Trespasser across Perilous Ways: Assia Djebar, Woman Writer

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In Spring 1957 a shy young woman who had yet to turn twenty was on her way to a meeting with René Julliard, whose press was considering her first novel and had asked her to select a pseudonym. Worried that she would also be too easily recognized in the requisite photo that might land on the book cover, she had just cut her hair to change her appearance. Still trying to decide to spare her honorable Muslim family and her stern father the shame of her writing, she listened as the fiancé who had accompanied her recited the ninety-nine attributes by which a good Muslim should invoke the divine. Djebar/djebbar /djébar, the tenth name she chose, suggested the forceful intransigence of an absolute God appealed to her, "and," she added, "in Arabic, the sound was so beautiful…"[2]

The decision to publish had already got her expelled from the prestigious École Normale Supérieure and banned from taking her qualifying exams. This might have finished her education forever – or, at least, destroyed the promising future as an academic star to which her elite French schooling destined her – had not General De Gaulle eventually reinstated her. Exactly half a century later, a mandarin among mandarins, this former colonial subject would be inducted into the center of imperial power, the *Académie française*. And it would be the same symbolic father figure of the humble primary school-teacher who had, upon her tenth birthday, accompanied her to a French school for the first time, that she would evoke to accompany her in her induction in a remarkably modest gesture: "A quoi me sert aujourd'hui ma langue

[1] I wish to thank the Taft Research Center at the University of Cincinnati, Richard Harknett, the Chair of the Faculty Board at the time, and Michèle Vialet, the Convener of the Research Seminar on Assia Djebar, for inviting me as Taft Research Fellow on residency to further my analysis of Assia Djebar's works.

[2] The variety of spelling bespoke her hesitations, the diacritic making it appear more French, the double B spelling of a stressed tonal accent, less so. Since her return to writing with the 1980 short-story collection, the simpler version has prevailed. These remarks come from my private exchanges with the writer while working on the American translation of her third novel, *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* (*Children of the New World*. Trans. M de Jager, NY: The Feminist Press 2005). A re-issue of her fourth novel, *Les Alouettes naïves* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1997) uses the picture on its cover.

française … Je n'ai fait, après tout, que prolonger l'activité de mon père" [Of what use is my French language to me today? … After all, I have merely been expanding on my father's work] (*Assia Djebar: Littérature* 416).[3]

But the daughter of the humble schoolteacher had achieved much more. By the time she agreed to play the academic game, producing the requisite work for the doctorate granted her in 2000 by the University of Montpellier, what she submitted had little to do, stylistically or structurally, with an academic exercise. Ignoring the chronology required by the genre (*thèse d'état*), she grouped selected essays around the most salient debates that have marked her work; particularly, the tussle between "forme" and "fond" that has all along raised the vexed question of her linguistic medium, the private challenge of what she once called "her booty of war".[4] If scholars rejoiced at the opportunity to find, at long last, many of the writer's scattered analytical writings under a single cover, Djebar, for her part, equally welcomed the opportunity to meditate upon half a century of writing. The resulting volume, *Ces Voix qui m'assiègent*, simultaneously published in Paris and Montreal,[5] with different types and covers in deference to a different public, demonstrated that her literary project had always been driven by an aesthetic quest. She never lost sight of her poetics even as her work became increasingly weighted down by the internecine political wars that continued to plague her country, turmoil to which she has increasingly felt obligated to respond. Her belief in a morally centered universe and her private pride in a morally centered *oeuvre* constitute the personal subtext that drives the Academy discourse. With an homage to the father who had made "the escape from the harem" possible – the famous phrase opening her 1989 *Quinzaine Littéraire* piece[6]– her induction was, for her, an opportunity to situate herself in a very long line of artists, writers, philosophers, from Apuleius to Zamparo, ethics-driven intellectual thinkers for whom France was not necessarily the be all and end all.

"vraiment une femme qui sait dire non…"

Although she opens her Academy speech with requisite formulae of modesty, in a venue presided over by the immortal ghosts of four centuries of high cultural elitism,

[3] The discourse is easily found on the Academy website. It has now been added as the very welcome appendix to the 2010 Cerisy proceedings, *Assia Djebar: Littérature et transmission*. All translations are mine unless specified otherwise.

[4] Further evidence of her independent mind, the book version of the doctoral thesis showed even more disregard for academic protocols. See Françoise Lionnet, "Ces voix au fil de soi(e): le détour du poétique," in *Assia Djebar: Littérature* (23-36).

[5] *Ces Voix qui m'assiègent*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1999 and *Ces Voix qui m'assiègent … en marge de ma francophonie*. Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1999. My page references are to the Montréal version.

[6] "Du français comme du butin" *Quinzaine littéraire* (1989) is included in *Ces Voix* (69-72).

she immediately dictates the terms of engagement by reclaiming the booty of war. First, as a shared medium, "la langue française, la vôtre devenue la mienne" [your langage, become mine] (*Assia Djebar: Littérature* 414); next, as now rightfully hers: "depuis des décennies, cette langue ne m'est plus langue de l'Autre" [or decades now, this language has ceased to be for me the language of the Other] (416). Here vibrates the vanishing echo of the adversarial challenge she had used, "decades ago," in the 1985 Le Clézio interview, "Écrire dans la langue adverse."[7]

Elegantly scholarly toward the shared heritage of the West and its larger than life figures, evoking Virgil's descent alongside Dante as spectral mentors, she nevertheless selects out for herself an eighteenth-century maverick, Encyclopedist Diderot, precisely because he never made it to the Académie: "qui ne fut pas, comme Voltaire, académicien, mais dont le fantôme me sera, je le sens, ombre gardienne" [Denis Diderot who, unlike Voltaire, was never an Academician but whose ghost shall be for me, I feel it, a protective shade] (403). Subtly, but wittily in step with this decidedly unconventional character whom the Academy shunned, a fellow writer whose protection is here invoked, this is a true Djebarian move whereby she implies that, like Diderot, she owes allegiance to no one but herself.

This self-staging performance earns her the grudging admiration of fellow academician Pierre-Jean Rémy formally sponsoring her that day, for whom, he said, she has remained "the woman who knows how to say 'no'," self-possessed and proud, even while facing thirty-nine living *Immortels*.[8]

For, ever since cardinal Richelieu created it in 1635, the forty-strong *aeropagus* has been charged with promoting the best and brightest that French culture may offer the world; and to preserve, above all, the purity of the national language. As its official site spells it, it is a highly selective, largely male club of "founding members of the genius of France," one whose election (by secret ballot only) cannot be rescinded: "Elle offre une image fidèle du talent, de l'intelligence, de la culture, de l'imagination littéraire et scientifique qui fondent le génie de la France. La qualité d'académicien est une dignité inamovible. Nul ne peut démissionner de l'Académie française" [It offers a faithful image of the talent, intelligence, culture, literary and scientific imagination that are the foundations of the genius of France. The title of academician is a permanent honor. No one may resign from the *Académie française*].[9] But if the new elect graciously accepted the mandate, well aware that, to date, she was only the fifth woman so blessed, she

[7] Title of the interview published in *Contemporary French Civilization* 9.2 (Spring-Summer 1985): 230-43.

