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Debra Kelly, *Autobiography and Independence: Selfhood and Creativity in North African Postcolonial Writing in French. Contemporary French and Francophone Letters 2*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2005. vii + 400pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$85.00 (hb). ISBN 0-85323-659-3.

Review by Clarisse Zimra, Southern Illinois University.

With this book, professor Debra Kelly, who teaches at the University of Westminster, proffers a richly researched study on four authors raised as subjects of Empire in North Africa during the first half of the twentieth century: Algeria's Mouloud Feraoun, a Kabyle born in 1913 and Assia Djébar, an Andalusian-Berber born in 1936; Albert Memmi, a Tunisian Sephardim born in 1923 and Abdelkébir Khatibi, a Moroccan Arab born in 1938. None had French as a native tongue. All wrote in the language of the colonizers. Trained in the schools of their colonial masters, witnesses to their country's access to full independence, their writings have been stamped by a personal experience profoundly marked by the cultural and political trauma of colonial history. Such history has defined them and shaped their craft. Therefore, Kelly posits, these four must be read along two simultaneous axes of interpretation: (a) the biographical connection that sees their works as the painful coming of age of the colonized self seeking agency; and (b) the socio-political context against which they define and eventually achieve their own private and public decolonization.

France conquered North Africa as a result of its hostile entanglements with the Ottoman Empire. The first expeditionary troops landed in Sidi-Ferruch, Algeria, in 1830, snatching the territory out from under the Ottoman overlords and ushering in a century of brutal occupation and land dispossession. By 1881, Tunisia had reluctantly become a French Protectorate; a generation later, in 1912, so did Morocco. Both were finally free of the French yoke in March 1956. That these protectorates should end so speedily was no coincidence. Two years earlier, the Dien Bien Phû debacle had tolled the knell of Empire in Indochina. A mere three months after relinquishing her hold on Viet-Nâm in July 1954, France had her hands full when a nasty Algerian uprising flared up in November. The Indochinese war had already lasted eight years. It would take another eight years of bloody struggles, in which close to ten per cent of the native people perished, before the last French soldier would finally leave Algerian soil in June 1962. Algeria thus gained her freedom at a much higher cost than either Tunisia or Morocco. If such literature explores its close connections with history, as Kelly contends, such details must yield vastly divergent fictional renderings. This may account for the tonal differences among the selected writers: Memmi, away from Tunisia but ensconced in Paris, and Khatibi, still living in Morocco, tend to look back at their formative years with fond nostalgia. Feraoun, murdered in the last days of the war, and Djébar, still in reluctant political exile, write much more closely to the anti-colonial bone, a distinction Kelly does not fully explore.

Coming after a short and crisp general overview ("Introduction" pp. 1-8), a long methodological chapter covers the theoretical wars ("Life/Writing" pp 9-51). Beyond that, *Autobiography and Independence* is evenly divided into four large parts, one per writer: (1) "Life-Writing, History," the Feraoun chapter; (2) "Fictions of Identity and the Quest for Truth," the Memmi chapter; (3) "The Deciphering of Memory and the Potential of Postcolonial Identity," the Khatibi chapter; and, finally, (4) "History, Selfhood and the Possession of Knowledge," the Djébar chapter. Each is, in turn, allotted several subchapters with descriptive subtitles. What connects these writers of different ethnic and class origins may well be, as Kelly surmises, what triggered in them the urge to write in the first place: their shared linguistic alienation, a sense of not quite owning nor controlling their craft and, thereby, the anxiety of not quite

owning themselves. In an act of imaginary self-birthing, each of them seeks in writing to recapture an imaginary homeland long disappeared. This paradox of an imaginary homeland more real than the real one Kelly felicitously summarizes in her conclusion by punning on “being in the word,” alongside “being in the world” (p. 339).

To demonstrate that their early circumstances have had an essential impact on their works, Kelly begins with a chapter on autobiography as a literary form, “Life/Writing in the Colonial and Postcolonial Contexts.” Eschewing a narrow psychoanalytical stance, whether of Freud’s or Lacan’s persuasion, one that would limit us to the tropes of victimized colonials, she also steers clear of a political one that would yield only oppositional moves. Instead, Kelly seizes on the autobiographical as a self-referential authorial move that she defines thus: “By ‘autobiographical discourse’ here I mean texts that we know (or suspect) write the life or parts of the life of the author, but in which the reader is reliant on outside information to substantiate this” (p. 37).

