

## Taming Trauma in the Land of the Million Martyrs: A Reading of Assia Djébar's *Algerian White*

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In *Algerian White*, Assia Djébar assigns to her female narrator the cumbersome task of remembering traumatic events of loss, both personal and collective. Djébar's narrator portrays the past in a number of ways. Figuring herself as a biographer, as a keeper of the trace, as a witness, as a survivor, she confronts the historic past, and in so doing strives to prevent a long-lived and witnessed violence from returning to haunt the present. Thus, this narrative presents itself as a leap into past memories charged with personal and collective losses. Vestiges of the past survive in a story that starts *in medias res*, where the narrator feels an urgent need to “respond to an immediate demand of memory: the death of close friends” (Djébar 13) who are brutally murdered at the hands of radical Islamists in the 1990s. A sociologist, a psychiatrist and a dramatist, and following them journalists, poets, writers, a generation of free-thinking men and women, all fell victims to what the author calls the “integrist cancer” (Djébar 33).

The first part of this paper is a reading of personal, recovered memories that haunt the speaker and that initiate a process of speaking out her trauma. Of importance here is the fact that the writer's voice fuses with the narrator's to produce a hybrid text where the generic boundaries of fiction and non-fiction, the imaginative and the real, merge. Most of the events are constructed around Djébar's own experience of and reaction to the trauma of loss. The central goal, here, is to understand how memory, in its chasms and ruptures, rather than in its fluid narrative content and structure, can serve to expose the narrator's feelings of guilt, anxiety and displacement. The second part moves into a reading of cultural memory. It explores the Algerian history of bereavement and loss; it deploys the impossibility of mourning and the inability to promote a sustainable reconciliation. The entanglement of postcolonial concerns with collective trauma oppresses public memory and accounts for the failure to grasp the complexities of personal grief and collective mourning.

In the 1990s, in the midst of political and religious conflict between the government of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) and the most popular party—the Islamic Salvation Front or Front Islamique du Salut (FIS)—that won the election but was not able to rule due to the cancellation of election results, intellectuals, whether writers, journalists,

or artists voiced their anger against the ideological war in which their country had been entrapped. The Islamist party claimed its right to rule and used violence to express its dissatisfaction by killing those who expressed reservations about establishing a monolithic religious regime. The targets were intellectuals who were caught between the call for the Arabisation of the nation made by the government (undermining therefore French and other regional languages like Tamazight spoken by the Berbers) and the setting up of a religious nation that broke away from the Western mode of living and thinking. *Algerian White*, published in 1995, is set within this critical moment of political history; in it, the exiled author/ narrator returns to an Algeria already traumatized by collective loss in order to mourn its dead and to assume the project of witnessing and testifying to the sufferings of the Algerian people.

The memory of the narrator's friends resurfaces years after their death and her trauma starts with the difficulty to communicate these moments of loss: "There are memories which revolt against being divulged without consultation. So they refuse to collaborate, they escape or conceal themselves" (Djebar 35). However, the successive apparitions of her friends, specters that haunt her and converse with her, ignited the narrative process. The belatedness in recollecting the painful events of death and the unspeakability of the narrator's trauma of loss echo what Caruth suggests when stating that "traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness" (Caruth 91-92). Delay is built into the first pages of the novel and reflects a postponed apprehension of facing and coping with a personal past replete with loss, violence and catastrophe:

I call them to me today, I raise them, my exemplary brother-writers, on the edge of the quagmire. Let us look deep into it, let us together question other absent ones, so many disturbing shadows! Together, too bad if it is thirty years late, let us at least bring back the strangled, the suicides, the murdered, nested in their somber history, in the hollow of tragedy. (Djebar 105)

As she tardily grasps the dilemma of loss, Djebar becomes a witness to her own past as a repetition and acknowledgment of a trauma survived and told; this inevitably results in an identity crisis, a shuttered subjectivity already burdened by exile and in search for roots. The overwhelming effect of loss and its belated manifestation have created what Boutler calls a "subjectivity without any subject," that hatches "some shift in the psyche, in the self, in the interiority of the subject, to the point where the subject finds himself to have become a trace of what he was, a cinder marking the passing of the disaster" (Boutler 9). Indeed, weighed down by exile, and feeling "left against [her] will" (Djebar 137-38), the speaker occupies a liminal space, an "out of place" condition that alienates her further from her land and community: "I settled into a constant coming-and-going, resigned myself to this between-two-worlds, between two-

lives, between-two-freedom, one of deeply diving backward, the other of rushing forward” (Djebar 177). The spectrum of traumatic disorder is clear in the narrator’s statement: “I no longer know who is the phantom—myself, in turn, beginning to float horizontally in the ether, ears gaping, eyelids hardly closed” (Djebar 18). The narrator’s marginality, her betwixt and between state of being inside (the nation) and outside (its economy of pain) weighs heavily on her consciousness; she makes practices of witnessing and testifying traumatizing.

