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Algeriance, Exile, and Hélène Cixous¹

Lynn Penrod

My way of thinking was born with the thought that I could have been born elsewhere, in one of the twenty countries where a living fragment of my maternal family had landed after it blew up on the Nazi minefield. With the thought of the chanciness, of the accident of the fall. Lucretius's Rain of atoms, in raining, the atom of my mother had met the atom of my father.

The strange molecule detached from the black skies of the north had landed in Africa.

In the smiling and happy little girl I was, I hid (from others and from myself) a secret, restless, clandestine little girl, who knew well that in truth she had been born elsewhere. The obscure feeling of having appeared there by chance, of not belonging to any here by inheritance or descent, the physical feeling of being a frail mushroom, a spore hatched over night, who only holds to the earth with hasty and frail roots. Another feeling in the shadows: the unshakeable certainty

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that “the Arabs” were the true offspring of this dusty and perfumed soil. But when I walked barefoot with my brother on the hot trails of Oran, I felt the sole of my body caressed by the welcoming palms of the country’s ancient dead, and the torment of my soul was assuaged. (Hélène Cixous, “Mon Algérieance”)²

In any discussion of cultural representations of exile, literary texts assume a place of prominence. From time immemorial creative artists have used the written word to communicate, articulate, and disseminate their sense of isolation and alienation from, as well as their longing for, a place and space which for one reason or another—political, social, economic—has been banished from their lives. Hélène Cixous is one such writer. In a sense, virtually the entire corpus of her writing could be placed under the sign of exile. Born in Algeria, her childhood spent in Oran and Algiers, she has lived her adult life, her writing life, in France. At first glance then, Algeria would seem to be the place from which she had been banished, the space to which she might long to return. Indeed, two of the writers about whom she has written extensively, James Joyce and Clarice Lispector, were themselves displaced persons writing far from the land of their birth.³ Yet the case of Cixous’s writing as it might relate to the concept of exile “from” Algeria proves more elusive, more complex than the situation of either Lispector or Joyce. In a sense, Algeria is both everywhere and nowhere in Cixous’s writing. And the very concept of exile “from” is one, which, in Cixous’s case, would be difficult to argue. Yet it is perhaps this very concept of “exile” in the fullest sense of both its ambiguity and its complexity that serves as the basic creative motor behind all her writing. Perhaps in the end we discover that it is “Algeria” and her “Algeriance” about which she has rarely written directly which truly inform much of her work.

As Susan Rubin Suleiman points out in her introduction to *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances* (1998) the word *exile* itself varies both in meaning and connotation. But the word nonetheless universally designates “a state of being ‘not home’ (or of being ‘everywhere at home,’ the flip side of the same coin), which means, in most cases, at a distance from one’s own native tongue” (1). But, Suleiman goes on to ask, “[i]s this distance a falling away from some original wholeness and source of creativity, or is it on the contrary a spur to creativity? Is exile a cause for optimism (celebration, even) or its opposite?” (1), and for Hélène Cixous, we might ask, does Algeria represent “home” or “not home”? Or both? Or neither?

Hélène Cixous was born on June 5, 1937, in Oran, the daughter of Georges Cixous, a physician, and Eva Klein Cixous, who later trained as a midwife. She spent her childhood years in the Mediterranean atmosphere of a French colony in North Africa, first in Oran and later in Algiers, as the

child of Jewish parents living through the historic and political turbulence of World War II. Her complex family situation, as well as her place of birth, has obviously had a lasting and profound effect on her and on her writing.

In an essay describing her own "coming to writing," Cixous says that she had the "luck" to take her first steps "in the blazing hotbed between two holocausts" (1991,17) and in interviews over the years she has frequently described herself as "triply marginalized"—as a woman, as a Jew, as an Algerian colonial. Indeed, being a Jewish child in Algeria during the German Occupation of France is certainly a key to many of the major preoccupations of her writing. "My father was a military officer during the war (temporarily, because he was a doctor)," she writes, "so suddenly we were admitted to the only garden in Oran (Oran is a very desert city), that of the Officers' Club. But the place was a hotbed of anti-Semitism. I was three years old, I hadn't the slightest idea that I was Jewish. The other children started attacking me, and I didn't even know what it was to be Jewish, Catholic, and so on" (1991,xix).

