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# Visions of Odalisques: Orientalism and Conspicuous Consumption in Leïla Sebbar's "Le peintre et son modèle" (2007)

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## ABSTRACT

Many Algerian writers (Alloula, Djébar, Boudjedra) have revisited the representational politics of colonial iconography despite awareness that this endeavor is at risk of renewing exoticism. This article examines how Leïla Sebbar's "Le peintre et son modèle" reproduces such a problematic stance through the inclusion of a photograph by Joel Leick inline with her short story. Whereas Sebbar attempts to deconstruct the photograph's orientalism by placing it outside the realm of the aesthetic and resituating it within the sexual exploitation of women in the former French colonies, I intend to demonstrate how this photograph reintroduces the very inequalities that her text tries to evacuate. Leick's model elicits an eroticized gaze from readers, who become onlookers and obedient participants in the neocolonial consumption process. Rereading Sebbar's short story through the lens of this photograph thus shows current limitations to the power of postcolonial texts and, ultimately, their troubled dependence on orientalist iconography.

One of the most pervasive and enduring misconceptions about orientalism as a "system of representation"—whether in textual or iconographical form—is that it is solely the product of a Western white-dominated canon and its imperialist practices. Derived from Edward Said's famous book *Orientalism* (1978), this misrepresentation presumes that the essentializing and exoticizing gaze asserted European dominance, became an "integral part of European material civilization and culture" (Said 2), and rendered the Oriental "Other" a powerless victim. Thus, as many critics have suggested, Said's definition of orientalism

essentially perpetuated the deep-seated divide between East and West that it had set out to denounce.

Said's approach did little to account for tensions, contradictions, and discrepancies that surface in comparisons between orientalist narratives. In his view, there was no room for the colonized subject to assert a voice on par with the master-narrative. Following his instrumental work, however, the rise of post-colonial discourse created a powerful counternarrative. As postcolonial scholarship developed oppositional practices and privileged voices from the margins, it began to demystify imperialist cultural representations, paying particular attention to orientalist artifacts and narratives (Alloula, Boudjedra). As a result of this progression, critical readings have often operated under the assumption that the reappearance of orientalist topoi and artifacts in contemporary Western culture manifest colonial nostalgia, while reproductions by postcolonial writers and artists represent by nature a subversive act. This dual vision, however, appears limited in scope: it cannot account for the complexity of negotiations that today's reality demands when colonial postcards are still sold in large numbers in the streets of Algiers, and Algerian artists reproduce paintings of the *Odalisque* (Lazreg 191). If orientalism involves the creation and consumption of images of the Orient as colonial desire, then how should we react to what Rey Chow has called "Oriental's orientalism"? Despite efforts to the contrary, it seems that the (re)production of orientalist artifacts is at risk of replicating or being co-opted by the uneven discursive geography of "us vs. them" that it intends to demystify.

This issue is further complicated by the predicament of postcolonial literature's publishing market: while it is regarded as a product of the margins of the global literary community, this literature addresses primarily Western readers and scholars and is destined to be consumed by the center. In this light, it is important to ask: can critical intervention forged on orientalism adequately address its historical distortions without feeding into a certain Western nostalgia for these visual artifacts? What are the ethical implications of this fascination, and does the exploration of orientalist or, more broadly speaking, exotic iconography necessarily serve as a mediation and subversion of Western discourse on oriental women?

Leïla Sebbar addresses these problematic questions throughout her work. Abundant scholarship has already analyzed the orientalist intertext in Sebbar's earliest texts (Lionnet, Mortimer, Donadey, Vogl, and Eileraas). Focusing their readings on the *Sherazade* trilogy and short stories such as "La photo d'identité" in *La jeune fille au balcon*, these critics establish how Sebbar developed a subversive aesthetics that relied heavily on visual artifacts to translate and lay bare the process by which orientalist discourse is constructed. My goal shall not be to repeat these readings but to concentrate instead on a more recent work that Sebbar produced with photographer Joel Leick, which offers a new perspective on the ways she employs this type of intertext. This collection of short stories published by Al Manar in 2007 includes "Le peintre et son modèle," a novella that lends its title to the collaborative project between the writer and the photographer. Like Sebbar's previous texts, it subverts the visual representation of "oriental" women by unveiling the sociopolitical and economic realities hidden behind their aesthetic representation. Yet, Sebbar adopts an entirely new approach: "Le peintre et son modèle" incorporates a glossy picture by Leick representing a nude and headless model surrounded by cactuses. Although the visual and textual elements each

taken separately entail a critical rereading of the Western representation of North African women, when combined, they negate this effect. The orientalist paradigm resists the deconstruction attempted by the text and survives through the visual medium offered to the reader's gaze.

### WHERE HAVE ALL THE ODALISQUES GONE?

"Le peintre et son modèle" investigates the ambiguous relationship between nineteenth-century painters and orientalist fantasies, through the story of an encounter between a French painter and his odalisque model. It addresses the strategies that artists use to come to terms with discrepancies between their fantasies of a literary orient and the sociohistorical realities of the colonies. This tension is balanced by the need for artists to recreate the imagined orient within their oeuvre and to perpetuate this myth in the colonial *métropole* upon their return to France.