After being suppressed for years, traumatic memories eventually resurface through the narrator’s dreams and daily apparitions of her friends. The repressed memory is suddenly ignited by involuntary remembrances of her friends’ sudden and violent death; this process Caruth describes as a “literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits” (Caruth 59). The narrator explains: “My friends come to me, I have never called them, and of course they should have stayed in my company, steadfastly present as in the past, reserved, tight-tongued; and yet they hurried off, went before me, over there, so far away... But now, they speak to me in volumes” (Djebar 18). The appearance of these friends, though unexpected, is appreciated and even solicited. The desire, whether conscience-stricken or melancholy, is to commune with the dead, pay penance, or restore what had been believed lost. Yearning for the dead, the narrator conjures them up and converses with them: “I want you to come back, I will go to the end of every ocean, through the window open like this in the morning... I will imagine us there, in the city!... Your city admittedly, but mine as well: in a different way” (Djebar 44). A process of narrative memory is established the moment she evokes her friends for the purpose of integrating her trauma of loss.

Coming to terms with trauma, however, proves to be very difficult as long as mourning remains impossible, for, argues Boutler, “guilt makes mourning an economic impossibility” (86). The narrator admits: “We, witnesses of the instant that breaks the path of a friend... of what sorrow or what upheaval must we slowly discharge ourselves?” (Djebar 83). The narrator embarks on a journey of remembrance overweighed with the burden of consciousness; a displacement of emotion that further intensifies trauma. “It seems that it is not so much death that is traumatic as survival, or at least survival in the face of particularly brutal or incomprehensible deaths,” Jenny Edkins remarks (99). The narrator regrets not knowing “how to admit her affection for them [friends]” (Djebar 218), failing in her empathic role of solidarity and compassion. It is the guilt of not being there, of being the outsider, the stranger, and the exiled: “While we are dispersing in Paris, while some begin to suffer again from that uncomfortable pain of knowing too much, not knowing the new “victim”—but knowing that he was “alone” in that last moment, and because we are elsewhere, safe and sound, safe and sick, alive... (Djebar 212). Boulter explains: “Here we see precisely the complexity of writing guilt/writing trauma: if the symptoms of trauma are themselves a displacement of the originary event, then guilt must be understood as a

displacement of a displacement, a double deferral of the impossible event of disaster” (Boutler 86). The articulation of guilt uncannily disturbs the process of mourning: “No. I have to say, no. I, who on those three occasions was absent—far away, almost the foreigner, in any case the wanderer, the one silent in operation, the one who repudiated all lamentation, I say, no” (Djebar 51).

Trauma is further manifest in the psychic anxiety that memory bequeaths. Such anxiety is clearly reflected structurally at the level of narration, which is necessarily achronological. In *Algerian White*, traumatic memories emerge out of context; they usurp narrative fluidity to the extent of destabilizing understanding and coherence. Time sequences float and intermingle, memories go back to one year or thirty, barely any logic is provided; memories of ten years are superseded by those of one year back, then by fifteen years before, then they leap to 1956 in the prison of Barbarousse, then to memories of adolescence, then to 1960 with the death of Camus, then to the eve of Independence, etc... Narration exemplifies the deferred action of trauma; a delay that stems not only from its temporal disjunction, but also from the difficulties of crafting a speaking position from which to bear witness to the political as well as psychological unspeakability of death and violence. Disconnected time reflects a splintered mind, for “this fluidity of time mirrors the timelessness of the unconscious and the intermingling of past and present that trauma victims re-experience in flashbacks, dreams, or overwhelming moments of grief” (Weisband 365). Death or its apprehension annihilates the narrator and is responsible for her discrete and disjointed appropriation of time: “What kind of death, like a glistening flatfish, slips into the river of our memory. Whereas the death which turns up unexpectedly in strife and disgorged blood erupts and violates our sense of time; it leaves us breathless” (Djebar 84). The disorder in tense use exemplifies the discontinuity of experience, and the mental imprint such a frightening ordeal as death has on time. Present and past tense intertwine in narrating memories, highlighting immediacy and lateness respectively.

