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## A Global Feminist Travels: Assia Djebar and Fantasia

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Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism, Volume 4, Number 1,  
2003, pp. 173-199 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mer.2004.0014>



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# A Global Feminist Travels

## Assia Djébar and *Fantasia*

Scholars and critics have hailed Assia Djébar's *Fantasia, An Algerian Calvacade* (1985) as a successful bridge between Western feminism and the experiences and philosophies of women living beyond the United States and Europe. Soheila Ghaussy's enthusiastic response to the text celebrates Djébar's blend of Western and French feminisms and her careful attention to the politics and lives of Arab women: "Djébar's *écriture féminine* re(dis)covers woman; it voices the protest of Arab women, it escapes the confines of the harem, it gives body to the oral accounts of women, it inscribes woman's unspoken name" (1994, 461). By means of a complex blending of genres and voices, Djébar's novel successfully represents what was formerly silenced and absent from representation, the participation of Algerian women in resistance struggles against the French colonization of Algeria, and politicizes the everyday experiences of Algerian women in their global and historical contexts. Ghaussy and other critics such as Mildred Mortimer (1997), Anne Donadey (1993, 1996, 2000), and Mary Jean Green (1993), among others, analyze the complexity and theoretical sophistication of *Fantasia* that they argue results in its successful representation of Algerian women. *Fantasia's* ambitious project borrows strategies from a variety of genres to create a multifaceted, multilayered, multivocal text. The genre that most critics have overlooked but that nonetheless shapes the political and textual achievement of *Fantasia* is travel writing. Quoting nineteenth-century French travel accounts, invoking and reworking travel genre tropes, including Orientalist representations of harems and veiled women, and representing Algeria as a "contact zone" (Pratt

[*Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 2003, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 173–199]  
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1992) where French colonial and Algerian cultures, languages, and people clash, Djébar uses travel writing strategies to promote a global feminist political and social message.

Djébar's use of travel writing answers critic Caren Kaplan's call for the necessity of inventing "out-law genres" to express the experience of marginalized women (1992, 136). Travel writing, as it is reinvented particularly by women of color, can function as what Kaplan terms "'writing technologies' that can work for and with women so that the law of genre will no longer dominate the representation and expression of women from different parts of the world" (1992, 136). Travel writing can certainly be considered among the genres used to figure subjectivity in exclusively white, male terms and reinforce hierarchies of race, gender, and nation. Currently, the flood of increasingly popular travel writing that commodifies Third World countries and cultures represents developing countries as travel bargains, and their culture and heritage as quaint fodder for souvenirs.<sup>1</sup> However, women authors have consistently contributed to the travel genre and many have used travel texts to protest social and political injustice. Authors such as Antiguan Jamaica Kincaid (*A Small Place* 1989), and African Americans June Jordan ("Report from the Bahamas" 1989) and Colleen McEllroy (*A Long Way from St. Louie* 1997) provide just a few examples of late-twentieth-century reworkings of travel writing to expose the power inequities of tourism and globalization. In the hands of global feminist writers and activists such as Djébar, travel writing can strategically disrupt discourses of neocolonialism and globalization.

Travel serves as a powerful tool for Djébar, operating as a trope for her recovery of Algerian women's history, which involves literal and metaphorical journeys through colonial archives, Algeria's battle-scarred countryside, and through her own lived experience of her homeland as both colonized and newly independent. Travel and travel writing also provide Djébar with a set of generic conventions that she can exploit and manipulate to replace texts that produce Algeria as a commodity with a nuanced and complex portrait that emphasizes individual and national agency. Ultimately, travel functions as a model for global feminist praxis for Djébar; her journeys to collect and represent women's voices allow them to be heard and to become shapers of discourse and agents of social and political change. The result is a dynamic exchange as Djébar does not position herself as merely translator or scribe for other, silenced women,

but illustrates the process whereby their stories inform her own search for voice and self. Representation becomes a deliberately political act for Djébar, as she insists on difference and multiplicity as the necessary starting point for coalition, community, and ultimately, for political and social action. Travel functions as a crucial strategy to connect women with each other and with historical and present-day strategies of resistance.

*Fantasia* constitutes a feminist journey into the past and unsettled present of Algerian women. The form of the novel shifts between the distant past (the colonial invasion of Algeria by the French in the 1830s), the recent past (interviews with women resistance fighters from the Algerian War of Independence, 1954–1962), and the autobiographical account of Djébar's coming of age before and after Algeria's independence (born in 1936, Djébar is 26 years old when the Algerian War of Independence begins).<sup>2</sup> *Fantasia* blurs genres by incorporating travel narrative, historical colonial documents, interviews, and autobiography. The first and second sections of the text are divided into chapters alternating between historical accounts of the 1830 French invasion of Algeria and autobiographical sketches of Djébar's childhood and adolescence on the edges of the harem. This juxtaposition of distant past and present suggests not only Djébar's important connection to her Algerian foremothers, but also the historical precedents for Algerian women's participation in revolution. Unearthing buried evidence of these female revolutionaries, Djébar calls into question practices of historiography that exclude women as acting subjects. Moving into the recent past, the third section of the text presents the accounts of women freedom fighters who participated in the Algerian War of Independence over a century after the French invasion. In the third section, voices are no longer contained in discreet chapters, but stories overlap and interrelate. A collective story begins to emerge as the identity of individual speakers is deemphasized and connections are drawn among the women.

Traveling between archives, interviews, and memories, Djébar unearths forgotten accounts of Algerian women's participation in revolution, finding a lineage of "women warriors" to offer women who struggle with the after-effects of colonization and the new challenges of globalization (19). Her travels take her from her own position as a Western educated intellectual to the homes and lives of her subaltern counterparts, middle-class women silenced by the harem and peasant women who fought with

the Algerian resistance.<sup>3</sup> Djebbar journeys to find and express their stories, a political act that foregrounds representation as the necessary prelude to women claiming their heritage of resistance. Further, this recovery work demands that the world recognize women in developing countries as agents of change. In order to reconnect with Algeria and tell the stories of her country's revolutionary women, Djebbar begins her journey in the archives of French colonial records, the travel texts of French soldiers, artists, and adventurers who recorded the conquest of her homeland.

