

Swarthmore College

Works

French & Francophone Studies Faculty Works


Spring 2011

"Homeland Beyond Homelands": Reinventing Algeria Through A Transnational Literary Community: Assia Djebar's "Le Blanc De L'Algérie"

Alexandra Gueydan-Turek
Swarthmore College, agueyda1@swarthmore.edu

[Let us know how access to this work benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-french>

 Part of the [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Alexandra Gueydan-Turek. (2011). "Homeland Beyond Homelands: Reinventing Algeria Through A Transnational Literary Community: Assia Djebar's "Le Blanc De L'Algérie"". *Cincinnati Romance Review*. Volume 31, 85-102.
<http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-french/4>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the Swarthmore College Libraries. It has been accepted for inclusion in French & Francophone Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

“Homeland beyond Homelands”
Reinventing Algeria through a Transnational
Literary Community.
Assia Djebar’s *Le Blanc de l’Algérie*

Alexandra Gueydan-Turek
Swarthmore College

D’autres parlent de l’Algérie, la décrivent, l’interpellent [...]
D’autres savent, ou s’interrogent [...] D’autres écrivent “sur” l’Algérie,
sur son malheur fertile, sur ses monstres réapparus. Moi, je me suis simplement
retrouvée, dans ces pages avec quelques amis. Moi, j’ai décidé de
me rapprocher d’eux, de la frontière [...]. (*Le Blanc de l’Algérie* 231-232)
[Some speak of Algeria, describe it, and question it [...] Others
know, or ask themselves [...] Yet Others write “on” Algeria, on her fertile
misfortune, on her reappeared monsters. I, on the other hand, I have simply
found myself, among these pages with a few friends. Me, I decided to bring
myself closer to them, to the border [...].¹

In Algeria, the decade-long civil war of the 1990’s provided the setting for the emergence of what critics have termed “écriture d’urgence,” a literature which thematically relies on “un désastre de chair humaine, corps démembrés, cris des suppliciés” [a disaster of human flesh, dismembered corpses, and cries of the tortured ones] (Mokhtari 31). Algerian critic Rachid Mokhtari has noted that the polemic surrounding this literature stems from the fact that its main project is to testify to horror through a raw rendering of gruesome realities, transforming the writer into a “vampire-writer” (27-31). While attempting to provide a testimony to the occulted violence that plagued Algeria and offering a way to document what Benjamin Stora has termed the “invisible war” (8-9), this type of literature runs the risk of re-producing and

¹ Assia Djebar, *Le Blanc de l’Algérie*. Paris : Albin Michel, 1995. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. The English translation of the book is *Algerian White*, trans. David Kelley and Marjolin De Jager. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001.

repeating the traumatic events it first intended to cope with. Through primarily descriptive narrations characterized by their lack of literary quality, such works seem to feed into the obsession of the Western colonial unconscious with the ex-colonized violence. Returning to Mokhtari's metaphor, this literature could be construed as preying on the grief of a society, transforming bloodshed into a pure literary commodity, or worse, a pseudo-ethnographical artifact, and placing the writer among the perpetrators rather than the victims it initially intended to represent. Concurrent with the "littérature d'urgence," another type of fetishizing discourse of mourning existed in Algeria. Over the past thirty years, the government of the FLN (Front de Libération National) had developed an all-encompassing discourse that erased individual experience and identity for the benefit of the uniformity of a national myth. Enforced through a policy of Arabization, this official discourse tried to deny the cultural diversity intrinsic to Algeria, simultaneously effacing both gender and ethnical minorities from public discourse. In addition, this nationalistic discourse exploited the martyrs of the War of Liberation for its own means: epic narrations and flowery language "gloss[ed] over and reshape[d] the indignity of the final moments" into a grandiloquent vision of the Nation's history (Hiddleston 10). And, although this official rhetoric was first identified only with those who perished fighting against colonialism, it would soon propagate and become the only accepted rhetoric to commemorate death itself. Thus, all commemorations of the dead were to be mediated by an official discourse and then reincorporated into a nationalistic, unitary and monumental framework (4-8).

Published in 1995, Djébar's seminal work on Algeria's civil war, *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, seemingly assumes the same project of witnessing the sufferings of the Algerian people, yet it does so in a drastically different manner. Written in the wake of the tragic death of three of her closest friends – the psychiatrist Mahfoud Boucebcı, the sociologist M'Hamed Boukhobza, and the dramatist Abdelkader Alloula – and with the constant image of Algeria's political turmoil in mind, Djébar's narrative attempts to recount the events that led to the disappearance of Algerian writers and intellectuals between the war of independence and the present day – not just murders, but also the accidents and illnesses. Yet, although Djébar's oeuvre seeks to bear witness to their disappearance, her text privileges an ethical rather than an historical approach. Djébar's narrative struggles to create an alternative commemorative discourse which is neither a horrific narrative recalling the "littérature d'urgence," nor an overtly memorializing discourse reminiscent of the official nationalist rhetoric. As illustrated by the title of her narrative, Djébar's liturgy inscribes itself as a counterpoint to the *vampiric* narratives Mokhtari described: she prefers the color white to the traditional blood red; she favors aporia and "absolute silence" to the realistic descriptions of violence. As many critics have already noted, the color white evokes at once the death shroud (and the absence of those who have past), the silencing of the victims' voices and the obliteration of the crime, at once the blankness of the page to write and the anticipation of the words that

will fill it.² Simultaneously inscribing and effacing death within the text, Djébar's *poetics of white* seeks to lend a voice to those who are absent without imposing her own upon them. In so doing, she explores the very possibility of restitution within testimonial literature and repeatedly questions the boundaries of her own language. Indeed, as she denounces official burials and the celebratory and formalized speeches that characterize them, she suggests that language itself runs the risk of reburying the dead, plunging them further than before, into complete oblivion:

Dans cet oubli là : oubli de l'oubli même sous les mots des éloges publics, des hommages collectifs, des souvenirs mis en scènes. [...] Non; je dis non à toutes les cérémonies: celles de l'Adieu, celles de la piété, celles du chagrin qui prête sa propre douceur, celles de la consolation. (*Le Blanc* 61)

Of that oblivion: oblivion of oblivion, even beneath the words of the public eulogies, collective tributes, dramatized memories [...] No; I say no to all ceremonies: those of farewell, those of pity, those of chagrin which seek their own comforts, those of consolation.

