

Unsettling Experiences: Transnational Dialogues of Necessity in *Journal, Nationalité: immigré(e)* and *Paletitas de guayaba*

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the transnational stories of two women --one born in France of Algerian descent and the other born in the United States of Mexican descent-- whose lives are interrupted by the inability to understand their status as ethnic women in the country of their birth. By analyzing their works in the proper socio-historical context and by defining how they fit into a relatively new mode of expression --the autoethnography-- I establish a transnational dialogue between the works of these two women. Transnational stories such as these challenge the superiority of the transnational identities established by the colonial powers and the literary, political and scientific works which have supported the exclusion and isolation of ethnic minority women. By analyzing and connecting these stories, my study helps to move forward the field of transnational feminist studies.

“The task of the writer is to talk about these things, no matter how unsettling they might be.”
Tino Villanueva, Poetry Recital at Old Dominion University, April 6, 2001

In 1987, Sakinna Boukhedenna, who was born in France to Algerian immigrants, published a book entitled *Journal, Nationalité: immigré(e)* (*Journal, Nationality: immigrant*), which traces the struggle of a young woman who attempts to find a stable identity in a national culture which has historically done violence to Algerians. In 1991, Erlinda Gonzales-Berry, a woman of Hispanic-New Mexican heritage in the United States, published a novel, *Paletitas de guayaba* (*Guava Suckers*), in which the female narrator recounts her struggle to find a stable identity in a national culture which has historically repressed its Hispanic roots. These two heavily autobiographical texts focus upon the difficulties a woman of ethnic heritage faces as she attempts to live in the nation of her birth. While each text reflects the views of a single author, we will see that it is only by placing them in their historical and social context that we can understand how these texts function as auto-ethnographies which force readers to question the colonialist ideals upon which the current construct of the nation is still based in France and the United States.

Further, considering the feminist content of these texts side by side, it is my desire to facilitate a dialogue, to explore the commonalities and differences of these two border-crossing experiences. By comparing and analyzing the often painful quest for wholeness experienced by these female narrators, we offer theoretical support for a transnational feminist movement, not only in France and the United States, but in Algeria and Mexico as well. Rather than speaking of “global feminism,” a term which, in the opinion of Constance S. Richards “tends to mask difference on the basis of ‘nation’ (in its varied constructions) and to overemphasize similarities on the basis of

gender” (*On the Winds and Waves of the Imagination: Transnational Feminism and Literature* xii), I prefer the term “transnational feminism,” also used by Richards and, previously, by Grewel and Caplan in *Scattered Hegemonies*. The textual analysis I offer in this paper highlights the specifically female dimension of these transnational experiences and provides the reader with insight into transnational feminist issues upon which further comparative research might be based.

In *Journal, Nationalié: immigré(e)*, we meet a young woman who no longer knows “where I am and where I am going” (All translations from the French and Spanish texts are my own, 7). The first pages of the journal are an outpouring of her frustration. In quick succession, we learn as well that she is estranged from her authoritarian father, that she feels alienated from her childhood, that she abandoned school because her schoolteachers were conservative and outright racist at times; that she took to wearing a big afro and unacceptable clothes to assert her ethnic identity and difference (which only resulted in increasingly volatile exchanges with school authorities). We also learn that she followed a vocational track but worked actively at asserting her ethnicity and insulting her bosses after feeling constantly denigrated by them, that she quit school and work because she was, in her words, tired of trying to make herself understood, that she has robbed a passerby with a friend, stolen clothes from a boutique and left home for three weeks. We learn further that she has developed a distrust of and even hatred for left-wing French intellectuals and hippies whose professed interest in Arabs is but a sham, has encountered brutal treatment at the hands of police, and has experienced “misogyny and male chauvinism” while being temporarily lodged by men of her age (11).

Sakinna, the author and narrator, spirals downward through a passing sexual encounter with a young Frenchman who she describes as nothing but “a son of the bourgeoisie lost in drugs” (11). This adolescent girl has gone out to see music, she has listened to punk and reggae, and typical of someone her age, she has tried to find her identity in the music but has found that, rather than being viewed as a punk or a Rastafarian, she will always be categorized as an Algerian and excluded from the national culture. Her association with female friends in a similar situation helps her to resist with “Arab pride” (18) what she calls a racist French culture, yet as one displaced from home, she lives with the constant fear of losing the papers which establish her identity as an Algerian national (8, 11).¹ “It’s at moments like that,” she reports, “that I remember I’m a foreigner in this country, even if I was born in this rotten barrio” (8).

All in all, this opening is something less than a celebration of multiculturalism, less than a flattering portrait of ethnic relations in France, and I, as a white reader situated in the United States, begin to doubt whether she is not somewhat to blame for the misfortunes she chronicles so shockingly. “This [racism] is not a complex that I have,” she answers me, anticipating my doubt, “but a reality that I notice. I don’t use racism as an excuse to make me innocent, no, it’s true, I have eyes for seeing and a conscience for observing” (18). The rapid recounting of her experiences, marked by displacement, closed doors, obstacles, incriminations, strikes me as dizzying, and indeed it is to the narrator: “I was feeling different than the others, I thought I was

in a jail cell,” she reports, and adds: “I feel strangely odd in this fucking labyrinth” (7). The narrator reports that her inability to get out of this labyrinth finally led her to sympathize openly in school (where she had once again tried her hand) with terrorists who had hijacked a French plane and killed some Frenchmen. When her teacher accuses her of being inhuman, she thinks, “How can one be human in a police state?” (22)

The opening of *Paletitas de guayaba* is markedly different. In a reflective, almost trance-like mood, the narrator is writing a letter addressed to her former professor and boyfriend, whom she groups with other “golden-haired men” (7). She recalls how he had promised to, and did in fact, help her escape the “suffocating virginity” which was the most important tenet of her upbringing, allowing her to peel away, layer by layer, a culture which had stifled her female sexuality and self-expression with guilt and shame, leaving her in a state of isolation (5-6). This is, however, a letter of revenge, for the boyfriend dumped her after she expressed her desire to have a baby with him.