In a later version recounting this first originary exile, Cixous writes:

The first garden out of which I was expelled was the "Cercle Militaire" in Oran. In 1940 we were thrown out as Jews.

The encirclement, the Circle, the siege, are primitive figures of my Algerian scene. Our familial and social movements were attempts to enter, to be admitted, to go through the doors, to pass the thresholds of intolerance one had to beware to the right to the left ahead behind. The Numerus Clausus (a restricted admittance quota) was the familiar demon of all our exclusions. It had a modest name, a Latin loincloth. One had to become seaweed to pass through the mesh of the fishing net or to rise a knight in armour.

The circles intersected. To be inside was also to be outside. Entering gave on to exclusion. This is the logic of the Numerus Clausus. (Cixous 1998, 159)

Dr. Georges Cixous, who had been born in Algeria, was technically a French citizen, yet because his family were Sephardic Jews and had lived in Morocco before moving on to Algeria, they still spoke Spanish at home. Cixous had recalled, however, that during the 1930s, at the time of the Popular Front government headed by the Socialists, her father felt both culturally and politically close to France. In 1933 Cixous's mother, Eva Klein, had left Germany (after Hitler had come to power) and in 1938 Cixous's maternal grandmother emigrated to Algeria as well. Cixous's grandmother had lived in Alsace prior to World War I and was thus able to leave Germany on the strength of her Franco-German papers. Cixous's Hungarian-Czech maternal grandfather had been killed in 1915 on the Russian Front.⁴

By the end of World War II many members of Cixous's extended family had been deported. The majority of them died in concentration camps. Cixous's sense of "luck" at being a survivor, even though a survivor "in exile," is another constant theme in her writing and may ground in large part her obvious attraction for "survivors"—Nelson Mandela, Osip Mandelstam, Paul Celan, among others. Speaking about various Russian writers and about the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, she explains that exile can be either metaphorical or real, that it can even be double, as in the case of the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva:

There is something of foreignness, a feeling of not being accepted or of being unacceptable, which is particularly insistent when as a woman you suddenly get into that strange country of writing where most inhabitants are men and where the fate of women is still not settled. . . . So, sometimes you are even a double exile, but I'm not going to be tragic about it because I think it is a source of creation and symbolic wealth. (Cixous 1991, 12-13)

We might add that exile may even be double for Cixous herself. However, it is also important to note that for her exile is not necessarily given a negative connotation, even when the person in exile may feel foreign, unaccepted, or even unacceptable. For the place of exile is also the place and space of writing.

These words give us the first inklings that for Hélène Cixous the very idea of being exiled is one which can cause pain, but one which she has overtly chosen to use in a positive sense, which is, in a way, the impetus for creation.

When I was three, the age of decisive experiences and of analysis, I knew that I was destined to leave. Of course it would be later on, but it would be as soon as possible. That destination, destinality, decision, was so strong that I have been able to say: when I was three I left. It was pure departure. I had no aim or vision of an arrival, no goal, and no desired country. I was in deferment and flight. In quasi-original detachment. (Cixous 1998, 167)

By 1942, when five-year old Hélène was ready to begin formal education, the political situation of the day made it impossible for a little Jewish girl to actually attend school. One of Cixous's earliest memories is of going to a house in Oran and sitting in a small room with other children, learning the alphabet, learning to read and write, yet all the while listening to the other older children recite their lessons.

