" ("world divided into two parts") of the French boarding school—a microcosm of Algerian colonial society—with the bridge across these worlds that Baudelaire's poetry both announces and creates (107). One hallmark of Djébar's works is to stage such unlikely encounters. When the paternal grandmother with her silent touch is conjured up beside Baudelaire and his sensual poetry, both become protective figures watching over the little girl.

In *L'amour, la fantasia*, Djébar made it clear that her father's loving gift of the French language and of mobility (he was an Algerian elementary school teacher who took his daughter with him to his Algerian boys' school) was also a curse of loss—loss of the written Arabic language and separation from other Algerian women—danger, and potential death. Like many Arab feminists of her generation and the previous one, Djébar

highlighted the modern father's role in emancipating the daughter through access to education. At the same time, she was critical of the limits of his emancipatory role, especially with respect to the daughter's body and sexuality. She was close to her father and never entirely got over his death in the mid-1990s. Influenced by her Mediterranean upbringing, she was full of *pudeur* (a term that does not exist in English and whose closest equivalent is "modesty"). In part as a result of this, she had an ambivalent relation to writing the self. In most of her works, starting with *L'amour, la fantasia*, she wrote in the autobiographical mode, but her autobiography always hides itself and insists on its uncertain generic status. For instance, her two most autobiographical texts, *Vaste est la prison* (*So Vast the Prison*) and *Nulle part*, are billed as novels. Djébar purposely confuses the reader about the generic status of the latter text: in this "roman" ("novel"), the narrator's first name is given as Fatima (Djébar's own first name, Assia Djébar being a pseudonym). The name Fatima first appears in *Nulle part* in the Baudelaire chapter (103), where it highlights her difference from her classmates in the context of the colonial divide and of the promise of potential healing announced by the poet's verses.

In spite of this promise, *Nulle part* is primarily a book of mourning and melancholia. Scenes of mourning occurred more frequently in Djébar's works starting in the early 1990s, as the promises that attended Algerian independence continued to recede—women's rights suffered many losses, and francophone intellectuals were targeted for elimination during the rise of fundamentalist Islam, as the country sank into a spiral of violence. Djébar's writing is a writing of war, at war with itself, autobiography wrestling with history, liberation with death. Her works are what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction," poised between history and fiction and self-referentially pointing to the process of representation at work in any retelling (105). They

are historical palimpsests superimposing different periods of violence in Algerian history, from nineteenth-century French colonialism and Algerian resistance to it to the mid-twentieth-century Algerian war of national independence from the French and the civil violence in 1990s postcolonial Algeria. In each case Djébar highlights details of women's oppression and resistance. Her writing is therefore also a writing of solidarity among ruins, of a never-extinguished desire to reach and listen to Algerian women—relatives as well as briefly encountered strangers—and to represent that process through fiction, to pass on their stories while trying not to speak for them, to alert us to the emotion in their voices when they tell their stories while never fooling us into believing that we can “give voice” transparently to someone else. This is another insight Djébar shared with Spivak (“Can the Subaltern Speak?”). Djébar always highlights her position as transmitter, mediator, the one who of necessity both passes on and obscures the story. Clarisse Zimra has traced the ambiguous position of the mediator or intertextual intercessor in Djébar's works. One of Djébar's most-often-quoted insights regarding writing about Algerian women appears in her 1980 collection of short stories *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (*Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*): “Ne pas prétendre ‘parler pour,’ ou pire ‘parler sur,’ à peine parler *près de*, et si possible *tout contre*” (“Don't claim to ‘speak for’ or, worse, to ‘speak on,’ barely speaking *next to*, and if possible *very close to*” [8; 2]). This insight is central to postcolonial and Muslim feminist theories alike. Djébar's call to really listen to the voices of Algerian women is especially relevant now, when pseudo-feminist imperialist arguments are regularly used to justify Islamophobia and Western military intervention in Muslim-majority countries (Abdo and Bobroff). In her works Djébar constantly highlights the dangers inherent in passing on a story, especially “dans la langue

de l'adversaire d'hier” (“in the former enemy's language” [*L'amour* 241; *Fantasia* 215]): she stages the danger of misrepresentation and appropriation of women's voices in colonial and postcolonial contexts, in which women's voices are often instrumentalized and made to serve other masters, as well as the danger of rejection and death faced by the transmitter-translator-transcriber herself. As I argue in *Recasting Postcolonialism: Women Writing between Worlds*, “the dialogue between women in Djébar's work inscribes itself precisely in the interstices between sisterhood and appropriation, in the shuttling between ‘speaking for’ and ‘speaking very close to’” (53).