[8] Académie's site Rémy's speech introducing her states: "Vous ne pouvez pas faire autrement. Vous êtes vraiment une femme qui sait dire non" [You can't help it. You are truly a woman who knows how to say no]. He may have been re-reading her Frankfurt Peace Prize speech.

[9] Membership is a maximum of forty Immortals. Marguerite Yourcenar, the first woman ever selected in 1980, had died in 1987. Djebar happens to greatly admire *L'Oeuvre au noir*, a literary jewel [véritable bijou littéraire] (*Ces Voix* 213). Danielle Sallenave was elected as the sixth *Immortelle* in 2011.

nevertheless immediately displaced the honor to a much larger perspective, thereby instantly deconstructing its centripetal pull.

Her inspiration has to do with Diderot's 1751 *Lettre sur les sourds-muets* (*Letter on the Deaf Mutes*), one that she suggests as a parable for any writer's position, her own included. The feeling of belonging, yet not belonging completely yields a felicitously kinetic metaphor: "Il m'a semblé, écrit le philosophe en 1751, qu'il fallait être à la fois au-dehors et au-dedans. Je lui emprunte cette perspective d'approche" [It seemed to me, so writes the philosopher, that one had to be simultaneously inside and outside. I shall borrow his methodological perspective] (203).[10] And since, according to protocol, she must first pay homage to jurist Georges Vedel whom she has just been elected to replace, she highlights in him a thinker astride several cultures and languages, "avec des racines si authentiquement populaires, qui impliquent aussi le double parler, la langue du grand poète Frédéric Mistral, 'langue d'oc' [l'on disait 'le patois'], encore palpitante sous le français, appris à l'école de la III^{e} République" [with roots so authentically grounded in the folk they imply a dual language, that of Frederic Mistral, the great poet, the 'langue d'oc' – Occitan language – they used to call a "patois," still rustling under the French he learned in the schools of the Third Republic] (*Assia Djebar: Littérature* 404).[11] If the learned reference to Diderot yields a cross-cultural paradigm, her reference to Georges Vedel's authentic folk roots, "presque symboliquement, dès l'origine, de part et d'autre du droit. Diderot dirait 'à la fois au-dehors et au-dedans !' [almost symbolically by their origins on either side of the law, as Diderot might put it, "simultaneously inside and outside"] (*Assia Djebar: Littérature* 414) delivers an emotionally charged relationship with French, his dominant language but not his first. We are thereby reminded that French is not Djebar's native tongue either and that for her, as well, a missing subterranean birth language rustles under the Algerian dialectal Arabic of her youth and the polished French of her academic career: the Berber she cannot speak to which she paid poignant homage in accepting the 2000 Frankfurt Peace Prize:

> Je crois, en outre, que ma langue de souche, celle de tout le Maghreb, je veux dire la langue berbère, celle d'Antinéa, la reine des Touaregs où le matriarcat fut longtemps de règle, celle de Jugurtha qui a porté au plus

[10] I unpack the Encyclopedist's debate on language further in the forthcoming "Still Besieged by Voices: Djebar's Poetics of the Threshold" in *Postcolonial Poetics,* Ed. Jane Hiddleston. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011. 109-28; and touch upon its consequences for Djebar's self-reading in my contribution to the *Assia Djebar: Littérature* volume, "Transhumance du sens dans l'oeuvre de Djebar" (83-99).

[11] This evocation of primary origins that shall re-orient an entire future resonates with her own. This son has fulfilled the spiritual legacy of his forefathers, as will the Algerian daughter in the oft-quoted vignette that opens *Fantasia*, a little girl on her first school day, her hand in the father's hand.

> haut l'esprit de résistance contre l'impérialisme romain, cette langue donc que je ne peux oublier, dont la scansion m'est toujours présente et que pourtant je ne parle pas, est la forme même où, malgré moi et en moi, je dis "non": comme femme, et surtout, me semble-t-il, dans mon effort durable d'écrivain.
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> Langue, dirais-je, de l'irréductibilité. (9)
> Furthermore, I believe that my core language, the language of the entire Maghreb, [by which] I mean to say, the Berber language of Antinea, queen of the Touaregs among whom matriarchy long reigned, the language of Jugurtha that nurtured to the highest degree the spirit of resistance against Rome's Empire, this very language, therefore, that I cannot forget, whose rhythm is forever present within me and yet (one) that I cannot speak is the very form wherein, in spite of myself yet within myself, I say 'no': no as a woman, and above all, it seems to me, no through my long lasting effort as a writer…
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> Language, I would say, of the irreducible.[12]

In debating the mental nature of human language, Diderot argued that the tight cause-and-effect linearity of French syntax – unlike languages wherein a different word order prevails – must of necessity reflect the workings of the human brain since all conceptual thinking had to be linear, a neat circular (if not circuitous) reasoning. France's cultural supremacy thus followed "rationally" its linguistic power. But the Encyclopedist and his peers failed to verify whether meaning preceded reason, whether sense precedes order, how cause-effect syntax might exist without visual or aural input (and, like the chicken and the egg, who/what might come first). Hence, the unsolvable conundrum presented by deaf and mute people. The debate was rendered intractable by the ideological war between Ancients and Moderns. In no uncertain hegemonic terms Rivarol, winner of King Frederick's competition, settles it: "French syntax is incorruptible. ... *What is not French is not clear*" (66).[13] As Djebar reminds fellow Academicians, although her "classical" French schooling required her to master Greek and Latin, she was thrice refused permission to study Arabic. It was not part of the official cursus. As a road to knowledge, it did not exist. It was not linear.

Contrapuntally, her Academy speech launches itself into a much wider epistemological world. She calls upon Rabelais, whose Pantagruel insisted that Arabic and Hebrew were indispensable languages of knowledge to call oneself educated; who learned from the Persian polyglot philosopher Ibn Sina, whom the West calls Avicenne,

[12] One version can be found at http://www.cairn.info/revue-etudes-2001-9-page-235.htm.
[13] With emphasis in the original.

not only the scientific lore the West had forgotten but, as well, an irreverent curiosity for a mental life larger than its geographic borders. She thus asserts allegiance to a much older, much larger intellectual *imaginaire*, one presided over by spectral presences that are not anchored in Europe: a heady list from Algerian-born and multi-lingual Berber Apuleius of Madaura, who invents the episodic novel; Carthage-born Tertullian, the woman-hater; the Andalusian-trained, father of history Ibn Khaldun of "Ifriqiyah;" Ibn Battouta, the fearless traveler from Tangiers; Ibn Rochd, the exegetical commentator of Aritstotle; and many others who belong to all of us: "ces grand auteurs font partie de notre patrimoine" [they are the core group of our common heritage] (*Assia Djebar: Littérature* 415).