Fragmentation, whether symbolic—memory fragmented and incoherent; or structural—the disconcerting sense of timelessness that breaks narration, closely relates to traumatic experience. Djebar worked with a disconnected text in part because she desired to make trauma clear in the most contingent, fragmentary ways possible. The narrator is constantly troubled by bits of images or memories that burst into her consciousness. The past erupts into the present, which in turn affects the interpretation of the past. For instance, in the midst of a conversation with her friend Kader, the memory of a theatrical performance that he successfully adapted interrupts in the narrator’s mind, followed by “another day from the past, during my film shoot in Tipasa” (Djebar 41). With M’hamed’s traumatic memory of death comes the involuntary memory of Barbarousse, a notorious prison famous for executing male and female war combatants. The murder of Mouloud Feraoun by the OAS (Organisation armée secrète or the Organization of the Secret Army,

which fought against the independence of Algeria from France), of Ramdane Abane by his compatriots and brothers in the resistance cell, of Said M'ekbel by radical Islamists in 1993 are all traumatic memories that interrupt the flow of narration. These moments of mental dissonance disrupt logical narration and so can be seen as subverting norms of coherence and unity. Traumatic memories are then at work, which, as Herman explains, "are not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story" (Herman 37). These recollections are rather out of time, chaotic and exemplify in Caruth's words, "a breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (Caruth 4). The fragmentary style of Djebbar's narration implies the chaos of her mental state, the estrangement of a displaced, alienated person occupying a blank position between the past and present: "I am there with no native land, your voices alone cross the frontier, first you three, as when I was asleep in California; then the others...How long will your voices sustain me, guide me, thrust me forward?" (Djebbar 138)

While time is confused, space is distinct. The traumatic memory discerns a fixed central place that remains visibly integral in the narrator's mind. Indeed, "trauma is not spatially amorphous but inscribed in place" (Kaelber 2). It is set in the geography of a culturally and socially appropriated space. For the narrator, traumatic memories stretch across the entire Algerian land. More specifically, Oran and Algiers become in Nora's words the "*loci memoriae*" or memory places around which traumatic events are constructed (Nora xv). When Kader is assassinated, he is quickly associated with his native city, not only because it bore witness to his murder, but also because as a traumatic site it exemplifies liminality and loss. After visiting Kader and learning about his death, the narrator exposes her rage at the inevitability of violence and death:

Out of what disgust with this vile and sullied country? To confront them [terrorists]? Not believing that you'd fall in your own city, over some cliff, that city whose secret places you showed me, the subterranean passages, the peaks, the crests, did you believe the city would identify your killers for you? Why? Your pride? ... Your fatalism? Your contempt? ... (Djebbar 46)

It is worth noting that the Algerian land is often depicted as obscure or tangential, a gothicized space that is menacing and unpredictable. It has been postulated that the haunted site in postcolonial Gothic is "any location that is freighted with unjust violent acts of the past" (Rudd 10). Algeria is entangled in a past replete with violence and death; the perpetuity of violence associates the land with rot and decay. While mourning her friend, the narrator vociferates: "You and your city, what nocturnal encounter? What passageway filled with stench, nightmares, having emerged from what inadmissible past? Since the eleventh century" (Djebbar 46). Algeria also is portrayed as a theatre of misery and ugliness:

And I know you, the three of you, my closest ones haunting me, distancing yourselves from me, I know you to be permanently settled above the Bay of Algiers in its coldly unmovable splendor, and at the same time contemplating the whole land of Algeria, its mountains, its desert, its oases, its villages... its stench, too, its ugliness, its swarming worms, its crows come back to the trees. I know you to be above the pine and cedar forests, the ones they're starting to burn with napalm again. Again ... (Djebar 47)

The concluding sentence enmeshes Algeria further in violence and death; a space that trauma renders unrecognizable.

