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Translingualism and Histories of Violence in Francophone Algerian Writing

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Abstract

This article explores the complexity of translingualism in francophone Algerian writing and offers a close reading of Assia Djebar's *Vaste est la prison* (1995) to demonstrate the variegated ways in which characters experience the interaction between languages in Algerian history. Drawing on thinkers such as Stefan Helgesson and Christina Kullberg, the article conceptualises 'translingualism' not so much as a sign of linguistic mastery, as has been the case in some earlier studies, but as a series of 'events' in which encounters between languages either blur or foreground boundaries in various ways at moments in texts where the history of Western imperialism and postcolonialism also play a role. This notion of events informs a reading of francophone Algerian writing, and in particular of Djebar, attentive to the subtle mingling and friction between languages as individuals use them in multiple and changing ways.

Keywords

translingualism – language – Algeria – francophone – Djebar

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> Translingual authors—those who write in more than one language or in a language other than their primary one—are the prodigies of world literature. By expressing themselves in multiple verbal systems, they flaunt their freedom from the constraints of the culture into which they happen to have been born. (KELLMAN, 2003: ix)

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One of the first theorists of literary "translingualism," Steven Kellman offers a description of the translingual author that celebrates the liberating effects of writing in a non-native language or across languages. Kellman's inaugural book, *The Translingual Imagination* (2000), launches a new approach to the study of linguistic border-crossing that helps challenge assumptions about the relationship between language, national identity, and authenticity in literary writing, and to conceptualise forms of creativity that transcend the assumed categories of both monolingual and bilingual expression (in the sense that the latter could be construed as the juxtaposition of two monolingual systems). Yet although his study opens with a reminder of the difficulty of writing in another language, and goes on to chart multiple forms of translingual writing in a wide range of texts, the variegated histories that produce the author's translingual experience tend to be side-lined in favour of an affirmation of the writer's linguistic agility and skill. Kellman's approach provoked a plethora of further studies of the transgressiveness of various forms of linguistic border-crossing in literature, including notably Doris Sommer's more specific focus on code-switching between two languages in *Bilingual Aesthetics* (2004) as well as her edited volume *Bilingual Games* (2003), both of which go still further than Kellman in their privileging of the emancipatory effects of transgressing linguistic boundaries in writing. Indeed, for Sommer bilingualism and its creative activity are construed as a form of activism on behalf of democracy or "serious fun," because "democracy depends on constructing those miraculous and precarious points of contact from mismatches among codes and peoples" (2004: xii).

More recent and sober analyses of the aesthetics and activism of literary multilingualism include Brian Lennon's *In Babel's Shadow* (2010), examining more challenging forms of "strong plurilingualism" in texts whose linguistic plurality lends them an opacity that may be transgressive but that also leaves them marginalised by the global literary market. Myriam Suchet's *L'Imaginaire*

hétérolingue (2014) uses the notion of "heterolingualism" to emphasise idiomatic diversity within as well as between languages, so as to debunk the illusory nature of any reductive or exclusivist notion of linguistic identity and to uncover the underlying alienation in language we all share. It is the term "translingualism," however, that has returned recently in discussions of the linguistic experimentalism of "world literature," perhaps because it does not assume that distinct linguistic systems are merely juxtaposed with one another while potentially remaining intact; it suggests more dynamic and eclectic ways of writing using more than one language. In a contribution to a Special Issue of the *Journal of World Literature* devoted to *Literary Translingualism* published in 2018, Stefan Helgesson and Christina Kullberg use the term to explore the simultaneous persistence of linguistic boundaries at the same time as the various and complex forms of their transgression. They redeploy Kellman's term "translingualism" rather than "bilingualism," "multilingualism," or "heterolingualism" to describe the fluid continuum between languages that potentially conditions all texts, though is foregrounded by some more than others, rather than the code-switching between different and distinct languages that the latter terms imply. Yet they conceptualise "translingualism" not so much as a sign of linguistic mastery, as Kellman suggests, but as a series of "events," in which encounters between languages either blur or foreground boundaries in various and nuanced ways at moments in texts where the history of Western imperialism and postcolonialism also play a role.

This article takes Helgesson's and Kullberg's approach as a starting point for an analysis of translingualism in francophone Algerian writing attentive to its subtle and complex manifestations at particular moments or events. While translingual writing in this context is at times conceived as a mode of resistance to the highly divisive language politics of colonial and postcolonial Algeria, it is not unequivocally associated with activism and liberation but dramatises a range of different and often ambivalent forms of linguistic encounter. Although Kellman's study provides an informative backdrop for this discussion in its attention to expression outside the constraints of the potentially restrictive notion of the "mother tongue," his emphasis tends to celebrate writers' inventiveness, and yet even the chapter on African writers pays little attention to the violent histories that shape their translingualism. Kellman's approach can be contrasted with that of Rey Chow, whose historically nuanced study *Not Like a Native Speaker* (2014) strikingly opens with a reflection on Fanon's insistence that racialisation is first and foremost a linguistic interpellation. The Black man's struggle to master the French language, theorised in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), is an example of translingualism created by a deeply hierarchical and oppressive society. The Algerian context that is the focus here, moreover,

is one where the imposition and promotion of one language (French, and subsequently formal or classical Arabic) over another was accompanied by violence, and where the non-hegemonic language was systematically denigrated and marginalised. While literary writers reflect on how Algerians in their daily lives use several languages, often switching fluidly between them, they portray "translingual events" that stage the continual encounter between languages at the same time as the various forms of tension between them. While French, Arabic, and Tamazight (Berber) languages continually rub up against one another, writers display the manifold ways in which linguistic events foreground the porosity as well as the friction between these languages as they are freighted with historical conflicts and power imbalances. This blending and friction also results in a reflection on the very limits of language, as linguistic borders are sites of tension and debate; at the same time, the expressivity of language comes under threat when confronted with experiences of colonial violence.

