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Rebellion and Nihilism
in the Works of
Leïla Sebbar and V.S. Naipaul

by

Peter Bartles Stranges

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APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

Bernard Aresu, Professor, Chair
French Studies

Jean-Joseph Goux, L.H. Favrot Professor
French Studies

Betty Joseph, Associate Professor
English

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ABSTRACT

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This study proposes that Leila Sebbar and V.S. Naipaul, two widely-read contemporary novelists, intuitively understand Albert Camus’ idea of revolt, using it to legitimate their non-essentialized, transcultural models of individual and collective identity. This dissertation views an Algerian teenager’s rendezvous with Nobel Prize-winning author V.S. Naipaul in Les Carnets de Shérazade as a magical portal through which Leila Sebbar allows us to see her fiction as a subversion and a reappropriation of the liberal philosophical principles underlying V.S. Naipaul’s novels and travel journals. Although they interpret the increasing visibility of cultural, racial, and religious fundamentalisms in Western and non-Western societies as signs of a gathering nihilistic storm, neither Sebbar nor Naipaul believe that these epistemologically bounded ideologies of revolt are invincible. Instead, both depict rebellion, an epistemologically open-ended and altruistic form of revolt, as the exclusive means through which post-colonials across the globe can experience individual and communal wholeness—liberty, equality, fraternity, and peace—amidst the
eponymous mixing of different peoples and truths in the late twentieth century.

Chapter One explores the concepts of rebellion and nihilism in Albert Camus' *The Rebel* and Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*. It also investigates the uncanny philosophical and thematic parallels in Leila Sebbar’s and V.S. Naipaul’s works. Chapter Two analyzes the theme of the returned gaze in Sebbar’s *Shérazade* and *Le Fou de Shérazade*. It shows how Shérazade, Sebbar’s title character, resists Orientalism and Islamic orthodoxy in a rebellious manner. The Algerian teenager challenges the “master’s” desire for supremacy without denying his or her dignity. Chapter Three investigates the relationship between Sebbar’s fiction and *Lettres parisiennes: autopsie de l’exil*, her correspondence with Canadian author Nancy Huston. It demonstrates that Sebbar’s formulation of exile as a hybrid, contingent identitarian space in *Lettres parisiennes* is coterminous with Camus’ notion of rebellion. Chapter Four is a detailed study of Shérazade’s encounter with V.S. Naipaul in southwestern France in *Les Carnets de Shérazade*. Using Anne Donadéy’s model of mimicry, it claims that Sebbar subverts the British-Caribbean writer’s representations of the ex-colonized’s subjectivity and revalidates his underlying faith in rebellion.
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To Nita and Indrajit
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--Introduction--
Rebels in a
Dangerous Time
In *Les Carnets de Shérazade* (1986), Shérazade, a seventeen year-old girl of Algerian descent, meets a popular and controversial British writer in southwestern France. She encounters V.S. Naipaul on a remote country road during a stage of her identitarian odyssey that began a few weeks earlier, in *Shérazade 17 ans, brune, frisée les yeux verts* (1982), with her flight from Paris' hard-scrabble immigrant suburbs. Along with her encounter with Henri Matisse’s *Odalisque à la culotte rouge* in Paris, a catalyst for her “ego trip” across France, the teenager’s rendezvous with V.S. Naipaul is one of the more revelatory moments in the *Shérazade* trilogy, which ends with *Le Fou de Shérazade* (1991). Their meeting is a magical portal through which Leïla Sebbar offers us a quick, highly revealing glimpse of the philosophical principles on which she and Naipaul have built their fictional and nonfictional edifices. These widely-read post-colonial writers intuitively understand the notion of rebellion defined by Albert Camus in *The Rebel* (1956) as man’s:

refusal to be treated as an object and to be reduced to simple historical terms. (Rebellion) is the affirmation of a nature common to all men, which eludes the world of power.¹

Sebbar and Naipaul are late twentieth-century defenders of rebellion’s liberal principles—liberty, equality, and solidarity. According to Camus, humanity had lost its way from these ideals during a violent

groundswell of nihilism, which reached its apotheosis at mid century in Nazi Germany’s extermination camps and the Soviet Union’s gulags.

Yet, Camus never lost faith in humanity, confident that we would rebuild civilization out of the smoldering ruins of National Socialism and Stalinist Marxism once we rediscovered the rebellious spirit:

(W)hen revolution in the name of power and of history becomes a murderous and immoderate mechanism, a new rebellion is consecrated in the name of moderation and of life. We are at the extremity now. At the end of this tunnel of darkness, however, there is inevitably a light, which we already divine and for which we only have to fight to ensure its coming. All of us, among the ruins, are preparing a renaissance beyond the limits of nihilism. (Camus, The Rebel 305)

Leïla Sebbar and V.S. Naipaul interpret the increasing visibility of fundamentalism in the world’s former colonies and metropolises as signs of a gathering nihilistic storm, a backlash against the Enlightenment’s grand narrative of human progress. Although they see the red skies of a new holocaust on humanity’s horizon, these post-colonial writers share much of Camus’ optimism. They also believe that “there is inevitably a light” (Camus, The Rebel 305). Rebellion is their prescription for pulling humanity away from nihilism’s brink. For them, rebelliousness does not simply prevent humanity from sliding into nihilism; it is the only form of selfhood that allows post colonials to
experience what Camus calls the “living transcendence”\(^2\) amidst the eponymous mixing of different peoples and truths in the post-colonial world.

Milton Viorst’s *In the Shadow of the Prophet* claims that the spread of fundamentalism across the globe in the late twentieth century might be symptomatic of a growing revolt against secular modernity. Viorst argues that people in the West, Middle East, and South Asia are turning away from the Enlightenment project to address a spiritual hollowness created by modernity’s excessive “worship of reason.” History will judge whether fundamentalism was an anti-modern fringe movement or modernity’s successor:

Historians may one day denominate the late twentieth century as the age of fundamentalism. Movements characterized as fundamentalist have established themselves among both Catholics and Protestants in the West, among Jews in Israel and among Hindus in India, as well as among Muslims in the Middle East[...]. Has the Enlightenment, with its worship of reason, run its course, leaving behind a sense of emptiness that can be filled only by primitive faith?...Has modern society so depersonalized human affairs that mankind requires stringent religious practice to give meaning to life? If the answer to these questions is yes, then humanity has changed direction from the secularizing process on which it embarked some five

\(^2\) Camus’ idea of the “living transcendence,” attainable through art and rebellion, reconciles divine transcendence and cynicism, giving man a sense of unity or wholeness that is not predicated on denying the dignity of life or other human beings: Nietzsche could deny any form of transcendence, whether moral or divine, by saying that transcendence drove one to slander this world and this life. But perhaps there is a living transcendence, of which beauty carries the promise, which can make this mortal and limited world preferable to and more appealing than any other. (Camus, *The Rebel* 258)
hundred years ago, when European thinkers began undermining the rigors of Church-dominated society.³

Political scientist Benjamin Barber’s *Jihad vs. McWorld* supports Viorst’s claim that modern society’s cynical “depersonaliz(ation) of human affairs” has been the catalyst for the explosion of “primitive” forms of belief worldwide (Viorst 19). Yet, Barber does not argue that modernity’s excessive materialism and commercialism means that the Enlightenment has run its course, as Viorst openly wonders. Rather, Barber writes that the Enlightenment is on the run, subverted from within by “McWorlders” and challenged from the outside by “jihadic warriors.” Barber defines McWorlders as neo-liberals. They are the uncritical champions of modernity understood as “the secular, scientific, rational, and commercial civilization created by the Enlightenment (and is) defined by both its virtues (freedom, democracy, tolerance, and diversity) and its vices (inequality, hegemony, cultural imperialism, and materialism).”⁴ “Jihadic warriors” is Barber’s all-inclusive term for modernity’s foes. In the East and the West, they “gather in isolation from one another but in common struggle against commerce and cosmopolitanism, around a variety of dimly remembered but sharply imagined ethnic, religious, and racial identities meant to root the wandering postmodern soul and prepare it

to do battle with (their) counterparts in McWorld” (Barber 164).

Although *Jihad vs. McWorld* paints an acrimonious, divisive portrait of late twentieth century man, it ends on an optimistic note. Barber believes that (cynical) cosmopolitans and (idealistic) fundamentalists can resolve their ideological conflict in a manner that is peaceful and mutually satisfying—liberal fundamentalism. That is to say, Barber enjoins us to cleanse the world of modernity’s “vices” and reconfirm its “virtues.” A return to the true spirit of the Enlightenment, he insists, can meet the existential needs of cosmopolitans and fundamentalists in a peaceful, non-coercive manner within the framework of the liberal, pluralistic state. Liberal fundamentalism provides these foes with a common ground in between jihad and McWorld, a place where spirituality and cynicism are in equilibrium, thus ending the strife that threatens to plunge humanity into another age of darkness.

Thomas Friedman makes a similar point in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. Friedman argues that to thrive in the post-Cold War era, societies must strike a balance between the Lexus which represents the “age-old human drive for sustenance, improvement, prosperity and modernization—as played out in today’s globalization system”\(^5\) and the “olive tree,” which stands for “everything that roots us, anchors us and locates us in this world—whether it be belonging to a family, a

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community, a tribe, a nation, a religion or, most of all, a place called home” (Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* 31). An imbalance between the Lexus and the olive tree will lead to spiritual and economic problems if a society places development over people, economic underdevelopment if community and culture are put before the global economy. Friedman explains that:

(t)he challenge in the era of globalization—for countries and individuals—is to find a healthy balance between preserving a sense of identity, home and community and doing what it takes to survive within the globalization system. Any society that wants to thrive economically today must constantly be trying to build a better Lexus and driving it out into the world. But no one should have any illusions that merely participating in this global economy will make society healthy. If that participation comes at the price of a country’s identity, if individuals feel their olive tree roots crushed, or washed out, by this global system, those olive tree roots will rebel. They will rise up and strangle in the process. Therefore the survival of globalization will depend, in part, on how well all of us strike this balance. A country without healthy olive trees will never feel rooted or secure enough to open up fully to the world and reach out into it. But a country that is only olive trees, that is only roots, and has no Lexus, will never go, or grow, very far. Keeping the two in balance is a constant struggle. (Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* 42)

Borrowing from Georg Hegel, Francis Fukuyama asserts in *The End of History and the Last Man* that liberal democracy is the most evolved form of social organization because it substitutes “megalothymia,” man’s irrational desire superior recognition, with “isothymia,” the more rational desire for equal recognition. Yet,
Fukuyama tempers his words on modern liberalism’s perfection, adding that the “ideal” liberal society would *ipso facto* disregard man’s natural desire for superior recognition. Fukuyama is no liberal fundamentalist:

> For as Hegel teaches us, modern liberalism is not based on the abolition of the desire for recognition so much as on its transformation into a more rational form. If thymos is not entirely preserved in its earlier manifestations, neither is it negated. Moreover no existing liberal society is based exclusively on isothymia; all must permit some degree of safe and domesticated megalothymia, even if it runs contrary to the principles they profess to believe in.  

Fukuyama suggests that human equality is the Enlightenment’s Achilles’ heel. If left unchecked, which it would be at the end of history, that is, in a society “based exclusively on isothymia,” equality would spark a bloody anti-modern revolt. Fukuyama may not be a liberal fundamentalist, but he is certainly no apologist for nihilism. Fearing that late twentieth-century man will fulfill Nietzsche’s bloody prophesy of “immense wars of the spirit” (Fukuyama 335), he implores Western democracies to “permit(s) some degree of safe and domesticated megalothymia, even if it runs contrary to the principle(s)” of liberal thought. We could say that Fukuyama is appealing to democratic societies to inoculate themselves against the virus of history, or better still, to keep up-to-date on their booster shots, by injecting

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healthy doses of megalothymia into the social body. If they do not, nihilism, which is already manifesting itself in anti-modern movements such as Islamic fundamentalism and European parochialism, will become a pandemic. Fukuyama warns, “(i)f liberal democracy is ever subverted by megalothymia, it will be because liberal democracy needs megalothymia and will never survive on the basis of universal and equal recognition alone” (Fukuyama 315).

The End of History and the Last Man is Fukuyama’s public health campaign. He employs Hegel’s master/slave dialectic to show that the disease of history, whose advanced symptoms are fear, hatred and murder, will break out in liberal societies--megalothymia will subvert stable democracies--if they cease to vaccinate themselves with inequality:

(H)uman beings will rebel at the idea of being undifferentiated members of a universal and homogeneous state, each the same as the other no matter where on the globe one goes. They will want to be citizens rather than bourgeois, finding the life of masterless slavery--the life of rational consumption--in the end, boring. They will want to have ideals by which to live and die...This is the contradiction that liberal democracy has not yet solved. (Fukuyama 314)

Fukuyama argues that last man, “the creature who reportedly emerges at the end of history” (Fukuyama 300) will undoubtedly repeat history. Mirroring the save, who rebels when he can no longer bear being treated by the master as an object, the last man will grow
weary of the objectification he experiences in the true liberal democracy, that is, the “universal and homogeneous state” based solely on equal recognition. He will revolt to make his comfortable bourgeois society recognize his irrational desire for superior recognition because he “find(s) the life of masterless slavery--the life of rational consumption--in the end, boring. (The last man) will want to have ideals by which to live and die.” He will strive to bring an end to the end of history for the same reason that the slave strives to bring history to an end--it reduces him to thinghood, to a creature of rational or physical desire. Like the slave, the last man is wants the others to recognize his dignity.

Fukuyama’s vision of the unrealized post-historical society bears a striking resemblance to Benjamin Barber’s McWorld and Thomas Friedman’s Lexus. Fukuyama also blames modernity’s rationalistic excesses for the spread of anti-modern protest movements--jihads and olive trees--across the globe. Whereas Barber, for instance, suggests that modernity’s rationalistic “vices,” (Barber 164) such as consumerism and cultural imperialism, are symptomatic of a betrayal of the Enlightenment’s true spirit, Fukuyama claims that isothymia, rational recognition, is “the contradiction that liberal democracy has not yet solved.” He sees the increasingly cosmopolitan and commercialist character of modern liberal societies as an outcropping of democratic ideology. Liberal societies reduce men to an economic
existence because they “tend to promote a belief in the equality of all lifestyles and values.” He adds, “if men are unable to affirm that any particular way of life is superior to another, then they will fall back on the affirmation of life itself, that is, the body, its needs, and fears” (Fukuyama 304-5). In other words, modern liberalism is creating “masterless slaves” people whose highest aspiration, to borrow from Thomas Friedman, is to drive a Lexus.

For Fukuyama, thymotic man is on the verge of becoming a rational last man; the imminent conclusion of human history will spark a nihilistic insurgency. “If men of the future become bored with peace and prosperity, and seek new thymotic struggles and challenges, the consequences threaten to be even more horrendous (than the Great War). For now we have nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, which will allow millions to be killed instantly and anonymously” (Fukuyama 335-6). Future “immense wars of (the spirit) foretold by Nietzsche” (Fukuyama 335) would not only have the potential to subvert modern liberalism, they could ignite another holocaust. Today’s democrats could easily metamorphasize into tomorrow’s jihadic warriors, the defenders of olive trees, unless democratic societies roll back their advance towards the end of history.

Fukuyama goes on to claim that the most egalitarian or rational societies will be more likely to fall behind their more inegalitarian or irrational rivals the closer they move towards the end of history.
People will lose their creative drive, their irrational desire to transform their condition in a post-historical society if their society restricts their existence to rational consumption. In a world where megalothymia has been tamed and reconfigured as isothymia, “no excellence or achievement (is) possible” (Fukuyama xxii). For Fukuyama, this explains why “(a) civilization devoid of anyone who wanted to be recognized as better than others, and which did not affirm in some way the essential health and goodness of such a desire would have little art or literature, music or intellectual life.” (Fukuyama 315) This is because human life “involves a curious paradox: it seems to require injustice, for the struggle against injustice is what calls forth the highest in man” (Fukuyama 311). He adds, “the end of history will mean the end, among other things, of all art that could be considered socially useful, and hence the descent of artistic activity into (the) empty formalism[...].” (Fukuyama 320).

Although he borrows this idea from Hegel and Nietzsche rather than Albert Camus, Fukuyama agrees with the French novelist’s premise in *The Rebel* that art and rebellion loose their social utility when the artist/rebel strives for the absolute. Camus abrades redemptive ideologies such as Christianity and Marxism for “preserv(ing) a belief in the finality of history” (Camus, *The Rebel* 69) and man’s deliverance from the dispersed world. He sees them as nihilistic because they “betray(s) life and nature, (and) substitute(s)
ideal ends for real ends, and contribute(s) to enervating both the will and the imagination.” (Camus, *The Rebel* 69) In other words, Camus argues that man is most exalted when engaged in a emancipatory struggle, when he makes moderate “aesthetic demands” on his condition. Art and rebellions based exclusively on “formal principles” (Camus, *The Rebel* 273), deny human dignity and the grandeur of life; they deny us our right to make modest distortions on the world.

For Camus, absolute belief in reality is no less nihilistic than total faith in the metaphysical: “If nothing is true, if the world is without order, then nothing is forbidden, to prohibit an action, there must, in fact, be a standard of values and an aim.” (Camus, *The Rebel* 69). Without a belief in higher, transhuman values, we cannot differentiate between goodness and evil. All values are relative, hence, “(w)e are free to stoke the crematory fires or to devote ourselves to the care of lepers. Evil and virtue are mere chance or caprice.” (Camus, *The Rebel* 5). Arbitrary force, the law of the human jungle, determines social relations in the cynic’s world. Camus counters that a person is whole only “beyond the (cynical and idealistic) limits of nihilism” (Camus, *The Rebel* 305); he or she achieves (the living) transcendence

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7 Camus writes that art is a form of rebellion because it also seeks to transform the world into a more meaningful or unified form:

*In every rebellion is to be found the metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility of capturing it, and the construction of a substitute universe. Rebellion, from this point of view, is a fabricator of universes. This also defines art. the demands of rebellion are really, in part, aesthetic demands. (Camus, *The Rebel* 255)*
during the struggle to reconcile "life and nature," the physical world, with his or her metaphysical "standard of values." Hence, Camus conflates wholeness with "diminish(ing) arithmetically the sufferings of the world" (Camus, The Rebel 303) through rebellion, the moderate and hybrid "stylization" of reality. A person is authentic, metaphysical and physical, when he or she places and maintains the two facets of nihilism in equilibrium. "Civilization" or collective wholeness, Camus asserts, "is only possible if, by renouncing the nihilism of formal principles and the nihilism without principles, the world rediscovers the road to creative synthesis," (Camus, The Rebel 273) the living transcendence.

My dissertation argues that Sebbar and Naipaul also value the struggle for a more dignified existence more than the realization of the pie-in-the-sky dream of universal human emancipation. In fact, their prose fiction and personal journals portray epistemological finality as detrimental to human dignity. Both argue that finalized configurations of meaning are responsible for much of the world's suffering. They deny our essential right to transform reality through

\footnote{Stylization promotes the living transcendence because it establishes an equilibrium between the metaphysical and the physical, idealism and cynicism, man and nature, and so on:}

(O)ne principle remains common to all creators: stylization, which supposes the simultaneous existence of reality and of the mind that gives reality its form. Through style, the creative effort reconstructs the world, and always with the same slight distortion that is the mark of both art and protest[...] The creative force, the fecundity of rebellion, are contained in this distortion which the style and tone of a work represent. (Camus, The Rebel 271)
“the creative effort” (Camus, The Rebel 271). Hence, their works do not seek to abolish the post-colonial’s suffering; they attempt to diminish it incrementally (which is also Fukuyama’s goal, albeit from a different direction). Sebbar and Naipaul write to advance history, not to erect a late twentieth century post-historical society. Through their aesthetic demands, these writers strive to create a rebellious “civilization” in-between idealism, “the nihilism of formal principles,” and cynicism, “nihilism without principles” (Camus, The Rebel 273). Prototypes of “creative synthesis,” (Camus, The Rebel 273) their narratives edify the living transcendence and the idea of a pluralistic, multicultural state.

Chapter One establishes the philosophical framework of my study. I explore the concepts of rebellion and nihilism in Albert Camus’ The Rebel and Francis Fukuyama’s The End of History and the Last Man. While Fukuyama tackles the problem of nihilism from a different perspective, his analysis of directional history is an invaluable explanatory model for my study. This chapter also explores the uncanny philosophical and thematic parallels between Leïla Sebbar’s Shérazade 17 ans, brune, frisée les yeux verts, Les Carnets de Shérazade, and Le Fou de Shérazade and a host of V.S. Naipaul’s works, including The Enigma of Arrival, The Mimic Men, Among the Believers, and An Area of Darkness. I demonstrate that Naipaul and Shérazade continue Albert Camus’ legacy of diminishing the suffering
of mankind. They view rebelliousness as the only identity that can offer wholeness without slandering man or nature.

Chapter Two analyzes the theme of the returned gaze in *Shérazade* and *Le Fou de Shérazade*. I argue that Shérazade’s contestation of other characters’ attempts to objectify her through representation doubles as a struggle for equal recognition. This chapter sees the teenager’s resistance to Orientalism and Islamic orthodoxy as prototypical rebellious acts, struggles that challenge the “master’s” desire for supremacy without denying his or her dignity. I also argue that Shérazade’s epiphanic encounter with Henri Matisse’s *Odalisque à la culotte rouge* is one of the more important rebellious acts in Sebbar’s *Shérazade* trilogy. The title character challenges Matisse’s configuration of the (ex) colonized’s subjectivity while reappropriating his desire to stylize the world at the interstices of the East and West. In doing so, Shérazade makes her own slight distortion on the post-colonial world by engaging with the *Odalisque à la culotte rouge* on equal footing. She foregrounds the viability of “métissage,” cultural hybridity, as a liberating and egalitarian strategy of selfhood, and she exposes the limitations of self-identities which repress the Other’s dignity and the indeterminate nature of meaning.

Chapter Three investigates the relationship between Sebbar’s prose fiction and *Lettres parisiennes: autopsie de l’exil* (1986), her correspondence with Canadian author Nancy Huston. I argue that
Sebbar’s formulation of exile as a hybrid, contingent identitarian space in *Lettres parisiennes* is coterminous with Camus’ notion of rebellion and the living transcendence. Her letters portray France in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a society drifting towards the totalizing extremes of exile—solitude and the homogeneous, organic community. The *Shérazade* trilogy reterritorializes late twentieth-century France as a more liberal, egalitarian, and cohesive polity. These novels expand the space of true exile, rebellion, beyond the author, who laments in *Lettres parisiennes* that she is without a like-minded group of peers, and thus is exposed to solitude. This chapter studies the “socially useful” nature (Fukuyama 320) of Sebbar’s narratives, that is, it investigates writing’s momentous role as instrument for promoting a liminal form of individual and collective wholeness. It argues that Sebbar strives to bring herself and modern French society back from the brink of nihilism by synthesizing nihilism’s material and metaphysical forms. Writing offers Sebbar a sense of wholeness; reading Sebbar incites the public to reconfigure France’s somewhat fixed national identity as indeterminate. They will realize Sebbar’s (imperfect) dream of a society where liberal ideology supersedes race and ethnicity as the criterion for belonging without the deculturalization inherent in the French Republic’s assimilationist ideology and social policies.

The focus in Chapter Four shifts to Shérazade’s encounter with
V.S. Naipaul in southwestern France in *Les Carnets de Shérazade*.

Using Anne Donadey’s model of mimicry in *Recasting Postcolonialism: Women Writing Between Worlds*, I argue that Sebbar subverts and reappropriates the British-Caribbean writer’s representations of the ex-colonized’s subjectivity. Sebbar has Shérazade lock horns with Naipaul to recast the self-identity of ex-metropolitans, who tend to receive the Nobel laureate favorably, into a form that recognizes the dignity of ex-colonial peoples at home and abroad. At the same time, Sebbar co-opts the rebellious elements of Naipaul’s narratives, insisting that his underlying faith in rebellion bears repeating in the late twentieth century.
For Albert Camus, the rebel’s struggle against the master is an assertion of the universal dignity of mankind. The rebel does not simply reject being “treated as an object” (Camus, *The Rebel* 250) to sate the master’s desire for superior recognition or absolute sovereignty; the mutinous slave declares independence, that is, the consciousness of being distinct from the physical world, in a manner superior to the master’s. The rebel “denies that (the master) has the right to deny him, a slave, on grounds of necessity, thereby “eluding the world of power” (Camus, *The Rebel* 23). The rebel’s desire for equal recognition or “isothymia” is more rational than the master’s desire for superior recognition or “megalothymia” (Fukuyama 337). It recognizes the dignity, the non-material consciousness of all human beings, even the master’s. Being defined or recognized in “simple historical terms” (Camus, *The Rebel* 250) satisfies the slave’s desire for security and the master’s want of total power, which is an inverted desire for absolute security. Hence, the rebel is a great emancipator because he or she liberates humanity—masters and slaves—from the purely physical desire that the master/slave relationship satisfies. Equal recognition is superior to superior recognition because it affirms “a (higher, non-material) nature common to all men” (Camus, *The Rebel* 250) while the latter reconfirms arbitrary and brutish nature of jungle law.

Yet, rebellion is not fully post-historical; it releases us, little by
little, from a self-identity understood in arbitrary or “simple historical terms.” Revolt does not emancipate us from history per se. If history ended, the rebel would not experience the beauty associated with creating, that is, with endowing the dispersed world with meaning. This type of transcendence is foreign to the last man and the cynical master, nihilists who experience wholeness by denying life and the ideal respectively. The living transcendence that rebellion yields is hybrid because it reconciles our physical and metaphysical desires, our want of positive objects, such as food and shelter, and our hunger for negative things, such as dignity. “The rebel himself wants to be ‘all’--to identify himself completely with (the struggle for human dignity)” (Camus, The Rebel 15) because he thrives in this blissful state of equilibrium in between the physical and the metaphysical, history and post-history, and self and other. Grasping that humanity is at its most transcendent during the journey to the end of history, the rebel understands that he or she would lose a part of him/herself, namely the ability to stylize reality, if the journey to the end of history ever ended.

“Immediately,” Camus cautions, “rebellion, forgetful of its generous origins, allows itself to be contaminated by resentment; it denies life (and) dashes towards destruction[...].” (Camus, The Rebel 304). Camus warns that the living transcendence is a fragile equilibrium. Rebellions commonly degenerate into nihilism because the
indeterminate nature of the living transcendence does not satisfy
every rebel’s desire for recognition. For Camus, the nihilist is not
simply “one who does not believe in what exists,” which is “the precise
sense that Nietzsche confers on the word,” but can also be “one who believes in nothing” beyond the physical (Camus, The Rebel 69). A
desire for total freedom, which is also a desire for absolute security,
enjoins the redemptive type of nihilist to renounce the physical world.
The historical type negates the metaphysical because the status quo
satisfies his or her desire for liberty and security. This nihilist thrives
in the arbitrary world of power, achieving innocence, independence, by
oppressing others. Whether worshipping the positive or the negative,
the nihilist only feels authentic in a world where where domination and
subordination, tyranny and murder, death and destruction, are the
currency of social relations, where difference, alterity, is threatening.

Jacques, the transparently autobiographical protagonist of
Albert Camus’ The First Man, wages a lifelong battle against the world
that insults his idea of human dignity. An incarnation of Hegel’s “First
Man,” Jacques “become(s) self-conscious, that is, aware of himself as
a separate human being” (Fukuyama 146) when he joins a private
school on a scholarship. Jacques “felt for the first time that (he)
existed” because his teachers and peers recognized him as “worthy to
discover the world.” They acknowledged his dignity, his ability to stylize
his condition:
Only school gave Jacques and (his neighborhood friend) Pierre these joys (of discovery). And no doubt what they so passionately loved in school was that they were not at home, where want and ignorance made life harder and more bleak, as if closed in on itself; poverty is a fortress without drawbridges...No, school did not just provide them an escape from family life. At least in Mr. Bernard’s class, it fed a hunger in them more basic even to the child than to the man, and that is the hunger for discovery...In M. Germain’s class, they felt for the first time that they existed and that they were the objects of highest regard: they were judged worthy to discover the world.⁹

When not at school, this youth from Algiers felt the existential burden of his poverty. At home, Jacques felt as if he were regressing from a rebel, a “thymotic man[...] who is jealous of his own dignity and the dignity of his fellow citizens,” to a slave, a creature governed exclusively by “the complex set of desires that make up his physical existence” (Fukuyama 194). Life was “harder and more bleak” away from school because he lost much of the self-consciousness, the perception that he was more than his physical existence. At home, Jacques considered himself more of a mere object than “an object of the highest regard” because there were no masters, no self-conscious or thymotic individuals at home, who could recognize that the boy was “worthy to discover the world.” For him, poverty was “a fortress without drawbridges,” a closed, immutable world. There could be no possibility of transcendence at home; life was circumscribed to the economic. The extremely poor subsisted; they did not make aesthetic

Poverty's irreversibility makes it a more nefarious form of human association than slavery, Camus insinuates. Whereas the "total absence of recognition (of his dignity) is what leads the slave to desire change" (Fukuyama 194), Camus' impoverished characters do not "desire change" because they do not recognize the presence of a master who is denying them recognition. Instinct is the master they cannot see. In other words, revolt is contingent on unequal recognition, injustice, and inequality. As long as the world insults their dignity, human beings will strive to improve it. They will alter history. On this basis, it stands to reason that grinding poverty, which Camus portrays as a type of prehistory, an existence not grounded in social recognition, can produce neither art nor rebellion. There are no masters to provoke outrage, only slaves. In order to rebel, Jacques was obliged to leave the fortress of poverty. Yet, he could not exit on his own free will; he was not self-conscious. The drawbridge was raised. A scholarship was Jacques' *deus ex machina*.

For V.S. Naipaul, it was a scholarship to Oxford that delivered him from Trinidad, a place he views as a spiritual prison, as a society weakened and divided by its people's slavish devotion to a multitude of redemptionist ideologies, including Hinduism, Marxism, and racial redemption. Reminiscent of Camus' Jacques, V.S. Naipaul associates wholeness with finding one's own way. Naipaul's school is the open-
ended, post-colonial world. Throughout his body of work, the writer conflates individualism with authenticity, arguing that we are incomplete until we detach ourselves from these static and holistic cultural, philosophical, or religious ideologies. As Naipaul sees it, those who champion the afore-mentioned super-stories are nihilistic; the wholeness people experience through them is fraudulent because it derives from the consumption of an absolutist version of truth.

Naipaul portrays post-colonial ideologues as fearful, instinctive creatures, but not quite as a slave in the hegelian sense of the term. Self-conscious, they desire the superior recognition of their dignity, which enjoins them, paradoxically, to deny their own dignity (and the Other's) by adhering to and imposing their totalizing belief system on the world. In *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples*, the 1998 follow-up to his polemical *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981), Naipaul listens as Paydar, a former member of Tudeh, Iran's Communist Party, explains why he walked away from Marxist ideology. He broke with the party because it denied the “individual differences” related to our essential liberty:

I thought that people are much too complicated in their nature to be led in a simple fashion, with a few slogans. Inside ourselves we are full of greed, love, fear, hatred. We carry our own history and past. So when we come to make a revolution we bring with ourselves all these factors in different proportions. Revolutions have always disregarded
all these individual differences.  

V.S. Naipaul gives Paydar the floor because the Iranian legitimizes the writer’s rebellious ideas, reconfirming his faith in the invincibility of the rebellious spirit. Through him, Naipaul implies that even in the most authoritarian post-colonial societies, such as Iran, people revolt against the excesses of nihilistic ideologies. Paydar is confident that Iranians will eventually launch a “revolution in the name of moderation and life” (Camus, _The Rebel_ 305). That is, they will rebel against the clerical regime’s purist interpretation of Islam after reaching the point where they can no longer bear the lack of recognition inherent in “being led in a simple fashion, with a few slogans.” All revolutions, Paydar claims, “disregard” their humble beginnings as protest movements intended to satisfy the complex physical and metaphysical desires of their creators. In so doing, revolutions repudiate what made them--man’s freedom to shape his own destiny, his dignity.

Naipaul’s philosophy of writing resonates in Paydar’s words on protest. In “Our Universal Civilization,” an address he gave in New York in 1992, Naipaul contends that the writer must refrain from imposing his ideas about the world on others. Otherwise, it would be authoritarian, an act of domination:

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I have no unifying theory of things. To me situations and people are always specific, always of themselves. That is why one travels and writes: to find out. To work in the other way would be to know the answers before one knew the problems. That is a recognized way of working, I know, especially if one is a political or religious or racial missionary.  

Naipaul makes a similar point in *Beyond Belief*, where he asserts that even the most benign desire for transcendence is authoritarian. In the late nineties, the writer returned to the *Tehran Times*, an English language newspaper, where in 1979 he interviewed Mr. Jaffrey, a journalist and Shia from Lucknow, India. Naipaul recalled Jaffrey as a lost soul, a person defined by his futile search for *jamé towhidi*, a theocratic society “based on things as they had been in the earliest days of Islam, when the Prophet ruled.” (Naipaul *Beyond Belief* 144). This myth of the pure society of believers took Jaffrey to Pakistan shortly after the Partition in 1948. But Pakistan, Naipaul notes, “hadn’t been able to hold Mr. Jaffrey and his dream.” Reality did not live up to his principles, so he moved on to Khomeini’s Iran in 1979. By the time Naipaul interviewed him for *Among the Believers*, Mr. Jaffrey was at odds with the clerical regime. Persecuted for his anti-Komeini editorials, he fled Iran for Pakistan in 1980. Mr. Jaffrey’s vision of the society of believers uprooted him again:

(For Mr. Jaffrey, *jamé towhidi*) was like a dream of the

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ancient city-state, and in the modern world it was a
dangerous fantasy. At its simplest it was a wish for
security; it also contained an idea of exclusivity[...]
Mr. Jaffrey’s dream of jamé towhidi was to him so pure and
sweet that he hadn’t begun to go into its contradictions.
He loved his faith; he traveled from country to country
because of it; he felt it entitled him to judge the faith of
others. And it was just there, in fact, in his fabulous dream
of an impossible, antique completeness in his awareness of
his own impiety, which was like pride, his constant rejection
of the impure, that the tyranny of the religious state
began. Other people had their own ideas, they, too, felt
they could judge the faith of others. Mr. Jaffrey was
suffering now from the “fanatics” (in Iran). But in his own
way he was like them. (Naipaul, Beyond Belief 145)

Naipaul theorizes that all forms of the faith which purport to be
originary and pure occlude their rebellious origins, and thus the
possibility of coexistence with competing versions of truth. Mr. Jaffrey
is portrayed as nihilistic—he denied the existence of alternate visions
of the faith and the dignity of these visions’ champions—because he
craved absolute security. Acknowledging the validity of alternate
formulations of meaning, which is isothymotic recognition, would have
frustrated Jaffrey’s desire for superior recognition, his need to see
himself and to be seen by others as the only self-conscious believer,
the strongest being in the human wilderness.

Megalothymia also pushed the clerical regime to objectify Mr.
Jaffrey. Seeing his editorials’ “peppery calls for the mullahs to get
back to the mosques and the ayatollahs to get back to Qom” as an
existential threat, Khomeini’s regime made the Indian immigrant “suffer” to position itself as the unchallenged master of Iranian social life. In the end, there could be no common ground, no chance of reconciliation, between these equally orthodox forms of the faith. Mr. Jaffrey and the clerics could only view each other through the lens of alterity. Each saw the (O)ther as an obstacle to transcendence. Their relationship was mediated by nihilism. The regime persecuted Mr. Jaffrey; Mr. Jaffrey rejected Iran (as he had rejected India and Pakistan before that). Until his death in 1990, Mr. Jaffrey’s faith in the abstract principles of jamé towhidi, however anodyne, obstructed him from finding terrestrial happiness; his idealism created nothing except rootlessness. Likewise, the founding of Islamic states in Pakistan and Iran, Naipaul writes, came “at such (a) cost in human life and suffering.”