Like Sakinna, who as an ethnic woman must guess at the motivations of those who reject her, the narrator of *Paletitas de guayaba*, Marí, intuits the thoughts of the golden-haired man: Since she is a woman “of brown skin,” she is guided by a primordial instinct, and can’t see clearly that having a baby is less important than pursuing a career. “You don’t have property,” she imagines him thinking, “you don’t have a name, you don’t have well-placed friends” (7). Like Sakinna, this narrator feels duped, for as she felt they were experiencing intimacy and union, she now believes that her white boyfriend had a plan all along, which was to drop her and continue on with his regularly scheduled life. “You men of golden hair,” she writes, “you think you’re the masters of the world. The world belongs to you to make and unmake as you plan” (7). She says that she spits in the face of a man for whom reason and economics are more important than emotions. Like Sakinna’s outburst, this protagonist’s letter has been, in her own words, “the agitated waters of a storm unleashed by furious gods” (9).

Throughout *Paletitas de guayaba*, Marí, the narrator, addresses her comments to an imagined man associated with a male character in the book yet whose specific identity is left intentionally ambiguous. In *Journal, Nationalité: immigré(e)*, Sakinna addresses her comments to an imagined immigrant who seems alternately to be a woman with whom she relates and a man whom she loves. As is evident in the opening pages of both books, neither narrator is able to love as she would wish in the national culture of her birth; neither woman can continue to live or work in the country of her birth until she resolves the dilemma of her status as an ethnic minority.

As Sakinna feels she has been dismissed because of her Algerian ethnicity in France, so does Marí feel that she has been misunderstood and dismissed as a person of Hispanic ethnic origin in the United States; unlike Sakinna, Marí does not present a tableau of a racist national culture in her country, the United States. Rather, she describes her breakup with one former boyfriend with golden hair as she begins her exploration of the difficulties involved in assimilating into the mainstream Anglo-American culture. Unlike Sakinna, while speaking of relationships with men,

she also speaks of sexuality in an intimate and detailed way.

Consider the distinctly different tones of the first chapter of these two books. Sakinna's official status as an Algerian national leaves her in an adolescent no-woman's land until she can decide to which country she truly belongs. Her rejection of the traditional family structure and the mutual antipathy which has developed between herself and school officials are the initial sparks which set her voyage in motion. She repeats the metaphor of the prison to describe her experiences and sums up her feelings as follows:

How to be a well-behaved student when the seed of revolt has grown in the suburbs and the shantytowns where they put your parents when they debarked in France? How to be a well-behaved student when you are, for them, above all else a dirty Arab, a "worth-nothing," a daughter of Mohammed couscous? Most of the undisciplined kids are Arab and poor. Almost all of them. Do they try to understand us, have these profs taken a drive after school to see what they call our 'neighborhoods'? (22)

The rejection which Sakinna encounters is indeed based squarely on her specific ethnic identity as an Algerian. When looking for apartments, she encounters several landlords who refuse to rent to "North Africans." One says, in a conciliatory tone, "Listen, I have nothing against Arabs, but Algerians, never" (26). She knows that she is viewed as Algerian, like an otherwise anonymous woman she reads about in the news: After having been lifted by her feet and tossed down a stairwell by a group of Foreign Legion soldiers, the paper reported only that "a young Algerian woman was molested" (85). Yet because she does not feel authentically Algerian, she identifies with a "zoner," someone without a home who wanders and depends only on himself. Without a functional national identity, life seems emptied of its sense. She speaks of "this tomorrow which came slowly, then the other tomorrows which followed the one I was waiting for" (41). The French response to her might be summarized by a young woman in a bar who tells her: "You are nothing" (73). In what seems a desperate plea for help, she drunkenly smashes her fist through a department store window and is hauled into the police station for questioning.

In the opening passages of *Paletitas de guayaba*, the protagonist is already on her way by train across the Mexican border. The novel is three-tiered: the author's voice intercedes at one point to describe the writing process as a "loss of temporal logic" (33). While in the past, a young New Mexican woman recently graduated from college is traveling to Mexico, the voyage is overlaid with the mental voyage of the mature narrator who reconsiders her post-college experiences in Mexico as well as her experiences there as a young girl with her parents. The non-linearity of the novel highlights the mental processes of the author in the present moment; her refusal to place the events in a linear order reflects the way identity is formed --as a spontaneous and often random communication between past and present. The train represents the interior, closed mental space of the narrator both in the past and in the present: the "present moment," then, is an overlaying of childhood, adolescence and maturity.

The distinct difference between the opening chapters of these two texts --that is, between Sakinna's desperate search to make sense of a present moment which she finds tragic and Mari's ability to consider her predicament in a reflective way-- can be explained in part by turning to a socio-historical analysis which will guide my reading of these works. Sakinna's presence in France is of course directly tied to a colonial past involving economic and military exploitation of Algerians. Their immigration to France began during World War One as an economic and military necessity. According to Alec G. Hargreaves, in his book *Voices from the North African Immigrant Community in France*:

Between 1914 and 1918, approximately 250,000 Algerians

were brought over to France, together with smaller numbers of Moroccans and Tunisians. Some came as civilian workers, while others were drafted into the army to assist directly in the French war effort. (10)

In his book *Immigration in Post-War France*, Hargreaves adds that "In 1947, mainly for political reasons, Algeria was given a new statute under which its Muslim inhabitants were allowed to move freely between North Africa and France" (4). Immigration increased in the period following World War Two. These immigrants, however, were considered temporary residents of France, and, it is only during the years Boukhedenna recounts in her journal that children of North African immigrants --whose parents began to settle permanently in France only in the 1950's-- were officially recognized as permanent members of France: In 1983, *La Marche des Beurs* --the walk of these children of immigrants across France-- attracted media attention and they were represented in a photo exhibit at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (Boubeker and Beau, 186).