To follow Kelly’s contention, aptly suggested in the parenthetical doublet of the quotation above, i.e. “we know (or suspect),” these writers encode themselves into their narratives in ways simultaneously obvious and opaque. What I would call an evasive strategy thus produces a double textual register, both an obvious autobiography and a fictional rewriting of the past. The reader is here invited to employ a very post-modern interpretive move: whether, to use Kelly’s terms, one “knows” or “suspects” one knows, one must engage this hermeneutics of suspicion and consider whether to do justice to life (the precise factoids of a writer’s recorded life events) or to literature (what this writer has chosen to do with those factoids). If, as Kelly justly argues, the authorial self has become other in the process of writing, so must the reader be transformed accordingly, both as a threat (because such a reader can sift between true facts and reinterpreted facts) and as an object of writerly desire (to willingly participate in the joint making of meaning). Only readers and writers who, confronting the post-colonial moment, remain aware of their own complicit inscription in the dominant western system of representation need apply, for it is a reading fully attuned to Western sensibility that Kelly invites us to undertake.

In order to do so she must, first, address the problem of autobiography as a literary form and, next, take in its evolution from modernist to post-modernist premises. Literary scholars working on autobiography now agree that one must first investigate the dialectical contradiction of nineteenth-century historiography that has given the West its understanding of the colonial self if one is to understand the post-colonial self. This question of form has generated a substantial body of research that Kelly briskly surveys in chapter one, “Life/Writing”. She moves us confidently from Lejeune’s foundational “pact,” this mimetic compact between reader and writer, to the fragmentation of the modern narrator in its exploded—and imploding—hypertext (think of Beckett’s *L’innommable*). What is one to call this new fictional form poised, as Kelly’s title defines it, at the juncture between “real life and “creative writing”? Edward Said’s life-work, in debunking nineteenth century historians’ claim to pure factuality, demonstrated that history always writes itself as though it were fiction and must be read accordingly. What modern critics call the text—that is, the phenomenological act of writing—creates the self, and not the other way around. Might this be the modern avatar of classical autobiography?

Classical autobiography (say, post-Augustine but pre-Rousseau) anchored authorial competence in a stable and transparent language; the twentieth century’s turn to linguistics (further complicated by the philosophical turn to theory) has muddied the waters by demonstrating that language can no longer be trusted to translate experience. This question of a modern hybrid form hugely complicates matters since, within the past dozen years, the unreliable authorial voice has nevertheless been reclaimed not only in clearly fictional narratives but in historical and pseudo-historical mutant text as well: to wit, Alice Kaplan’s *French Lessons: A Memoir* (Chicago 1993); or Kwame Appiah’s *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford 1993). This is the postmodern position that Kelly adopts when

dealing with four writers for whom the question of language defines the post-colonial subject and its coming to agency.

This long methodical first chapter crisply covers the theoretical wars, a useful move on Kelly's part since modern literary critics, although well versed in the literary history of autobiography as a genre, have yet to accept late twentieth century models as a legitimate transformation of the classical form. On this, her bibliography is admirably erudite. From Neil Lazarus to Gayatri Spivak, Declan Kiberd to Christopher Miller, Kelly has covered the principal postcolonial theorists, as well as taken a leaf from the feminist debates, from Shari Benstock to Françoise Lionnet, Anne Donadey to Susan Stanford-Friedman. Yet she is clearly hampered by her slippery master concept: auto(bio?)graphy. What to call it? Some critics have taken to all kinds of deconstructive spellings to underline the instability of the modern form. To grapple with the concept's indeterminacy, Kelly has selected only a few works per writer, and opted to eschew the traditional term (autobiography) the better, she says, to "enable close readings of the writing strategies at work in texts I have termed 'autobiographical discourses,' rather than 'autobiographies'...since it further allows this study to function within the broad theoretical framework of postcolonial studies" (p. 2, ellipses mine).