### Revising Generic Conventions: Djebbar's Feminist Response to Colonial Travel Texts

Djebbar opens her text with epigraphs taken from two European travel texts, Eugène Fromentin's *A Year in the Sahel* and Baron Barchou de Penhoën's *Expedition to Africa*, 1835. As she does throughout *Fantasia*, Djebbar uses the travel writing of her colonial predecessors as a starting point from which to present her own revised, authentic, and subversive view of Algeria. References to prior travel accounts function as a common convention of travel writing. By citing existing travelogues, authors demonstrate their preparedness for their journey and the legitimacy of their travel account; they have done their homework by reading about their destination. Travel authors not only cite other accounts, but they most often do so in passages evaluating the accuracy of those earlier travel narratives. Both strategies legitimize their travel-writing efforts: authors are fit for their journey because they have read other travelogues; they are authorized to write about and critique those accounts because they have made the journey. These devices were particularly evident in the nineteenth century, when the boom in travel and exploration writing resulted in a crowded literary marketplace and stiff competition among travel authors. As authors sought to establish the accuracy of their own accounts, travel writing became a genre in which revision of inherited sources figures prominently.

The sources that Djebbar revises are French colonial travel accounts written by soldiers, sailors, artists, and entrepreneurs. Donadey suggests the complicated way in which Djebbar appropriates colonial texts:

Djebbar's work does not purport to *reverse* the meaning of previous (colonial) texts. As I and others such as Derrida have suggested,

inversion would entail remaining within the logic of the master('s) text. Djebbar goes further, playing with that master('s) text in order to make it collapse. Her purpose, like Derrida's is "to subvert [the master's text] by repeating it, dislocating it fractionally through . . . a mimicry that mocks the binary structure" (1993, 112).

However, the lens of travel writing allows for a reading of Djebbar's text beyond repetition or even dislocation. She reads colonial texts against the grain to find evidence of active resistance, particularly by women, erased by the dominant narrative. Djebbar's travel writing effectively indicts colonial oppression and genocide and includes women as agents in resistance and freedom struggles. Interrupting the flow of representation of Algerians from the French occupying Algeria back to French audiences at home or even to Algerians subjugated under colonial rule, Djebbar's travel account appropriates colonial discourse to challenge its validity.

Fundamentally, Djebbar's strategy recognizes the power dynamics at work in colonial representations of soon-to-be conquered populations. Emphasizing the perceived failings of people inconveniently inhabiting resource-rich land, colonial texts turn difference into subordination by highlighting residents' savagery, backwardness, and ignorance as justification for imposing colonial rule. Djebbar answers these French accounts by deconstructing the binary logic of colonial ideology and revising representations of Algerians. Depicting atrocities and violence perpetrated by French armies against Algerian men, women, and children, Djebbar calls into question colonial ideologies that align the French with civilization and enlightenment and the Algerians with savagery and ignorance. Djebbar's recovery of Algerian women's participation in resistance struggles similarly disrupts colonial notions of Algerian passivity and docility contrasted against French mastery and authority. *Fantasia's* reworking of colonial ideology sets the stage for Djebbar's complicated portrait of the diversity of Algeria.

Djebbar's first two epigraphs set the stage for her process of revision. A sentence from Baron Barchou de Penhoën's *Expedition to Africa*, 1835 reveals some of the assumptions that facilitate and justify colonial occupation of Algeria: "Our sentinels were gaining in experience: they were learning to distinguish the footsteps and voices of the Arabs from the sounds made by the wild beasts that prowled around the camp in the dark" (2). Dehuman-

ized, Algerians are virtually indistinguishable from predatory animals, according to Barchou. Arabs are not just foreign to the occupying troops; they are almost another species. The sound of their movements is beast-like, as are their voices. Barchou does not say their language is strange; it is as if these beings are not advanced enough to have language, but merely animal cries. By choosing this one sentence from Barchou, Djébar presents the colonizer's view of Algerians that legitimizes French usurpation of Algerian land and domination of Algerian people.

While Barchou's epigraph foreshadows what will become the recurring colonial view of Algerians as subhuman, the epigraph taken from French artist Eugène Fromentin's account of his travels in Algeria in the early 1850s offers evidence of humanity and resistance that colonial ideologies cannot completely suppress. Fromentin's emotional response to the violence of colonial occupation belies the calm rational superiority of Barchou's account. Fromentin is haunted by his experience of Algeria, "A heart-rending cry arose—I can hear it still as I write to you—then the air was rent with screams, then pandemonium broke loose . . ." (1). This is not Barchou's view of a country and people that can be controlled through military and colonial might. Algerian voices are clearly distinguished from animal howls in Fromentin's account. In contrast to Barchou, these cries establish Algerian humanity and resistance to the imposition of colonial rule.

Fromentin sympathizes with Algerians, but more importantly his travel account provides evidence of the active ways in which Algerian men and women fought back against the imposition of French colonial power. Unlike the controllable beasts of Barchou's travel narrative, Algerians in Fromentin's view are capable of all-too-human responses to injustice and oppression. The cries of protest and screams of pain he hears as the Algerians fight back touch Fromentin emotionally. His record also reveals the instability of colonial rule; the military precision being perfected in Barchou's account is insufficient in the "pandemonium" of resistance Fromentin records. Rather than a justifiable and inevitable project, French colonization is revealed as an imposition and a tenuous one at that. The cries of resistance recorded in Fromentin's text obscure the clear mission of the occupation. The momentary interruption in Fromentin's text suggests Algerian humanity; however, it does not offer a complex portrait of Algerian subjectivity beyond cries of suffering and desperate guerrilla resistance.

Djebar presents both of these travel accounts to suggest their inadequacy—Fromentin's passing references to the humanity of the Algerians are ultimately as insufficient to express the complexity of Algeria and Algerians as are Barchou's racist stereotypes. Her text is an alternative; she presents her journey in search of a complex, dynamic, multivocal portrait of Algeria. That journey begins with her travel-writing predecessors, but their texts provide merely a departure point, what Djebar calls "hand-holds," which she uses to descend into the history of her homeland (77). Not only does Djebar depart from their limited view of Algeria, but also she finds the meaning hidden (or not so hidden) in their accounts, just as she finds the traces of humanity and sympathy in Fromentin's travelogue.

