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Alexandra Gueydan-Turek
Swarthmore College, agueyda1@swarthmore.edu

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**Visions of Odalisques:
Orientalism and conspicuous consumption
in Leïla Sebbar's « Le peintre et son modèle » (2007)**

Alexandra Gueydan-Turek

Abstract: Revisiting the representational politics of colonial iconography has been at the core of many postcolonial writers' projects, from Malek Alloula to Assia Djebar and Rachid Boudjedra. Such gestures, however, frequently risk appearing exotic. This article examines how Leïla Sebbar's short story « Le peintre et son modèle » (2007) reproduces this tension through the inclusion of a photograph by Joel Leick inline with the text. Despite Sebbar's attempt to deconstruct the photograph's orientalism by situating it outside the aesthetic realm and replacing it inside the material realities of colonial prostitution and the sexual trafficking of women, I intend to demonstrate that the particular representation that Sebbar has chosen reintroduces the very aesthetic elements which her displacement attempted to evacuate. No longer an Odalisque, but a North African Venus, Leick's model offers herself willingly to the gaze of the reader. As an outwardly enticing representation, it elicits a certain gaze from the reader, who becomes an onlooker, a voyeur *malgré lui* and simultaneously an obedient participant in the neo-colonial consumption process. Rereading Sebbar's short story through the lens of this photograph thus allows us to question the limitations of the powers of postcolonial texts and, ultimately, the troubled dependence on orientalist iconography.

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L'Orient, soit comme une image soit comme une pensée, est devenu, pour les intelligences autant que pour les imaginations, une sorte de préoccupation générale. Victor Hugo, preface to Les Orientales (1829)

As a driving discourse of colonial culture, orientalism, too, remains a fixed point of reference in postcolonial criticism, reappearing in the form of past images and fantasies to haunt the contemporary cultural scene. Michael O'Riley ("Specters of Orientalism" 48)

One of the most pervasive and enduring misconceptions about orientalism as a 'system of representation'-- whether it be in its textual or iconographical form—is that it is the sole product of Western white dominated canon and its imperialist practices. Derived from Edward Said's famous book *Orientalism* (1978), this (mis)representation presumes that the essentializing and exoticizing gaze arose from and helped assert European dominance, ultimately became an "integral part of European material civilization and culture" (Said 2), and rendered the Oriental "Other" a powerless victim. In other words, as many critics have suggested, Said's definition of orientalism essentially perpetuated precisely the deep-seated divide between East and West that it had set out to denounce.¹

Said's approach did not allow for tensions, contradictions and discrepancies which might arise from these Orientalist narratives, and gave no room for the colonized subject to assert his voice on par with the master-narrative. Nevertheless, the postcolonial discursive shift that emerged following his instrumental work would give rise to a powerful counter-narrative. As postcolonial scholarship developed oppositional practices and privileged voices from the margins, it instigated an effort to demystify imperialist cultural representations, paying particular attention to orientalist artifacts and narratives. (Alloula; Boudjedra)

As a result, critical readings have often operated with the assumption that the reappearance of orientalist *topoi* and artefacts in contemporary Western culture manifest colonial nostalgia, while reproductions by postcolonial writers and artists automatically involve a subversive act. This dual vision, however, is limited in scope: when colonial postcards are sold by Algerian street vendors in large numbers, and when Algerian painters reproduce paintings of odalisque, it becomes apparent that this schema cannot account for the complexity of negotiations that reality demands (Lazreg 191). If Orientalism is understood to involve the creation and consumption of images of the Orient as colonial desire, then what are we to do with questions of what Rey Chow has called “Oriental’s orientalism”?² Does the (re)production of orientalist artifacts within literary works systematically entail an oppositional practice? Does not such inclusion, despite the author’s best efforts, run the risk of replicating, being co-opted by or even colluding with the uneven discursive geography of “us vs. them” it intended to demystify?

This nexus of questioning is further complicated by the predicament of postcolonial literature’s publishing market: despite being regarded as a product of the margins of the global literary community, this literature addresses primarily Western readers and scholars, and is destined to be consumed by the center. In this light, one can add to the previous questions the following: can a critical intervention forged on orientalism adequately address its historical distortions without feeding on a certain western nostalgia for these visual artifacts? What, exactly, are we to make of this engagement of fiction with identifiable orientalist *topoi*? And what are the ethical implications of this fascination? Does the exploration of orientalist or, more broadly speaking, exotic iconography always-already necessarily serve as a mediation and subversion of visual representation held by European discourse on oriental women? Or, since decolonization does not entail immediate escape from colonial discourse, could it be that the

postcolonial intervention reproduces and duplicates the very oppressive process it was trying to negate?

Such are the theoretical questions that will occupy the forefront of this article. One key author who addresses this problematic in her work is Leila Sebbar. Abundant scholarship has already been produced about Sebbar's convocation of the orientalist intertext in her earliest work (Lionnet, Mortimer, Zimra, Donadey, Vogl, Eileraas). Focusing their readings on the *Sherazade* trilogy and short stories such as "La photo d'identité" in her 1996 collection entitled *La Jeune fille au balcon*, these critics established how Sebbar developed a subversive aesthetics which relied heavily on orientalist artifacts as visual intertext so as to translate and lay bare the process by which this discourse is constructed. My goal shall not be to repeat these readings but to concentrate rather on a more recent work Sebbar produced in collaboration with Joel Leick for the editions Al Manar.