The 1970's were particularly dramatic years in France, during which the reality of "the voyage in" (to use Edward Said's term) was being recognized in France. Anne Donadey argues convincingly in an article entitled "*Une certaine idée de la France*" that the French in the 1980's were still repressing the trauma of the Algerian War --labeled until very recently "the events of Algeria"-- and that the refusal of the French to face the consequences of their colonial involvement in Algeria (which was the inclusion of Algerians, or those born of Algerians in France, as members of the French nation) can be viewed as a traumatic reaction to this conflict.

This struggle for the recognition of people of Algerian ancestry as French citizens, and of the denigrating effects of French colonialism and France's role in the Algerian War, is ongoing today. Donadey suggests that even in the 1990's France was not yet ready "to enter into the third phase of its Algeria syndrome and to face the ghosts of the past in order to meet the challenges of the future" (228). Articles from *Le Monde* of Oct. 11, 2001, Oct. 16, 2001, and Dec. 30, 2001, respectively, feature, for example, the following articles: "*Le tabou du viol des femmes pendant la guerre d'Algérie commence à être levé*" 'The Taboo Concerning the Rape of Women During the Algerian War is Finally Being Lifted'; "*Le massacre du 17 octobre 1961 obtient un début de reconnaissance officielle*" 'The Massacre of October 17, 1961 Finally Starts to Obtain Official

Recognition' and « *Quarante ans après, les Français osent regarder en face la guerre d'Algérie*” ‘Forty Years Later, the French Dare to Face the Realities of the Algerian War’ (Beaugé ; Bernard, P. ; Beaugé).

Sakinna is actively forgotten. The majority of French citizens would prefer that she remain invisible and, if she is to be a citizen, demand that her ethnic identity in no way interfere with her civic duties. If she is to move about in public spaces in France in the late 1970's and early 1980's, Sakinna can do so only inasmuch as she erases her Algerian roots and does not disturb the myth of the goodness of the French “civilizing mission” of colonialism. Indeed, as we will explore further on, to function in the public sphere, Sakinna must accept a French model of citizenship which we could classify, ironically enough, as a sacred principle in post-revolutionary France. This important point concerning national identity will be explored briefly as it is an essential building block in moving along with an analysis of these transnational feminist texts.

In his well-known book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson seeks to understand why national identities have played such a defining role in the modern world. The first important and obvious point he makes is that although nations present themselves as eternal and unchanging entities containing, in some cases, religiously ordained essences and destinies, they are in fact historical constructions which have been fashioned and refashioned over time. Nevertheless, these “imagined communities” hold a quasi-religious power to stir human beings' thoughts and emotions and lead them to act in a self-sacrificing manner; further, nations can be described as quasi-religious in that they attach individuals to larger historical destinies, a process which infuses their lives with purpose. Anderson, in fact, begins *Imagined Communities* on a humorous note, indicating that nationalism has a uniquely affective quality which other abstract ideals, such as Marxism, lack: “The cultural significance of such objects [the tomb of the unknown soldier] becomes even clearer if one tries to imagine, say, a Tomb of the Unknown Marxist or a cenotaph for fallen Liberals” (10). In the context of this paper, we should note that this French national identity has historically been offered up not just as a national identity but in fact a *transnational* identity, that is, an identity to which colonized cultures must also ascribe in order to be part of the world community.

The issue of colonialism in the United States is distinct in that people of Hispanic heritage resided on the soil even before the arrival of the pilgrims in the eastern United States. As the French colonial adventure in North Africa began with the conquest of Algeria in 1830, the colonial adventure of the United States began with the military victory over Mexico in 1848. (The Mexican War, as the first offensive war in the history of the United States, and one in which the United States conquered the Mexican capital, stands out as a war of great historical importance in world history.) In his book, *Forgotten People*, New Mexican education pioneer George I. Sánchez chronicles how the New Mexican way of life was disrupted by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, when the United States took possession of what is now the southwestern United States. At that time, according to Sánchez, the United States offered citizenship to New Mexicans, and yet did not fulfill its contractual obligations, neither recognizing their rights as

stated in the treaty nor providing them with access to education wherein a civic identity might be formed.

In addition to these original settlers of the land came temporary Mexican laborers who, like the North Africans in France, were used for economic (and occasionally military) reasons and considered merely temporary guests. (Mexican-Americans served in all the major American wars of this century and were even disproportionately represented in Vietnam.2)

This colonization of Hispanic America by Anglo-American settlers --and specifically the colonization of New Mexico -- is chronicled in Rudolfo Acuña's groundbreaking work, *Occupied America* (54 – 81), written during the cultural nationalist phase of the Chicano Movement. Compared to Sakinna Boukhedenna, Gonzales-Berry writes from a position of greater strength, since the Chicano Movement, between the 1960's and the time of her writing (1991), had already made great strides --at least in the Southwest-- in seeking official recognition of an important fact: Native-born Chicanos lived in the Southwest before Anglo settlers (settlers of European descent) arrived there and could thus assert their Hispanic, or more specifically Mexican, roots. As Sánchez, writing in 1940, said, "In the march of imperialism, a people were forgotten, cast aside as a byproduct of territorial aggrandizement" (120); Sánchez's argument that a people was incorporated into the U.S. culture and then actively forgotten explains precisely the historical basis for the dilemma of the Hispanic-American protagonist who cannot fully accept a colonialist national identity which refuses to acknowledge its (and her) Hispanic roots. The successes of the Chicano Movement in the decades of the 1970's and 1980's explain the less tortured tone of Gonzales-Berry's work.