Of course, Djébar's own writing is not completely immune to this type of elegiac language, and as she is particularly aware that her poetics might foster the very same epistemological violence she is trying to deconstruct, she states that she must speak but wonders "Mais dans quelle langue?" [But in what language?] (*Le Blanc* 61). Foreseeing that her own words might be prone to similar reclamation, she invokes Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* in order to situate her own rejection of a tongue-tied idiom for a more intimate and less precious language as analogous to Dante's rejection of Latin in favor of the vernacular. Djébar does not appropriate Dante by rote, however; she subtly diverts his phrasing to focus on the disjunction he has constructed in the phrases "le vulgaire illustre" and "l'éloquence vulgaire," to bring attention to the fine line that her language must tread.

Dante, although a significant writer, is only one among many who Djébar has turned to in order to find the right language and tread this line. Of these multiple instances let us, for the moment, concentrate on those instrumental in the definition of her poetic enterprise and related to her constant recourse to "white," which she explains through Kandinsky's words in the last section of her text entitled "Écrire le blanc de l'Algérie."

² On that topic, Benjamin Stora explains that the main characteristic of Algeria's civil war is the "erasure of the tragedy" [l'effacement des lieux de la tragédie] (8) through the complex network of State and self-censorship, the ineffability of the traumatic events, and the aporia of the language. However, in keeping with the name given to the years of the civil war, "la décennie noire," [the black decade], Stora views this process as a blackout rather than a whitening (11-46). For further analyses of the white as a central metaphor in Djébar's text, see the excellent studies of Elizabeth Fallaize and John Erickson.

Je ne peux pour ma part exprimer mon malaise d'écrivain et d'Algérienne que par référence à cette couleur, ou plutôt à cette non couleur. "Le blanc sur notre âme, agit comme le silence absolu" disait Kandinsky. Me voici, par ce rappel de la peinture abstraite, en train d'amorcer un discours en quelque sorte déporté. (*Le Blanc* 241)

As for me, I can only express my discomfort as a writer and an Algerian woman through the reference to this color, or rather this non-color. "White on our soul works like an absolute silence" said Kandinsky. Here I am, by this reminder of abstract painting, beginning a somewhat displaced discourse.

Elizabeth Fallaize has commented on Djébar's recourse to this pictorial discourse and described it as at best an ambivalent gesture: according to Fallaize, while this quotation attempts to compensate for the aporia of language, it also serves as an acknowledgement of the very limits of her enterprise and a reminder of her precarious position, exiled from Algeria ["un discours en quelque sorte déporté"]. Yet, what Fallaize has failed to emphasize is the importance of the recourse to Kandinsky's quotation as a continuation of Djébar's own voice. Besides the original thematic treatment, Djébar stages textual heterogeneity on a discursive and structural level, constantly returning to other writers' words inside and outside the procession. Besides the nineteen intellectuals of the procession whose oeuvres are referenced more or less directly in the text, one can also find epigraphs from Western writers such as Jean Genet, Jacques Berque or Dante; excerpts of other Algerian writers' elegiac texts about their fellow intellectuals (138); and even words from the deceased themselves commemorating their colleagues and friends (153).

Djébar insists that the summoning of other writers and intellectuals be at the heart of the new literary ethos she sets out to establish: rather than writing "about" and "on" Algeria, one has to write "near it" (*Le Blanc* 263). This concern responds to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's axiomatic question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" posed in her seminal 1988 essay, where she acknowledged the epistemological violence inherent in the silencing of the "subaltern" by both colonial and local patriarchal powers.³ Spivak identifies this same epistemological violence in postcolonial academic discourse which, rather than debunking, reinscribes a totalizing collective identity of the subaltern to a heterogeneous people. Answering unequivocally the question of her title, Spivak states that indeed there is no space from which the subaltern can speak as, for it to be heard,

³ The figure of the silent subaltern is exemplified in Spivak's work by the discourse on the practice of *sati*, the ritual of widow burning. Both the colonial discourse which considers the widow as the brown victim who needs saving from the benevolent white intellectual, and the nativist stand which describes her as a willing participant to the ritual and a supporter of local traditions speak for the subaltern woman, appropriating her voice and participating in its erasure.

the subaltern discursive practice must remain dependent on and over-determined by “the narrative sanction granted to the colonial subject in dominant groups” (287). While Spivak’s essay rightfully emphasizes the subtle and ongoing negotiation of agency that takes place whenever the subaltern is speaking, I would question whether her statement itself denies the oppressed subject the capacity to self-represent effectively, thus perpetuating the silencing of the subaltern. Along with Bart Moore-Gilbert, one notices how Spivak pays “little attention to the process by which the subaltern’s ‘coming to voice’ might be achieved. Spivak often speaks to deny the (self-)liberating personal and political trajectories” (106). By contrast, Djébar gives greater attention to avoiding any ventriloquizing act through this lexical and ethical shift from “*écrire sur*” to “*écrire à côté*.”⁴

Privileging emancipatory possibilities over the potential associated with epistemological violence, Djébar’s imaginative and discursive encounter outside of any essential identitarian assignation is further asserted in the above quotation through the use of Kandinsky’s direct discourse. Critics who have previously commented on the intrusion of other writer’s voices have systematically linked it to the concept of haunting, and defined Djébar’s *Le Blanc de l’Algérie* as a writing inhabited by the dead (O’Riley, Fallaize and Hiddleston). Without discounting this reading, I would like to offer an alternate and concomitant interpretation. I will argue that Djébar’s intertextual practice not only conveys the trace left over by the deceased writers, it also exposes the limits of Algeria’s monolithic cultural identity through the multiplicity of the text’s literary references. I will demonstrate how it maps out a space of engagement through which Algeria as a nation is redefined within a complex transnational cultural network.