Dedicated to Eugène Delacroix, the short story seems to effect a rereading of the romanticist painter's famous journey to North Africa in 1832. Returning from a diplomatic mission to Morocco, Delacroix spent three days in Algiers, where he developed the inspiration for his 1834 painting *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*. During this trip, he is believed to have gained access to the private quarters of an Algerian household and to have observed the women of the house without their knowledge. Maghrebi writers, such as Assia Djebar and Rachid Boudjedra, have thus been known to return to Delacroix's painting to inform their discussion of orientalism and its oppressive and intrusive impact on Algerian society. Despite the artist's claim to the contrary, scholars and art historians such as Elie Lambert and Joan Del Plato have cast reasonable doubt as to whether Delacroix actually visited such a household, suggesting instead that his artistic vision was based on images collected throughout his journey. In her novella, Sebbar proposes yet another origination for Delacroix's famous painting.

Opening with the image of a painter cruising the streets of a North African town in search of a "fine sultane" reminiscent of that of *A Thousand and One Nights* (6), "Le peintre et son modèle" destabilizes the location from which the colonial lens operates. As the painter is unable to capture a vision that would remind him of the literary protagonist of Scheherazade, his frustration becomes perceptible: "La femme qui sourit, allongée sur le sofa, et les musiciennes assises, où sont-elles? Dans les rues, [ . . . ] il ne voit pas de femme blanche sinon sous le voile, les négresses vont librement, les mains fortes du travail, les reins fermes, trop massives, des géantes" "The women who smile, laying on the sofa, or those playing music, where are they? In the streets [ . . . ] he cannot see any white women aside from those who are veiled, while the negresses going freely, their hands strengthened by their work, their backs firm; they are too massive, giants' (8). Iconic representations of North African women in orientalist works are thus questioned, while the Orientalist artist's gaze, incapacitated, is superseded by an omniscient narrator. The painter posits himself as a participant within the scopic regime of the colonial power and desire, for whom women's bodies only count when white. For the colonial eye, the presence of the veil was equated with the absence of women from the public sphere and darker skin effectively rendered black bodies invisible.

In order to find a scene that replicates his literary fantasies, the painter has to enter a photography studio filled with costumes and props used to recreate

the perfect harem. As the photographer presents his model, he readily concedes that his work involves the creation of a fiction: “C’est mon odalisque préférée, je la mets partout. En Fatma, en Mauresque, en danseuse, au bain, au cimetière, fumant le narghilé, prenant le kaoua, dans son intérieur . . .” “This is my favorite odalisque ; I put her everywhere. As a Fatma, a Moorish, a dancer, in a hammam, a cemetery, while smoking a water-pipe, drinking coffee, in her apartment . . .” (9). The enumeration of different titles of *scènes-types* reveals the interchangeability of the “native” woman in the male gaze, which makes her disappear into a pure body. In the photographer’s eye, she is reduced to a sexual surface that both he and the spectator can mold, redefine, and possess as they please. As Malek Alloula had already demonstrated in his study of symbolic violence in early twentieth-century postcards (*Le harem colonial*, 1981), this passage shows colonial photographers using the same model to depict widely varying categories of scenes, a method that would jeopardize the very contention of authenticity on which the sales of these photographs were based. Photography thus appears as a consciously manufactured illusion lacking in transparency. As in her previous texts, Sebbar draws the attention of scholars to the issue of colonial representation by insisting on photography as a catalyst for false representation.

The disjunction between reality and representation is further elaborated by the discussion of the identity of the model. The painter discovers that she is originally from the Caucasus, a “Circassienne, égarée de l’autre côté de la mer,” and that she lives in an apartment furnished entirely with decorations from Normandy (10). Despite this information, he perpetuates a delusion in which this stranger to North Africa becomes the very embodiment of the orient: “Elle a la voix de l’Orient, la couleur de l’Orient” (10). In other words, the construction of her identity is entirely divorced from her outward physical appearance. In this manner, Sebbar reminds us that reality cannot be contained in a simple visual representation.

As in her previous texts, “Le peintre et son modèle” condemns orientalism as a cultural construction and colonial fantasy; yet, its mercantile underbelly is here denounced most vigorously. Referred to as a “boutique” (9), the photography studio is portrayed above all as commercial, downplaying its cultural and aesthetic role. Instead of the *couleur locale* that the painter had initially desired, he gravitates towards a glossy simulacrum, a commodity created for international tourist consumption, where the visual economy of the colonial society belongs to a global consumerist network. The photographer proudly explains: “mes collections se vendent dans le monde entier” ‘my collections are sold throughout the world’ (9). Despite his own revulsion at the view of the ridiculous staging, even the painter is not impervious to the wide dissemination of these images, as they are similar to the pictures that first brought him to the studio (8). In this portrayal, Sebbar has made a subtle shift: images that were historically part of a colonial economy are reappropriated and perpetuated by a globalized consumer culture.

