Atlantic Cross-Currents:
Transatlantiques

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REFOCUSING ALLOULA'S GAZE:

A Feminist reading of The Colonial Harem

by Nasrin Rahimieh

Malek Alloula's *The Colonial Harem* (originally published in 1981 in French under the title *Le Harem Colonial: Images d'un sous-erotisme*) has given rise to much debate and commentary among postcolonial, feminist, and cultural critics. The questions Alloula raises about the colonial representations of Algeria are focused on analysis of postcards produced by the French in Algeria during the first three decades of the century. His aim is to expose the appropriating and objectifying gaze of the colonizer, primarily upon the female colonized. In the colonial photographer's obsession with representations of veiled and nude women, Alloula discovers both the colonizer's scopic desire and obstacles to the fulfillment of that desire. He emphasizes the gaze of the colonizer and, in fact, bemoans the absence of a returned gaze:

> A reading of the sort I propose to undertake would be entirely superfluous if there existed photographic traces of the gaze of the colonized upon the colonizer. In their absence, that is, in the absence of a confrontation of the opposed gazes, I attempt here, lagging far behind History, to return this immense postcard to its sender. (5)

What is left out of this delayed exchange between the colonizer and the colonized is the Algérienne, who incidentally does stare back upon the colonized, a second time denied subjectivity and agency. Even in Alloula's postcolonial rereading of history, she is nothing but an image of her own absence, an image over which men, be they French or Algerian, inscribe discourses of male domination.

In my analysis, I would like to go beyond Alloula's attempt to confront the French colonizer. What I propose is a further problematization of the very conditions of such an exchange that relies upon representations of women's bodies but inadvertently denies them voice and agency.

The first obvious question that occurs to anyone leafing through *The Colonial Harem* concerns Alloula's choice and particular arrangement of the postcards. Why does he choose those postcards in which women are predominantly represented and how does his organization of those postcards under various chapter headings reflect the logic of his analysis? Alloula offers an answer to the first part of the question in the first two paragraphs of the opening chapter, "The Orient as Stereotype and Phantasm." For Alloula, the Western image of the Orient has been inextricably linked with the forbidden interior of the exotic and enticing harem: "There is no phantasm... without sex, and in this Orientalism, a confection of the best and the worst — mostly the worst — a central figure emerges, the very embodiment of the obsession: the harem" (3). That the feminization of the Orient is closely linked with the colonizer's desire for domination through violence is a familiar argument underlying Alloula's choice of postcards. He himself does not directly address his particular selection. In the introduction to the English translation, the issue is raised by Barbara Harlow. Pointing out that the French also produced architectural and landscape postcard representations of Algeria, she writes: "Landscape views are likewise of interest in cases where possession and occupation of the land are at stake. Women, however, have long been at the centre of the conflict between East and West" (xiv). Interestingly this clarification is left up to Harlow, while Alloula presents us with the images of Algerian women whose bodies became the primary site of colonization. Or, as Rey Chow has pointed out in *Writing Diaspora:*

> ... the images of the Algerian women are exposed a second time and made to stand as a transparent medium, a homoerotic link connecting the brown man to the white man, connecting "third world" nationalism to "first world" imperialism. What results is neither a dismantling of the pornographic apparatus of imperialist domination nor a restoration of the native her 'authentic' history but a perfect symmetry between the imperialist and anti-imperialist gazes, which cross over the images of native women as silent objects. (41)

Women, we are reminded, are not the exclusive targets of the colonizer's ambition. That is why Alloula, the male colonized subject, can easily identify with the figures represented in the postcards: "What I read on these postcards does not leave me indifferent. It demonstrates to me, were that still necessary, the desolate poverty of a gaze that I myself, as an Algerian, must have been the object of at some moment in my personal history" (5). In his "were that still necessary," Alloula appears to see himself free of that objectifying gaze, but in the next sentence he confirms the need to counteract the gaze, presumably on behalf of others: "Among us, we believe in the nefarious effects of the evil eye (the evil gaze). We conjure them with our hand spread out like a fan. I close my hand back upon a pen to write my exorcism: this text" (5). It should be noted that, after having introduced his

own subjectivity into his analysis of the postcards, he seems to withdraw into the background, to finally emerge as the central force and imagination behind the text.