The system of epigraphs employed by Djébar in her texts constitutes one of the foremost devices through which she mediates the voices of these writers. Most notable among her epigraphs, the words of Kateb Yacine and Albert Camus serve to frame the narration:

Hâtez-vous de mourir, après vous parlerez en ancêtres... (Kateb Yacine, dans *L’oeuvre en fragments*)

Haste yourself to die, then you will speak like an ancestor...

Si j'avais le pouvoir de donner une voix à la solitude et à l'angoisse de chacun d'entre nous, c'est avec cette voix que je m'adresserais à vous. (Albert Camus, dans une conférence, le 22.1.56).

⁴ Until recently, Djébar – in a similar fashion to Spivak – emphasized the importance of retracing the silencing historical process to which oppressed women had been subjected in Algeria. The particular attention devoted to gendered subaltern, however, gave way to a more balanced perspective after the Algerian Quartet, with some attention paid to the erasure of accounts from Algerian male which differed from dominant historiography, such as in *La Disparition de la langue française* (2006).

If I had the power to give voice to the solitude and anguish of everyone of us, it is with this voice that I would speak to you. (Quoted in *Le Blanc* 9)

Both epigraphs qualify the narrator's voice as ambiguous: Kateb's longing for death to free one's voice is at best ironic, while Camus's 1956 statement wishing to "give voice to [the] solitude and anguish" of the Algerian people acknowledges the very limits of this enterprise through the use of an hypothetical formula. In both cases, it is as if speaking under the auspices of the civil war had rendered the writer's voice devoid of the representational power traditionally associated with it. Her subsequent collection of essays, *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, however, imbues these epigraphs with new meaning. As the title of this collection indicates, Djébar is preoccupied with transmitting the importance of polyphonic voices so that the multicultural aspects of her identity will not be lost. In a chapter entitled "Tout doit-il disparaître ?" [Must everything disappear?], where she laments on the transient nature of things and the seemingly inevitable disappearance of the richness of Algeria's cultural past, Djébar frames her response with yet another epigraph:

Cette voix qui parle...

Elle sort de moi, elle me remplit, elle clame contre mes murs, elle n'est pas la mienne, je ne peux pas l'arrêter, je ne peux pas l'empêcher de me déchirer, de m'assiéger.

Elle n'est pas la mienne, je n'en ai pas, je n'ai pas de voix et je dois parler, c'est tout ce que je sais, c'est autour de cela qu'il faut tourner, c'est à propos de cela qu'il faut parler, avec cette voix qui n'est pas la mienne, mais qui ne peut être que la mienne puisqu' il n'y a que moi. (Beckett quoted in *Ces voix qui m'assiègent* 95)

This voice that speaks...

It comes out of me, it fills me, it clamors against my wall, it is not mine, I cannot stop it, I cannot prevent it from tearing me apart me from besieging me.

It is not mine, I do not have one, I have no voice and yet I must speak, it is all I know, it is around this that we must revolve, it is about this that we must speak, with this voice that is not mine, but that can only be mine since there is no one here but me.

As Inge Boer has convincingly demonstrated, this excerpt from Samuel Beckett's *L'Innommable* (1953) introduces the narrator's voice as "a voice that assaults the subject, a voice that is separated from her but not leaving her alone, is first and foremost to be interpreted as the voice of trauma" (62). She explains that Djébar's convocation of other writers' works and words remains ambiguous: it is not so much a

voluntarily employed literary device as it is a manifestation of the subject's fracturing – an outward sign of the dissolution of boundaries of the self. Its resolution with other writers' voices helps to offset the incommensurability and the foreignness of the violent events represented.

Beside the shared sense of alienation that is conveyed through Beckett's quotation and Djébar's haunted narration, traced convincingly by Boer throughout Djébar's text, I would argue that what matters most is the interweaving of voices forged by Djébar with her epigraph. To the questions "why write during the civil war?" and "what remains once the nation has disappeared?" the networks of writers convoked through Djébar's intertextual practices seem to provide a viable answer. In other words, in the face of the adversity and the dissolution of certainty that accompany the civil war, this multiplicity of voices not only provides a safe home for her writing, but also creates an alternative space to that of the nation-state torn apart by the civil war.

In *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, this multiplication of voices is exemplified by the use of Albert Camus's epigraph at the opening of the book and his life story at the start of the narration, alongside the life stories of Frantz Fanon, Mouloud Feraoun and Jean Amrouche. One cannot help but be surprised by Camus's inclusion into Djébar's Pantheon of "Algerian writers," in light of the controversy surrounding Camus's political identity at the time. Following Edward Said's reading of *L'Étranger* as a byproduct of the colonial unconscious and Mouloud Feraoun's earlier criticism of Camus's ambiguous position toward colonialism,⁵ many intellectuals had rejected Camus in favor of Fanon. And although Camus remained a prominent interlocutor of Algerian intellectuals between 1962 and 1995 – if only an implicit and unspoken one – Djébar was among the first to overtly reaffirm Camus's role in the national literary canon and to rescue him from the margins of Algerian texts into the narration itself.⁶ Elizabeth Fallaize has written in detail about the significance of Camus's status within Djébar's text:

And in forming her procession, she opens it not only with one of Algeria's most famous writers, but with a pied noir. This [constitutes a] reversed form of inclusion, in which the margin of the former colonized includes the colonial centre. (59-60)

⁵ One can also mention Albert Memmi's condemnation of the figure of the pied-noir in his *Portrait du colonisé* (1972) which is irreconcilable with Camus's plea in favor of his own settler community. For further reading on the topic, see Debra Kelly's article.