In parallel, Sebbar acknowledges the local, social, and economic forces at work in the production of the Orient by bringing the reader “behind the scenes” of the photo shoot. The second encounter between the painter and the model reveals the economic hardship that had been erased from the airbrushed orientalist photos: the painter discovers that she works as a prostitute in a brothel. This reinscription of the colonial image within an imperialist material economy is

further developed by the monetary transaction that opens the narrative. Unable to find a “fine sultane” in the streets, the painter decides to buy five black slaves to pose for his painting (8). Sebbar implies that only a small step separates the artist’s studio from the brothel, the visual trafficking of women from their sexual exploitation, and symbolic desire from material possession. Of course, critics had already pointed to the economic reality behind those pictures. In *Le harem colonial* (1981), Alloula argues that models who were hired to pose half naked in front of the camera were not ordinary women, but poor peasants forced to migrate to urban centers, where they often became prostitutes:

Ces femmes algériennes inaccessibles, le photographe va leur trouver des équivalents plus complaisants. Ce seront les modèles rétribués qu’il recrutera presque exclusivement dans les marges d’une société où le déclassé social-consécutif à la conquête et au bouleversement des structures traditionnelles—touche aussi bien les hommes que les femmes, poussant ces dernières vers la prostitution.

Paré pour l’occasion d’habits de gala et de bijoux—ces accessoires indispensables de la mise en scène—le modèle, par la grâce de cet art de l’illusion qu’est la photographie, figurera à s’y tromper ce référent inaccessible: *l’autre femme algérienne, l’absente de la photo*. (Alloula, *Le harem* 17; emphasis in the original)

The photographer will come up with more complacent counterparts to these inaccessible Algerian women. These counterparts will be paid models that he recruits almost exclusively on the margins of society in which loss of social position, in the wake of the conquest and the subsequent overturning of traditional structures, affects men as well as women (invariably propelling the latter toward prostitution).

Dressed for the occasion in full regalia, down to the jewels that are the indispensable finishing touch of the production, the model will manage, thanks to the art of illusion is photography, to impersonate, to the point of believability, the unapproachable referent: the *other* Algerian woman, absent in the photo. (*Colonial Harem* 17)

Alloula presumes that the models were always prostitutes whose “transgressive” behavior and ubiquity in photographs allowed more fortunate Algerian women to remain hidden from the Western gaze. While it is true that religious and moral imperatives at the time would have prohibited the upstanding Algerian woman, an elusive “Other,” from posing unveiled, it is important also to recognize the limits of this argument. Alloula’s statement seems to assign a particular moral value to visibility, thus aligning it with a patriarchal discourse that relied on the regulation of female public presence. Although he does not go so far as to blame their conditions on poor moral choices, Alloula continues to see these figures as “others” in Algerian society, defined by what they lack: purity. To subvert stereotypes attached to the bodies of Algerian women, his study purifies and desexualizes them. Despite its overarching condemnation of colonial oppression, it attracted criticism for these reasons. Imposing a normative behavior on the sexual habitus of women, Alloula’s negative statement comes to condemn all bodies in front of the colonial camera as those of prostitutes and projects, in the words of Winifred Woodhull, “the fantasy of an Algerian nation untroubled by questions of women’s oppression” (126).

Contrary to Alloula, Sebbar refuses to relocate the model-prostitute in the margins of society and focuses instead on the historical and economic dimensions excluded from his study. As she uncovers the hidden sexual economy behind the production of the Orient, she calls into question not only the complex race relations and inequalities that existed within colonial society, but also dominant male epistemology—whether white European, or not. It is no coincidence that the scenes that recount trafficking in feminine sexuality always place different cultures on opposite sides of the deal. From the old black woman who rents black slave girls as model-subjects, to the painter's night as the odalisque's client, and the ultimate murder of the odalisque, the battle for the symbolic control and trafficking of women that Alloula identified is extended beyond the colonial conquest, to the entire society.

At the end of the novella, the prostitute's violent death at the hands of a client foregrounds difficult realities that she must endure as a foreign-born woman and a sex worker. Significantly, no descriptions or details of the violent crime are provided, and the sole testimony comes from a servant who has only *aural* knowledge of the event: "Il n'a rien vu. Il raconte ce qu'il a entendu. Il dit la vérité" 'He did not see anything. He relates what he heard. He is telling the truth' (11). Beyond merely enunciating the brutal condition of women in the margins of colonial society, the prostitute's murder signals a more symbolic disappearance: the image of the odalisque dies with her. Indeed, her abrupt disappearance frustrates the painter's search for orientalism and, by extension, the colonial will to knowledge. From a formal standpoint, this frustration is relayed in the concluding pages by the recurrent trope of visibility and invisibility. By omitting this violent crime, Sebbar chooses to limit the reader's knowledge of the murder and frustrate his voyeurism.

With the death of his model, the painter abandons his quest for an odalisque painting and returns to the colonial *métropole*. Back in his studio, he continues in vain his attempts to recreate the scene he first imagined in North Africa. The contrast between his persistent vision and recurring failures is manifest in his final exchange with his governess:

Le peintre en passant près du chevalet, répète :

—Je suis dans le noir et je vois une odalisque. Je ne me trompe pas. J'ai peint une odalisque . . . sans négresse. Je ne vois pas de négresse près de l'odalisque blanche . . . vous la voyez ?

Je ne vois rien, dit la gouvernante. Le dîner est prêt.

Le peintre ne bouge pas ; debout devant la toile sombre, il regarde l'odalisque endormie sur un sofa rouge et or.

Walking near his easel, the painter repeats:

I am in the dark and I see an odalisque. I am not mistaken. I have painted an odalisque . . . without a negresse. I do not see a negresse near the white odalisque . . . can you see her?

I do not see anything, says the housekeeper. Dinner is ready.

