Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* series (1954-55) and the Algerian War of Independence

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The Algerian War of Independence, an eight-year war of decolonization between France and its colonial subjects in Algeria, began on November 1st, 1954. Six weeks later, on December 13, Pablo Picasso began a series of fifteen paintings, two lithographs, and a vast number of drawings inspired by Eugène Delacroix’s two versions of his classic nineteenth-century Orientalist painting, *Les Femmes d’Alger dans leur Appartement* (*The Women of Algiers*) [Fig. 1].

Reports of the conflict in Algeria appeared in the French press from its inception and intensified over the next three months while Picasso was working on the series, which he finished on February 14, 1955.

The extent to which Picasso’s choice of subject and its timing may have been influenced by the war has been considered by several scholars, including Susan Grace Galassi and Zeynep Çelik. The question appears ultimately unresolvable, but other factors connecting Picasso’s paintings to the Algerian conflict and its aftermath are worthy of examination. In particular, in the years since independence, several women writers within and outside Algeria have staged a reversal of conventional ideas by enlisting Picasso’s paintings as the voice of their own aspirations, reappropriating the works’ imagery as narratives of resistance to colonialism and Orientalism. This essay considers Picasso’s *Femmes d’Alger* (*Women of Algiers*) series, its relationship to Delacroix, its synchronicity with the war’s outbreak, and its unexpected afterlife in the post-independence writings of Algerian and other feminists. It argues that these writers colonize

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1 The better-known version, dated 1834, is in the Louvre. The later work, from 1849, is in the Musée Fabre, Montpellier.

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Picasso, an artist often accused of misogyny, as he colonizes Delacroix, a representative of colonialism and an Orientalist, reclaiming their imagery in order to reimagine their world in a form not defined by European (or, indeed, Algerian) men.

**Picasso and Orientalism**

When Picasso took on *Les Femmes d'Alger*, he was, consciously or not, committing an act of historical closure, made particularly apposite by its timing. Delacroix's first version of his painting in the Louvre—the one Picasso knew best—dates from the same year (1834) that France imposed colonial military rule on

Algeria; the nation was granted its independence in 1962. The two artists’
treatment of the same subject thus brackets the one-hundred-and-twenty-eight-
year colonial era: Delacroix at the beginning, and Picasso at the end. This series is
the first of Picasso’s variations on the iconic works of several old masters, begun
in his seventies. He subsequently tackled Velasquez’s Las Meninas (The Maids of
Honor, 1656), Manet’s Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe (Luncheon on the Grass, 1862-63),
and made several canvases after Nicolas Poussin, Jacques-Louis David and other
monuments of European tradition. Towards the end of his life, out of step with
contemporary art and already an “old master” himself, Picasso apparently felt
moved to negotiate his own place in art’s history and to resolve his relationship to
his historical peers. Jaime Sabartès, his secretary, describes the artist preparing at
this time for a “project of domination, during what we might call his grand
parade of conquest” of his predecessors.³

Picasso professed a lack of interest in Orientalist subjects. He had never
travelled beyond Europe, nor did he produce any significant Orientalist imagery
that was not mediated by the previous imaginings of other artists. Apart from a
few images, mainly in his graphic art, he was not drawn to the Arab world or Asia
as a source of either subject matter or formal experimentation. As he told
Guillaume Apollinaire, “…I loathe exoticism. I have never liked Chinese,
Japanese, or Persian art.”⁴ He was, however, extremely interested in the art of sub-
Saharan Africa, and in the efforts of his Orientalist predecessors Delacroix, Jean-
Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and in particular those of
his contemporary, Henri Matisse. Any Orientalist imagery Picasso produced was a
response to specific works of art by at least one of these artists.

