Empire Writes Back: between dreams of trespass and fantasies of resistance

Globalization Working Papers 06/7

November 2006

WORKING PAPER SERIES

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http://globalization.mcmaster.ca

GLOBALIZATION AND AUTONOMY
MONDIALISATION ET AUTONOMIE
www.globalautonomy.ca

PREFACE

Alina Sajed is working on her doctorate in Political Science and is a Graduate Research Scholar at the Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition for 2006-2007. In this working paper, she poses the question of how to read "between East and West." After situating herself as sitting on the boundary between East and West, she explores primarily women post-colonial writers in examining the notions of orality as a methodology and the ambiguity around the terms "East" and "West." She assesses the possibilities and impossibilities offered by this binary, the politics upon which it rests, and the questions that it raises for further exploration. She then returns to orality and looks at the power relations and politics involved in storytelling, both for the narrator and the listeners. She concludes by reflecting a little more generally on these questions and argues that the political context, particularly the history of colonialism in a given setting, must be considered in any of these readings and stories.

In drawing this conclusion, Alina Sajed reinforces similar conclusions drawn in different ways by Heike Härting in her Research Article, "Global Civil War and Post-colonial Studies" (http://www.globalautonomy.ca/global1/article.jsp?index=RA_Harting_GlobalCivilWar.xml). These conclusions are important in globalization studies because they help this field of research to move beyond the early tendencies in the literature to proclaim a new world and a fundamental break in history. In problematizing the concepts of "East" and "West," this paper also contributes to the decentering and the ontological work needed in the field, highlighted by Arif Dirlik in his IGHC Working Paper, "Globalization as the End and the Beginning of History: The Contradictory Implications of a New Paradigm" (http://globalization.mcmaster.ca/wps/dirlik.PDF). Finally, in reviewing women writers in particular in this paper, Sajed adds to the much needed research in the field on gender and globalization.

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Empire Writes Back: between dreams of trespass and fantasies of resistance

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Introduction

This paper attempts to address the issues of what is at stake in reading between East and West, and how orality might pose a challenge to the legitimized academic views of doing research and of attaining knowledge. Indeed, I find myself situated somewhere in the middle between East and West. I come from an Eastern European country, in which the mélange of Western and Eastern elements can be confusing at best. Romanian culture (if one can talk of a unified and homogeneous cultural system which would bear the unambiguous mark of Romanian-ness) has been profoundly influenced both by its Eastern neighbours (influence which sometimes materialized into lengthy occupation by the Ottoman Empire) and by Western ideas and practices that have been imported both by foreign travellers and by the local intelligentsia. Boasting rich and captivating oral traditions, Romanian culture has also been under the tyranny of the written sign. It has sometimes tried to negotiate between the two, but not without doing violence to the richness of the former, while acknowledging the modern necessity and superior expediency of the latter.

However, I am also a Western-based academic. As such, I felt it was worthwhile to explore the modalities through which women academics (most of them Western in their training) deal with the politics of reading between East and West. I use the term "reading" since, even though the merits of orality are explored throughout their works, the written sign is still the privileged party. This is indeed the contradiction upon which this whole paper is based: my essay argues for reading in the first part (more specifically for exploring the politics involved in reading between East and West), and for orality as an alternative form of knowledge. And this is understandable, considering the difficulties (if not the impossibilities) of bringing forward oral traditions in their oral form, and in the full reproduction of their atmosphere. This is probably one of the most important obstacles to making orality a legitimate part of academic knowledge. However, one should note that perhaps the whole point of considering orality as an alternative form of legitimate knowledge is not (and should not necessarily be) its faithful reproduction in the academic setting. Rather, commenting on the merits of orality, and bringing forward stories indicates that storytelling can be a powerful political tool.[1] Telling stories is not a practice that needs to be relegated to the sphere of the mythical and to that of mere entertainment (as if myths and aesthetic/ludic productions are devoid of political meaning). Rather stories are alive, they constantly create and re-create socio-political environments, they serve to both contest and re-establish hegemonic practices and outlooks.

"Anxiety eats at me whenever I cannot situate the geometric line organizing my powerlessness," claims Fatema Mernissi (1995, 3) in an autobiographical text. This paper is as much an essay on boundaries, power and powerlessness, fantasies and desires, as it issurvey of a minute part of post-colonial literature. The authors discussed in this paper (Rey Chow, Fatema Mernissi, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Lila Abu-Lughod, Mary B. Vogl, Monia Hejaiej) are all women. All of these authors are preoccupied with the politics of representation, whether in critical ethnography (Lughod, Hejaiej), sociological analysis (Mernissi), autobiographical texts (Mernissi), or literary and aesthetic criticism (Chow, Spivak, Vogl). At first, this attraction to texts written by women authors struck me as an accidental dimension of the literature taken into focus. But upon a brief pondering, I felt this was

more than mere chance or accident.[2] I found that I was drawn to these authors by the promise of a captivating mélange of discussions that deal with the politics of post-coloniality, the merits of orality, and the politics of reading between East and West. There is nothing particular in the general themes of these accounts that cannot be encountered elsewhere. But there is a clear and profound preoccupation with the role of emotions, fantasies, and desires within the practices of reading between East and West. The infusion of their texts with reflections upon these particular affects as concepts *and* practices confers upon them a touch of depth and sensitivity that I found to be uniquely feminine.[3]

The goal of this survey is twofold: to deal with the politics of reading between East and West, and to assess the merits, challenges and ambivalences of orality as an alternative methodology to writing.[4] The first part of my paper attempts (through an engagement with the texts of Rey Chow and Fatema Mernissi) to discern what is at stake in reading between East and West, and to expose the hierarchies entailed by such a reading. Most importantly, the issue that needs to be addressed, in this context, is that such an enterprise is marked both by difficulties and by promises. How one deals with such apparently contradictory facets of this kind of research is indeed a relevant aspect that deserves careful reflection. More than anything, I have attempted to cast a shadow of doubt on a binary that is so widely embraced: West(ern)/non-West(ern). My intention in analyzing this dichotomy is to investigate (by no means in an exhaustive manner) the possibilities and impossibilities offered by this binary, the politics on which it rests so comfortably, and the questions that I wish to leave open for further exploration.

The latter part of this paper explores the potential of orality (through an exploration of its merits as put forth in the works of Monia Hejaiej, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Fatema Mernissi) as an alternative not only to traditional methodological tools, but also to understandings of time, space, and relations that have much to do with questions of ontology. Can telling stories situate the narrator in a position of power? And if so, what is the relationship between narrator and listener? Are there political implications to telling stories? What is the connection between the so called "mythical time" of the story and the time of the present (or of the narration)? Such questions suggest that this paper makes claims concerning the profoundly political aspect of orality, and the politicized roles assumed by the participants in the act of narration/listening.[5]

I believe that the issues addressed by this paper are particularly relevant at a time when there is intense discussion on the merits and violences of Western patterns of thinking and imagining. In an age of the intensification of globalization processes -- understood as the intensive and extensive dissemination of images, ideas, goods, and not the least people -- there is an unambiguous domination (of public discourse, media, news, and scholarship) by ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies coming from Western academia. However, such a hegemonic position is intensely contested by voices coming from the margins, or at least claiming the position of marginality. To view the geography of power as a centre/periphery positioning is to overlook the way in which such a geography is imbued with contradictions and paradoxes. Margins have their own margins, and the points of centre and periphery are much more mobile than most Western theories recognize.

