Rewriting Writing: Identity, Exile and Renewal in Assia Djebar's L'Amour, la fantasia

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I

The invasion and conquest of Algeria by the French in 1830 provided an enabling context not only for the development of a multilayered system of repression on the part of the colonizing power, but also for the elaboration by the colonized of patterns of resistance which arose as a reciprocal response to this subjection. The cultural and subjective duality which are the primary manifestations of the colonial encounter—the product of simultaneous processes of cultural subordination and assimilation whose displacements render both colonizer and colonized subject to the colonizing process—tends to inscribe postcolonial literary discourse within a context of alienation and dislocation, as the authors seek to devise strategies which will mediate the demands of a colonial legacy which, *inter alia,* compels them to inscribe subjectivity in the language of the colonizer.

The effect of colonial domination on the literary production of the colonized is thus of a plural nature. Further, the problems implicit in the (re)construction of identity through writing raise questions of discourse and signification germane to the production of autobiography, where identity itself may be read as a construct subject to external patterns of connotation. The result of this desire for discursive identity is the adoption of narrative forms which tend to displace and subvert the norms imposed by the colonizer upon the colonized; the divisions and pluralities of the colonial heritage are subsumed into the narrative matrix and turned to the determination of a postcolonial identity-

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structure which adopts fragmentation and displacement as its primary discursive strategy. What interests me, then, in the case of minority or marginalized literatures, is the process whereby the trajectory of the experience of exile and subjection tends to lead to the elaboration of discursive codes of resistance as a means toward the construction of a culturally specific identity paradigm. The inscription of such a counterdiscourse is exacerbated by the particular configuration which the colonial dialectic and its neocolonial traces impose upon desire; defined by Lacan as that which is never satisfied, desire and its corollary, recognition, may ultimately be read as the overriding tropes of the entire colonial undertaking, figuring colonizer and colonized through a self-perpetuating web of fragmentation, lack, and demand. A prime example of the working-through of these dichotomies may be encountered in the work of the Algerian writer Assia Djebar. By examining her attempt to recodify colonial history and its subjective corollaries in her novel of the French invasion entitled *L'Amour, la fantasia,* I show how the multiplicity of issues inherent in the inscription of biculturalism informs the critical role played by displacement in the elaboration of postcolonial identity.

Djebar's work in both novel and film is emblematic of the paradoxical ambiguities of the colonial paradigm. Born in Algiers, she seeks in her work to come to terms with the legacies and implications of the French colonial presence in Algeria. To do this, she confronts the history of Algeria written by the French; signification and self-affirmation imply the displacement of the colonizer's discourse and its replacement by the discourse of the Other. Yet the overarching paradox of this process remains the legacy of division which is the heritage of the colonized; negotiating the cultural codes of *métissage* is what ultimately lies at the heart of this postcolonial paradigm. Given her position as a bicultural, postcolonial subject, Djebar undoes centuries of overdetermination, while at the same time putting into place a self which draws on the complicitous dialectic of the colonial encounter in order to express the multivalency of its subjective codes. Before proceeding to a detailed reading of the text, however, let us elaborate further some of the bases which will allow subjectivity and desire to be written within a colonial framework.

II

The primary issue faced by postcolonial novelists, that of writing the subject into being through fictive discourse, makes the colonial sub-

ject doubly subject to the writing act, since the erasure of identity which is the primary product of subjection to the colonizer's discourse is eventually countered by the effort to rewrite and to recodify historical experience on its own terms. Yet such a process tends to reinforce the issues of alienation and duality which seem to be an attendant part of the production of subjectivity through writing. David Lloyd, in his reading of the role of autobiography in the production of minor literature, puts this issue well: "A perpetual tension subsists between the desire for self-origination, to produce oneself as if without a father, and the awkward knowledge of indebtedness to what precedes and influences the subject."[1] However, the recognition, and, indeed, the tacit acknowledgment of the existence of any kind of cultural or psychological precursor appears inevitably to reinscribe for the subject its inescapable overdetermination by the figure Lloyd terms the "metafather." A further process aimed at internalizing this figure results in the subject's identification with what Lloyd terms "the nation's transcendental paternity," permitting a certain reciprocal signification between the subject and the group in whose name it purports to speak, to write into being (Lloyd, 163). At the same time, however, the elaboration of this problematic inscribes the presence within the determining matrix of a cultural and psychological Other, a figure in whom the postcolonial subject perceives both its progeniture and the field of its defining alterity.

This continuing dialectic between the colonized self and the colonizing other is given succor by the suppression of the colonial identity and culture, where, as Abdul JanMohamed puts it, the colonialist "destroys without any significant qualms the effectiveness of indigenous economic, social, political, legal, and moral systems and imposes its own versions of these structures on the Other."[2] One eventual consequence of this activity of negation and appropriation is the production of a paradoxically mimetic sense of alterity on the part of the colonized subject, manifest in her tendency not only to see herself through the

1. David Lloyd, *Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 162. See especially Chapter 6, *The Autobiographies*, for a discussion of these and other related issues.

2. Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," *Race, Writing and Difference*. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 78–106, see 85.

eyes of the Other, but to draw on aspects of the colonizer's model in order to elaborate her own sense of subjectivity.

