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Editors' Preface

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Editors' Preface

Our first issue published in 1990 under *CL*'s new editorship was a double issue on "The Politics of Literature" (17.1/2, 1990) followed shortly thereafter by a second issue, "The Politics of Literature II" (19.1, 1992). It was clear to us from our very beginning that literature, or more appropriately the literatures we would be dealing with, were inextricably a part of the political. Literatures, whether fiction, drama, poetry, essay, film, comics, or any other form of the written or even spoken word, exist as a response to the cultures in which they are created. As such they are political, responding and reacting to those cultures, or coming to life in a specific instant of history engulfed by all that is occurring at that historical moment and thus part of it whether they are aware of it or not. Twelve years later with the special issue "Algeriad," we are returning to the purely political in the literatures we have been critiquing, analyzing, and lobbying to find their rightful place in the college/university classroom.

The events of 9/11/01 have somehow knit more tightly the bond that exists between the words we use to express what we see, feel, and imagine and the cultures out of which these words are born. We can no longer doubt that what we do and say is part of who we are and part of the world in which we exist. The political becomes no more than our daily existence. The events of 9/11/01 have also served to solidify the area occupied by literatures. This area has been constantly expanding since the inauguration of the poststructural and the postmodern age, so that, with the recent tragedies at the World Trade Center, the ever-expanding universe of literatures has become a reality for all.

In the aftermath of 9/11 left wing intellectuals critical of U.S. foreign policy such as Noam Chomsky, Edward Said (2001, 2002), and Arundhati Roy (2001) among others, came under criticism for belonging to "that peculiar empire of the one-eyed," for "occidentalism" (Buruma 2002), for not being critical of "fascism" (Wente 2001),¹ and for making stringent critiques of U.S. policy difficult (Gitlin 2001). Our purpose here is not to argue against their case, but to note that the underlying discomfiture with the impassioned terms of the critique offered by the left, conspires further to put "terrorism" on the far side of the human.

In a column in the *New York Times* on 22 September 2001, Edward Rothstein expresses the wish that postcolonial studies and postmodern studies reject the tenets of their disciplines in the aftermath of September 11. According to him, a "transcendent ethical perspective" is not possible for these fields of study, rendering them "ethically perverse." Further, he contends that the West serves as the prime target for all postcolonial critiques

which do not merely focus on the West's "original sin" of colonialism, but take their own governments to task. It is important, however, to note that the West's idea of truth is not absolute and that postcolonial theorists do not give up on truth, nor do they want merely to substitute different versions. Poststructuralists might object to the truth-claims that civilizations have made and to the universalist claims of the West during its high imperial period, which many fear is on the ascendancy, but both still maintain that human rights and justice for all is crucial.

In this issue on Algeria, the reader will find no casual dismissal of truth claims, but rather a rigorous assessment of the same in such extreme situations such as war. Far from focussing on the West, the essays attempt to come to grips with ideological conflicts among diverse groups of peoples, including those who represent the West. The almost compulsive kind of dichotomization of Americans opposed to dehumanized Arabs that emerged shortly after 9/11 provides the best *raison d'être* for the work that is presented here. The face of the other became the face of terror, and while an officialized mobilization of hysteria by the government might have been expected, the daily probing into the other in terms devoid of any serious attempt to step out one's own familiar parameters was not. In these dangerous times, it is even more important to avail ourselves of the lessons of those schools of thought that have been active in trying to cultivate and engage difference rather than absorb or destroy it. This special issue contributes to the efforts of those struggling to come to a reasoned understanding of the conflicts that are searing our times and tries to contextualize seemingly insuperable differences of nationality, race, and class for our students.

The essays blur the distinction between history, literature, and political commentary. They force the reader to question self-identified "facts" and to understand such "facts" as informed opinions expressed in a myriad of ways. These ways of expression have for centuries been compartmentalized in academia into disciplines—history, literature, political science, philosophy, etc. This division of cultural knowledge into specific units has led to the misinterpretation of our world as one composed of "facts" separate from the "literary" which is created by the imagination. History becomes his-story, excluding her-story, the other-story, and the stories of all those who lack the power to write their own-story. What these essays demonstrate is that such compartmentalization is no longer viable in our postmodern universe. All these essays, whether in the form of poetry, memoirs, letters, historical accounts, or political tracks, lead to the same end—a divergent display of opinions by many voices on Algeria's plight today, which by extension is the plight of the colonized in general.