Published in 2007 in a collection of short stories bearing the same title, the novella "Le peintre et son modèle" both mediates and subverts the visual representation of oriental women held by Western discourse. Similar to her previous texts, it effects this by unveiling the material realities, both socio-political and economical, hidden behind the aesthetic representation of the Orient. Yet, unlike anything in her previous oeuvre, "Le peintre et son modèle" incorporates a glossy picture by Leick representing a nude and headless model surrounded by cactuses. Although the visual and textual elements of this combination taken separately each entail a critical rereading of the Western representation of North African women, combined they negate this effect: ultimately, the orientalist paradigm resists the deconstruction attempted by the text and survives through the visual medium offered to the reader's gaze.

Where Have All the Odalisques Gone?

“Le peintre et son modèle” investigates the ambiguous relationship between 19th century painters and Orientalist fantasies, through the story of an encounter between a French painter and his odalisque model. Starting with a confrontation of the socio-historical realities of the colonies, it treats the strategies that artists use to come to terms with the discrepancies between their fantasies of a literary orient and colonial realities. This tension is balanced, however, by the ultimate need for artists to recreate the imagined orient within their oeuvre, and to perpetuate this myth in the colonial *metropole* upon their return to France.

Dedicated to Eugène Delacroix, the short story seems to effect a rereading of the romanticist painter’s famous journey to North Africa in 1832. Returning from a diplomatic mission to Morocco, Delacroix spent three days in Algiers, where he developed the inspiration for his 1834 painting *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*. During this trip, he is believed to have gained access to the private quarters of an Algerian household and to have observed the women of the house without their knowledge. Maghrebi writers, such as Assia Djebar and Rachid Boudjedra, have thus been known to return to Delacroix’s painting to inform their discussion of Orientalism and its oppressive and intrusive impact on Algerian society.³ Despite the artist’s claim to the contrary, scholars and art historian such as Elie Lambert and Joan Del Plato have cast reasonable doubt as to whether Delacroix had in reality visited such a household,⁴ suggesting instead that his artistic vision was based on images collected throughout his journey. Sebbar proposes yet another origination for Delacroix’s famous painting through her novella. Opening with the image of a painter cruising the streets of a North African town in search of a “fine sultane” similar to that of the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights* (6), “Le peintre et son modèle” destabilizes the location from which the colonial lens operates. Iconic representations of

North African women in Orientalist works are questioned while the Orientalist artist's gaze, incapacitated, is superseded by an omniscient narrator. As the painter is unable to capture a vision that would remind him of the literary protagonist of Scheherazade, his frustration becomes perceptible: "La femme qui sourit, allongée sur le sofa, et les musiciennes assises, où sont-elles? Dans les rues, [...] il ne voit pas de femme blanche sinon sous le voile, les négresses vont librement, les mains fortes du travail, les reins fermes, trop massives, des géantes."⁵ (8) [The women who smile, laying on the sofa, or those playing music, where are they? In the streets [...] he cannot see any white women aside from those who are veiled, while the negresses going freely, their hands strengthened by their work, their backs firm, are too massive; they are giants.]⁵ The painter posits himself as a participant within the scopic regime of the colonial power and desire, for whom women's bodies are only seen when white and visible to the eye. For the colonial eye, one must not forget that the presence of the veil was equated with the absence of women from public sphere and that the darkness of one's skin effectively rendered black bodies invisible, even despite their dominant presence.⁶

In order to gain access to a scene that replicates the literary fantasies, the painter has to enter a photography studio. The studio is filled with costumes and props used to recreate the perfect harem scene. As the photographer presents his model, he readily concedes that his work involves the creation of a fiction: « C'est mon odalisque préférée, je la mets partout. En Fatma, en Mauresque, en danseuse, au bain, au cimetière, fumant le narghilé, prenant le kaoua, dans son intérieur... » (9) [This is my favorite odalisque ; I put her everywhere. As a Fatma, a Moorish, a dancer, in a hammam, a cemetery, while smoking a water-pipe, drinking coffee, in her apartment...] The enumeration of different titles of *scènes-types* reveals the interchangeability of the 'native' women in the male gaze, which ultimately facilitates her disappearance into a pure

body. In the photographer's eye, women are reduced to a sexual surface that both spectator and photographer can mold, redefine and possess as he pleases. In keeping with Malek Alloula's study of symbolic violence in early twentieth-century postcards (*Le harem colonial* 1981), this passage suggests that colonial photographers used the same model to depict widely varying categories of scenes, thus jeopardizing the very contention of authenticity on which the sale of these photographs was based. Photography thus appears as a consciously manufactured illusion, which lacks transparency. As with her previous texts, Sebbar draws the attention of scholars on the issue of colonial representation by insisting on photography as a catalyst for false representation by staging the encounter between the painter and a photographer.

