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‘For my Torturer’: an African woman’s transformative art of truth, justice and peace-making during colonialism¹

By Priya Narismulu²

Abstract

Against a range of injustices African women have made powerful challenges to structural, gender and repressive violence through their interventions in questions of justice, dialogue, creativity and transformation. This article addresses an activist’s interventions against colonial oppression by examining gender as the central variable in the relationship between justice and activism in African women's creative literature. The poem ‘For my Torturer, Lieutenant D...’ was written in prison by the Algerian activist Leila Djabali who navigated the silences and challenges of gender, age and national identity (postcolonial). It challenges the violence of colonial and patriarchal silencing to expose torture and rape by a prison official." Emerging from an abject position in a colonial jail the poet drew on the representational and allusive properties of poetry to heal and transform the role of victim so as to expose gross human rights abuses and hold colonial officials, the colonial state, and French culture to account. Predicated upon the recognition of very diverse audiences, the visionary poem invokes and explores emerging transitional justice and peace-making processes, decades before their formal appearance. It also demonstrates the value of creative communication strategies under conditions of extreme oppression and division. Using a Critical Theory lens with intersectional analysis, Djabali’s text may be read as innovatively connecting individual testimony to the nascent national processes of transitional justice and peace-making. The work of Audre Lorde is used to interpret this bold and resourceful experiment in the generation of justice and transformation through literary art.

Keywords: African women’s literature; anti-colonial resistance and transformation; gender and literary activism; transitional justice and peace-making; Critical Theory; intersectional analysis

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(Heinemann were first approached about the copyright six months ago and they referred me to Pearson Education (UK), who have bought the rights to this text. Eventually Pearson’s Contracts Co-ordinator indicated that I should contact the writer for permission. Various attempts to locate Leila Djabali over several years have not yielded any information beyond that provided in the article. The translator was also approached but has not responded.)

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Introduction

“... of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.... fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation (Lorde, 1984, p. 42).”

Colonialism was accompanied by diverse structural, coercive and cultural forms of oppression, which has meant that most people in the world, and particularly African women, have experienced many forms of tyranny, including racism, sexism and underdevelopment. Despite all the injustices African women have played vital though largely unrecognized roles in various struggles, often addressing their own oppression and marginalization at the same time. Their refusal to accept oppression is apparent in their powerful responses to the challenges of political and gender transformation. Despite operating in crisis situations, often with very few resources, a number of women acted with powerful sense of their priorities and agendas to create new roles for women, citizens and leaders, and negating stereotypes of being passive, submissive or muted.

Drawing on gender as a central variable in the relationship between activism and creativity in African women's literature, the article examines how Leila Djabali's short poem records experiences of torture and rape, exposes a torturer's criminal practices, and challenges the oppression of the colonial regime. The poem also alerts fellow activists about what to expect in prison, about their options for challenging oppression; and alerts support groups in Algeria, France and other colonized and colonial countries. It also tries to educate torturers, colonial officials and settler colonial women about the real consequences of colonial oppression for themselves, their families, and the lives of their children. Demonstrating a range of engaged and transformative responses the poem also offers some surprising solutions to the stalemate of ongoing conflict.

In these ways the article addresses the centrality of gender to the political transformation of a society experiencing colonial oppression. Gender is posited as the central variable in the relationship between justice and activism in African women's creative literature. The article investigates how a jailed and tortured poet developed the function of voice in her poem, with the ambitious and apparently irreconcilable objectives of challenging colonial patriarchal violence at the same time as she addressed a range of audiences that were otherwise unavailable to her as a political prisoner. The poet did this with the (again) apparently incompatible goals of invoking forms of transitional justice at the same time as generating a transformative ethos among all the audiences that she anticipated and addressed. This contribution to addressing questions of transitional justice, peace-making and human security comes from the area of African postcolonial feminist literary studies.