A psychoanalytic approach which embodies the desire for recognition in a postcolonial context suggests itself here as providing an effective enabling matrix which will illuminate the problematic of subjectivity. In this context, the constitution of the subject places him or her as secondary in relation to the signifier, which then imposes its laws on the subject, turning it, in effect, into a signifier which will then possess constituted meaning only in relation to another signifier. In the colonial context, then, this subject may be said to await approval and approbation from the colonizer, while, at the same time, she becomes an object of this Other's discourse through being defined by him, being spoken for, as well as by being forced to express her quest for identity in the colonizer's language. As Danielle Marx-Scouras points out: "As for the Maghrebine Francophone writer who appropriates the language of his adversary, he occupies an untenable site . . . Hence a profound sentiment of intrusion, non-belonging and alterity on the part of the writing subject who alienates himself in the language of the Other."[3] Issues of language and difference thus assume paramount importance in the double gesture constituting the (re)construction of a feminine identity within a postcolonial context. For if, as Nancy Miller points out, the question of subjective identity within a textual context "is irreducibly complicated by the historical, political, and figurative body of the woman writer,"[4] then such complications are even further exacerbated by a discursive history of conquest and subjection, racism and erasure written upon the figure of the colonized feminine body itself. The initiatory movement of any recodification must be to incorporate figures of race and conquest in the inscription of Algerian subjectivity. Negotiation of these barriers and absences will involve "a radical subversion of the meanings of the master's tongue,"[5] a rewriting of established codes of self and Other, subject and object, of discourse previously employed as a means of subjection.

3. Danielle Marx-Scouras, "The Poetics of Maghrebine Illegitimacy." In *L'Esprit Créateur*, (Spring 1986), vol. 26, no. 1: 3–10, see 3.

4. Nancy K. Miller, "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader," *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, Teresa de Lauretis, ed. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986), 102–20, see 107.

5. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 146.

III

Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*[6] is paradigmatic of the textual confluence of issues of decolonization, desire, and alienation as specific themes in Francophone North African literature. Published in 1985, Djebar's text takes as its point of reference the French invasion and conquest of Algeria in 1830. Through the figuring of Algeria itself as an object of desire for the pillaging French troops, Djebar is able to examine the process of colonization from the novel approach of territorial conquest as a trope of human cultural and political relations. With the narrative strategy aimed at evoking the anguish and ambiguity of the colonized subject as desired object, and as desiring subject, the dislocation generated by the use of the colonizer's language on the part of the speaking subject, and the historical, cultural, and textual interrelation between desire, the body, and writing, become the means by which Djebar's text eventually inscribes the code of its own affirmation. Crucial here will be the evolving dialectical relationship between writing and desire, in which writing will become inextricably bound to the unveiling and implementation of desire, the obscene imposition of the colonial undertaking, the double quest for recognition, and the integration of a valorized, decolonized self into the historical and cultural continuum.

Djebar's initial approach to the text will be that of problematizing writing itself. Her task will be to take on the "official" record of the French colonial conquest of Algeria, itself a rewriting of historical fact, and to rewrite this rewriting from the perspective of the colonized subject. With Algeria as the body upon which the history of this subject has been inscribed by the Other, this inscription has assumed, over time, the force of unassailable truth. Djebar will thus approach writing as a means toward subjective signification, drawing on the ambiguity and impossibility of consonance inherent in the discursive in order to reflect the colonial paradox and subvert the already written text of the colonizer. Djebar writes woman as object of desire into woman as desiring subject, drawing on the alienation and desire for recognition which are the legacies of a colonialist discourse.

Appropriately, duality is inscribed as a permanent condition of

6. Assia Djebar, *L'Amour, la fantasia.* (Paris: J. C Lattès, 1985). English edition translated as *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade,* by Dorothy S. Blair (London: Quartet, 1989). All quotations are drawn from this edition; page references are to the French and then to the English editions.

Djebar's (re)codification of Algerian subjectivity. The ambiguity that the colonial process has inscribed upon the colonized subject, as it alternates between the erasure of its own culture, and the desire to assume that of the Other, is refigured through the narrative's constant alternation between the presentation of the events of the 1830 invasion and the presence of writing as autobiography, as the female subject awakening to desire seeks to chronicle the constitution of her own subjectivity in the face of patriarchal domination. Djebar's text is thus structurally reflective of its own discursive quest, as it puts into place alternative writing strategies which figure the oppositional relationship to selfhood that colonialism institutes. Indeed, this ongoing ambiguity becomes prefigurative of the crisis of cultural integrity towards which the narrative inexorably leads the protagonist.

The novel in fact tacitly states this crucial disjunction in its very title. Between the implied integrity of *l'amour* and the binary encoding of *la fantasia,* whose duality mediates not only a musical fragment within Western culture, but also an equestrian display germane to the Arab region which traverses the domains both of the wargame and of the cultural festival, there lies the crux of the dilemma that this text attempts to address. The interpenetration of the formal latitude and freedom to improvise symbolized by the musical figure, on the one hand, and the violence necessary to cultural affirmation symbolized by the equestrian exhibition of the noble warrior, on the other, this interpretation subsumes the contradictions which underlie the colonial undertaking, inscribing through the double reading of the *fantasia* not only the opposition between cultures, but also the desire for autonomy as well as the very paradox of love as forcible appropriation whose intricacy the text will seek to explore. Indeed, the very tendency of the colonial paradigm to reduce the colonial identity by inverting traditional forms draws on the *fantasia* itself as a figure for this elemental conflict, appropriating and debilitating even cultural forms of self-affirmation as a means of colonial control, as Albert Memmi has indicated: "The Arab *fantasia* has become nothing more than the act of a trained animal which is asked to roar, as he used to, to frighten the guests."[7] The narrative will persistently work through this duality, beginning with the title and subtitle of Part I, *La Prise de la ville* ou

7. Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized.* Trans. Howard Greenfeld (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 93–94.