At the end of this long evocation, among those who have built "our patrimony," she singles out Augustine of Tagaste (now Algeria's Souk-Ahras), like her a Berber nursling of Empire. It is a very personal choice at a time when twentieth-century Algeria has yet to recover from the internecine wars that have decimated many of her own friends. The subject of the projected fourth volume of the Quatuor, Saint-Augustine dies wracked by despair in a decimated native land (hers and his), Barbarians at the gate: "Treize ans plus tard, il meurt, en 431 dans Hippone, assiégée par les Vandales" [Thirteen years later, in 431, he will die in Hippo, to which the Vandals have laid siege] (415). In her darkest private moments, Djebar, who has not returned home since 1990, envisions for herself a comparable fate. The death scene with which she will open volume four is for her the foundational moment when History shifts, when a once refined and cultured Orient is suddenly over-run by a bloodthirsty and power-mad Occident.

For over twenty long years, in Djebar's very own native city of Caesarea/Cherchell, the good bishop fought those whom she pointedly calls "les Intégristes chrétiens de son temps" [the Christian Fundamentalists of his time] (*Assia Djebar: Littérature* 415), Donatist sectarians against whom he could not prevail. In aligning these intractables of the fifth century with the current so-called "intégristes" of the twentieth ("intégristes," the preferred Algerian term for Islamic fundamentalists), Djebar is asking us to ponder the civil war that raged in her native land for over ten years throughout the 1990s, led to the public assassination of one president (Mohammed Boudiaf, a colonial war hero, in 1992), left well over two hundred thousand "disappeared,"[14] and may yet, she fears, flare up again for another ten. In her 1992 keynote speech to the Strasbourg Parliament of Writers, Djebar had insisted that all writers should feel responsible for these innocent civilian victims. To them, and to the personal friends and relatives shot, throat-slashed or vanished, she has devoted at

[14] The first deliberate targets were Western-trained intellectuals, such as writers, artists, journalists, school-teachers. By the end of the 1990s, large-scale massacres became routine. Gruesome pictures made it to the media for the butchery in Raïs (29 August 1997), and Bentalha (23 September 1997), hinterland villages on which Djebar has written the moving dirge-like poem, "Raïs, Bentalha." For a bilingual version, see "Dissident Algeria," special issue of *Research in African Literatures* (Fall 1999): 7-14.

least three works: *Loin de Médine* (1991), *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* (1995), and *Oran langue morte* (1997) "to demonstrate to the Islamists that Islam was not theirs exclusively," calling *Loin de Médine* "this book that *answers back*" ("When the Past Answers Our Present" 116; emphasis hers). A fourth text, *Les Nuits de Strasbourg* (1997), is in clear dialogue with this ethical imperative. A fifth, *La Disparition de la langue française* (2003), yet returns to it, to retrace the obsessive vicious circle that connects France's gory colonial conquest and the first bloodletting of the 1830s to the self-immolation of 1990s. Mourning her civilian dead, she writes the aftermath in blood, "j'écris l'après" because "le sang ne sèche pas sur la langue"[15] her corpus now a threnody.

St. Augustine's death is thus a highly private self-referential choice for the Quatuor in progress. Some may find her position a bit too "Orientalized," because too easily aligned along Fukuyama's historically scripted "clash of civilizations," driven by the binary simplifications that rustles through the "non-dits" of her Academy discourse. Given her well-known borrowings from Delacroix, Fromentin, Flaubert, as well as Picasso, all the Orientalist "intercessors" who have, she has said, given her back her absent and silent history, this is imitation with a vengeance. For, with this self-possessed performance,[16] this Orientalized native is sending us back the mirror image we had held up to her. As she bluntly reminds her listeners: "Mesdames et Messieurs, le colonialisme vécu au jour le jour par nos ancêtres, sur quatre générations au moins, a été une immense plaie" [ladies and gentlemen, colonialism, as it was lived daily by our ancestors, has been one long open sore] (*Assia Djebar: Littérature* 412). The nursling of Empire is behaving as though it is her moral right to Orientalize the West: "Il y a une autre Histoire." [There is / there must be another way to historicize] (412).

This was a right long disputed to her.

si vous êtes ainsi interpellée…

This de-orientlizing ideological thrust is still unmistakable two centuries after Diderot made his stand. As *Ces Voix* had already made very clear, in its multiple analytical references over the years to a very large spread of visible writers alongside those invisible ancestors she now honors in the Academic speech, Djebar has always cast her writerly net with little concern for the conventional limits of time or space or political ideology or cultural identity or assigned labels. Defining her writer's place on her own terms has been the steady purpose of a career now spanning well over fifty years.

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[15] "Le sang ne sèche pas sur la langue" is the title to the post-face of the collection of short stories dealing with the civil war, *Oran, langue morte*.

[16] Djebar wrote, acted and directed plays in Paris throughout the seventies. In 2000, she wrote the libretto, directed and produced the operatic version of *Loin de Médine*, "Filles d'Ishmaël," twice staged and performed in Italy. You might say she comes by the self-performing semiotics of her corpus naturally.

Asked to ponder her entry into literature, she whimsically reflects on the critical assumptions she has never quite been able to shake off, that she must justify her right to be a writer. Defiantly, she parses her answer: "L'écrivain est parfois interrogé comme en justice. Pourquoi écrivez-vous en français? Si vous êtes ainsi interpellée, c'est bien sûr pour rappeler que vous venez d'ailleurs" [The writer is sometimes asked/interrogated, as if in a court of law: 'Why do you write in French?' If you are thus interrogated, it is of course to remind you that you come from somewhere else] (*Ces Voix* 7). The adverbial aside "bien sûr," (of course, naturally, evidently) caustically stirs the unquiet waters of her own long accomplishments.

As early as the first novels, including probably the near-finished and abandoned historical novel, hundreds of pages long, that she says she "lost because it was not good enough," she has been pigeon-holed and she has fought against labels on both sides of the Mediterranean, defending throughout her writing her right to claim her own style, her own literary models, her own space. If she once expressed her early impatience at being compared to young Françoise Sagan for her first novel, *La Soif* (1957), a dismissive kinship Jean Déjeux was only too happy to propagate, she has mellowed, delighting in the fact that, sketched with elegant control in a delicately nuanced style, *La Soif*, has not aged a day, shows not even by a wrinkle: "Il n'a pas pris de rides" (Le Clézio 234).[17] Forty-five years later, in a question and answer moment for the 2001 meeting of the African Literature Association in Richmond, where I was to introduce her as the key-note speaker, she praised its sober texture, its finely etched psychology, and above all "a deliberately minimalist composition that I had hoped should remind readers of La Bruyère. It was something I had conceived on the model of a neo-classic tragedy in the Racinian mode" (Personal interview).[18] Pretty tall order for a Sagan soufflé. This assessment echoed the rich and complex references she has cited in our 1992 interview for *Women of Algiers*, Claudel, Mallarmé, Rivière, the early Gide, all those "neo-classic" puritans of style she was reading while writing. According to her German publishers, *La Soif* was also the work of hers that had sold the most copies by the time she was to receive the 2000 Frankfurt Peace Prize.

