Speaking and Writing Against "the Sentence of History": Assia Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*

Shelly Auster

In her semi-autobiographical novel, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (1985), Assia Djebar interlaces alternative pieces of Algeria's history and different narrative forms in a fragmentary way that enables an exploration of the productive contradictions and questions about the silent gaps of Algeria's colonial history. By intermingling conflicting perspectives of historical moments, Djebar's text resists what Homi Bhabha refers to as "the sentence of history" (56). In this play on words, in which "sentence" is understood in both the syntactical (that which is written) and legal (as a decision or judgement) sense, Bhaba suggests that the experiences and articulations of those who have been "sentenced" as "Others" by Western discourse offer strategies for thinking beyond the "certainty" and limitations of "description" to a more productive "dialogic process" (58). With his emphasis on the gaps in speech, he privileges the need to look outside the box in order to disrupt representations and constructions that have become sedimented and naturalized. In this sense, Djebar plays with and reconfigures moments of Algerian history to challenge the silencing capabilities of mainstream accounts and give voice to those who have been muted -- primarily Algerian women.

There is a productive space for the exploration of postcolonial perspectives of colonial experiences to be found not just in the "gaps" in speech as articulated by Bhabha, but also in the "silences" of historical accounts. By interlacing different pieces of Algeria's history (the French military conquest of Algeria beginning in 1830, the Algerian struggle for independence from French colonial rule and the story of her own experience as an Algerian women during a time of great upheaval) and different textual forms (including testimony, historical documentation and autobiography), Djebar highlights the limitations of univocal representations of history that succeed in excluding the voices of both the colonized and women.

We often can find valuable contradictions in postcolonial "re-writings" of history like Djebar's.[1] I contend that Djebar's many contradictions in *Fantasia* -- specifically, contradictory 'meanings' of silences in speech and historical accounts of Algeria under colonial rule -- are indicative of a productive use of strategic enunciation "that does not simply revise or invert the dualities" of encounters between cultures, "but revalues the ideological bases of division and difference"

(Bhaba 58). In refusing to accept the hegemonic static representation of the "other" that results from such 'encounters between cultures,' Djebar challenges the categorical assumptions that enable such representations in the first place. Furthermore, Djebar's own questioning regarding her role as the transcriber of the silenced voices of Algerians under colonial rule is suggestive of the questions that writers and intellectuals should consider when seeking to "speak for" those who've been denied the platform from which to "speak of" their own perspectives and experiences.

In the aptly titled *The Eloquence of Silence*, Marnia Lazreg attempts to 'shake up' the "one-sidedness of the prevailing discourse on difference between women" that has helped to subsume Algerian women under universalizing, often inappropriate labels. She explains that labels such as " 'Muslim women', 'Arab women' and 'Middle Eastern women,' " enforce "an identity that may not be theirs." As a point of comparison, she asks us to consider studying all women in Europe and North America as "Christian women" and points out that the label 'Middle-Eastern woman' fails to take into consideration that "the Middle East is a geographical area of some twenty-one countries that display a few similarities and as many differences" (7). Such a comparison emphasizes the way in which such blanketing labels assume a degree of sameness among women who greatly differ and maintains the problematic binary construction of East/West that denies variations and hybridities.

When she first began her research for this work which examines the social changes experienced by Algerian women after the nation won its independence from France in 1962, Lazreg came to see the crucial link between the events of Algeria's past and present, "especially the colonial past which still haunts the present" (15). In seeking to 'understand' Algerian women under French colonial rule by way of written documentation, she soon discovered that Algerian women wrote "very little, if at all" (17) during most of the colonial period of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. As a result, she was forced to rely primarily on sources written by French men, Algerian men, and, to a lesser extent, European women. Such texts -- that is, the testimonies, letters, journals, and reports -- of colonizers and colonized men, highlight the limitations of historical documentation, and the "fictions" (received as "truth") created by eye-witnesses who claim authority and knowledge under the guise of objective reporting.