Kelly's shuttling among terms may be too ambitiously broad. Her conviction that "autobiographical discourses rather than autobiographies" (a Foucauldian sidestep, this) will better grasp the relationship between self and text is what ails *Autobiography and Independence: Selfhood and Creativity in North African Postcolonial Writing in French*. This overly descriptive title yields either an over-determined referent or a semantic fuzziness further complicated by an abundance of subtitles that use such terms as "autobiography," "life writing," "fictional biography" and, perhaps the most problematic, "fictions of identity." The series suggests that such conceptual categories are not easily interchangeable. What is the precise relationship between "autobiography" and "independence" that the larger title proposes? Can selfhood be claimed only through (or after) independence; which would revisit the question of political agency? Or can there be no modern creativity unless couched autobiographically; which should revisit ontological agency? As the play of the primary titles implies, four positions are possible on this analytical grid (autobiography; independence; selfhood; creativity), perhaps explaining the selection of four writers. Kelly is up against fluctuating texts that continue to resist clear generic boundaries no matter what taxonomy she chooses for them. A tighter paradigm is needed, here, that would do justice to serial structuring. This reviewer thinks that, perhaps, a variation of Greimass's linguistic square, his astute modulation of textually paired binaries that never quite come to formal rest, might have provided a more agile structural model. But, whatever her choice, a model is sorely needed.

Within each of the four larger parts, unstable subtitles multiply. Witness the Feraoun part (chapter two) that seeks to triangulate among three concepts separated by commas: "Life Story, Life-writing, History." Punctuation and conceptualization have already shifted since the previous chapter, "Life/Writing," a subtitle that was typographically slashed. Which and what is cross-hatched, here? What kind of autobiographies are these? On this quandary, Kelly is honest enough to entertain the idea that her selected writers might be hailing from a distinctly different literary tradition, one for which Western generic borders do not apply. She states her problem bluntly: "The issue of 'comparison' between Arabic and Western genres is therefore a complex one and remains unresolved and open to critical interpretation, with critics often having hidden agendas" (p. 21).

Fair and humble enough. So what is her agenda? Careful to specify, "I am a European, British-educated woman with a limited experience of North African culture" (p.8), she takes her cues from feminist positions that ask how the gendered subject is constituted and what spaces it chooses to reterritorialize. With a nod to Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* (Jonathan Cape, 1995), she borrows his approach, "investigation into the depths of the political unconscious," to pronounce her own procedure, "motivated reading

strategies" (p. 32). That is, she expertly deploys a variation of Kiberd's textual critique to excavate the political subtext that motivates her own interpretation of the four writers she has chosen. But motivated by what textual features, exactly? Might she perhaps be unaware that Fredric Jameson, using Lacanian categories, had already investigated the question? His 1981 *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell University Press) examined this coded message Europe sent itself about that which Empire had repressed. She does not cite the American scholar and neither does she connect his well-known position to Said's, [1] a derivation that could have yielded her own critique a much sharper paradigm. For what her four selected writers are doing, whether in works directly autobiographical, or in fictionalized versions of their life experiences, is a systematic rescripting of the relationship between metropolitan center and colonial margins. In asking us to rethink the relationship between the West and the rest, Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* (Pantheon, 1978) had proven that the emperor had no clothes. In *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (Routledge, 2003), Gayatri Spivak likewise challenged our mental and geographic landscape by putting the Ottoman Empire at the center of modernity's blueprint—the unsettling perceptual result was a bit as if one had suddenly upended Mercator's map. Homi Bhabha, whom Kelly does not cite, has since further explored the complicity between colonizer and colonized, boldly going where Sartre, Memmi and Fanon had only tiptoed before. This sudden influx of colonials writing themselves on the cusp of their own decolonization has permanently reshuffled the Eurocentric deck of cards.

So, how postcolonial is Kelly's approach? The term itself is as slippery as the concepts this British scholar tries to stabilize. In the American academy, the postcolonial field has solidified; witness the loss of a fanciful spelling, with or without hyphen, with or without slashes or parentheses. In the wake of the poststructuralist assault of the second half of the twentieth century, literary critique has shifted from writer-centered "literariness" (framing the question of authorial intentionality), to reader-centered "textuality." This shift allows Kelly a great latitude in deploying her "motivated readings. The postmodern writer becomes his/her own reader-in-the-text, a narrative ploy of which Khatibi and Djébar are dazzling masters. Unfortunately, in Europe—and perhaps more than ever in the centripetal political culture of contemporary France wherein all good must flow from Paris—the term and the field have acquired a dubious profile, suspect of serving the still hegemonic Western (that is U.S.-grounded) episteme.