L'Amour s'écrit, which establish the reciprocity between conquest and desire that the text will explore. The alienation of the subject is put into place on the very first page, through the narrator's objective perspective. The somewhat enigmatic statement that "Toute vierge savante saura écrire, écrira à coup sûr 'la' lettre" [Any girl who has had some schooling will have learned to write, and will without a doubt write that fatal letter] links conquest to writing, and the duality of this inscription is further contextualized by the one that follows: "Viendra l'heure pour elle où l'amour qui s'écrit est plus dangereux que l'amour séquestré" [For her the time will come when there will be more danger in love that is committed to paper than love that languishes behind enclosing walls] (11; 3). Here, the double reading possible in "s'écrit" (ses cris) [writes/its cries] is directly linked to the preceding figural elements "vierge" and "écrire," effecting a double codification of subjectivity both as a product of the discourse of the Other and as the cry of anguish generated by colonial subjection.

As the third-person references to the protagonist give way to the first person, the patriarch simultaneously makes his appearance, linked to the plot by the insistence of the discursive: "A dix-sept ans, j'entre dans l'histoire d'amour à cause d'une lettre. Un inconnu m'a écrit . . . Le père, secoué d'une rage sans éclats, a déchiré devant moi la missive." [At seventeen, I am introduced to my first experience of love through a letter written by a boy, a stranger . . . My father, in a fit of silent fury, tears up the letter before my eyes . . .] (12; 4). The inevitability of conflict and the contours of a burgeoning subjectivity begin to assume their form: "L'adolescente . . . a reconstitué la lettre qui a suscité la colère paternelle . . . Les mots conventionnels et en langue française de l'étudiant en vacances se sont gonflés d'un désir imprévu, hyperbolique, simplement parce que le père a voulu les détruire." [I piece together the letter which has aroused my father's fury . . . Simply because my father wanted to destroy the letter, I interpreted the conventional French wording used by this student on holiday as the cryptic expression of some sudden, desperate passion] (12; 4).

Interestingly, what emerges in this discursive hierarchy are the axes of language and desire, recuperating the invasion matrix and subjecting the protagonist to the effects of a desire which is the product of the imposition of patriarchal law. Ultimately the incident presages the inscription of an ineluctable ambiguity: "ainsi, cette langue que m'a donnée le père me devient entremetteuse et mon initiation, dès lors, se

place sous un signe double, contradictoire . . . " [thus the language that my father had been at pains for me to learn, serves as a go-between, and from now on a double, contradictory sign reigns over my initiation . . .] (12; 4). This duality which the subject must undergo stems directly from the insistence of patriarchal coercion and a falsely constituted desire for alterity through the use of the language of the colonizing Other, symbolized through the duality of the paternal inscription; discursive resistance and female subjectivity are thus linked to desire and the subversion of patriarchy, the main issues to which the text addresses itself. What arises from such a collision of thematic variables is the question of whether language will merely mark desire, or whether it will mask it as well. In other words, if the colonizer's language is read as the mark of colonial desire, then its appropriation by the colonized may undermine the very goal it sets out to achieve, screening the desire of the colonized subject. For, in situating herself as a writer who must come to terms with the history of Algeria and with herself as a postcolonial, Arab, female subject writing in French about Arab women who do not speak French and cannot speak for themselves, Djebar's narrative will inevitably problematize its own discourse to the point where its own tenuous coherence threatens to dissolve.

But this is (the) prologue. The first chapter opens by situating the reader at dawn on the day of the attack, 13 June 1830, just prior to hostilities; what the narrator calls the "premier face à face" [first confrontation]. Following the inscription of the city as female subject—"La ville . . . surgit dans un rôle d'orientale immobilisée en son mystère" [The city . . . makes her first appearance in the rôle of 'Oriental Woman', motionless, mysterious] (14; 6)—the very indecipherability of the respective roles, the inseparability of subject and object, are integral to the immobility of the scene: "Qui dès lors constitue le spectacle, de quel côté se trouve vraiment le public? . . . Parmi la première escadre qui glisse insensiblement vers l'ouest, Amable Matterer regarde la ville qui regarde." [But who are to be the performers? On which side shall we find the audience? . . . Amable Matterer is at his post in the first squadron which glides slowly westward; he gazes at the city which returns his gaze] (14–15; 6–7). The first chronicler, Amable Matterer, watcher as well as watched, is present, about to write, and the story again suggests an equivalent relationship between military conquest and desire, the women a metonymical representation of an Algeria taken against her will:

> En cette aurore de la double découverte, que se disent les femmes de la ville, quels rêves d'amour s'allument en elles . . . Comme si les envahisseurs allaient être les amants!
>
> As this day dawns when the two sides will come face to face, what are the women of the town saying to each other? What dreams of romance are lit in their hearts . . . as if the invaders were coming as lovers! (16; 8).

The suggested equivalence between "envahisseurs" and "amants" foregrounds the duality inherent in the activities of desire and conquest, linking this equivalence to the dichotomies which ground and structure the text. Indeed, the suggestion of forcible conquest tends to foreground the violent nature of colonial appropriation, further problematizing the inscription of this fragmented female voice. We are witness, shortly thereafter, to the doubling of the axis of writing, of alterity. A second chronicler makes his appearance, also inscribed under the double sign of love and writing, thus assimilating the inscription of the Other to the workings of desire: "Un second témoin . . . le baron Barchou de Penhoën . . . rédigera presque à chaud ses impressions de combattant, d'observateur, et même, par éclairs inattendus, d'amoureux d'une terre qu'il a entrevue sur ses franges enflammées" [A second eye-witness . . . Baron Barchou de Penhoën . . . still fresh from the scene, [he] sets down his impressions as a combattant, as an observer and even, with unexpected insight, as one who has fallen in love with a land of which he has glimpsed the fiery fringes] (26; 16). The interstices foregrounded between writing, conquest, and desire cause desire to emerge as the primary mediator of this encounter between self and Other.