In The Middle Passage (1962), which documents his travels through the Caribbean, Naipaul links the concept of Western modernity to a civilizational emphasis on individuality. He believes that the West is technologically and socially progressive because it sanctifies the individual. It is rebellious. For Naipaul, modernity in the post-colonial West Indies is an expression of its people’s false consciousness or nihilism. West Indian societies are politically and economically stagnant, he asserts, because they slavishly imitate extraneous Western styles instead of addressing their local needs:
Trinidad considers itself, and is acknowledged by other West Indian territories to be, modern. It has night clubs, restaurants, air-conditioned bars, supermarkets, soda fountains, drive-in cinemas and a drive-in bank. But modernity in Trinidad means a little more. It means a constant alertness, a willingness to change, a readiness to accept anything which films, magazines and comic strips appear to indicate as American[...]. To be modern is to ignore local products and to use those advertised in American magazines. The excellent coffee which is grown in Trinidad is used only by the very poor and a few middle-class English expatriates. Everyone else drinks Nescafé or Maxwell House or Chase and Sandborn, which is more expensive but is advertised in the magazines and therefore acceptable [...]. Modernity in Trinidad, then, turns out to be the extreme susceptibility of people who are unsure of themselves and, having no taste or style of their own, are eager for instruction.\(^\text{12}\)

As with Camus, who defines style as the result of man’s effort to give “the dispersed world a form it does not have” (Camus, *The Rebel* 161), Naipaul considers “style” a signifier of rebelliousness. He argues that Trinidadians “hav(e) no taste or style of their own” (my emphasis) because they equate wholeness with rejecting life. They repudiate their own ability to stylize their condition by disregarding any product or institution of local origin. For Naipaul, the Trinidadian’s distaste for everything local represents a type of post-colonial slavery. Yet, it is not for want of self-consciousness, Naipaul implies, that people in Trinidad (or other West Indian territories) uncritically appropriate what amount to abstract American styles instead of

creating their own.

If “a few middle-class British expatriates” drink the higher quality local coffee, it is because they are metropolitans and presumed by Naipaul to be rebellious. They have the ability to choose their course of action, the capacity to make aesthetic demands. The expatriate’s taste is subjective. Conversely, the islander does not really choose his brand of coffee (or his movies, wardrobe, automobiles, or furniture). The poorest Trinidadians’ choices are dictated by economics. They drink what they can afford. Although Trinidad’s middle and upper classes appear self-conscious, that is, undetermined by economic forces, they uncritically consume American products and styles because they lack faith in their ability to judge. To the writer, the islanders’ “constant alertness, (a) willingness to change, (and) readiness to accept anything” American stems from this absence of confidence. “Unsure of themselves,” the islanders put their faith in the beyond. Drinking Maxwell House or Chase and Sandborn is an act of supplication. Their “eagerness for instruction” is a way of begging the hegemonic culture for security. In short, the islanders look beyond themselves for salvation, for the order that they feel powerless to create. In other words, they embrace the arbitrary world of power to save themselves from the arbitrary world they cannot unify.

expatriates, who are shown in *The Middle Passage* to stylize the dispersed world, “Europeans” born in the Americas slavishly imitate Western styles. They derive a sense of wholeness from rejecting the local:

(T)o be European in Argentina was to be colonial in the most damaging way. It was to be parasitic. It was to claim--as the white communities of the Caribbean colonies claimed--the achievements and authority of Europe as one’s own. It was to ask less of oneself (in Trinidad, when I was a child, it was thought that the white and the rich needed no education). It was to accept, out of a false security, a second-rateness for one’s own society[...] When the real world is felt to be outside, everyone at home is inadequate and fraudulent. A waiter in Mendoza said, “Argentines don’t work. We can’t do anything big. Everything we do is small and petty.” An artist said, “There are very few *professionals* here. By that I mean people who know what to do with themselves. No one knows why he is doing any particular job. for that reason, if you are doing what I do, then you are my enemy.” 13

The European “colonial’s” mimicry so deeply offends Naipaul because it violates what he considers most sacred: individuality. For him, Trinidadians and Argentines of European heritage are inauthentic or “second-rate” because they are satisfied with the security related to their worship of an abstraction called Europe. Naipaul calls them “parasites” to underscore the relationship between nihilism and servitude. American-born Europeans in South America and the West Indies find it easier to circumvent the difficulty and ambiguity

associated with the struggle for the living transcendence. They take shortcuts to wholeness, living off the rebellious "achievements," the aesthetic demands or distortions, of other Europeans. For Naipaul, this represents a form of unequal recognition, a denial of dignity, a reduction of man to his economic components. By choosing "second-ratedness" over rebelliousness, Europe over the local, subsistence over thymotic struggle, the non-metropolitan European accepts an almost animal-like existence. The nihilist’s consciousness, which mirrors the slave’s lack of consciousness, is so embedded in Trinidad that the wealthy islanders do not examine their distaste for scholarship. Naipaul employs the passive voice--"it was thought that the white and the rich needed no education" (my emphasis)--to underscore their lack of rebellious consciousness. He does not allow the elite to speak as an independent subject, denying it the dignity that it denies itself.

"Argentines don’t work. We can’t do anything big," the waiter in Mendoza told Naipaul. "If you are doing what I do, then you are my enemy," an artist confided. For Naipaul, these self-deprecating remarks give expression to the "second-ratedness" of the European "colonial’s" existence. A disdain for the local goes hand in hand with his or her contempt for human dignity. This explains why Argentines "can’t do anything big" and why there is no social contract between them. Argentines define themselves in historical terms, seeing
local as arbitrary, the outlying and abstract "real world" as necessary.

They do not work in the thymotic sense of stylization; they work to
subsist in the world of power, considering other workers mortal foes.

Alterity not solidarity underlies social relations. If Argentines "can’t do
anything big," as the waiter claims, it is because they exist at the
subsistence level, satisfying their physical needs. Self-conscious
individuals, the creators of aesthetic demands, live in the imaginary
"real world."

In An Area of Darkness (1964), Naipaul portrays his
grandfather’s house as a nihilistic or negative aesthetic demand. He
wants to convince the reader of Indian’s society’s obedience to
Hinduism, and Caribbean’s dependence on the West. After arriving in
Trinidad as an indentured laborer in the late nineteenth century,
Naipaul’s grandfather built a house whose style neglected the local.
Instead, he constructed his home on an abstract foundation—India:

My grandfather had made a difficult and courageous
journey. It must have brought him into collision with
startling sights, even like the sea, several miles from his
village; yet I cannot help feeling that as soon as he had left
his village he ceased to see[...] When he built his house he
ignored every colonial style he might have found in Trinidad
and put up a heavy, flat-roofed oddity, whose image I was
to see again in the small ramshackle towns of Uttar
Pradesh. He had abandoned India; and like Gold Teeth (the
author’s nickname for a family friend), denied Trinidad. Yet
he walked on solid earth. Nothing beyond his village stirred
him; nothing forced him outside of himself, he carried his
village with him. A few reassuring relationships, a strip of
land, and he could satisfyingly recreate an eastern Uttar Pradesh village in central Trinidad as if in the vastness of India.\textsuperscript{14}

Naipaul claims that his grandfather could not create because he “ceased to see” after leaving his community. Uncomfortable being a rebel, an individual faced with the daunting task of creating a place for himself in dispersed or “startling” world, Naipaul’s grandfather sought security and comfort in the absolute. He found it easier to destroy the real than integrate himself into it. With an incongruous house, “a few reassuring relationships (and) a strip of land” Naipaul’s grandfather “satisfyingly recreate(d) an eastern Uttar Pradesh village in central Trinidad.” In other words, he easily sated his desire for transcendence through a “frenzy of annihilation” (Camus, \textit{The Rebel} 273). He achieved wholeness the fraudulent way—by imposing his abstract principles on the arbitrary world, sacred India on worthless Trinidad. As easy as it was to simulate India in the West Indies, the grandfather is shown to have paid a heavy price for his megalothymia. “Nothing beyond his village stirred him; nothing forced him outside himself.” As with the European elite, this Indo-Trinidadian lived a “second-rate” existence. He was as parasitic, and therefore, as responsible for the island’s divisiveness and dependency on the West.

For Naipaul, imitation is not simply the sincerest form of self-contempt; it shows contempt for others; his grandfather diminished

himself and his neighbors by imitating faraway, irrelevant Indian housing styles. A unique, hybrid architectural style, one located at the interstices of the ideal (South Asia) and the real (Trinidad) would have paid homage to the common dignity of human beings. It would have translated the Hindu taboo of impurity or alterity into a signifier of rebelliousness. The writer’s message is that people who embrace hybridity are authentic because they associate epistemological difference—different “styles”—with the individual’s right to unify his or her condition. “Creative synthesis” yields the living transcendence (Camus, The Rebel 271). Therefore, hybridity is inherently isothymotic, perfect in its open-endedness, its imperfection.

Here, his message is: the Caribbean will not be a “civilization,” in Camus’ understanding of the term, until it values “creative synthesis” (273), that is, the West Indies will remain within the world of arbitrary power until its diverse people recognize the dignity they share. After that moment of equal recognition, the Caribbean will be able to create unity instead of importing it. It will begin to alleviate its suffering, spiritual and economic. Creative synthesis is also his prescription for India, the primary subject of An Area of Darkness. He encourages Indians to look for a cure for their economic and social problems at the juncture of the beyond and life. Spirituality and cynicism, which he views as the easiest and most popular routes to wholeness, only magnify India’s suffering.
The West Indian novelist who narrates *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) has a completely different relationship with the dispersed world than Naipaul's grandfather. This autobiographical narrator—like Naipaul, he lives in a cottage in Wiltfordshire, England and writes a novel called *The Enigma of Arrival*—considers the post-colonial diaspora a catalyst for his spiritual transformation from slave to a master. He believes that his "arrival" in Britain enabled him to become an "enigma," an open-ended self. Seemingly aware that this conflation of authenticity with the ex-metropolis could be viewed an attempt to isolate individualism in the West, Naipaul creates numerous British-born rebels and nihilists to universalize these self-identities. One of the more prominent nihilists in the novel is the narrator's landlord:

(He) had struck his form and won admiration for his style at an early age, had early arrived at an idea of who he was, his worth and his sensibility; and he stalled there. Perhaps he stalled in what might be considered a state of perfection. But that perfection—that absence of restlessness and creative abrasion, that view from his back windows of a complete untouched, untroubled world—had turned to morbidity, acedia, a death of the soul.\(^{15}\)

The narrator attributes his landlord's "morbidity, acedia, (and) death of the soul"—to his estrangement from the true principles of rebellion. In many ways, he fits Paydar's profile of the typical revolutionary zealot in *Beyond Belief*. As with the revolutionary, whom an excessive desire for power drives to obfuscate the modest and

terrestrial origins of his revolt, the landlord lost his way from rebellion’s “restlessness and creative abrasion”--his rebellious soul began to die--when he mistook his friends' “admiration for his style” as their recognition of his superior “worth and (his) sensibility.” The narrator adds that “he stalled there[...] in what might be considered a state of perfection.” The landlord considered his self-identity to be perfect, which eliminated the need to engage in the world and improve himself through the creative act. Instead, he withdrew into himself and his estate to protect the “idea of who he was” that he had created decades before.

The landlord achieved his perfect self-identity under the aegis of imperialism. Britain’s hegemony over much of the world enabled him to see his individual self-identity as timeless. A member of the British elite, his place in the world was fixed; his supremacy was unchallenged. Thus, his “view from his back windows (could only be) of a complete untouched, untroubled world.” Yet, megalothymotic worldviews are directional; only the master considers them final. Inevitably, the lack of recognition prompts the slave to desire change. The Empire, the manor, and the landlord all crumble in the end because they strove for the impossible--superior recognition. The outside world demanded recognition of its dignity. It rebelled. The landlord’s withdrawal is meant to be a cautionary tale for Great Britain. It too will decay, Naipaul implies, unless it reconciles itself to decolonization and the presence of
post-colonial minorities on its soil. Through equal recognition, Britain
can rediscover the “restlessness” and “creative abrasion” that made
it so powerful, that it needs to keep up with the changing times.

Mrs. Phillips, an employee on the estate, also retreated into the
myth of the pure cultural patrimony. She projected herself as the
archetypal middle class domestic to repress the upheavals of post-
colonial life in Britain. Yet, Mrs. Phillips did not have her employer’s
means to shut them out. According to the narrator, this disconnect
between her self-identity and reality was the source of her
“incompetence, her new unhappiness:”

Mrs. Phillips didn’t really know what was happening in the
(manor) grounds around her. She had no means of judging
men, judging faces. Depending on herself now, she was
continually surprised by people[...] It was part of her
incompetence, her new unhappiness. And it came out when
she tried to help, when she advertised for women to help in
the manor and was surprised again and again to get people
like herself, women adrift, incompetent, themselves
without an ability to judge people, looking as much for
emotional refuge as for a position[...] women who for
various reasons had been squeezed out of a communal or
shared life. (Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* 325)

The domestic’s faith in abstract principles, that is, her
identification with a static vision of Britishness, prevents her from
living independently. Mrs. Phillips is incapable of “judging men, judging
faces”-- because she lacks the rebel’s self-consciousness and with it
the ability to unify the physical world. The rebel thrives in contingency,
feeling most exalted when stylizing the arbitrary. The sensation of being undifferentiated from the arbitrary, being an object, diasporic jetsam, “squeezed out” by modern life, spurs Mrs. Phillips to seek existential shelter, redemption, through the imperial master-narrative. She clings to the manor, instinctively hiring women “like herself, women adrift, incompetent[...] looking as much for emotional refuge as for a position.” The fact that Mrs. Phillips “was surprised again and again” to have hired such “incompetent” women suggests an absence of self-consciousness. She cannot identify with her fellow “women adrift” because her faith in the abstract is absolute. Nihilism prevents her from recognizing her own flaws in others; and these “bad hires” only quicken the manor’s deterioration.

In *The Mimic Men*, Ralph Singh recalls his teenage years in Britain as a period of identitarian fraudulence. He found it easier to navigate this strange land as a clichéd “extravagant colonial” than as an individual. Singh imitated the West’s megalothymotic aesthetic demands, its exotic tropes, instead of making his own subjective distortions on life. A puerile desire for innocence, complete detachment from the dispersed world, drove the student to choose transcendence over the living transcendence, nihilism over rebellion:

In London I had no guide. There was no one to link my present with my past, no one to note my consistencies or inconsistencies. It was up to me to choose my character, and I chose the character that was easiest and most
attractive. I was the dandy, the extravagant colonial, indifferent to scholarship. (Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* 20)

Believing that rebellion and nihilism are moral choices, Singh states, “it was up to me to choose my character, and I chose the character that was easiest and most attractive. I was the dandy, the extravagant colonial.” Associating total independence with total security like all nihilists, Singh subordinated himself to the absolute because it was the least taxing way to achieve transcendence, detachment from the arbitrary. He made a negative aesthetic demand, choosing an abstract, ready-made self-identity over a self-created, enigmatic one. In the process, Singh denied man’s common dignity. In particular, he rejected the colonial’s dignity when he permitted Londoners to disregard his individuality. Instead of recognizing him as independent from imperialist discourse, the British saw this West Indian student as an exotic stereotype, an object. He satisfied the colonizer’s desire for superior recognition.

In *The Middle Passage* and *Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad* (1979), Naipaul investigates the nihilistic underpinnings of racial redemptionist ideologies in the Caribbean. He argues that a fundamental contradiction underlies black nationalism and Ras Tafarianism. These redemptionist ideologies inscribe their believers within the historical parameters they purport to transcend. For Naipaul, both ideologies are internalizations of the Christian meta-
narrative that the West employed to subjugate colonials. He writes, “in these West Indian territories, where the spiritual problem is largely that of self contempt, Christianity must be regarded as part of the colonial conditioning” (Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* 160). Instead of preaching individual empowerment—self-love and self-reliance—black nationalism and Ras Tafarianism mimic the Christian-imperialist discourse, teaching ex-colonials to equate salvation with withdrawal not an emancipatory social struggle. In *Michael X*, he explains that:

(Racial redemption) is, in the end, a deep corruption: a wish to be granted a dispensation from the pains of development, an almost religious conviction that oppression can be turned into an asset, race into money. While the dream of redemption lasts, Negroes will continue to exist only that someone might be their leader[...]

For Naipaul, racial redemption represents “a deep corruption” of the human spirit, turning humanity away from its material condition and the living transcendence one achieves from bringing unity to it. As is the case with the colonial, who the colonizer convinces is in debt to the outlying metropolis, to an abstraction, redemptionist ideologies manipulate the ex-colonial, instructing him that he is lost, displaced and arbitrary, without the redeemer. Existing “only that someone is (his) leader” the redemptionist brings to mind the young Ralph Singh and aging Mrs. Phillips. By choosing to play the victim’s rôle in racial redemption’s story, he hopes to earn a “dispensation from the pains of

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development." The rôle excuses the redemptionist from the burden of rebellion—stylizing (and letting others stylize) contingency.

Redemptionism encourages individuals to spurn life, human solidarity, and the difficult struggle for the living transcendence. It prompts people to make negative aesthetic demands, to annihilate the world, to seek absolute unity.

For Naipaul, the Ras Tafarians’ philosophy of withdrawal, their rejection of Jamaica and the West, is a type of spiritual servitude:

Neuroses afflict communities as well as individuals, and in these slums (of Kingston) the sects known as Ras Tafarians or “Rastas” have developed their own psychology of survival. They reply to rejection with rejection. They will not cut their hair or wash; and for this neglect of the body, this expression of profound self contempt, they find Biblical sanction...They will vote for no party because Jamaica is not their country and the Jamaican Government not one they recognize. Their country is Ethiopia and they worship Haile Selassie. They no longer wish to be part of that world which has no place for them—Babylon, the world of the white and brown and even yellow man, ruled by the Pope, who is really the head of the Ku-Klux-Klan—and they want only to be repatriated to Africa and Ethiopia.
(Naipaul, The Middle Passage 225)

For Naipaul, the incongruous Uttar Pradesh house and village his grandfather built projects an anathema for otherness. The Ras Tafarians also disavow the world around them: “They will vote for no party because Jamaica is not their country and the Jamaican government not one they recognize.” To recognize the inherent
worthiness of the world and its “white and brown and even yellow” inhabitants, an article of the rebellious faith, would be the Rastas’ undoing. Rebellion’s emphasis on equal recognition and the indeterminacy of truth would compromise their need for absolute freedom and security. It would frustrate their desire to see themselves as the master and the oppressor as the slave; it would frustrate their desire for innocence, forcing them to integrate themselves into “Babylon,” the multiracial, modern world. In a word, they find “the frenzy of annihilation” an easier path to wholeness than “creative synthesis” (Camus, The Rebel 273). Rejecting Babylon requires less effort than distorting it into a more just and egalitarian civilization through social struggle.

Naipaul addresses the fundamental contradiction of redemptionist ideologies. When he looks at Christianity’s prominent place in the Ras Tafarian worldview, he suggests that the Rastas’ desire for worldly detachment and absolute self-consciousness secures their place within the parameters of Western power. Through Christianity, the colonizer subdues the outraged Rastas, convincing them that waiting for their redeemer—Hailie Selassie—and their repatriation to Ethiopia—the end of history—is preferable to altering history. For the novelist, the Ras Tafarians’ indifference to personal hygiene—“they will not cut their hair or wash”—epitomizes the self-contempt underlying redemptionist ideologies. Ras Tafarians have little
respect for their material being, Naipaul argues, because their nihilism drives them to slander all forms of life. In this light, they see little difference between their bodies and Babylon. Both are arbitrary. (The only part of the Earth they recognize is Ethiopia, which is really, an abstract, otherworldly realm.) Any attention to the body would amount to a recognition that the material world has value, and, by extension, that the ex-colonial is worthy of transforming it.

For Naipaul, integration into the modernity has metaphysical implications. Following Albert Camus, he insists that we are at our most authentic during the emancipatory struggle. We do not truly exist, Naipaul suggests through his grandfather, Ralph Singh, the Ras Tafarians, and Mrs. Phillips, until we embrace a rebellious self-identity. Wholeness comes from integration into modern liberal society, which he calls the “universal civilization” due to its emphasis on “immense human ideas” such as tolerance and the pursuit of happiness:

Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. There was no such human consolation in the Hinduism I grew up with, and—although I have never had any religious faith—the simple idea was, and is, dazzling to me, perfect as a guide to human behaviour[...] This idea of the pursuit of happiness is at the heart of the attractiveness of the civilization to so many outside it or on its periphery[...] It is an elastic idea; it fits all men. It implies a certain kind of society, a certain kind of awakened spirit[...] So much is contained in it: the idea of the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of the intellect, the idea of vocation and perfectibility and achievement. It is an immense human idea. It cannot be reduced to a fixed system. It cannot
generate fanaticism. But it is known to exist; and because of that, other more rigid systems in the end blow it away. (Naipaul, "Our Universal Civilization" 517)

Ultimately, Naipaul’s praise of “our universal civilization” is self-serving. By spotlighting the transcultural appeal of modern liberal society, Naipaul naturalizes his presence in the ex-metropolis. Hence, “the attractiveness of (Western) civilization to so many outside it or on its periphery” is meant to appear organic where authentic ex-colonized peoples are concerned. Thymos spurs Naipaul (and other self-conscious Third Worlders) to flock to the West. What they seek is the living transcendence, attainable only through the “human” and therefore authentic ideas of “the individual, responsibility, choice[...] vocation and perfectibility and achievement.” Immigration to the West is meant to be seen as part of a transhuman emancipatory struggle.

“Our Universal Civilization” is a microcosm of Naipaul’s narrative project. Not only does he strive to create a place for himself in the West by foregrounding the transhuman and “elastic” principles of liberal modernity, Naipaul attempts to unite the ex-colonizer and the ex-colonized through individualism. He reconfigures as foreign, as Other, all post-colonials who choose to repudiate Western modernity’s universal principles. Naipaul substitutes nihilism for race and ethnicity as the marker of alterity in the late twentieth century. “Us” vs. “them” is no longer a geographical distinction; difference is
metaphysical. Mrs. Phillips, the Rasta, and Mr. Jaffrey are Others, liberal society’s boogeymen.

Naipaul’s rebellious archetype is Jack, the modest farmer in *The Enigma of Arrival*. Unlike the landlord or Mrs. Phillips, Jack established a temporary home for himself in the world. His garden stylized nature:

Jack himself had disregarded the tenuousness of his hold on the land, just as, not seeing what others saw, he had created a garden on the edge of a swamp and a ruined farmyard; had responded to and found glory in the seasons. All around him was ruin; and all around, in a deeper way, was change, and a reminder of the brevity of the cycles of growth and creation. But he had sensed that life and man were the true mysteries; and he had asserted the primacy of these with something like religion. The bravest and most religious thing about his life was his way of dying; the way he had asserted, at the very end, the primacy not of what was beyond life, but of life itself. (Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* 93)

Camus writes: “If rebellion wants a revolution it wants it on behalf of life, not in defiance of it...] when (the rebel) causes history to advance and alleviates the suffering of mankind, (he) does so without terror, if not without violence[...]” (Camus, *The Rebel* 298). In his own way, Jack advances history, improving himself and his condition when he “disregard(s) the tenuousness of his hold on the land.” As the narrator sees it, embracing life’s contingent nature is a precondition for any form of rebellion, political, social, or in Jack’s case, horticultural. If he had worshiped perfection, Jack would have failed to cultivate his patch of earth. He would have eradicated nature instead
of integrating himself into it, which would be tantamount to asserting
the sanctity of the beyond, the worthlessness of life.

Jack’s garden is intrinsically hybrid because it is an act of
distortion or creative synthesis. The fruit of equal recognition, his
garden exists at the interstices of the ideal and the real. Part nature,
part civilization, it reconciles the gardener’s desire for freedom—he
wants to reconstruct the physical world into a more unified form—and
his desire for physical security—he wants to belong to the physical
world. The narrator underscores the rebellious nature of Jack’s
creative effort by pointing out its liminality. His garden is located in
between a “swamp” (nature) and a “farmyard” (civilization). Jack “had
responded to and found glory (emphasis mine) in the seasons,”
achieving the living transcendence, partial unity, by stylizing his
condition.

For the narrator, Jack’s “way of dying,” perhaps even more so
than his garden, was the “most religious thing about his life.” Leaving
his deathbed on Christmas Eve to share a final pint with his friends
epitomized “the way he had asserted, at the very end, the primacy not
of what was beyond life, but of life itself.” His last trip to the pub, like
his garden, was an aesthetic demand, an attempt to create
indeterminate meaning, partial unity, by reconciling his physical and
metaphysical desires. Rather than seeking existential comfort in a
master-narrative such as Christianity--Jack did not ask to be saved--
the dying farmer strove for temporary salvation, the living
transcendence, on earth. Thus, if Jack had denied life in favor of the
ideal, he would have repudiated his own dignity, his worldly divinity. The
narrator describes the farmer’s life and death in “religious” terms
because it confirmed his own faith in humanity and the world. His death
was metaphysical in the same way that rebellion is. Camus states,
“when he rebels, man identifies with other men and so surpasses
himself, and from this point of view human solidarity is metaphysical”
(Camus, *The Rebel* 17). Jack’s death was rebellious; it was a selfless
act (the nihilist’s is selfish) because it affirmed in man a higher nature
than his physical desire without negating the material world. Through
death, Jack “assured the primacy not of what was beyond life, but of
life itself.”

Jack was the antithesis of England’s new type of worker, whom
the narrator rebukes for imposing scientific laws indiscriminately on
the world. He considers the “new workers”’ relationship with the land
tyrrannical and destructive; they see nature as an object and science as
a tool for satisfying their desire for transcendence, total self-
consciousness. The land was Other. The new breed of farmers tame
nature with science’s laws to assuage their fear of death. For the
narrator, this explains why they see:

(t)he house as a place of shelter, not as a place to which
you could transfer (or risk transferring) emotion or hopes-
-this attitude of the new couple to the thatched house seemed to match the more general new attitude to the land. The land, for the new workers, was merely a thing to be worked. And with their machines they worked it as though they intended to turn all the irregularities of nature into straight or graded curves. (Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* 56)

Equipped with reason and the latest farm equipment, the modern farmers show their contempt for life’s open-endedness, its “irregularities,” by imposing geometric principles, “straight or graded curves,” on it. In doing so, they disregard the grandeur of (human) nature in “a frenzy of annihilation” (Camus, *The Rebel* 273). In their aspiration to total unity, the new workers inscribe themselves within the world of arbitrary power. Their desire for innocence confirms the arbitrary because, beneath everything, the workers desire physical security. They treat nature as an object, as a thing to be exploited, because they fear death. Reminiscent of Naipaul’s grandfather, the *Enigma of Arrival’s* farmers project their nihilistic self-identity onto the house, which functions as “a place of shelter, not (as) a place to which you could transfer (or risk transferring) emotion or hopes.” The narrator considers this house a purely negative aesthetic demand because it fails to reconcile the farmers’ metaphysical “emotions or hopes,” and their physical want of shelter and comfort. Instead, the new arrivals use the house to screen out contemporary society, whose socioeconomic upheavals they blame for their diaspora to the British
countryside. As was the case with Naipaul’s grandfather’s domicile, the new workers’ homes were built on the fear of homelessness, identitarian drift. This resonates strongly with the West Indian narrator, who grasps that the new workers, in part, act out their fear of non-European newcomers (the Other who Naipaul naturalizes in “Our Universal Civilization”) onto the English landscape.

A passage in the *Enigma of Arrival* so eloquently conveys the grandeur of the living transcendence. Rebellion is so beautiful, the narrator suggests, because it satisfies man’s desire for freedom and security in the face of death. He finds glory in his humble, indeterminate goals:

> We remade the world for ourselves, every generation does that, as we found when we came together for the death of this sister and felt the need to honor and remember. It forced us to look at death. It forced me to face death I had been contemplating at night, in my sleep; it fitted a real grief where melancholy had created a vacancy, as if to prepare me for the moment. It showed me life and man as the mystery, the true religion of men, the grief and the glory. And that was when, faced with (my sister’s) death, and with this new wonder about men, I laid aside my drafts and hesitations and began to write very fast about Jack and his garden. (Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* 354)

The narrator claims that he could not begin his novel, *The Enigma of Arrival*, until that epiphanic moment when he looked at the human condition through the rebel’s eyes. He was only able to create after grasping life’s open-endedness and accepting the inevitability of death.
In short, the narrator became whole, and thus capable of creative synthesis, when he reached the point where his fearlessness of death coincided with his love of life. It was “(W)ith this new wonder about men, (that the narrator) laid aside (his) drafts and hesitations and began to write very fast about Jack and his garden.”

In his meditation on death, the narrator brings to mind Oedipus, for he also solves life’s *enigma*. The mythical Greek figure correctly answers the Sphinx’s query, “who walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?” with “man;” the narrator discovers that man is “the mystery, the true religion of men, the grief and the glory.” Jack is an Oedipal figure because he makes this humanistic discovery in the face of death. Oedipus risked his own life to answer the Sphinx’s riddle; the narrator recognizes that man cannot be true—he cannot experience the living transcending—unless he overcomes his fear of death without developing contempt for life. It is preferable to be like Jack, a creator of meaning during our limited time on Earth. And even in death, the rebel creates for he asserts the “the primacy not of what was beyond life, but of life itself. (93). What he asserts is man’s common dignity, his metaphysical nature which is inextricably linked to nature, to the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death.

Edward Said investigates representation’s complicity with power.

17 This idea comes from a graduate seminar given by Professor Jean-Joseph Goux at Rice University in the fall of 1998.
He examines how cultural forms, such as Orientalist painting, the novel, and the media manufacture the truth of Western moral superiority to legitimate the West’s economic, military, and cultural dominance. He writes, “(n)arrative itself is the representation of power, and its teleology is associated with the global role of the West.” In *The Politics of Vision*, Linda Nochlin investigates the ideologizing function of Orientalism’s “artlessness” or “transparency.” Analyzing the moral lesson embedded in Jean-Léon Gérôme’s “objective” *Snake Charmer*, which is depicted on the cover of Said's *Orientalism*, Nochlin writes that:

(a) “naturalist” or “authenticist” artist like (Jean-Léon) Gérôme tries to make us forget that his art is really art, both by concealing the evidence of his touch, and, at the same time, by insisting on a plethora of authenticating details[...] what Roland Barthes has called “the reality effect” (*l’effet de réel*)[...] (The reality effect has) still another function: a moralizing one which assumes meaning only within the apparently objectivized context of the scene as a whole. Neglected, ill-repaired architecture functions, in nineteenth century Orientalist art, as a standard topos for commenting on the corruption of contemporary Islamic society[...] When Gérôme’s (*Snake Charmer*) is seen within this context of supposed Near Eastern idleness and neglect, what might at first appear to be objectively described architectural fact turns out to be *architecture moralisée*. (Nochlin 38-9)

By concealing the constructed nature of their paintings through “a chilly and remote pseudoscientific naturalism--small, self-effacing

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brushstrokes, and 'rational' and convincing spatial effects—in other words an apparently dispassionate empiricism,” (Nochlin 44) the authenticist painter concealed his ideologizing message of the Western moral superiority beneath what appears to be scientific fact. The “reality” of Eastern backwardness and depravity mystified the West’s military and economic exploitation of the Orient as a civilizing mission. Orientalism made it appear that the Orient would decay further without the intervention of Western powers. Through the reality effect, which obfuscates the fact that “art is really art,” Orientalist paintings satisfied the West’s desire for superior recognition. They presented the East as a “teleology” (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 273), allowing the Western viewer to experience the sensation of absence, to see him/herself as the universal sovereign, as detached from the physical world that the “artless” painting not only claims to represent, but claims to be.

Leïla Sebbar also investigates the ideological function of representation, but she goes a step further than Nochlin and Said. In the *Shérazade* trilogy, Sebbar places Orientalism and more contemporary depictions of the East at the interstices of nihilism and rebellion. Evocative of Camus, Sebbar argues that the artist’s work often begins as a desire for equal recognition in sketch, but grows “forgetful of its generous origins” (Camus, *The Rebel* 304), ending in the finalized or “artless” version as a desire for transcendence. In
turn, the past and present champions of nihilistic ideologies, such as yesterday’s imperialists and today’s cultural fundamentalists, co-opt these finalized versions to achieve wholeness through alterity. Mild and extreme cultural fundamentalists alike appropriate exotic topoi to edify the concept of *la vieille France*, which Panivong Norindr defines as “a vague and nostalgic idea of the way the nation once was, that is to say, a vision of France uncontaminated by the presence of (Third World) immigrants.”

Shérazade, Sebbar’s title character, subverts authenticist representations to decenter the self-identities of the individuals and groups who see them as documentation of the West’s superiority. Shérazade legitimizes the open-ended and benevolent origins of rebellion by placing the ambiguous artistic study on equal footing with the finalized version. At the same time, she demonstrates that the artist cannot completely conceal epistemological ambiguity in the finished work. By doing so, Shérazade launches “a revolution in the name of moderation and life” (Camus, *The Rebel* 305), declaring her independence from the nihilistic ideologies that employ artless representations to portray racial, ethnic, and cultural difference as abhorrent. Sebbar wants the post-colonial world to read artistic sketches, as well as their finalized versions, as moderate aesthetic

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demands, signposts that lead toward the end of history.

In Les Carnets de Shérazade, the narrator foregrounds the lengthy artistic process involved in creating the Orientalist reality effect. She traces the origins of Ingres’ Odalisque à l’esclave back to eighteenth-century representations of the Orient, bringing to light the painting’s constructedness, its temporality, and its mystification of the West’s megalothymia:

(Shérazade) retournait au musée Ingres à Montauban avec Julien, il verrait les études pour l’Odalisque à l’esclave, à la plume, au crayon noir, à la mine de plomb. Elle lui avait envoyée sur une grande feuille blanche sans donner le titre définitif de l’étude, la liste des projets de titres, sans commentaires[...]. Ingres s’est inspiré de gravures extraites d’un recueil d’estampes du XVIIIe siècle représentant différentes nations du Levant et en particulier Femme juive en habit de cérémonie, et Femme juive qui repose sur le sofa, sortant du bain.21

A critic such as Said or Nochlin would be inclined to place the studies for Ingres’ Odalisque à l’esclave in their ideological context. Nochlin would see the sketches the foundation for Ingres’ own architecture moralisée, his documentation of the East’s subhumanity through an archetypal female nude composed of “les formes pleines, la peau tendue, le col puissant et fort, les bras gros, les mains pesamment et abondamment enveloppées de chair.” 22 Certainly, the painting’s artless, highly-polished style and its “plethora of

authenticating details” (Nochlin 38) moralizes Western hegemony over the East. Ingres creates the illusion of Western primacy giving the viewer total access to the East’s moral depravity. The Odalisque is a creature of physical desire, as is the slave whose music readies her impassive charge for a sexual encounter with the unseen, lecherous sultan. Our unobstructed view sets the (Western/male) spectator apart from the physically-determined East. Homi Bhabha notes, the “fetish or stereotype gives access to an ‘identity’ which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence[...].”

Ingres’ artless finality offers the viewer the pleasure of being exclusively self-conscious, absent, from this scene of sheer physical presence, this flash of “unadorned” reality. We experience pleasure, wholeness, by containing our threatening Other. From this angle, it stands to reason that Ingres’ Odalisque sketches are meant to deteriorate in a provincial museum; their rebelliousness impedes the West’s desire for primacy. They demystify the ideology of representation; they take away the pleasure we derive from alterity.

If the finished work formulates the Easterner and the Westerner in historical terms—both are frozen in the arbitrary world of power—the sketch presents us as historical agents. The West’s lack of recognition of its post-colonial minorities, embodied in the marginalization of the sketches to the Ingres Museum located in

Montauban, a small town near Toulouse. This mystification pushes Shérazade to rebel in defense of our common dignity. She revolts by sending her boyfriend, Julien Desrosiers, a list of tentative titles for the *Odalisque à l’esclave*. She wants Julien, a symbol for all of us whose world view is partially informed by Orientalism or any other seemingly closed, exclusivist discourses, to draw inspiration from the unfinished work and the values of true rebellion inscribed on it. To her, the sketches chronicle a work in process; they speak about the beauty of aesthetic demand as it unfolds; they give expression to the artist’s humble passion for liberty and love for life. Shérazade presents this Odalisque to the world.