As Julia Clancy-Smith notes, "Algerian historiography of the past 132 years appears as the 'imperial man's world' par excellence" (61).[2] However, these same texts -- with their 'eerie' silences and 'missing pieces' (whether of time, place or alternative perspectives) also reveal the significance of what is *not* said, or rather, that which is not recorded: in particular, the silences of colonized women.

The 'presence' of silence in these texts is often multiple in form and strategic in nature. Silence on the part of the 'non-speaker' is imposed in certain circumstances but chosen in others, implying a form of agency on the part of the 'silent one(s)'. As Lazreg contends, "silence as the absence of public voice is not synonymous with absence of talk or action" (18).

Like Lazreg, Djebar was well aware of the dearth of Algerian women's perspectives of Algeria under French colonial rule and during the struggle for independence when she began writing *Fantasia* in the early 1980s. After the "success" of her early novels[3] and a twelve year period beginning in 1962, in which she ceased writing fiction to concentrate on teaching history at the University of Algiers, she embarked on an oral history project in the mid-1970s. This project involved interviewing Algerian women who had participated in the independence struggle (1954-1962), many of whom could neither read nor write and "whose contribution to the independence struggle had been overlooked, forgotten, or simply not known" (Mortimer 104). Pieces of these oral testimonies are woven into the second and third parts of *Fantasia* alongside autobiographical bits. This follows a first part in which Djebar presents recreations of episodes from Algeria's nineteenth-century colonial history based heavily on her research of the written testimonies, letters, diaries and published accounts of French soldiers and officials in Algeria just after the invasion of 1830.

However, far from simply inserting the previously silenced voices of subaltern women in an uncomplicated, linear history of Algeria from nineteenth-century conquest to twentieth-century independence, Djebar persistently collapses spaces of time and challenges notions of fixed representation. Narrative commentaries and contemporary autobiographical interludes are intermixed in the first "historical" section of this three-part text. Additionally, her 'contemporary voice' is frequently intermingled with those of the women who fought for independence in the 1950s and 60s in the last section, blurring the line between the "I" and "we" of her autobiography. In doing this, she creates the space for alternative female voices to emerge by challenging the very notion that "objective" historical documentation delivers the only acceptable "reality."

In Part I, Djebar conjures up a female presence that is omitted from historical documents detailing the French invasion of Algeria in June of 1830. By placing imagined "silent spectators who will live to tell the tale when the encounter is over" (7) in the moment of invasion, she suggests a challenge to the French colonial forces—not so much to their soldiers on the battlefield as to their words recorded in historical documents. Had these imagined (but "real") Algerian

"spectators' " stories been recorded as were those of the French, they would have challenged that which came to be accepted as 'truth' regarding historical events. Djebar specifically genders these "silent spectators" as women, imagining "King Hussein's wife neglecting her dawn prayer to climb up to the terrace" and asking "how many other woman, who normally only retreated to their terraces at the end of the day, must also have gathered there to catch a glimpse of the dazzling French fleet"(8). These Algerian women may be silent, but they are 'present' (not buried in historical documents). Indeed, their presence is suggestive of Derrida's notion of the "visor effect" in which "we do not see who looks at us" (7): these women are 'invisible' according to European historical documents; but, according to Djebar, they exist and observe the French before they are 'captured' by them in written accounts.

Their silence indicates not so much a collective passivity as a curious watchfulness as they follow the soon-to-be conquerors' moves as if they are taking part in a theatrical performance. Indeed, Djebar asks: "who are to be the performers? On which side shall we find the audience?" (6). As Mary Jean Green points out, Djebar emphasizes "the way in which the European accounts reduce the Algerians, like women, to objects of a dominant gaze" (962) – they are the viewed by the French and frozen in their written words (or, when painted, in their art). While Djebar is able to locate in the accounts of this invasion "an inscription of a resisting look" from the Algerian women, she herself must 'write in' the image of the Algerian women watching the French because such a "reciprocal gaze has never before been written" (962).