The disjunction between reality and representation is further elaborated by the discussion of the identity of the model that serves as an odalisque. The painter discovers that the model is originally from the Caucasus, a "Circassienne, égarée de l'autre côté de la mer" and that she lives in an apartment furnished entirely with decoration from Normandy (10). Despite this reality he perpetuates a delusion in which she, the stranger to North Africa, becomes the very embodiment of the orient: "Elle a la voix de l'Orient, la couleur de l'Orient" (10). The construction of her identity, in other words, is entirely divorced from her outward physical appearance; through this, Sebbar reminds us that reality cannot be contained in a simple visual representation.

Although, like her previous texts such as *Sherazade* and "La photo d'identité," "Le peintre et son modèle" deconstructs Orientalism as a cultural construction and colonial fantasy, it is its mercantile underbelly which is here denounced most vigorously. Instead of a more neutral and non-commercial term, the photography studio is purposely referred to as a "boutique" (9), focusing on its commercial aspect and downplaying its cultural and aesthetic role. Instead of the local image that the painter had initially desired, he ultimately gravitates towards a glossy

simulacrum, a commodity created for international tourist consumption, where the visual economy of the colonial society belongs to a global consumerist network. This is expressed, proudly, by the photographer: “mes collections se vendent dans le monde entier” (9) [my collections are sold throughout the world]. Despite his own revulsion at the view of the ridiculous staging, even the painter is not impervious to the wide dissemination of these images, as they are similar to the pictures that first brought him to the studio (8). In this portrayal, Sebbar has made a subtle shift: images, which were historically part of a colonial economy, are foretold to be reappropriated and perpetuated by a globalized consumer culture.

In parallel, Sebbar acknowledges the local social and economical forces at work in the production of the Orient by bringing the reader “behind the scenes” of the photo shoot. The second encounter between the painter and the odalisque reveals the economic realities of the model’s hardship which had been effaced from the airbrushed Orientalist photos: the Odalisque works as a prostitute in a brothel catering to local men. This reinscription of colonial visual economy within imperialist material economy is further developed by the monetary transaction that opens the narrative as the painter, unable to find a “fine sultane” in the streets, decides to buy five black slaves to pose for his painting (8). Sebbar implies that there is only one small step separating the artist’s studio from the brothel, the visual from the sexual trafficking of women, and the symbolic possession from the material possession. Of course, other critics had already pointed to the economical reality that lay behind those pictures. In *Le harem colonial* (1981), Malek Alloula argued that hired models who were to pose half naked in front of the camera were not ordinary women, but poor peasant women forced to migrate to urban centers, and to become prostitutes:

Ces femmes algériennes inaccessibles, le photographe va leur trouver des équivalents plus complaisants. Ce seront les modèles rétribués qu’il recrutera presque exclusivement

dans les marges d'une société où le déclassé social –consécutif à la conquête et au bouleversement des structures traditionnelles- touche aussi bien les hommes que les femmes, poussant ces dernières vers la prostitution. Paré pour l'occasion d'habits de gala et de bijoux – ces accessoires indispensables de la mise en scène- le modèle, par la grâce de cet art de l'illusion qu'est la photographie, figurera à s'y tromper ce référent inaccessible : *l'autre femme algérienne, l'absente de la photo*. (Alloula 1981: 17, his italics)

Alloula presumes that the models were always prostitutes whose 'transgressive' behavior was an artifact of colonial society, and whose ubiquity in photographs was a consequence of the fact that true Algerian women remained hidden from the Western gaze. By this argument, the "other," that is to say a decent Algerian woman, could not pose for photographers as she had to behave according to religious and moral imperatives at the time. While this might be true, it is important to recognize the limits of Alloula's statement. Without dwelling extensively on the critical body of work that took issue with Alloula's study,⁷ I would like to focus on a specific facet which Sebbar addresses. Despite Alloula's condemnation of colonial oppression as the root of the structural and economical changes in traditional society that lead women into prostitution, his statement seems to assign a particular moral value to visibility, thus aligning itself with a patriarchal discourse which relied on the regulation of female public presence. Although he does not go so far as to blame their conditions onto poor moral choices, Alloula continues to see these figures as 'others' to Algerian society, defined by what they lacked: purity. To subvert the lascivious stereotypes attached to the bodies of Algerian women, Alloula needs to purify them and rid them of any narrative of heterosexual copulation. Imposing a normative behavior on sexual *habitus* of women, Alloula's negative statement comes to condemn all bodies in front of the colonial camera as those of prostitutes and projects, in the words of Winifred Woodhull, "the fantasy of an Algerian nation untroubled by questions of women's oppression" ("Unveiling Algeria"126)

Contrary to Alloula, Sebbar refuses to relocate the model-prostitute in the margins of society and focuses instead on the historical and economic dimensions which had been excluded from Alloula's study. As she uncovers the hidden sexual economy behind the production of the Orient, she calls into question the underlying colonial oppression, the complex race relations and inequalities that existed within colonial society, and the dominant male epistemology, both Western and non-Western. After all, it is no coincidence that the scenes which recount the trading on feminine sexuality always stage different cultures on opposite sides of the deal. From the old black woman who rents black slave girls as model-subjects, to the painter's night as the odalisque's client, and the ultimate murder of the odalisque by an Arab client, the battle for the symbolic control of women that Alloula identified is extended beyond the colonial conquest, to the entire society.