The Politics of Reading between East and West

What does reading between East and West entail? Such a reading could be understood as an exploration of the symbolic, imaginative, and material systems that characterize what are now known as Western and non-Western societies. A binary sneaks in here that requires much attention and a sort of deconstructive analysis, namely West/non-West. It is not the binary per se that troubles me, but rather the underpinnings of such a binary. A number of questions arise here that relate to the problematic character of such a binary: what constitutes or what is the West? Is the West a particular set of ideas that may be held or promoted by anyone irrespective of their geographical location? Or, is West/non-West to be understood mainly as delineated by geographical limits? What are the ethics of defining "other" or particular "sets of ideas" as "non" or "not" West? Who is a Western subject? Who is a non-Western

subject? Is this subjectivity tied to the geographical designation "West" or is it a matter of spirit or of commitment to particular ideas or of living through a particular world view?[6]

This string of questions is not intended to confuse the reader (although I am afraid that a certain degree of confusion at this point is inevitable), but to put forth something that is rarely problematized or mused upon in many scholarly texts. Academics seem to use terms such as "West/Western" and "non-West/non-Western" in one breath, almost mechanically, as though the content and signification of such terms is universally known and unequivocally established. But I wonder to what extent the foundations upon which such terms lie are explored and analyzed. This binary is significant not only because its deconstruction might tell us something about the ethical impulses (or lack of them), the sets of fantasies and desires that seem to provide a content for what is the West and what is the non-West, but also because it throws light on the relationship between what we conceive to be the West and the non-West (or the East). For example, in his *Orientalism*, Said is concerned that the East (or the Orient) is constructed and perceived precisely *as* the non-West, meaning as a space and set of ideas that is irretrievably different from the West, *and* incapable of defining itself; hence its designation as *non*-West (1994a, 300-301).

Rey Chow's research seems to be moved by the same concerns. In *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, the author explores the politics of reading between East and West as illustrated by modern Chinese literature. Chow employs "[t]he materiality of Westernized Chinese subjectivity" both as a "mode of discourse" and as a topic (1991, xi). Her intent is to point to the illusory nature of "nativism" that requires a clear and unambiguous distinction between "East" and "West," and that advocates for an unreflexive purging of Western elements from non-Western ideas and practices (Ibid.). In this context, she talks about the dichotomy between the "realpolitical" non-West and the "imaginative" West: "in an attempt to show how things really are in the non-West, our discourses produce a non-West that is deprived of fantasy, desires, and contradictory emotions" (1991, xiii). However insightful and thought-provoking such an observation might be, I would argue that Chow's analysis does little to unsettle the binary "West/non-West" or to expose the questionable premises upon which it is founded. Her statement seems to imply that the West and the non-West are recognized categories, whose problematic character lies not so much in their content, but in the palpable hierarchy of power constructed by their relationship. It is as though she is echoing Said's concerns regarding the politics of *difference* that supports the binary West/non-West, without actually pondering on what is implied by the construction of the Orient/East *as non*-West.

Rather, Chow's concerns revolve around the manner in which the non-Western subject *cum* object of research is constructed as the Other who commands "humorless reverence" and whom "we cannot hope to know" (Ibid.). As Western thought patterns have such a strong hold over academic research, Chow observes that the West "owns not only the components, but also the codes of fantasy" (Ibid.). The author's main argument is that fantasy structures can tell us about politics as well as anything else. As such, the questions that arise are the following: How does one uncover, recover, and capture the fantasy structures of cultures? Is it a matter of recovering/recapturing, or more of creating and imbuing cultures we study with our own sets of fantasies? Is it a mixture of both? I would argue the latter, meaning that such an exercise never implies a mere retrieval or recapturing of fantasy structures, as if such structures lay somewhere hidden and untainted by external influences, ready to be brought to light by the curious investigator. Rather, it is more an issue of retrieving certain patterns of fantasy and desire, imbuing them with our own sets of desires and expectations, thereby constantly (re) creating or altering such structures. I will illustrate this process later in the paper with the example of orality and storytelling.

In an article recently published in *Postcolonial Text*, Sandro Mezzadra and Federico Rahola argue that "[a]t the very moment when the *dispositifs* of domination, originally forged in the context of the colonial experience, filter into metropolitan spaces, we find ourselves already, in some way, in a postcolonial time" (2006, 3). As such, Mezzadra and Rahola point to the hybridization of domination,

which suggests that the violence directed by Europeans against the colonies returned to its place of origin and expanded across the European continent itself (Ibid.). Bearing this in mind, I wonder to what extent the binary West/non-West erases precisely this hybridization of domination, and this "spilling over of typically colonial logics of domination out of the very spaces from which they originated" (Ibid.). Does this particular binary not obscure the degree to which West and East no longer pertain exclusively to the domain of geography, and instead they suggest the performance of certain ideational and material structures in ways in which it would be difficult to discern clearly defined lines that separate the West from the East?[7]

My digression on the West/East or West/non-West divide is meant to inform the reader of the possibilities and impossibilities engendered by such a divide, and to open the space for further discussions concerning the politics involved in the construction (and deconstruction) of this binary. Also, this discussion suggests that the subsequent uses of the terms "West," "non-West," and "East" in the present paper should be looked at through the prism of these comments. As such, the phrasing "reading *between* East and West" does not suggest a separate and dichotomous reading of two different patterns of thought. Rather it indicates those spaces of intersection and overlap, but also of contestation and tension that arise from the meeting of ideas and symbols that accede to different degrees of power.

As Said would have it in *Culture and Imperialism*, such a reading could be understood as a "contrapuntal" reading which can be summarized as follows: "…a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (1994b, 51). While such a contrapuntal reading has its undisputed merits, as it reveals the "other" side of the story of colonialism, or as Urvashi Butalia has aptly phrased it as the "other side of silence,"[8] I believe that Said's technique confers a very limited and elitist reading of "culture." As in *Orientalism*, Said understands culture here mainly as "high" culture. His technique serves to reproduce the very treatment of culture that he problematizes: the closed-off academic and intellectual endeavour from whence exclusionary ideas (such as imperialism) came. Nonetheless, the contrapuntal technique put forth by Said has its merits, as it exposes the power relationship that characterizes the interactions between different accounts of history and culture. Moreover, Said's technique traces a geography of history and culture that is by no means politically innocent. Rather this geography is imbricated in material and symbolic/ideational violences that permeate its conflicting narratives. However, such a technique overlooks the role of fantasy, desire, and emotion in the construction and (re)production of such a hierarchical geography.[9]

Fatema Mernissi, in *Scheherazade Goes West,* states that the "emotional landscape is one of the keys to understanding cultural differences between East and West" (2001, 157). In her book, the author explores the ways in which the fantasy of the *harem* is transposed into aesthetic representations by famous Western artists, such as Delacroix and Matisse. By reading between what the *harem* actually signifies within Muslim cultures and what it came to represent within Western imaginary, Mernissi ponders on the complex of fantasies and desires that haunt the Western psyche. Moreover, she points to the politics of this aesthetic transposition in so far as the *harem* got to be equated with exoticism and eroticism, and it informed Western attitudes and practices about non-Western femininity. Both Chow and Mernissi underline the crucial role of emotions and of structures of fantasy and desires in understanding political structures in general, and the politics of reading between East and West in particular.[10] One should note that Mernissi operates with a quasi-reified notion of the West, in her desire to expose the complexities of the East, and to counteract the Western stereotypes regarding its Other. Although she attempts to capture the tensions and nuances existing within the West, she offers a unified account of the West as the space where the Kantian position on the passivity of the feminine seems to be the norm, and where women submit to such a norm unreflexively. In Mernissi's view, Western women are associated with the ideal of the beautiful, that of the supine woman whose main purpose is to please the eyes and senses of man. Western men, on the other hand, attach themselves to the ideal of the sublime, that of the rational and meditative person capable of depth of thought and feeling.

Since Mernissi's aim is to illustrate that Muslim women are viewed within their societies as capable to attain both the sublime and the beautiful, one could make the case that her desire is the reversal of domination (understood in terms of both superiority and female agency) between East and West. In this case, I find she is seduced by the same fallacy as Said (*Orientalism*), who unproblematically presents a homogeneous and undivided West, while taking to task Western authors and codes of thought for operating with a monolithic representation of Eastern cultures/societies. Although Mernissi's rendition of the West might be viewed as monolithic, the merit of her approach lies in her conscious attempt to challenge the hegemonic critical apparatus that seems to be so easily embraced by many self-proclaimed non-Western intellectuals. To the by now traditional method of dropping names of famous Western thinkers and theorists, Mernissi opposes a rich incursion into Arab Muslim scholarship, which entails bringing forward conflicting and converging voices of traditional scholars, narrators, "subjugated" women, characters from stories, epics, and poems.

The notion of hegemonic critical apparatuses (and the practices that they entail) is deeply relevant to the practice of reading between East and West, and it exposes the politics of such an endeavour. Chow argues that "since the West owns not only the components, but also the codes of fantasy, the non-West is deprived not only of the control of industrial and commercial productions, but also of imaginary productions as well" (1991, xiii). Yes, the unconscious may be an export from Europe. But what happens to it in modern China? Chow talks about the ambivalence (I would call it multi-valence) of using Western critical apparatuses in order to "know" the non-West and to critique Western hegemony.