There we were like the Arabs identical twins in deprivation, were we conscious of this? It was in the un-Frenchified Jewish dining-room-school that I had my first franco linguistic ecstasies. The room contained seven classes. The first row was the big kids. In the last row where I sat with my brother it was the level of lines and circles. From the back of the room I inter-

cepted the magic that awaited me when I would be in the first row. I heard these prophetic words: “adjectif qualificatif” (qualifying adjective). Ah my God is this what you announced to me? One day I will have the keys to the qualifying adjective! I shivered on my chair and meanwhile the Qualiph Haroun Al Rachid made the rounds in the first row of the dining room in the streets of Oran. So there were caliphs who slipped into the language of this France that repudiated us? It was the height of the subversive enchantment. In rue d’Arzew (one of Napoleon’s victories) the Pétain Youth brigades marched in vain. I had the language and its subterranean passages. (Cixous 1998, 168)

Even from this very early age, Hélène Cixous decided that whatever work she eventually chose in life, it would involve doing something with books. “In Books I became someone,” she says. “I was ‘at home’ there, I found my counterparts in poetry (there were some), I entered into alliance with my apparent soulmates, I had brothers, equivalents, substitutes, I was myself their brother or their fraternal sister at will” (1991, 29).

Growing up in a French colony left its mark on Cixous in many ways. Besides the fact of her Jewishness, there was also the sense of being without a national identity in Algeria: “People said ‘the French,’ and I never thought I was French. . . . I felt that I was neither from France nor from Algeria. And in fact, I was from neither.” (1991, xix).

Even the basic question of language was problematic. Both Cixous’s mother and her grandmother spoke German at home, thus Hélène’s first language (literally her mother tongue) was German. She has described German as her language of nursery rhymes and songs and later the language of poetry. She had begun to learn Arabic and Hebrew with her father, yet these languages were abruptly silenced when he died of tuberculosis at the age of 39. French became the language of school, and later English was added to her repertoire (her mother had sent her off to London in 1950 so that she could learn English, and her later academic training would focus largely on literature written in English). Yet even this tremendously ambiguous, complex, and potentially confusing relationship with language itself is consistently described by Cixous in the most positive fashion. Being in a sense “exiled” from each of her languages in some of its aspects is seen as a source of the creative impulse: “Blessing: my writing stems from two languages, at least. In my tongue, the ‘foreign’ languages are my sources, my agitations. ‘Foreign’: the music in me from elsewhere; precious warning: don’t forget that all is not here, rejoice in being only a particle, a seed of chance, there is no center of the world, arise, behold the innumerable, listen to the untranslatable” (1991, 21). And again:

We played at languages in our house, my parents passed with pleasure and deftness from one language to the other, the two of them, one from French the other from German, jumping through Spanish and English, one with a bit of Arabic and the other with a bit of Hebrew. . . . That translinguistic and loving sport sheltered me from all obligations or vague desire of obedience (I did not think that French was my mother tongue, it was a language in which my father taught me) to one mother-father tongue. . . . For a long time I asserted—but I did not believe it—that my mother tongue was German—but it was to ward off the primacy of French and because German, forever distanced from the mouth of my conscience by the Nazi episode, had become the idealizable language of my dead kin. These excluding circumstances made French and German always seem charming like the foreign fiancée. But at school I always wanted to beat the French in French, to be the best “in French” as they said, to honor my father, who had been driven out. (Cixous 1998, 168–69)

After World War II ended, the Cixous family moved from Oran to Algiers, the capital, where Dr. Cixous resumed his interrupted medical practice, setting it up in an Arab neighbourhood. Once again a sense of isolation and alienation become a focus for the young Hélène: “Since I didn’t belong to the European community and wasn’t admitted into the Arab community, I was between the two, which was extremely painful” (Sudaka 1976, 92).⁵ Perhaps the most crucial event in Cixous’s formative years was the death of her father on February 12, 1948, when she herself was not quite eleven. This traumatic event was a crystallizing moment in her psyche and in some sense the source of the majority of her early “creative” (as opposed to “academic”) writing.⁶ Although the immediate family circle included Cixous’s brother, mother, and grandmother, and although the maternal is also deeply implicated throughout Cixous’s work, it is the daughter’s problematic relationship with her absent dead father that represents the earliest and most reliable point of entry into her narrative world.