The colonialist model of assimilation proposes, with little concern for those who live in a "blank darkness" (to use a term which connects the work of Francophone scholar Christopher Miller with a significant essay protesting United States colonialism written by Mark Twain), the superiority of specific national cultures as appropriate models for restructuring the identities of colonized peoples --by force if necessary. In my opening paragraph, I referred to these works as "auto-ethnographies" and suggested that auto-ethnographic writing challenges the colonialist attitudes upon which national identities are based in the United States and France. It is evident that to use the term "autobiography" would obscure from view a key aspect of both texts, which is the narrator's historical and political situation as an ethnic other who, by definition, finds herself divided against herself, as one who must choose between being an authentic citizen in the new country or an authentic member of the ethnic group of origin.

In *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt states that auto-ethnographies "will become important in unraveling the histories of imperial subjugation and resistance as seen from the site of their occurrence" (9). In *Imperial Eyes*, Pratt emphasizes that such writing challenges the longstanding tradition of European scientists who traveled the world and developed a "planetary consciousness" based on their "objective" scientific theories. She notes that "One by one the planet's life forms were to be drawn out of the tangled threads of their life surroundings and

rewoven into European-based patterns of global unity and power” (31). Writers --in the sciences, social sciences or literary fields-- emerging from the mainstream culture in France and the United States supported the colonial enterprise --and the imposition of the dominant national cultural identity--inasmuch as they participated in a system of classification of other, non-European peoples. They built the museum of ethnography, and the “local” cultures of other peoples were put on display inside and considered “objectively.”

Auto-ethnographic writing, as Françoise Lionnet describes so well, “simultaneously demystifies the writing of both the self (auto) and the culture (ethno) because it involves the self and its cultural contexts in a dialogue that transcends all possibility of reducing one to the other” (122). The auto-ethnographic writer is reshaping the national identity which has tried to claim her; her work contests the exclusionary practices of the assimilationist model. In *Imperial Eyes*, Pratt notes that “auto-ethnography involves partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror” (7).

In this sense, by claiming a space as narrator, the auto-ethnographic writer can begin to challenge the eternal category of “other” imposed upon her and need no longer feel divided against herself on the basis of speaking and writing a language --or a culture-- which is not accepted as “pure” in either country. Secondly, because auto-ethnographic writing implies writing about oneself from both a subjective position and objective position, viewing oneself as a whole individual and also as the ethnic other, the auto-ethnographic writer challenges the false dichotomy between “authentic” and “assimilated,” in essence realizing the possibility of unity in the core being of a person caught in a divide between two national cultures (102). The resulting claim that one has an identity which is truly transnational implies that one is resisting the specific national identity which has been mythologized and rendered sacred in two countries (the United States and Mexico; France and Algeria). As we shall see, because these ethnic *women* encounter certain obstacles which ethnic men would not leads them to push stridently for the destruction of these mythical national identities and the creation of a legitimate transnational identity.

The children of immigration in France who took to writing in the 1970’s and 1980’s had a scarce theoretical basis to orient their appreciation of their own condition as children (and especially as daughters) of North African immigrants living in France. This is evident in Boukhedenna’s work, where Sakinna is lost in the “labyrinth” of a completely non-functional national identity. Marí, the protagonist in *Paletitas de guayaba*, suffers the same national identity crisis in her youth.

To understand how the protagonists seek --in lived experience as well as in their writing-- to find a functional transnational identity, we can turn to a model developed by critic Juan Flores in a study dedicated to Puerto Ricans living in New York. In an article entitled, “*Qué assimilated, brother, yo soy asimilao*: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.,” Flores divides the quest for Nuyoric identity into four steps: first is the “state of abandon” which I have already demonstrated in these texts, when the present reality proves too confusing to deal with; second comes a state of enchantment, when the ethnic minority, in a “dream-like trance,”

imagines the ancestral culture to be one of luxuriance and freedom.

It is only when Sakinna begins to dream of a return to Algeria that she finds a way out of her labyrinth. She studies Arabic (which her parents refused to use with her in the home) and buys a dress imported from North Africa which is “red, blue, pink, green, oh! color of the dream of my country” (63-64). Though she had rejected her authoritative father, she never lost respect for the way her family held together in opposition to the system in times of trouble. Sakinna’s new orientation in life is communicated by means of another symbolic date on the calendar, New Year’s Eve. She realizes that this day is meaningless to her because nothing changes in French society; she compares its meaningless presence to the meaningful absence of July 5 (1962), the day Algeria won its independence from France (49).

By pursuing the dream of a return to Algeria, Sakinna’s life begins to take on some meaning. She mentions more often the commonality of suffering among the working classes in many countries and begins to explore the Arab side of her identity. She feels she has lifted the mask of goodwill which France projects to the world and revealed “a disguise which hides its conservative and exploitative nature” (68). She criticizes the hypocrisy of France’s position in World War Two when it united with other world powers to fight for the principle of freedom while unquestioningly continuing to enslave the colonies (and use these “national subjects” as soldiers).