⁶ In light of the recent polemic surrounding the celebration of Camus's 50th death anniversary, one can still wonder about Camus's status within Algerian Letters. In March 2010, plans were made to honor Camus by sending a cultural "Caravan" in Algeria, but this celebratory gesture was met with resistance by some intellectuals and prompted a debate unresolved to this day, about whether Camus should still be read, and if so, whether he should be read as part of a colonial or an Algerian canon (See Sara Kharfi).

In this respect, the framing of the text by Camus's quotation, the quotation's repetition within the text (121) and its positioning alongside Kateb Yacine indicate a fundamental departure from the practice of her predecessors. Djébar encourages us to reshape our understanding of the conventional definition of the community of Algerian writers and of Camus's Algerianity in particular. Although she does not set out to rehabilitate Camus *per se*, her convocation implicitly challenges the public attacks he has endured. Furthermore, in choosing an excerpt from Camus's 1956 "An Appeal for a Civilian Truce in Algeria," in which Camus argued for the absolute refusal of acts of terrorism and the resumption of peaceful negotiations, Djébar prefigures the fact that Camus's plea would become a rallying point among intellectuals in the late 1990's, during Algeria's civil war, in a collective effort to stop violence against civilians.

Redrawing the political lines that demarcate the canon is hardly new; writers such as Emmanuel Roblès and Jean Pélégri, both members of the *École d'Alger*, had already questioned the correlation between the nationality of a writer and the labeling of his literary production. In "Les signes et les lieux," Pélégri takes issue with the simplistic vision that divided Algeria's pre-independence literary production between colonized/colonizer, which had *de facto* classified all pied-noir writers as colonialist enthusiasts. In his essay, Pélégri confronts the political definition of identity, where a homeland is defined by restrictive criteria such as race, religion and language with an inclusive definition born in the literary realm:

L'appartenance littéraire et spirituelle à un pays ne relève pas nécessairement du sang, des origines, de la consonance d'un nom, et pas d'avantage de critères pseudo-nationalistes [...]. En art, [...] l'appartenance ne peut se définir que par la façon dont une réalité a été vécue, sentie, intériorisée et formulée. (18)

One's literary and spiritual belonging to a country does not necessarily coincide with one's blood, one's origins, and the resonance of one's name, nor is it defined by pseudo-nationalistic criteria [...]. In art, [...] belonging can only be defined by the way in which reality has been lived, felt, internalized and transcribed.

Here, Pélégri emphasizes the singularity of art as one that always already exhausts traditional definitions of belonging, and that effectively moves beyond essential categories. To illustrate this point, Pélégri redraws Algeria's literary Pantheon so that writers such as Isabelle Eberhardt become integral to the "patrimoine algérien" (18). Pélégri goes even further by rethinking the process of emergence of traditionally

acclaimed Algerian artists like Kateb Yacine and Mohammed Dib, and retraces their aesthetic and political engagement to their European predecessors.⁷

Djebar's epigraphic use of Camus's text alongside Kateb Yacine's, I argue, allows us to reconsider the conventional definition of Algerian literature and to challenge it. As Judith Still and Michael Worton have pointed out, quoting previous writers does not merely echo their words, in the same way that allusion does not simply parrot the referenced meaning. At the very least, these practices indicate a debt to a preceding tradition, which can, in turn, be either legitimized or questioned (Worton 12; Genette 134). In that sense, the literary corpus that serves as a text's intertext is no different from the Foucauldian archive⁸ insofar as it creates a space that distinguishes between works and authors chosen to be remembered and those who are simply silenced. But, whereas the discursive space of the Foucauldian archives enables one to achieve and assert cultural hegemony, postcolonial critics have specifically defined intertextual practices as a disruptive literary practice, one that allows the postcolonial author to "write back" and challenges institutional literary and linguistic hierarchies (Donadey 29-31).⁹ In keeping with this understanding, Djebar's epigraphic use of Camus's text reincorporates the traditionally labeled "French" writer into the Algerian corpus, thus blurring the border between the French and Algerian literary canon.

Once this border has been blurred and Camus has been brought into the space of her work, Djebar uses him to denounce the daily violence and evoke an improbable peace. Despite the harsh context of her discourse, Djebar envisions an idealized version of the setting for Camus's 1956 plea, where she describes an unlikely fraternization of Muslim nationalists and French liberals in the audience, a fraternization that implicitly erases both political and national boundaries between Algeria and France (115). Djebar goes even as far as to embody colonial Algeria through the figure of Camus, and thus

⁷ To read further on the reframing of Algerian literature by writers such as Pélégri, Roblès and Camus, see Bernard Aresu's excellent article "Albert Camus, European-Algerian Writing, and the Aporia of Identity."

⁸ In *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969), Foucault defines the archive as a discursive space and a site of symbolic power. According to Foucault, beyond the archive as a real physical space where knowledge is neutrally stored and preserved looms a site of discrimination and domination. Indeed, through its content, the archive imposes what can be said and what has to be silenced (129). For the purpose of this study, I would like to broaden the definition given by Foucault so as to include the references to the literary canon that pervade fictional works.