The desert landscape of Algeria—its seacoast, sun, and sand—is also a key point of reference in all of Cixous’s writing, presenting topographical elements of childhood used again and again, transformed and constantly undergoing metamorphosis, as the writer moves through time. The wordplay Cixous uses in the autobiographical text *Vivre l’Orange/To Live the Orange* (*Vivre l’Oran-je* = “I living in Oran”) is a small but significant marker of the North African sensibility and sensuality that will return repeatedly in her writing. For Hélène Cixous, the possibilities of exile, the realities of exile were always and already present even at a very young age, yet the feeling of “not belonging” did not engender within her the yearning to “be part of.” As she writes:

The possibility of living without taking root was familiar to me. I never call that exile. Some people react to expulsion with the need to belong. For me, as for my mother, the world sufficed, I never needed a terrestrial, localized country. (In the family mode of dwelling there remained a nomad's simplicity: never any furniture. Always the backpack.) I did not lose Algeria, because I never had it, and I never was it. If ever I identified it was with its rage at being wounded, amputated, humiliated. I always lived Algeria with impatience, as being bound to return to its own. France? I did not know it and I knew no one there. My German-Jewish family had emigrated to twenty different countries but not France. (Cixous 1998, 167-68)

Although she has only rarely written anything which directly and specifically relates to Algeria⁷ Cixous's most recent work is a text published in 2000 by Galilée called *Les rêveries de la femme sauvage* and subtitled "Scènes primitives." The echoes of her eighteenth-century exile compatriot Jean-Jacques Rousseau, resonate in the title as does one of her "marginalised" states, the "wild woman" alienated from the patriarchal domain of language. The text is divided into eight parts, each section a kind of "primitive scene" (echoes of Freud but transformed as always by Cixous). Cixous's brother, mother, and grandmother all figure prominently as do a bicycle, a dog, and an assortment of characters from Cixous's childhood years. Aïcha, Fatma, Zohra Drif, Kader/Ider, Mohamed, Maria, Françoise. Places, too, have their magical evocations in this text: Cixous's two Algerian cities, Oran and Algiers; Clos-Salembier, where the Cixous family lived; echoes of Osnabrück (her grandmother's home); the Clinic where her mother practiced midwifery; the Lycée where Cixous first sensed perhaps that in Algeria she was "not at home;" even the "Ravin de la femme sauvage" (the Wild Woman's Ravine) of the title, in reality an actual locale in the topography of Cixous's childhood.

The first words of the text draw the reader into the dream world, the world of reverie in which the writer seeks to "recover" place and space from past time.

The entire time I lived in Algeria I dreamed of one day coming to Algeria, I would have done anything to get there, I had written, but I never found myself in Algeria, it's really necessary now that I make this very clear, how I wanted the door to open, now and not later, I had jotted down very quickly, in the fever of the July night, for it is just now, and for dozens or hundreds of reasons, that a door has opened a crack on the Gallery of Forgetfulness in my memory, and for the first time, it is possible for me to return to Algeria, thus I must do so. (Cixous 2000, 9)⁸

This message, which comes to the first person narrator/writer/Cixous in the middle of the night, is a kind of visitation of the muse, the return of memory in the form of dream dictation, and continues during sleep: "[A]ll night

long through the abundant flood of dreams the chaos of civilizations Algeria had sent me packages of tracks, visions, sending packages through thousands of obstacles resurrecting completely forgotten characters” (2000, 10-11). But when morning comes, the magical dream text has just as magically disappeared—save for its opening words, beginning with “The entire time I lived in Algeria” and ending with “I must do so.” And so the text which will follow, the “*rêveries de la femme sauvage*” (the reveries of the wild woman) will represent the narrator’s attempt to recapture via the written word the place where for her exile was first grounded.