True to her rebellious principles, Shérazade deliberately withholds “le titre définitif de l’étude” from her boyfriend. Instead, she sends him “la liste des projets de titres sans commentaires;” she respects the principle of open-endedness truth and the individual’s right to create it, a right that the finished *Odalisque à l’esclave* denies. We could say that Ingres’ studies are a *mise en abyme* of Julien’s entry into a more rebellious self-identity. Similar to the artist who asserted his dignity through myriad sketches, Julien, with Shérazade’s benevolent assistance, learns how to make his own aesthetic demands on reality outside the parameters of exoticism. He stylizes his condition as he reconstitutes Ingres’ Odalisque from “la liste de projets” and a (future) visit to Montauban.
In the final scene of *Le Fou de Shérazade*, Sebbar brilliantly collapses the distance between reality and fiction, literature and cinema, and ethnic categories, suggesting that the individual is responsible for creating meaning. At novel’s/trilogy’s conclusion the reader and the spectators within the novel are left alone to construct their own versions of what happened. In a rather comical misreading of the movie being filmed in the courtyard of her housing project, which doubles as the novel’s/trilogy’s end, Shérazade’s mother mistakes the simulated death of her daughter—Shérazade is an actress in Julien’s movie—for the real thing:

Les journalistes et la femme sont tués. La servante se met à hurler devant le carnage, en même temps que la mère de Shérazade qui crie:

--Ma fille! Shérazade Vous l’avez tuée! Ma fille est morte...Shérazade, ma fille! Réponds-moi...Ils t’ont tuée!  

Believing that Shérazade died during a mortar attack, the mother’s “real” cries mix with the “simulated” wailing of the film’s Egyptian servant character. While the bystanders (and the reader) may get a chuckle out this naïve misreading of the movie shoot, her confusion could be warranted; Sebbar takes great pains to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality. Like Shérazade’s mother, the reader loses the ability to differentiate the characters in the film within *Le Fou de Shérazade* from the novel’s “real” characters. The narrator, for example, does not inform us if the film’s servant and the

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one Shérazade actually encountered in Lebanon a few weeks earlier are the same. That’s for each of us to decide.

Leïla Sebbar also uses the eighteenth-century travel narratives of Lady Mary Montagu, the wife of Britain’s ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, and Mehmed Effendi, the Ottoman ambassador in France, to illustrate the universalism of rebellion and nihilism. Through the Briton and the Turk, she shows that Easterners and Westerners misrepresent foreign cultures to buttress their individual and collective self-identities. They do this to counteract the sense of identitarian upheaval people experience when cultures rub against each other. Mirroring Ingres, Lady Montagu gives her personal and immediate observations—her sketches—a fraudulent air of finality and authority:

Lorsqu'elle écrivait à ses amies anglaises, lady Montagu ne parlait pas de la Turquie paysanne. Elle préférait raconter les fêtes des villes et des palais comme Mehmed Efendi qu'elle avait rencontré à Belgrade. L'Orient croisant l'Occident, chacun de retour dans son pays natal, le bagage alourdi de notes, des anecdotes piquantes et pittoresques, des deux côtés de la mer.

(Sebbar, Les Carnets de Shérazade 183)

Similar to Naipaul’s grandfather, who represses the startling sights of diaspora by replicating an Indian house and village in Trinidad, Montagu manages the ambiguity unleashed by travel (and travel writing). In the final version of her narrative, Montagu represents the East through well-dermarcated, exotic stereotypes; her recognition of
the real Orient is occluded beneath those “anecdotes piquantes et pittoresques.” The narrator adds that, "(t)rouv(ant) la France rurale sale et misérable,” Mehmed Efendi “ne remarque que les châteaux, les palais et les fêtes royales” (Sebar, Les Carnets de Shérazade 181) in his narrative on the West. The devil, the rebel, is in the details, buried in the pages and pages of notes that tell the story of two individuals struggling to assert themselves as creators. Both Montagu and Efendi strive through writing to experience unity; in the end, the mixing of cultures and truths generates too much insecurity. They give their travel narratives a finished, objective sheen to repress the ambiguity associated with rebellion.

We learn through Sebar that things haven’t changed all that much since the eighteenth century. Individuals and groups continue to feel the push and pull of rebellion and nihilism on their self-identities.25 Responding to the rising tide of nihilism throughout the world, Sebar defends rebelliousness to reel in post-colonial middle selves who are close to nihilism’s brink; she also throws out a lifeline to more moderate middle selves who appear to be drifting towards it. Self-preservation alone does not explain why Sebar struggles to prevent the post-colonial world from plunging into nihilism. The writer does not limit her goals to peace; she strives to unify the world of power

25 I have invented the term “middle self” to describe individuals and groups who feel caught between nihilism and rebellion. I will use “middle self” and “middle selfhood” throughout this study.
through the creative act, that is, to establish a more egalitarian and
less historical society in France.

Sebbar believes that France’s extremist fringe, not the
government or the mainstream, is closest to the brink of nihilism. The
Extreme Right looks to satisfy its desire for superior recognition by
cleansing French soil of its threatening Other, the post-colonial
minority. Its “jamé towhidī,” (Naipaul, Beyond Belief 145) is “la vieille
France,” “la France pour les Français” (Norindr 238). France’s cultural
mainstream does not go so far as to demand the expulsion of Arabs,
Africans, and Asians from the Hexagon. Rather, the “threat level” that
post-colonial minorities pose varies from person to person. The threat
dissipates the closer one moves towards the ideal of rebellion; it
intensifies the closer one moves towards nihilism and an “imagined
common cultural legacy” (Norindr 238). The Hexagon’s middle selves
and nihilists repress the Other’s dignity through the topos of “la vieille
France” according to the “threat level” each assigns to him. A low
level threat may manifest itself in stereotyping (positive and
negative), a moderate threat in social and institutional discrimination,\(^{26}\) a high threat in hate crimes and expulsionist rhetoric, and the highest threat in war, ethnic cleansing and genocide.\(^{27}\)

Unless rebellion is re legitimated in their increasingly diverse polity, the French will drift towards a nihilism, potentially repeating early twentieth century history. But, validating rebellion requires a demonstration of its grassroots appeal. Hence, Sebbar shows that rebellion already has a base level of support in France even if the

\(^{26}\) In *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), Samuel Huntington examines the presence of extremist ideas in the rhetoric of mainstream European political parties, foregrounding what I call the mainstream’s middle selfhood. In the early 1990s, Huntington writes, mainstream politicians countered the Extreme Right’s anti-immigrant sentiment with its own call for the end to immigration:

In France Jacques Chirac declared in 1990 that ‘Immigration must be totally stopped;’ Interior Minister Charles Pasqua argues in 1993 for ‘zero immigration;’ and François Mitterand, Edith Cresson, Valery Giscard d’Estaing, and other mainstream politicians took anti-immigration stances. Immigration was a major issue in the parliamentary elections of 1993 and apparently contributed to the victory of conservative parties. During the early 1990s French government policy was changed to make it more difficult for the children of foreigners to become citizens, for families of foreigners to immigrate, for foreigners to ask for the right of asylum, and for Algerians to get visas to come to France. (Huntington 201-2)

\(^{27}\) It may appear indelicate to use the Department of Homeland Security’s “terror alert level” analogy to do study the theme of the Other in Sebbar. However, I believe the comparison is warranted. Many critics of George W. Bush’s Iraq policy have argued that the White house capitalizes, if it does not outright exacerbate, the American public’s justifiable fear of terror in order to “manufacture consent” (Noam Chomsky, Michael Moore) for military operations in Iraq. They argue that the White house portrays the war as a “war of no choice,” as an act of self-defense, as a justification for its imperialistic aspirations. In other words, we (meaning individuals and groups) project our desire for primacy onto the threatening Other. I would not go so far as Chomsky and Michael Moore and argue that America’s interests in the Middle East are completely cynical. America is not entirely motivated by a desire to dominate the Arab-Muslim world. Rather, I would argue that U.S. policy is a function of middle selfhood, and thus, a conflicting desire to liberate and dominate, with a greater attention given to the latter, unfortunately.
political mainstream appears to be drifting more and more to the right.

In *Shérazade 17 ans, brune, frisée les yeux verts* the narrator describes the public’s general apathy for the Louvre’s collection of Odalisques. She states that, excepting Julien and Shérazade almost no one:

\[s'arrêtait à ces femmes qui ne devaient pas figurer dans les guides étrangers ou à l'usage des étrangers, parmi les œuvres d'art qu'il fallait avoir vues, si on était passé par Paris et par le Louvre. Personne non plus devant l'Odalisque couchée ou le Bain turc […]\] ²⁸

Despite their prevalence in museum guides, Orientalist paintings no longer have the appeal they once did. Among those canonical works that no longer attract crowds are Ingres’ *Odalisque couchée* and *Bain turc*. The dissonance between official and popular aesthetic tastes suggests that the state is less receptive to rebellion’s principles than the general public. People overlook these works because they have reconciled themselves, to varying degrees, to the drastic social, political, and demographic changes that French society, Europe, and the world have undergone since WW II and decolonization. In other words, sectors of the French populace no longer find these paintings meaningful and satisfying models of *francité* or Frenchness. Sebbar’s point is that the government lags behind its citizens. It tries to shut out post-colonial upheaval through a more benign, but nonetheless exclusivist, version of Frenchness. The Extreme Right has the slogan

“la France pour les Français;” the French State has the TGV, the Concorde, and Odalisques.

In Les Carnets de Shérazade, the protagonist goes behind the scenes of Nantes’ Museum of Fine Arts with a new acquaintance, Denise. Shérazade watches Denise’s friend restore Lecomte du Nouy’s Esclave blanche and Gustave Courbet’s Les Cribleuses de blé:

La grêle avait détruit les verrières des plafonds et des toiles avaient été endommagées. On avait fermé les salles sinistrées et on restaurait les tableaux dans des lieux secrets, interdits au public. Les Cribleuses de blé que Shérazade avait vues chez Julien dans un album sur Courbet étaient entre les mains d’une jeune restauratrice, une amie de Denise. C’est ainsi que Shérazade put voir, dans une pièce réservée, où elle passa la journée avec la jeune femme, Les Cribleuses de blé à côté de L’Esclave blanche. L’odalisque et les paysannes.

(Sebbar, Les Carnets de Shérazade 128)

On an allegorical level, the teenager is observing a humanitarian disaster: the Extreme Right acting on its fantasy of the ethno-culturally pure nation. Like Jean-Marie Le Pen who vows to rehabilitate “la vieille France,” the conservationist attempts to return these paintings to their original state. She focuses her effort on removing those outside contaminants, the dirt, water, and hail, that have spoiled these canvases, these icons of France’s unique cultural legacy. Yet,

29 Ironically, Air France and British Airways both retired their fleet of Concorde jets as I wrote parts of this chapter in the fall of 2003. While this has much to do with the decline in air travel since 9/11, mothballing the Concorde is an apt metaphor for the waning importance of a pure cultural heritage. The dissonance between state and popular configurations of “francité” is becoming more strident.
the storm itself challenges the idea of the pure “national cultural patrimony” (Norindr 238). Nature contested the myth of cultural purity when it burst through the museum’s skylights. The restorer’s own presence also decenters the myth of “la vieille France.” The fact that she has to struggle to reverse the effect of time demonstrates the mythological nature of cultural purity.

If the canvas is a metaphor of national identity in Sebbar’s work, Shérazade could very well be an avatar of Delacroix’s Liberté guidant le peuple. Shérazade does not just cast out rebellion as a lifeline to prevent the French Republic from drifting even further down the identitarian stream towards nihilism. The ideal Republic incarnate, Shérazade uses revolt as a means to pull the Hexagon upstream towards a more just and egalitarian society. By following in Shérazade’s wake, French society will be able to soften the dissonance that has always existed between Republican ideals and social reality. More and more residents will experience the living transcendency the closer France moves toward the end of history. More and more people will associate wholeness with inclusion, inauthenticity with exclusivity. Ingres no longer offers the pleasure he once did.

If Shérazade is “la liberté” personified, Julien Desrosiers is “le
peuple,” the French nation in a state of middle selfhood. 30 Julien is an embodiment of the *Odalisque à l’esclave*, which makes the Ingres painting an allegory of nation. Much like the artistic studies that Ingres works and reworks into the finalized version, Julien constantly alters his self-image. One minute, he appears comfortable being rebellious; he navigates post-colonial France without the existential support of Orientalism. The next, he retreats into a bounded, abstract self-image, finding that exoticism speaks to his need for absolute liberty and security. Julien is the museum visitor who does not identify with Ingres’ finalized version of the *Bain turc* and the *Odalisque couchée*; he is the art conservationist who strives to fulfill a fantasy of purity. This ambiguous character, in short, gives voice to the struggle between rebellion and nihilism that takes place in the souls of all middle selves.

When in a rebellious frame of mind, Julien exposes Shérazade to the ethnographic inaccuracies of Orientalist paintings. His decentering of Orientalism’s authenticist claims goes a long way in helping Shérazade determine herself and her condition; it delegitimizes the dominant culture’s authority to determine the individual’s self-identity.

30 Although Republican iconography is not the focus of my work, I believe that Shérazade could be studied as a post-colonial incarnation of “Marianne,” the allegorical figure of the French Republic. In *Lettres parisiennes*, Sebbar talks at length about her fascination for female warriors, and mentions her interest in French postage stamps that depict “Marianne.” It would be interesting to investigate republican symbolism in the *Shérazade* trilogy with the assistance of Maurice Agulhon’s seminal *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
For instance, during one visit to the Louvre’s Orientalist collection with Shérazade, Julien sees things through the rebel’s eyes. He explains to his companion that nineteenth century artists mystified the Odalisque’s historical meaning when they appropriated it for ideological purposes:

On les a appelées Odalisques dans l'art du siècle dernier en oubliant que l'Odalisque, dans l'empire Ottoman, l'empire turc, était simplement une servante, une esclave au service des femmes du harem royal. (sebbar, Shérazade 190)

From Julien’s remark that Odalisques “sont plutôt dénudées; à part celle d'Ingres qui porte juste le turban,”31 Shérazade learns that Ingres’ femmes orientales are the genre’s most fanciful. These “effets de réel” not only create the illusion of scientific objectivity, configuring the Easterner as a libidinous creature, but they speak volumes about their creator’s respect for the society, culture and ideas of the Italian Renaissance.32 Through the reality effect, Ingres simultaneously dehumanizes the colonized and pays homage to humanism, reminding the (Western) viewer that the Renaissance was a glorious age for (Western) man, who revolted against Church orthodoxy in the name of “the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of the intellect, the idea of vocation and perfectibility and achievement

32 Aileen Riberio’s Ingres in Fashion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) studies the influence of Renaissance art and fashion, such as the turban, a popular woman’s headgear in sixteenth century Italy, on the French artist’s aesthetic.
(Naipaul, “Our Universal Civilization” 517).” By placing him at the center of the universe in the sixteenth century, man asserted his status as his own master. For the humanist, wholeness comes from within, not from a “fixed system” (Naipaul, “Our Universal Civilization” 517) that links it to redemption.

The first person perspective that emerged in Renaissance painting went hand in hand with man’s rebellion against God. It made the individual (the viewer) the source of meaning, and thus wholeness. Ingres used the single point perspective to validate humanism, altruistic individualism, in the West; the single point perspective also allowed him to create a “‘rational’ and convincing spatial effect(s)” (Nochlin 44), giving the viewer the impression that Westerner’s gaze was absolute, that the Renaissance’s “immense human idea(s)” (Naipaul, “Our Universal Civilization” 517) did not apply to the East. Like Julien’s, Ingres’ aesthetic is located in-between nihilism and rebellion. His works are at once humanistic and imperialistic, isothymotic and megalothymotic, impressionistic and naturalistic. They enjoin the Western individual to create meaning; he or she imposes the teleology of East/West difference on the world, denying our common dignity in the process.

When in a nihilistic state, Julien rejects post-colonial reality. He denies the world’s impurity, inscribing himself and others within the

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33 We discussed the humanism inherent in the perspective monocentrique in many of Jean-Joseph Goux’s graduate seminars at Rice University.
teleological parameters of exoticism. Julien imposes his purist fantasy on life when life makes him feel too insecure. For example, he denies Shérazade’s dignity by reducing her to an exotic stereotype, a fetish. When he attempts to inscribe her within discourse, he resembles the Orientalist painter, the eighteenth century travel writer, the Ministry of Culture, and the art conservationist; he denies life’s dirtiness and sanctifies the beyond’s purity.

Of course, Shérazade invariably rebels against objectification. After agreeing to play the exotic warrior “Zina” in Julien’s movie, Shérazade rejects her boyfriend’s motion to film a scene in a Parisian greenhouse:

--Qu’est-ce que tu penserais d’une séquence du film ici, dans une serre?
--Alors là, non!
--Pourquoi? C’est beau.
--C’est tellement beau qu’on voit ça tout le temps pour les pubs de mode, dans des boutiques, ou des films publicitaires genre Club Méditerranée...couleur locale. Alors là, non. (Sebbar, *Shérazade* 198-9)

Shérazade attacks the “nihilism of formal principles” (Camus, *The Rebel* 273) that informs Julien’s screenplay and worldview. She advises her boyfriend that idealism by itself cannot yield meaningful aesthetic demands. For it to be authentic, the work must be an act of creative synthesis. It must strike a balance between the totality of the real and the totality of the ideal for its creator to experience true
pleasure, the living transcendence. Julien’s “greenhouse scene” is
doomed to imitate other styles—the scene will be “tellement beau qu'on
voit ça tout le temps pour les pubs de mode, dans des boutiques, ou
des films publicitaires”—because Julien rejects life, one of the two
preconditions for creativity. The greenhouse captures this disregard
for life, this desire to create beauty in an artificial setting. In the end,
Julien’s desire to detach himself from the terrestrial—he strives to be
as pure as a hothouse flower—imprisons him within the world of power.
A fear of nature’s indeterminacy makes him slavish, which explains
why he parrots the topoi of exoticism instead of creating his own
style, why he tries to objectify Shérazade through Zina, an adaptation
of the Amazon princess topos.

Of course, Shérazade resists being imprisoned like a hothouse
flower within the greenhouse and the pseudoscientific, artlessly
transparent language of exoticism. Like the storm in Les Carnets de
Shérazade, she breaks through the glass, shattering exoticism’s
illusion of scientific objectivity and subverting Julien’s desire for
transcendence. By doing so, the protagonist saves her boyfriend from
the pull of nihilism. She objects, “(a)lors là, non,” encouraging Julien to
equate wholeness/pleasure with creative synthesis not annihilation.
Only rebellious aesthetic demands such as this can (partially)
emancipate Julien from the dispersed world. For Sebbar, as for Albert
Camus a generation before her, there is little difference between
divine transcendence and subsistence. One subordinates us to the
teleology of the beyond, the other to the totalitarianism of the reality.
Wholeness is liminal, between the greenhouse and nature. It blossoms
in Jack’s garden.

Sebbar must have read V.S. Naipaul’s *The Middle Passage* (1962).

In *Shérazade*, her protagonist literally takes aim at Ras Tafarianism
and Marxism, two of Naipaul’s favorite ideological targets. To the
horror of her friends, the Marxist revolutionary Pierrot and black
nationalist Basile, Shérazade shoots a hole in a Che Guevara poster,
and threatens to shoot at one featuring Bob Marley:

(Shérazade) jouait avec le P. 38 de Basile. Le coup partit
juste dans l’œil gauche de Che Guevara dont le poster
jaunissait au mur depuis des mois. Basile poussa un cri [...] 
— Attends, j’allais tirer sur l’autre...Qui ça? Lui, là à
côté de Marx [...] 
— Quoi? sur Bob Marley! T’es dingue, complètement
dingue!
— Bof, ils sont tous morts. (Sebbar, *Shérazade* 46)

Shooting Guevera in the left eye is not enough. Through
indifference, Shérazade desecrates Basile’s and Pierrot’s shrine to
these emancipatory ideologies that encourage man to believe in
historical finality. First, she underscores the impotence of
Rastafarianism with her query “Qui ça?”. Bob Marley, in Shérazade’s
eyes, is every bit as forgettable as other clichéd images of
Easternness such as Julien’s “serre” and the tropical scenes appearing
in “pubs de mode, dans des boutiques, ou des films publicitaires genre Club Méditerranée” (Sebbar, Shérazade 198-9). Marley’s redemptionist message is stale. It is derivative of the Christian super-story that Western powers use(d) to appease their neo-colonial subjects. Instead of promoting the oppressed’s and the marginalized’s integration into the world through political and social reform, Ras Tafarianism (like Marxism) rejects life and humanity’s divine struggle to distort it moderately. In doing so, it objectifies humanity, encouraging people, like Pierrot and Basile, to wait for transcendence. It is preferable, these ideologies insist, to put one’s hopes in a charismatic figure and the unattainable dream of redemption than to create a better life for oneself in the real world. It is almost as if Shérazade is responding to Bob Marley’s ubiquitous mantra “I’m a révolté; I’m a révolté” with “No! I’m a révolté!”

Contempt for redemptionist ideology explains why Shérazade shoots Che Guevera in the left(ist) eye. She attacks Marxism and its cult of the hero, frustrating the Marxist’s desire to repress individualism. In doing so, she suggests that Pierrot and Basile are inauthentic because they are constructs of Marxism’s fraudulent emancipatory narrative. Instead of demanding equal recognition, that is, to be seen as self-masters, Pierrot and Basile accept the unequal recognition associated with hero worship. They “exist so that someone else might be their leader” (Naipaul, The Middle Passage 189).
And, similar to the West Indian racial redemptionists who, according to Naipaul, wish “to be granted a dispensation from the pains of development” (Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* 189), these young men isolate themselves in their suburban *squat*. They sanctify their outcast state because more moderate forms of protest entail power-sharing, which frustrates their desire for transcendence.

In the end, Pierrot and Basile find it easier to repudiate the imperfect world in favor of the absolute than to engage themselves in an emancipatory struggle with limited terrestrial goals. This also sheds some explanatory light on Shérazade’s motivation for shooting Guevera in the *left* eye. She believes that wholeness is attainable through social and political moderation not revolutionary extremism and alterity. When she discharges Basile’s .38, Shérazade commits an act of rebellion. The mark she leaves on Guevera (and France) is, in Camus’ words, “the same slight distortion that is the mark of both art and protest” (Camus, *The Rebel* 195).
Chapter 2
The Gaze and
the Problem of Human History
In *The Colonial Harem*, Malek Alloula foregrounds the excesses of meaning—the bored stares, oblique glances, and irreverent smirks—that female Arab models brought to 19th century erotic French postcards. He points out how the models return the photographer’s gaze, frustrating the sense of primacy the colonizer experiences through “la violence du regard.”\(^3^4\) Shérazade resembles these Algerian models. She too is Arab, poor, and unveiled; and she constantly asserts herself through the gaze, bringing her liminal self-identity as an excess of meaning to the master(ing)-discourses that numerous characters employ to buttress their absolutist configurations of self-identity.

Shérazade’s interactions with Julien Desrosiers, Henri Matisse’s *Odalisque à la culotte rouge* and Hezbollah militants in Lebanon are apt metaphors of the rebel’s struggle for the living transcendence. Despite the threat of symbolic and/or real violence from them, Shérazade has a romantic relationship with Julien, appropriates Matisse’s paintings, and challenges the militants’ nostalgic vision of Islamic identity; she sees something in each of them that bears repeating with a difference. What Shérazade recognizes is that the characters’ middle selfhood—their antagonistic desire to exist as rebels and nihilists—has the potential to provide people in Europe and the Middle East with guidance for making themselves and their condition more unified.

It makes perfect sense that Sebbar would convey the themes of rebellion and nihilism through the look. Francis Fukuyama writes that our complex desires, embodied in Hegel’s “first man, distinguish us from animals. Instinct explains why human beings and animals desire material things, such as food, shelter, and warmth. Unlike animals, we also have non-material needs. We desire “the desire of other men.” We want “to be wanted by others or to be ‘recognized:’”

Hegel’s “first man” is radically different from (the) animals in that he desires not only real “positive” objects—a steak, or fur jacket with which to keep warm, or a shelter in which to live—but also objects that are totally non-material. Above all, he desires the desire of other men, that is, to be wanted by others or to be “recognized.” Indeed, for Hegel, an individual could not become self-conscious, that is, aware of himself as a separate human being, without being recognized. Man, in other words, was from the start a “social” being[...] (Fukuyama 146)

Fukuyama repeats what Hegel and Camus argued before him: the desire for recognition, thymos, is the motor of history. The master’s desire for superior recognition enjoins him or her to take slaves. By superior recognition, Fukuyama means that the master desires to be seen as the only being “radically undetermined by nature,” the only being in the wilderness “capable of true moral choice, that is, the choice between two courses of action not simply on the basis of the greater utility of one over another but because of an inherent freedom to make and adhere to his own rules.” (Fukuyama 149)
The slave rebels—he or she strives to “make(s) and adhere(s) to its own rules”—after deciding that objectification is intolerable. Rebellions occur the moment the slave’s desire for the master’s desire to be recognized as “an agent of free moral choice” surpasses his or her desire for self-preservation. Fukuyama writes that the slave’s desire for recognition is the linchpin of progress. The rebellious slave is the agent of history:

By submitting to the master, the slave of course is not recognized as a human being: on the contrary, he is treated as a thing, a tool for the satisfaction of the master’s wants. Recognition is entirely one-way. But this total absence of recognition is what leads the slave to desire change. (Fukuyama 194)

The nineteenth-century postcard models Alloula studies conform to Hegel’s, Camus’ and Fukuyama’s concept of the rebellious slave. They rebel because they have tired of the “total absence of recognition” that underlies colonialism. They look back\(^{35}\) because they no longer tolerate one-way recognition, being viewed by the colonizer as an object of his desire for primacy. The models “return the gaze” of the master because they desire its desire to be recognized as agents of moral choice, makers of aesthetic demands. The subtlety of

\(^{35}\) I borrow the terms “looking back” and “returning the gaze from Frederic Jameson. In *The Cultural Turn* (New York: Verso, 1998), Jameson describes these actions in rebellious terms:

To make other people over into things by way of the Look equals the primal source of a domination and subjection which can only be overcome by looking back or returning the gaze. (Jameson 105)
their returned gazes is also consistent with Hegel's, Camus' and Fukuyama's understanding of rebellion. These smirks, sneers, and stares are isothymotic in nature. Through them, the models advance history towards its conclusion. On the postcard, they have replaced megalothymia or one-way recognition with isothymia or two-way recognition. They challenge the Look by looking back. As Camus points out, "the slave is not concerned, let us note, with repudiating his master as a human being. He repudiates him as a master" (Camus, The Rebel 23).

The postcard models do not deny the photographer's right to make aesthetic demands. What they reject through their various ways of looking back is the colonizer's exclusive right to make them. They deny the legitimacy of colonialism, and the idealized constructions of East/West difference that the colonizer uses to configure its arbitrary relationship with the colonized as necessary. Through rebellion, the Algerian women not only spotlight the historicity of the colonial situation, but they point the way to the end of history and express a certain willingness to create a more authentic form of social organization along the way. The models tackle what Fukuyama calls the "problem of human history:"

The problem of human history can be seen, in a certain sense, as the search for a way to satisfy the desire of both masters and slaves for recognition on a mutual and equal basis; history ends with the victory of a social order
that accomplishes this goal. (Fukuyama 152)

Shérazade also tackles (but doesn’t attempt to resolve) the problem of human history when she recasts exoticism, which goes hand in hand with the idea of “la vieille France,” and orthodox Islam as two-way recognition. Through the returned gaze, she works towards a more unified post-colonial social order, one that enables greater numbers of people to achieve the living transcendence. Shérazade returns Julien Desrosiers’ gaze instead of repudiating it/him because the rebel, by definition, finds annihilation self-wounding. She realizes that wholeness entails recognizing the interconnectedness of self and other, master and slave, individual and community, and so on.

Julien plays a vital role in the teenager’s life because he exposes her to art from both coasts of her colonial heritage. These include his own work, Matisse’s Odalisques, Arabic poetry, and Wagner’s operas. Even though Julien typically reinforces Western stereotypes about the East, he provides Shérazade with access to a community that the young runaway would never have known otherwise. Repudiating him would have prevented her contact with images of rebellious Algerian women that eventually play a crucial role in her (inter)subjective identity construction, and in her eventual decision (prompted by observing Matisse’s *Odalisque à la culotte rouge* in *Shérazade*) to return to Algeria. In short, Julien is an important link to the community
of rebels; megalothymotic he may be, this pied-noir prevents the
teenager’s revolt against the essentialized community from taking a
nihilistic turn into solitude.

Shérazade’s contentious relationship with Julien places her in a
position where, in addition to learning about her own Algerian heritage,
she can distort her companion’s partially megalothymotic vision of
Arab women and the East through the returned gaze. For instance,
during one of their many visits to the Louvre, Shérazade interrupts
Julien with a question about the Algerian war-- she asks “Et la
guerre?”-- as he extracts the Orientalist essence, the East/West
difference, from Eugène Delacroix’s Femmes d’Alger (Sebar
Shérazade 13). Her query disrupts his attempt to impose himself/the
West on Shérazade/the East “by making statements about it,”
“authorizing views of it” and “teaching it.” 36 In an anti-authoritarian
move, she asks, “(e)t la guerre?” to unmask the megalothymotic
underpinnings of Julien’s/the West’s gaze; she foregrounds her/the
East’s tireless resistance to it.

“Et la guerre?” is also an identitarian question. On a personal
level, it expresses the teenager’s blossoming curiosity about her
colonial past and post-colonial present. Anne Donadey points out that
the Algerian war was the apotheosis of centuries of Franco-Arabic
conflict. It was also the founding event of Algeria’s independence, the

5th Republic, and the North African diaspora to the Hexagon (Donadey, *Recasting Postcolonialism* 15). This occluded event informs Shérazade’s past and present. In addition, Shérazade’s query is a commemorative gesture. It is intended to orient France’s fractious communities toward a more unified but heterogeneous collective identity. In an isothymotic manner, she asks the French and Algerians to remember their historical interconnectedness. Orientalism, nationalism’s handmaiden, to paraphrase Said, manufactured social cohesion by exaggerating the threat of cultural difference.\(^{37}\) Shérazade, on the other hand, forges national unity through rebellion. By destabilizing stereotypes about the Other, the Beur reconfigures the collective identity as an inclusivist *brassage* of self and other. Through hybridity--historical and contemporary--Shérazade believes France can reinvent itself as more tolerant, egalitarian society. It is the responsibility of marginalized and mainstream communities, her simple question implies, to move closer to that ideal. Groups must work together to cultivate a more cohesive French Republic at the same time that they create themselves as individuals.

By foregrounding Julien’s silence on the war—’*(I)* I n’avait pas envie de parler de la guerre d’Algérie, après le Louvre’* (Sebbar,

\(^{37}\) In *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Lions Gate Films, 2004), Michael Moore makes a connection between fear and unanimity. He claims that the Bush administration manipulated America’s fear of terrorism in the months following the September 11 attacks to whip up support for military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq and its right-wing political agenda in the United States.
"Shérazade" 14) --Sebbar's narrator demonstrates that the "Algeria syndrome," a collective repression of colonial violence and loss, is a psychological hurdle to Franco-Arabic reconciliation. Ultimately Shérazade's contestation of Julien's orientalist atavism--his insertion of real Arab women into exotic fantasies--is both an individual and collective strategy of selfhood. By dragging Julien away from aesthetics, and into a thorny dialogue about the war, Shérazade provides her fellow post-colonials with a model for anamnèsis, for "com(ing) together to find ways to uncover and memorialize" (Donadey, Recasting Postcolonialism 33) a shared violent past. She helps the French Republic clear the hexagonal thicket of history, not of historical events per se, but of asymmetrical social relations between its mainstream and minoritarian communities. According to Donadey, anti-immigrant violence is a manifestation of this collective repression:

The explosion of racist violence in France in the 1980s could well be interpreted through the lens of Sigmund Freud's theory of the return of the repressed. According to Freud, what used to be familiar but has been subsequently repressed resurfaces through unconscious acts and dreams and expresses itself in the compulsion to repeat[...] The escalation of anti-Arab incidents, together with the generalization of racist rhetoric in that decade, could be linked to that long repression, first the violent reality of the Algerian war, and then of the psychological loss experienced by the French after 1962. (Donadey, Recasting Postcolonialism 12)

The friction in Shérazade's and Julien's relationship suggests
that the cross cultural dialogue that produces anamnesis--
psychological liberation--is an extremely difficult process. Although
Julien does not commit physical violence against Arabs, his repressed
memories of the Algerian war, in short, return as pictorial violence
against the Arab woman he loves. At the trilogy’s beginning,
Shérazade tells Julien that her green eyes hardly justify his comparison
of her to Aziyadé, the Turkish lover of the prototypical 19th century,
French orientalist writer, Pierre Loti:

- Et pourquoi pas Aziyadé?
- C’est qui?
- Une très belle Turque de Stamboul que Pierre Loti
  a aimé, il y a un siècle
- Pierre Loti je connais. Mais pas Aziyadé? [...] 
pourquoi vous me parlez de cette femme? Je n’ai rien à
faire.
- Elle avait des yeux verts, comme vous.
- C’est pas une raison. (Sebbar, Shérazade 7-8)

Foreshadowing her encounter with Femmes algériennes 1960, a
photo anthology of anti-colonial résistantes whose “visages avaient la
dureté et la violence de ceux qui subissent l’arbitraire,” (Sebbar,
Shérazade 220) Shérazade refuses to see Julien’s arbitrary vision of
things as necessary, as the timeless, inviolable truth. She resists
“naming,” which Rafika Merini defines as the imposition or “bestowing
of an arbitrary identity” on the Other.\(^\text{38}\) Yet, Shérazade does not
negate Julien’s worldview absolutely; she “repudiates it on grounds of

\(^{38}\) Rafika Merini, Two Major Francophone Women Writers, Assia Djébar and Leila
Sebbar: a Thematic Study of Their Works (New York: Peter Lang, 1999) 44.
necessity” (Camus, *The Rebel* 250). Hence, when she tells Julien that the link between her own and Aziyadé’s green eyes is arbitrary—she claims “je n’ai rien à faire” (with the Turk)—it is to assert her liberty (and Aziyadé’s) through the returned gaze. Shérazade claims she has nothing to do with Aziyadé because both are self-determined. Individuals, they see things through different eyes. Both are subjects, that is, “agents of true moral choice” (Fukuyama 149).

While she does let Julien photograph her—she won’t deny him the right to create, “to make and adhere to his own rules” (Fukuyama 149)—Shérazade resists being objectified as the pied-noir’s Odalisque fantasy. Furious that Julien has canvassed his apartment with her image, Shérazade violently returns his colonizing gaze:

(E)lle arracha toutes les photos d’elle que Julien avait collées, punaisés, épinglées de la cuisine à la salle de bains, en passant par les panneaux couverts de la chambre et de la grande pièce, des photos de formats différents, de la photo d’identité au poster:
- J’en ai marre de voir ma gueule partout, tu comprends...tu as pas besoin de moi vivante, finalement. (Sebbar, *Shérazade* 158)

Julien’s photographs bring to mind Pablo Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, a cubist reworking of Eugène Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger*. Similar to Picasso’s work, which uses geometric fragmentation and the Arab woman as signs of feminine difference, the pied-noir’s photos objectify Shérazade through fragmentation. He carves the Beur up into
body parts that he has “shot” from a variety of perspectives. In
response to her Picasso-like dissection, Shérazade barks, “J’en ai
marre de voir ma gueule partout, tu comprends.” An active subject,
she destroys Julien’s photos because she senses their multiple poses,
angles, and sizes are intended to name her as “knowable, controllable,
and thus representable, exotic Other” (Said, Orientalism 3).

Being seen metonymically—as a “gueule” or a “green eye”—
sparked her desire for change. Shérazade does not look back through
the gaze per se; she uses verbal and physical contestation to
confronts the “master” and subvert the nihilism that informs his
representations. By ripping up Julien’s photos, she makes her demand
for equal recognition. She insists on being recognized as a separate or
self-conscious human being, an agent of moral choice, a maker of
aesthetic demands.