She puts it in terms of "the analytical tools […] becom[ing] the means with which to restore the 'elusive' realities of the Westernized ethnic subject" (Chow 1991, xvi). But why are such tools *the tools* with which non-Western subjectivities are to be restored and brought forward? Can this be interpreted as an excuse devised by the post-colonial intellectual, who speaks from the privileged position of Western academia in an Western(ized) language, while claiming marginality and oppression for herself? Spivak would certainly see it this way. Consider for example Spivak's musings on the topic in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, *The Postcolonial Critic*, and *In Other Worlds*, where she engages in bitter diatribes against what she calls the Native Informant. Is she justified in her disenchantment with what Anthony Appiah (1991) characterizes as the "comprador intelligentsia"?

Appiah states that "comprador intelligentsia" consists of "a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have intended for the world, for each other, and for Africa" (1991, 348). Therefore, Appiah seems to think that this sort of intellectual is not so much a mediator (in the sense of Spivak's *re-presence* or in the sense of attempting to bring voices forward), as an appropriator. The latter term suggests a particularly violent hubris on the part of the Third World intellectual: it is a double hubris, one that refers to a violence that is directed (perhaps unwittingly?) towards the very voices one claims to represent/re-present, and towards oneself.

The former sort of violence was brilliantly exposed by Spivak in her *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, when she discusses the implicit and explicit hypocrisies of what she calls the "Native Informant," that is of the intellectual that appropriates for herself/himself an oppression that does not really belong to such a privileged voice. Spivak claims that "[e]lite postcolonialism seems to be as much a strategy of differentiating oneself from the racial underclass as it is to speak in its name" (1999, 358). Harsh words, but do they have any foundation? I believe they do insofar as there is a constant apologia for self-marginalization that permeates the writings of many post-colonial intellectuals. There seems to be a quick overlooking of the fact that possessing a well-entrenched position in the Western academy confers upon one's voice undisputed authority and privilege, which is perversely not so much due to the particular expertise of the scholar, but to her/his mere positioning in a Western institution of learning.

In an attempt to destabilize the hegemonic status of Western thinking and imagination, Mernissi performs a re-reading and a re-capturing of the Western structures of fantasies and desires regarding the *harem*. I would call this method that of the "returned gaze": Mernissi watches the West watching the East, and the insights she brings to the surface are stunning. In *Scheherazade Goes West*, she wants to understand why the Western portrayal of the harem (as captured by the paintings of Ingrès, Matisse, Picasso) lacks the subversion and the tension that permeated the harem in which she grew up (2001, 19); and why the West discarded Scheherazade's "brainy sensuality and political message" (2001, 68). Mernissi illuminates, in her texts, a world that is largely unknown to Westerners, because of its perplexing nuances and paradoxes. Her women are endowed with a distinct sense of individuality as well as with an awareness of their complex social roles. The women Mernissi brings to the attention of the reader are not passive beings, deprived of agency and ability to exact any transformation. Rather they are agents, painfully aware of their limitations and restrictions, but with a deep sense of their political role. Moreover, there is great beauty and depth in the creativity with which these women subvert the dominant masculinity of their world.

Both in *Scheherazade Goes West* and in *Dreams of Trespass*, Mernissi conceives of power as more than a dialogical relation: she conceives of power as theater, "with the powerful dictating to the weak what role they must play" (2001, 114). In *Dreams of Trespass*, the author recounts her childhood in the harem, and introduces the reader to a space that is vastly misunderstood and misconstrued by Western accounts: the domestic space (or the *harem*). In an engaging and intimate narrative on the women and men in her family, and on the intricate relations between them, Mernissi dismantles the aura of exoticism and eroticism that is usually associated with the harem, and points to the political (and politicizing) aspects of life in the harem. When pondering on the power relations and on the hierarchies that are present within the harem, she envisions resistance as a "shuffling of the cards," as a "confusing of the roles" (1995, 152). One must first figure out who has authority (*sulta*) over one's self, and then one must reverse and confuse the roles within the power relation. I find her vision of power to be both similar and dissimilar to that of Foucault. It is similar in that Mernissi's sense of power seems to be reminiscent of the kind of capillary and diffuse network of practices that was conceptualized by Foucault. Nonetheless, although such practices of power are produced and replicated through family, educational systems, church, etc., this is not to imply that Mernissi's power is faceless. Mernissi's power has a face, a clearly contoured one: it is a male face. The agents of power are constantly named and identified, be they Islamic scholars, writers, teachers, clergymen, fathers, grandfathers, cousins, or simply strangers. It should be observed, however, that old women are also perceived as power holders.

Mernissi finds creative and insightful ways to show that the society in which she lives undergoes a constant process of (re)negotiation and transformation. It is the complex dynamics of negotiation between attempts at resistance and desires to preserve the traditional societal structure that Mernissi is eager to capture. Her most fascinating insights stem from the representation of contesting voices coming from within the Moroccan society and from the Arab world. To the widely held notion that Islam connotes rigidity and inflexibility, the author counters the Muslim idea of love, which implies learning from and about differences, and which views *mobility* as key to dealing with and understanding differences. Citing the Arabic scholar, Ibn 'Arabi, she states that there is a universal and natural desire in humans "to cross boundaries toward the 'other'." (2001, 174-75, 178-79, 180-81) While authors such as Judith Butler would take issue with the notion of natural propensities that exist in all humans, I believe that Mernissi's refusal to shy away from categories such as "natural" and "universal," while minding the contingency and historicity of certain practices, gives her project a sensible and grounded touch, which I think is lacking in the works of many critical authors.[11]

One question that arises is whether Rey Chow ends up constructing a project similar to the one Mernissi undertook in *Scheherazade Goes West*, where the latter openly critiques Western patterns of thinking and Western approaches to theorizing. By embarking on such a project, Mernissi exposes not what the "Westernized ethnic subject" is all about. Rather she re-captures those codes of fantasy and desire of the West that regard its relation to the Other(s). Mernissi's uncovering of structures of Western

fantasies and desires is a self-professed one, something which does not come through clearly from Chow's project. Chow's main intention is to re-capture the structures of fantasies and desires of the non -West, by using a Western methodology.[12] However, in assuming such a posture, does not the focus of her project automatically fall on the Western patterns of thought? Is this a danger inherent in every project that operates with Western methodologies? Can one extricate oneself from Western codes of knowledge?[13] Would such an extrication even be desirable? I believe that awareness of the precariousness which accompanies a researcher's privileged positioning is vital to any project which undertakes the task of reading between East and West. One cannot (and perhaps one should not) remove oneself from the immediacy of her location. Judith Butler makes an important remark when she claims that it is erroneous "to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location, and hence, promote itself as a global subject" (1999, 187).

Therefore, one needs to be aware of one's cultural location, which constantly underwrites and has an impact upon one's project (although such an impact is not necessarily a purely deterministic one). Yet, at the same time, one needs to be alert to the risks involved by using Western methodologies when reading non-Western texts. In this context, a key concept that needs to be brought to attention is that of the *hudud* (which is translated as "boundary," "frontier"). Mernissi (*Dreams of Trespass*) states that "education is to know the *hudud*, the frontiers" (1995, 3). This can be extrapolated in regards to culture and cultural practices, in so far as culture can be seen as the manner in which one gets to know the *hudud*, and to practice, re-negotiate, and reconfigure the *hudud*. Mernissi understands the *hudud* as a "sacred frontier" that needs to be respected and obeyed, so that order instead of chaos might prevail (1995, 1). This concept expresses a somewhat religious position on boundaries and frontiers. More specifically, it refers to the frontier between what is permissible and what is forbidden. But Mernissi does not put this concept/practice forth as an admonisher to those tempted to reach beyond the "permissible" into the "forbidden." Rather she uses this concept so as to explore the politics of frontiers, of what it means to trespass such frontiers, and how such a trespassing can be more effectively performed.