This rediscovery or recuperation of Algeria is then accomplished through a series of loosely connected but thematically related “*rêveries*,” each one with an object, person, or place at its origin—such as, for example, the Bicycle, the Clinic, Dr. Cixous’s Citroën, the Dog Fips, the Close-Salembier neighborhood where the family lived, the family maid named Aïcha. Fragments of conversations with her brother or her mother are utilized in order to recapture the childhood past even though mother and brother remember dramatically different stories of and from the past. Yet each “*reverie*” does leave its trace on the narrator. “What is left of Aïcha who has been dead for a long time: volumes and volumes. Art. Algeria, in the sense of a name, which caresses (touches) the untouchable. The velvety name of the fleeting. The beauty of softness, a rare and difficult beauty” (Cixous 2000, 91-92). Each succeeding section of the text involves the attempt to open a closed door via the narrator’s own memory or the memory of a family member. “My heart pounding I keep at it I’m on the lookout still perhaps even today a door will open in the City of Algiers if I knock hard enough at my mother’s memory still even now I follow the high wall I feel my way I dream of entering the country whose stubborn little runt I am” (96). Cixous’s mother in particular provides the textual impetus for a particular recollection of language and cultural non-belonging.

On the one hand she is a midwife but there is also the irreversible (in my view) German woman, and beyond the German woman there is the French woman, which in my view my mother isn’t in any way, but as far as her papers and language she is, and beyond the German who is French there is the Jewish woman that in my opinion she absolutely is not from the Jewish point of view she has neither religion nor tradition she never goes to synagogue, she says she was all alone in Oran her family was her world, add to that the German refugees she met . . . the Hellmanns, the Fulds, the Hagenauers, the Morgensterns, the Florsheims, in Oran there was her family and then Germany . . . all these people exiled and deported behind French barbed wire, some with tattoos others without. . . .

Besides she never had the feeling of belonging to a community which she'd never even heard about before her arrival in Algeria and if her father-in-law hadn't died shortly before her arrival she would probably not have married my father who could not so easily have opposed the refusal of his father to a marriage with an Ashkenaze who for her part had never heard the word Sephardic before coming to Oran. (Cixous 2000, 99-101)

There is always, too, the important question for Cixous of whether or not one is "invited" which serves as an indicator of exile's isolation and alienation. Although she was occasionally invited to visit her "French" friend Françoise, it was rare that Françoise was permitted by her family (her mother, her aunt) to participate in activities with Hélène. The description of Françoise's family home is instructive:

On the opposite side of town from Clos-Salembier, in the north, on the slope, on the church side, Françoise's house, upstanding, solid, like an equestrian statue with its back turned to the masses. Frozen on its pedestal at the moment when it was going to attack the church. All the surroundings are white, the soil is chalk white, whereas around our house everything is red. (Cixous 2000, 117)

In the "Albums and Legends" section of *Rootprints*, Cixous also speaks of her family and her childhood in Algeria as being inextricably linked to the act of creation "What I am recounting here (including what is forgotten and omitted) is what for me is indissociable from writing. There is a continuity between my childhoods, my children, and the world of writing—or of the narrative" (Cixous and Galle-Gruber 1997, 203-04).

Then I arrive in France, in 1955. It is the first time. . . . In 1955, the khâgne at the Lycée Lakanal—that is where I felt the true torments of exile. Not before. Neither with the Germans, nor with the English, nor with the Africans. I did not have such an absolute feeling of exclusion, of interdiction, of deportation. I was deported right inside the class.

In Algeria I never thought I was at home, nor that Algeria was my country, nor that I was French. This was part of the exercise of my life. I had to play with the question of French nationality which was aberrant, extravagant. I had French nationality when I was born. But no one ever took themselves for French in my family. Perhaps, on my father's side, they refrained from not being French. We were deprived of French nationality during the war. I don't know how they gave it back to us.

