

**Assia Djébar and Algerian Cultural Memory: Reimagining, Repositioning and Rewriting in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade***

**Erin Peters**

*Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, first published in French in 1985 with the title *L'amour, la fantasia*, is one volume from Assia Djébar's Algerian Quartet. Within this novel, Djébar - author, filmmaker and historian - has combined her autobiographical work with the history of the French conquest of Algeria in 1830, as well as with the Algerian War of the mid twentieth century. The novel, whose chapters alternate between the historical and the autobiographical, is a carefully constructed dialogue between Djébar's own, recent past and Algeria's more distant, national past and is, in essence, an inquest into the nature of identity, both personal and national. The chapters dedicated to the French colonization of Algeria are based on evidence that Djébar, the historian, has researched and selected from the French archives. Djébar reimagines, repositions and eventually rewrites the archival sources that she has selected in an attempt to challenge the hegemonic discourse of the archive. These eyewitness accounts, written during the nineteenth century by French officers, artists, and journalists, give Djébar an insight into an aspect of Algeria's past from the point of view of an outsider and colonizer. The authors of these documents write sometimes for publication and sometimes for personal reasons; the variety of sources includes such items as private diaries, official political correspondence, and letters home from the soldiers. These documents help to set up a contrast in the novel between the French written and established historical records in the archives on the one hand, and the Algerian oral and traditional manner of storytelling which has no written evidence on the other. In response to this, the documents that Djébar selects from the archives are particularly those which detail atrocities committed by the French invaders toward the Algerian natives as well as those which highlight the experiences of the Algerians, especially women. Djébar then appropriates the French colonial discourse and subverts it into a new Algerian cultural memory.

Cultural memory has been defined by Marita Sturken as the way a group of people with shared experiences, history and cultural identity construct ways of perceiving

themselves.<sup>1</sup> Cultural memory can also be described as the way the past is understood in a society at certain times and places. It is not restricted to presenting accurate and truthful testimonies of the past, but makes meaningful statements about the past in a given context of the future. Cultural memory is not exclusively concerned with valid facts, or even coherent methodology, but rather with the consensus of assumptions and prejudices shared by a culture or society.<sup>2</sup> Thus, as interpretations of the past change, so do cultural memories.

This current paper explores the techniques used by Assia Djebar in her attempts to reconstruct a version of Algerian cultural memory in her novel, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, and the extent to which it is a new representation. H. Adlai Murdoch explains,

[Djebar's] task will be to take on the 'official' record of the French colonial conquest of Algeria, itself a re-writing of historical fact, and to re-write this re-writing from the perspective of the colonized subject.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore this paper examines how Djebar accomplishes the task of rewriting and reimagining a new Algerian cultural memory by combining evidence selected from the French colonial archives with her own narrative fiction. The primary focus will be centered on the section of *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* that concentrates on the nineteenth-century colonization period of Algeria as this is the section of the novel that is based mainly on the archival material selected by Djebar. In the novel, Djebar uses historical evidence and combines it with her own narrative fiction to construct her novel. This narrative strategy reflects postmodernist theories of history writing, which maintain that history is constructed by historians who combine facts with fictional narrative, and so applying these theories to Djebar's novel helps to more clearly display her appropriation of the archival sources. My exploration of Djebar's narrative strategy in retelling and rewriting Algerian cultural memory throws into relief two further correlated areas of enquiry: first, whose imagined reconstructions of the past are to be acknowledged when

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<sup>1</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: the Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 1-6.

<sup>2</sup> John Elsner, 'From the Pyramids to Pausanias and Piglet: Monuments, Travel and Writing', in *Art and Texts in Ancient Greek Culture*, ed. by S. Goldhill and R. Osbourne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 224-254 (pp. 224-225).

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the reconstructions are based to a certain extent on fiction, and second, who is entitled to speak for the past in the present. Ultimately, my aim here is to chart the extent to which Djébar appropriates the French colonial representation of Algeria in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, and to analyze the manner in which her imaginative augmentation of historical narratives with fictive memories enables Djébar to create a novel that offers a new, subversive Algerian cultural memory.