Mernissi's use of the *hudud* and her exploration of the practices it entails can be regarded as a call to disobedience to women. She examines the practices of the *hudud* with the intent of destabilizing its legitimacy and of alluding to the fact that frontiers are more flexible than one thinks, that they need to be negotiated and reconfigured. This practice is particularly relevant for women in the Muslim world, at a time when processes of modernization are altering the traditional gender divide within these societies, and offer women the opportunity to assert their autonomy by becoming more visible in the public sphere. Moreover, the concept of the *hudud* should not be confused with the notion of "margin," which is very widely used in Western academia, particularly by critical discourses. While the *hudud* refers to a sacred frontier that distinguishes the permissible from the forbidden (thus having profound religious inflections), the idea of "margin" refers to a geography of power that relegates certain knowledges, practices, and groups of people into the shadow, by either ignoring them or by undermining the legitimacy of their truth claims. Undoubtedly, the *hudud* is related to marginality, in so far as women's obedience of the "sacred frontier" also involves assuming a marginal position that consigns them exclusively to the domain of the private. But while the concept of "margin" involves a somewhat definitive positioning within society, the notion of the *hudud* (although it makes claims to a definitive and sacred order of things) it points, by its very nature, to the in-betweenness of frontiers and boundaries. Frontiers are meant to separate, but their positioning *between* worlds also indicates the existence of alternative ways of beings, and of possibilities of trespass and negotiation.

While Mernissi acknowledges that the *hudud* is nothing but a social construction, most of the time purely arbitrary, she points to the fact that the *hudud* becomes internalized and legitimized. Such an internalization and legitimization have concrete ramifications, hence frontiers need to be treated in a more meaningful and attentive manner. She notices, from her own experience, that one caries the harem within oneself, that the line between *haram* (the forbidden) and *halal* (the permissible) does not need

physical walls, it is inscribed under one's forehead and under one's skin, one constantly carries it within one's head (1995, 61). The concept of the *hudud* is extremely important in reading between East and West. What would the lines separating *haram* from *halal* look like in Western societies? What would a non-Western reading of Western patterns of thought and practices reveal? What are the frontiers produced and replicated by Western societies and, more importantly, what role does the non-West play in creating and establishing the Western *hudud*?[14]

At this point, a discussion of the effects of colonialism seems not only inevitable, but necessary. One needs to be sensitive to the ways in which experiences of colonialism figure in the politics of reading between East and West. How important is it for researchers to position and situate themselves vis-à-vis their subjects of research? As stated earlier in the paper, I believe that one should become (and remain) aware of the unequal power relation inherent in the practice of academic research, and that such a practice is constantly plagued by the possibilities of its being linked to ongoing (neo)colonial practices and outlooks. The authors dealt with in this paper offer various perspectives on colonialism and its current effects, but, most importantly, they provide valuable insights into the difficulties of doing research, while remaining aware of their privileged positions. For example, both Fatema Mernissi and Mary B. Vogl (2003), when discussing aspects of Maghrebin cultures and societies, deal with colonialism head-on, musing about its implications and ramifications. Lila Abu-Lughod (1993) has very little to say about the role of colonialism in the lives of and the impact of colonial mindsets on the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin tribes from Egypt. Surprisingly enough, at least from my reading of her text, colonialism does not seem to be part of the Bedouins' senses of identification and history.

Mernissi (1985) tackles the male-female dynamics in modern Muslim society (Morocco). She is trying to uncover the sources of female oppression in Muslim societies, and grapple with traditional justifications offered for this oppression. The author goes beyond simplistic oppositions such as colonizer-colonized, oppressor-oppressed or foreign-authentic/native. Rather, she is more interested in the in-betweenness of such complex relationships, in the spaces in which various claims interact and contest each other's positions. Claims coming from the French colonial administration, Arab nationalists, modernization fanatics, and traditionalists all serve to submerge women in a deeper shadow. Mernissi brings to the reader's attention the complicities of contradictory elements that trigger sexual anomie in Moroccan society. For example, schooling for girls was advocated by Arab nationalists, who wanted to defeat the French at any cost. Thus the state became the main threat to traditional male supremacy, enhancing paradoxically both the autonomy gained by women, and the sexual repression that takes place in a depressed economy.

Mary B. Vogl (2003) muses about the problematic practice of the "white" intellectual writing and/or speaking about "non-white" cultures. She wonders: where do we get the authority to represent others? Most importantly, paraphrasing Linda Hutcheon, she points to the "dangers of postmodern deconstruction without a post-colonial exposé" (2003, 35). In her opinion, any dealing with non-Western cultures must come from a post-colonial perspective, as the prism of colonialism informs and constantly underwrites the multiple and contradictory experiences and attitudes of non-Western societies. She is aware that one (the researcher, writer, viewer, photographer) cannot simply discard one's European identity, and she wonders whether this would be desirable and possible to begin with (2003, 69). Dealing with the concept and practices of the image, as performed in literary texts and in photography, Vogl muses on the tyranny of the image, on the violences that lie at the foundation of images, of their production and re-production (dissemination). She is preoccupied with the possibility of capturing the image of our *others*, of our *selves,* of our *self-others* in a responsible manner. She counterposes to the practice of "spectacle," that of "resistant reading" (2003, 47, 161).

Quoting Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Vogl asserts that "[r]esistant readings… depend on a certain cultural and political preparation that "primes" the spectator to read critically… While disempowered communities can decode dominant programming through a resistant perspective, they can do so only to the extent that their collective life and historical memory have provided an alternative framework of understanding" (2003, 47). Vogl identifies such an alternative framework to be provided

by the Islamic sign. Vogl points to the fact that writers such as Michel Tournier conceive of writing (the word) as countering the violences of the image, and as demystifying the image's claim to veracity. However, she points that writing is itself violent in its exclusion of the spoken word, of orality.

Another possibility for a "resistant reading" comes from exile and migration, from what Mernissi sees as "mobility." For Vogl, exile is an enlightening experience, as it provides the critical distance to look at one's milieu from a fresh perspective. She sees it as a "cleaning of the eyes," as a "telescopic view" (2003, 136). It should be noted though that however enlightening, exile is an opportunity offered to very few. And of those few, even fewer possess that "cultural and political preparation" to perform a resistant reading of the "civilization of the image" (as Vogl identifies the Western society), and counter it with the "civilization of the sign." Besides, Vogl seems to entertain ideas about authenticity, about clear boundaries between foreign and authentic/genuine/native, when she states that fortunately there are Moroccan artists who attempt to offer an "authentic image of their own people" (2003, 115). While being keenly sensitive to violences performed by outsiders, by Western viewers, Vogl seems to be disappointingly oblivious to the ways in which our own fantasies and desires rewrite and recreate even the environments that we claim as our own. Therefore, I get the feeling that at times she herself lapses into what she calls "postcolonial Orientalism," of which she accuses Barthes and Kristeva.

Mernissi deals as well with the insidiousness through which images and fiction can become more powerful than what we call "reality." In assessing the violence of the painted images of the Western-imagined harems, she quotes John Berger: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (2001, 180). As such, according to Mernissi, the Western brush captures women within a paralyzing frame that erases their subjectivity and their sense of political agency. Can such a violence not be extrapolated to that of colonialism, in which the "Westernized ethnic subject," as Chow would put it, is captured and held prisoner in a paralyzing frame that denies her/his voice and her/his possibility of resistance? I think it would be more than fair to state that such an extrapolation is not only possible, but useful. In this case, does post-colonialism constitute the returning gaze, the margins that strike back? Or is it perhaps the case that such a self-proclaimed mission can be viewed as a sign of hubris on the side of the post-colonial scholar, who, for the most part, is well-positioned within Western academia and/or profoundly influenced by Western codes of thought? Where should a decolonizing of the minds begin, as endorsed by Said in his *Orientalism*?

In a chapter entitled "French Feminism in an International Frame" in her *In Other Worlds*, Spivak rages against Julia Kristeva, as the latter "dared" to formulate the main question of her research agenda in the form of: Who I am to you?[15] Spivak's harsh critique of the question charges that such a question is selfish and that Kristeva should have been more preoccupied with knowing her "others" rather than with knowing herself. But I believe that Kristeva's question speaks very well to the problems of author-ity. Spivak's critique assumes that one has already positioned oneself in full self-awareness and self-knowledge, and that all that is left to the researcher is to know the "others," the subjects (so many times the "objects") of one's research. Should not Kristeva's question be the question with which one should start research? As Spivak assumes she knows herself and her position all too well, her narrative also tends to lack self-reflexiveness, self-doubt and modesty. Of the authors examined in this paper, I find Mernissi to be the only one who addresses the question of her position vis -à-vis the subjects of her research. Such a meditative stance comes through more clearly in *Dreams of Trespass*, where she examines her childhood in a harem, the women in her life and their stories, the men in her life and their views. The reader is confronted with a narrative that exudes honesty, depth, and a sense of tension and struggle.