Nonetheless, since his art first registered a powerful interest in African
sculpture in the early 1900s, Picasso’s work shared in the discourse that Elizabeth
Ezra calls “the colonial unconscious.”⁵ Characterized chiefly by its repressed
ambivalence to France’s colonial subjects, and driven by the “will to dominate,”
the action of this twentieth-century discourse on one hand celebrates and seeks to
assimilate the exotic and the primitive, while simultaneously excluding them and

Collins, 1993), 324.
⁴ Pierre Caizergues, Apollinaire Journaliste: Textes retrouvés et textes inédits avec
présentation et notes, thesis for the University of Paris, May 1977, 3 vols. (Lille, 1979),
quoted in John Richardson, A Life of Picasso, Vol. 1, The Prodigy 1881-1906 (New York:
Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 488, n. 24. Richardson comments “Apollinaire may have had a
hand in rephrasing the artist’s words.”
⁵ Elizabeth Ezra, The Colonial Unconscious: Race and Culture in Interwar France (Ithaca
and London: Cornell University Press, 2000). Ezra’s analysis of the colonial unconscious is
more complex and nuanced than my brief reference to it suggests, but its fundamental
premise illuminates Picasso’s relationship to a colonial subject.
insisting on their irreconcilable distance from modern French society. Applying this idea to Picasso’s practice engages with territory that Patricia Leighten explores in her analysis of his seminal Demoiselles d’Avignon of 1907. Leighten suggests that in the painting Picasso embraces Europe’s most savage and grotesque image of Africa, its dark Other, as a challenge to its pretensions of civilized order and to classical art’s canon of beauty. He elevates the primitive exotic, only to emphasize its alterity, its alarming and implacable Otherness that accuses modern Europe of decadence and hypocrisy. Leighten’s argument—that an insistence on their Otherness is crucial to Picasso’s valorization of the women of Demoiselles—intersects with Ezra’s in its recognition of the ambivalence at the heart of the colonial unconscious. Picasso was inescapably part of a colonial culture, however much he despised its hypocrisies in the early 1900s. For all his disavowal of Orientalism, his aesthetic with respect to Delacroix—the desire at once to embrace and to alienate his subjects—is deeply implicated in the same impulses that produced Delacroix’s North African paintings, as well as Picasso’s own forays into modernist primitivism.

In his variations on Delacroix, Picasso incorporates references to Ingres’ Odalisque with Slave of 1839 (itself inspired by Les Femmes d’Alger dans Leur Appartement), and in particular to Matisse, to whom the series is partly an homage. Picasso drastically compresses the already shallow space of Delacroix’s harem, reversing and reordering his women so that two figures dominate the foreground: the monumental, large-breasted, narghile (water-pipe)-smoking one in a red garment at left, and the reclining one with raised legs on a blue surface at right and center. Their formal relationship echoes Ingres, but lacks the cozy intimacy of his and Delacroix’s harem settings, which Picasso renders as claustrophobic. Picasso’s reclining figure, simultaneously prone and supine in a pose of erotic abandon, refers to Matisse’s Blue Nude: Souvenir of Biskra (1907), while the cross-legged nude with raised arms behind and between the first two quotes, among other works, Matisse’s Odalisque with Raised Arms (The Hindu Pose, 1923), as well as Picasso’s Demoiselles d’Avignon. All three figures are wholly or partially nude, posed in attitudes of assertive sexual display. In the fourth figure, Picasso pushes Delacroix’s serving-woman to the background, exaggerating her body’s torsion into a dancing attitude and defining her breasts and buttocks clearly through her green clothes. Suggestions of a doorway with

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6 Ezra, 6; the author quotes Fredric Jameson here.
8 Leo Steinberg analyzes the figures in their relationships to each other and to Picasso’s processes of formal experimentation in “The Algerian Women and Picasso at Large,” in
stairs leading to another room behind the raised-arm woman, and, framing the servant, a portal to a lighted (perhaps exterior) region, delimit the space at rear. A blue curtain of fragmented cubist planes cascades down the right side of the picture, continuing underneath the reclining woman, behind whose legs a small table is just visible. A dish of figs establishes some slight depth between her form and the picture plane. The nudity, sexual emphasis, and sense of movement in the distorted forms make Picasso’s canvases vibrate with erotic energy, demanding a more active type of viewer engagement than do their sources in Delacroix, Ingres or Matisse.

