theories and methodologies

Retracing Assia Djebar's Steps

ODILE CAZENAVE

I am about to take my departure; but for the moment I am still hovering around. I speak to you as if I had known you intimately, and in so doing suppress the hint of remorse that haunts me, as if I had fallen again under the spell of those women of long ago . . .

—Assia Djebar, *A Sister to Scheherazade*

THERE IS SOMETHING DAUNTING ABOUT WRITING AN HOMAGE TO AN ARTIST WHO JUST DIED. ONE IS FACED WITH QUESTIONS OF PROXIMITY, expertise, and knowledge: questions on how to evoke the person and oeuvre without giving oneself too much prominence, questions on the intended audience and adequate tonality as well as the standpoint one is speaking from. This is especially true with the Algerian writer, filmmaker, historian, and playwright Assia Djebar: "As a Moslem woman, educated in the French system while her country was still under de-facto colonial rule and witness to eight years of brutal war while still in her twenties, Djebar is the only writer of her sex and her generation who has managed an impressive output both before and after her country's accession to independence" (Zimra, Afterword 163). As Clarisse Zimra further reminds us in "A Daughter's Call," "By the time of her death, Assia Djebar had been writing for nearly sixty years." The range of her training, her professional experience on three continents (Africa, Europe, North America), and her practice of different genres are just as impressive. She received several prestigious awards, including the FIPRESCI Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1979 for her film *La nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua* (1978; "The *Nouba* of the Women of Mount Chenoua") and the Neustadt Prize (1996), often considered a gateway to the Nobel Prize (for which she was short-listed twice). Elected to the Académie Française in 2005, she is, as Zimra remarks, "une immortelle."

While I have had the honor of facilitating a number of homage sessions and roundtables on African writers and intellectuals, until now I had never written an homage. When writing, I am no longer a *passeuse de parole*; rather, this solitary exercise implies a different responsibility

ODILE CAZENAVE is professor of French at Boston University. Her most recent publications include *Contemporary Francophone African Writers and the Burden of Commitment* (U of Virginia P, 2011), cowritten with Patricia Célérier, and, coedited with Célérier, a special issue of *Présence francophone*, titled *Vingt ans après le génocide des Tutsi du Rwanda: Regards sur la production artistique* (2015). Her current book project is on conversation, social networking, intertextuality, and new narratives in twenty-first-century literature in French.

© 2016 ODILE CAZENAVE
PMLA 131.1 (2016), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.1.140 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and set of objectives, with another set of questions to be resolved beforehand: How much of the artist's life should be included, and what should be the focus—Djebar the filmmaker? Djebar the writer? Djebar the playwright? How much should be devoted to her intervention in the cultural politics of decolonization in Algeria? How much to the significance of her feminism or to her contribution to debates about the relations between languages?

Critics around the world have written eloquently on Djebar's oeuvre. They have addressed her writings on Algeria and Algerian history, including the crises in postwar Algeria and the violence and self-destruction there[1]; her representations of Algerian women, eroticism, female agency, and the reappropriation of the gaze[2]; the role of space, memory, and exile[3]; the politics of language, the ambiguity of being suspended between cultures and languages, and the importance of translation in that circumstance (Calle-Gruber); and the key role of first-person narrative and autobiography in Djebar's intertwinement of history and memory.[4] Pieced together, these approaches help us grasp the richness and complexity of her work. But they would remain fragments of an unfinished puzzle if we did not consider a key feature of her writing: the repetition and "re-enactment" of motifs, characters (e.g., the grandmother), and scenes, including traumatic episodes in childhood and adulthood—techniques of her "resistance to containment" and labeling (Hiddleston 11), of "[u]n jeu d'écriture qui demande une lecture en rappel: relire, repartir en amont, retrouver l'endroit où cette image, ce cri, ce détail ont surgi; mais alors les reprendre en aval, un tel mouvement modifiant l'autre sens. Bref, se déploie alors un régime du sens multiplié, symphonique; ce que Bakhtine nommait « polyphonie »" ("[a] playful intertextuality that requires going back to earlier texts: rereading, heading upstream, finding the place where this image, this scream, this detail arose but bringing them downstream, such a movement modifying the other meaning. In sum, a regime of multiplied, symphonic meaning unfolds, what Bakhtin called 'polyphony'"; Zimra, "Cadastre" 171; my trans.).