What follows are brief introductions to the poet's context and to the poem, followed by a section on the theoretical and methodological frameworks. This is followed by an explanation of how the poem relates to transitional justice research on the African continent. Then the article focuses on analysing the poem, in four sections that focus on the challenge the poet set herself, of engaging antagonistic and dislocated audiences singly and jointly, and what this means for the poet's early and prescient engagement with challenges of peace-making and transitional justice in the transformation of a violent

conjuncture.

Brief background to Algeria, Leila Djabali, and ‘For My Torturer, Lieutenant D...’

“...we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us (Lorde, 1984, p. 44).”

Algeria was fully colonized by France by 1848 and within three decades 400,000 French settlers had occupied the best farmland. By 1957 France had stationed some 500,000 troops in Algeria. The Algerians resisted colonial occupation for more than a century. During the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62) over 100,000 Algerian guerillas and 10,000 French soldiers were killed, in addition to many civilians. In a referendum in 1962 the Algerians chose to be independent. It was in this context that Leila Djabali was born, in 1933. She was a young intellectual in the 1950s. A fellow activist offers an index of the level of structural oppression in educational provision in occupied Algeria, and the impact of the revolution on women’s participation in public life:

“...the war of 1954-62 ... marks the beginning of women making their presence felt. In 1954 Algerian women were totally excluded from public life. Nearly all illiterate, with only 4.5% among them able to read and write.... The University of Algiers had no more than 500 Algerian students, among whom were about 50 girls (Amrane-Minne, 1999, p. 62).”

During the war Djabali was imprisoned and tortured in the Barberousse Prison in Algiers in 1957 (Mapanje, 2002). Authoritarian states tend to imprison activists ‘to contain and eliminate organised dissent’ (Harlow, 1987, p. 123). Amnesty International, which monitors the human rights violations of prisoners, explains that torture ‘does not occur simply because individual torturers are sadistic.... Torture is usually part of the state-controlled machinery to suppress dissent’ (cited in Harlow, 1987, p. 123). This is borne out by Frantz Fanon’s observations in Algeria in 1957: ‘Torture is inherent in the whole colonialist configuration.... The police agent who tortures an Algerian infringes no law. His act fits into the framework of the colonialist institution’ (1967, pp. 64, 71).

Introducing the poem

“What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day ... in silence? (Lorde, 1984, p. 41). “

“I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood (p. 40).”

Apparently undeterred by being tortured, Leila Djabali wrote the poem ‘Pour mon tortionnaire, le Lieutenant D...’ while in prison in 1957 (Mapanje, 2002). The English version is ‘For My Torturer, Lieutenant D...’ (translated by Anita Barrows, in Chipasula

and Chipasula, 1995, p. 4):

You slapped me –	1
No one had ever slapped me –	
electric shock	
and then your fist	
and your filthy language	5
I bled too much to be able to blush	
All night long	
a locomotive in my belly	
rainbows before my eyes	
It was as if I were eating my mouth	10
drowning my eyes	
I had hands all over me	
and felt like smiling.	
Then one morning a different soldier came	
You were as alike as two drops of blood	15
... Your wife, Lieutenant –	
Did she stir the sugar in your coffee?	
Did your mother dare to tell you that you looked well?	
Did you run your fingers through your kids' hair?	

Written in the first person, the poem addresses the ordeal of a woman political prisoner who endured violations ranging from colonial invasion, imprisonment, torture (beatings, electric shocks and verbal abuse) and rape by a colonial official. This is a courageous and remarkable account given that such violations can produce deep trauma and silence, and that the poem was written in jail.

Recognizing the disempowering nature of silence and self-censorship when speech is crucial to transformation (Lorde, 1984), the speaker challenges the dangerous forces of suppression, and the cultures of reticence into which women and activists are inducted. This was necessary to overcome the colonial strategy of erasure and its 'many-layered narratives' of suppression (World Court of Women Against Racism, 2001, p. 2). Against the restrictive culture of colonialism and patriarchy, the poem is predicated upon the recognition and democratic engagement of very divergent audiences, a literary micro-strategy that parallels the activist poet's meta-textual strategy of building broad alliances against oppression.