The painter does not move; standing in front of the dark canvas, he looks at the odalisque sleeping on a red and golden sofa. (12)

Sight and representation are ironically linked in this passage to the lexical field of obscurity. Nighttime darkness impedes the painter's vision and symbolically



opposes his own desire for colonial mastery and enlightenment. Simply put, the painter is “in the dark” in all senses of the term. As demonstrated by the constant disruption of the scopic trope, orientalism has lost all referents, even in the imagination of the painter. Thus, it is exposed as an illusion—or, rather, a delusion. Given that his canvas remains bare, the subject’s very identity is suspended; he can no longer fully identify himself as a creator of images.

Despite this final triumph over the colonial will to knowledge, the story’s ending is not without a certain pain. The artist ultimately becomes a prisoner and a victim of his own fantasy, in much the same way that the model was slave to her economic condition. In addition, the female characters remain subjugated to their social and gendered roles as slaves, prostitutes, or maids. The painter’s role foregrounds the missed opportunities for dialogue between the colonial subject and the object of his desire. It also evokes the very ambiguous relationship between France and Algeria, Sebbar’s dual countries of origin. Although, in this particular instance, no direct ties link the female protagonists to one another, the author calls specific attention to transnational female solidarity through her juxtaposition of characters facing various gendered oppression as women. It is no coincidence that the black slave girls become the audience and indirect witnesses to the murder of the foreign-born prostitute and that the painter’s governess is the direct witness to the painter’s final failure. Although it plays out in the background of the narration, the common position of these female protagonists as witnesses to each other’s gendered oppression constitutes the only opening within the narration that allows for the possibility of reconciliation. Defying social, cultural, and racial differences, Sebbar thus makes a gesture of transnational solidarity between women which parallels and foregrounds her hope for reconciliation between France and Algeria.

#### *FROM READING TO GAZING: THE LECTEUR-VOYEUR*

If indeed “Le peintre et son modèle” literally and metaphorically lays bare the process of production of orientalist clichés, it also participates in the elaboration of a parallel fantasy exemplified by the photograph by Leick that supplements the text. At first, this black and white photograph appears to conflict with Sebbar’s orientalist narrative. It depicts a nude model standing in an exotic garden, her genitals hidden by the shade of a cactus leaf that links her to nature and cuts the picture horizontally. This visual axis, reinforced by a play on light and shadow, emphasizes the stark contrast between her modestly concealed vagina and her pale breasts exposed to the viewer.

Through its aesthetic refashioning of the exotic female body, Leick’s photograph parallels Sebbar’s story and operates with a similar displacement of the expectations built by the orientalist intertext of the narration. However, the artistic coupling that appears in the title of the short story and collection refer directly to her protagonists, while the nude in the photograph shows many differences with the reclusive odalisque. Its unusual framing, which cuts out the head of the model, reduces her to an “anonymous” nude, whose sole purpose is to incarnate a depersonalized body. In showcasing the objectification of the woman’s body, it forces readers to adopt the position of the onlooker as though assuming they will adopt “le regard désirant,” replete with lust, that typically characterizes the Western male gaze.

The choice of the exotic setting seems designed to displace the frame of the narration. While many settings might have accomplished such an effect, this particular choice has a clear aim: this garden recalls that of the painter in the story, thereby reinforcing the parallel between the photograph and the narration. The photographer and painter thus adopt parallel stances in gazing at their respective models in their gardens. While both the garden and the harem traditionally depicted on orientalist work are sumptuous, the garden differs from an interior setting in that it suggests a savage, untamed, and natural beauty. These characteristics, which logically extend to the model's body, contrast with the premeditated sensuality and "domesticated" appearance of orientalist models in harem-like décor. As Fatima Mernissi notes, the close interior space that the orientalist artist invades thematizes the transgressive crossing of the harem's limits, and while this crossing served to embody the power relations between the colonized woman and the colonial gaze, it was also 'a strategy for containing [and controlling] her [sexual] power' (19). In contrast, the exterior setting frees the model from this power dialectic.

Despite these fundamental differences between the written and visual odalisque, readers are invited to perceive her image in orientalist context by virtue of its interjection within the narration. Flagrantly erotic rather than simply suggestive, the photograph calls on readers to scrutinize a body in precisely the manner that the story's ending discourages. In other words, they become viewers of the missing odalisque. The juxtaposition of Sebbar's text with Leick's photograph thus complicates readers' positions by denying them the simple dissociation from and negative judgment of the painter of the story.

By introducing the text, this photograph precludes a subversive reading, as there exists a contradiction between the questioning of the short story (which would tend to lead towards a deconstruction of orientalism) and the conspicuous eroticism of Leick's image. In *Double Exposures*, Mieke Bal warns scholars against trying to find an adequate mode of representation and reappropriation of colonial and orientalist illustrations. According to her, the "perlocutionary effectivity" of colonial and orientalist iconography is such that any reproduction or revision risks reinforcing the fascination of spectators with the object of their criticism (196–97). This danger is even more pressing given the collaboration of Leick and Sebbar, where neither a caption title nor an explicatory note clarifies the relationship the photograph is intended to share with the text. Without these key elements, the mediating links between them are left up to readers' imaginations and nothing guides them in combining his reading of both elements. Even if readers grasp the criticism of the colonial visual practice within the short story, this interpretation might well be tainted or relegated to the background by the aesthetic and voyeuristic pleasure experienced when viewing the *mise en scène* of the palpably sensual nude. While its interpretation may vary from one reader to another, there remains a questionable "composite" effect produced by this combination of text and image. Irrespective of the author's and artist's individual intent, the successes and limits of the final oeuvre have less to do with its content than with the way its elements are combined in the final publication. The interpretive outcome will depend on negotiation and resistance on the part of the reader, who filters through, reinterprets, and potentially transforms the work as a whole under an anti-orientalizing gaze.