Language Policy and Literary Production in Algeria

French colonial policy in Algeria sought to impose "assimilation" on native Algerians, and an attempt to insist on the use of the French language played a major role in that project. As an indicator of the violence of that imposition, Louis-Jean Calvet has traced the history of conceptions of the hegemony of French and its significance in France's imperialist vision, notably using the vocabulary of "anthropagie" and by extension "glottophagie" to describe the destruction of local languages. French colonial policy in Algeria was particularly aggressive, as Algeria was conceived to be a part of France, and the ambition to establish the widespread teaching and usage of French was a crucial part of the endeavour to assimilate local practices to French governance, law, and culture. The result of this endeavour was the systematic denigration both of classical Arabic and of spoken Arabic and Tamazight dialects. Mohamed Benrabah even goes so far as to attest that "France's 'civilising mission' implied the domination of its language and culture, and eventually the eradication of indigenous idioms and traditions" (2013: xii). While complete assimilation may have been the ultimate goal of the assimilation policy in Algeria, this goal was at the same time highly unrealistic, with the result not so much that Arabic and spoken dialects were eradicated, but that those who did not also learn French were effectively excluded from participation in any kind of professional decision-making. Only a very small minority of Algerians attended French schools, and they formed an acculturated elite highly unrepresentative of local communities more broadly. Translingual francophone writers are examples of

this elite, representing a privileged minority but working in a language that they believe struggles to translate their local Arabic- and Tamazight-speaking communities and alienates them from their compatriots.

In the wake of independence, however, a concerted policy of Arabisation was put in place to try to remove French influence and in the service of a new Algerian national identity. The attempt to impose Arabic as the national language instead of French, however, was rushed and fraught with difficulties, though ironically the very idea of a new national language was modelled on the French example. Algerians speak Arabic and Tamazight dialects as well as French, whilst the teaching of formal, classical Arabic was for a long time inadequate. During the 1970s, French was replaced by Arabic as the language of instruction and was instead taught as a foreign language, but it was difficult to appoint sufficient Arabic teachers; many teachers were brought in from the Middle East and were not properly qualified. The political vision of a new, Arabised Algeria clearly became seriously out of touch with the reality of a plurilingual society, and rested on the attempt to impose the written language which in the decades after independence many still struggled to master.

During the postcolonial period, Benrabah asserts, a further antagonism was created by two distinct forces: "Algeria's language planners directed linguistic Arabization from above and forcibly implemented it; juxtaposed with this top-down intervention, the plural linguistic situation has continued to challenge from below the State-sponsored project imposed by a leadership regarded as suspect by Algerians" (2013: 52). This mismatch led to growing tensions, as those who still spoke French were seen as betraying local culture, even though they too of course would speak Algerian dialect, while Tamazight speakers also became increasingly marginalised, resulting ultimately in the protests and violent suppression associated with the "Berber Spring" in 1980. The language question also fuelled the brutality of the 1990s, known as the Black Decade, where francophone intellectuals were repeatedly targeted by the Islamist group known as the Groupe Islamique Armée for betraying Arabic culture. While at war with the GIA, the administration also continued to promote Arabic, confirming that penalties could be imposed on those using French in a public context. More recently, Benrabah's study notes that Arabisation can be seen to be all but complete, with all teaching taking place in Arabic in schools, whilst in universities the humanities are taught in Arabic and sciences are taught in French. Linguistic antagonism remains, however, particularly with ongoing Berberist movements, despite the official acceptance of Tamazight as Algeria's second national language in 2002.

Algerian literature at once dramatises and seeks to undermine this divisive structure. In many ways the split between writers who write in French and those

who write in Arabic is a further manifestation of these conflictual language politics. It is striking that most writers choose one language over the other and write exclusively in that language, with just a few exceptions. Kateb Yacine, whose early works were published in the 1950s, began by writing in French, for example, though he sought to stretch the French language in a challenge to colonial discourse and in order to inscribe Algerian culture within it, so that his written French could function as a weapon against the coloniser (Kateb, 1994: 132). Driven by a desire to better address the Algerian people, however, he would later turn to writing and producing plays in dialectal Arabic. Rachid Boudjedra also started by publishing in French in the late 1960s and 1970s, switched to Arabic during the 1980s, to return to French again during the Black Decade and after. Yet for the most part, writers opt for just French or Arabic, and the communication between "francisants" and "arabisants" is not particularly developed.