Methodology

The theoretical approach and interpretive method are drawn from Critical Theory (e.g., Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005), which focuses on questions of culture, power and justice. Recognizing that culture is a domain of power, different types of power are addressed: oppressive forms such as domination, coercion and violence; and productive forms such as empowerment (of self and other), affirmation of sovereignty (of self and society), and activism that includes creative and directed action and reflection. This may involve the development of assertive voices and actions against repressive histories,

contexts, institutions and behavior; and the creation of dialogue, communication and art to develop trust, inclusivity and a social justice ethos. Critical Theory offers resources for understanding conflict, and addressing what is needed for transformation (e.g., how injustices may be productively challenged) so that more humane societies may develop. It recognizes that differing values and interests may place people and societies in antagonistic positions, and that all human actors have the capacity to transform themselves, and contribute to the democratization of their contexts through critical reflection and engaged action. Art can be a powerful source of innovation, advancing justice and transformation, and helping generate the mind-shifts required for peace-making to occur. Literary art, which is based on a shared medium of communication (language), can enable the development of peace-making dispositions, even in deeply polarized situations. The focus on readers (audience/s) in this analysis is influenced by reception aesthetics (reader response theory). This allows for the identification of multiple audiences, and enables an understanding of the different forms of intervention used by the poet to address the personal and political transformation of diverse individuals and groups.

A transformative response to colonial oppression and trauma requires an interpersonal, intercultural and interdisciplinary hermeneutic approach. The analytical method developed in my research and teaching is a form of intersectional analysis that addresses the interdisciplinary complexities of feminist postcolonial African cultural studies through a heuristic that allows for an integrated analysis of subjectivity (including gender, national, race, and class identities), creative forms of expression, and socio-political analysis (Narismulu, 2009; 2011), as well as taking account of transitional justice and peace-making.

Given that little is known about Leila Djabali and that little attention has been given to her remarkable poem, the poet Audre Lorde's perceptive essay 'The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action' (1984) is used for its clarificatory power. Arising from her experiences of vulnerability, isolation, suppression and marginalization as a Black lesbian United States feminist activist-intellectual, Lorde's engaged and productive attention to questions of survival, justice, gender, communication and activism parallel and illuminate the poet's responses to the challenges of voice in dealing with torture and rape in productive ways.

Locating the poem in the context of transitional justice research on the African continent

Given the dearth of information about the developing field of transitional justice (Scanlon, 2009), and the challenge that current discourse on transitional justice needs to be expanded to promote more inclusive gender-oriented notions of justice (Scanlon and Muddell, 2009), Leila Djabali's poem is ground-breaking. Set in the Algerian revolution, the text makes a substantive contribution to the current 'need to address gender-based violations as a critical facet of women's struggles for human rights, especially in those societies emerging from civil war and militarized environments, [which] remains a slowly developing field' (Muddell & Scanlon, 2009, p. 10).

At the same time, while a large number of women were involved in the Algerian revolution, half a century later 'the dynamics of gender keep women from speaking publicly about [the] trauma' they experienced (Mortimer, 2012, p. 106), notwithstanding

the feminist and human rights advances that have occurred, and the development of fields such as transitional justice and conflict resolution. Against this challenge, Djabali's poem articulates the voice of an isolated activist dealing with torture and rape, even as it represents the experiences of many activists in the Algerian revolution and in other societies experiencing high levels of political conflict. Patriarchal societies continue to socialize women and activists to be ashamed about male violations against themselves and to maintain silence. The continuing high rates of gender-based human rights violations (Nabukeera-Musoke, 2009) highlight the importance of ensuring accountability and justice for past as well as current human rights violations (Ndlovu, 2009).