The "reciprocal gaze" of the women on the terrace denotes Djebar's questioning of the dispassionate, objective French accounts of that first encounter even as she depicts the scene not as a moment of violence, but as a performance. If this moment of 'European history', this so-called "first encounter between the two nations" (Djebar 16), is recast as a performance, then it is one the audience (both the spectators on the terrace and the readers of the historical accounts) is meant to believe is taking place for the first time. However, this moment of "first encounter" is part of a repetitive cycle of European conquest and 'discovery' that can be discussed in terms of Derrida's notion of the history of modernity. In *Specters of Marx*, he refers to "a certain dramaturgy of modern Europe, notably that of its great unifying projects" (5) and the way in which certain links are forged between generations (skipping over other generations, as well as "Other" perspectives) in the creation of a unifying European narrative of history. Moreover, each link is presented as if it's occurring for the first time, as if the historical moment is truly original and has never taken place before.

And yet, Djebar counters this fantasy of historical originality by implying the very repetitive nature of this "first encounter" when she voices the thoughts of a spectator who doubts any real threat on the part of the incoming French fleets: "so many foes have sailed away after a token bombardment or two, just as Charles V of Spain did in the sixteenth century" (Djebar 7). As Derrida claims, history is a repetition of something that is always felt as if it were happening for the first time: "Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time* makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history" (emphasis in the original 10). Each historical event is described in terms of its 'first-ness' – in its performative construction each has a beginning, middle and end. After "the end of history", that is only an end until the next "staging" -- the creation of the linked chain that is 'Modern European history' -- there are the unspoken, not written, not repeatedly performed moments in-between. This suggests that in the realm of 'witnessing' (particularly in the historical sense -- that is, in the documentation of historical events), that which has been seen and recorded by 'Western eyes' has been prioritized and has shaped the understanding/s of events. Those who are not heard and recorded are either (mis)understood or are simply left out of the retelling. Thus, if the "silent actors" are present at all in the links of history, they are fixed as objects around which the privileged "speaking actors" perform.

In this "first encounter", though, Djebar seeks to transform the silence imposed upon the Algerian women by the "sentence" of history, not so much by giving them speech (i.e. lines in the play) but by transforming their silence into one of defiance. She refuses to leave them fixed as immovable objects on the pages of history -- they actively watch the approaching French. As Anne Donedey contends, for Djebar, "fiction is the only way to flesh out…'the flat restraint' of historical documents in order to fill their gaps"(112). Thus, Djebar counters historical omission and fills in the "gaps" by breathing textual life into the imagined Algerian women she lifts from 'between the links' of linear history, placing them in the empowered position of witness to the moment of contact.

It is her 're-presentations' of different European accounts of two separate, but related responses to Algerian insurrections in 1845 (which I will discuss in further detail below) that perhaps best demonstrate the "double-violence" committed by the exclusion of the "other" voice from dispassionate historical accounts. By "double-violence" I mean both the violence of the act itself and the subsequent violence committed by the re-description of the act in presumably acceptable and cohesive terms; that is, the attempt to create a logical narrative out of illogical acts. Claudine Raynaud notes that "readers of the printed text seldom

contemplate that they might be treading in a mine field of excisions, deletions, changes" (35). This is the field into which we wander when reading the historical accounts of colonial violence. Rather than seeking to 'fix the problem' of the "deletions" and "changes" of the historical text which might be attempted by the simple inversion of the binary structure (for example, by revising all Frenchman/"Europeans" as barbaric and all Algerians/"Arabs" as civilized), Djebar instead foregrounds the editorial presence of revisions and exclusions in her own retelling of colonial events. Instead of trying to write "the truth" from the Algerian perspective over the Frenchmen's "false" accounts, she blends pieces of their stories with her own interpretations and suppositions to highlight the role of storytelling involved in any retelling, whether historical or fictional**.**

By resuscitating pieces of Algerian history in the potent form of a novel, Djebar articulates Stuart Hall's depiction of the 'past' as something that is not fixed, but created: "the past continues to speak to us. But no longer addresses us as a simple factual 'past' " as "it is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (395). Thus, Djebar enables the past "to speak to us" more powerfully than the "simple factual 'past' " as recorded in historical documents. In doing so, she blurs the line between historical documentation and fiction, suggesting that both use "excisions, deletions, changes" for strategic purposes in the acts of retelling and recreating.