Even as Djebar puts travel writing to her own feminist purposes, her text simultaneously recognizes the powerful way in which colonial travel texts reinforce imperial expansion by articulating hierarchies of race, gender, and nation. In her rendering of the invasion of Algiers on 13 June 1830, she begins with a quote from the travelogue of a French sailor, Amable Matterer, who records, "I was the first to catch sight of the city of Algiers, a tiny triangle on a mountain slope" (6). Matterer's claim to first sight of the city constitutes a first step to colonization; physical and military possession will inevitably follow this initial visual possession of the Algerian landscape. Matterer in this instance becomes a "seeing-man," a term Pratt applies to "the European male subject of European landscape discourse—he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess" (1992, 7). Narrating the "peak moments at which geographical 'discoveries' were 'won,'" the traveler claims territory merely by viewing it, becoming what Pratt terms "the monarch-of-all-I-survey" (1992, 202). The seeing-man's gaze inventories the resources of the land and people viewed; simultaneously, the gaze evaluates deficiencies that can only be redeemed with the intervention of the explorer's superior home culture (Pratt 1992, 204–205). Thus, travel accounts lay the practical and ideological groundwork for subsequent imperialist projects. Djebar acknowledges the power of French travelers' representations of Algeria as resource-rich and culturally inferior, which foreshadow the military invasion to follow.

Djebar expands on Matterer's view, rendering the scene as an elaborate landscape painting, illustrating the tropes Pratt describes. Djebar fictionalizes the moment of discovery, and depicts it in the language of travel narrative:



As the majestic fleet rends the horizon the Impregnable City sheds her veils and emerges, a wraith-like apparition, through the blue-gray haze. A distant triangle aslant, glinting in the last shreds of nocturnal mist and then settling softly, like a figure sprawling on a carpet of muted greens. The mountain shuts out the background, dark against the blue wash of the sky.

The first confrontation. The city, a vista of crenelated roofs and pastel hues, makes her first appearance in the role of 'Oriental Woman', motionless, mysterious (6).

The first glimpse of Algiers estheticizes the city in service to the ideologies of the conqueror. By representing the city as a static landscape view, "the relation of mastery [is] predicated between the seer and the seen," according to Pratt (1992, 204). The act of viewing establishes the seer as the authority, the judge, and recorder of worthiness. Pratt also points out that "what [the seer] sees is all there is" in this formulation, all knowing, all seeing - there is no allowance made for other views, other perspectives (1992, 206). The result is a landscape represented as empty and available, the residents erased.

Djebar's metaphor comparing the city to a veiled woman reinforces the power dynamics at work in Matterer's gaze. Objectified and represented as irresistible and vulnerable, Algiers is feminized, understood by her would-be invaders to be tempting, but ultimately weak, passive, and easy to conquer. Critic Annette Kolodny argues that narratives of exploration frequently represent landscapes in feminine terms and frontier settlement in terms of sexual violation (1975). Although Kolodny focuses exclusively on the example of the United States's Western frontier, her argument can be extended to the context of Algeria and complicated by an attention to race issues involved in the French-Arab conflict. Gendered representations reinforce the appropriateness of conquest by the manly home nation. Masculinity is equated with strength and rationality and assigned ideologically to the French, in opposition to the feminine, emotional, weak, and ultimately inferior and subordinate residents of Algeria. Ideologies of gender reinforce those of race and nation to authorize and legitimate the imposition of French (masculine, superior, civilized) rule. Djebar recognizes the ways in which these ideologies support systems of domination, and she works to dismantle them in her text.

After presenting the traditional colonial “seeing-man” perspective, Djebbar subverts the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” (Pratt 1992, 201) trope by imagining the gaze returned by the inhabitants of Algiers. Djebbar asks:

But who are to be the performers? On which side shall we find the audience? . . . Thousands of watchful eyes there are doubtless estimating the number of vessels. Who will pass on the number? Who will write of it? Which of all these silent spectators will live to tell the tale when the encounter is over? Amable Matterer is at his post in the first quadron which glides slowly westward; he gazes at the city which returns his gaze (6–7).

In this passage, Djebbar replaces the objectifying one-way viewing of the colonizer with the defiant returning gaze of the Algerians. The Algerians thus become subjects capable of active resistance to French occupation. Resistance can take multiple forms, including the ability to “write” and “pass on” an alternative narrative to the colonial version of the justifiable and inevitable subjugation of Algeria. While the success of the invasion has been documented by both travel writers and the “four painters, five draughtsmen and about a dozen engravers on board [the incoming fleet] . . . anxious to ensure a pictorial record of the campaign” (8), Djebbar journeys into Algeria in search of that alternative version. She looks for evidence of resistance, “the cavalcade of screams and carnage which will fill the ensuing decades,” the sounds of revolt that disrupt the silent, seamless possession imagined by the colonial gaze (8).

### A Feminist in the Contact Zone: Travel as Trope for Djebbar’s Recovery Project

Djebbar’s alternative version of Algeria captures the complexities of a culture shaped by ancient tradition and imposed Western modernity. The violence of the clash between the two cultures, Algerian and French, resonates in her text. French culture and power is not seamlessly imposed onto Algeria, but rather, the two remain in constant tension, even after Algerian Independence. Djebbar uses travel accounts to provide evidence of the dynamic interplay between Algeria and her would-be conquerors. French accounts themselves belie the colonial narrative of an easy and easily justified occupation. Instead, the colonial agents find themselves

changed, impacted by Algeria and Algerians, unable to straightforwardly impose their military, capitalist, and ideological agendas.

Algeria, in Djebbar's complex portrait, represents a "contact zone" that Pratt describes as "a space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (1992, 6). Pratt's notion of the contact zone, as well as Djebbar's representation of colonial and present-day Algeria, emphasize the "copresence, interaction, interlocking understanding and practices" between colonizers and colonized, which recognize that colonizing agents are affected by the places and people they attempt to control (Pratt 1992, 7). In other words, the exchange of culture and experience does not only come one-way from Europe to her colonies, but also functions in reverse as colonized populations impact and interact with colonial agents. Djebbar's more complicated representation of Algeria revises colonial portraits that work to deny Algerian diversity and humanity. Colonial representations that reduce all Algerians to passive, inferior, backward savages effectively deny agency to populations the French seek to control, using both military and ideological weapons.