Mary B. Vogl's narrative is an exposé on the violences entailed by the investigation of a cultural framework that is not one's own, musing on the predicaments of the Western researcher whose claims to authority (understood also as authorial voice) she finds problematic.[16] But there is little sense in which the reader is edified as to how Vogl positions herself as a Western academic vis-à-vis her subjects of research. The author offers no account as to how it is that, while exposing the precarious

position of the "white" intellectual representing "non-white" cultures, she takes no pains to explain how she might have superseded this difficulty. Perhaps like Mernissi, Rey Chow takes pains to situate herself within the enterprise of academic research and to muse on the violences engendered by "the hegemonic status of Western theoretical thinking" (1991, xii). But her readiness to embrace Western theoretical thinking as the tool to expose and decode Chinese structures of fantasy and desire strikes me as highly problematic. It seems to imply that, while the status of Western ideational structures is that of hegemonic imposition, such structures remain nonetheless the appropriate tools for the examination of non-Western ideational and symbolic structures.[17]

Lila Abu-Lughod's attempt to portray the life of the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin tribes from Egypt through the medium of women's stories constitutes an interesting attempt to render the authorial voice accountable and transparent, as she makes sure to inform the reader of her personal interactions with the families in whose lives she had been closely involved. The reader is a witness to the difficulties and dilemmas of her position, as she tries to gain the trust of her subjects, and as she attempts to build a relationship based on confidence and respect. However, the reader becomes aware that while Abu-Lughod takes great pains at self-reflexivity, the rendition of her encounters lacks something very important: reciprocity. The author refuses to let the others know her views and opinions on various matters (such as sexual relations, marriage, or romance), claiming that she fears she would lose the respect of her interviewees should she expose her personal positions. If Kristeva's question of "Who am I to you?" is to be applied in this case, one can conclude that Abu-Lughod poses the question, but she is not interested in the answer. Or perhaps she is afraid of the answer. Another possibility would be that by giving the answer she would have ended any chance at dialogue.[18] After all, the returned gaze is not always flattering for the one who is gazed at. I mention this particular instance as her refusal to be known to the *other* struck me as somewhat dishonest and subversive of her claims to self-reflexivity and critical ethnography. Although critical of the disappointing lack of reflexivity in the works of self-proclaimed critical theorists, I am aware that I myself am probably guilty of the same hubris. This hubris consists in the failure to acknowledge one's entrenched position in the structures of hegemonic theoretical thinking, while purporting to bring to light "subjugated knowledges," to speak their voices, and understand their experiences.

In "Two Lectures", Foucault (1980) explains his understanding of the concept of "subjugated knowledges." He claims that one understanding of this concept implies "those blocs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematising theory and which criticism […] has been able to reveal" (1980, 82). Post-colonialism can be seen as one of the subjugated knowledges envisioned by Foucault. The experience and legacy of colonialism is something that was left in the shadow for a very long time. However, I wonder to what point postcolonial intellectuals are aware of the fact that implicit claims to one's sufficiency of voice, and to a condition of self-imposed exile to the margins, tends to overlook many voices that lie in the shadow of these self-named margins. This self-placement at the margins has as much to do with the violence against oneself mentioned earlier in the paper, as with violence against "others." As mentioned earlier in this paper, margins have their own margins, and the geography of power is not constituted of an unproblematic and neatly cut centre and periphery, but rather it is made up of mobile centers and peripheries that are highly protean. At times, one's centre of power can constitute someone else's periphery and vice versa. I do not see margins as frozen lines, rather I see them being performed and re-performed *ad infinitum*.[19]

An important question that Foucault asks and that should give us food for thought is the following: "is it not perhaps the case that these fragments of genealogies are no sooner brought into light, that the particular elements of the knowledge that one seeks to disinter are no sooner accredited and put into circulation, than they run the risk of *re-codification* and *re-colonisation*?" (1980, 86).[20] To what extent are we aware, as intellectuals, of the implications and imbrications of our discourses with the "master narrative of the dominant European subject," as Spivak aptly put it? When considering the notion of violence against oneself, can it not be said that by positioning ourselves as intellectuals at the margins, and by lamenting such a positioning as a *deus ex machina* condition imposed on us from the

outside, we are much more vulnerable to practices of *re-codification* and *re-colonization*? However, it needs to be acknowledged that it is precisely this painfully ambivalent position of the non-Western intellectual within Western academia that can be very productive.[21]

Contra Appiah and Spivak, as much as I find their critiques deeply thoughtful and perceptive, I would argue that such a position(ing) is less a unidirectional one, whereby the Third World intellectual simply appropriates the discourse of oppression, and more a hybrid one, whereby such an intellectual no longer belongs to either world: the Third World or the West. Rather her/his positioning is somewhere in the in-betweenness of such worlds. Such an in-betweenness, as Bhabha explained, is not to be conceived as a "third term that resolves the tension between two cultures […] in a dialectical play of recognition" (2004, 162). Rather, it is to be conceived of as disruption of authority, as the denial of a mirror through which the colonial subject produces its double. As Bhabha claims, "it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid" (2004, 162). In his vision, the very entry of what he calls "denied knowledges" into the realm of authorized and authoritative knowledge, serves to disrupt such authority and to expose its simulacrum status, its yearning for an original that never existed, to put it into a Baudrillard-inspired terminology.

Telling Tales: The Challenges and Ambivalence of Orality

One of the "subjugated knowledges" of Western thinking is orality. The oral tradition possesses a subjugated (indeed suppressed) status in the traditionally acknowledged fields of learning. It is largely viewed as a residue of primitivism, as one of the last remains of pre-modernity illegitimately seeping through the age of modern enlightenment. I attached the term "illegitimate" to orality as this tradition is regarded as lacking legitimacy and authority as an avenue towards attaining knowledge.[22] Academic knowledge, in the modern tradition of reason, must pursue a set of injunctions which confer upon it the status of legitimacy. These injunctions imply the pursuing of questions in a fashion that allows the researcher to control as much as possible of her/his environment, and to constantly predict failures, successes, variables, and invariables -- in a nutshell, it frowns upon the unexpected and the uncontrollable.

With its characteristics of "verbal flexibility" and "openness," as remarked upon by Monia Hejaiej (1996), orality is considered inappropriate for the academic sphere as it operates with not only different epistemological tools, but its practices evince a different ontological stance, which poses an interesting challenge to the recognized academic approaches. One reason for the superficial treatment that orality has received in the academy is that, as it shall be seen later in greater detail, the narrator manages to simultaneously subvert and re-found the traditional system of values that underpins her stories, and thus she/he manages to both recreate and contest traditionally held views on life and knowledge. "Legitimate academic knowledge" operates within a much more rigid framework that allows for little contestation (and ambiguity) and that makes little space for the recreation of knowledge paradigms and epistemological frameworks.

Fatema Mernissi (1995) sees orality as a challenge posed to the written sign, in the same manner that Mary B. Vogl (2003) views the written sign as a challenge posed to the image. The latter suggests that the written sign can be regarded as an antidote to the "tyranny of the image." If the image seduces by its claim to veracity and to "faithful" reproduction of the real, then only by deciphering the image, and by reading it in the code of the written sign can the spell of the simulacrum be broken. Perhaps an extrapolation can be drawn from this example with regards to orality. The mythemes (which are the irreducible and unchangeable units of myths) with which the oral traditions operate challenge and subvert the fixity and the rigidity of the written word. The events, characters, and even the underlying values of the tales are open to contestation and re-negotiation, they can be doubted and interrogated, whereas the written sign claims a legitimacy and an authority that stems primarily from its bounded nature.

Narratology operates with the concept of the "unreliable narrator," whose credibility as informant is seriously questioned due to her/his biases, to a psychological condition, or to a lack of

information. As such, narratology seems to imply that "out there" is an ideal of the "reliable narrator" whose credibility and veracity are uncompromised. The oral tradition does not discriminate between credible and less credible narrators. Narrators constantly infuse their stories with their personal experiences and values; it cannot be otherwise. The practice of storytelling is viewed as living and breathing, in the sense that there seems to be some kind of osmosis between the narrator and her/his story. Thus one can understand why the association between credibility and narration seems to be a fallacy in the oral tradition, and why it is that academic research regards orality's easy acceptance of uncertainty with such uneasiness.