This split was clearly most marked during the 1990s and was dramatically underlined when the francophone writer Tahar Djaout was assassinated, purportedly by the GIA, in June 1993, and the Arabophone writer Tahar Ouettar acerbically commented in a BBC interview that 'the death of Djaout is not a loss to Algeria, but a loss to his wife, his children, and France' (Benrabah, 2013: 150). Ouettar was a proponent of an authentic Algerian literature, written in Arabic but capable of capturing the people's oral culture, and he perceived Djaout's francophone writing as a betrayal of that culture. Moreover, critic Farid Laroussi notes that the divisiveness continues after the year 2000, observing that "two different literatures coexist and hedge their bets as to how to define their identities and roles, while at the same time they advertise their special ties to Europe and the Middle East" (2003: 83). Madeleine Dobie, too, notes this problematic dichotomy, pointing out at the same time that the association of francophone writing with a more diverse and multicultural outlook does not solve the need for a better understanding of the relationship between French, Arabic, and Tamazight languages in the Maghreb. The problem is confounded, Dobie asserts, by critics reticent in producing comparative readings of francophone and Arabophone texts.

At the same time, however, increasing critical attention has been paid to translingualism in Algerian writing and to the ways in which literary texts can testify in dynamic ways to Algeria's multilingualism. While few writers write systematically in both French and Arabic, many stage the porousness between them through their performance of linguistic encounters, through their dramatisation of instances of linguistic dialogue operating on different levels and in multiple different ways. Critics such as Dobie and Edwige Tamalet Talbayev have called for increased critical attention to various forms of translingualism looking beyond French colonialism, Talbayev arguing for "a translocal reading

practice marked by plurilingualism and lateral trajectories between multiple sites across the Mediterranean," including an awareness of the influence not only of French and Arabic languages and dialects but also Italian, Spanish, Catalan, and English (2012: 9). Yasser Elhariry has perhaps gone the furthest in challenging the binary and conflictual structure of language politics in the Maghreb and their transmutation to the literary sphere with his *Pacifist Invasions* (2017). Elhariry's thesis is premised on a rejection of the notion that literary texts stage the history of colonial violence, and explores the peaceful infiltration of francophone literature with Arabic language and culture. Elhariry's subtle analysis of "postfrancophone" writing from a range of contexts looks beyond the postcolonial to insist that "the empire does not write back. It writes over and beneath. It writes through and across" (2017: 6). His reading of the Algerian poet Habib Tengour's *Césure* (2006), for example, elegantly uncovers the poet's subtle translations of early Arabic lyric into what appears to be monolingual French. Yet if Elhariry's readings privilege writers whose works seemingly leave behind the residue of postcolonial tension, his model of translingualism will in many cases seem hasty in its claim to transcend the history of linguistic conflict. Again, Helgesson's and Kullberg's approach to translingual events, to particular performances of linguistic border-crossing, as well as to the persistence of boundaries and hierarchies resonates well with the work of linguistically experimental francophone Algerian writers such as Rachid Boudjedra and Assia Djebar.

The rest of this article will build on Djebar's own reflections on her translingualism in *Ces voix qui m'assiègent* (1999) as well as on critics' attention to the linguistic complexity of her best-known work *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985), to offer a reading of a series of scenes in her later novel *Vaste est la prison* (1995) where languages meet, blur, complement one another, and conflict. *Vaste est la prison* will be read as a sequence of vignettes staging translingual events which together portray the complex and variable affective charge associated with linguistic encounters, particularly among Algerian women. Djebar's works continue to foreground colonial language politics but also set this in the context of a longer history of linguistic encounters; they succeed in showing how individual experiences of language in Algeria are both shaped by and contest the opposition imposed by French colonialism.

Before moving on to Djebar, however, I want to pause briefly to note the different ways in which Rachid Boudjedra describes the encounter between French and Arabic in his writing during the postcolonial period between the 1960s and the 1990s, again to reveal not so much either linguistic antagonism or a peaceful infiltration as a combination of blending and friction. Whilst, despite their highly experimental form, Boudjedra's novels address the language

question less explicitly and less directly than those of Djebar, his comments on language relations in *Lettres algériennes* (1995) serve as a provocative springboard for the reading of translingualism in Djebar. On the one hand, Boudjedra affirms the presence of French in his Arabic, and Arabic in his French: "quand j'écris en arabe, le français est là. Quand j'écris en français, l'arabe est obsédant" [when I write in Arabic, French is present. When I write in French, Arabic haunts me] (1995: 94).[1] This apparently peaceful blending, moreover, is also a means of expanding meaning, of introducing resonances of one language into another. Boudjedra's French is not punctuated with Arabic words, but the French terms and structures he uses are stretched and twisted by the echo of Arabic the writer hears as he writes, even if the reader cannot detect this, as Boudjedra tries to "flouer et feinter le sens traditionnel, archivé et reconnu par les dictionnaires" [swindle and fake the traditional meaning archived and recognised in dictionaries] (22). Using a vocabulary that echoes that of the Moroccan thinker Abdelkébir Khatibi in *Amour bilingue* (1983) Boudjedra figures this mutual reshaping as a "forme de seduction" [form of seduction] (25). Far from a postcolonial conflict, French and Arabic would from this perspective be construed mutually to call to one another, to invite the other into their folds, and to allow themselves to be transformed both structurally and semantically in the process. On the other hand, however, this transformation at the same time brings about a huge loss, this continual translation process reveals an inevitable untranslatability, and the linguistic seduction also ends in rupture: "ballottés entre des mots arabes, berbères et français, il y a une énorme perdition, une fuite de sens et des sens" [tossed about between Arabic, Berber and French words, there is a great sense of ruin, as meaning and senses escape] (23). If Boudjedra conceives language as restless, dynamic, and alive, then it is also slippery, deceptive, and sly. French and Arabic speak to one another in his writing, but they also speak past one another; they address one another but also fail to communicate.