Picasso’s paintings thus evince an Orientalism twice removed: first from the “reality” of the exotic setting, and then from the original artist’s re-imagining of that reality. His concern is not with a romantic vision of an imaginary Orient but with the paintings themselves, which he treats as repositories of forms, and approaches to problems of representation, spatial manipulation, and compositional strategy. Picasso’s Orientalist sources were not ideological or emotional blueprints for his art, nor guides to the imaginative territory of North Africa and the East, but aesthetic discourses to interrogate, deconstruct, complicate and transform, in order to reach solutions that were entirely his own. Edward Said defines Orientalism as “a western style for dominating, re-structuring and having authority over the Orient.” We may regard Picasso’s approach to Delacroix and the other artists he quotes as a style for “dominating, re-structuring and having authority over” the Orientalists.

Why did Picasso decide to begin his “parade of conquest” with Delacroix, coincident with the outbreak of the colonial war? Three certain factors come into play in his decision: First, his long-standing interest in the painting, and self-constructed sense of rivalry with Delacroix; next, his response to Matisse’s death; and finally, his relationship with Jacqueline Roque, whom he married in 1955. Picasso’s competitive desire to engage with Delacroix’s painting is well documented: Françoise Gilot, his partner in the 1940s, reports how he had “spoken often of making his own version of the Women of Algiers,” and had taken her to the Louvre at least once a month to study the picture. “I asked him how he felt about Delacroix,” Gilot writes. “His eyes narrowed and he said: “That bastard. He’s really good.”


By late 1954, other factors had arisen that made the time right for a challenge to the master, most immediately the death of Matisse on November 3rd. The loss of Matisse affected Picasso profoundly; the older man was the only living painter whom Picasso had considered a rival, and both valued their mutual understanding of the same artists and the same principles. His friend, British artist Roland Penrose, wrote that Picasso “thinks a lot about Matisse, especially since his death,” and Picasso told him “Matisse has left me his Odalisques as a legacy.” He confessed to his dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler that his Algerian women showed “the heritage of Matisse,” adding “why shouldn’t one inherit from one’s friends?” Almost certainly, Picasso was compensating for Matisse’s loss: Matisse’s “legacy” is evident, his color and the bodies of his Orientalized women appropriated to Picasso’s conquest of Delacroix.

Also significant was the striking resemblance of the artist’s new love, Jacqueline Roque, to the woman with the narghile on the right of Delacroix’s picture. Daix allocates Jacqueline the role of Picasso’s “recluse,” the mistress of his Provençal retreat, claiming that he loved the idea of delivering “secluded harem beauties” to the public gaze. She fit the bill perfectly. Penrose even refers to her (apparently without irony) as “the perfect beautiful slave.” Picasso’s engagement with Delacroix is conducted, in colonialist fashion, as a campaign to re-envision the master in his own image: he restages Delacroix’s seraglio as his own personal harem of female forms, with Jacqueline as its new queen. It is, moreover, a harem seen through the lens of Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, the work that many critics claim heralds the beginning of modern art and whose demolition and reinvention of the basis of representation reverberates throughout twentieth-century painting. Not only does Picasso’s recomposition of Femmes d’Alger quote his own painting: as mentioned earlier, Demoiselles’ invocation of African masks and Iberian sculpture as confrontational strategies in the faces and figures of the five prostitutes who are its subjects channels Picasso’s colonial unconscious in a manner that finds echoes in the second-hand Orientalism of Femmes d’Alger.
Picasso acknowledged the Orientalism of his project when he declared, “This is my idea of the Orient, though I have never been there,” implying that he was content to be depicting a fantasy, as he embarked on a project of multiple variations on an Orientalist work which can only be understood in relation to their source.\textsuperscript{18} Picasso, however, refused to look at the original while he was working on the variations in his Paris studio, claiming—perhaps disingenuously given Gilot’s recollection cited earlier—that he had not seen the Delacroix for years.\textsuperscript{19} Nonetheless, all the paintings in the series keep their source in view, despite their considerable differences from one another in composition, spatial dynamics, palette and post-Cubist abstraction of the women’s forms. But in Delacroix’s two canvases and Picasso’s fifteen, the two artists’ Algerian women differ in more than the pictorial styles of their representation: each artist endows his female subjects with a profoundly different affect. Delacroix’s sensuous, romantic work is contained, repressed and ordered; passive women are displayed to the western male gaze, enclosed in their harem, smoking, lounging, and endlessly waiting, rich, muted tones emphasizing their indolent forms. In contrast, Picasso’s composition translates the women into energized, fragmented sexual bodies, uninhibited, spontaneous, and verging on the chaotic, both hieratically still and caught in headlong motion, and painted in brash colors.