Image: I am three years old. I have followed in the streets of Oran the Pétain Youth parade. Dazzled, I go home singing "Maréchal here we are." My father takes my brother (two years old) and me solemnly on his knees. He solemnly tears the photo of Maréchal Pétain that I brought back, and he explains it to us.

The logic of nationality was accompanied by behaviours that have always been unbearable for me. The French nation was colonial. How could I be from a France that colonized an Algerian country when I knew that we ourselves, German Czechoslovak Hungarian Jews, were other Arabs? I could do nothing in this country. But neither did I know where I had something to do. It was the French language that brought me to Paris.

In France, what fell from me first was the obligation of the Jewish identity. On one hand, the anti-Semitism was incomparably weaker in Paris than in Algiers. On the other hand, I abruptly learned that my unacceptable truth in the world was my being a woman. Up until then, living in a world of women, I had not felt it, I was Jewess, I was Jew.

From 1955 on, I adopted an imaginary nationality which is literary nationality. (Cixous and Galle-Gruber 1997, 203-04)

Susan Suleiman quotes Edward Said, who has written: "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience" (1994, 137). And Said goes on to ask: "If true exile is a condition of terminal loss, why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching motif of modern culture? . . . Modern western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees" (138). Victor Burgin also speaks of the "melancholy tension" that most of us feel in relation to the separation from our origins (1991, 29). The element of autobiography inherent in any discussion of cultural representations of exile, no matter the form the textual representation takes on, bears out yet again the power of the personal voice in criticism. The case of Hélène Cixous and her relationship to the very concept of exile illustrates this kind of creative transformation.

Perhaps critic and writer Christine Brooke-Rose has found the best solution to the question of the place or space of exile in the texts of Cixous when she asks the question,

Ultimately, is not every poet or "poetic" (exploring, rigorous) novelist an exile of sorts, looking in from outside onto a bright, desirable image in the mind's eye, of the little world created, for the space of the writing effort and the shorter space of the reading? This kind of writing, often at odds with publisher and public, is the last solitary, non-socialized creative art. . . . The circle of light on the page, excluding the world, the escapes from it in stray thoughts and imaginative leaps, for writer or reader: an imagined world, an "inner circle," within the island of exile, is that not also an island, the reader or writer ex-ile, exsul? (Brooke-Rose 1998, 22)

For Hélène Cixous the word *exile* has perhaps at one and the same time no meaning and all meaning. The importance of the feeling of banishment, of exclusion threads through her work from her doctoral dissertation on "the exile" of James Joyce to her latest theatrical work on Jeanne d'Arc and the

Rêveries de la femme sauvage. Exile, like Algeria itself, is everywhere and nowhere. In Cixous's own words: "Neither France, nor Germany nor Algeria. No regrets. It is good fortune. Freedom, an inconvenient, intolerable freedom, a freedom that obliges one to let go, to rise above, to beat one's wings. To weave a flying carpet. I felt perfectly at home, nowhere" (1998, 155).

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Highway Two Joint Colloquium at the University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, on April 15, 2000.

² Cixous (1998). "Mon Algérie" was first published in *Les Inrockuptibles* 115 (20 August–2 September 1997): 71–74; this translation first appeared in *TriQuarterly* 100 (1997): 259–79.

³ Note even the title of Cixous's doctoral dissertation: *L'Exile de James Joyce on l'art du remplacement* [The Exile of James Joyce or the Art of Replacement]

⁴ For a more complete picture of Cixous's family ancestry, see "Albums and Legends" (Cixous 1997, 179–206).

⁵ My translation.

⁶ One thinks especially of Cixous's Prix Medicis-winning "novel" *Dedans* (1969).

⁷ The most notable exception is the essay "Mon Algérie" (1998).

⁸ All translations from this text are my own.

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