Djebbar's nuanced presentation of the French fumigation of tribal groups barricaded in caves (1840–1847) illustrates her complex approach to representing Algeria as a contact zone. The chapter "Women, Children, Oxen Dying in Caves" uses the accounts of French generals and army officials, particularly officers Pélissier and Saint-Arnaud, to reconstruct the horrible violence of French occupation. Modern French warfare ("infantry battalions . . . cavalry . . . artillery" [65]) meets ancient strategies of guerrilla warfare and retreat with disastrous, even genocidal results. The Oled Riah tribe retreats from Pélissier's army to the security of a system of impenetrable caves, where "since the time of the Turkish rulers tribes have taken refuge with their women and children, flocks and munitions in these subterranean depths which run for more than 600 feet and open out on to almost inaccessible gorges. Their silos permit them to hold out for long periods and so defy the enemy" (66). A centuries-old strategy designed in concert with the harsh desert environment, the caves provide security and subsistence for the Oled Riah while Pélissier's army suffers exposure and dwindling supplies.

Frustrated by the Oled Riah's tactics, Pélissier follows the advice of his commanding officer: "‘If the scoundrels retreat into their caves,’ [Field-Marshal] Bugeaud orders, ‘do what Cavaignac did to the Sbeah, smoke them out mercilessly, like foxes!’" (65). Bugeaud's orders echo Barchou's representation of Algerians as wild animals. The logic of ideology that figures Algerians as subhuman sets the stage for the extreme violence of the outcome of Pélissier's confrontation with the Oled Riah—French soldiers light fires at the entrances to the caves and the entire tribe is exterminated.<sup>4</sup>

Pélissier's subsequent report, drafted after he personally views the charred bodies of the campaign's victims, generates outrage and scandal when it is received in Paris and ultimately preserves the incident in the historical record. From Pélissier's account, along with other accounts of soldiers and travelers, Djebbar reconstructs the contact zone of the caves of the Oled Riah. Djebbar deconstructs the logic of colonization that justifies brutality; the fumigation can be represented in its full tragedy and horror when its victims are shown to be fully human by Djebbar. Finding further evidence of courage, resistance, and humanity from anonymous sources that complement Pélissier's report, Djebbar includes details like the description of an Algerian family fighting for its life: "‘I saw a dead man, with one knee on the ground, grasping the horn of an ox in one hand. In front of him lay a woman with her child in her arms. It was easy to see that this man had been asphyxiated, together with the woman, the child and the ox, while he was struggling to protect his family from the enraged animal’" (73). The family's efforts are ultimately futile; however, their story illustrates the humanity of the Arab victims and the very personal level on which resistance to colonization can be staged. Representing the variety and complexity of individual resistance, Djebbar ultimately challenges colonial ideologies and historiography that rob Algerians of agency and paint them as passive victims.

Pélissier's report documents the violence and atrocity of the French occupation and disrupts the colonial ideologies that justify his mission. His emotionally charged descriptions of Algerians suffering and fighting to their deaths undermine the notion of French forces as calmly rational, standard bearers of civilized warfare, and sure of their victory against an inferior opponent. Pélissier's disruption facilitates Djebbar's reworking of the scene to imagine Algerian humanity and resistance. The conflict

becomes a contact zone, a dynamic exchange between the two cultures, rather than a simple moment of the colonizer's victory over an easily conquered native population. Pélissier is changed by his experience of Algeria and Algerians, no longer sure of his own distance from savagery: "After Pélissier emerges from this promiscuous contact with the fumigated victims clad in their ashy rags, he makes his report which he intends to compose in official terms. But he is unable to do so . . ." (79). Djebbar calls into question French superiority, and with it the ideologies supporting the invasion.

Djebbar goes so far as to thank Pélissier for his "eloquent and realistic—much too realistic—description of the Arabs' suffering" (75). She recognizes the contradictory nature of the impulse for gratitude, a contradictory product of the continuing contact zone that is Algeria:

I venture to express my gratitude—however incongruous. . . . to Pélissier. After the spectacular, brutal killing carried out in all naïveté, he is overcome with remorse and describes the slaughter he has organized. I venture to thank him for having faced the corpses, for having indulged a whim to immortalize them in a description of their rigid carcasses, their paralysed embraces, their final paroxysms. For having looked on the enemy otherwise than as a horde of zealots or a host of ubiquitous shadows. . . . Pélissier, butcher-and-recorder, brandishes the torch of death which illuminates these martyrs (78).

Pélissier's record, shaped as it is by contact with the humanity of those he would conquer, is a crucial stop on Djebbar's travels. Post-independence Algeria continues to be a contact zone, a space in which cultures, people, and ideologies meet and sometimes clash. Djebbar's travel writing makes an eloquent argument for contextualizing present-day liberation struggles in terms of history—but it must be a history that has been revised to include formerly silenced participants. Over a century later, reading his text constitutes a vital exchange in the contact zone: "[Pélissier] hands me his report and I accept this palimpsest on which I now inscribe the charred passion of my ancestors" (79). Colonial history written in the contact zone is a palimpsest, an obscured text offering traces and promises of alternative narratives to be rewritten over it.

Djebbar retrieves from colonial accounts evidence of the rich and varied resistance that is the legacy of present-day Algerians. Her recasting of

Algeria as a contact zone is particularly feminist not only in her sophisticated representation of the workings of power between colonizer and colonized, but also in her focus on women's participation as revolutionary agents. Péliissier inadvertently offers Djébar evidence of women's desperate resistance: "The women, lying among the cattle in their lyrical embraces, reveal their aspirations to be the sister-spouses of their men who do not surrender" (79). Djébar can now trace a female line of women revolutionaries into the present-day postcolonial struggles of her homeland.

## A Global Feminist Travels

Djébar's different kind of travel, a journey undertaken to understand and accurately represent Algeria, and particularly its women, begins with colonial travel accounts sent back to France. Djébar combs through historical travel texts to find evidence of what is assumed to be missing—the stories of Algerian women. Texts by the women themselves are not available for reasons ranging from illiteracy and lack of education for women to the reality of decades lived in war zones. Djébar reads the texts she can find, those of French officers and civilians recording their observations as they travel through Algeria, for brief mentions of Algerian women that undermine their erasure from the historical record.