The fear that Algeria has been disfigured by the violence the country succumbed to, that it has become unfamiliar and inaccessible, is tied to a precarious sense that identity is also disfigured and lost. Algeria as a site haunted by specters is an apt illustration of Homi Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely," clear in the narrator's continuous sense of anxiety as she fails to appropriate a sense of "home" in her native land:

You spoke of Algeria? The Algeria of yesterday's suffering, that of the night of colonialism, that of the mornings of fever and trance? You said this land, this country: no, a dream of sand, no, a populous caravan that faded from sight, no, a Sahara all flooded with oil and mud, a Sahara betrayed... (Djebar 137)

The "uncanny," as such, evident in the feeling of estrangement and displacement experienced by the exiled narrator in her own city, her "home," creates an identity crisis of being "in" and "out" simultaneously:

An "uncanny" experience may occur when one's home—one's place—is rendered somehow and in some sense unfamiliar; one has the experience... of being in place and 'out of place' simultaneously. This happens precisely at the moment when one is made aware that one has unfinished business with the past, at the moment when the past returns as an 'elemental' force to haunt the present day (Rudd 18).

Identity is therefore inextricably linked to a sense of place. The condition of being severed from homeland accentuates trauma and anxiety: "I simply no longer see Algeria. I am simply turning my back on my native soil, on my birth, on my origin" (Djebar 138). Estrangement is the narrator's condition and is the outcome of a colonial history, for "what has been buried and kept hidden as a personal trauma brought about by historic events can, in an unhomely moment, make visible the relationship of that personal tragedy to a wider political reality" (Rudd 14).

Djebar often mingles the mythical and the mundane. The use of myth offers an alternative reading to history; it is meant to unify shuttered subjectivities. Feuchtwang argues:

A founding myth is a perpetual truth, a story of vindication and salvation. A past that is present, it fuses the sequence of events in ordinary history, making the founding event a part of current experience. Here the bonds of chronological narrative are dissolved and transcended. (Feuchtwang 182)

Mythical references abound in the narrative, highlighting the fact that Algeria has survived a plethora of threats to its existence. They allude to

the idea that Algeria has survived because of the elasticity of its culture which enables its people to access stored wisdom and cope with disasters. References to Lalla Fatma N'Summer and Emir Abdelkader—both historic figures of resistance to colonialism in the nineteenth century but both acquiring a mythical dimension—as well as the eleventh-century Almoravid prince, who is the pride of the city and “who still dwells within us, even after nine centuries” (Djebar 45) and whose murder the narrator associates with Kader's—all reinforce the sense that Algeria is a land that defies death and violence.

However, such comforting convictions of an Algeria that outlasts all historic calamities can only be short-lived, in view of the burdensome weight of afflictions and violence to which the land has succumbed. Though healing and integration of traumatic experience require a re-processing of the original event, this cathartic effect is, in the case of Djebar, a very experimental process in which the tragic past experience continues to impact its survivor, and seeps into the fabric of her life: “Have they really disappeared? No, I stubbornly refuse the evidence; I refuse right up to the end, to the very end of this ramble, of this remembrance of the “afterwards” (Djebar 17). Caught up in the web of history, the narrator fails to claim her own deliverance, which she also sees in terms of a national one. For “[t]here can be no complete healing for anyone as long as the collective sources of trauma remain unaddressed, because, in the long run, collective trauma cannot be healed as isolated events in the lives of individuals. It needs a group setting for its proper exploration and resolution” (Kellermann 9). A connection is forged between the personal loss and the collective one. Such traumatic historic events like the guillotining of Zabana and Fradj in the prison of Barbarousse or the execution of Abane Ramdane in a conspiracy organized by Algerian compatriots, or the violence of the 1957 “Battle of Algiers” and the torture practices accompanying it, the deaths of Tahar Djaout, Yousef Sebti, and Said Mekbel in 1993 through different execution methods but similar ideology, justify the necessity of the act as follows: “he speaks of liberty, that intellectual? And what about faith in Islam, is that not enough for him? He speaks of a secular state? He should have stayed in Moscow, that's where he came from...” (Djebar 189); all these traumatic events require integration before a personal working through of trauma is possible.

If healing from and reconciliation with personal trauma require an excavation and a reconstruction of history, it is imperative for Djebar to concatenate the collective traumatic past. In a narrative that gleaned over a period of more than thirty years, and that sometimes nostalgically leaps to hundreds of years earlier, the entire fabric of the nation is involved in “the tragedy of Algerian history” (Djebar 151); intellectuals, journalists, poets, politicians or ordinary citizens are portrayed as overwhelmed by fears, anxieties and apprehensions about the future. The mourning of victims of the war of independence and of those of the “madmen of God” (Djebar 127)—Radical Islamists—becomes for the writer an ethical responsibility:

“In the middle of this gallery of death I am seized by the desire to put down my pen or my brush and go off to them, to join them: to bathe my face in their blood (that of the victims of assassination), to rend my joints with them... To join them, that is the temptation” (Djebar 137). Their sudden and unjust deaths are experienced as irresolute traumas that resist relegation to the past.