By equating the desire of the French soldiers to take the town of Algiers with physical desire, the narrator is in effect putting into place a polyvalent form of desire which knits this web of signification together, and which is equally applicable to the domains of military and cultural appropriation. Now if as Lacan states, "man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other . . . because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other,"[8] then a reasonable inference here is that this action of physical and cultural appropriation by France masked, or marked, a desire on its part to be recognized, that is to say, desired, by its own Other, a cultural opposition symbolically under-

8. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*. Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1967), 58.

taken by Algeria in this particular instance. Conversely, the narrator's ongoing subversion of this patriarchal colonial text signifies her own desire to be recognized in turn by this Other, to reclaim and reconstitute that self which was subverted and devalorized by the original writing and possession. Thus the assertion that "Dès ce heurt entre deux peuples, surgit une sorte d'aporie" [After this first encounter between the two nations, both sides watch and wait] (26; 16). The aporia covers exactly the space of that reversal of desire between these two historically differentiated attempts at inscribing identity out of the discourse of alterity. Repeatedly, writing marks, or masks, desire, and this opposition will continue to figure to a large extent the continuing ambivalence of identity's inscription in the narrative.

But it is the obscenity of colonial desire, with all its myriad implications, that demands emphasis. The narrator asks: "pourquoi . . . cette première campagne d'Algérie fait-elle entendre les bruits d'une copulation obscène?" [why . . . does this first Algerian campaign reverberate with the sounds of an obscene copulation?] (29; 19), marking this colonial effort with the sign of negativity and forced possession: "est-ce le viol, est-ce l'amour non-avoué . . . " [are these the ghosts of the raped . . . ? Is it the spirit of an unacknowledged love . . . ? (26; 16). Here, the overt equivalence between colonial desire and rape bespeaks the violent subjection inherent in the colonial condition, and underscores the brutal force of the colonial desire to which the colonized are traditionally subjected. The unreciprocated nature of this desire nullifies the female voice, foreclosing the context for elaborating its desire and ending the very possibility of establishing a unified identity. The narrative continues to mark the growth in the ambiguity of this colonial desire, as succeeding chapters alternate between the (re)codification of the events of 1830 and the efforts of the protagonist in the present to mediate the opposition between desire and paternal law. Still, an almost inevitable interpenetration of discourses occurs as the concept of the *fantasia* comes to inform the context of the invasion: "Les tribus bédouines sont venues comme à une fantasia de plus où le risque est paré d'insouciance" [The Bedouin tribes arrive as if to participate in yet another *Fantasia,* where the less caution is shown, the more attractive the hazards] (26–27; 16). By putting the figure of the fantasia into place, the narrative extends the inseparability of the subject-object dichotomy to the colonial context itself, as this basic constituent of Arab culture becomes incorporated into the enigmatic indecipherability of the colonial undertaking. The pervasive duality of

the discursive operation is thus intrinsic to the process of working through the parameters of desire. Thus the appearance and contribution of a third chronicler, one J. T. Merle, "venu là comme au spectacle" [tantamount to a visit to a theatrical performance] (39; 28), occurs in Chapter III as the progressive overdetermination of the identity of the colonized continues to be subsumed by the discursive matrix constituting the desire of the Other. Indeed, Merle himself, "notre directeur de théâtre qui ne se trouve jamais sur le théâtre des opérations" [our theater manager who is never in the theater of operations] (42; 32), ultimately becomes a figure for the paradoxical absence, the lack which ultimately underlies the entire colonial undertaking. The narcissism and self-absorption which figure his discourse come to stand for the trajectory of precisely that colonial desire which he seeks to describe and to define: "Pourtant ce publiciste . . . ne s'attache qu'à décrire son rôle dérisoire. Il est sans cesse à la traîne du combat décisif; il n'est jamais témoin de l'événement." [However, this publicist . . . is only interested in describing his own ridiculous role. He lags permanently behind any decisive battle; he never witnesses any actual events] (45; 33). This constant slippage which figures the relationship between Merle's presence and the events he seeks to recount marks the entire discursive contextualization of the colonial invasion. The subjective and cultural appropriation that these accounts seek to effect are reflected in the lack of consonance between discursive subject and object, between signifier and signified.

It is the recognition of the impossibility of immediacy, of a subversion of the figural ground which eventually subsumes both subject and object, that has undermined this inscriptive intention and made duality supreme. Such a slippage ultimately renders this writing nothing but an elaborate recuperation and ordering of referential materiality: "Hors combat, toute parole semble gelée et un désert d'ambiguïté s'installe." [Outside of the battlefield, speech is at a standstill and a wilderness of ambiguity sets in] (45; 33). As such, writing itself becomes representative of the objective underlying this colonial desire; as its misreading produces an unnecessary death, it embodies this desire for recognition from the Other, and encodes the ambiguous slippage so injurious to colonial subjectivity: "Toute écriture de l'Autre, transportée, devient fatale, puisque signe de compromission" [Any document written by 'The Other' proves fatal, since it is a sign of compromise] (44; 33). The inherent instability of colonial writing, exacerbated here by the insidious nature of its double task of justifying

territorial dispossession and destroying colonial subjectivity, displaces the lack underlying the colonizer's desire onto the alienation and dislocation by which the colonized are figured. And it is this lack which ultimately overdetermines the discourse by which colonial subjectivity is constructed. Such a discourse eventually becomes so pervasive that it is systematically accepted as the final and authoritative definition of the culture in whose name it purports to speak, and which it in effect circumscribes. It is the subversion and reversal of this practice, the putting into place of a new form of writing which will speak to the anguish of alienation and the desire for recognition and identity on the part of the dispossessed, that Djebar attempts to effect here.