Often brief mentions of women are intended to reinforce stereotypical views of soon-to-be-colonized Algerians. Barchou provides three sentences recording the presence of Algerian women on the battlefield, and once again his account emphasizes Algerian animal-like savagery:

Arab tribes are always accompanied by great numbers of women who had shown the greatest zeal in mutilating their victims. One of these women lay dead beside the corpse of a French soldier whose heart she had torn out! Another had been fleeing with a child in her arms when a shot wounded her; she seized a stone and crushed the infant's head, to prevent it falling alive into our hands; the soldiers finished her off with their bayonets (18).

For Barchou, the women reinforce his view of Arabs as uncivilized barbarians who terrorize French troops with the threat of cold-blooded mutilation (having their hearts ripped out). Unwomanly women, these female Arabs exemplify the backwardness (or nonexistence) of Algerian culture,

which is incapable of keeping women in their proper place, off the battlefield and properly caring for children (as opposed to murdering them). The violent mutilation performed with bayonets by the French soldiers on an unarmed woman is not equated with either woman's actions, but rather is seen as justifiable punishment for both women's transgressions against proper femininity.

Djebar refuses Barchou's analysis of the scene, however, and uses his travelogue to document instead the existence of "two warrior women" (19). Her journey through the archives of colonial travel texts does not merely document the racist assumptions of the colonial travelers, but also unearths evidence of women's participation in resistance struggles. Refusing Barchou's pronouncement of unwomanliness, Djebar rewrites his passage emphasizing the women's humanity, courage, and strength:

Thus these two Algerian women—the one in whom rigor mortis was already setting in, still holding in her bloody hands the heart of a dead Frenchman; the second, in a fit of desperate courage, splitting open the brain of her child, like a pomegranate in spring, before dying with her mind at peace—these two heroines enter into recent history (18).

Djebar brings these women from the margins of colonial discourse to a more central place in the history of resistance struggles. By approaching them without the stereotypes Barchou automatically imposes, Djebar makes space to imagine their motivations and suffering. Djebar offers the women in Barchou's account humanity, and even more importantly, places them in a historical line of "women warriors." By reconstructing the history of female revolutionaries, Djebar revises continuing stereotypes of Arab women as helpless, passive victims. Asserting that these two women "enter into recent history," Djebar asserts present-day Algerian women's place in the same line of "women warriors." Tracing the history of resistance to colonial oppression, Djebar argues that women continue to be active agents engaged in past and present freedom struggles.

Djebar further emphasizes the connection between historic and contemporary women's participation in revolution by including the stories of women fighters in the Algerian War of Independence. Djebar's journey through colonial travel accounts and Algerian history shifts to the twentieth century as she travels to interview surviving women resistance fighters. Her visits to these women reinforce the attention to historical specificity

and context with which her search through the archives began. While Barchou passes judgment on the few women in his travelogue, Djebbar practices a very different kind of travel writing. Her journey is like a pilgrimage, marked by respect and humility, rather than by arrogance. Djebbar equates her textual production with a sacred religious rite:

I do not claim here to be either a story-teller or a scribe. On the territory of dispossession, I would that I could sing.

I would cast off my childhood memories and advance naked, bearing offerings, hands outstretched to whom?—to the Lords of yesterday's war, or to the young girls who lay in hiding and who now inhabit the silence that succeeds the battles. . . . And what are my offerings? Only handfuls of husks, culled from my memory, what do I seek? Maybe the brook where wounding words are drowned (142).

Declaring that she is neither “story-teller” nor “scribe,” Djebbar situates her text between fiction and unadorned journalism, aspiring to make the various stories she weaves into her own journey “sing” with more meaning than they each might alone. Her travel text and her interviews are shaped and filtered through her own experience, her “childhood memories,” and she seeks to do justice to those memories as well as the stories of the soldiers and women warriors. By injecting autobiographical moments into her travel writing, Djebbar disrupts the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” mode, rejecting the “mastery predicated between seer and seen” that characterizes traditional colonial travel writing (Pratt 1992, 202, 204). Instead, her personal history is intimately connected to the history, people, and places she describes.

Djebbar's intensely personal travel writing makes her vulnerable, “naked,” and her approach of supplication with “outstretched hands” and “offerings” signals the fundamental difference between her text and Barchou's (142). Barchou's travel writing is part of a tradition that inventories and catalogs the riches of territories and cultures in order to steal efficiently. The plunder of Algeria begins with colonial travel accounts, Djebbar argues: “words will become their most effective weapons. Hordes of interpreters, geographers, ethnographers, linguists, botanists, diverse scholars and professional scribblers will swoop down on this new prey” (45). In sharp contrast, Djebbar's travel writing is an offering—an attempt to give back the richness of an erased and devalued history.



Djebar's position on the margins of both Algerian and French culture facilitates her journey and her unique travel writing. Djebar's narrator in *Fantasia* shares with her a French colonial education (denied most Algerian women) and travels outside of Algeria to France and Europe. She also shares experiences growing up in traditional Algerian culture, which for women centers on the exclusively female space of the harem. It is this position as an insider/outsider that allows her to gain access to the hidden world of Algerian women and to translate that experience for a wider audience. Djebar's project risks appropriating the voices and experiences of the women she recovers and interviews. She must be careful not to re-colonize the women she would represent, an especially crucial issue when dealing with the harem, such an overdetermined subject of fascination for the Western imagination.

Djebar and her narrator gain experience with the cloistered world of the harem in her home village during summer vacations from French language boarding school. She is both a part of that home culture and fundamentally alienated from it, a position shared by many dislocated and expatriate feminists.<sup>5</sup> Mobility and autonomy are the privileges associated with Western education, "I had passed the age of puberty without being buried in the harem like my girl cousins; I had spent my dreaming adolescence on its fringes, neither totally outside, nor in its heart; so I spoke and studied French, and my body, during this formative period, became Westernized in its way" (127), but they come at the price of alienation from her home culture. However, Djebar's position as cultural exile and intellectual elite allows her to travel between cultures, to depict both the oppression Algerian women experience and their subversive resistance.