At the end of the novella, the violent murder of the odalisque by an Arab client foregrounds the realities of the difficult life that a foreign prostitute has to endure. Beyond merely enunciating the brutal condition of women living in the margins of colonial society, however,, the prostitute's murder also signals a more symbolic disappearance: that of the image of the odalisque. Indeed, the odalisque's abrupt disappearance frustrates the painter's search for orientalism and, with this, the colonial will to knowledge. This is relayed in the last pages by the recurrent trope of visibility and invisibility: despite the third person narration, Sebbar chooses to frustrate the reader in his spectatorship by limiting his knowledge regarding the murder. No descriptions or details are provided, and the sole testimony we hear is that of a domestic: "Il n'a rien vu. Il raconte ce qu'il a entendu. Il dit la vérité" (11) [He did not see anything. He relates what he heard. He is telling the truth].

With the death of his model, the painter abandons his quest for an odalisque painting, and returns to to the colonial *metropole*. Back in his studio his studio, all of his attempts to recreate the scene he first imagined in North Africa fail. The contrast between his continuing vision, and his recurring failures is manifest in the final exchange between him and his maid:

Le peintre en passant près du chevalet, répète :

— Je suis dans le noir et je vois une odalisque. Je ne me trompe pas. J'ai peint une odalisque...sans négresse. Je ne vois pas de négresse près de l'odalisque blanche...vous la voyez ?

— Je ne vois rien, dit la gouvernante. Le dîner est prêt.

Le peintre ne bouge pas ; debout devant la toile sombre, il regarde l'odalisque endormie sur un sofa rouge et or. (12)

Walking near his easel, the painter repeats:

— I am in the dark and I see an odalisque. I am not mistaken. I have painted an odalisque...without a negresse. I do not see a negresse near the white odalisque...can you see her?

— I do not see anything, says the housekeeper. Dinner is ready.

The painter does not move; standing in front of dark canvas, he looks at the odalisque sleeping on a red and golden sofa.

Significantly, seeing and representing are ultimately linked with terms denoting obscurity. The darkness of the night impedes the painter's vision and is antithetical to his own desire for enlightenment and, by extension, that of the colonization: the painter is "in the dark" in both senses of the term. As demonstrated by the reiteration of the disruption of the scopic trope, orientalism has lost all referents, even in the imagination of the painter, and is thus exposed as an illusion. As his canvas remains bare, the subject's very identity remains suspended and he can no longer fully identify himself as a painter and a creator.

Despite this final frustration of the colonial will to knowledge, the short story's ending is not without a certain pain. The artist ultimately appears in Sebbar's eye as a prisoner and a victim of his own fantasy, in much the same way that the model was slave to her economic condition, and the women of the novella remain subjugated to their social and gendered roles (as

slaves, prostitutes, or maids). The painter's role foregrounds the missed encounters between the colonial subject and the object of his desire, and foreshadows the very ambiguous relationship between France and Algeria, Sebbar's dual countries of origins and affiliation; the roles of the other women call specific attention to the question of women's conditions and speaks to Sebbar's desire to stress transnational female solidarity, even though, in this particular instance, no direct ties link the female protagonists to one another.

From Reading to Gazing: the lecteur-voyeur

If indeed "Le peintre et son modèle" lays bare the process of production of orientalist *clichés*, both literally and metaphorically, it also participates in the elaboration of a parallel fantasy, particularly exemplified by the insertion of a photograph by Joel Leick supplementing Sebbar's narration.⁸ At first, this photograph appears to conflict with Sebbar's orientalist narrative. The black and white photograph depicts at its center a nude model standing within an exotic garden; her genitals are covered by the foliage of a cactus leaf which links the model to the nature that surrounds her and operates as a horizontal cut within the picture. This visual axe, reinforced by a play on light and shadow, brings to our attention the stark contrast between her pale breasts offered to the viewer and her modestly concealed vagina.

Although the artistic coupling of the painter and his model that appears in the title of the collection and of the short story refer directly to the protagonists of the orientalist painter and his exotic model(s), the nude in the photograph contains many differences with the reclusive odalisque. Through its aesthetic refashioning of the exotic female body, Leick's photograph parallels Sebbar's story and operates with a similar displacement from the horizon of expectation that was built by the orientalist intertext of the narration. Its unusual framing that cuts off the head of the model reduces it to an "anonymous" nude, whose sole purpose is to incarnate a

depersonalized body. In its showcasing of the very objectification of the woman's body, the photograph forces the reader to adopt the position of onlooker, or to become "le regard désirant" and embody the Western male gaze, replete with desire.