In rewriting the historical evidence from the French archives, Djébar does not seek to erase French colonial presence in Algeria but rather to engage with colonial representations in order to adjust her reader's awareness of the limits of French archival sources on colonial Algeria. Djébar is, in effect, destabilizing the established historical archives in favor of creating a new Algerian history. As she says, 'It is now my turn to tell a tale. To hand on words that were spoken, then written down. Words from more than a century ago...'<sup>4</sup> Djébar is attempting to construct a new collective memory of Algerian national identity by excavating references to Algerians from the French archives and rescuing them from a sweeping Western historical discourse. As Murdoch explains, the colonizer's discourse

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 in effect it circumscribes. It is the subversion and reversal of this practice, the putting in place of a new form of writing that will speak to the anguish of alienation and the desire for recognition and identity on the part of the dispossessed, that Djébar attempts to effect here.<sup>5</sup>

A century and a half later, Djébar's writing reveals her attempt to uncover Algerian identity and her subjectivity toward the sources she uncovers. After reading one source by Colonel Pelissier describing the French crushing of a Berber insurrection in the spring of 1845, Djébar writes,

I, in turn, piece together a picture of that night...I imagine the details of this nocturnal tableau...I ponder over Pelissier's next order...I can't say for sure what the military policy was; this is just a surmise; I am telling the story in my own

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<sup>3</sup> Adlai H. Murdoch, 'Rewriting Writing: Identity, Exile and Renewal in Assia Djébar's *L'Amour la Fantasia*', *Yale French Studies*, 2.83 (1993), 71-92 (p. 75).

<sup>4</sup> Assia Djébar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1985), p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> Murdoch, p. 82.

way and is it so purposeless to imagine what motives these butchers had?<sup>6</sup>

This quotation from *Fantasia* highlights two main limitations in regards to historical reliability in archival sources, and these have been identified by historical theorist John Tosh. First, the primary sources available to the researcher form only a partial record, not only because so much has been destroyed through accident or intention, but also because a large amount of what happened left no material trace. This is especially true of mental processes, as no evidence of the thoughts or intentions of historical persons is usually recorded in full. Second and more importantly in regards to Djébar's novel, the primary sources that are available are frequently tainted by the intentions of their authors as well as the established conventions and suppositions of the time and place in which they were written. Thus what a researcher can extract from a document is not solely confined to its explicit meaning, and therefore requires a certain amount of imagination and assumption on the part of the researcher to find inherent meanings.<sup>7</sup> Anne Donadey states, 'History...can never be a seamless, linear, grand narrative. Instead it is presented as a fractured, painfully reconstructed collage pieced together from a variety of sources'.<sup>8</sup> The French archival sources that Djébar employs depict the colonizers' description of Algeria based on French imperial ideologies of the time; Djébar utilizes her imagination and the oral traditions of Algerian cultural memory in combination with the archival sources to piece together and reimagine a new Algerian cultural memory.

The extent to which Djébar reimagines, repositions and rewrites a new Algerian cultural memory out of the primary sources she selects from the archives can be accentuated by considering the process of historical reconstruction and the limits of historical knowledge. Although postmodernism is an extremely difficult term to define, in regards to history and its truths, its central premise can be defined as the belief that all 'truths' in history are constructed.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, postmodernist theorists consider all truths to be fabrications that reflect and advance the interests of the people who construct them. Moreover, they argue that historians construct narratives according to their own

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<sup>6</sup> Djébar, pp. 70-73.

<sup>7</sup> John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 1984), pp. 168-169.

<sup>8</sup> Anne Donaday, *Recasting Postcolonialism: Women Writers Between Worlds* (New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2001), p. xxviii.

<sup>9</sup> Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 59-60.

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ideologically inflected interpretation of evidence and reject any claim that these narratives contain absolute truths that faithfully represent the past. It is on this basis that postmodernists claim that historians do not uncover the past, but construct it.