Well into the twenty-first century the historical roles of colonial regimes across the African continent continue to impact on initiatives to secure women's rights, whether through the law (Scully, 2009), Special Courts (Teale, 2009), or Truth Commissions, as identified in studies of societies as diverse as Sierra Leone (Teale, 2009) and South Africa (Kusafuka, 2009; Meintjes, 2009). While a Truth Commission can enable a society to address its past, its contribution is not substantive enough (Graybil & Lanegran, 2004). Part of the problem has to do with the close links between structural and gendered violence in many postcolonial societies (Kusafuka, 2009), which is compounded by the continued incapacity of the state to secure women's rights through the legal system (Scully, 2009).

These challenges suggest the need for a range of approaches to secure gender justice during the political transformation of societies experiencing high levels of violence, including developing the capacity of women, activists and organizations (possibly through various forms of education). Kusafuka (2009) and Meintjes (2009) argue that the involvement of women's organizations are important in helping break with structural histories of violence, while Nabukeera-Musoke (2009) addresses the significant roles that activists and women's groups play in advancing transitional justice initiatives. Djabali's work represents an early indication of the value of such strategies. Written fifty-five years ago, Djabali's work offers evidence of women activists' commitment to the development of cultures of transitional justice and peace-making while in the depths of dangerous anti-colonial struggles of liberation. The poem addresses very sensitive areas of conflict in societies at war, i.e., torture and rape, about which it is very difficult to get testimony even today, as Mortimer (2012) indicates.

There are various challenges in the development of transitional justice systems today. Scanlon and Muddell (2009) are critical of transitional justice initiatives that reduce concerns about women to 'victimhood' and which perpetuate stereotypes of women's passive roles during conflicts, along with a failure to refer to women's multiple roles as leaders and agents. These are challenges that Djabali's compact poem tackles very powerfully, even as it goes further and 'explores how men are affected by the gendered dynamics of conflict' (Scanlon, 2009, p. 9). In its thematic engagements and discursive processes the poem contributes creatively to developing cultures of freedom, openness and assertiveness to advance a more democratic mode of justice through incipient peace-making initiatives.

Addressing the torturer

“In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation (Lorde, 1984, p. 43).”

How did the poem survive the extremely harsh conditions in Barberousse Prison? If a reader tries to look at the poem through the eyes of the colonial prison officials it becomes apparent that the activist agenda is camouflaged, firstly by the title, which makes the first stanza appear as if it is a complaint directed (misguidedly) to the torturer and rapist himself. If this was not unthreatening enough, the soft toned second stanza seems to confirm that the writer’s agenda is innocuous, and somewhat deranged (which would be consistent with the intentions of a torturer/rapist). Such textual effects could have worked to secure the poem against confiscation in an extremely repressive environment.

Notwithstanding the concealment strategies, the powerful responses of the speaker to the torture and rape suggest that the poet is sovereign. In the title of the poem an atomized version of the dominant audience (the colonial forces) is drily fingered: ‘For my torturer, Lieutenant D...’. That this is a serious accusation is suggested in the reference to the rank and the initial of the torturer/rapist, who could have been easily identified by anyone who knew the prison in that period. This is followed up with the accusative second person form of address that opens the first line of the poem. Rejecting the assigned role of victim, the activist sets up this communique to confront the torturer. Given that violent acts like torture and rape are generally coded by powerful perpetrators to be unspeakable (a restriction that continues to be heeded, unwittingly, by traumatized victims and hegemonized societies), the position of the speaker in Djabali’s poem is forthright and reasoned as she reverses the roles and holds the official (and the colonial state) to account.

The speaker details the abuse, bearing witness to the multiple violations of imprisonment, interrogation, abuse, torture and rape for challenging colonial occupation. The metaphor of the train that is used to represent the rape (lines 7-8) references the spatial invasion of colonialism and exposes the boast of many colonial cultures about the progress they contribute to the societies they colonize. In the absence of much information about the often-concealed atrocity of rape (including during war), the careful account of the abuses (lines 1-12) and the irrepressible responses of the speaker (line 13, which ends the first stanza) record the failure of the torture and the rape to traumatize and silence her.