⁹ Assia Djebar's *Quartet* has encouraged a critical move to link intertextuality, as a mainly poetic and compositional practice, with the ethical imperative of postcolonial writers to address and respond to an earlier text from the colonial period within their own works. For example, in her study of these novels, Anne Donadey has established parallels between intertextuality and multilingual practice: intertextuality, which designates a more or less demarcated interpenetration of different texts, favors the interweaving of different voices and registers, and ultimately the incorporation of different languages present in translation. And, just as intertextual practices become a strategy to overwrite the silencing of the oppressed in colonial texts, so the multilingual aspects participate in the debunking of normative French.

reshapes the conventional allegory of Algeria as a violated woman into that of a wise old man at peace:

Camus, vieil homme: cela paraît aussi peu imaginable que la métaphore Algérie, en adulte sage, apaisé, tourné enfin vers la vie, la vie ordinaire... Ainsi, l'Algérie en homme, en homme de paix, dans une dignité rétablie est-ce impensable ? (110 emphasis is Djebbar's)

Camus, an old man: this seems as hardly conceivable as the metaphor of Algeria as a wise and peaceful adult, finally looking toward life, ordinary life... Thus, Algeria as a man, a man of peace, in a reestablished dignity, is this really unthinkable?

The image of a peaceful Algeria is simultaneously summoned and distanced by the unrealistically utopian vision of a post-independence Camus who would have survived his 1960 car accident and become a national icon. Informed by Jacques Derrida's hauntology, Camus's presence hovering over Djebbar's text was to be interpreted as a remnant of Algeria's colonial trauma, allowing the fundamental ambivalence of the scene to translate the impossible negotiation out of this (post)colonial conflict. However, far from limiting itself to the vision of an eternally delayed French-Algerian fraternity – an echo of postcolonial theory – the peculiar use of Camus frames Algerian writers and literature on a broader canvas: Camus's identity becomes a foundation for a notion of an inclusive *algérianité* and for the redrawing of the cultural borders of the nation in crisis. This movement beyond the postcolonial dialectic is even more apparent in the essay version of the book, which was presented in 1993 in front of the Strasbourg International Parliament of writers (Zimra 152). There, in the capital of Europe, a city that Djebbar was later to represent in her novel *Les Nuits de Strasbourg* (1997) as a transnational “ville-refuge” for intellectuals whose lives were being threatened, Djebbar first reclaimed Camus's legacy. The deliberate choice of this political setting served to displace Djebbar's literary allegiance, as Camus became less an emblem of tumultuous postcolonial French-Algerian relations than a symbol of the movement that was to remap Algeria as transnational through a network of lateral references, what Djebbar has termed *Alsalgérie* (*Les Nuits de Strasbourg* 353). In *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, Djebbar even goes further, compounding references to Camus with those of a transnational coterie comprised, among others, Derrida, Kafka, Pessoa, Chédid, Levinas, and Arendt.

More generally, intertextuality also testifies to the circulation of cultural production that was suppressed during the civil war, and re-asserts Algerian identity and culture as inherently unstable and always subject to reinterpretation. Jacques Berque's epigraph to the last and final chapter of *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* bears witness to this practice. This quotation, taken from a missive that the Algerian-born French Islamologue addressed to Djebbar a few days before his disappearance, echoes Djebbar's aggravation with the civil war. In his letter, Berque links the violence of the civil war to the idea of

imprisonment in a tradition of repression and destruction, and implicitly traces the civil war's violence to French colonial politics in Algeria.¹⁰ Most interestingly, he does so through a direct reference to Djébar's 1995 novel, *Vaste est la prison*. His final words read: "Oui, vaste est la prison algérienne" [Yes, so vast is the Algerian prison] (*Le Blanc* 231), ever so slightly modifying Djébar's title which was inspired by a traditional Berber song: "*Vaste est la prison qui m'écrase, Meqqwer Ihebs iy inyan.*" This epigraph thus asks the reader to navigate between at least four literary contexts: the original Berber song, Djébar's rereading of it in her novel, Berque's reading of Djébar's novel in the light of the civil war and Djébar's echoing of Berque. In this, the narration draws a subtle link between the civil war, with Algeria's strict Arabization and rigid monolingual policy which gradually led to the suppression of Berber dialects, and the subsequent flight of Francophone writers.

Recalling earlier scenes depicting the funerals of Kateb Yacine and Mahfoud Boucebcî, Berque's *mise-en-abyme* of Djébar's earlier text foregrounds a celebration of linguistic diversity, which is expressly contrasted with the institutional demands of monolingualism. At Kateb Yacine's funeral, for example, the Imam's prayer in classical Arabic is interrupted by the outcries of the crowd in both dialectal Arabic and Berber, a multilingual depiction which inverts the nationalist perception of Yacine as the quintessential father of the literary notion of a unified Algeria through his novel *Nedjma* (Salhi). From his burial ground, he is resurrected as a dramaturge who fought in the last years of his life to promote dialectal Arabic through his plays, and an intellectual who conceived of a plural and inclusive nation like that which Djébar honors. Although Djébar never formally incorporates languages other than French within the narration, her polyphonic writing, composed of multiple quotations of deceased writers and interjections of anonymous voices into official commemorations, effectively mimics the linguistic character of otherness, and adequately mediates Algeria's multilingual reality. Consequentially, Djébar's articulation of "the white of Algeria" as its untold plurality implicitly redraws the network of associations between the diverse literary contexts invoked as one would redraw a map of Algeria, transgressing geopolitical and symbolic borders of the Algerian nation as they have been established by the monolithic

¹⁰ Parallels between the War of Liberation and the civil war of the 90s are hinted at through the narrative's interplay between the deceased intellectuals of the 1950s and those of the 1990s. This parallel is never truly argued. It thus runs the risk of reproducing the French phantasm which understands the civil war and Islamism as part of an endless Algerian cycle of violence which could never be rationally explained. Djébar is not alone in this endeavor. As Benjamin Stora suggests, the main parallels between the war of Liberation and the civil war of the 90s were driven by "la persistance des préjugés et des stéréotypes" [the persistence of prejudices and stereotypes]. (65).