The facts are not given, they are selected... Historical writing of all kinds is determined as much by what it leaves out as by what it puts in...the decision whether to include this set of facts rather than that is closely affected by the purpose that informs the historian's work...clearly, then, much depends on the kind of questions that the historian has in mind at the outset of research.<sup>10</sup>

The significance of the historian's, or author's, subjectivity and the resulting selection of facts to be included and thus remembered, or else rejected and forgotten, is emphasized by Djébar in *Fantasia*. She grasps at evidence which has been intentionally marginalized in the archival accounts and repositions it into the focus of her text. One excerpt, from a letter by Captain Bosquet in 1840 to his friend in France, reveals this repositioning at work in the novel. Among Bosquet's description of a particular battle, he casually mentions the small 'detail' of a woman's foot being hacked off to appropriate an anklet of gold or silver.<sup>11</sup> Djébar seizes upon this fact and transposes it to the foreground of her narrative, thereby altering a facet of the history of the battle by selecting the facts and the emphasis applied to them.

The concept of inventing history through methods of narrative, likening historical writing to a form of literary construction, has been communicated by Hayden White, who has united historiography and literary criticism. White believes that there has been '...a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found'.<sup>12</sup> White emphasizes this point with his concept of 'emplotment', by which he means the process that researchers use to construct interpretive histories out of archives. Like the literary construct of fiction, White suggests here that researchers use the facts found in archives selectively in order to build a specific kind of plot structure in accordance with their personal interpretation.<sup>13</sup> This is clear in the example, given above, of Djébar seizing on a selected excerpt of the

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<sup>10</sup> Tosh, pp. 171-173.

<sup>11</sup> Djébar, p. 55.

<sup>12</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> White, p. 83.

archival source and emphasizing it for the purposes of her novel. As White maintains,

History writing thrives on the discovery of all the possible plot-structures that might be invoked to endow sets of events with different meanings. And our understanding of the past increases precisely in the degree to which we succeed in determining how far that past conforms to the strategies of sense-making.<sup>14</sup>

Accordingly, White believes that no historical event has intrinsic meaning. The individual researcher places specific emphasis on elements of historical fact (which he or she has already selected) in order to highlight what is specifically tragic or comic about them. This implies that historical truths are utterly unreachable in historical writings because of the multitude of possible interpretations, and that the only historical truths are facts and events.<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, as truths can be seen to be elusive in postmodernist historical reconstruction, imagination is vital to the historian. But whose imagined reconstruction of the past is to be acknowledged? Who is entitled to speak for past events in the present? In Assia Djébar's novel *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, we can see an example of how a researcher claims this entitlement and attempts to recreate a new Algerian cultural memory by reimagining, repositioning and rewriting the authority of the French archives. An examination of the ways in which Djébar employs her imagination and narrative fiction in combination with the facts she selects from the archives will answer the above questions based on two considerations: first, the use of imagination and fiction in history and memory reconstruction, and second, the extent to which, by rewriting the French archives, Djébar is potentially creating a further fictive cultural memory of Algeria.

As mentioned, a large part of *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* presents a partial history of the nineteenth century colonization of Algeria through documents selected by Djébar from the French archives and combined with her narrative fiction. Writing of the archival sources, Donadey points out, 'These reports and letters are not objective or factual accounts; they do not reflect a historical truth'.<sup>16</sup> In using this information, Djébar reimagines, represents and eventually rewrites the history of colonial Algeria in order to create a new cultural memory. However, Djébar's reconstructed history of Algeria is, to

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<sup>14</sup> White, p. 92.

<sup>15</sup> White, p. 84.