As Jane Hiddleston further pointed out, ". . . Djebar's works should not be read in isolation, each covering a separate, succinct period or theme, but on the contrary, they should be understood as a network of intertextual references. Each text engages in processes of projection and retrojection, picking up and reinventing earlier preoccupations while foreshadowing new developments to be explored in later works" (11). *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* (2007; "Nowhere in My Father's House") is emblematic of such recurrence of words, motifs, and scenes: a flutter here, a whisper there, at times laughter, maybe a howl, remembrance of tears, of a voice, or of an intense gaze. In this way, Djebar pursues her "trajet d'écoute" ("journey of listening") as described in *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980; *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*): "Conversations fragmentées, remémorées, reconstituées," "une écoute où je tente de saisir les traces de quelques ruptures, à leur terme" ("Fragmented, remembered, reconstituted conversations," "a listening in, by means of which I try to grasp the traces of some ruptures that have reached their term"; 7–8; 1).

When I considered what to highlight in my homage, several aspects seemed obvious choices. Certainly her place in the Algerian literary landscape, her voice as a woman, her crafting of her "own kind of feminism" (Djebar, qtd. in Zimra, Afterword 175), and her writing of women[5]—all close to my research interests—were suitable points of entrance. And yet, while it was tempting to go that route, I felt that it might not adequately convey the amplitude of her literary and filmic writing and of her engagement with Algeria and with literature and film.

For weeks I wondered, What would she have considered essential? Where and how

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.1.140 Published online by Cambridge University Press

would I find it? I sought it not solely in her works but also geographically. How important was the location in which she wrote? For instance, was Assia Djebar in the United States—where she taught for years, starting in the nineties, at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, and then at New York University, a period that coincided in part with the Black Years in Algeria—different from the young Djebar in France and from the writer in her final years as a member of the Académie Française? How was she regarded and remembered in Algeria? Was she received differently in the United States, France, the rest of Europe, and elsewhere? I opted to reflect on colloquiums and other projects dedicated to her in France and Algeria.

Djebar through Translation: Le Cercle des Amis d'Assia Djebar, Paris, 13 June 2015

Je ne demande rien: seulement qu'ils nous hantent encore, qu'ils nous habitent. Mais dans quelle langue?

I ask nothing: only that they continue to haunt us, that they live within us. But in which language?
—Assia Djebar, *Le blanc de l'Algérie* (*Algerian White*)

The role of languages—Arabic, Berber, and French—a theme that appears most tellingly in *La disparition de la langue française* (2003; "The Disappearance of the French Language"), is central to Djebar's writing. So is the question of translation: how we read Djebar in other languages and in different places in the world. Le Cercle des Amis d'Assia Djebar, an association created in 2005, organized a one-day colloquium on that topic in 2015. Gathering at the Algerian Cultural Center in Paris, translators of Djebar's novels from Japan, Germany, Italy, and Turkey joined other readers and friends of Djebar to converse about what it means to read Djebar in other languages. The comments of Kiyoko Ishikawa, the translator of *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985; *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*) into Japanese, were especially powerful. Algeria and its people, she pointed out, are geographically and culturally remote from Japan and the Japanese. This, she felt, requires the translator to find the right balance between compensating for any lack of sensitivity and knowledge in the reader and being true to Djebar's writing, to the text's language, pace, musicality, and spirit. Translating works like Djebar's means making clear the verticality of the horizontal text. For instance, to properly render the use of different languages, such as Arabic, in the original text, she recurred to katakana, an alphabet used in Japanese almost exclusively to translate foreign words. Because of the barriers to Japanese readers' understanding of Djebar's work, the translator felt that an afterword is always necessary, with a map, a glossary, and explanatory remarks on the writer, the Algerian people, and the larger Muslim world. Attending this colloquium was like conversing with Djebar herself, like going back to what was close to the young Djebar's heart when she was bringing the Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi to us, from Arabic to French.