Given this importance assumed by discursive representation, it should be no surprise that instances of its occurrence continue to proliferate. Indeed, almost on cue, a fourth chronicler appears in Chapter IV, although, interestingly, this one appears to be an Algerian witness: "Hadj Ahmed Effendi, mufti hanéfite d'Alger . . . nous rapporte le siège en langue turque, plus de vingt ans après et en écrivant de l'étranger, car il s'expatriera." [Hadj Ahmed Effendi, the Hanefite Mufti from Algiers. . . . More than twenty years later he reports the siege for us in the Turkish language, writing his reminiscences . . . from his exile in foreign parts] (50; 39). To the paradox of his nationality, an Algerian recounting the invasion and conquest of his own country by the Other, is added the further paradox of the use of a language not his own, leading to the additional displacement of his place of residence. This doubling of the undecidabilities already inherent in discursive recuperation exacerbates the sense of alterity already attached to the imposition of paternal law through the obscenity of colonial desire; by extending the field of the Other through the use of an alternative language to represent subjective repression, a national subjectivity in danger of being subsumed, Hadj's efforts to work through these ambiguities ultimately symbolize that lack of a stable scriptive ground which figures the colonial subject. The apparent inadequacy of any form of discursive representation to codify fully subjective integrity appears to presage the paradox facing the narrator of having to rewrite the colonial undertaking in the language of the colonizer. This impossibility of consonance between language and the object it seeks to represent makes desire, in language, the ground of subjective definition. Thus the number of representations of this event is itself a recognition of the paradoxical inadequacy of the role of language in the elaboration of the subject and the appropriation of culture: "trente-

sept descriptions seront publiées, dont trois seulement du côté des assiégés . . . il reste tout de même trente-deux écrits, en langue française, de ce premier acte de l'occupation . . . cette conquête ne se vit plus découverte de l'autre . . . le mot deviendra l'arme par excellence . . . " [thirty-seven descriptions will be published, of which only three are from the viewpoint of the besieged . . . there still remain thirty-two chronicles, in French, of this first act of the occupation drama . . . this conquest is no longer seen as the discovery of a strange new world . . . words will become their most effective weapons . . .] (55–56; 44–45). The elaboration of this desire for recognition from the Other through colonial appropriation has metamorphosed into a struggle for linguistic mastery, one in which discursive representation ultimately overdetermines material referentially: "Toute une pyramide d'écrits amoncelés en apophyse superfétatoire occultera la violence initiale." [The supererogatory protuberances of their publications will form a pyramid to hide the initial violence from view] (56; 45). This double ambiguity, of the discursive and of the colonial subject, is what the protagonist will seek to inscribe as she faces the figure of the familial and the cultural father in the struggle for self-determination.

There is progressively less differentiation between these two scenes of subjective definition, between the discursive recuperation of the colonial desire of 1830, and the linguistic and subjective indeterminacy figuring the protagonist in the present. Through appropriating and realigning the discourse so as to feminize effectively the figure of invaded Algeria, the narrator is able to instill the beginnings of revolt, of self-affirmation, into the lives of those victimized by historical discourses: "Ces lettres parlent, dans le fond, d'une Algérie-femme impossible à apprivoiser" [between the lines these letters speak of Algeria as a woman whom it is impossible to tame] (69; 57). The resistance on the part of the Algerian woman, both in the plurality of her collective entity and in the singularity of the narrator who speaks for her, engenders the resistance which the protagonist will discursively assume in her turn as she seeks to carve subjectivity out of subjection. And indeed, the importance of recognition in this matrix is critical: "Ne lève pas les yeux pour regarder son vainqueur. Ne le «reconnaît» pas. Ne le nomme pas. Qu'est-ce qu'une victoire si elle n'est pas nommée?" [Does not raise his eyes to gaze on his vanquisher. Does not "recognize" him. Does not name him. What is a victory if it is not named?] (69; 56). This repudiation of the Other's desire will determine the appropriation of identity which patriarchy seeks to impose upon the

Other, inscribed diachronically as the female body: "Ce monde étranger, qu'ils pénétraient quasiment sur le mode sexuel, ce monde hurla continûment . . . Y pénètrent comme en une défloration. L'Afrique est prise malgré le refus qu'elle ne peut étouffer" [This alien world, which they penetrated as they would a woman, this world sent up a cry that did not cease . . . Penetrated and deflowered, Africa is taken, in spite of the protesting cries that she cannot stifle] (70; 57). The assimilation of this recognition paradigm to an act of sexual violence serves only to deepen the horror implicit in the colonial encounter.

For in (re)tracing the parameters of this subjective struggle, the protagonist encounters parallel structures of paternal imposition, structures which she must subsume if she is to inscribe any value upon this ambiguity. If the letter which she reconstitutes is read as an attempt to negate colonial subjection and to impose the law of desire, then the continuing elaboration of paternal law must be recodified by this subject for self-assertion to occur: "Chaque mot d'amour, qui me serait destiné, ne pourrait que rencontrer le diktat paternel . . . Mon écriture, en entretenant ce dialogue sous influence, devenait en moi tentative—ou tentation—de délimiter mon propre silence . . . " [Every expression of love that would ever be addressed to me would have to meet my father's approval. . . . By keeping up a dialogue with this presence that haunted me, my writing became an attempt—or a temptation—to set the limits on my own silence . . .] (75; 61). In attempting to surmount the paternal obstacle and to enter into language, the subject in effect seeks the vagaries of signification. This linkage between language and meaning for the subject is a crucial one: ". . . the female subject's linguistic inauguration must be seen as inaugurating her, too, on the side of meaning rather than being."[9] The ultimate goal of elaborating a female postcolonial subject eventuated in discourse will take the very concepts of ambiguity and duality as paradigmatic of the oppositional construct it seeks to define.