Shérazade demands to be recognized in spite of the inherent
physical risk involved. Julien is her physical superior—“il aurait pu lui
faire du mal” (my emphasis) —and actually comes close to using brute
force to assert his superiority when representation fails. Hence, the
physical repercussions for looking back are very real. Shérazade is a
true rebel because she has “the courage to renounce life.” According
to Camus, this separates the rebel from the slave:

(The slave lacks) the courage to renounce life and is
therefore willing to recognize the other kind of
consciousness without being recognized itself in return. It consents, in short, to being considered an object. This type of consciousness, which to preserve its animal existence, renounces independent life, is the consciousness of the slave. The type of consciousness which by being recognized achieves independence is that of the master. (Camus, The Rebel 140)

Shérazade is willing to die to satisfy her desire for “independent life,” but she is no nihilist. The nihilist renounces the material realm absolutely—he renounces all worldly things—because non-material objects (e.g., liberty) are all that he desires. What Shérazade rejects is an “animal existence,” and the “type of consciousness[...]that renounces independent life;” she does not renounce life. On the contrary, she risks her individual life to underscore man’s common dignity, an eternal value worth defending to the death. Thus, rebellion is a liminal struggle because it desires the recognition of individual and collective liberty, the equality of master and slave, the co-sanctity of the real and the ideal. Shérazade’s resonance with The Rebel is strong:

(T)hough it springs from everything that is most strictly individualistic in man, (rebellion) questions the very idea of the individual. If the individual, in fact, accepts death and happens to die as a consequence of his act of rebellion, he demonstrates by doing so that he is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of a common good which he considers more important than his own destiny. If he prefers the risk of death to the negation of the rights he defends, it is because he considers these rights more important than himself. Therefore, he is acting in the name of certain values which are still indeterminate but which he feels are common to himself and to all men. (Camus, The Rebel 15)
Shérazade also destabilizes the mastering gaze through an indirect form of looking back: criticism. By providing feedback on Julien’s screenplay, which he eventually films in Le Fou de Shérazade, Shérazade asserts her individuality. When she brings her critical eye to Julien’s narrative, the teenager positions herself as subject, a (co)creator of meaning:

Shérazade fit des remarques que Julien écoutait, un peu tendu, à cause, disait-il, de ce rasoir de merde qui rasait mal...Il pensait qu’elle n’avait pas tort et il modifia le scénario en tenant compte de ce qu’elle avait dit.” (Sebbar, Shérazade 160)

By giving feedback, Shérazade steps out of the silent role of femme représentée, and becomes a vocal femme représentant. She asserts that she is a separate human being not a material object, a creator of meaning not a creation. Hence, Shérazade’s criticism is rebellious because it is isothymotic and moderate, creative and destructive. Instead of taking over the screen play, which would be a form of looking--she would be asserting her absolute liberty--Shérazade demands that Julien acknowledge the merit of her ideas. When the narrator remarks that Julien “pensait qu’elle n’avait pas tort et il modifia le scénario en tenant compte de ce qu’elle avait dit,” it appears that Julien no longer looks at Shérazade (or himself) in the same way. He sees her as separate from other objects because her criticism makes him acknowledge—“tenir compte de”—her desire for
recognition, her non-materiality. In doing so, Shérazade makes Julien acknowledge the superiority of two-way recognition. As a result of Shérazade’s revolt, “(I) modifia le scénario.” He altered his aesthetic demand without having to surrender his status as an agent of moral choice. With Shérazade’s assistance, Julien chose an isothymotic course of action. He moved closer towards the heartland of rebelliousness when he altered his parameters of identity.

Criticism, and the modification it precipitates represents the precise moment when Julien begins to exist as a more authentic human being via Shérazade’s return of the gaze. He becomes more authentic when his middle selfhood tips in favor of rebellion. Through his recognition of Shérazade, he begins to understand that isothymia has greater creative potential than megalothymia because it is open-ended. At the same time, Shérazade satisfies her desire for recognition—she asserts her rebelliousness—when she forces Julien to “tenir compte de ce qu’elle avait dit.” Furthermore, the collaborative effort is rebellious because its vision is limited to modification. Together, Julien and Shérazade distort the screenplay slightly; they do not throw it out.

Moderation is also the defining characteristic of Sebbar’s relationship to social inequality. Rather than rejecting Enlightenment ideas, which are the guiding principles of the French State, Sebbar wishes to distort the 5th Republic into a polity committed to decreasing the dissonance between ideology and reality. It stands to
reason that Julien’s screenplay is an allegory of contemporary social relations between France’s mainstream and minoritarian communities. Like his “scénario” in macrocosm, France remains flawed so long as nihilism remains a more appealing way for the people and the State to deal with its post-colonial minorities. By “tenant compte de” minoritarian voices, France can transform itself into a more just, egalitarian, free, and dynamic society.

At the same time, the individual must recognize “certain values which are still indeterminate but which he feels are common to himself and to all men” (Camus, *The Rebel* 15). In other words, one must grasp the limitations of individual sovereignty and relative truth. The individual’s aesthetic demands must recognize that others have the capacity for free moral choice. It is the individual’s belief in a universal human dignity which discourages him or her from imposing subjective moral choices, personal style, on others. Camus implies that rebellions which do not recognize the limited indeterminacy of meaning/style and with it our “common value,” aggravate the problem of history:

If men cannot refer to a common value, recognized by all as existing in each one, then man is incomprehensible to man. The rebel demands that this value should be clearly recognized in himself because he knows or suspects that, without this principle, crime and disorder would reign throughout the world. An act of rebellion on his part seems like a demand for clarity and unity. The most elementary form of rebellion, paradoxically, expresses an aspiration to order. (Camus, *The Rebel* 23)
Despite being “a demand for clarity and unity” as well as “an aspiration to order,” rebellion always involves the risk of violence. The Arab community’s demands for equal recognition, such as *la Marche des Beurs* (1983), are countered with xenophobic violence from nihilistic middle selves and nihilists who see such struggles for social equality as existential threats to “la vieille France.” France’s Arabs, like the *Femmes algériennes 1960*, cannot make the Other recognize their dignity without a fight, without risking their material security. The contemporary xenophobic violence reverberates in Julien’s reaction to Shérazade. When his girlfriend looks back, Julien displaces his anger onto “ce rasoir de merde qui rasait mal.” Not only does the razor bring to mind the knife, a synecdoche for the French xenophobe, but it also conveys the physical repercussions of rebellion.

Yet, Shérazade’s rebellious spirit is indomitable. She loves liberty more than she fears the knife. Her courage also explains why Julien’s razor “rasait mal.” Julien’s razor cannot subjugate Shérazade. He cannot dominate her through physical violence or representation because she is willing to sacrifice herself for her rebellious principles. Like the master who recognizes the slave after the latter shows a willingness to die, Julien, after a brief pause—the ellipsis is Sebbar’s—grudgingly acknowledges her dignity: “Il pensait qu’elle n’avait pas tort.” Such a realization suggests that, albeit slowly, Julien is indeed moving towards a more rebellious self-identity. Will France follow?
Sebbar suggests that cross-cultural dialogue and self-criticism enable mutual understanding—two way recognition—to supplant violence (virtual and real) as a strategy for dealing with the Other. Through Shérazade, Julien is slowly learning how to view post-colonial relations through the rebel’s optic. Shérazade’s rebellion brings him back into the heartland of rebellion, where he sometimes ventured alone:

Il travaillait à la fois sur des archives coloniales et des archives de la civilisation et de la littérature arabes. On s’étonnait toujours lorsqu’il en parlait qu’il prit le même intérêt à des productions assez différentes—antagonistes—lui disait-on. Mais ces contradictions, s’il y en avait, ne le gênait pas. Il était curieux de tout ce qui constituait du plus loin de l’histoire, sa propre histoire et celle de deux peuples, deux cultures qui se fréquentaient depuis les croisades. (Sebbar, Shérazade 113)

In the past, Julien refused to ground his scholarship on a rigid, ideological foundation other than rebelliousness. He neither condemned nor apologized for colonialism. A rigid political stance, he felt, would reduce colonial relations to what Panivong Norindr calls “easily graspable binary oppositions: us versus them, a clash between French culture under attack by outsiders, aliens, les étrangers.” (Norindr 238). His fluid methodology doubled as a mode of identitarian enrichment; his scholastic foray into a complex, ambiguous heritage, for a time anyway, went part and parcel with self-discovery. Françoise Lionnet defines this identitarian posture as “métissage,” a strategy
undecidability and indeterminacy (we can use) to articulate new visions of ourselves, new concepts that allow us to think otherwise, to bypass the ancient symmetries and dichotomies that have governed the ground and the very possibility of thought, of ‘clarity,’ in all of Western philosophy. 39

While Julien appeared to value métissage as a liberating strategy of selfhood, he also shared the nihilist’s longing for “clarity,” for a pure identity. In time, he grew tired managing the ambiguities of exile and sought refuge in nostalgia, a screen memory for the trauma of exile. Exilic fatigue explains why he abandoned his archival work for “les défauts sublimes” of an art collector (Sebbar, Shérazade 20); historiography brought painful memories of colonial violence and the other’s rebelliousness into sharp focus. Despite withdrawing into exoticism, Julien never crossed over into nihilism. At no point did he completely reject the exilic for the exotic, the diasporic for the originary. A remark he makes about pied-noir racism evokes the complexity of his middle selfhood:

(J’ai entendu, par certains pied-noirs, que la France dans très peu de temps serait colonisée par les Arabes du Maghreb, du Machrek et du Golfe[...]
--- Ils sont fous ces pied-noirs (dit Shérazade) et tu les crois?--- Ce que je crois c’est que la France se métisse[...] les Français de souche seront dans quelques décennies, les nouvelles minorités..., dit Julien en riant et tout à cause de filles comme toi[...] vous allez faire des enfants bicoleores,

des sangs mêlés, des mixtes, des coupés, des bâtards...des hybrides...des travestis[...] (Sebbar, 
*Shérazade* 191-2)

Julien employs pejoratives, such as “enfants bicolores,” “sangs mêlés,” and “coupés,” to warn Shérazade that French and North African inbreeding will contaminate the metropolis’ racial purity. This will contest the idea of “la vieille France” and the stable self-identity this exclusivist, parochialist topos provides the Extreme Right and to a lesser extent, France’s cultural and political mainstream. Next, he provides pied-noir xenophobia with intellectual legitimacy by quoting Théophile Gautier’s 1843 *Voyage pittoresque en Algérie*:

Nous croyons avoir conquis Alger, et c’est Alger qui nous a conquis. Nos femmes portent déjà des écharpes tramées d’or, bariolées de mille couleurs qui ont servi aux esclaves du harem [...] dans quelques temps d’ici, la France sera mahométane [...] (Sebbar, *Shérazade* 190-191)

Julien is speaking literally and ironically in both cases. He talks in his own voice and imitates the voice of power, subverting and reinforcing Western hegemonic discourse. On the one hand, Julien identifies with Gautier, pied-noir bigots, and the Extreme Right when he’s speaking from the cultural idealist’s megalothymotic perspective. He derives a sense of pleasure from repeating the West’s primacy without a difference, from configuring the West as the East’s unequivocal superior, himself as Shérazade’s master. Yet, Julien is also speaking as a rebel. He uses the trope of irony to contest these racist
stereotypes, thereby bringing an excess of meaning to the West’s self-identity. The difference he brings is sameness. Julien demonstrates that the Easterner and the Westerner are both endowed with the ability to transform their post-colonial condition as each sees fit; both are dignified and united under the aegis of rebellion.

Instead of connoting Eastern sexual depravity and Western advancement, the sexual union of mainstream and minority is the sign of a rebellion against an exclusivist understanding of “francité,” Julien also suggests. The mixed union is a form of two-way recognition because the Easterner and the Westerner recognize their own divine self-image in each other. They come together out of love, not out of a desire to dominate. Freedom of choice, not coercion or power or fear dictates who joins whom. The mixed union is a microcosm of Sebbar’s ideal society—the recasted 5th Republic progressing toward (but not all the way to) the ideal of universal emancipation—because it transcends the reductive Manichaeism of East vs. West, native vs. foreigner, us vs. them, etc. The mixed couple, in turn, engenders hybrids. It sires “enfants bicolores,” “sangs melés,” and “mixtes”. How these liminal rebels lead their lives is up to them. They can choose rebellion, middle selfhood, or nihilism. Their parents merely provide them with “the (liminal) terrain for elaborating (these various) strategies of selfhood—singular and communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of
defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha 1-2). They must see for
themselves; they must make their own aesthetic demands on the
world; they must bring unity to their condition, satisfying their desire
for freedom through “contestation,” their desire for security through
“collaboration.”

Shérazade’s dialogue with Julien also facilitates her discovery of
nihilistic multimedia images of the Maghreb, representations that bring
new energy to her revolt against discourses of domination. While Julien
and a friend discuss their collaboration on a film, Shérazade leafs
through Marc Garanger’s Femmes algériennes 1960, which will become
an important template for rebellion:

Ça s’appelait Femmes algériennes 1960. Elle le feuilletait. Les visages des femmes dévoilés devant l’appareil photographique que manipulait le Français soldat-photographe, pour le recensement de plusieurs villages de l’intérieur [...] ces visages avaient la dureté et la violence de ceux qui subissent l’arbitraire sachant qu’ils trouveront en eux la force de la résistance. Ces Algériennes avaient toutes devant l’objectif-mitrailleur, le même regard, intense, farouche, d’une sauvagerie que l’image ne saurait qu’archiver, sans jamais la maîtriser ni la dominer. Ces femmes parlaient toutes la même langue, la langue de sa mère. (Sebbar, Shérazade 220)

Shérazade’s identification with these modern, real-life versions
of Delacroix’s Femmes d’Alger is instantaneous. The teenager
identifies with the Algériennes paraded before the French “objectif-
mitrailleur,” a stunning metaphor for the nihilistic underpinnings of
representation, because they share her (and the nineteenth century postcard models’) fierce determination to protect their individuality from objectification. These women, who turn out to speak her mother(‘s) tongue, also teach Shérazade that rebellion is as much a part of her Algerian heritage as Arabic and Islam. In other words, they enlighten her to the fact that rebellion is not antithetical to the Arab-Islamic world. This realization will help her, particularly in Le Fou de Shérazade when she revolts against Islamic radicalism. The photo anthology teaches her that she can assert her individuality against the most extreme (and more benign) expressions of Islamic orthodoxy without having to inscribe herself within Western discourse. She does not have to reject her Arab-Islamic heritage in order to assert her individuality; nor does she have to reject individualism to challenge Western hegemony. She can return these gazes from the space in between these exclusivist categories of identity.

By staring down the photographer, the naked prisoners in Femmes algériennes expose the arbitrary underpinnings of objectivized Western representations of the Maghreb. Resembling their nineteenth century forbearers, the women frustrate the West’s desire for superior recognition. The Algériennes’ wild eyes prove that Garanger’s “objectif-mitrailleur,” much the nineteenth century daguerreotype, cannot contain Maghrebin women. On the contrary, the lack of recognition pushes them to rebel. They express their desire for it
through “le même regard, intense, farouche, d’une sauvagerie que l’image ne saurait qu’archiver.” Although “collective,” their gaze, “le même regard,” is not the impassive stare of a colonized, objectified Other. They speak through their eyes as “nous,” as sisters united against Western hegemony.

Francis Fukuyama writes that thymos explains why Chinese student confronted tanks (Fukuyama, 312). That image of Tiananmen Square springs to mind whenever I read the passage where Sebbar discovers Femmes algériennes 1960. Even at gunpoint, these women do not back down because, like the rebellious slave and the Chinese dissident, they risk their lives to make the master recognize man’s independence from the material world, the eternal quality of human dignity. Mirroring the Chinese student, the Algerian women stop the French colonial war machine and the discourses that legitimate it dead in their tracks. Hence, the French master (narrative) cannot “maîtriser” or “dominer” colonials; it can only “archiver” them, and photographic archives inevitably deteriorate, like paintings do. Unequal recognition spawns rebellion out of necessity.

A few days after Julien exposed her to the Louvre’s Odalisques, Shérazade, drifting about Paris, finds herself in the Le musée national d’art moderne. After wandering through a labyrinth of exhibition rooms, she encounters Matisse’s Odalisque à la culotte rouge:

Elle ne comprend pas pourquoi ça l’émeut. La femme
allongée les seins nus, les bras derrière la tête recouverts d’une légère gaze, les cheveux à moitié cachés par un foulard [...] Shérazade ne la trouve pas belle [...] Elle a écrit la description de l’Odalisque sur son carnet sans rien préciser, sans noter qu’elle la trouve plutôt laide et que pourtant cette femme la touche. Elle ne cherche pas à savoir pourquoi. Sa décision est prise. Shérazade ira en Algérie. (Sebbar, Shérazade 245)

After inscribing a description of the woman in red pants in her notebook, Shérazade decides to travel to Algeria. Scholars have not adequately explained why Matisse’s painting motivates the youth to leave for North Africa. Anissa Talahite considers Matisse’s Odalisque paintings monolithic exotic icons. She believes that Shérazade appropriates them in “hybrid space (thus) corroding the boundaries of monolithic and unilateral discourses of identity.”40 Denise Brahimi sees Shérazade’s odd appropriation of this painting as a metaphor of the Beur generation’s desire for liberty, to “se vivre à la fois comme l’un et l’autre, contre la volonté raciste de ceux qui les rejettent dans l’altérité et contre la volonté intégriste de ceux qui les confinent dans l’unicité.” 41

Shérazade does not make the Odalisque à la culotte rouge liminal in order to destabilize “monolithic and universal” discourses of domination. Although she does indeed challenge its status as an

“ideological statement,”42 the teenager also uncovers the Odalisque’s (and the Matisse’s) existing liminality to make the West’s self-identity isothymotic. By overlooking this important detail, scholars fail to see the transfigurative potential of rebellion. They do not see that it enables individuals and groups to live subjectively and rationally, that it helps the French, not simply les Beurs, create new signs of identity multilaterally. In short, Talahite and Brahimi do not see that Shérazade co-opts Matisse’s hybridity to make hybridity an authentic identitarian paradigm in France (and beyond). That is to say, she reterritorializes Matisse’s middle selfhood as rebelliousness, weeding the megalothymotic from his liminal self-identity without delegitimizing hybridity’s status as an authentic self-identity.

Despite its debt to a tradition of Odalisque paintings that began with Ingres and Delacroix, Matisse’s aesthetic is marked by métissage. His *Odalisque à la culotte rouge* moves the heroine because, to a degree, it reinforces hybridity’s liberating values. So, even if Sebbar implies that Shérazade has a certain affinity for Matisse’s painting because it puts her in touch with her North African heritage, or more specifically, with Arab women’s defiance of the imperialist gaze, it is

42 In “Constructing Myths and Ideologies in Matisse’s Odalisques” (*Genders* 5 Summer (1989)), Marilynn Lincoln Board takes an anti-formalist approach to Matisse criticism, which “concentrate(s) on descriptions of Matisse’s stylistic virtuosity and his buoyant expression of apparently uncomplicated happiness.” (Board 23) Board builds on Jack Flam and Dominique Fourcade, who investigate the “unresolved tensions” in Matisse’s work, namely the figures’ joylessness and melancholy. She examines Matisse’s Odalisques in their colonialist/masculinist context, highlighting their relationship with the male/the West’s desire for dominance.
well documented that the female models for the Matisse’s Odalisques are not North African women. Matisse actually paid European women to dress in North African clothes. In his French studio, he mixed European models, Maghrebin decor, and a modernist aesthetic to construct a subjective vision, an affective portrait of the Maghreb he visited in 1912 and 1913.

As much as the influence of Mediterranean light and the abstract patterns of Islamic art on his aesthetic, his disguising of European women in North African clothes illustrates the hybrid nature of his Odalisques. Profoundly ambiguous, they are neither French nor North African. Like Shérazade, they cannot be contained in either imagined cultural space. Hence, the paintings themselves, not merely Shérazade’s co-optation of the paintings, demonstrate that “the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha 37).

According to Jack Flam, this aesthetic ambiguity makes Matisse’s work resistant to historical, social, or political contextualization. It cannot be named:

(T)he literal content of Matisse’s writings is profoundly ahistorical. Just by reading him, it would be virtually impossible to reconstruct any of the social or political history of his time, or even to get a clear idea of what his world looked like. His conception of art is quite literally
other-worldly.\textsuperscript{43}

Flam adds that Matisse avoided affiliation with artistic schools and movements because they blocked his quest for a deeply personal aesthetic:

For as Matisse states it, the artist must find his own signs, \textit{signs} that are unique to himself, that are a manifestation of his own personality, through which his deeply subjective responses to the world can be given form. Matisse is quite explicit about this, pointing out that a true artist cannot use another artist’s signs because the true artist’s work must emanate from the true self. (Flam 21)

Flam views Matisse’s appropriation of eclectic signs “unique to the painter himself” as the font of his “profoundly ahistorical,” and “other-worldly” aesthetic. Unwittingly, Flam puts his finger on Matisse’s partial liminality, on the artist’s desire to live as a rebel through aesthetic production. It is by painting his Odalisques at the crossroads of Orientalist, modernist, North African, and Islamic artistic conventions that this maverick attempts to exist as a rebel, as a “true artist” and a “true self.” He seems to repeat with a difference a variety of aesthetic traditions to emancipate himself from aesthetic traditions.

Despite all of this, Matisse’s rebellious self-identity is incomplete--he remains a middle self--because he also exhibits a contrary, nihilistic impulse. He struggles to master the Other, using

\textsuperscript{43} Jack Flam, \textit{Matisse on Art} (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995) 20.
the Western/masculinist gaze to do it. Certain details in the *Odalisque à la culotte rouge* express the painter’s fear of métissage, and thus, a profound anxiety about the Other. For instance, the model’s vibrant red pants and sexually explicit pose position her vagina as the painting’s focal point. Matisse uses this composition to suggest that libidinal instincts, not intellect, govern the female (/Eastern Other). It portrays the Other as physically determined, the self as undetermined. Unless contained, aesthetically and physically, the predatory East will degrade Western civilization; the East as female will emasculate the West as male. And the age of innocence ends with this loss of liberty.

Thus, the vagina’s centrality is also a demonstration via the voyeuristic gaze of colonial/male power.\textsuperscript{44} Matisse magnifies this mark of East/West and male/female difference to assert the totality of Western/male control, the pleasure and fear of alterity (Bhabha 75). Julien’s remark to Shérazade, “vous allez faire des enfants bicolores, des sangs mêlés, des mixtes, des coupés, des bâtards...des hybrides...des travestis,” resonates in this painting. As with Julien, who photographs Shérazade from all angles, and Marc Garanger, who “shoots” naked Algerian women, Matisse asserts his mastery over the East through a hyperbolically transgressive gaze. In addition to violating the harem’s sacred space, Matisse makes the Arab woman’s sexuality—her last vestige of privacy after the veil and the harem

\textsuperscript{44} My dissertation director, Bernard Aresu, discussed this painting’s violent sexual imagery during a graduate seminar I attended at Rice University in 1998.
disappear—the French public’s domain.\textsuperscript{45}

Théophile Gautier’s \textit{Voyage pittoresque en Algérie}, which Julien conflates with contemporary racist discourse, projects the Other as conquering phallus at the same time that it feminizing the self. Contact with the Maghreb, Gautier laments, has contaminated France’s cultural and racial purity. He fears that the Other will assert its sovereignty over him; he worries that the Other will ravish France:

La France sera mahométane et nous verrons s’arrondir,
sur nos villes, le dôme blanc des mosquées et les minarets
se mêler aux clochers, comme en Espagne au temps des Mores... (Sebbar, \textit{Shérazade} 191)

In \textit{Les Carnets de Shérazade}, Sebbar spotlights the persistence of these colonial-era stereotypes in the 1980’s. Georgette, a café owner, tells Shérazade that it is still fashionable in France to represent East/West contact as miscegenation. If this stereotype was used to justify military actions in colonial times, it legitimates anti-immigrant violence today:

(C)es Turcs, disait Georgette, n’auraient pas touché à un cheveu de leurs femmes, ces vilains cheveux queue de vache des femmes d’ici, pourtant les hommes se méfiaient d’eux...Comme on a peur de guerriers trop virils? [...](Les femmes) pousseraient leurs hommes à se conduire comme des brigands, des aventuriers qui auraient pu à nouveau les séduire en tirant des coups de feu courageux dans la porte des maisons pestiférées, ils défendaient le village, femmes et enfants, en héros, contre l’envahisseur. (Sebbar, \textit{Les Carnets de Shérazade} 185)

\textsuperscript{45} The East/the woman’s status as public/male property was reiterated when the French government purchased Matisse’s \textit{Odalisque à la culotte rouge} in 1922.
Familiarity breeds tolerance; ignorance contempt. Unlike her neighbors, Georgette accepts Turks in her town. Over time, she has developed a certain degree of familiarity with the Turkish guest workers who patronize her café. This has allowed her to meet the complex individuals beneath the hollow, undifferentiated stereotype that continues to feed her mainstream neighbors’ xenophobia. Experience has taught Georgette that these guest workers couldn’t be farther from the virile barbarian trope. In actuality, she claims “(ils) n’auraient pas touché à un cheveu” of French women. Similar to Gautier and Matisse, these Alsatian villagers use emasculating imagery to symbolize France’s colonization by (ex)colonials. The 1980’s Turk is a reincarnation Matisse’s predatory Odalisque and Gautier’s libidinal Arab. Each of these stereotypes allow(ed) the West to justify aggression as acts of self-defense (which is how George W. Bush marketed the Iraq War to the American public, according to Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11) because they were what Kobena Mercer calls “phobic objects.” Each one:

[...] project(s) the fear of a threat not only to white womanhood, but to civilization itself, as the anxiety of miscegenation, eugenic pollution, and racial degeneration [...] (It) is acted out through white male rituals of racial aggression [...]  

Gautier’s mosque-phallus and dome-womb and Matisse’s

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Odalisque excused colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries respectively. Likewise the “guerrier viril” trope legitimated xenophobic violence in the 1980s. It enabled the Alsatians to pretend that their aggression against foreigners wasn’t a desire for superior recognition, but that it was a rebellion against the other’s megalothymia. Hence, they could “tir(er) des coups de feu courageux dans la porte des maisons pestiférées” in “good faith” because they were “défend(ant) le village, femmes et enfants, en héros, contre l'envahisseur.” They convinced themselves, in short, that they were asserting the equality, not the superiority, of their self-identity, that their struggle against the Other was a demand for rational not superior recognition. They were protecting the cultural patrimony from outside aggression.

If anyone, in reality, was demanding equal recognition it was the Turks, Georgette suggests. They did not resettle in France to dominate the Other—“(ils) n’auraient pas n’auraient pas touché à un cheveu de leurs femmes, ces vilains cheveux queue de vache des femmes d’ici.” They came to France to earn a living (a positive want) and to improve their condition (a negative want). And, this desire for physical security and metaphysical liberty is associated with rational recognition. In short, the Turks are not a threat to the Alsatians’ self-identity; rational self-interest encourages them to recognize the Easterner and the Westerner equally. They want to live and let live. In

addition, isothymia has everything to do with the Turks’ distaste for European women. They do not attempt to objectify women/the West by fetishizing blond hair—hair is not a “phobic object”—because they recognize themselves and the Other equally. They do not resort to “racial aggression,” to reducing the Other to thinghood (Mercer 185) so they can monopolize liberty and security. Rather, subjective taste, not a fear of racial degeneration—rebellion not nihilism—explains why the Turks find blond ponytails “vilains.”

The sexually aggressive composition of the Odalisque à la culotte rouge illustrates Roger Benjamin’s point that Matisse’s Odalisques are the products of “a colonial situation in which it is almost always the West that retains the power to represent, to produce for Western consumption images of a colonized people[...].” In 1951, Matisse explains his technical/objective interest in Odalisques. He insinuates that he painted them to impose harmony and order—himself in transcendent form—on the Maghreb:

Look at these Odalisques carefully: The sun’s brightness reigns in a triumphal blaze, appropriating colors and forms [...] In this ambiance of languid relaxation, beneath the sun-drenched torpor [...] a great tension smolders, a specifically pictorial tension that arises from the interplay and mutual relations of the various elements. I eased those tensions so that an impression of happy calm could emerge from these paintings[...]
(Quoted in Flam 301)

Matisse's Odalisques are somewhat megalothymotic because their creator employs them to erase difference, to deny the Other's right to "find (his or her) own signs, signs that are unique to (him/herself), that are a manifestation of (his or her) own personality." In other words, they only recognize the self's dignity, that is, Matisse's (the West's/male's) desire to be undetermined and innocent. Hence, the "happy calm" or pleasure art offers is inauthentic--it is a false sense of transcendence--because it is neither fully creative nor completely rational. That is, it buttresses the self by denying the Other's dignity. It hoards the right to self-consciousness, the right "to make and to adhere to rules" of one's making. Matisse's Odalisques, to a certain degree "affirm his identity as the sovereign I/eye empowered with mastery over the abject thinghood of the other" (Mercer 177). They assert the West/the male as absence or agency, the East/the female as presence or objectivity.

Because he is a middle self like Matisse, Julien attempts to find the "happy calm" of wholeness inside and outside Western/masculinist discourse. He alternately seeks transcendence and the living transcendence. At times, he turns to a liminal self-image--to hybridity and rebellion--to deliver himself from what Françoise Lionnet calls "the troubling question of miscegenation (that) began to feed the European imagination with phantasms of monstrosity and degeneracy since the first contact between Europe and the Orient"
(Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices* 6). At other times, Julien takes a more nihilistic approach to his post-colonial condition. He acts on this fear of miscegenation by objectifying Shérazade. In a Paris library, for instance, he spies on his girlfriend as a middle self. One second, he recognizes her humanity; he acknowledges their equality. The next, he sees her as an oriental cliché; he only recognizes himself:

Il se dit qu’il fallait en finir avec ce trouble étrange qui lui faisait battre le coeur, chaque fois qu’il voyait dans un tableau Orientaliste ces deux figures, si présentes dans la peinture occidentale du XIXe siècle, la Noire et la Blanche [...] Il oubliait tout à fait cet exotisme d’artifice lorsqu’il aperçut à sa place, Shérazade [...] Il s’arrêta pour la regarder. Il la voyait de trois quarts, le visage penché vers un livre qu’elle tenait sur le genou croisé haut sur la jambe droite [...] Shérazade se contentait de caresser son émeraude, et le bout du lobe de son oreille gauche. Une fois ou deux, elle se gratta vigoureusement le crâne et ses cheveux restèrent ébouriffés sur le front à l’avant, sans qu’elle y prît garde. Elle lisait un livre sur la guerre d’Algérie. (Sebbar, *Shérazade* 76)

Julien’s desire to root out these troubling feelings of sexual degeneracy suggests the potentiality for a reconciliation with his hybrid past and present, and by extension, the possibility for more egalitarian social relations in France. Quite possibly, he is starting to recognize that orientalist paintings--his screen memories for the Algerian war and diaspora--can no longer repress reality’s fundamental impurity. Anxious to move beyond racial conventions, Julien strives to be relatively transcendent. Orientalism’s “exotisme d’artifice” is
becoming an identitarian straitjacket. Uncomfortable with liminality’s freedom, Julien quickly retreats into the asylum of binary thought and nihilism; he recasts Shérazade as an exotic liseuse (in 3/4 view no less). Oblivious to her voyeuristic audience, Shérazade unwittingly repeats “la non-chalance, la lascivité, la séduction perverse des femmes orientales” (Sebbar, *Shérazade* 190). Her repetition of these clichés is also a slight distortion. Shérazade disrupts Julien’s exotic fantasy by bringing her human presence to it. Humans—not Odalisques—scratch their heads. People itch; they feel pleasure and pain. Reading also bears witness to Shérazade’s rebellious self-identity. It subverts the Western stereotype that the Other is a mere sexual organ, a “phobic object.” When Shérazade reads as an active subject, she creates meaning. She constitutes her self-identity by making sense of another’s narrative. Her book, a history of the Algerian war, also demystifies Julien’s vision. A reminder of the violence implicit in his own colonizing gaze, the war forces the pied-noir to recognize the Other’s humanity equally. He sees the war not as a form of Western looking, but as the East rebelling, the East looking back.

The philosophical overlap of Leïla Sebbar and Islamic scholar Milton Viorst is striking. Viorst’s *In the Shadow of the Prophet* portrays Arab-Muslim civilization much like Sebbar’s *Lettres parisiennes* presents the women’s movement, the French Left, and the feminist revue *Histoires d’elles*—a community that has betrayed the
principles of rebellion. For Sebbar, these emancipatory movements, in
which she participated in the 1960s and 1970s, lost much of their
creative power when their members’ desire for personal security and
power diverted them from their altruistic struggle. 49 Viorst traces the
social, economic, and political problems of contemporary Arab-Muslim
society back to the Abbasid era, which is widely viewed by Westerners
and liberal Muslims as the golden age of Islam.

For Viorst, this decline began when the traditionalists, who held
“that Muhammad, at a time chosen by God, simply transmitted to the
Arabs a message that was, like God Himself, eternal,” (Viorst 87)
gained the upper hand over the Mu’tazilites, who “were the product of
the same invasion of new knowledge that produced (under the
Abbasids) great mathematicians and astronomers...(and)
foreshadowed the revolution of the mind that the West experienced
centuries later in the Renaissance”(Viorst 156-7). Viorst argues that
the Arab-Muslim world lost its dynamism and creativity when it
abandoned reason for tradition, epistemological relativity for absolute
truth, the present for the past. He laments that the fate of the
contemporary Muslim world was determined almost one thousand years
ago:

before the Abbasid era was over, the competition between
reason and traditionalism had been settled for all time. In

49 In particular, see Sebbar’s letters 5,15, 19, 21 and 29 in Nancy Huston and Leila
walking away from the Mu'tazilites, Muslims made a decision with which Islamic civilization has lived ever since. (Viorst 162)

Although he believes that the forces of “traditionalism” routed the forces of “reason” centuries ago, Viorst remains hopeful that the Arab-Islamic world can save itself if it returns to the liberal, multicultural version of the faith. He believes that there is a vanguard of liberal Muslim intellectuals and political leaders, including Nasser Hamid Abuzeid, an Islamic scholar at Cairo University, and (the late) King Hussein of Jordan, who can lead Islamic civilization out of the dark ages by taking the faith back to its Mu'tazilites roots. Nasser Hamid Abuzeid told Viorst that Islam once again must open itself up to other cultures and ideas to “overcome (its) stagnation:”

If we Muslims are to get out of the crisis in which we are living today we have to reach out. Our Arab ancestors saw what the Greeks, the Persians, the Indians had to offer, and drew from them. It is that amalgam that made the earliest Islamic culture. We should be proud of how our civilization was formed, reaching from outside Arab borders. Other civilizations have deepened our understanding of our own. But for hundreds of years we have kept our minds closed. If we are to overcome our stagnation, we have to stop repeating ourselves, as our society has been doing for a thousand years. We must reopen our doors to other influences. (Viorst 50)

Jordan’s King Hussein added that Muslims made a terrible error when they abandoned the principles of “ijtihad,” reconciling the faith and the world, and “wasatiya” or moderation. King Hussein’s vision of
true Islam fits Albert Camus’ definition of rebellion. It makes moderate demands on the world. His corresponding vision of orthodox Islam is nihilistic. For Hussein, orthodoxy’s absolute rejection of “present day life” has produced nothing but the “sad deterioration” of Islamic civilization:

When ijtihad—the possibility of reconciling faith and present day life—stopped a long time ago, that was the beginning of a very sad deterioration that has continued over the years and has opened the way to all sorts of fringe movements and splits. We need to do whatever we can do to repair that mistake. (Muslims need) to reaffirm the moderation of Islam. Islam is called wasatiya, which means “centralist.” This is the Quran. It is where we should be now. (Viorst 319)

Shérazade could take her place alongside King Hussein and Nasser Hamid Abuzeid in Viorst’s liberal, secular vanguard. She is another Muslim who did not “walk away” from the Mu’tazilites’ rebellious faith, which explains why Hezbollah soldiers took her hostage in Le Fou de Shérazade. The teenager’s rebellious presence—she roamed Lebanon unfettered, unveiled and unchaperoned—challenged their literal interpretation of shari’a or Islamic law. Shérazade’s self-identity was threatening because it undermined an article of faith among orthodox believers—the holiness of 7th century Arabian language, society, and culture. Shérazade’s individualism, her cultural ambiguity, her native proficiency in French, and her halting, colloquial Arabic—she spoke “la langue de sa mère” not the Arabic through which
God transmitted his message to Muhammad--brought to mind the long conflict pitting tradition and righteousness against reason and fitna. For them, this “battle for the soul of Islam,” to borrow the title of a recent Newsweek cover story and subtitle of Viorst’s In the Shadow of the Prophet, did not end with the victory of the traditionalists in Abbasid times. Rather, they believed that Mu’tazilism and its secular modernist descendants have orthodoxy on the run.