Djebar’s fragmented method of weaving her text, so strategically used when narrating her personal trauma and foregrounding an ellipsis in the heart of her narrative folding expands to cover the narrative of national trauma, making history seem latent and always in deferral. For as Caruth explains, “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (Caruth, Introduction 6). Colonial and postcolonial history is mediated by collective memory that substantiates the very working of cultural trauma, being itself “a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric” (Eyerman 2). Linett further postulates that:

Postcolonial texts invite readings in terms of trauma because they are concerned with articulating the ongoing after-effects of colonial domination and violence in contemporary society. Postcolonial writers often emphasize that the encounter between western and non-western societies remains a traumatic one, because the processes and systems of empire continue to inform and shape the present. (Linett 10)

Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy have also suggested that living between cultures and having to reconcile different and conflicting pasts may also be “constitutive of trauma itself” (Bennett 7). The narrator’s experience with trauma assimilates this condition of cultural estrangement. “Trauma, like other forms of memory, is a historical and cultural product, which is not to deny its reality or the suffering that is associated with it but rather to locate that reality in the individual and collective investments that are made in it and in people’s beliefs and convictions” (Linett 8). Djebar acknowledges the traumatic nature of postcolonial Algeria by emphasizing the deadly, violent quality of its history and the perpetuity of oppression:

Why this digression into the killing fields of ’56 and ’57? Why, to flee the years ’93 and ’94, an Algeria cracking with the hollow sound of fracture? Because today, it might once more be possible to hold one’s breath, restrain a moment the hammering subterranean step of reaping death, death reaping with its scythe, and begin to imagine, to invent possible solutions? ... the strange fissure involved in living in the very heart of a colonial war, a civil war... (Djebar 114)

The historic memory of the colonial past is mired in carnage, deception, and death; it is an extension of the narrator’s disillusionment over her own personal loss in a post-colonial present. The site of trauma therefore expands to a national setting. The articulating discourse of cultural trauma is mediated by an array of dissenting voices, in addition to the narrator’s, in an attempt to reconfigure or reconstruct a collective



memory of violence and loss. Individual stories meld and intertwine—journal entries, poems, newspaper articles, public lectures—providing a link between personal memory and collective one:

And thus would develop the caricature of a past in which sublimated heroes and fratricidal murders were to be mingled in an hazy blur. How then can we get out of this mire—in what language, in what aesthetic form of denunciation and anger—how can we give account of these changes?... (Djebar 128)

For Algerians, the nation is remembered and reconstructed as a site of the unmitigated disaster of the war of independence and the civil war. Algeria failed to shift into a democratic state, ushering in a period of neo-colonialism characterized by violence, death and repression: “An Algeria of blood, of streams of blood, of bodies decapitated and mutilated, of stupefied, staring childlike eyes...” (Djebar 137). For forty years (since the “Battle of Algiers” in 1957 to the 1990s), intellectuals have failed to comprehend the gratuitous cruelty of the French aggressors and the Algerian victims turning themselves into aggressors; they continue to voice out their discontent, shock and incredulity in front of colonial and postcolonial violence, aware that, in doing so, they put their own lives at risk: “A nation seeking its own ceremonial, in different forms, but from cemetery to cemetery, because, first of all, the writer has been offered as propitiatory victim: strange and despairing discovery” (Djebar 14).

Colonial violence, postcolonial political and religious strife, imprisonment, torture and humiliation are the accumulating painful memories that burden the narrator but also her nation. “Violence, torture, oppression and tyranny are cyclical phenomena leaving Algeria trapped in an ongoing process of mourning that resists completion and working through” (Hiddleston 137). On the first day of independence, for example:

Algeria presents herself ... stripped recently of [her] writers—above all, it’s true enough, orphaned of nearly a million of her own (the resisters, the victims, the anonymous mass of bodies hidden in the woods and in communal graves: women, old men, children, the innocent ones, sometimes left stupefied, their eyes always open (Djebar 103).