Boudjedra's reflections on the porosity as well as the tension between French and Arabic foreground not so much the language politics of postcolonial Algeria as the simultaneous fusion and separation between languages in the process of translation. His writing is nevertheless steeped in the politics of postcolonial Algeria, as he challenges both the legacy of the War of Independence and the restrictive, stultifying bourgeois culture that has come to rule in the place of the French. Boudjedra is perhaps the Algerian writer who has embraced most successfully both French and Arabic cultures and languages,

1 Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

and he has insisted on freedom of expression in response to oppressive and dogmatic thinking on both sides. His use of both languages supports and fuels his transgressive thinking, though in the novels this is notably less through explicit references to the Arabic language within his French than through his use of formal experimentalism reminiscent, for example, of the French *nouveau roman*.

Djebar's writing, however, is more introspective, more clearly anxious in its translingualism, and reflects more directly on language relations in Algerian history and culture. Unlike Boudjedra, Djebar did not write in Arabic, but her francophone novels dramatise both the encounter between French, Arabic, and Berber through colonial history and the multiple forms of linguistic relationality in Algeria during the postcolonial period. In *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, Djebar evokes the simultaneous competition and intermingling between French and Arabic, both the liminal space and the barrier of what she calls the "entre-deux-langues" [between-two-languages], at the same time as the long-standing co-presence of Berber:

> Ces deux langues (pour moi, l'arabe, langue maternelle avec son lait, sa tendresse, sa luxuriance, mais aussi sa diglossie, et le français, langue marâtre l'ai-je appelée, ou langue adverse pour dire l'adversité), ces deux langues s'entrelacent ou rivalisent, se font face ou s'accouplent mais sur fond de cette troisième—langue de la mémoire berbère immémoriale, langue non civilisée, non maîtrisée, redevenue cavale sauvage.
>
> These two languages (for me, Arabic, my mother tongue with its milk, its tenderness, its richness but also its diglossia, and French, which I have called my stepmother tongue, or opposing language to express its status as an adversary), these two languages are interwoven and in competition with one another, they conflict with one another or form a couple against the background of a third—the language of immemorial Berber memory, a language that has not been civilised, not mastered, that has become again a wild escape. (1999, 34)

Djebar's reflection foregrounds both conflict, with French as the language of adversity, and a mutual linguistic entanglement played out against the background of the longer subterranean history of Berber languages, restless and alive but relegated to the margins.

Djebar's writing dramatises the binary linguistic encounter between French and Arabic, then, but also crucially foregrounds their interface with the "langue de la mémoire berbère immémoriale" [the language of immemorial Berber

memory], brought to life as I have suggested through episodes that suggest both antagonism and mutual interpenetration. She identifies a "triangle linguistique" [linguistic triangle], between the original "libyco-berbère" of the region, the "langue du dehors prestigieux" [language of the prestigious outside] (Greek, Arabic, Turkish, and then French), and the "langue du pouvoir" [language of power] (Latin, Classical Arabic, Turkish, and French) (55–6). She then suggests that the encounter between French and Arabic in Algeria is a sort of false bilingualism, a painful dichotomous structure that disavows the other languages that have contributed to their genealogy. Réda Bensmaïa (1999), moreover, uses Deleuze and Guattari's schema in *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure* (1975) to set out still more broadly the multiple languages on which North African writers such as Djebar draw, this time drawing attention not just to different linguistic systems but also to different sorts of dialect and idiom. Bensmaïa suggests that one can identify four languages at play in francophone Maghrebian literature, namely, the vernacular (spoken Arabic or Kabyle, often a heterogeneous mix), the vehicular (the national or regional language, either French or Arabic), the referential (made up of oral and written references, proverbs, sayings, literature, and rhetoric), and the mythic (literary or classical Arabic).

While Bensmaïa goes on to argue that theatre is the most appropriate forum for the exposition of these four dynamic languages, offering the work of Kateb Yacine as a notable example, Djebar's extraordinarily intricate novels, and in particular *Vaste est la prison*, can be seen to portray them in all their dynamism through its scenes of singular moments where their juxtaposition and interaction come into play in diverse ways. The rest of this article will read these manifold idiosyncratic scenes to showcase the diversity of Djebar's "translingual events" in the text that sets the linguistic encounter centre stage most persistently and with the most nuance in Djebar's œuvre. Stefan Helgesson has notably drawn attention to the difference in Djebar's relationship with language as it evolves between *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* (2007), tracing a shift in the latter work towards a more conciliatory or redemptive vision (Helgesson, 2013). My reading of *Vaste est la prison*, published in 1995 midway between *L'Amour* and *Nulle part*, argues that it is here that her "translingual events" present the most varied and complex portrait of language relations in Algeria.