Abu-Lughod states that storytelling (orality), due to its being situated (in terms of a teller and an audience), refuses the social scientific power of generalization (1993, 15).[23] But she ignores that storytelling (or at least the type of storytelling with which she engages) involves a lot of repetition, and generalization in itself and of itself. Storytelling operates with general, generalized, and generalizable human types, attitudes and situations (archetypes). There is an innate generalization in storytelling, which arises from its desire to address a large variety of audiences, and to touch and captivate them by portraying general types with whom/which everyone can identify themselves. This is not to suggest that storytelling does not rely on the contingent as well. But one must keep in mind the fascinating interplay of general and particular that weaves the narrative and the background of stories.

It seems that the desire to emphasize difference, complexity, and contingency, prompts us to purge any indications of homogeneity, similarity, and timelessness. The time of stories is often not that of historical contingency, rather that of timelessness and mythical time. There is a sense of ahistoricity that pervades the temporality of stories. How do critical authors reconcile this with their desire to encounter and *create* contingency, complexity, and difference? I believe that when dealing with orality, one should bear in mind the negotiation that takes place, within the practice of storytelling, between timelessness and contingency, general and particular, contestation and acceptance. As such, orality is not without its caveats. As orality is a blend of fluidity and fixity, one can easily fall into the trap of pursuing a unidimensional interpretation of stories, and of the social and moral systems they indicate. Therefore, an important issue that arises points to the ways whereby researchers use the oral tradition as a means to challenge traditional epistemological positions, and yet fail to meditate on the inherent fallacies of such endeavours.

For example, Abu-Lughod aptly states that "experimentation with techniques of ethnographic writing to relieve anthropologists' discomforts about their power over their subjects … [such as] refiguring informants as consultants or 'letting the other speak' in dialogic […] or polyvocal texts […] leaves intact the basic configuration of global power on which anthropology is based" (1993, 26). It seems that this experimentation serves more the purpose of salving the researchers' conscience than that of dealing meaningfully with the violences implied by the unequal relation between researcher and subjects. This critique does not suggest that such violences can indeed be done away with and wholly eliminated from our work. Rather it points to the implicit hypocrisy that can be encountered within claims to responsible and ethical research, which is meant to place the researcher under the protection of a self-regarding ethical umbrella, and which does not particularly target the subjects (often transformed into the objects) of our research.

In an interview from 1987, Spivak insightfully notes that the post-colonial critic cannot but "inhabit the structures of violence and violation" that she/he seeks to interrogate (1990, 72). As such, the exercise becomes more one of negotiation than one of radical transformation and supplanting. This is strongly reminiscent of Judith Butler's remark that critiquing involves contesting hegemonic practices and ideas from *within* one's own cultural location (1999, 187). Thus, to claim that the researcher can somehow rise above those "structures of violence and violation" she/he inhabits and erase the violence that such structures entail, is to forget how us, Western(-based) researchers, thrive upon these very structures.

Spivak, in *Death of a Discipline*, suggests that "language-based literary investigations" escape or diminish the violences of working *through* "interested cultural informants" (2003, 13). As storytelling is

usually associated with a particular literary tradition (such as narratology), how do literary techniques and literary works escape this duplicitous "liability clause" that seems to protect primarily the interests of the researcher? Can they? What are the pitfalls associated with Spivak's approach? Can this turn into the highbrow endeavour that strives to illuminate the complicities of culture with imperialism, always at the level of rarefied and elitist culture, as adopted by Said in his *Culture and Imperialism*? Spivak disavows the position of the anthropologist and constructs an apologia for the position(ing) of the reader, as the latter offers the unique possibility of "com[ing] close to the irreducible work of translation, not from language to language but from body to ethical semiosis" (Ibid.). Such a statement can be extrapolated to suggest (to a mind biased towards the merits of orality) that the oral tradition is closer to a translation "from body to ethical semiosis" than that of the written word, which is inextricably bound by a rigid representation of language. Storytelling, aside from using language as a medium of sharing information, employs other elements that become crucial to the story, such as body language, tonality, voice inflexions, the smells and sounds of the material set in which the act of narration takes place, the instantaneous reactions of the listeners, and the atmosphere.

Abu-Lughod (1993) deals with the oral tradition of the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin tribes from Egypt through the textual reproduction of women's oral narratives. However, while bringing forward stories told by women, she fails to capture the deeply political overtones stemming from women's attempts to cope with and sometimes to resist certain practices and attitudes that relegate them to the silenced sphere. Her purpose is to challenge the prevailing ethnographic accounts that privilege the voice of the researcher, and to offer an alternative way of doing ethnographic research, which respects and privileges the voices of subjects. However meritorious such an endeavour, it is important to note that the mere act of bringing the other's voice forward is not sufficient. Such a practice must be accompanied by a contextualizing of that particular narrative, by a drawing out of its political ramifications, and by making the appropriate connections between those narratives and the socio-political practices they target.[24]

If Abu-Lughod disappointingly fails to emphasize the deeply subversive political undertones of orality, Monia Hejaiej (1996) and Mernissi (1995; 2001) try to underline precisely this political aspect of storytelling. Hejaiej (1996) perceives storytelling as a practice that (re)creates and is being created by social hierarchies existing both outside the tales (the tellers are usually women, as storytelling is a practice despised and trivialized as something pertaining to the realm of the feminine/the private realm), and within the tales (between classes, races, genders, animals, and humans). Moreover, the stories are told, re-told, and re-fashioned to suit the personal experiences of the narrator. In this case, the sense of authority and subjectivity of the storyteller is much more striking than in the written text (1996, 47).[25]

Hejaiej remarks that "telling tales is not so much recounting past events, as a reflection of present cultural values. In the act of narration, memories are brought back to life" (1996, 58). As such, storytelling is not a dusty archive in which we collect and *preserve* old and antiquated traditions. Rather they are alive, they re-fashion and rewrite both past and present. Hejaiej emphasizes the political power of women as narrators. She is using the Greek myth of Philomela the weaver to illustrate how forced silencing encourages women to capitalize on their creative capacity, and to express their sense of political agency through narration (1996, 58-59). As such, she brilliantly suggests that orality is not about bringing the past forward. Rather it is an expression of a contingent sense of identity/ identification, a living tool of self-understanding, agency, and resistance, which allows women to "explore alternative consciousness" (1996, 86). The contingency of storytelling arises from the contingent positioning of the teller, not from the story itself. She points to the fact that orality and storytelling can be both tools for resisting patriarchal and hegemonic codes of thought, and for practicing self-empowerment; yet, at the same time, stories can be tools for enforcing and endorsing patriarchal codes of living.

Mernissi suggests, in a captivating and keenly profound narrative of her childhood, that "to speak while the others are listening is the expression of power itself. But even the seemingly subservient, silent listener has an extremely strategic role, that of the audience. What if the powerful

listener loses his audience?" (1995, 41). In this beautifully simple, yet profoundly revealing passage, the author points to two key things. One would be the strategic role of the speaker (that could be read as the storyteller), which implies that women possess an extremely important weapon, that of telling stories. The other point, reminiscent of the Hegelian inspired master/slave dialectic (taken on by Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skins, White Masks*), suggests a way of resistance: the female listeners can stop listening to the male speakers, thus subverting the relation of domination and "confusing the roles." The powerful male speakers enjoy their position of domination *as* speakers only in so far as there is an audience who listens. When the audience stops listening, resistance begins.

Readers of Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller" might find such an argument disturbing. In his essay, Benjamin muses on the implications of the disappearance of the art of storytelling, which he views as "an artisan form of communication" (1986, 91). Benjamin puts forth the argument that storytelling implies a sharing of experience that entails giving counsels (1968, 90). Such an immediate form of communication (most particular in its oral form) has "germinative power," in so far as stories to do not explain their meaning, they do not explain themselves. Rather, they "concentrate [their] strength and [are] capable of releasing it even after a long time" (Ibid.). If oral stories (the oral sharing of experiences) allow for a layering and nuancing of the same story through its repeating by different storytellers, who imbue it with their own experiences and worldviews, the rise of the novel and the dissemination of information (in particular in its written form found in newspapers) involved a distancing between participants in the narrative act: between the creator/author/storyteller and her audience/reader, between the members of the audience or the readers themselves. The reader of the novel, argues Benjamin, is more isolated than any other reader and is completely absorbed by the act of reading, which she makes completely her own, beyond the possibility of sharing such an experience with others (1968, 100).