Indeed, *La Soif* (written in 1956 and published in 1957) and *Les Impatients* (written in 1957 and published in 1958) were composed within a year of each other, and

[17] Her 1983 phrase to Le Clézio is echoed in Mimi Mortimer's 1988 question as to its relevance, "il n'a pas vieilli" (it has not aged), *in Research in African Literatures* (198). The two interviews exhibit a remarkable congruence of purpose and vocabulary, including in their use of architectural similes: "Je construis d'abord" [first, I construct], a remark embroidered anew during the Yale symposium on "Algeria, Forty Years Later" (2002). Not so coincidentally, the main female character of her first film, *La Nouba* (1979), trained as an architect, tells her wheel-chair-bound husband, "I've always wanted to build transparent houses" [j'ai toujours voulu construire des maisons transparentes]. An obvious metaphor for their disintegrating marriage it describes, as well, the collapsing socialist paradise once promised by a revolution for which Leïla was jailed and tortured.

[18] Quoting from my private notes and a private copy of a videotape Assia Djebar agreed to on that day.

at a dizzying speed. Both novels follow the slow disintegration of semi-westernized Muslim couples unhinged by a modernity to which men and women aspire with equal "thirst," but unequal success with which they soon grow "impatient." Young middle-class people seduce each other in a desultory effort to escape the existential boredom that consumes their days. Very young women move about unveiled and unchaperoned, they smoke, they drink, they even travel alone, but this illusory "escape from the harem" is foiled by young men who would unveil them yet allow them neither autonomy nor agency. As Fanon would eventually uncover, the practice of the veil, whether allegorical or real, was always-already a gendered political choice that had neither to do with female desire nor with religious convictions.[19]

A more patient reading would have noticed that they lived painfully divided lives in a clearly segregated colonial system (even if, by that time, Algeria was no longer legally a "colony"), a separate yet non-equal system that was just as responsible for their demise as their own ill-conceived modernity. With a measure of ambivalence, the writer often presented them in early interviews as "exercices de style." When queried, she could claim them to be deliberately unconnected to her private life – a-autobiographical, as it were: "j'écris pour me cacher" [I write to hide myself].[20]

They were lauded or condemned for much the same reasons on both sides of the Mediterranean sea: their intimistic mode. Their intense first-person close-ups covered a too narrowly circumscribed psychological area, for which bourgeois self-indulgence they were duly attacked by the social realist proponents of the new Algeria as well as by its moral guardians. That is, they were judged with regards to their presumed biographical "fit" between text and writer. On such failings, Jean Déjeux, a Catholic priest who deemed her works immoral, and Mohammed Lacheraf, a party apparatchik who found them devoid of the sufferings of the people, suddenly were in eerie agreement.

As I attempted to demonstrate, a more interesting fit obtained in the obvious mirroring effect between the two novels. Thematically as well as structurally, *La Soif* (1957) nestled inside *Les Impatients* (1958), each the mirror object of the other in theme, plot, structure; and, ideologically, in the spatial play of the modern, open "French" quarters as opposed to the enclosures of the traditional Moorish house in the "Arab" quarter. Unfolding further all of the sub-textual "non-dits" of *La Soif*, *Les Impatients* offered both a looking back and a looking forward that simultaneously pitted the flaws of the traditional culture against the consequences of a blind leap into modernity. Critics

[19] Fanon's very famous and oft-quoted "L'Algérie se dévoile" ("Algeria Unveiled" chapter in *A Dying Colonialism*. Trans. H. Chevalier (Grove 1967), written in 1958-59 for the aptly titled *L'An Cinq de la reévolution algérienne* perhaps too optimistically, misreads the political coding of the veil and all but fetishizes its practice.

[20] She expostulates in our interview appended to the American version of *Femmes d'Alger* ("Women's Memory Spans Centuries" 159-86). I developed the contention (and its critics) in "Écrire comme on se voile: La première venue à l'écriture d'Assia Djebar" (79-90).

who found the writer's cultural politics wanting, had simply not read closely enough. Closer to the mark, Djebar would several years later, in the 1988 interview, speak of "a fit of rigor and precision" (203).

Yet, a genderized political sub-text was clearly in the service of a developing poetics in "half-breed" heroines who preferred their Muslim relatives to their French ones; who felt more at home and at peace within the ancestral Moorish house of their birth; and who thrilled to the guttural sounds of the primal language that inflected the local dialect, a Berber hardly ever spoken but always remembered, as if pouring from a private echo-chamber. This was the missing limb, this aching nostalgia for an original language that would eventually drive Djebar's filmic experiments and stamp the finished poetics of the Quatuor.

From the beginning, therefore, the gender question (bemoaning the audacity of this too young, too unsupervised, too unchaste female) and the language question (writing for the greater glory of the colonial master) fused and confused Djebar's critics, who erected them as the coded landmarks whereby her works should be measured, regardless of what she might be trying to accomplish. That is, they denied a writer's right to develop her own poetics. Moroccan linguist-philosopher-writer, Abdelkebir Khatibi, was the only one to sound a much different sub-text; to argue that painting such an erotic canvas was, for these times, just as revolutionary in a repressive society as a good blood-and-gore anti-colonial war story (Khatibi 60-65). What the critics failed to see was that an original, incremental poetics was being developed, step-by-step, theme by theme, structure by structure, novel by novel. It would take Djebar four very fine novels to find her way into the tight intertextual architecture that she now claims as her own,[21] and the filming of two very original films, to find her voice. And it would take, as she has said, the travails of the project she calls "Quatuor algérien," (the upper case is hers) to make peace with her medium and perhaps, with her exiled self: "Le terrain a glissé sous vos pas. Vous avez à comprendre, alors que vous auriez dû le savoir dès le début – que votre seul véritable territoire était bien la langue et non la terre" [the earth has shifted under you, whereas you should have suspected it from the beginning – known that your one true territory was the language rather than the (native) land] (*Ces Voix* 215).[22] It was *Fantasia*, she believes, who freed her: "Mais enfin, j'ai fait le geste augural de franchir moi-même le seuil, moi librement et non plus subissant une situation de colonisation" [But finally, I was able to perform the augural step of crossing the threshold by myself, freely, no longer suffering a colonized condition] (*Ces Voix* 44). Here is the quiet taking stock, a writer's pride out of which the inaugural Academy speech would be born; to state without having to put it too bluntly, I am who I am and

[21] Developing a position examined with the graduate Taft seminar, I attempt to follow the challenging directions developed with my Cincinnati students in "Transhumance du sens" (*Assia Djebar: Littérature* 383-99), who pushed and prodded and wonderfully challenged this investigation. The credit is theirs. Any factual or interpretative failing is entirely mine.