Assia Djebar's *Vaste est la prison*

Vaste est la prison is also notably most focused on Algerian women's relationships with language and with the ways in which encounters between languages are shaped both by colonial and postcolonial history and by gender. Whilst

L'Amour concentrates largely on the conflict between French and Arabic, *Vaste est la prison* uncovers in more depth how gender relations also inflect that encounter by introducing further tensions as words cross from one system into the other. Translingualism between French, Arabic, and Berber brings subtle and distinct meanings to particular Algerian women and can both challenge linguistic hierarchy and demonstrate the multiple levels on which such hierarchies and tensions operate. Djebar's depiction of a series of scenes, featuring by turns the narrator, her family, and characters across a broader history, also emphasises the variegated lived experience of translingualism beyond the public discourses of colonialism and Arabisation. The opening sequence of the text is entitled "Le Silence de l'écriture," to signal the narrator's unease with her own writing in French, and inaugurates the work with a striking scene that both performs and upsets her apparent endeavour to bring the idiom of her Arabic-speaking culture into her written French. The sequence takes place in the hammam, with the narrator initially enjoying the sense of female complicity and the verbal as well as the nonverbal sounds of the setting: "je m'abandonnais au brouhaha et à cette tiédeur murmurante" (Djebar, 1995: 12) ["I surrendered to the hubbub and murmuring warmth" (Djebar, 2001: 13)]. Yet if the scene starts by evoking a feminine communicative space, the harmony is brutally interrupted when one of the women refers to her husband as "l'e'dou" in Arabic, or "l'ennemi" [enemy] in French. Djebar uses the Arabic term in her francophone text in an apparent attempt at cultural translation, and yet it is striking that the term introduces a further conflict—that between women and patriarchy in postcolonial Algeria. While drawing attention to her translingualism, then, Djebar nevertheless alludes to another form of antagonism, as this "translingual event" finishes by translating the original colonial dichotomy between French and Arabic into that between the sexes—hardened precisely as a symbol of resistance to French culture. The "langue maternelle" [mother tongue] may have been a way to access the culture of her feminine genealogy, and yet it also enters into her French to announce a new divisiveness: "la langue maternelle m'exhibait ses crocs, inscrivait en moi une fatale amertume" (Djebar, 1995: 15) ["the mother tongue had shown me her teeth, inscribing within me a deadly bitterness"] (Djebar, 2001: 15)].

The subsequent story, "L'effacement dans le cœur" [What is erased in the heart], moreover, on one level recounts a narrative of liberation, as the narrator, Isma, has an affair with a man she calls "l'Aimé" [the Beloved], and where notably their dialogue takes place in French since l'Aimé is a Berber and not an Arabic speaker. Their complicity once again is achieved through a form of translingualism, this time with French bearing the echo of thinking in Arabic and Berber, and at once allowing intimacy and preventing it as they recoil

from explicitly naming their love. Nevertheless, if this affirmation of freedom is linguistically complex, so too is the patriarchal structure that the narrator leaves behind. Here too her furious, jealous husband is "l'ennemi" or "l'e'dou," and in remembering this term the narrator both records the trace of the dichotomy between the sexes, anchored in her society and yet fuelled by colonial oppression, and at the same time seeks to transcend that structure by bringing the memory of another Arabic into her French. She resolves to try to separate from her husband, but "je me surpris à conclure par un serment solennel: «Au nom de Dieu et de son Prophète!» Ces mots, en arabe, étaient à la fois les miens et ceux de ma grand-mère (je me dis que je retrouvais spontanément la première tradition coranique selon laquelle les femmes elles aussi répudient leurs hommes!)" (Djebar, 1995: 107–8) ["I surprised myself by concluding with a solemn oath: 'In the name of God and the Prophet!' These words, in Arabic, were mine and at the same time my grandmother's (I tell myself that I was spontaneously rediscovering the first Koranic tradition whereby women also repudiated their men!)" (Djebar, 2001: 109)]. These moments of Arabic insertion in Djebar's text reveal the differing connotations of the society and culture it represents, as the narrator finds herself both alienated by the patriarchal oppression implied by the use of "l'e'dou," but also reminded of the agency accorded to women by the Koran in her use of its language. Far from a simple revelation of colonial conflict through the clash between languages and cultures, Djebar's reflection reveals a varying relationship with particular Arabic idioms as they weave through her narrative in French.

In addition to these layered Arabic insertions, however, the central section of Djebar's novel, headed "L'effacement sur la pierre" [Erased in stone], is devoted to the longer story of the rediscovery of the Berber alphabet, bringing into her francophone narrative that "langue de la mémoire berbère immémoriale," referred to above. With this narrative, Djebar portrays the history of the language and its destruction in Algeria both before and as a result of the recent colonial period, and reveals at the same time the journey of this writing as a testimony to its fragility and its dynamism, to traces of its survival as well as its occlusion by Algeria's subsequent divisive politics. Djebar's account charts how, in 1631, a French explorer converted to Islam, Thomas d'Arcos, discovers a stele engraved with an inscription in two languages, one he understands as Punic and one he does not recognise, at the ruins of Dougga. He judges it must date from the second century BC and sets about transcribing it. Much later in 1815, Count Borgia of Naples too finds himself at Dougga, and studies and copies the inscriptions. Next, in 1833, archaeologist Sir Granville Temple discovers and copies the inscriptions in turn, returning in 1837 to witness at the same time the siege of

Constantine by the French. Djebar offers a fragmentary account of Temple's work while stressing the colonial destruction carried out in the background. Finally in 1842, the general consul of England in Tunis, Thomas Reade, decides to bring the stele back to London, to sell it to the British Museum. The stele is not fully deciphered, but is conserved in fragments, though other remnants were subsequently found containing traces of the same alphabet.

