theories and methodologies

Experimenting Freedom

NICK NESBITT

NEVER HAVING KNOWN ASSIA DJEBAR, I CAN ONLY SPEAK OF THE EFFECT HER WRITING HAS HAD ON ME, ABOVE ALL ONE OF HER FIRST WORKS, *Les enfants du nouveau monde* (*Children of the New World*), created as Algerian independence became a reality, inaugurating a postcolonial nation full of promise and contradiction. In this novel Djebar wrote of Algeria at a moment, 1961–62, when it was on the threshold of its becoming, the very moment of the invention of Algeria, when the coming laborious construction of Algeria, which continues today, was already visible. The moment when the unyielding violence of the struggle to invent this new country, nation, people, and culture might have ceased, in a site subject to a violence that had proceeded endlessly, terrifyingly, since 1954, since the massacre in Sétif in 1945, since the French invasion of 1830, since the fly-whisk incident and the blockade of Algiers in 1827. By 1961 Algeria had for centuries been defined and constructed by violence. In *Les enfants du nouveau monde* we encounter the trace of a moment when the participants in the Algerian revolution and war had been shaken to the core of their being by the terror of that struggle and risking of life, a moment when what Frantz Fanon called "le problème de l'homme" (374), the invention of a human being beyond the consuming circles of Eurocentric hegemony, was of the utmost urgency. A moment when Algerians were about to give form and reality to Algeria. Here Djebar wrote of this Algeria in a future perfect and perfect future of that moment, an Algeria that would no sooner be born than vanish, an Algeria that still, today, will have been.

This was the nation as an "experiment," as Réda Bensmaïa has written, of "territories to rediscover and stake out, step by step, countries to invent and to draw while creating one's language" (8). What might it mean to consider a nation, Algeria, not as an essence, a property, or a fact but as an experiment?

To occupy and claim a space in which one might experiment with what being an Algerian could mean, to become at the height of the Algerian revolution a subject of justice as undivided equality, is, I think, the imperative inscribed in Djebar's novel, published on 1 July

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

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.1.125 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1962, the day before Algerian independence. While the novel narrates the experiences of a vast range of figures in Blida, I find the character Chérifa most fascinating. Daring to reject the sexual advances of her first husband, divorcing him, and marrying the militant Youssef, she has doubly escaped the paternal order of violence. On the day of the events Djebar describes, Chérifa, worried the police will capture her husband, leaves the female space of the home, at once sanctuary and prison, to cross the city. "Pour une épouse heureuse vivant au cœur d'une maison d'où elle ne sort pas, selon les traditions, comment prendre, pour la première fois, la décision d'agir? Comment « agir »? Mot étrange pour celle qu'emprisonne l'habitude . . ." ("For a happy wife, living inside a house she never leaves, as tradition has prescribed, how for the first time to decide to *act*? How to act? It's a foreign word for someone imprisoned in custom . . ."; 97; 84).

The figure of the "Medinant," the colonial or Maghrebian flâneur Bensmaïa deterritorializes, moves freely through the city space of the Medina. Not so the subjects of French colonial Algeria, in Fanon or in Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*. Strolling is a capture of space that marks out in Djebar's novel the enormous distance between Fanon's terrifying colonial city and an independent, postcolonial one. For Chérifa, doubly constrained as a colonized woman, the city space of Blida is unknown and unavailable and must be strategically taken. About Chérifa's decision to break out of her domestic imprisonment and enter the unknown, to cross the forbidden city, Djebar writes, "« Agir! Moi? Moi?… »—Peut-être est-ce ce que se dit Chérifa; peut-être se prend-elle pour une personne familière de la pénombre et qui aurait par hasard heurté le soleil, l'intuition l'envahissant alors qu'elle ne pourra se contenter de s'aveugler de cette lumière, mais qu'il lui faudra aussi inventer un autre pas, une autre démarche—une autre façon de voir, d'être vue; d'exister" ("'Me, act? Me?' Perhaps that's what Cherifa is telling herself; perhaps she takes herself for a person at ease with the semidarkness, accidentally thrown into the sun and then overcome by the intuition that she cannot be satisfied with the light that blinds her but must also create a new step, a new approach—a different way of seeing, being seen; of existing"; 97; 84).

Chérifa's story is a mise-en-scène of the desire to move freely across a space, the desire for that space to be not a terror or taboo but a form that allows for the experimentation of freedom and equality. It remains a problem and a struggle, as she breaks out of the home to traverse the terrifying openness of the city, subject to the controlling, violating male gaze at every step yet compelled to go on, not knowing, not yet a subject. "Lorsque Chérifa arrive au bout de la rue, laissant derrière elle tout un brouhaha de voix dont elle ne comprend pas le soudain éclat, elle hésite. Devant elle, la place du centre qu'on appelle « la place d'armes ». Où aller maintenant?" ("When Cherifa reaches the end of the street, leaving behind the rumble of voices whose sudden explosion she doesn't understand, she hesitates. In front of her lies what they call the *place d'armes*. . . . Which way should she go now?"; 102; 89). How to resist the panic that seizes her in this place of exposition, vulnerability, and insecurity so as to pursue truth ("en vérité . . . un désir sournois de savoir" ["[i]n truth . . . a gnawing desire to suddenly know"] seized her)? "Voici qu'elle a peur maintenant," Djebar writes. "Une vraie panique. Elle oublie tout, sa course, son audace" ("Now she is afraid. Real panic. She forgets everything, her racing, her audacity"; 162; 143–44). How to occupy this place of freedom without panicking? How to overcome the endless oscillation between the anxiety of exposure, the unbearable experience of formlessness, and, after the revolution(s), the Thermidorean return to the superego and the archaic law? This experimentation of the nation as form, as the working through of the consequences of a break, of a rupture into anx-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.1.125 Published online by Cambridge University Press

iety, offers the promise of an Algeria *à venir*. If anxiety leads to the reassuring restoration of the mythic law, justice, in contrast, might be the transformative process that surpasses obsessive repetition. Today we still recognize the courage in *Les enfants du nouveau monde*: Chérifa's and Djebar's magnificent insubordination to the symbolic order and the unyielding struggle to dissolve its tyranny.

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