Remembering Djebar in Algeria: Algiers and Cherchell

A couple of weeks later, participating in the eighth edition of FELIV—the international festival of literature in Algeria, directed by Azeddine Guerfi—I was pleased to see that Djebar and André Brink, who died on the same day, 6 February 2015, were to be honored during the festival (fig. 1). The first segment of the opening ceremony took place in the Algiers subway. There, in a newly inaugurated station, the minister of transports and minister of culture visited an exhibit of photographs of Algerian writers by Kais Djilali.[6] Excerpts from the writers' texts were displayed next to their pictures. The second part of the ceremony was a roundtable on Djebar moder-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.1.140 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ated by Mohamed Sari, with Najiba Regaieg (Tunisia), Ahmed Bedjaoui (Algeria), Amel Chaouati (France and Algeria),[7] and Jean Rouaud (France). After screening a twenty-four-minute montage of clips from Djebar's films *La nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua* and *La zerda ou les chants de l'oubli* (1982; "The *Zerda*; or, The Songs of Oblivion"), Bedjaoui reminded the audience that *La nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua*, while produced by and for Algerian television, was rejected by Algerians, and yet the film was accepted for the 1979 Venice Film Festival, where, besides winning the FIPRESCI Prize, it received a ten-minute standing ovation. As Zimra stresses in "A Daughter's Call," this was a moment of "poetic justice." Like Bedjaoui, she reminds us that Djebar, "[h]ereafter banned from filming in her own country, . . . had to drop the next project. Followed ten years of self-censored silence and exile. If literature has flourished, cinema certainly lost." In other words, because Djebar's development as a filmmaker was thwarted in her country, she eventually favored writing over filmmaking. As Regaieg and Chaouati further stressed, central to her oeuvre is her rendering of women, always aimed at highlighting their beauty, regardless of their age and origins, whether they are from a rural or urban world.[8]

Two days later another event was held, at her birthplace, Cherchell—formerly called Caesarea—where she is buried. These words of Isma in *Ombre sultane* (1987; *A Sister to Scheherazade*) came back to me: "Ville de ma tante et ville mienne, le port antique où se ferme mon trajet" ("The town with the ancient harbor where my journey will end is my aunt's birthplace, as well as mine"; 227; 159). About forty people attended the event, held in the inner courtyard of the public library, the perfect space for the gathering. After a screening of clips from her films (fig. 2), Jean Rouaud focused on what it had meant for her to be an *académicienne* and how her election to the academy could be read as her ultimate appropriation of the French language and thus be a paradoxical source of pride for Algeria and Algerian letters. Chaouati told the audience about past and future colloquiums and other projects undertaken to honor Djebar and keep her work alive through study.

I was disheartened, even distressed, to realize that while she had focused on giving



FIG. 1
Photographs of Assia Djebar and André Brink on display at FELIV.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.1.140 Published online by Cambridge University Press

women a voice, the audience at the Cherchell library was nearly all male. Across the street, on the public square, tents of FELIV events were well attended, full of young people and children, many of them women and young girls. Only a handful of women attended the homage to Djebar, most of them in their late forties and fifties.

And yet there was a heartening moment as well: hearing of a project to create a foundation that would maintain a house in Cherchell where her manuscripts and objects would be preserved and where young writers might work. Djebar may have been largely misunderstood in Algeria, but she will be remembered. Both homages were signs that Djebar carved out a space for women writers and artists. Algerian literature and film can no longer be thought of as men's dominions. "Pour ma part, soutenue par mon souci d'un récit scrupuleux, j'ai été amenée à constater que de nouveaux rituels se mettaient à l'œuvre: l'écrivain une fois mort, et ses textes pas encore rouverts, c'est autour de son corps enterré que s'entrecroisent plusieurs Algéries…" ("For me, sustained as I am by the search for a scrupulously faithful account, I have been brought to note that new rituals were in the coming into being: the writer once dead, his texts not yet reopened, it is around his buried body that several different Algerias are being sketched out…"; Djebar, *Le blanc* 12; *Algerian White* 14).

Was attending these two events essential? Probably not, but as I returned to Algiers, then to France and the United States, I had a realization. While Djebar's friends, critics and admirers of her writing, and other readers tried to pay her adequate homage, an essential feature of her oeuvre became evident: she had spent her life paying homage—to Algeria, to its people, and, first and foremost, to women, telling us of their beauty and pain, of Algeria's intellectuals, of the importance



Fig. 2
Viewing film clips at the Cherchell library.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.1.140 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of cultures and languages. Two works are particularly representative in that respect: *Le blanc de l'Algérie* (1995; *Algerian White*) and *La femme sans sépulture* (2002; "The Woman without a Grave"). To a certain extent, her last project too involved an homage: retracing the life of Augustine and determining what he represented for Algeria, historically, culturally, and spiritually.

In *Le blanc de l'Algérie*, Djebar writes about three of her close friends, all assassinated in 1993: Mahfoud Boucebci, a psychiatrist; M'Hamed Boukobza, a sociologist; and Abdel Kader Alloula, a playwright. She reflects on the Black Years, the violent period of Algerian history that began in 1991. Other writers who had violent, untimely deaths are evoked as well: Tahar Djaout, Jean Senac, and, earlier, Albert Camus. Djebar revisits Camus's place in the literary landscape and the history of Algeria.