Most palpably, Djebar's retracing of the journey of the stele emphasises its survival through a history of violence, of destruction and pillaging, as if to promote it as a tentative signifier of multilingualism in a story of European power. Without copying the transcription herself, her French conjures a language whose longer history she goes on to imagine back to the time of the Numidian king Jugurtha, and which she suggests resonates in defiance of colonial violence:

> Or l'écriture vivait; or ses sonorités, sa musique, son rythme se dévidaient autour d'eux, autour des voyageurs, leurs émules, circulant entre Dougga et Cirta, et jusque dans Constantine prise, et sur les montagnes kabyles insoumises quinze ans après Constantine puis, au-delà des dunes et des sables sahariens, jusqu'au cœur du désert même! (DJEBAR, 1995: 146)

> And yet the writing was alive. Its sonority, its music, its rhythms still reeled on around them, around the travellers and their followers going back and forth between Dougga and Cirta. It travelled into conquered Constantine and onto the Kabylian mountains, still rebellious fifteen years after the fall of Constantine, and then, beyond the dunes and sands of the Sahara, it went all the way to the heart of the desert itself! (DJEBAR, 2001: 148)

Djebar links the survival of the language, moreover, to the resistance of the Tuaregs to the invasion of the French, noting at the same time that the Tuaregs attributed the conservation of their writing to women. This ancestral writing, and the culture of women, finish by representing a fluidity and freedom that Djebar's own text is at pains to conserve, and that persists defiantly if only in fragmentary form despite the antagonistic forces to which its society bears witness: "comme si l'écriture ancestrale conservée hors de la soumission allait de pair avec l'irréductibilité, la mobilité d'un peuple qui, supreme élégance, laisse ses femmes conserver l'écriture, tandis que leurs hommes guerroient au soleil ou dansent devant les brasiers de la nuit" (Djebar, 1995: 148) ["as if the ancestral writing, maintained outside of any state of submission, went hand in hand with the intractability and mobility of a people who, in a gesture of supreme elegance, let their women preserve the writing while their men wage

war in the sun or dance before the fires at night" (Djebar, 2001: 151)]. Finally, Djebar finishes the section by evoking the story of Tin Hinan, ancestor of the Tuaregs born in the fourth century BC, who fled her native region, who later died and was buried at Abalessa, and whose tomb is surrounded by engravings in an alphabet even older than that of the Dougga stele. Here again, it is significant that the ancient writing is preserved by a woman, and Djebar fantasises that its form might still find its echo in oral idiom in the present: "*notre écriture la plus secrète, aussi ancienne que l'étrusque ou que celle des "runes" mais, contrairement à celles-ci, toute bruissante encore de sons et de souffles d'aujourd'hui, est bien legs de femme, au plus profond du désert"* (Djebar, 1995: 164) ["*our most secret writing, as ancient as Etruscan or the writing of the runes, but unlike these a writing still noisy with the sounds and breath of today, is indeed the legacy of a woman in the deepest desert"* (Djebar, 2001: 167)]. In her reading of Djebar's text, critic Andrea Flores (2000) emphasises the imagery of ruin as it links the narrator's heartbreak in "L'effacement dans le cœur" with the fragile remains at Dougga and with Tin Hinan's tomb. At the same time, however, Djebar's writing again conjures forms of linguistic presence and survival that persist despite the linguistic antagonism of colonialism as well as its aftermath. This language at once transcends the divisive confrontation between French and Arabic, produces sounds and rhythms that can be carried into present speech, and represents a tentative feminine form of expression in defiance of the systems of oppression that have silenced it.

This intervention of the echo of Berber into the encounter between French and Arabic is crystallised by the scene referenced in the novel's title, in which Djebar explains its origins in a Berber song. The novel's third section, "Un silencieux désir," shifts back closer to the present with a series of scenes depicting the experiences of women in the narrator's family, notably her mother, often again revealing the prominence of linguistic encounter in their experience, and interspersed with reflections on the narrator's production of a film about the memories of Algerian women. In the "3e mouvement: de la mère en fillette" [Third movement: Of the mother as a little girl], the narrator records the death of Chérifa, the older sister of her mother, Bahia, after contracting typhus, and the moment during her funeral where the girl's cousin suddenly surprises the mourners by singing in her Berber dialect a song containing the lines, "*vaste est la prison qui m'écrase / d'où me viendras-tu, délivrance?*" (Djebar, 1995: 237) ["*so vast the prison crushing me / Release, where will you come from?*" (Djebar, 2001: 243)]. Djebar includes the Berber verses in her text: "*Meqqwer lhebs iy inyan / Ans'ara el ferreg felli!,*" and explains that Chérifa's sister Malika translates them for the mourners, half a page later, who do not understand it. The moment is highly charged, as the family is astonished by the abrupt intervention, and