In the chapter entitled "Women, Children, Oxen Dying in Caves," Djebar pieces together swatches of European military reports and letters to deliver a non-cohesive depiction of the barbarous murder of over two thousand Algerian men, women, and children in June of 1845. Hoping to put an end to five years of resistance among the Berber tribes who have been hiding out in caves in the western regions of Algeria, Field-Marshal Bugeaud orders his chief of staff, Colonel Pélissier, to " 'smoke them out mercilessly, like foxes!' " (65). Pélissier's 'successful' smoke-out campaign is followed by a similar triumph just two months later under the leadership of Colonel Saint-Arnaud in a nearby area. Djebar's narration of the two French military men's accounts (whether in official reports or letters) depicts their opposing strategies during and after these campaigns and also their different writing styles (which prompt contrasting responses). In effect, both men attempt to bury the Algerian rebels twice: first by literally asphyxiating them in the caves and then by denying them status as humans, transforming them into a mass of carcasses with their pens to be preserved as such in the history books.

However, Djebar suggests that Pélissier's attempt at the complete silencing of the Algerian rebels backfires -- both during his time and hers -- as a

direct result of his verbose writing style. In this sense, she strategically complicates the notion that there is little of 'redemptive value' to be found in the one-sided accounts of 'barbaric' colonizers. That is, she uses Pélissier's official report of the mass murder to her advantage in her retelling (rather than discarding it altogether), complete with her own arrangement of "excisions, deletions," and "changes." For example, she mixes rumor (what is supposed to have been spoken) with an excerpt from his report (what was written) to complicate the character of Pélissier so that this "master of strategy" (67) and "butcher" (73) also becomes capable of suffering for his actions. After ordering his men to drag all the bodies out of the caves to count them, Djebar speculates about his having entered the caves himself: "He is supposed to have said, as he emerged, 'It's horrible!' Others report that he sighed, 'It's terrible!' Be that as it may, he states, in the prescribed report: 'These operations, Field-Marshal, are such as one undertakes when obliged to do so, but one prays to God that one will never again have to carry them out!' " (74).

Although Pélissier may have attempted to discount the 'humanness' of the Algerian rebels, his report of the smoke-out campaign (which is read at a parliamentary session in Paris) "unleashes an uproar of controversy: insults from the opposition, embarrassment on the part of the government, fury of the warmongers, shame throughout Paris." Djebar speculates that the reason for this uproar can be found in the verdict delivered by Lieutenant-Colonel Canrobet regarding Pélissier: he " 'made only one mistake: as he had a talent for writing, and was aware of this, he gave in his report an eloquent and realistic -- much too realistic -- description of the Arabs' suffering' " (75). Herein can be found a "useful" contradiction within the accusation of Pélissier's "too realistic" writing style. If the intention of realism in writing -- whether in a fictional piece of literature or a military report -- is to make possible the consumption of objects and images as Amere description" (Pollack 123), then particular attention should be paid to the appearance of that which is being described in order to make the object(s) visually real to the reader who cannot 'be there'. The purpose of this is to make the reader believe that the description *is* the reality – not merely a representation of it.[4]

Stephen Greenblatt refers to the "principle of eyewitness" as one based on the presumption that the "eyewitness directly possesses the truth and can simply present it" because he has physically observed it (129). As "eyewitness" and "possessor of truth", then, Pélissier would need only 'objectively' and 'factually' convey in words what he has *seen* in order to 'visually transport' the political leaders in Paris to the battlefields of Algeria. However, Djebar portrays Pélissier as having gone too far in this respect -- he has 'succeeded' so well in depicting

'reality' that he ultimately has 'failed' because of his inclusion of that which should have been excised: not the bodies of the "Arabs" but their "suffering". He is a victim of his own excess for he has provided too much detail and too much description, making the scene at the caves in Algeria all too visual for those reading his report thousands of miles away in Paris. In short, he fails because he makes the "Arabs" human by acknowledging their pain (in spite of himself) and enabling others to "see" this through his words.