Here, I would also take issue with Berque's discourse in his letter to Djébar and its inclusion within the text: his use of the terms "origine" and "destin" seem to posit violence in Algeria as something almost pathological to Algerians, thus exempting the reader from further analysis of the role played by the colonial legacy.

definition of Algerianness, and calling for the conceptualization of an inclusive and transnational community.

There are also ontological implications which result from the network of texts and voices Djebbar deploys in her narration. The interpenetration of multiple writers' voices, I would argue, creates a renewed conception of subjectivity where ideas need not be absolute and terms are not necessarily fixed and polarized. Building on Freud's concept of inter-subjectivity and Kristeva's concept of inter-textuality, Laurent Milesi has noted that such a discursive practice shifts the conception of an oeuvre, from a closed and full structure written by a self-sufficient and totalized subject, to a plural text, produced by multifaceted and decentered subjects who are the "sum of multiple productivities" and whose quotation creates as many zones of contact (10). *Le Blanc de l'Algérie's* writing strategies thus allow for the examination of Algerian postcolonial identity as a continuing construction articulated by multiple disparate subjectivities. Djebbar's intertextual literary practice thus privileges the vision of a postcolonial writer "en mouvement," passing across literary and geopolitical borders. While one can rightfully interpret Algeria's white as the sign of what Emily Apter has termed "a nation of literary exclusion" (97), I would argue that one cannot exclude its more positive textual counterpart: Djebbar's vision of writing Algeria's white as a site of togetherness which collapses conventional binary oppositions such as North/South, French/Algerian, Colonizer/ colonized, Arab/Berber, etc. In other words, it is the imminence of the cultural homogenization of Algeria in the aftermath of Independence which prompted Djebbar to rethink writing as a refuge from the implosion of the geopolitical national space. She concludes her text by expressing her yearning for a renewed conception of writing as a deterritorialized space:

Dans la brillance de ce désert-là, dans le retrait de l'écriture en quête d'une langue hors les langues, en s'appliquant à effacer ardemment en soi toutes les fureurs de l'autodévoration collective, retrouver un « dedans de la parole » qui, seul, demeure notre patrie féconde. (*Le Blanc* 275-276)
In the brilliance of this desert, in the safe harbor of writing in quest of a language beyond languages, by trying fiercely to obliterate all the furies of the collective self-devouring in oneself, finding "the word within" again that, alone, remains our fertile homeland

This passage summons "*une langue hors les langues*" (*Le Blanc* 275), a language that would exist outside all labels and national categorizations known to us, and thus escape the type of political recuperations that threatened French, the colonial idiom, and Arabic, that imposed on the emerging nation. In contrast to these idioms, this language "beyond languages" appears to be intimate and singular; it comes from "within," and permits authors to escape the collective frenzy of homogeneity. Yet, paradoxically, it does not preclude all types of communal belongings, but rather provides – if we are to

continue Djebbar's play on word – *une patrie hors les patries*, a homeland located beyond existing homelands, a fluid space of belonging without fixed borders and exclusive membership, which is nevertheless constituted of plural singularities. This renewed conception of community, I would argue, calls to mind Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of "being singular plural." In his book *Être singulier pluriel* (1996), Nancy delineates a new type of community which is always in a state of flux – becoming, dissembling and reforming – and as such is linked to the temporal and, more importantly, to the ephemeral. Although it allows for singularities to be taken into account, "being" has little value by itself: "The outside is inside [...] Being in touch is what makes us "us," and there is no other secret to discover or bury this touching itself, behind the "with" of coexistence" (13). In other words, not unlike Djebbar's imaginary nation of writers brought together by the interweaving of their voices and quotations, the community is a collection of singularities, formed within and informed by a relational discourse, where heterogeneity is a constitutive facet of its being. Mirrored within the narration through each writer's voice and restituted words, this community of writers' "singular plurality" is etched on the page with each quotation mark, and each reference.

Of course, whether a text can provide a viable site of resistance to political turmoil and extreme violence is still a vexed question. As the power of a deterritorialized community and its corresponding linguistic quest remains limited to the space of the text and does not actually have any practical consequences, Djebbar's writing risks becoming an impotent gesture trivializing Algeria's hardship. Although it may not matter to the oppressor whether or not a writer's work subverts his oppression, there is indisputably social and aesthetical value in the exploration of such a vision, despite its fragility and limitations. Djebbar's writing, conceived as a site of displacement for a pacified transnational identity, is further complicated by her own positioning as an "exiled"¹¹ and a migrant writer. Her transnational discursive practice is mirrored by her cosmopolitan life: biographically—as an Algerian woman living between Paris and New York, and intellectually—as a French trained historian and now a scholar holding a literature chair in New York and a seat in the *Académie française*. Given its main imperative to protect and promote standard French, while concurrently legislating on aesthetical deviations from the linguistic norms, the *Académie* is considered today to be among the most linguistically normative institutions and situates itself at the forefront of the battle for French cultural sanctity.¹² Djebbar's presence there brings us back to

¹¹ I use the word "exiled" for a lack of a better one. Although Djebbar has never lived as a true political exile, she was unable to return freely to Algeria during the 1990's. This combined with her much discussed linguistic and cultural exile into French brings Djebbar to define herself as an "exile" in *Ces voix qui m'assiègent* (11).