So it is that the narrative voice itself becomes plural, fragmented, as the narrator proceeds to write, to speak, in the names of all those women subjected to oppression, and exiled from their heritage; writing and identity become practically interchangeable as past and present meet across the abyss of absence: " . . . soudain la voix explose. Libère

9. Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 189.

en flux toutes les scories du passé" [suddenly the voice bursts forth. It drains off all the scoriae of the past . . .] (131; 115). The technique of that which unnames is turned against itself, as alienation and division give way to the quest for voice and presence which will supplant the absence engendered by being spoken for. The one who speaks in the name of all tropes the colonizer's mission in repeating it, while seeking to wrest subjective identity out of objectified nonentity.

Yet the progression of the narrative continues to trace the parallels between past and present, to demonstrate the ineluctable trajectory of the female colonial subject made to undergo the dictates of paternal law. In Part II of the novel, for example, we are witness to the story—which takes place in 1845—of Badra, only daughter of Si Mohamed Ben Kadrouma, who is captured on the eve of her wedding and whose resistance before her captor Mohamed ben Abdallah, a.k.a. Bou Maza, may be read as a model for the maintenance of female subjective integrity in the face of a patriarchal desire for her subjection. Indeed, Badra's refusal to succumb to the desire and will of the male Other implies the effective elaboration of an oppositional discourse, engendering through this process of signification a position of enunciation which negates the ambiguous ground which seeks to define her as a thing to be possessed, a portion of the spoils of war. By encoding and enacting the terms of her resistance to the paternal dictates of the conqueror, Badra nullifies her status as female object, and turns this attempt at an imposition of alterity into a paradigm of postcolonial feminine resistance.

A parallel situation subsequently presents itself for the protagonist with the issue of her own impending marriage and the respective roles of her father and fiancé, suggesting her appropriation of the experience of Badra as paradigmatic of her own dilemma. Here, the protagonist is reduced to the female body across which both father and fiancé vie for supremacy, inscribing her into an economy of exchange which reflects the absence of her grounding as a subject. And it is this lack of grounding that precipitates her inscriptive ambiguity, as she seeks to align herself with an axis which would negate her own burgeoning alterity and produce a means of signification: "C'était vérité: ces deux hommes n'auraient pu s'affronter dans cette ambiguïté, aucun d'eux ne voulant céder le pas à l'autre . . . " [It was true: these two men could not have faced each other in this ambiguous situation, neither of them prepared to give way to the other] (121; 105). As we observe an increasing shift in the discourse toward the autobiographical mode, the at-

tempt to subvert the alienation and dispossession produced by the discursive inscription of the Algerian invasion progressively becomes a struggle to wrest identity out of the vagaries of biculturality and patriarchy, to establish the parameters of female postcolonial subjectivity in a context of shifting, plural codes where even the basic issues of language and culture for this subject hold the possibility of complete subversion of the subjective enterprise.

As Part III of the novel develops, the protagonist states this alienation and displacement implicitly through her oscillation between the first and third persons, giving vent to the division by which she is figured, and which in its turn stems from the presence of an overdetermining colonial discourse. This inability to preserve the first person in fact reveals a subject pervaded with ambiguity, as the impossibility of speaking the self as 'I' marks an identity-structure at odds with its own integrity.[10] This ambiguity to which the protagonist is subjected becomes progressively fixed upon the instability of language, its simultaneous reflection of, and lack of consonance with, the pluralities of postcolonial existence. In this regard, it becomes a perfect figure for her duality, as it represents the basic paradoxes of exile and belonging underlying colonial dispossession: "La langue étrangère me servait, dès l'enfance, d'embrasure pour le spectacle du monde et de ses richesses. Voici qu'en certaines circonstances, elle devenait dard pointé sur ma personne." [Ever since I was a child the foreign language was a casement opening on the spectacle of the world and all its riches. In certain circumstances it became a dagger threatening me] (143; 126). And so it is this double heritage of ambiguity and resistance, traversing the subjection inherent in colonial repression as well as the defiance signified and symbolized by Badra, that overdetermines the protagonist's present-day existence, exacerbates her sense of displacement, and ultimately, as she states, renders it impossible for her to address the exigencies of desire. For in order to do so, she must be able to recognize her own identity, to fix her subjectivity so as to translate it into signification. And here the language of the colonizer proves the ultimate obstacle: "Cette impossibilité en amour, la mémoire de la conquête la renforça . . . J'héritai de cette étanchéité; dès mon adoles-

10. Both Wallace Martin's *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New York: Methuen, 1983), discuss at length the discursive implications of the relationship between the speaking subject and the terms of its own enunciation of its identity-structure.

cence, j'expérimentai une sorte d'aphasie amoureuse: les mots écrits, les mots appris, faisaient retrait devant moi . . . " [The impossibility of this love was reinforced by memory of the conquest . . . I had inherited this imperviousness; from the time of my adolescence I experienced a kind of aphasia in matters of love: the written words, the words I had learned, retreated before me . . .] (145; 128). Intangible, fragmented, the essence of this subjectivity remains distanced from itself, caught in the interstices of cultural definition and colonial appropriation. But language, the discursive, appears to lead to betrayal.