[22] Keynote speech to the 1995 Munster conference on Romance literatures.

I write as I write.

je commence à m'affronter avec la tradition

For there had always been a clear moral center in all of her works, as she has herself pointed out, in the tightly scripted yet carefully hidden confrontation with tradition, couched in the architectural metaphor of the traditional Moorish house, that has shaped all of her novels. By the end of this second novel, the prodigal daughter had moved back into the traditional house and reintegrated the clan – as would, many books and many years later, the narratrix of *Ombre sultane* (1987). Looking back in the 1985 Le Clézio interview, the author specifies: "j'ai écrit ce livre par rapport à l'architecture des maisons que j'ai connues" [I wrote this book with regard to the architecture of houses I had known] (234). Three years later in the 1988 Mortimer interview, Djebar reiterates: "Quand je repense aux *Impatients*, pour moi, se présentent d'abord le patio et la maison traditionnelle. Dans ce roman, je commence à m'affronter avec la tradition et je ressens celle-ci d'abord comme l'architecture d'une maison" [When I think back on *Les impatients*, it is the traditional courtyard/patio and the traditional house that I see first] (199). Thus began a writerly quest that would, many years later, drive the spatial structural plot of *Ombre sultane*, "a certain kind of rigor and precision in one's thinking. That's what I intended for *La Soif*; that's what I came back to with *Ombre sultane*. You might call it an ethics" (*Women of Algiers* 179).

Djebar has often stressed the crucial importance of constructing (and thus reading) her work "architecturally," her thinking through the preliminary spatial conceptualizing of a single novel as an affect that will, eventually, fuse both writer and reader in a shared *imaginaire* – an architectonics. If the first two novels were neatly embedded into each other, oscillating between the Western house by the beach and the traditional one inside the old Arab quarters, virtual *moebius* strips of each other, she was to experiment further with the third novel, *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* (1967). But these rare qualities bemused the critics.

The third novel moved from the confrontation of young women, barely out of adolescence (the old Sagan syndrome of Nadia loves Jedla), to the exploration of a much larger socio-political world, men and women of all ages and classes, a community firmly anchored on Algerian soil, its lore and its customs. She made good use of ideological chronotopes in precise symmetrical spatial opposition, the inner courtyard of the Moorish house in the old medina vs. the military drill-practice plaza of the French quarters, thus deploying a formalism that went well beyond the intimate realism of *La Soif* and *Les Impatients* wherein the spatial dialectics between "French" and "Arab" quarters had served largely private cultural politics. In *Les Enfants*, each of these two ideological centers, Moorish house and Place d'Armes, is now positioned with regard to a third, the mountain under aerial attack whose sharp description opens the story, "la montagne sous les feux de la lutte" [the mountain under the aerial fire of war] (13). The

third novel was conceived over the preceding year 1959-60, a tumultuous period of ugly negotiations between France and Algeria preceding the independence that was yet to come. To a stalled peace process, it offered a tentatively hopeful end. *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* clung to the master narrative of a successful decolonization in progress and, at the end, dropped us on the mountain, after the consuming fire: not quite a celebration; not quite a closure.

For this experimental exploration of structure-as-form, Djebar had constructed a plot balanced in the perfect symmetry that controls nine chapters of even length: four led by a female protagonist, four by a male protagonist, organized dialectically around a core, the fifth chapter devoted to the Algerian policeman who, employed by the colonial police, must torture his friend and neighbor, a guerilla suspect. With contrapuntal choreographic precision, the others chapters fanned around chapter five. To match this very tight cast, she chose a tight spatial canvas (one small town in the hinterland); and a tight Aristotelian time-span (twenty-four hours). The cultural territory thus reclaimed had become more substantial as the imagined country was getting closer to birthing a nation. By the time this third novel was finally in print, 30 June 1962, its author's twenty-sixth birthday and Algeria's first independence day, had arrived.

However, if the end was already contained in the beginning, a mountain afire, closure remained suspended by an ambivalent conclusion.[23] Much the same suspension had obtained in the ending of the first two novels, *La Soif* and *Les Impatients*, young women's dreams of a fair future unrealized. By the end of the *Les Alouettes naïves*, this "new world" is definitely foreclosed. By the end of *Fantasia*, the free woman shall be publicly "punished" and murdered. By the end of *Ombre sultane*, having taken back her daughter but left her son behind, honoring the cruel patriarchal dictat that mothers may have daughters but fathers own sons, the sultana[24] returns to the ancestral house, all hope foreclosed as was, at that point in time, the future of a free Algeria. By 1988, blood was flowing in the streets of Algiers. This recurring foreclosure signaling disempowerment has been emplotted in every Djebarian work, with *Vaste est la prison* (1995) its final dirge for the disappearance of language and memory – language as memory, the dispossession of the primal Queen "forever lost in the belly of Africa;" she whom she also bewails in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* (1996), "Antinea rising from the sands." Exhibiting remarkable self-constancy, Djebar shall return to it in *La Disparition de la langue française* (2003); as if all of the preceding works had but been a preparatory mourning ritual for the double dispossession that opens the final fourth volume of the Quatuor as planned. In a scene of double dispossession, St. Augustine's tears (the title she wanted to give this fourth and final volume of the Quatuor),[25] ushers in the dying of

[23] I examine this tightly plotted twenty-four hour choreography and its conclusion in my "Afterword" to the American translation, *Children of a New World.*

[24] Or her sister. Djebar deliberately plays on the twinning of the two women, Scherazad to Dinarzad as Esma to the wife who replaces her –or, possibly, the reverse.

[25] Our private conversations over the years.

the old bishop forced to watch libraries burn, as a whole civilization collapses. Her entire corpus has become its own self-referential *lieu de mémoire* for the double dispossession that takes center stage in her avowed autobiography, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* (2009).

Could this new world bless its children with a joyous enjoyment of their independence? Current history and a ten-year long civil war have since answered the question. Avowedly political, *Enfants* dug deeper in the quest for a tight "architectural" form that would best honor this ideological emplotment: "pour évoquer la guerre, j'ai voulu la discipline d'une intrigue étroitement montée, et qui a été déclenchée par une histoire vraie, dans la famille de ma belle-mère, une vieille voisine morte d'un éclat d'obus devant sa porte" [to evoke the war, I wanted to try my hand at the discipline of a tightly run plot, which was triggered by a true story of my mother-in-law's whose elderly neighbor had died of shrapnel in front of her own door]. And she concluded, "s'il me fallait marquer un tournant, ce serait avec ce roman-là" [if I had to mark a turning point in my work, it would have to be this particular novel].[26]

This was a mode of writing reviewers of *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* slid right over.