To journey back to her birthplace, bringing with her a Westernized education and perspective, is a task that Djebar represents as complicated and difficult: "They call me an exile. It is more than that: I have been banished from my homeland to listen and bring back some traces of liberty to the women of my family . . . I imagine I constitute the link, but I am only floundering in a murky bog" (218). A politicized understanding of Algerian women's existence grounded in the historical context of both repression and participation in freedom struggles are the "traces of liberty" Djebar offers her female ancestors. Her privilege entails a burden of responsibility to untangle the complexities of Algerian women's experience and adapt and even transform Western feminism in some useful way to promote liberation.

## Harem Tales Revisited

Along with accounts of violent conquest, colonial travel writing features a parallel tradition of illicit titillation from stolen views inside the forbidden world of the harem. Djébar's position as an insider/outsider in relation to the harem allows her to dismantle traditional representations of Arab women found in "harem tales." In the memoir, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, Fatima Mernissi draws careful distinction between the "imperial harems" that captivated Westerners and the present-day practice of "domestic harems," which are domestic arrangements usually limited to one extended family (1994, 34). Despite the effective dissolution of imperial harems at the start of the twentieth century, "it is the Ottoman imperial harem that has fascinated the West almost to the point of obsession. . . . splendid palaces full of luxuriously dressed and lasciviously reclined indolent women, with slaves standing by and eunuchs watching the gates, existed when the emperor, his Wazir, generals, tax collectors, etc., had enough influence and money to buy hundreds and sometimes thousands of slaves from conquered territories, and then provide for such expensive households" (Mernissi 1994, 34–35). Djébar acknowledges the continuing fascination with the harem that fueled Western travelers' obsession with glimpsing the forbidden world. The obsession was fueled further by publishing demands for the illicit subject matter. Her journey back to her childhood replaces the account of the traveling voyeur with her own eyewitness voyage from the confines of the cloister to the world outside and back again.

Travelers and traveling artists fixed the image of the imperial harem in the Western imagination through their texts and paintings (Mernissi 1994, 34). Djébar's earlier novel, *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (1980), explores the impact of Delacroix's painting of the same name (1832), which, as critic Victoria Best argues, constituted "a sexually significant penetration of the male gaze into the cloistered female world . . . and produced a painting that embodied the spirit of the Orient for his age and inspired countless other artists" (2002, 874). Djébar continues to deconstruct colonial representations of exotic female sexuality in *Fantasia*, challenging the representation of Algerian women and Algeria as female bodies available for use by occupying armies, be they French or Algerian. Scholar Leila Ahmed argues that imperialist ventures are reinforced by

exaggerated and stereotypical views of the veil: “The peculiar practices of Islam with respect to women had always formed part of the Western narrative of the quintessential otherness and inferiority of Islam” (1992, 149). The otherness and inferiority with which the Western imagination conceptualizes Islam extends to the Arab world, and to the specific context of Algeria. Critic Laurence Huughe suggests the continuing power of “the veil as being ‘of a body’ with the identity and the imaginary of the Algerian woman” (1996, 867). Thus, Djebbar’s project of dismantling representations of the harem gains urgency by acknowledging the ways in which such formulations continue to limit the lives and opportunities open to Algerian women as much as the practice of seclusion itself.

An alternative but related representation of the harem found in travel writing depicts seclusion as a form of sexual slavery, a sign of unrelenting oppression of women that indicates the barbarity of the culture in question. One key example is *The Romance of the Harem* (1872), traveler Anna Leonowens’s controversial and fictionalized portrait of Siam.<sup>6</sup> Instead of presenting the imperial harem in terms of titillating exotic sexuality, “what Leonowens explicitly and continually offers as her key objection to the harem arrangement is that, from the perspective of the women living in Nang Harm [Siam’s imperial harem], their lives are not a matter of free choice” (Morgan 1991, xxx). Certainly important differences exist between the Ottoman imperial harems described by Mernissi and Nang Harm; however, the Western imagination’s fascination with Leonowens’s portrait from its first publication to the twentieth-century popularity of “The King and I” informs Western audiences’ dual response to harems as sites of illicit sexuality and extreme oppression.

Leonowens represents Siamese women’s lack of freedom and sexual servitude with a plea to sympathy so effective that it continues to shape Western understandings of harem life:

[Women in the harem] are nearly all young women, but they have the appearance of being slightly blighted. Nobody is too much in earnest, or too much alive, or too happy. The general atmosphere is that of depression. They are bound to have no thought for the world they have quitted, however pleasant it may have been; to ignore all ties and affections; to have no care but for one individual alone, and that the master. But if you became acquainted with some of these very women under favorable conditions,—very rare, however,—you might gather

glimpses of recollections of the outer world, of earlier life and strong affections, of hearts scarred and disfigured and broken, of suppressed sighs and unuttered sobs, that would dispose you to melancholy reflections and sad forebodings, and if you were by nature tender, to shedding of tears ([1872] 1991, 107).

Leonowen's sympathetic and sentimental rendering of women's oppression in the harem figures individual women as all part of the amorphous, indistinguishable "general atmosphere of the harem." Individuality disappears in the use of collective pronouns ("all," "nobody," "some") to be replaced by a universal experience of "suppressed sighs and unuttered sobs." Leonowen's account of women as victims works with representations of secluded women as exotic sex objects to render veiled women as completely lacking in agency.

Djebar's travel narrative revises facile formulations of veiled women as only sex objects or hapless victims. Unlike Delacroix or Leonowens, Djebar presents "domestic harems," that are, in contrast to imperial harems, "rather dull, for they have a strong bourgeois dimension and . . . are more of an extended family, with hardly any erotic dimension to speak of" (Mernissi 1994, 35). Extremely critical of the ways in which the institution of seclusion limits women's access to education, physical mobility, expression of sexuality, and ultimately, autonomy, Djebar nonetheless presents a complicated portrait of individual women's experiences that makes room for women's agency, even in the harem. By presenting the experiences of individual women living in domestic harems, Djebar avoids the sweeping generalizations of Leonowens' collective pronouns and replaces exoticized renderings of cloistered women with a journey into forbidden female space in non-Orientalist terms. Djebar's glimpse inside the cloistered world is not voyeurism, but a global feminist view of female bodies as complex sites of oppression and potential liberation.