One possible way of circumventing the destructive nature of such a paradox is through the incorporation of a form of *métissage*, by attempting to weave together the warp and the woof of conflicting cultural codes rather than remaining subject to the exigencies of their separation. Such a strategy, as Françoise Lionnet points out, works toward a valorization of the pluralities of the postcolonial heritage: "If . . . identity is a strategy, then *métissage* is the fertile ground of our heterogeneous and heteronomous identities as postcolonial subjects."[11] Yet in choosing between two possible formulations of cultural *métissage*, the protagonist simultaneously chooses to place limits upon her own submission, to circumscribe the possibilities for betrayal: as she considers the "seul métissage que la foi ancestrale ne condamne pas: celui de la langue et non celui du sang" [the only *métissage* that ancestral faith does not condemn: that of language and not that of blood] (161), the articulation which she implicitly puts into place acts as a form of cultural affirmation and resistance, delimiting the difference between the adulteration of language and that of identity. This tacit acknowledgement of the continuing inscription of biculturality reinscribes the subject into a field of duality, but one which now incorporates the possibility of discursive signification.

IV

What Djebar confronts here is the ultimate paradox underlying postcolonial identity-construction: the problematic legacy of a bicultural heritage. Such a paradox may have the ultimate effect of negating the entire quest for political and literary liberation. Albert Memmi, for example, in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, points out that:

11. Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 8.

"current social life . . . the entire bureaucracy . . . uses the colonizer's language . . . *mak[ing] the colonized feel like a foreigner in his own country . . . Possession of the two languages is . . . participation in two psychic and cultural realms. Here, the two worlds symbolized and conveyed by the two tongues are in conflict; they are those of the colonizer and the colonized,*" (Memmi, 106–07, emphasis mine). It is the cultural conflict suggested by this duality, this inability to choose from among discourses reflecting alternative modes of repression, that faces Djebar's discursive reconstruction of a postcolonial Algerian subjectivity at this juncture, threatening this intrinsically ambiguous construct with dissolution.

Such a conflict also presents itself to the narrator, for, having decided to subvert the patriarchal text of her history and her culture by rewriting it from the perspective of its feminine component, she finds herself caught between French and Arabic, between the delimiting impositions of the colonizer on the one hand, and the desire for recognition and affirmation of identity on the other. For her, the issue of language is firmly linked to that of identity; the use of Arabic produces an "instant purificateur comme un frôlement du linge de la mort. L'écriture réintervient et le cercle se referme" [the moment of absolution, like touching the hem of death's garment. Again it is the turn of writing, and the circle is completed] (208; 184). The suggestion of concurrence between signifier and signified which is produced here is immediately placed in contrast to the alienating effects produced by the use of French, and the resulting ambiguities appear to be driving the protagonist to the edge of self-dissolution:

> Quand j'écris et lis la langue étrangère: [mon corps] voyage, il va et vient dans l'espace subversif . . . mes mots ne se chargent pas de réalité charnelle . . . Ces apprentissages simultanés . . . m'installent . . . dans une dichotomie d'espace . . . [la] chance me propulse à la frontière d'une sournoise hystérie.
>
> When I write and read the foreign language, my body travels far in subversive space . . . the words I use convey no flesh-and-blood reality . . . These two . . . apprenticeships, undertaken simultaneously, land me in a dichotomy of location . . . This stroke of luck brings me to the verge of breakdown. [208; 184–85]

The question of subjective nomadism produced by engagement with the foreign tongue goes to the heart of the dilemma underlying the cultural inscription of identity which the narrative elaborates. The

dissonance of the subject to itself is figured by the subversive space of this speech, contextualizing the subject through the division which reflects and recuperates her own discursive dichotomy. Such a dichotomy in language use, the opposition between completion and dislocation, self and other, reduces the speaking subject to a being whose identity-formation is based, and remains, in two separate linguistic and cultural domains, potentially neither one nor the other, broaching that sense of linguistic and cultural dispossession which Memmi has termed "foreignness." The option of *métissage,* whether textual or cultural, suggests the recuperation of the bicultural as a reflection of the extent to which this element has pervaded the discursive space.

At this juncture, however, a second discursive paradigm suggests itself. It is equally possible to postulate the thesis that the paradox of having to write in the colonizer's language—since it is, so to speak, imposed from the outside through the dominant forces of assimilation and acculturation—also provides a means for subverting and rewriting the discursive framework of oppression from the very space of its own elaboration. As Marx-Scouras puts it in her gloss on the Maghrebine dilemma: "For if the situation of being outside was initially perceived to be a negative effect of colonialism, today, it constitutes the basis for a writing and aesthetics of difference," (Marx-Scouras, 4). This difference will ultimately be definitive of the process of subjective recodification which the discourse engages. But since language also structures demand, this dichotomy is the result of a demand inherent in the process of colonization as well; since any demand, in Lacanian terms, is addressed to others and marks, at bottom, a demand for recognition, this makes of colonization a process symptomatic of an inherent lack on the part of the colonizer.[12] In this case, the dialectic of subjectivity and colonial desire is exacerbated by biculturality, which not only inhibits the inscription of integrity, but capitalizes on dichotomies of language use in order to generate the pervading sense of ambiguity that underlies the split subject. Djebar's subject, intensely aware of her own existential and discursive situation, attempts to exorcise these thorny issues by addressing them directly:

> Le français m'est langue marâtre. Quelle est ma langue mère disparue, qui m'a abandonnée . . . Sous le poids des tabous que je porte en moi comme héritage, je me retrouve desertée des chants de l'amour

12. See J. LaPlanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis,* Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), 483.