It is Audre Lorde’s work that helps clarify Djabali’s decision to write such a poem and such lines even while in the colonial prison where this occurred: ‘that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength’ (Lorde, 1984, p. 42). To expose an iniquitous multi-level system of oppression a powerful indictment is needed, which necessitates the sacrifice of privacy and the acknowledgement of extreme violation, which few could countenance. But the poet’s ego, her grasp of transformational strategy, and her communication and literary skills are equal to her mission.

In the second stanza (lines 14-19) Djabali reaches beyond the criminal behavior and bigotry to find out who the torturer is as a human being. She looks beyond the brute, the colonial prison, and the political and cultural systems that enabled and ostensibly protected him, into his home environment, to make sense of the appalling behavior. This surprising choice on the part of the poet seems to issue from an unshakeable sense of self-worth.

The speaker calmly challenges the Lieutenant with leading questions (lines 17-19) of her own that stand in ironic contrast to his brutal interrogation techniques, which have clearly failed to quell her, much less extract the responses his regime sought. Deploying an incisive imagination the speaker advances on the torturer's domestic environment to raise what appears to be a mild enquiry about his family. Subtle persuasion strategies are evident in the references to his family (lines 16-19), which represent a bid to evoke his feelings, and put an end to the abuse. It may also be linked to an attempt at peace-making, through educating the torturer about the consequences of his actions for himself and his family, as a way of beginning to break the deadlock. Such non-adversarial tactics evolve perhaps because the poet-activist is at the mercy of the colonial jailers.

The questions about the disaffection of his wife (line 17), the unnatural fearfulness of his mother (line 18), and to his torture-stained hands that defile his children (line 19) serve to subtly interrogate the torturer about his allegiance to a brutal colonial system that dehumanizes him as much as his captives in the prison and in his home. By invoking his family the poet seeks the most effective way of teaching the brute how he (and the colonial army and society) wreak violence not only on the people it has colonized but also on the supposed beneficiaries of colonialism, French settlers and citizens. So the speaker invokes the Frenchwomen and children to keep the colonial official (clearly a metonymic figure) accountable for all the consequences of his actions.

In a more assertive reading the reference to 'a different soldier' (line 14) is satirical (as indicated by the simile in line 15), for it patronizes him through the mocking observations that he is influenced by, and dependent on, how his wife and mother treat him. This derides the supposedly macho practices of torture and rape. But it does not appear that the poet is interested merely in showing the torturer to be at the bottom of some domestic pecking order (as the next section will elaborate). Rather it seems that by interrogating the torturer about his wife, mother and children, the poet is exposing the contradictions that inform colonial values and behavior, so that the veneer and hypocrisy of 'civilization' are exposed. This is based on the classic feminist demand that, across all the domains of their lives men need to behave with integrity, respect and equality towards women.

Reading the issue through the lens of male gender performance, it appears from the earlier section (lines 1-12) that the Lieutenant expresses a hypermasculine aberration consonant with the rogue patriarchy that implemented and drove colonialism. That the rank of the torturer ('Lieutenant', in the title) is emphasized as a significant part of his identity serves to indict the officer class (for unprofessional practices), which may be read as a rebuke of the export of colonial racist patriarchy to Algeria, for reasons of nationalist and capitalist accumulation. Given that even oppressive monoliths have cracks, this one appears vulnerable to splintering along class lines. At the micro-level Djabali's compact writing strategy shows recognition of the torturer as a vulnerable social being (though pre-empting excuses for liability), with the more familiar tone of the

second stanza suggesting recognition that the torturer could be from classes conscripted into doing the dirty work of the elites that controlled the government and profited from the colonies. Then the reference to the family would serve to disabuse the torturer about his role in the corrupt colonial machine and interrupt his class servility. The poet counts on the torturer recognizing that he and his class cohort are pawns in an elite patriarchal project that took the form of colonialism to perpetuate the goals and primitive accumulation processes of a feudalistic mentality no longer tenable on European soil. While the poem disaggregates the torturer in these illuminating ways, it also deconstructs, at successive macro-levels, the hypocrisy that the French National Assembly produced the Declaration of the Rights of Man (sic) and of the Citizen in the eighteenth century; and that France and other colonial states signed the Declaration on Human Rights only a decade earlier, in 1946.