The choice of the exotic setting clearly serves to displace the frame of the narration. Many different settings could have accomplished this however, and Sebbar's particular choice is clearly by careful design with a clear end: the garden, with a sole cactus leaf in focus, recalls the painter's garden referred to in the accompanying short story, and further asserts the parallel between the photograph and the narration. The photographer and the painter thus collude in their gazing at their respective models in their gardens. While both the garden and the harem's chamber traditionally depicted on orientalist work are replete with sensuality, only the garden suggests a savage, untamed and natural beauty. These characteristics, which the reader logically extends to the model's body, contrast with the lasciviousness and "domesticated" appearance of orientalist models, and its harem-like décor. As Fatima Mernissi notes, the close interior space that the orientalist artist invades thematizes the transgressive crossing of the harem's limits, and while this crossing served to embody the power relation between the feminine colonized and the colonial gaze, it was also 'a strategy for containing [and controlling] her [sexual] power' (Mernissi 19). In contrast to this, the exterior setting symbolizes the extrication of the model from this power dialectic

Yet, despite these fundamental differences between the narrative's odalisque and the photograph's, the reader is invited to perceive the latter within the former's orientalist context by virtue of its interjection within the narration. Functioning via flagrant eroticism rather than being simply suggestive, the photograph calls the reader to scrutinize a body clearly paralleling that which he is driven away from in the story's ending. The reader is invited, in other words, to

become the spectator of the missing odalisque. The juxtaposition of Sebbar's novel with Leick's photograph thus complicates the reader's position by denying him the simple dissociation from and negative judgment of the painter of her story.

Although this photography remains on the threshold of the text, it still precludes a subversive reading of the text, as there exists a contradiction between the foretold goal of the short story (the condemnation of orientalism) and the conspicuous sensuality of Leick's image. In *Double exposures*, Mieke Bal warns scholars against trying to find an adequate mode of representation and reappropriation of colonial and orientalist illustrations. According to her, the 'perlocutionary effectivity' of colonial and orientalist iconography is such that any reproduction or revision risks reinforcing the fascination of the spectator with the object of his/her criticism (Bal 196-197).⁹

This danger is even more pressing in the collaboration of Leick and Sebbar, where neither a caption title nor an explicatory note is given to the reader to clarify the meaning of the photograph and its relationship to the text. Without these key elements, nothing mediates between the image and the reader, and nothing is able to guide him in combining his reading of both elements. Even if the "seasoned" reader was to capture the criticism of the colonial visual practice within the short story itself, wouldn't his critical interpretation be tainted or even relegated to the background by the pleasure (both aesthetic and voyeuristic) that one experiences when faced with a « mise en scène » of the palpable sensuality of the nude?¹⁰

While I have no simple answer to this question, it is not one that can be ignored: this image is going to remain with us whether we like it or not. What I wish to emphasize here is the idea that, irrespective of the author's and the artist's individual intent, the successes and limits of the final oeuvre have less to do with its specific content than with the way those elements are

combined in the final publication and with how the readers receive it. In other words, publishing and reading are not a passive matter but are instead engaged activities that involve negotiation and resistance on the part of the reader, in such a way that, despite or in spite of its intended meaning, the text is bound to be filtered through, reinterpreted and transformed as it is received and understood.

In the light of this poststructuralist textual instability, the school of reader-response critics, such as Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss and Michael Riffaterre, have argued that scholars need to shift attention away from the “literal meaning” of the text and the creator’s original intent to the “constructed meaning” that results from the reader’s interpretation. Elaborating on this interpretation, and on what Stanley Fish has termed “interpretive communities,”¹¹ Robert Fraser calls our attention to the fact that reading is not a private nor isolated process and that all interpretations are socially and culturally situated and conditioned.

Texts are received and read by different communities of readers, who are bound to react differently to what they are given [...] No reader approaches a text with a blind mind. The political conditions in which he or she lives will of necessity affect expectation, and determine the way in which any set of statements, any given storyline, will be perceived. (119)

Fraser, through Fish, elaborates on the idea that our interpretation of a text is indebted to our personal background, our historical context, and the way these factors condition what reading practices and “interpretive strategies” we deploy.

Here, it should be noted that Sebbar, like most francophone authors, addresses a predominantly metropolitan market where the demand is often driven by French readers who are most likely unaware of postcolonial interpretive paradigms and their workings. As such, we face the distinct possibility that a non-academic reader of Sebbar’s work might be unable to recognize postcolonial strategies such as those that Sebbar deploys. It would be natural for such a reader,

furthermore, to remain fixated on the visual and supposedly ‘transparent’ photographic medium as a visual aid to his/her interpretation of the text. Of course, it could be argued against my point that visual media, such as photographs, are no different than textual media, and can elicit multiple readings from different spectators: Their reading will vary according to the inclination of the viewer and the interpretive community to which she/he belongs. But whether Leick’s photograph is treated a work of art, an illustration, or viewed as a disguised form of pornography, there is an element of the erotic underlying both the nostalgia and the voyeurism that is inescapable.