> arabe . . . «L'amour, ses cris» («s'écrit») . . . il ne s'agit plus d'écrire que pour survivre . . . Après plus d'un siècle d'occupation française . . . un territoire de langue subsiste entre deux peuples, entre deux mémoires; la langue française, corps et voix, s'installe en moi comme un orgueilleux préside, tandis que la langue maternelle, toute en oralité . . . résiste et attaque . . . je suis à la fois l'assiégé étranger et l'autochtone partant à la mort par bravade, illusoire effervescence du dire et de l'écrit.
>
> French is my 'stepmother' tongue. What is my long-lost mother-tongue, that abandoned me and disappeared? . . . Burdened by my inherited taboos, I discover I have no memory of Arabic love songs . . . *"L'amour, ses cris (s'écrit)"* . . . it is no longer a question of writing only to survive . . . After more than a century of French occupation, a similar no-man's-land still exists between the French and the indigenous languages, between two national memories . . . the French tongue, with its body and voice, has established a proud *presidio* within me, while the mother tongue, all oral tradition, resists and attacks . . . I am alternately the besieged foreigner and the native swaggering off to die, so there is seemingly endless strife between the spoken and written word. [240–41; 214–15]

At this juncture, the subject's ambiguity is encoded discursively. The struggle between the *langue marâtre* and the *langue mère* bespeaks the cultural dilemma produced by colonial appropriation and the imposition of colonial desire. Splitting off the corporeal, scriptive French tongue from the nurturing orality of her Arabic heritage renders the subject both stranger and native, self and Other. With love now overtly linked to the violent appropriations of the scriptive, the impossible context of the language of the Other is made even more explicit. Both the spoken and the written appear, paradoxically, to engender a context for survival while simultaneously elaborating a reciprocity which decenters the subject mediated by both axes.

This is precisely the dilemma faced by the postcolonial subject attempting to establish a history and an identity through language. And this is the form that exile assumes in the text; a separation not simply from self, from country, but from language itself, from a singular discourse within and through which one can inscribe for the subject a valid and coherent sense of identity. In a certain sense, this subject is attempting to establish her right to define the parameters of her own perception, to prevent the translation or adulteration of her own essence: " . . . whether implicit or explicit, there appears to have been a close connection between language and racial, or cultural, iden-

tity . . . The notion of what is human . . . is intimately tied to the question of linguistic difference."[13] At issue, then, is the capacity for self-definition, the inscription of identity as the visible mark of subjectivity, its viability as a sign-system. In elaborating the identity-structure across the gap of cultures, it is a necessary stage in the articulation of the self-determination that the subject seeks. Those who persist, Januslike, in the attempt to narrow this impossible gap will succeed only in widening it, in making division and separation appear to be both culturally and psychologically inescapable.

Neither French nor Arabic, neither literacy nor orality, is sufficient to allow Djebar's narrator—trapped as she is between discourses—to continue, yet she knows that she must: "Est-ce d'avoir été expulsée de ce discours amoureux qui me fait trouver aride le français que j'emploie?" Is it because I was cut off from this impassioned speech that I find the French I use so flat and unprofitable? (240; 214). The rewriting of the colonialist discourse must find a way to forestall its own reappropriation by the negative pluralities that colonialism inherently generates. As a revalorization of a historically determined absence crucial to the selfhood of both the narrator and the elements of the *Algérie-femme* in whose name she speaks, the binarism proposed by the dilemma of language may indeed, in the final analysis, mask desire as it simultaneously marks the implementation of a strategy of self-affirmation.

Writing, then, the very sign and condition of signification, ultimately undermines colonial desire and affirms the validity of the subject by virtue of its very inscription. The postcolonial subject which it constitutes is the embodiment of displacement, and Caren Kaplan points to the postmodernity of this system in "locat[ing] this moment of alienation and exile in language and literature. In one sense, it describes the effects of radical distanciation between signifier and signified. Meaning and utterances become estranged . . . This writing . . . travels, moves between centers and margins . . . [and is] not imperialism but nomadism."[14] Language, reflecting here the dual inscription of the colonized subject, marks the construction of the sub-

13. Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from* The Tempest *to* Tarzan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 102–103.

14. Caren Kaplan, "Deterritorializations: "The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse," *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse, Cultural Critique* no. 6, (Spring, 1987), Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, ed., 187–98; see 188.

ject through discourse as well as the double bind of cultural alienation. Marginality thus signifies a subjective pluralism which incorporates the ambiguities of historical experience. Ultimately, the dialectic of the colonial encounter informs the perspective of both colonizer and colonized, generating dislocation in each category and rendering them both subject to the dualities inherent in cultural exchange. Within this context of double displacement, the vision of both self and Other undergoes a critical rearticulation.

In a published interview, Djebar herself has addressed her own recognition of and subjugation to this formative cultural and linguistic duality: " . . . j'écris dans une langue étrangère chez moi, bien plus, dans la langue de l'ancien occupant . . . dans la langue que j'appelle la langue *adverse* . . . Donc, pour me résumer, un premier exil s'installe dans une langue qui m'est langue *d'en face* . . . Le français devient la langue de dehors . . . Donc, mon rapport avec la langue arabe est un rapport dualiste" [At home I write in a foreign tongue, in fact in the tongue of the former occupying power . . . in the tongue which I call the *adverse* tongue . . . So, to sum up, the first exile occurs in a tongue which is opposite to me . . . French becomes the public tongue . . . Thus, my relationship with Arabic is a dual one.][15] Language thus becomes the place of inscription of a paradoxical colonial subjectivity: while marking the divided desire of the colonized subject, at the same time writing may be read as signifying a subjection to cultural alienation as well as its eventual subversion and transcendence. Exile and nomadism become figures for the inscription of an identity which ultimately derives its validity from the experience of alienation. It is from its elaboration of elements of textual and cultural *métissage* as figures for the ambiguities and disjunctures of postcolonial subjectivity that this exploration of the implications of the colonial encounter ultimately derives signification.

15. Marguerite Le Clézio, "Assia Djebar: Ecrire dans la langue adverse," *Contemporary French Civilization*, (Spring/Summer 1985), vol. 9, no. 2, 230–44; see pp. 232–234: [translation mine].