Addressing colonial women

“The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken (Lorde, 1984, p. 44).”

Djabali’s poem uncovers the gender oppression to be found even at the heart of (settler) colonialism: the alienation, fear and repression felt by those closest to colonial officials: the fearful wife who may only be able express her feelings in passive-aggressive acts like omitting to stir the sugar she adds to his coffee (line 17); the mother who may feel too afraid to exchange pleasantries with her son (line 18), and the children who are defiled by the touch of a torturer-rapist father (line 19). She suggests that far from benefiting from colonialism, these subjects and relationships are poisoned by the violence required to maintain it, and despite the cover-ups.

By asking whether the far more privileged settler women have to resort to self-censorship (in the case of the parent-progenitor) or passive aggression (in the case of the partner), the speaker questions their supposed status and the price of oppression, along with questioning their awareness, integrity, roles and choices in enabling criminal pathological behavior. Through the quiet, searching questions the speaker simultaneously reprises and eschews the role of interrogator, showing more humane and effective ways of behaving in community. To the women (and colonial women readers of the poem) the speaker suggests that although they have been led to imagine they are the beneficiaries of colonialism they are unable even to play their entrenched gender roles of mother and wife with any license or satisfaction. In this Djabali seeks to educate her audiences beyond what they think they know (Boyce Davies, 1995). She shows empathy and challenges the women (and their compatriots) about whether they dare to begin to act with integrity and break the abnormal restraints on their own freedom of expression and action.

The brutal colonial system does not stop the irrepressible activist from trying to conscript the colonial French women into the culture of liberation. There are no boundaries to her scheme: recognition of the ideology that subjugates women leads naturally to a consideration of how women may join forces to deal with the patriarchy that brutalizes everyone, including the men serving the elites. It is significant that Djabali

is able to go beyond her own deeply oppressed position to allude to the possibility of a transnational dialogue about gender empowerment and articulation consonant with the feminist movements that had been rising at the time with activists like Simone de Beauvoir. The mediation and pre-emption of some of the destruction patriarchy inflicts is important for the protection of vulnerable people all over until the scourge of racism, sexism, and imperialism are checked. There is also a more assertive and catalyzing aspect to Djabali's engagement with the colonial women:

“to get beneficiaries to see their own social responsibility.... to teach beneficiaries not only of the abuses for which they bear no personal responsibility but also of the structural injustice of which they have been direct beneficiaries, and therefore bear direct responsibility to redress (Mahmood Mamdani at a South African Truth and Reconciliation public discussion, 12 March 1998, cited in Jolly, 1999, p. 6).”

Addressing activists

“My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences (Lorde, 1984, p. 41).”

The primary, if concealed, audience of this poem are activists, primarily Djabali's fellow activists (as is apparent from what has gone before) but no doubt other activists as well (given the scale and significance of the Algerian struggle), and the entire poem and all its strategies (including those discussed earlier) appear directed at activists and the work they must do for justice, transformation and peace.

While any poem allows a poet space to express herself freely on her own terms, under conditions of captivity, surveillance and horrific torture, the existence of such creative work is extraordinary. It is likely that the poet had concerns about whether she would survive, so the poem represents a final authorized communication (against the counter-claims repressive regimes make to defend their abuse and decimation of activists). At the same time the poem also bears generous witness to the effaced experiences of other detained, tortured or slaughtered activists.