Assia Djébar was supremely wary of official commemorations, all the while working relentlessly toward a recognition of the multifaceted ways in which women, especially Algerian women, exercise their agency. She highlighted their daily acts of speech and of courage as well as their inevitably less noble feelings and actions. She did not want to make them into statues and saints but always insisted on their faults and failures, their sometimes inappropriate desires, including her own. She was herself constantly in motion, her female narrators endlessly striding around cities, fully inhabiting the public sphere and watching others around them—all traditionally male prerogatives. She became a writer because she was a reader and a listener first. May the circle of her readers continue to widen so that her voice keeps on being heard, pushing us, inspiring us, sometimes disturbing us across space, time, and languages.

NOTES

1. Unattributed translations are my own.
2. Brigitte Weltman-Aron also reads this scene. She focuses on the importance of rhythm to both the French poetry and Quranic recitation (42).
3. Djébar had described this scene in *L'amour, la fantasia*, a book she called her “préparation à une

autobiographie” (“preparation for an autobiography” [“Entretien” 203]).

WORKS CITED

- Abdo, Diya, and Maria Bobroff. “Don’t Claim to ‘Speak for’ Algerian Women: Reading Djébar across Disciplinary Borders.” *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Assia Djébar*. Ed. Anne Donadey. New York: MLA, forthcoming.
- Boutaghou, Maya. “Le style en arabesque d’Assia Djébar.” *French Studies* 67.2 (2013): 216–31. Print.
- . “Writing in *Bi-langue*.” *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Assia Djébar*. Ed. Anne Donadey. New York: MLA, forthcoming.
- Christian, Barbara. “The Race for Theory.” 1989. *Making Face, Making Soul / Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*. Ed. Gloria Anzaldúa. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990. 335–45. Print.
- Djébar, Assia. *L’amour, la fantasia*. 1985. Paris: Michel, 1995. Print.
- . “Entretien avec Assia Djébar, écrivain algérien.” Interview by Mildred Mortimer. *Research in African Literatures* 19.2 (1988): 197–205. Print.
- . *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*. Trans. and introd. Dorothy S. Blair. London: Quartet, 1989. Print.
- . *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*. Paris: Femmes, 1980. Print.
- . *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*. Paris: Fayard, 2007. Print.
- . *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*. Trans. Marjolijn de Jager. Charlottesville: Caraf; U of Virginia P, 1992. Print.
- Donadey, Anne. *Recasting Postcolonialism: Women Writing between Worlds*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988. Print.
- Lionnet, Françoise. “Reframing Baudelaire: Literary History, Biography, Postcolonial Theory, and Vernacular Languages.” *French Cultural Studies: Criticism at the Crossroads*. Ed. Marie-Pierre Le Hir and Dana Strand. Albany: State U of New York P, 2000. 153–84. Print.
- Rosello, Mireille. *France and the Maghreb: Performative Encounters*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2005. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 1985. *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. 66–111. Print.
- . *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999. Print.
- . “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism.” *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1991. 798–814. Print.
- Strand, Dana. “Assia Djébar’s *La femme sans sépulture* as Postcolonial Primer.” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 13.3 (2009): 339–47. Print.
- Weber-Fève, Stacey. “Assia Djébar as Film Theorist in ‘Touchia: Ouverture’ and *Ces voix qui m’assiègent*.” *French Review* 81.3 (2008): 542–50. Print.
- Weltman-Aron, Brigitte. *Algerian Imprints: Ethical Space in the Works of Assia Djébar and Hélène Cixous*. New York: Columbia UP, 2015. Print.
- Zimra, Clarisse. “Disorienting the Subject in Djébar’s *L’amour, la fantasia*.” *Yale French Studies* 87 (1995): 149–70. Print.