Like Viorst, liberal Muslims and most Westerners agree with their anti-modern adversaries on one point—the Muslim world’s economic stagnation and lack of political freedom prove that today’s believers are paying a heavy price for “walking away” from “the true faith.” Of course, modernists and traditionalists disagree on what that true faith is. The modernists believe that salvation lies in return to the rational, open-ended version that fueled a scientific revolution under the Abbasids; fundamentalists and extremists counter that contemporary problems can only be solved by returning to the austere faith that Muhammad practiced in the 7th century. This is the reason, Viorst writes, why orthodox Muslims emphasize obeying Islamic law over spiritual enlightenment. They equate salvation with imitating the life of

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50 In Beyond the Veil, Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), Fatima Mernissi defines the Islamic concept of fitna as social disorder, anything that runs contrary to the prevailing laws and norms of Islamic society, (Mernissi xxiv). One of her examples of “fitna,” the unmarried adolescent woman, describes Shérazade. Shérazade ran away from home after being informed that she would be married off. Her presence not only threatened the mainstream’s self-identity, it made some in her community feel uprooted.
Muhammad. “Contempl(ating) the grandeur of God” smacks of Mu'tazilism:

For (orthodox) Muslims, modeling themselves on Muhammad is more than a moral imperative; it is required conduct. Muslims believe that how faithfully they observe the law determines whether they will spend their afterlife in heaven or hell—the shari'a—the laws governing a believer’s relationship with God—has become the dominant force within Islam. It is more important than spiritual piety, more important than noble intentions, more important than inner purity. Muslims are not commanded to contemplate the grandeur of God; they are told to obey the law. (Viorst 142)

This also explains why the Islamic guerillas in Le Fou de Shérazade care more about forcing their hostage to behave correctly than helping her achieve spiritual enlightenment. The militants forced these rites on Shérazade because they could not bear alternative interpretations of the faith. Truth had to be absolute because they believed that “how faithfully they observe the law determines whether they will spend their afterlife in heaven or hell.” Recognizing Shérazade’s desire for recognition of her individuality and a reason-based form of worship would be tantamount to apostasy.

Shérazade resists the militants’ attempts (routinely made at gunpoint) to impose their version of the true faith. She constantly frustrates their desire for superior recognition (which ultimately is a desire for absolute security or salvation) by refusing to “obey the law.” In jail, Shérazade no longer performs rituals like ablutions, reading
the *Quran*, and studying classical Arabic; she deems them coercive, insults to her individual dignity and the dignity of Mu’tazilist Islam. On the outside, these rites went part and parcel with her personal relationship with God and her North African heritage. By rejecting them in jail and embracing them on the outside, Shérazade seeks recognition of her freedom and the liberal version of her faith. She demonstrates that Islam is compatible with her need to create and to live by her own rules. Her version of faith does not contradict the Quranic principles of “ijtihad” and “wasatiya” or the secular humanist values of rebellion. When Shérazade does pick up the *Quran* and Arab grammar books in her Lebanese cell, she does so on her own terms; she uses the Arabic grammar book as an aid for poetry writing, and reads the *Quran* to widen her faith in the individual, not to repudiate it. So, perhaps, we could view Shérazade’s Islamic reading as a jail-house conversion. She co-opts Hezbollah’s teaching materials to convert Islamic orthodoxy into a liberal, reason-based form of worship.

At one point in *Le Fou de Shérazade*, Hezbollah decides to leak photos and videotape of their hostage to the international media. As with their captive, the militants demand the Other’s recognition. Whereas Shérazade demands to have her individuality recognized by the world, the militants want the world to recognize the superiority of their radical interpretation of the faith. They are attempting to dominate Shérazade and the world through representation rather than
using it to demand equal recognition, which would be consistent with
the Islamic concept of “ijtihad” and “wasatiya:"

Un matin, le géant aux yeux clairs—lorsqu’il lui parle elle le regarde-- lui a apporté un tee-shirt blanc, propre, un pantalon en toile grise. Il l’a filmée mais elle a refusé de lire le texte qu’il a remis, en français et en arabe[...] Le lendemain, il est revenu avec d’autres photographies, il lui a demandé d’en choisir pour la presse. Elle ne sourit jamais, n’importe quelle photo conviendra.
(Sebbar, Le Fou de Shérazade 102)

The radicals furnish the international media with images of a female whose presence on Islamic soil they consider subversive. They believe they are circulating an objective image of their hostage, confident that they have rendered the Beur and the godless, cosmopolitan world from which she comes, into a thing, into something that lacks the dignity inherent in their negative self-identity. In doing so, they confidently assert the primacy of faith over reason, the past over the present, separation over integration and orthodox Islam over secular modernity. Yet, Shérazade foils her captors’ attempts to repress her individualistic spirit through “les yeux clairs” of the Islamist gaze. Despite the tremendous physical risk, she rebels by taking an active role in representation. Shérazade speaks volumes about her dignity when she refuses “de lire le texte.” Her silence and her refusal to smile are nonverbal dialects of the language of rebellion. The guard “lui a demandé d’en choisir pour
la presse. Elle ne sourit jamais, n’importe quelle photo conviendra.”

Through these actions, she communicates to the world the Western principles of liberty and equality and the liberal Islamic ideas of “ijtihad” and “wasatiya.”

Through her insubordination, Shérazade addresses the problem of human history. “(A)ct(ing) in the name of certain values which are still indeterminate but which (s)he feels are common to (her)self and to all men,” (Camus, *The Rebel* 15) Shérazade establishes the common ground between East and West, past and present, ideal and real, etc. which is requisite for achieving the living transcendence at the individual, communal, local, and global levels. If she did not create this authentic common ground, the East and the West would slide further into nihilism. Through her title character, Sebbar demonstrates that rebellion is the true organizing principle of Eastern and Western thought, supporting Viorst’s premise in *In the Shadow of the Prophet* that the Greek-inspired configuration of the individual fueled the scientific, mathematical, and astronomical discoveries under the Abbasids; it was the philosophical foundation of the Western modernity. Each of these civilizations entered a period of decline when they “walked away” from the ideas of “our universal civilization.”

Because she is acting in the name of transhuman values, Shérazade also looks back at the Western, neo-imperialist gaze when
she disobeys her guard’s orders. She does not want to be recognized in the West as just another Western hostage.\textsuperscript{51} This explains why “elle a refusé de lire le texte en français” (Sebbar, \textit{Le Fou de Shérazade} 102). If Shérazade had, she would have helped Western middle selves—the mainstream and extremist fringe—use Islamic extremism to portray the Islam as an existential threat to the West. This course would only perpetuate those negative myths about Muslims that the West has long employed to curtail or to eradicate the insecurity it equates with difference. In short, Shérazade’s desire for East/West coexistence in the post-colonial world would be severely undermined if she were seen by the West as a 1980’s version of Lecomte du Nouy’s \textit{Esclave blanche}, that is, as the victim of the colonized’s sexual aggression. She would justify anti-Islamic discrimination and violence as acts of physical and moral self-preservation.

Through their co-authored screenplay, Julien and Shérazade attempt address the problem of nihilism together. In their film’s climatic scene, which also closes the \textit{Shérazade} trilogy, Julien and Shérazade have Islamic militants “silence” two journalists and their elderly cosmopolitan host who refuse to submit to an orthodox interpretation of the shari’a. The co-authors use this struggle

\textsuperscript{51} Edward Said’s \textit{Covering Islam} (New York: Vintage Books, 1997) examines how Western media coverage of the Arab-Islamic world accentuates violence to moralize its economic and military hegemony. It “coverage” of the Middle East is a containment strategy.
pitting rebellion against nihilism to demonstrate that human relations between and within post-colonial societies remain historical in spite of the Enlightenment’s emancipatory project which served as a catalyst for decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, women’s liberation in the 1960s and 1970s, and the spread of liberal democracy in the 1980s and 1990s. Julien and Shérazade also demonstrate that most Westerners and Easterners do adhere to a common set of values--the inauthentic principles of nihilism. They suggest through their screenplay that people in the East and West generally concur that wholeness is a one-way street.

In this particular scene, which is being filmed in the courtyard of Shérazade’s housing project or HLM, the co-authors demonstrate that the proponents of orthodox Islam and “la vieille France” are mirror images. Both desire one-way recognition, which entails seeing the self as self-conscious, the Other as object. In short, megalothymia is inauthentic because it is the type of common humanity which precludes different people from recognizing their common humanity. At the same time, Julien and Shérazade portray rebellion as the authentic form of selfhood in the East and West. It will prevail; two-way will gradually replace one-way recognition as the foundation for private and associational life, humanity will move toward the ideal of universal emancipation.

The film-within-the-novel (and the trilogy) ends with the image
of a despondent black servant. The character survives a mortar attack by Islamic militants, which takes the lives of her elderly employer, “la femme patricienne,” and two female journalists, one played by Shérazade:

Les journalistes et la femme sont tués. La servante se met à hurler devant le carnage, en même temps que la mère de Shérazade qui crie:
--Ma fille! Shérazade Vous l’avez tuée! Ma fille est morte!
Mériem secoue sa mère qui sanglote:
--Imma! Imma! Tu deviens folle! Shérazade n’est pas morte. C’est le film...Ta fille est vivante[...] Shérazade est vivante, vivante, vivante.
(Sebbar Le Fou de Shérazade 203)

The “femme patricienne” and the journalists became targets of physical violence because they stubbornly resist objectification via the extremists’ gaze. The elderly cosmopolitan character, who Shérazade bases on an “actual” person she met in Beirut, draws fire because she refuses to vacate her villa which was located in a no man’s land in-between warring Lebanese factions. Her villa was an incarnation of exilic space, the indeterminate identitarian ground where absolutist self-identities blend and societies express (or rediscover) their creativity.

A rebel, the “femme patricienne” chose to die for her liberal principles, which Hezbollah associated with secular modernity and Mu’tazilism. They sought to destroy the cosmopolitan host and her
journalist guests because these independent women were signs of “fitna,” disorder and decadence. They brought to mind the 1960s and 1970s, a time when Lebanese society enjoyed a period of social freedom, tolerance, and economic development. What liberal Muslims and Westerners saw as progress, the traditionalists saw as decadence. For the militants, Lebanon’s modernity—its secularism, materialism, and moral laxity—is symptomatic of Islamic civilization’s estrangement from its originality.

The mortar round is a mirror image of Garanger’s “objectif-mitrailleur” or Julien’s razor. It is the mechanism by which the Islamic militants assert the primacy of their essentialized formulation of selfhood. Instead of effacing the women’s rebellious spirit, the mortar shell foments revolt, spreading it beyond the frontier that separates the film-within-the-narrative from the narrative. The mortar, which the militants use to treat these modern women (and the West) as objects “for the satisfaction of the master’s wants[...] is what leads the slave to desire change.” (Fukuyama 194). When the domestic “se met à hurler devant le carnage” and Shérazade’s mother, referred to as “Imma,” screams “Ma fille! Shérazade! Vous l’avez tuée!” they rebel on behalf of man’s common dignity. They are repulsed by the Islamic militants’ disregard for human life.

52 See Thomas Friedman’s From Beirut to Jerusalem (New York: Anchor Books, 1995). Friedman believes that the destruction of a thriving, but by no means perfect, cosmopolitan society was one of the Lebanese Civil War’s greatest tragedies.
Crying “devant le carnage” is also a rebellion against the myth of the pure cultural patrimony. An artistic device, the muscular black female domestic simultaneously enhanced the Odalisque’s whiteness and femininity and functioned as a reality effect. They were mere décor, which, like hookah pipes, mosaics, and palm trees, underlined the objective difference between the Western viewer and the Eastern/female subordinate (Nochlin 38-9). Mirroring the nineteenth-century postcard models, the Egyptian servant asserts herself as a living, breathing human being, as entirely separate from the décor of Orientalism. In doing so, she shatters Orientalism's scientific objectivity and the necessity of Western domination of the East.

Shérazade’s mother, referred to as “Imma,” also looks back at orthodox Islam and “la vieille France” concurrently. Similar to the domestic, she detaches herself from the physical world by mourning the loss of her daughter. This is because her cries are purely irrational. They are related to a non-economic loss—the death of a loved one—not the privation of a physical need, such as security or comfort. Shérazade’s Algerian mother is an individual, not the instinctive creature that Orientalism makes the Eastern female out to be. Nor is she a construction of shari’a that orthodox Muslims make her out to be.

53 For a detailed study of the representation of black sexuality in Western visual arts see Sander Gillman’s “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature” (Critical Inquiry 12: 1 (1985)).
In "death," the journalists and the "femme patricienne" pass on the spirit of revolt to the servant and "Imma," who bestow it upon the reader. The immortality of revolt supports Albert Camus' belief that the rebellion:

indefatigably confronts evil, from which it can only derive a new impetus. Man can master in himself everything that should be mastered. He should rectify everything in creation that can be rectified. And after he has done so, children will still die unjustly even in a perfect society. Even by his greatest effort man can only propose to diminish arithmetically the sufferings of the world. But the injustice and the suffering of the world will remain and, no matter how limited they are, they will not cease to be an outrage. (Camus The Rebel 303)

As with all acts of rebellion, the women's revolt against French cultural orthodoxy and Islamic orthodoxy, "la vieille France" and "jamé towhidi," bring new energy to humanity's struggle against injustice and suffering. Their limited aesthetic demands--they demand equal not superior recognition--leave something to be desired, the end of history. This imperfection, the persistence of injustice, will spark rebellion after rebellion. The end of the Shérazade trilogy is not to be confused with the end of history. It is one link in the chain of aesthetic demands--a slight distortion--that brings humanity ever closer to historical finality, an unattainable but necessary ideal. Sebbar gives new dynamism to the struggle for human dignity by passing on the spirit of rebellion--her outrage--to the reader. Sebbar enjoins each of
us to carry on the her characters’ revolt against these discourses of
domination that cause so much suffering and injustice, but also so
much potential for rebellious glory. Sebbar implores us to carry out a
rebellion on “in the name of moderation and of life” (Camus The Rebel
305). She hopes that we will be buoyed by the life-affirming ending to
the Shérazade trilogy—Shérazade est “vivante, vivante, vivante.”
Rebellion lives on.
--Chapter 3--
Sebbar and the Space of Identity
The topographical variety would impress anyone who mapped out Leïla Sebbar’s narrative travels. Her trilogy’s title character roams the Paris basin, crisscrosses France, and wanders the Holy Land. In *Lettres parisiennes: autopsie de l’exil*, Sebbar takes her correspondent, Canadian author Nancy Huston, on a scenic ride through Paris, the French countryside, and her Algerian childhood. There seems to be an overarching simplicity to the identitarian territory that Sebbar covers in her work, however. The writer divides the space of identity into three parcels—community, solitude, and exile. In this configuration, nihilists either live exclusively in the community, understood as any fixed and holistic social grouping, or they embrace solitude, a state of social disconnect. The singular-minded self rejects the surrounding world because it contaminates the pure community from which he or she is separated but remains a source of wholeness; the rugged individualist rejects the idea of human solidarity because it frustrates his or her desire for primacy in the world as it currently exists. Rebels and middle selves reside in exile, a hybrid swath of terrain where solitude and community overlap.

Beneath this apparent simplicity, Sebbar’s territorialization of identity is elastic. The individuals and groups within these states choose their self-identities, thus, these borders are in a constant state of flux, expanding and contracting in accordance with the identitarian desires of the world’s rebels, middle selves, and nihilists.
Yet, Sebbar looks ambivalently at identity, attributing to its elasticity both peace and war, freedom and oppression, cohesion and disconnect, jubilation and sorrow. Sebbar believes that the marginal individual is free but never alone because he or she savors the freedom of solitude and the security of community that exile fosters. This is consistent with Camus’ definition of rebellious selfhood:

(T)he individual is not, in himself alone, the embodiment of the values he wishes to defend. It needs all humanity, at least, to comprise them. When he rebels, a man identifies with other men and so surpasses himself, and from this point of view human solidarity is metaphysical. (Camus, The Rebel 17)

In addition to asserting our individual liberty, we create a rebellious community when we revolt. We become whole only by cultivating the individual and the communal components of our selfhood. For Camus, “human solidarity,” the collective self-identity, is metaphysical because it represents a higher form of identitarian truth. By identifying with the group, man “surpasses himself,” transcending the existential limits of solitude where the individual is “alone, the embodiment of the values he wishes to defend.” This is not to say that the individual is inferior to the group. Rather, Camus implies that one achieves the living transcendence when hybrid, that is to say, when one is individualistic but still “identifies with other (rebellious) men.” To be whole, the rebel must see his or her emancipatory struggle within the context of a community. Camus adds that rebellions that upset the
balance between the individual and the community, independence and solidarity, are nihilistic:

Man's solidarity is founded upon rebellion, and rebellion, in its turn, can only find its justification in this solidarity. We have, then, the right to say that any rebellion which claims the right to deny or destroy this solidarity loses simultaneously its right to be called rebellion and becomes in reality an acquiescence in murder.
(Camus, The Rebel 22)

While the rebel equates marginality with wholeness--exile satisfies his or her desire for liberty and security--the nihilist abhors this border zone. The rogue nihilist does not tread on exilic ground, believing that any contact with community, however slight, threatens his or her liberty and security; the communal-minded nihilist avoids the interstices, convinced that the slightest trace of individualism taints the community, his or her source of transcendence. Unlike the nihilist, the middle self does not seek asylum in solitude or community--he or she does not search for absolute wholeness. And unlike the rebel, the middle self does not thrive in exile--he or she does not seek relative transcendence, but navigates exile with trepidation. The distance that each middle self ventures into exilic space depends on his or her level of rebelliousness. The most rebellious will travel the farthest out from solitude or community; the most nihilistic will stay the closest to their hallowed Gründ, their personal organizing principle.

Sebbar believes that exile is the most authentic terrain “for
elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal” (Bhabha 1). In *Lettres parisienes*, the writer asserts the dignity of rebellious selfhood, personal *and* collective. She considers exile the location of individual and collective wholeness because its epistemological ambiguity allows for self- and social transformation. It is the space of revolt:

> Quand je parle de *division* nécessaire, vitale, je devrais dire *divisions*, ou division multiple, multipliée. C’est ma conscience de l’exil qui ma fait comprendre vivre la division, dans le mouvement des femmes en particulier, où j’ai su que je suis une femme dans l’exil, c’est-à-dire toujours à la lisière, frontalière, en position de franc-tireur, à l’écart, au bord toujours, d’un côté et de l’autre, en déséquilibre permanent. Un déséquilibre qui aujourd’hui, après des passages, des initiations amoureuses et politiques, me fait exister, me fait écrire. Un déséquilibre qui, lorsque je suis venue en France pour y rester, a failli plus d’une fois me voir—comme ma jeune soeur qui était venue passer une année avec moi, dans la ville du Midi où je me retrouvais après l’Algérie—enfermée, séquestrée volontaire de jour et nuit.\(^5\)

Sebbar accentuates the shortcomings of exilic revolts that bring us to exile’s inauthentic fringes and potentially beyond them. Here, she hopes that the reader will recognize the deficiency of her sister’s personal revolt against French society and culture. Sebbar’s sister sought wholeness by completely denying the Other’s existence and the idea of epistemological difference, that is, the “divisions, ou division multiple, multipliée” of truth and identity. To preserve her original

configuration of self, the Algerian woman said “no” to what exists—France—and “yes” to the beyond—Algeria. She refused to embrace the principle of cultural relativity, fearful that recognizing cultural difference would frustrate her “desire for an originality” (Bhabha 75) or transcendence.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. makes a related point. In *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*, he underscores the elasticity of cultural identities, suggesting that the concept of multiculturalism has an egalitarian and an inegalitarian dimension. Cultural difference can satisfy a group’s desire for equal or superior recognition, for the living or absolute transcendence:

In its mild form, (multiculturalism) calls attention to neglected groups, themes, and viewpoints and redress a shameful imbalance in the treatment of minorities both in the actualities of life and in the judgments of history. It does this within the concept of a shared culture[...]. (M)ulticulturalism also assumes a militant form in which it opposes the idea of a common culture, rejects the goals of assimilation and integration, and celebrates the immutability of diverse and separate ethnic and racial communities. Extreme separationists[...] in fact rush beyond true multiculturalism into ethnocentrism, the belief in the superior virtue of their own ethnic group.  


Borrowing Schlesinger’s terminology, Sebbar’s sister falls into the category of “extreme separationist.” She withdraws from France because she believes in “the superior virtue of (her) own ethnic
group." Her retreat is a negative aesthetic demand because it negates other cultures and the concept of a hybrid or "shared culture." Her revolt takes the forms of self-imposed confinement and then repatriation. It is a movement from one nihilistic fringe of exile to the other. The phrase "enfermée, sequestrée, volontaire de jour et de nuit" challenges the legitimacy of the type of transcendence associated with ethnocentrism. It implies that people sacrifice their authenticity when they upset the liberty/security division that underlies the living transcendence and the adjoining ideas of homogeneity, equality and inclusion, which are also the principles of "true multiculturalism."

Sebbar's sister and all "extreme separationists," singular and communal, resemble Francis Fukuyama's description of the "Economic Man," the individual who cares more about satisfying his physical needs, that is, the "complex set of desires that make up (his) physical existence," than making others recognize his dignity:

The man of desire, Economic Man, the true bourgeois, will perform an internal "cost benefit analysis" which will always give him a reason for working within the system. It is only thymotic man, the man of anger who is jealous of his own dignity and the dignity of his fellow citizens, the man who feels that his worth is constituted by something more than the complex set of desires that make up his physical existence--it is this man alone who is willing to walk in front of a tank or confront a line of soldiers. (Fukuyama 180)
Although each supports liberal democracy, Leila Sebbar and Francis Fukuyama disagree on which form of recognition yields wholeness. Sebbar conflates unequal recognition with the Economic Man’s desire for self-preservation; Fukuyama insists that liberal society’s fetishization of equality breeds “men of (physical) desire.” Sebbar imparts that her sister is slavish—“enfermée, sequestrée volontaire” (Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes* 30)—because she seeks to satisfy her desire for liberty and security in a primordial fantasy of “the immutability of diverse and separate ethnic and racial communities.” (Schlesinger 150). She seeks innocence.

Only the rebel, the “true multiculturalist,” is authentic, Sebbar insists. He or she satisfies the desire for liberty and security in an altruistic and emancipatory fashion, “call(ing) attention to neglected groups, themes, and viewpoints and redress(ing) a shameful imbalance in the treatment of minorities[...] within the concept of a shared culture” (Schlesinger 150). Although they demand the superior recognition of their group, which makes them somewhat thymotic, the separationists’ desire for absolute transcendence, ultimately, is a desire for self-preservation. A fear of this shared culture of rebellion, a contempt for true exilic selfhood, is behind their association of diversity with contamination and degeneracy. They reject or contain the Other to feel whole in the sense of being completely free and secure, the strongest beast in the human wilderness.
Sebbar anoints herself “la conscience (mêmes) de l’exil,” a paragon of exilic authenticity, based on her ability to “vivre l’exil.” Ambiguity is her life force, what makes her “exister” and “écrire” (Sebbar, _Lettres parisiennes_ 30). Unlike her sister, Sebbar strives to liberate herself from these absolutist realms by balancing them. She achieves the living transcendence, in other words, by partially satisfying her desire for liberty and security. She finds relative wholeness “à la lisière, frontalière, en position de franc-tireur, à l’écart, au bord toujours, d’un côté et de l’autre” (Sebbar, _Lettres parisiennes_ 30). Writing, possible on epistemologically open-ended terrain, is not merely a signifier of authenticity; it is the means by which the novelist retains her authentic selfhood. Stylization is why exile Sebbar “a failli plus d’une fois (la) voir--comme (sa) jeune soeur...enfermée, séquestrée volontaire de jour et nuit.” (Sebbar, _Lettres parisiennes_ 30) Through writing, Sebbar cultivates this “déséquilibre permanent” which liberates and unites the Self and Other under the umbrella of the shared, non-essentialized culture of rebellion.

Dissimilar from “sa jeune soeur,” whom the fear of difference motivates to retreat from the exilic, Sebbar recoils from the nihilistic because she fears the absolute. She is afraid that nihilism will consume her the moment she stops writing. Writing is the limitless means through which she asserts her undetermined nature, thus
mitigating her anxiety about sliding from middle selfhood into solitude or the homogenized community. At the same time, her aesthetic demand on the post-colonial world provides a degree of security. It fabricates the rebellious community. By inventing her peers, Sebbar appeases her fear that she will succumb to nihilism.

The novelist’s credo could be *scribo ergo sum*--I write therefore I am--because stylization is the only thing that proves, maintains, and enhances her interstitiality. Exile, she tells Nancy Huston, is her natural state, “ce qui me fonde depuis le premier jour de ma vie.” She is authentic, at best a rebel and at worst a middle self, only so long as she treads on exilic soil:

> Et moi, il me semble que je suis en train de perdre mon territoire, ma terre, l’exil...Que ferais-je hors exil, désertant ce qui me fonde depuis le premier jour de ma vie?...Je me tiens au croisement, en déséquilibre constant, par peur de la folie et du reniement si je suis de ce côté-ci ou de ce côté-là. Alors je suis au bord de chacun de ces bords...J’ai tellement peur que l’inspiration, je veux dire une certaine émotion qui m’est nécessaire pour écrire, me quitte avec l’exil, que je me raccroche au moindre signe. (Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes* 185-6)

The remark “je me raccroche au moindre signe” underscores writing’s vital role in reinforcing and expanding the terrain of exile. Words are lifelines, allowing the writer to tread safely on the uneven soil of exile, to thrive in a state of “déséquilibre constant.” The aesthetic demand enables Sebbar to maintain her selfhood “au bord de
chacun de ces bords,” understood as solitude and community. “Je me tiens au croisement,” she explains, “par peur de la folie et du reniement si je suis de ce côté-ci ou de ce côté-là.” If she ceased to write—if she let go of her lifeline—Sebbar fears that she would tumble, landing in the identitarian quicksand of nihilism that already claimed her sister. A quest for absolute transcendence, she implies, can only end in “la folie” or “le reniement,” in the individual’s or collectivity’s disconnect from exilic life. Individuals and groups who do not se tenir au croisement deny the dignity of everything beyond themselves. They reject any configuration selfhood other than their own. And, because they deny relativity, they ipso facto deny human dignity, negating the premise that we have the power to make continuous, moderate aesthetic demands on our condition. They deny our metaphysical nature, our creativity.

Although she writes, Sebbar feels incomplete; the absence of an actual rebellious community, which vanished in 1980 when the feminist journal Histories d’elles folded, leaves her vulnerable to “la folie et le reniement,” to a nihilistic loss of control of her individual liberty. Sebbar laments the fact that her sisters in the women’s movement, her comrades on the intellectual Left and her colleagues at Histories d’elles, shifted their identitarian orientation from the disorderly center to the more unitary peripheries of exilic terrain. These emancipatory struggles did not “remain(ed) faithful to (their) first noble promise of”
the living transcendence. In camusian terms, these protest movements forgot that:

rebellion must respect the limit it discovers in itself—a limit where minds meet and, in meeting, begin to exist. Rebellious thought, therefore, cannot dispense with memory; it is a perpetual state of tension. In studying its actions and its results, we shall have to say, each time, whether it remains faithful to its first noble promise or if, through indulgence or folly, it forgets its original purpose and plunges into a mire of tyranny or servitude. (Camus, The Rebel 22)

This is precisely what Sebbar means when she writes, “l’inspiration, je veux dire, une certaine émotion qui m’est nécessaire pour écrire, me quitte avec l’exil” (Sebbar, Lettres parisiennes 186). Sebbar is convinced that the most authentic self-identities are marginal. Alloys of the individual and the collective, they are “in excess of, the sum of the ‘parts’ of difference” (Bhabha 1). Sebbar surmises that, in order to be transcendent—- to be “in excess of” one’s “parts”—- individuals and groups must embrace their antisocial and social natures proportionately. This means that “Qui sont mes pairs?” a question she asks Huston in letter xix, is inseparable from “Qui suis-je?” (Sebbar, Lettres parisiennes 124). They are two parts of a transcendent, identitarian riddle. Sebbar believes that we achieve wholeness by answering both questions, which is tantamount to recognizing equally our negative want of liberty and our positive need of security, our marginal desire to be an insider and an outsider.
According to Sebbar, the women’s movement lost much of its creativity when it drifted towards the communal edge of marginality. “(J)e n’aime pas les colloques (de femmes) où il faut montrer patte blanche,” (Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes* 122) the writer complains, highlighting the tyrannical trajectory the women’s movement took. Sebbar excoriates her former leftist peers for upsetting the balance between self-interest and altruism. She abrades them for “cherchant à s’établir dans le pouvoir politique politicien et le pouvoir des grands médias qui diffusent aux larges masses du prêt à manger, prêt à porter, prêt à penser” (Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes* 122-3). The writer suggests that her ex-colleagues’ desire for self-preservation motivated them to join rather than to distort the status quo. These economic men exuded slavishness; they “perform(ed) an internal “cost benefit analysis” (of their society)” which gave them “a reason for working within the system.” (Fukuyama 180). Sebbar attacks her ex-comrades for loosing sight of their original goal--justice and equality. Their want of security and power, in the end, tempered their outrage, their desire for personal and social emancipation. There, at the margins of rebellion and the bounded community, transcendence is associated mostly with the consumption and imposition of absolute truth. This space is a “mire of tyranny (and) servitude” (Camus, *The Rebel* 20) where meaning is “prêt à manger, prêt à porter, prêt à penser” (Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes* 122).
Sebbar reserves most of her grief for *Histoires d’elles*. She mourns the demise of this “lieu privilégié” because, more than the feminist movement and leftist politics, the feminist review most epitomized the liminal values of rebellion. She confides to Nancy Huston that, perhaps more than any other, this loss fuels her desire to write fiction. Through stylization, Sebbar strives to recapture the experience of the living transcendence that the journal offered her from 1977 to 1980. Writing fills an immense existential void:

*Histoires d’elles* j’ai aimé (et je recherche désespérément cela, sachant aussi que c’est fini) ce lieu privilégié où se sont mêlés pendant plusieurs années, entre plusieurs femmes, le privé et le politique, dans une pratique autonome de travail et de jeu. J’aimais le mélange des genres dans l’équipe et dans le journal. C’est ce métissage des pays, des cultures, des corps, des vêtements, des accents, des voix, des gestes qui m’ont attachée et je ne l’ai pas retrouvé ailleurs, sauf dans un imaginaire relié de loin au réel, dans des textes de fiction où je mets ce qui secrètement m’importe le plus[...]. Nous n’avons pas été dans la voix unique, mimétique, la voix du maître—c’est ce qui a fait l’intérêt du journal[...]. On ne cherchait pas la fusion, la sonorité à tout prix. Il n’y avait pas de modèle à quoi se conformer. Nous avons vécu un temps, un lieu, une pratique utopiques et réels dans la faille où nous avons réussi à nous inscrire...Mais c’était une faille provisoire[...]. La faille, nous n’avons plus l’énergie de la découvrir ou elle n’existe plus en marge, et nous ne voulons pas entrer en institution[...]. Ces trois années de 77 à 80, ou deux et demie, sont je crois les seules où je n’aie pas eu souffrir de l’exil, parce que *Histoires d’elles* est le seul lieu où j’aie trouvé une place où je ne me sois pas sentie à côté, en marge, à l’écart comme je le suis depuis toujours et aujourd’hui. (Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes* 90-91)
*Histoires d’elles* lost much of its creative potential— it folded— when its diverse members tired of epistemological relativity spawned by rebellion. A desire for absolute wholeness enjoined them to turn away from “ce qui a fait l’intérêt du journal”— the balanced expression of “le privé et le politique,” equal doses of realism and idealism, “le mélange des genres,” and “(le) métissage des pays, des cultures, des corps, des vêtements, des accents, des voix, des gestes.” Like Sebbar’s younger sister, who recoiled from France’s multicultural landscape, the journal’s contributors assuaged their lingering fear of relativity and difference through the absolute. Some felt that rugged individualism, the bounded “je,” was the most direct path to wholeness.

Speaking in the first person collective to stress the need for solidarity, Sebbar states in letter xix, “(n)os intransigeances, notre horreur des tuteurs, des protecteurs, des souteneurs, hommes ou femmes [...] ces attitudes de rigueur nous renvoient non pas à la marge mais à la solitude” (Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes* 122). Other contributors to *Histoires d’elles* withdrew into the essentialized community— the closed “nous”— to extricate themselves from France’s messy hybridity. A handful left the review outright, emigrating from France. “Elles s’appelaient les <<Migrants>> et de fait elles l’étaient, plus que toi et moi puisque Simone est retournée au Brésil, Barbara en Allemagne et Maria au Cameroun; dès qu’elle le pourra, Carmen retournera au Chili si elle ne l’a déjà fait” (Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes*
91). Sebbar’s unique perspective on women’s issues, which made her feel “si misogynne, souvent,” yet accepted among the journal’s more open-minded contributors, barred her from collaborating with her fellow immigrants on an anthology studying exile. She could not work with people who ran from their diasporic condition. “C’est pour ces raisons, sans doute,” Sebbar explains, “que je n’ai pas participé au travail sur l’exil avec Carmen, Simone, Barbara, Maria...” Still, for others, the creative act became nostalgic, a mechanism for obliterating rather than improving the world. Sebbar laments, “(n)ous étions dans la nostalgie et la nostalgie fait mourir à petits coups sournois. Nous avons cru à un artifice naïf qui n’a rien remis en place, rien recréé, rien créé que peut-être de la déception, de la tristesse” (Sebbar, Lettres parisiennes 122).

Sebbar fears that, without access to an actual rebellious community, it will only be a matter of time before individual or collective disconnect, solitude or the bounded community overtake her. If her work didn’t simultaneously cultivate individual and collective self-identities, she would loose her toehold on exile, and with it, the heightened sense of self, the self-consciousness, which “(lui) est nécessaire pour écrire.” (Sebbar, Lettres parisiennes 186). The imagination is where Sebbar makes her rebellious last stand against the forces of nihilism. Making signs of the exilic is her only hope:

Je prends conscience aujourd’hui du vide auquel je suis
Je ne me sens plus de communauté, de famille d’esprit. Il me semble parfois que ma seule terre c’est l’écriture, l’école, le livre...une terre bien abstraite si j’entends par l’école le lieu du savoir[...]. Qui sont mes pairs? (Et) je me demande aussitôt pourquoi j’ai besoin de le savoir...Ce sentiment de n’appartenir à aucun groupe politique, professionnel ou culturel, de n’être liée à aucune communauté idéologique, religieuse ou intellectuelle où il soit possible de se reconnaître en d’autres, des semblables qui puissent entendre et faire entendre un jugement équitable, suivant des règles acceptées par tous, c’est cela qui me manque et me manquera toujours telle que je suis[...]. Je peux dire que je n’ai pas de famille littéraire, que je n’ai pas de modèle: père putatif, mère putative...Je ne me rattrache à rien en amont, à rien dans le présent, à aucune ligne ni cercle[...]. Je te l’ai déjà dit, mais ce que j’écris là, je l’écris comme la pointe extrême et cruelle de l’exil où je suis en vérité. (Sebbar, Lettres parisiennes 124)

When she writes that her growing disconnect--her consciousness of n’(étant) liée à aucune communauté”--represents “la pointe extrême et cruelle de l’exil,” Sebbar not only reveals her proximity to nihilism’s frontier, but she implies that writing is the only thing preventing her from crossing over from middle selfhood--“où (elle est) en vérité”--into the nihilism of solitude. We get the sense that corresponding with Nancy Huston helps Sebbar maintain her place at exile’s fringe. Sebbar’s marginal self-identity is tenuous, but marginal nonetheless, because writing allows her to assert her independence from the originary community and her dependency on other rebels. She clings to the living transcendence by establishing with Nancy Huston the smallest rebellious circle possible, an imaginary micro society that
offers what her actual society cannot: a place “où il soit possible de se
reconnaître en d’autres, des semblables qui puissent entendre et faire
entendre un jugement équitable, suivant des règles acceptées par
tous.” 56

Sebbar’s aesthetic demand establishes a society (albeit the
smallest possible) on the principles of liberty, equality, and solidarity
within the parameters of liminality. She writes because she desires the
recognition and the security of the group as much as she craves
independence; the novelist understands that she can exist in the
fullest sense of being only if a rebellious society exists around her.
This is the precise sense of “c’est cela qui me manque et me
manquera toujours telle que je suis.” Ultimately, creating fictional
worlds satisfies Sebbar’s desire for the living transcendence more
than commenting on the real world in letters. The author feels the
freest and the most secure writing fiction because imagination is at
once a sign of her undeterminedness and a source of unity.