the song is described as emitting from the woman's voice in a kind of involuntary spasm: she "eut comme un spasme étrange, le torse secoué comme d'une sorte de rire" (Djebar, 1995: 236) ["suddenly she had something like a spasm, her torso shaken as if with a sort of laughter" (Djebar, 2001: 242)]. It seems to perform a spontaneous, guttural, embodied form of expression, a rejection of the formalised discourse of mourning in place of a more visceral cry. Yet it also addresses the other women present, as the child Bahia starts to repeat the words to herself, by turns in Arabic and Berber, as if to bring the two languages together: "deux ou trois mots tantôt en arabe et tantôt en berbère chantaient en elle, lentement, avec des cahots, une sorte de marche rude, qui tanguait, mais qui calmait aussi" (Djebar, 1995: 237–8) ["two or three words, sometimes in Arabic and sometimes in Berber, were singing inside her, slowly, a sort of rough march, jolting, but also calming" (Djebar, 2001: 243)]. On the one hand, the repetition of the refrain is significant because it creates solidarity against a history of oppression: the song speaks of imprisonment, yet the women present also come together in recognising this shared history. On the other hand, the linguistic encounter here is threefold, with Bahia reciting in both Arabic and Berber, whilst Djebar translates into French. The passage manages to keep the three versions alongside one another, as if the translations bring communicability here rather than tension or rupture. Nevertheless, the history of oppression to which they refer is also founded on cultural division. Together with the central narrative of the Dougga stele, the scene is central to the novel's aesthetic of movement between languages and of the preservation of idiolect against the forms of both colonial and patriarchal oppression that also result in linguistic persecution.

Many of the scenes in the later parts of the novel nevertheless record the effects of colonial and postcolonial language politics in Algeria on women, in particular the narrator's mother, who both moves between languages and remains subjected to the imbalance of power that colours their usage. The section opens with the memory first of Zoraidé from Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, who frees a slave by means of her writing in order herself to flee with him, and whose story connects Algeria with Andalusia in order to introduce the narrator's mother, whose ancestry is also Andalusian. The scene records the mother's isolation as the wife of a schoolteacher in the colonial school who is unable to write in French though gradually learns to speak it, and the position of subordination in which she is placed by a colonial system that does not recognise Arabic writing. If the mother treasures her transcriptions of Andalusian poetry, however, her texts are subsequently destroyed by French soldiers during the War of Independence, who fear they may contain some kind of nationalist code. Djebar's own narrative in response testifies to the mother's effacement,

compared to that of Zoraidé, while she also seeks to use its translingual form to allow the sonority of those Andalusian verses to echo in her French:

> *Je n'inscris pas, hélas, les paroles des* noubas *trop savantes pour moi. Je les remémore: où que j'aille, une voix persistante, ou de baryton tendre ou de soprano aveugle, les chante dans ma tête, tandis que je déambule dans les rues de quelques cités d'Europe, ou d'ailleurs, alors que quelques pas dans la première rue d'Alger me font percevoir aussitôt chaque prison ouverte au ciel, ou fermée.*
>
> *J'écris dans l'ombre de ma mère revenue de ses voyages de temps de guerre, moi, poursuivant les miens dans cette paix obscure faite de sourde guerre intérieure, de divisions internes, de désordres et de houle de ma terre natale.*
>
> *J'écris pour me frayer mon chemin secret, et dans la langue des corsaires français qui, dans le récit du Captif, dépouillèrent Zoraidé de sa robe endiamantée, oui, c'est dans la langue dite «étrangère» que je deviens de plus en plus transfuge. Telle Zoraidé, la dépouillée. Ayant perdu comme elle ma richesse du départ, dans mon cas, celle de l'héritage maternel, et ayant gagné quoi, sinon la simple mobilité du corps dénudé, sinon la liberté.* (DJEBAR, 1995: 172)

> *I do not record, alas, the words from* noubas. *The language is too scholarly for me to write, but I remember them. Wherever I go, a persistent voice, either a sweet baritone or a reckless soprano, sings them inside my head while I stroll through the streets of some city in Europe, or even in the first few steps into the first street of Algiers, where I am immediately aware of every prison, whether open to the sky or closed.*
>
> *I write in the shadow of my mother, returned from her wartime travels, while I pursue my own travels in this obscure peace composed of silent internal warfare, divisions, within, riots, and tumult in my native land.*
>
> *I write to clear my path. I write in the language of the French pirates who, in the Captive's tale, stripped Zoraidé of her diamond-studded gown, yes, I am becoming more and more like a renegade in the so-called foreign language. Like Zoraidé, stripped. Like her I have lost the wealth I began with—in my case, my maternal heritage—and I have gained only the simple mobility of the bare body, only freedom.* (DJEBAR, 2001: 176–7)

Later, the narrator goes on to tell the story of the mother's journey to France during the War of Independence where her son Sélim has been imprisoned, suspected of some form of dissidence, where French is figured as the language

of authority and bureaucracy. After making the journey and finally negotiating herself in to visit Sélim, this authoritarian language is broken by the mother's tender words in her vernacular Arabic, which are then mingled with French as their conversation continues. While the judicial setting places the languages in a hierarchical relationship and uses French to identify, classify, and ratify, the bilingual exchange between mother and son promises a different form of encounter. The divisive structure of the colonial system is nevertheless reinforced in a later passage, reflecting on the earlier period of World War II, where the narrator again notes the use of the term "ennemi" to describe the French in Algeria ("le *roumi* chrétien"), linking again through this word the antagonism between cultures and that between the sexes described above (Djebar, 1995: 258; 2001, 263). The narrator laments in the same scene her mother's struggle to express herself in French, as well as the elegance she regains and is unable to translate when speaking in private to her husband in "ce dialecte arabe chuintant, particulier à notre cite autrefois repeuplée d'Andalous" (Djebar, 1995: 256) ["the shushing tones of the Arab dialect peculiar to our city that was once resettled by Andalusians" (Djebar, 2001: 262)].