In deconstructing his predecessors’ forms, Picasso attacks and dismantles the conventional Orientalist vision. He subjects those forms to unnatural exaggeration, distortion, and anti-intuitive coloration, rendering them all but unrecognizable as human figures. He reorders composition and compresses space, rendering it ambiguous while accelerating motion. But in order to do this he builds on the whole long tradition of Orientalist vision—imaginary, ethnographic and documentary—and in revising it he perpetuates and reinforces it, giving it new life long after it had ceased to exist as a viable topos in art. Thus, he inevitably becomes implicated in its continuance as a visual mode—or was he, perhaps painting its epitaph as the colonial world that inspired it was violently ending? Picasso’s images exist at the intersection of a creative and a destructive course with respect to Orientalist representation. They are historically and ideologically ambivalent. What is evident, recalling Said’s definition quoted earlier, is that Picasso emerges as a colonizing conqueror, painting himself into the history of art as another dominant and authoritative presence among the artists whose ranks he aspires to join, having first re-structured them in his own style.

\textbf{Picasso and Colonialism}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{18} Penrose, Journal (16 February 1955), quoted in Cowling, \textit{Visiting Picasso}, 104.  \\
\textsuperscript{19} See note 11.}
It is reductive to regard Delacroix's and Picasso's women as emblematic of repression and liberation respectively, and it is impossible to know for certain whether Picasso intended his Delacroix series as a response to or comment on the Algerian situation. However, the synchronicity of its making and the uprising's beginnings enables us to put art in conversation with political history in such a way as to illuminate the paintings from the perspective of Algerian resistance to French rule. Picasso's own political history is relevant here.

Did Picasso oppose colonialism? His involvement with anarchism before World War I, and his membership of the French Communist Party (PCF) from 1944 until his death suggest he may have done so. By 1954, he had produced several works protesting tyranny and highlighting its cost in human suffering: *Guernica* (1937) condemns the bombing of an innocent town during the Spanish Civil War; *The Dream and Lie of Franco* (1937) attacks Franco’s Fascists; *The Charnel House* (1945) memorializes Spaniards killed during the Nazi occupation; *Massacre in Korea* (1951) attacks American atrocities in the Korean War; and the murals *War and Peace* (1952) in the Chapel of Peace, Vallauris, depict the tragedy of war and the universal desire for peace. Picasso announced a combative position on behalf of art in 1945, famously stating “painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy.” Yet he withdrew somewhat from politics after 1953, and although he might have been expected to support the FLN in the Algerian conflict, he made no public pronouncement at that time, unless we regard the paintings as one—an equivocal one to be sure. His silence somewhat echoes the PCF’s ambivalence towards Algeria. The Party position was complex and tended to support a negotiated independence rather than war and acts of individual terrorism. Or is the timing of Picasso’s play with Delacroix, as Gertje Utley suggests, a “blatant

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disregard for political matters,” a willful indifference to, rather than an engagement with, politics.\(^\text{24}\)

