

BOOK REVIEW

Anne Donadey, ed. *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Assia Djebar*.

New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2017. x + 188 pp. Notes on Contributors. Works Cited. Index. \$40.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1603292955.

Assia Djebar, one of the most notable francophone writers of all time, offers a very rich and insightful ground for the classroom. *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Assia Djebar*, edited by Anne Donadey, comprises a wide range of entries to facilitate the teaching of Djebar's works, from historiographical, interdisciplinary, cultural, pedagogical, and linguistic perspectives. Part One, "Materials," contains a comprehensive bibliography and a section on editions and translations of Djebar's works and secondary sources. Part Two, "Approaches," which includes sixteen essays, introduces critical, theoretical, and pedagogical debates on the various interpretations of Djebar's works while highlighting the challenges and issues, but also the rewards, in teaching her texts. Postcolonial feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak gives a concluding overview on teaching Djebar, attesting that her works call for an "absolute reader" and that its most important stance is against identitarianism, since "if you cannot say yes to the enemy, you cannot practice freedom—this is imaginative activism" (157).

In order to better understand Djebar's complex and oftentimes ambivalent standpoints regarding patriarchy, orientalism, colonialism and post-colonialism, feminist stances, and multilingual structures, many contributing scholars propose to introduce students to the intertwining historical layers of Djebar's works by first giving them a solid historical, geographical, and cultural framework and access to source materials (Guyot-Bender, Budig-Markin). But because of the richness and multilayered nature of Djebar's works, which present particular challenges to students unfamiliar with Arab and Muslim societies, several other contributors propose an approach and reading strategies that would help to deconstruct images, myths, and preconceived stereotypical notions, in order to acquire intercultural competence and nuanced perspectives to such complex realities. Hanan Elsayed (focusing on *Loïn de Médine*) proposes a break with the monolingual approach adopted in francophone studies by reading some excerpts from other accounts of early Islam, as the *Islamiiyyat*, the twentieth-century corpus of prose texts in Arabic, or the multivolume *Biographies of the Women of the Prophet's Household* of the Egyptian Islamic scholar and author 'A'isha 'Abd

al-Rahman. Robert Mortimer's pedagogical approach to *Les enfants du nouveau monde* is to situate the text historically, bringing anti-colonial and feminist theory into the discussion. Najat Rahman proposes to discuss Djébar's literary style and strategies in *L'amour, la fantasia* to avoid the students' simplification of Djébar's gender narrative of seclusion and silencing, studying for instance the term *aporia* and giving ample gender examples—as Rahman contends—since *aporia* is defined as a conflict in meaning that cannot be altogether resolved, where one meaning cannot be privileged over another. Diya Abdo and Maria Bobroff (examining *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* first and then *L'amour* in the classroom) propose reading Edward Said's introduction in his seminal book *Orientalism* in order to emphasize how orientalism intersects with issues of gender, then watching Tania Kamal-Eldin's *Hollywood Harems* and Parminder Vir's *Algeria: Women at War*. Christa Jones proposes to discuss *Oran, langue morte* in conjunction with a mosaic of journalistic, historical, and literary materials, including interviews, letters, world press photographs, and documentaries. To discuss the use of myth in political propaganda, Annica Vonèche recommends reading from Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* and then comparing the Casbah as a myth with Zeynep Celik's *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations*, Julien Duvivier's 1937 film *Pépé le Moko*, and Djébar's *La disparition de la langue française*. Carine Bourget suggests starting with a simple prereading activity to raise students' awareness about stereotypes of Muslim women. The whole class brainstorms and then elaborates on associations that first come to mind on hearing the words "Muslim women." The short stories in *Femmes d'Alger* are then read and studied to challenge these stereotypes by emphasizing several episodes that problematize and subvert a simplistic reading of Islam.