Having learned from the mistakes of his predecessor, Saint-Arnaud insists that all the victims' bodies be left in the caves, and he sends a confidential report to Field-Marshal Bugeaud which is never sent to Paris and soon after is destroyed in Algiers. In fact, Saint-Arnaud is so successful in "silencing" the campaign that "in 1913, sixty-eight years later, a respectable academic named Gauthier looks for [Saint-Arnaud's report], finds no trace of it, wonders if Saint-Arnaud had not made up the whole story to have something to boast about" (76). Thus, of the two Frenchmen, Djebar finds that Saint-Arnaud has succeeded in eternally silencing the Algerians he asphyxiated simply by keeping "silent about this ruthless triumph. This is death indeed. To be interred in Saint-Arnaud's caves and never exhumed!" (76). By contrast, she thanks Pélissier. For, however unintentional, his gift for writing "resurrects before [her] eyes" those who died in the caves (75). His "too realistic" descriptions of the "suffering Arabs" provide her with a way to re-present their very existence, while Saint-Arnaud's strategic silence is an attempt to write them out of history as if they are mythical figures, mere legend. In contradictory terms, Djebar labels Pélissier as both barbarian and "the foremost chronicler of the Algerian War!" (78). The exclusion of the Algerian perspective in this extreme act of violence (the 'gap' or the 'ellipsis' that marks that which is missing, that which is not spoken) commingled with the Atoo realistic" writing of a barbaric, but talented French officer is the entryway for Djebar's exploration of this historical moment. By presenting this moment as a fragmentary, contradictory one, Djebar emphasizes the constructed nature of all written accounts, in particular historical ones.

The silence imposed upon Pélissier's victims and especially Saint-Arnaud's (who are literally sealed up in a cave and made to vanish through the 'disappearance' of a report), comes to play a role -- albeit a different one -- over one hundred years later in the Algerian War for Independence, as well as in the author's autobiographical interludes. If women's voices, along with children's and men's, were buried in the caves in 1845, then Djebar intends to counter this Adouble violence" through the transcription of the oral testimonies of women who participated in the war for independence. Following her re-presentations of

fragments of nineteenth-century colonial history in which she blurs the boundaries between history and fiction, Djebar mixes these oral testimonies with autobiographical fragments, "using polyphonic discourse to blur the boundaries between fiction and experience", creating a "collective autobiography" (Mortimer 103). With the violent events of the nineteenth-century continuing to haunt the twentieth-century struggles for independence as presented in the third part of *Fantasia*, Djebar highlights the 'silenced' experiences of women – "her own and those of her Algerian sisters" (Mortimer 105).