In Lettres parisienes, she describes the creative process as “la
suture” that threads individual and communal identities together. As
she sees it, writing closes the gaping existential wound--middle
selfhood--that causes her so much emotional suffering:

Et puis, pour moi, la fiction c’est la suture qui masque la
blessure, l’écart, entre deux rives. Je suis là, à la croisée,

56 This explains why Leïla Sebbar revealed in an interview with Monique Hugon in “Leïla
Sebbar ou l’exil productif”(Notre Librairie 84 (1986)), that she identifies more with
Julien Desrosiers than Shérazade.
enfin sereine, à ma place, en somme, puisque je suis une croisée qui cherche une filiation et qui écris dans une lignée, toujours la même, reliée à l’histoire, à la mémoire, à l’identité, à la tradition et à la transmission, je veux dire à la recherche d’une ascendance et d’une descendance, d’une place dans l’histoire d’une famille, d’une communauté, d’un peuple, au regard de l’Histoire et de l’univers. C’est dans la fiction que je me sens sujet libre (de père, de mère, de clan, de dogmes...) et forte de la charge de l’exil. C’est là seulement là que je me rassemble corps et âme et que je fais le pont entre les deux rives[...] (Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes* 138)

It is on the symbolic level that Sebbar has her most intense and satisfying experience with the “déséquilibre constant” (Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes* 185) of exile. She only feels whole when writing fiction—she is “enfin sereine, à (sa) place, en somme (read transcendent)”—because she reconciles the myriad antitheses of exilic selfhood. By striking a balance between “ascendance” and “descendance,” her negative impulse to be “(un) sujet libre” and her positive desire for filiation, Sebbar makes her life more meaningful. That is to say, she asserts her ability to stylize the arbitrary world (of power), and she secures herself a place in history. Nonfiction may be the tenuous lifeline attaching her to the exilic; fiction is “le pont entre les deux rives,” a sturdier means for navigating exile.

Yet, it is important to note that Sebbar’s choices of images—the bridge and the suture—are as much about fiction’s transfigurative limitations as its potential. Metaphors of the artistic process, the
bridge and the suture are the means to an extra-textual (open) end. The text is not an end in itself although it provides Sebbar with the deepest and longest-lasting sense of relative transcendence. Creative writing can only span (in the case of the bridge) or conceal (in the case of the suture) the rebellious community’s absence. Any narrative (or meta-narrative) that purports to fill in completely “le vide auquel (on est) confrontée” (Sebbar, Lettres parisiennes 124) is nihilistic. It is an “artifice naïf” that creates nothing except, “peut-être de la déception, de la tristesse” (Sebbar, Lettres parisiennes 122). Sebbar’s antipathy for nihilism explains why she desires something more than the imagined rebellious community, which is restricted to the writer and her cast of characters. Her work will remain flawed--it will not be fully liminal despite being founded on liminal values--until it reconciles the real and the ideal like Histoires d’elles once did.

Reconciliation cannot happen unless the reader receives Sebbar’s work as an identitarian template and uses it to transform self and society into more unified (but not final) forms. Until that occurs, Sebbar contents herself to write. The imaginary remains the only place where “(elle se) rassemble corps et âme et qu’elle fait) le pont entre les deux rives.” The writer builds bridges; the reader must reclaim terrain from the nihilistic quagmire beneath the bridge. The writer closes the wound; the reader heals it. In short, Sebbar can only be complete if her readers choose to appropriate her imaginary rebellious
community and translate their singular and the collective identities into more meaningful (less arbitrary) forms. This collaborative effort of writer and reader, this “pratique utopique(s) et réel(s),” (Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes* 90-1) is a true rebellious act. It will transfigure individual and collective modalities of self-identity, reinscribing the post-colonial world “dans la faille où nous avons réussi à nous inscrire” earlier and on a much smaller, more ephemeral scale at *Histoires d’elles*.

The review’s contributors lost “l’énergie de la découvrir”—their renounced their ability to stylize reality in a socially meaningful form—when they chose singular and collective visions of the absolute over relative ones. *Shérazade’s* contributors—the writer and the reader—will not grow weary of marginality. Sebbar hopes that her text and the unbounded, post-history-bound world that emerges from it will remind reader and writer alike that rebelliousness is the most authentic form of selfhood. Expanding the space of true exile will bring liberty, equality, and solidarity, peace and prosperity, the living transcendence, to greater numbers of post-colonials. Destroying it for individual or collective gain will produces nothing, except suffering. Thus, the core message of *Lettres parisiennes* and the *Shérazade* trilogy is—individuals and groups have much to gain by sharing their liberty and security with others, everything loose if they hoard, individually or collectively, the experience of wholeness.
We could say that the *Shérazade* trilogy recasts *Histoires d'elles* on the textual and the worldly level. First, Sebbar temporarily reinscribes herself in “la faille,” (Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes* 91) in the liminal terrain between solitude and community, by rehabilitating rebelliousness. Her imaginary colleagues include Shérazade, Henri Matisse, Julien Desrosiers and an unnamed journalist-activist, to name only a few. Through them, Sebbar excises the nihilistic elements from her actual ex-colleagues’ self-identities that underlaid *Histoires d'elles'* failure and the author’s resulting sense of disconnect. Sebbar’s narrator often collaborates with Shérazade, passing negative judgments on these “characters’” nihilistic inclinations. Shérazade’s and the narrator’s work impart to the reader an elaborate model for authentic selfhood, a strategy for bringing themselves and their society from the margins to the mainstream of exile. Shérazade and the narrator enable equal recognition--reconciliation--between author and reader, utopia and cynicism, the text and the world.

Sebbar creates Julien Desrosiers to delegitimize nostalgia, the individualistic or collective longing for the “perfect” past, which plagued *Histoires d'elles* and underlies redemptive, anti-cosmopolitan or “jihadic” ideologies such as the Extreme Right and Islamic fundamentalism. At times, Julien’s passion for art is nothing short of mystical. He contemplates orientalist paintings to achieve bliss, a sensation of total security and freedom, a feeling of detachment from
the dispersed material world. Julien received this aesthetic mysticism and a few paintings from his parents. In the late 1950s or early 1960s, Julien’s family fled the Algerian War, arriving in France with the existential basics: linens, dishes, a family scrapbook, some postcards, and a few second-rate Orientalist paintings:

De l’Algérie, sa mère n’avait rapporté que le linge, la vaisselle, l’album de famille, quelques cartes postales et des tableaux orientalistes mineurs que Julien avait sortis récemment des valises entreposées dans son appartement. Il en avait tapissé un mur entier. C’était bizarre. La propriété de famille das plateaux sétifens était devenue une coopérative agricole. (Sebbar, Shérazade 23)

The linens and kitchen utensils helped the Desrosiers detach themselves from the physical space of exile, and communicate with the Absolute in the form of a timeless, perfect Algerian “home.” The paintings photographs, and postcards, with their colonial subject matter and their studied objectivity, also offered the displaced family certainty in very uncertain times. They made the world seem comprehensible and manageable; they made the Desrosiers feel transcendent. Sebbar makes it clear that these representations, however objective they may seem, are not stable images of “nostalgérie,” those “tender memories of prewar Algeria”57 that

signify the pied-noirs’ desire for communion with the timeless beyond.  

Sebbar shows that the ideal Algeria depicted in those postcards, photographs, and paintings cannot suppress those changes brought about by Algerian independence. Through free indirect discourse, we are privy to the anguish that the real Algeria caused Julien’s family and continues to cause him: “C'était bizarre. La propriété de famille des plateaux sétifien était devenue une coopérative agricole.” To mitigate his discomfort, Julien does what he always did—he withdraws from the real world, seeking deliverance in those representations of which “il en a tapissé un mur entier.”

Julien’s is an escapist fantasy, a puerile, nihilistic desire to recapture his innocence. He shirks the uncertainties and disappointments of adult life that undermine his desire for total liberty and security. To sustain the childish fantasy of total control that is “nostalgérie,” Julien denies the immorality of French colonialism, the dignity of the Algerian people. For the past to be pure and him innocent, the brutality of French Algeria and the righteousness of the anti-colonial struggle must be occluded. Thus, the nationalization of his family estate can only be “bizarre;” it can only be a flaw, a sign of paradise lost, his splitting with the sacred One.

58 Through Shérazade, Sebbar deconstructs a multitude of hegemonic representations of the (formerly) colonized, including Garanger’s Femmes algériennes 1960, Matisse’s Odalisque à la culotte rouge, du Noyer’s Esclave blanche, and Ingres’ Odalisque à l’esclave. Sebbar insists that no image, however objective it may appear, can completely contain the Other. The Look always ignites looking back, inequality sparks rebellion.
Orientalism also overdetermines Julien’s life as a screenwriter. Outside Shérazade’s housing project, Julien informs the film’s director of his plans to transform the apartment building’s courtyard into an exotic wonderland:

--[...]-Regarde ce que j’ai apporté. C’est plus beau qu’en vrai. Regarde.
Julien déroule des posters gigantesques qui seront suspendus à partir des balcons du premier étage, la cour deviendra un patio onirique: scènes de guerre en Orient, combats à cheval entre guerriers arabes, bains turcs, Odalisques[...]." (Sebbar, Le Fou de Shérazade 29-30)

Obviously, Julien’s delusion of innocence is behind his desire to use Orientalist art to deny the Arab’s dignity. His work, which meets Anne Donadey’s criteria for a “repressive fantasy,” demonstrates memory’s primary function “as the organization of forgetting (that) substitute(s) nostalgic recollections, ‘screen memories,’ to the more painful memories” of diaspora” (Donadey, “Une Certaine Idée de la France” 221). The presence of “onirique” suggests that screen writing, quite literally, is Julien’s dream job. By shrouding the HLM in Orientalism, what he considers an idealized aesthetic code, Julien hopes to repress the historical and contemporary reality of diaspora. Unlike Shérazade, who appropriates Orientalist works because their discontinuities are reflective of her own, Julien co-optes Odalisques and femmes au bain as “tender memories of prewar Algeria” (Donadey, “Une Certaine Idée de la France” 222). Timeless, perfect, and
idealized, they are his childhood Algeria, his paradise found, his communion with the original.

We could say that the olive tree is a double sign of libertarian struggle. It signifies the immigrant’s nihilistic or rebellious relationship with the surrounding world. In the rebellious sense, “l’olivier” symbolizes the migrant’s humble desire for a better life. This rebel hopes to achieve relative security and liberty by putting down roots in French society. He experiences wholeness through economic, social, and political integration, associating liberty with equality and solidarity. In the irrational sense (which is how Thomas Friedman portrays “l’olivier” in The Lexus and the Olive Tree) it is synonymous with uprootedness, with the belief that one’s authenticity has been lost and can only be found by rejecting globalization. To survive, the olive tree must be repatriated; to remain whole, the nihilistic immigrant must retreat into nostalgia or repatriate.

Integration into the interconnected, post-colonial world is tantamount
to deculturalization, to a death of the spirit.\textsuperscript{59}

The olive tree is the centerpiece of Julien's screen memory.
Without it, his "patio onirique," (Sebbar, \textit{Le Fou de Shérazade} 30) the film that encompasses the HLM scene, the world surrounding the movie, and Julien's self-identity would all be meaningless. He would be lost--uprooted and incomplete--if reality upset his mystical communion with the absolute. Hence, the pied-noir denies the dignity of other people to assure his own. His vision of truth, because it recognizes no other, is a constant source of interpersonal conflict. While his relationship with Shérazade is rife with conflict, the reader's overall impression is that the couple, is working towards a more equitable union. Shérazade's rebelliousness is the mitigating factor. She alters Julien's self-identity, teaching him to equate sanctity with embracing life's open-endedness, to value the relative more than the absolute.

\textsuperscript{59} In \textit{Le Fou de Shérazade}, Shérazade also unites with Palestinian villagers to thwart Israeli Defense Forces bulldozers from razing an olive grove that impeded the construction of an Israeli settlement in the occupied territories. Uprooting olive trees, not to mention entire Palestinian villages erases the Arab's presence from the Palestinian landscape, creating the illusion of a purely Jewish state. Meron Benvenisti's \textit{Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land Since 1948} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) investigates the relationship between erasing the Arab presence in Palestine and building of the State of Israel. In addition to its symbolic reach, the systematic destruction of olive trees and other traditional crops had far-reaching economic consequences:

The demolition of Arab villages was, of course, a major component of the destruction of the old landscape, but the destruction of Arab agriculture--orchards, citrus and olive groves, terraces--had an even more devastating effect[...] the Israelis destroyed whatever the Arabs had left that could not be integrated into their framework. Most citrus groves were uprooted to make room for housing developments, ancient olive trees were left uncared for or destroyed to make room for field crops.

(Benvensti 7)
The pied-noir’s encounters with other nihilistic characters, show little conciliatory potential.

Julien and an elderly immigrant in Provence have many things in common. Both emigrated from the Maghreb years ago; each seeks transcendence in the beyond. Yet, neither seems capable of recognizing their common humanity because their sacred olive trees, and by extension, their self-identities, are oriented towards nihilism. Mutually threatening, they cannot coexist. When Julien and his crew arrive to extirpate the tree, the woman warns that nature will avenge itself. It punishes blasphemers, those who upset the sacred order of things, her order of things:

J’ai abandonné mon village depuis tant d’années. Là-bas, celui qui attaque un olivier est un assassin et, même s’il réussit à s’enfuir dans la forêt, il meurt parce que la nature refuse de le nourrir[...]
(Sebbar, *Le Fou de Shérazade* 10)

But, the divine does not intervene, and Julien’s wicked deed goes unpunished—he brings the tree to Paris without incident. Instead of shaking the migrant’s faith, this lack of retribution reinforces it. She comes to see herself as an instrument of God, the defender of truth. On foot, she follows Julien to Paris to reclaim the tree and impose her vision of absolute truth, her primordial self-identity, her olive tree, on the world. This woman’s ethnicity is unclear, which is significant. First, it underscores the hybridity of Maghrebin culture. A microcosm of the
North Africa she departed years ago, this woman is part Arab, part Berber, part European. Her hybridity is the outcome of centuries of cultural crossings. Hybridity also explains the tree’s transcultural value. Arabs, Berbers, and Europeans worship the olive tree because there is no essential difference between them. Beneath their superficial cultural differences, these North Africans share an essential humanity. What makes them fundamentally the same is their impulse for rootedness, that is, metaphysical freedom and physical security.

Discomfort with hybridity explains why a Moroccan immigrant in Les Carnets de Shérazade retreats into solitude. On the surface, the Moroccan bears a striking resemblance to Shérazade. Each broke with their traditional families to block their impending arranged marriages. One fled from North Africa to Toulouse, the other from Paris to southwestern France. This is where the similarities end. While Shérazade embraces liminality to the fullest, the Moroccan fears it. Shérazade overhears this recluse tell her young North African guest:

Je ne veux pas sortir. Je sais que je pourrais aller où je veux, quand je veux. C’est (mon mari) Jean qui fait les courses. Je ne sors pas ou alors pour aller loin du village, en voiture. Il m’amène dans des brocantes, des marchés aux puces, chez les bouquinistes parce qu’il sait ce que je cherche. Tout ce qui me parle du Maroc. Ma chambre, tu l’as vue? Jean dit qu’il ne veut plus y entrer, que j’en ai fait un musée, que c’est insupportable. Mais dans cette pièce-là je suis bien. Le reste est à Jean. Je l’habite avec lui. Je n’ai
pas de nouvelles de ma mère, depuis trois ans. Elle ne sait pas où je suis, ce que je fais.
(Sebbar, *Les Carnets de Shérazade* 242)

The Moroccan appears to lend support to Shérazade’s belief that marginality protects one’s freedom. She states, “(j)e sais que je pourrais aller où je veux, quand je veux.” Yet, the recluse prefaces this with “(j)e ne veux pas sortir,” implying that she exercises her freedom in a nihilistic fashion. She voluntarily withdraws into nostalgic solitude to repress the social and cultural realities of France and Morocco. She does not recognize the former because diversity threatens her security; she denies the latter because patriarchy chafes her liberty. Only in self-imposed solitude does she feel complete. “(D)ans cette pièce-là je suis bien,” she tells her guest, because she has transformed it into an imaginary Morocco through the bric-à-brac she has collected from the “brocantes,” “marchés aux puces,” and “bouquinistes.”

The reclusive immigrant’s connection to France is completely artificial. Her excursions into the world serve one purpose: to strengthen her repressive fantasy, her negative aesthetic demand. Nor does this “chambre-musée” provide any actual connection to her homeland. The North African decor, artifacts, and souvenirs give her the illusion of belonging. This atmosphere of peace and calm, in turn, dissuades her from reaching out to her family. It is the reason why she
tells her guest, “(j)e n’ai pas de nouvelles de ma mère, depuis trois ans. Elle ne sait pas où je suis, ce que je fais.” At the same time that it disconnects her from France and Morocco, the shut-in’s desire for transcendence subordinates her to French neocolonialism. Mirroring France, the Moroccan mimics “la voix du maître” (Sebbar, Lettres parisiennes 90-1) when she appropriates “toujours que lui parle du Maroc.” She finds security in the exotic trinkets that enable France to view Arab-Islamic culture and society through the lens of alterity. Relying on the master’s cultural currency for sustenance only proves that she is not “fort et solide dans la marginalité de géographie, de langue, de couleur, de civilisation pour échapper à l’institution correctionnelle en psychiatrie, rééducation ou réinsertion [...]” (Sebbar, Lettres parisiennes 119). This shut-in bears an uncanny resemblance to Fukuyama’s economic man. After performing a cost benefit analysis, she inscribes herself within the system that oppresses her.

Although she uses aesthetics, not religion, to configure the past (and herself) as pure, the recluse could be likened to Islamic fundamentalists in V.S. Naipaul’s “Our Universal Civilization:”

While the faith held, while it appeared to be unchallenged, the world perhaps held together. But when there appeared this powerful, encompassing civilization from outside, men didn’t know what to do. They could only do what they were capable of doing; they could only become more assiduous in the faith, more self-wounding, more ready to turn away
from what they couldn't master.  
(Naipaul, "Our Universal Civilization" 513).

The Moroccan seems to understand that her solitude is a flawed self identity, a form of servitude. At one point, she confides to her guest that her strategy for dealing with exile is “self-wounding.” She recognizes that her discomfort for France, “the civilization from outside” and her economic decision to repress its presence by becoming “more assiduous in the faith” of exoticism is a psychological flaw. She admits:

Je suis folle, je crois. Je m’enferme plus que n’importe quelle femme de chez moi qui sort voilée, plus que ma mère, plus qu’une femme du Mzab.” (Sebbar, Les Carnets de Shérazade 243)

At the same time, the recluse’s recognition of the psychological deficiency of aesthetic fundamentalism suggests that her faith in the beyond is not holding. The outside world which she cannot master is asserting itself into her mastering narrative. Liminality is demanding equal recognition, namely through her husband, Jean. Jean’s rebellious presence is the primary reason why the recluse has not crossed over into nihilism, why she is capable of recognizing the error of her ways and the superiority of rebellious selfhood. The Moroccan remains at “la pointe extrême et cruelle de l’exil” (Sebbar, Lettres parisiennes 124) because Jean prevents her from completely shutting out the exilic. He is her link to the rebellious community.
Jean’s professional and personal interests are the embodiment of liminality; the history of “les Juifs et les Arabes d’Espagne avant la grande Inquisition” (Sebbar, Les Carnets de Shérazade 243) fascinates this high school Spanish teacher. Intellectually and emotionally engaged in the historical and contemporary reality of East-West cultural crossings, Jean works with North African academics on “la mémoire immigrée” in the Toulouse area which is home to “des Algériens de l’Ouest, Ain-Témouchent, Tiemcenc, Sebdou, et de Mostaganem” (Sebbar, Les Carnets de Shérazade 243). His scholarship investigates the “always already hybrid nature”\(^6\) of the Mediterranean region and the efforts of “jihadic warriors” (Barber 164), such as Spanish Inquisitors, the Extreme Right, and Islamic fundamentalists, to suppress “le métissage.” It is also likely that Jean teaches a non-essentialized, cosmopolitan version of Spanish language and culture at a Toulouse-area high school. He speaks to his pupils in the rebel’s tongue, not “la voix du maître” (Sebbar, Lettres parisiennes 90-1), encouraging them to recognize how cultural hybridity shapes their individual and collective destinies. Ultimately, Jean’s inquisition into the “always already hybrid” nature of the Mediterranean displaces contemporary Islamic and French fundamentalisms.

His defense of hybridity has personal and social implications. At home, Jean contests his wife’s “jihadic” solitude. Telling her young

guest what Jean thinks of her room, the Moroccan states: “Jean dit qu’il ne veut plus y entrer, que j’en ai fait un musée, que c’est insupportable” (Sebbar, *Les Carnets de Shérazade* 242). Jean cannot bear entering her room for the same reason that he rejects nostalgic or “jihadic” historiography: it denies human dignity by repressing the relativity of truth and identity. Jean goes so far as to call her room “un souk” to foreground her complicity with neocolonialism. Yet, because Jean is a rebel, he does not impose marginality on his wife. He can only promote the non-essentialized values of métissage. She must choose to inhabit the ambiguous, intersubjective space of rebellion on her own. There is a sense of hopefulness that one day, the shut-in will stop asking Jean to take her “dans des brocantes, des marchés aux puces, chez les bouquinistes.” Under his guidance, she will learn to value the imperfect present over the perfect past, the rebellious community over solitude, the house over the room. She will reconcile herself to her hybrid past and present. In so doing, she will create a space for herself in the exilic, cosmopolitan world; she will become whole by letting go of her aspirations to the absolute wholeness.

Nasser, a Tunisian immigrant, handles the ambiguity of the post-colonial condition much like the shut-in. While waiting for him at a café in Toulouse, Michel Salomon tells his new acquaintance, Shérazade, that Nasser studies history to escape the present:

(O)n a fait nos études ensemble, à Paris. Lui, il a continué,
moi je suis parti en Amérique et voilà... Il s'appelle Nasser, il est tunisien. Il a fait de l'histoire, comme moi, mais lui, c'est le siècle d'or arabe et le siècle d'or de l'Espagne musulmane. Il sort pas du Moyen Age et il voudrait que les rois catholiques n'aient jamais chassé ses ancêtres d'Espagne. (Sebbar, Les Carnets de Shérazade 269)

Julien and the elderly immigrant have their “oliviers;” Nasser seeks refuge from reality in “jihadic” historiography. He feels complete when he writes about “le siècle d'or arabe et le siècle d'or de l'Espagne musulmane.” From Michel’s perspective, Nasser would be at peace with himself and the world if “les rois catholiques n'aient jamais chassé ses ancêtres de l'Espagne.” Nasser views the West as the enemy, the illegitimate sovereign, the reason for the Arab-Islamic world’s weakness and his own sense of displacement. Hence, this historian looks for salvation in parochialism, in the image of an original Islamic past. The present is worthless to him. It is an age of darkness and will remain such so long as Spain remains under non-Muslim rule. Not only does historiography help Nasser feel closer to what he believes is the ultimate truth--the mythical Islamic patrimony--but he senses his liberty the most intensely through the creative act. Nasser’s world becomes an organized, coherent place when he shrinks it to myth through writing. For Michel, his friend’s rejection of life amounts to a servile desire for total security. He rejects the sacred, life’s radically undetermined nature, because he craves security more than liberty. Nasser looks to the ideal for redemption instead of creating his own
kingdom in the dispersed world. If Nasser “sort pas du Moyen Age,” it is because he can’t, Michel insists. He lacks the will to live as his own God on Earth.

Although Elizabeth Vergano does not include Michel Salomon among the many “individus toujours en marche” in Sebbar’s fiction, the nomadic label seems fitting. Shérazade’s and Gilles’ mobility—the former is a hitchiker, the latter a trucker—is synonymous with freedom and wholeness. According to Vergano, both characters achieved an almost mystical “non-appartenance” from normative forms of selfhood, by embracing marginality:

Comme Shérazade, Gilles fait partie de ces individus toujours ‘en marche,’ vivant dans la non-appartenance, dans une certaine marginalité, de par leur capacité à se mouvoir sans cesse, à être à la lisière d’une normalité sociale.  

Likewise, Michel Salomon is constantly on the move, crossing paths with Shérazade in southwestern France, Lebanon, and Israel. When Shérazade runs into the vagabond in the Middle East, she finally learns why Salomon abandoned his research on the Jewish diaspora for an itinerant life. He suggested that historiography turned him away from the present. It frustrated his desire to write his own story; it foiled his wish to exist as a sovereign in the dispersed world:

Quand je pense que j’ai passé des années dans les bibliothèques à dépouiller des documents d’archives sur

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l’histoire des Juifs... Là, oui, j’étais fou. Je vivais pas ou plutôt je vivais l’histoire des autres, pas la mienne...
(Sebbar, Le Fou de Shérazade 129)

After many years spent “à dépouiller des documents d’archives,” Michel came to the realization that investigating his community’s diasporic past was inferior to navigating the diasporic present as an individual. He tired of living “l’histoire des autres,” which he felt was not really living at all. Writing about the communal past involved slandering the ambiguous present and the idea of the sovereign individual. Michel emancipated himself from his past and his community, setting out for America (Sebbar, Les Carnets de Shérazade 269), where myth has it that the individual is unfettered and the past has little value.

Michel drifted from country to country before achieving “enlightenment” in the Holy Land. There, the “non-appartenance” (Vergano 178) he professed to attain was not of the spiritual variety. Michel told Shérazade that he achieved it by renouncing other-worldly things. The One with which he merged was the dispersed world. He found glory in war photography. First, the sheer physical risk involved in covering the Lebanese Civil War and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict enhanced his liberty. Salomon felt the freest, that is, the least physically determined, when he risked his life taking pictures. Second, he believed that war photography was superior to idealistic
representations, such as historiography and the cinema.

Charles Baudelaire’s piece on the Salon of 1859 addressed the danger that photography posed to French painting. Baudelaire argued that the exploding popularity of photography would eventually subvert the “génie artistique français, déjà si rare” unless reverted to its original purpose, the technical adjunct to science and art:

S’il est permis à la photographie de supplanter l’art dans quelques-unes de ses fonctions, elle l’aura bientôt supplantée ou corrompu tout à fait, grâce à l’alliance naturelle qu’elle trouvera dans la sottise de la multitude. Il faut donc que (la photographie) rentre dans son véritable devoir, qui est d’être la servante des sciences et des arts, mais la très humble servante, comme l’imprimerie et la sténographie, qui n’ont ni crée ni suppléée la littérature. Qu’elle enrichisse rapidement l’album du voyageur et rende à ses yeux la précision qui manquerait à sa mémoire[...] qu’elle soit enfin le secrétaire et le garde-note de quiconque a besoin dans sa profession d’une absolue exactitude matérielle, jusque-là rien de mieux[...] De jour en jour l’art diminue le respect de lui-même, se prosterner devant la réalité extérieure, et le peintre devient de plus en plus enclin à peindre, non pas ce qu’il rêve, mais ce qu’il voit. (Baudelaire, “Salon de 1859” 618-19)

In a way, Baudelaire’s “Salon de 1859” prefigures Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*. Fukuyama argued in his 1992 book that egalitarianism, the contradiction of modern liberal society, was destroying the human spirit. Liberal democracy reduced man to economic terms. It repressed his metaphysical desire to

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struggle for the recognition of his superior worth. This discourages "excellence or achievement" (Fukuyama xxii) because "(a) civilization devoid of anyone who wanted to be recognized as better than others, and which did not affirm in some way the essential health and goodness of such a desire would have little art or literature, music or intellectual life" (Fukuyama 315). Fukuyama’s conception of liberal society is nihilistic in the physical sense of the term. This civic faith enjoins man to worship the ideal of total equality, to value "the totalitarian aesthetic of reality" (Camus, The Rebel 273). A century and a half earlier, Charles Baudelaire argued that photography denied man’s dignity, subordinating the ideal to the real, unity to the arbitrary, unreason to reason. Photography repressed man’s "génie artistique," his irrational desire to unify the dispersed world through the creative act. Like liberal democracy, it reduced humans to mediocrity, to creatures of physical desire, to "true bourgeois" (Fukuyama 180).63

Baudelaire wrote, "(L’)art se prosterne devant la réalité extérieure, et le peintre devient de plus en plus enclin à peindre, non pas ce qu’il rêve, mais ce qu’il voit." The artist reduced himself to a consumer of meaning, a prisoner of reality’s arbitrary and totalitarian aesthetic. His "aux bourgeois" in "Salon de 1846" and his critique of

63 Incidentally, Baudelaire dedicates his essay on the Salon of 1846 "aux bourgeois," whom he implores to "sentir la beauté," that is, to respect our spiritual nature, thymos. He reminds his readers that striving for material comfort is not enough. "Vous pouvez vivre trois jours sans pain;--sans poésie, jamais." (Baudelaire, "Salon de 1846," Oeuvres complètes, vol. 2: 415.)
photography in “Salon de 1859” were calls to arms. The poet implored France’s “Economic Men” to rebel against the tyrannical camera on behalf of human dignity. He called for the bourgeois to put photography back in its rightful place—“la servante des sciences et des arts, (mais) la très humble servante, comme l’imprimerie et la sténographie.”

In a shocking reversal of Baudelaire’s aesthetic code, Michel Salomon tells Shérazade that war photography is the superior to other forms of representation because it captures life’s arbitrary and brutish nature. It shatters the illusion that man can unify his world through stylization:

Si je fais un montage de cinéma, je reprends des plans, c’est sûr, des faux[...] Mais là, ces photos (de guerre), elles sont uniques parce qu’on ne peut pas penser à les fabriquer, c’est la surprise absolue, la réalité plus forte que la fiction...Ce qui se passe dans la violence, c’est l’émotion, tu comprends, l’émotion...
(Sebbar, Le Fou de Shérazade 131)

According to Michel, a photo’s underlying instability—it is always “la surprise absolue”—captures our radically undetermined nature. He tells Shérazade that photographs, at their most essential level, are about one thing: “l’émotion, tu comprends, l’émotion.” They tell the story of human beings striving to be sovereigns in a world without God, in a world without any hope of transcendence, divine or terrestrial. This means that Michel considers human association to be arbitrary. Power, not the abstract principle of dignity determines how people
interact. For him, the truth that war photography captures is our life-long struggle for superior recognition, a struggle whose outcome is domination and subordination, arbitrary because it does not lead us to a more meaningful, a more unified, form of social organization. As Michel sees it, each of us wants to be king of the arbitrary world, the strongest beast in the human jungle. Without ideals, namely without the idea of our shared dignity, there can be no social contract between us. Violence is beauty; war is truth.

Michel abandoned historiography because he found it repressive. During his travels across the globe, he drifted closer and closer to the brink of solitude. By the time he arrived in the Levant, Salomon looked at representation as an instrument for satisfying his desire for superior recognition. By documenting the violence in the Middle East, the photographer seeks to repress individual liberty. In other words, he takes photos to assert himself on Earth as the sole beholder of meaning, the source of “la réalité plus forte que la fiction.” Possessing and imposing the truth—“la surprise absolue”—he boasts, makes him humanity’s undisputed master, the universal sovereign.

Salomon feels as if he is absence—he feels detached—when “covering” (Said) the violence in the Middle East. In fact, he tells Shérazade that people will worship him through his work. His photographs are received as icons because he has undetermined himself; he has merged with the absolute; he alone is God:
Michel condemned his Tunisian friend Nasser for writing history instead of his story. Michel’s story is no less historical. The more he detaches himself from community, the deeper his self-identity (and its adjoining vision of human relations) inscribes itself within the master/slave dialectic. Hence, his work will inevitably provoke outrage. It will push viewers to rebel in the name of a higher value, dignity. According to Hegel, the master provides the slave with material security so long as the latter recognizes the former’s liberty as absolute. Michel thinks that he has a similar contract with society. He believes that he is providing “des groupes d’hommes, de femmes, (et) d’enfants” with existential security through photographs, which he views as touchstones of the absolute. In other words, Michel is certain that his pictures give the viewer the sensation that the arbitrary world is somehow unified. Viewers are “attirés par la magie” of his photos because contemplation places them in contact with the beyond.

In Hegel’s version of history, the master threatens to kill any slave who dares to challenge his absolute authority. Similarly, Michel
warns that death awaits the viewer who questions the sanctity of his photos, and by extension, the supremacy of his self-identity. He boasts, “personne n’aura l'idée de les graffer, personne ou celui qui le ferait serait lynché comme sacrilège.” Michel cannot tolerate competing narratives--his photographs cannot coexist with graffiti--because he desires superior recognition. His story must be the only story. Representation must underscore his status as the most powerful being in the social wilderness.

Shérazade’s derisory laughter and her dismissive “(t)u es complètement mystique” exposes the fraudulence of Michel’s desire for terrestrial sovereignty or earthly “non-appartenance.” Shérazade’s insolent outrage is a type of aural graffiti. Similar to the graffiti artist, she expresses her liberty--she protests against the status quo--by writing herself into (but not over) another’s story. If she rejected the principle of non-belonging absolutely, Shérazade would be nihilistic; she would be denying the individual his or her basic right to independent life by imposing her vision of things--her narrative--on others. What Shérazade protests, on megalothymotic grounds, is the excessive materialism of Michel’s desire for absolute detachment. She takes issue with his need to be “complètement mystique” (my emphasis), suggesting that he only recognizes himself as self-conscious. He objectifies humanity because he sees epistemological diversity as an existential threat. Rebellion is “sacrilège.” It threatens
the sanctity of the arbitrary.

Shérazade’s levity goes part and parcel with stylization. Through derision, she attempts to recast Michel’s largely nihilistic self-identity as rebelliousness, to bring him from the inauthentic/total “non-appartenance” of solitude back to authentic/relative “non-appartenance.” She wants to rekindle in him the spirit of rebellion, the libertarian passion that motivated him, years before, to leave historiography to less hearty souls, such as his friend Nasser. Shérazade hopes her mockery will prompt Michel to draw an equivalence between Nasser’s escape from reality and his own retreat from the ideal, to recognize that his face appears with Nasser’s on the counterfeit coin of nihilism. Ultimately, she wants Michel to grasp that wholeness, the living transcendence, lies somewhere in-between Nasser’s desire for spiritual “non-appartenance” and his desire for physical “non-appartenance. It is at the interstices of Nasser’s faith in transcendence and his faith in the living, the original community and cynical solitude.

The irony is now palpable in Michel’s remark that Nasser “sort pas du Moyen Age.” The photographer, it turns out, sort pas du présent. He is a prisoner of his delusion that cynicism is emancipatory, that adhering to the human wilderness’ law of domination and subjection (by way of the camera eye) is the path to wholeness. So, instead of being outraged by it, Michel achieves total emotional and
physical sustenance in the Lebanese Civil War and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. War is his truth; and he feels complete when he documents the human calamity around him, the worthlessness of all lives but his own. Capturing this truth sets him apart from others, satisfying his instinctual need to dominate, his impulse to be the last person standing, the only being who matters.

Michel lacks agency because he does not recognize his dignity in others. If the photographer had the rebel’s idealism—his compassion for others, his belief in a common humanity, and his sense of community—this “Solo-man” would revolt against the status quo. His outrage at the encompassing human tragedy would serve as a catalyst for engaging in some sort of protest on a world whose current form insults man’s common dignity. Of course, Michel’s interest in photography is proof, in and of itself, that he is not interested in making modest aesthetic demands on his condition. Salomon does not use representation to ameliorate his condition; he employs it to copy reality, which amounts to a slavish repetition of the truth.

Baudelaire wrote that photography was killing painting and literature. Sebbar seems to be going a step further. In addition to art she insinuates that la photographie pourrait tuer l’homme if we perceive it as Michel Salomon does—a “mystical” portal to the absolute. But, this aperture is only trapdoor. It leads to nowhere beyond the historical present, beyond the brutish status quo. It
legitimates wilderness law, giving us the illusion that the killing fields are hallowed ground, that each of us is an island. Until he has that revelatory moment, and equates wholeness, as he once did, with the living transcendence, with belonging to a community of true rebels, Michel will remain a slave to his fearful, instinctual desire to be pure and innocent. He will be chained and stained, physically determined and accountable for the carnage surrounding him, until the shooting stops.