If the implications of Benjamin's argument are to be worked out, one could make the case that the act of ceasing to listen does not constitute resistance; that the rise of the novel signals the decay of storytelling by removing "narrative from the realm of living speech" (1968, 87). Such a process isolates even more the individual from the social collective and precludes the possibility of sharing wisdom. However, I believe that there are strong merits to Mernissi's argument. Benjamin does not seem to make a distinction between stories shared via speech, as part of the art and tradition of storytelling, and written stories. Nor does he ponder on what happens when oral stories are transposed into written ones. Do they retain their germinative power? What about the process of layering and nuancing of stories that only happens when stories are *told* by different tellers? After all, there is no *retelling* in the written form of stories.[26] Mernissi's statement brings into sharp focus the political (and politicizing aspects) of the double role of speaker/listener. To claim that storytellers are merely mediators of their experience and givers of counsel is to obscure the power relations between listener and speaker. Spivak (1988b), making a case for why the subaltern cannot speak, argues that to speak is the sign of a privileged position within a social order, one that enjoys social and political recognition. But the speaker can make a claim to power and truth only in so far as she/he has an audience. Here, Mernissi points to possibilities of resistance, by taking the act of storytelling as an example and extrapolating it to the larger social domain. She unfailingly captures the political message of storytelling, and returns the paralyzing gaze of the local patriarchal figures and of the French colonial administration. In her narrative, the margins write back loudly, forcefully, and most importantly, compellingly.

Conclusions

What is at stake in reading between East and West? I suppose one tentative answer would be the contestation or reproduction (perhaps both?) of hierarchies that tend to be constructed and replicated when Western researchers attempt to "read" the East. Also, another possible answer would be the destabilizing of our understandings concerning the very notions of "West" and "non-West." One possible avenue for the investigation of the above mentioned hierarchies could be, as indicated by Rey

Chow, the structures of fantasy and desire that underpin both East and West (as monolithic as this phrasing may sound). As Mernissi masterfully demonstrates, in her *Scheherazade Goes West*, it is not so much the case (as Chow seems to claim) that there is the belief in a "realpolitical" non-West and in an "imaginative" West. I believe the lines are blurry. Mernissi suggests that it is more likely that the "imaginative" East exists in the Western imagination only when gazed at through the prism of Western structures of fantasy and desire. The Western-imagined Scheherazade has nothing in common with the Scheherazade from *Arabian Nights*, as imagined by the East. She is rather a production of a Western set of desires and fantasies that bespeak its views on the feminine, sexuality, and not the least, on power and politics. As such, while deconstructing such codes of dreams and longings seems to be a must for the post-colonial intellectual, it is important to beware, as Linda Hutcheon noticed, "the dangers of postmodern deconstruction without a post-colonial exposé" (quoted in Vogl 2003, 35).

Therefore, one cannot attempt to understand the politics of reading between East and West, without paying due regard to the legacies of colonialism (which translate into ongoing neo-colonial practices, I might add). Abu-Lughod's *Writing Women's Worlds* aspires to be a collection of stories that allows women's voices to be heard, while implicitly claiming to offer the reader the freedom to make the appropriate connections between local politics, stories, and the researcher's interventions. However, to merely reproduce narratives that fail to capture their political overtones is highly problematic, as it can be interpreted as a way to circumvent responsibility for one's research project. Contextualizing narratives and drawing out their political ramifications is certainly not without its violences and dangers, but it does establish that the researcher is accountable for her project. Undoubtedly, the position of the post-colonial intellectual is fraught with ambivalence and tension. As Spivak noted, one cannot extricate oneself from the "spaces of violence and violation" one inhabits. One should be aware that the position is rather one of negotiation, which implies a blending of one's desire for transformation with an awareness that one's locus (read as privileged academic position) is granted and made possible by those very "spaces of violence and violation" one seeks to contest. What this implies is an awareness that the above mentioned locus is part of and implicated in a network of power hierarchies in which the academic researcher is not the marginal party. This awareness triggers a series of uncomfortable questions: how I am implicated in the violence I contest and write against? What are the margins of my project? What are the voices I silence? What do I not see? Who I am to you?

NOTES

1. When making such a statement, what I have in mind are not the written stories, but the tales that circulate primarily by oral means. The Maghreb has an immensely rich tradition in oral stories, so that some people have (or rather used to have) the social function of storytellers. The interesting thing is that women seem to be the ones who perform such roles, as story-telling is scoffed by men as an exclusively feminine (and therefore domestic) practice. It is precisely here that resistance takes shape, as women can and do use storytelling as a way to undermine the prevailing patriarchal attitudes and practices, and to reverse the power roles. Monia Hejaiej, Fatema Mernissi (1995), and Lila Abu-Lughod approach this specific kind of oral stories.

2. As a woman, I also found myself drawn to these texts because they seemed to offer some sort of elucidation on what it means to be a Western/non-Western woman in the Western academy, investigating non-Western cultures and claiming to speak with an authority and legitimacy that is bestowed on her voice by her location.

3. I am deeply aware that this statement might be interpreted by the reader as a reification and reproduction, on my part, of the much discussed binary masculine/feminine, by opposing the idea of emotion and desire (that is frequently associated with the feminine) to the idea of detached and lucid narrative (often associated with the masculine). I do not want to pre-empt this caveat and eschew any such binaries. Rather I am trying to suggest that binaries and reifications are sometimes unavoidable; that if one wishes to explore the ambivalent productivity of "the third space," much theorized by Bhabha (2004), one needs to cease regarding binaries (and the associations they imply) as taboos. Perhaps a more productive approach would be to explore the mechanisms that allow such binaries to be (re)produced, and attempt to unveil the ensconced desires and fantasies that surface in the form of binaries. This, in my mind, is what politicization is all about: exposing fantasies and desires that get to be presented and produced as natural(ized) propensities of humans.

4. By conceptualizing orality as an "alternative methodology to writing" I do not wish to imply that I view orality as a tool supplanting practices of writing. Rather I wish to suggest, in a more forceful way, that orality should be acknowledged as one of various methodologies one might employ for research, and as an intriguing possibility to explore the mechanisms that confer legitimacy upon well-entrenched binaries such as East/West, and masculine/feminine.

5. Among the authors surveyed in this paper only Fatema Mernissi (1995; 2001) and Monia Hejaiej (1996) discuss the political aspects of storytelling, although they do not make explicit claims regarding the political (and politicizing potentialities) of orality.

6. I thank William D. Coleman for his helpful and thoughtful insights on this issue and for pushing me to consider the implications of using this binary unreflexively.

7. However, one needs to take into consideration that various authors would argue that binaries such as West/East or West/ non-West allow for the emergence of possibilities for collective mobilizations and resistance. For example, Ella Shohat argues that terms such as "Third World" can be empowering in so far as they "imply a belief that the shared history of neo/colonialism and internal racism form sufficient common ground for alliances among such diverse peoples" (1992, 111). Therefore, Shohat claims that the term "post-colonial" (in its desire to erase binaries such as West/East, First World/Third World) collapses the structural global hierarchy with its emphasis on hybridity and fragmentation. Consequently, one needs to ponder as well on the counter-argument: what is at stake in dismantling and transcending the West/non-West divide? For provocative and insightful discussions on the problematic practices and concepts that the term "post-colonial" implies, and for arguments contra "hybridity," see Arif Dirlik (1994, 2003), Ella Shohat (1992), and Rey Chow (1993). For counter arguments, see Mezzadra and Rahola (2006) and Ien Ang (1994).

8. Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (2000) aims at bringing forward voices of the people affected by the partition of India. The author's attempt is to re-write and re-fashion history as not only the impartial account of official meetings and events, but mainly as the contested and paradoxical set of narratives of some of the voices coming from people of various backgrounds who are affected by and who affect events.