Writing *Fantasia* in the 1980s, Djebar had the advantage of hindsight. That is, she could see that while the nationalist project of Algerian liberation clearly relied on the efforts of women, it did not secure equality for all Algerian women during the time of the struggle or after independence was won.[5] Because she has lived through the post-independence period, Djebar is able to address the experience of Algerian women involved in the independence struggle from a different perspective than did Frantz Fanon (who died in 1961, before Algerian independence). As Rita Faulkner explains, at the time Fanon was writing *A Dying Colonialism* (1959), he thought that "the newly won position of respect and apparent equality held by female combatants (as described and, presumably perceived by him) was permanent, an augury of the future 'modern' socialist, revolutionary Algeria" (847). At that time, Fanon was the editor for the revolutionary Algerian newspaper *El-Moujahid* and Djebar served as a writer under him. Faulkner suggests that not only would Djebar "have been familiar with Fanon's ideas", she "in fact may have influenced them, for she could well have been an informant regarding the rare female students he describes who grew up not wearing the veil" (847). However, Fanon's untimely death from cancer at the age of thirty-six would prevent him from witnessing the condition of Algerian women after independence.[6] Over twenty years after her 'collaboration' with Fanon, Djebar addresses his conviction of women's achieved equality. She indicates that from the beginning, women were not perceived as being equal to men in the struggle. For example, she implies the naivete of a young female student who wants to join the revolution: "She persisted in believing that girls were being accepted as volunteers; were not the Nationalist leaders anxious to make it know that all were equal in the struggle?" (103).

And yet, even as she challenges Fanon's utopian vision of equality, she stresses that her objective in transcribing these women's experiences is to provide them with an 'equality' of representation in written form. For, as one former revolutionary proclaims: "Alas! We can't read or write. We don't leave any accounts of what we lived through and all we suffered!" (148). To prevent the

infinite silence of these women who "suffered" but survived to tell their story, Djebar writes their words and asserts that "writing does not silence the voice, but awakens it, above all to resurrect so many vanished sisters" (204). But because she is still aware that, indeed, writing *can* "silence the voice" -- as is the case in so many historical accounts excluding the voices of women -- she opts for a form of writing that enables her to 'speak outside the box.' In other words, she turns her transcription of oral testimony into a "dialogic process" to avoid the pitfalls found in the straight descriptions of the "sentences" of history.

Djebar's textual strategy in 'giving voice' to the Algerian women who were involved in the struggle based on their testimonies (that is, beyond the rhetoric of revolution and nationalism) is to juxtapose this with her own experience as a "modern woman" (that is, one who attended school, studied French and does not wear a veil) trying to establish her own identity in post-independence culture. In doing so, Hafid Gafaiti contends that Djebar's integration of the collective histories and identities of Algerian women who fought for independence "problematizes the very idea of autobiography and challenges the genre's insistence on the transcendent 'I' " while also foregrounding both "history's essentially intertextual dimension" and "the decisive role of oral -- and often anonymous -- histories in her own autobiography and in Algerian national histories in general" (815). Since so many of these women are 'missing' from the historical archives, she seeks to 'write them in' through the transcription of their stories, while realizing that to do so in a manner associated with 'traditional' ethnographic practices (in which the ethnographer examines the members of another culture and seeks to describe them from a position outside of that culture) -- without acknowledging her own subjectivity -- would be problematic. Thus, she mixes 'her story' with 'their stories' to create a collective, fragmentary retelling of the Algerian woman's experience– just one retelling of many, constructed out of multiple voices.

As much as she emphasizes the need to record these women's stories in written form, she is conscious of the tension between the oral tradition and the experience of writing, as well as between those who can read and write and those who cannot. She laments that her "oral tradition has gradually been overlaid and is in danger of vanishing" (156). In order to 'reconnect' with it she turns to the form of storytelling, both as listener and teller, as if to resurrect the oral tradition as well as the women who uphold it. She contends that "in our towns, the first woman-reality is the voice...next comes writing" (180). And yet, for many Algerian women -- including those who struggled for independence -- 'tradition' commanded that they never learn to read or write, preventing them from accounting for their experiences in the same manner as their male counterparts (or

the women with a 'European education', like Djebar). The "first woman-reality", then, is the only one shared between Djebar and "her sisters". There is a certain degree of empowerment to be found, then, in the oral tradition in its ability to 'connect' women, to enable them to serve as links in the passage of their own history. However, as Green notes, "the memory of oral transmission extends only so far, and a modern consciousness demands written records, historical documents whose truth status seems assured." It is to this demand that Djebar writes, if only to counter the "truth status" of documents written "almost exclusively by men – and, in colonial cultures, largely by the colonizers" (959-60). It is through the juxtaposition of oral testimony and written documentation that Djebar seeks to give voice to the previously silent and silenced.