Djebar articulates a cogent critique of women's subordination through seclusion, which she complicates by including moments of veiled women's expression and agency. Djebar represents interdictions against women's public expression and participation in dramatic terms of torture and death: "while I am only a wandering exile, in flight from other shores where women are white walking wraiths, shrouded figures buried upright" (115). Djebar links the confinement of women's bodies and the silencing of women's voices as two simultaneous aspects of veiling that disempower

Algerian women. Violent consequences reinforce proscriptions on women's autonomy:

There had been numerous cases of fathers or brothers taking the law into their own hands for less than this; the blood of an unmarried daughter or sister shed for a letter slipped surreptitiously into a hand, for a word whispered behind shuttered windows. . . . (12)

Violence institutionalizes Algerian women's subordination, just as violence enforces colonial rule. Djébar represents the devastating effects of both patriarchy and imperialism on Algeria, and ultimately strives to imagine alternatives for her country and its women.

Even as she acknowledges the devastating effect of seclusion on Algerian women, Djébar also presents moments of resistance that involve women's coalition and expression. Her grandmother's ritual dance, an occasion when she dances for hours until she collapses into the waiting arms of her daughters and daughters-in-law, is an example of resistant expression that is possible even within the confines of the cloister:

[T]he matriarch was normally the only one of the women who never complained; she condescended to mouth the formulas of submission disdainfully; but this extravagant or derisory ceremonial which she regularly organized was her own way of protesting. . . . Against whom? Against the others or against fate? I wondered. But when she danced, she became indubitable queen of the city. Cocooned in that primitive music, she drew her daily strength before our very eyes (145).

The dance symbolizes the need for creative outlets, and suggests that there are strategies for protesting that can be carefully incorporated even within the confines of the harem.

In her descriptions of all-female gatherings, Djébar provides another example of strategies secluded women use for survival and could adapt for revolutionary change. Sharing stories of their experiences, women break their imposed silence to express suffering and find solidarity with other women: "Adding a vivid detail, a caustic comment, they fill in the picture of the calamity: the man coming home drunk and striking her, or, on the contrary, 'himself' overtaken by ruin, sickness, involving endless tears, debts, inexorable misery. . . . So these city ladies sit there and bear witness, as best they can, to the unfolding drama of their own lives" (154). The

process is partial, limited by decorum and social constraints, but within these limits, the women break the silence that surrounds their experience. “Merriment or happiness” are also alluded to by the women in the group, providing a hint to the complexity of women’s lives lived behind the veil that contradicts formulations of unceasing oppression and victimization (155). These moments of shared expression hold restorative and resistant power: “In speaking to the listening group every woman finds relief from her deep inner hurt” (154). For Djebbar, these female gatherings hold the potential to move beyond survival to become tools for uniting women and making social and political change.

During the composition of *Fantasia*, Algerian women needed strategies for empowerment like those Djebbar describes. Written before the current resurgence of fundamentalism in the Arab world, Djebbar’s text presents models of women’s revolutionary participation and agency that could be adapted as the institution of seclusion diminished in terms of social and political power. Djebbar describes the crucial moment of possibility for Algerian women:

After several centuries of cloistering, the bodies of my sisters have begun to come out of hiding here and there over the last 50 years; they grope around, blinded by the light, before they dare advance (214).

In this moment of possibility and danger, Djebbar offers the map that she has reconstructed of Algerian women’s revolutionary subjectivity to her fellow women travelers.

Even as she complicates formulations of seclusion by emphasizing possibilities for resistance already practiced in the harem, Djebbar offers further complexity by portraying differences among the secluded women. The harem thus becomes another contact zone, contested ground on which women with varying levels of privilege and oppression interact. Social class and strict adherence to norms for appropriate female behavior determine, in part, veiled women’s status. In her portrayal of a traditional wedding ceremony remembered from her narrator’s childhood, Djebbar demonstrates hierarchies in the community of veiled women. The all-female celebration allows the women invited to dance, eat, and display their finery: “the city ladies sit crushed beneath the weight of their jewellery, clad in embroidered velvet, their faces adorned with spangles or tattooing” (204). At a specified moment, the doors of the harem are

opened and the “horde of ‘voyeuses’ swarms in; that is what the women are called who will remain veiled even in this exclusively feminine gathering” (204). The job of these uninvited guests is to testify to the correct following of traditions and the display of wealth achieved by the hostess. The “voyeuses” earn their dubious position as uninvited guests because they are “women who ‘shout’ in their daily lives” (205) who earn the contempt of respectable matrons because they “[rail] aloud against fate” rather than appropriately submitting (203). The “voyeuses” shouting potentially threatens the security and privilege the matrons have carved out of the subordination of seclusion and justifies the matrons’ contempt.

The demonstration of this contempt occurs at the wedding ceremony:

The hostess has let them in order to show off, as if saying, “Look! Examine everything! I’m not afraid of gossip! My wedding celebration respects all the traditions! Let even the women I’ve not deigned to invite see for themselves and let everybody know!” . . . The crux of the ceremony is there, in this uneasy knot. As if the guests could no longer endure their exclusion from the outside world . . . As if they were finding a way of forgetting their imprisonment, getting their own back on the men who kept them in the background: the males—the father, sons, husband—were shut out once and for all by the women themselves who, in their own domain, began to impose the veil in turn on others (205).

Djebar’s account of the matrons and the women veiled even within the harem is another facet of her complicated portrait of Algerian women’s diverse experiences. By acknowledging the ways in which veiled women can exercise power over other women, Djebar resists the representations found in colonial travel texts and harem tales.

“Yes, there is a difference between the veiled women, a difference that the eye of the foreigner can’t discern,” Djebar insists (203). Djebar travels through the often obscured and misrepresented world of the harem in an effort to fully represent the differences among women as a revolutionary antidote to the stereotypes offered in colonial accounts. Djebar’s insistence on representing Algerian women in all their multiplicity and variety ultimately replaces the totalizing view of the monarch-of-all-I-survey with an intimate and respectful account that foregrounds Algerian women’s agency.