<sup>16</sup> Donadey, p. 45.

an extent, fictive, just as the reports from the French archives are, to an extent, fabricated by the intentions of their authors based on the established conventions and suppositions of the time and place in which they were written, and so are also fictive. Donadey points out the importance for Djébar to emphasize the close nature of historical writing with fictional narratives, 'Foregrounding the fictional nature of colonial history empowers the writer to seize fiction as a legitimate means of reconstructing her past'.<sup>17</sup> Djébar does exactly this in her text, describing the records of chronicler J.T. Merle from 1830. Merle is not a military man but rather a 'man of letters' who publishes his account of the capture of Algiers while never actually being involved in the fighting. Djébar comments on his writings, stating that 'he observes, he notes, he makes discoveries...he is inspired to the heights of eloquence when he portrays...[however] he lags permanently behind any decisive battle; he never witnesses any actual events'.<sup>18</sup> With this in mind we can now raise the matter of whose imagined fictive reconstruction of the past is to be acknowledged.

In *Fantasia*, Djébar endeavors to place the women who were involved in the struggle against colonization, but whose existence and participation have been disregarded or distorted in the accounts of the French archives, into Algerian cultural memory. By using the information selected from the archive, Djébar is in effect attempting to expose the dissimilarities between what is emphasized in the French archival accounts of the conquest of Algeria, and what is revealed yet marginalized about the colonization of Algeria within those archival sources. In doing so, Djébar calls to attention the fact that the French reporters were not always immediately witnessing what they were describing in their accounts of the conquest. Furthermore, the accounts were often written in highly artistic or poetic language, as is the case with Merle when he is 'inspired to the heights of eloquence'. One of many illustrations of this can be found in the description by Baron Barchou de Penhoen of a scene he claims to have witnessed after a battle. Djébar records his report,

Arab tribes are always accompanied by great numbers of women who had shown the greatest zeal in mutilating their victims. One of these women lay dead beside the corpse of a French soldier whose heart she had torn out! Another had been

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<sup>17</sup> Donadey, p. 46.

<sup>18</sup> Djébar, pp. 28-33.

fleeing with a child in her arms when a shot wounded her; she seized a stone and crushed the infant's head, to prevent it falling alive into our hands; the soldiers finished her off with their bayonets.<sup>19</sup>

This report by Barchou was written a month after the battle which he is describing. The lapse in time between witnessing the event and writing his record of it leads to the assumption that at least part of his record must be the result of his imagination, combined with his intentional placement of specific emphasis for 'emplotment', and therefore casts doubt on its complete truthfulness. This is how Djébar stresses the contradictions and misrepresentations of the archival sources. Barchou's account therefore highlights the fact that primary sources available to a researcher are frequently tainted by the purposes and prejudices of their authors. Although Barchou brings to light the involvement of women in the resistance to colonization, he does so with a predisposed prejudice toward Algerian women which is presumably the result of French imperial ideology. This is apparent in his description through his emphasis on the violent and unnatural actions of the women in their efforts to escape French ascendancy. Consequently, it is evident that Barchou's account illustrates the postmodern view that history is constructed according to the chronicler's interpretation of the past and that the narratives created cannot contain absolute truths that conform to the reality of that past.

This is further exposed by considering Djébar's reaction to Barchou's description. Djébar writes,

Thus these two Algerian women – the one in whom rigor mortis was already setting in, still holding in her bloody hands the heart of a dead Frenchman; the second, in a fit of desperate courage, splitting open the brain of her child, like a pomegranate in spring, before dying with her mind at peace – these two heroines enter into recent history.<sup>20</sup>

Djébar's response to Barchou's description is to invert his narrative. As Jenny Murray observes, 'The narrator seizes on the image of these women and moves then from the margins of the Frenchman's account to the center of her revised history'.<sup>21</sup> Instead of intentionally creating a sense of disgust and horror at the actions of these two women, as

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<sup>19</sup> Djébar, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> Djébar, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Jenny Murray, *Remembering the (Post) Colonial Self – Memory and Identity in the Novels of Assia Djébar* (Bern: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2008), p. 75.