These scenes weave together French, Arabic, and Berber languages, including spoken vernaculars as well as a range of what Bensmaïa (with Deleuze and Guattari) called "referential" and "mythic" languages, to showcase their porosity as well as the tense and difficult history that shapes that interaction. It is in the final section, in which Djebar reflects on the devastating violence of the 1990s civil war that this series of "translingual events" stalls in a moment of linguistic breakdown. Initially, Djebar connects the new sequence of murders with the death of Chérifa, since while Chérifa died of typhus rather than as a result of the brutality, women's exclusion from official writing is evidenced at both moments: "Chérifa la morte est revenue. Sur la terre Algérie, si longtemps après, les morts reviennent. Les femmes, les oubliées, parce que sans écriture, forment de la procession funèbre, les nouvelles Bacchantes" (Djebar, 1995: 338) ["Chérifa the dead woman has returned. Onto Algerian soil the dead (men) are returning after so long. The women, forgotten ones because they have no writing, make up the funeral procession, new Bacchantes" (Djebar, 2001: 348–9)]. If women seeking agency and self-expression were targeted by Islamists during the 1990s, their silencing mimics that of generations of women whose histories are not recorded in public, either in French or Arabic written form.

In addressing the current brutality, however, Djebar's translingual staging of women's linguistic border-crossing falters, as if language itself is defeated by this degree of violence. The sequence of murders is barely recounted by the narrator; rather, her text presents a horrific stifling of verbal expression. She dreams of being choked by some strange, opaque substance, attempts to vomit

it out but imagines instead that she must cut her throat to release it, only to discover that what issues from her mouth is a scream projected by centuries of feminine oppression. In the place of words, then, "je vomis quoi, peut-être un long cri ancestral. Ma bouche ouverte expulse indéfiniment la souffrance des autres, des ensevelies avant moi, moi qui croyais apparaître à peine au premier rai de la première lumière" (Djebar, 1995: 339) ["I vomit something, what? Maybe a long ancestral cry. My open mouth expels, continuously, the suffering of others, the suffering of the shrouded women who came before me, I who believed I was only just appearing at the first ray of the first light" (Djebar, 2001: 350)]. While Priscilla Ringrose has read this emission as a sort of weapon, as an activist statement against patriarchal oppression, I would suggest that Djebar's vision of expression is nevertheless more ambivalent and circumspect here (Ringrose, 2006: 154). Translingualism blurs into an anguished, nonverbal cry, not so much the communication of message as an embodied gesture: "je ne crie pas, je suis le cri" (Djebar, 1995: 339) ["I do not cry, I am the cry" (Djebar, 2001: 350)]. Behind this cry, she imagines, "se lèvent les mots de la langue perdue qui vacille" ["words of the quavering, lost language rise up" (Djebar, 2001: 350)], and yet whilst these words might be those of the women in preceding chapters, their idioms are here dissolved into this wordless sound. Djebar's vision of linguistic richness and elasticity is here perhaps most devastatingly juxtaposed with a reminder that cultural violence attacks not just particular linguistic systems but also language itself. The nonverbal cry emerges as a form of expression that stretches the very limits of what we understand as language.

Vaste est la prison in this way probes and tests the borders between languages and the consistency of language itself. If Mireille Calle-Gruber has read the novel as a story of writing, as it moves from "Le Silence de l'écriture" to the history of the tifinagh alphabet, the present reading foregrounds its study not just of written forms but of languages, of oral forms and nonverbal expressions, of their encounter, their conflict, their entanglement, and their failure (Calle-Gruber, 2001: 84). Djebar's novel explores both writing and speech, and exhibits the many forms of their encounter in the lives of Algerian women across different periods. Moreover, it sits uneasily with theories of translingualism privileging a straightforward resistance to linguistic oppression, the claim for freedom that Kellman (2003) alludes to in the quotation at the start of this discussion. The instances of linguistic blending and confrontation described here are no doubt displayed to demonstrate the destructive effects of linguistic oppression, yet the novel cannot be construed merely as activism but as a profound and many-layered reflection on different forms of translingual experience and on the affect associated with them. The closing section in verse repeats the anxious self-questioning refrain "comment te nommer

désormais, Algérie!" (Djebar, 1995: 345) ["what can we call you now, Algeria!" (Djebar, 2001: 356)], as if the journey through scenes of linguistic encounter undertaken in the main body of the text may enrich our understanding of Algeria's linguistic landscape—yet the journey cannot end with a naming, an identifier that could do justice both to its plurilingualism and to its history of silencing. The life of the languages of Algeria, their usage and investment in particular by women, can be represented only through such multiple, continuing, eclectic "translingual events."

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