Our interpretation of the text is rendered more complex by the reality of the publishing market, and the specific connotations of the way the book’s packaging negotiates this market – effectively, how the book situates itself via its sales pitch. Although considerations such as these are rarely tied to the problem of reception as discussed above, they are, at their core, a consequence of the same issue. As articulated by Kwame Anthony Appiah in his opening discussion of the relation between postmodernism and postcolonialism, the market economy and the global art scene often collude to create contemporary structures of domination that are more subtle and less visible than their colonial precedents. Examining the selection of a 1987 African art exhibit in New York, Appiah denounces the criteria that are used to filter African art and render it available to the Western public: financial considerations combined with a specifically Western understanding of African aesthetics are the decisive factors used to assess the value of these artworks. In the process, the figure of the Western buyer becomes prevalent, privileged over the figure of the creator. (Appiah 57) In this process of commodification, the creator/artist/writer is thus destined to become more of a ‘producer’ anticipating the Western public’s demand than an artist *à part entière* if he/she is to pursue his/her art.

Appiah's reading of this art market can be extended to analyze postcolonial literature as "a postcolonial commodity," and in this precise case to reconsider Francophone literature which is produced in France and for French readers. Laroussi, extending this reading, notes that "The origin of the discourse [is] no longer the Maghreb but France, where exoticism has been reinvented and the orientalist paradigm survives" (Laroussi 88) In saying this, Laroussi implicates the writer in commodification of his/her work, implying that the displacement of francophone literature to the old colonial *metropole* mirrors a vested interest on the part of the old colonized. Exoticism and orientalism, Laroussi argues, remain integral to the writing and reading of postcolonial literature because of the interpretive and publishing practices that still prevail in France.¹² Although I agree with Laroussi's argument, I would temper his statement with the caveat that the critical agendas of the writers need not coincide with the way their books are read or marketed, and as such this does not invalidate their creative project. Even if this sort of argument does not categorically deny her project, however, this does remind us that Sebbar's writing is understood to have succumbed to a certain commercial demand. While the impact of commercialization on Francophone works is widely acknowledged, what is rarely alluded to – and what is most relevant here— is the fact that the French market exercises a power over literature which might replicate imperialist power relationships while displacing it only ever so slightly.

In his outstanding study *Packaging Post/Coloniality* (2005), Richard Watts investigates how controlling mechanisms and power relationships operate at a paratextual level (Watts 2-3). Arguing, with Watts, that the paratext and peritext of francophone works published in France, in certain instances, can still act as a "neo-colonial ballast [...] that continues to weigh it down," (Watts 172), I wish now to turn to the peritext and examine how this short story was made

available and legible for its readership. Given the relation between imperialist discourse and the paratext established by Watts, it is not surprising that orientalist stereotypes, apparently dismantled by Sebbar, reappear on the back cover of Al Manar's edition:

De l'Orient des palais et des jardins odalisques et courtisanes de Delacroix à l'Orient altéré de Kateb Yacine. De l'Orient à l'Afrique et à l'Asie sur fresques pétrifiées de la Porte Dorée à Paris. De l'Orient qui résiste en Palestine à l'Orient de l'exil et de la folie. Le retour au pays natal. (Back cover)

[From Delacroix's Orient made of palaces and gardens of odalisques and courtesans to Kateb Yacine's altered Orient. From the Orient to Africa and to Asia laid on petrified frescos of the palace of the Porte Dorée in Paris. From the Orient that resists in Palestine to the Orient of exile and folly. The return to a native country.]

In the same vein as Leick's photograph, this back cover is part of an editorial strategy that is meant to include Sebbar's narrative strategy within a wider context of crossing borders between France and the Maghreb. It intersperses French perception of the orient (embodied by Delacroix and the Museum of the Porte Dorée) with that of the Algerian Kateb Yacine and Sebbar's own "return" to her native land. The omnipresent label of the Orient recalls in an uneasy manner Edward Said's "imaginary geography," equating the commercial packaging with a gesture that obliterates an entire critical tradition since Said and celebrates the Orient (REF). Against all odds and against the grain of Sebbar's text itself, this peritextual¹³ framing tends to reduce her writing to an "easily assimilable form of otherness" (Watts 161). In my view, this not only reasserts her text as a new form of exoticising, but, most importantly, provides a rhetorical reframing of Sebbar's collection itself. Indeed, this text has particular significance as it is the only external commentary that accompanies both the short story and the photograph, and can thus serve to highlight any theme imputed to the volume as a whole. This gesture that targets a predominantly French readership replete with nostalgia sheds light onto the surreptitious domination that the *métropole* exercises in francophone literature.

Guilty pleasure in the age of consumption

It would seem that the collaboration between Leick and Sebbar is a missed encounter between textual and visual practices, which, instead of revising the pleasure derived from the sight of colonial and orientalist imagery, perpetuates it. This paradoxical gesture is evocative of the dissemination of Orientalism as a postcolonial “idiom” that Michael O’Riley has recently established in his scholarship. Questioning the omnipresence of orientalist imagery in postcolonial studies, O’Riley discussed the perpetual reemergence of orientalism as a “colonial sit[e] of memory,” calling into question whether the fascination of postcolonial literature and criticism with images of colonial violence is part of a fully conscious process (“Postcolonial Haunting” 7-9). The constant return to orientalist images, O’Riley explains, reveals a legacy that follows from a compensatory discourse and, as such, appears to be inescapable. If, at first, the exhumation and reappropriation of these images appears to denote a voluntary critical engagement on the part of the critics and writers toward this “colonial site of memory,” O’Riley explains that the persistence of this “fixed point of reference” turns it into a site of “orientalist haunting.” Echoing O’Riley’s influential study, Anastasia Valassopoulos explains that the word ‘haunting’ in its Freudian sense does indeed indicate “a latent or unconscious *slipping* into discourse,” suggesting that somehow the postcolonial writers who give themselves to this exercise “are *powerless* to change the trajectory of their writing” (135).