At the imaginary interface of cultural and political negotiations between the colonized subjects and their former colonial masters, *Autobiography and Independence* investigates the fractured memory by which Western nations (particularly here, France) have consolidated their hegemonic hold on their former colonial subjects. As I write this review during summer of 2006, Djébar has just made her maiden speech (22 June 2006) under the dome of the Académie française to which she was elected in 2005. In dozens of French cities, Paris, included, France has been celebrating "la francophonie" for months, officially welcoming on French soil and under the financially generous aegis of the Ministry of Culture thousands of creative artists from all cultures and countries where some portion of the citizens can "lay claim to some French." [3] For the French government at least, this postcolonial moment should erase all memories of the colonial past. Can this glowing patronage efface the determined attempt by lawmakers on 25 February 2005 to promote the benevolent aspects of colonization in the classroom by rewriting official textbooks? After much acrimonious public debate, the proposal was withdrawn at the quiet urging of President Chirac in January 2006. It was an uncanny restaging of Renan's well known quip that a nation establishes its legitimacy by forgetting what it does not wish to remember.

But why select these four, stranded as they are a generation apart in such disparate personal, cultural and political circumstances? Seeking only their textual similarities, Kelly zeroes in on the question of language, an old and honorable position in the field. But is it the only criterion that makes grouping these four worthwhile? This reviewer finds perplexing the implicit, perhaps too optimistic, assumption that the postcolonial field in the Maghreb is so neatly defined by way of the four writers' response to

language alone. By the time, in December 1989, when the Parisian journal *Quinzaine Littéraire* queried a posse of Francophone writers on the linguistic issue, their widely divergent responses showed that the oppositional moment had passed. They no longer felt hobbled by having to use the master's tools to deconstruct the master's house; no longer "in the wolf's maw" ("dans la gueule du loup") as Kateb had once complained. Kelly tells us she chose serendipitously, starting with a study of Camus and Memmi, although Camus is not a focus of this text. Indeed, when it comes to making the case for the Judeo-Tunisian writer's importance to the Maghrebian corpus, Kelly is at the top of her form. Her participation in the Maghreb Research Group at the University of Manchester yielded two more writers from the next generation, Djébar and Khatibi. This generational gap may well be the key variable she was looking for in those divergent formal strategies that her multiple subtitles have such a tough time pinning down. Such generational differences should have been historicized further to determine what holds this four-partite investigation conceptually together and answer, once and for all, the question: why these four and not others?

Autobiography and Independence differentiates the four writers in decreasing concentric circles of authorial congruence. The earliest, Feraoun, clings to a linear confessional narrative in his desire to achieve coherence. Kelly pits the overtly autobiographical novel, *Le fils du pauvre* (recently translated, at long last) against the copious contradictory evidence of Feraoun's private diary (no less superbly translated and edited by James LeSueur).^[5] Over the war years in which he served as a colonial subject, a grade-school teacher and French civil servant, his anguish accelerated: "When I say that I am French, I am giving myself a label which all Frenchmen refuse me" (Kelly, p. 113). Kelly is able to align Feraoun's existential position with Memmi's (both equally indebted to Camus, undoubtedly). The Tunisian did not have to pay with his life. Feraoun was murdered during the final weeks of the war by the rightist arm of the OAS.

With Memmi, Kelly selects two foundational novels, *Statue de sel* (1953) and *Le Scorpion* (1969), pointedly subtitled, *La confession imaginaire* separated by the essays on racism for which Memmi is known the world over. They provide "a kind of matrix generating subsequent narratives" (p. 135) that articulates his situation as a Jew and a Tunisian in a doubly mixed marriage, since his wife is Christian and French-born. This inter-textuality has formal consequences, what Kelly calls "multiple interconnections between Memmi's fiction, poetry and psycho-sociological work" (p. 134).

A student of Memmi's, Khatibi shares in the crazy-quilt experimental format of an ever expanding variety of forms: essays, plays, novels, memoirs, as well as treatises on calligraphy and, even, carpet design. A true Renaissance man, his work is, intellectually at least, of a piece. Kelly prefers those texts that the writer has declared autobiographical: *La mémoire tatouée* (1971), subtitled "autobiography of a decolonized man;" *Le Livre du sang* (1979); and *Amour bilingue* (1983). Unlike most critics who exalt the deconstructive Khatibi, Kelly prefers a simpler phenomenological grounding, a "situation that it is difficult not to read as self-analysis on the part of the author" (p. 213). She makes a persuasive case, but the affiliation here is less with Memmi than with such iconoclastic Moroccan writers of the previous generation as Dib or Chraïbi.