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Barchou does, Djébar claims that they are heroines and praises their courage. However, similar to Barchou's and various other accounts found in the French archives, Djébar writes her imagined account of the past with the same sort of artistic and poetic language. Never having witnessed the event, Djébar nevertheless employs literary devices to aid in her reimagining of the scene, describing the opened skull 'like a pomegranate in spring'. This illustrates the postmodernist stance that not only are historical narratives reconstructed according to a particular interpretation of the past, but also according to a specific placement of emphasis on the elements of the past to create a desired plot structure. Djébar's use of this particular report by Barchou, as opposed to any other report he may have left, helps to display how researchers use the facts found in archives selectively, in order to build a specific kind of plot structure in accordance with their personal interpretation. Barchou's record was constructed a month after the event he is describing, Djébar is responding to his report and rewriting it one hundred and fifty-five years later, yet neither is able to write neutrally or conceal their ultimate objectives. Both reports can be seen to be tainted with the prejudices and objectives of their authors, prejudices which have developed out of the cultural memory of the society in which the authors are writing and exhibit the established beliefs and ideologies of the time and place in which the reports were written. In this light it appears that neither Barchou's nor Djébar's report should be acknowledged above the other. As both are subjective imagined reconstructions of the past, their usefulness in advancing toward any clear picture of past events, or workings of specific cultural memories and modes of remembering and forgetting, might be best served in combination with each other.

That said, it is interesting to consider Djébar's acknowledgment of the archival representation of colonial Algeria and her combined use of the archival sources with her own imagination in her narrative. David Lloyd suggests that

A perpetual tension subsides 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.<sup>22</sup>

Djébar portrays this tension, aspiring for self-origination but troubled by the archival accounts which she must utilize as the basis for her narrative if she is to succeed in

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<sup>22</sup> Murdoch, p. 73.

reimagining, repositioning and rewriting an Algerian cultural memory. This can be best seen in her explanation of her reaction to a report she comes across in the archives by Colonel Pelissier, dated 22 June 1845. Pelissier's report recounts the massacre of the Ouled Riah tribe in the caves of El-Kantara. Djebar acknowledges that without this source she would never have known about the massacre of her ancestors in such detail and would only have heard of it through oral tales passed down through generations. She explains in her narrative how Pelissier's report, as horrific as it is, caused her to feel a certain acknowledged indebtedness to him for recording what happened:

...my only hand-holds are words in the French language – reports, accounts, evidence from the past...could my exploration be obstructed by a belated 'partiality'?...Yes, I am moved by an impulse that nags me like an earache: the impulse to thank Pelissier for his report...which allows me to reach out today to our own dead and weave a pattern of French words around them...I venture to thank him for having faced the corpses, for having indulged a whim to immortalize them...[Pelissier] is for me the foremost chronicler of the first Algerian War!<sup>23</sup>

This quote from Djebar plainly documents her conflicted feelings over Pelissier's report. She acknowledges and is indebted to Pelissier's reconstruction of the past because it has informed and assisted her in rewriting her counter narrative of colonial Algeria. From his report, Djebar writes, 'I, in turn, piece together a picture of that night' and is able to 'weave' her fictional tale from a combination of his words and her own.<sup>24</sup> However, Djebar does display that she is deeply disturbed by her feelings of gratefulness to this 'butcher-and-recorder'.<sup>25</sup> This disturbance echoes Lloyd's theory of the perpetual tension between wanting to produce one's own history and the necessity of acknowledging an inability to do so without reference to the accounts that came before. The French colonial archival sources are a valuable basis of information for Djebar as they hold traces of her ancestors which offer a starting point for her fictional reconstruction. As she explains, speaking of Pelissier but perhaps true of all of the chroniclers whose sources Djebar has examined in the archives, he 'hands me his report and I accept this palimpsest on which I now inscribe the charred passion of my ancestors'.<sup>26</sup> However, this notion of palimpsestic

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<sup>23</sup> Djebar, pp. 77-78.

<sup>24</sup> Djebar, p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> Djebar, p. 78.

<sup>26</sup> Djebar, p. 79.

historical construction leads to a consideration of the extent to which, by reimagining, repositioning and rewriting the French archives, Djébar is creating a further fictive memory of colonial Algeria and begs the second question, who is entitled to speak for past events in the present?