This tension between conscious recovery of the occulted orientalist legacy (which goes hand in hand with the gesture of reappropriation), and the risk of reinscription of an imperialist gesture through this process is particularly present in “Le peintre et son modèle.” Indeed, contrary to the ending of Sebbar’s short story “La photographie,” which O’Riley holds up for its “destruction of the fetishistic impulse [...] [and] refusal to participate in the spectral dynamics”

(O’Riley, “Orientalist Reminders” 172) the presence of a blank canvas in our final scene reinscribes the “blind spot” central to postcolonial orientalism. Despite her death, the odalisque comes back to haunt the painter, as a presence which recalls the haunting voyeuristic impulse perpetuated by Leick’s photograph, in spite of Sebbar’s text.. Perhaps consciously, Sebbar mimics through this oeuvre and her collaboration with the artist¹⁴ the conundrum at the core of postcolonial studies: even within the appropriation and subversion of dominant cultural codes, one always remains dependent upon these very codes (Lionnet 174-175).

The tension between the field of production and its reception, which remained implicit in O’Riley’s and Valassopoulos’s analysis, is also very much at the forefront of Sebbar’s work. If, as O’Riley rightly suggested, the return of writers and critics to the site of orientalist artifacts, and in particular visual media, risks reproducing the machinery of marketable sex, it is partly because those works circulate in and are read by the old colonial *metropole*. Although I agree with both critics that there exists an injunction to francophone writers to incessantly return to orientalism as a site of memory, in practice, the specific source of this injunction is left vague whether it is from a return of the repressed (as Valassopoulos would have it), from a colonial literary and cultural legacy that O’Riley does not wish to ignore, or—as I wish to suggest— from the combination of both with the implicit desire of an editor and the expectations of the readership.

In the case of “Le peintre et son modèle,” this complex network of influences can be seen at work through the production and the reception of this novel. In addition to the blurb that appears on the back cover of the collection, the reviews published in the mainstream press clearly receive this work in the orientalist tradition¹⁵ The type of reading that predominates celebrates the exotic aspect of the collection, privileging lush descriptions which give the illusion

that the stories are readily available for aesthetic enjoyment through the copious use of sensualist adjectives: “Un renvoi parfois nostalgique vers le jardin secret des esthètes du paradis perdu [...] L’Etranger aime se raconter l’Orient, monde des sens et de l’interdit” (Fériel Berraies Guigny) [A return at times nostalgic to the secret garden of the esthetes of the lost paradise [...] The Stranger likes to tell himself stories about the Orient, a world of senses and of the forbidden]. These nostalgic readings of Sebbar’s text are echoed by a purely aesthetic engagement with Leick’s photograph. As Djilali Bencheikh, from Radio Orient, puts it, the collection constitutes « un recueil de beauté et d’engagement avec une jolie photo de nu » [a collection of such a beauty and engagement with a pleasant picture of a nude].

Finally, along with O’Riley, one can question the ethical ramifications that the recollection of the orientalist paradigm brings with it. Does it, as O’Riley would have it, testify, to a propensity for the writer and the society in which he/she writes to focus on the past, ignoring the problems of contemporary society (“Orientalist Reminders”¹⁷³)? Or, can we benefit from such a practice to better understand the tumultuous relationship between the ex colonial *metropole* and to its old colonies? In a slight departure from O’Riley, I would actually conclude that Sebbar’s obsessive return to the site of orientalism is an important engagement with persistent, contemporary French perceptions of “oriental women” as the radical other. Rather than viewing such orientalist imagery purely as a residual historical artifact, I would argue that engagements such as Sebbar’s serve an important social role moving forward, debunking derogatory underpinnings of contemporary discourse which may impede effective solutions to more pressing socio-political problems.

¹ There is little doubt that Edward Said's scholarship was instrumental in the questioning the representativeness of dominant—that is to say white, Western and male—discursive geography. However, critics have rightfully addressed the limits of Said's argument, calling particular attention to his overarching, unifying and transhistorical view which seemingly subsumes and homogenizes the tensions and contradictions that the relations between colonized and colonizer ought to entail, repeatedly depicting the Oriental 'Other' as a powerless victim. Cf *Studies* by James Clifford; Bryan Turner; Carol Appadurai Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer among others.

² In his study *Primitive Passions*, Chow terms "Oriental's orientalism" the self-exoticizing gestures through which subalterns willingly and willfully stage themselves as radically 'other,' and to a certain extent parody orientalism's politics of representation. Building on Bhabha's mimicry, Chow systematically equates this gesture with a subversive tactic which replicates the Western fetish and presents ironically the onlooker's gaze with exactly what he wanted to see (179).