This move between the position of subject and object, to which Alloula subjects himself in the last paragraph of the first chapter, is crucial to our understanding of the focus of his re-animation and re-presentations of Algerian women in French colonial postcards. He admits to a partial identification with the female figures, but his subjectivity as an Algerian man is and must remain distinct so that he can address the colonizer on behalf of his female counterparts. It is important to stress that Alloula is aware of the difficulty he will have in negotiating the necessary position and voice. His vacillation between subject and object is itself indicative of his self-conscious positioning vis-à-vis the women on whose behalf he speaks. The almost exclusive focus on French representations of Algerian women can also be seen as necessitated by Alloula's difficulties in occupying a position of authority from which to speak for and about his female compatriots. If, for instance, he throws only a cursory glance at the photographs of couples grouped together in Chapter Five, it is because he is compelled by the force of his own argument to shift the focus back upon women.

> ... in contrast to the series on "women's quarters" in which the documentation is relatively large, the series on couples turns out to be quite lean. The nature of the subject as well as the difficulty of finding male models no doubt explains this shortcoming of photographic "inspiration," this thematic gap. (37)

Alloula's undocumented assertion that male models would have been much less easily coopted by the ethnographic gaze raises questions about his own male-centered view of Algerian society, one he unproblematically transfers from the early decades of the century to the time of his writing:

> Moreover, if it is true that Algerian society is generally loath to let itself be photographed, it makes sense that it would be, a fortiori, even more loath to do so in the case of couples. The mixing of the sexes that is supposed by the photographing a couple is doubly inconceivable in the Algerian family at the beginning of the century. (37)

It is remarkable that Alloula does not see the paradoxical position in which he himself is caught vis-à-vis the ethnographic reductionism of the colonizer/photographer. Alloula counters the ethnographer's oversimplification of the patterns of Algerian social and familial interaction with sweeping generalizations of his own. Rather than opposing the uniformity of the ethnographer's gaze with the real complexities of Algerian social fabric, he sacrifices a productive resistance strategy in favor of a self-authentication that affords him the right to speak on behalf of a seemingly timeless and Orientalized society. Ironically, this same

positioning prevents Alloula from taking into account the nature of gender relations in Algeria. The consequences of this oversight are spelled out by Winifred Woodhull in her Transfigurations of the Maghreb. She argues that Alloula's strategy takes for granted that what is evident in the photographs is "the desire of the colonial photographer to render Algeria transparent: his fascination with veiled and unveiled Algerian women betrays his wish to strip Algeria of its cultural identity, deny the existence of its male population, and possess it through its women" (37). Woodhull locates the failure of Alloula's project in his "assessing the pernicious effects of the postcard images exclusively from the standpoint of Algeria's male population... and thus obstruct[ing] efforts to resolve conflicts between men and women in Algeria, conflicts that cannot be explained solely in terms of colonial exploitation" (38).

Alloula could have anticipated this critique and produced a different reading of the postcards by applying the kind of double critique Abdelkabir Khatibi suggests in his *Maghreb pluriel*, a postcolonial reading strategy which allows the colonized to engage at once in a critique of the colonizer and a self-critique. Alloula's *Colonial Harem* completes only the first part of this double critique. In his rereading of the postcards, he succeeds in performing a crucial anticolonial gesture whose importance should not be overlooked. In fact, had he not taken this initial step, I doubt that so many critics would have had the occasion to push the critique further. In the absence of his self-critique, I will attempt to open up the parameters of his analysis and identify those of Alloula's blind spots that prevent him from making the transition from decolonization to postcoloniality.

Decolonization and postcoloniality may be seen as signifying the same socio-political conditions of detachment from colonialism. But, if viewed as discursive formations, they can refer to two distinct stages of engagement with a colonial past. The discourse of decolonization may be seen as one that is still caught up in the necessary polarization between the colonizer and the colonized. Postcolonial discourse, on the other hand, shifts the focus further away from the colonizer and also erodes the compulsory, but illusory uniformity and univocality of the colonized. This opening onto the complexity and multiplicity embedded in the term "colonized" is crucial if we are to avoid slipping into neocolonialism.

With this distinction in mind, let us now turn to *The Colonial Harem* and see how a double critique might produce a different, feminist position from which to send the postcard back not just to its original sender, but also to the secondary proprietor.