For example, in a 24 May 1962 preview for *France Observateur*, Sylvie Marion pronounced herself thrilled: "Miraculeux! Ce n'est pas une Sagan de plus de l'écurie Julliard. Elle s'appelle Assia Djebar, elle est Algérienne, son roman est bouleversant" [A miracle! This is not one more Sagan clone turned out by the Julliard stable. She is called Assia Djebar, she is Algerian-born, her novel is deeply moving, and she has so much to say] (22). With her country's newly won independence, this "new Algerian woman" (the title of this review) was ushering something of a novel social being, or so the journalist concluded while simultaneously praising the writer's poise as well as her Parisian silks. It followed that her novel must be the results of a successful colonial acculturation. This was to re-open the sorry question of the desirable fit between a writer and her text, her life and her medium.

As far as tight, symmetrical structural architecture went, the third novel had been a *tour de force*.[27] And, whoever had a good grasp of colonial history, would have found it was just as tightly if – discreetly – ideologically gridded. Such a document composed with such a deft hand that it could be read as a fiction did not fool the Algerian censors who refused permission for an Arabic translation. With a historical precision that should have pleased her critics, *Les Alouettes naïves* (1967), the next novel, exposed the nasty details of the ongoing fratricidal power struggle among revolutionary factions (the unresolved power struggles persisted into the civil war of the 1990s). This was the very sub-text that *Les Enfants* had managed cleverly to disguise. However, for those who understood the ugly, self-serving, suicidal underbelly of what Djebar has

[26] In our conversations of September 2005, working on the final touches to the American translation of *Children of the New World*.

[27] A pattern I attempt to investigate in the afterword to *Children of the New World*.

always refused to call "the revolution," the *roman-à-clef* was not so hard to decode. Years later, *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* (1996) would fearlessly spell it all out.

The third and fourth novels shared a common anthropological terrain in their evocation of traditional rural life. The tightly controlled symmetrical form practiced in *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* now made possible the binary thematics that frame *Les Alouettes naïves*, as if the third novel had logically, naturally, incubated the fourth; just as the first, *La Soif* had once naturally led to the second, *Les Impatients*. Later, Djebar would laud a construction predicated on balanced twinning frames, the world of men carefully paired alongside the world of women.[28] Across a span of some twenty-seven years, the first twinning was to be replicated with the elaboration of the Quatuor, producing a comparable fit between the first and second volume but in reverse, *Ombre sultane* (1987) now clearly nestled inside *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985) as if read from within an optical mirror; as if Sherazad was Dinarzad and vice-versa. Were they not? Fresh from the success of *Ombre*, Djebar would easily ferret out in the 1988 interview what its conception owed to the early novels: a common ethical thread carried by an architectural metaphor.

True to form, in a reverse looping movement, the fourth novel enfolded the third, just as the second had once nestled the first. But now, instead of the single little town that was so tightly focused in *Les Enfants*, many such other places translated the harsh realities of war. An ambitious, sprawling novel, *Les Alouettes* covered a much larger canvas. Composed, on and off, during the years of return, it was a muted response to life in the new nation. It gathered all of the threads hitherto woven through the works that had preceded it. But it also indulged them in such profusion of details that its huge bloated spread threatened to collapse under its own weight. For all her planning, as carefully as the writer had constructed this meticulous "fresco," (as she calls it in the 1985 Le Clézio interview), it seemed that she could not bring it to heel.

Oddly out of kilter in an unbalanced, definitely un-Djebarian structure, *Les Alouettes* offered two elegantly paired parts, one and two, followed by a strangely overstuffed third. Part one, "Autrefois" [Once upon a time], covers one hundred and sixty some pages. Part two, "Au-delà" [Beyond], fifty some pages. They are hinged through their reverse mirroring dialogical titles, and reverse mirroring plots, a favorite Djebarian process that will be forcefully exploited as a structuring principle in the Quatuor. Therefore, we might infer that they tell the same story and proceed from the same nostalgic back-and-forth reminiscing. As part one, "Autrefois," engages part two, "Au-delà," and vice-versa, while the temporal spread of "once upon a time" (but a long time ago) expands into the infinite space of an immaterial "beyond." The narrative consciousness is thus plunged into a time-space chronotope that knows neither place

[28] "roman construit de façon binaire, avec dominante masculine et dominante féminine" [a novel constructed in a binary frame, along a male dominant variable and a female dominant variable] (Le Clézio 237).

nor time (and certainly not war). Part two eventually regresses into part one in a failed attempt at avoiding the travails of unwanted memories.

United in tone and style, these two parts could easily have stood as an elegiac novel, dedicated to the traditional life in a self-contained community; one whose proud people knew themselves to be part of a much longer historical span; one wherein the French were but the last in a line of conquerors who have come and gone. *Les Alouettes* already foreshadowed the historical claim the Quatuor would unfold with a vengeance.

In "Autrefois," for example, Nfissa's grandmother easily pushes those conquerors-du-jour out of her mind as if they were gnats; convinced that they will eventually be pushed out of her land as have all the others before them. Determined to go pray in the village mosque, with or without armed French soldiers prodding her at every checkpoint, she dismisses her son's caution: "Bien peu de femmes y vont, maintenant que c'est la France. La France, grommelait l'aïeule, que m'importe? [Few women go to pray there, now that France is here. France, the grandmother would mutter, what do I care] (171). In contrast to the beautifully paired tonal symmetry of the first two parts, the third part, "Aujourd'hui" (over two hundred and sixty-five pages), would be less problematic if it stood alone. Much longer than parts one and two together, it covered the daily problems of survival of Algerians on the battle-fields and refugee camps, and made detailed if covert use of the factional struggles among political exiles. In tone and mood alone, this was altogether a different novel. To blend the three parts into a harmonious whole seemed impossible. The narrative ran out of steam.

The writer's naked-faced self-insertion ("unveiled" as her native language calls simultaneously the uncovered woman and the woman who talks about herself) abruptly suspends the final lines of *Les Alouettes naïves*. This signaled the conceptual stumble of a writer unable or unwilling to come to closure. In the final lines of *Les Alouettes naïves*, a primary first person, hitherto unnamed and invisible, suddenly pulls off her mask: "Voici que j'interviens, moi, le narrateur, qui les ai suivis pas à pas jusque là et qui, à ce terme où tout commence pour eux, m'apprête à couper le fil de leur histoire" and signs with her own name, "Assia Djebar, Alger 1965 / Paris 1966" [And here I suddenly intervene; I, their narrator, who has accompanied them step by step until this point; I who, until this end moment when everything must start for them, must stand ready to cut off the thread of their story/narrative](481). The trained historian questions her choice of material; simultaneously, her writing double, doubts the soundness of her own execution. This is the very moment when Assia Djebar becomes the first reader of the text she has just finished writing, invests her own *imaginaire* in the self-referential Proustian looping back that Walter Benjamin has called the Penelope-like movement of memory.[29] Her "intervention" carves a chiasmic mirroring between the past experience, as lived, and its perfect "nostalgic" incarnation as re-imaged and re-imagined: what art

[29] Benjamin on Proustian time in *Illuminations, Essays and Reflections*. Tr. H. Zorn; Ed. Hannah Arendt. NY: Schocken Books 1968, 204-06.

manages to steal from the jaws of disaster. We see here the first full-fledged self-identified appearance of the meta-textual chronicler, who will eventually take center stage in the projected architectonic Quatuor to raise the question of textual agency, and weave a polyphonic choir for the "besieging voices" that had hitherto not been allowed to surface. Her long held contention, expressed in the 2002 Yale conference on Algeria, that the Quatuor was planned as a synergistic suite, (to wit, *Fantasia*'s Beethoven motif and prologue) that can be read vertically and sequentially (volume one, then two etc.) as well as re-read horizontally and spatially (chapter one of volume one talks to chapter two of volume two etc.), from book part to book part, and back, thus exponentially enriches its meaning across time and across space. This "suite," the Quatuor, in the way in which it must be read, is, literally as well as metaphorically, vertically as well as horizontally, a space wherein Assia Djebar, the writer, negotiates meaning with Assia Djebar, the reader, as she re-reads herself. As we, the audience, must do likewise with both.