³ Assia Djébar's postface to *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1979) entitled "Regard interdit, son coupé" most famously took to task Delacroix's portrayal of the women as passive prisoners, dispossessed from their own bodies and spectator to their own condition.

⁴ I borrow this reference to Carine Bourget's article in which Bourget explores the limits of Assia Djébar's postface to the second edition of *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*. By referencing Del Plato, Bourget pinpoints Djébar's temptation to romanticizing Delacroix's supposed encounter with the harem (n 9 p. 102).

⁵ All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁶ According to Emer O'Beirne, the physical contrast between the portrayal of black and Arab women constitutes one of the recurring motifs of Orientalism. The skin color and the musculature of African bodies are used as foil to the fairness of the skin and sensuality of North African women (qtd in Bourget 97).

⁷ While acknowledging the critical debts they owed to Alloula's controversial work, feminist scholars have also rightfully criticized the limits of his postcolonial project. In order to turn back the colonial gaze onto itself, Alloula appropriates women's voice and recuperates their position as victims to denounce the orientalist visual archive and its colonial foundation. Yet, by positing Algerian women as passive victims and reproducing alluring colonial postcards, extensively supported by titillating sexual descriptions of their content, Alloula reinscribes and perpetuated the symbolic violence first made against women (Cf. Lazreg, Vogl, Woodhull).

⁸ For the purpose of this study, I will focus on the picture that appears in the main edition and that is the most widely diffused in print. The same photograph appears twice: on the front cover, cropped to include only the bust of the model, and on a full page within the text, across from page 8. This photograph is part of a set of multiple pictures which ornate different editions of the text. The specific photograph that I discuss in this article can be found in the standard edition of the text, as opposed to the *exemplaires de tête* (40 total sold 300 euros a piece) that were each adorned by two original photographs by Leick, one on the cover, another in frontispiece. Although those photographs differ in their setting and the position of the body of the model, the differences have little impact on the way this text is read. The photograph studied here, along with examples of photographs from the *exemplaires de tête* can be seen on the website of the editions Al Manar <<http://www.editmanar.com/auteurs/Peintre%20et%20modele.htm>>.

⁹ "This effect does not disappear before a critical analysis of the images that merely studies their constative messages. More importantly, it also affects the critic writing about them. The critic cannot help being the expository agent, the pointing subject who shows the image, even if the image is the object of this subject's negative analysis." (Bal 196-197)

¹⁰ In her critical study of Djébar's postface to *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, Bourget rightfully demonstrates the limits to Djébar's rereading of Picasso's paintings as emancipator. Arguing along the lines of Richard Leppert's study of the nude within the Occidental tradition, Bourget notes that nude paintings reproduce the

scopic exclusivity of the male gaze and participate in the objectification of women. Perhaps, Bourget suggests, if there existed a liberation of female bodies and an opening of the harem in Picasso's work, then it would be only "to the pleasure of both the artist and his spectator" (Bourget 98-99).

¹¹ This concept first appeared in Stanley Fish's *Is there a Text in this Class?* (1980) in which Fish polemically called into question the very pre-existence of a text prior to theoretical interpretation and, most importantly, located the production of textual meaning as the "social and intellectual milieu in which a text is consumed rather than to its author or reader *per se*." (16) Fish's argument was widely criticized in its oversimplification of the different systems of meaning that coalesce in a text. In promoting "interpretive communities" as the sole system within which meaning was produced, Fish dismissed the author as an authoritative source, and overlooked the role the publisher and the media might have in shaping the text's reception. Finally, Fish's restrictive definition of "interpretive communities" forbade any variation within and negotiations in between these communities.

¹² Postcolonial critics such as Edward Said in "Secular Criticism" (1983) and, more recently, and Graham Huggan in *Postcolonial Exotic* have used a comparable argument to bring to attention the fact that Orientalism and exoticism are central to the scholarship of postcolonial literature. Postcoloniality has become as much an intellectual as a cultural commodity. Said, in particular, brings Fish's concept of authority of interpretive communities to the forefront of his article to raise the awareness in the profession of a tendency to close itself off from the world, and become a sort of echo chamber.

¹³ I refer here to the peritext as defined by Jean Genette in *Palimpsestes*, that is to say to peripheral features of a traditional text which include the cover, titlepage, table of contents, chapter titles and subtitles, epigraphs, preface and postface, notes, and illustrations. (9)

¹⁴ It is important to note that, according to an interview that I conducted with Alain Gorius, the editor of Al Manar, Sebbar herself chose Joel Leick as a collaborator after being consulted by Gorius. (Interview conducted during the "Rencontres internationales de l'édition de création," in Marseille, France, on October 16 2009).

¹⁵ These articles are available on the site of the editions Al Manar, and have been thus recuperated as purely promotional pieces, even though their primary intent might have been to give an "objective *compte-rendu*" of the collection of short-stories (<<http://www.editmanar.com/auteurs/Peintre%20et%20modele.htm>>).

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