Several chapters focus on close readings which are essential for guiding students to approach Djébar's texts with hands-on activities, focused on specific passages, on stylistic innovation, and on features such as fragmentation, rhythmic repetition, frequency of some sounds, music quality, minimalist descriptions, or absence of verbs. Mortimer contends that interior monologues, as an index of fictionality, allow the students to understand the whole spectrum of different life experiences and viewpoints, introducing a gendered perspective that offers a nuanced interpretation of Algerian women's capabilities and limitations.

Considering the multiplicity of languages at work in Djébar's texts in order to elucidate the multilayered struggle between them is another way to approach her works. In the classroom, Abdo and Bobroff reenact what they call an "active listening silence" by asking students to simply read aloud, which can be productive to emphasize a "trajet d'écoute" (7), bringing awareness of the formal and aesthetic qualities of Djébar's intricate and complex prose. Comparing original texts with their English translation is another strategy that several chapters introduce in order to foresee what might be gained or missed by a reader unable to access either the French

or English (Abdo and Bobroff). Maya Boutaghou investigates, through the lens of Arabic, the interactions between French and Arabic and their possible visibility to the bilingual reader. Djébar's imitation and reproduction of several voices, as Boutaghou attests, could have different values. As an example, Djébar's complex use of syntax, in which oral and written cultures intermingle, dismantles hierarchies between languages. For example, her exploration of قلم (*qalam*, pen) and كلام (*kalaam*, speech) in many of her works encompasses the variations and plurality of Algeria's voices. Alison Rice asserts that turning students into translators makes them aware of the multiple possibilities that the original text contains and heightens their ability to analyze the translated text as its own literary creation.

A few chapters focus on the various intersections of genres and aesthetic detours in Djébar's works. Dominique Fisher uses the notion of "veiling effect" (76) to help students understand how Djébar's documentary approach uses fiction to claim the recognition of memories, which at the end highlights the intricate linkage between the narrative and body language and rhythm. Fisher also discusses how studying Djébar's references to novel and film documentary genres in *La femme sans sépulture* and *La disparition* can illuminate the transnational dimension of her work and enhance readings of it. In her upper-level French course titled Visual and Textual Interplay, Thérèse De Raedt examines the mutual influence between image and word by showing how paintings inspire writers and how texts inspire visual artists. Other chapters suggest pairing Djébar with other writers' works. Dana Strand recommends Hélène Cixous's *Pieds nus, Rêverie de la femme sauvage* with *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, to enhance students' appreciation of the diverse voices that contribute to the Algerian cultural and historical scene. For the class on memory they watch and discuss *La femme* and *La nouba*, read in conjunction with Charlotte Delbo's *La mémoire et les jours*. Vlatka Velcic asserts that Djébar is best read and analyzed in comparative contexts, transcultural, transhistorical, and transnational. She teaches her works in juxtaposition with those of other postcolonial women writers such as Arundhati Roy, Etel Ednan, Ama Ata Aidoo, Dubravka Ugresic, and Gloria Anzaldúa.

Assia Djébar's legacy is incommensurable. This constellation of essays provides numerous, insightful, culture-centered dialogical approaches to teaching her works. The essays are impressively adept at exploring the various interstitial spaces in Djébar's works, where languages, genres and viewpoints intertwine, expanding the students' horizons of thinking, bringing nuances to their perspectives, and challenging the ideas they often take for granted.

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For more reading on this subject, see:

- Bangura, Joseph J. 2012. "Gender and Ethnic Relations in Sierra Leone: Temne Women in Colonial Freetown." *History in Africa* 39: 267–92. doi:10.1353/hia.2012.0003.
- Mack, Beverly. 2011. "Nana Asma'u's Instruction and Poetry for Present-Day American Muslimahs." *History in Africa* 38: 153–68. doi:10.1353/hia.2011.0000.
- Schler, Lynn. 2004. "Writing African Women's History with Male Sources: Possibilities and Limitations." *History in Africa* 31: 319–33. doi:10.1017/S036154130000351X.