In the light of poststructuralist textual instability, the school of reader-response critics, such as Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, and Michael Riffaterre, have argued that scholars need to shift attention away from the “literal meaning” of the text and original authorial intent, towards the “constructed meaning” that results from reception. Elaborating on what Stanley Fish has termed “interpretive communities,” Robert Fraser furthermore calls attention to the fact that reading is not a private or isolated process: all interpretations are socially and culturally conditioned:

Texts are received and read by different communities of readers, who are bound to react differently to what they are given [. . .] No reader approaches a text with a blind mind. The political conditions in which he or she lives will of necessity affect expectation, and determine the way in which any set of statements, any given storyline, will be perceived. (119)

Fraser elaborates on the idea that our interpretation of a text is indebted to our personal background, our historical context, and the way these factors condition what reading practices and “interpretive strategies” we deploy.

Here, it should be noted that Sebbar, like most francophone authors, addresses a predominantly metropolitan market where the demand is often driven by French readers who are likely not yet sensitized to postcolonial interpretive paradigms and their workings. Hence, there is a distinct possibility that nonacademic readers would prove unable to recognize postcolonial strategies like those that Sebbar deploys. Furthermore, it would be unsurprising for such readers to remain fixated on the photographic medium as a visual aid to their interpretations of the text. Of course, visual and textual media can each elicit multiple readings from different spectators. Their reading will vary according to the inclinations of viewers and the interpretive community to which they belong. Whether Leick’s photograph is treated a work of art or an illustration, or simply viewed salaciously, there is an inescapable erotic nostalgia and voyeurism underlying his image.

The publishing market likewise complicates interpretations in that the connotations of book’s packaging negotiate the initial “seduction” of the reader—effectively, how the book makes its sales pitch. Although considerations such as these are rarely tied to the problem of reception, they are a core result of the same issue. In his opening discussion of the relationship between postmodernism and postcolonialism, Kwame Anthony Appiah demonstrates that the market economy and global art scene often collude to create structures of domination that are more subtle and less visible than their colonial precedents. Examining the selection of a 1987 art exhibit in New York (“Perspectives: Angles on African Art”), Appiah denounces the criteria used to filter African art and render it accessible to the Western public: financial considerations combined with a Western understanding of African aesthetics are the decisive factors used to assess its value. In the process, the figure of the Western buyer becomes a more decisive figure than the artist in determining an artwork’s meaning and worth (Appiah 57). In this process of commodification, writers are thus destined to play the role of “producers,” anticipating the Western public’s demand, rather than creators *à part entière* if they are to pursue their art.

Appiah's reading of the African art market can be extended to analyze post-colonial literature as "a postcolonial commodity," and, in this particular case, to reconsider francophone literature produced in France for French readers. In this spirit, Farid Laroussi notes: "The origin of the discourse [is] no longer the Maghreb but France, where exoticism has been reinvented and the orientalist paradigm survives" (88). In saying this, Laroussi implicates writers in the commodification of their work, implying that displacement of francophone literature to the old colonial *métropole* mirrors a vested interest on the part of the formerly colonized. Exoticism and orientalism remain integral to the writing and reading of post-colonial literature, Laroussi argues, because the locus of power in publishing and interpretation still resides in France. It is nonetheless important to temper this argument with the caveat that writers' critical agendas may not coincide with the way their books are read or marketed; hence, reception alone does not invalidate their creative project. Although this argument does not categorically deny that Sebbar may have sought to accomplish a different project, it reminds us that her writing succumbs to commercial demand in a context beyond her control. While this predicament of francophone editorial practices is widely acknowledged, what is rarely alluded to—and is most relevant here—is the fact that the French market exercises power over postcolonial literature in a way that risks replicating imperialist power relationships, while displacing them only ever so slightly.

In his outstanding study *Packaging Post/Coloniality* (2005), Richard Watts investigates how controlling mechanisms and power relationships operate at a paratextual level (2–3). Watts argues that the paratext and peritext of francophone works published in France under certain circumstances act as a "neo-colonial ballast . . . that continues to weigh [the novel] down" (172). The peritext of "Le peintre et son modèle" is also revealing in its manner of making the short story legible for its readership. Given the deep-seated relationship between imperialist discourse and the paratext established by Watts, it is not surprising that orientalist stereotypes, apparently dismantled by Sebbar, reappear on the back cover of Al Manar's editions:

De l'Orient des palais et des jardins odalisques et courtisanes de Delacroix à l'Orient altéré de Kateb Yacine. De l'Orient à l'Afrique et à l'Asie sur fresques pétrifiées de la Porte Dorée à Paris. De l'Orient qui résiste en Palestine à l'Orient de l'exil et de la folie. Le retour au pays natal.