9. Such a criticism of Said's work could be counteracted with the argument that the whole premise of *Orientalism* is that the West (anxiously) constructs its own identity by means of an imagined (or fantastical) geography of the "Orient." That is true, Said makes it clear that the "Orient" portrayed by the West is imagined. But what are those particular fantasies, desires, and emotions that haunt Western imagination and psyche? I believe Mernissi's project deals with these fantasies of the "West" in a more meaningful and thoughtful way. More importantly, why is it that he talks in terms of a unified and monolithic Western imagination, while critiquing precisely the homogeneous and stereotypical representations of the "Orient"?

10. Such a claim can be encountered in the texts of Monia Hejaiej, Mary B. Vogl, Lila Abu-Lughod, and a host of mainly feminist authors, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, Catherine Lutz, Anne McClintock, Trinh Minh-ha, and others.

11. The obsession of post-colonial thought (particularly the one inspired by post-structuralist/post-modernist theories) with eschewing any adherence to universal, general(izable), and ahistorical conceptualizations has been the focus of heated debates. Consider, for example, Anna Tsing's argument that universality is "charged and enacted in the sticky materiality of practical encounters" (2004, 1). In her opinion, to reconceptualize the universal means to acknowledge that universals are local knowledges, but they are also local knowledges that move across locales and cultures (2004, 7). Therefore, one needs to ask what are the implications of moving from one end of the spectrum (universal) to the other end (particular), and why is it that the universal/particular cannot be understood and explored beyond unidimensional understandings of culture, identity, and historicity. For intriguing reconceptualizations of the universal, see Anna Tsing (2004), Arif Dirlik (1994; 2003), Ella Shohat (1992), and Mezzadra and Rahola (2006).

12. In the light of the earlier discussion on the politics of the West/non-West binary, such a statement might seem highly confusing. However, I need to clarify that it is Chow herself who claims that she is using a set of analytical tools that she identifies as belonging to the "West" ("practical criticism," structuralism, post-structuralism, feminist theory, popular culture theories, and theories of ethnicity) (1991, xv). By doing so, she acknowledges that she "undoubtedly" pays homage to the West. Yet, in an age where the "West" has become "an ineradicable environment," what matters is not, in the author's opinion, whether one pays homage, but rather *how* this homage is paid.

13. My enthusiasm for Mernissi's incursion into Arab culture instead of appealing to analytical tools popular in Western academia, and my desire to extricate current scholarly discussion from Western codes of knowledge might be seen as an enactment of a fantasy for authenticity that desires to escape the "polluting" aspects of Western knowledge and retrieve some sort of long lost nativistic wisdom. Perhaps that is the case. But what my questions are trying to subvert is the almost undisputed precept according to which to do academic research is to embrace a host of methods, tools, and famous names coming from academic institutions in North America and Europe, which confer legitimacy and a "sophisticated" touch upon our projects. *What* is it about these methods, tools, and names that bestows an aura of legitimate scholarship? What are we missing out on by not exploring also *other* avenues of knowledge, other sets of

tools, other names? And if, indeed, as Rey Chow puts it, the Western academy has become "an ineradicable environment," where does this leave me and my work? As one of the anonymous reviewers remarked, it is ironic that the paper argues strongly for reading between Western and non-Western intellectual and critical traditions, and yet all its references are published by Western presses (including the materials identified as "alternative"). I guess this observation speaks very richly as to the location of the production of "legitimate" knowledge; but is this a valid proof to Chow's argument that Western academia has become an "ineradicable environment?"

14. I suppose that, when posing this question, I bear in mind that it is not a homogeneous non-West that contributes to the creation of the Western *hudud*. Rather, certain parts of what is known as the non-West seem to have a more potent role in the creation and maintenance of the *hudud*, such as practices that come to be known throughout the world for their "exotic" overtones (norms regarding dress codes, certain foods, certain sexual practices, etc.). To put it within a framework conceptualized by Anna Tsing (2004), these point as much to the "an ethnography of global connections" as to the messy network created by specificities and universals.

15. Kristeva formulates this question in *About Chinese Women* (1986).

16. Authority implies here a legitimacy to speak and to make claims to truth. Claims to authority need to be understood in this context also as claims to author-ity, in so far as Western claims to authority, which stem from a position of power, stem also from a sense of authorial entitlement. This sense of entitlement needs to be perceived as the practice of creating and originating values and practices that are taken hereafter as the norm.

17. In spite of my criticisms of Rey Chow's project, I want to state that I have a great deal of admiration for the depth and sophistication with which she puts forth her striking insights. I was particularly impressed and compelled by her arguments regarding the insidiousness with which Orientalism sneaks into our texts; the ideological underpinnings of our attempts to "sanctify the subaltern"; the ambivalent politics of diasporas; and the politics that inform various attempts at retrieving the native's voice. Such insights are to be found in her *Writing Diaspora* (1993).

18. I believe this possibility speaks volumes about those moments of untranslatability and about those incommensurable elements that constitute the space between the researcher and her subjects. Spivak (1988a) seemed to think that she could bridge this gap, but I disagree. I believe that it is in these moments of cultural untranslatability that the hierarchy of power between researcher and her subjects is inscribed. After all, the researcher can always access the privilege of transparency: she can at any time in her text justify her actions, thoughts, and fears. This is not the privilege of her subjects.

19. I do not see the centre/periphery divide as necessarily mapping over the West/non-West divide. I think the centre/ periphery binary encapsulates quite well a more dynamic understanding of power, in that it allows for the possibility to explore networks of power and violence *within* societies/cultures themselves, and not only *between* or *among* societies/ cultures.

20. My emphasis.

21. Arif Dirlik (1994) poses a provoking question: to what extent can the self-proclaimed post-colonial intellectual be considered a "non-Western" intellectual, and what are the politics of placing oneself in the realm of marginality while being comfortably situated in the realm of the centre?

22. Anthropology might be considered a discipline that could escape such a criticism. However, one thinks of Lila Abu-Lughod's statement according to which experimenting with various ethnographic techniques such as polyvocal texts, or changing the status of informants into consultants, serves mainly to alleviate the researchers' discomforts over the power relation between researchers and their subjects (1993, 26). Such a statement encourages us (researchers, academics, intellectuals) to meditate on the context in which orality has been appropriated by anthropology as an alternative methodology, and wonder whether anthropology can indeed fully escape this critique.

23. As explained in Note 1, I am equating storytelling with orality in this paper in so far as the women authors with whose texts I engage (Lila Abu-Lughod, Monia Hejaiej, and Fatema Mernissi (1995)) refer specifically to this particular type of stories that are narrated orally.

24. By suggesting this, I am aware that the very exercise of commenting and offering perspectives on other cultures has its own traps and is plagued by its own violences. Nonetheless, I do not regard as sufficient the practice of merely reproducing narratives without contextualizing them within a larger social and political framework. For example, Mernissi's women speak with powerful and clear voices, and their narratives are endowed with a political meaning that exceeds the sphere of their limited and restricted positions within their society. Abu-Lughod's women, on the other hand, seem unable, for the most part, to politicize themselves.

25. However, one needs to bear in mind that oral stories are conveyed into written text (in books). As such, it is worthwhile to ponder on how the oral form is conveyed *through* the written form. Since certain elements are lost (such as inflections of voice, tonality, the listeners' reactions) when oral stories are transposed into written text, one can make the

argument that a certain sense of active mediation between speaker/storyteller and audience (present in the oral form) fades into the background of the written sign. I thank the anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to explore the transposition of the oral form into written text.

26. Benjamin is engaging mostly with a European tradition of stories, in particular with the stories written by Nikolai Leskov, Herodotus, and Johann Peter Hebel. This tradition of storytelling in the written form is imbued with a deep sense of contingency, in so far as the stories are inspired by the authors' personal experiences and fantasies. But some Arab scholars have attempted precisely this: the act of *retelling* of stories through the written form. Monia Hejaiej (1996) shows how the same stories are being retold by various storytellers, and how the stories alter according to who the storyteller is. These particular stories involve a sense of timelessness about them (mythical time), as they approach more the genre of fairy tales. The elements of contingency and historicity arise mainly from the storytellers' alteration of the storyline or of the ending of the story according to their particular worldviews and desires. At no time, do these storytellers claim to be authors or creators of the stories they tell: they are mediators, or transmitters.

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Empire Writes Back: between dreams of trespass and fantasies of resistance

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