The different revisited historic events explore the structural and economic legacies that the colonial past has bequeathed to the post-colonial present, which set forth the continuation of violence and repression:

Perhaps if I see myself plunging deeply into a past forty years old, it’s because in the town of Algiers at the start of the year ’57 the mechanics of violence and carnage correspond largely to the schema practiced today: on one side as on the other, unleashers of death—on one side in the name of the law, but using mercenaries and hirelings, on the other in the name of a historical justice which is often ahistorical, and transcendental, and thus incorporating both its illuminati and its “demons.” Between these two extremes, from where the clash of arms is born, from where the daggers are drawn, there opens onto infinity a field on which the innocent fall—far too many ordinary people and a certain number of intellectuals. (Djebar 114-15)

Algeria is enacting a national trauma that is escalating rather than subduing with time; the memory of violence continues to dominate the present and looms over the future. Trauma persists “when individuals and groups *feel* they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their consciousness, will mark their memories forever, and will change their future in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Jeffrey et al, 1). When trauma seems unmanageable, reconciliation offers itself as a preliminary step to explore possibilities of moving beyond the injustice of the past.

To remember past injustices is an ethical responsibility and a national duty; it is meant to reconcile with and move beyond the prison house of the past. Reconciliatory in essence, practices of remembrance have been first and foremost acts of mourning. However, the narrator, already trapped in the web of historic injustice, considers no possibility of purging, not even through national mourning. The path to mourning and remembrance is revealed strewn with danger. Djébar’s view on commemoration, for instance, echoes that of Nora who considers public memorials “beleaguered and cold—they mark the rituals of a society without rituals” (Nora, “Between Memory” 12). Djébar deplores the loss of spontaneous memory; “I say no to the theatre when not improvised” (Djébar 53), the narrator states, referring to “farewell ceremonies” (Djébar 53). As Nora contends, “without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep [memory] away” (“Between Memory” 12). While Nora deplores the loss of the sense of memory and its replacement by archival history that renders remembrance artificial, Djébar considers commemorations and memorials undertaken for the purpose of mourning victims of war as fake, mock-ceremonies that aim at politically burying memories and ossifying the past rather than at sincerely honoring the dead victims and allowing reconciliation with a collective trauma: “No; I say no to all ceremonies: those of farewell, those of pity, those of chagrin which seek their own comforts, those of consolation” (Djébar 53). Djébar exposes the structures of public memory, the vehicle that would initiate mourning as she lays bare the national designs that are shaped and disfigured by politics. She rejects the artifice of false ritual, of pretence as depicted in the funeral of Abane Ramdane, a war combatant. Leaders orchestrate speeches to calm the audience’s anxieties; the abundant patriotic messages of public memory are rooted, however, in a quest for power and control by opponent parties. The symbolic language of patriotism mediates a form of social control and does not naturally find resonance within the heads and minds of ordinary people or intellectuals:

As the speeches droned on, the audience fell silent, withdrew into itself. It was as though the real purpose of all the eloquence pouring forth was to bury deeper in the earth, alongside the corpse, the only question to be read in the eyes of those present: “How did our Abane Ramdane really die and, above all, how did you kill him?” (Djébar 125)

Djebar denounces the politics of revenge, recovery and reconciliation, teeming with grandiose and admiring rhetoric, made by competing political parties in the form of memorials or ceremonies that falsely glorify the victims and that aim at glossing over and masking violence and political incompetence and banishing these historical realities from consciousness. Speaking of the death of her three friends, she says:

Not the white of oblivion... even beneath the words of the public eulogies, collective tributes, dramatized memories. No, because all this noise embarrasses my three friends; and I am sure, prevents them from coming back, to offer us their light touch, to bring us back to life. I ask nothing: only that they continue to haunt us, that they live within us. (Djebar 51)

As such, while memorials can bridge the gap between public and private memory, they are for the narrator mutually exclusive, therefore, national mourning remains impossible.