There are preliminary indications in *Le Fou de Shérazade* that Michel will stop shooting one day. A rebellious viewer, Shérazade, wanders the streets of Jerusalem in search of this lost soul. Although she does not find him among a group of Moroccan Israelis at a sidewalk café, Shérazade does discover that nihilism has not completely snuffed out the living transcendence’s flame within him. Salomon hangs to the rebellious community by the thread of language:

(Shérazade) s’est arrêtée à chaque table de café où parlaient des Juifs du Maroc, Michel parle comme eux, malgré les années françaises, parisiennes, elle reconnaît l’accent, les gestes de main [...] (Sebbar, *Le Fou de Shérazade* 181)

Resisting cultural homogenization in France, in the Arab-Islamic world, and in Israel is the common cause Salomon shares with other displaced Moroccan Jews. In France, “l’accent (et) les gestes de main” set Michel apart from State, which employs linguistic standardization (along with Odalisques) to cleanse the Hexagon of the cultural
diversity, the alterity, that undermines the idea of an original cultural patrimony. In North Africa, unconventional French enabled Michel and his fellow Moroccan Jews to resist the encroachment of French neocolonialism and orthodox Islam. In Israel, it allows them to maintain their distinctiveness within the prevailing European, Hebrew-speaking culture, which the State is imposing on the Palestinian landscape.

The aphorism “you can take the boy out of the city, but you can’t take the city out of the boy” springs to mind here. Sebbar’s twist on this aphorism would be something to the effect of: “you can take the rebel out of the like-minded community, but you can’t take the community out of the rebel.” When Shérazade recognizes her friend in the Israeli immigrants’ North African accents and mannerisms, she reconfirms her faith in rebellion. In other words, Michel’s accent and his mannerisms suggest that, deep within the recesses of his soul, he still belongs to a community of rebels. Hence, there is hope that the “shooting” will stop. Michel will stop imposing his cynical worldview on others when he returns to the ideal of relative transcendence and the belief that belonging to a community of outsiders--to a group of rebels--is infinitely more satisfying than belonging to nothing at all. For this to happen, Michel’s viewers must revolt against his photographs and the suffering it documents. Shérazade began this rebellion when she crossed paths with Salomon in the Holy Land.
In Shérazade, the title character gravitates to France and Zouzou, her West Indian and Tunisian coworkers at a clothing boutique in Les Halles, for the same reason that Michel Salomon interested her—they appear to uses discourse to free themselves from domination. Shérazade accompanies Zouzou and France to a swanky party in Paris’ fashion milieu. The trio amuses itself by acting the part of the hip and insubordinate ghetto youth, a rôle that the other guests, photographers, modeling agents, clothing designers and magazine editors want them to play:

Zouzou et France plaisaient beaucoup dans les fêtes, autant aux hommes qu’aux femmes. Elles le savaient et se protégeaient des convoitises ou de leur propre narcissisme par les copains et les copines de la bande avec qui elles faisaient corps...Lorsqu’elles arrivèrent avec Shérazade, les habitués n’allaient pas tout de suite vers elles pour les embrassades rituelles. On les regardait. Elles s’étaient assises sur les coussins soyeux disposés autour du palmier central...Elles se levèrent pour danser. C’était du hard rock. France réclama du reggae, du vrai. On mit du reggae, du vrai. Shérazade dansait aussi bien que France. Elles se retrouvèrent soudain seules sous le palmier; les autres regardaient, formant un cercle aussi compact que ceux de l’esplanade de Beaubourg autour des tambours africains ou marocains...Ils avaient tout à coup l’air de touristes ou de provinciaux en promenade dans le ventre de Paris...L’un d’eux fit la remarque, ils s’enfuirent en débandade dans les coins de la pièce ou sur les balcons vides.
(Sebbar, Shérazade 122-3)

At first, the trio’s rôle-play seems more “negotiation” than “negation” (Bhabha 29). Through acting and dance, they appear to be
making modest aesthetic demands on their surroundings, exercising their liberty through the creative act. It seems that they are using the topos of the inassimilable and marginalized immigrant youth to challenge francité understood in homogeneous terms. Their performance, particularly Shérazade’s and France’s dance, has a rebellious aura; it challenges the exotic worldview of the party-play’s creators. Suddenly, while watching these teenagers dance to the reggae music that France insisted they play, the photographers, editors, and designers “s’enfuirent en débandade dans les coins de la pièce ou sur les balcons vides.” It shames to realize that the the law of the jungle, not humanism, cynicism not altruism, is the primary force driving their representations of post-colonial minorities in France. The crowd realizes that it uses its representations--its “soirées tropiques,” magazine layouts, clothing lines, and urban lofts--for narrow personal gain. It reaps the physical and emotional benefits--fortune and fame--of complicity with hegemony. These economic men have made a cost benefit analysis for working within the dominant (signifying) system, trading independence for material security. Hence, their representations are not true aesthetic demands because they serve no necessary social function. They do not underscore our common dignity with the intent of advancing history towards its conclusion; they do not unify the dispersed world. Instead these representations seek to maintain us in the arbitrary world of power
where domination is the law of the land. The crowd feels the shame of arbitrary life “dans le ventre de Paris.” It humiliates them to depend on the antiquated and anti-cosmopolitan visions of “la vieille France” and exoticism.

For a moment, the chic, fashionable crowd saw itself as if it were the emperor without clothes and Shérazade and France as the regent’s insolent subjects. In the children’s tale, the ruler’s self-absorption protected him from the shame of megalothymia when he looked at his naked body in the mirror. He did not recognize that his self-identity was a sham, that the sovereignty in which he cloaked himself was inauthentic, until he gazed into a more reliable mirror: the Other. The crowd’s jeers, ignited by a child’s unabashed remark, “the Emperor’s not wearing any clothes!” offered a startling insight into the nature and duration of authoritarian rule. The Emperor realized, as he strolled naked before the increasingly restive crowd, that his power was arbitrary. His days were numbered because the crowd no longer feared him. The rebellion began with a laugh. In Shérazade, it got underway with laughter, music, and dance. There, it was the girls on parade who informed the crowd that it wasn’t wearing any clothes, that it could no longer achieve a feeling of wholeness at the post-colonial’s expense; “la vieille France’s” days were numbered. Or were they?

France, the character, covets the mainstream’s power, hence, she views rôle-play differently. Instead of seeing it as Shérazade does-
a strategy for achieving mutual recognition, France hopes that this party will be her big "break." She rôle plays for superior recognition. This desire for absolute power compels her to make the guests change the music. "C'était du hard rock. France réclama du reggae, du vrai. On mit du reggae, du vrai." The West Indian does not dance to share power like Shérazade. She does not want simply to be a co-producer of meaning. What France desires is total power. She wants to be the exclusive standard and source of truth in the arbitrary world, "le ventre de Paris." The verb "réclamer" and the unadorned, repetitive style in this phrase underscores France's megalothymia. She wants to dominate those who dominate her, to be the subject, the sole actor. By cloaking herself in exoticism, France articulates her desire to wear the Emperor's new clothes. She likes the touch and feel of alterity, finding exoticism fitting for an aspiring empress like herself. Taking after the crowd around her, this cynical character parrots "la voix unique, mimétique, la voix du maître" (Sebbar, Lettres parisiennes 90-1). She too is predominately a creature of physical desire. Self-preservation is her most reliable guide.

As with the crowd, the law of the idea of society as wilderness mediates France's relationship with others. In the teenager's eyes, Paris was a brutish place where only the heartiest souls survived, an unforgiving environment where arbitrary force, not shared values, was the currency of all human interchange. Instead of seeing the
community as she saw herself—a source of strength, the fount of liberty and security—France viewed it as the enemy. People were lethal threats to her self-identity; she equated mutual recognition with subordination, power-sharing with servitude, belonging to a community with death. Her primal fear was that if she lived and let live, she would not live to tell about it.

The West Indian’s physical appearance is a reflection of her misanthropy: “France était belle et hautaine, elle faisait peur” (Sebbar, Shérazade 151). Her desire for supremacy manifests itself in her menacing beauty, stature, and personality. France projects herself as the master of the dispersed world because, in the deepest recesses of her soul, she fears extinction. A deep-seated insecurity feeds her passion to be innocent and pure, to be the unchallenged master, absorbed into the absolute. Fear enjoins France to deny the equality of the material and the ideal. By rejecting their interconnectedness, and thus the legitimacy of the living transcendence, France reduces the human condition to the most primitive level: instinct or subsistence. She eschews rebellion’s premise that people are authentic when they are relatively free and secure, when they stylize the arbitrary world, that is, when they find glory in striking and maintaining the difficult equilibrium between cynicism and idealism, living (subsistence) and transcendence, solitude and community. France cannot distort her condition into a more meaningful form because she is a slave to her
material desires. Her aesthetic demands support the arbitrary nature of living while denying any hope of transcendence.

France’s attraction to feminist ideology and her pedestrian interactions with men and women reflect her conduct at the party. In the realm of ideas as in the world of action, through words and deeds, she struggles for superior recognition. It is a fixation with self-interest not a modest passion for equality and justice, that drives the West Indian youth to protest against the status quo. France does not want more out of life; she wants to survive:

France était très belle. Si elle n’avait pas été ébranlée par les idées du Mouvement des Femmes, elle aurait pu, sans scrupule, accepter les propositions d’agences de mannequins, mais elle avait toujours dit non, ce que Zouzou ne comprenait pas. Elles se disputaient chaque fois que France racontait à Zouzou ses refus “J’ai une tête non... Ils m’emmerdent à la fin.” Zouzou tentait de lui expliquer que ça n’avait rien à voir avec la prostitution. “Tu parles... tu crois que les photographes sont tous des pédés? J’ai des copines qui m’ont dit qu’elles devaient coucher avec eux à cause de la concurrence[...] Ça me fait penser à une call-girl, une métèque, elle aussi, qui supporte pas les mecs mais qui aime tellement le fric qu’elle ne s’arrêtera jamais. Elle est jeune et belle. Elle s’habille aussi bien que Catherine Deneuve, elle est classe et tout mais elle boit et elle se shoote. Elle a des histoires pas possibles avec des femmes. Il faut qu’elle fasse souffrir quelqu’un. Elle est insupportable. Je l’ai rencontrée à une fête, elle s’est soûlée à la vodka et la femme qui l’avait invitée, une femme écrivain ou journaliste qui voudrait qu’elle abandonne son job et ces mecs pourris, a dû la prendre dans ses bras, comme un homme[...] non, Zouzou, non. Je ne veux pas de cette vie-là. Plutôt crever. (Sebbar, Shérazade 121-2)
The aesthetic demand that France makes on the world when she protests the fashion and sex industries is self-sustaining, hence arbitrary. France lacks the rebel’s idealism, the ability to identify her want of dignity with a higher social struggle for justice and equality. Instead, her vision of the emancipatory struggle begins and ends in cynicism, domination and subordination. In her hobbesian wilderness, she sees the women’s movement narcissistically, as an extension of herself. Hence, the social battles in which she engages are self-sustaining. Through both, she hopes to position herself as the strongest creature in the dispersed world; she does not strive to unify it. France regards prostitution, which she conflates with representation because it puts women in an asymmetrical relationship with men, as the inevitable end result of artistic engagement. She says to her friend, “non, Zouzou, non. Je ne veux pas de cette vie-là. Plutôt crever.”

In her eyes, the living transcendence is a fate worse than death. It maintains the individual in a degraded state of “appartenance,” making one dependent on others for a sense of wholeness. She would rather die than sacrifice a degree of her freedom. In her arbitrary worldview, power-sharing is a more subtle form of slavery, ultimately. There is no middle ground, no higher value uniting the master and slave in a necessary relationship. A person is One or the Other, the universal sovereign or a wretched thing. If she cannot make others recognize
her dignity through domination, she will force them to acknowledge it through her own death. France does not look beyond the status quo for wholeness. She vows to live or die in the dispersed world.

Since the West Indian considers the living transcendence a signifier of servitude, it stands to reason that she would look scornfully at the writer-activist’s compassion for the prostitute. From her cynical perspective, rational self-interest--not principle--explains why this woman would seek an egalitarian relationship with the sex worker. France rejects the idea that writer encourages the prostitute to “abandonne(r) son job et ces mecs pourris” on principle, on the conviction that prostitution, like other forms of domination, lowers the standards of human behavior. Instead, France argues that the activist feels empathy for the prostitute because she has low expectations for herself. Out of faint-heartedness, she puts security before freedom, choosing to coexist with the prostitute, whose addictions to booze, hard drugs, and expensive clothes she views as a more extreme and degraded form of her own desire for security. In short, it appalls the West Indian youth that the writer would stoop to power sharing, that she would be so willing to cast her fate with a weaker beast in the social jungle.

France displays her contempt for egalitarian human relationships when she calls the prostitute “insupportable” because “(i)l faut qu’elle fasse souffrir quelqu’un.” Through these remarks, France suggests
that altruistic individualism is a less obvious form of slavery because it exists in-between mastery and servitude. In her eyes, the activist and the prostitute are slavish because they are hybrid. By submitting to her slavish desires—"elle s’est soulée à la vodka"—the prostitute subordinates herself to her well-intentioned emancipator. Instead of abandoning "son job et ces mecs pourris," she abandons herself to thinghood, repeating her personal, sordid history when she places her destiny squarely in "dans les bras" of a new master: "la femme qui l’avait invitée."

At the same time, France insists that the prostitute is master-like, and the writer/journalist is slavish; the former is endowed with the ability to "(faire) souffrir quelqu’un;" the latter is not immune from suffering. In France’s eyes, this capacity to harm others and this susceptibility to harm proves that the "call-girl" is partially undetermined, the writer/journalist, partially determined. In other words, it confirms the West Indian’s belief that mutual recognition is the wrong path to wholeness. Its fundamental flaw is its social nature. Because it ties individuals together, equal recognition precludes the possibility of experiencing the power of universal sovereignty, the innocence and purity, the presence felt as absence, related to ruling over the dispersed world.

This economic (wo)man has one foot in rebellion, by way of her relationship with the activist, and one foot in servitude, by way of the
bottle and the needle. Sebbar suggests that the prostitute will not fall into nihilism's abyss--she will not surrender totally to her physical desires--the bottle, the needle, or money--so long as the writer remains a guiding presence in her life. On the contrary, the writer will help the prostitute emancipate herself from her various material dependencies by encouraging her to believe in herself and others, in the idea of human dignity. When she takes the drunken prostitute into her arms, she is very much bringing the sex worker back into rebellion's bosom, making this a poignant *mise en abyme* of Sebbar's narrative project.

In the end, France's addiction to power appears to be more debilitating than the prostitute's dependency on drugs, alcohol, and money. She is much closer to the brink of nihilism than the "call-girl" because she has, by and large, severed her ties with the community. France's cynical view of society blinds her to the redeeming qualities, the idealistic components, of the pair's relationship. She does not see that the activist's so-called "suffering" is really an act of distortion, an isothymotic struggle. Pride in humanity inspires her to diminish the prostitute's suffering. Instead, France can only see the relationship as a violation of the jungle's sacred laws. She would "*(p)lutôt crever*" than live in a fallen state where justice, equality, and fraternity are the laws of the land. France would rather cease to exist than dwell in carnivalesque land where relativistic values like tolerance, compassion,
and responsibility are sacred, and absolute values such as domination and absolute "non-appartenance" are abhorrent.

Nowhere is France's social alienation more palpable than in her exotic rôle-play. She assumes the persona of myriad "héroïnes hollywoodiennes de wilderness, brousse et tropiques" to make Paris suffer so that she can experience the innocence of primacy:

France qui était martiniquaise ne cessait de jouer, toujours avec bonheur, les héroïnes hollywoodiennes de wilderness, brousse et tropiques, revues et corrigées à sa fantaisie de mulâtresse qui cherchait à séduire Paris tout en crachant de dégoût à la manière rasta sur Babylone--l'Occident corrupteur et moribond des Blancs.
(Sebbar, Shérazade 119)

France appears to be challenging "la voix du maître " (Sebbar, Lettres parisiennes 90-1) when she appropriates cinematic clichés only to alter them "à sa fantaisie." It seems that she is bringing an excess of meaning in the form of the sovereign post-colonial female to the neo-orientalist discourse of domination. But, rôle-play is rebellious only when it is isothymotic, when the actor is on equal footing with the representative establishment. In doing so, the actor asserts his or her status as a co-producer of meaning. France's rôle-play is inauthentic; she asserts herself as the universal sovereign by distorting these clichés "à sa fantaisie de mulâtresse." That is to say, she makes an arbitrary aesthetic demand on the world--she says "no" to human solidarity--to achieve a sense of total detachment from the rebellious
community, thereby repudiating the idea of the living transcendence. Her “fantasie de mûlatresse,” in short, is a desire for innocence, a wish to step out of her mulatto skin, to sublimate the muddled, “always already hybrid” world (Lionnet) her skin epitomizes without rejecting the arbitrary status quo. It is a desire to experience absence in presence.

From the narrator’s perspective, the West Indian’s refusal to recognize the skin/world in which she lives is blasphemous. In renouncing her own hybridity through rôle-play, France spits on the hallowed ground of exile rejecting the living transcendence and its concomitant principles. By speaking in “la voix du maître,” she legitimizes social relations based on domination and subordination. It could be said that the insolent youth isn’t mocking the “Emperor” when she plays “les héroïnes hollywoodiennes de wilderness, brousse et tropiques;” France wears his clothes. Spitting on France figuratively--it is figurative because she does it through exotic tropes--is the ultimate gesture of contempt. The only subject she recognizes is herself; she see others, people in the mainstream and at the margins, as undifferentiated objects, material things inseparable from Babylon, the decadent West. Hence, she spits on Babylon to set herself apart from the world she finds so threatening, so capable of making her feel like an object. In France’s world, it is kill or be killed, spit or be spat upon. Much like the Ras Tafarians, who leaned on the Christian redemption
story of "l'Occident corrupteur et moribund des Blancs," France relies on "Babylonians" for deliverance from "Babylon." She speaks in the master's voice to feel like a master.

Despite her disconnect, France is not to be seen as a lost cause. The prostitute had her guardian rebel—the activist; France has hers—Shérazade. After leaving the "soirée tropique" in an enraged state—she lost her temper when someone photographed her challenging another guest's racist assumptions about Arab women—Shérazade sat outside the apartment building and waited for France:

France était restée. Elle n'avait pas entendu les injures du photographe qui avait terminé son monologue par un tointruant "et qu'elles retournent dans leur pays ces petites garces"...
Zouzou proposa à Shérazade de dormir chez elles...
--Tu viens?
--Non. J'attends France avec toi et je m'en vais. Justement France arrivait au milieu de la bande un peu éméchée et bruyante[...] (Sebbar, Shérazade 124-5)

Shérazade waits in the street for France because she is a rebel. If she didn’t believe in the living transcendence, the protagonist would have taken a nihilistic course of action, such as departing without saying good-bye to France or dragging France out of the party. If Shérazade departed without saying good-bye, it would mean that the teenager is a cynic. The implication would be that narrow self-interest—not humanitarian ideals—dictates her relationship with the world. She would have disentangled herself from the fray because only her well-
being mattered. She would have cared about saving herself, not others. Likewise, Shérazade does not yank France out of the apartment because of her unwillingness to impose rebellious ideals on others. Running away promotes living at the expense of transcendence; dragging France out of the party validates transcendence at the cost of living. This explains why Shérazade tells France’s roommate Zouzou, “(j’)attends France avec toi et je m’en vais.” Only waiting legitimizes the living transcendence. Here, it is the only form of protest that rejects the status quo without denying the dignity of man.

By waiting, Shérazade humbly offers herself to France and the crowd as a rôle-model before heading off on her own. Similar to the writer-activist, Shérazade hopes that her presence will have a sobering effect on her inebriated friend and the drunken crowd. She wants to help France, the disconnected individual and France the essentialized society, overcome their dependency on the discourses of domination that makes both feel “un peu éméchée et bruyante,” drunk on nihilism. Shérazade will leave France, the character and the society, understanding that the West Indian and the Hexagon must learn to embrace life’s open-endedness and the idea of universal human dignity on their own. Shérazade can only bring her friend and her society back into rebellion’s fold; she cannot force either to stay there. Rebellion cannot be imposed; one must choose it.
--Chapter 4--
Mimicking V.S. Naipaul
Anne Donadey explains that Leïla Sebbar “use(s) mimicry, in the form of repetition with a difference, to rewrite (her) intertexts from an oppositional perspective” (Donadey, *Recasting Postcolonialism* xx). Donadey looks at mimicry as an important tactic in the writer’s dual strategy of resistance to Western hegemony—subversion and reappropriation. She explains that Sebbar subverts the “hegemonic dominant” through mimicry, exposing its representations “for what they are: ideological constructs and not objective truths” (Donadey, *Recasting Postcolonialism* 118). At the same time, Sebbar reappropriates hegemonic discourse, “using aspects of (Orientalist) representation to fashion (her) own multiple identit(y)” (Donadey, *Recasting Postcolonialism* 118). The novelist prefers subversion and reappropriation to mythologizing, which is “often built around a nostalgic, imaginary return to a prehegemonic world. The *Négritude* movement participitated in that strategy, as do separatist cultural feminism and feminist theology of the Goddess” (Donadey, *Recasting Postcolonialism* 117). Unlike mythologizing, subversion and reappropriation enable Sebbar to construct a liminal, ambivalent self-identity, to establish a space for herself in France and Algeria’s hybrid and contentious past and present.

My work would do little justice to Sebbar’s socio-literary project if it did not examine her subversion and reappropriation of one of the more prominent intertexts in the *Shérazade* trilogy: V.S. Naipaul.
Whereas an earlier discussion foregrounds Sebbar’s and V.S. Naipaul’s intuitive understanding of rebellion, the foregoing analysis examines Shérazade’s encounter with Naipaul in *Les Carnets de Shérazade* as an act of mimicry. Through her protagonist, Sebbar subverts and reappropriates the British-Caribbean writer’s configuration of the formerly colonized’s subjectivity. In doing so, Sebbar distorts the self-identity of Westerners, who tend to receive V.S. Naipaul favorably, so that they recognize the dignity of non-Western peoples (herself included) at home and abroad. At the same time, Sebbar reappropriates the rebellious components of Naipaul’s worldview. She insists that the writer’s underlying faith in rebellion bears repeating in the late twentieth century as the clouds of nihilism begin to form over the post-colonial world.

In *Les Carnets de Shérazade*, Shérazade meets V.S. Naipaul while hitchhiking through the Dordogne region of France. Similar to her, Naipaul is on his way to Algeria, presumably to write the sequel to his *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*. Shérazade encounters the famous author shortly after reading his prose fiction and travel narratives (except *Among the Believers*) during a brief stay in Nantes. This intensive reading makes the teenage traveler realize that V.S. Naipaul is more middle self than rebel. His vision is ambivalent, both isothymotic and megalothymotic. This prompts Shérazade to confront the novelist when they meet on a remote country road near the village
of Bordas.

Through mimicry, Sebbar shows that Naipaul’s work is a useful identitarian template for France and the Arab-Islamic world, realms that are united ethnically, culturally, and racially under the umbrella of métissage, but divided by separationist or “jihadic” ideologies. Sebbar fundamentally agrees with Naipaul’s premise that post-colonial peoples must have faith in altruistic individualism and the associated principles of liberty, equality, solidarity, and epistemological uncertainty. Upheaval and interconnectedness, the eponymous characteristics of the post-colonial condition, have made essentialized self-identities obsolescent and dangerous. In the mixed-up, open-ended world where the only constant is change, the only meaningful standard left for us is us. Ultimately, Sebbar supports the author’s core argument that individualism, from a rational standpoint, allows post-colonials to keep up with the changing times. It ensures one’s physical security because it is an open-ended, elastic form of selfhood. To survive in the post-colonial world, post-colonials must cultivate self-identities that are every bit as ambiguous and fluid as their surroundings; we must constantly create and recreate ourselves. We must adapt.

Sebbar also concurs with her British-Caribbean counterpart that individualism is the most authentic form of selfhood from an irrational standpoint. We are at our most authentic when constantly distorting ourselves and our condition, when striving, that is, to sate our desire
for recognition of our essential human dignity. In short, Sebar repeats Naipaul's assertion that rebellion is the most complete self-identity because it satisfies our positive desire to survive in the ever-changing post-colonial world and our negative desire to be recognized as undetermined or self-conscious.

Sebar is convinced of rebellion's innocence, not of Naipaul's or the West's. She believes that the Trinidadian (and much of the West) is a middle self. His self-identity exists somewhere in between rebellion and nihilism due to his conviction that his self-identity is righteous. Through Shérazade's encounter with the novelist, she demonstrates that Naipaul represses the megalothymotic side of his own self-identity and the brutality of Western cultural and economic imperialism. Naipaul convinces himself that he and most Westerners are indeed rebels, and therefore, are inherently benevolent. This entails another obfuscation: the dignity of most Easterners. Naipaul self-righteousness encourages him to "blame the victim" for the formerly colonized world's economic stagnation, political tyranny, and spiritual malaise. By and large, he lets the West off the hook for the suffering that plagues the post-colonial world.

Naipaul's own nihilist leanings, Sebar argues, compel him to reduce post-colonial relations to a neat Manichaeism pitting rebels against nihilists, believers against heretics, the authentic against the inauthentic. With Naipaul, there is no existential middle ground, only
friends and enemies; and enemies can become friends only if they convert to rebellion. In Naipaul’s world, “you’re either with us or against us,” as the equally defensive and self-righteous George W. Bush told the world in the days immediately following September 11, 2001. For Naipaul, acknowledging the nihilism within himself (and within most Westerners) would border on apostasy. It would be an expression of self-hate, an attack on the principles of rebellion, not a humble desire for self-improvement, which ennobles rebellion’s principles.

Mimicry allows Sebbar to reject Naipaul’s spurious claim that the West and the East are largely antithetical without invalidating the principle of rebellion. Through Shérazade, she establishes that the West is indeed like Naipaul, but then again, so is the East. Each is a middle self, that is, liberal and illiberal, egalitarian and authoritarian, idealistic and cynical. By legitimizing the rebelliousness and invalidating the nihilism in Naipaul’s work, Shérazade reverses the world’s libertarian polarity. She makes rebellion the pole of attraction and the living transcendence a more attractive end than either transcendence or subsistence.

It is likely that Shérazade and V.S. Naipaul would not have met in Les Carnets de Shérazade without a prior act of mimicry. In Shérazade, the teenager mimics Henri Matisse’s Odalisque à la culotte rouge after discovering the artist’s work through Julien, art catalogs, and direct experience. That is, she subverts the painting’s
megalothymotic elements, reappropriating its rebelliousness as an
identitarian paradigm. This multifaceted experience with Matisse
inspires her to depart for Algeria: “Sa décision est prise. Shérazade ira
en Algérie” (Sebbar, Shérazade 245). On her way to North Africa, the
runaway meets V.S. Naipaul. As with Matisse, Shérazade’s relationship
with Naipaul is shaped through reading, other people’s opinions, and
direct experience. Shérazade knew very well it was the famed Naipaul
she saw walking near Bordas; she had read articles about him in Paris
newspapers, devoured his books in Nantes, and listened as a friend-of-
a-friend talked about meeting the writer in London:

A Paris, j’avais vu son nom dans les journaux. C’est à
Nantes que par hasard, un soir, j’ai entendu parler de lui.
Régis avait un ami qui l’avait rencontré à Londres. Ils
avaient bavardé chez lui dans son jardin. Il disait qu’il avait
été subjugué par cet homme si Anglais, si Antillais et si
Hindou à la fois.
(Sebbar, Les Carnets de Shérazade 214-15)

Sebbar uses the past participle “subjugué” to convey the nihilistic
undercurrents of V.S. Naipaul’s and his partisans’ worldview. Although
he purports to sanctify the rebellious selfhood, Naipaul appears more
desirous of total liberty. He imposes an absolute truth on readers: the
primacy of the Western individual. Régis’ friend is “subjugated” by the
writer because he derives a feeling of wholeness by mindlessly
consuming Naipaul’s vision of things. Naipaul gives Régis’ friend a
sense of total liberty, telling him what he wants to hear: open-ended
self-identities (read as Western) are superior to essentialized self-images (read as traditional). They are superior, Naipaul suggests and Régis’ friend concurs, because they allow the individual to exercise his or her metaphysical liberty, and build a unique and complex self-image from a variety of cultural components. When the individual is self-conscious, as Régis’ friend suggests, he or she can freely choose to be “si Anglais, si Antillais et si Hindou à la fois.” Cultural hybridity is a form of stylization.

While Sebbar agrees with Naipaul’s and Régis’ friend’s position, she challenges their assumption that open-endedness and choice are more or less foreign to the East. She takes issue with their premise that ex-colonized peoples, by and large, are hopelessly inauthentic. Sebbar believes that people could also choose to be “si Anglais, si Antillais et si Hindou à la fois” in the East if the playing field were level, if they had access to the same economic and political opportunities that Westerners have. This is another way of saying that non-Westerners do not cling to traditional and bounded self-identities. They do not find it existentially easier to deny the post-colonial world than to integrate themselves into it. Some do, of course as do some in the West. Many formerly colonized chafe in societies run by authoritarian, Western-oriented élites or dominated by Western powers.

Sebbar demonstrates that Régis’ friend is nihilistic because his desire for total liberty is basically a slavish desire for total security.
He is “subjugé” by Naipaul because he uncritically consumes the writer’s ideas, however open-ended and individualistic they may be. Régis’ friend’s parroting of Naipaul is an act of unequal recognition. By devouring Naipaul at face value, he renounces his individual liberty, recognizing instead the primacy of Naipaul’s worldview, the writer’s status as the maker of absolute truth. Naipaul rules over him. The fact that Régis’ friend is just that—he is Régis’ friend, not his own person—underscores his spiritual servitude. He is inauthentic precisely because he does not create his own selfhood. He lacks self-consciousness.

By presenting this metropolitan character in nihilistic terms, Sebbar challenges Naipaul’s claim that the West has the monopoly on authenticity. Like the Muslims, Africans, and South Asians, whom the Trinidadian repeatedly criticizes for consuming truth ready-made, metropolitans, Sebbar shows, often prefer consuming truth to making their own aesthetic demands. This is an important point because it locates rebellion and nihilism in the East and the West. It is part of the human condition, Sebbar argues, to choose one’s existential freedom or existential servitude, to live nihilistically, rebelliously or somewhere in between. Epistemological consumption, like epistemological creation, is a matter of choice. To diminish the post-colonial world’s suffering, however, Easterners and Westerners must choose rebellious selfhood.

In addition to hearing about him there, Shérazade also reads V.S. Naipaul in Régis’ house. Reading his works, save his incendiary Among
the Believers, allows Shérazade to experience Naipaul’s megalothymotic-oriented vision directly. In turn, this enables her to create her own opinion of the novelist. Up to that point, her ideas on Naipaul had been informed by metropolitans, namely by Régis’ friend and Parisian newspapers. As with Matisse, Shérazade could not rescript Naipaul until she experienced his work for herself. If she didn’t, she would be nihilistic, repeating (without a difference) what Naipaul or what others have to say about him. Either way, she would be consuming truth ready-made.

It is precisely because Shérazade reads Naipaul that she does not feel “subjugée” when she meets “him,” in the Dordogne. Instead, reading enables her to judge him, to bring an excess of meaning, her (and the Easterner’s) dignity, to the novelist’s vision of things. For example, she tells Naipaul the character that his appeal in France can be explained by the “simplicity” of his name and his ideas. When she does this, Shérazade speaks as a rebel; she makes a demand for equal recognition:

(Naipaul) l’a regardée de nouveau, surpris:
--Comment savez-vous que j’ai des magnolias dans mon jardin? Vous me connaissez?
--Oui, dit Shérazade. Je sais qui vous êtes; vous vous appelez Vidyadhar Sarajprasap Naipaul...Heureusement, Naipaul est facile à dire et à lire, sinon personne en France n’aurait lu vos livres avec un nom pareil[...]
(Sebbar, Les Carnets de Shérazade 215-16)
It is likely that Naipaul would not have been as startled if a European knew there were magnolias in his yard. He expects Westerners, people like Régis’ friend, to recognize him in a megalothymotic manner. That is to say, Naipaul anticipates being received uncritically, recognized as superior, seen by others as the epistemological authority. Through irony, which is an act of mimicry because it repeats with a difference, Shérazade hints at the nihilism underlying the writer’s reception in France. Stating that, “(H)eureusement, Naipaul est facile à dire et à lire, sinon personne en France n’aurait lu vos livres avec un nom pareil,” she tells the writer that his popularity in the Hexagon can be attributed to his simple message. He is well received because he tells metropolitan what they really want to hear: their self-identity is superior to the Easterner’s. In other words, the French read Naipaul because he maintains the primacy of whiteness after colonialism. He enables France to see its post-colonial minorities through the bifocal lens of alterity. The French accept objectification—they enjoy being stereotyped as individualistic—because it gives them a tremendous amount of prestige; they inscribe themselves within the discourse of domination for the security the latter offers. In this respect, Naipaul’s narratives are complicit with exoticism; they lend support to the idea of a pure cultural patrimony; they support the myth of “la vieille France.” In fact, Shérazade tells Naipaul that, if he did the contrary, if he contested France’s purist
self-image by relativizing Eastern and Western notions of self, “personne en France n’aurait lu vos livres.”

This feeling of wholeness is illegitimate, Shérazade suggests, because it contains nihilistic elements. First, Naipaul encourages Europeans to see the world through his simplistic world view instead of developing their own. The irony is not lost on Shérazade who sees that Naipaul praises Europeans for doing the same thing for which he criticizes non-Europeans: living through someone else’s absolutist vision of things. Although he does not really believe that the Western individual is undetermined—afterall, he imposes his truth on the West as much as on the East—Naipaul believes that Western selfhood is superior to its Eastern counterpart because it is the most germane to his own. Hence, when he recognizes the primacy of the individual, and by extension, the West, Naipaul is really demanding to be recognized as superior in the East and the West. He desires universal recognition.

What surprises V.S. Naipaul the most about being recognized in the Dordogne is that he is recognized in an isothymotic fashion, and by an Arab of all people. Naipaul does not anticipate that an Algerian teenager would challenge him in defense of rebellion’s principles. Rather, he expects her to attack him on behalf of Islam. Naipaul is surprised to be seen critically by an Easterner—he asks “vous me connaissez?”—because he so rarely sees Easterners as rebels. He expects that his meeting with the Arab youth will be mediated by one-
way recognition, megalothyria. Misreading Shérazade as a champion of Islamic orthodoxy, Naipaul waits to be repudiated absolutely. He believes that, instead of asserting herself in an egalitarian manner, Shérazade will assert the primacy of Islamic orthodoxy on him. He simply assumes it is through Islam, not her own eyes, that Shérazade judges the world. This explains why “l'homme l’a regardée de nouveau, surpris.”

In addition to herself, Shérazade looks out for Easterners. For instance, she asserts their dignity by telling Naipaul that he consistently misrepresents Africans in his travel narratives. As it does with her in the Dordogne, Naipaul’s middle selfhood prevented him, in Africa, from seeing people isothymotically. Although Sebbar has Naipaul defend himself against these charges of unequal recognition, Shérazade has the last word. She makes it apparent that his narratives sustain the fantasy of Western primacy. Naipaul’s sanctifies himself/the West by blaming the victim of colonialism for his or her problems:

Peut-être que vous les connaissez mal, même si vous avez voyagé en Afrique et partout comme on l’a dit dans les journaux. Mais même si on voyage, on peut se tromper non? --Bien sûr, reprit Naipaul, mais moi je dis la vérité et on ne me croit pas parce ce qu’elle est dure à entendre. Je ne suis pas un démagogue, vous comprenez, et j’ai horreur de l’exotisme, de la manière dont certains Blancs regardent l’Orient, l’Extrême-Orient, le tiers monde, en somme; je ne suis pas un Blanc même si j’écris dans la langue d’un Blanc,
en anglais, je ne suis pas tendre avec eux, ni avec les miens d’ailleurs.
--Vous êtes tendre avec vous-même, dit Shérazade.
(Sebbar, Les Carnets de Shérazade 216)

Naipaul cannot see ex-colonials as he sees himself and most Westerners: self-conscious. He naturalizes rebellion and the Western concept of the individual by distancing the majority of Westerners--“les Blancs”--from nihilism. It is significant that, for Naipaul, only a minority of whites, “certains Blancs,” people resembling the landlord and Mrs. Phillips (The Enigma of Arrival), see the East through the prism of cultural fundamentalism. Sebbar has him state: “j’ai horreur de l’exotisme, de la manière dont certains Blancs regardent l’Orient, l’Extrême-Orient, le tiers monde, en somme” (my emphasis). In other words, Naipaul (the character) claims that his contempt for nihilism is not determined by race or ethnicity.