From Delacroix's Orient made of palaces and gardens of odalisques and courtesans to Kateb Yacine's altered Orient. From the Orient to Africa and to Asia laid on petrified frescos of the palace of the Porte Dorée in Paris. From the Orient that resists in Palestine to the Orient of exile and folly. The return to a native country. (Back cover)

In the same vein as Leick's photograph, this back cover is part of an editorial strategy that is meant to include Sebbar's narrative within a wider context of border-crossings between France and the Maghreb. It intersperses French perception of the orient (embodied by Delacroix and the Museum of the Porte Dorée) with that of the Algerian Kateb Yacine and Sebbar's reinterpretation of Aimé Césaire's *Cahier* through her own "return to [her] native land." Straddling the Orient and Occident, past and present, this promotional text extends Sebbar's affiliation beyond the

nation's border or the mere France/Maghreb divide to promote the collection of short stories as a site of crosscultural encounter. In so doing, the epitext comes to illustrate Al Manar's editorial politics: with a catalog almost entirely composed of "Mediterranean" works, the book collection wishes to bring together Occident and Orient through the collaboration of writers with visual artists. This project cannot be reduced to the sole promotion of texts from the margins within the Hexagon, as was the case with book collections such as Gallimard's "Continents Noirs." Unlike the director and editor of "Continents Noirs," Jean-Noël Schifano, Al Manar's founder and editor, Alain Gorius, does not perceive the fictions he publishes as representative of the essence of the country or culture from which they emanate, nor does he conceive francophone literature as a foreign element to French literature that needs compartmentalizing. On the contrary, his entire production is dedicated to the process of decompartmentalization of the literary canon and crosspublishing.

Yet, the omnipresent label of the Orient on the back cover recalls in an uneasy manner Edward Said's "imaginary geography," equating the commercial packaging with a gesture that overlooks an entire critical tradition since Said and celebrates the Orient. Against the grain of Sebbar's actual text, this peritextual framing tends to reduce her writing to an "easily assimilable form of otherness" (Watts 161). This apparatus not only reasserts her text as a new form of exoticizing, but also provides a rhetorical reframing of Sebbar's entire collection. Indeed, this text has particular significance as it is the only external commentary that accompanies both the short story and the photograph and, thus, constitutes a unifying element to highlight themes considered relevant to the volume as a whole. This gesture targeting a predominantly French readership often known to harbor orientalist nostalgia sheds light on the surreptitious domination that the *métropole* exercises on francophone literature.

### GUILTY PLEASURE IN THE AGE OF CONSUMPTION

It would seem that the collaboration between Leick and Sebbar is a missed chance to make textual and visual practices work together. Instead of revising the pleasure derived from colonial and orientalist voyeurism, they perpetuate it. This paradoxical gesture is representative of the persistent dissemination of Orientalism as a postcolonial "idiom" that Michael O'Riley has recently established in his scholarship. Questioning the omnipresence of orientalist imagery in postcolonial studies, O'Riley discusses the perpetual reemergence of orientalism as a "colonial sit[e] of memory," calling into question whether the fascination of postcolonial literature and criticism with images of colonial violence is fully conscious ("Postcolonial Haunting" 7–9). According to O'Riley, the return to orientalist images reveals compensatory discourse and, as such, appears to be inescapable. Whereas the exhumation and reappropriation of these images appears at first to denote a voluntary critical engagement on the part of the critics and writers with orientalism as a "colonial site of memory," O'Riley explains that the persistence of this reference turns it into a form of haunting. Echoing his influential study, Anastasia Valassopoulos explains that the word 'haunting' in its Freudian sense indeed indicates "a latent or unconscious *slipping* into discourse," suggesting that the postcolonial writers who engage in this approach "are *powerless* to change the trajectory of their writing" (135).

This tension between conscious recovery of the occulted orientalist legacy (which goes hand in hand with the gesture of reappropriation), and reinscription of imperialist gestures is particularly present in "Le peintre et son modèle." Unlike the ending of Sebbar's short story "La photographie," which O'Riley holds up as an example for its "destruction of the fetishistic impulse . . . [and] refusal to participate in the spectral dynamics" ("Orientalist Reminders" 172), the presence of a blank canvas in this story reinscribes the "blind spot" central to postcolonial orientalism. In spite of Sebbar's text, the odalisque comes back to haunt the painter as a presence that recalls the haunting voyeuristic impulse of Leick's photograph. Perhaps consciously, Sebbar mimics her writerly collaboration with the artist, which reflects a conundrum at the core of postcolonial studies: writers remain dependent upon dominant cultural codes in order to appropriate and subvert them (Lionnet 174–75).

The interpretive gap between the field of production and its reception, which so often remains implicit in criticism proves to be very much at the forefront of Sebbar's work. If, as O'Riley rightly suggested, the return of writers and critics to the site of orientalist artifacts through visual media can reproduce the machinery of marketable sex, then it is partly because those works circulate in and are read by the former colonial *métropole*. Although there exists an understandable impulse for francophone writers to return incessantly to orientalism as a site of memory, in practice, the specific source of this impulse frequently remains ambiguous. It may result from a return of the repressed (as Valassopoulos would have it), from a colonial literary and cultural legacy (which O'Riley considers crucial), or—as suggested here—from the combination of these factors and their influence on editorial practices as they relate to readers' expectations.