In her "Politics of Citation," Mieke Bal offers such a reading of Alloula's preoccupation with female figures. She argues that, in many instances, Alloula appears to become complicit with the photographer and to adopt the latter's erotic vision. For example, offering to pass aesthetic judgments on the quality of the photographs, Alloula seems to remove

himself from the necessary critical distance that would enable him to place the postcards in a larger historical and social frame of reference:

> Alloula's blindness to the functional position of the pimp in the colonial sexual economy betrays a more general blindness to the ideology of class. Whereas he does pay due attention to the exploitation of the female models as wagewinners whose labor was poorly rewarded, and whose subservient status determined the self-humiliation imposed on them, his aesthetic judgments on the "artistic" quality of the postcards or lack thereof demonstrate not only an erotic complicity with the postcards, but a class-bound contempt for the products of popular culture. When he writes that the photographs are failing in quality, their poverty does not lie in the Eurosexism but in the failure to do a good enough job.... One wonders whether the critic is simply disappointed by the lousy quality of the porn? (37)

What Bal's analysis brings to light is the investment of Alloula's own desire and his own subjectivity which direct him further and further away from the position and plight of the women depicted in the postcards.

Alloula's primary focus on the French male voyeur overlooks the problematic figuration of Algerian women in Alloula's own gaze. He is so preoccupied with returning the gaze of the French colonizer that he subjects Algerian women to a second level of objectification. If the French photographer used Algerian women to live out his own sexual fantasy, then Alloula uses those same women, in new configurations suggested in the various segments of his argument, to deny the photographer the fulfillment of that fantasy. Alloula's ultimate goal is reflected in the last paragraph of the book which faces a photograph that bears the caption, "Moorish Bust." That the nude upper torso of the photographed woman is envisioned by Alloula as a challenge to the photographer is confirmed in the text: "Voyeurism turns into an obsessive neurosis. The great erotic dream, ebbing from the sad faces of the wage earners in the poses, lets appear, in the flotsam perpetuated by the postcard, another figure: that of impotence" (122). As Irvin Cemil Schick has demonstrated in "Representing Middle Eastern Women," wrenching the photographs away from the specific social and economic conditions that led to their production prevents Alloula from coming to terms with the larger colonial agenda of which the postcards are only one manifestation:

> Such ahistorical psychologizing can hardly explain the mass phenomenon that was Orientalist photography. Although this kind of argument may conceivably explain the motivations of a given photographer, it is untenable to suggest that an entire industry owed its existence to the photographers' collective scopophilia. Nor am I inclined to believe that a pimp conducts his sordid business as a vicarious means of satisfying himself, rather than as a matter of economics based upon the exploitation of women's bodies. (353)

As I have already pointed out, Alloula does little to counteract this exploitation of women by failing to grant them a site of resistance. He misses what Marc Garanger describes in the Introduction to his *Femmes algériennes* 1960 as the photographed women's "look at pointblank range" (Qtd. in Woodhull 43). The angry and defiant way in which many of the women in postcards chosen by Alloula stare back at the camera is at odds with the promise of pleasure and sexuality he attributes to them. For instance, Alloula's text opposite the "Moorish Bust" reads:

> Raided, possessed but always offered with the bonus of a smile and elegance, these women are phantasmically freed by the postcard from their prison, the harem. The postcard lifts the veil from them and grants them a space (that of the postcard) in which they can romp and frolic to their hearts' desire. (122)

The juxtaposition of the "Moorish Bust" and what Alloula in the next paragraph calls the "very space of orgy" could not be more discordant. It would seem that, in the process of analyzing the postcard, Alloula's own gaze has been diverted from the model's angry facial expression to her breast. A different reading of this same postcard could, without much effort, transform the space of orgy to the space of defiance.

Where we might begin to see other traces of resistance and the returned gaze in the postcards is precisely in the "erotic" representations of Algerian women. The very artificiality of the setting and the exaggerated details and ornamentation might provide another domain of analysis. Not all the smiling women appear as complicit participants. But Alloula fails to make distinctions between the various expressions on the face of the "models." His primary interest is indeed to re-animate them as testimonies of French domination. A telling reminder of Alloula's fascination with this kind of reanimation is his analysis in Chapter Eight, "Song and Dance." Where the still photos fail miserably in portraying the supposedly erotic movements of the body and the mesmerizing voice of the singers, Alloula rushes in to help the photographer whose representation he completes and brings back to life through his commentary:

> ... song and dance, by the very fact that they propel and animate, that is exteriorize, have the virtues of a psychodrama played out in a closed environment. They are the equivalent of an imaginary escape from the rigid limits of the confinement, distended as long as the feast lasts. (86)

Ironically, the photographs do not convey any of the movement and breaking from rigid boundaries Alloula reads into them. The erotic mobility he inscribes onto these photographs distracts from a paradoxical rejection of the gaze and the game of the colonizer/photographer. The models may be forced into erotic poses dictated by a desire for the alien and exotic other, but the very medium used to capture these images testifies to the colonizer's failure. Had Alloula left the inadequate and telling representations to stand

on their own, he might have been in a better position not to simply recall the colonial past but to propel himself into a postcolonial future.