The poem also works as a primer, covertly signaling how activists can respond to the difficult problems of being held in captivity, tortured and raped. That the poem survived being written under the surveillance in a notorious jail in Algiers is part of how Djabali empowers other activists. That the poem, in its process, reverses and overhauls the role of the interrogator indicates how the colonial goals and objectives are to be reversed, instead of yielding the incriminating statements it is for activists to ensure that the criminal practices of the oppressors are exposed, to much larger and more effective audiences.

In the second stanza (lines 16-19), with her speaker deftly reconfiguring the options available to victims of oppression, Djabali redefines the relationship of a captured freedom fighter to an agent of oppression. She teaches fellow activists to engage

assertively to resolve their challenges. This suggests a restorative agenda: Djabali's writing strategy seems to be directed at creating a broader culture to redress colonial oppression. In settler-colonial societies riven with violence and divisions, radical openness and truth-telling are integral precursors to the trust needed for genuine peace-making to occur. By re-enacting elements of the torture experienced and leading readers through the experience (lines 1-13), a difficult but cathartic ritual, Djabali's speaker is shown to be liberated from the ordeal (line 13 and the second stanza). This also signals that the speaker is communicating with fellow activists, whom she invokes creatively and whose solidarity perhaps enabled the development of the healing and unexpectedly challenging elements of the poem despite the violence she experienced. The clarity and resolve of the poet, to deal with the repression and use her art to challenge the torturer and the entire colonial system, serves to influence activists and activist-artists focus on their own goals and agendas and to teach others how to overcome such widespread forms of oppression.

Addressing multiple audiences simultaneously

“And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives. That we not hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own (Lorde, 1984, p. 43).”

The previous three sections indicate how the poem constitutes and addresses different groups of readers in different ways. Djabali's leadership extends to challenging everyone: the second person form of address in 'You slapped me' (line 1) extends the entire experience covered in the poem to every person, Algerian (addresser) or settler colonial (addressee), showing Djabali's mettle as a political and cultural organizer in a society needing to engage in dialogue about a transitional justice ethic.

In demonstrating the process by which the speaker alleviates her suffering to be able to engage in activism, the poem works to rescue and liberate readers who have experienced or fear similar threats of violence. Women who have suffered sexual violation are also encouraged to challenge injustices by tackling the individuals and the systems involved to achieve their own agendas.

Moving polarized groups to engage in dialogue over the ending of conflict requires great creativity and risk-taking, to generate a voice that can speak out of an impossible situation in a society at war. Reaching out to any colonial agent during the revolution could have been mistaken for betrayal, as Tassadit Yacine (1999) records.

Djabali's strategies involve even riskier maneuvers. The poet's apparent goal of accessing multiple audiences simultaneously may be identified in the dual encodings (deliberate ambiguities) that allow for different readings by different types of readers. This is important for achieving similar outcomes from polarized audiences (e.g., the movement into the dialogue essential for peace building). The poet's surprising diction (assuming close translation) in 'smiling' could suggest mental breakdown to torturers looking for the results of their criminal activities. Indeed the United Nations Convention against Torture (1984), which outlines the physical and mental effects of torture,

addresses the possibility of permanent psychological damage. But experienced activists would recognize that while the speaker shows awareness of the danger (lines 1-12), the unexpected diction (in lines 9, 10, 11, 13) signals resilience and strategy rather than mental dissociation. In these ways the poet uses and challenges the assigned role of victim, while refusing to be defeated by the coercive violence of colonialism and showing that the worst forms of oppression may be used as catalysts to engender freedom.

As a whole the poem contradicts the stereotypes of gender, race, culture and religion. In the second stanza Djabali takes on oppressive local colonial and global patriarchal norms governing women's roles, and patriarchal social attitudes that compound colonial human rights abuses against women (and some men). By representing herself and invoking the women and children in the Lieutenant's life the speaker challenges a range of colonial stereotypes: that the women are passive and tractable; that the north of Africa is not like or part of the rest of the continent despite the common experience of colonialism (which also created those divisions); that the experiences of women under patriarchy are divided by their racial and national identities; and that white colonial women and men share nothing in common with African people, and particularly those who were colonized.