The writer has been seeking a language, a form of articulation, to heal herself and her nation from trauma, but she has also been writing in order to make sense and rectify the lies of history. However, the therapeutic effect of writing trauma has its limits. In *Opening Up*, James W. Pennebaker argues that “writing about the thoughts and feelings associated with traumas... forces individuals to bring together the many facets of overwhelmingly complicated events. Once people can distill complex experiences into more understandable packages, they can begin to move beyond the trauma” (193). Yet, though symptoms of healing begin with the willingness to write at the personal level, writing has not instituted any recovery; the narrator is as frustrated and in as much pain as when she started writing. The accumulating weight of disaster, Jonathan Boutler argues, “fractures the archival possibility for the subject: he cannot any longer stand to history as witness or memorial, cannot, that is, become the workable archive, because his interiority, his sense that there is a space for history, for the event of history, is no longer continuous or stable” (Boutler 8). The failure to negotiate a coherent relationship between the narrator’s memory and history aborts her endeavour to document her personal trauma. At the national level, the profusion of deaths, injustices and atrocious violence are made infinitely harder to bear by ordinary people as well as intellectuals, and mourning is impossible, since death is seen as “work in progress” (Djebar 221). The multiple traumatic legacies of oppression and death are seen as ongoing, if not endless: “As I write, a few tears have finally fallen on my cheeks... I write and I dry a few tears. I don’t believe in their deaths: for me, their deaths are works in progress” (Djebar 218).

Pain, trauma and emotional devastation are the backbone of the story. The trauma of loss, however, is productive in the sense that it leads to continuously generating narratives and representations which try to make the gap that frustrates the possibility of full representation disappear. Hunt acknowledges the potential of narration in the recovery from trauma: “We have fundamental beliefs that the world is meaningful, that it is benevolent

and that the self is worthy. Trauma disrupts those beliefs, and recovery is about rebuilding them, or developing a narrative” (Hunt 62). While we may claim that recovery fails when Djebbar asserts that her whole narrative is reduced to “[w]riting to express Algeria vacillating and for which some are already preparing the white of the shroud” (Djebbar 227), *Algerian White* remains a book about the importance of narration in mapping out an alternative commemorative discourse that breaks with official nationalist rhetoric. Yet, narration has also foregrounded the impossibility of resolution through testimony, leaving the victim of trauma in limbo. More than that, it has given a very bleak image of Algeria in the future; it has predicted the ongoing of trauma for the millions of Algerian people whose lives will still be disproportionately circumscribed by the often intense suffering created by neo-colonial practices and the religious and political strife. “Writing in Algeria, our own extinction?” (Djebbar 220), the narrator tragically pronounces, placing death at the very heart of Algerian trauma. With trauma forming the gap between disparate historic events, the uncanny historicity of Algerian colonial and postcolonial violence becomes more imminent.

But even though the work of mourning attempted in the novel is incomplete, it has allowed for a re-examination of personal and historic memory: “If I persist in going on,” Djebbar asserts, “it is rather death to be tamed—in an Algerian night that is no longer colonial” (Djebbar 221). The admission of collective guilt is only reinforced, a burden that the nation has to carry seemingly for a longer time as long as it has not done justice to the spilled blood of its citizens. Despite the recurrent references made to the two wars that destroyed Algeria, that of independence and the civil war, the main theme of the novel, as I understand it, is the importance of narration. The attempt to communicate unfathomable stories, however difficult they might be, must be undertaken in order for history to be revised and for humanity to derive lessons. In this alone, the victory is enough. If “recovery from the traumas of colonialism is basically a matter of the individual witness gaining linguistic control over his or her pain” (Craps, Buelens 4), then Djebbar’s novel is a modest step towards that recovery, and this is evident in the way she chooses to end her narrative: “In the brilliance of this desert, in the safe harbor of writing in quest of a language beyond languages, by trying fiercely to obliterate all the furies of the collective self-devouring in oneself, finding ‘the word within’ again, alone, remains our fertile homeland” (Djebbar 230).

Of course, whether the novel has appealed to the Algerian readers as an authentic book of testimony and resistance, or whether Djebbar’s rendering of traumatic agonies of the civil war victims ring hollow, is still a vexed question. The writer’s displacement—geographical, linguistic and cultural—creates a distanced vantage point that may limit her ethical involvement with her Algerian community. Another limitation is that the language used in the book—French—restricts the readership to a largely francophone one. The reading audience may not be the one originally targeted, so the intended message of the writer may fall on deaf ears. But

this is only a natural result of writing in “the enemy’s language”, a condition of which not only Assia Djebar but the majority of postcolonial writers are also aware. Djebar’s continuous commitment to the Algerian cause, through a proliferating number of books is her answer to that dilemma.<sup>1</sup> She writes from the margin while still considering herself “the daughter of the nation” (Boehmer 106).

## Notes

1. See *Vaste est la prison* (1995), *Les Nuits de Strasbourg* (1997), *Ces Voix qui m’assiègent* (1999), *La Femme sans sépulture* (2002), *La Disparition de la langue française* (2003), and *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* (2007).

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