In her first "open" and most recent autobiography, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* (2007), she spells it all out for her (and for herself) this time. She steps into her text again, addressing herself this time in the second person (a challenging narrative stance she manages to control in *Ombre*): "Au terme de votre entreprise vous voici en train de devenir au cœur de cette mise en œuvre, lecteur (lectrice) aussi" [At the tail end of your undertaking, there you are [caught] in the very process of becoming, within this elaborating practice, its own / your own reader [male or female] reader] (406).[30]

Colleagues and assorted political appointees had not hesitated to signify their disapproval in the new Algeria where writers now had clearly assigned roles.

At the end of *Les Alouettes naïves*, the writer hit a self-censoring wall. Indeed, as she has many times explained, the lovely central part, "Au-delà," hewn from her private life, cut much too close to the bone. She explained, in our 1992 interview, that intensely private moments had suddenly erupted into the linear narrative of victorious war and nation rebuilding. In the lyrical portrayal of a young woman surprised by her own body, Part Two gave full play to the phenomenological erotics that have made Djebar a poster child of Western feminism, somewhat against her will. Many of these private details would reappear, in different contexts and with different affects, in *Ombre sultane*, the second volume in the Quatuor. They surfaced in the first, eponymous story of the collection, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, wherein the authorial voice fragments. Much expanded in *Vaste est la prison*, the disintegration of the youthful idealist pair of *Les Alouettes* would resurface, its newlywed bliss swallowed up by the sour disenchantment of a postwar society. Thus, with or without the important filmic experimentation that, she has said, had oriented the rest of her poetics during her long *traversée du désert*; with or without the more than thirteen years of self-enforced silence that were to separate

[30] All translations are mine, and if they are often awkward, it is because Djebar writes for the eye as well as for the ear, inflecting whimsical punning and punctuating rhythms to the "academic" French.

Les Alouettes from *Femmes d'Alger*, as she began her second involuntary exile from the homeland, the core of Djebar's subsequent writing was already embedded in this fourth novel, rich lore to be excavated for the ambitious project she always spells with an upper case: her Algerian Quatuor. *Les Alouettes* made possible an autobiographical suite wherein history would become the primary narrative trigger of the imploding colonial subject. Thus, before she could continue writing, she had to find a poetics that would allow her to control both the realist urge to document, so apparent in the third part of *Les Alouettes*, and the private temptation to confess that had tripped her in "Au-delà." Too proud to explain, too disillusioned to comply, Djebar would continue to write for herself ("à pleins tiroirs," [by the drawerful] as she said in our 1992 interview) but cast about for a different medium.

Serendipitously, cinema would steer her toward a new poetics. Frustrated by her publishing ventures, unable to write in Arabic, unwilling to follow the party line, she decided to make a documentary focused on women's contributions to the anti-colonial struggle: an archival war project, as it were. Or so she presented it to the censors. This foray into a different medium and practice became altogether something else. Five times in *Ces Voix* she returns to what she later identified as "mon besoin d'une écriture de cinéma," triggered by a new relation to sound and an ekphrastic montage between the aural and the visual: the felt need for a truly writerly film practice.[31] In *La Nouba*, using sound unmoored from its spatio-temporal boundaries, she would show herself (and us) how to propel the present into the past and vice-versa, a visual spatial traversing of time, a quasi-Proustian move wherein memory obsessively repeats its *moebius* looping because it cannot come to rest. The film experience, and along with it, a quasi-Deleuzian discovery of *image-temps* and *image-son*, constituted felicitous responses to the hitherto tight-jacket of the written word. They would free her as well from the old critics' shackles, enable her to disregard their demands of an appropriate fit between text and writer. Her cinema practice honed the discovery of a voice that would move her into her own confident poetics, the Quatuor project. This was the self-assured position, the proud measure of her talent that subtended the Academy speech, with explanation or apology or justification to no one.

nostalgie de la horde, inexplicably

The formal challenge that *Les Alouettes naïves*, this helter-skelter formless form posed also contained, unbeknownst to itself, its own solution; a vignette she called "Nostalgie de la horde". But it would take a film staging to unfold its full aural and visual powers. In written form, it appears briefly as a short vignette at the end of "Autrefois," a ritual reactivating of the primal childhood bed scene whereby memory is activated, as the foremother passes on the tribal truth to the little ones gathered around.

[31] I follow the ekphrasistic practice in "Still besieged by voices."

A performance unfurls, couched in the imperfect tense of rememory: "Les enfants se serraient, filles ou garçons, en ces soirs où la nostalgie de la horde, inexplicablement, s'infiltrait dans les cœurs (tout prétexte était bon: Une noce, une mort)" [The children, boys or girls, would lean tighter into each other, during those evenings when the nostalgia for the herd, inexplicably, crept into their hearts (any pretext would do: a wedding; a death)] (173). At this moment, oral history interrupts the flow of a realistic narrative devoted to the here-and-now of war while, at the same time, it renders visible the always evanescent connection between past and present. Recalling long lost female relatives, the ancestress concludes thus: "C'était l'année où les Français entrèrent dans notre ville" [It was the year the French entered our town] (176). The absence of a specific date imperceptibly fuses the protracted struggle against colonial conquest of the 19th century with the anti-colonial war of the 20th, a sudden mental slippage that will reappear both in *La Nouba* and *Fantasia* whereby the past invades the present and dispossession is suddenly brought to presence, visually as well as aurally. To counterbalance the ache of dispossession, the film returns several times to moments when, in glorious elegiac visuals, the regal foremother in elegantly ornate headdress presides over the traditional high-bed, children at her feet. The Ancestress passes on (to use Toni Morrison's phrase) the truth about the tribe's honor, that of the 1857 execution of the Ancestor who did not run away.

The scene is – literally – nost/algic, re-enacting and thereby amplifying the ache for the long lost virtual home obsessively made recurrent in quite a few Djebarian texts. This brief vignette in *Les Alouettes* stages the first performance of the ceremony of remembering that will reappear in the first film, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (1978); to be given its full autonomy as a separate, self-contained story by that very name, "Nostalgie de la horde," in *Femmes d'Alger* (1980); and, finally, to subtextually eviscerate the shameful run of inauthentic memories offered in the second film, *La Zerda ou les chants de l'oubli* (1982).