Marí also senses intuitively that in achieving a university education in the United States, she has had to sacrifice her attachment to her ethnic roots. Marí too dreams of a return to Mexico at age twenty when she senses that the price of her social interaction was the loss of “a very essential part of my being” (35). Marí labels her journey as both a spiritual quest and an adventure (35). She entertains the possibility that she is “Mexican,” yet very quickly on the train, she remembers incidents from her childhood in Mexico which make her skeptical of herself, divided against herself. Nevertheless, she reflects upon the necessity of the return to a different, collective past essence as the first step in defending oneself against a cultural oppressor:

To return to the same root, to the source, walk again the lost steps in order to arm yourself with something which permits you to defend yourself against the alluvial force which shoves you along with greater and greater force, threatening to tear you away from your very essence. (87)

According to Flores, in the third step, the ethnic minority, by imagining and exploring the culture of her roots, experiences “an apprenticeship in social consciousness” which leads to “a renewed encounter” with the national culture of her birth (189). Flores notes that this contact becomes an encounter with popular cultural roots, which leads to an awareness of the difference between the mainstream ideology of the colonizers and the popular culture of the oppressed; the discovery of roots invigorates the outcast ethnic minority. As we shall see, the protagonists are invigorated by their journeys outside of France and the U.S. Yet what the model established by Flores fails to take into account is how the journeys in question are also problematized specifically by the question of gender.

A hatred for those who exploited her immigrant parents finally drives Sakinna out of France. An awareness of history motivates her to travel by boat to Algeria, a country which she associates with revolution and the rejection of French colonialism. Though she recognizes in leaving that a small minority of French have been helpful toward her, these random acts of kindness are not enough to lessen the pain caused by a systematic rejection of her ethnic/racial group.³

It is with the decision to “re-arabize” herself in a more profound way that a crucial contradiction in Sakinna’s existence comes to the fore: the lack of respect which she believes Arab culture displays toward women. Recounting her adolescence, Sakinna describes the “misogynistic” behavior of a local gang, and she mentions wearing a chain around her neck as a symbol of feminine power. After making her way into the intimate space of the personal journal, she begins to discuss more openly the contradiction she faces, that an Arab woman must accept a role as either mother, sister or whore in a very rigid, male-dominated culture, viewed alternately as a national (Algerian) culture or an international (Arab) culture. Virginity and marriage are the sole factors recognized as important in a woman’s existence; her virginity “concerns the honor of the brother, the father, the cousin, the uncle, the little brother, and, why not, the male dog” (62). Arab men “tie up our sexuality” (51) and Arab women accept their subjugation. It appears that the only way Sakinna can assume her Algerian, or Arab, identity is to deny herself any rights as a woman. She states that all Arab countries oppress women, and that because of this her situation in what she calls her own culture is “worse” than her situation as an excluded Arab in France (53). She connects female sexuality to politics, and states that “one must be clear sexually if one is to be clear politically” (53).

It is clear, then, that for Sakinna, the struggle for freedom must recognize the equal importance of these two concerns, the specifically feminine and the specifically racial/ethnic. Interestingly, the political situation of the Palestinians concretizes her feelings about how she is repressed as a woman by Arabs in France. She decries the hypocrisy of Arab men who recognize the freedom of French women yet refuse to allow an Arab woman to change. She desires to renew Arab tradition by creating a new role for women. In this sense, she encounters a spiritual guide in writer Assia Djebbar, finding in her book *Women of Algiers in their Apartments* a feminist Arab message which accords with her own sentiments. Nevertheless, after a harsh critique of Arab men, Sakinna reveals an overwhelming desire to protect the Arab male from French exploitation, reverting back to the Arab class struggle against racist Occidental capitalist exploitation. In a poem, she writes:

And me, I was passing by, I am called Sakinna,
They whistled, insulted me, calling me whore,
but I saw in their eyes,
and I read the wound of a voyage in exile. (58)

In order to compare Mari’s journey with Sakinna’s, it is important to observe the stages Mari

passes through. Like Sakinna, Marí begins what seems to be an “interminable solitary voyage” (5). Sensing the limitations of her parents’ attitudes concerning Mexico, and wanting to recapture childhood memories which have faded with the passing of time, she sets out “to regain my lost paradise” (36). The storm of emotions on the part of Marí in chapter one of *Paletitas de guayaba* is quickly followed by another. The second chapter begins like the first with an evocation of a journey on a train, heading off to Mexico City. The narrator recalls her twenty year-old self traveling to Mexico City, and this other self in turn recalls a childhood year she spent in Mexico. On the train, the smell of a lemon brings back the memories. “Not my childhood there,” she writes in her journal, “but my childhood *there*, I mean, in Mexico” (9). This contemplative mood of the twenty year-old narrator --who is between the two “theres” and can consider them objectively—is, as I shall show, absent in the narrative of the adolescent Arab-French woman, who appears at the outset to be unable to find a reflective middle space. The New Mexican girl, however (again I remind the reader of the three-tiered temporality of the book), like the Arab-French woman, is caught up in the conflictive present moment when she experiences not fully belonging to either her own national culture or the culture of her ethnic heritage. During her brief stay in a Mexican elementary school, while Marí has the desire to be a “BORN AGAIN MEXICAN,” her older sister identifies with other United States-oriented students.

While she describes her sister as a “fucking *pocha*” (designating the sister’s refusal to consider herself Mexican), she labels herself as “very Judas” for wanting to be Mexican (10). Concerning her status as “*gringa*,” she states, “In a certain manner we were, well, not gringos (how barbarous, perish the thought), but North Americans, yes” (9). The border between Mexico and the United States the reader sees inside the girl, dividing her from herself, and between her and her sister, dividing family members; this division is still present in the young protagonist/journal writer on the train who needs to specify where “there” is. Marí as a child has internalized the Mexican stereotype of the Mexican-American as a *pocha* (blanched, pale): a traitor.