## Travel as Global Feminist Praxis

“Western eyes see the colonized as an amorphous, opaque collectivity of undifferentiated bodies,” according to critics Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (1992, xvi). Djebbar recognizes the revolutionary potential of replacing harmful generalizations with carefully nuanced and multiple representations of the diversity of women’s experiences under colonialism, participating in freedom struggles, and forging new lives in their emerging nations. Djebbar’s revision of traditional travel writing uses the genre to express a global feminist agenda that combines the emphasis on multiplicity and specificity of Third World feminist theory with Western feminist theory’s analysis of institutionalized hierarchies of race, class, and gender. By depicting forgotten Algerian women from this century and the last who are “sister-spouses of their men who do not surrender” (79), her narrator’s mother, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters living first inside the harem and later poised on the edge of independence, and the narrator herself as intellectual elite, exile, and Algerian sister, Djebbar attempts to break the silence that has surrounded Algerian women. Breaking silence is the first step toward working together to redefine women’s role in Algeria and, eventually, the rest of the developed and developing world.

Careful attention to the differences among women reveals that women are not automatically allies, and that for women to work together will take careful coalition building. Djebbar shares this insight with other global feminist thinkers, such as Lama Abu Odeh, a Jordanian feminist whose essay “Post-colonial Feminism and the Veil: Thinking the Difference” explores the difficult challenges associated with forging links between Western feminism and Third World women’s experience. Odeh writes “from the complicated perspective of an Arab feminist, who both rejects the veil as a personal choice but also recognizes its empowering and seductive effect on Arab women” (1993, 26). Describing Arab women’s use of the veil to avoid sexual harassment, Odeh approaches veiling from complicated perspective similar to Djebbar’s that acknowledges both the veil’s “empowering effect on the street as [women] go to work” and the dangerous logic of “the veil as rhetoric [which] assumes that women should be ideally inconspicuous” (1993, 33). Odeh argues that it is only through a Third World feminist approach that acknowledges the complex nature of the veil that coalitions among women can be initiated:



For the feminist, such multiplicity of veiled sexuality could be exciting and promising of rich interaction and dialogue with veiled women. Her position accordingly could become more nuanced and multiple. Instead of dismissing them as the enemy, the threat, the falsely conscious, she could see them as the varied, divided, seemingly united, female community trying to survive in an environment that is hostile to them as much as it is to her. It is a multiplicity that invites conversation between the 'same,' rather than the apartness of the 'other' (1993, 35).

Odeh demonstrates Third World feminist theory's insistence on complex representations of women's experiences and careful efforts to build coalitions that respect difference, a practice that Djébar follows in *Fantasia*.

The tension between commonality and particularity is at the heart of global feminist activism and theory. Insisting on both difference and community, the revolutionary texts of women's lives subvert dominant structures predicated on alienation and the eradication of difference. Chandra Mohanty in her working definition of colonization points to the erasure of difference as a colonial tool of domination: "colonization almost invariably implies a relation of domination, and a suppression—often violent—of the heterogeneity of the subjects in question" (1991, 336). Expressing themselves as heterogeneous subjects, women telling the stories of their lives lay claim to a subjectivity predicated on agency.

Djébar's global feminist travel text effectively models a coalition among Third World women, be they "voyeuses" or Western educated feminists. Her insistence on particularity and specificity succeeds in recovering women's voices and linking contemporary women with historical models of resistance and agency. Djébar's respectful journey to interview women resistance fighters suggests the necessity of moving from silence to speech and the role that global feminists can play as facilitators. Travel becomes a metaphor for this kind of work and a vital practice—moving figuratively away from disempowering stereotypes, from the relative comforts of class and educational privilege toward interactions with various women, respecting difference and using the benefits of mobility, education, and literacy to bring their stories to the world. Gayatri Spivak's groundbreaking essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" outlines the duty of post-colonial feminists:

The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with "woman" as a pious item. Representation has not withered away.

The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish (1987, 308).

By traveling to Algerian women, be they resistance fighters or historical “women warriors” footnoted in French colonial texts, Djébar uses her education and privilege to make women’s voices heard. By recognizing her responsibility to these women and to Algeria, Djébar’s *Fantasia* “calls attention to women’s ‘agency,’ an agency not only for the silent subaltern woman but for the alienated postcolonial writer,” according to critic Nancy Von Rosk (2001, 74). Her travel text becomes global feminist praxis as she succeeds in “traffic[king] in a radical practice of differences” (Spivak 1987, 285). Djébar travels in search of alternatives to colonial representations of Algerian women’s passive victimization. In *Fantasia* her journey has only begun:

Love, if I managed to write it down would approach a critical point: there where lies the risk of exhuming buried cries, those of yesterday and as well those of a hundred years ago. But my sole ambition in writing is constantly to travel to fresh pastures and replenish my water skins with an inexhaustible silence. (63)

#### NOTES

1. The “Travel Channel” and Michael Palin’s BBC documentary series *Full Circle* are just two examples of popular culture manifestations of the marketing of Third World destinations to would-be First World travelers. Travel to “exotic” developing countries is increasingly becoming a status marker. The documentary *Cannibal Tours*, which documents the promotion of tourism and its exploitative effects in Papua New Guinea, offers a scathing critique of this mindset.
2. *Fantasia*, *An Algerian Calvacade*, initially published in French as *L’Amour, La Fantasia* (1985) constitutes the first novel in a projected quartet. Djébar subsequently published three more installments of the quartet, *A Sister to Scheherazade* (*L’Ombre Sultane*) (1987) and *Far From Medina* (*Loin de Médine*) (1991) and *So Vast the Prison* (*Vaste est la Prison*) (1995).
3. I am using the term subaltern as Gayatri Spivak (1987) uses it, which I will discuss further later in this essay.
4. Even as Djébar highlights the horror of the fumigation, she does leave room for ambiguity about whether either Bugeaud or Pélissier intended for the outcome to be so violent.
5. For a discussion of the political and academic pressures faced by postcolonial feminists living in the United States, see Mohanty (1993).

6. Debate continues over Leonowens' veracity and reliability. For further information, see Susan Morgan's introduction to *The Romance of the Harem* (1991).

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