¹² While Djebbar's membership in the *Académie* certainly demonstrates an official sanction of her literary worthiness, thus marking her as having paradoxically become a "mainstream writer," and testifies to a larger movement that promotes Francophone literature as a renewed medium for the dissemination of the French language outside the Hexagon, it also brings into sharp focus "the great unresolved arc of France's Algerian adventure." (Murdoch 15) Indeed, Djebbar's election was portrayed in the media as a

Spivak's questioning of the epistemological violence which results from the very positioning of whoever produces knowledge in a postcolonial context. One could hypothesize that Djébar's privileged situation creates a distanced vantage point, from which her description of the cries of the civil war victims might ring hollow.¹³ Spivak treats exactly this concern in "Echo", where she extends her previous investigation by scrutinizing privileged intellectuals writing from cosmopolitan centers with oeuvres focusing on the representation of oppressed people in their respective countries. According to Spivak, women writers such as Djébar who are "world travelers," are utterly empowered by their mobility in comparison to women still residing in Algeria; still, Spivak sees them as invariably struggling with "various structures inherited from colonialism" (30). Spivak's pessimistic view leads her to conclude that the ethical challenges that arose from social stratification, cultural hierarchies, and other forms of privilege can never be completely overcome by such writers. This is not to say, however, that we should universally read such works with an eye to their colonial tendencies; Spivak herself warns us against the simplification that would lead us to consider that the finding of a voice automatically implies its co-optation by the hegemonic order (Moore-Gilbert 107). Spivak's primary concern is thus the acute awareness of the limitation set by one's own privileged position as a speaker, and the continual struggle for the writer to grapple with this ethical challenge.

To this limitation, one might add a second one: that which is imposed by the literary and sociological expectations of the readership. How and to what extent, we might ask, is a specific text shaped by its targeting of a presumed audience? Considering that most of the Francophone literary output is produced from and consumed by the Western world, Djébar's complex positioning is extremely pertinent to these debates, as her newly acquired membership in the *Académie française* and her position in American

way to highlight the reconciliation – and thus paradoxically the on-going struggle – of France's official memory and the national trauma associated with Algeria's independence in 1962.

¹³ A similar concern regarding Djébar's oeuvre has already been voiced by Marnia Lazreg. In *The Eloquence of Silence*, Lazreg criticizes Djébar's adoption of global feminism to discuss the status of women in Algeria in her earlier texts, a perspective that articulates the predicament of a unified and decontextualized feminine community, identifying it with the widespread tendency to view the Islamic world as a homogenized patriarchy invariably violent toward women. Historically, such generalizations have been instrumentalized to reinforce neo-imperialism by imposing Western normative standards on women from emerging countries without encompassing their own specific culture and status in society. Furthermore, it takes away all notions of 'native' agency. According to Lazreg, such limits translate in Djébar's systematic rejection of Algerian tradition and the practice of Islam which "turns [her female characters] into pitiful, empty-headed puppets" (201). In this perspective, Lazreg speaks of Djébar as an "anti-native" Westernized writer, whose criticism of the position of Algerian woman in Islam reeks of colonial nostalgia. While I would agree with Lazreg's cautioning against Western feminism's tendency to generalization when it comes to understanding the varying status of women in Islam, I would take issue with her characterization of Djébar's writing as oppressive. Lazreg's reading of Djébar's work is not only limited by her singular focus on Djébar's earlier work, but also by her assumption that anything except a "nativist" portrayal should be deemed elitist.

academia seems to predestine her work to be read by a largely Western public.¹⁴ Peter Hitchcock's analysis of the culture industry, and more generally of strains of commodity aesthetics from the Maghrebi to the Caribbean literature, has deeply problematized the links between the production and commodity markets: "despite imagination's centrality," explains Hitchcock, "its cognitive force is dependent upon the myriad structures of power, production, and reproduction" (2). Ultimately, just as Djébar's treatment of transnational voices is indebted to the need to reconfigure the Algerian nation during its time of crisis, so also is it indebted to the very academic trend of cultural exchange in which it is born (23).

It would be naïve to think that Djébar's literary production can ever fully escape this commodification of Francophone literature, postcolonial theory, and transnationalism. Yet, she is acutely aware of these pitfalls, and while she does not directly address the extent to which her novel plays to the expectation of her Western public, she actively contests the labels imposed on her literature by critics and publishers alike, and constantly objects to being cast as the exemplary *Arabe de service*. In *Ces voix qui m'assiègent..*, Djébar expresses the fact that she refuses to allow her literary work to be forced into a purely socio-political feminist discourse by the dominant Western reading practice, concurrently acknowledging that such politicized reading is the cornerstone of her own literary success:

"Ce qu'ils n'aimaient pas en lui, c'était l'Algérien." Justement, je souris à cet Algérien-là, moi qu'on accueille de si loin et dans une université prestigieuse parce qu'écrivain, parce que femme et parce qu'algérienne: je note à mon tour en contrepoint: "ce qu'ils reconnaissent en moi, c'est l'Algérienne." Ce qu'ils reconnaissent? Rectifions: "Ce qu'ils espèrent de moi, c'est l'Algérie-femme." (224)

"What they did not like in him was the Algerian." Just so. I smile at that Algerian, I who is being welcomed from so far away at a prestigious university, as writer, as woman, as Algerian: in my turn, I note, as a counterpoint: what they recognize in me is the Algerian." What they recognize, really? Let's rectify: "What they are expecting of me is Woman-Algeria."¹⁵

¹⁴ This tendency is reinforced by the fact that her texts in Algeria do not appear as favored as those of other writers, such as Maïssa Bey. This might be due to the confluence of several factors: the quasi-complete absence of a distribution circuit making the cost of imported books prohibitive, and the fact that, contrary to Djébar who publishes only in the Hexagon, Bey copublishes her texts in France (éditions de l'Aube) and in Algeria (éditions Barzakh). One can also mention Bey's direct involvement with her local readership, via the promotion of female literacy in Algeria, by the Association "Paroles et Ecriture" which she co-founded, and in particular the opening of a library in Sidi Bel-Abbès, when Djébar herself has not returned to Algeria in the past decades.