The only traces of resistance Alloula himself finds in these postcards are in the photographs of veiled women, who unlike the nude or half-clad subjects of the remaining postcards, always appear in groups: "It will be noted that whenever a photographer aims at a veiled woman, he cannot help but include in his visual field several instances of her. As if to photograph one of them from the outside required the inclusion of a principle of duplication in the framing" (11). Ironically this collectivity can only pose a challenge to the photographer's gaze through a self-erasure:

> The whiteness of the veil becomes the symbolic equivalent of blindness: a leukoma, a white speck on the eye of the photographer and on his view finder. Whiteness is the absence of a photo, a veiled photograph, a whiteout, in technical terms. From its background nothing emerges except some vague contours, anonymous in their repeated resemblance. Nothing distinguishes one veiled woman from another. (7)

One might add that this whiteness not only marks the absence of a photo, but rather the absence of a viable subject position that Alloula himself is capable of recognizing. If the only resistance offered by Algerian women to the colonizing gaze of the photographer is to be negotiated from beneath a veil that imposes uniformity and anonymity, then it is not surprising that Alloula finds it necessary to speak on their behalf. In his analysis of the depiction of the veiled women, in comparison with the photographs of nude or half-clad women, Alloula is far more reluctant to pay attention to the details. It matters little to him that in these representations there are often men accompanying women who, in some cases, stare directly into the camera. How are we to interpret their returned gaze?

While in the later chapters Alloula sees obvious traces of deliberate poses and sets, in the case of the veiled women he is not willing to consider the possibility that even these photographs are staged. Why should we assume that veiled women represent an "authentic" and unproblematic Algeria? Alloula's lack of treatment of the position of the Algerian male subjects points to a deeper problem: the opportunity Alloula misses is to read into these postcards the history and practice of veiling by Algerian women. Under those veils, the women may be less susceptible to appropriation by the colonizer, but are they not subject to an internal mechanism of domination that forces them into subordination to Algerian men? Seen in this light the resistance these women offer is carefully staged by Algerian men who, as depicted in the photographs Alloula chooses for us, watch over them and herd them around. I do not wish to imply a simple equation of the veil and oppression of women. As Fatima Mernissi has demonstrated in *The Veil and the Male Elite*, the history of the veil is far too complex to be subjected to this kind of reductionism. What I am emphasizing is Alloula's effective elimination of women's agency by

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limiting it to groups of veiled women. Read in light of Alloula's comments on the photographers' difficulty in coercing men into posing in front of the camera, this imposition of resistance on a female collectivity becomes another subtle denial of women's individual agency.

To find a viable alternative to Alloula's vision, we have to step outside his rhetoric of anticolonialism and seek testimonies of women who do not

> satisfy themselves with a mere act of negation when they write about themselves... [and] shoulder a double burden, namely, to work toward an epistemological break with the prevailing paradigm and to reevaluate the structure of gender relations in their own societies. (Lazreg 101)

As I have suggested above, Such work has been undertaken by Fatima Mernissi who situates her feminist analysis in the social and historical conditions of women's lives in Islam. Most relevant to my analysis is Mernissi's *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* in which she embarks on uncovering the names, identities, and careers of women silenced by history. More interestingly, unlike Alloula, she insists on analyzing the reasons for which these women's existence and voice have been suppressed. For Mernissi, the uncovering and analysis of a forgotten history is a first step towards empowerment and political agency:

At a time when those among us who have advanced degrees are counted by the millions,... at a time when we are supposed to be shrewder, better informed, and more sophisticated, we find ourselves firmly excluded from politics. The essential problem is in fact one of space. Women are disturbing as soon as they appear where they are not expected. And no one expects to see us where decisions are made... So there is an urgent need for us to decode our grandmothers' secrets. Who were these mysterious queens? How did they succeed in achieving power without frightening the men? (4-5)

In a similar vein, Assia Djebar, an Algerian woman writer who was once married to Alloula, unravels the myth of the harem in her *Sister to Scheherazade*. We observe the difficult path along which her two protagonists, Isma and Hajila, travel to liberate themselves from the omnipotence of the anonymous male character through whom they are bound together: "Does the body of every male serve to indicate the crossroads towards which we women spin, blindfold, out of control, holding out our hands towards each other?" (76). For these woman the harem is a prison — not exclusively a construct of the European imagination, but rather one imposed by their own social customs: "In the secret of the nest, in this hidden corner of the night, in the warmth of this ignorance, the harem closes in on all of us women" (97). If Djebar succeeds in debunking the myth of the harem as a place of libidinal excess, she does so by unleashing a complex verbal domain against the colonial visual economy. In her anticolonial gesture, she follows the colonial gaze only as far as it

enables a new discursive space from which Algerian women have traditionally been excluded. It is from the interior of this seemingly impenetrable and mysterious domain of sexuality that we hear the very voices whose right to speak Alloula fails to acknowledge. In contrast to Djebar's, Alloula's strategy, though anticolonial in its own right, comes perilously close to replacing European colonization with a mechanism of neocolonialism from within.