It is not unreasonable to assume that “Les Événements Algériennes,” as *Le Monde* headlined its daily report on the war from November 1954 onwards, helped to shape the mental terrain out of which Picasso produced the *Femmes d’Alger* series. The conflict was rarely off the front pages during and immediately before the months in which he was working on his series, and the reports of bombings, shootings, “terrorist attacks,” and enumeration of those killed and wounded in Algeria, as well as in Tunisia, Morocco, Libya and Egypt, were a constant refrain. The French public was given to understand that its chief North African colony was in the grip of a major security crisis; Picasso could hardly have failed to be conscious of the issue, whether he took sides or not. It provided an immediate context, and quite possibly a stimulus, for the other motives mentioned earlier to coalesce into the Delacroix project.

If Picasso did engage with Algeria, it was through his art, not through direct political action. He did not sign the “Manifesto of the 121” in 1960—a document criticizing the French Left’s alleged timidity over Algeria, with signatories from across the political spectrum, including many artists—but it is not known whether or not he was invited to do so.\(^\text{25}\) Yet Pierre Daix, Picasso’s first biographer and one of his oldest friends, tells us “Picasso remained politically informed and ‘engagé’ to the end of his life.”\(^\text{26}\) In the light of such conflicting evidence, it is difficult to assess Picasso’s commitment to anti-colonialist struggle. He lent his name and his art to the International Peace Movement in the 1950s, but his communism was perhaps more idealistic than ideological. Several observers have remarked on the apolitical, naively sentimental nature of Picasso’s politics: as he said, “for me, the Communist Party is the party of the poor.”\(^\text{27}\)

However in 1961, the somewhat divided French Left found an Algerian cause around which to unite: the imprisonment, torture and rape of a young woman, Djamila Boupacha, on a trumped-up charge of trying to bomb an Algiers café. Demonstrably innocent, she was nonetheless convicted and sentenced to the

\(^{24}\) Utley, *Communist Years*, 202.


\(^{27}\) “Pour moi, le Parti Communiste est le parti des pauvres.” Picasso to Roland Penrose (10 December 1956), quoted in Cowling, *Visiting Picasso*, 181.
guillotine. Her lawyer, Gisèle Halimi, together with Simone de Beauvoir, made an international cause of her case, and at their request, Picasso drew her portrait (from a photograph), which was published on the cover of the Communist newspaper Les Lettres françaises on 8 February 1962, and widely circulated in poster form as part of the campaign to free her. The artist had a precedent during the Cold War for such activism on behalf of dissidents: portraits of the Greek Communist Nichos Beloyannis in 1952 and the Americans Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1954 were commissioned by the PCF as part of campaigns to prevent or commemorate their execution.  

Picasso’s haunting portrait of Djamila Bouacha, who was eventually amnestied when the war ended, invokes the power of an icon, her individualized features in contrast to his paintings’ faceless women making one “femme d’Alger” stand for them all. The Algerian curator and art historian Anissa Bouayed writes: “she challenges the universal conscience.”

**Postcolonial Picasso**

Bouayed is one of a number of feminist writers from the Maghreb who, since Independence, have paid attention to Picasso’s Femmes d’Alger, reappropriating his works’ meaning as a voice in support of Algerian women’s struggle to liberate themselves from colonialism and Orientalism. They take their cue from the writer Assia Djebar (Fatima-Zohra Imalayen, 1936-2015). In her novel, also titled Femmes d’Alger dans leur Appartement (1979), Djebar invokes Baudelaire’s apprehension of “the heady perfume of evil that leads us…toward the unplumbed limbo of sadness” in Delacroix’s painting. Djebar claims that “Picasso reverses the malediction [of Baudelaire], causes misfortune to burst loose, inscribes in audacious lines a new happiness” for Algerian women. She sees in Picasso’s reworkings of Delacroix a “glorious liberation of space, the bodies awakening in dance, in a flowing outward;” in fact a “bursting out” of the harem, which, in her reading, he has dissolved. The women’s nudity in Picasso’s imagery connotes for Djebar an unveiling, a “rebirth to their own bodies,” and a reinstatement of female identity and intimacy that Delacroix stilled when he violated their most sacred space, their appartement, as his journals indicate he did, and as French soldiers also did during the Algerian war, invading and