Djébar's other aim in using the French archives, apart from reimagining Algerian cultural memory, is to counter the authority and hegemony of the French view of colonial Algeria. She rejects the French colonizer's conception of Algeria and refuses to tolerate the French archives as the only recognized narrative of Algerian conquest and colonial history. She does not want the colonizer's account to speak for Algerian history. However, by examining and rewriting the French archival sources to create her own counter narrative, Djébar is at risk of positioning her adaptation of the past in the same manner against which she is struggling. Murdoch explains this phenomenon:

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 the tendency not only to see herself through the eyes of the Other, but to draw on aspects of the colonizer's model in order to elaborate her own sense of subjectivity.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, in addressing the question of who is entitled to speak for past events in the present, it is useful to consider the extent to which Djébar is creating a further fictive memory of Algeria. This is achieved by examining the similarities between the French archival sources and Djébar's narrative.

The similarities can be seen in three major ways. First and predominantly, Djébar writes on behalf of those who cannot write. Just as the French reporters of the Algerian conquest wrote of their own experience as well as the experiences of the Algerians, who could not document their own narratives in the French archives, Djébar writes on behalf of herself, and also on behalf of Algerian women who cannot write their own experiences or histories for themselves. Indeed, the 'I' in her novel has a distinctly representational characteristic.<sup>28</sup> Of course, 'I' does refer to the narrator herself, there is a clear singular narrative voice at work in the novel, but it also can be seen to refer to Algerian women

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<sup>27</sup> Murdoch, pp. 73-74.

<sup>28</sup> Salah M. Moukhlis, 'Assia Djébar's *L'Amour, la Fantasia*: Colonial History and Postcolonial Identities', *Connecticut Review*, 24.2 (2002) 115-125 (p. 121).

collectively. Djebar addresses the enforced silence of Algerian women, explaining, 'How could a woman speak aloud, even in Arabic, unless on the threshold of extreme age? How could she say "I", since that would be to scorn the blanket-formulae which ensure that each individual journeys through life in a collective resignation?'<sup>29</sup> Therefore in writing the representational 'I' in *Fantasia*, Djebar can be considered to act as the omniscient voice of Algerian women, just as the French archives could be seen to act as that voice for colonial Algeria as a whole. It must be noted that Djebar herself comes from an educated and privileged background, belonging to a family who encouraged the rejection of the cloistered life of the majority of Arab girls in order for her to enter the outside world.

This brings us to the second similarity between the French archival sources and Djebar's narrative, namely the disparity between Djebar and the Algerian women whom she seeks to represent. Djebar is from a distinctly different social position than the women to whom she aims to relate. She is highly educated, bilingual, bicultural and liberated from the cultural repression faced by the majority of Algerian women described in her novel. She explains, 'I had passed the age of puberty without being buried in the harem like my girl cousins; I had spent my dreaming adolescence on its fringes, neither totally outside, nor in its heart; so I spoke and studied French, and my body, during this formative period, became Westernized in its way'.<sup>30</sup> The women she aims to represent are from a very different social class and cultural heritage than Djebar herself, which is similar to the French archival sources in that it places Djebar socially and culturally apart from her subjects.

The third similarity between the French archival sources and Djebar's narrative can be seen in the fact that Djebar also writes in French. Just as the French archival sources document Algerian culture in their language, so Djebar documents Algerian culture in another language. This has been commented on by Murdoch, who believes that Djebar makes her novel problematic,

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 women who do not speak French and cannot speak for themselves, Djebar's

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<sup>29</sup> Djebar, p. 156.