This complex network of influences can be seen at work also in the critical reception of "Le peintre et son modèle." In addition to the blurb that appears on its back cover, reviews published in the mainstream press inscribe this work readily into the orientalist tradition. Predominant readings celebrate its exotic aspects with a penchant for lush descriptions that give the illusion that the stories are designed for aesthetic enjoyment: "Un renvoi parfois nostalgique vers le jardin secret des esthètes du paradis perdu [. . .] L'Étranger aime se raconter l'Orient, monde des sens et de l'interdit" 'A return at times nostalgic to the secret garden of the esthetes of the lost paradise [. . .] The Stranger likes to tell himself stories about the Orient, a world of senses and of the forbidden' (Fériel Berraies Guigny). Such nostalgic readings, made sensual by copious adjectives, are echoed by a purely superficial engagement with Leick's photograph: When critics such as Djilali Bencheikh, from Radio Orient speak of how the collection constitutes "un recueil de beauté et d'engagement avec une jolie photo de nu" 'a collection of such a beauty and engagement with a pleasant picture of a nude,' they relegate the artwork to a mere illustration included to please the eye of the reader, and undermine Alain Gorius's initial editorial project.

In the end, having recognized the misencounter between the editorial packaging and the reader, we are left wondering about the consequences of Sebbar's return to the Orient: Does the ambiguous framing of the text leave room for it to be read on its own terms? And, more important, what does this gesture tell us about the relationship between author, editor, reader, and text? I have attempted to demonstrate that, even though Sebbar aims to oppose contemporary French

perceptions of “oriental women” as the radical other, the framing of her text predisposes us to a more problematic reading. Not a result of conscious design, this inversion is more likely a consequence of tensions between the creative goals of the francophone writer, the editorial wishes of the publisher and the cultural expectations of the French reader. That said, the temptation to judge a book by its cover is to some extent inescapable, and may play a large role in shaping the public understanding of a text. Certainly, this is the case with Sebbar’s “Le peintre et son modèle,” and it is imperative that we, as critics be mindful of postcolonial works within this broader and more ambivalent light.

## NOTES

1. There is little doubt that Edward Said’s scholarship was instrumental in the questioning the representativeness of dominant—that is to say white, Western, and male—discursive geography. However, critics have rightfully addressed the limits of Said’s argument, calling particular attention to his overarching, unifying, and trans-historical view that seemingly subsumes and homogenizes the tensions and contradictions that the relations between colonized and colonizer ought to entail, repeatedly depicting the Oriental “Other” as a powerless victim (see studies by Clifford; Turner; Appadurai; and Breckenridge and van der Veer, among others).

2. In her study *Primitive Passions*, Chow terms “Oriental’s orientalism” the self-exoticizing gestures through which subalterns willingly and willfully stage themselves as radically “other,” and to a certain extent parody orientalism’s politics of representation. Building on Bhabha’s mimicry, Chow systematically equates this gesture with a subversive tactic that replicates the Western fetish and presents ironically the onlooker’s gaze with exactly what he wanted to see (179).

3. In a personal interview, Alain Gorius, editor of Editions Al Manar, explained that Sebbar had been consulted at the beginning of her work on this book and had declined the proposed works of another artist. Gorius then proposed Leick as a replacement whom Sebbar accepted without agreeing to specific photographs (Interview conducted during the “Rencontres internationales de l’édition de création,” in Marseille, France, on 16 Oct. 2009).

4. Assia Djébar’s postface to *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* (1979), entitled “Regard interdit, son coupé,” most famously took to task Delacroix’s portrayal of the women as passive prisoners, dispossessed from their own bodies, and spectator to their own condition.

5. I borrow this reference to Carine Bourget’s article in which Bourget explores the limits of Assia Djébar’s postface to the second edition of *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*. By referencing Del Plato, Bourget pinpoints Djébar’s temptation to romanticizing Delacroix’s supposed encounter with the harem (102n9).

6. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

7. According to Emer O’Beirne, the physical contrast between the portrayal of black and Arab women constitutes one of the recurring motifs of Orientalism. The skin color and the musculature of African bodies are used as foil to the fairness of the skin and sensuality of North African women (qtd. in Bourget 97). By gesturing toward the constant juxtaposition of black servants and whiter models on the canvas rather than being solely concerned with “l’Afrique blanche,” Sebbar foregrounds the inequality between white and black women within colonial depiction and lays the groundwork for an ethics of solidarity.

8. While acknowledging the critical debts they owed to Alloula’s controversial work, feminist scholars have also rightfully criticized the limits of his postcolonial project. In order to turn back the colonial gaze onto itself, Alloula appropriates women’s

voice and recuperates their position as victims to denounce the orientalist visual archive and its colonial foundation. Yet, by positing Algerian women as passive victims and reproducing alluring colonial postcards, extensively supported by titillating sexual descriptions of their content, Alloula reinscribes and perpetuated the symbolic violence first made against women (see Lazreg, Vogl, and Woodhull).