This original vignette she called "Nostalgie de la horde," focused on the *Nouba* scene of performance as a *lieu de mémoire*, marked her deliberate re-appropriation of the Orientalizing topoi that had hitherto served to the greater glory of a world of men; a move she would repeat and expand in *Ombre sultane*. That is, with her version of "nostalgie de la horde," she re-appropriates to different ends that other "nostalgia of the primal hord," the Orientalized version of dangerous female desire offered throughout *The Arabian Nights*: de-Orientalizing the West's Orient as it were. What the 19th century knew of this masterpiece was, largely, the 1850 fabrication of Sir Richard Burton, that served up all the tolerated yet intolerable clichés projected by Europe onto the subjugated, feminized colonial Other. By the time multiple centuries had looked down on Napoleon's Egypt, such transparently coded phantasms would shape the vision of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1912-13). In that particularly potent sex-and-murder allegory, Freud freely embroidering Darwin, would cast the myth of origins necessary to coalesce society's blood bonds. With "Nostalgie de la horde," Djebar gutted the patriarchal

metaphor, dislocating it to construct a much different primal myth in the prelapsarian paradise of childhood: ungendered, this time.

On the screen, this past re-enacted by the grandmother in the high bed of childhood is happening in a virtual present structured by desire. Mirroring the filming, its textual inscription is marked by recursion, with the infinitely looping variations that render closure impossible, a move further suggested by the use of the Beethoven quote that opens *L'Amour, la fantasia*, "*qasi una fantasia.*" There will be no "real" recovering of the ancestral past-qua-past. Rather, all one may access is a phenomenologically (dis)embodied moment, released by the powerful *image-son* film experience that I have called, for lack of a better term, a writerly affect.[32] Visually as well as aurally, "Nostalgie de la horde" governs the first film, hides in the second, surfaces in the fourth novel and will eventually govern the third volume of the Quatuor, *Vaste est la prison*, wherein private diary and public script from *La Nouba* are given verbatim to suture an ekphrasis that, like the very process of memory itself, blurs all boundaries.

This looping recursion operates a plunging back movement into the future past of remembering, a veritable future-anterior that will be re-iterated, and re-imagined from then on, in both film and fiction. The nodal core of Djebarian re-memory, it is a tribal *lieu de mémoire* that is, as well, *lieu de deuil*, the space and time and site of the travails of mourning: one mourns in order to remember and remembers in order to mourn. The foremother whose "memory spans centuries" (to quote the 1992 interview) re-activates the absent presence, blind spot of dispossession within the willed collective amnesia that defines Algeria today, monolinguistic and obsessively monocultural by political *fiat*. The memorial spot is empty, canceling out the return of a collective repressed that pushes through the "leaden sleep" of a conquered people's obsessive attempt at moving outside a history it has not been allowed to make. *La Zerda* demolishes the "sommeil de plomb" of collective amnesia. *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, as well as *Vaste*, attempts to bring back to the un-memoried surface the lost glory of multi-lingual, multi-cultural Algeria-that-used-to-be. A new Algeria yet to be (re)born.

This omphalic node hidden within *Les Alouettes* re-appropriates the primal scene and destabilizes the East-West encounter; a move so essential to Djebar's increasingly confident poetics that, returning to it, she will develop it fully in the second volume, *Ombre sultane* and expand it in the third, *Vaste est la prison*. Performance is memory and memory, unmemoried, must repeat itself. This invisible thread connects *Ombre* back to all the novels preceding it, as well as foreshadows those that will come; as if the writer, with each attempt, was perfecting the peculiar specular core of the entire corpus in increasingly wider (and wilder) helicoidal *moebius* turns. The moment of original collective transmission is a moment of self-performing. The interactive intertextual

[32] As I try to investigate the memorial "montage" in "Visual / virtual memory sites: the case of Assia Djebar" in *Films with Legs: Crossing Borders with Foreign Language Films*. Eds. R. Peters and V. Maisier. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. 1-6.

structuring principle follows Bakhtinian architectonics. That is, it stages the near epiphanic moment when the writer sees herself as both narrating and narrated inside her own imaginary (re)construct; thus imperceptibly moving toward a truth situated both within the events she is recounting and beyond.

Geste augural … enfin

But this writerly birthing that is the stated aim of the Quatuor might not have happened without the little memoried vignette nestled inside *Les Alouettes*. The fourth flawed novel represents the movable hinge between earlier and later Djebarian writing; its key characters, images and situations will henceforth persist throughout the rest of her corpus. If indeed *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* and *La Zerda ou les chants de l'oubli* allowed Djebar, as she has claimed, to become simultaneously documenting historian and fictional writer of the same events, to sharpen her own visual acuity and fine-tune her retrieval of collective memory, it was thanks to a Janus-like, deeply flawed fourth novel that had borrowed from the earlier texts as well as foreshadowed much in those texts that would follow; connections she expected her readers to make architectonically. She trusted us to envisage the original myth-time-space that can only be accessed through its historical re-appropriation – a re-appropriation performed several times, many times to recapture a past that still resists and disappears in the present.

By the time Djebar openly tackles autobiography as such with *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, this architectonic self-staging of a writer who is also her own best reader, she unfurls the regressive mode of a narrative self who inscribes herself in order to foreshadow herself reading herself. Looking back on half a century of writing, in the biography as well as in the Academy speech, she addresses herself and her readers as well. Given the importance of her dazzled, enchanted discovery of the magic of the French language in the classroom, by way of Mme Blasi's Baudelaire poem, one may be excused to hear echoes of the poet's challenge that opens *Fleurs du mal*, "Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère."

When on 22 June 2006, Assia Djebar was formally inducted into the *Académie française*, she had more than earned her literary stripes. Her oblique homage to Diderot, the intellectual giant who was certainly Academy worthy, but who, nevertheless was repeatedly not deemed worthy enough, hides a proud humility that knew, without having to spell it all out, that the Academicians' vote on her own candidacy had not been unanimous. Her inaugural/augural speech reminded the audience, therefore, that, in her long, half-century practice of writing in the French language, she owed just as much to another Republic of letters; one that owed very little to Richelieu's gentlemen's club. The formal inaugural and augural "discours" salutes Rabelais, "grand traverseur des voies périlleuses" [a great traverser/trespasser across perilous ways] who, "un siècle avant la création de l'Académie par le cardinal de Richelieu" [a full century before

Cardinal Richelieu's creation/foundation of the *Académie*] reads Ibn Sina in order to qualify as a medical student in Montpellier. This was the very hallowed center of philosophical and medical learning that would, a few centuries later, honor one Dr. Fatma-Zora Imalhayêne, she of the glorious Berber name, no mean perilous trespasser herself.

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