¹⁵ I borrow this translation from Clarisse Zimra, 151.

To denounce and avoid the representational limitations today's postcolonial writers are faced with, Djébar has recourse once again to Camus and his expressed alienation from the intellectual marketplace in his posthumous novel, *Le Premier homme*. She notes that, just as Camus remains a constant colonial suspect for many contemporary critics, her own identity is often reduced to embody all Algerian women with the usual attendant clichés. By quoting Camus, adopting his voice and finally duplicating his words in the feminine, Djébar reveals herself to be a Protean figure as well, and consciously deconstructs the straightjacketing imposed by both the French metropolitan literary market and postcolonial studies on Algerian writers as 'native informant.'

In conclusion, one may choose to read Djébar's *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* with attention to her questioning of the power of the act of writing following the extreme violence of the civil war, an interpretation which reads the color white as emblematic of the complex relationship implied by the utterance of such thoughts in the language of the old colonizer. However, should one choose to read *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* in this way, one must also cultivate an understanding of what Djébar accomplishes through her writing alone. Her reappropriation of other writers cannot be solely explained through the lens of postcolonial criticism, and begs for an alternate and yet inclusive reading. Actively reading, interpreting, explaining, and exposing the words of those she has invoked, Djébar's textual polyphony signals, above all, the need to rethink the Algerian nation. Epigraphs, quotations and paraphrases mark a ceaseless desire to displace her narrative consciousness into others' oeuvres, which are conceived as points of contact with alterity. Djébar's intertext thus becomes a language *beyond* languages, a writing *near/with* writings and a space beyond restrictive geopolitical borders.

WORKS CITED

- Apter, Emily. *The Translation Zone: a New Comparative Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. Print.
- Aresu, Bernard. "Albert Camus, European-Algerian Writing, and the Aporia of Identity." in *Albert Camus, précurseur méditerranéen d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*, (dir) Alek Baylee Toumi. New York: Peter Lang, 2009, 45-60. Print.
- Boer, Inge. *Uncertain Territories: Boundaries in Cultural Analysis*. New York: Rodopi, 2006. Print.
- Camus, Albert. "Conférence, le 22 janvier 1956." in *Chroniques algériennes, 1939-58 : Actuelles III*. Paris : Gallimard, 2002, 181. Print.
- Djébar, Assia. *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*. Paris : Albin Michel, 1995. Print.
- . *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Paris : Actes Sud, 1997. Print.
- . *Vaste est la prison*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1995. Print.
- . *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1999. Print.

- Donadey, Anne. "The Multilingual Strategies of Postcolonial Literature: Assia Djébar's Algerian Palimpsest." *World Literature Today* 74:1 (2000): 27-36. *Jstor*. Web. 14 Dec. 2009.
- Fallaize, Elizabeth. "In Search of a Liturgy: Assia Djébar's *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*." *French Studies* 59:1 (2005): 55-62. Print.
- Feraoun, Mouloud. "Mouloud Feraoun à Albert Camus. 27 Mai 1951." in *Lettres à ses amis*. Paris : Seuil, 1969. 203. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *L'Archéologie du savoir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969. Print.
- Genette, Gérard. *Seuils*. Paris: Seuil, 1987. Print.
- Hiddlestone, Jane. "Political Violence and Singular Testimony," *Law and Literature* 17:1 (2005): 1-20. *Jstor*. Web. 1 Jan. 2010.
- Hitchcock, Peter. *Imaginary States: Studies in Cultural Transnationalism*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. Print.
- Kateb, Yacine. *L'oeuvre en fragments*. Ed. and intro. Jacqueline Arnaud. Paris: Sindbad, 1986. Print.
- Kelly, Debra. "An unfinished death!: the legacy of Albert Camus and the work of textual memory in contemporary European and Algerian literatures." *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 10:1-2 (2007): 217-235. Print.
- Lazreg, Marnia. *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Milesi, Laurent. "Inter-textualités : enjeux et perspectives (en guise d'avant-propos)." in *Texte(s) et Intertexte(s)*. Eds. Éric Le Calvez and Marie-Claude Canova-Green. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997, 7-34. Print.
- Mokhtari, Rachid. *La Graphie de l'horreur : essai sur la littérature algérienne, 1990-2000*. Alger: Chihab éditions, 2002. Print.
- Moore-Gilbert, Bart. *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*. London: Verso Books, 1997. Print.
- Murdoch, H Adlai. "Woman, Postcoloniality, Otherness: Djébar's Discourses of *Histoire* and *Algérienité*." *L'Esprit créateur* 48:4 (2008): 15-33. Print.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Être singulier pluriel*. Paris: Galilée, 1996. Print.
- O'Riley, Michael. *Postcolonial Haunting and Victimization: Assia Djébar's New Novels*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007. Print.
- Pélégri, Jean. "Les signes et les lieux. Essai sur la genèse et les perspectives de la littérature algérienne." *Le Banquet maghrébin* dir. Giuliana Rodinis, Rome : Bulsoni, 1991, 9-35. Print.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993. Print.
- Salhi, Kamal. "Nedjma and Algeria in the works of Kateb Yacine. Towards a national identity." PhD Thesis, University of Exeter, 1991. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak ?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988, 271-313. Print.

- . "Echo." *New Literary History* 24:1 (1993): 17-43. *Scribd*. Web. 29 Dec. 2009.
- Stora, Benjamin. *La Guerre invisible: Algérie années 90*. Paris : Presses de Sciences Po, 2001. Print.
- Worton, Michael and Judith Still. *Intertextuality: theories and practice*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991. Print.
- Zimra, Clarisse. "Hearing Voices, or, Who You Calling Postcolonial? The Evolution of Djébar's Poetics." *Research in African Literature* 35:4 (2004): 150-159. *JStor*. Web. 4 Jan. 2010.