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28 Utley, Communist Years, 179-181; Keen, Communist Interlude, 467.  
searching their homes. The door that Picasso “open[s] to the full sun,” to light and the world, offers hope for emancipation, his figures’ dancing vitality counteracting the deadly lethargy imposed by Delacroix, and by colonialism itself. Djebar associates this domestic liberation with women’s activities as resistance fighters in Algeria during the war. In the artist’s fragmented forms she sees a reference to the bombs carried beneath their clothes by Algerian women “as if they were their own breasts,” which, she writes, “exploded against their bodies.” This metaphor refers not to suicide bombers, but to the repressive backlash Algerian women suffered from conservative Islamist men after independence, despite their heroism in the struggle. By linking women’s private realms with their bodies and their lives through these paintings, Djebar makes Picasso a symbolic agent of their, and Algeria’s, freedom.

Anissa Bouayed believes that Picasso’s beginning his series when he did is “not trivial.” Announcing that “Picasso subverts Delacroix’s vision,” Bouayed echoes Djebar’s theme, reading in Picasso’s work a rupture of Delacroix’s closed space, and a new vision that anticipates Algerian women’s active role in the struggle for independence, as well as an allegory of their liberation from “the specular link with the western [i.e. Orientalist] gaze.” Her interpretation, inflected by Eastern women’s rejection of the visual stereotyping of Delacroix and his followers, chooses perhaps surprisingly to read the eroticism with which Picasso invests the women’s figures as a liberatory critique, rather than a continuation, of an Orientalist trope.

The cultural historian Ranjana Khanna assimilates such potentially troubling factors within her analysis. She argues that Picasso “introjects” and thus critiques the eroticism of Delacroix’s and after him, Matisse’s odalisques. Arguing that Picasso breaks up the women’s forms at same time as the boundaries for them are breaking down in reality, endowing them with convulsive movement so that they threaten to burst out of their cloistered interior and out of their previous

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31 Djebar, 149-50. Djebar notes that, in Arabic, the “unveiled” denotes the “denuded” woman. On Delacroix in Algeria, see Çelik, 158.
32 Djebar, 151. The reference is clearly metaphorical, but presumably also applies to the painted door towards which the servant rushes in Picasso’s versions of Femmes d’Alger.
33 Djebar, 151.
35 Bouayed, 25.
36 “Picasso bouleverse la vision de Delacroix;” “le lien speculaire d’avec le regard occidentale,” Bouayed, 26.
images in the spectators’ imagining, Khanna allegorizes the actual frames of the pictures as the limitations of the sexist/sexualized stereotypes of both colonialism and traditional Islamic society: “the context of war causes them almost to burst out of their frames, out of their apartment.” Claiming that Picasso’s paintings speak “a complex history of war-torn bodies as well as of women’s freedom, as the naked women are unveiled,” Khanna looks forward from the paintings’ moment of creation. She claims that in Djebbar’s book, Picasso’s women are reinflected to empower them to reclaim their own imagery. In other words, Djebbar’s literary art reinvests Picasso’s visual artifact, complicating it as a new space of subversion, allowing it to stand for women’s voices, speaking back to conventions of Orientalist representation.

Other critics, more cautiously, call for continued debate with Djebbar’s reading while defending her right to appropriate Picasso’s paintings, despite whatever Orientalism and misogyny they may reveal, in the cause of Algerian women’s actual and psychic liberation. In particular, the architectural historian Zeynep Çelik argues, citing the work of Pierre Nora on memory and cultural geography, that Delacroix’s painting constitutes a “lieu de mémoire” (memory space): a repository that is capable of being “recharged with new meanings” in order to serve a new purpose. Picasso’s canvases, presumably, are equally lieux de mémoire, available for such transformation. Later Algerian writers have gone further, calling Picasso’s women warriors, invested body and soul in the struggle for liberation.