As has been shown, Djebar intends to counter the silence imposed upon Algerian women with stories to tell but with no means for recording their words in written form. Through their stories, she also demonstrates that not all silences are imposed; some can be seen as forms of resistance. Cherifa, who begins her career as a revolutionary at thirteen years-old, is captured by the French and refuses to confess. She will not reveal the whereabouts of certain fellow revolutionaries even when exposed to beatings and torture. When told to speak, she is silent. It is only years later as an aging women, that Cherifa recounts that "summer of devastation…her voice lift[ing] the burden of memory" (141). An unlikely 'match', Djebar links Pélissier and Cherifa by writing: "words that are too explicit become such boastings as the braggard uses; and elected silence implies resistance still intact" (178). Pélissier's "too explict" words (i.e. his "too realistic" writing) once got him into trouble (as is often happens to "the braggard") by revealing too much. Cherifa's "elected silence" achieves the opposite effect and demonstrates that some forms of suppression cannot penetrate the resistant.

However, the term "elected silence" takes on another meaning in a different context. Djebar recalls her experience interviewing a small group of peasant women. She wonders how she will be able to speak to them individually so that she can ask the one question she knows they will not respond to in front of the others: " 'Sister, did you ever, at any time, suffer "damage" '? The word suggesting rape – the euphemism" (202). She then imagines a young girl who had "suffered damage" at the hands of French soldiers being asked the same question by her own mother. The young girl's response: "rape will not be mentioned, will be respected. Swallowed" (202). Thus, Djebar calls into question her own role as 'reporter' -- one who asks the questions she feels must be asked in order to record the 'silenced voices', but that some may "elect" not to answer or want recorded. While she ultimately determines that silence is a

"sentence" she must lift to give voice to these women, she still asks "can I, twenty years later claim to revive these stifled voices? And speak for them?" (202).

The question of "speaking for others" is addressed by Gayatri Spivak, in a 1986 interview with Walter Adamson, in which she contends that:

> *There is an impulse among literary critics and other kinds of intellectuals to save the masses, speak for the masses, describe the masses…Now if I could speak in such a way that such a person would actually listen to me and not dismiss me as yet another one of those many colonial missionaries, that would embody the project of unlearning about which I've spoken recently. What can the intellectual do toward the texts of the oppressed? Represent them and analyze them, disclosing one's own positionality for other communities in power. (110-11)*

In this interview, she touches on what she discusses at greater length two years later in her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"; that is, the question of the representation of others and the need to look at representation as two different possibilities. She explains these possibilities as "the contrast, say, between a proxy and a portrait" ("Subaltern" 71). A proxy can be seen as a surface representation that, by disallowing distinctions, turns the identity of the "other" being represented into an "essence", into flat description that homogenizes the group being 'spoken for.' – i.e "the [undifferentiated] masses." This is suggestive of Bhaba's notion of the limitations of description -- its 'sententiousness'. A portrait, on the other hand, 're-presents', it presents the subject all over again (re-inscription) and offers a more entangled, complex articulation of the subject. This involves, on the part of the representing intellectual, the 'textual analysis' of which Spivak speaks of above, as well as the disclosure of one's own "positionality." Thus, art can be seen as a "portrait" as it is not fixed; its meaning changes each time dependent upon both the presenter and the audience. Spivak contends, "there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation." ("Subaltern" 80). Appropriately, then, Neil Lazarus argues that "in fact, Spivak's theory of subalternity does not seem to be a theory of native agency at all, but a theory of the way in which disenfranchised elements of the 'native' population are represented in the discourse of colonialism" (9).