Our guest editor Mustapha Marrouchi has brought together a selection of essays that challenges the notion that Arab reality is monolithic, and complicates once and for all the easy notions of the good Arab/the bad Arab by laying out the complex history of diverse groups of people—many of who may be Muslim and not Arab, many of who may be Arab, but not Christian, and many who may be Algerian and neither—and their understanding of the world. Together the essays constitute a challenge to what we study in the classroom, how we use it for the purpose of considering the human condition, and what it means.

While *College Literature* is continuing with the task of bringing diverse studies of literature to its readers, as it has in its many special issues, it has in this issue expanded its generic focus by publishing work that blurs generic boundaries. Certainly much literature has offered both social and aesthetic critique, and the creative pieces here belong to a genre of writing that, for want of an exact definition, we would call public cultural critique. The fictional essays included are by writers who have wrestled with alien genres and tongues to put pressure on narrative and poetry to bear the burdens of both history and testimony. To those of us to whom Algeria has come, Pontecorvo and Fanon notwithstanding, very much through western filters, Marrouchi's rich introduction offers a new perspective to teach the pieces in this collection, many of which are newly accessible to us in English. Far from presenting structuring binaries as a way of understanding the tumult in Algeria, Marrouchi scrupulously presents his version of Algeria, without slipping by and avoiding ethical judgment. However, the judgments offered here by Marrouchi and others do not claim to be absolute, thereby showing the importance of being ethical while being provisional. The alternative is, quite simply, frightening.

"Rachida: Letters from Algeria," adapted by Eliza McDonald and Jo Thomas, dramatizes the choices present in contemporary Algeria as well as the lack of choices for those who try to somehow live, work, and suffer and even achieve through it all. The reader will find in this piece a changing history of women wearing hejab, or women being compelled to wear hejab, but will not find it easy to endorse the slick condemnation of the hejab proffered by all our media gurus and the corollary that women are not thinking through this specific issue on their own.

As critics, neither Jacques Derrida nor Hélène Cixous need introduction to the U.S. academy, but their pieces in this volume attest to the extent to which their critical thinking has been influenced by their Algerian-ness, or their lack of it, their contact with ineradicable difference, or otherness in both France and Algeria that has produced these discourses on writing as difference, and *l'écriture féminine*. *La pensée algérienne*, Algerian thinking, has taken

root in our own thinking, our discourses. Derrida's reflections raise questions on the implications of writing on others, on Algerians. What does it mean to take a stand on a given issue, specifically, here on Algeria? Cixous's story straddles the autobiographical and fictional, not in itself surprising, but also navigates these through history, culture, and identity. Marrouchi's own story, invoking Naipaul, Rushdie, and Bhabha is a story of the journey back, of an exile that began in childhood. He ends poignantly by noting the singularity of his vision of Algeria, and its personal limitedness, even as he wonders at Algeria's capaciousness.

Salwa Ali Benzahra's essay on Mimouni's *Tombeza* introduces us to those who are exiled within Algeria. It brilliantly plots the manner in which the pressures of exile are compounded by the post-colonial state and shows us how Mimouni understands the changes wrought, not just in society, but in human nature, by the violence of colonialism and the distresses in Algeria after the FLN lost the election in 1991.

A provocative essay by Lynn Pennrod on Hélène Cixous and her wilful rejection of belonging asks us to think about home, language, Diaspora, and exile in ways that leave all of them unfixed. Hassen Bouabdellah on culture, art, and violence sees the subjugation of art and culture by the body politic as that which prevents newly independent countries from integrating themselves both mentally and spiritually into the modern world. Abdelkader Kjemai in "No Way Out," a Sartrean nightmare which reminds one of "No Exit," follows a young man through the surrealistic maze of contemporary Algiers as he seeks to escape a city that will not let him go, blocking his every way with the horrors of war. In the final essay of this collection, the painter Izmer Bin Ahmad attempts to explain his views of Algeria through the painting that graces the cover of this special issue. Indeed, unfixing the stale understandings of the past—of Islam, of terror, of difference—is what this selection of essays strives to do.

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Notes

¹ White mentions Hitchens of *The Nation* as considering several of these left responses as being apologists for Islamic fascism, which were picked up by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* of Friday, 2 August 2002 and appeared also in *Dissent*. Mitchell Cohen's recent piece is one of the most extreme and comprehensive attacks of "postmodernism" and left leaning tendencies. See "An Empire of Cant," Hardt, Negri and Post-modern Political Theory." ([Http://www.dissentmagazine.org/archive/su02/cohen.shtml](http://www.dissentmagazine.org/archive/su02/cohen.shtml)).

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