When Marí arrives in Mexico as a twenty year-old, she realizes that she is a stranger there, and that her priority is to “survive in this jungle” (12). Her self-image as Mexican breaks down into a more nuanced reflection of herself as a woman and of her historical position as an “ethnic” American. Not long after her arrival in Mexico, Marí meets Sergio, who introduces her to a new type of awareness; she begins to reconsider her existence in political terms which will also renew her capacity to love: In order to understand herself, she seeks to discover how her socio-historical position has shaped her personal experience. This self-questioning leads her to reconsider her original rejection of Steve (the golden-haired boy) and to criticize her own “imperial attitude” (50) and her traditional view of relationships. Before meeting Sergio in Mexico, Marí is entirely unaware of her political situation: “What do I know about politics I told you” (12). She soon realizes how she has unquestioningly adopted her parents’ condemnation of Chicanos and communists.

The arrival of the twenty year-old Marí at the school for foreign students demonstrates the way

cultures are set up to interact in formal ways, maintaining distance from each other and leaving stereotypes intact. The families would prefer to lodge a *gringa* rather than Mari because (similar, as we shall see, to the attitudes that Arabs hold concerning Sakinna) they see her as a traitor who has sold out and compromised Mexican culture. Although Mari speaks Spanish fluently, she is placed in a class for beginners in order to rid her of her *pocha* accent. To be a true Mexican, then, one must speak Spanish in a socially acceptable fashion. In the United States, Mari was taught to call herself “Spanish” in order to avoid discrimination by being associated with Mexicans, and in Mexico she is considered as a traitor, not specifically because of issues relating to being a liberated woman, but because of the ways in which U.S. culture have influenced her behavior. Sergio offers Mari support and guidance as she struggles with the pain that such strict notions of cultural purity unavoidably cause her.

As we witness Mari’s political transformation in Mexico, we understand how she is, in fact, invigorated by her reassessment of her ethnic formation in the United States. She realizes how her parents had internalized Anglo-American domination, distancing themselves from anything Mexican. Although they say, “I’m not Mexican, I’m Spanish,” it occurs to Mari that her parents only described themselves as “Spanish” when speaking in English, while in Spanish they used the term “*mexicanos*” (29). Her parents prohibited use of the word ‘*gringo*’ and spoke of “how the Mexicans are (...) violent and untrustworthy people” (29). Mari reflects that her parents were walking “a tightrope” in order to fall in line with the stereotypes of the English-speaking establishment for whom Mexican culture is the enemy. She criticizes this “jes sir” mentality, and begins to see it as a result of an historical process. Mari says, further on in the narrative, “During their entire lives, they were oppressed by fears and doubts; they nevertheless learned to function in a foreign and hostile environment (I mean the sphere of the Americans) and this is the heritage they gave us” (61).

Unlike Sakinna, whose voyage, as we shall see, remains a solitary one, Sergio leads Mari to discover a group of Chicanos at “Casa Aztlán” who share her identity problems. There, she begins to form a new identity, realizes she is in love with Sergio, and feels that she is among family: “I wanted to stay there, absorbing the intimacy that my new friends offered me, that is to say, in reality, my new family” (21). She discovers the spiritual mothers and fathers of the Chicano Movement --Dolores Huerta, Cesar Chávez, Tijerina-- and experiences a series of political and personal awakenings. Ironically, it is in Mexico that she is lodged with a *gringa* and realizes that not all blondes are deserving of her hatred; this realization speaks again to her “renewed encounter” with the United States. Mari’s awareness expands until she realizes the futility of trying to recapture her personal past and accepts that it is an illusion to think of herself only as Mexican. However, she reflects upon the necessity of the return to a different, collective past essence as the first step in defending oneself against a cultural oppressor.

Mari thus attains the fuller social consciousness of which Flores speaks. Her New Mexicanness has been expanded by a connection with the Chicano movement. By language and tradition, she is tied to Mexican culture, yet she knows that her language and North American behavior also

mark her as distinctly not Mexican; she knows that through education she has made certain advances in American society. Though she learns to criticize how North Americans (the masters who make and remake the world as they please) have caused her alienation and isolation, she also learns that she is an outcast in Mexico; the middle space between these two nations is “Casa Aztlán,” where she is temporarily lodged.

Marí slowly unravels “the neurosis, or the double consciousness, which afflicts each marginalized being” (36). She states that the Mexicans do not understand the suffering of the Chicanos, their valiant effort to maintain their culture, language and sense of self worth in the face of Anglo domination. Marí, through her connection with Sergio and the Chicano movement, has found a theoretical transnational identity which will serve her as she attempts to live and love in either nation.

When Sakinna arrives in Algeria, she notices that men and women do not hold hands in public places. Like the school for foreign students which is set up to take gringo dollars but not to accept Chicanos, the Algerian society is not set up to accommodate the travels of a single woman who is neither a (bourgeois) student or member of a family. Sakinna feels deeply inside that she is an Arab; the discovery of these different roots, as Marí explains in *Paletitas de guayaba*, is crucial in preserving her sense of self against the onslaught of a colonizing national culture which will not recognize these roots. She pretends to fit into Algerian society in order to view more closely its similarities with her own experience. Very quickly, she feels like a “stranger” (83). Although she wants “the tree of my culture” (81) to sprout from her mouth, Arabic words are slow in coming, and she cries once over the feeling of disconnectedness when she cannot communicate in Arabic. In her journal, she addresses Algerian society directly, begging for recognition: “. . . I am the immigrant who vacillates between Marseilles and Algiers. Oh! my country, my roots, my land, I implore you. Speak to me only in Arabic so that I forget this dirty French, this colonial language which crushes me” (84). Here again, language would not be a problem if Sakinna were a foreign tourist, or perhaps if she were acceptably lodged in a female dormitory as an officially registered student. Her exclusion on the basis of language compounds her already deeply felt exclusion as a single woman traveling in Algeria. Most of the Arab words that Sakinna hears are the insults of men who shout “whore” as she passes them on the street (85). Still seeking a new, *essential* identity in Algeria, she has not yet even imagined that she will need to develop a functional *transnational* identity, one rooted in both national cultures.