9. Faced with the problematic task of representing women's oppression without replicating victimization, it is not coincidental that Sebbar privileges the act of witnessing the murder over that of describing. Rather than dwelling on gendered violence, which risks becoming symbolically complicit with the crime described, Sebbar instead elaborates on the "silence" of the female protagonist and her cultural invisibility. Her murder is relayed by others, but her own voice is absent from the entire text. This difficulty is compounded here with the presumed identity of the prostitute's murderer. It is not directly articulated, but the context allows for several hypotheses regarding the murderer's identity: a French soldier, her pimp, or maybe an Arab client. While I believe this is left intentionally vague so as not to distract focus from the symbolic violence between the painter and his model, it is also suggestive of the many potential avenues for female oppression within a transnational context.

10. Here, Sebbar seems to draw on Chandra Mohanty's concept of transnational female solidarity, which offers women a counterhegemonic position and accounts for their cultural diversity, heterogeneous backgrounds and perspectives. This gesture reproduces Assia Djebar's concept of sisterhood, although in a more nuanced way. Sebbar acknowledges the shortcomings of this strategy by limiting its scope to a chain of witnessing instead of placing her community of women in a more active role.

11. For the purpose of this study, I will focus on the picture that appears in the main edition and that is the most widely diffused in print. The same photograph appears twice: on the front cover, cropped to include only the bust of the model, and on a full page within the text, across from page 8. This photograph is part of a set of multiple pictures that ornament different editions of the text. The specific photograph that I discuss in this article can be found in the standard edition of the text, as opposed to the *exemplaires de tête* (40 total sold, 300 euros apiece) that were each adorned by two original photographs by Leick, one on the cover, another in the frontispiece. Although those photographs differ in their setting and the position of the body of the model, the differences have little impact on the way this text is read. The photograph studied here, along with examples of photographs from the *exemplaires de tête*, can be seen on the website of the editions Al Manar <<http://www.editmanar.com/auteurs/Peintre%20et%20modele.htm>>.

12. "This effect does not disappear before a critical analysis of the images that merely studies their constative messages. More importantly, it also affects the critic writing about them. The critic cannot help being the expository agent, the pointing subject who shows the image, even if the image is the object of this subject's negative analysis." (Bal 196–97)

13. In her critical study of Djebar's postface to *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, Bourget rightfully demonstrates the limits to Djebar's rereading of Picasso's paintings as emancipator. Arguing along the lines of Richard Leppert's study of the nude within the Occidental tradition, Bourget notes that nude paintings reproduce the scopoc exclusivity of the male gaze and participate in the objectification of women. Perhaps, Bourget suggests, if there existed a liberation of female bodies and an opening of the harem in Picasso's work, then it would be only "to the pleasure of both the artist and his spectator" (98–99).

14. This concept first appeared in Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980) in which he polemically called into question the very pre-existence of a text prior to theoretical interpretation and, most important, located the production of textual



meaning as the “social and intellectual milieu in which a text is consumed rather than to its author or reader *per se*” (16). Fish’s argument was widely criticized in its oversimplification of the different systems of meaning that coalesce in a text. In promoting “interpretive communities” as the sole system within which meaning was produced, Fish dismissed the author as an authoritative source, and overlooked the role the publisher and the media might have in shaping the text’s reception. Finally, Fish’s restrictive definition of “interpretive communities” forbade any variation within and negotiations in between these communities.

15. Postcolonial critics such as Edward Said in “Secular Criticism” (1983) and, more recently, Graham Huggan in *Postcolonial Exotic* have used a comparable argument to bring to attention the fact that Orientalism and exoticism are central to the scholarship of postcolonial literature. Postcoloniality has increasingly become a cultural more than an intellectual commodity. Said, in particular, brings Fish’s concept of authority of interpretive communities to the forefront of his article to raise the awareness in the profession of a tendency to close itself off from the world, and become a sort of echo chamber.

16. I refer here to the notions of paratext and peritext as defined by Jean Genette in *Palimpsestes* (1981). The peritext refers to peripheral features of a traditional text, which include the cover, titlepage, table of contents, chapter titles and subtitles, epigraphs, preface and postface, notes, and illustrations, while the paratext comprises as well elements connected to editorial and promotional work (9).

17. Launched in 2000, Gallimard’s *Continents Noirs* collection is dedicated solely to francophone literature from Africa and has been widely criticized for its essentialist *ghettoisation* (Moudileno, Waters). Compounding geography with skin color in its name, this book series operates on the premises of the radical opposition and mutual exclusion between French and francophone literature. Jean-Noël Schifano’s postface to the series contains numerous racial stereotypes echoing the myth of *le bon sauvage*: “Nous parions, ici, sur l’écriture des continents noirs pour dégeler l’esprit romanesque et la langue française du nouveau siècle. Nous parions sur les fétiches en papier qui prennent le relais des fétiches en bois” “We are betting here on Africans from Africa and elsewhere, who speak and write the French language, on those who use any language, be it written, spoken, or not written yet; we are betting on the writing from the dark continents to help warm up the romantic spirit and the French language of the new century. We are betting on paper fetishes to take up the task of the wooden ones.” Implicit in the anachronistic reference to Africa’s fetishes is Schifano’s belief that African art is only important in so far as it helps loosen French canons and free its writers from their intellectual rigidity.

18. These press releases are often of little critical interest for an accurate analysis of the text. However, in this particular case, the fact that the editions Al Manar has made them available on their website demonstrates that their function is primarily promotional, even though their original intent may have been to give an “objective *compte-rendu*” of the collection of short stories ().

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