So it appears, then, that question to be asked is not so much "can the subaltern speak?"; but rather, since representation does and will continue to take

place, how can postcolonial writers, artists and intellectuals pursue "re-presentations" that will prevent them from confusing "the social practices and forms of consciousness of the classes and groups of people they are investigating with the (mis-, or even, non-)representation of these practices in the available colonial documents?" (Lazarus 9). If Assia Djebar's questioning of her own capacity to "speak for" the stifled voices of Algerian women reveals anything of her project in *Fantasia*, then that is that she *does* seek to re-present these women in response to the silence imposed upon them through description and exclusion by colonial documents -- most of which have been written by European men. In doing so, she 'speaks to' the challenge Spivak poses to "the female intellectual as intellectual" to not disown her circumscribed task with a flourish ("Subaltern" 194). That is, she presents and analyzes her own "positionality" in the process of transcribing other women's stories with the intention of having them be read intertextually with her own voice and those of the colonial past.

Endnotes

1. For other examples of postcolonial novels that present compelling historical Are-writes," see Beryl Gilroy's *Stedman and Joanna B A Love in Bondage: Dedicated Love in the Eighteenth Century* (1991), a reconfiguration of late eighteenth-century Scotsman John Stedman's depiction of colonial Surinam's plantation life in *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam;* Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), a fictional account of the famous late eighteenth-century case of the British slave ship *Zong* whose crew threw nearly half its 'cargo' of slaves overboard while still alive; and Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), which re-imagines the fate of national heroines Las Mariposas, the Mirabal sisters murdered for their involvement in the underground movement struggling to topple Trujillo's regime in the Dominican Republic in the 1950s and early 1960s.
2. She points out that, for the most part, "women, whether European or indigenous, are notably absent in the two standard historical studies of Algeria, Charles-André Julien, *Histoire de l'Algerie contemporaine (1827-1871)* [published in 1961] and Charles-Robert Ageron, *Histoire de l'Algerie contemporaine (1871-1954)*," published in 1979 (73).
3. Her first novel *La Soif,* published in Paris in 1957, earned her comparisons to France's Françoise Sagan and also criticism from Algerian revolutionaries who found her "exclusive preoccupation with sexual problems indecent at a time when Algeria was subject to a merciless war" (Marx-Scourras 172). This was followed by *Les impatiens* (1958)which only added to Algerians' criticism of her work, as Clarisse Zimra notes: "to the revolution, these self-indulgent 'bourgeois' stories that did nothing to advance the cause of national liberation proved an embarrassment. [Djebar] was criticized in vitriolic attacks *ad hominem*" (68).
4. The fetishistic nature of realism, as Griselda Pollack notes, is its ability to satisfy fantasy with visual details which "secure the credibility of the imaginary scene" (123). Peter Brooks further supports the idea of realism's 'visual' nature: "realism insistently makes the visual the master relation to the world…to know in realism, is to see" (88). So, it appears, then, that the fantasy of the 'successful' realist writer is that he/she is capable of maintaining the fantasy of 'virtual transportation' to the scene for those who cannot actually be there. I am purposely blending the literary notion of realism (in fiction) here with that of description found in non-fiction (as in military reports) to suggest that neither is ever

capable of 'capturing' exactly what has taken place (whether in an actual location or a place imagined/presented as being actual) and that both involve distinct elements of fiction as they are inevitably filtered through the perspective of the writer.

5. Lazreg points out, for example, that Algerian women's participation in the war, for the most part, adhered to "a 'traditional' pattern of gender roles, where men held the positions of responsibility and command, and women executed orders" (125).

6. Hafid Gafaiti explains that "despite the loosening of restrictions against women during the anti-French resistance" and in "the first few years of independence, women in the present are again subject to the repressiveness that has plagued women in the centuries past" (815). At the same time, Amina Mama complicates Gafaiti's position. She asks if there is "an empirical basis for the sense of betrayal" that women in certain African nation-states (particularly Algeria and Zimbabwe) claim based on "instances in which men have reneged on their promise to share the fruits of independence", and then suggests that it is women's very participation in independence struggles that can be linked, in certain circumstances, to their unequal status today (61).

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