One of the riskiest challenges the poet-activist undertook involved refusing to pathologize and dismiss the torturer-rapist, despite the unfavorable colonial history of invoking and exploiting national, racial, gender, ethnic and cultural differences. Undaunted, she chooses to try to educate the torturer, to help make the world a safer place for all women and oppressed men. This strategy is followed from the outset, in the curious preposition in the title, '*For* my Torturer' (rather than '*To* my Torturer'). This confirms what also occurs in the second stanza: that one recipient of the generosity of the speaker is the torturer. This is perhaps because Djabali seeks an end not only to the torture and rape, but to colonialism as a whole. The poet also teaches that, besides trouncing evil practices, this is ultimately what one human being grants another: understanding and compassion. This concept of transformation is delivered with the consonant equanimity and integrity, as even a superficial reading of the second stanza (lines 14-19) yields. Of course, part of this strategy could have involved stroking the ego of the torturer so that if the poem were discovered, she and the poem would survive. These are some of the strategic choices activists make to develop systems of transitional justice.

Anti-colonial activists will be alert to the contradictions of using the language of an invader but, under the circumstances, the use of French represents the poet's best option for challenging the oppressor while in prison, and for articulating her rights and the need for justice. The text exposes and challenges the colonial official in his mother tongue, to other French-speaking readers, at the same time as it broadcasts the poet's agendas. Further, by writing in French, Djabali takes on the language and discourses used to develop the culture of colonialism that became hegemonic in France and in the colonies. And, by challenging colonial discourse and ideology Djabali shows that no one who is alert should be imprisoned or undermined by the bigotry of colonial patriarchal and racial discourses. Given that language is the building block of literary art, the poet creatively reconfigures the French language, turning its discursive resources into instruments of justice and transformation. This serves as a counter to colonial impunity and disruption. (These arguments apply to the English language and cultures as well.)

However, the focus and intentions of the poem help mitigate Ngugi's (1986) valid concerns about the self-defeating use of colonial languages in the transformation projects of a continent where only a fraction of the population has access to such languages.

Conclusion

“...in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us (Lorde, 1984, p. 43)”

Leila Djabali's poem encourages women and oppressed people to find their voices and she offers a model of how art and a powerful discourse of resistance may be developed and deployed to secure justice and peace. The poet also alludes to the pathologies that drive colonialism, infect the colonial and colonized states, and undermine the humanity of their agents and beneficiaries. In this she anticipates Frantz Fanon, the psychiatrist - and later theorist of anti-colonialism - who worked in Algeria during this time and resigned his post in protest against colonial atrocities. But while Fanon would argue that '[t]he colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence' (1963, p. 86), a few years before him the battered but unbowed poet in Barberousse prison was exploring the creative, communicative and revolutionary propensities of art, to see if a colonized woman could find her freedom in and *despite* violence.

Exemplifying the role of the artist as a healer, activist and innovator, Djabali's poem records oppressive and criminal colonial practices, resists taboos and creates ways of talking about rape, exposes colonial officials and holds them up for scrutiny, insists that the supposedly high art of poetry serve the needs of the most oppressed people, tries to educate torturers and colonial officials, and seeks to disabuse settler colonial women and officials about the impact of colonial oppression on their own lives and the next generation. It also mobilizes activists against colonial aggression, alerts them about conditions in prison, and how to deal effectively with incarceration, in addition to addressing like-minded groups, wherever they may be. In these ways the enterprising poem attests to the power of creative activism over brute force, even in the absence of other resources, which is of value in societies struggling to meet the basic needs of all people. The allusive nature of poetry helps activists elude oppression and retribution, and develop transformative and peace-making initiatives. Finally, Djabali's creative and confident poem shows that the colonial language does not necessarily have to be a conceptual prison but can instead serve as an effective instrument for countering violence and enabling justice, freedom and peace-making.

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