If Djebar problematizes the space of the harem by focusing on the women subjected to its confinement, in her "Female Trouble in the Colonial Harem," Emily Apter unveils unsuspected expressions of sexuality on the part of the French colonizers which mark an even more noteworthy departure from Alloula's vision of the colonial harem:

> Insofar as much of the suspense of the harem genre devolves around the introduction of an interloper into the interdicted space of the harem, it may ultimately be read from a postcolonial feminist perspective as an antiphallic, gynocentric fantasy about the thwarting of colonial mastery. Challenging the apparent impregnability of phallic authority, undermining the threat of castration used to keep this authority intact, fostering Mektoub — a kind of fatal, voluptuous, sapphic masochism pegged to an originary self-generating feminine libido, the harem sub-genre of *littérature coloniale* communicated the unconscious wish for an *exote-ic* discourse of feminine *jouissance* no longer mimetic or envious of discursive *phallocentrism*... the culture which turned to psychoanalysis in an effort to name its unnameable inner obsessions (thereby colonizing itself from within), turned for the same reward to colonial narratives that nourished, through their mixture of realism and phantasm, the dream of a feminocentric eroticism as yet unconquered. (219)

Alloula's inability to conceive of such subversive implications of the colonial gaze and desire stems from a masculinist logic he cannot escape. The anticolonial posture he has assumed is one which insists on protecting and secluding women, not bestowing upon them the power of subversion.

The note on which Alloula's book ends reminds me of a recent book on the history of photography in Iran, *The Treasure of Iranian Photography*, which dates back to the nineteenth-century and the Qajar kings' fascination with things European. During his trips to Europe, Nasir udin Shah, the Iranian monarch, learned the art of photography and returned to Iran determined to preserve images of himself and his subjects. This obsession with the images of his own power is evident in the photographs as well as his commentary on the photographs. Paradoxically, however, the very medium though which he believed to have gained more authority over his subjects ended up recording a picture of his own assassin. The photographs Alloula redeploys and comments upon similarly remind us of his being caught in the very apparatus he uses to dismantle one means of objectification.

Critical intercultural readings of the sort Alloula undertakes need not be doomed to failure as long as in reading one cultural practice against another, we do not posit false and simple dichotomies and do not overlook complexities and diversities inherent in any domain of culture.

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Women's Sexuality and the USE OF THE EROTIC *in Calixthe Beyala*

by Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi

One of the strengths of African women writers has been their ability to reclaim and rewrite their oppressive histories by reconstructing herstories, creating other stories with the materials at their disposal: women's lives and women's experiences. The Cameroonian, Calixthe Beyala, is one of those new voices in African literature who has given a different dimension to that Other voice through complex representations of the woman's body-as-text in her writing.[1] Beyala presents what I read as "institutionalised" heterosexuality and what this practice, in conjunction with women's economic disadvantaged position, has had on the objectification of women's bodies. The commodification of women's bodies in Beyala's work underlines not only how men enforce and reinforce women's subjugation, but also, how women themselves have become part of the oppression and exploitation of other women.

Some women, however, are presented by Beyala as having agency. They are portrayed as having the will and ability to fight the objectification of their bodies. In my view, Calixthe Beyala uses the erotic as a discursive tool, to examine the different ways in which women can strive towards empowerment and agency. Through their exploration of the erotic, of what Audre Lorde has described as "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognised feeling," women create positive closer ties with other women ("Uses of the erotic" 53). They valorise women-to-

1. She has published to date: *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée* (Paris: Stock, 1987), *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* (Paris: Stock, 1988), *Seul le diable le savait* (Paris: Le Pré aux Clercs, 1990), *Le petit prince de Belleville* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992), *Maman a un amant* (Paris: Michel, 1993), *Lettre d'une Africaine à ses soeurs occidentales* (Spengler), *Assèze l'Africaine* (Paris: Michel, 1994), *Les Honneurs perdus* (Paris: Michel, 1996) and *La Petite fille du réverbère* (Paris: Michel, 1998). The first two novels will be the focus of this paper.

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