Djebar also captures Algerian history in *La femme sans sépulture*. Through the portrayal of Yamina Oudaï, also known as Zhoulika, Djebar gives a voice to the voiceless, fleshing out the heroes and especially heroines who were forgotten once the War of Independence was over. Differently and yet similarly, both texts reflect on the transformations of Algeria and its people. Ultimately, they reinscribe Djebar's rapport with her country.

Notes

1. E.g., Jane Hiddleston's *Assia Djebar: Out of Algeria* analyzes Djebar's oeuvre as emblematic of tensions in the writer's expatriation and of her conflicted rapport with Algeria. See also Erikson.

2. Déjeux; Mortimer, "Reappropriating"; Andrade.

3. See the comparative analysis of Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Djebar's *A Sister to Scheherazade* in Mortimer, *Journeys* (147–57). See also Hiddleston; Gafaïti, "L'écriture."

4. Kelly; Gafaïti, "Blood"; Mortimer, "Assia Djebar's *Algerian Quartet*."

5. Not "for" or "on," as Djebar remarks in her preface to *Femmes d'Alger*: "Ne pas prétendre « parler pour » ou pire « parler sur », à peine parler près de, et si possible tout contre: première des solidarités à assumer par les quelques femmes arabes qui obtiennent ou acquièrent la liberté de mouvement, du corps et de l'esprit" ("Don't claim to 'speak for' or, worse, to 'speak on,' barely speaking next to, and if possible very close to: these are the first of the solidarities to be taken on by the few Arabic women who obtain or acquire freedom of movement, of body and of mind" (8; *Women* 2).

6. The exhibit was organized by Djilali, a photographer and documentarian, and Khadija Chouit, a journalist.

7. A psychologist living in France since 1992, Chaouati is the president of Le Cercle des Amis d'Assia Djebar and the editor of a collective volume, *Lire Assia Djebar!*.

8. An example, in *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, is the portrait of Djebar's mother, whose appearance changes over the years as she moves from Cherchell to Algiers to Paris.

Works Cited

Andrade, Susan. *The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms, 1958–1988*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011. Print.

Calle-Gruber, Mireille. *Assia Djebar ou la résistance de l'écriture*. Paris: Maisonneuve, 2001. Print.

Chaouati, Amel, ed. *Lire Assia Djebar!* Paris: Cheminante, 2012. Print.

Déjeux, Jean. *Assia Djebar. Romancière algérienne, cinéaste arabe*. Sherbrooke: Naaman, 1984. Print.

Djebar, Assia. *Algerian White*. Trans. David Kelley and Marjolijn de Jager. New York: Seven Stories, 2000. Print.

———. *Le blanc de l'Algérie*. Paris: Actes Sud, 1995. Print.

———. *La disparition de la langue française*. Paris: Michel, 2003. Print.

———. *La femme sans sépulture*. Paris: Michel, 2002. Print.

———. *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*. Paris: Femmes, 1980. Print.

———. *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*. Paris: Actes Sud, 2007. Print.

———. *Ombre sultane*. Paris: Lattès, 1987. Print.

———. *A Sister to Scheherazade*. Trans. Dorothy S. Blair. New York: Quartet, 1994. Print.

———. *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*. Trans. Marjolijn de Jager. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1992. Print.

Erikson, John. *Islam and Postcolonial Narratives*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. Print.

Gafaïti, Hafid. "The Blood of Writing: Assia Djebar's Unveiling of Women and History." *World Literature Today* 70.4 (1996): 813–22. Print.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.1.140 Published online by Cambridge University Press

———. "L'écriture d'Assia Djebar: De l'expatriation à la transnation." *Cincinnati Romance Review* 31 (2011): 75–84. Web. 27 Oct. 2015.

Hiddleston, Jane. *Assia Djebar: Out of Algeria*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2006. Print.

Kelly, Debra. *Autobiography and Independence: Selfhood and Creativity in North African Postcolonial Writing in French*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2005. Print.

Mortimer, Mildred. "Assia Djebar's *Algerian Quartet*: A Study in Fragmented Autobiography." *Research in African Literatures* 28.2 (1997): 102–17. Print.

———. *Journeys through the French African Novel*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1990. Print.

———. "Reappropriating the Gaze in Assia Djebar's Fiction and Film." *World Literature Today* 70.4 (1996): 859–966. Print.

Zimra, Clarisse. Afterword. Djebar, *Women* 159–211.

———. "Cadastre de l'imaginaire dans le quatuor." *Assia Djebar. Nomade entre les murs… Pour une poétique transfrontalière*. Ed. Mireille Calle-Gruber. Paris: Maisonneuve, 2005. 171–84. Print.

———. "A Daughter's Call." *Savannah Review*, forthcoming.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.1.140 Published online by Cambridge University Press