Unlike Marí, Sakinna finds no support group to help her through her identity crisis. She begins to doubt herself: “I contradict myself and I said to myself: maybe I am the one who is mistaken and who is going against what is normal” (81). Slowly, she reaches a higher level of social and political consciousness, discovering that her Marxist beliefs put her at odds with the Islamic faith, which she had not explored in France. Although she assures herself that one can be atheist and Arab at the same time, the thought is a secret which she guards. She fears the disapproval of others in general and the extremist Brothers of Islam in particular. What emerges here, then, is a clash of her imagined roots (the birth of a new, essential identity) and the reality of living in what

she quickly realizes is a foreign nation. Unlike Marí, she finds no “Casa Aztlán,” no “new family,” as Marí puts it, to help her out of her labyrinth.

While living with a family, Sakinna fasts during Ramadan in order to share some closeness with them. She feels alienated, however, when family members ask her point blank whether she is a virgin. It is in realizing that “the immigrant is always wrong” (83) that Sakinna begins to question national identity in Algeria. The sexist oppression intensifies as Sakinna tries to move about and function in Algerian society. She comes to see this lack of respect as rigidly enforced by the power of the state in Algeria. Because she travels unaccompanied by a man, she is perceived as a prostitute. Hotels refuse her access, and when she is finally accepted into one, the hotel clerk immediately propositions her in a hostile fashion. Her refusal invokes his wrath:

When I told him to leave me alone, he told me: “Go back to your country France, go fuck the French, they’re better than us, huh?” But if I had raised my voice, he wouldn’t have hesitated to hit me. (98)

In response to another man who makes sexual advances, Sakinna tells him that her refusal of him is not in order to protect her virginity but simply because she does not find him pleasing; he then proffers insults concerning her lack of purity. She finds no recourse in the police, the specific enforcers of the state order. Of her encounter with the police, she says, “If I had not had an iron will, they would have raped me in the most legal fashion” (97). She is disappointed that instead of finding mutual assistance between women, “In Algeria (...) woman is the enemy of woman” (113). She is therefore left to feel like “an intruder” (91). Before she can fight for the economic rights of Arabs, or for the right to worship freely, Sakinna must be able to be a woman on her own terms, both in public and private spaces; despite her great suffering, Sakinna’s struggle to become a transnational woman is invigorated by her unsuccessful return to her mythical roots, as she says it, her “false dream” (94).

As she realizes that she will return to France, Sakinna then moves into the fourth step according to the Flores model, in which the ethnic minority with a renewed social consciousness reinserts herself into the national culture of her birth. She can no longer tolerate life in Algeria, and directs her criticism at the male-dominated state. She criticizes the “false socialism” of Algeria, saying that the ideals of the revolution have been confiscated by bureaucrats (90). Both national identities have been rejected. Given the lack of acceptance shown toward immigrants who come to Algeria in pursuit of the dream of Arab unity, and in particular given the sharp refusal of non-traditional women, Sakinna declares that a comparison can be made between the colonialism of France and the “neo-colonialism” of Algeria (94). She offers an auto-critique of Arab racism toward Blacks and pleads for a greater recognition of legitimate class differences in the country. She returns repeatedly to the comparison of women to the Palestinians, declaring women to be “a non-recognized Arab state” (108). Although Sakinna supports passionately the liberation of Palestine, she discovers, through yet another disappointing encounter, that even the Palestinians treat women as inferiors (91); she decides therefore, that without a struggle for women’s rights,

the pan-Arabic or international class struggle is absurd.

Both protagonists find a specifically female transnational identity which will allow them to function essentially as rebels in either country. Sakinna speaks of “the absurdity which results from a discussion of oppression which does not open the door to the struggle of women” (35). Sakinna portrays how she is oppressed by men, and declares that she should be permitted to engage in sexual activity for the pleasure of the act. Like Sakinna, Mari declares (in capital letters) her right to engage in sex for the pleasure of the act, yet Mari goes farther, theorizing a sexual politics and tying her feminine transnational identity to her ability to express herself sexually as a woman. Sakinna’s reserve in this matter contrasts sharply with Mari’s unabashed theorizing of her sexuality. Locked in a struggle against stereotypes, Sakinna Boukhedenna avoids explicit references to female sexuality. Mari describes the act from the female point of view: “Mmmmmmm. There. No. No. Higher. There... Perfect. No, not so hard (...)” (15). Mari openly names and pokes fun at the penis in an effort to demystify this “sacred instrument”:

Vehicle and carrier of the male ego, the word made flesh,
obscene extension, inspirer of our fright, object of our desire,
's thing, the cock, the dick, the pecker, the magic wand,
the tool, the pope's nose, the trumpet, the big banana, the
lollypop, the cucumber, the percolator, the peewee (...) (52)

Further, in writing to Sergio, she develops a political theory based on the female multiple orgasm, which she qualifies as “serious” yet “purely personal” (64). She claims that this phenomena inspired men to deny a woman her sexuality in order to control her. By insisting that the vaginal orgasm is the only type of orgasm a woman can have, man dictated her attachment to him and made his penis the “sacred instrument.” He then constructed an arsenal of language --full of words like “whore,” “nymphomaniac” (for which there is no male equivalent), and “cuckold” (for which there is no female equivalent (63-65)—which he could use to castigate a female who does not worship his penis. She concludes by saying that “what we women are missing is to explore and develop the multiple orgasm, making of it the base of a new ideology (...) with or without a penis” (65).