In Djébar, Kelly praises a writer intensely self-aware, yet, unlike Memmi, one who does not tackle moral or political themes overtly. This is too hasty a judgment. The Algerian ghetto comes through as early as the first novels if one would read patiently; to wit, the newly translated *Children of the New World* (NY Feminist Press, 2005), for example. But, true enough, the social subtext is always obliquely foregrounded; for Djébar, the experimental narrative is the point. Hence, the importance of epigraphs, multiple narrators, differentiating typographics, all the concrete features by which Djébar, like Memmi before her, emphasizes the materiality of the act of writing. Woven together yet not integrated into a

seamless texture, they underline the hybrid character of the enterprise; “plural chronicle” for a “singular autobiography” (p. 288).

In her introduction, Professor Kelly claimed to “follow the brief of this series which seeks to provide studies that are useful to students while incorporating current research in the field” (p. 4). She succeeds admirably in imparting the achievement of four major writers without dragging her young charges (beginning students, perhaps) down in a morass of conceptual quarrels and jargons. Her primary focus is textual, and she maintains it firmly. But, as this reviewer has tried to make clear, *Autobiography and Independence* has the qualities and the flaws of its mandate.

Determined to contextualize foreign writers for a home audience, Kelly ends up using a hefty dose of plot summaries and biographical details; a teacher’s occupational hazard, we must presume. The average undergraduate will probably welcome this. A more advanced reader may find it distracting and, sometimes, off target. For example, she mentions the variable editions of Memmi’s *Scorpion* to justly deplore what disappeared in subsequent versions: family photos and drawings he had included as part of a parallel meta-discourse, as well as the desired typography with inks of different colors; the laws of the market, no doubt. But here the scholar misses a glorious opportunity to dig into the problem of the materiality of the book and its language, a materiality that simultaneously seeks to by-pass yet engage the purely verbal or purely graphic. Both Djebbar and Memmi share this urge, and one could argue that Khatibi’s works on calligraphy and rug-weaving proceed from the same need to engage non-Western aesthetics by way of a Western form and vice-versa. This series of “real” documents (Memmi’s own “real” private pictures) and “fictional” graphics (illustrations by his own hand) construct a multi-level structure. To borrow Genette’s categories, such a work operates both by way of a “paratext,” the alternative frame that interrogates its contents, and by way of a “hypertext” that trans-textually engages the writer’s other works.

Postcolonial studies have claimed an ever larger conceptual territory astride any and all the subfields of the humanities writ large. Iconoclastic Australian scholars have even declared us well “past all the posts.”[4] At times, *Autobiography and Independence* straddles such ambitious categories that its focus threatens to dissipate altogether. Although Kelly has wisely refrained from entering the messier political debates on “Francophonie,” this may not be wisdom enough. But for beginning scholars eager to get a sense of the complexity of this strangely decentered and decentering corpus some call “the Maghreb,” this book will more than do. Whether one agrees or disagrees with her interpretations, one must relish the fact that Professor Kelly has steadfastly maintained an open-mind: no ax is being ground; no ox is being gored. In its confident grace of purpose, *Autobiography and Independence* offers one and all an intelligent appraisal to which we will probably return, time and again: altogether, a bracing read!

NOTES

[1] Other works by Jameson and Said are in her bibliography: for the former, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” in *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed. Michael Sprinker (New York and London: Verso 1999); and, for the latter, *Freud and the Non-European* (New York and London: Verso, 2003).

[2] Announcing the planned festivities, the electronic newsletter of Festival de la Francophonie refers to “gouvernements ayant le français en partage.” “Lettres d’informations”, #48 (23 juin 2006), at <http://www.francophonies.fr>.

[3] Ian Adams and Helen Tiffin, eds. *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism* (University of Calgary Press, 1990).

[4] Feraoun, *The Poor man's Son: Menrad, Kabyle School Teacher*. Trans. Lucy R. McNair, introduction by James D. LeSueur (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005); *Journal: 1955-1962: Reflections on the French-Algerian War*, ed. James D. Le Sueur, trans. by M. H. Woolf and C. Fouillade, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2000).

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