“(O)n ne me croit pas,” he adds, “parce ce qu(e) (la vérité) est dure à entendre.” Naipaul suggests that it is not him, but the people who do not believe him, who are misguided. They think he is wrong because his “objective” vision threatens the wholeness they experience through their particular ideology. They “can’t handle the truth,” as Jack Nicholson says in A Few Good Men, because nihilists lack the fortitude to embrace the contingent post-colonial world. They crave nihilism. However inauthentic and authoritarian it may be, nihilism promises total security and liberty. And security, Naipaul believes, is
what gets the ex-colonized through the post-colonial world. Without the fantasy of transcendence, he or she would be lost.

With the scathing remark, “(v)ous êtes tendre avec vous-même,” Shérazade lays bare the megalothymotic underpinnings of Naipaul’s self-identity. No matter how much he travels, Shérazade implies, the writer’s belief that his self-identity is sacred blinds him to the dignity of others not to mention his own imperfections. This illusion of universalism\(^6\) prevents Naipaul from coming to terms with the hegemonic undercurrents in his work that he (and his champions) employs to maintain post-colonial relations between the West and the East within the world of power. Naipaul cannot see that his universal recognition of the individual, the tenderest of self-identities, is ultimately an act of unequal recognition.

\(^6\) In *The Clash of Civilizations*, Huntington writes that civilizations that believe they are final, the ultimate form of organizational life, are convinced that their values are universal. For Huntington, this illusion of universalism is the underlying cause of Christianity’s and Islam’s long conflict as well as the present tension between “the West and the rest.”

The central problem in the relations between the West and the rest is, consequently, the discordance between the West’s--particularly America’s--efforts to promote a universal Western culture and its declining ability to do so.

The collapse of communism exacerbated this discordance by reinforcing in the West the view that its ideology of democratic liberalism had triumphed globally and hence was universally valid. The West, and especially the United States, which had always been a missionary nation, believe that the non-Western peoples should commit themselves to the Western values of democracy, free markets, limited government, human rights, individualism, the rule of law, and should embody these values in their institutions. Minorities in other civilizations embrace and promote these values, but the dominant attitudes toward them in non-Western cultures range from widespread skepticism to intense opposition. What is universalism to the West is imperialism to the rest. (Huntington 183-4)
Shérazade’s remark that Western newspapers have documented his myriad travels undermines Naipaul’s own claim to impartiality and innocence. Her insinuation is that Naipaul’s travel narratives go part and parcel with neocolonialism. Western readers, not just a minority of Western readers—most “Blancs” not “certains Blancs”—have a vested interest in receiving Naipaul’s work at face value. Seeing his travel narratives as transparent reportage helps the West maintain the illusion that its self-identity is universal. Ultimately, Naipaul’s narratives give the West the same sense of existential security in the post-colonial age that he claims nihilistic ideologies offer “certains Blancs,” Muslims, West Indians, and so on. That is to say, the West believes Naipaul because it can’t handle the truth. The truth it cannot accept or recognize is the formerly colonized’s agency. The West does not recognize that the truth, rebellion, is absolutely relative. It does not see that its megalothymia has much to do with the East’s congenital “backwardness;” it does not see, finally, that it isn’t wearing any clothes.

At the same time, Shérazade insinuates that Naipaul’s antipathy for collectivist self-identities brings him to the brink of solitude. When the novelist insists, “je ne suis pas tendre avec eux, ni avec les miens d’ailleurs,” he seemingly removes identity from its cultural and ethnic context. Rebellion and nihilism, two universal concepts, determine who are “eux” and who are “les siens” in the writer’s worldview. “Les
siens" would be rebels from the East and West, "eux" nihilists. Naipaul is not simply universalizing his self-identity to deflect criticism. He does not state, "je ne suis pas un Blanc même si j'écris dans la langue d'un Blanc, en anglais, je ne suis pas tendre avec eux, ni avec les miens d’ailleurs" to appease those critics who deride what they see as his aspiration to whiteness. Rather, Naipaul's suggestion that his particular vision is transparent and true--"je dis la vérité"--is a function of his existence at the frontier of rebellion and solitude. The rebel inside the writer values individualism and epistemological ambiguity; the nihilist within enjoins him to see his rebellious self-identity as transcending the self-identities of most whites and non-whites.

Shérazade mimics Naipaul to get his universalist message to Westerners and Easterners in an isothymotic form. When she attacks the nihilistic underpinnings of his work by stating "vous êtes tendre avec vous-même," Shérazade brings Naipaul from solitude towards the rebellious ideal. As a result of her criticism, the writer begins to speak as a rebel:


--Shérazade, dit Shérazade.
(Sebbar, Les Carnets de Shérazade 217)

65 Such as Edward Said.
Shérazade’s meeting with Naipaul mirrors that moment in
*Shérazade* when she tore down a series of photos in which Julien
objectified her. By acting on her own behalf to address Julien’s slight to
her self-worth, Shérazade forces her boyfriend to recognize the
interplay between nihilism and exoticism. He recognized her dignity:
“(Julien) l’avait donc regardée et à la fin, aux derniers morceaux de
photos dans la corbeille, il sentit que Shérazade avait raison. Il ne lui en
voulait pas” (Sebbar, *Shérazade* 159). After she challenges the
transparency and innocence of his worldview, Naipaul concedes, “(O)ui.
C’est vrai.” He admits that his “tenderness,” is a double form of
unequal recognition. It portrays the former colonizer’s self-identity as
superior to the ex-colonized’s, his self-identity as superior to both.

After a while, Naipaul admits to Shérazade that his aesthetic
demands are flawed because they are related as much to his desire for
security as his want of independence. Mirroring the character France in
*Shérazade*, Naipaul places himself at the frontier of solitude and
rebellion because part of him considers ambiguity and power-sharing a
threat. He concedes to Shérazade that if he weren’t so “tendre avec
lui-même” or self-centered, he would loose possession over himself:
“(s)inon je serais devenu fou, ou je serais mort. Vous comprenez. Pour
revivre une histoire en morceaux comme la mienne...” Shérazade helps
Naipaul grasp the irony of his worldview, enabling the writer to see that
his fear of nihilism was itself nihilistic. His anxiety about insanity and
death was the very thing that alienated him from society and the world. A fear of extinction pushed Naipaul towards cynical solitude. By stating “vous êtes tendre avec vous-même,” Shérazade encourages Naipaul to view wholeness as the equal division of tenderness, dignity, among Self and Other. Naipaul begins to realize that, in order to be whole, he must overcome his fear of death, and with it his anxiety about the Other’s independence, and the epistemological ambiguity resulting from equal recognition.

Naipaul’s epiphany is why he changes the subject (literally and figuratively): “mais...je ne parle que de moi. Et vous? Vous savez mon nom et j’ignore le vôtre.” Naipaul wants to know Shérazade’s name--he is curious about her--because mimicry has sparked his interest in understanding difference as a marker of personal wholeness. Before she mimicked him, Naipaul partially denied it so that he could feel more powerful than other people. The only selfhood he held sacred--the only name he really cared about knowing--was his own or the names of people much like him. The writer states, “je ne parle que de moi” because, at last, he grasps the spiritual limitations of his pre-mimicked vision. He realizes that his narratives buttressed his bounded formulation of self, his “moi,” while ignorant les autres. “Oui,” “mais,” and “tout à coup” mark Naipaul’s spiritual transformation. They illustrate the exact moment when this middle self recognizes his dignity in the Other, when he begins to move from a more unitary and
exclusivistic formulation of selfhood toward a more open-ended and benevolent one. Through Shérazade’s intervention, Naipaul displaces himself from the margins to the mainstream of rebelliousness.

Hence, Shérazade mimics Naipaul to expunge the megalothymotic elements from his notion of tenderness so that it, and the overarching idea of rebellion, can become a legitimate identitarian paradigm worldwide. Shérazade transforms tenderness into a universally valid identitarian paradigm—she makes the East and the West recognize the individual—by making it isothymotic and hybrid. In its recasted state, tenderness is characterized by rational self-interest and irrational (but altruistic) self-worship. It satisfies our rational desire for physical security while fulfilling our irrational need to be recognized as metaphysically free. Altruistic individualism recognizes both facets of the individual because it is based on the principle of equal recognition.

When individuals recognize each other equally, they ipso facto recognize the positive and negative components common to all humans. The individual respects the Other’s physical presence out of rational self-interest, realizing that acknowledging the Other’s right to relative wholeness is the easiest means of assuring his own. Whether it promotes transcendence or living, nihilism cannot deliver on its promise of absolute liberty and security. The dearth of recognition nihilism incites the disregarded to rebel, moving humanity a step away from domination and subordination, the form of associational life in
which negatively- and postively-oriented nihilists seek wholeness.

Although it is a form of rational recognition, Shérazade’s recasted vision does not remove the possibility of death. This archetypal rebel is willing to die for her rebellious credo. She will sacrifice her material well-being, not to affirm her non-materiality as the nihilist does, but to confirm that the physical and the metaphysical are interconnected, that a person is transcendent outside the parameters of nihilism. She will put herself in harm’s way because she loves rebellion’s core principles. To paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr., Shérazade believes that life is not worth living without a cause to die for. Answering General Public, a 1980s ska-new wave band from Britain whose wildly popular hit wondered where is the tenderness? Shérazade suggests that it exists in the liminal space of rebellion. Tenderness, she shows, is found in the interstices of the real and the ideal, cynicism and transcendence, solitude and community. There, individuals and groups can be hybrid by choice; they can be what they want, individualistic and Muslim, individualistic and European, or individualistic and African, so long as they recognize the Other’s hybrid configuration of self-identity, the Other’s right to choose his or her self-identity. In the end, Shérazade will sacrifice herself in the name of the living transcendence because, as General Public croons, without tenderness there’s something missing.

Shérazade meets V.S. Naipaul as he was moving through
southern France towards North Africa, one of the few places in the Muslim world he had not yet visited. Shérazade tells the writer that he will need her Arabic services over there. For her, interpretation is a form of mimicry. Interpreting enables her to repeat with a difference, to translate his megalothymotic narrative into an isothymotic form:

-Vous êtes allé en Algérie? dit Shérazade.
--Vous irez? demanda Shérazade. C'est le pays de mon père et de ma mère.
--Vous voyez, dit Naipaul, en montrant sa canne et le chemin, je suis en train d'y aller.
Il a poursuivi son chemin et moi le mien. Je ne l'ai pas revu, dit Shérazade à Gilles.
(Sebbar, Les Carnets de Shérazade 217)

What will be gained in such a translation is Shérazade’s (and the Muslim’s) equality with the Western individual; what will be lost is megalothymia. By translating Naipaul into Arabic, the rebel’s Arabic that she her mother, and the women in Garanger's Femmes algériennes speak (Sebbar, Shérazade 220), Shérazade looks to transform Naipaul’s self-identity into Naipaul-Shérazade. She will make him speak through her isothymotically, as a true rebel who talks with the Other instead of talking about him or her. Interpretation not only sets Muslims free from the hegemonic gaze, but it liberates Naipaul from
the spiritual servitude inherent in his middle selfhood. When Shérazade
says, "(j)'irai avec vous[...] Je sais l'Arabe. Vous aurez besoin de moi,"
she is giving Naipaul some positive and negative advice. Physically-
speaking, she is telling the writer that his stay in Algeria will be easier-
-he will be more comfortable—with an Arab interpreter.

Metaphysically-speaking, she suggests that he needs to
recognize the Other in order to be authentic, to be his own master. So
long as his travel narratives remain self-centered in the nihilistic
sense, Naipaul will not really be. His self-identity will be flawed—he will
remain a middle self—because he will repeatedly fail to make sense of
the world. He will fail to see that the only truth is the relativity of
truth, and that truth is relative because rebellious individuals
construct it, each in his or her own way. In short, Naipaul will continue
to exist in bad faith so long as his faith in himself is absolute, so long
as he does not recognize that his wholeness, his physical presence and
his metaphysical agency, hinges on recognizing the Other’s. Without
acknowledging the Other, he cannot be authentic. Until he recognizes
that tenderness is hybrid, that sanctity is intersubjective, he will not
be able to “make it.” He will not be able to survive or make authentic
socially meaningful aesthetic demands.

Naipaul answers, “Bien sûr. Je vous emmène, Shérazade,” after
the teenager awakens him to tenderness’ hybridity. Moreover, she has
made him realize that he cannot make it in the world on megalothymia
alone. Yet, a second later, we find out that Shérazade does not accompany the writer to the Maghreb, despite his ostensible need of a rebellious companion. Shérazade tells Gilles, the truck driver who picks her up shortly after she met the famous novelist, that Naipaul “a poursuivi son chemin et moi le mien. Je ne l’ai pas revu.” Naipaul and Shérazade part company shortly after meeting--Naipaul heads to the Maghreb and Shérazade continues her “Tour de France” because she has successfully recasted him. Shérazade will indeed be there in Algeria--she will be present as an agent--because she will constantly mediate Naipaul’s vision of Muslim societies.

So, when Shérazade tells Gilles, “je ne l’ai pas revu,” she implies that she didn’t have to look back at Naipaul again; he recognized the symbiotic relationship of Self and Other; he grasped that he can only see/be if the Other can. As with any good interpreter, Shérazade’s role is that of an intermediary. She will be the in-between go-between on which Naipaul depends to see the world more clearly, to cultivate a truer self-identity. When Naipaul lands in North Africa, he will be able to communicate in Arabic, not in the actual language, but in Arabic understood as a dialect of the universal language of rebellion. If the recasted Naipaul is authentic, then his ensuing Algerian travel journal, which would be a sequel to his controversial Among the Believers,⁶⁶

⁶⁶ In reality, Naipaul followed Among the Believers (1981) with Beyond Belief (1998), a travel journal that does not explore North Africa, but revisits Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia.
would be a more authentic vision of things. In turn, it would be a more fulfilling identitarian paradigm throughout the post-colonial world.

The logic of mimicry dictates that Naipaul and Shérazade part ways. Shérazade states “il a poursuivi son chemin et moi le mien” because she has reappropriated Naipaul’s rebellious world view. She insists that to be authentic, the individual must find his or her way in the world alone, which is not to be alone in the megalothymotic sense of self-centeredness. When the teenager describes her own and her Moroccan friends' perceptions of Naipaul to Gilles, it is apparent that she mimics the writer’s vision of things to enable herself and all post-colonials to live more authentically. She informs Gilles that seeing is believing, that the rebel naturally worships--he recognizes--our common dignity:

Né à la Jamaïque dans une famille hindoue émigrée, Naipaul est un écrivain vagabond, un métis attaché à trois continents, la Caraïbe, l’Europe et l’Inde, passionné de chacun et traître à chacun. J’avais lu ses récits de voyages et ses romans chez Régis. C’est un homme de cinquante ans et c’est comme s’il avait été mon frère ou mon père. Comme si on avait appartenu à la même tribu, je le reconnaissais comme l’un des miens. Peut-être que je me trompais. Plus tard, des copains marocains m’ont dit qu’il fallait se méfier de ce qu’il dit sur l’Islam. Je n’avais pas lu ce livre-là, Régis ne l’avait pas dans sa bibliothèque, ou il l’avait prêté. Je l’ai feuilleté dans une librairie à Toulouse, sans l’acheter il était trop cher, sans le voler, je ne vole pas les livres, je ne sais pas ce qu’il dit sur l’Islam.
(Sebbar, Les Carnets de Shérazade 215)

67The reader is not privy to Shérazade’s conversation about V.S. Naipaul with her Moroccan friends, who may or may not be Muslim.
Describing Naipaul as "un écrivain vagabond," "un métis attaché à trois continents," and "passionné de chacun et traître à chacun," Shérazade seemingly repeats the writer's rebellious creed. She makes the connection between individualism and creativity when describing him as an "écrivain vagabond." It is as if Shérazade is insisting that self-consciousness is attainable by departing the community, by walking away from, by becoming "traître(s) à chacun" of, those bounded communal ideologies that give people the illusion of innocence, absolute wholeness.

Shérazade also appears to recognize Naipaul's rebellious drive in the fact that he remains "passionné de chacun" of those communities that see meaning in perfect terms. To her, Naipaul remains passionate about them--he is still "attaché à trois continents" despite his independence--precisely because he is conscious of being a "métis," a transnational, heterogeneous being. Naipaul appears to be interested in the Indian, West Indian, and European components of his self-identity, in the same way that the protagonist is passionate about her Franco-Algerian origins. The writer recognizes that the individual is capable of creating a personalized self-identity (and hence personal meaning) that is based on, but ultimately superior, to those communities that inform his self-identity. The hybrid individual, not the homogeneous community, is an excess of meaning. In addition, Shérazade underscores mimicry’s value as a catalyst for equal recognition. In the
same way that Naipaul recognized the Muslim Other after Shérazade repeated his vision with a difference, the teenager appears to recognize the writer as her equal by reading his work as mimicry. She says, “c’est comme s’il avait été mon frère ou mon père. Comme si on avait appartenu à la même tribu, je le reconnaissais comme l’un des miens.”

On a certain level, Shérazade identifies with Naipaul because his work mimics Eastern and Western essentialized configurations of identity and truth. His novels and travel narratives infuse into them this excess of meaning—the writer as an ambivalent, self-conscious being. Hence, Shérazade acknowledges V.S. Naipaul as a rebellious peer, a fellow “écrivain(s) vagabond(s).” Like her, Naipaul is out in the world orchestrating his own destiny based on his fragmented, ambiguous colonial past and post-colonial present. And, the “tribu” to which Naipaul and Shérazade belong is “tribal” in a recasted, non-exclusivist sense. An anti-tribe, it is the community of rebels, a vanguard which sees alterity as a marker of the living transcendence. In the traditional or pre-mimicked sense, “la tribu,” signifies all fixed communities in the East and the West. In the East, those inside it are pure, the Other is a contaminant. In the West, the tribe is a marker of Eastern “backwardness.” Those outside of it are perfect, the tribal Other is threatening. Alterity is an existential threat, a marker of selfhood understood in absolutist terms.
Yet, "comme si" (present twice) suggests that Shérazade does not completely recognize the rebellious elements of Naipaul’s self-identity. For her, his hybridity is a signifier of existential incompleteness, middle selfhood as opposed to true rebelliousness. He is not a full-fledged "écrivain vagabond," or rebel, for the simple fact that his self-identity remains somewhere in between rebellion and nihilism. Ultimately, the writer’s passion for the Caribbean, South Asian, and European components of his identity is self-sustaining. His favorite subject is himself and people like him. What stirs him is his arrival at self-consciousness, his capacity to separate himself apart from the existential strictures of “la tribu.” In other words, Naipaul is nihilistic because he objectifies formerly colonized societies and cultures, configuring them as physically-determined realms, worlds of subsistence that the individual must overcome to achieve wholeness. He makes himself absent at the ex-colonized’s expense.

Shérazade notes that it was “comme s’il avait été mon frère ou mon père,” and that it was “(c)omme si on avait appartenu à la même tribu” to suggest that Naipaul’s middle selfhood brings him to rebellion’s threshold, but prevents him from crossing it. She can only recognize him fully—comme l’un des siens—after mimicry. Equal recognition occurs when Naipaul utters phrases like “Oui. C’est vrai;” “je ne parle que de moi[...]. Vous savez mon nom et j’ignore le vôtre;” and “Bien sûr. Je vous emmène, Shérazade” (Sebbar, Les Carnets de
Shérazade 217). The writer says these things when he finally recognizes Shérazade’s (and formerly colonized’s) rebellious dignity. At that moment, Shérazade recognizes that Naipaul has crossed over from middle selfhood to rebellion. She no longer views him “comme s’il avait été (son) frère ou (son) père,” or “comme si on avait appartenu à la même tribu;” they are in the same family, the rebellious community. And, it is as rebels, “écrivains vagabonds,” that Naipaul and Shérazade part company.

Although Shérazade and the writer recognize each other when they go their separate ways, she feels compelled to tell Gilles, “(p)eut-être que je me trompais (about his ideas)[...] je ne sais pas ce qu’il dit sur l’Islam.” At first glance, this would seem to contradict the notion that mimicry leads to the living transcendence. If she said something to the effect of “maybe I’m off the mark about Naipaul[...] I don’t actually know what he thinks about Islam,” wouldn’t Shérazade be insinuating that her attempt at mimicry failed? Could she be admitting her inability to make sense of another’s worldview? Could it be that Shérazade is not a rebel?

Au contraire. Shérazade does not pass judgment on Naipaul’s Among the Believers for the very fact that she considers herself an authentic Muslim. Refusing to parrot Naipaul’s Islamic critics, Shérazade will not say anything definitive about Naipaul’s ideas on Islam until she has had an opportunity to read this work carefully. If
Shérazade simply repeated what others had to say about the writer, she would be objectifying herself, Easterners, and Westerners. First, she would be seeing the world through another person’s eyes, denying her dignity in the process. Second, she would be repudiating Naipaul’s dignity if she unequivocally rejected his vision of things. Instead, Shérazade refrains from making a statement about Among the Believers because she values subversion and appropriation as a strategy of selfhood. She will not speak about Naipaul until she has had time to read his polemical text. Régis did not have a copy, and she didn’t have enough money to buy one in a Toulouse bookstore. Since shoplifting Among the Believers was out of the question—Shérazade does not steal aesthetic demands, however megalothymotic they may be—she could only leaf through it at the bookstore. And skimming, Shérazade suggests, is not mimicry because it does not give the reader sufficient time to make independent sense of the text, enough of an opportunity to investigate Naipaul’s representation for what needs to be contested and reappropriated.

In the end, the teenager realizes that delaying her verdict about Among the Believers is the only approach consistent with rebellion and her dual strategy of subversion and appropriation. Naipaul would cease to see her (and her fellow Muslims) equally if she betrayed the faith by consuming truth ready-made. She would inscribe herself within the

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68 She only pilfers things untouched by thymos, utilitarian objects such as socks, underwear, toilet items, and food.
existential parameters Naipaul had set for the Arab-Islamic world, thereby conforming to his stereotype of the nihilistic believer. Nevertheless, Shérazade manages to challenge Naipaul’s *Among the Believers* through mimicry without actually reading it.

Rather than simply repeating (without a difference) what others have to say about the text, she explains to Gilles, “(m)es amis marocains me disent qu’il faut se méfier de ce qu’il dit sur l’Islam mais je ne sais pas.” Far from showing contempt for free inquiry, which is how Naipaul portrays the average Muslim in *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief*, Shérazade’s Moroccan friends warn: “Il faut se méfier de ce qu’il dit.” Instead of telling the teenager that it is the Muslim’s spiritual obligation to condemn the writer *à la* the Salman Rushdie Affair, the Moroccans implore Shérazade (and all readers) to approach Naipaul with caution. She should neither completely condemn nor wholeheartedly endorse his views. Doing so would repeat Naipaul’s critics or Naipaul; she would be seeing with someone else’s eyes. And, since seeing is being, Shérazade wouldn’t really *be* if she refrained from drawing her own conclusions about Naipaul, conclusions located in between total condemnation and total acceptance, conclusions drawn in the hybrid space of rebellion.

When Shérazade’s friends insist “il faut se méfier,” they are urging her to read Naipaul carefully, to withhold her verdict until she has examined all of the evidence for herself. By following their advice,
she recognizes the worthiness of their opinions, and by extension, their rebellious dignity. Likewise, her friends recognize Shérazade’s dignity when they encourage her to find her own way through Among the Believers. And, much like Naipaul, whom she sends off to Algeria with a more isothymotic vision of humanity, Shérazade parts company with her Moroccan friends with a renewed faith in the individual. Obviously, she is still heeding their advice. A few days after meeting Naipaul and discussing his work with some friends, the runaway tells Gilles, “je ne sais pas ce qu’il dit sur l’Islam.”

Sebbar’s desire to universalize the individual also explains why she has Shérazade (mis)inform Gilles that Naipaul is Jamaican. This “mistake,” an excess of meaning in its own right, can only be intentional; Shérazade has read all of Naipaul’s novels and travel narratives. Given how much Naipaul talks about his Trinidadian upbringing in his work, it would be a stretch to believe that Shérazade thinks that he hails from Jamaica. Through Shérazade’s biographical “error,” Sebbar suggests that any West Indian society could have produced the famous author; the rebellious self-identity is universal. In other words, there is nothing terribly exceptional about Naipaul’s ascendancy from nihilism to rebellion. Anyone in Jamaica, Trinidad, Martinique (or the Arab-Islamic world for that matter) can achieve the living transcendence if the conditions are right.

Sebbar reappropriates Naipaul’s premise that rebellion is an
existential choice; she subverts his belief that it occurs in a vacuum, that the formerly colonized shoulders the burden of rebellion because the West, save "certain blancs" such as Mrs. Phillips and the landlord in *The Enigma of Arrival*, has already arrived at the living transcendence. The West is not innocent; it is not absent from the ex-colonized's affairs. For Sebbar, Naipaul occludes the fact that the West also needs to move into the space of rebellion. The former colonizer needs to recognize the persistence of megalothymia in its relationship with the formerly colonized, its desire to remain the hegemonic dominant in the post-colonial era. When the ex-colonizer and the ex-colonized move from the margins to the mainstream of rebelliousness, human suffering will be reduced. Sebbar mimics V.S. Naipaul to make his narratives works of two-way recognition, paradigms of rebelliousness, which along her own aesthetic demands, provide post-colonials with a blueprint for recasting the space of post-colonial identity in more egalitarian terms.
--Conclusion--
Wanting Change
and the
Living Transcendence
A curious association it may be, but the punch line to the joke: “how many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb?” springs to mind when I read Leïla Sebbar and V.S. Naipaul. The punch line, of course, is “None! The light bulb has to want to change!” We could say that these writers see most people as light bulbs, themselves as psychologists. Sebbar and Naipaul limit their rôle to guiding humanity to the living transcendence through writing. Both concur that change, the desire to live (and let others live) as self-masters in the ambiguous, ever-changing post-colonial world has to come from within. Neither purports to force rebelliousness on the world because they respect our right and to create our self-identities. In “Our Universal Civilization,” the Trinidadian expatriate claims “(t)o work in (that) way would be to know the answers before one knew the problems. That is a recognized way of working, I know, especially if one is a political or religious or racial missionary” (Naipaul, “Our Universal Civilization” 503).

Naipaul and Sebbar believe that imposing two-way or isothymotic recognition is authoritarian, a signifier of their own inauthenticity and an invitation to people to continue viewing the indeterminacy of life, truth, and identity--change--as threatening. V.S. Naipaul’s inauthenticity, which manifests itself in his insistence that the woes of ex-colonial societies stem from a widespread lack of rebellious desire, is the very reason Sebbar recasts him in Les Carnets de Shérazade.
She believes that his narratives are partially megalothymotic, and he a middle self, because they absolve the ex-colonizer of any responsibility for the ex-colonized’s socioeconomic problems, for his or her difficult adjustment to life after colonialism. In other words, Sebbar subverts Naipaul’s work because it configures the former colonizer’s middle selfhood as rebellion. As she sees it, Naipaul does not recognize that the West is part of the post-colonial problem, that its desire for change is also underdeveloped. Naipaul is unmindful of the irony that, to some extent, his work resembles that of “a political or religious or racial missionary.” In short, his understanding of two way recognition has a ways to go before it is isothymotic. By reappropriating Naipaul, Sebbar attempts to advance human history, a struggle her Anglophone counterpart undertakes but cannot continue (without some help) due the nihilism that informs his worldview. We could say that Sebbar views her fellow writer as the lesser psychologist, the inferior guide, because he disregards the former colonizer’s need to change. For him, only a handful of light bulbs in the West need changing; the East is mostly in the dark.

Before leaving the Musée national d'art moderne with the intention to go to Algeria, Shérazade stops off at the gift shop and buys the last ten postcards of Matisse’s *Odalisque à la culotte rouge*. Sebbar’s alter ego underscores her own and the author’s status as “psychologists” and the post-colonial public’s position as “the light
bulb.” Shérazade presents herself to the middle selves around her as a facilitator of change:

Shérazade s’arrêta à la librairie du musée et acheta toutes les cartes de L’Odalisque qui restaient dans le présentoir. La vendeuse s’étonna:
--Vous les prenez toutes? Vous ne vous êtes pas trompée?
--Non.
--Vous êtes sûre? Je compte les dix?
--Oui.
--Qu’est-ce que vous lui trouvez?
--Je ne sais pas.
--Elle est plus belle sur l’original, vous ne pensez pas?
--Non.
La vendeuse tendit l’enveloppe des Odalisques à Shérazade:
--Vous faites peut-être un travail sur Matisse?
--Non, non.
--Je suis curieuse.
--C’est vrai. Au revoir.
La vendeuse sourit à Shérazade.

Anissa Talahite argues that Shérazade’s purchase of the Odalisque postcards “could be read as an ironic attempt to demystify notions of authenticity” and that the “Odalisque à la culotte rouge has been reproduced in an endless number of postcards and has therefore become a commodity to be purchased and exchanged.” 69 Talahite’s

observation is astute because it makes the connection between irony, translation, and thymos. She understands that irony can satisfy the individual’s desire to be recognized as an excess of meaning. This trope distorts the Other’s self-identity, its vision of truth, beauty, and identity. However, Talahite does not recognize that isothymia is the principle underlying Shérazade’s act. She doesn’t see that the teenager is committing a “straight” act of mimicry in the museum’s gift shop when she purchases, writes on, and expedites these reproductions of Matisse’s work. When Shérazade answers “non” to the salesclerk’s query, “(l’Odalisque) est plus belle sur l’original, vous ne pensez pas?” by no means is she saying, as Talahite suggests, that the original painting, and by extension the West’s self-identity, is now meaningless. That would equate transcendence with denying the Other’s dignity. If she denied the original’s authenticity outright, Shérazade would be backsliding into nihilism. She would be reconfiguring her true selfhood as middle selfhood or worse.

Shérazade is really saying that the postcard Odalisques are more meaningful than the semi-meaningful original. Everyone whom the Odalisque postcards touch becomes a rebel endowed with the ability to alter his or her destiny through stylization. The postcards’ creators include Shérazade, who asserts her rebelliousness by recasting, purchasing, and sending the *Odalisque à la culotte rouge*, Matisse, whose self-image Shérazade has subverted and reappropriated, and a
multicultural French society to whom the teenager sends the postcards, allowing people to make sense of them in their own way. Shérazade underscores the symbiotic relationship between the creative act and rebellion on the postcard she sends to her sister, Mériem. She writes, “Je quitte Paris ce soir. Dis qu’on ne me cherche pas. Je pars en Algérie. Je vais très bien. J’enverrai des nouvelles.” Like the recasted Odalisque on the front, this succinct message on the back is transfigurative. By writing, Shérazade removes the megalothyria from Western and the Eastern self-identities. She makes the West recognize the presence and agency, the wholeness, of Eastern people; she forces Islamic orthodoxy to recognize the worthiness of individuals, of individualistic women, in particular.

Shérazade’s personal narrative of emancipation, her story of flight and self-actualization—“Je quitte Paris ce soir” and “je vais très bien”—problematises the West’s desire for universal sovereignty, its need to be recognized by the Other as exclusively self-conscious, its hunger to be seen as uniquely entitled to pursue happiness. In other words, she writes on the Odalisque postcard to show the West that most Easterners want to write their own story. By asking Mériem to tell her family, “(d)is qu’on ne me cherche pas,” Shérazade rebels against Islamic orthodoxy, enjoining it to acknowledge the dignity of individualistic women and the arbitrary nature of many Islamic interdictions, such as the presence of unmarried, unchaperoned young
woman (Mernissi, xv) in the public eye. In particular, she is saying that
her father and her brothers should not try to track her down for that
would be an act of objectification. She warns her male relatives that
attempting to assert shari’a’s sovereignty over her body and soul will
be futile. She cannot be contained; she cannot be “covered” through
any form of representation, Islamic or (neo)colonial.

The fact that Shérazade does not steal the *Odalisque à la culotte rouge* postcards also raises questions about Talahite’s hypothesis. If
Shérazade really believed that the postcards were worthless shards of
the original, she would have undoubtedly shoplifted them. Shérazade
only steals utilitarian goods. If she shoplifted Matisse’s *Odalisque à la
culotte rouge* (or Naipaul’s *Among the Believers*), she would be
reappropriating without subverting. She would be viewing herself and
the Other in historical terms, The Other and his or her aesthetic
demand would only be seen as things to satisfy her desire for total
security and freedom. Shérazade abhors all forms of identity theft.

Interestingly, when the salesclerk asks Shérazade what it is
about the Odalisque that she finds so alluring—“Qu’est-ce que vous lui
trouvez?”—the teenager replies “(j)e ne sais pas.” Shérazade
respects individual liberty so much that she refuses to impose meaning
on the salesclerk. It is up to her, Shérazade insinuates, to draw her
own conclusions about Matisse’s aesthetic. Thus, by stating “(j)e ne
sais pas” Shérazade recasts the salesclerk’s middle selfhood as
rebelliousness. As with Julien and Matisse, the clerk’s worldview was megalothymotic and isothymotic before she encountered Shérazade. On one hand, she felt that “l’original (était) plus belle,” and the postcards were simulacra. To an extent, the clerk derived a sense of transcendence from the painting because the canvas partially denied the ex-colonized’s dignity.

In the end, it is the salesclerk, not Shérazade, as Talahite believes, who thinks that the postcards’ open-endedness makes them less beautiful and true than the original. Before Shérazade came along, the clerk found it disquieting that people could alter Matisse’s painting ad infinitum through mimicry. It troubled her that we can make the painting meaningful in our own way by buying postcards, writing on them, putting them in a scrapbook, sending them to friends, and so on. And, by altering the painting’s meaning through what amount to limitless aesthetic demands, the postcard challenged the security and power that the salesclerk gleaned from the megalothymotic elements embedded in l’original.

Yet, the salesclerk’s interest in Matisse’s Odalisque à la culotte rouge was not fully megalothymotic; she exists as a middle self. On some level, she also sensed, before Shérazade came into the gift shop, that she could achieve a more meaningful self-identity--she could blossom into a rebel--if she moved beyond the static East-West binarism. To a degree, the clerk understands that we are at our most
transcendent when making our own aesthetic demands on the world. Middle selfhood explains why she wants to know why the Odalisque moves the teenager, why it triggers an emotional and/or an intellectual response in her, and why it motivates her to purchase every last postcard in the display. Her curiosity-about-Shérazade’s-curiosity-about-Matisse is tantamount to a tentative first step from the margins to the mainstream of liminality. By struggling to make sense of how Shérazade makes sense of her condition, the clerk catches a glimpse of her own rebelliousness in the Other.

At that point, the clerk begins to realize that transcendence has more to do with ambiguity than clarity, more to do with isothymia than megalothymia, and finally, more to do with self-exploration than self-possession. During that revelatory moment Shérazade decides to leave the gift shop. When the clerk says “(j)e suis curieuse,” the Beur replies “(c)’est vrai. Au revoir.” As she does with V.S. Naipaul days later in Les Carnets de Shérazade, the teenager departs after leaving the indelible mark of rebellion on a middle self. Shérazade validates rebelliousness everywhere in this incredibly brief exchange. By stating “(c)’est vrai,” she lets the salesclerk know that curiosity, and the underlying thymotic notions of equal recognition and self-discovery, are what make rebellion the truest self-identity.

The point Sebbar makes by having her heroine say “good-bye” to the salesclerk (and her family, and V.S. Naipaul, and her boyfriend
Julien) is that people must make their way in the world. Sebbar can only use Shérazade as Shérazade uses mimicry, that is, to position post-colonials in the heartland of rebellious terrain, to situate them squarely in between the nihilism of solitude and the nihilism of the exclusivist community. How we cultivate our self-identities is up to us. Sebbar mimics V.S. Naipaul and Henri Matisse to recast the artists’ dim desire for relative transcendence—each navigates the exilic with some degree of trepidation—into a prescription for it. She hopes that her mimicry will inspire her readers, who we can assume are middle selves, at the very least, because they are “curieux” about her ideas, to revolt against the mild and extreme forms of cultural and religious jihadism and the cynicism that plague the post-colonial world. Sebbar hopes that her title character and Matisse and Naipaul in their recasted forms will be useful identitarian paradigms in a future “fight to ensure (the) coming” of the living transcendence. Her readers will say “no” to nihilism in a moderate fashion, in a way that asserts individual liberty without repudiating rebellion’s other core value: human equality and solidarity. Following Sebbar, the reader will struggle to bring humanity to a more unified (but not perfect) form of singular and associational life in-between the “nihilism of formal principles and the nihilism without principles” (Camus, *The Rebel* 273), at the interstices, that is, of community and solitude, idealism and cynicism, at the juncture of transcendence and life itself.
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