In terms of a socio-historical analysis, it is easy both to see why Boukhedenna does not express herself in these terms and to speculate that, as a fellow female author of auto-ethnography, she would concur with both this message and the personal and playful tone in which it is written, in a love letter to Sergio. In regard to the “golden-haired boy” and a French boyfriend whom Sakinna recalls mysteriously rejected her, Mari and Sakinna are not angry at them as men per se. These texts are less interested in denigrating men than in exposing how imposed national identities prevent the women from living and loving in either national culture.

Sakinna, through reading Assia Djebbar, Kateb Yacine and other sources, finally develops a

theoretical confirmation of the injustice of her situation and an awareness of an indigenous Berber past in Algeria. After speaking of Yacine's evident respect for women, and of his being attacked by the *Frères Musulmanes* in Algeria, she states, "What a shame that at such moments the Algerian security forces are hardly present" (96). She mentions for example Cahinna, a female warrior who fought against Arabs during the Islamic expansion of the eighth century (96). She says that modern Algerian women should not forget that they are the daughters of this warrior who fought the Arab invaders. Sakinna indeed experiences the wild dream of a new beginning in a feminist resistance to imposed forms of political control/national identity. Sakinna associates this new, specifically feminine transnational identity not with seduction but with struggle (96).

Chicana theory, however, provides the narrator of *Paletitas de guayaba* a theoretical foundation upon which to build this specifically feminine transnational identity. This manifests itself in the narration of Mari, when she meets, in a dream, La Malinche. In this dream sequence near the end of the book, Mari is visited by La Malinche (the legendary mistress of and translator for Cortés), who explains that she was not a traitor but actually, through her compromise, intent on saving the indigenous American people. La Malinche says to Mari:

Thanks to my actions, there will be produced a new mestizo race, in whose veins will flow the force of my blood, of my will, and of my feminine word. You, Mari, you are the future fruit of my womb, the flower of my betrayal. (77)

Mari's wild dream of a new beginning, like Sakinna's, comes specifically from this dream encounter with La Malinche. Instead of being conceived of as passive beings whose only purpose in life is to reflect men's identities (75) and to live as traitors to either their country or their ethnic group, women might join together and create a paradise (76). La Malinche's message is mostly about surviving as a woman in a community dominated by men. Rather than a passive traitor of her people, La Malinche was one who saw the choices as either extinction of her people or racial blending, and she chose to found a new mestizo race. The modern woman can thus be something other than, in Sakinna's words, mother, sister or whore when she enters the public/national sphere unaccompanied by a man.

As previously stated, the fourth step in the Flores model is the reinsertion of the ethnic minority into the culture of her birth, and rather than being assimilated, she branches outward, looking for ways to connect with other marginalized people. In Flores' words, this process involves "the selective connection to and interaction with the surrounding North American society" based largely on a connection to other marginalized groups (191). What I am attempting to do in this article is to extend that "branching out" across national borders.

In Sakinna's story, metaphors of prison begin to be linked to metaphors of insanity, as she hears the stories of other female immigrants who have been excluded and condemned to a life on the streets, and who end up insane. Although the reader sees that Sakinna has found a theoretical basis for a new identity, on the plane returning to France, she can envision no future for herself:

“I cried about all the violence of which I was the victim” (105). In Mari’s story, the presence of the reflective narrator is indeed proof that this fourth stage of reintegration continues at the time of the writing. Flores sees this social process which is a result of this transnational identity quest as a “cross-cultural fusion” of marginalized groups in the United States (and in my study, in France). These transformations, in the case of Puerto Rican identity in New York, are “integrally tied to the prospects of national independence or continued colonial subordination to or, as the official euphemism would have it, ‘association’ with the United States” (193). The future of these protagonists is intimately and inextricably tied to the connections they can form with similar women who have transnational stories to tell.

As stated in the introduction, it has been my goal here to establish a transnational dialogue between the narratives of these two women by analyzing their works in the proper socio-historical context and by defining how they fit into a relatively new mode of expression, the auto-ethnography.

Transnational stories such as these challenge the superiority of the transnational identities established by the colonial powers and the literary, political and scientific works which have supported the exclusion and isolation of ethnic minority women. As a male who comes from the mixing of the white ethnic groups in post World War II suburbia of the Midwestern United States, I would only dedicate this work to those who have actually lived experiences like those described in these books, and I would suggest that it is useful to connect their experiences by performing comparative analyses such as this one. The comparison of the experiences of the female descendents of Algerian ancestry in France and Mexican ancestry in the United States is one which certainly deserves continued study, informed by history, sociology/anthropology and literary theory.

Notes

1 “In practice, children born to Algerian immigrants up to 1962 (...) are effectively Algerian unless they decide to apply for French citizenship, whereas those born in France since then automatically receive French papers unless they specifically opt for Algerian ones” (Hargreaves, *Voices* 24). Boukhedenna was born before 1962, and so must apply for French citizenship upon reaching the age of majority.

2 “Unlike their actions during previous wars, they [the Chicano community] did not proudly brandish the heroism of their boys nor did they see a noble sacrifice in Mexican casualties. In fact, many felt resentful because while twenty-three percent of the casualties of soldiers from the Southwest were Hispanic, only ten percent of the general population in the Southwest was of Hispanic origin” (Rosales, F. Arturo, *Chicano!: The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* 198). Please consult this book and the accompanying video series for a wealth of

information regarding the Chicano movement in the United States.

3 At this point, Sakinna has retraced her life up to the age of twenty and the tense in her journal accounts switches from past to present. Throughout the rest of the book, the new reference point is 1985, and journal accounts in the present tense blend with transitions and memories which occasionally appear in the past tense, reflecting both a forward movement and a certain critical distance she is gaining from the events of her adolescent life.

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