<sup>30</sup> Djebar, p. 127.

narrative will inevitably problematize its own discourse to the point where its own tenuous coherence threatens to dissolve.<sup>31</sup>

Djebar acknowledges this issue and highlights the consequence, stating, 'Speaking of oneself in a language other than that of the elders is indeed to unveil oneself, not only to emerge from childhood, but to leave it, never to return'.<sup>32</sup> This statement suggests a rift between Djebar herself and the culture she is speaking for. Since she uses the colonizer's language to represent Algeria, she has subsequently removed herself from the group she seeks to represent. This again is entirely congruent with the French archival accounts, which depict Algerian culture from an outsider's perspective and so are removed from it. For Djebar, writing in the French language is problematic for personal reasons as well. The separation it creates between herself and her Algerian heritage is troublesome and causes her an identity-crisis. She writes, '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'.<sup>33</sup> Continuing with the notion of threatened identity, Djebar maintains, 'To attempt an autobiography using French words alone is to lend oneself to the vivisector's scalpel, revealing what lies beneath the skin. The flesh flakes off and with it, seemingly, the last shreds of the unwritten language of my childhood'.<sup>34</sup> She noticeably struggles with an internal paradox, between being grateful on the one hand for the opportunities that her education in the French language has afforded her ('the world and all its riches'), while on the other hand she suffers feelings of resentment toward an education that has essentially made her an outsider from her Algerian heritage.

Thus we have seen three ways in which Djebar's narrative is similar to the French archival sources, although it should be noted that Djebar does appear to be aware of this fact. However, if the French archival sources can be argued to create a fictive and nonrepresentational view of colonial Algeria then, through these similarities, Djebar's narrative can be seen as a further fictive memory of Algeria. She is not remedying the French representation, if such a thing were even possible or required, but creating yet

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<sup>31</sup> Djebar, p. 78.

<sup>32</sup> Djebar, p. 156.

<sup>33</sup> Djebar, p. 126.

<sup>34</sup> Djebar, p. 156.

another representation in a similar fashion. This new representation, however, works to subvert and destabilize the hegemonic archival version. From a postmodern perspective, as Hayden White argues, the writing of historical narratives benefits from the discovery of diverse possible plot structures that might be appealed to, so as to provide a certain event with different meanings. Our perception of the past enhances precisely through the degree to which we employ and combine those plot structures to fabricate a more accurate narrative. In addressing the question of entitlement to speak for past events in the present, as Djébar's narrative has been shown to speak for the past in a similar manner to the French archives, although with different objectives based on differing cultural memories and social ideologies, both the archival sources and Djébar's narrative are effectively equally entitled to speak for the past. As Moukhlis explains, quoting Linda Hutcheon, 'History is no longer the only pretender to truth...both history and fiction are discourses and both contribute equally to our understanding of the past'.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, if it is acknowledged that both the French archival sources and Djébar's account display their own distinctive biases grounded in the established conventions and suppositions of the time and place in which they were written, and neither is more truthful or accurate than the other, then our understanding of the past and the construction of cultural memories is furthered by both accounts. Yet, though the accounts are similar in their display of their biases and the culturally conditioned ideologies at work in each, they do not combine together to make a better understanding of the period and events which they describe. In fact, they contradict and mutually challenge the notion of any possibility of a singular, complete historical view. In the end, perhaps it is the disparities between the two accounts, and the mutual contradictions they display, that contribute to our perception of the past.

This paper has considered the extent to which Djébar, by appropriating the French colonial discourse and its representation of Algeria, attempts to reimagine, reposition and rewrite a new Algerian cultural memory. What is most significant in Djébar's novel are her efforts to respond to the archives, as the 'official history', and to contest them. As Salah Moukhlis persuasively points out, 'What matters in the final analysis is not the truth-value of either discourse, but the fact that a magisterial narrative has been

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<sup>35</sup> Moukhlis, p. 122.

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challenged, contested and destabilized'.<sup>36</sup> The extent to which Djébar appropriates French colonial discourse and subverts it into a new Algerian cultural memory is somewhat difficult to assess because not only is the truth in both the archives and her narrative shown to be ambiguous, but also because Djébar creates her counter narrative from a position apart from the culture she seeks to represent, in a manner similar to the French representation. However, in Djébar's narrative, what is factual and what is fictive is of lesser significance. Her foremost purpose is re-enactment from a new, Algerian-centric point of view.

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<sup>36</sup> Moukhlis, p. 122.

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