All this goes counter to one of the most persistent conventional images of Picasso, contradicting his reputation as a misogynist who pictorially tortured women’s bodies for his aestheticized sexual pleasure. At first sight, it seems


40 Leo Steinberg takes issue with this critical trope in “The Algerian Women,” 133.

Françoise Gilot commented that the *Femmes d’Alger* displayed “his usual ferocity toward
counterintuitive to enlist a major cultural figure of the colonizers, and a notoriously anti-feminist one, as a champion of female political, personal, and sexual emancipation. So what has moved these feminists not merely to defend Picasso, but also to embrace him? Natalya Vince has examined Algerian women’s wartime experiences and their postwar consequences. Profiling (among others) educated, Europeanized women, some of whom had fought alongside men in the FLN, Vince argues that for many of these women, the war acted as a crucible in which aspirations were formed and identities transformed, but that their expectations of new, more active roles in independent Algeria were often disappointed in reality. She analyzes the ways in which individuals have interacted with and memorialized the past, appropriating it in order to construct meaningful narratives for their own experience. The use of Picasso by the writers discussed in this essay may be read in a similar fashion: as part of a process of reshaping the past to make sense of the present—as well as of the past itself. Djebar, Bouyaed, and others who have taken up their theme are reclaiming their imagery as Algerian women from the long history of sexist Orientalist representation. Picasso’s “bouleversement” of Delacroix opens the door to this act, allowing them to make him their agent in retaking control of their visual identities. But they go a stage further, reclaiming their imagery from Picasso as well, colonizing him as he colonizes Delacroix. Commenting on Simone de Beauvoir’s intervention in the Djamila Boupacha case, Lee Whitfield shows how “…a newly empowered female authority crossed the boundary of power erected by men and helped to eradicate that boundary, thereby permitting women to enter into and to transform a man’s world.” The writers discussed here perform a similar act: they revenge themselves on male artists with their heritage of Orientalist sexism and colonialism, and by exerting female agency on former European male territory, they succeed in transforming their world.

Djamila Boupacha’s portrait gave Picasso impeccable anti-colonial credentials. From this drawing, and from the date of the Femmes d’Alger series, arose his perhaps undeserved reputation as a champion of Algerian freedom. This was probably not what the artist intended. However, it is not his purpose, but the semiotic value the paintings acquire by historical association and imaginative political investment that is important. The readings of Djebar, Bouayed, Khanna


and others, however idealistic, re-appropriate the paintings for the purpose of resistance, making subversive spaces of them, thus recasting Femmes d’Alger as an expression of anti-colonial dissent by a European artist, and placing Picasso’s series in opposition to its source in Delacroix. As the perception of Algerian women who experienced the war for independence and its traumatic aftermath, their readings also carry authority as the voice of the colonized, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s phrase, speaking back to empire.\footnote{Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1983), in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, eds. Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 271-313.}

Picasso was not thinking of these works’ Algerian reception when he told Kahnweiler, in January 1954, “You never know how your work will turn out. You start a picture and it becomes something quite different. It’s strange how little the artist’s intention counts for”—but he might as well have been.\footnote{Kahnweiler, “Entretiens,” 13.} The interpretive history of his variations on Delacroix is an instance of publicly circulated images accruing meanings beyond their makers’ intent or control – meanings that are entirely contingent on their context, including the political uses for which they may be appropriated. It demonstrates how, in the postcolonial world, narratives of resistance may legitimate themselves by reinvesting the expressive forms of the formerly dominant culture. In an irony that captures the shifting relationship between art and politics in the modern period, Picasso the conqueror is recast as the voice of the oppressed—and oppressed women, at that. In making him their agent, though, they do more than enlist him—they replicate his action of conquest, taking control over the meaning of his work. Thanks to the “femmes d’Alger” of the postcolonial era, Picasso’s victory over Delacroix is assured. But in this particular narrative of appropriation and reappropriation of cultural artefacts, it is the women who have the final word.